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**"Q&A Interview"  
with Barbara Rosenthal  
June 13, 2008, Berlin**

**Clare Carswell: What are you doing in Berlin?**

**Barbara Rosenthal:** Presenting *Existential Interact*, a series of live and video street performances involving interactions with passersby. I've got a suitcase I drag with me, and work with battery-powered videos, ventriloquism, button pins, artists' books, spontaneous caricatures, slogan cards, logo images, handouts and free money. I'm on the sidewalk in front of Kunst-Werke, Berlin's premier space for avant-garde art, and where the Berlin Biennale happens to be on exhibit now. I'm part of the Wooloo Berlin New Life Festival.

**CC: You've got your videos running on your laptop strapped to a garbage can. What's playing?**

**BR:** My existential videos. Today's program will be:  
*Barbara Rosenthal Contemplates Suicide*  
*How Much Does The Monkey Count*  
*How Much Does The Monkey Remember*  
*I've Got The World In The Palm Of My Hand*  
*Words Come Out Backwards*  
*Nonsense Conversation*  
*I'm A Dog You're A Dog.*

**CC: This morning you handed out cards. What were they?**

**BR:** Those were some of the *Provocation Cards*. Most people think I make up the slogans in order to provoke them. But although that might be why I give them out, that's not how I thought of the words. Like all my texts, the phrases are internally directed, as if they came from Voices. There are about a dozen cards now; it's an ongoing project. They say things like:

"Time Plays Tricks"

"Put It In Writing"

"Are You Jewish"

"Don't Try It Again"

"Don't Ask"

"You Are Participating In Live Performance Art" and

“God Is The Idol Of Science / God Is The Icon Of Science”.

**CC: And you’ve been wearing a lot of your Button Pins throughout the festival. Is that another ongoing project? The pins are like the cards, too, in that they’re confrontational. Which are you wearing now?**

**BR:** There are about a dozen of my Button Pins. I have a little machine to make them. They are like *Provocation Cards* because in both pieces what I say aloud for me is also meant for you. But *Button Pins* comprises images as well as texts, and the Voices that provoked *Button Pin* texts seem softer and scarier than for the cards. I’m trying to respond to your question by thinking back: when I made each one, I knew automatically if the text would surface on a pin or card, or, for that matter, if on a photogram or video. Form and content usually blast into my creative consciousness together. Today I’m wearing these pins:

"I Am Not Myself Today"

"Bird Hands"

"World in Palm" and

"Brain Scan". Some are visual, some are text.

**CC: Why are you wearing them?**

**BR:** I guess I want to make people realize what I realize: that identity can’t be pinned down easily, and that the universe is a big place with lots of room. I meet them on the surface of the buttons. And, also, dressed in the art, the artist becomes the art. I can be an object in the world instead of a personality. I can be giving a performance instead of living a life. And “I” is “You, Too.” We are just objects in performance.

**CC: Why are you outside Kunst-Werke rather than in it?**

**BR:** How can I do sidewalk performances if I'm not on the sidewalk? Anyway, it's a lot easier for anyone inside to come out, than it is for anyone outside to get in.

**CC: What can you tell me about the puppets?**

**BR:** The ones I brought to Berlin are The Monkey, The Alien and The Artist. The Monkey is a large hand puppet that wraps around me. He was originally a toy that my brother had bought for my first child. The Monkey and both my kids have appeared in several videos and live performances. I had many wild inspirations while playing with children and toys. The Alien and The Artist are relatively new marionettes who haven’t learned to behave. They all undoubtedly represent parts of my psyche; I want the puppets and other stuff in my suitcase

to be the parts that represent my interactive audience's psyches, too. I want my insights to be theirs – so it's The Alien, of course, who tries to phrase them. The Artist just mostly wants to be left alone.

**CC: Who do you want your audience to be?**

**BR:** I don't know if I can answer this easily. I make work with the idea that God (which I mean metaphorically) is watching.

I studied art-making formally since I was 14, several times from very noted artists and critics. But the epiphany of what art is all about didn't strike me until one day in Boston, looking at a roomful of Mark Rothko paintings, when I was already over 25. I was completely transformed, lifted to nirvana, all my brain waves harmonized. I want my audience to be people I can transport to heaven – I don't care who or what they were before they entered my sanctuary. When I am in the presence of Rothko paintings I am brought deeper into myself and further out to the universe; and that became my goal for every work of art in every medium. That art must be transcendental. It doesn't have to look alike. It doesn't especially have to look like anything.

**CC: Your work sure doesn't look like Rothko's, compelling as you both are.**

**BR:** Many paths converge in Heaven.

**CC: Who is your audience?**

**BR:** Anyone swimming by who stops to tread water and look up.

**CC: Why are you presenting this project as part of the Berlin New Life festival?**

**BR:** I'd originally planned this independently. But when I tried to find out if I needed a street-use permit from the city of Berlin, a German diplomat in New York familiar with both art scenes, Johannes Scharlau, of Goethe House, proposed my project to the festival sponsor, Wooloo, which is an artist-run organization I'd... been a member of anyway. When the festival's press contact here, Katrine Dyrebye Clausen, e-mailed me to please include the name of Wooloo in the display ad that eMediaLoft New York ran for it in *Flash Art International*, I understood this to mean that *Existential Interact* [my show here] would be adopted by the festival. That was okay with me as long as no one would try to interfere with my project, and no one did. The director, Martin Rosengaard, even provided me with housing. As for why Berlin itself, I wanted to

be in Berlin this year because of its art dynamic: it's more like New York was in the '70s and '80s when I showed in the East Village.

**CC: You were born and are still based in New York. But you've been showing often abroad. Are you always on the street?**

**BR:** Actually, I rarely do live work at all. This 2008 Berlin project is the first series in a long time. Most of my performances are to be mediated as photographs or videos. And usually, things are indoors. In 2007 in Moscow I showed *Existential Cartoons* at the L-Gallery. In 2006 in Beijing, I hung *Self-Devolution*: huge, transparent mylar prints of my logo-images, distorted and roped up, from the 22-foot ceilings of the Pickled Art Centre. In 2005, in New York, I did do two street interactions similar to this one, in front of the White Box Gallery and The Guggenheim.

**CC: Is video always a part? Video came about after you'd finished graduate school. How did you learn it?**

**BR:** Yes, wherever I am I show video. I've been making videotapes since 1976. I started with a Sony 1/2" Portapak. I'm a disciple of Bill Creston, a performative video pioneer so original and irreverent he's too hard to categorize to ever get the reputation he deserves.

**CC: Are you making Performance Art?**

**BR:** That's what I sometimes say. But it's easy to take issue with. It depends on whether you define performance as "an act," or whether you believe that whatever an artist does in public deliberately, (or maybe even not deliberately, and maybe not just artists, and maybe even not just publicly, maybe just what everyone does) is performance. I say anything is what the artist says it is, but maybe it's not, if the critic says it's not. The practitioners of these separate fields define their own territory and say what can grow there and what can't. I realize that that concept, because of the words "can" and "can't," would take a lot more words for me to investigate. Anyway, something can be and can't be the same thing at the same time, in my universe.

Roselee Goldberg invented a wonderful new idea, "Visual Art Performance," and I think I fit into that. I guess I've been looking for a way to categorize myself for decades. That's the "problem" with being avant-garde. The categories for you might fit into, even the names for the genres you work in, don't come around for a long time.

**CC: There's definitely room in Performance Art for guerilla street theater.**

**BR:** I agree. Goldberg coined a new term and developed the Performa Biennials based on it. I fit into her stated concept so well that I "volunteered" to do street performances called *Taboo or Not Taboo* during the first one. "Volunteered" means I wasn't asked, I did them anyway, you know, like crashing—Milton Fletcher marvelously dissected some thoughts about this in his review of it in *NYArts*. I've been castigated for projects in the past, so I feared the worst, but there was a fairly positive response to my mix of life and art after all.

**CC: So besides the ongoing work that appears from time to time, your street work, like some of your videos, involves spoken improvisation. You ad lib. What was your influence for this?**

**BR:** My work has roots in Allan Kaprow's wonderful concept of "Happenings"; I staged my first Happening in my parents' basement when I was 16, in 1964, as soon as I read about Kaprow in *The Village Voice*. I had for two years already been studying painting and drawing from the nude, in classes taught by Isaac Soyer at The Brooklyn Museum. Growing up in New York one just sees that the boundaries of art are limitless.

**CC: Where are your energies right now?**

**BR:** There are a few things in progress and being shopped around now:

a) An Installation, *Unfashionable Art*, using my clothing, saved since the 1960s. One small work from it went up for auction recently at White Box Bowery.

b) A novel, *Wish For Amnesia*, which has a trunkfull of nearly three decades of drafts. It's about the son of Holocaust survivors. I've reworked it again, and I'm now again trolling for a new literary agent. There had been a wonderful agent in the 1990s, Gunther Stuhlmann, the editor of Anais Nin's *Diaries*, who unfortunately passed away before getting it to a publisher.

c) Two short stories. One is "Haunted House," about a mother on pot, and daughter on science and literature, who have a car accident in the countryside around Princeton. The other is "Chinese Soldier", about an American woman in late middle-age, who travels to China on business and has an affair with a 23-year-old Chinese soldier.

d) *Landscapes On The Horizon*, a series of recent color and BW photographs similar to my piece *Five Houses On The Horizon* from the early 1990s.

e) A profile for the Spring 09 issue of *NYArts Magazine* of the sensational artist

Alexandra Dementieva, who makes funny, and technologically brilliant, interactive video installations.

f) Remastering 106 video shorts for my 1976-2009 video retrospective back here in Berlin at the Director's Guild in June 2009.

g) Two offset artist's books of journal-text and photographs, including *Performance and Persona* and *Cold Turkey at the Dog Run*, which I'm hoping to be published by Visual Studies Workshop Press.

h) One digital-and-real artist's book containing sweepings from my studio floor, called *Dirty Book*.

i) Circulation of my father's Outsider Art, watercolors of Americana. My dad was Leon Rosenthal, a mid-century architect in private practice on Long Island.

j) Editing and circulating my father's *Memoirs* and his *Wartime Diaries*, which will contain many of his drawings of Hawaii.

k) And... I have to find a new art dealer. My beloved Monique Goldstrom died unexpectedly of a stroke about three years ago. I haven't done much about looking, though. I don't like seeking a representative, much as I need one. Art makes me make it, and completes itself when I do; there's no similar compulsion/reward dynamic regarding pitching.

**CC: Where do you most need your artwork to be?**

**BR:** Most of my work that's been purchased is in museums or public collections. Much in private collections has been sold through Printed Matter, the artists' bookstore in Chelsea and online. But most in private hands I've given free, and most of that in trade for artworks or for health services. You can see how life and art are, in reality, if not inseparable, truly intermixed and interdependent.

**CC: Why do you make so much stuff?**

**BR:** The stuff makes me make it.