

Daniel Rothbart : Art ombilical

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L'artiste américain Daniel Rothbart nous fait revivre à chacune de ses expositions, les grandes théories de l'American Art, cher à Greenberg. La mise en scène des oeuvres se jouent sur des liens de vie qui veulent dépasser toutes les mystiques que l'art a toujours cherché ou repoussé.



Vous rappelez-vous du jour ou du moment ou vous avez voulu devenir un artiste ? Et quel a été l'impératif qui vous a poussé à l'être ?

Do you remember the day or moment you decided to become an artist? What drove this decision?

As a child I used to observe people in public places and record situations with drawings, cartoons and caricatures. Much later, as a young man living in Rome, I began to physically change the flow of everyday life through temporary placement of sculptural objects in public spaces and photographing interactions that ensued. These Roman projects ultimately developed into collaborative performance work with sculptural objects that I engage with currently. So there is a certain continuity in my creative practice from childhood to now. It wasn't a particular experience or moment that prompted my decision to make art but rather an evolving interest in subverting the commonplace and shifting the perception of experiences and ideas.



Vous êtes le pur produit de l'héritage de la culture américaine, en particulier des notions qu'avancait déjà Barnett Newman avec la Kabbale, naviguant entre sociologie et religion. Le ressentez-vous ainsi ? Voulez-vous exprimer les confrontations de la société moderne ?

You are of Jewish American heritage, and share Barnett Newman's interest in Jewish mysticism or Kabbalah. How do you feel about this influence which lies somewhere between sociology and religion? What meaning does it have for contemporary society?

Though born and raised in the United States, I also consider myself the product of European culture. I studied in Rome as an undergraduate and returned to Italy with a Fulbright grant in 1990. During this time I met art theorist and collector Enrico Pedrini who deepened my understanding of Fluxus, Arte Povera, Possibilism and other advanced expressions of European art making.



I am interested in the spiritual dimension of art and my book "Jewish Metaphysics As Generative Principle in American Art" explores the influence of Jewish thought on post-war American abstraction. In it, I discuss the work of Barnett Newman among others, and his fascination with Jewish mysticism or Kabbalah. Jewish metaphysics have influenced the development of my work and continues to have relevance for contemporary society.

There is a Jewish creation story, which interests me particularly. According to the Lurianic Kabbalah (and I paraphrase John Perreault's elegant description), energy or light or meaning poured from the Unknowable-Unnameable-Unlimitable down the Kabbalah tree from vessel to vessel. Perreault likens the effect to a wedding-glass pyramid. At this wedding, however, the lower vessels weren't strong enough to contain light and shattered, sending sparks into the void.

Because of the flawed creation, Divine light remains intermingled with dark vessel shards and trapped in the commonplace. Through a process known as "tikkun olam" ("repairing the world" in Hebrew), Jews seek to liberate light, so it may return to its source. This correction is accomplished through prayer and social engagement. I believe that art making also has the potential to release this energy.



La spiritualité semble tenir une grande place dans votre œuvre. Vous semblez montrer une spiritualité provocante qui semble toujours dépasser les stéréotypes acquis de la métaphysique.

Spirituality seems to have an important place in your work. But your interpretation of Jewish metaphysics seems provocative at times and not bound to organized religion.

Spirituality, as expressed in contemporary art, interests me far more than organized religion.

While influenced by Judaism, my approach to art making also finds inspiration in Buddhism. My ongoing conceptual work "Meditation/Mediation," for example, involves working with artist collaborators who fill my twelve vessel sculptures with temporary meaning through performance interventions. The physical form of these vessel sculptures is influenced by the shapes of summer tea bowls used in the Japanese tea ceremony. But they also refer to the tradition of begging bowls in the Buddhist tradition. Monks still go out into the world with nothing but a bowl and live from the sustenance given them by people they encounter on the path.

I lived very near the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan during the 9/11 attacks and this trauma

temporarily impeded my ability to make art. Deeply shaken, I found myself unable to create new forms in the studio. I'd been awarded a residency at the Napoule Art Foundation near Cannes, and carried pre-existing vessel sculptures with me in a rucksack. It was on the Côte d'Azur that I began exploring what Achille Bonito Oliva later referred to as "the concave spaces of art." I sought to fill these vessels by siting them in environments, encountered on walks, and documenting them with photography. In Rome one year later, at the Baruchello Foundation, I began performance collaborations that define "Meditation/Mediation." Enrico Pedrini remarked, "Within these projects, collective spiritual and emotional exchanges take form and resonate."



Vidéos, sculptures, photos, performances sont tous les médias que vous utilisez au sein d'une même exposition, comme celle que vous consacrez actuellement la Galerie Depardieu à Nice. Ce mélange des genres et des techniques forment-ils une unicité, un tout sur le format expressif de votre œuvre ?

Sculpture, performance, video and photographs are among the forms on view at your current WATERLINES exhibition at the Galerie Depardieu in Nice. Does this mixture of genres and techniques synthesize into a single expression for you?

For decades I've been interested in multidisciplinary approaches to art making, though performance didn't become an integral part of my work before the "Meditation/Mediation" works of 2003. Videography was a rough form of documentation in these early works but has since become an important expressive medium for me.

In 2007 I was invited to create an open-air sculpture in Venice for Open 10 and decided to create a floating sculpture, which drew inspiration from the Venetian glassmaking tradition.

I grew up on the West Coast of the United States where glass-blown fishing floats wash up on beaches after floating across the Pacific Ocean from the Sea of Japan. Having broken loose from fishermen's nets, they undertake a journey of eight thousand kilometers over a depth of eleven thousand meters, to reach America. I love the fragility and strength of these objects, and decided to incorporate them into the work.



The result was "Flotilla," a floating sculptural installation anchored in the lagoon outside the Hotel Excelsior. Crafted from welded aluminum around found-glass floats, this serpentine work would move and glide in response to currents (and frequent wakes from vaporetti carrying movie stars to the Venice Film Festival).

"Everything Flows, Nothing Stands Still (For Enrico Pedrini)," my 2011 performance work in Aix-la-Chapelle, Germany, marked an important turning point for my work with performance, objects and water. Curator Wolfgang Becker had invited me to create a work in dialogue with thermal springs that flow underneath the city. I scripted a performance work for myself and three other artists based on the ritualistic immersion of sculptural objects into two wells. I collaborated with filmmaker Joachim Gerich to document and interpret the work.

WATERLINES at the Galerie Depardieu went a step further to include a matrix of still photographs along with performance, moving image and sculptural objects. The idea of a gesamptkunstwerk, which synthesizes diverse modes of expression into a more powerful whole has long interested me. I've written about this theory for years but my studio work is only now moving closer.



Un équilibre précaire est très présent dans vos œuvres. Le maintien d'objet semble toujours mis en danger dans l'eau ou sur la terre, que cela signifie-t-il ?

An urgent, precarious balance is present in your work. Your objects are in danger both on water and on land. What does this mean to you?

There is a strong element of danger in the WATERLINES performance. The Gowanus Canal, for which the work was conceived, is among the most polluted waterways in the United States, containing raw sewage and all kinds of pathogens. Years ago, policemen were chasing a suspect when he jumped into the canal and fled into a 19th century clay sewer pipe. He died at once from inhalation of toxic fumes.

The Gowanus Canal became a federal "Superfund" cleanup site in 2010 but there is so much toxic sludge that dredging proved insufficient. Therefore it was important to minimize our contact with the water and, if a canoe capsized, we were in serious trouble. I had organized the project and felt responsible for the safety of Jessica Harris, the dancer with whom I was performing.



Through WATERLINES, we entered into dialogue with the canal, which is a place of great natural beauty. Tidal currents informed the movement of floating sculpture and our choreography with the canoes. This water ritual featured circumambulations of a central tree-like sculpture, anchored to float in the center of the canal. At one point, a bird even landed on the sculpture, as though it were a real tree. We sought to neutralize poison and evoke the sublime and mysterious Nature of this place.

Quel est pour vous le danger pour l'art aujourd'hui dans la formulation de son expression aux USA et en Europe? Qu'elle ne soit pas comprise par le public ?

What do you view as dangers to art today in the United States and Europe? Is contemporary art understood by the public?

Yesterday we had mid-term elections in the United States and I voted for Democrat and Green Party candidates. Therefore I might be considered a liberal. Yet, to my mind, liberal politics pose a terrible threat to

contemporary art. Inclusion and equality sound like attractive values, but when they become criteria for funding artist's work, the results are disastrous. Gore Vidal once declared, "You don't decide to be a writer. You are one or you're not one. .. Art is not a democracy. In fact, art is the enemy of democracy."



In the United States, contemporary art is most certainly not understood or appreciated by the general public. It is divorced from our culture at large and survives thanks to private patronage and initiatives in galleries, alternative spaces and occasionally museums. Our president has publicly disparaged the field of art history and the annual budget of the Teatro dell'Opera in Rome is greater than the American National Endowment for the Arts.

But Europe gives me hope. What a refreshing pleasure to walk in Nice and view streets named after artists rather than generals or enter the splendid MAMAC free of charge.

Quels sont vos futurs projets ?

What are your future plans?

I'm working with Vittoria Broggin, chief curator at the Museo MAGA in Gallarate, Italy, on a project with the museum titled "Gente del Po." It takes both name and inspiration from a 1947 short film by Michelangelo Antonioni, which documents life in the Po River valley.



My idea is to rent an old fishing boat and drape it with serpentine floating sculptures that will trail in the water as the vessel sails the Po from Mantova to Venice. The entire project will be videotaped and result in a film. Unlike Antonioni's neo-realist document of hard life on the river and people at the mercy of the elements, this journey will include floating sculpture, water-based performance work and interviews with ecologists, poets and creative people who live along the river today.

I'm also curating a section of the MIT Press journal "PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art" on the theme of water and performance. For this project I am writing an introductory essay on the subject and presenting the work of four international contemporary artists along with my own.

DANIEL ROTHBART

Daniel Rothbart is an artist and writer based in Brooklyn. His work explores the relationship between nature, urban postmodern identity and metaphysics. Rothbart holds a B.F.A. from the Rhode Island School of Design, an M.F.A. from Columbia University and was awarded a Fulbright grant to Italy. Rothbart represented the United States at OPEN10 with a floating sculptural installation in Venice. Projects include exhibitions at the Andrea Meislin Gallery, Exit Art and the LAB Gallery in New York and the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in Peekskill. European exhibitions include the Galleria nazionale d'arte moderna in Rome, the Galerie Depardieu in Nice, the Galleria Il Ponte in Florence and the Cultural Centre of Belgrade in Serbia. Rothbart has participated in numerous international artists' residencies and was awarded a New York Foundation for the Arts grant.



Daniel is the author of two books: *Jewish Metaphysics As Generative Principle in American Art* and *The Story of the Phoenix*. His creative work is the subject of a monograph by Enrico Pedrini published in 2010 by Ulisse e Calipso of Naples. Recent projects include OPEN15 in Venice, curated by Paolo De Grandis and "Everything Flows, Nothing Stands Still (For Enrico Pedrini)" curated by Wolfgang Becker in Aachen, Germany. Together with Joachim Gerich, Rothbart realized a film of the Aachen performance that was screened at White Box in New York. The Galerie

Depardieu of Nice presented a solo exhibition of his work at VOLTA NY and Daniel Rothbart's work can be found in public and private collections including the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Entretien Daniel Rothbart par Silvia Valensi

Interview with Daniel Rothbart by Silvia Valensi

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by Daniel Rothbart, Foreward by Enrico Pedrini
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The Story of the Phoenix
by Daniel Rothbart, Introduction by Richard Milazzo
Publisher: Ulisse & Calipso (1999)

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