

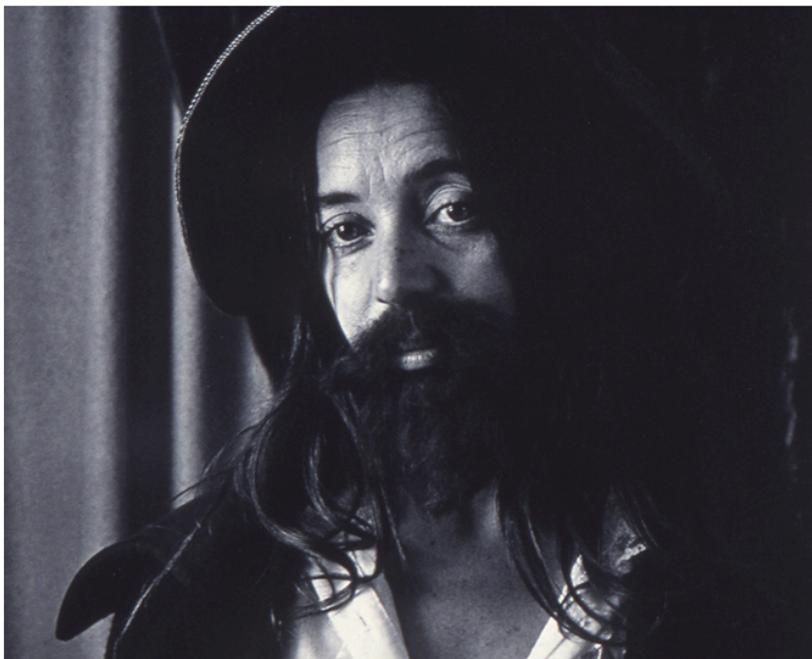
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With a Bang: An Interview with Eleanor Antin

By Erik Morse

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*Eleanor Antin began her career as a stage actress and painter-cum-assemblagist in the late 1950s. She was inspired by the techniques of Yiddish theater and Michelangelo Antonioni, as well as those of Marcel Duchamp and Fluxus. Her versatile art practice was conceptual by design, though leavened by black humor and pageantry. Antin's relocation to the purlieus of San Diego in 1968 contributed to her particularly Californian blend of theater and autofiction, while the native New York she left behind remained dominated by the more politicized tenets of minimalism. Since then, her stylistic DNA has imprinted itself on a cross section of literati and literary artists, from Kathy Acker to Chris Kraus and Sophie Calle, fortifying her status as not only an archetypal feminist artist but an innovative writer as well. This autumn's Richard Saltoun exhibition "Romans & Kings" together with Frieze Masters' "Spotlight" presented the first major London showcase of Antin's oeuvre, including seminal series like "100 Boots" (1971–1973)—often considered the defining entry of the mail-art genre—"The Last Days of Pompeii" (2001), and "Helen's Odyssey" (2007), part of her larger tableaux vivants collection, "Historical Takes," as well as a reading from her ten-year cycle of performances, films, photos, and writings as the fictitious Ballets Russes ballerina Eleanora Antinova, which was collected in a book titled *An Artist's Life* last year. Following her appearance at the Serpentine Pavilion on the eve of Frieze Masters, Antin spoke to me via email about the significance of narrative in her artwork, an ominous adventure to the West Coast, and the literary world's importunate conservatism.*



ELEANOR ANTIN AS THE KING, 1972. COURTESY RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS, NEW YORK.

INTERVIEWER

I want to begin by asking you about some of the unifying themes behind the autumn exhibitions in London. Part of what becomes clear in looking through all of these very different works in photography, performance, writing and set design is your recurring attention to the highly gestural, the whimsical and the "literary." Such interests seem to be at odds with the ultra-politicized performance of artists like Chris Burden, Marina Abramovic, and Vito Acconci during the height of the post-'68 period. How were these ideas received when you began working in earnest?

ANTIN

I only worked on what interested me, no matter how alien it may have seemed to everybody else at the time. Vito and Chris were very dramatic artists. Sure, Acconci's scenarios—at least the earlier ones—sound simple. Like, choose somebody at random and follow him or her until she goes inside. But the possibilities of this life/art piece are various, potentially dangerous, funny, boring, whatever. My *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* has what looks like a minimal system, it does. But its potential for complex personal and psychological meanings are there, especially for women. The times weren't so minimalist, after all.

INTERVIEWER

It is difficult to imagine the theatrical "reenactments" of your "Historical Takes" *tableaux vivants* sitting alongside, or as a part of the same genealogy as, these minimalist performances of the 1970s.

ANTIN

I don't think anyone would argue with me now about the similarities between the American empire and Rome. But when they first saw those pictures, I saw the confusion, sometimes even the distaste, on the faces of artists, curators, and other people I knew—*What the fuck is she doing now?* By the way, I never use the term *tableau vivant*. I'm telling stories, not so much to the world as to myself. That is what is so interesting about the past. It's like a closed book waiting for me to open it. But these stories are very visual, too. Some are allegorical—cheesy allegories. Don't misunderstand me, I know life back then was no less complicated or difficult than now, but I have a world of research and imagination about how they lived their lives, how they died, how they loved, how they hated. Since I assume that all peoples are like us, an amalgam of personal desires, needs, revulsions, fears, and their own version of bad luck—they are all different. I have a world of unemployed actors living in my head waiting to jump out onto the stage that I give them. But even an extra should have some identifying mark that is only hers, no matter how insignificant, because it will announce her and not the person standing next to her. I always had a passion for ancient Greece. But then later I discovered how badly they treated women; and with the flick of a finger, I became an ancient Roman. The Romans were more useful actually. Their empire gave me an in to our own growing empire. Although the Romans were smarter, I think. We won't be hanging around as long.

INTERVIEWER

In much of your work there is a kind of poetry of placeness—an interesting pull between the "vertical" histories of Europe and the "horizontal" landscapes of California. In retrospect, how significant was the move to San Diego in 1968 for you in rethinking your place within the art world?

ANTIN

Our arrival on June 5, 1968, after a ten-day car ride from New York to San Diego, began with a bang that never ended. I still can't think of two places more divergent than Southern California and New York, where I was born and brought up. As the crow flies, I live about a quarter of a mile from the Pacific Ocean. Even our ocean is different from New York's ocean. Unfortunately, there's been a lot of overbuilding and so-called development here where the U.S. ends, just about thirty miles from Mexico. Though I live in a rural area, it is still, more or less, that same brilliant, sun-lit California we arrived in. But the bang I spoke of is literal. The night before we arrived, Robert Kennedy had just won the Democratic presidential primary in Los Angeles and was then killed an hour later. And twenty-four hours before, Andy Warhol had been shot. It made the front pages of a tacky little newspaper in the small city where

we stopped overnight before tackling the early morning trek through the desert. These were the days when there was no air-conditioning in cars nor cell phones. Our one-year-old son developed a high fever the moment we arrived, and we cured him within a few hours with the sweet juice from the orange trees in our garden.

INTERVIEWER

In a series like “The King of Solana Beach,” which was featured as part of this year’s Frieze Masters, there is a strong sense of the Baroque in the way you reinvent the sleepy and remote beaches of San Diego as a sort of quixotic, medieval kingdom of imaginary subjects. Did Southern California represent a new stage set for you to develop a form of theater?

ANTIN

Yes and yes and yes. I had arrived in the theater of the new world, though I’m glad I wasn’t born here. My culture and my education was sophisticated European, with leftist immigrant parents and some great public schools thrown in. I would always remain something of an outsider in my new world. Indeed, in my life. So, I peopled this new land with the theatrical characters who had always lived in my head. Now they would live in this world. A Hollywood of my own making—funny, absurd, sad, and always, deep down, deadly serious.

INTERVIEWER

Feminist autofiction has become a very important genre in the millennial era of social media, fan fiction, third-wave feminism, and *I Love Dick*. Your various writing projects and performances as Eleanora Antinova appeared to have a profound influence in the art world but less so in the literary world, despite their appearances at the height of second-wave feminism. As someone who had focused as much on the discipline of writing as on the arts, did you hope that your experiments in literature would gain as much recognition as the performance?

ANTIN

I had a growing reputation as an artist. I invented my own ways of working, but they were related enough to the going thing to be acceptable, more or less. Within the next few years, everybody was working similarly to how I had been working, but I had already moved on to my next interest. These were never arbitrary—my new methods were usually related to the narrative and discourse of what I had been working on earlier. But “narrative” wasn’t, until recently, a respectable word in the postmodern art world. Neither, of course, was it in the modern literary world, which was the home of my husband, David Antin, who died last year. His literary works were built out of his performances, his improvised talking before an audience. Until recently, he was not called a performance artist but an avant-garde poet and writer, which he was, too, of course. I wonder if my books confused the literary world because they always included drawings and photos, while the art world knows I’m one of them. “So what’s this book doing here?” That’s what I always rebelled against, a neat package of things called literature in books, a stack of photographs like Ansel Adams, or a set of drawings and prints by you name him—the list goes on and on.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think, as many avant-garde writers have commented in the past, that the literary world was decades behind the art world at the time you began combining these text and theatrical projects?

ANTIN

Yes, the literary world is way behind the art world in experimenting with new forms and ideas. David and his friends are still poison to *The New Yorker*, *The New York Review of Books*, the *London Review of Books*. Those guys still think Richard Wilbur is a poet! I had originally thought I was going to be a writer—I was an English major in college—but when conceptual art arrived, suddenly there was a feast of possibilities. I could make video and movies, act in my own written plays along with life-size, painted puppets, collect blood from poets, choose my manner of distribution, wear a beard, and lead a revolution against the developers.