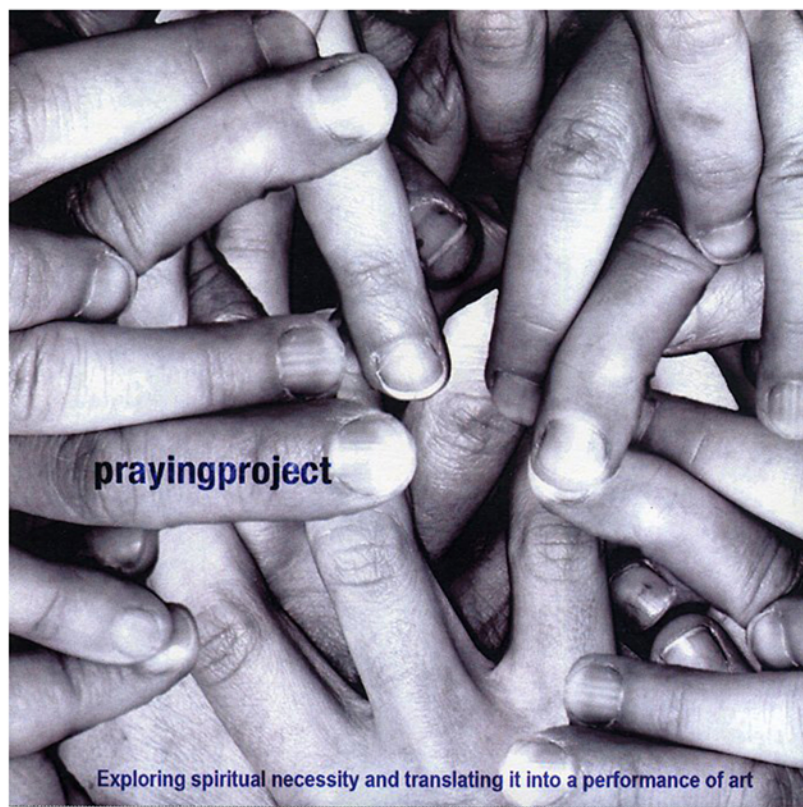


EXIT ART



The stretch of 10th Avenue that runs north from the Javits Center is a desolate one. Shops are scarce and the few cars and pedestrians that happen to be there, are all on their way to somewhere else.

On the corner of 36th Street, however, a disparate group of astute art crawlers and convention goers, their suitcases in tow, is standing outside Exit Art, a non-profit art exhibition space, peering into its windows. Each has been outfitted with a makeshift stage. In the windows that line the 36th Street side of the building, a young man dressed in a suit and tie, crunched over a small table is madly hitting the keys of an old typewriter; in another a woman with knee-high socks and a severe bob is drawing pencil faces, crosses and abstract shapes on a pair of cash-register paper rolls; nearby another is rolling paper beads and stringing them on a huge spool of cotton, periodically stopping her labor to play a flute; next to her a woman is running on a treadmill. In the windows that line Tenth Avenue, a woman is prostrating herself over and over on a black mat while another is rubbing a huge block of soap into a thick lather and one more is burying her head in a pile of sand. Those who venture inside find a statuesque and naked man methodically dipping a large butcher's brush into a bucket of vinegar and rubbing himself with it with bold, determined strokes. His skin is dangerously red. At the sound of a chime—a metal spoon clanking against a metal bowl—the performers switch stages or are replaced by others. A couple dressed in Kennedy-era clothes begins a stylized version of the Kama Sutra while a woman methodically walks back and forth on a plank of wood resting on a small teeter.

There you have it, a segment of the Praying Project, Exit Art's bold exploration of spirituality which gathered 21 different performers and as many interpretations over the course of a three day week-end in April. In a culture of overachievers and a contemporary art world where everyone seems to be entirely focused on how and when to make the next big splash, proposing an exhibition that asked performers to retreat into their inner most core is a daring feat. By the same token, it was also putting on display an inherently private practice.

Papo Colo, co-founder of Exit Art and conceiver of most of its exhibitions' themes will only say that he has "a little book of ideas" from which he plucked the Praying Project. Camila Marambio, the Assistant Curator who worked on the exhibition elaborates a bit further. "Faith is a very important topic in the 20th Century. It tears up apart," she said, invoking the war in Iraq and the rift that is pitting Christians and Muslims against each other. She specifies that their goal was to "to expand the definition of prayer rather than link art and spiritual practices."

The Praying Project is a realm where terms such as prayer, meditation, spiritual, ritual and religion are used almost interchangeably. Each vision remains distinct from the one next to it but they are united by endurance and theatricality. The performances are interpretations of the concept of prayer, not its practice.

Mayumi Ishino, a practicing Zen Buddhist, struggled at first with the very concept of prayer, which she understands as a distinctly Western form of asking—asking for forgiveness, for health. "It's strange for someone to ask for something, for some results by praying outwards to someone. My practice is about meeting myself inwards," she says. In the end, she created See-Saw—the teetering wood plank—based on the Zen Buddhist practice of walking meditation. To add a theatrical element bells hung from the plank's underside and Ishino periodically clicks a pair of castagnettes whenever her focus risked drifting. The accessories were obviously there for sonorous effects, but also to communicate with the public. "I don't expect them to have a cultural understanding [of the meditation] and needed something to draw people in," she notes.

If Ishino's piece gave the viewer a sense of astute mental focus rather than of exuberant endurance, other performers triggered a definite sense of awe with their physical prowess.

Sarah Bauer, an American practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism, who also transplanted a segment of her daily private worship onto the stage with Nund'dro, glided along her black matt 150 to 400 times an hour. The piece is based on the Buddhist Ngondro meditation, which requires that worshipers prostrate themselves 100,000 times for each of the meditation's 5 stages. Bauer has completed 65,000 cycles since 1997, some of which she video recorded in the privacy of her studio.

In Runner's High, Laura Nova ran up to four hours a day on a treadmill. Striving to establish a connection with the viewer that went beyond the visual, she connected herself to an EKG machine that printed out her heartbeat, visualized in graph form. Her neck, chest cavity as well as the inside of her mouth were outfitted with patches "to equate this practice to the public," while a pair of headphones brought the sound of her moving muscles and bones or the swish of water flowing down her throat to whoever cared to listen. Nova, who began long distance running 2 years ago after a family member was diagnosed with lymphoma, relates the endurance aspect of her piece to some of the rituals of her Jewish upbringing. "The repetitiveness of the action places you in this zone of trance," she remarks.

One week after the beginning of the praying project, Rob Andrews was still trying to decipher the ways in which his piece Clean Prayer had transformed him—he was the one yielding the butcher's brush. He was also on a 20 day antibiotic regimen to annihilate the bacteria that had seeped into his ankle joints through his lacerated skin and blown them to four times their normal size—by the last day of the praying-project, blood was running down almost his entire body. His performance stemmed from a 2 year reflection on the theme of cleansing which he explored initially through drawings and writing. "It was important for me not to embody the cliché version of other artist scrubbing the skin off their body," he notes. He structured Clean Prayer through a pattern of movement, scrubbing and breathing, creating in the end what he describes as a "musical rhythm." The piece is ultimately about how "I relate to myself," although he denotes a definite influence from his Catholic upbringing.

Beyond each performances' theatricality and, to a certain extent, their wow factor, this coincidence of choice highlights not so much a commonality in each artist's interpretation of prayer as an endurance marathon as an instinctual knowledge that the physical must be transcended—through dramatic pain or quiet meditation— in order to reach a distinct form of self-awareness.

Endurance is a constant in any religious worship, from the repetitive recitation of Hail Marys or Buddhist mantras to the fasting of Yom Kippur or the bloody self-flagellations of certain segments of the Catholic Church and Islam. Endurance also brings an undeniable form of theatricality to action, no matter if it is an actual prayer or the artistic interpretation of one. Endurance is both the physical representation of ones commitment to prayer, via focus and intention, and also the tool through which the optimal state of meditative detachment to accomplish the rite is reached. And detachment there was, from Andrews worrisome trance-like stare to Ishino's quiet focus.

The other interesting commonality to the Praying Project's performances was the total absence of deity worship associated with most religions. The only performances that were based on direct "quotes" from an actual practice stemmed from Buddhism, which emphasizes a heightened sense of self-awareness, not the celebration of a god. In fact, most of the performances tended towards a distinctive form of secular if not atheistic worship.

For Andrews, who claims that he is "just as cynical as the next guy," the most important aspect of spirituality is precisely this ability to step out of oneself. In Clean Prayer he turned his back on the "processed prayers" of his upbringing, gravitating instead towards establishing his specific place within it all, a process similar to Ishino's and Bauer's.

Nova conceives of running as her own ritual, one that provides her with a similar experience and feeling that religions provide, but is undeniably her own, conceived for and by herself only. She is quick to emphasize that she is "definitely not talking to God," when she is sweating on her treadmill.

Similarly, Nico y Katiushka, the husband and wife duo who re-interpreted the Kama Sutra, argue that Coitus Reservatus is their secular ritual as a couple, to the same extent that praying is the ritual of a religious person. They practice their ritual everyday between noon and 2pm in the privacy of their bedroom, striving for the same transcendence of the body by the spiritual as does Bauer through her prostrations.

What was initially so daring about the Praying Project, the varied quality of the performances notwithstanding, was that it tackled a theme frequently disdained in the Chelsea centric art world. Indeed, spirituality, in so many ways, is hopelessly un-hip. It is not provocative, it is not sexy, it is weird in the wrong sense of the word. What's more, it disturbs in ways that Damian Hirst can never achieve, no matter how many cow slices he pickles. Spirituality leaves people struggling to define its very meaning. It does not fit in neat little bundles. Basically, its commercial value is nil and so it is discarded.

But through its secular representations of worship, Praying Project succeeds in suggesting that spirituality is in fact inherent to the practice of art itself, that it resides at the core of any artwork and experience. It is a form of spirituality void of literal references to an established form of worship, created instead out of each person's vision and sensitivity, their personal religion so to speak. "Religion does not have to have a name or a specific vocabulary," remarks Mark Stafford who typed his mantra "the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog," continuously for three days.

The physical engagement and endurance illustrates in no small way the commitment to oneself and one's artwork; the intent that goes into the creation of a work of art. In the end, what the Praying Project achieved most successfully was demonstrating how essential spirituality is to creativity. -Isabelle Dupuis