



Art and about: Daniel Rothbart's Meditation | Mediation

by John Isaacs



Daniel Rothbart introducing the performances. Photo: Meg Skaff.

Childhood visits to the Japanese Garden in Portland, Oregon, exposed Brooklyn- and Hudson-based sculptor and conceptual artist Daniel Rothbart to the Japanese Tea Ceremony. Tea bowls with their aesthetic of studied imperfection fascinated him in particular. As a young man, he aspired to become a ceramicist and threw hundreds of Japanese-inspired tea bowls on a potter's wheel. In 1993, Rothbart began experimenting with installations comprising various-sized bowls and gongs, which were either arrayed on the floor or integrated into more complex static constructions. He pursued numerous variations on the theme for several years, creating an ingenious body of work, that perfectly well stood on its own. Later, he hit upon the idea, at the Baruchello Foundation in Rome, of adding an element of action to the project, inviting other artists to respond to the works.

Over the years, numerous artists and others have taken it upon themselves to employ the vessels, not only in galleries, but in unusual situations, particularly outdoors. According to Rothbart, "A critic like Achille Bonito Oliva uses the vessels as a metaphor for the role of the critic in society, while Ana Zaballata, a Oaxacan Indian who prepares cornmeal for a living, uses the same vessels as repositories for kernels of corn. Each intervention is as unique as the person with whom I collaborate. "

A few weeks ago, twelve artists were invited by Rothbart to create their own interventions at WhiteBox, a nonprofit gallery on the Lower East Side, and, as it happened, seven of the artists had Hudson connections.

Situationist Joan Bankemper calmly and methodically shattered a bunch of decorative crockery into Rothbart's vessels, making an unholy but charming mess.

Performance artist, musician, and actress Bibbe Hansen and husband Sean Carrillo performed Fluxus composer George Brecht's "Drip Music", first created in 1959, with a variety of procedures utilizing water and Rothbart's vessels.

Catskill-based multimedia artist Brian Dewan combined an eerie electronic soundtrack with his own murmurs into Rothbart's vessels.

Weird CBGB vet (The Erasers) Jane Fire created (with David Ebony) a rear-projected tableau involving elusive statements and an iPhone, but did not, as far as I could tell, interact with Rothbart's vessels.

Ever funny and smart, poet/critic Wayne Koestenbaum dedicated his poetic piece "Camp Marmalade" to Rothbart's pots, punctuated by striking them.

Yours truly led the assembled through "The Artist is Omnipresent," the opportunity to experience *Traspasso*, an interactive ritual exercise parenthesized by the sounds of one of Rothbart's songs

And five others: The excellent interdisciplinary artist Lisa Park demonstrated how her own brainwaves could stimulate water in the vessels; the ubiquitous Anthony Haden-Guest offered up a few spontaneously and amusingly composed haikus; critic/curator Richard Milazzo dedicated "The Story of the Twelve Bowls" to Daniel; critic/curator Boshko Boskovic used the vessels to evoke harvest time in Serbia with soil and song; environmental activist and OCEAN EARTH founder Peter Fend riffed for ten minutes on the state of the world, at breakneck pace (I'd be interested in reading a transcript) with fascinating imagery (though the connection with the vessels was elusive).

While there was a dollop of cheese and a dose of earnestness, nothing had been coordinated (other than Rothbart's selection of the participants, who performed—more or less—in alphabetical sequence) and nobody's interpretation was remotely like anyone else's, yet the program managed to sustain a mysterious and elegant cohesion. The whole event lasted a couple of hours, which fairly zipped by. It would be worthwhile seeing in Hudson—New Yorkers coming up instead of Hudsonians going down. It's tailor-made for CR10 or Second Ward, or even Basilica Hudson.

All the WhiteBox performances can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/album/4326794>.