

art US

The Outlaw Series

BY DOMENICK AMMIRATI

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The week-long Outlaw Series comprised some fifty projects in most every form and medium in venues ranging from a fancy hotel to an auto body shop to rooftops to sidewalks to the apartment of the curator's mother. It took its logo from a subway token, its title from clandestine '80s dance parties. Its raison d'être was foremost to extend art beyond white-box, institutional contexts; less explicitly and more uniquely, it sought to re-inscribe onto New York art a local identity apart from its role as a global art hub—consonant to some degree with justifications of "peripheral" art events from Tirana to Havana. The budget-less Outlaw Series could not in fact have existed without a strong sense of community and concomitant generosity, and these elements dominated the event from its structure on down to the thematics of individual artworks. Artists donated their time and energy—and T-shirts for a fundraising auction—and organizer Lisa Kirk green-lighted just about every outlawish pitch tendered in response to an open call; which, true, diluted the show's overall quality, but afforded perhaps a truer New York art "snapshot" than an institutional roundup.

Projects for the Series invariably attempted to involve, if not embrace, the city. That hug was most often made with Allan Kaprow's bearish arms, and a little of Robert Smithson in the grip. Take as typical Columbia MFA student Christy Gast's *Left Mitten* (2003-): it's performative; it's long-term and open-ended; it's public; it's wacky; it's vaguely salubrious. On the uneven cobbles of Greenwich Village's Minetta Street, Gast set down a burgundy suitcase, opened a panel built into one end of it, and tugged out a mass of marigold-yellow nylon. In just a few minutes it had inflated to assume a chubby, ten-foot-tall upthrust with a single skinny arm. *Mitten* represents a Monument Valley mesa but also bears a distinctly feminine mien: red fringe around its base like that on a skirt; several appliqués in the shapes of flowers and a pair like guitar bodies that suggest breasts. Finished, the lushly ornamented *Mitten* will be an homage to cowboy clothier Nudie Cohen; Gast plans a tour this summer, presumably, in Kaprowian mode, to jar those who encounter it into fresh awarenesses of their own gender, style, place.

Such desire to engage an audience at times took on erotic charge. Adam Pendleton's *Call Me* (New York) (2003) employed that entreaty and variations on it as meme: neon signs, one in downtown Brooklyn and one in Lower Manhattan, blazed it to nighttime passersby; one AM rush hour in Brooklyn's Williamsburg balloons lined blocks near a subway stop; paper cups donated to cafés turned latte-sippers into lonely hearts or, in the other common interpretation, ad pimps. (People asked the balloon-strewing Pendleton if they were a message to his girlfriend, or else what he was selling.) More farcically, K48 co-editor Bengala and Jana Leo, whose works focus on surveillance and the body, lured people to the New Museum's bathrooms with promises of sex via Craig's List (zero hookups: too much traffic), then led them with riddling limericks and handbills to other local heads concluding at the Astor Place Starbucks, where they were handed a camera and asked to take a photo; i.e., to surveil themselves. Remarkably, genitals—male—appeared in only a single picture.

Projects that relied on object-oriented displays more often lacked visual and/or conceptual pep—a black square in homage to Malevich on the side of an East Village building, for example. Matt Keegan's marzipan figure of his father led the curious to a superb Brooklyn bakery, Fortunato's, but demonstrated less anything about memory and place than that art really is good for business, even on a small scale: it was hard to leave without buying an espresso and a pastry. One exceptional work in this vein: Robert Melee's interpolation of a signed photographic self-portrait into the array of head shots at the Chelsea Square diner. His freaky-cool, Johnny Ramone-esque visage amid the smooth smiles and careful coils of C-grade actors short-circuited reflex responses to celebrity, manqué and otherwise.

Rounding out the interventions and sites were a holiday cabaret (in the Series' improving spirit, it presented mini-histories of Christmas and Santa Claus); a screening that includes Mungo Thomson's all-buildup *Now Playing* (2003), an archive of pre-flick reels from the '70s and '80s exhorting moviegoers to visit the snack bar, etc.; and, with rare gallery involvement, a night of performance at a Scott Hug-curated Deitch Projects space. Artists with more traditional practices took part in the Series by transforming their normally private acts into interpersonal ones. Painters Ann Craven and Keith Mayerson conducted sittings at cost-only rates. A four-person group sketched exquisite-corpse portraits on the subway—though an installation of works in a Lower East Side café, on top of their choice of the Williamsburg artery L train, illustrated how easily "outlaw" work can descend into boho posturing.

A glaring lack in the Outlaw Series—particularly in light of its title, dance parties or no—was overt politics. The mark of the festival's true counterculturalness was best captured by Alexandra Mir's *48 Hour Underground* (2003-), in which the artist vowed to disappear for the specified duration each year for the rest of her life, during which she will "engage in unspecified anarchist activities." Mir's wry provocation remained close to the dominant spirit of bringing art into life; only Bradley McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry brought life's unpleasantness into art by reinstalling *Witness* (2000/03), a retired NYC emergency call box that plays accounts of police brutality, at locations including City Hall and the Bronx site of the Amadou Diallo shooting.

The political blind spot highlights the larger lack of bite in the work in the Outlaw Series. If the festival's guiding light was Kaprow, recall that he assigned his ludic, life-imitating art a moral function: "As art becomes less art, it takes on philosophy's early role as a critique of life." And zany AI was not the only influential aesthete to advocate art that, through mimicry, initiates questioning; though little of the Series could be fairly described as Adorno-esque, he too supported art that takes on the form of what it critiques. His Frankfurt School cohort Max Horkheimer makes declarations parallel to Kaprow's: "The real social function of philosophy lies in its criticism of what is prevalent (...). The chief aim of such criticism is to prevent mankind from losing itself in those ideas and activities which the existing organization of society instills into its members" ("The Social Function of Philosophy," 1939). While only a small portion of the Outlaw Series rose to the level of spur or critique, the event did perform a social function that Kaprow and the Frankfurters could thus have agreed on. To Chelsea—or 57th Street—the porous, unfunded, minimally publicized Series barely existed; but by mixing "real" artists with outlanders and naifs in an enterprise at a distance from the market, it made it difficult to remain wholly lost in the art world's existing organization.

COVER LEFT TOP-TO-BOTTOM: (LEFT) BRADLEY MCCALLUM & JACQUELINE TARRY, WITNESS: CALL BOX INSTALLATION, 53rd STREET AND LEONARD AVENUE, DECEMBER 20, 2003; (RIGHT) ADAM PENDLETON, CALL ME (NEW YORK), 2003; INSTALLATION IN A COFFEE SHOP AT ASTOR PLACE, WILLEMINGBURG, BROOKLYN. PHOTO BRADLEY MCCALLUM, BENGALA AND JANA LEO, FUND FOUNDATIONS, 2003; MATCHLINE PHOTOGRAPHY, ASTOR PLACE STARBUCKS, NEW YORK; ADAM PENDLETON, CALL ME (NEW YORK), 2003; INSTALLATION VIEW (LEFT) AT 114 FULTON STREET, NEW YORK; PHOTO BRADLEY MCCALLUM, CHRISTY GAST, LEFT MITTEN; WORK IN PROGRESS, MEDIA MEDIA, (MID) (12 X 6 X 9 FT. INFLATED), INSTALLATION VIEW, MINETTA STREET, NEW YORK, DECEMBER 16, 2003; BENGALA AND JANA LEO, FURT FOUNDATIONS, 2003; MATCHLINE PHOTOGRAPHY, ASTOR PLACE STARBUCKS, NEW YORK; COURTESY THE ARTISTS; (OPPOSITE PAGE) DENISE BURKE, MY JOY, 2003; INSTALLATION DETAILS; COURTESY WESTON GALLERY, ANTHONY CENTER FOR THE ARTS, CHANDLER.