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Monday, February 04, 2008

Art Space Talk: Mark Jenkins

Mark Jenkins is an American artist most widely known for the street installations he creates using packing tape. His work has been featured in various newspapers and magazines including *Time Out: New York*, *The Washington Post*, *The Independent*, the book *Hidden Track: How Visual Culture is Going Places*, and on the street art blog *Wooster Collective*.

Mark has shown indoors in galleries in the U.S., Europe and Brazil and is represented by Lazarides gallery in London. He maintains the website www.tapesculpture.org and teaches his tape casting process in workshops in the cities he visits. He was born in Fairfax, VA and currently lives in Washington DC.

Brian Sherwin: Mark, it is my understanding that you have not had any formal training in art and that your interest in installation sculpture occurred after you viewed a Juan Munoz exhibit at the Hirshhorn Museum in 2001. Why did Munoz's work inspire you? Can you recall how you felt upon viewing that exhibit?

Mark Jenkins: I did take a Humanities & the Arts class in college and studied a few artists, Bellmer for instance. Munoz was the first live introduction I had to figurative installation sculpture. Actually, prior to this show, "installation" didn't have a meaning to me in an artistic context. I'd just thought of sculptures as stand alone objects that caved in on themselves, not something to use to affect space around it. So for me it was a radical shift in the way I saw the use of art objects.

BS: You have a strong background in music. How does music influence the installations that you create? Is there a connection? Does one form of expression feed off of the other-- a unity of creativity? Do you ever combine the two?

MJ: The connection isn't so direct, but more in the way I see the people receiving it. A good live show for me is a lot like my street work in that it causes people to react, interact, or even get on stage. As for a combination, I've played around with making the Trashers make pig sounds, or with the G.R.L. we were working on having Jesus 2.0 call out lucky lotto numbers to passersby, but these ideas didn't/haven't made it to the street.

BS: I understand that your first experience of using the tape sculptures as a form of street art occurred in 2003. In a sense, the connection between your work and the street happened by chance-- you enjoyed the attention the piece, which you have described as a 'giant sperm' received from onlookers as you tried to photograph it. Would you say that your work on the street has become a form of addiction?

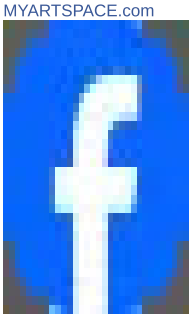
MJ: Oh, well, with the giant sperm in Rio that was really more just an outdoor experience, integrating the piece, pushing the sperm out into the ocean and letting it surf back in while the bathers looked on baffled or came up to ask a few questions. I wouldn't really call that a street piece since I never abandoned it. It was more like taking my sculpture for a walk even if it ended up getting stuffed in the trash at the end. But no, I don't see these street installations as an addiction either. It's just something to explore.

BS: Place us in your frame of mind when you hit the streets in preparation for setting up an installation. What thoughts go through your head? Do you ever have any legal concerns... or concerns that the pieces might be destroyed before they are viewed? Is there a sense of being on 'the edge', so to speak?

MJ: It's a lot of details being thought through. Not wanting to have forgotten something, and then just

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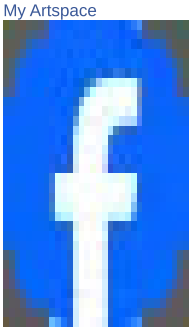
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trying to keep the mind empty, to be attentive to what's going around, cops or other authority types, who might prevent the installation from happening. But sure, the "edge" is there. Out in public space you never really know what might happen.

BS: Mark, do you do all of the placement by yourself? Do you sometimes have help?

MJ: I always like to have someone along if possible and with the bulk of the installations, my girlfriend, Sandra Fernandez, has been the co-conspirator.

BS: You have mentioned in the past that watching self-cast sculptures as they are disposed of was like a form of death and rebirth for you. With that in mind, would you say there is a spiritual side to your work?

MJ: In the surreal sense it's a sort of religion in that I'm manifesting fictitious ideas to warp the social fabric. And for me since it's my own body a lot of the time, it cuts deeper into my psyche--this sort of self-projection in the landscape. But still even though its very surreal, it's more psychological than spiritual.

BS: Tell us about the other thoughts behind your work? What is the message you strive to convey? Is there a message?

MJ: I don't really ever set out with something that intentional as a "message". I think doing figure installations it was more an idea to extend the conversation Munoz was having within the art institution to a larger more open canvass and in the illegal sense, in order to get better social integration and social impact. It's also why the work went away from the clear alien look toward the hyper real. But it's been as much a social experiment as it is an art project. If it gets urbanites to question the authenticity of their surroundings that's good. But to me, the need for meaning is a human convention that doesn't really sync with the universe at large so I never feel a pressure or strong desire to explain or justify myself.

BS: Mark, you feel that unsanctioned public sculptures make more of an impact on viewers than commissioned public memorials, monuments, and sculptures. You have a 'here and now' philosophy about your work and other unsanctioned public works. However, you-- and others who utilize the street as a basis for their work --face great opposition for creating these works? In your opinion, what do people need to remember when viewing these works?

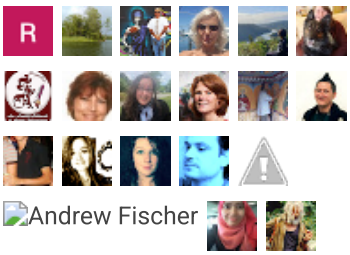
MJ: There is opposition, and risk, but I think that just shows that street art is the sort of frontier where the leading edge really does have to chew through the ice. And it's good for people to remember public space is a battleground, with the government, advertisers and artists all mixing and mashing, and even now the strange cross-pollination taking place as street artists sometimes become brands, and brands camouflaging as street art creating complex hybrids or impersonators. I think it's understanding the strangeness of the playing field where you'll realize that painting street artists, writers, as the bad guys is a shallow view. As for the old bronzes, I really don't see them as part of what's going on in the dialogue unless addressed by a new intervention.

BS: You have exhibited in galleries as well. When faced with four walls do you feel as if your work is contained-- boxed in --missing the freedom that is crucial to the existence of these works? Do you ever regret taking your work indoors? Or do you see it as a challenge?

MJ: In galleries, museums, the work has been presented more in a documentary/artifact sort of way. My tangent off Munoz has been about migrating the conversation out of the art institution and so going in reverse didn't make much sense, at least initially. This last year though, I started setting up installations indoors in non-art spaces such as high school lockers and cafeterias. And in turn, that has brought the possibilities to bring it full circle in the sense that the work could maintain it's camouflage, say, with a pair of legs sticking out of the museum toilet. Still the energy potential is diminished here. In other words, fire trucks won't be rolling up to save a girl on the rooftop. But that doesn't mean it isn't worth doing.

BS: Can you give us any insight to what you have planned for 2008? Have you thought of placing works in cities you have yet to visit?

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MJ: I think it's more of the same and also more workshops. For new cities, I'm trying to get over to Tokyo in the spring, also gigs lined up for Sweden, Barcelona, LA and Norway.

BS: Finally, is there anything else you would like to say about your art?

MJ: I think that does it.

You can learn more about Mark Jenkins and his art by visiting his website--www.xmarkjenkinsx.com. You can read more of my interviews by visiting the following page--www.myartspace.com/interviews.

Take care, Stay true,

Brian Sherwin

Posted by Balhatain at 7:41 PM

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