Anney Bonney

To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim.
-Oscar Wilde, “The Picture of Dorian Grey”

Since his seminal New York appearance in an abandoned massage parlor (the infamous Times Square Show of 1980), he’s emerged as the purest of the Appropriationists. Repainting other artists’ paintings, like de Chirico, Warhol, and Matisse, Mike Bidlo’s surrendered to the discipline and the destiny of remaking art history. Not everyone understands he’s taking inventory of 20th century Modernism. It’s a public service. Mike Bidlo mediates the moment between the riddle posed and the riddle answered. It’s not that comfortable a position. Like Cocteau’s poet peering through the keyhole in the hotel of lost souls, he dives into the mirror.

All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beyond the surface do so at their peril.
-Oscar Wilde, Ibid

Mike Bidlo: I can’t believe the Swiss authorities shut down your last show, “Not Leger.” That puts you back on the insurgents’ list. Is all the publicity it generated the good news?
MB: No. The whole situation was psychologically demoralizing. It seemed to give me a painter’s block, and I’m still dealing with the ramifications.
AB: What ramifications?
MB: General malaise and chronic fatigue.
AB: You’ve recreated artists’ histories. Couldn’t you pretend you were someone else?
MB: No. You can’t pretend you’re someone else, you can never pretend you’re someone else.
AB: But you do act out a cultural collective view. Your persona is a form of impersonation, and Mike Bidlo, the individual, submerges.
MB: You mean like Pirandello?
AB: You’ve presented more than six characters. And you are in search of the author. Your works’ origins are not from logos, I think they’re from mythos.
MB: You mean from an archetypal unconscious level?
AB: Exactly. Don’t worry, it would take psychic surgery to know how Mike Bidlo really operates or who’s behind the mask.

Are you conscious of any selection process in the artists you’ve chosen to “do”? Why Pollock, Klein, Picasso, Duchamp? The choosing itself is Duchampian.
MB: I think so. They’re all ready-mades.
AB: And all ready-knowns. You did a performance about Pollock’s “Blue Poles,” called “And One Blue Pole for Germany.” What was that?
MB: I recreated the painting “Blue Poles” in a gallery in Germany because it had been sold to the Australian National Gallery in Canberra. And it was my thinking that every major museum in every country should have a “Blue Poles,” a major Pollock piece, even if it was a Bidlo.
AB: That was the follow-up to “A Chicken in Every Pot and A Pollock Over Every Couch”?
MB: Right.
AB: Your sense of distribution did not include your performances. There’s almost no documentation of them.
MB: That’s true. And there was a time when I remember saying I’m glad I don’t have to do a performance again. I felt towards the end that they became brutalizing Cirque du Soleil for an ungrateful audience. Between you and me, it got to me. But I guess there was a need to do the performance in order to draw people in.
AB: Bidlovian exhibitionism.
MB: Just getting yourself out there was the point. That’s part of what every young artist has to do.
AB: Part of your process is to flirt with, but ultimately subvert, the idea of literal. Perhaps directing or acting a piece as theater was too straight forward, too much of its own milieu.
MB: Directing was exciting but I felt uncomfortable being in the spotlight even as director.
AB: I’m picturing you as the Master of Ceremonies in your Yves Klein piece, “Not Anthropometries,” where naked girls drenched in blue paint pressed against white sheets of paper. Were you doing exactly what he did?
MB: Well, as much as I could figure out from the photographs, I did recreate the “Monotone Symphony” and I saw “Mondo Cane.”
AB: Oh God, I forgot that movie. In 1962, I snuck into a forgotten art house to see it. I don’t know what the impact would be on me now. Probably his brief appearance would seem sacrilegious.
MB: Actually, I think Yves Klein felt somewhat the same way. When he saw the sensational way he was portrayed in “Mondo Cane” he didn’t like it — he had been exploited, played. It was not his vision of himself. It got him really depressed, severely depressed, and probably towards the end — not good. I think he felt they had snatched a piece of his soul. So that situation can be very powerful . . . It’s almost like you touch it, you’re going to get burned. It’s so hot.
AB: All his offerings to St. Rita, the saint of lost causes, couldn’t save him from his public, his rage, or his Theater of the Void... Magic plays a part in many of the artist’s work you’ve chosen, their attraction to alchemy, Jung, occultism, blood, Pollock’s being influenced by lunar phases, dematerialization—
MB: Yeah. It’s true, not to mention Duchamp’s and O’Keefe’s aesthetic cross-dressing.
AB: You like to cross some fashion lines yourself. Is that what provoked your Nam June Paik art attack, where you approached him at his opening and cut off his necktie?
MB: I was reversing roles because originally it was Nam June who cut off John Cage’s tie. You should have seen the look on Paik’s face. He smiled, took one step backward, and bowed!
AB: Obviously he appreciated the Karmic burlesque. You always select very dramatic moments, in art’s history of space as well.
MB: Pictorial space?

Anney Bonney is a painter who lives and works in New York City.
AB: Yeah, consider Picasso's "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon." There was the moment when Cubism critically altered our perceptions of space. Wasn't that the turning point?
MB: I think so. To further alter my perceptions, I did the performance "She Worked Hard For The Money" about that painting. Actually, most of the performances were done because I had that studio at P.S.1. After doing my two year sentence there the performances became less frequent, but I started painting in public. Larry Gagosian offered me his space in Los Angeles to do the Guernica because he knew I wanted to paint it and my studio wasn't big enough. The gallery was on Robertson Blvd. People could drive by the double open doors and see me painting it right on the scaffold at night. It almost became a Surrealist Diorama. They could see the grisaille build up, Guernica's architectural skeleton, in progress from their cars.
AB: Almost like a drive-by time lapse of—
MB: The codex of early modernism. You see it was such a wonder for me to see these images evolving. I had to submerge my own feelings to be able to let other people see that.
AB: Sublimating. You're reincorporating the masters of modernism, like a love affair between you and these artists, like a Gestalt therapist and his patient — a transference.
MB: You mean like a love-hate affair, real life. Let's get into some reality here, some deep unresolved Oedipal...
AB: Better unresolved, really, but there'd be no ancient theater or modern psychology without it. Tell me about the "Original Schnabel Simulacrum."
MB: That piece got such a violent response from an artist that he wheatpasted these flyers everywhere. (Anney reads the flyer.)
AB: Kind of excremental!
MB: I recreated "The Birth..." or was it "The Death of Fashion," Schnabel's piece. (Mike passes Anney a photograph.)
AB: I see a guard standing in front of your "Schnabel's Plate painting. Is he armed and dangerous?
MB: Everyone was armed and dangerous. It was the early 80's, a time when artists were reacting to and subverting the gallery system. David Wojnarowicz and I staged an artists' take-over of a deserted Port Authority Pier on Spring Street. This was an incredibly huge vault-like interior, a place for all types of people on the edge: prostitutes, junkies, sexual outlaws, the homeless. We decided it was the perfect forum for an open call, uncured art show. Literally hundreds of artists became involved before the police padlocked the site. It had a great view of the river in decay, part Piranesi, part Pasolini.
AB: You know, some of the artists you've picked were pariahs, but all of them were living legends, showmen, show boats... They had the power to project.
MB: This is true. I never thought of that. You're right.
AB: I'm thinking of the heroism, the levitation — remember Yves Klein out the window? Julian Schnabel doing Yves Klein out the window. Spatial breakthroughs: Picasso, Pollock — they're all expansionist, conquistador type personalities. Did you think about that?
MB: No, I didn't. Do you think that's one of the elements of being an artist in contemporary society, that you have to have this personality?
AB: Only if you want success early, like when you're alive. I love the fact that you don't necessarily have answers to every question. People assume that you're much more calculating than that.
MB: Yeah right, no, it's not a major calculation of any sort really. I don't care what people may think. It's a perpetual rite of passage. I'm totally in my own world. I've created my own world, this whole bubble. I reflect and the bubble reflects all these different things at the same time. It's like H.G.Wells' "Time Machine" and you can just go from this time period to not interested in that one, (snaps fingers) go to this one, and create new perspectives along the way. I guess that's what directors do, too.
AB: Here's a quote from Artaud: "If the theater has been created as an outlet for our repressions, the agonized poetry expressed in its bizarre corruptions of the facts of life demonstrates that life's intensity is still intact and asks only to be better directed."
MB: Hmm, better directed.
AB: You directed an actor to recreate Jackson Pollock urinating in Peggy Guggenheim's fireplace, "Jack the Dripper at Peg's Place."
MB: I used to call it a free fall performance where it just takes its
A Chicken In Every Pot and A Pollock Over Every Couch

own organic structure from the viewers, an interaction of the performers and spectators. A three-dimensional painting. Even I was a little shocked when the actor peed into an empty champagne glass, toasted everyone, and then slurped it down before he crawled into the fireplace and assumed a fetal position.

AB: Oooh. Jackson got upstaged on that reenactment. From Artaud again: "...what has been said is not still to be said, that an expression does not have the same value twice, does not live two lives, that all words, once spoken are dead..." Does this apply to actions and images as well?

MB: I always thought that the paintings had the possibility of having double the meaning. In other words, there is the original and yet there is another layer of meaning added to the original that made it richer, more Bergsonian — sort of liking doubling the inventory.

AB: The quotes I just gave you were from "The Theater and Its Double." You invert the originality issue.

MB: Probably what I'm contributing is another layer to the legacy — like being a wrestler and at the same time a surgeon doing corrective revisionist surgery. The work is simultaneously aggressive and submissive.

AB: It's the most regressive Frankenstein avant-gardism.

MB: It combines many of those irreconcilable characteristics.

AB: When you recreate an artist's paintings do you see the canvas as a body? Are your brushstrokes like putting on the other painter's skin or getting under it?

MB: Well, I don't go by brushstrokes, but by quadrant or by section. Each painting becomes a series of abstract oil washes. The breasts of a Picasso woman become just rounded forms from dark to light tones and very abstract. It's funny. I do mostly figurative work, you know, but I'm always dealing with the abstract.

AB: I know; do you use assistants?

MB: No, I mean, I have in the past for certain pieces, and in the future I wouldn't rule anything out, but generally, no. In doing the work myself there is a certain osmosis. Even in doing Schnabel's plate painting, there was a common denominator in the actual hands-on making of it. This was not just being a spectator, but a participant going in under it.

AB: Do you think about being possessed, or is more incantation time? Is Pollock over your shoulder? Is Georgia whispering in your ear?

MB: Sometimes I feel I'm in a scriptorium, but it's not a conscious invocation if that's what you mean. I don't hear voices in the night.

AB: I know, your ego's still sequestered in the house of the unconscious, the invisible, and...

MB: Tight-assed art historical taboos. I'm interested in exploring and penetrating those taboos.

AB: In violating the inviolate. Mike, I think you turn Oedipus into a blind hierophant, unconsciously, of course. You and Yves are up there at the altar checking out the divine.

MB: Yeah, because Yves Klein was totally into Rosicrucianism, mysticism, and Art. His vision was a religion for him. All the artists we're talking about were shamans or religious figures. Art was life to them. In a way the work I've done has become my past, part of my DNA. After I've gone through the period of indentured servitude of painting each painting, it's become me. It is part of me. It is me, that's what I am and yet it's not me.

AB: Hermetic epiphanies as they apply to Mike Bidlo: Psychopomp, Thief, Con (Artist), Guide, Apprentice, Master/Slave, Merchant, Androgynous.

MB: Don't kid yourself. It was not a free ride. You pay a lot more than what you're paid back. There's more yin than yang. I mean it's not Happy Valley Days, you know. It isn't. The myth of me is more about Sisyphus than you know. That's another reason the layer of controversial qualities must come to the surface. I'm totally unaware of it. I try not to think about it because I have to stay in almost a long-term altered state in order to do this type of work — I mean to suppress my ego on so many levels. I hope it's not ultimately going to drive me crazy.

AB: Think of it as a Tibetan Buddhist concept, crazy wisdom.


AB: (laughs) VERY SOON —

MB: Mike, museums are institutions.

MB: They are. That's ironic because now my work's been a little more accepted. In the beginning I didn't want it to be. It was this rebellious gesture to do the Pollocks, to destabilize the idolatry. And now it's all been consumed, which is good because I always thought you couldn't cause change from without, you had to be in the system to cause change. So maybe it's all working in a way — for this minute — (laughs) Tomorrow is gonna be another story. But it's still important that the work be controversial, something to do with freeing myself from the bondage of their tyranny. OY.

AB: The tyranny of the artists you've chosen? The monster quality of their stature, the weight of their histories? Their...

MB: Yup, megalomania, almost Hannibal Lecter time. (laughs)

Want to see something really sick: (A photo of Mike, aged nine, as an altar boy dressed in cassock and surplice, golden inscriptions on the side).

AB: Ah, portrait of the artist as a young exorcist.

MB: One part of my work has to do with taking something which should be public, namely art history, but which is held privately and stealing it back for the public. I'm interested in confronting these perverse internal contradictions. I'm interested in an art which incorporates inversions and paradoxes as politically subversive as it is seductive.

AB: A mission to rescue art's lost intimacy?

MB: It's a re-introduction of intimacy on my level. Because that intimacy has been lost through reproduction. The nature of our society doesn't give you a true intimate view of art. It's more about interchangeable images from a data bank.

AB: The "is/not" dimension of your work is pure intro/extra version polarity.

MB: It's very Wayne's World. There's humor in it. The performances really used to crack people up.

AB: There's not too much humor happening in the art world right now. I mean is anybody really funny?

MB: Orlan. She's the one who reconstructs herself through surgery.

AB: That's a long way to go for a laugh.

MB: She's a French woman who goes through plastic surgery to reconstruct her face and then presents performances of the plastic surgery being done, photographic tableaux. Have you seen it?

AB: Michael Jackson deconstructed?

MB: That's right, babe, the Michael Jackson of the Art World. Her lips have no separation. The epidermis is pulled, and you see the liposuction going on in her thigh, that big needle shaking in

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and out, and then she puts the fat into petri dishes — you have to see this!

**AB:** Well, she's got some of your key ingredients: controversy and transformation with identity problems, but it's more about sacrifice.

**MB:** More about scarification, mutilation and beautification.

**AB:** The side effects of self-image as object.

**MB:** Let me read this to you. "I want paintings to help establish a relationship. The viewer must be put into a state to love so much that one must endeavor to actually be the loved or hated object..." And this is from Ad Reinhardt: "We need to renegotiate constantly, to barter discipline and anarchy simultaneously. The art must be resolute and demonstrative, disquieting, including agitation, irritation, estrangement, vampirism, transference, possession; an art which has elements of self denial and impropriety simultaneously. I want the work to fool as no other."

**AB:** Will the real Mike Bidlo please...

**MB:** There are some things which you will find history repeats. Whether I read these things or I subconsciously consumed these things, which I doubt, or it's synchronicity. They're strange.

**AB:** Do you have another example of where you predicted the past or it predicted you?

**MB:** These are a couple more examples: "I make art because I am a cannibal, quite simply it feeds a bittersweet addiction, an omnivorous appetite."

**AB:** Welcome to Happy Valley Rehab.

**MB:** It's not a very pretty picture at all.

**AB:** "Every real effigy has a shadow which is its double. Art must falter and fail." (Artaud) There's a lot of transference in your work, Mike. It's going on — right here, right now.

**MB:** What did I say here? (Leaving through notes) I said, "On one hand art is the only way we can get outside of who we are. On the other hand making art is an act of physical passion — of being involved. And on the other hand it connects us to other states of being where art is the norm." Now, where'd I get that? I don't know.

**AB:** By the way, Mike, you have three hands.

**MB:** Am I spinning? No seriously — (continues reading) "I make representations of other paintings in order to undermine a certain certainty of appearance"...Talk about confluence.

**AB:** Now you see us, now you don't.

**MB:** "I make art in order to sabotage and/or infiltrate the ivory tower. I make art as therapy, as meditation, as battle, as investigation...I wrote this.

**AB:** (laughs) Are you sure?

**MB:** "I make art because it enables me to change hierarchical relationships, to represent reshirings and to recontextualize because I'm omnivorous, and obsessed. I make art in order to rematerialize." Did I say this already?

**AB:** That seems to be the theme here.

**MB:** "I make art because I have no other choice? I make art..." Oh, there we go again.

**AB:** Duchamp meets Goya's Saturn devouring his own son.

**MB:** That's really pre-Oedipal then, and it's still not a pretty picture.