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JASON RHOADES: *Black Pussy*

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Photo courtesy Douglas M. Parker Studio

Jason Rhoades' untimely death in 2006 at age 41 cut short a career which, through the sheer audacity, scope, and ambition of his prolific artistic output since 1993, promised to make him one of the defining artists of his generation. While often perceived as a maverick - constantly changing styles, materials, and intellectual approaches for each project, it is the very continuity and reoccurrence of Rhoades' most important concepts and concerns throughout his career that is the hallmark of his final exhibition, *Black Pussy*, conceived by the artist in 2005 and 2006 and completed in Rhoades' studio shortly before his death.

The last installment in a trilogy of work that includes *Meccatuna* (2003) and *My Madinah: in pursuit of my ermitage...* (2004), *Black Pussy* remains one of Rhoades' most mysterious works, and his most ambitious. Sprawling roughly 3,000 square feet, the work presents itself as a large installation, dominated by an empty stage bearing a neon sign which reads "Live in the Black Pussy." The work also features 185 neon *pussy word* signs, as part of the artist's ongoing project of creating a cross-cultural compendium of synonyms for female genitalia. Large storage racks are covered with myriad objects, including hundreds of Egyptian Hookah pipes from a seized shipping container, over 350 unique Dream Catchers (a traditional Native American fetish object used to filter dreams), 89 beaver-felt cowboy hats, 72 Chinese Scholar stones, Venetian glass vegetables (and Chinese knock-offs), colorful cloth rugs, a homemade aluminum replica of Jeff Koons' famous stainless steel *Rabbit* (1986), and more. To one side, a large macramé textile object covers the wall. Beyond the formal juxtapositions created, the individual elements in the massive installation interact symbolically, communicating dichotomous relationships of masculine versus feminine, Eastern versus Western traditions, the handmade versus the mass-produced, and the authentic versus the fake.

Black Pussy is foremost a sculpture; however it is not merely the result of material objects chosen by the artist, but also the activities of participants in the ten *Black Pussy soirées* held in his Los Angeles studio. For a period of six months, the artist invited a small group of selected guests to attend a series of events officially known as *Black Pussy Soirée Cabaret Macramé*. Though seemingly improvised, these evenings were highly structured hybrids of performance, Happening, dinner party, and art opening. Rhoades hired performers, but also expected a high level of guest participation with the intention that these *soirées* would add to the constantly evolving *Black Pussy* installation. Each guest not only contributed a new personal *pussy word*

to his encyclopedic list, but also a bit of themselves in the form of charisma—their intangible and individual spiritual power. The events were heavily documented in the form of photographs, which were both physically incorporated into the installation and used to compile a coffee table book, and also in the form of a soundtrack, which became a part of the work itself. Only after the addition of sound - the auditory remains of the cycle of *soirées* – did Rhoades consider the sculpture complete.

It is important to note that Rhoades did not intend to continue the *soirées* once the work was shown in a different context. These events were clear extensions of the artist's studio practice, creating not only an aura for the work, but also turning the ephemeral quality of the participatory evenings into concrete material for his sculpture. The varied materials found in *Black Pussy*, the formal density, and the strange soundtrack (especially powerful today, as we mostly hear the artist's voice) create a narrative of utmost complexity, or conversely, multiple narratives. An undoubtedly provocative title, *Black Pussy* refers most directly to the darkness of the cavernous installation within Rhoades' studio and the ultraviolet lights which are the sole sources of illumination in the space. The notion of absence, so powerfully illustrated by the empty stage and the disembodied voices on the soundtrack, is especially poignant when we contemplate Rhoades' favorite white suit, which the artist placed in the middle of the piece, in lieu of a signature, just days before he died.

While Rhoades could be the most dazzling colorist and materialist (as is abundantly evident in *Black Pussy*), it is really his conceptual vigor that frames and connects his oeuvre, and makes him the ultimate artists' artist, not only as someone who commands the respect of his peers, but as an artist who redefined the arena in which art is possible, and tried to expand the boundaries of this arena. The conditions under which art is made, shown, and consumed were sources of enormous interest for Rhoades, and it is his continuous assault on these conditions and rules that made his work so challenging and fascinating. For Rhoades, the creative process demanded ultimate freedom. His work could be dangerous, overwhelming, politically incorrect, obnoxious, or utterly sublime. Rules and conventions were materials for Rhoades, and he subverted them not out of bratty adolescent impulses, but because he understood them to be safety nets in the art-making process, and knew that, once these were removed, there lay a whole new set of challenges for the artist and his audience.

Rhoades' work can be both physically and visually demanding, yet it is its intellectual challenges which often prove most daunting. It takes a long time to see a Jason Rhoades' work, as the physical viewing and the production of meaning can be similarly arduous. For Rhoades, the ideal audience would pick up bits and pieces of literal meaning from the multitude of real world objects in his work, and enter into an investigative dialogue with the work in order to unearth the sculpture's metaphorical potential. His work exists on numerous levels, and only through continuous engagement with the work do new levels reveal themselves. Whereas traditional visual media can often be seen and judged instantaneously, Rhoades' work functions in time, much like a film, or the reading of a book. Time needs to be invested. Once this investment is made, the returns can be enormously gratifying.

On a formal level, the work reveals great precision and beauty, and attests to the artist's singular aesthetic. Intellectually, a thorough investigation leads to themes that Rhoades investigated again and again in his career: the conditions under which art is possible, the role of the artist, the sources for creativity, the notion of abstraction, and our ultimate inability to fully understand that abstraction. Control was of great importance to Rhoades. He not only tried to control the actual space of the work, but also the imaginary space in his installations. Further, Rhoades' work was extremely personal. He touched on ideas of consciousness, communication, power, love, the creation of life, culture, religion, and thought itself, as filtered through his own experiences, using the banal vocabulary of post-industrial consumer culture to open spaces of dialogue with these enduring themes.

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