

## Existential Interact: Rosenthal and Obama in Berlin

Review by Clare Carswell

New York avant-garde artist Barbara Rosenthal, an American art export with attitude, created her latest performance work, *Existential Interact*, in Berlin this summer. And she wasn't the only American to choose this time and place to strut their stuff. Barak Obama came in July. Both Americans brought their national persona of self-invention, self-reliance, charisma, improvisation and psychic connection to their fellow-beings. But in contrast to the impulsivity that Milton Fletcher wrote about Rosenthal's work in these pages, I saw an artist as pre-prepared as was the Senator.

Obama spoke at the Tiergarten because in requesting permission to speak at the Brandenburg Gate, he was informed it might stir controversy; Rosenthal, in her attempt to apply for a Berlin city street performing permit, was happy to be grafted by German cultural organizations onto the Wooloo Berlin New Life Festival, a two-week socially engaged participatory arts series. But because she considers deliberate social commentary "retro-garde," she participated in the festival selectively: on one hand, she fulfilled its mission of interaction with random Berliners, but on the other, she trod the fence between sanctioned and unsanctioned presentations, choosing her own degree of in-ness or out-ness like a falcon. As an independent, she brazenly chose her own art-squat: Berlin's premier avant-garde showplace, KW, Kuns-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art, which just happened to be hosting the desultory but prestigious 5th Berlin Biennale. Since she had once before, although by her own choice, grafted herself onto an above-ground art event (Performa05, NYC) and interacted in front of White Box Gallery and The Guggenheim Museum, her alliance with Wooloo brought critical focus to the phenomenon of risk-taking by artists independent of cultural handlers. "Do not be afraid," Rosenthal's Alien Puppet intones to one passerby, "of art not inside institution"—pause—"I certify it sane."

Rosenthal chalks her name in a square she's drawn at the entrance to KW. She's wearing fifteen of her ubiquitous "*Button Pins*": *I Am Not Myself Today*; *You Go First*; *Are You Jewish*; etc. Rows of her artists books, like *Clues to Myself*; *Homo Futurus*; and *Soul & Psyche*, and DVDs like *Nonsense Conversation*; *How Much Does the Monkey Count*; *Society*; and *Barbara Rosenthal Contemplates Suicide* are lining the kerb. And, defying chancy weather, her lap-top is there too, chained to a lamp-post and playing a loop of her loopy shorts. This is all cool political media saying hot personal things: they tell us about our existence as persons. Just reading the titles makes us think about who are we, and why we think so. If we linger in this magical chalk arena, we will learn more about ourselves, as individuals and as a species. And we'll have some laughs.

Rehearsed and poised to perform her verbal manoeuvres, Rosenthal presents at first as disarmingly dippy but is in fact locked on her targets, us! Her under-cover performance technique is an impromptu chat with her or her three archetype puppets—The Monkey, The Artist, The Alien. She doesn't have "an act;" if you speak to her or a puppet, they will converse with you. Rosenthal's assumed voices and personae lure us closer. Electricity is sparked by a smile; a line is tossed as we negotiate her carefully prop-strewn street carpet. She may seem flirtatious, fluttering her arms upwards whilst making her pitch. At other times she's a lean, mean art toreador, her arm downward thrusting into our hands one of the "*Provocation Cards*," her printed slogans. "*Life Has a Life of Its Own*," says one of them, "*Time Plays Tricks*," "*Put It In Writing*," "*Everything is Performance and Persona*." We are challenged to make ourselves known. In the 1980s, *The Village Voice* referred to Barbara Rosenthal as a "Media Poet," and although this might be a category of one, she invites the rest of us to join. Like Obama, Rosenthal is an oracular outsider, not asking to be allowed in, but asking everyone to come on out.

Some Berliners get embroiled in her raree show, a few with her overtly interactive pieces like *You're The Computer Poet*, or *You & I Cardgame*, others to make

improvements to an online dictionary's translation she had printed on the back of the cards. Mistakes by found robotic translations delight her. "Meaning is masticated to puerile pulp inside any mouth kissed by the blistered lips of language," The Artist Puppet devines.

For an artist so unyieldingly direct in her tongue-in-cheek, zany, poetic, yet astonishingly literal transcriptions, Rosenthal's work-method of continually updating imagery and text by ongoing revision over time yields to appropriate collaborations between personality and persona, and between behavior and performance. Some of her pieces have been honed over decades. This is why I disagree with Milton Fletcher. In *NYArts* March/April 2006, Fletcher characterizes Rosenthal's essential work as organic; he calls it "the impulsive, non-processed act of performing itself." His provocative article is entitled "Barbara Rosenthal During Performa05: Taboo or Not Taboo." Rosenthal brings the poet out in all of us, so I parse the title: Fletcher playfully nods here to two of Rosenthal's pieces: *Old Address Book/Totem and Taboo*, a 3-D photo book and wall sculpture, 1997, and *Barbara Rosenthal Contemplates Suicide*, a video riff on Hamlet, 2005. He says that her work "point[s] directly to Surrealism." I believe that Rosenthal's work is more pre-planned than Fletcher does. Based on my daily attendance at her rehearsals and performances on Auguststrasse, as well as meetings alone with her in the Alexanderplatz apartment provided by Wooloo, and at various cafes for various drinks alone or with her entourage, I think her street work is anything but "non-processed" art-making. Barbara Rosenthal is knowledgeable and knowing, and packs and plans every detail. Little is incidental or impulsive. Obsessive, neurotic perhaps, if she were a lay person, but for an artist, "impulsive," "non-processed," no! In her world, performance and reality can only transcend disbelief if they can be mistaken for each other. And she works to make sure that will happen.

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*"Existential Interact"* Barbara Rosenthal. Solo improvised performance with passersby, Public sidewalk in front of KW Institute, Auguststrasse 69, 10117 Berlin. Wooloo Berlin New Life Festival, June 10-15, 2008.

Image to accompany article by Clare Carswell about Barbara Rosenthal in Berlin  
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Attached TIFF and JPG files of same image:

*“Logo Image Diptych: Brain Scan/World In Palm II”* Barbara Rosenthal, 1986-2008. Two rondells: one computer processed slice of artist’s authentic brain MRI, and one digital frame of VHS video *“I’ve Got the World in the Palm of My Hand”* Variable dimensions, media and edition sizes. Worn on *“Button Pins Shirt 25”* by Barbara Rosenthal during “Existential Interact,” Berlin, 2008.  
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