



JULIA MANDLE: THE CATALYST

BY KATY DONOGHUE

Julia Mandle, in her own words, sets out to create art that “causes the passerby to stop, causes reconnection to the surrounding, causes interaction between people, causes deep curiosity and questioning, causes beauty and tragedy to mix comfortably, and causes a spark.”

For all that to take place within her installation and performance work, the topic will often be pretty heavy — sometimes political and at times controversial. Mandle doesn’t claim to change the world with her art, but she does believe it can be a catalyst for the viewer. *Whitewall* reached out to her to ask her why she approaches topics like Iraqi detainees and Guantánamo prisoners.

WHITEWALL: *You grew up in the museum where your father worked. What museum was that, and what was his role there? Can you share with us a specific memory?*

JULIA MANDLE: My father was the director of the Toledo Museum of Art in Ohio, a wonderful museum where Frank Gehry did one of his earliest museum designs, and also which had an unusually strong emphasis on exhibiting artwork of different media together to provide a context and illuminate core ideas of an era. Specific childhood memories include watching the ultra-dark staging of *Carmina Burana* in the museum’s classical peristyle; sketching works by El Greco, Rembrandt, Beckmann, David, Bartlett, LeWitt, and Rubens, which helped me to understand composition; and swinging fresh Japanese soba noodles in the air as we learned to make them during one of the many weekend family programs.

WW: *You work in many mediums but also present that work in varying locations. How do you decide upon which medium and location is appropriate for the idea you’d like to convey?*

JM: Often my projects have begun with an arresting story, information that literally stops me in my tracks and that I cannot go around it until I respond creatively. For example, in 2004 I saw a photograph by war correspondent Jean-Marc Bouju that pictured a son being comforted by his father in one of the first U.S. detention centers there. What was so striking was that this Iraqi father was gently covering his son’s eyes with his hand, while his own head was covered by a suffocating black plastic fabric hood. It took my breath away, and it was not until an opportunity through an invitation by Mikhail Baryshnikov for a residency in his Art Center in Manhattan that I was able to create my response and begin to express my remorse and own sense of blindness about the occupation.

I created a project called *Fabrication of Blindness* using 385 black sandbags, which the military uses to blind detainees. Each I embroidered with their internment serial numbers and hung with thick rope from the ceiling. The installation took its shape in response to site: the Art Center’s enormous wall of windows that exposed the open sky. Working there, I wanted to block out the light in the room with my installation, therefore it took the shape of a large black cloud.

In general, my choice of site is really about carefully constructing a relationship to the audience, so that my audience is

Opposite page:

Julia Mandle

Fabrication of Blindness

2007

Installation view at Baryshnikov Arts Center

PHOTOGRAPH BY KEVIN ROGERS

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Right:

Julia Mandle

Amis Raus/Americans Out

(bodice of costume from *Come & Have a Chicky Meal, Cuz You're Gonna Love This Deal*)

2006

Fabric, embroidery, and powder

29 x 30 inches framed

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

COURTESY OF LEILA TAGHINIA-MILANI HELLER GALLERY



actively engaged in the work. In *Fabrication of Blindness*, visitors spoke about their attraction to the physical nature of the piece, the beauty of the installation, and a sense of revulsion when they discovered that the fabric was used to hood detainees. It seemed to become a catalyst for the viewers.

WW: *You incorporate installation and sculpture into your performances. What goes into the making of a performance for you?*

JM: Live performance causes a more active relationship to the audience. I am inspired by the challenge of engaging the audience in the role of the performer, rather than being a passive consumer — a collaborating public, engaged spectators.

I clearly combined installation and performance in my project *Come & Have a Chicky Meal, Cuz You're Gonna Love This Deal*. In the gallery space, viewers could walk around a twenty-two-foot-wide, six-foot-tall pentagon-shaped installation that I created with a neon sign rotating above. During gallery hours audience encountered the work, all white, sculpted holes, and in the evenings performers would appear in the crowd, in plain clothes and get dressed in large early American dresses I created and embroidered with anti-American protest chants decoratively sewn down their backs. Suddenly the lights would change with a cloud of dust. As the performers touched the installation, they became dirty. Each hole was coated with charcoal, and the walls became graffiti with the traces of their movements. There was also a flirtatious character, a woman dressed with a chicken mascot head who whitewashed the structure each night.

It was a piece that expressed my frustration about America's imperialist tendencies and a sense of futility with the antiwar movement. The work was sparked by reading an arresting article about a bombing of an American symbol, a Kentucky Fried Chicken, in Pakistan. At that time, Americans were calling themselves "Canadian" as they traveled abroad; it was a time when we were targets of worldwide hatred and revulsion.

WW: *Your recent projects investigate themes of urban revitalization and civil liberties. Are there any specific issues that are currently plaguing your thoughts?*

JM: I am currently working on an exhibition at the Leila Heller Gallery in New York for winter 2011 about children — inspired by another deeply disturbing and arresting image from America's occupation of Iraq that has haunted me for years.

Recently I created *Fabricating Rain*, a companion piece to my 2007 *Fabrication of Blindness* installation that I mentioned. *Fabricating Rain* is exhibited together and illustrates our current dilemma: the sorting-out process and grappling with accountability. In my work, the hoods and rope fall from the cloud shape toward the ground. There is an enormous, confusing pile of files, cabinets, ropes, and hoods. In this work I also invited the viewers to engage further, by joining me in embroidering the personal texts from the files onto the fallen hoods. These collective moments allowed people to pause and spend time with "enemy combatants." The process was humanizing.

WW: In a piece you wrote for the Huffington Post, you quoted Susan Sontag, who said “guilty if we were able to do something and did nothing.” Do you see your performance and artwork as doing something?

JM: On the one hand you can say, “Art cannot stop war,” but on the other hand art can mobilize people’s commitment to action. I like to think of art — defined in a very broad sense — as a catalyst. Art can build empathy between people in very powerful ways. Conflict is all about separating “us” from “them,” and the art that I create is about reconnection.

Recently I heard a very powerful speech by Hope Metcalf, a lawyer who is representing former enemy combatant José Padilla in a lawsuit against John Yoo. She spoke about the role that culture can play in human-rights struggle. The central role of torture is to erase the dignity of humans; the role of accountability is to restore it. Metcalf said that there are three things that victims of injustice want: first, “I want to know my suffering counted for something”; second, “. . . is to know that my suffering was wrong”; and third, “. . . is to know that my suffering makes a difference and never happens again.” Metcalf believes very strongly that the third case is where society can join in because it is fundamentally a cultural project. It was very interesting to hear a lawyer advocate that “art is one of the most important tools to bridge humanity and empathy.” I think this is very compelling.

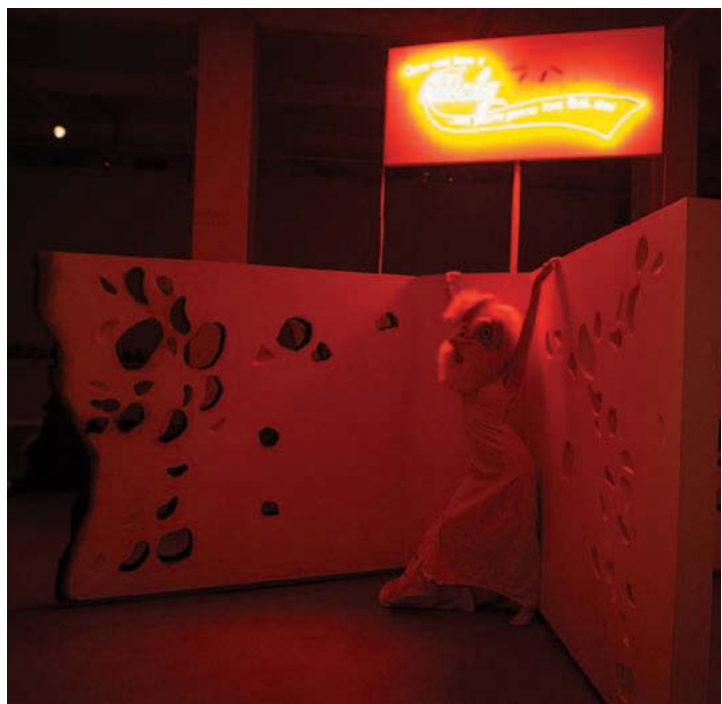
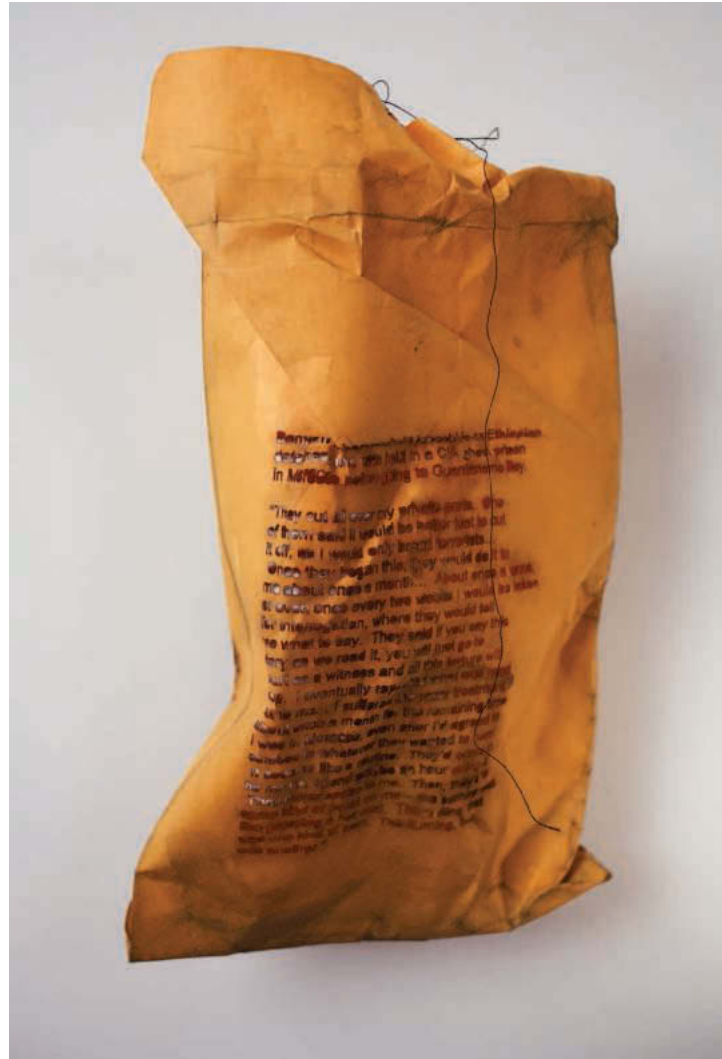
WW: You’ve said that you think performance art is the most important category in art to support. Why is that?

JM: It is an ephemeral art, a hybrid form — of performing arts and visual arts — and therefore lost in between funding categories. Yes, historically, performance art is the most underfunded. And yet performance art, a close relative of political protest, is often where you see breakthroughs in our culture — like raw experimentation — and see expressions of political will.

I have been very surprised at how compartmentalized our culture still is: the media, the venues, and the funding world, while our experience of culture is far more fluid. Obviously, greater support allows for allow the hybrid areas to flourish.

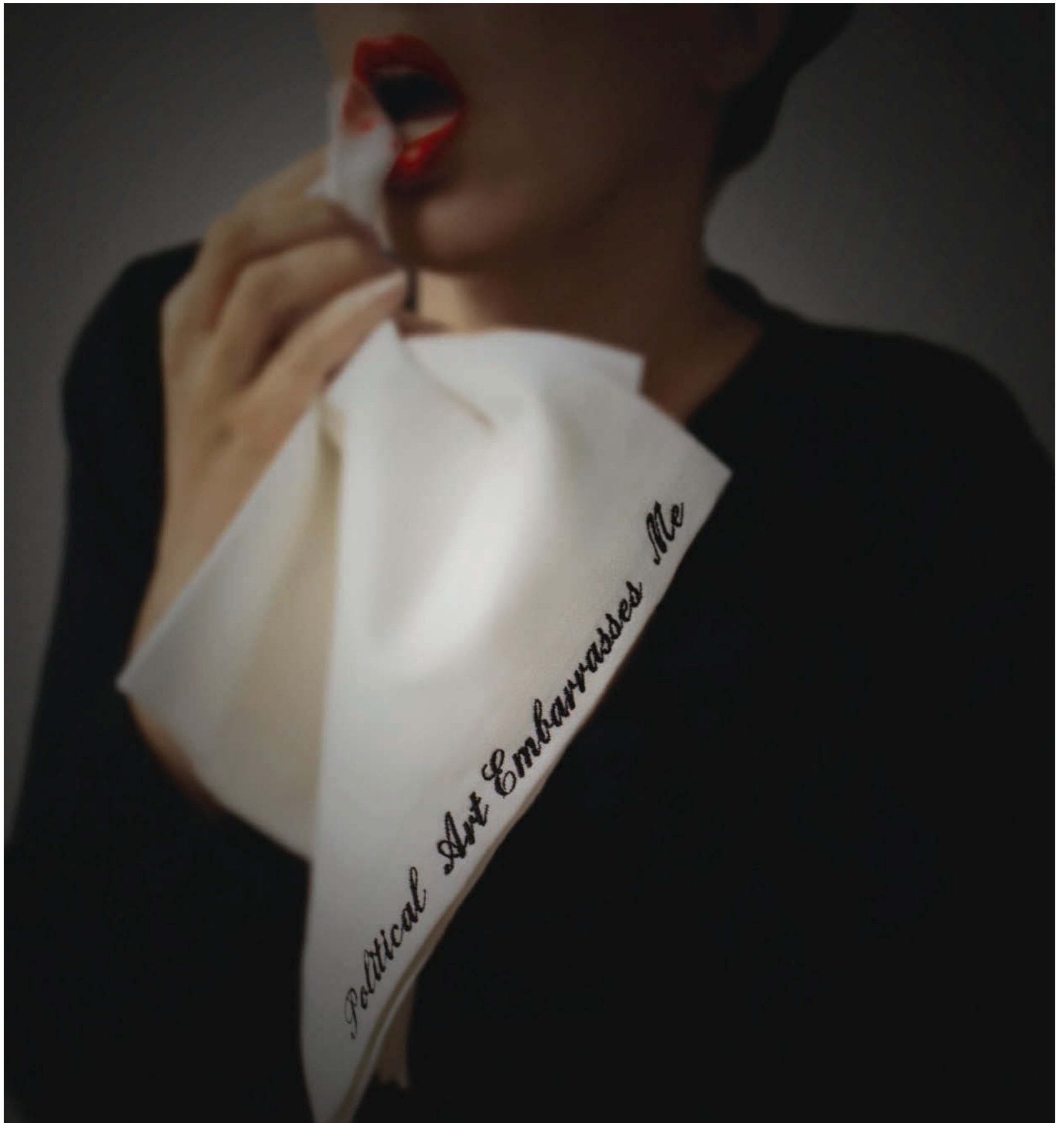
WW: Performance art has received increased attention in the past four or five years, especially recently with Tino Sehgal at the Guggenheim and Marina Abramovic at MoMA. Do you think performance art is finally getting the attention it deserves?

JM: Well, in some ways I see this as a sign that performance art is being absorbed into the mainstream culture. Just look at early performance art and its influence on today’s reality TV. So it’s no surprise to me that performance is more visible in the main cultural venues. The more opportunities for boundary-breaking artists, the better. But I do think artists have to be strongly cognizant that the mainstream venues are a specific context, otherwise work can lose its vitality and meaning.



Above:
 Julia Mandle
File of Mohammad
 (from *Fabricating Rain* installation)
 2009
 Paper, laser-burned text, paint, and coffee
 5 x 8 x 3 inches
 Photograph 8 x 10 inches C-print
 COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
 COURTESY OF LEILA TAGHINIA-MILANI HELLER GALLERY

Below:
 Julia Mandle
Come & Have a Chicky Meal,
Cuz You’re Gonna Love This Deal
 2007
 Performance-installation at Art Director’s Club
 PHOTOGRAPH BY RONALD COWIE
 COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Julia Mandel
*Untitled (Political Art
Embarrasses Me)*

2007

C-print

10 x 10.5 inches

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

COURTESY OF LEILA TAGHINIA-MILANI HELLER GALLERY