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Mark Allen: The Spectator as Spectacle

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Inside a suburban Kansas City Wal-Mart on Black Friday 2013, (the so-called inaugural holiday shopping season immediately following Thanksgiving) artist Mark Allen zips himself inside one of his custom body bags and plays dead. Allen gets the reaction he expects. People walk over and past him, some stopping to watch. Many, of course, photograph/record Allen's inert body on their camera phones. The silent performance goes for about six minutes before store security eventually escorts him out.

This particular Wal-Mart asked Allen to leave, with a sheriff questioning him before he could go.



Unfailingly polite and compliant, Allen has staged these "non-performances," as he calls them, in both the United States and Europe before and since graduating from Pepperdine University (Malibu, Ca.) with a degree in painting. There is a philosophy to his non-performances; there is no conveying of message, with the context itself playing a vital role in the act. These actions, however, posit much larger questions about how we process feelings about death and fear in a post-9/11 culture.

Reactions have varied. At the Tate Museum in London, security was calmer. Unlike at a famous, unnamed department store where three police officers were called to escort Allen off the premises. They held him for questioning, and the store threatened he not return or use the store's name in any publication.

In Florence, in front of the Duomo (cathedral) police were also civil. The Italians told him he could not play dead.

At Art Basel in Miami, Florida, (aka holiday shopping for the plutocracy), Allen was escorted out of the building, again held for questioning, and, along with his videographer Kelly Reemsten, banned from the space.

These non-performances and the resulting documents are a moving invitation to renegotiating the social contract.

For Allen to be alive and dead, per se, is a paradox. To be still allows the environment to work for him. To be motionless subverts the power structures of public spaces and of art, in general.

Another event at Kansas City's Country Club Plaza, an upscale, high-density outdoor shopping district, Allen was asked to leave by on-site security who told him he made shoppers feel uncomfortable. Allen admits his actions manipulate context; museums are a sacred space. Shopping centers have their own sacredness as well. One attains status and affiliation by making a purchase or visiting the space. Stillness distracts from our retail therapy and speaks to our heightened fear in society, especially in public spaces where the simple act of playing dead sparks that fear. This fear, and visual interruption from mundane tasks, yields unexpected dividends that study our culture's voyeuristic inclinations. Allen's projects appear to be embracing dangerous bodily states that, juxtaposed with American rites, suggests there is a slow, steady turning of the hive mind.

Allen's interruption of established environments reminds me of Andy Warhol's 1963 Death and Disaster series. In turn, inspired by both Marcel Duchamp's readymades and the brutally honest photojournalism of Arthur Felig, aka Weegee.

In an interview with the artist in his Kansas City studio, Allen references the book *Art Power* by Boris Groys, which talks about viewing terrorists through the lens of contemporary performance art. Allen tells me they utilize media documentation and their bodies to create great spectacles that incite fear in the public. These terrorists are successful because they both acquire infamy and instill fear in the general public.

Allen is providing a satirical critique of our fascination with death and disaster that grabs our attention. Spectators will lie down next to him, pretend to be dead as well, and take photographs. Allen is never in control of how the audience will react; he simply allows himself to be motionless in a public space and let the audience determine what it does.

Allen intends to continue these non-performances and project his own status as an artist, and not only with the body bags, which Allen fits to a buyer's specifications, like a custom-made suit. He uses vinyl replicating crocodile, ostrich or leather. The cost is payable in an ounce of gold. Asked why, Allen says it's "solid, symbolic, (with) value attached to the bags literally worth their weight in gold."

Allen will also be driving a pop-up shop inside a rental truck to cities like Los Angeles and Kansas City, selling t-shirts and other items. Similar to artists like Keith Haring, Damian Hirst and Jeff Koons, to name a few, Allen's pop-up enables a larger audience to acknowledge the experience, and for less money than a custom body bag or other original work of art.

Since the propitious use of camera phones, Wi-Fi and continuous connectivity, our relationships with group thinking have changed dramatically. Relying upon third and fourth party resources to story tell for us, the outsourcing of context can inhibit our own self-revelation. Mark Allen is presenting us with an immediate opportunity to absorb a rich experience, much like a 1960's-style "Happening." However, it remains to be seen if those who bear witness to Allen's events are conscious and present or documenting it into the ether.

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