

Endurance: Daring Feats of Risk, Survival and Perseverance

September 11 to November 29, 2009

Phyllis Baldino • Janet Biggs • Johanna Billing
Patty Chang • Caryl Davis • Emily Jacir • Nikki S. Lee
ManosBuckius Cooperative • Renzo Martens • Laurel Nakadate
John Pilson • Alysse Stepanian & Philip Mantione • Type A Curated by Sue Spaid

Filmed Actions with Movies in Mind:
Extreme Art for Extreme Times
essay by Sue Spaid

The Backstory

In 2006, Kelly Crow's alarming *Wall Street Journal* story, "The 23-Year Old Masters" stirred a hotly contested debate concerning the actual possibility of *young masters*.¹ This article rather reminded me of what I'd felt all along, that society should reward artists whose careers reflect endurance (sticktoitiveness and dogged determination against all odds), not disproportionately colossal figures (\$60,000 for paintings by artists just five years out of grad school). Similarly, women should be celebrated for their strength and energy, not their disproportionately slight figures; and design or music trends should be praised for influence and longevity, not brand newness or brand identity. Once the money and attention wanes, one wonders which young masters shall endure.² Thanks to William Powhida's hilarious 2009 drawing *Post-Boom Odds*, published in *New York* magazine, one need not do too much guesswork. This work features the absurd odds of today's most hyped artists actually mattering ten years on. Soon after Crow's article appeared, videos focusing on risk, survival and perseverance started popping up again, continuing a pre-millennial movement whereby artists endure physical feats as art. That trend was briefly derailed by Fourth Wave Feminist Photographers who seriously shot "inaction."³ Still, no one could have anticipated our world spiraling into the worst recession since the depression, transforming such extreme art into allegories of personal struggle; globalized sagas simulcast to mobilize victims of tumultuous economies.⁴



Janet Biggs, *Vanishing Point*, 2009.

My own fascination with artists who dare us to dare them began in July of 1986 when college pal and "impact addict" David Leslie proposed to propel himself in a single-seat rocket over 1000 watermelons stacked to form a 30-foot long wall along Broome Street.⁵ Long before *Jackass* and backyard wrestling, Leslie garnered artworld fame for wearing a suit sporting 10,000 exploding firecrackers, boxing an Olympic silver-medalist aboard the Staten Island Ferry and diving from a three-story building onto a steel plate. Two years later, he retired, performing his last stunt, a *Sound-of-Music*

themed six-story free-fall off Performance Space 122's roof during its annual benefit. My move to Cincinnati a decade later brought me face to face with demolition derby, for which teams work weeks to create the ideal vehicle, only to see it flattened fifteen minutes later. Confounded by this annual ritual, I videotaped interviews with competing teams, hoping to grasp their motivations and expectations. Hardly dare devils or nut cases, most drivers claim merely to be thrill seekers. With so many exquisitely painted cars, a demolition derby evokes how quickly exhibitions get dismantled following months of careful preparation. Finally, my essay "Survival Strategies: Gearing Up for Autarkic Communities or the Post-Political Society?" (*New Art Examiner*, 2001) archived the Y2K trend of art focused on survival.

Rather than return to the era when Bas Jan Ader balanced precariously on wooden blocks, Chris Burden had himself shot, Gina Pane repeatedly wounded herself or Marina Abramović invited strangers to torture her, "Endurance" focuses on works created since 1997, when

Matthew Barney's Diva character climbed Budapest Opera's proscenium arch during *Cremaster 5*. This recent generation not only evolved alongside ESPN's notorious X Games, which first aired in 1995, but they can afford to move beyond merely testing art's boundaries, as their action-oriented predecessors did decades ago.⁶ The popularity of the X Games (24-hour coverage in 75 countries), the pervasiveness of 2000 demolition derby contests nationwide and *Man on Wire* winning an Oscar, 35 years after Philip Petit walked between the twin towers, attests to our enduring interest in risky ventures.

During the 1990s, the vast majority of artists were engaged in studio practices, producing either objects or situations, while only a handful were trying to figure out how to transform actions into videos. Of the many action-oriented artists included in my exhibitions "Action Station: Exploring Open Systems" (Santa Monica Museum of Art, 1995) and "An Active Life" (The Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, 2000), only Patrizia Giambi, Lun*na Menoh and Martin Kersels ever exhibited videos of live actions as art. While a decade-long debate raged regarding how much audiences can contribute before participatory art is no longer attributable to an artist, the significance of memory in light of such fleeting situations or the problem of overzealous participants destroying artworks, the "Endurance" coterie eschewed these issues, since their actions were destined for video art or photography from the onset. Earlier artists who performed for the camera mostly produced documents, not movies. By movies, I don't mean narratives, but complex imagery that prompts repeat viewings and conflicting interpretations.

During the '90s, performance art's perspective was shifting from audience attendee to movie viewer, as the movie, not some performance recorded on video for posterity, became the ultimate product. Compare this to David Leslie's multiple videos. Although they capture his terrifying spectacles, they're after-thoughts as compared to being there. Within a decade, performance art went virtual as China Adams, Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Alex Bag, **Phyllis Baldino**, Matthew Barney, Lynne Berman/Kahty Chenoweth, **Janet Biggs**, **Patty Chang**, Annika Eriksson, Andrea Fraser, Anna Gaskell, Oliver Herring, Sharon Lockhart, **Nikki S. Lee**, Paul McCarthy, Michael Moore, Pipilotti Rist, **Alysse Stepanian**, Sam Taylor-Wood, **Type A**, Uri Tzaig, Bill Viola and Gillian Wearing produced action-packed photographs or movies, minus live audiences. From the get-go, **Baldino**, Barney, **Biggs**, **Chang**, **Lee**, **Stepanian** and **Type A** focused on extreme actions. Just as mid-80s artists had appropriated pop imagery to comment on

consumer culture, early-90s sculptors had infused their minimal objects with personal commentary and early-90s painters had purposely combined color and pattern to provoke discussions of female beauty, "Endurance" artists filmed extreme actions to explore relevant issues, while also celebrating their subject's physical capabilities.⁷

Risk

Johanna Billing's short movie *Where She is At* (2001) captures a not uncommon experience; one that has frustrated many, due to fears of height, water or unpredictability. Filmed at Ingierstrand Bad, a swimming center on Oslo's outskirts, the film focuses on a high



Johanna Billing, *Where She is At*, 2001.

board diver's reluctance and angst. Given that this modernist landmark, designed in 1934 by functionalist architect Ole Lind Schistad, is slated to be torn down, one also senses the artist's anxiety about this looming aesthetic erasure. **Nikki S. Lee** gained notoriety for photographs (1997-2001), in which she temporarily altered both body and face to seamlessly blend in with various demographic groups, from exotic dancers to Latinos, rappers, the elderly, trailer park folk and skater kids, among others. More recently, Lee traveled alone to eight global cities (such as Rio de Janeiro,

Rome and Istanbul), where she discovered and hired street artists to sketch her on translucent paper. Back in New York, she photographed the drawings stacked in piles of three to illustrate how much her image varies not just artist to artist, but especially culture to culture.

In 2000, the Brussels-based Dutch artist **Renzo Martens** taught himself Russian and traveled illegally to Chechnya. Traveling around, he realized NGOs face a dilemma. Their continued existence and authority depend on the persistence of the very problems their meant to end, but ending such problems would be suicidal. His first film, *Episode 1*, exposed how NGOs (non-governmental organizations) sustain refugees' plight. With *Episode III*, filmed during his 2005-2006 visit to the Democratic Republic of Congo, he identified a different issue. News outlets routinely reward (\$50/picture) western photographers who photograph victims of murder, malnourishment or rape. To highlight the disparity between local and foreign photo-journalists, he encouraged local photographers to focus on more financially lucrative images, only to learn that plantation owners, newsgroups and NGOs forbid the locals to distribute such sensitive material. This film exposes how he comes to realize that poverty is the only viable option for everyone involved. This video's full-length version further implicates capitalism's role in furthering misery, as the west consumes

Africa's largest export (the value of poverty images exported annually exceeds that of all oil and ore exports).

Laurel Nakadate takes her life into her own hands whenever she invites new partners, met either casually on the street or via internet ads, to *play* with her on film. Although she considers this really no different than meeting people at parties or work, the actions they perform can signal mixed messages. So long as the camera is rolling, she can safely play with anyone, anywhere, since the camera captures unsolicited acts. No wonder she considers her most risky project to be the *Lucky Tiger* series, for which she passed around photos on a Craigslist date with three guys who refused to be videotaped, but agreed to handle her cheesecake photographs with fingers covered in fingerprint ink. It generated traces for sure, though not as explicit as her trusty security-cam. The two videos shown here, *Beg for Your Life* (2006) and *I Want to Be the One to Walk on the Sun* (2006) were selected since they exemplify Nakadate's desire to explore her freedom as a performer, exposing her body to risky situations. Her videos typically leave the viewer fearing for her life. That we're pleasantly surprised when her touching stories have innocent outcomes suggests that we've been programmed to expect the worst.



Emily Jacir, *Crossing Surda* (a record of going to and from work), 2002.

Survival

Since 1997, **Janet Biggs** has presented single and multi-channel videos, as well as multi-discipline performances that feature live actions such as dressage or synchronized swimming against a backdrop of projected videos. Fascinated by discipline and structure, her multi-channel videos capture dreaming horses, swimming polar bears, eagles, hawks, synchronized swimmers, marching soldiers, basketball players, bagpipe players, pianists, equestrian acrobats, football players and wrestlers. *Vanishing Point* (2009) juxtaposes her footage of motorcyclist Leslie Porter setting three world records on Utah's Bonneville salt flats with a top speed of 234mph against that of the Harlem Addicts Rehabilitation Center's Gospel Choir, singing a song with lyrics by Biggs and music by Grammy-award winner Barney McAll. Filming on the salt flats caused Biggs' eyes to swell shut each night, requiring her to add hot compresses each morning to pry them open. She set her own speed records of 100+ miles per hour, filming backwards, while strapped into a custom-built chair (built by her and an assistant who works for biker.net), suspended off the back of a hemi-engine pickup.

Producing video art since 1998, **Patty Chang** first became famous for the two-channel video *In Love* (2001) for which

she passed a raw onion back and forth between her and her parents' mouths, the onion disappearing with each pass, tears flowing all the while. Featured here is the lesser known *Eels* (2001), for which she squirms, while wrestling with eels flopping around in her blouse. A lot of her earlier works resemble the kinds of acts one might perform on a dare – eating bits of melon cut out of a brassiere, slurping

water off the floor, shaving one's pubis or contorting one's body like a Chinese acrobat. Such actions visualize her efforts to challenge stereotypes attributed women and Chinese immigrants.

Emily Jacir, winner of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's 2008 Hugo Boss Prize, first became known for *Where We Come From* (2001-2003), a massive photographic

installation detailing the myriad tasks Palestinians living in the occupied territories or abroad requested her to do. Equipped with a U.S. passport, she crosses the border dividing Israel and Palestine swifter than either Israelis or Palestinians. When an Israeli soldier caught her filming her feet at a checkpoint, she felt threatened by his butting an M-16 rifle against her temple, so she decided to film *Crossing Surda* (a record of going to and from work) (2002), an intense two-hour plus videolog of her routinely passing through checkpoints from the perspective of a camera hidden in her bag. This access to an otherwise inaccessible space would not exist had she "not had this direct threatening experience."⁸

Perseverance

Meeting an art historian who teaches the same class, three times back to back in the same room, inspired **Phyllis Baldino's** *Room 1503 in a row* (2000). Baldino showed up for class and videotaped each lecture, consecutively displaying the recording of the last class on the monitor adjacent the teacher, thus measuring whether her pace matches her earlier lecture. *Room 1503 in a row* serves as paean to those whose work is not only repetitive, but requires great acting and commitment to perform tasks in a manner that feels fresh and exciting. The duo **ManosBuckius Cooperative** (Melanie Manos and Sarah Buckius) also present videos centered around repetitive, menial chores. *The MBC @ The Office OR 8'5" x 11"* (all works 2007) features task masters copying, collating, sorting and filing mountains of papers in record speed. With *101 Ways to Humanize Technology*, two workwomen deliver monitors, co-manuever a panel truck and activate a ladder. On June 29, 2007, they projected two-hours of real-time activities, performed live in 95 degree heat onto the Detroit Museum of Contemporary Art until their camera suffered burnout. One version of *MBC @ The Museum*

shrinks that memorable YouTube event into a 2-minute slot! Stressed out moms everywhere can relate to **Caryl Davis's** *The Ground is Good (Study in 3-D)* (1996/2009), her frantic, though comical appeal for relief. Hardly a “desperate housewife” herself, Davis’s iconic image of her body strewn over a clothespole certainly suggests otherwise. In contrast to Davis’s backyard scene, Manhattan is the subject of **John Pilson’s** humorous video *Portraits (Manhattan) Vol. 1* (2005). This features three classic New York tales- a pretty computer tech doling out detailed instructions concerning software negotiation, while getting dolled-up to go out on the town; two guys, still dressed in work clothes, discussing sports sprawled on a bed; and a woman whose personal space is constantly interrupted by beeps and pings.

Following a military action whereby 64 soldiers stayed awake for 80 hours, **Alysse Stepanian** challenged herself to a similar test, *72 Hours: Acrobat’s Little Leap* (1998). Remaining awake for 72 hours, she kept herself alert with strenuous activities such as balancing acts, boxing and counting the passing seconds, accompanied by the field recording of a marching band playing patriotic tunes. In *eggpoem* (2000), she and her husband **Philip Mantione** challenge one another to contests concerning outdoor games, while an anonymous narrator reads a text cobbled from vacation brochures and campground regulations in a voice that is simultaneously enticing and stilted. Mantione composed both videos’ original soundtracks. Just as Stepanian and Mantione battle it out, the collaborative duo **Type A** (Adam Ames and Andrew Bordwin) have challenged one another for well over a decade to see who will outperform the other. They first gained recognition with *4 Urban Contests* (1998) for which they literally raced each other in city-sporting events they devised themselves. With *5 Urban Rescues* (1998), they performed daring rescues and in *Action* (2000), they perform high-speed actions. Also included here are *Insertions* (2007), photographs for which they insert themselves squeezed into/under/around architecture.

Survival Games: Acts of Defiance, Resistance and Self-Preservation

Such perseverance tests as captured and/or performed for film by these artists are testaments to everyday challenges. One thing I’m certain of is that all artists view art-making as a survival game: a dare to bare their soul in public and a risk to air potential failures. That so many artists have sought to publicize life’s daily struggles, presenting them in a manner that is both compelling and provocative is indeed a sign of the times. In spite of waning sales and attention, artists have only one real option, but to endure, if only for the novelty of beating the system on their own terms. Incidentally, this was the lesson of the French Resistance during WWII. Although it was nearly impossible to defeat military occupation, their acts of resistance revealed “(if only to oneself) a true self that is better and braver than one had ever supposed.”⁹ Such feats ease surviving crises!

¹Kelly Crow’s story is available online at www.post-gazette.com/pg/06107/682265-42.stm

²At 23, Keegan McHargue reported that his Parisian gallerist fêted him with a dinner for 500 at Maxim’s!

³Entirely focused on “posed” portraits, Fourth Wave Feminist Photographers include Vanessa Beecroft, Jenny Gage, Katy Grannan, Dana Hoey, Sarah Jones, Justine Kurland, Malerie Marder or Daniela Rossell. Photos by Annika van Hausswolf and Rineke Dijkstra, whose style inspired these gals, remain third wave.

⁴In addition to AAC’s “Endurance,” four other concurrent museum exhibitions explore action-packed practices: “Reflections” at Gallery 400, University of Chicago; “Acting Out: Social Experiments in Video” at ICA-Boston, “Dance on Camera” at ICA-Philadelphia and “This is Killing Me” at Mass MOCA.

⁵For more details of this Soho spectacle, check out www.impactaddict.com/bio.html

⁶In addition to Ader, Burden, Pane, Abramović and Leslie, artists famous for performing physically risky actions include Skip Arnold, Joseph Beuys, Günter Brus, Sophie Calle, Valie Export, Tamara Fites, Tehching Hsieh, John Latham, Tom Marioni, Ana Mendieta, Paul McCarthy, Linda Montano, Otto Mühl, Hermann Nitsch, Orlan, Raphael Ortiz, Charley Ray, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, Kazuo Shiraga, Barbara T. Smith, Stelarc, Cosi Fan Tutti, Robert Whitman and Jiro Yoshihara. For more details, read Paul Schimmel, *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1998).

⁷Other post-millennial artists who routinely film extreme actions include Yael Bartana, Sacha Baron Cohen, Phil Collins, Regina José Galinda, Alex Hartley, Sigalit Landau, Klara Liden, Mika Rottenberg, Santiago Sierra, Morgan Spurlock and Guido van der Werve. Live video feeds accompany STREB Extreme Action acts.

⁸Michael Z. Wise, “Border Crossings Between Art and Life,” *New York Times*, January 30, 2009.

⁹Hannah Fenichel Pitkin *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social* (Chicago: UCPress, 1998).

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