



LESBIAN ART AND ARTISTS

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7000 Year Old Woman. Performance #2, a street event, fully clothed. Photo by Su Friedrich

THE 7000 YEAR OLD WOMAN

Betsy Damon

Photographs by Su Friedrich

Who is she? I will tell you what I know about her which is very little. She is my sister, mother, my grandmothers, my great grandmothers, friends and lovers. She is my woman line of 7000 years and she is me, the me that I know very little about. She found me in Los Angeles in spring, 1975. I began imagining myself covered with small bags filled with flour. For the next two years I constantly saw the image with one change. She became a clown and I decided to paint my body and face white. Only after completing the first Sacred Grove, did I identify her as a 7000-year-old woman. While I was more and more in awe of her and did not know very much about her, naming her was the first step towards performing her.

What has become clear is that I am a facilitator for her. I have some skills and discipline but she has her own magic. I learn about her through the performances, that is, through her existence.

Performance #1: A Sacred Grove Collaboration
Cayman Gallery, New York
March 21, 1977

Description of the piece:

I painted my body, face and hair white and blackened my lips. Hanging from and covering my body were 420 small bags filled with 60 pounds of flour that I had colored a full range of reds from dark earth red to pink and yellow. To begin the piece I squatted in the center of the gallery while another woman drew a spiral out from me which connected to a large circle delineated by women who created a space with a sonic meditation. Very slowly I stood and walked the spiral puncturing and cutting the bags with a pair of scissors. I had in mind the slow deliberateness of Japanese Noh theater, but none of the gestures were planned and at one point I found myself feeling so exposed that I tried to put the bags back on. The ponderous slowness combined with the intrinsic violence of the cutting and the sensuous beauty of the bags created a constant tension. By the end of the performance the bags on my body were transformed into a floor sculpture. I invited the audience to take the bags home and perform their own rites.

The 7000 year old woman will exist in many places and many aspects in the future.

This piece is about time; remembering time; moving out through time and moving back through time; claiming past time and future time. At the end of the piece I had a certain knowledge about the metaphysical relationship of time; the accumulation of time, and women's relationship to time past. I came out of the piece with a knowledge about the burden of time. A woman sixty years old is maybe twenty times more burdened than the thirty-year-old by her story. While I don't understand the mathematics of this I did feel it to be true. If we had had 7000 years of celebrated female energy this would be different.

During the performance I was a bird
a clown
a whore
a bagged woman
an ancient fertility goddess
heavy-light
a strip-tease artist
sensuous and beautiful

After the performance I was certain that at some time in history women were so connected to their strength that the ideas of mother, wife, lesbian, witch as we know them did not exist.



7000 Year Old Woman. Performance #2, giving bags away. Photo by Su Friedrich

Performance #2: A Street Event

Claiming a space on Prince Street near West Broadway, New York
May 21, 1977 1-3 p.m.

Description of the event:

7000 year old woman existed on the street for two hours unprotected except by a sand circle, yellow triangles and her energy. As I was preparing the bags in the studio I imagined her in light colors, part clown and part an ancient spring person who would hang out in the street. I asked one woman, Su Friedrich, to assist me. At home I painted my body, hair and face white and blackened my lips. I wore underpants and a shirt. We began by delineating a space with a sand circle. In the center we ceremoniously arranged all the bags. I stood in the center while Su tied the bags on my body aware constantly of the shield the bags were providing. There were 400 bags filled with pale red, yellow, orange and purple flour. This became an intimate ritual of its own which lasted nearly an hour. When this was done Su left the circle and I remained with my only protection, the bags. There were a few bags left over which I tossed to the audience, hoping to capture some of the clown and establish contact with the audience. However, my sense of vulnerability was overwhelming, I could not move from the center of the circle and did not want to begin cutting the bags off. Friends brought flowers, boys threw eggs and I could feel the intense reactions of the audience. I was in a constant struggle with a group of street boys who wanted me or the bags and could never get enough. They were balanced by the many girls and women who were silently engrossed. Finally I stood and slowly walked the circle cutting the bags away, letting the flour spill out or handing the bags to the viewers. Without the bags to protect me, my sense of vulnerability was intolerable and I returned to the center and squatted to finish the piece. Throughout the performance, Amy Sillman painted yellow triangles around the sand circle. Her activity, more intimately connected with the cobble stones and always at the mercy of the crowd was the only buttress between me and the crowd.

Some additional reactions and notes on the event: Su and I were exhausted after the piece. All that I could say was that I had been a guerrilla fighter for two hours. This feeling was so powerful that it obscured everything else. For two hours I created a female space. However, I never knew until that afternoon how completely all things female had been eradicated from our streets. So totally is this true that we do not even notice that she is missing. I experienced much unanticipated violence during the event, yet I felt that I was a natural person in a normal space.



7000 Year Old Woman. Performance #2, end of event. Photo by Su Friedrich

Performance #2: A Street Event

A description by Su Friedrich who assisted in the performance of the event

Betsy's magic circle:

The 7000 year old woman's Sacred Grove.

My temporary refuge, my stage.

Private activities becoming public, intimate gestures between Betsy and me being questioned, observed, encouraged or debased by the fluctuating crowd. Westchester ladies, street tough boys, perplexed and absorbed girls, Soho thinkers and smirkers, women friends, Catholic grandmothers—a strange (re)union, our temporary bond being this massive cryptic 7000-year-old woman.

Intimate gestures: tying the bags on Betsy's chalk white body layer by layer, led along by whispered directions from her but gaining my own momentum as I absorb the colors and textures, the soft, firm, heavy bags laid out on the ground in front of her like offerings, like children's clothes, like flowers, these useless but nevertheless significant treasures.

Our theatre, our ritual of preparation reminded me of the decoration rituals shared by young girls, by my friends and me: brushing Veronica's long blonde hair, helping my sister into her dress before the party, quiet conversations on our common "secrets" of what is pretty or strong or burdensome about ourselves; sharing nervous anticipation, mutual support for the eventual, inevitable journey outside our female circle; feeling positive about ourselves, feeling protected, so as to be strong outside, on the stage.

I lost some of that inner tension and private interaction when I had to assume my more familiar public role of photographer as she continued the piece. Through the lens I observed the crowd, the same people who had just been watching me and therefore somehow had power over me. There was the enchanted young girl whose concentration and comfort was shattered when an egg landed nearby and soiled her dress; the greedy, arrogant boys who had no qualms about entering the space to take as many bags as possible (to be used down the street later in a fight); and the many 20-30-40 year old men and women whose interests ranged from trying to guess her gender ("no woman has a jawline like that") to staring transfixed and delighted at the apparition of a woman, white faced and laden with sixty pounds of rose- and jonquil-colored bags making a substantial, private, controlled but romantic/theatrical space for herself.

My immediate attraction to her visually is the direct reference (unconscious: Betsy has never seen them) to the beautiful "warrior vests" of certain African nations: cloth jackets heavily laden with magic tokens of leather, wood and stone, used essentially as "arrow proof" vests in war.

Hugeness, protection, ponderous weight, gentle colors, sensuous textures, tenuous construction and so temporary as the bags were slashed open, letting the colors pour out and cover the ground, leaving a soft pink trail, a circular trail of footsteps and discarded bags.

Betsy Damon is a performer, sculptor and mother who recently moved to New York City. Over the last five years she has been a visiting artist and lecturer at many universities, involved in feminist art programs, and founded a Feminist Studio in Ithaca, New York.

Su Friedrich is a freelance photographer who is interested in doing projects which explore fantasy and deception.