



INTERVIEWS

Focusing

MK Guth: The Restraints Are The Framework

Part sculpture, part improv performance, the art of MK Guth feeds on collaboration and constraints.

By Ariston Anderson

Drawing from inspirations as diverse as Eva Hesse, Marcel Duchamp, and Goethe, MK Guth is redefining how we look at public art by creating works that are entirely dependent upon a social exchange or donation. In her 2008 Whitney Biennial piece, “Ties of Protection and Safekeeping,” she wove

visitors' responses to the question "What is worth protecting?" into an ever-growing braid, while the "Red Shoe Delivery Service" saw her using a van and an arsenal of red glitter Dorothy shoes to transport unsuspecting bystanders wherever they wanted to go.

Most recently, the multidisciplinary artist invited New Yorkers to become a part of a new project entitled "This Fable Is Intended for You: A Work-Energy Principle," a three-month public art piece that begins in a storefront at One New York Plaza. Through this past Friday December 18th, visitors were invited to donate old clothes, which Guth will weave into large ropes and objects. The finished sculpture will then be exhibited in the World Financial Center's Courtyard Gallery, and the project will finish with a series of January performances in the Winter Garden.

Through this fable, Guth aims to connect the people who live and work in Lower Manhattan as well as to capture the regenerative rhythms of the city, "a place where energy is constantly being converted into something new." Guth's body of work draws heavily on her interactions with the public. We talked with her about the need to remain flexible in collaborations, the role of organization in facilitating the works, and—of course—the vital importance of pacing when getting started.

Why did you decide to involve the public in your latest work?

There are many different "publics" and lower Manhattan has a very distinct character. During the weekdays many of the people in the area are there to work. There are 7,000 people working in One New York Plaza alone where the residency is located. This is something that connects the people of the area regardless of the nature of their work. So I wanted the public residency to exhibit the processes of making the work and the nature of work itself. By having people donate old clothing, bedding, or fabric, there exists a personal and direct connection to the work being done to create the project and to the other people who have donated.

How important is location to your work?

There are some projects that demand the site be incorporated and others not. "Ties of Protection and Safe Keeping," which was completed at the Park Avenue Armory for the 2008 Whitney Biennial was a project that for me could not ignore its location. The Park Avenue Amory is such a historic and distinct site that trying to compete with the imbued meaning would not have served the work.

What is your work process like?

It depends on where I am and what I am working on but as far as my time in the studio, Bruce Nauman's "Stamping in the Studio" comes to mind. I pace a lot. I find this to be essential to my process. I am interested in many different histories and ideas, and walking back and forth in my studio, packing and unpacking the relationships, problems and ideas, is for me like sorting out a set of materials for which I am trying to become familiar.

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What's the first thing you do when you have an idea for a new project?

I start by trying to knock it down, followed by doing research. I ask a lot of questions. I usually do multiple sketches and drawings, and it is not uncommon that the first element of a project manifests in video. Most of the projects I do will generate a series of other projects that connect to similar content.

What are the biggest distractions in your work, and how do you overcome them?

Anything can be a distraction if I am not focused. And sometimes a distraction can be good and will lead me down a new path in what I am doing or thinking about. Regardless of what type of distraction it might be, I try to stay focused to the best of my ability. There are times I give in to the distraction and I am better for it. It is about discerning if it is a distraction worth my time.

Your current project depends on audience participation. How will this affect your work process? Will it adjust to what is coming in?

The public residency is not really a site of audience participation; rather, I would define it as audience involvement, in that the physical artwork is made up of materials donated by the public. The donated materials are the restraint as well as the framework of this work. So if only white bath towels were donated then that is what the piece would be made out of. This is part of what is interesting about the project for me. The appearance and success of the work depends on my responses to materials that I have only limited control over. The place I do believe participation comes into play is in the performance, as there are people who have visited the residency who have volunteered to be in the performance.

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What methods or tools do you use for staying organized in your work?

In many ways part of my art is organizing or facilitating. The project “Red Shoe Delivery Service” that I did with Molly Dilworth and Cris Moss was dependent on organization. What we did in that project was to facilitate an experience for the people who chose to engage and participate in the project. In order to keep everything moving smoothly there are lists, notes, image archives, and video archives that have to be updated and tracked. I have multiple hard-drives that help maintain a system of organization of data. It is important for me to keep this aspect of the work simple so that I am not spending all my time in this area.

In a work like “This Fable Is Intended for You: A Work-Energy Principle,” each phase of the project affects the other. While many details need to be thought out ahead of time, I always need to keep in mind that something might need to shift. This project was developed with intentional flexibility to accommodate changes along the way.

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The performances of “This Fable Is Intended for You” are part of Under the Radar Festival, which takes place from January 6–17, 2010.