

## **Hunter Reynolds' Hurricane Renunciations**

G. Roger Denson

It's been said that among the hardest lessons in life, learning to let go counts chief among them. Mystics and artists alike have made much of renunciation. Whether we consider the abjurations of Francis of Assisi or Marcel Duchamp, Guatama Buddha or John Cage, letting go of control has been heralded an achievement few can master.

For most of us, letting go is a desperate act even when it's born from a loss as common as being made to say goodbye to a former lover or to a child grown up. In the existential scheme of things, letting go is compelled by despair and force, as when facing loss by plague, a conquering army, or natural catastrophe. And, of course, in facing death.

The installation at Momenta Art by Hunter Reynolds is the outcome of such a confrontation with calamity and mortality. Never one to be easily demoralized, Hunter wants us to know that in surviving disease, attack, catastrophe, despair, and what came close to being his death—by learning to let go—he has been made more resilient in his determination and more protean in his ability to make vital art.

In 2005, Hunter succumbed to the darkest despair of his life as his Florida home came under siege by Hurricane Wilma at the same time that he suffered the first of four HIV-related strokes. In its indiscriminate rage, Wilma leveled art and artifacts, quotidian objects and garbage, to seemingly inconsequential detritus. Subsequent weeks provoked an inner turmoil that proved even more devastating. Before the strokes could take their toll, Hunter revolted against his body in an emotional and physical meltdown he now calls Hurricane Hunter—his attempt at a suicide so explosive and out of body that he demolished all that Wilma had left intact in his studio.

I didn't recognize this Hunter when I first heard of him after an absence from New York of three years. In truth, I didn't believe he existed when I was told of the strokes that cut him down. "Hunter's just being a drama queen," I said to more than one mutual acquaintance as I pictured him whipped by winds like some Baroque patron saint. I failed to recognize that at the moment of my glib accusation, Hunter was learning the relentless lesson of existential submission.

I had many reasons for my skepticism. I had always known Hunter not only for his tenacity and hope in the face of crisis, but for the art that arose from it. As an AIDS activist, he was an early member of ACTUP and in 1989 co-founded Art Posi-tive, an affinity group of ACT-UP, to fight homophobia and censorship in the arts. His paintings, photographs, performances, and installations always reflected his experience as an HIV positive gay man living in the age of AIDS and fighting prejudice.

For many, Hunter was best known for his transgendered incarnation in the early 1990s as Patina du Prey, a mythopoetic healer/shaman/god-dess dancing a healing dance in public spaces throughout North America and Europe to willfully bring to a close the Age of AIDS. Although Patina was commonly mistaken as a drag queen, Patina's dresses were actually designed for a male torso, signifying s/he was intended to invoke the polygendered heroes and shamans from classical and tribal societies as an invitation to men—not just drag queens—to wear dresses as enlightened and enlightening models of a transformative sexuality and morality in the conservative age of Reagan and the first Bush. At the same time Patina made every effort to free “The Goddess Within” (the name of an exhibition documenting the eight-year collaborative project he mounted with photographer Maxine Henryson, as his displacement of female parody in favor of an assertion of the feminine within men.

In this same period, Hunter's Memorial Dress, inscribed with the names of those who died from AIDS, mesmerized us as we watched it (and sometimes Patina/Hunter in it) rotating like some music box ballerina to a music unheard by mortal ears. The stark and reverent silence compounded the effect of the minimalist theater of compassion in a manner that could be awesome, dispersing the fears of death that, even more than death, separate us from loved ones departed. The dress, a ball gown imprinted with the names of the AIDS dead in gold on a black bodice and frothing bell skirt, memorialize loved ones lost while mirroring the constellations of stars rotating in the celestial firmament. I used to enjoy squinting at the dress in motion so to make the names trail in symbolic prolongation of the departure of the disembodied.

I found the commemorative power of the Memorial Dress reflected many times over when it was shown against Hunter's large Photo Bloodspots—photographs scanned within greatly enlarged contours of actual blood splatters made from Hunter's HIV-infected blood falling onto paper—and his Photo Weavings, all of which universalize Hunter's personal memories of loved ones lost to AIDS. I say universalize because the quantity of photo manipulations have the effect of focusing our sight beyond Hunter's personal relationships to their greater signification of the human community bound by a virus.

To my mind some of the most beautiful work of this period consists of Zen-like paintings made with single droplets of Hunter's HIV-infected blood on paper. The Blood Splatters series, as Hunter calls them, are as delicate in their evocation as in their physical properties. Since the blood is let directly from Hunter's veins, there is the danger the work's aura will for some become associated with the relics of saints. But Hunter isn't reaching for hagiographic associations so much as he is reminding us of art's power to take up the blood of one generation's underclass and transform its signification to the blood of a latter generation's martyrs. To my mind, the Blood Splatters series counts among the more enduring and moving testaments to human tenderness and persistence amid a plague that at times seems prolonged by sexual and racial prejudice.

If the late 1990s brought hope to the fight against HIV in terms of increased monies and enhanced treatments, the new millennium burned into our brains the unfathomable

iconography of skyscraper-annihilating planes, imploding towers, and raining bodies. Hunter had just arrived with a sightseeing friend to tour the World Trade Center as Mohammed Atta crashed American Airlines Flight 11 into the North Tower. Although easily escaping the concourse, Hunter and his friend, like the thousands outside the towers, has never been able to escape the falling bodies around him. Although the work he produced since 9/11 has largely gone unseen, for Hunter, 9/11 magnified the intimacy and struggle with mortality that began for him when HIV laid claim to his body nearly twenty years earlier. Like so many artists in New York, 9/11 recontextualized his life and work for the remainder of the decade. For the first time, the trauma bled out of Hunter in a way that immersed him in substance abuse and prolonged despair. Although he continued to make art prolifically for the next three years in Florida, for some of us in New York at least, it seemed Hunter had blacked out

By 2005, Hunter had little choice but to relinquish himself over to the forces of nature. His T-cell count fell to 5 and brought on a series of HIV-related strokes that have since left the right side of his body partially paralyzed. He's always had a secular strain of spirituality circling his brain—I know he often resigns himself to the universe when he finds his willpower outranked by circumstance. But in 2005 Hunter's grace of resignation became an act of empowerment, though he had yet to find this out. He could only see Hurricane Wilma taking apart his life like one grandly savage random operation he would within weeks mirror in his attempt to kill himself.

I have little doubt that Hunter's was not an attempt at obliteration; it was an attempt to re-empower himself and his art through the ultimate dematerialization. I will not go so far as to say that he didn't want to die. I *will* say that whether or not he was egged on by delusion, he was transformed—though not by some mystical act or revelation, and not in the dematerialization he desired. His transformation was accomplished by handing over his will to Chance, something he came to prize through his knowledge of modernist art history, particularly that strain (Duchamp, Pollock, Cage, Fluxus) which re-systematized spiritual notions of release. The proof of this is in Hunter's making chance operations the departure point for all the work seen at Momenta Art, specifically the objects Hunter calls his Hurricane Artifacts—the demolished and randomly reconfigured objects and detritus left behind in his studio in the wake of Hurricane Wilma and Hurricane Hunter.

Hunter has brought these Hurricane Artifacts to New York and digitally scanned them into Photo Shop, composing thousands of individual 4 x 6 inch c-prints that he sewed together into grid panels and used to cover the gallery walls at Momenta Art to a height of 8 feet. The Hurricane Artifacts represented in the installation include water-damaged and wind-ripped Photo Weavings from earlier series, artwork by other artists, CD covers, paper fragments, and shards of broken glass, all of which were paint splattered, thrown, shattered, and bonded by the forces of wind and rain (Hurricane Wilma) or the impassioned yet indiscriminate flailing and trashing of a suicide attempt (Hurricane Hunter). The installation also includes a table station, a central surface upon which visitors can peruse Hunter's Photo Weavings, Blood Spot Photos, and Photo Stacks generated with the Hurricane Artifacts. Amid the installation, viewers talk with Hunter during a series of live skype conversations and story-telling performances while watching

a music video documentary he has made about the disastrous episode in his life—comprised of video footage of Hurricane Wilma and Hunter’s subsequent recovery of Hurricane Artifacts in his studio.

Despite being a departure in terms of relinquishing a sizable part of his artistic process and authorship to chance, Hunter’s Momenta Art installation extends his prior performance narrations of gender identity, body politics, social and personal histories by considering how his relationship to these realities contributed to his meltdown. Then too, structuring, reordering, finding and building ways to arrange and place the chaos in a compelling human context has comprised Hunter’s art for the last thirty years.

If the dark and traumatic tenor of the Momenta Art installation is unrecognizable without exposition, it is both because the very nature of chance operations are antithetical to melodrama and because Hunter has chosen to focus on the role chance played in his survival and recovery. Despite the cumulative toll, the period of crisis that began for Hunter with 9/11 gave way in the aftermath of Hurricane Wilma and Hurricane Hunter to a slow-growing but unrelenting resilience and determination to climb back to the height of his creative powers as an activist-artist struggling with HIV. “Art has always been one of the tools I have used to heal myself and others,” Hunter says, “and to find order in the chaos of my life, by not only telling the story through art, but by transforming myself in the process of making it, using it, to rebuild my life, and to find hope, beauty and a desire to be alive.”

In a larger sense, Hunters’ Hurricane Art deserves consideration in terms of the historic context of chance operations and particularly the existentialist art and theory informing it. Most of us suffering a fixation with the art of an earlier modernism, whether in appreciating its aesthetic and utopian virtues or lamenting its political limitations, are well versed in the postwar art impacted by the global catastrophes and despair of 1914-17 and 1936-45. Postwar art, the art made firstly by the Dada and Surrealist artists and secondly by a conglomeration of Abstract Expressionist artists and Existentialist philosophers, writers, performers, filmmakers and theater groups, indicted the grandiose aesthetics and utopian political systems that had failed to civilize a hostile world. In the wake of tens of millions dead and whole cities annihilated, how could the postwar generations not demand that a new art restore the authentic mark of human existence purged of all remnants of the cultures of despotism and mass destruction?

To the postwar generations there was nothing more authentic and hopeful than a return to the primitive and unmediated mark made through chance, automatic, and improvised operations. Primitive in the sense of being uncultivated, unmediated in the sense of being devoid of controlled or formal applications, the art of masters became devalued in favor of the raw traces of human existence and survival that manifested not layers of culture but immediate and direct response, not systematized aesthetic theories but the first acts of a throbbing nervous system or the records of random events. In the parlance of Albert Camus, such art was singular because it dispensed with all human contrivance obscuring the human contest with the Absurd—the harsh reality that greets any and all human desire with intransigence, obstacle, and naked hostility. Only in recognizing the Absurd

and making art that takes the Absurd into account can the confrontation between human will and existential reality be mitigated and despair be circumvented. The postwar generation of 1945-63 in particular turned to an art of chance operations, automatic writing, improvisational movements, and expressionist gestures as stratagems intended to cut through the cultural traditions that not only failed to civilize the barbarous impulses of humankind but were now seen to buttress the endeavors of war, holocaust, and nuclear annihilation. What was called for in the aftermath of global trauma was an art that leveled human artifice and institutions to the core experience of life—physical and psychological events as they exist prior to human cultural refinements and idealizations that fail to stand up to the forces of a hostile world.

I immediately associated Hunter's release of artistic control in random operations with the response to despair evocative of existentialist renunciation. Hunter's reprisal of existentialism was by no means intended as ironic, but to the art historian the irony cannot go unnoted when considering that Hunter is a representative of the generation of artists making art during the Age of AIDS and 9/11—a generation renowned for its art of political confrontation. In effect, Hunter poses a stark contrast to the earlier generations' skirting of political realities in favor of aesthetic and metaphysical principles, especially in the cases of expressionist and existentialist art.

And yet, I have always seen the artists of the AIDS generation, particularly its feminists and queers, as having common aims with the postwar generations in terms of their passionate and direct response to the collective despair of plague, disenfranchisement, and sexual abuse. As politicized and confrontational as the art of the late 1980s and 1990s is—think of Robert Mapplethorpe, Greg Bordowitz, Kiki Smith, Sue Williams, Kara Walker, Sherin Neshat, Felix Gonzalez Torres, Nayland Blake, Glen Ligon, General Idea, Ross Bleckner, Deborah Kass, Nan Goldin, Collier Schorr, and Hunter Reynolds—we cannot deny that in multiple ways the work evolved as passionately assertive responses to despair, whether in the context of feminism and abuse, transgender and queer abjection, or the deconstruction of essentialist values that defined conventional systems of race, creed, identity, science, and morality. We need only recall how existentialist Simone De Beauvoir's anti-essentialist feminism informs the transgender theory of Judith Butler; of the performance art of Karen Finley and Janine Antoni literally embodying and taking charge of expressionist depictions of women (DeKooning) or the employment of women's bodies as tools of the male artistic process (Kline); and of the abject existentialism of Genet and Mishima being converted to the queer activist art of Greg Bordowitz and David Wojnarowicz .

If I defer in closing to this history, it is because I see in Hunter's work, as in the generation of anti-essentialist artists of the Age of AIDS and 9/11, traces of the existentialist principles trickling down through the decades like so many stalactites of culture. When struggling with devastation and death, we reach out for what looms largest before us. When Hunter had to grab at a counterweight that could withstand the onslaught of life-altering events, he reached not for structuralism or post-structuralism, not for conceptualism or minimalism, not pop art or commodity theory art—all highly intellectualized and multilayered armatures. He grabbed at the art history that had

formed the culture of his upbringing: an art with a lifeline to the core of existence that could withstand the leveling storms surrounding him. It matters little that once he recovered Hunter reassumed artistic control in making and mounting this installation. That it is an art born in greeting force and despair with a renunciation of individual power and control is sufficient—especially when considering the kind of existential crises it commemorates can at any moment require us to let go of all things threatening to pull us under.

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