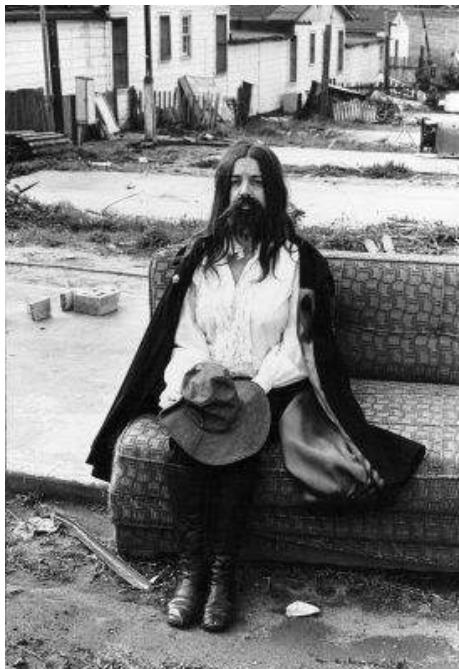


# THE WHITE REVIEW



Culpan, Daniel. "Eleanor Antin, Romans & Kings" *The White Review*. October 2017.  
<http://www.thewhitereview.org/reviews/eleanor-antin-romans-kings/>

Eleanor Antin, Portrait of the King, 1972  
Black and white photograph mounted on board, 34.9 x 22.48 cm  
Image courtesy of Richard Saltoun Gallery, 2017



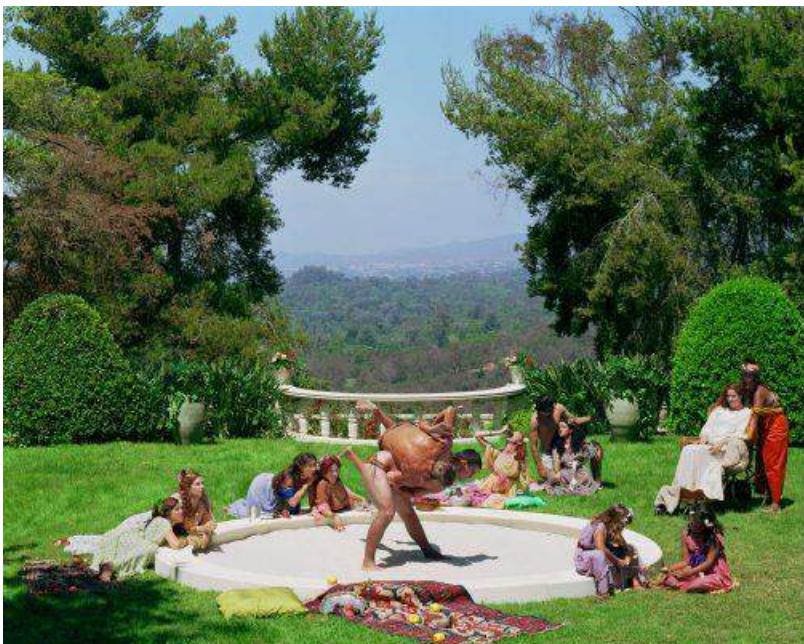
Eleanor Antin, Men from The King of Solana Beach, 1974  
Unique set black and white photographs mounted on boardsheet, 24.1 x 16.5 cm  
Image courtesy of Richard Saltoun Gallery, 2017



Eleanor Antin, King with Paint Brush from, "The King and Its Subject." 1978

Watercolour on paper, 26.7 x 31.8 cm

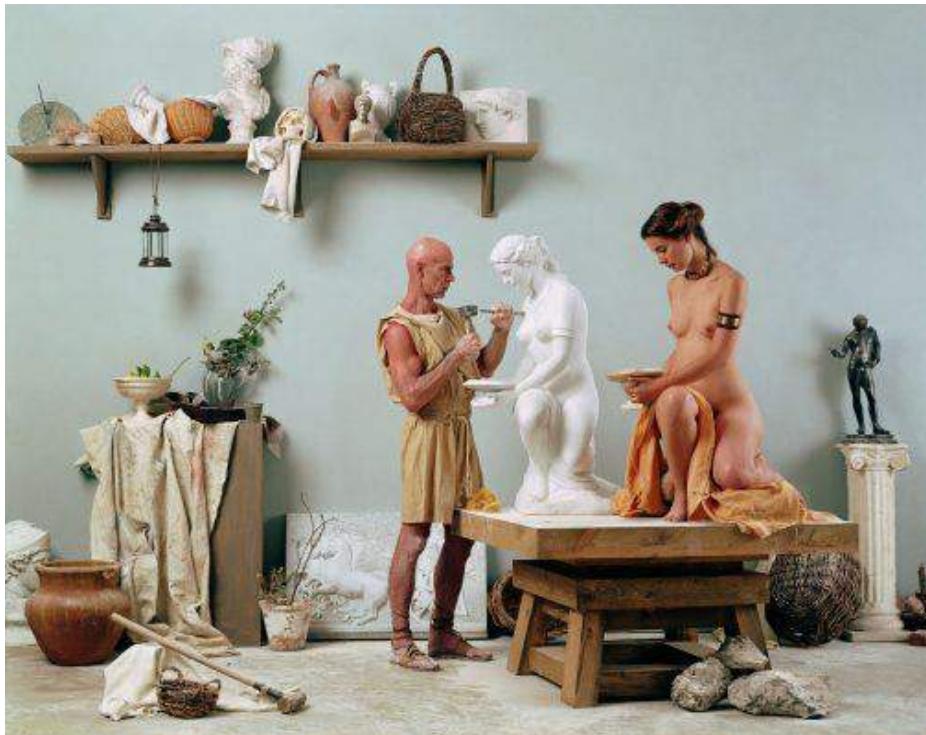
Image courtesy of Richard Saltoun Gallery, 2017



Eleanor Antin, A Hot Afternoon from "The Last Days of Pompeii" 2002

Chromogenic Print. Paper: 78.7 x 63.5 cm. Image: 76.2 x 45.7 cm

Image courtesy of Richard Saltoun Gallery, 2017



Eleanor Antin, *The Artist's Studio, "The Last Days of Pompeii,"* prototype 2002

Chromogenic print mounted no board. 47.3 x 60 x 4.4 cm

Image courtesy of Richard Saltoun Gallery, 2017



Eleanor Antin, *Constructing Helen from "Helen's Odyssey,"* 2007

Chromogenic Print, 172.7 x 302.3 cm

Image courtesy of Richard Saltoun Gallery, 2017

# ELEANOR ANTIN, ROMANS & KINGS

For the past five decades, feminist conceptual artist Eleanor Antin has created an anti-essentialist chronicle of herself. Working within a range of media – including photography, film, writing and installation – Antin has explored a stream of selves, influenced by everything from Yiddish theatre to European cinema. As she has commented: ‘I’ve always been addicted to masking, to the slipperiness of genre. I despise purity. It’s so boring. What the hell, it doesn’t exist, anyway.’

During her rise to prominence in New York’s downtown art scene of the late 1960s, when women artists and feminist themes were routinely excluded from gallery programming, Antin’s work presented female subjects with bare-knuckles chutzpah, depriving the viewer of the easy consolations of pathos or titillation. A recent reappraisal of feminist art from this period, such as the showcase *Sex Work: Feminist Art & Radical Politics* at Frieze London – featuring the libidinal, uninhibited work of artists such as Marilyn Minter (sucking, rhinestone-studded mouths) and Renate Bertlmann (cacti sprouting hot pink dildos) – shows how defiantly these second-wave feminists exploded taboos around female sexuality and the body. It also shows an establishment ready, 50 years on, to welcome them with open arms.

But the current popularity of second-wave feminism comes with questions of how to read and receive the politics of these works today, and how to negotiate the way in which their former riotous, outsider charge is inevitably dampened by the embrace of the market.

As Antin’s work comes back into the spotlight, how do her expressions of 1970s feminism come into conflict with contemporary identity politics? At a recent performance at the Serpentine gallery, Antin was grilled by an audience member about her use of blackface when inhabiting her persona of Eleanora Antinova, whom she invented in the early 1980s. At the time, as Antin explained in a *New York Times* interview, the persona was an intended expression of solidarity with those caught within the intersecting oppressions of race and gender: ‘She’s an outsider, like women and blacks in our society... Antinova is a survivor.’ And yet, to audiences today, Antin is guilty of glib appropriation: a white artist performing an experience of blackness to which she had no claim.

At 82 years old, Antin is still ambitiously at work. *Romans & Kings* at Richard Saltoun Gallery is an exhibition that dramatises the present moment by impersonating the past. The first room features selections from two of Antin’s more recent bodies of work: ‘The Last Days of Pompeii’ (2002) and ‘Helen’s Odyssey’ (2007). As the titles suggest, Antin raids ancient history – the classical myths of Greece and Rome – to re-stage it,

challenging the master narratives of western culture with a vision that's hyper-stylised, arch and shot through with campy irreverence.

'Constructing Helen' (2007) dominates the room. A digitally photographed collage in austere black and white, it depicts Helen of Troy as a nude clay sculpture – monumental and supine – waiting to be brought to life. Helen has long been condemned to myth with a kind of slut-shaming ambivalence: the supreme object of female beauty who passively ensnared Paris, Prince of Troy, and ignited the Trojan War. But what if the moral co-ordinates of history were scrambled? Cooking the history books, Antin enacts a kind of snarky revenge on ancient injustices.

The artists in 'Constructing Helen' are mere Lilliputians trying to make their mark, wearing skewed berets and foppish poet shirts. One sculptor tweaks Helen's nipple – the finishing touch? – while making an incision with a modelling knife. Yet for all the scene's exploitation, male power is show as curiously slavish, even shrivelled. Two sculptures strike heroic poses of assertion, but look comically grandiose. One – decapitated – aimlessly brandishes a spear, as if self-consciously compensating for his nakedness. Could torching Troy be Helen's vengeance for this vainglorious male meddling?

'The Artist's Studio' (2001) also conveys the potency of the female muse. A bald sculptor works with po-faced rigour to immortalise his nude subject in marble. From Helen onwards, the fantasy of female beauty has helplessly ensorcelled male artists – resulting in some of western civilisation's greatest art. Yet it's been a one-sided affair, and Antin 'corrects' this defective art-historical narrative by wryly snatching back the gaze: a woman looking at men looking at women.

Elsewhere, the show explores this inversion of gendered looking. In 'A Hot Afternoon', two wrestlers in gold lamé loin cloths – like extras from a Derek Jarman-directed swords and sandals epic – are locked together in combat. Grappling in perfectly manicured gardens, the gladiators almost look as if they've frozen into sculpture themselves: an act of pure objectification.

These works draw unsubtle but self-evident connections to our own era. Indeed, Antin has described Pompeii as having 'dark shadows in which failure and death lurk at the edge of consciousness. Now, in these times, we have even closer parallels with those ancient, beautiful, affluent people living the good life on the verge of annihilation'. Beyond the surface gloss of these photographs, Antin is attempting to redress some of history's most glaring imbalances.

'Helen's Vengeance' (2007) depicts the severed head of Homer, served like chicken in a basket from a picnic in hell. Helen, a sneer scrawled across her lips, raises a toast to her dead progenitor. In the background, a loin clothed captive – Paris? – has his cage rattled by a comically aggrieved virago. By unloosing Helen of Troy from the great word-prison of the *Iliad* and its cultural authority, Antin not only suggests an alternative ending to this well-trodden fable, but points to its transcendence –

emancipating Helen from the narrow determinism of the canon. History itself, Antin poses, is as constructed as fiction.

‘The King of Solana Beach’ (1972–74) also attempts to displace timeworn forms of power. Antin poses as a saturnine drag king, dressed like a wandering troubadour in a felt hat and cloak. Antin’s King is an incongruous ray of black sunshine in this San Diego surfing mecca. He seems to incarnate a new kind of sovereignty: vulnerable, reflective. In the five black and white photographs that make up ‘Men’, the King poses as a radically democratic figure: signing charters for his people, mundanely bumbling around a drug store, flinging out his arms in symbolic embrace of his kingdom. ‘Here’ shows the King, Canute-esque, trying to stem an encroaching tide of property developers.

Antin’s work gave a platform to a mode of presentation that contradicted gender expectations at the time and surely paved the way for a new generation of artists to interrogate gender norms. But today, this gender-switching looks oddly quaint in an era when the fluidity of gender, and the demolishing of fixed binaries, has entered the mainstream.

**Romans & Kings** comes full circle with Antin’s most celebrated work, ‘100 Boots’ (1971). Presented as 51 postcards posted to over 1,000 people, they record a stampeding breakout from the rarefied, often woman-excluding confines of the 1970s art gallery. Seizing the means of her own exhibition and distribution, Antin’s anthropomorphised Wellingtons make their way to New York City, at once eerily absent and ebullient. We see them in ominous rank and file outside a bank; stomping through a dystopian industrial landscape; lined up in a supermarket aisle; passing a row of ducks.

In her biography of post-modernist punk writer Kathy Acker – a close friend of Antin’s – Chris Kraus discusses the significance of ‘100 Boots’. While art history has come to see Antin’s work as a clever strategy of navigating around traditional gallery shows, there was another, more practical motive for her modus operandi: ‘At the time it was the only means Antin had of showing her work,’ Kraus explains. In other words, she did not have gallery recognition, and so she fought back with mail art.

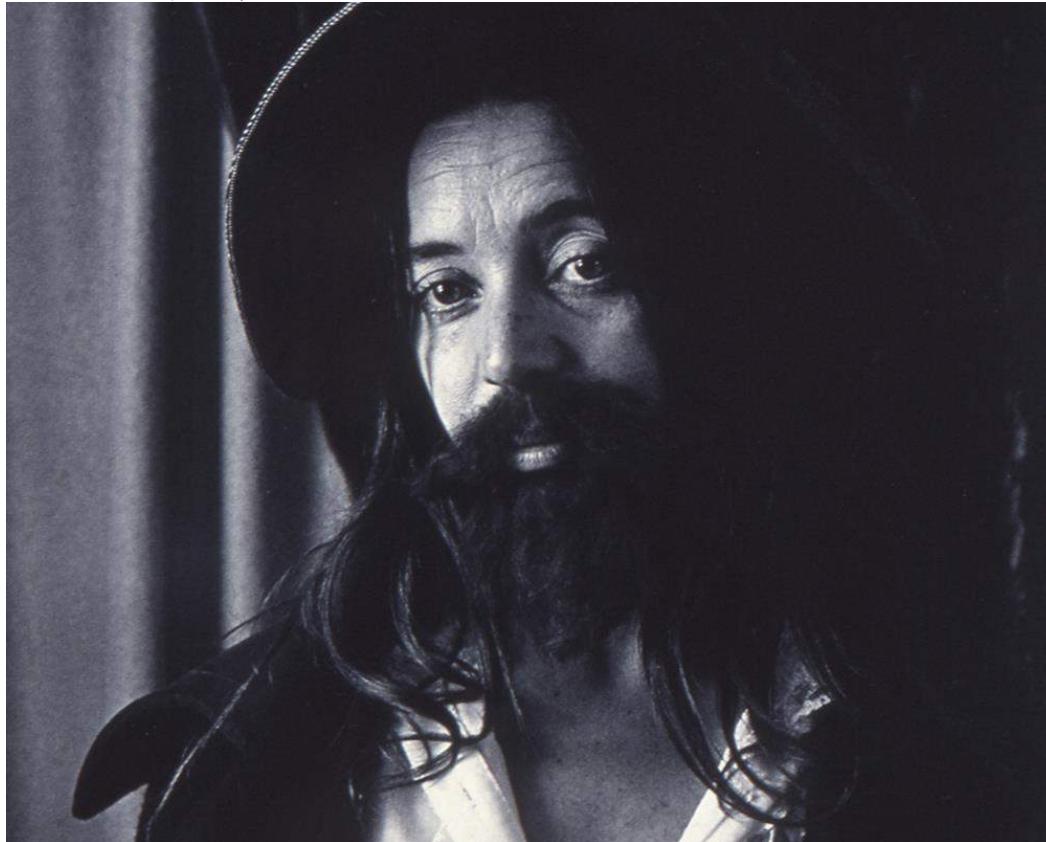
Indeed, Antin’s bold method was influential. Kathy Acker later adopted it to help circulate her early writing and gain recognition, prefiguring modern self-publishing. By 1973, ‘100 Boots’ found its way to MoMA and – finally – its place in the canon of seminal feminist art, the revolutionary spirit of ‘100 Boots’ ensuring Antin’s legacy: a second-wave feminist who stood her ground and forced her way into the fold.

*the* PARIS REVIEW

# With a Bang: An Interview with Eleanor Antin

By [Erik Morse](#)

October 22, 2017



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

Morse, Erik. "With a Bang: An Interview with Eleanor Antin." *The Paris Review*. October 22, 2017.  
<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/10/22/bang-interview-eleanor-antin/>

*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.*

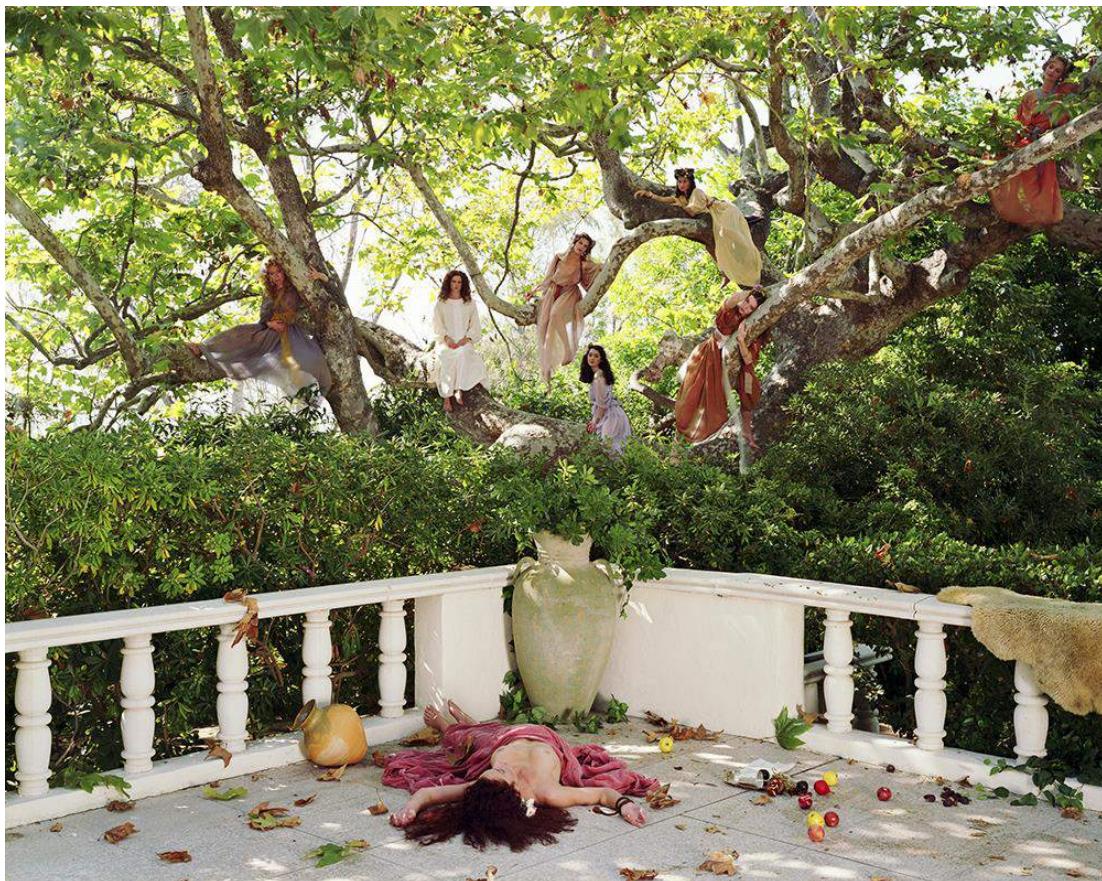
#### INTERVIEWER

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.



ELEANOR ANTIN, *THE TREE*, 2001. FROM THE SERIES “THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII.” COURTESY OF RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS, NEW YORK

## INTERVIEWER

It is difficult to imagine the theatrical “reenactments” of your “Historical Takes” *tableaux vivant*s 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.



*THE ARTIST'S STUDIO*, 2001. FROM THE SERIES "THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII." COURTESY RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS, NEW YORK.

## 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.



*CONSTRUCTING HELEN*, 2007. FROM THE SERIES "HELEN'S ODYSSEY." COURTESY RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS, NEW YORK.

## 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.



A HOT AFTERNOON, 2001. FROM THE SERIES "THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII." COURTESY RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS, NEW YORK.

## 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.



*KING WITH PAINT BRUSH*, 1978. FROM THE SERIES "THE KING AND HIS SUBJECT." COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND RONALD FELDMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK.

### 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.

*Erik Morse is the author of Dreamweapon (2004) and Bluff City Underground: A Roman Noir of the Deep South (2012). He is a former lecturer at SCI-Arc and the 2015 recipient of a Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant.*

# AnOther

## The Feminist Artist Who Dieted to Become a Marble Sculpture

— September 21, 2017 —

Ahead of a new solo show opening this week, the 82-year-old “priestess of 20th-century conceptual art”, Eleanor Antin, talks to AnOther about the death of her husband and performing her ‘selves’



Constructing Helen from 'Helen's Odyssey', 2007 © Eleanor Antin, Courtesy of Richard Saltoun Gallery

Emily Gosling

Gosling, Emily. "The Feminist Artist Who Dieted to Become a Marble Sculpture." *AnOther Magazine*. September 21, 2017.  
<http://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/10182/the-feminist-artist-who-dieted-to-become-a-marble-sculpture>

Artist Eleanor Antin cuts a tiny little figure, one with glorious lengths of dark hair, eyes that could be the dictionary definition of ‘twinkling’ and a gorgeously dirty Noo Yoik twang. But while small in stature, there is nothing diminutive about this priestess of 20th-century conceptual art: her presence is as vast as her CV. Now, at the age of 82, she’s over in London to perform at the Serpentine Gallery’s Park Nights series ahead of the opening of a solo exhibition at Richard Saltoun Gallery, entitled Romans and Kings. She speaks of sympathies with her cab driver, who ran half an hour late because he needed a cup of coffee, but Antin seems conversely indefatigable.



Portrait of the King, 1972 © Eleanor Antin, Courtesy of Richard Saltoun Gallery

Antin's career began in the late 1960s, and her most famous piece, *100 Boots* (1971-3), saw her photograph said footwear in various settings and mail the images to hundreds of recipients, thus taking notions of art distribution and display into her own hands. Much of her work is based on creating other 'selves' – namely a chic, sophisticated ex-ballerina called Eleanora Antinova, forever harking back to her young and beautiful days in the *Ballet Russes*; a grand Charles I-style king; and Eleanor Nightingale, a nurse.



100 Boots Looking for a Job, San Clemente, California, 1972 © Eleanor Antin,  
Courtesy of Richard Saltoun Gallery

The artist is a delightful raconteur. I learn about how at 12 years old, she helped her (married) mother meet her charismatic new Hungarian poet husband; her love of spy novels; her "generous breasts"; her bacon and exercise-dependent diet for *Carving*, an art piece originally performed in the early 1970s, in which she photographed her weight loss until she reached the shape of a marble sculpture. Like Antin's life and work, there's so much to cram in, which even the most generous of word counts and interview slots couldn't accommodate. Here's just a tiny portion of her wisdom.



The Artist's Studio from 'The Last Days of Pompeii', 2002 © Eleanor Antin, Courtesy of Richard Saltoun Gallery

On starting out...

"I have a suspicion I would have had a career in the literary world rather than in the art world if I hadn't come up about the time when conceptual art was coming up. A lot of the boys' [art] was essentially very kinda dry and boring – *Art and Language* and that sort of thing – but there was no reason why you couldn't do whatever you wanted. I had been an actor, I went from one thing to another except for music – my sister was a wunderkind musically, but I have no talent in music at all – but I was a pretty good dancer. I kept going from one thing to another, so if I did badly or a teacher gave me a B-minus or something I left that immediately, I'm not a masochist. But anyway, the wonderful thing was that once conceptual work started, and you didn't have to be painter or a sculptor, you could do whatever you wanted. Everything was so open."



100 Boots at the Beach, Solana Beach, California, 1972 © Eleanor Antin, Courtesy of Richard Saltoun Gallery

On returning to *Carving* 45 years on...

"It was about a month after my husband died, and while I had a very busy and lively youth, I was married to this brilliant man who was a poet, for 56 years. While I always notice a good looking guy, nevertheless I was absolutely *with* David and then he got Parkinson's. Before that beautiful mind of his could disintegrate, he died. About a month later I started doing *Carving 2*. When I say that it sounds like 'oh well she's making herself attractive so she can find another man' but that's not true at all, it had nothing to do with that at all. Maybe it was that I lost him, and then I lost part of myself. That's what I thought it meant for me personally, but it wouldn't mean that for other people. It helped also as I knew when he died I had to get working immediately, so and this was there and it felt like the right thing to do. Maybe that's why I didn't mind the dieting this time – even the slight torment that it gave made me feel... it felt right. It's something I did and it meant a lot to me."

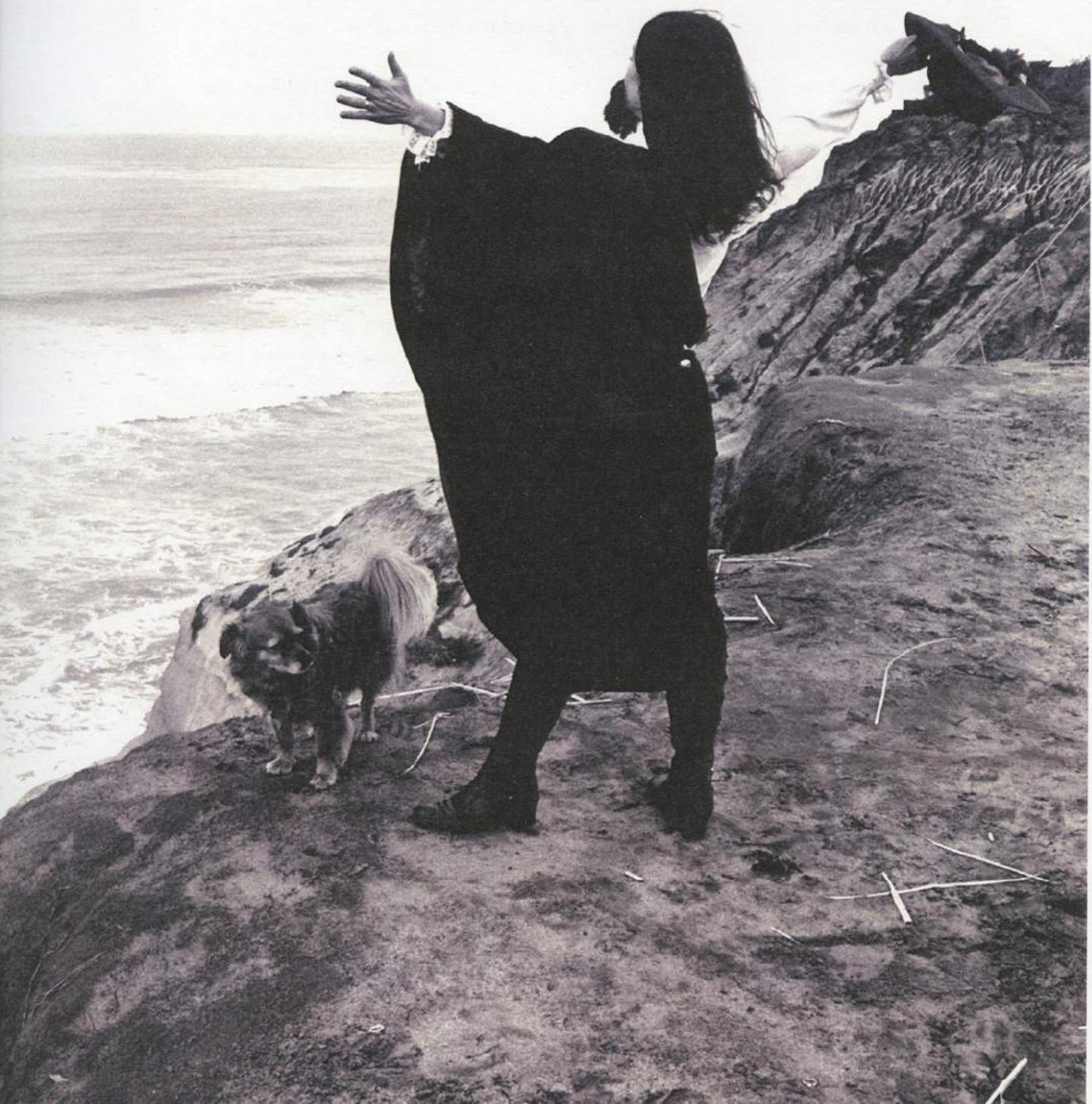


The Conversation from 'The Last Days of Pompeii', 2002 © Eleanor Antin, Courtesy of Richard Saltoun Gallery

On making work through other ‘selves’...

“If you think of us as we are now, I’m not the same all the time. You’re you and I’m me, whoever those people are. We’re not always the same with everybody; we’re not always the same with ourselves. It’s the same thing when I’m Antinova – there is a kind of trying to hold on to her, but sometimes Eleanor interrupts. I don’t expect to be feeling like I’m Antinova all the time. I take away more knowledge about myself and my character, my role. I thought I could take on a lot of roles and I realised no, you can hold about three together and that’s it. When therapists think somebody has seven or eight personalities or some enormous amount you can’t, it’s bullshit. They’re calling somebody a ‘self’ when it’s really just a version of another self.”

Romans & Kings opens September 22 at Richard Saltoun Gallery, London. Serpentine Gallery’s Park Nights runs until September 29, 2017.



## Eleanor Antin by Rachel Mason

This year Diane Rosenstein Fine Art in Los Angeles presented an exhibition called “Passengers,” which assembled a treasure trove of previously unseen drawings, photographs and videos from Eleanor Antin’s oeuvre of multifaceted projects.

One of her most well-known pieces is *100 Boots*, in which she placed 100 black rubber boots in hilarious and profound sets of arrangements, ranging from military formations to chaotic takeovers of objects in the landscape. Another famous work, which is taught in most feminist art history books and classes, is *Carving, A Traditional Sculpture*, from 1972, in which she photographed herself in sequence as her naked body was “carved” by dieting.

Less known but just as revolutionary are her more narrative pieces, like *The King of Solana Beach*. In a series of black-and-white photographs, Antin presents herself as a troll-like king lounging, breaking into conversations, “working the beach” for annoyed, befuddled and amused bystanders. She created a truly lived fiction, allowing the world and all its unpredictable elements to become her stage — turning everything and everyone into fiction. I had the sense in looking at the images that Eleanor was a model for *FutureClown*, a character of mine who engages with history as it unfolds on the Internet, such as in re-enacting Rand Paul’s 13-hour filibuster. Playing with and questioning reality is our shared bond. Eleanor’s backdrop was her real world, and mine is the Internet world, which has become partially my “real world.”

The many drawings, photographs and videos on display at Diane Rosenstein revealed Antin’s lifelong obsession to step into history and play with it in her own particular way, another passion that we share. My recent film, *The Lives of Hamilton Fish* explores a particular world of New York during the Great Depression. A world I can access by imagining my own version — and seeing Antin’s output in this territory, I felt that her show was a kind of directive to me and to all artists, and all people — to be a wanderer, to create journeys and to go on them and to allow others to join you. Go ahead, invent reality. After wandering into her show, I decided to write to her and ask some questions; what follows is our correspondence.

— Rachel Mason  
[rachelannmason.com](http://rachelannmason.com)

(opposite page)

Eleanor Antin

Men from *The King of Solana Beach*, 1974

5 black and white photographs mounted on board

9 1/2 x 6 1/2 inches each



(left)

Eleanor Antin

*Myself 1854 from The Angel of Mercy: The Nightingale Family Album*, 1977

Toned silver gelatin print mounted on paperboard  
18 x 13 inches

(opposite page)

Eleanor Antin

*In the Trenches before Sebastopol from The Angel of Mercy: My Tour of Duty in the Crimea*, 1977

Black and white silver gelatin print mounted on handmade paper with text

30 x 22 inches

Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art,  
New York

## Style

Eleanor Antin: Rachel, we can find and expand on stuff that interests us as we go on. Talking, if it's interesting, always opens up to new talking. But given your mixed media audience, it might be interesting to discuss "style," which most people see as an artist's identity ("yes, that's a Carl Andre" or "oh look, there's a de Kooning"). I see style as more free-floating and available to play with, to clothe myself in (or to disrobe in), to suggest and visualize my ideas, to open a whole domain of possibility related to what interests me in the particular work I'm doing.

You can start from there or anywhere else. Just send me some questions and we can go on. Oh and I did look you up when the gallery told me about you. I thought your work looked really interesting, witty and quite beautiful. Unfortunately, *Hamilton Fish* was the only one I could get to play without interruption (my computer is ancient). I'm looking forward to our e-mail conversation.

Rachel Mason: How fascinating to bring up style right away because it wouldn't be my first inclination and I think it's a great leaping off point.

It seems to me that each of your endeavors has a brand new starting point — asking a new question and following

whatever course it needs. What I love about this is that there is a freedom in your work to not be beholden to the constraints of any style. You work with what you need for any given project.

That brings me to a question — do you feel that there is a pressure on artists to be branded, or to have clearly defined styles? Have you ever felt pressure to have a style? And if so, has that affected your practice, or have you ignored any pressure to have a style?

EA: Style is a language, it isn't a fucking branding iron. After doing my videotapes "The Adventures of a Nurse" and "The Nurse and the Hijackers" I realized I had left something out. Something important. The idea of the nurse as caregiver, a role so often given to women, not given so much as historically forced on us whether we wanted it or not, probably the major role assigned to us by history and religion (remember it includes the role of the mother). It was left out while I explored the contemporary pop image of the nurse: sentimental, sexy, a passive player who does the best she can in a thankless role. But what did "nursing" actually mean? What was a caregiver? I went back to the founding of nursing as a job for women by Florence Nightingale back in the mid-19th century. She invented Nursing as a profession, as a calling, during the Crimean War. That was several years

before our Civil War. It was actually the first war that was photographed by that new invention, the camera, but differently than it would be done several years later by [Mathew] Brady and his associates. Roger Fenton was with the Brit army in the Crimea as a patriotic shill for the British government, to publicize the soldiers to the public back home. Some early PR. So if I wanted to discover what nursing meant to Flo (Miss Nightingale), I had to use the camera language of the time. (Here, I must confess I opted to be closer to Brady, Fenton was a poor model of actual reality.) This required actors and costumes and settings to set up anecdotal moments for the lives and deaths of the soldiers and Miss Nightingale's actual work. Literally it meant to discover the nature of war by re-enacting a particular one as it was in its own time. Not a very important war, not a very interesting one, certainly a very badly fought one (as most wars are). The glamour of Thermopylae is very rare in the history of war). So this work morphed into a study of war, its ambiguities, its disasters, its comedy. I had a style, 19<sup>th</sup>-century reportage/narrative photography, which helped me to discover the complexities of my subject, and how the idea of helping or "nursing" was so ironically bound up with killing and death. To paraphrase Miss Nightingale in my performance play/video, "If I save one soldier, he will just go back and kill another. So whereas before he killed one, he will now kill two or three before perhaps dying himself. So I have become a double murderer. But... when I see a man bleeding, I have to bandage him." So I now had 60-some 19<sup>th</sup>-century photos. But the subject was hardly over. I needed to consider war further, there was more, much more. There were the economic aspects, the political aspects, the moral (or immoral) aspects. I made life-scale masonite puppets on wheeled bases so they could



be moved around. They're painted puppets of the actors in the photos, painted in a flat style reminiscent of a Brechtian propaganda play because I have political ideas I want to argue. I write my Brechtian melodrama with hints of Oscar Wilde thrown in (he's so good at miming aristocrats) and go deeper into the issues I brought up in the photos. But now I use words and narrative for the murders, betrayals, stupidities, cruelties, romance, heroism, ironies, absurdities of war. I speak for all the characters. About 50 of them. With the exception of Miss Nightingale, they're all men. They're Brits, which requires many dialects (cockney, Irish, Scotch, aristocratic). I'm a good melodramatic actor but I suck at dialects. I just do the best I can. At the end of the play, after the death and destruction, Miss Nightingale is given a gold medal by Victoria and sent home instead of making her a cabinet member, Minister of War, the position she desired. Did you know that she took to her bed for the next 50 years in true Victorian female neurasthenic style? As a woman, she had no other place to go. So without my taking on

an early 19<sup>th</sup>-century photographic style along with a more modern Brechtian propaganda theater style, "The Angel of Mercy" would never have come off. I wouldn't have had a language to do it.

RM: Since you mentioned my film *The Lives of Hamilton Fish*, as someone who is in drag (female to male) in a film made in the present era [in the film, I play a male character, the editor of a newspaper], I would love to know what it was like for you to take on male characters and to act them out in the "real world" over 30 years ago. I would love for you to speak to this with regard to *The King of Solana Beach*, a piece which you began in the early 1970s.

I personally have to imagine that being a woman in drag at that time was a much more risky thing, or at least a much different thing, than it might be today, and also to imagine that there were experiences you had then that would be different now. I would love for you to elaborate on any of those differences or to simply provide an inside account of what it was like to

do that seminal piece which has now entered the canon of art history. Were you excited, scared, horrified?

EA: I've always loved drag. It's over the top, and I'm attracted by the fearlessness in the face of danger by people who dance on the high wire. An absurd courage keeps them from falling. They're not pathetic Humpty Dumptys. They have an extravagant beauty that I love. A fearlessness and joy in self-invention and fuck everybody else. This is me and isn't it grand.

And sure, I was scared the first few times I walked around my kingdom of Solana Beach with a beard and breasts. It was the days of Nixon, the Vietnam War, but also the exploding of the old bourgeois culture. And the 70s contrary to media cliché, was not the selfish age of me but the age of the liberation of the "me" for those gutsy and astute enough to fight for it. Women's liberation, gay liberation, black liberation (which had, of course, begun much earlier but now flowered into a black cultural explosion). Solana Beach was a small beach community of surfers, new agers, retirees and Republicans along with the occasional home grown Nazi. It still felt like small town America but with an easy California style. So the day I appeared with a beard and breasts on Main Street, yes, I was scared. My presence was an attack on traditional Republican values of correctness. I mean, women still wore white gloves and Easter bonnets in the neighboring rich town of La Jolla. I was sticking it to them, fuck them and their bourgeois culture. But even I was shocked at the ease with which people either took me in stride or politely ignored me like a bad smell. A convertible crowded with surfers screeched to a halt. "Hey, who are you?" they yelled. I bowed courteously. "I'm the King of Solana Beach," I answered politely. "Don't you think Solana Beach deserves a King?" "Cool," they

shouted, waving at me as they sped away. And I began to realize that if I were a tall person and not a small person, they might have looked on me as dangerous. But I didn't scare anybody because I wasn't threatening. I bowed to people, doffed my cap, kissed ladies hands. I certainly looked more like Charlie Chaplin than Charlie Manson. David, my husband, called me a dwarf policeman in my flowing cape and boots. Now that I think about it so many years later, maybe I was a hobbit. What I was was different, an outsider perfectly comfortable in alien country. And as the days went by, I began to notice that the only people who said hello to me and had conversations with me and remembered me from day to day were the old people (maybe they didn't see so well) and the young people, who were usually stoned. The responsible adults who had jobs and took their kids to school and went to church on Sunday and baked cookies for Little League, those younger and middle-aged respectable adults merely ignored me. I shouldn't have been in their landscape so I wasn't. They erased me.

### History

RM: I would love to have some thoughts on your inclination to step into other times in history and to create worlds as you do — in installations, in plays, in photographs, in films, videos, fiction. The re-making and re-imagining of history is so important in your work, and it is such a specific vantage point that you take, I wonder if you can expand on that in any way.

I think much of this question was considered when I discussed my time travelling to the Crimean War in the mid-19th century to discover what the creator of "nursing" as a profession for women learned on the bloody plains of the Crimea.

Of course, I enjoy time travelling. Sometimes I think I'm in the tradition of the Victorian woman dreaming of the big world out there but stuck in the prison of female life. Maybe like Emily Dickenson or Emily Bronte. (Wow! I never realized before that they had the same first name). Of course, I'm not stuck anywhere, and my work forces me to travel to many places, though frankly, I don't find any place existing today as seductive as the past, except perhaps for the giant redwoods in northern California. And hey, I'm not being totally honest here, because walking in that forest is walking into the past. My trip to the Jedediah Smith National Forest on the California/Oregon border was one of the most amazing moments of my life.

RM: In a related thought — to get back to your most recent book (however I can understand if it's too recently completed for you to have the hindsight to analyze yet), I'm transported to a different era in America, and specifically in New York. I had to wonder if you were writing from experience — and if you are describing your own life growing up in New York — (of course with the exception of meeting Stalin!) and I wonder if you can also talk about that.

I've done a lot of readings from "Conversations with Stalin." People often ask me whether my adventures in the book are true or not. But what does that question mean? Yes, they were my experiences. Yes, my mother worked me to the bone in the family hotel business. Yes, I had those bad boyfriends...lots of other bummers too, I had a talent for finding them. But you start a story that you remember happened to you a long time ago and it opens up to perhaps become another story, or maybe not, maybe it just opens to reveal more of itself or maybe it suggests something entirely different but related in some

subconscious way that surprises you but you have to go with it. Are you stepping into your previous footsteps? Who remembers? The work begins to take over. You remember another fact. But maybe it happened during another time and in another place but it pops up here. Go with it. What are you going to do, stop the flow to interrogate yourself? What are you, the FBI? Fuck it. You're flying. And when that chapter is over, if it sounds right, it's right. And it happened. And even if it wasn't that way, it must have been that way. You have the words on the page to prove it.

RM: To get back to the style point — as you say “style is a language and not a branding iron,” and the wonderful description of exactly how its used as a tool in your work — I am curious about the fact that you brought up de Kooning and Andre in the introduction to this topic. I found it to be such a curious set of examples — so I was just wondering if there was anything that made you think of them in particular, and if you were using them as an example of a contrast to your work?

EA: C'mon Rachel, you can always recognize an Andre or a de Kooning. Thats why I mentioned them. But to set the record straight because you're younger than I am, de Kooning was one of the great contemporary artists of my early years. He's still a great painter, much more interesting to me than say, Jackson Pollock. I knew Carl Andre's work later. I like his work. It's dangerous. You can trip over those bricks in the doorway and fall flat on your face. I set myself against the minimalists and the conceptualists of my art generation not because I didn't like them but because they were too lean and narrow. I was drawn to narrative, theater, autobiography, absurdity, and the fascinating new politics of feminism, so much more relevant and complex than my family's stagnant Stalinism. I suppose

I was postmodern when there wasn't yet a postmodernism. At least not a recognized postmodernism. But I learned from those minimalists like Andre and Bob Morris. I learned how to create a coherent show. And in their way, they were theatrical. At their best they cut to the bone. Nothing existed in that gallery but the minimal movements their work was making. And above all, they taught me cool. For a person like me always standing at the edge of a cliff, cool helps. It stops you from falling.

### Acting

RM: Because of your fantastic description of the staging and decisions behind the photographic process in “The Angel of Mercy” (and no, I had absolutely no idea that Florence Nightingale was bedridden for the last 50 years of her life!) a new question emerges for me now — a question about craft.

It is fascinating to me that you bring up a detail about “accents,” it shows me that you clearly think a lot about the skill and craft of acting. I wonder if you can address how your training in acting prepared you for the work that you do? I also would be curious to know — if you can imagine that you'd had some huge “break” as an actor early on, would you have even bothered to pursue art? Or were you already ready to leave the field and head into the uncharted waters of your hybrid practice?

EA: Interesting question. Who knows what might have been. I studied acting with Tamara Daykarhanova, a Russian actress who had studied with Stanislavsky. I think I was pretty bad then. I was trying to find emotional truth and it kept eluding me. Occasionally, though, it seemed to come, and usually as tears. I thought that was truth, honest emotion. When I became an artist, I stopped worrying about

truth, feeling, emotions. I wrote and acted in plays for my ballerina self, Eleanora Antinova, filled with sorrow and comedy, pathos and absurdity, reality and dream, and in that mess of possibility I found her truth which was also my truth...There's that word again. Sometimes it makes sense. Sometimes it doesn't.

Craft? What's that? I don't believe in rules or the right way to do things. There are many right ways. An artist does what she needs to do to do what she wants to do. That's all the craft anybody needs. It sounds so deceptively simple, doesn't it? It isn't.

### Feminism

RM: Where do you see feminism today? So many of your pieces from the '60s and '70s entered into the canon of what we think of as feminist art. At least, that is how I first learned of your work — as situated within the feminist movement in art history. My question is: what do you think the “issues” might be that today's emerging women artists face? You are still very much active but you are an authority at this point — which makes me wonder if you can address anything specifically that you face, as a woman, if there is an experience that you can describe which sheds light on the situation as you may have seen it change for women in the arts.

EA: I'm a passionate feminist and feminist artist, but I am also a conceptual artist, a performance artist, a video artist. Remember, those were the days when we were inventing the new world of art, liberating it from the standard Painting and Sculpture designations. And feminist artists were in the front lines. Though not all of my works were thought of as feminist. I even have works that embarrassed me, because they made me feel like a fink. So there were several earlier works that I never told anyone about, never



Eleanor Antin

"...here?" from *The King of Solana Beach*, 1974-75

8 black and white photographs and one text panel  
mounted on board



Eleanor Antin

"...here?" from *The King of Solana Beach*, 1974-75

8 black and white photographs and one text panel  
mounted on board



Eleanor Antin

*My Kingdom is the Right Size* from

*The King of Solana Beach*, 1974

8 photographs and one text panel

Eleanor Antin  
*100 BOOTS Facing the Sea*  
Del Mar, California, February 9, 1971 2:00pm  
Mailed: March 15, 1971



Eleanor Antin  
*100 BOOTS At the Bank Solana Beach, CA*  
February 9, 1971 10:00 am  
Mailed: April 26, 1971



Eleanor Antin  
*100 BOOTS Cross Herald Square*  
35th ST & Broadway, NYC  
May 13, 1973 8:10 am – Mailed: June 6, 1973



Showed to anyone for years. They didn't seem communal or supportive of women. For instance, I had one work called *4 Transactions*. It consisted of "2 Encounters" and "2 Withdrawals." They were done in secret in a women's group of about eight to 10 artists here in San Diego. We used to meet every other week to make art together. We weren't into consciousness raising, we were into making art together. Let's say one day we'd bring in everyday materials and throw them in the middle of a large floor and start to play with them. People would add materials — ropes, wood, paper, whatever. A large sculpture began to take shape, very interesting too, as people might make secret entrances to hide in, others hid parts they didn't like with other materials, overburdened sections caved in and the sculpture changed. We didn't talk to each other, we were too busy doing, but we could make sounds or song pitches, and eventually, maybe after 40 minutes or so, we found our way to an ending. It was fascinating how we all knew when the work was finished. Nobody said anything, it was just over. Afterwards we talked about what had happened and what we made, then we trashed the materials and the work was gone. Well, my secret *Transactions* piece consisted of an action I would take during each meeting that nobody would know about. They were by and large simple actions but they could have had consequences. Before each meeting, I had the Withdrawal or Encounter that I planned for the day, signed and dated by a notary public. Withdrawal #1 read:

"At the Feb. 6th meeting any conversation I initiate will be addressed to persons from their rear, never frontally or from the side. I can respond to comments or questions initiated by others regardless of position. If I initiate a conversation from the wrong position I shall leave the meeting immediately."

Sounds simple but I was known to be pretty talkative. So I found myself constantly moving around the room to be behind people because just walking out on the group would have been both confusing and hurtful to them.

Encounter #1, which I performed during the next session, was actually much more dangerous.

"At the Feb. 20th meeting, I shall take on the job of ombudsman. This will necessitate my pointing out to each member of the group, and in any manner I choose, a particular failing she displays in relation to the others. These may be of an ephemeral sort, such as personal bugginess taken out on someone else or of a more serious nature like, say, a rip-off of the entire group. I must always keep in mind that my statements are intended to bring

about more satisfactory behavior from the others and are never to be used for egoistic purposes of my own. I must complete these 8 tasks before the group normally disperses, otherwise I must keep the session going by whatever means I can until I complete them."

(Wow! That one was rough)

Years later, when I was choosing the works to include in my retrospective at the L.A. County Museum of Art with my curator Howard Fox and the art critic who would be writing an essay for the catalogue, Lisa Bloom, I showed these secret works to them as if I were making a confession. Much to my surprise, they both immediately loved them, and Howard included several of those pieces in the exhibition, including *The 4 Transactions*. Almost 30 years later, they read the piece in a more complex way. They thought I was asserting my independence, my own self, while being part of a community. Their feminism was more sophisticated than my earlier one had been. They believed that my instincts to hold onto my sense of self by working secretly was my way of liberating myself from the conformity of the group, even a sympathetic group. As far as being successful, no artist really believes she is successful enough. As one of my paper dolls says in "The Nurse and the Hijackers" video: "It's never enough." And tastes change, the discourse changes, how does one stay relevant and interesting while continuing to do one's own thing? How does one keep moving? Because art is a vocation, not merely a career. Once you've been converted, once you've been called, you have to keep working or die. I've said before, the description of an artist is somebody who never takes a vacation.

As for young women artists, the scene is very difficult now because it's so contaminated by money. But nevertheless it is really so much more open to you. We had to fight for our place in the sun. You still have to fight, probably because there are so many more artists around. Somehow, there didn't seem that many in the old days. Hey, I'm partially responsible. I was a professor of Art at UCSD for almost 30 years. I had a lot of students. Some of them were terrific and are doing very well now. Some were terrific and aren't doing well. Luck, character, there are so many circumstances that play a role. I remember an American artist who lived in Istanbul. He had a once in a lifetime opportunity to come to NY and do a show at the Fischbach Gallery, a hot gallery at the time. There was a violent snowstorm and only 5 people came to the opening. He was a good artist. I never saw him in NY again and I don't remember his name.

## The Internet

RM: You did *100 Boots* originally as a project that was distributed via the mail. I wonder if you can speak to the differences or similarities that you see in any aspects of artists using the available tools of dissemination.

Could you imagine that *100 Boots* would have had its potency if it was a Web-based project? What do you think of the way artists intersect with the Internet? Many artists are able to now engage with the public online. They can have dialogues instantly by posting their work online.

For instance, I had an experience where I wrote a song about a Chechen military leader and it went viral in Chechnya! It was astonishing to me to experience a reaction from a people that I truly have no connection to. I wonder if you have had any encounters from any of your projects that may have been disseminated via the Web.

RM: Snail mail was a very different experience from the Internet. A picture postcard came to your mailbox and it was an object you held in your hand. It represented the place where I took *100 Boots*, and after recording that place, sent it out to you to pick up in your hand and look at before perhaps slipping it into a desk drawer or taping it to the refrigerator or maybe just throwing it away. The Internet is not a place. It's a great void, a black hole from which you can call up an incredible amount of disorganized information. It's interactive and can reach millions rather than be quietly slipped into a small mailbox by a mailman with a big leather bag on his shoulder. The often-ragged edges of the card suggests something of the places the card itself had been before it came to your place. On the Internet you delete without touching. Germ-free. Life-free. Sure, you can print it out, but that's just an ugly piece of typing paper, perhaps if you're sensitive you realize it's a bit of stolen property from a tree that was once standing in a real place somewhere. Of course, you can make artworks for the Internet, people are doing it all the time on Facebook, inventing new selves and characters, inventing new truths. The invisible talking to the invisible. *100 Boots* was real even if he was uninhabited and empty. He lived in an actual world, he had soul.

## Documentation

RM: I am curious about the role of photography in your work, and how the photographer factored into the performances. Who did you recruit to shoot the photos? Was it a hired gun or a friend? I wonder because whenever I look at the work of artists like Joan Jonas for instance, I notice that her early work had a handful of very particular photographers, like Paula Court or Babette Mangolte, and because the photographs are all we have of many of the great early works of dance and performance, to me, their photographers become a central part of the equation.

EA: My photographs are not documentation. They are inventions. Artworks. I am responsible for the sets, the lighting, the actor's poses, costumes, makeup, story, style. I work with friends or they become my friends, but their job is to realize my vision according to my directions. Sure, when an actor puts on a costume and walks onto a set, he adds something, but then I chose him for that something, though I admit to being occasionally surprised. The kind of photos you mentioned in relation to a Joan Jonas performance, they are documentations for people who aren't there of a work that is being experienced at that very moment by an audience in real time and space. I am responsible for the content of my live performances, but not with those pix though I hope they are faithful reproductions of what's happening onstage. I won't know until later, of course. I am concerned with my artwork in a particular time and space attended by an audience disinterested in the documentation being produced for the people who aren't there. They are concerned only with their own "here" and "now" with me. These different types of photographs are as different as night and day.

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Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, NY: feldmangallery.com

# Eleanor Antin

## by Rachel Mason

*On influence, feminism, and performance.*



Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots at the Bank*, Solana Beach, California, February 9, 1971, 10:00 am. Mailed: April 26, 1971. Black and white photograph. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

In past few years there have been a number of survey exhibitions focused on Antin's tremendous bodies of work. A few months ago, I happened upon a show at Diane Rosenstein Fine Art in Los Angeles, which presented a more intimate view of the artist's work. Entitled *Passengers*, the exhibition assembled a treasure trove of previously unseen drawings, photographs, and videos from Antin's oeuvre of multi-faceted projects. The many drawings, photographs and videos reveal a lifelong obsession with storytelling.

Most people think of two pieces when they think of Antin's work. In *100 Boots* (1971–73) she placed 100 black rubber boots in a wide ranging set of arrangements, from military formations to playful scenarios including dancing on a car and a mass of boots walking into a bank. The other is *Carving, A Traditional Sculpture*, from 1972, in which she photographed herself in sequence as

her naked body was “carved” by dietiing, a piece that became a widely reproduced symbol of the feminist art movement in the 1970s.

The project which has had the greatest impact on me, however, is *The King of Solana Beach*. In a series of black and white photographs, Antin presents herself as a troll-like King lounging, breaking into conversations, “working the beach” for befuddled and amused bystanders. She created a lived fiction, allowing the world and all its unpredictable elements to become her stage, turning everything and everyone into fiction.

One of the lessons I learned from Antin's work is that an artist can make a stage out of anything and step inside of it with the simplest of methods. Her show felt like it offered a possibility: feel free to be a wanderer, create journeys, go on them, and see where they lead you. After wandering through her show, I decided to write to her and ask her some questions. The following is our correspondence.

## Style

**Eleanor Antin** Rachel, we can find and expand on stuff that interests us as we go on. Talking, if it's interesting, always opens up to new talking. But given your mixed media audience, it might be interesting to discuss style, which most people see as an artist's identity. I consider style to be more free-floating and available to play with, to clothe myself in—or disrobe from—to suggest and visualize my ideas, to open a whole domain of possibilities related to what interests me in the particular work I'm doing.

Let's start there or anywhere else. Just send me some questions and we'll move on. Oh, and I did look you up. Unfortunately, *Hamilton Fish* was the only one I could get to play without interruption (my computer is ancient). I thought your work looked really interesting, witty and quite beautiful. I'm looking forward to our email conversation.



Rachel Mason, *The Lives of Hamilton Fish*. Preview performance at Clocktower Gallery NYC, 2013. Photo by Macela Pardo.

**Rachel Mason** How fascinating that you bring up style right away because it wouldn't be my first inclination and I think it's a great starting-off point. It seems to me that each of your endeavors has a different beginning, asking a new question and following whatever course it needs. There is a freedom in your work to not be beholden to the constraints of any style. You work with what you need for any given project.

Which brings me to my question: Do you feel that there is a pressure on artists to be branded, or to have clearly defined styles? Have you ever felt pressure to have a style, and if so, has that effected your practice? And could you give an example of how style and content function together in your work?

**EA** Style is a language, it isn't a branding iron. After doing my videotapes *The Adventures of a Nurse* and *The Nurse and the Hijackers* I realized I had left something out. Something important. The idea of "the nurse as caregiver," a role so often given to women—not given, so much as historically forced on us whether we wanted it or not, and probably the major role assigned to us by history and religion (remember, it includes the role of the mother). It was left out while I explored the contemporary pop image of the nurse: sentimental, sexy, a passive player who does the best she can in a thankless role.

But what did nursing actually mean? What was a caregiver? I went back to the founding of nursing as a job for women by Florence Nightingale back in the mid-19th century. She invented modern nursing as a profession, as a calling, during the Crimean War. That was actually the first war to be photographed using that new invention, the camera, but differently than it would be done several years later by Mathew Brady and his associates. Roger Fenton was with the British army in the Crimea as a patriotic shield for the British government, in order to publicize the soldiers to the public back home. Some early PR. If I wanted to discover what nursing meant to Nightingale, I had to use the visual language of the time. (Here, I must confess I opted to be closer to Brady, as Fenton was a poor model of actual reality.) This required actors, costumes, and settings in order to set up anecdotal moments from the lives and deaths of the soldiers, and from Nightingale's work and experience. It meant discovering the nature of war by reenacting a particular one as it was in its own time. It was not a very important war or a very interesting one, and it was certainly a very badly fought one (as most wars are. The glamor of Thermopylae is rare in the history of war). So this work morphed into a study of war, its ambiguities, its disasters, its comedy. I had a style—19th-century reportage/narrative photography—which helped me look into the complexities of my subject, and how the idea of nursing was so ironically bound up with killing and death. To paraphrase Nightingale from my performance play/video: "If I save one soldier he will just go back and kill another. So whereas before he killed one, he will now kill two or three before perhaps dying himself. So I have become a double murderer. But ... when I see a man bleeding, I have to bandage him."

I now had sixty 19th-century photos. But the subject was hardly covered. I needed to consider war further, there was more, much more. There were the economic aspects, the political aspects, the moral (or immoral) aspects. I made life-scale masonite puppets on wheeled bases so they could be moved around. They were painted to look like the actors in the photos, in a flat style reminiscent of a Brechtian propaganda play because I have political ideas I want to argue: I write my Brechtian melodrama with hints of Oscar Wilde thrown in

(he's so good at miming aristocrats) and go deeper into the issues I brought up in the photos. But now I use words and narrative for the murders, betrayals, stupidities, cruelties, romance, heroism, ironies, and absurdities of war. I speak for all the characters. About fifty of them. With the exception of Nightingale, they're all men. They're British, which requires many voices; I'm a good melodramatic actor but I suck at immitations. I just do the best I can.

At the end of the play, after the death and destruction, Queen Victoria gives Nightingale a gold medal and sends her home instead of making her a cabinet member, Minister of War, the position she desired. Did you know that in true Victorian female neurasthenic style, she took to her bed for the next fifty years? As a woman, she had no other place to go. Without my taking on an early 19th-century photographic style along with a more modern Brechtian propaganda theatre style, *The Angel of Mercy* would never have worked. I wouldn't have had a language to do it.

**RM** In *The Lives of Hamilton Fish* I play a male character, the editor of a newspaper. As someone who is in drag (female to male) in a film made in the present era, I would love to know what it was like for you to take on male characters and to act them out over thirty years ago. I would love for you to speak to this with regard to *The King of Solana Beach*, which you began in the early 1970s. I can only imagine that being a woman in drag at that time was a much more risky thing, or at least a very different thing, than it might be today.

**EA** I've always loved drag. It's over-the-top and I'm attracted by the fearlessness in the face of danger by people who dance on the high wire. An absurd courage keeps them from falling. They're not pathetic Humpty Dumptys. They have an extravagant beauty that I love. A fearlessness and joy in self-invention and fuck everybody else, this is me and isn't it grand.

And sure, I was scared the first few times I walked around my kingdom of Solana Beach with a beard and breasts. It was the Nixon days, the Vietnam War, but also the exploding of the old bourgeois culture. And the 1970s—contrary to media cliché—were not the selfish age of "me" but the age of the liberation of the "me" for those gutsy and astute enough to fight for it. Women's liberation, gay liberation, black liberation (which had, of course, begun much earlier but now flowered into a black cultural explosion). Solana Beach was a small community of surfers, new-agers, retirees, and Republicans, along with the occasional home-grown Nazi. It still felt like small-town America but with an easy California style.

So the day I appeared with a beard and breasts on main street, yes, I was scared. My presence was an attack on traditional Republican values of correctness. I mean, women still wore white gloves and Easter bonnets in the rich neighboring town of La Jolla. I was sticking it to them and their bourgeois culture. But even I was shocked at the ease with which people either took me in stride or politely ignored me like a bad smell. A convertible crowded with surfers screeched to a halt. "Hey, who are you?" they yelled. I bowed courteously. "I'm the King of Solana Beach," I answered politely. "Don't you think Solana Beach deserves a King?" "Cool," they shouted, waving at me as they sped away. I began to realize that if I were a tall person and not a small person, they might have considered me dangerous. But I wasn't threatening. I bowed to people, doffed my cap, kissed ladies' hands. I certainly looked more like Charlie Chaplin than Charlie Manson. David, my husband, called me a dwarf policeman in my flowing cape and boots. Now that I think about it so many years later, maybe I was a hobbit. What I was was different—an outsider perfectly comfortable in alien country. And as

the days went by, I began to notice that the only people who said hello and talked to me and remembered me were the old people (maybe they didn't see so well) and the young people who were usually stoned. The responsible adults who had jobs and took their kids to school and went to church on Sunday and baked cookies for little league, those younger and middle-aged respectable adults merely ignored me. I shouldn't have been in their landscape so I wasn't. They erased me.



Eleanor Antin, from *The King of Solana Beach*, 1974. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

## History

**RM** I'm interested in your tendency to step into other times in history and to create worlds as you do in installations, plays, photographs, films, videos, and fiction. The re-making and re-imagining of history is so important in your work and you take such a specific vantage point. I wonder if you can expand on that in any way.

**EA** I think much of this question was considered when I discussed my time travelling to the Crimean War in the mid-19th century. Of course, I enjoy time travel. Sometimes I think I'm in the tradition of the Victorian woman dreaming of the big world out there but stuck in the prison of female life. Maybe like Emily Dickenson or Emily Brontë. Of course, I'm not stuck anywhere and my work forces me to travel, though frankly, I don't find any place that exists today as seductive as the past, except perhaps for the giant redwoods in Northern California and I'm not being totally honest here, because walking in that forest is walking into the past. My trip to the Jedediah Smith National Forest on the California/Oregon border was one of the most amazing moments of my life.

**RM** Similarly, your recent book, *Conversations with Stalin*, transports the reader to a different era in America, specifically in New York. I had to wonder if you were writing from experience, describing your own life growing up in New York—of course with the exception of meeting Stalin! What is fact and what is fiction?

**EA** I've done a lot of readings from *Conversations with Stalin*. People often ask me whether my adventures in the book are true or not. But what does that question mean? Yes, they were my experiences. Yes, my mother worked me to the bone in the family hotel business. Yes, I had those bad boyfriends...lots of other bummers too; I had a talent for finding them. But you start a story that you remember happened to you a long time ago and it opens up to perhaps become another story or maybe not, maybe it just opens to reveal more of itself or maybe it suggests something entirely different but related in some subconscious way that surprises you but you have to go with it. Are you stepping into your previous footsteps? Who remembers? The work begins to take over. You remember another fact. But maybe it happened during another time and in another place but it pops up here. Go with it. What are you going to do, stop the flow to interrogate yourself? And when the chapter is over, if it sounds right, it's right, and it happened. And even if it didn't happen that way, it must have been that way. You have the words on the page to prove it.

## Acting

**RM** Following your fantastic description of the staging and decisions behind the photographic process in *The Angel of Mercy*—and no, I had absolutely no idea that Florence Nightingale stayed bedridden for the last fifty years of her life!—I have a new question, about craft. You clearly think a lot about the skill and craft of acting. I wonder if you can address how your training in acting prepared you for the work that you do? Had you had some huge "break" as an actor early on, do you think you would still have pursued art? Or were you already ready to leave the field and head into the uncharted waters of your hybrid practice.



Eleanor Antin, *The Angel of Mercy*, 1976. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

**EA** Interesting question. Who knows what might have been. I studied acting with Tamara Daykarhanova, a Russian actress who had studied with Constantin Stanislavski. I think I was pretty bad then. I was trying to find emotional truth and it kept eluding me. Occasionally, though, it seemed to come—usually as tears. I thought that was truth, honest emotion. When I became an artist, I stopped worrying about truth, feeling, emotions. I wrote and acted in plays for my ballerina self, Eleanora Antinova, which were filled with sorrow and comedy, pathos and absurdity, reality and dream, and in that mess of possibility I found her truth which was also my truth.... There's that word again. Sometimes it makes sense. Sometimes it doesn't.

Craft? What's that? I don't believe in rules or the right way to do things. There are many right ways. An artist does what she needs to do to do what she wants to do. That's all the craft anybody needs. It sounds so deceptively simple, doesn't it? It isn't.

## Feminism

**RM** Where do you see feminism today? So many of your pieces from the 1960s and '70s entered into the canon of what we think of as feminist art. At least that is how I first learned of your work. What do you think are the issues that today's emerging female artists face? And since you are an authority at this point, but are still very active, is there an experience that you can describe which sheds light on the situation as you may have seen it change for women in the arts? I also realize that the category of "women" is not so simple because it is subdivided into many categories within it. so even though that is an overgeneralization, I would still like for you to offer any thoughts at all.

**EA** I'm a passionate feminist and a feminist artist, but I am also a conceptual artist, a performance artist, a video artist. Remember those were the days when we were inventing the new world of art, liberating it from the standard painting-and-sculpture designations. And feminist artists were in the front lines. Though not all of my works were thought of as feminist. I even have works that embarrassed me because they made me feel like a fink. So there were several earlier works that I never told anyone about, never showed to anyone for years. They didn't seem communal or supportive of women. For instance, I had one work called *Four Transactions*. It consisted of two encounters and two withdrawals. They were done in secret in a women's group of about eight to ten artists in San Diego. We used to meet every other week to make art together. We weren't into consciousness raising, we were into making art together. Let's say one day we'd bring in everyday materials and throw them in the middle of a large floor and start to play with them. People added materials—ropes, wood, paper, whatever—and a large sculpture began to take shape, very interesting too, as people might make secret entrances to hide in, others hid parts they didn't like with other materials, overburdened sections caved in and the sculpture changed. We didn't talk to each other, we were too busy doing, but we could make sounds or song pitches, and eventually, maybe after forty minutes or so we would find our way to an ending. It was fascinating how we all knew when the work was finished. Nobody said anything, it was just over. Afterward we talked about what had happened and what we made, then we trashed the materials and the work was gone. Well, my secret Transactions piece consisted of an action I would take during each meeting that nobody knew about. They were by and large simple actions but they could have had consequences. Before each meeting, I had the withdrawal or encounter that I planned for the day, signed and dated by a notary public. "Withdrawal 1" read:

At the February 6 meeting any conversation I initiate will be addressed to persons from their rear, never frontally or from the side. I can respond to comments or questions initiated by others regardless of position. If I initiate a conversation from the wrong position I shall leave the meeting immediately.

Sounds simple, but I was known to be pretty talkative. So I found myself constantly moving around the room to be behind people because just walking out on the group would have been both confusing and hurtful to them.

"Encounter 1," which I performed during the next session, was actually much more dangerous:

At the February 20 meeting, I shall take on the job of ombudsman. This will necessitate my pointing out to each member of the group, and in any manner I choose, a particular failing she displays in relation to the others. These may be of an ephemeral sort such as personal bugginess taken out on someone else or of a more serious nature like, say, a rip-off of the entire group. I must always keep in mind that my statements are intended to bring about more satisfactory behavior from the others and are never to be used for egoistic purposes of my own. I must complete these 8 tasks before the group normally disperses otherwise I must keep the session going by whatever means I can until I complete them.

(Wow! That one was rough.)

Years later, when I was choosing the works to include in my retrospective at the LA County Museum of Art with curator Howard Fox and the art critic who would be writing an essay for the catalogue, Lisa Bloom, I showed these secret works to them as if I were confessing something. Much to my surprise, they both immediately loved them and Howard included several of those pieces in the exhibition, including *Four Transactions*. Almost thirty years after the fact, they read the piece in a more complex way. They thought I was asserting my independence, my own self, while being part of a community. Their feminism was more sophisticated than my earlier one. They believed that my instincts to hold onto my sense of self by working secretly was my way of liberating myself from the conformity of the group, even a sympathetic group.

As far as being successful, no artist really believes she is successful enough. As one of my paper dolls says in *The Nurse and the Hijackers* video, "It's never enough." And tastes change, the discourse changes. How does one stay relevant and interesting while continuing to do one's own thing? How does one keep moving? Because art is a vocation, not merely a career. Once you've been converted, once you've been called, you have to keep working or die. I've said before, the description of an artist is somebody who never takes a vacation.

As for young women artists, the scene is very difficult now because it's so contaminated by money. But nevertheless it is really so much more open. We had to fight for our place in the sun. You still have to fight, probably because there are so many more artists around. Somehow, there didn't seem to be that many in the old days. Hey, I'm partially responsible. I was a professor of art at UCSD for almost thirty years. I had a lot of students. Some of them were terrific and are doing very well now. Some were terrific and aren't doing well. Luck, character, there are so many circumstances that play a role in this. I remember an American artist who lived in Istanbul. He had a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to come to New York and do a show at the Fischbach Gallery, a hot gallery at the time. There was a violent snowstorm and only five people came to the opening. He was a good artist. I never saw him in New York again and I don't remember his name.

## The Internet

**RM** *100 Boots* was originally conceived as a mail art project . Could you imagine *100 Boots*would have had the same potency had it been a web-based project? What do you think of the way artists intersect with the Internet? Many artists are now able to engage with the public online. For instance, I had an experience where I wrote a song about a Chechen military leader and it went viral in Chechnya! It was astonishing to experience a reaction from people that I truly have no connection to.



Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots Cross Herald Square. 35th Street and Broadway, New York City, May 13, 1973 8:10 am.* Mailed: June 6, 1973. Black and white photograph. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

**EA** Snail mail was a very different experience from the Internet. A picture postcard came to your mailbox and it was an object you held in your hand. It represented the place where I took *100 Boots*, and after recording that place, sent it out to you to pick up in your hand and

look at before perhaps slipping it into a desk drawer or taping it to the refrigerator or maybe just throwing it away. The Internet is not a place. It's a great void, a black hole, from which you can call up an incredible amount of disorganized information. It's interactive and can reach millions rather than being something quietly slipped into a small mailbox by a mailman with a big leather bag on his shoulder. The often ragged edges of the card suggests something of the places the card itself had been before it came to your place. On the Internet, you delete without touching. Germ free. Life free. Sure, you can print it out but that's just an ugly piece of paper; perhaps if you're sensitive you realize it's a bit of stolen property from a tree that was once standing in a real place somewhere. Of course, you can make artworks for the Internet, people are doing it all the time on Facebook, inventing new selves and characters, inventing new truths. The invisible talking to the invisible.

## Documentation

**RM** I am curious about the role of photography in your work and how the photographer factors into the performances. Who did you recruit to photograph? Were they hired guns or friends? I wonder because whenever I look at the work of artists like Joan Jonas I notice that her early work was documented by photographers like Paula Court or Babette Mangold for instance. Since photographs are all we have of many of the great early works of dance and performance, to me, the photographers become a central part of the equation.

**EA** My photographs are not documentation. They are inventions. Artworks. I am responsible for the sets, the lighting, the actors' poses, costumes, makeup, story, style. I work with friends or they become my friends but their job is to realize my vision according to my directions. Sure, when an actor puts on a costume and walks onto a set, he adds something but then I chose him for that something, though I admit to being occasionally surprised. The kind of photos you mentioned in relation to a Jonas's performances, they are documentation for people who aren't there of a work that is being experienced by an audience in real time and space. I am responsible for the content of my live performances but not with those pictures, though I hope they are faithful reproductions of what was happening on stage. I am concerned with my artwork in a particular time and space attended by an audience disinterested in the documentation being produced for the people who aren't there. They are concerned only with their own "here and now." These different types of photographs are as different as night and day.

*Rachel Mason (b. 1978) is a New York-based artist born in Los Angeles. Solo exhibitions include Starseeds, envoy enterprises (2014), Filibuster, envoy enterprises, NYC (2013), The Deaths of Hamilton Fish, Marginal Utility Gallery, Philadelphia (2010); I Rule With a Broken Heart, Andrew Rafacz Gallery, Chicago (2009); The Candidate, Circus Gallery, Los Angeles (2008); and Still Legends, Jessica Murray Gallery, NYC (2004). Her work has been featured in the New York Times, Artforum, Modern Painters, New York Magazine, the Village Voice, Art in America, ArtNews, FlashArt, and the Huffington Post. She received her B.A. from the University of California, Los Angeles and her M.F.A. in Sculpture from Yale University. Mason is currently touring performing her feature film song, The Lives of Hamilton*

*Fish at art, film, and music institutions in the U.S. and internationally. She will be featured in an upcoming solo exhibition opening November 2014 at kim? Contemporary Art Centre in Riga, Latvia curated by Kristen Chappa as part of Art in General's Eastern European Residency Exchange program.*



FEATURED BY ARTSY

## The Many Selves of Pioneering Feminist Artist Eleanor Antin

Pioneering conceptual and feminist artist Eleanor Antin once said, with obvious relish: “I used to think that I didn’t have a self that was mine...if I don’t have a self of my own, I can borrow other people’s.” While most might feel a lack of self as a void, for Antin it was a source of art. For more than half a century, Antin has been inventing and embodying a wide-ranging cast of alter egos, mash-ups of real and fictional, historical and contemporary figures. Through these and her studied, delicate drawings and *découpages* (collaged paper cutouts), and deadpan photographs—currently on view in “Eleanor Antin: Passengers” at Diane Rosenstein Fine Art—she critiques the way in which history is told

Among the works on view is Antin’s exquisite and absurd *Dance of Death* (1974-75), a suite of pastels she made to tease out her ideas. They feature the skeletal reaper in positions not necessarily of power; the voluptuous maiden he dominates in one drawing becomes his dominatrix in the next. The soldiers whose lives he has supposedly come for instead induce him into a smoke and a chat.

The exhibition also includes one of the artist’s most iconic pieces: *100 Boots Facing the Sea* (1971/2005). Part of her *100 Boots* series (1971-73), in which she photographed 50 pairs of black rubber boots traipsing in increasingly mischievous formation around Southern California and New York, this photograph is the first in the narrative. Lined up at the seashore, facing away from the viewer, the boots appear both ordered and defiant—hinting at the cast of their coming adventures.

Referring to the ancient Egyptian poem that serves as the conceptual nucleus of the exhibition and the source of its title, Antin claims: “I think that the idea of ‘passing through’ has been a trope of mine throughout my career as an artist.” The poem’s opening question, “where are you going,” is answered, “I don’t know...I’m only a passenger—just like you.” Here is the lens through which the often hapless, always humorous figures populating her works should be seen, as they, like us, ride through life, each one a small part of the greater historical narrative.

“Eleanor Antin: Passengers” is on view at Diane Rosenstein Fine Art, April 12-May 31, 2014.



**Eleanor Antin**

*Plaisir d'Amour (after Couture), (from "Helen's Odyssey")*, 2007

Diane Rosenstein Fine Art



**Eleanor Antin**

*Going Home (from "Roman Allegories")*, 2004

Diane Rosenstein Fine Art



**Eleanor Antin**

*Death and the Maidens 3 (from "Dance of Death"), 1974-75*

Diane Rosenstein Fine Art



**Eleanor Antin**

*Death and the Maidens 1 (from "Dance of Death"), 1974-75*

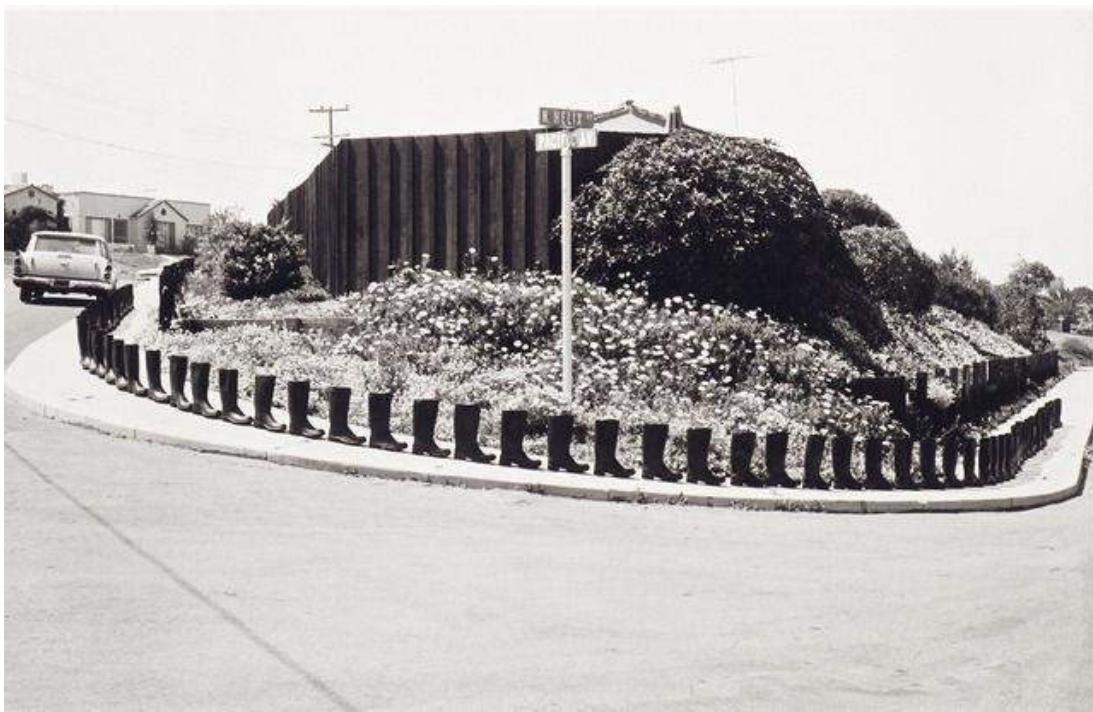
Diane Rosenstein Fine Art



**Eleanor Antin**

*100 Boots Facing the Sea*, 1971/2005

Diane Rosenstein Fine Art



**Eleanor Antin**

*100 Boots Turn the Corner*, 1971/2005

Diane Rosenstein Fine Art



**Eleanor Antin**

*100 Boots on the Porch*, 1971/2005

Diane Rosenstein Fine Art



**Eleanor Antin**

*Artist's Studio (from "The Last Days of Pompeii")*, 2001

Diane Rosenstein Fine Art

## The Many Faces of Eleanor Antin

by Alexis Clements on November 29, 2013



Photo of Eleanor Antin's printed photograph "The Two Eleanors" (1973) in "Multiple Occupancy" catalogue, published by Wallach Art Gallery. (All photos by author for Hyperallergic)

Let me introduce you to a few of the many selves of Eleanor Antin, as they are represented in the show [Multiple Occupancy: Eleanor Antin's "Selves."](#) currently on view at the Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University.

### Eleanor Antin: The Artist Herself



Installation shot of "Caught in the Act" (1973), by Eleanor Antin.

Born in 1935 in New York City to parents who had recently emigrated from a small town in Poland, Antin's father worked in the garment industry and her mother was formerly an actress on the Yiddish stage in Poland.

After grade school, Antin pursued an undergraduate degree in writing and art, and she went on to study philosophy. From there she took up acting on the stage before moving to California with her husband and young child in 1968. In San Diego, she began making artworks in a variety of media — assemblage ("Blood of a Poet Box," 1965–1968); photography series (*100 Boots*, 1971–1973), and photographic documentation of performance (*Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, 1972), each underpinned by strong narratives, as well as elements of humor, satire, and critique.

In 1972, she began exploring her other selves (whom you will meet shortly). In these works she brought together traditional acting, performance art, photography, narrative, film-making, invented histories and artifacts, sculpture, assemblage, and institutional critique in order to construct and explore often seriocomic personas that now comprise a large portion of her body of work.

In the introductory essay to the slim but thoughtfully put together [catalogue](#) that accompanies *Multiple Occupancy*, curator Emily Liebert highlights a quote from Antin about her relationship to identity:

"I consider the usual aids to self-definition — sex, age, talent, time, and space — as tyrannical limitations upon my freedom of choice."

Antin's exploration of identity also cannot be understood without acknowledging that these works took shape as the second wave of feminism was splintering under critiques of the ways in which dominant voices (many of them white, straight, and middle and upper class) were failing to take on issues of race, class, and sexuality; the art world was rejecting doctrinaire Modernism; and anti-Vietnam War and student protests were giving truth to the post-WWII lie of unity and wholesome prosperity in the US.

### The King of Solana Beach



*Installation shot of various photos representing "The King of Solana Beach," created and performed by Eleanor Antin (1972-75).*

Like certain other well-known European leaders, the King of Solana Beach — one of Antin's fictional personas — was small of stature but grand in his ambitions. Exiled from his own country, he, occasionally accompanied by a small Pomeranian, spent time visiting with his subjects, surveying the land, and attempting to broker agreements and alliances. He made peace with his diminutive holdings:

"Solana Beach is a small kingdom but a natural kingdom for no kingdom should be should extend any further than its king can comfortably walk on any given day. My kingdom is the right size for my short legs" (quoted from *The King of Solana Beach*, 1974–75).

Alas his efforts to halt development projects by using his regal entitlement failed. A melancholic, but committed royal, he wishes to preserve his own little piece of the empire, even in the wilds of Southern California. His old world charm and soft approachability lend a certain pathos to his desire to revive feudal rule — a pursuit that sidles up against American capitalism, class structures, and racism, even as it amuses those who encounter the King.

## Eleanora Antinova



Film still of "From the Archives of Modern Art" (1987) by Eleanor Antin.

Perhaps the best known and most discussed of Antin's selves, Antinova is an African-American ballerina who ended up performing with the Paris-based [Ballets Russes](#) in the 1920s, a renowned troupe led by Sergei Diaghilev. This persona grew out of Antin's explorations of the pose and the gaze — of hidden truths behind perfected images. Antin taught herself to strike balletic poses by reading books on the subject, but she could not hold the poses for long, as revealed in the video performance "Caught in the Act" (1973). As her explorations of ballet continued, she also briefly explored the character of a black female movie star. In 1974, the two lines of inquiry merged and Antinova was born.

Antinova is a complex woman. A classically trained prima ballerina with an intense intellectual and artistic curiosity, she describes in "Recollections of My Life with Diaghalev 1919–1929" (1975–1976) the ways in which she was constantly cast in "exotic" roles because of her dark complexion. Photographs accompany selections from the text, depicting Antinova as Cleopatra, Pocahontas, and the Queen of Sheba. But beyond her racialized frustrations, Antinova also longs to be considered an artist in her own right, making work that seeks to challenge the strict hierarchies and dehumanizing elements of her form. She describes a work she choreographed this way:

"Ballet is a machine really, so the dancers fell easily into their rotating slots, and not without a certain pleasure in self-annihilation. It was all very modern." (from page "192" of *Recollections*).

When her career with the Ballets Russes came to an end, Antinova fell on hard times and seems to have resorted to paying her bills by starring in some vaguely pornographic films, fragments of this period of her life can be viewed in the film [From the Archives of Modern Art](#) (1987).

Antinova has taken many forms over the years, primarily embodied by Antin, sometimes with makeup on to darken her skin. She was revived in 2012 in a new performance of Antin's play about her, "Before the Revolution," as part of *Pacific Standard Time*, an art and performance festival focused on work by artists working in Southern California from 1945–1980. In this reincarnation of Antinova, co-directed by Antin and Robert Castro, an African-American actress (Daniele Watts) embodies Antinova.

Many 21st century viewers would/will reflexively cringe at early depictions of Antinova as a white woman in blackface. And in the 1980s, writer and activist [Michelle Cliff](#) published an essay describing those performances as racist. In his essay for the *Multiple Occupancy* catalogue, scholar [Huey Copeland](#) takes a more nuanced approach to looking at Antin's use of blackface — its pitfalls and problematic aspects, but also the ways in which her exploration of Antinova are tied primarily to her narrative based critiques:

"The scandal of Antinova is that this creature so devastatingly elaborates the play of fantasy and projection that remains crucial to the construction of race, though it emerges most credibly as a political project when it takes the form of a historical record."

## Little Nurse Eleanor



*Installation shot of set used for "The Nurse and the Hijackers" (1977), by Eleanor Antin.*

Little Nurse Eleanor partly represents one of the main professional paths offered to women in the early 20th century, nursing. This character engaged in a number of adventures, the most spectacular of which involves her being trapped on a plane that has been hijacked by environmental extremists who want the OPEC nations to stop exporting oil. You can see her, among other places, in the film [The Nurse and the Hijackers](#) (1977), or the crude scale model of an airplane fuselage that was used as a set for the film and which is part of the *Multiple Occupancy* exhibit.

## All in One



*Installation shot of "Recollections of My Life with Diaghalev 1919-1929" (1975-1976), by Eleanor Antin. (All photos by author for Hyperallergic)*

Other personas that feature heavily in the show include Eleanor Nightingale, a nurse during the Crimean War ("The Angel of Mercy," 1977), and Yevgeny Antinov, a recently rediscovered Russian-Jewish filmmaker ("The Man Without a World," 1991).

Above all Antin is an artist of narrative who has countless tools at her disposal, not least of which is her cunning sense of humor, informed by her sharp attention to the ways that politics influence narrative. Each artifact, film, and performance associated with these myriad fictional "selves" show us all the ways that we are enticed, enraptured, and even controlled by the stories we are told and that we tell ourselves, even as they reveal some of the darker aspects of our beliefs.

[Multiple Occupancy: Eleanor Antin's "Selves"](#) is currently on view at the Wallach Art Gallery (8th floor of Schermerhorn Hall on Columbia University's Morningside Campus, Morningside Heights, Manhattan) until December 7.

Ollman, Leah. "Getting into Character." *Art in America*, no. 2 (February 2000): 90-95, 142.

# Getting into Character

*Over her long and varied career, Eleanor Antin has used masquerade, performance and role-playing to extend the frontiers of her own identity. A recent retrospective provided an overview of her freewheeling polymorphism.*

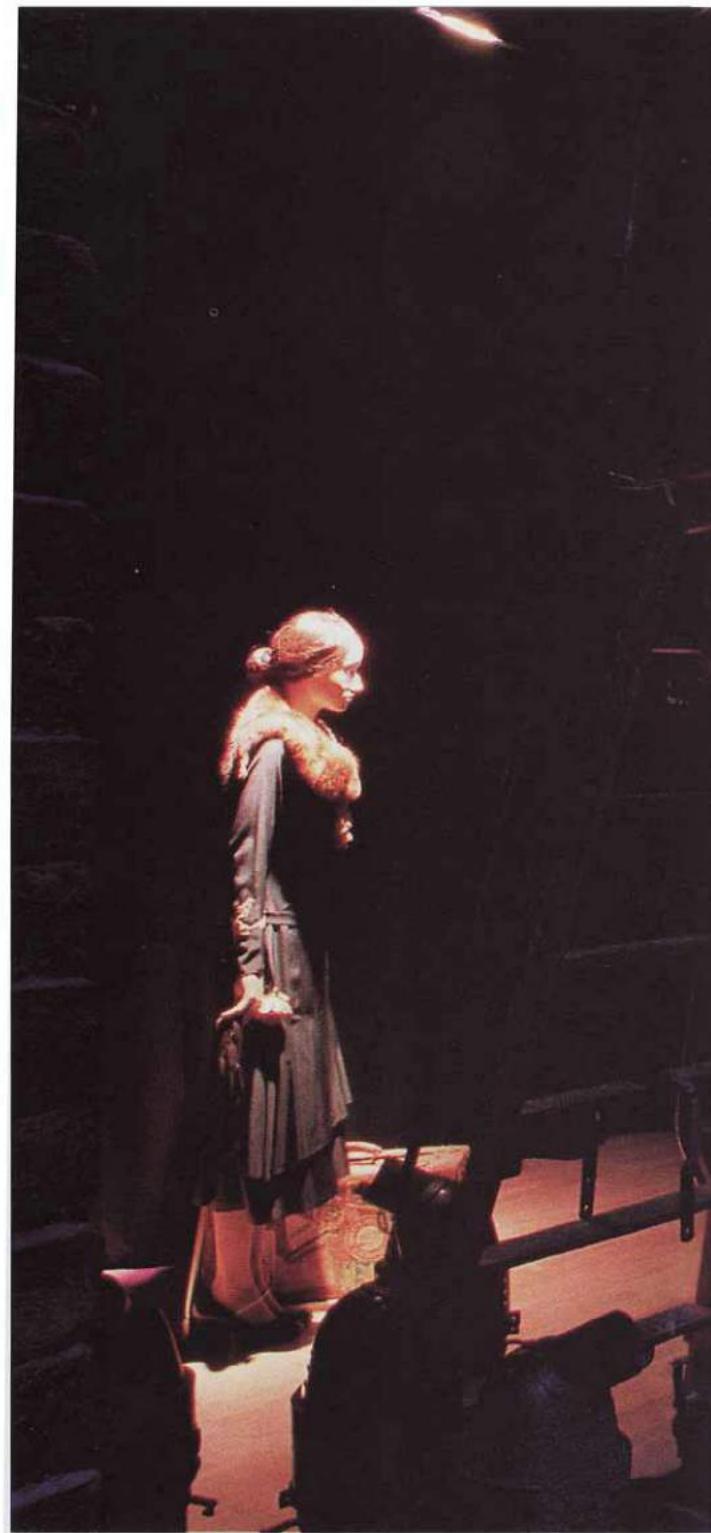


Above, a life-size cutout figure of Eleanor Antin as the Ballerina in front of a mock theater entrance to her 1999 retrospective; at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). Opposite, stage props for Antin's Waiting in the Wings audio installation, created for the exhibition. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy the artist and LACMA.

BY LEAH OLLMAN

**A**n Eleanor Antin retrospective is a tricky proposition. Retrospectives tend to be positioning devices, occasions to clarify artistic identity, and, for Antin, identity has always been a multiple-choice question to which she has repeatedly answered, "all of the above."

Over the past 30 years, Antin (b. 1935) has made of herself a collage of aspirations, personalities, histories and possibilities. In her ongoing inquiry into what constitutes the self, she has taken on the personae of a king, movie star, nurse and ballerina, using photographs, video and performance to document them, drawings and writings to speak from within them. Her obviously contrived fictions originate in the role-playing implicit in everyday



life. Antin is a trickster who works the indeterminate ground between real theater and the theater of the real. And if the characters she occupies are never more than tenuous patchworks, neither, her work insists, are we.

Her retrospective, organized for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art by LACMA curator Howard N. Fox, was—like her life, like any life—an absorbing drama. Antin's work requires a certain suspension of disbelief, but it rewards the effort with abundant, subversive humor and an incisive intelligence that often masquerades as charm. One entered the show next to a mock-up of a theater marquee and exited through a stage door that was part of a new, postscript installation made for the exhibition. Fox



closely edited 30 years' worth of Antin's work, designing the installation to progress as a well-paced play does. The early galleries containing her wry Conceptual work were white and boxy. Color and texture emerged as the personae appeared, and the last few galleries, with their darkened spaces and jagged angles, were apt vehicles for the later work's preoccupation with ghosts and nostalgia.

Antin's exhibition did convincingly position her—as a pioneering link between Conceptualism and feminism, and as a key player in the art of masquerade, an old tradition that continues to find new life in the identity-obsessed art of the '90s. Identities assumed, imposed, constructed

and innate have intrigued Antin since the 1960s, when she was acting and writing fiction and poetry, as well as making visual art. Though she settled into the art world, where she has been well received over the years, showing regularly at galleries, museums and international biennials, she still draws upon all her other skills in her art work, and has even taken up a new one, film, in the last decade.

As much as it endorses multiplicity, Antin's career shows a surprising degree of cohesiveness. Nearly all of the work boils down to portraiture or self-portraiture, character sketches of varying degrees of elaboration that attempt to articulate identity through clues of appearance and occupation:



Above, Antin's "Angel of Mercy" photo series, 1977; installed at LACMA. Insets, My Tour of Duty in the Crimea (left) and In the Trenches at Sebastopol (right), tinted gelatin silver prints, 30% by 22 inches each (framed).

what we buy (the Pop-inflected consumer-goods sculptures of 1969), what we look like (*Carving*, a pithy photo-text work from 1972) and what we pretend to be (*personae*, 1972-89).

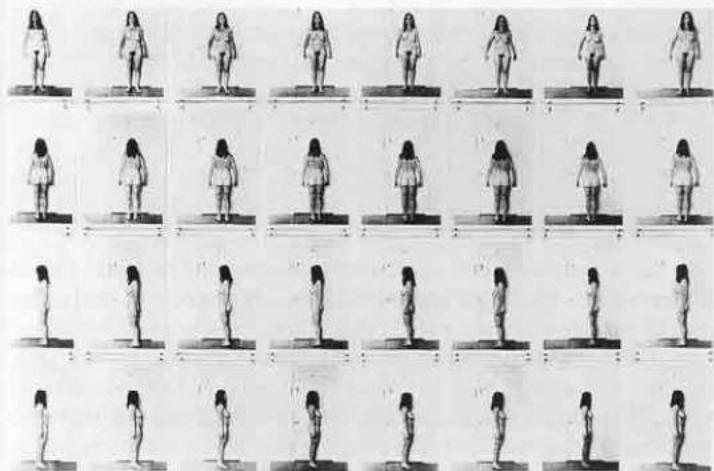
In the earliest work exhibited, and the first of several to delve specifically into the identity of the artist as type, Antin tweaks the myth of inborn creative genius. *Blood of a Poet Box* (1965-68) is a pseudo-scientific group portrait, a case of glass microscope slides bearing blood samples that Antin collected from 100 poets, including Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gerard Malanga and David Antin, her husband. The sculpture's sober format, its literal translation of ineffable gift into quantifiable specimen, reveals a deadpan irony that continues to be one of the driving forces in Antin's work.

In contrast to the more aggressively taboo-busting body art that emerged in the mid-'60s, *Blood of a Poet Box* entailed only a small physical sacrifice—and that not from Antin herself. A few years later, in her landmark piece *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972), Antin pictured herself exposed, naked, a work in progress. *Carving* tracks the artist's weight loss over a 36-day period, through a grid of 144 black-and-white photographs showing her body daily from the front, back and sides. Again, Antin's highly rational, systematic approach belies the emotional charge of the subject—here, woman's

quest for the ideal body. In the text accompanying the piece, Antin likens her own slimming down to the ancient Greek sculptor's notion of carving away layer after layer of stone to reach the ideal form within. Exercising self-denial and altering one's own body to conform to a culturally bound concept of beauty are conventional practices that Antin undermines when she asks, with a straight face and crooked intent, "whose ideal, anyway?"

The rift between the actual and the "appropriate" in a woman's life serves as a staging ground for Antin's richly comic, affectingly human work of the '70s. In the funny yet painfully familiar *Domestic Peace* (1971-72), Antin seismographically charts her mother's emotional responses to sensitive conversational topics, thereby presenting her mother's expectations as ideals to be subverted. More typically, Antin targets the faceless, more nebulous powers-that-be as the source of sexist and racist oppression. While not radical in its politics, Antin's work of this period was in sync with the feminist agenda in the U.S., and the feminist art movement that flourished in Los Angeles in the '70s became part of her extended community. (She had moved from New York to Solana Beach, in northern San Diego County, in 1969, when her husband was hired to teach art history and run the new gallery at the University of California, San Diego.)

**Aligning herself with outsiders and exiles, Antin thrives on the margins. Her characters strive for centrality, yet remain caught at the periphery.**



Carving: A Traditional Sculpture (detail), 1972, 144 daily black-and-white photos of Antin, 7 by 5 inches each. The Art Institute of Chicago.

Bearded Antin during one of her performances as the King of Solana Beach, 1974-75.



Still from The Ballerina and the Bum, 1974, black-and-white video, 54 minutes.



Antin's '70s work seems oblique compared to some of the barbed, explicit expressions then coming out of the Feminist Art Program at Cal Arts, for instance, but it shared with the feminist movement of the time a drive to validate personal experience and autobiography. The vexed encounter between individual freedom and societally imposed constraints then loomed large for numerous women artists, many of whom gravitated, like Antin, to the idea of the self as a composite, a sum of both intentions and external projections. Absurdity, extremity and humor became Antin's best tools for identifying and realizing her many selves.

"I am interested in defining the limits of myself, meaning moving out to, in to, up to, and down to the frontiers of myself," she wrote in 1974. "The usual aids to self-definition—sex, age, talent, time and space—are merely tyrannical limitations upon my freedom of choice."<sup>1</sup> Asserting the fluidity and inconclusiveness of her identity, Antin began to take on various personae, starting with the King of Solana Beach in 1972-75. To reach her "male self," Antin donned a false mustache and beard, and made permeable the boundary not just of gender but of time. The King was a living anachronism in his cape, boots and broad-rimmed hat. A series of black-and-white photographs shows him exploring his realm, sharing a beer with teenagers, waiting in line at the bank, hitchhiking.

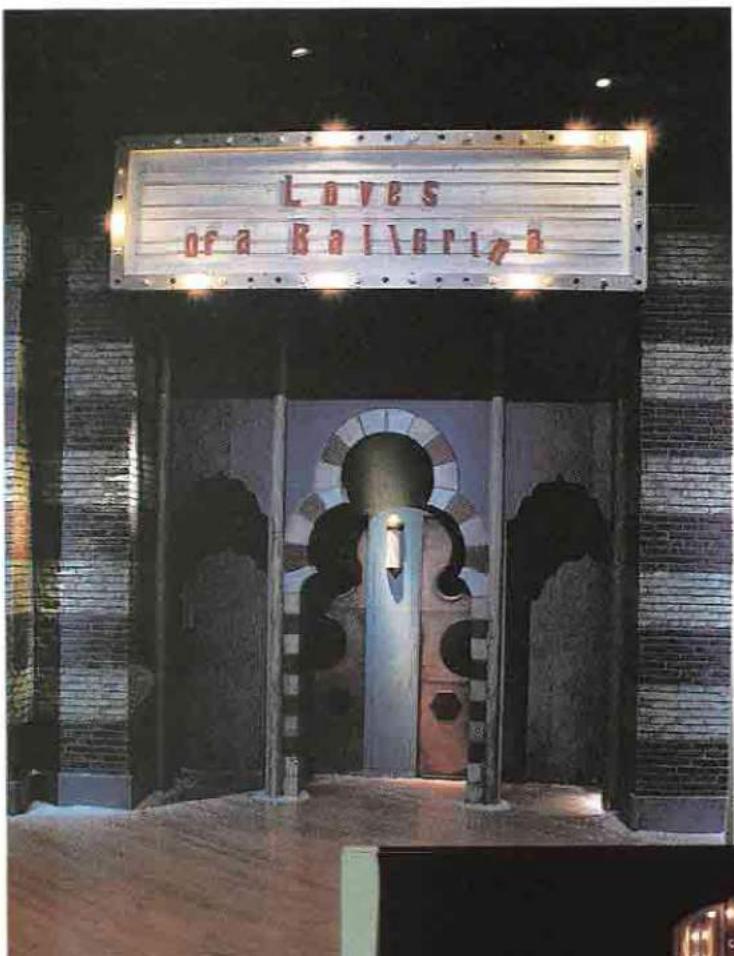
Antin's role-playing has obvious parallels to Cindy Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills" of a few years later, but Antin doesn't stop at the one-liner. She fleshes out each of her characters in various ways. The King comes with a series of "meditations," diaristic entries with ink sketches; the Ballerina has a printed set of memoirs. Antin's personae seem continually to be negotiating their own status as fiction, caricature and credible individual.

Antin had company in her masquerading antics. Lynn Hershman, Martha Wilson, Jacki Apple, Adrian Piper, Linda Montano and others assumed invented personae via performances and photographs during the '70s, many of them in backlash against the role-playing conformity expected of women in daily life. While San Diego then had its cultural deficiencies, Antin recalls in the exhibition catalogue that she found it easier there than in New York to believe in, and act on, the American dream of self-invention.

What invigorates Antin's work is faith in the act of personal transformation, not belief in the viability of the personae themselves. She occupies those roles only loosely. Conscious gaps and slippages—anachronisms, costume changes, her undiluted New York accent—emphasize the artificiality of the roles and, in turn, reinforce the idea that our quotidian identities are equally constructed and contrived. The delicious tension in her work comes not from seamless illusion but from the idiosyncratic layering of her different roles. An actor or performer has two bodies, Frantisek Deak writes in the artist's introductory essay to *Eleanora Antinova Plays*, an anthology of the Ballerina performance scripts. Antin, simultaneously herself and her alter ego, "actually stages (dramatizes) the duplicity of the actor, turning what is a paradigm of acting into an aesthetic and philosophical issue." She throws "her double body into relief."<sup>2</sup>



Blood of the Poet Box, 1965-68, wood box with blood droplets collected from 100 poets, including John Ashbery, Jerome Rothenberg and Allen Ginsberg. Photo Peter Moore.



Above, the faux vaudeville theater entrance to Antin's "Loves of a Ballerina" installation, 1986/99; part of the LACMA retrospective. Inset, dressing table with the Ballerina's face projected onto a mirror.



In the mid-'70s, Antin also conceived the Nurse as well as the Ballerina, one a clichéd embodiment of female servitude and selflessness, the other an archetype of feminine grace and glamor. Both characters evolve over time from naive to wise, innocent to experienced. In tandem with those changes, the form of the work itself grows more sophisticated.

Antin acts out the adventures of Nurse Eleanor in a 1976 video using paper dolls as stand-ins for a cast of stereotyped characters—the egotistical doctor, the sexy ski instructor, the exploitative politician. This soap opera of seductions and betrayals takes place on a bed within a little girl's room, with Antin in nurse's uniform manipulating the cutouts across the bedspread and providing all the voices. Nurse Eleanor, a cloying, somewhat pathetic character, is of a piece with this make-believe world. By 1977, the Nurse has matured and transformed herself into a fictionalized version of Florence Nightingale, the woman credited with legitimizing the nursing profession. Antin's spectacular "Angel of Mercy" photographs, made in a faux 19th-century manner (and hung salon-style in the exhibition, in a chandeliered room), "document" Eleanor Nightingale's tour of duty in the Crimean war, depicting her tending to soldiers and gazing poignantly at the fallen. Brilliant fakes printed in rich sepia tones with elegantly handwritten captions, Antin's photographs insinuate themselves right into photo history,

**"The usual aids to self-definition—sex, age, talent, time and space—are merely tyrannical limitations upon my freedom of choice," Antin has declared.**

claiming a place alongside the actual Crimean War reportage of Roger Fenton. And Antin, as the Nurse, writes herself into history as well, appropriating the role of another woman who chafed against the conventions of her day (that she should marry well, for instance, staying within her class) and defied them with missionary zeal. "Disobedience," she says, in character as the Nurse in a 1977 video, "is man's defining act."

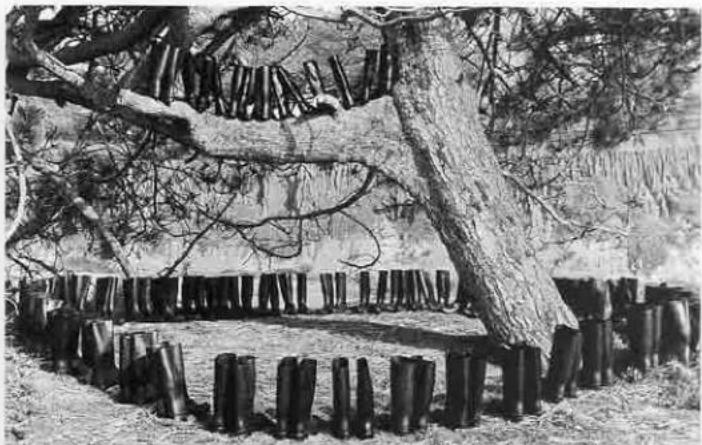
Antin's Ballerina starts out similarly sheltered and idealistic, only to develop a healthy, if somewhat bitter skepticism, and, during her long lifespan as a character (1973-89), Antin's moving-image work blossomed. Her single-channel videos of the '70s suffer from the low-tech, real-time tedium that plagues much of the medium's first generation of work. By the latter half of the '80s, however, Antin had progressed to constructing narratives, either framing the videos within full-scale environments or giving them enough substance to stand alone effectively as feature films.

In *Blood of a Poet Box*, artistic talent is presented as innate. In the case of the Ballerina, Antin tried out a variant, equally well-established biographical formula—the artist, self-taught in the face of adversity, who is discovered by chance and hailed as a wondrous natural talent.<sup>3</sup> In the humble but amusing 1974 video, *The Ballerina and the Bum*, Antin, in pristine tutu, tells a drifter whom she's met on the railroad tracks that she is heading to New York to be discovered. She has taught herself how to dance from books, while standing in front of a narrow mirror and holding onto a chair. "I can dance very well standing still," she boasts, before laying out her plan to get a waitressing job at George Balanchine's favorite restaurant and to serve his meal with such flourish that the master will

hail her as his next great find.

Because so many great dancers have been Russian, Antin's Ballerina announces that she is, too, after pinning up pictures of Nijinsky and Pavlova on the walls of the train car where she has set up house. Since she is piecing together an identity for herself as if shopping for a new outfit item by item, why not pick up a new nationality as well? Before long, Antin's Ballerina trades in her Russian identity to become a black American (merging with Antin's short-lived character of a black movie star) who has an assumed Russian name, Eleanora Antinova, and a position as prima ballerina in Diaghilev's legendary *Ballets Russes* (1909-29).

As "a black face in a snowbank,"<sup>4</sup> Antinova gets typecast during her tenure with the company. Instead of dancing the great classical showpieces like *Giselle*, she's given roles like *Pocahontas*, which Deak characterizes as "female versions of the male noble savage."<sup>5</sup> In the performance *Recollections of My Life With Diaghilev*, Antin as Antinova commented on her own uneasy integration into the "white machine" of ballet, seeing it as a disjunction with great dramatic potential: "I preferred the imperfect fit, where you saw the performer intersecting with her ambitions. There, at the edges, they might overlap—the desire and the fact—when two impossibilities come together, a beauty is created."<sup>6</sup>



Images from the "100 Boots" black-and-white photographic postcard series, 1971-73 (top to bottom, left to right): 100 boots on the way to church, . . . in a field, . . . on the ferry, . . . on the road, . . . in the market, . . . move on. 4½ by 7 inches each. Photos Phillip Steinmetz. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

Antin first spoke these lines at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in 1980, during a three-week period she spent in New York living in character as Antinova, an experience she chronicles in the marvelously amusing 1983 book *Being Antinova*. Performance art, especially a "life performance" such as this, often functions as something of an endurance test for the artist, but for Antin the most challenging test of all would have been to remain simply Eleanor Antin. It is the oscillation between her actual and fabricated identities that generates meaning for her. Or as Fox writes in his catalogue essay, "For Antin, confusing and conflating art and life may be the highest means of realizing both."<sup>7</sup>

Antinova's career rises to respectable heights, then falls after the death of Diaghilev in 1929. Antin pursues the dancer through ups and downs, infusing her memoirs with dusty gossip and the bitterness of faded glory. In the multipart "filmic installation" *Loves of a Ballerina* (1986), Antinova seems just past her prime and somewhat desperate for attention. In the first part of the piece, she attempts to appease two lovers at once in adjacent compartments of a train, dancing to and fro between them in a splendidly clever installation that incorporates rear-projected video in the

*continued on page 142*

# Antin

continued from page 95

windows of an actual train car. Positioned nearby in the LACMA installation was a run-down movie-palace facade built nearly to scale. Standing in the narrow shelter of the entryway, one could look through windows cut into the front doors and watch, over the silhouetted heads of a stage-prop audience, several short tragicomic black-and-white films starring Antinova. In the third component of the installation, a rear-projected video shows Antin in the mirror of a dressing table, simply looking—both outward to the world and inward toward the self. The gallery was otherwise dark, and artificial snow stirred beneath the viewer's feet.

**A**ntin has made two other filmic installations fueled by nostalgia: *Minetta Lane* (1995, not included in the LACMA show), a fond but unresolved look back at Greenwich Village bohemian life in the '50s, and *Vilna Nights* (1993), one of the exhibition's high points. A breathtaking assertion of loss as a palpable, continuous presence, *Vilna Nights* is Antin at her most unironically personal, though she doesn't appear in the work at all. It is her ode to the vanished world of Eastern European Jewry, the world of her parents and grandparents.

Here again, Antin opens windows onto other people's lives, this time through three rear-projected scenes framed by the collapsed architecture of a dilapidated neighborhood. A brief vignette appears in each window, in vivid color against the surrounding gray rubble. In one, two children left alone in a bare room live out a brief fantasy of Hanukkah feasting that afterward leaves them seeming even more like orphans than before. In another, a woman forces herself to throw a ribboned bundle of letters into a fire. And in the third window an old man, a tailor, sits down to his machine, sets to work sewing, finds something in the pocket of the garment he's working on and dissolves into tears. Whether these characters are ghosts of the Jewish inhabitants of the Eastern European city of Vilna before the Holocaust or the sparse survivors of the ghetto's liquidation, they haunt this space. As representatives of the three stages of life, they both personalize and encompass the devastation of the Holocaust. Its millions of victims include not only those who lost their lives but also those who lost the dreams and loves that made their lives their own.

In a provocative essay for the exhibition catalogue, Lisa Bloom calls attention to the dominant role played by Jewish women in the rise of feminism among Southern Californian artists of the '70s. Though many, if not most, of the voices of the movement were Jewish—Miriam Schapiro, Martha Rosler, Judy Chicago, Kathy Acker, Arlene Raven and Antin among them—their identities as Jews did not generally surface in their art at the time. Also preponderantly Jewish were Antin's colleagues in the visual arts department at the University of California, San Diego, where she began teaching in 1975—artists such as Allan Kaprow, Helen and Newton Harrison, Harold Cohen and Jerome Rothenberg. But it wasn't until the '90s that Antin's work began to overtly reflect her Jewish heritage. This new awareness she attributes to the "liberation" that began with feminism and the civil rights movement, then broadened, metamorphosing into a more general regard for ethnicity that now goes by the umbrella term "multiculturalism."

Lighter in spirit than *Vilna Nights*, but sharing its nostalgia for faces and textures from the old country is *The Man Without a World* (1991), a film Antin wrote, directed and produced under the pseudonym of Yevgeny Antinov, a controversial (and fictitious) Soviet silent-film director of the 1920s. Billed as a classic shtetl film, it is Antin's most refined cinematic project. A full-length feature dealing with love, temptation and, as ever, the irrepressible artistic impulse, the film is set in a small village in Poland—a country "loved by the angel of death," as Antinov explains in the opening titles. *The Man Without a World*, rich with Antin's irreverent, time-bending quirks, received enough critical acclaim to make it something of a crossover vehicle for Antin, and it received screenings at a number of film festi-

vals and programs. Less successful was the recent *Music Lessons* (1997, a collaboration with David Antin), which bears the trappings of a mainstream production but lacks both verve and fully rounded characters.

**T**hat Antin should turn with such concentration to film in the past decade comes as no surprise, since, as the exhibition made clear, filmic strategies have been present in her work from the start. Her 1969-70 "Movie Boxes" each join three or four unrelated black-and-white reproductions from books and magazines in glass-fronted cases, as though they were film stills advertising a coming release. A single, hand-lettered word in each set—*Here, And*—acts as the nominal glue to bind the shots in a Baldessari-like anti-narrative. The concept of a sequence of stills that the viewer perceives as a continuous whole comes to brilliant fruition just a year later in Antin's wittiest, most notorious work, "100 Boots" (1971-73).

Reading like an epic of stop-motion stills, "100 Boots" comprises 51 photographic postcards that Antin staged and mailed, Fluxus-style, over the course of two and a half years. Using 50 pairs of black rubber boots she bought in an Army-Navy store, Antin creates a single persona (which she refers to as "he," not "they"), a multiple self par excellence. The boots partake of a range of suburban pleasures and obligations—marching down the aisle of the supermarket, parking in the stalls of a drive-in movie theater, attending church, going to the bank and staring out at the sea in a continuous line, one long stripe on the spare horizon. The narrative (recently published for the first time in book form) takes amusing, novelistic shape when the boots commit a transgression—trespassing—which leads to flight and a splintered life of odd jobs, meanderings through nature, military service, loving and grieving. By the time 100 Boots makes it to New York, where he marches in the front door of the Museum of Modern Art (for an actual solo show of the series in 1973), he has assumed a definite personality as a charming loner, an outsider who has suddenly arrived.

Antin's ability to imbue this bodiless amalgam with pathos is remarkable, a hint of what was to come in her various personae. Each of her characters strives for centrality yet remains caught at the periphery—the Nurse is instrumental yet undervalued, the Ballerina cast off by history as marginal. Antin has written her own fate, or perhaps her own fears, into these roles. (Despite her long and varied career, for instance, no other venues signed on to host the LACMA show.) Purposefully aligning herself with outsiders and exiles, she thrives on the margins, where she stirs up trouble with her devious antics. In creating her personae, she creates herself, a pantheon of tricksters bent on blurring the boundaries between past and present, reality and fiction, life and performance. When those borders dissolve, Allan Kaprow wrote in 1966, describing the Happenings that were to transmute into performance work like Antin's, "Not only does art become life, but life refuses to be itself."<sup>8</sup>

1. Eleanor Antin, "An Autobiography of the Artist as an Autobiographer," *L.A.I.C.A. Journal*, October 1974, p. 20.

2. Frantisek Deak, "Before the Revolution: Acting as an Art Paradigm," in Eleanor Antin, *Eleanora Antinova Plays*, Los Angeles, Sun & Moon Press, 1994, p. 40.

3. Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz trace this formula back at least as far as Giotto in their book, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1979.

4. Antin, *Eleanora Antinova Plays*, p. 75.

5. Deak, p. 26.

6. Antin, *Eleanora Antinova Plays*, p. 76.

7. Howard N. Fox, "Waiting in the Wings: Desire and Destiny in the Art of Eleanor Antin," in *Eleanor Antin*, Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1999, p. 116.

8. Allan Kaprow, "Manifesto," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, 1993, p. 81.

"Eleanor Antin" was organized by Howard N. Fox for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art / May 23-Aug. 23, 1999. The show was accompanied by a catalogue with essays by Fox and Lisa Bloom, and an interview with the artist. 100 Boots was published, with an introduction by Henry Sayre, by Running Press, Philadelphia, in 1999.

a magazine of woman's culture

# "Smashing"

Smashing: Women's Relationships  
Before the Fall  
by Nancy Sahli

# Chrysalis

Cover Girl/Artist Eleanor Antin  
as The King

Eleanor Antin: What's Your Story?  
by Arlene Raven  
and Deborah Marrow

Feminism and Family Revivalism  
by Sandi Cooper

Fathers: The Men in Our Lives  
by Judith Arcana

The Literary-Industrial Complex  
by Celeste West

Women Athletes in Reel Life  
by Michele Kort

The Resonance of Interruption  
by Michelle Cliff

Fiction  
by Joanna Russ

Catalog of Feminist Publishing  
by Linda Palumbo

Poetry  
by Mary McAnally,  
F. S. Pearlson,  
Holly Prado,  
Elizabeth Zelvin

Reviews  
by Alice Bloch,  
Joan Kelly

# Eleanor Antin: What's Your Story?

**Eleanor Antin, R.N.;**  
1975. The "little  
nurse" plays with  
paper dolls on a  
hospital bed.



**The King; 1972.**  
Eleanor Antin/  
Charles I shortly  
before the King's  
execution on  
January 30, 1649.



**The Ballerina;**  
1973. Eleanor  
Antin as a  
glamorous  
ballerina.



Whether fact or fiction, narratives or "stories" have supplied people throughout the world with inspiration, dreams and fantasies, and emotional charge and release since the beginning of recorded time. Today the likes of NBC, Twentieth Century Fox, and their publishing counterparts inundate us daily with dominant-culture versions of events both real and imagined. But there's also another tradition, a hidden narrative tradition, a vehicle for "outsiders" – bards, witches, healers, spiritualists, traveling performers, and others who hand down their stories through oral tales, songs, journals, legends, lullabies, and gossip or other ephemeral forms. Oppressed people who have no access to publishing companies, broadcasting networks, or film studios must use these alternative traditions. Often their stories contain encoded messages that identify members of an underground group to one another.

Eleanor Antin, an artist living in Southern California, is part of this alternative tradition, spinning tales that blur fiction and history in her videotapes, performances, and other multi-media art forms. She is among a small group of innovative artists who are internationally recognized for returning the element of narrative to the contemporary visual arts, which until the 1970's had been dominated by highly abstract, purist work.

It could be said that Antin's work is of the verb rather than the object. Her narratives provide a travelogue of the journey toward the self, revealing the essential transformational nature of the self as she travels. How does she accomplish this? Instead of portraying a single static moment in time, she creates characters and situations which flow and evolve from one work to another.

Her 1971-1973 postcard work, **100 BOOTS**, illustrates this process. Antin conceived this piece as the visual equivalent to a picaresque novel which centered on a "footloose" hero and which appeared in installments like the great novels of the 17th and 18th centuries. Over a two-year period the 100 black rubber boots she chose as her fictional "hero" journey on the road from suburban California to New York City. At first, the boots lead a conventional and mundane life; they are seen shopping or going to the bank or to church. Then they trespass on private property and have to take to the road as outlaws "on the lam." They traverse the Southern California countryside, find and lose work, ride a riverboat, go into combat, and more. Finally they head east, winding up in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Antin chronicled their adventures in a series of 51 photographic postcards which she mailed to 1,000 people over the two-year period. Some episodes followed each other on a daily basis, and sometimes weeks would pass – to build up anticipation – before a new episode went into the mail. Using the mails enabled Antin to expand or compress time as the narrative required and also to completely bypass the traditional art-world distribution system of the New York galleries.

Woven like a connective thread through Antin's work, the theme of the outsider beautifully expresses the experience of women in a world defined by male experience and values. Her feminist perspective manifests itself even more directly in two later works, **Carving: A Traditional Sculpture** and **Representational Painting**. **Carving** – a pun on the traditional method of Greek sculpture in which the layers of marble were carved away until the ideal form inherent in the material appeared –

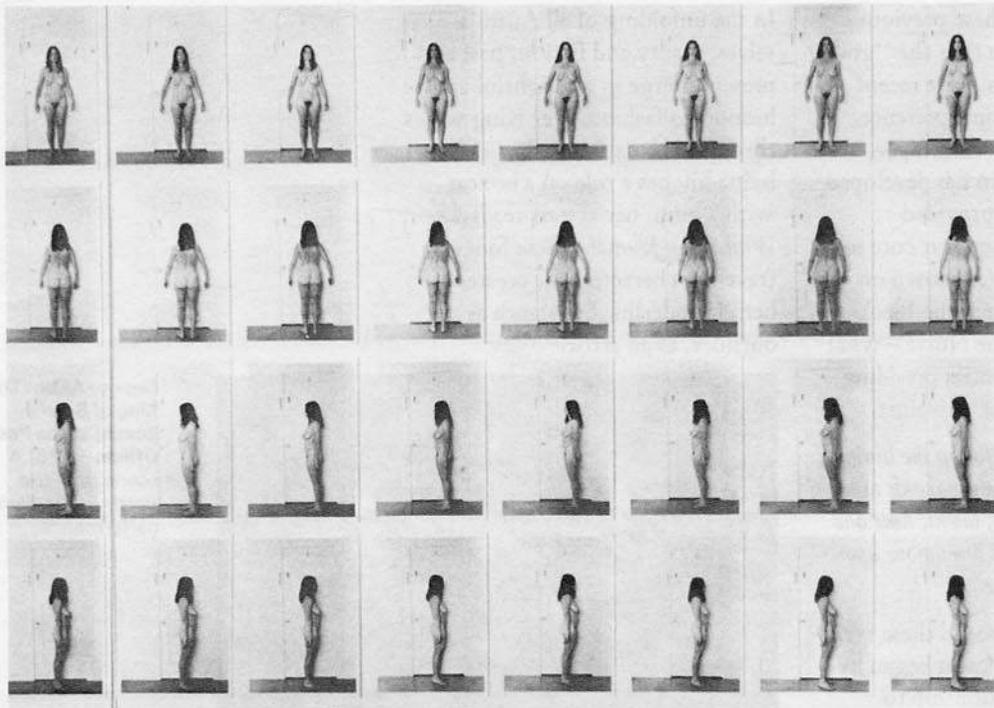
documents Antin's 36-day diet, during which she lost 10 pounds. **Representational Painting** shows her putting on makeup, creating art by painting the "canvas" of her face. These two pieces convey the idea that, for women, dieting and cosmetics take the creative place of art and that in this culture women themselves are the art product. There are both joy and whimsy in her reclamation of the roles of both creator and creation. Along with other women artists of the 1970's, Antin has brought a renewed focus on the self in all its aspects, and an appreciation for autobiography, back into an art context otherwise preoccupied with formalist concerns.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout Antin's work, autobiography – along with biography and history – provides the environment in which the self unfolds. For Antin *all* history is fiction, a conceptual "creation" of events after they have taken place. The autobiography of a human life therefore can be constructed just like a literary life: that is, made up out of whatever elements seem suitable and meaningful. The only stumbling block in the way of this re-created self is "hearsay."

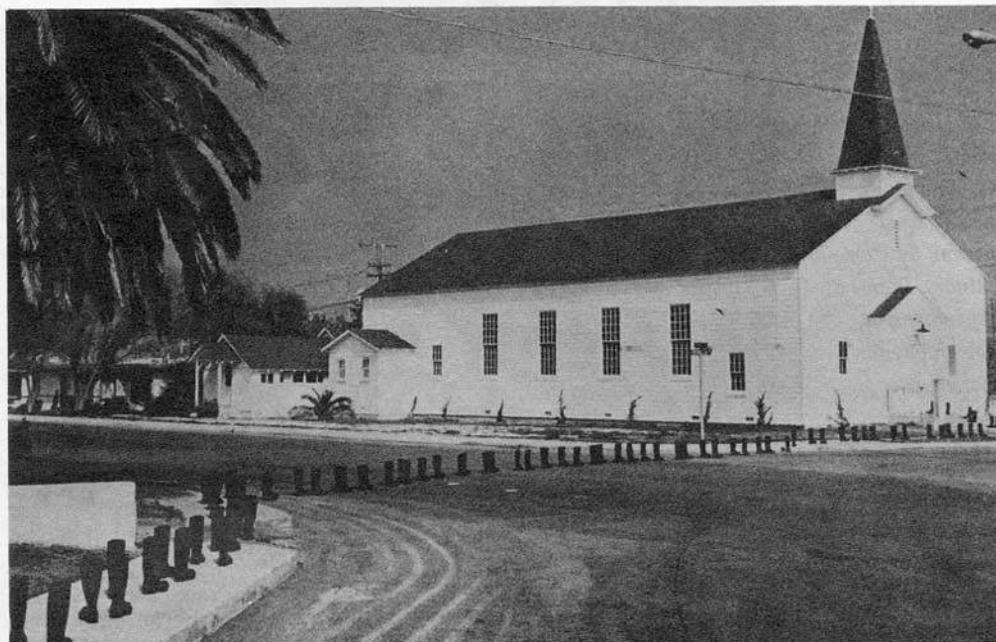
*If I am known mainly by hearsay, for others there is no easy way to separate myself from the public report of myself. I could therefore announce myself to be anything I wished were it not for the accumulation of previous reports.<sup>2</sup>*



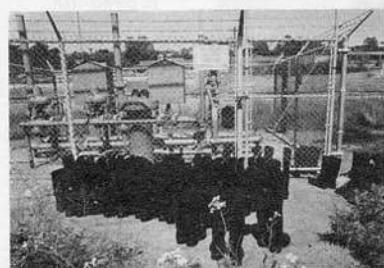
**Representational Painting:** 1972. A videotape in which Antin applies makeup, a metaphor for creating art by painting the "canvas" of her face and becoming at the same time the work of art. As *Carving* is a parallel of the reductive process of sculpture, this work parallels the additive art of painting.



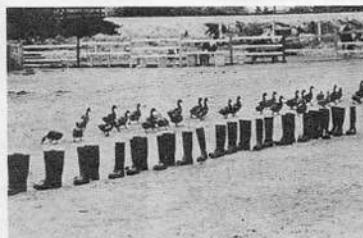
**Carving: A Traditional Sculpture;**  
1972. Detail of the project, consisting of 148 photographs of Antin's naked body "carving" down 10 pounds over a period of 36 days of dieting. She photographed herself in four poses each day; each day is shown vertically, and the weight loss can be "read" horizontally.



**100 BOOTS ON THE WAY TO CHURCH;**  
Solana Beach, Calif.; Feb. 9, 1971; 9:30 a.m./mailed 4-5-71.



**100 BOOTS TREPASS;** Highway 101, Calif.; May 17, 1971; 2:30 p.m./mailed 8-30-71.



**100 BOOTS MOVE ON;** Sorrento Valley, Calif.; June 24, 1972; 8:50 a.m./mailed 12-8-72.

Antin confronts these previous reports – what she calls the “gossip of history” – with more recent “evidence”: personal presence, photography, and videotapes.

Since 1973 Antin has developed and documented (provided “evidence” for) her four core self-images: the King (as shown on our cover), the Ballerina, the Black Movie Star, and the Nurse – what she calls the “dignities presiding over my soul.” She explains:

*I am interested in defining the limits of myself. I consider the usual aids to self-definition – sex, age, talent, time and space – as tyrannical limitations upon my freedom of choice.<sup>3</sup>*

In seeking to transcend these tyrannical limitations, Antin began by exploring her relationship to visibility and power through creating an identity as a man, “discovering” her resemblance to the 17th-century English King Charles I.

*My claim to be Charles I comes up against that previous claim of a short egotistical guy who had his head chopped off, or of a portrait by Van Dyck. But that's all history. I come as Charles I with video, photography (everybody knows photography can't lie), this whole personal presence as Charles.<sup>4</sup>*

Antin's self-image as Charles I gave way to the fantasy images of the Ballerina, the Black Movie Star, and the Nurse, all “feminine” professional stereotypes. With these choices, Antin has dared to cross sexual and racial boundaries in an exploration that continually deepens. Of her black self she has recently said:

*It finally appears now to me that my black self is not a profession. Black is a color, and it will color my other roles.<sup>5\*</sup>*

\*Antin's most recent creation is Eleanora Antinova, the Black Ballerina.

In the unfolding of all Antin's selves, reality and fiction, past and present merge in a delightful and humorous fashion. Her King walks through Solana Beach, her Ballerina hitches a ride on a boxcar with a bum, her actress reads *The Wall Street Journal*. These foot-traveling characters she creates as herself underline her stance as an outsider, as an artist.



Eleanor Antin (The King of Solana Beach) at the Post Office; 1976. A scene from the *Battle of the Bluffs* performance.



The Ballerina and the Bum; 1974. On her way to New York to become a star, the ballerina hitches a ride with a bum.



The Black Movie Star; 1974. An image from the videotape *Black Is Beautiful*.

## Angel of Mercy

As the Angel of Mercy, Eleanor Antin journeys through space and time, from the concrete, defined present to Florence Nightingale's world: the 19th century, Victorian England, and the Crimean War. She had previously explored her Nurse self as "mad" Eleanor Antin, R.N., who manifested her frustration at the limitations of her role by playing with paper dolls on a hospital bed. She found that nurses are defined by a narrow set of expectations; like secretaries, servants, and wives, they must serve the needs and conveniences of others. In her desire to understand why a woman would choose this profession, Antin decided to go back and explore the career of Florence Nightingale, the first professional nurse.

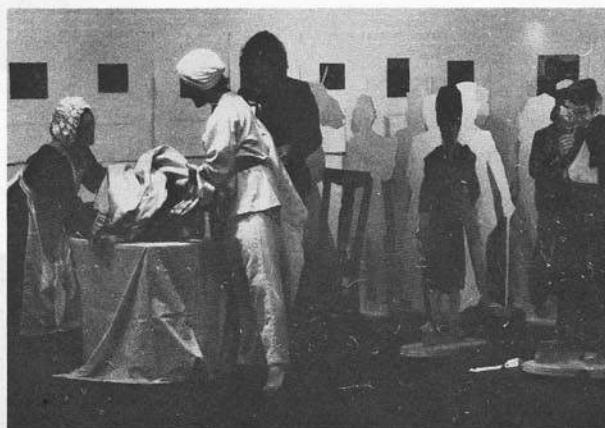
*Just what did Miss Nightingale intend to invent and what had she actually invented? Could it really have been that small subservient space that nursing seems to occupy today? Was that what she had in mind? Really? The Ballerina in me rebelled. The King protested. I went back and found a distinguished, intelligent, resourceful and powerful woman who had fought violently to open a great merciful, ministering space between the suffering soldiers, the doctors, the surgeons, the officers and the War Office. She had tried to open a great benevolent professional space, where no one had seen a clearly defined space at all. She was the Angel of Mercy and most of her descendants were cheerful servant girls. Why?*<sup>6</sup>

To answer her own questions Antin created **Angel of Mercy**, an exhibition and performance held in New York and in La Jolla, California, in 1977. In the exhibition, "documentary" photographs\* from the albums of Grand Nurse

Eleanor hung on the walls and large, cutout painted figures stood around the floor of the gallery. The models for both cutouts and photos were contemporary art-world people dressed in 19th-century costume.



**Angel of Mercy:**  
1977.  
Eleanor Antin with  
her cast of 4 1/2' tall  
painted Masonite  
figures during the  
performance of  
*Angel of Mercy*.



Operation scene  
from *Angel of Mercy*  
performance.



**Eleanor Antin, R.N.:**  
1976. To express  
the deprived parts  
of herself, Antin  
explores her fourth  
self-image as a  
nurse.

\*In creating the "evidence" for this project, as well as many others, Antin was aided by cameraman Philip Steinmetz.

The photographs, romantically cast in sepia, are drawn from two fantasy albums. The first, **The Nightingale Family Album**, portrays Eleanor/Florence's life in the superficial atmosphere of Victorian society before she decided to become a nurse. In these pictures we see Eleanor/Florence's estrangement from the society of her family. In **The Gentleman's Game** **Is the Lady's Gain**, she stands in the background, alienated and alone while others play croquet. In **The New Arrival** she withdraws to the side while other women fuss over an infant. She is again the outsider, clearly uncomfortable with the female role as defined by her contemporaries. Only by climbing a tree (**Tree Sprite**) does she literally begin to "find her niche." Her 1854 "portrait" reveals some of the anxiety and tension that resulted from living in Victorian society. In contrast, the last picture in the album – her 1856 portrait, taken after her decision to become a nurse – shows her as calm and self-confident.

Photographs from  
**The Nightingale**  
**Family Album:**



**Tree Sprite**



**The New Arrival**



The Gentleman's Game Is the Lady's Gain



Eleanor Antin,  
1854



Eleanor Antin,  
1856

The second album, *My Tour of Duty in the Crimea*, displays Eleanor Nightingale's heroic activities in the war, as she provided physical and spiritual care for the sick and wounded. The photos furnish the documentary "proof" that Eleanor was actually in the Crimea. She could almost be Florence Nightingale: History as fiction convincingly re-creates reality. And the images are metaphors — "fictitious" documents, rich with meaning and filled with visual puns. The dialogue between past and present remains: The "Victorian" characters are recognizable to an observer familiar with the faces of contemporary artists and critics; in the captions for the Nightingale album, Eleanor keeps her own name; and in a few early scenes, the tropical Southern California vegetation is conspicuous in the "English" setting.

Photographs from  
My Tour of Duty in  
the Crimea:

**Eleanor Antin aims at  
expanding her profession to  
include a more human  
dimension and thereby  
return to the original creative  
impulse of the artist.**



**Angel of Mercy**



**Prayer Meeting**



**In the Trenches  
Before Sebastopol**

As the **Angel of Mercy** performance unfolds, Antin, dressed in 19th-century costume, converses with the other characters – her family, her friends, her lover – to whom she expresses her compassion for the poor and her aspiration to heal the sick and wounded.

Antin is the only major live character, and she plays all but two of the roles. She speaks to and for the cutouts, moving them about like giant paper dolls. She brings them to life and at the same time takes them on as aspects of herself. In the dialogue with the soldiers and doctors in the Crimea, she explores Florence Nightingale's relation to the military and medical hierarchy and reveals her sympathy for the private soldier:

*All the roles are spoken by Antin as she moves the other "characters" – large Masonite figures on wheels. In this scene she is aided by two live assistants (Massimo Mastacchi and Peter Klein) dressed as 19th-century characters.*

**Doctor:**

Get that next one up here. The one with the bullet in his chest. Come on now . . .

*Antin and her two assistants rush around tying people up with bandages while the Doctor operates quickly. People are picked up, placed on the operating table, and put down quickly and unceremoniously while the Doctor keeps calling out things like –*

**Doctor:**

Don't bother with that one. He's hopeless. Make room for the officer over there – a bit more softly, boys. The man's a gentleman. . . . There! Clean job! (wipes off knife on apron) This arm has come off at the joint. . . . Miss Nightingale, a sponge, please . . . More bandages . . . Etc.

*E interjects occasionally –*

**Eleanor:**

More softly there, boys. Gently, now. There, there. It will be all right. Calmly, now. Try to bear up as best you can. All right, Doctor. . . . Etc.

*Gradually there develops a great pile of painted Masonite arms and legs and scattered bodies, torn shreds of sheets, etc., on the floor. Gradually the speed slows down and finally limps to a stop. Assistants ceremoniously remove the Doctor's operating sheet, then freeze, while E goes about quietly making order out of chaos. She stacks arms with arms, legs with legs, laying bodies in parallel pairs, separating the live from the dead. Then she sweeps up all the shreds and tatters of sheets that she tore apart during the operations. General Raglan is rolled in next to the surgeon. E sits down, exhausted.*

**Raglan:**

Very good, sir. I see that everything is in order here. In order! Good show!

**Doctor:**

A nasty business, Your Lordship. A nasty business.

*Both Doctor and Lord Raglan are rolled off while E glares at their white departing backs.*

From her dialogue/monologue emerges her theme – the initial impulse for the creation of nursing as a response to the unsanitary and inhuman conditions of the Crimean War. Florence Nightingale was able to bring food, cleanliness, and cheer to the wounded soldiers and to mediate between them and the doctors and officers. She provided a creative solution to a social problem and a whole context for healing which did not previously exist. Yet as the script reveals, she remained an outsider, a humanist trying to expand a basically inhuman system.

In speaking to the others, is Eleanor also talking to herself? Something of the so-called madness of women emerges – the madness and anger which result when one's abilities are compressed into a space too small to permit development, self-expression, or contribution to society. "Mad" Nurse Eleanor plays with dolls on a hospital bed. Eleanor Nightingale plays wildly on stage, completely carrying out a feature-length, one-woman

production in which Antin is actor, director, set designer, scriptwriter – creator. She interweaves historical, imaginative, contemporary stories as well as artistic, philosophical, and specifically feminist issues in a direct, almost childlike acting style.

**Angel of Mercy** suggests a parallel between Antin's relation to the professional art world and Florence Nightingale's relation to the medical profession. Like Florence Nightingale, Eleanor Antin aims at expanding her profession to include a more human dimension and thereby return to the original creative impulse of the artist. She explains madness and the limitations of the contemporary nursing and art professions as distortions of the human impulse to contribute toward and expand the future. As the subject of **Angel of Mercy** is the nature of the healing and nurturing processes, the performance itself becomes a journey from fragmentation to wholeness through the artistic creation of the expanded self.

**References**

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3. *Ibid.*
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5. Kim Levin, "The Angel of Mercy and the Fiction of History," *Angel of Mercy*, La Jolla, Calif.: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1977 (catalogue).
6. Eleanor Antin, Introduction, *ibid.*

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