
Nye Ffarrabas (formerly Bici Forbes Hendricks)

As Bici Hendricks, Nye Ffarrabas participated in Judson Gallery shows in 1966, 1967, and 1968.

It began for me one evening late in the fall of 1966, when Jon Hendricks was over to dinner. I showed him some of my work, and he asked me point blank if I would like to have a show at the Judson Gallery. I said I would, and asked when. December, he told me. Wow, just like that. For a few minutes I experienced sheer, unadulterated thrill. Then, reflecting that almost my entire oeuvre consisted of a series of notebooks, much of it in the form of events and abstruse conceptual whatnots, that I had a scant three weeks to prepare, and that I had a two-and-a-half-year-old daughter and was entering my third trimester with child number two and had never had a show before, I had a pretty good case of panic.

WORD WORK

The panic passed, and I settled down to work, creating tangible realizations of the scribbled notations in my journals. Since I am a poet, and the pieces had their genesis in words on a page, we called the show "Word Work." Pretty quickly, with a lot of infrastructure support from Geoff, logistical assistance from Jon, and encouragement from both, it came together.

I remember the black, wrought-iron railing with sections missing, smeared with many coats of shiny black paint ... the clanging metal stairs down to that mysterious, dingy—almost clandestine—space that was a tabula rasa, all mine to transform and adorn the way I liked. I remember the clink of the latch on the heavy iron gate and the way the gate rang when it slammed. I remember trudging up and down those steps—the baby out to *here*—carrying crates of objects, lumber, and furniture past the black-and-white sign Jon had

painted to announce the show. I was so proud of that sign; it stood for my first solo show. I meant I was an artist and part of a community of art and mystery and celebration. I was wonderstruck.

The show opened on December 2. There were found objects: a flag misprinted with all the stars pointing down; everyday materials transformed in various ways: a small restaurant sign with letters pressed into the slots spelling DAILY SPECIAL: bread; a pair of found deco chairs I had painted, one black, one white—my “Separate But Equal Chairs”; four birdseye diapers pinned to a clothesline, one dyed pale blue and painted with the emblem of the United Nation flag.

There were Word Boxes (moving message displays) bearing communications such as MEMENTO MORI; ingen plant, ingen retur (“no deposit, no return” from a Norwegian beer bottle); and, given the season and my opinions about the Vietnam War, PEACE ON EARTH, GOODWILL TO MEN — NAPALM VILLAGES FOR FUN AND PROFIT. I also found that haiku fit very comfortably in that format as did, with a little squeezing, quatrains.

We built two booths. The first one was painted black, with a black burlap curtain across the front, and a blackboard inside with an eraser and a black chalk. To make sure the booth was dark enough, I painted the ceiling black. On top of the booth sat a slide projector that played a continuous series of typed “Events” on a nearby wall: instructions such as “Go for a mushroom walk (a) in the Metropolitan Museum, (b) on the Staten Island Ferry,” or “Imagine that today’s newspaper is a book of mythology.” (Doesn’t that last one resonate, after the Monica Lewinsky soap opera? Maybe today, that would need to be changed to “Imagine that today’s newspaper is an episode from a Stephen King novel.”)

Opposite the black booth was its counterpart in white: white walls, white burlap, bright white overhead light, and inside a white vanity table with round mirror and a white chair to sit on. On the glass surface were two white saucers with dymo label instructions. One held a needle and white thread (THREAD A NEEDLE), the other a white egg (BALANCE AN EGG).

People reported that they enjoyed going into these mini meditation spaces and making little performances for themselves with the materials provided. The black booth, especially, evoked thoughts of confessionals, voting booths, and dark corners where you could write any messages or draw graffiti with absolute privacy and freedom.

There were tables displaying my unbound book *Language Box*, *Punctuation Poems*, and *Egg Time Events*, and there were several ice pieces: *Ice Jigsaw Puzzle*, *Ice Candles*, and an ice disk with a crumpled American flag embedded in it, lying on a bed of beach pebbles (*Defrost the American Flag*), all of which had to be made anew and toted down from 104th Street every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday for the show's six-week run. I had difficulty unmolding the jigsaw pieces at the opening, and one of the knobs broke off. Dick Higgins popped it in his wine glass. "I've never had sculpture in my drink before," he chuckled, and proceeded to put the puzzle together.


There was a bright-red, slat-back rocking chair with a square blue cushion with white stars sewn on it. When the chair was placed against a white wall, the ensemble instantly turned into a flag (*American Rock #1*). I had made several calligraphies with stencilled letters on rice paper. Examples are:

C
ALL
IGRA
PH
Y

and this prayer:

O
HOLY
MAD RAY
MOTHER OF MAGIC
PRAY
FOR
US
NOW
&
AT THE
A & P
ROACH
OF
DEATH

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Lee Guilliatt reads a Language Box card in Bici Hendricks's Word Works installation, January 1, 1967. Copyright © 1967 by Peter Moore. Reprinted by permission of Barbara Moore.

Two major pieces—both as to size and as to complexity (and as to future notoriety)—were *Dinner Service*, a table set with a rainbow cloth with Ford hubcaps as plates; empty Coca-Cola bottles for glassware; a windshield-wiping paper towel and a hammer, screwdriver, and pliers to complete each place setting; and a neon sign that flashed, in steady yellow capitals, “U S,” and, in rapid blue flashes, an umlaut over the U and the letters “ber alle” between the U and the S, so that the total effect was

U S
ÜBER ALLES

At the Happening and Fluxus Retrospective in Cologne, in 1971, the table was spread with a 5 × 8 foot American flag instead of the rainbow cloth. The letters “US”—instead of “Deutschland,” as in the German anthem—were disturbing to Germans and older Americans alike, though most younger viewers needed historical fill-in.

This flag imagery, which may have been one of the precursors of the Judson Flag Show (1969), was born in the contemporaneous context of U.S. aggression in Vietnam, just as the black and white chairs were conceived against the backdrop of our national struggle toward racial equality and justice.

Several encounters I had at the show were especially memorable. One was with the photographer Diane Arbus, who liked the work a lot. Another was with art critic John Gruen, whose book *The New Bohemia* had just been published; he came up and asked me if I was in the book!

All of this work, however iconoclastic or playful some of it was, had a devotional quality that was intensified by the rough, underground character of the space itself. It proceeded from a love of the natural and the ordinary, delight at the surprise of discovery, and outrage at atrocious events and attitudes. In this respect, my work was a form of moral statement, abstracted and torqued and right at home in a church whose ministers authored cutting-edge, innovative social programs and wild, high-camp operatic extravaganzas and whose front entrance carried a sign tallying the weekly body count on both sides as the Vietnam War raged on.

The ice pieces, to my mind, were accelerated examples of the ephemeral nature of all persons, works, and materials. The Sphinx abraded by the desert sands and the sulfurous atmosphere of Florence eroding Michelangelo's *David* so badly that it had to be moved to an indoor location are only two versions of the same phenomenon.

The show closed in January 1967, a month before my son was born (on February 9, the night of Charlotte Moorman's arrest at her Town Hall concert for playing the cello barebreasted). The show was revived on February 24 as an intermission and post-show diversion for Judson Poets Theater goers attending a performance of the Gertrude Stein/Al Carmines amazing *What Happened* and song-and-dance pieces by several other artists.

MANIPULATIONS

In October 1967 Judson Gallery was also the scene of *Twelve Evenings of Manipulations*. On the second evening, I presented some large ice works in the gallery, with more candles and projected word pieces, in a piece called "Deteriorations: Bici Hendricks on Ice." I had

been asked to provide icepicks to hasten the melting process, in consequence of another installation, at Trude Heller's *Trik* discotheque, where this had been requested—rather against my better judgment—for the enhanced entertainment value of viewer participation.

With a three-year-old and a baby, I did not make it to most of these events. I did, however, get to Kate Millett's installation, a wooden cage of heavy dowels set in two-by-fours, top and bottom; it made a very sturdy enclosure perhaps 8 x 8 feet and 7 or 8 feet high. The audience was courteously escorted to a gap in the bars and asked to go inside, which we all did. There was quite a crowd of us, maybe fifteen or twenty. Suddenly, we became aware that the remaining dowel had been snapped into place, and there we were, *in jail*. I don't recall if Kate remained outside the enclosure or whether she and her helpers left the gallery altogether. I rather think she was somewhere where she could see our reactions. These were quite varied, and some were intense: claustrophobia, depression, embarrassment, outrage, bravado, ennui. I do not recall any amusement. One woman who had an appointment uptown she "really *had* to get to" became extremely self-righteous. After ten or twenty minutes of listening to her kvetching and moaning, a couple of us flexed the bars and let her slip out, to Kate's apparent annoyance (we weren't playing by the rules).

I have no idea how long this event went on, but at some point I was seized by an urge to revolt *within* the context of the piece. The top two-by-four was within six or seven inches of the ceiling. I eyed it, took a deep breath, and began to climb. Somehow, I shinnied up the bars, probably with the help of many hands, though all I remember is the seizure of will that carried me up and through the right squeeze at the top, over, and down. I experienced an incredible exhilaration, a triumphal "No" to our unceremonious caging. I don't remember whether the others stayed inside or whether I just left. It was a powerful event.

This was the first occasion at Judson at which I felt seized by the energy of the matter at hand, and it took me very much by surprise.

ORDEALS

About this time, the Judson arts program was getting a good deal of publicity, which resulted in the creation of several "catered" produc-

tions. One was *Conjunctions*, the afore-mentioned event at Trude Heller's *Trik*, in which Larry Kornfeld, Geoff, and I participated along with Roland Turner, Arlene Rothlein, and Florence Tarlow, among others.

Another event, staged all over the premises at Judson, was *Ordeals* (August 1967), a production mounted expressly for the International Congress on Religion, Architecture, and Visual Arts. It was contrived as a fantastic evocation of many of the real-life horrific and humiliating situations visited upon persons and populations all over the world by individuals and groups vested with authority and power.

The masterminds of this enormous undertaking were Al Carmines and Larry Kornfeld, aided and abetted by Carolee Schneemann and myself. Both of us created environment/happenings that augmented the other goings-on. Jon Hendricks was the herculean stage manager, assisted by a cast of dozens, both illustrious and obscure.

The general flow of events was as follows. People entered through the front door of the church, where they were subjected to bureaucratic processing with much shuffling and signing of papers. Then they went up the stairs, where each participant was kissed by a black woman and had a hangman's noose placed over his or her head ("courtesy of Black Power") by a silken-voiced black man. Everyone was given a paper cup of blood-colored mashed potatoes to eat. From there, by twelves, the curious and eager priests and nuns, architects, teachers, artists, and scholars were led through a nightmarish sequence that included an intimidating police line-up with bright lights, crawling through a dim passageway, and being photographed on a large, rough wooden cross while being verbally harassed. Immediately thereafter, they passed by a placard carrying a long, nonsensical passage from *Through the Looking Glass* and one of my Word Work boxes under a strobe light. "PAY ATTENTION," the message warned, "YOU WILL BE TESTED ON THIS MATERIAL. PAY ATTENTION. YOU WILL BE HELD RESPONSIBLE." This was followed by a kindergarten version of a song teaching the children to adore "the one true leader." Then came nap time on cushions on the floor while listening to a humorous horror tale.

From this point, the participants were led down the stairs in back of the church, where the walls were plastered with lewd and explicit magazine photos, past an open door where a man was



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Bici and Geoffrey Hendricks grade "exams" during the Ordeals show, August 29, 1967.
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seated on a toilet, trousers down around his ankles, and out to the Garden, with music and dim lights, where each participant was escorted to a dancing partner of his or her own sex.

Entering the Garden Room, the participants had to pass a man in black wearing a clerical collar who was hacking meat on a butcher block with a huge cleaver. This was the beginning of my environment, *Final Exam*. The participants were shown to seats at long tables with bluebooks and pencils and were peremptorily told to keep silent. The exam had ten multiple-choice questions, ending with "What makes you think there ought to be ten questions: (a) There should be but there aren't; (b) Ten is arbitrary; nine is just as good; (c) This is a question; (d) This is not a question, it is a philosophical statement on the nature of expectation." There was also an essay, "This I believe ..." to be completed in twenty-five words or less, while the exam proctors insulted and harried their charges. As they left, each participant was given a report card stamped "Fail,"

with predetermined “reasons” for said failure. They were also thumbprinted and received a rubber-stamped “Fail” on the back of their hands.

Then came the enforced flagellation of a nude female mannikin in bondage and a disconcerting journey through Carolee’s smothering, pink foam “burial” environment on the way to the “nurse’s station,” where participants were subjected to pointless “physicals” and humiliating questioning. Abruptly, they were escorted to the side door, which was thrown open as they were told, “Get Out!” The next moment, the heavy wooden door slammed behind them and they were standing on the Thompson Street sidewalk facing bright lights, a TV news camera, and a crowd of onlookers. The feedback that we received from those who wrote to us afterward was that *Ordeals* caused in many of them an awakening to the daily realities of millions of people throughout the world. It had been a profound and sobering experience that many of them would never forget.

If I have concentrated on my own part in this and other events, it is because, typically, Judson at that time was a place of rich simultaneities. I could be in only one place at a time, and I have more complete and reliable documentation for the work I was involved in. In describing *Ordeals*, I have relied on remembered descriptions by other people and on a detailed, well-illustrated, unsigned account in the *Boston Sunday Globe* of November 12, 1967.

DIAS

The Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS) was a broad-based and truly international venture. A large number of artists participated in the events, which took place at Judson, Finch College Museum, and elsewhere. Its main event at Judson, in the spring of 1968, was a sprawling group exhibition in the gallery and the garden, with the symposium convened in the Garden room after a series of performances outside.

At the far end of the garden, against the brick wall, was my piece, a shrine made out of a monolith of ice and paved with at least twelve dozen large white eggs, with flagstones radiating out to the surrounding space. Candles and mirrors were interspersed among these, and again there were icepicks—an element I considered foreign to my contemplative feeling about the piece, in which the “de-

struction” would be accomplished without human agency at the natural pace of melting ice. Nevertheless, I capitulated to the action orientation of the day, and I also provided the flagstones as steps by which one might make one’s way among the eggs, up to the ice block to chop at it. (Some people also got into smashing the eggs, and the stench in the garden lasted for weeks.)

At the other end of the garden, Ralph Ortiz was preparing to kill two chickens (*The Sad End of Henny Penny*, or something like that). One of the hens was black and one was white. Amidst much squawking and flapping, they were hung by their feet from two tall ailanthus trees and their throats were cut.

There was great commotion about this ritual (?) slaughter, and voices rose to loud, angry, and righteous heights. It was “art,” it was “race politics,” it was “senseless brutality,” it was “freedom of speech,” it was “wanton,” “sadistic,” “over the line,” et cetera. My focus was at the other end of the courtyard, and I was glad of the opportunity to refrain from getting involved. Having worked on a farm and plucked chickens many times, I was not horrified by the killing, but there was a jagged and polarized energy to the whole thing that haunted me.

This piece was followed by an action of Hermann Nitsch, involving a sacrificial lamb that had been professionally and humanely killed prior to the event. Nitsch dragged the flayed carcass up and down the yard on a rope. I stood watching, with an icepick in my hand, since nobody was “doing” ice at that point. I found myself seized by pity for the lifeless animal. It was perfectly clear that the body was in no pain, yet there was an aura of implied suffering around it that galvanized me. Stepping forward, I leaned over the carcass and plunged the ice pick into its rib cage several times with all my might as if to still the heart. The moment soon over, I withdrew, shaken.

In the symposium that followed people asked me what the stabbing was all about. I said it was about pity for the lamb and wanting to do the merciful thing and end its misery. This did not make sense to people who wanted my action to have been about rage, vengeance, stompin’, stormin’ macho stuff: a political statement.

The symposium was filled with controversy, rhetoric, politics, and theatrical grandstanding. There must have been 150 of us crammed into the Garden Room. Charlotte Moorman performed

Nam June Paik's *One for Violin*, raising a violin slowly, slowly, high over her head, and bringing it down with full force to smash on the table. Just as she completed her excruciating five-minute swing, Saul Gottlieb jumped up, shouting that this was shameful and wasteful, depriving some hypothetical kid on the Lower East Side of music lessons, and so on. He charged at Charlotte to grab her arm and prevent the smashing, but she had already reached the apex and was starting the descent like some overcoiled spring. There was no way she could stop as Gottlieb's head was suddenly thrust into the path of the fiddle. Down the violin came, creasing his forehead with a pretty nasty gash before it hit the table and exploded into splinters. People thought that Charlotte had gone for him deliberately, but that was not the case. It certainly fed the chaotic energy in the room, though.

I don't remember much of what was said during the rest of the symposium, but I do remember the passion of the arguments, the sarcasm of the rejoinders. When my turn came, I read my statement. At this distance, it seems thin and inadequate. I was trying to confront the kind of knee-jerk sentimentalism that many rosewater liberals use to object to art works and actions that push boundaries, the very attitude that turns explorations into commodities, discoveries into collector's items (from which the dealers, not the artists, reap the profits), and that inexorably trades in the authentic, radical insight for the comfortable anaesthetic. Today, I would say that in art everything depends on transmutation of the object, the moment, the phrase, *even if infinitesimally slightly*, so that new meaning emerges.

Surprise, double-entendre, even shock, and certainly humor are effective transformative means, but what was manifestly missing in a lot of this very in-your-face work was a basic humanity, or patience, the artistry to take it to the next step. Some of the art, and the criticism that accompanied it, was such shrill, scornful, antisensibility polemical overkill that it tended to preempt attention like a five-year-old's tantrum: interesting, perhaps, but scarcely edifying. Here's a condensed version of what I said at the symposium:

Although my own work involves *nonviolent* destruction, I'd like to say a few words to answer the objections to these strong methods and materials. Few areas of imagery could

be more appropriate at this moment in history. Art has no obligation to be pretty. It does have an obligation to be relevant in its time. Art is educative in function, but not didactic in method. Art appeals to us through the intellect, but even more through our emotions [*and our senses!*]. Intellect may have carried us nearly to the stars, but emotionally we are still very close to the Aurignacian cave-temples of 20,000 years ago. In a culture so characterized by violence and bloodshed, this imagery *is* legitimate in art. This imagery should be tolerated for the sobering and civilizing insights it can offer.

My participation in Judson Gallery events was part of *living at the edge*, which was clearly happening in my life. Geoff and I were in the thick of a very yeasty soup—the art world in New York at that time. We were both experiencing huge creative upswings. I loved my children dearly and had an intense connection to them, but in this maelstrom I scarcely broke stride for childbirth. I kept going. In addition to the events detailed here, I was involved in perhaps a half dozen other shows and performances that year. I was stretching and growing convulsively, and emotionally I was close to my limit. Much of the real and implied violence and other raw weirdness in other people’s work troubled me profoundly. Geoff seemed to get off on it: the edgier, the better. As much as he helped and supported me, he may also have felt competitive and threatened by my new high profile in “his” field. I felt vulnerable and unprotected, especially in my parenting. Eventually, a rift formed and gradually began to widen. I could not continue to nurture my children or myself in the midst of so much “danger music.” I felt it as a rising tide in the real world, too: overwhelming, menacing, psychotic. This was no mere projection of my inner state on outward events. It was, I think, a very accurate perception of the world. Remember the year was 1968. My unease was reality-based and prophetic.

TERMINAL READING

There was one further occasion in the gallery, probably in 1969, in which I participated. It was *Terminal Reading*, the first of three readings of an unfinished novel of mine (I had three copies). The second

was performed at the Arts Lab in London, in the fall of 1970, and the third was at the Billy Apple Gallery on 23rd Street, in the spring of 1971.

Four performers are seated in the center of the space, like a string quartet with music stands in front of them. (These may be pre-selected readers or they may arise spontaneously from the audience.) On each stand is one-fourth of the manuscript, loose-leaf in black folders. In the middle of the square formed by the music stands is a hibachi or other small, contained fire. The audience sits or stands around the perimeter and may approach, withdraw, circulate, or simply listen.

Performers begin to read, first one at a time, then one voice over another, fast, slowly, loud, soft, repeating passages at will, holding silence, sometimes all four speaking at once, sometimes none. As performers are finished with a page, they may crumple the page and throw it in the fire, or they may pass it on, or another may reach over and start reading it. Thus, all manner of musical structures—theme, counterstatement, development, recapitulation, solo, duet, stretto, fugue, and so forth—are spontaneously produced from the written word on the page.

This process continues until all the pages are read and finally consumed. At Judson Gallery, the performers were Geoffrey Hendricks, Ronald Gross, myself, and one other person whose face and name elude me after thirty years. It was difficult but very cleansing to rid myself in this way of a piece of writing that never would finish itself, and the resulting “piece” was remarkably strong and beautiful, irrespective of the quality of the manuscript and different each time with other readers. This was one of my favorite art works.

THE GALLERY'S LASTING INFLUENCE

I want to emphasize how incredibly steady, nurturing, and seminal Judson has been to me—and to generations of artists of all kinds. Permitting maximal creative exploration, it provided stability and context when we ventured farther than our own internal gyroscopes could manage, and safety when censorship and other challenges threatened from without. It is hard to imagine now, but in 1970, participating in the Flag show was scary business, borne out by the arrest of Jon Hendricks, Jean Toche, and Faith Ringgold—

the stalwart souls who agreed, at an all-artists' meeting, to stand for the rest of us as the exhibitors if push, or should I say Putsch, came to shove. It did, of course, and the case of the Judson Three went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court before the ACLU legal team let it slip through the cracks.

My contribution to that show was a documentation of ways in which *Newsweek* and *Art in America* had misrepresented a large barbed-wire-and-ice work, shown at the Finch College Museum as part of DIAS, sensationalizing and totally fabricating a fictitious piece in which "a flag, a wedding dress, and old shoes, melted down into a sodden mess of garbage." I never made such a piece. I would have considered it pointless and aesthetically alien. The caterers, in a statement of their own, threw their detritus onto the remains of my ice piece in the courtyard, after the opening. The critic David L. Shirley, who "reported" the show, only interviewed me on the telephone and, by admission, never saw my piece in the courtyard at all.

When the world became too grievous, there was the comfort at Judson of being reassured that, yes, that was reality, that was how it was. There was ferment and fellowship, and, always, celebration. For me, much of this happened in the gallery and in the garden, and it has traveled outward into the world in widening ripples, with me and with the others, in all our lives ever since.

I'd like to end with an observation I wrote in October 1967 for inclusion in John Cage's *Notations*. It captures the spirit of bold and resolute good humor and support with which Judson took all our reeling and writhing in stride. To have had such a sandbox was good fortune beyond measure for dozens, maybe hundreds, of artists of many stripes and persuasions.

Creative work defines itself. Therefore confront the work.
There will always be critics eager to fashion opinions for
the lazy and incapable ... but what has that to do with
enchantment?

NYE FFARRABAS

lives in Vermont.