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Eleanor Antin

Pioneer of conceptual art, visual artist Eleanor Antin is still avant-garde.

From August 1st to November 1st this year, "The Original Copy: Photography of Sculpture, 1839 to Today" was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

The exhibition presented a critical examination of the intersections between photography and sculpture. It featured more than three hundred major works by Eugene Atget, Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Bruce Nauman... avant-garde Eleanore Antin.

The work displayed by Eleanor Antin was "The Last Seven Days, 1972/1999, from CARVING: A TRADITIONAL SCULPTURE". Through that work, Eleanor discovered anew what could be the object of sculpture. She carved herself and materialized all the processing of her carving. The work became representative of artwork in American art history of the 20th Century.

Eleanor Antin, a film maker, works also as an artist, painter and photographer. She was a member of professional theater and performed as a ballerina. She cast herself as a ballerina in a film she directed and produced. In this film Eleanor portrayed a drunken, vagabond ballerina whose traveling companion was a bum. At that time, in the early 70's, she also performed onstage as a negro ballerina.

She was the first feminist avant-garde artist to command center stage of the art world at that time. Her work was the very first to herald in the genre conceptual art. Most of all, when the museum displayed her artwork and her concept were accepted as a art, she turned to another outlet. Creating the reality of our lives as a work of art is Eleanor's interest. She has been working as an avant-garde artist for fifty years.

I met Eleanor Antin on June 17th in San Diego, CA. When I entered her studio, she smiled brightly at me and said, like an old friend, "would you like to have a beer?" We talked endlessly until the sun that had risen over the hill top of her desert perch had sunk into the distant Pacific.

Heekyung Ahn: This morning I went to the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art.

Eleanor Antin: In La Jolla?

H.A. : Yes, I found your words at Marcos Ramirez Erre's artwork, "Crossroad". It was originally at the border in Tijuana, Mexico. There are several signs that lead to the world's greatest artists.

"San Diego 20mile"- "The idea of fame is repulsive. I wanted to save the world. - Eleanor Antin"

And just above your words, there is Marcel Duchamp's : "Paris 9160km"- "The only works of art produced by America are its plumbing fixtures and its bridges.- Marcel Duchamp".

E.A.: (laughing)

H.A.: What is the meaning of your words?

E.A. : The meaning? Okay, I'm still faithful to the image of the avant-guard that I had back then when I started working seriously as an artist. That would have been in the late sixties. I've since taught at the University of California at San Diego for thirty years, all the while being a full time artist. I spent my whole life making art. That's what I do, make art. In those days, your art was not related to how much it fucking cost for someone to buy it. The eighties brought money into the picture. And fame. It's not that I'm a purist. Art is the way we attempt to conceptualize reality and all of its possibilities. It is too important to have it tied up with money.

I think what happened was, and still is, a simplistic reading of Andy Warhol. I remember all the exciting shows he would do before he was 'THE' Andy Warhol. He was a well known pop artist, with his own slant on things when he did the electric chairs, car accidents, the flowers, consumer goods, etc. It was later on, when his least interesting work caught on with the media and he started doing movie stars and going around with all sorts of rich people and making dumb statements, that he became an icon for a more superficial, degraded form of art making. I think that idea of him, which he perversely encouraged, titillated the new collectors, kid artists, ad men, etc. I think they enjoyed "being bad", like a punk rock group breaking their instruments all over the place.

Decades aren't neat. They're loosely drawn. Different things go on simultaneously. So the scene always changes and grows into something else. What happened to the art world? I guess sometime around the 90's it became a more international scene. It no longer mattered whether you came from Addis Ababba or Seoul or New York. Artists all over began working in what came to be known as "the international style". Artists wanted to get out of their provincial scenes and join the modern world and enjoy money and fame and good times. So young artists around the world are working with post modern conceptual art ideas along with many, non traditional art materials. There's certainly a lot of attractive, sometimes interesting, work around. However, it feels like everybody is waiting for something new, more complex. It's been the same old discourse for the last two decades.

H.A.: Now, many young artists want to be stars. The art market rushes to them and it causes much confusion. I have interviewed the greatest artists. They all have their center.

E.A.: Center. That is a very nice word for it. Remember though that it takes time for a young person to find her/his voice; their centers. Also in the 80s and 90's, the scene got so fast and ferocious that when it spit people out, who the hell had time to find a center? You do, after all, have to find yourself a place in the world, as well as in your self. When you find your way of working, then you can survive.

Those of us who are older and haven't dropped out, we are in touch with our centers already, so we can survive the art world, which is nasty and mean. Sure the art world can be fun and exciting. It has done well by me, but I know how nasty it is. The art world's attention span only lasts five minutes. The kids, the young ones, if they haven't had the time to develop as artists and to find their own voices, what I think you're calling their "centers", these kids may have been selling works, often for lots of money. When the scene changes in four or five years, nobody wants them anymore. They were bright and new and young, once. Now they don't know where to go or what to do. They collapse. Most of them drop out. It's terrible. They have as short a career span as athletes.

H.A.: They should stay away from the dealer?

E.A.: Well you can't really do that, because the dealers give you a place to exhibit and sometimes a way to support yourself. You have to somehow work out a way of surviving, both in the world and in yourself. Unfortunately, the dealers come rushing in to the newest thing, hoping to find the new Rauschenberg before he's the new Rauschenberg, and then before you know it, they see something else and they're gone with the wind.

H.A.: Tell me your story. Did you have a similar experience?

E.A.: Well no, you see, I came out of an earlier time, out of the avant-garde. We never thought our work was related to money. We supported ourselves as best we could. I was a university professor. Others painted houses, whatever. I know it sounds very bizarre now, but we were making art; maybe we were naive but we wanted to change the world.

H.A.: I want to ask you about "100 Boots". When they came out into the world, the reaction was sensational!

E.A.: We moved here to San Diego from New York in 1968. San Diego was just a little navy town then; there was hardly any culture. But it was a beautiful semi-desert with the Pacific ocean on one side and mountains and deserts on the other, with Mexico on the south end and Los Angeles north up the coast. Now, it retains some of its original beauty but it's been dreadfully marred by over development.

I was going back and forth to New York at the time, to show in these small galleries, alternative spaces we used to call them. Now they've become big operations. But in those days, they were little non commercial galleries protecting their art vision.

"Gain Ground" was the first one of these places. Robert Newman was the artist/director. This is where Vito Acconti had his first show, and other artists as well. I was flying back to NY all the time. One day, on the plane back to San Diego, I decided to do a piece that I wouldn't have to go into NY to do, but I had no place else to go that I knew of. My connections were all in NY. I didn't have LA connections yet.

I thought, everybody gets mail. I'll use the U.S. Postal System, but I needed a hero to carry a long work forward, to make it continuous. "100 BOOTS" came to me in a dream. I paid \$200 for 100 boots, that's 50 pairs of big black men's rubber boots, at the army navy surplus store. Artist friends shared their personal mailing lists with me and I put together about 1000 people around the world. But, it was mostly people and institutions in the U.S. that I sent to - cheaper than international mail.

I didn't realize how taken up with the piece I would become. With the narrative trajectory... life in the suburbs, and then escaping, and traveling through the west. And it got longer and longer with more and more images. It continued being sent through the mails for almost 3 years. It was a pictorial narrative with real life time and space intervals. I continued placing my boots onto the California landscape and sending their photographic images out into the world. I was getting

lots of mail from people, thanking me. Then a year and a half into the piece, MOMA asked if I would do a show of 100 BOOTS at the museum. Remember now, conceptual art is everywhere. Not so, in those early days. More traditional people would ask what is this? Why are you sending me these images? So I knew 100 BOOTS would have to go into a museum to officially become art. But it was still early in the piece. "I am sorry; I am not ready yet," I said to MOMA. So they waited and then I walked into the Museum of Modern Art with a one woman exhibition. Not bad for a kid artist. Afterward, I don't know if I had talked about this in any interview, but the Corcoran museum invited me to take the 'Boots' to Washington DC. But for me, the piece was over when it officially became art in a museum. It would no longer be cutting edge. However, in those days of the Vietnam War, we were always marching on Washington to protest the war. This was another special meaning that the boots conveyed. They evoked everyman. They were lost souls in the modern world, but some of the images were specifically military. Washington, D.C. is built in concentric circles. I made a battle plan. Every day we would be in a different place and by the end of the show we would end up at the capitol steps. It would obviously be viewed as a protest against the war. But you know, passionate about the awfulness of the war as I was, I didn't want to do another 100 BOOTS piece. I was ready to move on. As a young feminist, I was interested in exploring my body and so I did "CARVING: A Traditional Sculpture" later that summer.

H. A.: I see similar political power in your new work like "The Last Days of Pompeii". And, you show 21Century America as a dangerous empire. When I saw those photos, I thought she went to Roma! But, when I went to La Jolla in California I thought, "she is such a genius, she turns over the meaning again and again." I understood you showed us the power of the U.S. in the present century and she has a similar fate as Rome.

E.A.: The American empire is in a state of decline. I don't like empires. I hate all empires. My comparison between the United States and ancient Rome is not far fetched. I do think La Jolla is a lot like Pompeii. You know, Pompeii was where rich Romans went during the summer to get out of mosquito ridden Rome. Later, they retired there. Here in San Diego, they used to joke that La Jolla was where senior citizens brought their parents to retire. It was a very conservative town; it's a little different now, more modern and liberal. But like all of California, its situation is dire. It is basically at the edge of the sea and the cliffs are eroding right over a major earthquake faults. We could have anything here. Who knows? An earthquake or a, tsunami; the only unlikely dangerous thing is a volcano.

I always described our affluent California communities as places where the beautiful people live the good life on the verge of annihilation. All of my images are different aspects of this allegory of impending disaster that lies waiting just around the corner. Remember, for those that can afford this kind of life, it is luxurious, fun, glamorous, empty, and unfortunately based upon the labour of other, less fortunate peoples. If capitalism were not so seductive, it wouldn't be so successful. It's a seductive dream for many people around the world who can't afford to live it. They watch movies and dream of that life. It is very nice to eat pomegranates and lie on silken pillows looking out at the tranquil sea. I am perfectly delighted to see the American empire go "fuck itself". At the same time, we have to acknowledge that the Roman life, like the affluent American life, is tantalizing and immensely attractive.

Shhh.. I'll tell you a secret. That life is more seductive to those that don't live it than to those that do. The emptiness of such a life does not actually make people happy, neither Romans nor Americans.

H.A.: Who is the woman in the wheelchair who appears in so many of these images?

E.A.: She is from a different time than the others. She is from the 19th century and represents the British and French colonial empires, the major ones that came before ours. When the disaster strikes, she is finally standing. I suppose the allegory then becomes a nightmare of liberation. She came to me in a poetic insight. I don't even know how or from where. I tell stories and I make images and the images tell the stories. If I were able to say, "This means this and that means that," then why bother making the image at all? There is something profound that the image adds to the story that you are telling. This is the story these works are telling ...the story of our disintegration.

H.A.: I thought that this Roman series looks like a movie.

E.A.: Myself, I think of them as silent movies.

H.A.: Yes! Yes, I thought that, but at the same time, very loud.

E.A.: Yes, but there is no orchestra there.

H.A.: Why did you pick photography?

E.A.: You know, I have been working with photography for half a century. The Roman photos are based upon 19th century salon paintings, which celebrated the era of colonial empires. Belgium, Britain, France, Holland, Spain, they were

all cutting off pieces of the world. They loved seeing themselves as the new Romans, like my own nutty government, our mad military, does today.

H.A.: Did you write out a scenario?

E.A.: I made lots of sketches and also used poetry from the great antique poets, like Homer.

H.A.: How did your players act?

E.A.: I like casting. I get a lot of ideas from casting calls. There are a lot of actors here in Southern California. Isn't Hollywood in our backyard? In L.A, every waiter is an unemployed actor, but sometimes I see a person in the street whom I want to audition. I am fearless. I say, "Hello, I am an artist...would you like to be an ancient Trojan or an ancient Roman?" These young guys, these big hunks, they love it.

It's very much like making a movie, except nobody ever talks, except me telling them what to do. I have to get from them what I want to get, what I see is there, even if they don't know it. And they have to be still. When I say to an actor, "This is your dead baby here, and you are holding the little corpse in your hands," what she is giving me is her own transformation of my idea.

I choose the actors because their faces and their bodies suggest to me something that I need, and at the same time they add something which is their own. Like if I chose you to be a character in my pictures, and I had you in make up and costume and I said, "go over there because that soldier is going to say something dangerous," And then I say "Good, but I would like you to bend forward slightly to the left, away from him. Maybe you don't want to hear him."

H.A.: This "Artist's Studio" came to Korea. I wonder how many people really understood what it represents.

E.A.: It is about representation. Out of the real woman, the artist is trying to materialize his idea. It shows women in the traditional role of muse, of model, with the man as artist. That was the standard, as we know, until the 20th century changed the name of the game. That photograph is loosely based upon a 19th century painting.

People often ask how I got the sculpture to look like the girl. I did it the other way around. I got the sculpture first and then found a girl we could make up to look like the sculpture. Though it was very difficult to make a healthy American girl look like that 19th century sculpture. Healthy American girls look athletic, strong, they stand straight, the actor's body was more like this...Š (Posturing like an athlete)... It was hard to make her body speak that subtle second language, the subversive language of service and self effacement that the 19th century sculpture represents as the ideal female.

HA Why did you send it to Korea?

E.A.: That was the picture that the curator asked for.

H.A.: Also, That one is the traditional woman's role.

EA: Maybe that's what he wanted to remind people of.

H.A.: I know that you had meditated for a long time.

E.A.: I used to be a 'Zenny'

H.A.: What is that?

E.A. Insider slang for a Zen Buddhist. I used to go to the Zen center regularly for about two and a half years.

H.A.: Why did you stop?

E.A.: Two reasons... One is I had a very busy showing schedule besides a busy teaching one, and there was just so much time I had to be 'perfect' so instead of meditating, I went to the gym.

Eventually as I went deeper into the practice, I began to understand that you have to give up your intense pleasure when you are very happy. Just as you do not fall into the depths of despair during the bad times, you go for the middle ground at all times. At least you try. It's not at all easy.

H.A. : The Middle Way?

E.A.: Yes. The Middle Way. And, I realized I couldn't do that. I feel things very intensely. When I am unhappy things can get pretty bad, but when I'm happy life is great. I thought, I can't do that. I can't give up the pleasures of happiness to prevent the miseries of despair. 'Fuck it', I never went back.

I love Zen, I love the stories. It's kind of an atheist religion and I come from a family of atheists. I'm not into god stuff, but I love the stories of those wise, crazy monks. I guess religion is just not for me, even one I admire.

H.A.: I want to ask you one more thing about CARVING: A Traditional Sculpture". Could you explain it?

E.A.: The Whitney Museum invited me to be in their sculpture Biannual. I thought of them as a traditional museum, because they separated painting and sculpture into two different Biannual. I did 'CARVING' as a traditional Greek sculpture, only instead of marble, I used my own body since women's bodies are always being forced into particular modes of fashion and beauty. In the traditional Greek sculpture, the artist carves all the way around, which is the same way you lose weight when you diet. You lose a little here and a little there, you don't lose it all at once in one place.

Traditionally, whether in marble or wood, the sculptor would carve all around until the perfect form had been achieved. Michelangelo said, "you can only make out of the marble what is already there." So I thought, "oh well I can starve myself for a very long time." I can try, but there is just so much that I can get out of this "marble" that is my body of flesh and blood. I will always have breasts, curves. I will always be short. I will never look like today's ideal, a super model.

So like Michelangelo, I stopped when the perfect body had been achieved, that is, whatever my body could transform into. Then I sent it to the Whitney, which turned it down. "It is not sculpture," they said, "it is conceptual art." That was in 1972. In 2000, when the Whitney had its big millennium show of American Art of the 20th century, they exhibited that work.

H.A.; I think the Whitney was very brave. They liberated sculpture from solid form.

E.A.: (laughing) 30 years later than they could have.

H.A.: Because you are avant-guard. What is your next project?

E.A.: I just finished a memoir and now my agent is negotiating the publication. The book is called 'Conversations with Stalin' (confessions of a red diaper baby). That is what they called us kids whose parents were communists. It is 23 chapters of very funny, dark, sometimes terrible stories of growing up in an immigrant, communist, Jewish family in New York City in the late 40's and 50's.

H.A.: That's very interesting?

E.A.: I want to make some more drawings. Dancing Stalins, the genial old murderer flying cheerfully in the clouds like a Tiepolo. Funny and ridiculous. What will happen after? I don't know.

H.A.; Your endless passion is so beautiful.

E.A.: Because I'm avant garde, that means I have to stay on the edge at all times... and just hope that I won't fall over.

There are Indonesian puppets standing on wine bottles in Eleanor's living-room. These puppets are laughing and weeping. Before I met Eleanor Antin, I mentioned the Korean street puppets playing through e-mail. She was interested in Korean people's old folk. In Korean Mask and puppet, we can find laughing and weeping face. I could find same facial emotion in Eleanor's artwork. Eleanor said, she loves that ironic emotion. She said that is the Yiddish tradition among those who are living with feelings of nostalgia toward Trotsky and Stalin. She, who loves lower class people's realistic story, is an avant-garde artist. Ironic double meaning is the key that she has conceptualized in our world for 50 years.