



EXCHANGE RADICAL MOMENTS!

Live Art Festival

23.9.2011 – Rob Andrews – Bitola Clean

<http://11moments.org/rob-andrews/>

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INTERVIEW #16: This time we have an appointment with Rob Andrews. Rob is an artist from New York, USA. He will do his piece „Bitola Clean“ in Bitola, Macedonia as part of the Exchange Radical Moments! Live Art Festival. Hi Rob, where are you at the moment?

Rob Andrews

Good morning resp. afternoon Silvia. I'm in Brooklyn, New York – waiting for the sun to rise. So nice to have this opportunity to chat!

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Yes, the new technology makes it easy to exchange :-). Can you put in one sentence what your work is about?

Rob Andrews

My work is about storytelling. It's about the stories that are visceral and that we try so hard to keep hidden: the blood, spit, and the sweat.

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In your short biography you write: „He steals from tradition, religious practice, and from collaborators and gets their stories wrong on purpose in order to make them right in another way.“ How did your interest in rites, traditions, religions evolve? And how have they become the focus of your art work?

Rob Andrews

As my performance practice grew over the last 10 years, I found myself searching for stories. My own life and my own stories seemed too ... immediate. Too narrow to provide the impetus for others to cross boundaries. So I tried to go deeper – into our spiritual DNA. To mine the territories that we share. The prayers that even the faithless whisper in desperation. The hunger that we have to define something larger – in order maybe to just see each other in a less threatening way. This kind of storytelling goes beyond the personal narrative, to me. Which is what brings me to these shared stories. The ritual. The religious. It's there to invert, to challenge, and to embrace.



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In "Bitola Clean" a large group of shrouded figures will stand in a public space, with exposed feet. You will clean their feet from sunrise to sunset, and the public will be invited to do the same. How much does the fact that they are shrouded, affect the reaction of the people? Would it be different if they could see who is under the veil?

Rob Andrews

It would be profoundly different. I've been staging cleaning actions for a while. I've cleaned myself. Cleaned others. Had others clean me and collaborators. And the connection and vulnerability that is implied in eye-to-eye face-to-face contact is somehow too easy for this piece. If you are able to look into someone's eyes, you give yourself (and are given) permission to establish and reaffirm the narratives that are in place already – cultural, sexual, racial, emotional. The shrouded figures have a more totemic significance. I hope to ask would-be participants – what can you gain from cleaning another human's feet? – from sublimating yourself to them, even if you can't access who you think that they are. What do you lose in this faceless exchange? What do you stand to gain?

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When you think about a new work do you do research on the religious background of the country where you are planning to work? How does research influence your decisions concerning your work?

Rob Andrews

Absolutely. I have become an eager student of Macedonia. And here is when I humbly thank Biljana Isijanin who has been a guide and collaborator for months. That said – I'm deeply looking forward to touching down in Bitola, and walking. This is how I relate to a space, a place and people. I have to pass through the place and breathe there to really understand it. Bitola is rich, with an established and potent artistic life, and my interaction with its people and its cultural life must be with bowed head. Enter as a student, leave a student, and the performance will remain open beyond the time of its physical life. Place and space is everything. Ah – here comes the sun. Good morning from Brooklyn!

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Have you ever been confronted with fundamentalist expressions from the audience? How is your experience with the public anyway? How do they react?



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Rob Andrews

This is THE question really. In my public work – and I have another strain of work that involves placing myself as the minotaur in public spaces as a sort of impotent and threatening figure, chained and essentially lost – that has absolutely brought the "worst" out of people.

Meaning: if an audience doesn't get what they think they want or deserve from a public act, they become the storytellers. The shift is incredibly palpable. For instance, when I cleaned the gallery Exit Art for three months with a toothbrush (over 40 toothbrushes actually) I was kicked, screamed at, pushed over – all because I wouldn't verbally engage with an audience. They felt they deserved a response, and when denied became the storytellers. This is where the art lives I think. When stories meet and then mesh. Fundamentalist. Hm. If I understand the term correctly: aren't we all fundamentalist in some way? It comes down to where the sacred lives in you. For some people it's in unexpected places.

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I think all of us believe that we possess the truth or at least know what is right and wrong. But if everybody does so, who can be right at all? Back to your performance: it is a very personal thing to touch somebody – especially if he or she is a stranger. How do you experience that?

Rob Andrews

This is how we learn. This is how we relate. Person to person. Spirit to spirit. I'm never sure what to make of the notion that we've lost intimacy as a human culture. In a sense I think our intimacies are just different, translated into another form. But as an artist I feel it's my obligation to confront people with the body. The stark reality of the fact that this is our container, and that the many extensions we have fashioned for it are just that. My experience with strangers changed my life! Erased me as a person and an artist! Allowed me to start from scratch. I'm a teacher in New York City as well, and my connection to strangers is informed by this act as well. I have thankfully as an artist and person created a practice that is about learning from others. Accepting their energy. Touching. Being touched. Breathing.

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It seems to me that the rite of cleaning, has a strong analogy to meditation practices. When you perform, do you reach a different state of mind?

Rob Andrews

I often describe the work as meditative, but with the qualification that I'm not a dedicated or serious student of the truly beautiful practice. I like to think of it in terms of structure. I order the disorder inside myself with structured action, and invite others to do the same with me.



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My sense – and not to be too abstract here – is that we humans are doors. Just that. A door is nothing and everything. A structure and an emptiness. We imply higher states of consciousness - can maybe even see it. Or maybe our existence implies a higher state. I can't say that I've ever achieved anything other than a vista or perch from which to see what's possible. But perhaps only possible in oblivion. Maybe the simple answer is: in performance, I often do not feel fear, which is the dominant emotion in my life. This act of reaching out, of opening the channel, eliminates fear and this feels "higher" in some way.

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When was the last time that time stood still for you? Can you tell us about it?

Rob Andrews

I walk four miles to work every morning, and the process feels very much like a shedding of the psychic weight I accumulate. There is a point during every walk when my feet are the ground, my hands are the air, my breath is the wind, and my eyes are what I see rather than what I see with. Time stops during this process. Also every time my son or daughter learn something – that special moment when they realize that something is different, something has changed and you can actually see the tumblers falling in their heads. There is nothing more humbling, flattening, or timeless than that!

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Thank you for sharing that with us! Where can we find more information about your work online?

Rob Andrews

It has been an absolute pleasure! Please look at my website:

<http://www.andrewsautomatic.com/> or my gallery (my solo show opens on October 22 upcoming if you're in NYC): <http://www.englishkillsartgallery.com/>

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Thank you for the interview and good luck in Bitola and of course for your opening in NYC.