

# BOMB

## Eleanor Antin on influence, feminism, and performance, by Rachel Mason (September 8, 2014)



Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots at the Bank, Solana Beach, California, February 9, 1971, 10:00 am*. Mailed: April 26, 1971, black and white photograph. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

In past few years there have been a number of survey exhibitions focused on Antin's tremendous bodies of work. A few months ago, I happened upon a show at Diane Rosenstein Fine Art in Los Angeles, which presented a more intimate view of the artist's work.

Entitled *Passengers*, the

exhibition assembled a treasure trove of previously unseen drawings, photographs, and

videos from Antin's oeuvre of multi-faceted projects. The many drawings, photographs and videos reveal a lifelong obsession with storytelling.

Most people think of two pieces when they think of Antin's work. In *100 Boots* (1971–73) she placed 100 black rubber boots in a wide-ranging set of arrangements, from military formations to playful scenarios including dancing on a car and a mass of boots walking into a bank. The other is *Carving, A Traditional Sculpture*, from 1972, in which she photographed herself in sequence as her naked body was “carved” by dieting, a piece that became a widely reproduced symbol of the feminist art movement in the 1970s.

The project, which has had the greatest impact on me, however, is *The King of Solana Beach*. In a series of black and white photographs, Antin presents herself as a troll-like King lounging, breaking into conversations, “working the beach” for befuddled and amused bystanders. She created a lived fiction, allowing the world and all its unpredictable elements to become her stage, turning everything and everyone into

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fiction.

One of the lessons I learned from Antin's work is that an artist can make a stage out of anything and step inside of it with the simplest of methods. Her show felt like it offered a possibility: feel free to be a wanderer, create journeys, go on them, and see where they lead you. After wandering through her show, I decided to write to her and ask her some questions. The following is our correspondence.

## Style

Eleanor Antin Rachel, we can find and expand on stuff that interests us as we go on. Talking, if it's interesting, always opens up to new talking. But given your mixed media audience, it might be interesting to discuss style, which most people see as an artist's identity. I consider style to be more free-floating and available to play with, to clothe myself in—or disrobe from—to suggest and visualize my ideas, to open a whole domain of possibilities related to what interests me in the particular work I'm doing.

Let's start there or anywhere else. Just send me some questions and we'll move on. Oh, and I did look you up. Unfortunately, *Hamilton Fish* was the only one I could get to play without interruption (my computer is ancient). I thought your work looked really interesting, witty and quite beautiful. I'm looking forward to our email conversation.

**Rachel Mason** How fascinating that you bring up style right away because it wouldn't be my first inclination and I think it's a great starting-off point. It seems to me that each of your endeavors has a different beginning, asking a new question and following whatever course it needs. There is a freedom in your work to not be beholden to the constraints of any style. You work with what you need for any given project. Which brings me to my question: Do you feel that there is a pressure on artists to be branded, or to have clearly defined styles? Have you ever felt pressure to have a style, and if so, has that affected your practice? And could you give an example of how style and content function together in your work?

**EA** Style is a language, it isn't a branding iron. After doing my videotapes *The Adventures of a Nurse* and *The Nurse and the Hijackers* I realized I had left something out. Something important. The idea of "the nurse as caregiver," a role so often given to women—not given, so much as historically forced on us whether we wanted it or not, and probably the major role assigned to us by history and religion (remember, it includes the role of the mother). It was left out while I explored the contemporary pop image of the nurse: sentimental, sexy, a passive player who does the best she can in a thankless role.

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But what did nursing actually mean? What was a caregiver? I went back to the founding of nursing as a job for women by Florence Nightingale back in the mid-19th century. She invented modern nursing as a profession, as a calling, during the Crimean War. That was actually the first war to be photographed using that new invention, the camera, but differently than it would be done several years later by Mathew Brady and his associates. Roger Fenton was with the British army in the Crimea as a patriotic shield for the British government, in order to publicize the soldiers to the public back home. Some early PR. If I wanted to discover what nursing meant to Nightingale, I had to use the visual language of the time. (Here, I must confess I opted to be closer to Brady, as Fenton was a poor model of actual reality.) This required actors, costumes, and settings in order to set up anecdotal moments from the lives and deaths of the soldiers, and from Nightingale's work and experience. It meant discovering the nature of war by reenacting a particular one as it was in its own time. It was not a very important war or a very interesting one, and it was certainly a very badly fought one (as most wars are. The glamor of Thermopylae is rare in the history of war). So this work morphed into a study of war, its ambiguities, its disasters, its comedy. I had a style—19th-century reportage/narrative photography—which helped me look into the complexities of my subject, and how the idea of nursing was so ironically bound up with killing and death. To paraphrase Nightingale from my performance play/video: "If I save one soldier he will just go back and kill another. So whereas before he killed one, he will now kill two or three before perhaps dying himself. So I have become a double murderer. But ... when I see a man bleeding, I have to bandage him."

I now had sixty 19th-century photos. But the subject was hardly covered. I needed to consider war further, there was more, much more. There were the economic aspects, the political aspects, the moral (or immoral) aspects. I made life-scale masonite puppets on wheeled bases so they could be moved around. They were painted to look like the actors in the photos, in a flat style reminiscent of a Brechtian propaganda play because I have political ideas I want to argue: I write my Brechtian melodrama with hints of Oscar Wilde thrown in (he's so good at miming aristocrats) and go deeper into the issues I brought up in the photos. But now I use words and narrative for the murders, betrayals, stupidities, cruelties, romance, heroism, ironies, and absurdities of war. I speak for all the characters. About fifty of them. With the exception of Nightingale, they're all men. They're British, which requires many voices; I'm a good melodramatic actor but I suck at imitations. I just do the best I can.

At the end of the play, after the death and destruction, Queen Victoria gives Nightingale a gold medal and sends her home instead of making her a cabinet member, Minister of War, the position she desired. Did you know that in true Victorian female neurasthenic style, she took to her bed for the next fifty years? As a woman, she had no other place to go. Without my taking on an early 19th-century photographic style along with a more modern Brechtian propaganda theatre

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style, *The Angel of Mercy* would never have worked. I wouldn't have had a language to do it.

**RM** In *The Lives of Hamilton Fish* I play a male character, the editor of a newspaper. As someone who is in drag (female to male) in a film made in the present era, I would love to know what it was like for you to take on male characters and to act them out over thirty years ago. I would love for you to speak to this with regard to *The King of Solana Beach*, which you began in the early 1970s. I can only imagine that being a woman in drag at that time was a much more risky thing, or at least a very different thing, than it might be today.

**EA** I've always loved drag. It's over-the-top and I'm attracted by the fearlessness in the face of danger by people who dance on the high wire. An absurd courage keeps them from falling. They're not pathetic Humpty Dumptys. They have an extravagant beauty that I love. A fearlessness and joy in self-invention and fuck everybody else, this is me and isn't it grand.

And sure, I was scared the first few times I walked around my kingdom of Solana Beach with a beard and breasts. It was the Nixon days, the Vietnam War, but also the exploding of the old bourgeois culture. And the 1970s—contrary to media cliché—were not the selfish age of "me" but the age of the liberation of the "me" for those gutsy and astute enough to fight for it. Women's liberation, gay liberation, black liberation (which had, of course, begun much earlier but now flowered into a black cultural explosion). Solana Beach was a small community of surfers, new-agers, retirees, and Republicans, along with the occasional home-grown Nazi. It still felt like small-town America but with an easy California style.

So the day I appeared with a beard and breasts on main street, yes, I was scared. My presence was an attack on traditional Republican values of correctness. I mean, women still wore white gloves and Easter bonnets in the rich neighboring town of La Jolla. I was sticking it to them and their bourgeois culture. But even I was shocked at the ease with which people either took me in stride or politely ignored me like a bad smell. A convertible crowded with surfers screeched to a halt. "Hey, who are you?" they yelled. I bowed courteously. "I'm the King of Solana Beach," I answered politely. "Don't you think Solana Beach deserves a King?" "Cool," they shouted, waving at me as they sped away. I began to realize that if I were a tall person and not a small person, they might have considered me dangerous. But I wasn't threatening. I bowed to people, doffed my cap, kissed ladies' hands. I certainly looked more like Charlie Chaplin than Charlie Manson. David, my husband, called me a dwarf policeman in my flowing cape and boots. Now that I think about it so many years later, maybe I was a hobbit. What I was was different—an outsider perfectly comfortable in alien country. And as the days went by, I began to notice that the only people who said hello and talked to me and remembered me were the old people (maybe they didn't see so

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well) and the young people who were usually stoned. The responsible adults who had jobs and took their kids to school and went to church on Sunday and baked cookies for little league, those younger and middle-aged respectable adults merely ignored me. I shouldn't have been in their landscape so I wasn't. They erased me.

## History



Eleanor Antin, from *The King of Solana Beach*, 1974. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

**RM** I'm interested in your tendency to step into other times in history and to create worlds as you do in installations, plays, photographs, films, videos, and fiction. The re-making and re-imagining of history is so important in your work and you take such a specific vantage point. I wonder if you can expand on that in any way.

**EA** I think much of this question was considered when I discussed my time travelling to the Crimean War in the mid-19th century. Of course, I enjoy time travel. Sometimes I think I'm in the tradition of the Victorian woman dreaming of the big world out there but stuck in the prison of female life. Maybe like Emily Dickenson or Emily Brontë. Of course, I'm not stuck anywhere and my work forces me to travel, though frankly, I don't find any place that exists today as seductive as the past, except perhaps for the giant redwoods in Northern California and I'm not being totally honest here, because walking in that forest is walking into the past. My trip to the Jedediah Smith National Forest on the California/Oregon border was one of the most amazing moments of my life.

**RM** Similarly, your recent book, *Conversations with Stalin*, transports the reader to a different era in America, specifically in New York. I had to wonder if you were you writing from experience, describing your own life growing up in New York—of course with the exception of meeting Stalin! What is fact and what is fiction?

**EA** I've done a lot of readings from *Conversations with Stalin*. People often ask me whether my adventures in the book are true or not. But what does that question mean? Yes, they were my experiences. Yes, my mother worked me to the bone in the family hotel business. Yes, I had those bad boyfriends...lots of other bummers too; I had a talent for finding them. But you start a story that you remember happened to you a long time ago and it opens up to perhaps become another story or maybe not,

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maybe it just opens to reveal more of itself or maybe it suggests something entirely different but related in some subconscious way that surprises you but you have to go with it. Are you stepping into your previous footsteps? Who remembers? The work begins to take over. You remember another fact. But maybe it happened during another time and in another place but it pops up here. Go with it. What are you going to do, stop the flow to interrogate yourself? And when the chapter is over, if it sounds right, it's right, and it happened. And even if it didn't happen that way, it must have been that way. You have the words on the page to prove it.

## Acting



Eleanor Antin, *The Angel of Mercy*, 1976. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

**RM** Following your fantastic description of the staging and decisions behind the photographic process in *The Angel of Mercy*—and no, I had absolutely no idea that Florence Nightingale stayed bedridden for the last fifty years of her life!—I have a new question, about craft. You clearly think a lot about the skill and craft of acting. I wonder if you can address how your training in acting prepared you for the work that you do? Had you had some huge "break" as

an actor early on, do you think you would still have pursued art? Or were you already ready to leave the field and head into the uncharted waters of your hybrid practice.

**EA** Interesting question. Who knows what might have been. I studied acting with Tamara Daykarhanova, a Russian actress who had studied with Constantin Stanislavski. I think I was pretty bad then. I was trying to find emotional truth and it kept eluding me. Occasionally, though, it seemed to come—usually as tears. I thought that was truth, honest emotion. When I became an artist, I stopped worrying about truth, feeling, emotions. I wrote and acted in plays for my ballerina self, Eleanora Antinova, which were filled with sorrow and comedy, pathos and absurdity, reality and dream, and in that mess of possibility I found her truth which was also my truth.... There's that word again. Sometimes it makes sense. Sometimes it doesn't.

Craft? What's that? I don't believe in rules or the right way to do things. There are many right ways. An artist does what she needs to do to do what she wants to do. That's all the craft anybody needs. It sounds so deceptively simple, doesn't it? It isn't.

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## Feminism

**RM** Where do you see feminism today? So many of your pieces from the 1960s and '70s entered into the canon of what we think of as feminist art. At least that is how I first learned of your work. What do you think are the issues that today's emerging female artists face? And since you are an authority at this point, but are still very active, is there an experience that you can describe which sheds light on the situation as you may have seen it change for women in the arts? I also realize that the category of "women" is not so simple because it is subdivided into many categories within it. so even though that is an overgeneralization, I would still like for you to offer any thoughts at all.

**EA** I'm a passionate feminist and a feminist artist, but I am also a conceptual artist, a performance artist, a video artist. Remember those were the days when we were inventing the new world of art, liberating it from the standard painting-and-sculpture designations. And feminist artists were in the front lines. Though not all of my works were thought of as feminist. I even have works that embarrassed me because they made me feel like a fink. So there were several earlier works that I never told anyone about, never showed to anyone for years. They didn't seem communal or supportive of women. For instance, I had one work called *Four Transactions*. It consisted of two encounters and two withdrawals. They were done in secret in a women's group of about eight to ten artists in San Diego. We used to meet every other week to make art together. We weren't into consciousness raising, we were into making art together. Let's say one day we'd bring in everyday materials and throw them in the middle of a large floor and start to play with them. People added materials—ropes, wood, paper, whatever—and a large sculpture began to take shape, very interesting too, as people might make secret entrances to hide in, others hid parts they didn't like with other materials, overburdened sections caved in and the sculpture changed. We didn't talk to each other, we were too busy doing, but we could make sounds or song pitches, and eventually, maybe after forty minutes or so we would find our way to an ending. It was fascinating how we all knew when the work was finished. Nobody said anything, it was just over. Afterward we talked about what had happened and what we made, then we trashed the materials and the work was gone. Well, my secret *Transactions* piece consisted of an action I would take during each meeting that nobody knew about. They were by and large simple actions but they could have had consequences. Before each meeting, I had the withdrawal or encounter that I planned for the day, signed and dated by a notary public. "Withdrawal 1" read:

At the February 6 meeting any conversation I initiate will be addressed to persons from their rear, never frontally or from the side. I can respond to comments or questions initiated by others regardless of position. If I initiate a conversation from the wrong position I shall leave the meeting immediately.

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Sounds simple, but I was known to be pretty talkative. So I found myself constantly moving around the room to be behind people because just walking out on the group would have been both confusing and hurtful to them.

"Encounter 1," which I performed during the next session, was actually much more dangerous:

At the February 20 meeting, I shall take on the job of ombudsman. This will necessitate my pointing out to each member of the group, and in any manner I choose, a particular failing she displays in relation to the others. These may be of an ephemeral sort such as personal bugginess taken out on someone else or of a more serious nature like, say, a rip-off of the entire group. I must always keep in mind that my statements are intended to bring about more satisfactory behavior from the others and are never to be used for egoistic purposes of my own. I must complete these 8 tasks before the group normally disperses otherwise I must keep the session going by whatever means I can until I complete them.

(Wow! That one was rough.)

Years later, when I was choosing the works to include in my retrospective at the LA County Museum of Art with curator Howard Fox and the art critic who would be writing an essay for the catalogue, Lisa Bloom, I showed these secret works to them as if I were confessing something. Much to my surprise, they both immediately loved them and Howard included several of those pieces in the exhibition, including *Four Transactions*. Almost thirty years after the fact, they read the piece in a more complex way. They thought I was asserting my independence, my own self, while being part of a community. Their feminism was more sophisticated than my earlier one. They believed that my instincts to hold onto my sense of self by working secretly was my way of liberating myself from the conformity of the group, even a sympathetic group.

As far as being successful, no artist really believes she is successful enough. As one of my paper dolls says in *The Nurse and the Hijackers* video, "It's never enough." And tastes change, the discourse changes. How does one stay relevant and interesting while continuing to do one's own thing? How does one keep moving? Because art is a vocation, not merely a career. Once you've been converted, once you've been called, you have to keep working or die. I've said before, the description of an artist is somebody who never takes a vacation.

As for young women artists, the scene is very difficult now because it's so contaminated by money. But nevertheless it is really so much more open. We had to fight for our place in the sun. You still have to fight, probably because there are so

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many more artists around. Somehow, there didn't seem to be that many in the old days. Hey, I'm partially responsible. I was a professor of art at UCSD for almost thirty years. I had a lot of students. Some of them were terrific and are doing very well now. Some were terrific and aren't doing well. Luck, character, there are so many circumstances that play a role in this. I remember an American artist who lived in Istanbul. He had a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to come to New York and do a show at the Fischbach Gallery, a hot gallery at the time. There was a violent snowstorm and only five people came to the opening. He was a good artist. I never saw him in New York again and I don't remember his name.

## The Internet



Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots Cross Herald Square*. 35th Street and Broadway, New York City, May 13, 1973 8:10 am. Mailed: June 6, 1973. Black and white photograph. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

**RM** *100 Boots* was originally conceived as a mail art project. Could you imagine *100 Boots* would have had the same potency had it been a web-based project? What do you think of the way artists intersect with the Internet? Many artists are now able to engage with the public online. For instance, I had an experience where I wrote a song about a Chechen military leader and it went viral in Chechnya! It was astonishing to experience a reaction from people that I truly have no connection to.

**EA** Snail mail was a very different experience from the Internet. A picture postcard came to your mailbox and it was an object you held in your hand. It represented the place where I took *100 Boots*, and after recording that place, sent it out to you to pick up in your hand and look at before perhaps slipping it into a desk drawer or taping it to the refrigerator or maybe just throwing it away. The Internet is not a place. It's a great void, a black hole, from which you can call up an incredible amount of disorganized information. It's interactive and can reach millions rather than being something quietly slipped into a small mailbox by a mailman with a big leather bag on his shoulder. The often ragged edges of the card suggests something of the places the card itself had been before it came to your place. On the Internet, you delete without touching. Germ free. Life free. Sure, you can print it out but that's just an ugly piece of paper; perhaps if you're sensitive you realize it's a bit of stolen property from a tree that was once standing in a real place somewhere. Of course, you can make artworks for the Internet, people are doing it all the time on Facebook, inventing new selves and characters, inventing new truths. The invisible talking to the invisible.

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## Documentation

**RM** I am curious about the role of photography in your work and how the photographer factors into the performances. Who did you recruit to photograph? Were they hired guns or friends? I wonder because whenever I look at the work of artists like Joan Jonas I notice that her early work was documented by photographers like Paula Court or Babette Mangold for instance. Since photographs are all we have of many of the great early works of dance and performance, to me, the photographers become a central part of the equation.

**EA** My photographs are not documentation. They are inventions. Artworks. I am responsible for the sets, the lighting, the actors' poses, costumes, makeup, story, style. I work with friends or they become my friends but their job is to realize my vision according to my directions. Sure, when an actor puts on a costume and walks onto a set, he adds something but then I chose him for that something, though I admit to being occasionally surprised. The kind of photos you mentioned in relation to a Jonas's performances, they are documentation for people who aren't there of a work that is being experienced by an audience in real time and space. I am responsible for the content of my live performances but not with those pictures, though I hope they are faithful reproductions of what was happening on stage. I am concerned with my artwork in a particular time and space attended by an audience disinterested in the documentation being produced for the people who aren't there. They are concerned only with their own "here and now." These different types of photographs are as different as night and day.