

Secret Messages

At a friend's prodding, I wrote something about the genealogy of the dance *Flood Light*. But then I wondered who would read it, who *could* read it? What if I published it? How would it be changed by the hermetic seal of publishing? The disembodiment of the printed word. A self-selected audience. Obscurity. Like the candy coating on a pill, publishing helps both to disseminate and to protect.

I suddenly realized I could do anything with the text; I could recite it on street corners, leave it on the subway, chalk it on the sidewalk. My epiphany was in realizing that whatever I did with it would alter its content, meaning, and effect-- the way that every space in which we performed *Flood Light* changed the dance. The act of dissemination was in fact part of the message.

I suddenly imagined that my words were *read*. Unmediated, unannounced, the way not paved by context or introduction. A shocking thing, an almost unimaginable thing. Someone might see. But isn't that why we write? It forced me to reconfigure my agenda, to ask myself what I would really want to say if people would actually *read* what I wrote, if they could stumble on it unbidden in the paths of their daily lives. If I were really to speak up, what would I tell them?

I decided to write secret messages to New Yorkers. I created four texts, all based on the thoughts and words that had shaped the other essay. They had to be short, so that people could read them quickly, and they had to have a visual image so that people would want to read them at all. I chose a detail from a photo of *Flood Light*, a poetic but puzzling image of me arching backwards with a fluorescent light bulb on my chest. On seeing the photo, people always ask me if the bulb is hot.

At first it was hard to decide what to say when faced with such a narrow opening. How should I whisper into the frenetic information landscape of a too-busy city. Should I preach? Should I educate? Should I complain? Should I consciousness-raise? I realized that if I could only do one thing I wanted to tell people why I do what I do. I wanted them to be baffled, or surprised, or maybe even to understand, but at some level to be engaged. I wrote the following texts:

Artists in NYC are nomads. So I set out to make something completely portable. I thought I could embrace the nomadism and make it a part of my work. We worked with lightbulbs because we could carry them. The theater is completely dark until we screw in the first bulb. I thought we could outsmart the fact that we never have the things we need. And we did; we made magic. But hundreds of lightbulbs later I came to the same conclusion:

Art needs a home.

I ask myself every day. Why try to do the impossible? My government doesn't care about art, I have no money, and I get caught in the rain with more props than I can carry. Why do I bother? I guess I think art is about transforming the world,

recognizing ourselves in others, getting underneath the skin. Searching blindly for something real. Authenticity. In the end I feel like I have no choice. Without it, all would be lost...

What kind of world do you want to live in?

Why do we keep missing the point? Locating the value of art in its ability to stimulate the economy is to see it as part of a corporate consumer culture, but it can never really make sense on those terms. And besides, war will always do a better job. When will we begin to think that art is valuable for what it *is*? Because it makes people see and feel new things; it speaks up for the silent; it cuts through the bullshit.

Art creates a new world.

I think of myself as a kind of tour guide. Artists lead people to new "places", translate their experience into the language of those places, and point out the things they wouldn't see if they were traveling alone. I used to lead architectural tours of Belgium and I realized that it was very much like performing. Some people don't like to travel at all. Some people take pictures but don't see. Some have culture shock or food poisoning. But for others, a light goes on.

Art is like screwing in lightbulbs in the dark.

I printed each of the texts on a different color paper, made 200 copies, and set about leaving them all over New York City. I left them on subway cars, in taxi cabs, and in my local supermarket. I put them in the frozen food section in front of the Ben and Jerry's. I posted them on lampposts, public telephones, and bus shelters, and taped them to bathroom stalls, bookstore shelves, bars, picnic tables, and New Jersey Transit trains. I thumbtacked them to trees in Riverside Park, posted one in front of the Guggenheim Museum, and one on the public sculpture diagonally across from the Magnolia Bakery. I took them to Beacon, New York, and Princeton, New Jersey. Others took them to Boston, Swarthmore, Seattle, San Francisco, Florida, Paris, Lisbon, and Trinidad. Over three months later, I know of two that remain: on a telephone pole in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and on a red fire pump at the south end of Union Square.

I wonder what happened to the ones that didn't survive. I wonder if the people who clean the subways ever read them, or if anyone ever took them home. Was whoever removed one from my local bus shelter while leaving all the other notices irate or amused? I suddenly had a new awareness of the endless stream of scraps that people tape to the public surfaces of this city, and I became attuned to the vigilant waves of cleaning that purge New York bus shelters, telephone poles, and pay phones weekly. In a city that

appears to be continuously carpeted with paper, I was astounded by how quickly signs are harvested and new ones spring up in their place.

I was also shocked to realize how many other messages weren't actually *selling* anything either. In addition to the usual apartment rentals, cleaning services, and guitar lessons, there was "My Lover's Prayer for You" with a pull-off phone number, "Save Sammy" with info about a swindled ex-boxer in Florida, and "Bush and Rumsfeld, Dumb + Dumber", a looseleaf scrap hand-scrawled in red and blue ballpoint. I began to see the entire city as a giant bulletin board, and found myself part of an eclectic conversation unfolding over time and place.

The texts were small-- only 3 1/2 x 5 inches with a tiny postage stamp color photo-- unassuming and easily lost in the sea of scraps. One friend called them "minifestos". Many people said, "You should make them bigger. You should make them poster-sized." I said that *they* could make them poster-sized, or in different colors or languages or even with different texts. Any response was welcome, so long as it too was in the public forum. Performing artists habitually spend lots of time *getting ready* to act, rehearsing-- and thereby invisible. I wanted this dialogue to be a public one.

As for my own texts, I had decided that they should be small. I wanted people who noticed them to have to work a bit, to lean forward, to take a moment of their lives. I wanted to pull New Yorkers out of their information stupor, that way they have of surveying the visual field without really seeing, like the scanning probe of a blind person's stick. I wanted a moment of contact. By reading a tiny text in a strange place people would already be engaging in action, creating a momentary intimacy.

I started to put the texts in less obvious places to increase this effect-- at the *bottom* of lampposts, *behind* the pasta boxes in Gristedes. It was like creating a treasure hunt for someone I didn't know. Noticing them would be less likely but more significant. Of course, fewer people would see them, but I was more interested in the kind of experience I created for those who did.

It was a choice that made me clarify my view of activism, and it reminded me of a similar choice in connection with an art action I had organized in 2002. That July 4th I led "The Liberty Belles' Independence Day Promenade" to protest the disappearance of civil liberties in this country. I gathered a motley crew of five performers to march in slow motion to music like the Jimmy Hendrix version of the national anthem. We were covered in white clay, sporting sashes with text from the Constitution, bits of Americana, and red, white, and blue tutus fashioned as hats, skirts, and other accessories.

It was ghastly hot and there was no one on the street. I had planned to take the procession to Riverside Park for maximum aesthetic effect-- a Fellini-style circus troupe wandering through the summer green on theater-set paths-- but it was unlikely there would be many people in the park. Others thought that we should go to whatever busy spot would allow us to give out the most flyers, maybe Times Square or Union Square. I had to think about what my goal really was.

We would have a smaller audience in the park, but I liked the idea that someone might see us emerging from the trees and experience it as an apparition or private performance. I was willing to trade reaching fewer people for a more potent experience for those we reached. I also knew that in the park the message would be politically less clear; at Union Square, for example, people had already come to expect progressive protest. The park would be a relatively neutral political context. But if they got it, it would be all the more charged. I wanted people to be minding their own business, living their lives, and suddenly say, "wait, look at that." I wanted to create wonder.

We did. People in the park greeted us with open mouths-- children and adults alike. Many asked for flyers; we ran out three times and had to send someone to Xerox! And for some I imagine our message *was* ambiguous; we didn't hit as many political hardballs as we could have. But we created an opening. You can give people flyers, you can rant and rave, you can argue brilliantly, but you can't change anyone's thinking unless you have an opening. And wonder creates an opening. I realized that if someone went home that July 4th and simply said, "You wouldn't believe this incredible thing I saw today..." and that were all, I would still be happy. I would have affected someone. And *that* is the beginning of change.

I suppose that's what I wanted to do with the secret messages. To surprise people. To make one person notice and think "I can't believe someone put this here for me". I realized it's very much how I see performance. Sure there's subtext, message, something to think about-- my company is called jill sigman/*thinkdance*-- but really, deep down, I just want to give people some small, surprising gift: a moment of contact.

Eventually, I got tired of leaving the texts around the city and began to think about variants on the project. A phonenumber for people to call in their responses? An internet bulletin board? I began to wonder what would happen if I could shout louder, with the monied voice of consumer America... What if I could buy a subway car, and instead of a stereotyped sex goddess dressed in metallic beer labels passengers would see a woman with a lamp on her chest asking why she makes art? Would a louder voice make more people sit up and take notice or would the format just leave them numb? Is shouting always better than whispering? Can you have a moment of contact with an ad campaign?

I can't help but wonder if artists whisper for its effectiveness or for its *cost-effectiveness*. What if artists had buying power? What if they weren't landless citizens? What if this country believed in making art? What if *everyone* wrote manifestos? What if more people screwed in light bulbs in the dark?

WHAT IF.

Jill Sigman
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