

Rachel Rosenthal

Earth First

I have been performing as a solo performance artist for twenty years. In that time, my work has seen many changes, mainly in the area of content. From purely personal, I switched to a global content of mainly ecological focus. Nuclear power and weaponry, and animal rights, were also prominent in my work.

In the recent months, after an output of more than thirty full-length pieces over the years, I realised that I had come to another bifurcation in my creative life. That trend is still in flux, and I am now struggling with an understanding of it as well as the direction my path is to take. My conflict lies in the fact that, devoted as I am to Earth issues, and painfully aware of the facts and figures concerning our calamitous destruction of the biosphere, I am concerned about the effectiveness of my work, and the form it is to take in order to communicate my knowledge and fear to an audience while still making valid art.

This is a very large problem, touching as it does the very meaning of art, and its purpose in society.

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I am committed to *ahimsa* or non-violence. I eat no animal-derived food, spend a great deal of my time lobbying the government on animals' and the Earth's behalf through letter-writing and telephone calls, and I participate in many rescues and placement of stray animals. All the monies I can spare are sent to environmental, animal welfare and animal rights foundations, and I have bequeathed my estate mainly to such organisations. I have also bequeathed my entire body to science, in the hope that it will save the lives of a few animals used in biomedical research and education. My dream is to be awarded a large grant by the MacArthur Foundation ("genius" grant), which would enable me to buy land in order to save a parcel of wilderness from development.

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subjects of animals and ecology, has led me inexorably to trace Earth's problems to over population of the human species. Our number, inflated beyond any logic or sense in the second half of this century, is the motor propelling our insane devouring of resources. There are simply far too many people now, and those numbers will double, and probably triple, before an inevitable and catastrophic crash will befall us, hurtling us toward extinction. But not before we have disrupted, perhaps for good, the exquisite workings of terrestrial life. This view, upheld by most scientists and observers, is not new or original. What makes it so desperate is the ignorance and wilful indifference of so many of us on the planet. Some go so far as to call our behaviour insanity, evil and sadism. This tragedy is also compounded by efforts by the Vatican and other religious and conservative groups to paint the concerns and efforts of those who would curb human fertility as criminal, when the true crime is that of encouraging even more births, thus condemning billions to poverty, hunger and violence, while exacerbating the predation on Earth's resources and biota.

I don't see, at this point in my life, a quick and workable solution. New Age thinking, always positive and optimistic, points to change, transformation, a "new age" dawning of spiritual awakening, and I can indeed see that in certain individuals and groups all over the world. But I am crushed by the numbers, data, statistics and facts compiled by many, that point to dire events down the road. I am, in a word, in despair.

But I still have many years of creativity to fill, don't I? And I have no other skills or desires than my art. So, I teach and still make performances. But with every one I make, the questions loom more ominously. What am I saying? What information am I

putting forth? What am I communicating to an audience, which for the most part is made up of the already converted, and probably just as despairing as myself?

I find that the most satisfying moments in work life come in my classes when I talk about these concerns, and in Question and Answer periods I initiate with audiences after I perform. Because I am not at the moment "making art", I am free to say what is truly on my mind without worrying about form. I believe that the combination of art with these instances of plain talk is a good solution to my problem at this time. I would want, however, to augment my audience through the media of television and press beyond what I already have reached. The ideas I try to propagate are fighting against time. It is perhaps already too late to turn things around.

I want to find a way of moving an audience beyond a doubt, to motivate them to change their lives, habits, modes of thinking. We must begin to see ourselves as part of a continuum as opposed to being the top of the heap. We must begin to appreciate and venerate all life, and also the non-living bones of the Planet, stones, air, water. We have to stop making babies in quantities that are outrageous in an evolutionary sense. We must stop eating animals, for ethical as well as ecological reasons. We must stop overtaxing land, and drenching it with chemicals. It takes six tons of oil to make one ton of fertiliser. It takes twenty pounds of grain to make one pound of animal protein. Cattle is killing land, habitat, and irreplaceable forests and eco-systems. We are living high off the hog, and hurtling toward disaster. My work must say these things without actually "saying" them.

Most of all, I want my work to prod people into examining their thinking habits and world views. Some are already making deep and healing paradigm shifts. Now we

must access those whose far-reaching acts are shaping the future and perhaps eradicating it. I am wondering if people are still vulnerable to gentleness rather than violence, whether an art that will appeal to the heart as well as the brain can have power in a world numbed by brutality, whether beauty can still prevail ...

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RACHEL ROSENTHAL (United States) has been performing since she was three. In the last twenty years she has presented over thirty-five full-scale pieces both alone and with her group, The Company. She has toured extensively throughout the USA, Canada, Europe, Australia and received many awards. She has had several books published of and about her work. She has also been teaching since 1979 both in her own studio in Los Angeles and throughout North America and Europe. She is an animal rights activist, a vegan and companion to two cats and two dogs.



Rachel Rosenthal with companions Hytoo and Barney Bear. Photo: Ann Fishbine