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Ecstatic Resistance

NEW YORK,
at X initiative

by Lyra Kilston



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What do burning sage, cross-dressing and pulling an island southward with ropes have in common? They are all examples of what artist/curator Emily Roysdon has termed “Ecstatic Resistance” in her title for this exhibition, which brought together unconventional or impracticable responses to seemingly intractable problems. Featuring videos, installations, photographs, silkscreens and paintings by 10 artists, “Ecstatic Resistance” offered a range of approaches to activism, the defiance of norms and the creation of solidarity. Several degrees removed from direct critique, the works assembled instead use humor, imagination and play to confront the world’s ills.

Jeanine Oleson’s project *The Greater New York Smudge Cleanse*, for example, was represented by a 6-foot-long bundle of dried sage hung from the ceiling. Last fall, Oleson ritually burned similar bundles in public demonstrations around New York to “cleanse” the city of “eco-destruction, election anxiety, gentrification, heterosexism, U.S. imperialism, classism, racism and greed.” Combating such a slew of troubles with herbal smoke is an intentionally goofy choice, but one can’t deny that this city has a lot of bad vibes to dispel—and sage smoke recommends itself as a “so crazy it just might work” option.

More somber but just as surreal is Yael Bartana’s moving 2007 film *Mary Koszmary* [see article on Israeli artists this issue]. It features Polish left-wing activist Sławomir Sierakowski delivering a speech on the field of a Warsaw stadium, during which he requests that the three million Polish Jews who were killed during World War II return to Poland to create a new state of solidarity. Children behind



him render the words 3,300,000 JEWS CAN CHANGE THE LIFE OF 40,000,000 POLES in chalk dust on the grass. When the camera pans across the stadium, you see that it is abandoned, the stone benches cracked by tall weeds. Touching on the conflicting impulses manifest in postwar contrition and ongoing ethnic strife, the film offers another off-center political solution that suggests that the unimaginable is the only remaining choice. Likewise, Rosa Barba's visually lush film *Outwardly from Earth's Center* (2007) "documents" the plight of the residents of the tiny Swedish island Gotska Sandön, which this film imagines is drifting northward at the rate of one meter per year. Barba films various experts discussing possible solutions; a more openly fictional sequence shows the residents trying to anchor the island with long, thick, braided ropes pulled out to the sea.

Is it a privilege to indulge in joyful tactics and entertain unfeasible endeavors? When artists who confront social issues choose the realm of the imaginary rather than action, critique or analysis, it can seem as though they are hiding their discipline's paralysis behind a curtain of spun language (which the curatorial essay amply provides). On the other hand, thought precedes action (or should), so carving out space for the impossible might spark the beginning of radical change.

In any case, more conventional modes of dissent were not completely absent from this show. A mural-size photo-collage by A.L. Steiner, reminiscent of 1970s feminist imagery, presents a disorderly array of gender-bending young adults proudly—and often lewdly—flaunting their naked bodies for the camera. Called *Positive Reinforcement*, it indeed evolved from mere snapshots of the artist's friends to a group portrait of a collective utopia where sex and gender norms are happily capsized. Sharon Hayes's *Yard (sign) after Allan Kaprow* (2009) is a messy sprawl of signs that look like they were stolen from front yards (it riffs on Kaprow's 1961 *Yard*, in which he filled a courtyard with car tires). Hayes's installation once more pits Obama against McCain, while Mary Kay advertises her cosmetics and homemade plywood signs chide passersby in a wrecked New Orleans for gawking at their post-Katrina plight. This visual cacophony represents the range of voices taking advantage of our right to public expression—adamant, banal, angry, funny, confused. It also speaks of another kind of ecstasy: the simple joy of sounding your opinion freely.

Photos: Left, Rosa Barba: Outwardly from Earth's Center, 2007, 16mm film transferred to video, 25 minutes. Right, view of A.L. Steiner's installation Positive Reinforcement, 2009, photo-collage. Both at X Initiative.