

ART PAPERS

STRIKING IDEAS + MOVING IMAGES + SMART TEXTS
JANUARY 2006 US \$7 CAN \$9 UK £4 EU €6



INTERVIEW
FRENCHMOTTERSHEAD'S
MICROPERFORMANCES

SELF-ARCHAEOLOGY
EUGENIO ESPINOZA'S
PENETRABLES

RUPTURE
XIE NANKING'S
PAINTERLY RADIANCE

EMERGENCE
COLLECTIVES
IN ISTANBUL





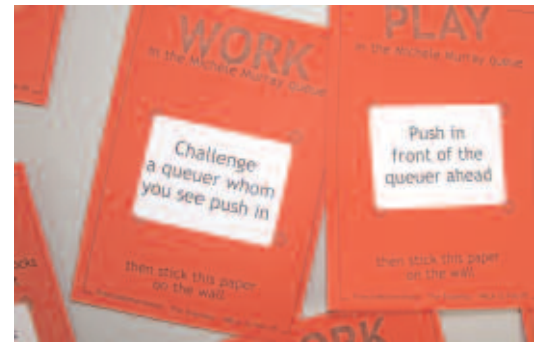
TEXT / JENNIE KLEIN

Performance or live art was initially theorized as the end game of the modernist quest for abstract art, with the pure—and commodity-resistant—actions of the body replacing the object, which itself had reached abstract purity. Thanks to the conceptual performances of Fluxus, Art & Language, Black Market Collective, and other collectives, and theories of engaged and performed activism posited by thinkers such as Guy Debord, Peggy Phelan, and Judith Butler, live art has been re-theorized in the recent past in terms of how local, or micro, actions can disrupt political and institutional structures on the macro political level. The UK-based performance duo FrenchMottershead, whose moniker is derived from the combined last names of its two members Rebecca French and Andrew Mottershead, facilitates actions that expose the conventions that govern daily social interchange. Eschewing the traditional "black box with raked seating" theatrical space which usually hosts contemporary live art, FrenchMottershead has taken to the streets, the clubs, the bars, the local stores, and the public queues in order to interrupt business as usual by asking people to do the unexpected—such as come back for a group photograph or pick up an

object from the ground without allowing their "bums" to stick out. In so doing, they politely ask the participant to reconsider her or his actions in relation to the social conventions that shape those actions. Forewarned, participants know to expect the unusual, often to the degree that *all* that occurs during the course of the event into which FrenchMottershead intervenes is interpreted as performative, whether or not that is actually the case.

In spite of the proclaimed death of the author and birth of the reader in academic circles, the art world has understandably been slow to relinquish the association of objects and actions with an authorial identity. The work of FrenchMottershead is unusual in that it is dependent upon the actions of the audience/participants for its meaning.² Prior to working together, Mottershead and French realized that they were simply not interested in making a spectacle of themselves. Instead, they wished to work with the skills that people already had. Sociologists in action, FrenchMottershead observes body language and social interactions at the micro level and uses this knowledge in order to expose the way in which conventional social behavior is in fact a series of small, micro performances that accrue

OPPOSITE: details of *Five Shops*, performance for camera, ANTI Festival, Kuopio, Finland (© FrenchMottershead 2005; photos: Pekka Mäkinen); left: *Kalakukkoleipomo Hanna Partanen—Bakery*, 10.30am, 17 September 2005; RIGHT: *Levykauppa Äx—Record Shop*, 1.30pm, 17 September 2005 / ABOVE LEFT: *A Daily Ritual to Capture the Presence of Everybody*, Thursday 9 February 2006, photograph from performance for camera, National Review of Live Art, Glasgow (© FrenchMottershead 2006; photo: Neilson Photography); RIGHT: details of *Club Class*, 2005, interactive microperformance club; TOP: documentation of the *Club Class* social arena, 19 June 2005, Great Eastern Hotel, London, with microperformers mingling and trying to maintain their altered identities; BOTTOM: image of the *Ready To Wear* micro-class with Marsha Roddy, London (© FrenchMottershead 2005) [all images courtesy of the artists]



until they have amassed a historicity that is difficult to challenge. FrenchMottershead intervenes in that process by asking, reminding, gently prodding, and sometimes chiding people to re-perform everyday actions—a process they have termed microperformance.

In one of their earliest actions, *Social*, 1999, FrenchMottershead presented two one-night events, mixing an art audience with the membership of two very different venues, London's Surdoc Social Club and the Latvian Welfare Club. In each case, *Social* adopted the characteristics of its host—a working class club for dock workers and a club where Latvians can enjoy many different types of vodka—while programming interactions to activate audience and performer, including a (fake) marriage, Latvian folk dance lessons, a stripper, and other subtle or exaggerated social behaviors such as intrusions on people's conversations or chatting people up before moving on to their friend. The actions were documented by the participants, who were given disposable cameras for the task. In a more recent, ongoing performance, *The People Series* (first premiered at the Floating IP Gallery in Manchester in December 2003), FrenchMottershead has designed an event for festivals and other large gatherings based on the ubiquitous business card. Players/participants are invited to select a card containing instructions for a microperformance to be performed at their discretion and documented with a red dot placed on the spot. The stickers correspond to a "key" on display at the venue that lists all of the instructions. At the end of the evening, the "performances" are documented through a constellation of red dots, which map the otherwise ephemeral actions.

Unlike many other artists whose public work depends on a non-art audience, FrenchMottershead is not particularly interested in making

people angry or uncomfortable. No one is asked or expected to engage in a performance or become a microperformer without her or his consent—it is always possible to simply walk away, although surprisingly most people choose not to. In *Five Shops*, 2005, programmed by the ANTI Festival in Kuopio, Finland, customers at five city shops were either given a handbill, whispered instructions, or a stamped receipt that contained an invitation to "come be part of our picture." Customers who returned to each shop on Saturday were placed and posed by the artists, who had a professional photographer take the photograph, which was in turn donated to each shop. In a review of the ANTI festival that included a discussion of *Five Shops*, Dominic Johnson suggested that "the work showcased here will sit uncomfortably with audiences nurtured on spectacle, amounting to a performance aesthetic almost stripped of the live, carnal body that has been performance's key mainstay."³

FrenchMottershead has departed from the tradition of the live, carnal body for good reason—the work would simply not be successful if the bodies that belonged to the artists were front and center. Much of FrenchMottershead's work has been predicated on the meaning and deployment of surveillance. Anonymity is crucial for the success of their projects, which means that they are sometimes difficult to find. Live art events and festivals are well established and astonishingly numerous in Europe and the UK—unlike in the United States. FrenchMottershead's contributions to many of them often involve some sort of audience manipulation. For *The Enarelay*, performed at the National Review of Live Art (NRLA) in Glasgow in 2005, FrenchMottershead positioned the audience as creator, performer, and documenter. As audience members, whose hands had been previously stamped with WORK or PLAY, went to the toilet, queued for

ABOVE, LEFT: publicity image for *Artists in Residence*, 2006, National Review of Live Art, Glasgow (© FrenchMottershead 2006; photo: Manning Photography); RIGHT: details of *The Enarelay*, 2005, interactive microperformance, National Review of Live Art, Glasgow (© FrenchMottershead 2005); TOP: detail of documentation wall after an interactive microperformance; BOTTOM: selecting instructions during an interactive microperformance game

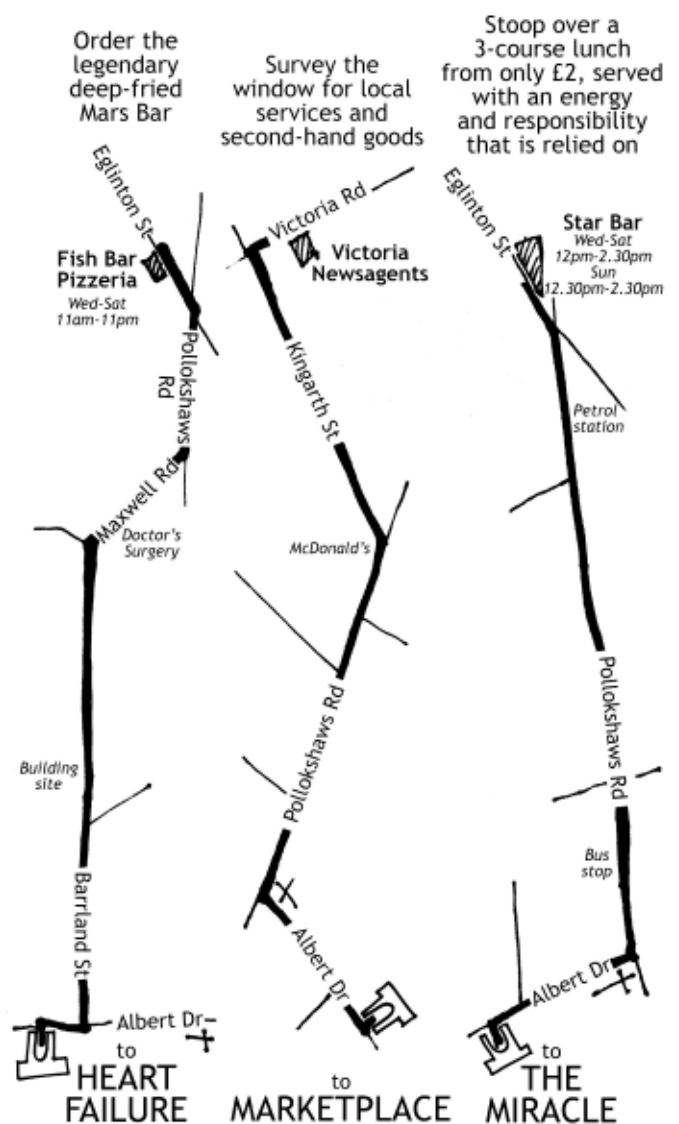
performances, or had a drink in the bar, they were presented with lucky dips—two boxes, one labeled WORK and one labeled PLAY—that contained pieces of paper with performance instructions such as "stress your achievements to the queuer ahead" (WORK) or "slip your hand in their back pocket" (PLAY). When the newly minted microperformer had completed his or her task, the performance was documented by sticking the paper on the wall. For the *Inbetween Time* festival presented at Bristol's Arnolfini Gallery in February 2006, FrenchMottershead moved as unobtrusively as possible through the audience, making notes of their observations and presenting the results on the final evening. Interestingly enough, audience members who recognized FrenchMottershead often approached them to reveal salacious tidbits, some of which were too risqué to share in the final presentation. Artists-in-residence at this year's NRLA, FrenchMottershead took a more gentle approach to the audience. Their three interactions were designed to make the festival less intimidating for first-time attendees, and facilitated creative exchange between audience, artists, and local residents. *Local Review of Necessary Amenities*, a meticulously detailed map printed on the back of the daily schedule, gave useful directions to NRLA attendees such as where to get a cheap lunch or a deep fried Mars Bar, or commit suicide quickly. *A Daily Ritual to Capture the Presence of Everybody* required audience members to assemble each evening for a group photograph, which was printed overnight and added to a growing exhibition. In an effort to unite past and future NRLA attendees, FrenchMottershead contacted all of the artists who had ever participated in the festival and asked them to submit a favorite and anonymous text for *Now That's An Idea*. On display for the duration of the festival, the texts were distributed on the last day.

FrenchMottershead's work has a significant pedagogical dimension. It frequently takes the forms of lectures and workshops. Not surprisingly, these are somewhat atypically structured. FrenchMottershead is currently touring *Club Class*, an artwork where distinguished experts—people involved in the theater and entertainment industries—help participants transform themselves in some small but significant way. Participants subsequently step into the social arena, mingling while attempting to maintain their altered identities. Aspiring microperformers will have the opportunity to participate in *Club Class* at the Tate Modern in 2006 and the ICA in London in 2007.⁴

Jennie Klein is a contributing editor for ART PAPERS. Her profile of Athens, Georgia, artist Michael Oliveri appeared in ART PAPERS 30:1 (January/February 2006).

NOTES

1. Interview with author, February 12, 2006.
2. FrenchMottershead seldom use images of themselves in their work, their website, or in reviews and articles about their work. As artists-in-residence at the National Review of Live Art, however, they made a postcard with their images, partly because this context required them to be seen performing their role.
3. Dominic Johnson, "Anti-Festival," *Frieze* 97, March 2006, 164-165, http://www.frieze.com/review_single.asp?r=2388, accessed on March 22, 2006.
4. See www.frenchmottershead.com for information on other artworks and events created by FrenchMottershead.



ABOVE, TOP TO BOTTOM: publicity still for *Borrow me*, June 2006, Peckham Library, London, UK (© FrenchMottershead 2006); detail from *Local Review of Necessary Amenities*, 2006, print published with the *National Review of Live Art 2006* daily programme, 420mm x 297mm (© FrenchMottershead 2006)