

Social Exchange and Life

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In conclusion, in proposing to artists a common enterprise of the heart and the mind, I in fact suggest they go beyond art itself and work individually to return to real life, where the thinking human being is no longer the centre of the universe but where the universe is the centre of man.—Yves Klein¹

In *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976), the book that effectively made his name as social thinker, Jean Baudrillard states that industrialized society has overreached its limit by losing any authentic relationship to what it makes. He describes a state of post-production, or the 'end of production', which can also be described as hyperproduction, a surfeit of production so multifarious that the causal relationship between object and desire has become a naïve mystery. The greatest casualty of this is the human subject who is cast adrift on an ocean of signs that cannot be made sense of in any authentic or genuine way. This book is the basis for the Baudrillard's catchphrase 'end of the real' for which he is notorious and which caused him to be widely misread. While he ceases to be as fashionable as he was twenty years ago, his ideas continue to be relevant. Baudrillard has been criticized for not offering a viable solution to the grim image of chaos he so lovingly painted. But this is debatable. For Baudrillard, through his very

theorizing and what it discloses, suggests that the status quo cannot be overturned, although it can to some extent be understood. He as with other thinkers like Foucault observed that power was abstract and in many ways immeasurable, although once we begin to observe the places and methods by which power exerts itself we begin to avail ourselves of the power of resistance. The same can be said of some of the art that was being produced at this time. And the same can be said of some of the art that is being produced today, of which the work of Sylvia Schwenk is a part.

One of the by-products of the decade marked by John Howard's stewardship in Australia, the two terms of George W. Bush, and the advent of the so-called 'New Labour' in Britain, was a renewed anxiety on the part of artists about their sense of communicability and agency. The optimism sparked by the revolutionary fervour of 1968-72 had all been quashed by sedimented social divisions, mass social disenfranchisement, and a cynicism about social improvement that, in many quarters, amounted to despair. One hardly needs to add that such concerns are still with us. Curiously, by the late 90s, artists in astounding number began to return to the performative acts that marked the protest era of the late 1960s and early 70s. This renaissance was fundamentally rooted in the mounting resentment of artists – and indeed countless others – over circumstances they felt powerless to control. This came to a head by the early 2000s with the war in Iraq and the worldwide acceptance that the theory of climate change is also a reality.

This is the wider context for Schwenk's two interventions, *Life Preservers* and the elegantly titled *Boots for Rising Waters*, both executed in Cologne in 2008, and part of a larger series about environmental irresponsibility under the rubric, 'They paved paradise, put up a parking lot'. The visual documentation for these works combines the beautiful with the bizarre. It would have given the most die-hard Surrealist satisfaction. (It is worth mentioning however that Surrealism initially began as its own special revolution, but its relationship to women was far

less sympathetic.) We are presented with a procession of women in spectacularly strange clothing with no relation to either fashion or workability, or in footwear that clearly impeded the ability to walk. These articles are examples of the artist's hypothetical universe, of, as it were, the 'latest fashions for global warming'. I would say this is ironically put if the reality of the situation were not so grim. Just seen from their photographic documentation, what both of these works have in common is a forceful spirit of purpose. We take the oddities of these 'fashions' seriously because they seem to have followed a rigorous conception.

In *Boots for Rising Waters*, nine women were asked to model rubber gumboots with black stilt-like fixtures at their base. The performance took place on the steps of Cologne cathedral in the middle of the day, one of the most prominent sites of the city, and in full view of passers-by. Stage-managed by the artist, the models were asked to undertake the ritual of climbing the steps, sitting, putting on the boots, rising, attempting to walk, and after a while, undoing the process and descending. As the title indicates, this work has to do with global warming; the melting of the polar caps and rising sea levels that will result in untold complications to cities low on water shores from Miami to Panama city (not to mention the Netherlands much of which is located just below sea level). The boots with their exaggeratedly raised bases are a humorous, baroque theatricalization of an issue of great seriousness.

Life Preservers is underpinned by a similar environmental theme. Here four young women modeled short dresses festooned with plastic bottles paraded through the streets of Cologne. In one of those cases of artistic serendipity, it was raining on the day designated for the performance, which only added to one of the messages of the piece which was the limited percentage of clean water available, made worse by rising incidents of drought and the salination caused by erosion. The weather also necessitated that the women use umbrellas, which, since they were all red, gave them a

more striking presence in the grey urban streets. The documentation shows the women smiling, as if inviting onlookers to look on and be part of the event. These dresses, such as they were, enshrined an amusing imaginary double-bind based on the extremes of climate change: to fill them would be good for drought but would make one sink in the event of a flood, and vice versa. For all its serious and considered social intent, there is a conciliatory lightheartedness, a lack of combativeness that pervades all of Schwenk's work to date.



But lightheartedness should not be confused with irresponsibility, the disassociation from, or inability to deal with a pressing idea. Rather it is an irony that belongs to art that can easily oscillate between bitterness – the bitterness that comes from the need to speak out over an unfortunate state of affairs – and triumph, the triumph of being able to find a solution, however far-fetched. In any case these are strategies that have a long and exalted history. Seen in terms of more recent history, Schwenk's

interventions can be traced back to the theatrical exercises of one of the fathers of modern theatre, Émile Jacques-Dalcroze whose theatre in Dresden-Hellerau, was a major progenitor to Berthold Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, or 'alienation effect'. At the beginning of the twentieth century, inspired in part by the theatrical body-cultism rife amongst the German avant-garde, Dalcroze dispensed with the proscenium arch, the barrier between actor and audience that acted as the signifying threshold between reality and the theatrical imaginary. With this gone, theatre was freed from the onus of mimesis, that is, it no longer needed to give the illusion of life, but rather it could revel in its many devices and subterfuges, drawing attention to them. Brechtian alienation was intended as an antidote to a much more insidious social alienation brought about by the false consciousness that everything is what it appears to be. The exaggerations and at times heavy-handed formalizations of such theatre were used to jolt audiences out of the former lethargy.

In the same vein, Schwenk's *Boots for Rising Waters* function as a kind galvanic spark that seeks to alter the viewer's point of view, at least in some small, but lasting, way. Her work subscribes to the view, quite sensibly to my mind, that art's role in social change is not simplistically causal, like a war or a revolt. It cannot abruptly change people's minds, because it uses a force that is altogether more abstract, and for that, potentially more subversive. To say that art can change people's perspectives or can create fault lines in the surface of society, while true to some extent, is also something of a limiting perspective, since it doesn't take into account that art does not cause things to happen as such.

For the effects of art are always adventitious, whether accidental or the result of innumerable, imperceptible channels of thought and desire. Nor are the effects immediate, though they can appear sudden. This is why to invest art with prescribed agency is likely to end in disappointment, or outright failure. While defending the inclusiveness and openness of her

project, one of the targets of Schwenk's art are people whose lives appear controlled, or inhibited by urban stress. A component of the work that is visible neither in the events nor in their documentation is the ritual of getting the people to take part in her actions: the artist randomly seeks out people on the street, like an interviewer or someone soliciting donations. Schwenk also invites friends and acquaintances to participate – a keynote is that the people are largely if not wholly derived from a public external to the art world. These acts of social contact, are the crucial founding stones on which her whole project is built. For the notion of communication is one that inhabits every level of Schwenk's practice, from the early stages of the work to its static outcome within the gallery setting. These encounters culminate in the art event in which a handful of people who otherwise don't know each other form, briefly and aesthetically circumscribed, a small community.



Her acts, interventions, or events may have the pleasant air of carnival entertainment, and perhaps because of this, they have the positive capacity to work their own by stealth within the viewer's mind. What is worth emphasizing is that the most obvious message of the work, environment protection and abuse, is an issue that is topical and paramount that everyone knows about. But, as Schwenk's work implies, it is perhaps the constant presence of this issue that causes in us a certain blindness,

especially those in cities who instinctively insulate themselves from the barrage of information thrown at them every hour. These works are clever, gentle reminders of what we already know. Put another way, they tell us that we ought to remind ourselves a little more often of this knowledge.

In the 1960s artists had begun to reabsorb the radical gestures that blurred the line of art and theatre of Dada and the Bauhaus, culminating in what have come to be known as 'Happenings'. One of its main originators, Alan Kaprow, sought to redefine the boundaries between art that, as with many generations of the twentieth century avant-garde before him, was depriving art of its potential to penetrate people's lives in a fulfilling and memorable way. Schwenk's works have much in common with these experiments of melding art and society, especially insofar as they attempt to make art a community affair. Although allied to the Beat generation, Kaprow was serious in his attempts to dismantle museum-mausoleum, and to regain the kind of cohesion which, albeit a little too nostalgically, we associate with the Ancient Greeks. He insisted on maintaining the 'fluidity' between art and life; art materials could be taken from anywhere and anywhere was a potential site for art; happenings must be sited places with indistinct boundaries, and so on.² Where Schwenk's work departs from these criteria is that her work is happy also to live on elsewhere in the gallery setting, in remnants, through photographs and through the objects used in the original performances. Happenings mark the end of a radical phase to eliminate the gallery, which, today, is now identified as much as an idea as a concrete entity, and therefore exists hand in glove with the idea of art. For Schwenk, the gallery is an important final stage in the evolution of her artwork – in its multiple incarnations or lives – and the gallery also provides another context for modeling the 'fashion' items.

The thesis of the loss of self that Baudrillard described had already been to some extent mapped by Herbert Marcuse twelve years before in the provocatively titled *One-*

Dimensional Man (1964). Technology, Marcuse argues, has become so forceful and overarching as to alienate humans from their own best interests. We are the dupes of a highly complex irrationality:

The union of growing productivity and growing production; the brinkmanship of annihilation; the surrender of thought, hope, and fear to the decisions of the powers that be; the preservation of misery in the face of unprecedented wealth constitute the most impartial indictment – even if they are not the raison d'être of this society but only its by-product: its sweeping irrationality, which propels efficiency and growth, is itself irrational.³

Art, too is irrational – unmanageable uprights on the base of boots, water bottles jangling from dresses, women in umbrellas parading through streets without no apparent purpose except to show themselves off. There is a special beauty to such things, which offer reprieve to the greater irrationality that bore down on Marcuse's time and, alas, bears down on us more somberly still.

Notes

1. Yves Klein, 'Conférence à la Sorbonne', *Le dépassement de la problématique de l'art et autres écrits*, Paris: École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 2003, 127.

2. Alan Kaprow, 'Happenings are Dead: Long Live Happenings!' (1966), *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley, Berkeley and Los Angeles: California UP, 1993, 59-65.

3. Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, London: Routledge, 1964, 12.

pxx Sylvia Schwenk, *Life Preservers I*, Cologne, 2008

pxx Sylvia Schwenk, *Boots for Rising Waters, on the stairs of the Dom Cathedral I*, Cologne 2008

pxx Sylvia Schwenk, *Boots for Rising Waters, on the stairs of the Dom Cathedral II*, Cologne 2008

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