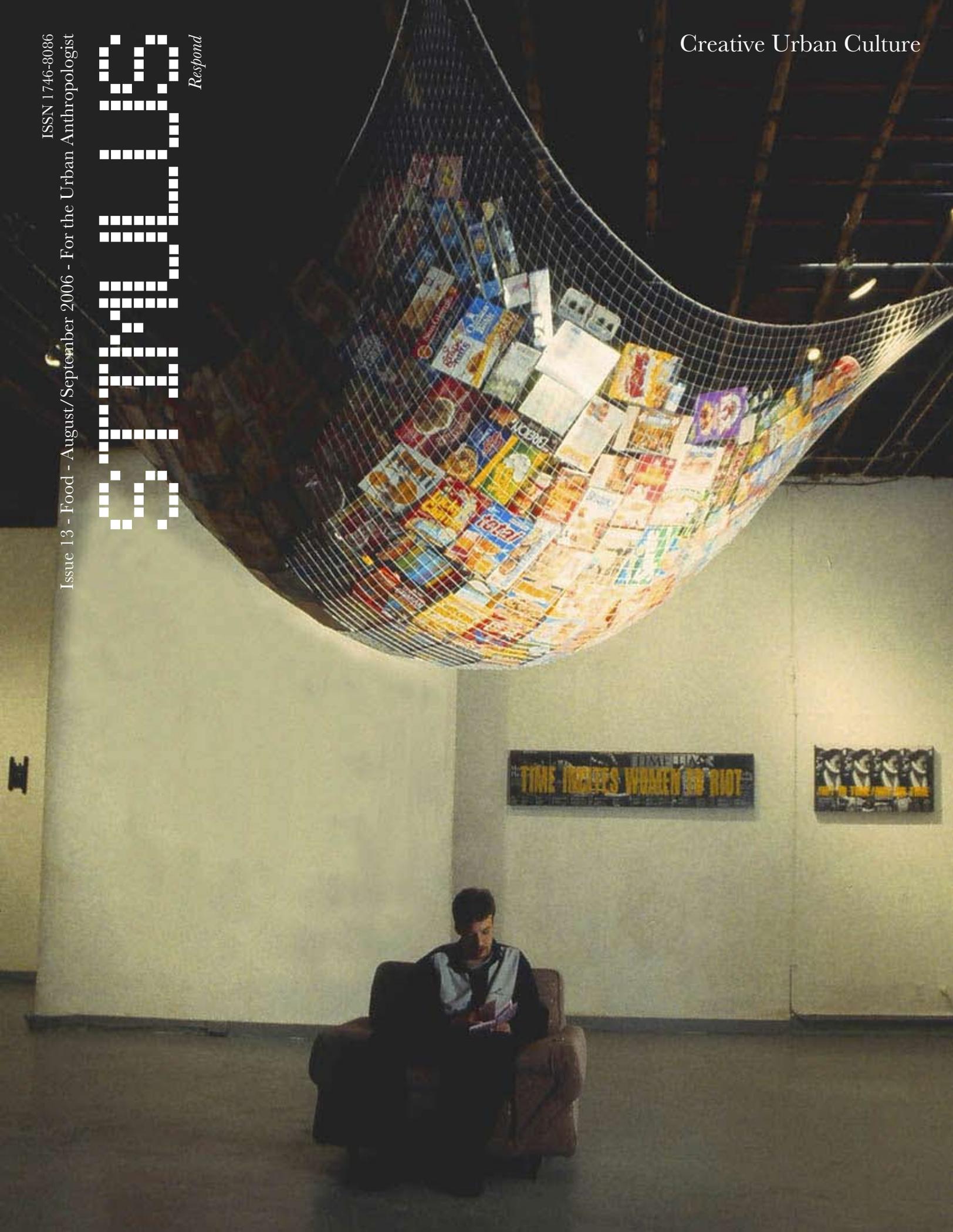


STUDIES

Respond





Matter of Life and Death (Bolero)

Michigan Gallery installation photos by *Ralph Neri*
Lyric Stage B&W performance photos *Julia Millis*
Words by *Barbara Neri*

I began collecting and flattening food boxes and containers around 1992. At the time such paper packaging could not be re-cycled and this troubled me. I decided they were not trash and that I would no longer throw them away. I liked their busy colorful surfaces and observed how seductive their designs were in the super market, especially for my two children who were easy marks in the cereal aisle. I remembered having to design such a package in art school and had



some appreciation for the work of the commercial artists who composed them and I surmised that many of them were visual artists lost to earning a living. We all have our tasks to perform and a portion of my time was spent shopping for and preparing food for my family. Along with collecting the packaging, I became quite obsessed with documenting the process of meal preparation, presentation, eating and cleanup. I kept a camera loaded with slide film and my partner or I stood on chairs to photograph the surface of the table as the food was eaten. We had a garden and a compost heap and I became fascinated with growth and decay, the matter of life and death that food was to my family, and to all humans and animals.

I eventually began reconstructing the flattened boxes with a glue gun. There were so many they took over my studio and the idea of hanging a net and tossing them inside came to me. The net was 14 feet square and bulging with hundreds of boxes and other containers that by then included egg and milk cartons and some cylindrical containers. One day I was sitting at a table I had moved under the net, reading about the origins of agriculture



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when Ravel’s *Bolero* came on the radio. Being a dancer I was inspired to get up and dance to the finish, ending exhausted flat on my back. Ravel’s *Bolero* came into existence when Ida Rubenstien commissioned Ravel to write a piece with Spanish qualities. It was choreographed and staged by Bronislava Nijinska for Ida Rubenstien and premiered in Paris on November 22, 1928. The solo dancer performs a sexually charged dance on top of a huge round table surrounded by men and women dressed as men ⁽¹⁾. I subsequently forgot about the music but the physicality became a part of the piece immediately.

The next day I walked into the studio and an internal voice said “let them out of the net.” I resisted because it had taken quite an effort to find the right net material and figure out how to hang it let alone fill it with all the boxes but I eventually relented and dropped one of the corners. The noise the boxes made as they hit the floor was an astonishing loud percussive crash with some of the boxes remaining in the net like a cornucopia. A period of improvisation ensued that involved moving the boxes into shapes using my hands and eventually a plastic shovel. Finally I re-hung the net, put them all

back in and went on with research on agriculture and the invention of pesticides. One of the first insecticides was called “Paris green.” ⁽²⁾ And this along with the discovery that the credit card was invented in the 1950s led me to begin wearing a sparkly, vintage emerald green dress that I had found years before. The idea of becoming the archetypal 50s housewife consumer became part of the piece and I decided to begin unclothed and become her as part of a performance involving all the boxes and the actions and tasks I was experimenting with. The matter of life and death had now grown to include the contamination of our food by pesticides and

both our victimisation and complicity as consumers. I began to feel hopeless about the situation and that our extinction as a species was probably inevitable and that to spite what we know, there was nothing anyone could do to stop this ⁽³⁾. It was around this time that I remembered *Bolero* and decided to use it as accompaniment for the central action of the work. The performance became a ritual enactment of creation and destruction with the crescendo of *Bolero* and its crashing finish becoming a fitting score.

“Matter of Life and Death (*Bolero*)” was first performed at a workshop in Rhinebeck NY, July 1995. I was

there to study with Rachel Rosenthal and asked her if I could bring this new work to show and she agreed. I packed the boxes and showed the performance or Bolero portion of the work. When I returned home, I knew I wanted to install the boxes in the net and let them out as part of the performance. Carl Kamulski, director of Detroit's Michigan Gallery, agreed to let me do this for a show called *Time Bombs* (October 1995). As I prepared for that performance I kept a diary and recorded some of what you read here. The pre-performance installation consisted of the mass of boxes in the net hanging above an overstuffed armchair. Visitors could sit beneath the net and unlock and read the diary before the performance. The chair is then moved away and one corner of the net lowered allowing the boxes to crash to the floor. The net is taken down and the boxes shoveled into a large circle and in the center area the green dress, and other props are placed on the floor including the net and shovel.

The performer enters nude and crouches down on the floor within the circle. She rises boldly and stretches her arms above her head; lowering them she looks

at the audience, takes in her surroundings and sees there are clothes for her to dress in. She dresses, finally slipping her feet into gold high heel shoes. Winding her hair into a chignon and securing it with long red chopsticks she dons her flowered satin apron all with ritualistic aplomb and applies lipstick and rouge she finds in the apron pocket. Seeing and opening a special box of cereal she dramatically eats a single flake. She plunges her hand deep in the box and finds the surprise, a small black pistol. She poses momentarily with the gun and box of cereal and then restores the gun to the box, closes it and buries it in the circle with the other boxes. She sees the Bolero record album lying on the floor and hands it to an audience member. Bolero begins softly as the performer lifts the net and swings it around her body, eventually draping it on her head like a veil. She sees the shovel, picks it up and pauses. Stepping outside the circumference, she begins to push the boxes in toward center. Overcome she abandons the shovel and falls to her knees, using her hands to pile the boxes in a mound, losing her high heels in the process. Pulling the chopsticks

from her hair frees her from the net. Feral like she stands and finding the shovel plows into the mound of boxes forming a spiral. With increasing abandon, she shovels all the boxes away from the spiral's center, back into the original circle form and falling to the floor spins and swirls swinging the shovel around her like the second hand of an out of control timepiece. Bolero comes to its crashing end as the shovel scrapes a cacophony against the floor. She lets loose of the shovel and jumps up and steps into the circumference of boxes. Chugging her heels she travels along splitting the circle into two, cartons and boxes ricocheting off her shins. Finding the shovel once more she carefully refines the double circle, tucking in stray boxes. She disrobes in the stark silence, circling the area to find her heels, hairpins, the net and other props carefully replacing them as they were and now nude, exits slowly through the audience.

Post-performance the costume elements and props were collected and the boxes were then arranged on the floor in a large spiral and left in the gallery for the remainder of the exhibit⁽⁴⁾. The boxes were shipped in an enormous container and the piece was again

performed (sans pre and post installation) at the Lyric Stage in Boston on 16 February 1996, produced by Katherine Hargreaves for the Women's Caucus for Art national convention.

NOTES

¹ Hunt, Marilyn. Nijinska Revival Continues - Restoring a lost work. *Dance Magazine* 1995, 69: 10. 74-77.

² Whorton, James. *Before Silent Spring - Pesticides and Public Health in Pre-DDT America*. 1974; Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 104-105, 20-23. Paris green, a compound of arsenic and copper, was first used in the US as an insecticide in the summer of 1867 against the Colorado potato beetle. It was so successful it was quickly used internationally and by the end of its first decade it sold at over "500 tons a year in the New York City market alone." Often used for suicide it was also the pigment used for most of the green paints in the nineteenth century. Additionally a Wikipedia search reveals that Paris green was used for a very old green dye for cloth that unbeknownst caused the demise of the wearer and to this day French theater costumes eschew the color green. Cezanne's diabetes, Van Gogh's neurological disorders and Monet's blindness are also thought to be at least in part due to this pigment.

³ When I expressed this to Rachel Rosenthal she said "Hopefully! Hopefully for the earth." Neri, Barbara. *The Animal Question*, an interview with Rachel Rosenthal. P-form 1995, 36: summer. P-form is out of print. Readers may contact the author at barbaraneri.com to obtain a copy of the interview.

⁴ It was after this Detroit performance that I had the dream that led to the project I am working on now.