

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Richard Dedomenici, FrenchMottershead, Grace Surman, and Oreet Ashery, are amongst a crop of emerging UK live artists whose work stretches the boundaries of what performance can be. Cathy Butterworth reports

For many live artists working in the UK today, the interplay between public and private domains is a major area of consideration. From interventions into daily life in city centres, to intimate encounters between artists and their audiences, live art practices encompass a number of strategies for subverting notions of where public and private spaces begin and end. And, in so doing, they invite audiences to take a closer look at the everyday and familiar.

The potential for live art to not only entertain but to provoke, seduce, enrage, amuse, repulse, challenge and unsettle, makes it well positioned to draw new audiences, and empower those who have been marginalised within the cultural mainstream. 28-year-old Richard Dedomenici is an emerging artist whose work challenges notions of democracy, bureaucracy and the public realm. At the Edinburgh Festival Fringe last year, he donned a high visibility jacket and, posing as a city official, told people that due to a new 'Pedestrian Congestion Charge', all who walked within the parameters of the city's Royal Mile would have a £1 GBP fine automatically deducted from their mobile phone account. In order to have the fine waived, the duped recipient of the fine was to phone a special help line. The charge of the call was £1 GBP!



A comment on issues of freedom and ownership within the public realm, this performance takes a sideways and humorous look at the conditions within which we live on a daily basis. For *Liverpool Live* in 2004, Dedomenici arrived in the city the day after ex-Shadow Minister for the Arts Boris Johnson had visited in an attempt to make amends for his now notorious gaffe over the kidnapping and execution in Iraq of Liverpoolian Ken Bigley. Disguised as the aforementioned MP, he wandered the city "apologising" on behalf of Johnson. "Some accepted my apology, others threatened to break my legs," Dedomenici recalls.

Dedomenici's acts of civil disobedience ask pertinent questions of society and the element of risk in his confrontational interventions adds an unpredictable layer to his work, which contributes to its vibrancy. In reaching out to audiences that may not even realise they are experiencing a live art event, Dedomenici broadens the scope of how people begin to understand what performance can be. His charming persona and use of humour allow him to push the limits of his interactions with the public, enabling him to challenge, provoke, and raise issues that people may not respond to were they presented in a more traditional performance context.

While some live artists deploy more oppositional, albeit humorous, tactics in their interrogation of public and private space, others activate less obtrusive devices in order to bring about shifts in audience awareness. FrenchMottershead is a London-based live art collaborative led by Rebecca French and Andrew Mottershead. Since 1999 it has created live art platforms for performances that invite interaction and participation. Its work transforms everyday actions into what it calls "microperformances". FrenchMottershead has created in excess of five hundred of these to date, exploring ideas of identity, physicality, interaction and social ritual. They often take the form of a series of instructions printed on cards and handed to individuals in social situations. The card might instruct the participant to 'direct a warm, welcoming smile to those whose gaze meets yours', for example, or to 'join a group and add something to the conversation'. The location of the microperformance is then marked with a small red sticker and the individual is expected to try and repeat the microperformance several times.

For FrenchMottershead, everyday public and private realms are the material of its work, which subtly reconfigures space and creates a shift in experience and perception of the everyday. Its subtle and persuasive strategies gently immerse individuals in encounters that blur the usual connections made between audience and performer. For many live artists it is becoming increasingly important to shatter traditional notions of representation – to destroy pretence and narrative. Intimacy and proximity become very powerful tools for creating alternative engagements with audiences.

Franko B is an artist whose exploration of beauty, ignorance, shame and society is manifest in a number of intimate one-to-one



performances. In *Aktion 398*, individual audience members encounter the artist naked in a room and are invited to engage with him in a way in which they feel most comfortable. In an inversion of this, *Aktion 893* is, again, a one-to-one encounter with the artist, but this time the viewer is invited to remove his/her clothes whilst the artist remains clothed. The space between artist and individual becomes a potent site; a space for the individual to contemplate his/her relationship with the "other".

Grace Surman is another live artist who tackles notions of public and private space in her theatre-based performances. In *White*, she assumes the persona of a hapless magician's assistant, presenting mundane activities as though they are on the scale of the most fantastic feats of escapology. Surman plays around with ideas of "on-stage" and "off-stage", exploring the mechanisms that performers employ to engage their audience. Through her gentle and comic subversion of this relationship with the audience, she confounds expectations of quality; questioning assumptions about presence and activity in a performance space.

London-based Israeli artist Oreet Ashery is interested in the slippage between art and life, the mutations of current art practices and cultural anxiety, particularly in relation to popular culture. Marcus Fisher, Ashery's orthodox Jewish male alter-ego, has been involved in street interventions, club and



stage performances and durational actions. During the live interaction *Say Cheese*, Fisher embodies the "other" whilst questioning notions of multiculturalism, ritual and masculinity. Continuing Ashery's investigations into the politics of the body in relation to culture and location, *Say Cheese* attempts to break down geographical, gendered and religious zones. Fuelled by the desire to be photographed with the "native" or the "celebrity", and influenced by reality TV shows like *Big Brother*, *Say Cheese* explores the relationship between private and public and speculates on the nature of intimacy. It takes place in a bedroom: one at a time, audience members are invited to enter and share an intimate moment on the bed with Fisher, who later sends them a copy of a photograph taken of that encounter along with a personal letter. Some participants want to act out a particular "pose" or fantasy, some want to be directed. Some interactions are heart-warming, some challenging, some kinky, and some a little awkward.

Live artists generate endless and varied possibilities for audiences to experience all that performance practices can offer; providing limitless opportunities to engage with performers, artists and their work. In consistently pushing the limits of creative practice they open up a huge range of brand new spaces for the exploration of performance, making live art the most vital and active space for the creation of new work in the UK today. □

Cathy Butterworth is a performance practitioner and freelance director, and has led performance workshops and projects throughout the UK. Most recently she was Live Art Programmer at Bluecoat Arts Centre, Liverpool.

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OREET ASHERY

Works available for touring include: *What is Your Current Address?*, an interactive performance highlighting the 1947–49 evacuation of Palestinian villages; *7 Acts of Love*, in which alter-ego Marcus Fisher explores cultural anxiety; *Central Location*, an installation offering a free hair-cutting service; and *Will You Cook For Me?*, a dinner performance including Jewish and Middle Eastern food. Ashery's forthcoming production, *Welcome Home*, will look at the notion of home-coming and returning, particularly in relation to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

www.londonartistsprojects.com

RICHARD DEDOMENICI

Works available for touring include: *Did Priya Pathak Ever Get Her Wallet Back?*, a performance lecture exploring the complex relationship between the artist's work and the police; *House Arrest*, an installation in which, following instructions given in a 1980 British Government booklet, the artist constructs and lives in a nuclear bomb shelter; and *Embracing Failure*, a performance lecture in which Dedomenici archives and critiques his own work.

www.dedomenici.co.uk

FRENCHMOTTERSHEAD

Works available for touring include: *Club Class*, an interactive microperformance designed to change the appearance, behaviour or identity of all who attend; *Shops*, in which shoppers and retail staff are invited to create an art work that traces a network of personal purchases and draws them into a group ritual; *The People Series*, an interactive microperformance for festivals, galleries and social events which creates an experimental social milieu; and *Reviewing*, a site-specific performance that critiques audiences, not artworks.

www.frenchmottershead.com

GRACE SURMAN

Works available for touring include: *White*, in which Surman assumes the role of assistant to an absent magician, and has to conjure moments of transformation and everyday enlightenment from the materials surrounding her; and *Slow Thinking*, the first work in a series of duets, performed by Surman and a woman in her twenties, examining the decades that they both grew up in. *Slow Acting*, the second work in the series, will be performed with a woman in her forties and will be available from late 2006.

www.gracesurman.com