The world is made up of unfinished stories

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Artereal Gallery 747 Darling St Rozelle, Sydney, Australia

3 March to 3 April 2010

Cover: Sylvia Schwenk, *The workers' lift I*, 2008-10 Ultrachrome inkjet print on Ilford satin paper, 90cm × 120cm



Sylvia Schwenk, *Remember the importance of SELF I*, Schöppingen Germany, 2009 Ultrachrome inkjet print on Ilford satin paper, I 20cm × 90cm 'That's the way it goes. Life is like watching falling stars on an August night. They appear out of nowhere, draw a trail of light through the darkness, and then disappear again. The stories we tell imply that we experience an event from beginning to end, but all we really see is that briefly glowing trail. What happened before that, and what happens afterward, we don't know.'

'So you think the world is made up of unfinished stories.' 'Yes, and what we do is extrapolate those stories. We try to give them a beginning and an end. We try, on the basis of those fragmented stories, to understand the world.'

Marcel Möring, In Babylon, (Holland; J M Meulenhoff bv, 1997) p144.

Sylvia Schwenk: The world is made up of unfinished stories

Performance plays in that overlap between the fictional and the real, staging a parallel world that disrupts norms and conventions. It is an artwork genre that operates like a portal: a bit outside, a bit inside – not quite fact, not quite fiction; drawing from the everyday but piquing the narrative to enhance the curious, the exquisite, the mundane; or to question veracity.

Sylvia Schwenk takes her exhibition title, *The world is made up of unfinished stories*, from a passage in a novel by the Dutch writer Marcel Möring, *In Babylon*,¹ which uses a format akin to the way performance art works. The uncle in this novel interweaves a panoply of shards from myths, ghost stories, family history and real events exposing the tensions between now and then, fantasy and reality, to give his niece a heightened sense of self and place as he tells her the generational stories of their family.

Sylvia Schwenk's exploration of the relationship between performance and the everyday in order to reflect upon the significance and beauty of commonplace activities and spaces is founded in the practices of artists like Francis Älys and Santiago Sierra. Some of Schwenk's performances simply capture a moment. Others are socially based interventions.

Belgian artist, Francis Älys now resident in Mexico, is a close observer and sometime stage-manager of everyday life. Performance is at the heart of all his works. The street is his inspiration and his theatre. He acknowledges its significance with his statement that 'the street will always beat your imagination...'² Walking in particular, whether solo or in a quasi-ritualized procession, becomes a narrative process through which the artist investigates social and political spaces and inspires contemporary fables.

Social issues, like discrimination and the refugee experience, underlie the experiential performances of Santiago Sierra. At the 2003 Venice Biennale he concealed with black plastic the name 'España' on the facade of the Spanish Pavilion and walled in the building's entrance with cinderblocks. Visitors were re-directed to queue, sometimes for hours, at the rear of the building manned by uniformed guards. Only those with Spanish passports were ultimately allowed access; entering to find a dark, empty interior with the scattered remnants, debris and the dirty washrooms from the previous year's installation.

Schwenk directs on a lighter and more subtle platform than Sierra but similarly choreographs to stimulate experiences that create awareness of important social issues for the performers and by-standers. Issues can range from sense of self, or community to matters as diverse as climate change and prostitution. Many passers-by unwittingly become actors in the shared public space of the intervention.

Her performances involve local participants and take place in cities and landscapes ranging from Sydney to Saigon and Cologne. The artist seeks out volunteers who are not actors, who generally do not go to galleries and who are from different demographics.

Sylvia Schwenk creates her performances to engage with the architecture, geography, civic function and physical or social dynamics specific to a public location. Where a performance is set and how it is performed adds to the theatricality of the event. Colour, unity and community building are significant elements in Schwenk's

performances with participants wearing matching clothing appropriate to the psychology and setting of the theme, while performing simple, repetitive steps. The simplicity and elegance of which enhance the impact and potency of the performance.

She introduces her interventions into the everyday functions and routines of the public site. The interruption to commonplace rhythms and routes with an exotic intrusion of colour and movement captures attention and piques imagination, breaking the torpor induced by the familiar; prompting those in the vicinity to look anew at the space and the people in it to reveal some thing or idea previously unseen or unconsidered.

Although the performance itself is a transient art form, each of Schwenk's interventions has a permanent exhibition outcome in a variety of formats either as photographs, video, text, installation or sculpture that perpetuate the experience and the ideas. Equally as significant as these static formats can be the social, psychological and attitudinal legacies evolving from a performance. Art may not necessarily effect change. But it can open both viewer and participants to differing views of the world.

Schwenk's practice also includes performative works that are slices of life she captures from people's everyday lives, which operate at the confluence of public and the private space. These are moments that exist in that crossover of the public and the private where we perform every day, presenting ourselves differently and with varying personae for roles of worker, boss, host or parent.

A mix of approaches to the ways performance art can be conceived, presented and understood is seen in the works in Schwenk's exhibition. The workers' lift explores the hidden space occupied by workers in a large shopping centre in Cologne, Germany. The workers move between floors unseen by shoppers, using an exclusive private elevator that allows them to step on and step off at different levels in the shopping centre. The lift offers a peaceful and quiet mode of transport; a moment of escape for the workers, in a hidden pocket of space away from the hectic noisy shopping environment that awaits them on the other side.

The sleek lift moves rhythmically, seamlessly and silently between floors in a continuous loop, never stopping. The workers glide on and off in concert with its flow. Man and machine engage in a form of pas-de-deux; in a daily ritualistic dance where the basic step is so simple yet becomes bigger and more beautiful with repetition and isolation from the complexities of urban life.

Boots for Rising Waters, first performed in 2008 on the steps of the Dom Cathedral in Cologne is an elegant and subtle intrusion into the everyday life of the city where fashion and performance come together in the mode of contemporary allegory to bring attention to issues of environmental degradation.

Young women, stylishly clad in black model modish but impractical high platform-gumboots, which Schwenk has designed as the latest footwear for global warming. The stacked soles of the boots range in height from 10 to 30 centimetres. The participants precariously ascend the rising levels of the steps with decreasing mobility, some even requiring assistance, to ultimately cluster at the doors of the cathedral, seated with their feet protectively drawn up against the tide.

Remember the importance of SELF is from of a series of works called Mind the Gap. The difference between life as you dream it, and life as it is. These works are intended as visual metaphors addressing existential issues like inner balance. Art can serve to alter the way we understand the world. It can also be a source of solace.

Remember the importance of SELF I reminds us that each of us is important and that who we are is more important than the gap, which exists between the life, we dreamt of and the life we have. The artist's expressed hope is that 'the work will sustain us in moments when we are feeling less than our best.' To this end, Schwenk has the participant don a cloak of luxurious purple with a long regal train. Its rich colour and plush texture immediately endows status on the wearer as purple is associated with royalty and nobility, stemming from classical antiquity when Tyrian purple was only affordable to the elites. Seen from the rear, the cloaked wearer is anonymous, inviting the viewer to personify with the role The long swathe of vivid purple cloak, contrasting with the sylvan setting and the lush green grass of the wide open space is suggestive of opportunity and optimism as is the glimpse of the path ahead indicating a way forward.

Remember the importance of SELF V is from a performance where the participants hold aloft three sumptuous purple cloths on poles to form a canopy or palanquin. The procession moves through the streets of Schöppingen, a small town in Germany, and the performers raise the palanquins over people they meet who are going about their everyday activities. The performance, with its implications of bestowing importance and the sharing of a moment of richness and prestige is a small oasis, a moment of pageantry injecting something out of the ordinary into the known and the familiar: endowing a sense of worth and inclusion. Anja's reality is a poignant text-based work about a prostitute who offers 'drive-thru' sex in a designated zone for prostitution, known in the Netherlands as a *Tippelzone*. In 'the zone' men can legally pick up a prostitute when a daytime two-way street is turned into a one-way circuit around a railway station.

Three divergent stories or 'realities' are presented in the work; Anja's, the caretakers' or social workers' and 'my reality' (which serves as the reader's view), are printed on the wall of the gallery in script as if taken from a typed record of interview. As we, the viewer, stop to read, our silhouette is cast in shadow from a light behind, imposing us into the trio of narratives - at once reminiscent of the voyeuristic way we see prostitutes on the street and indicative of the fleeting, ephemeral and unfinished nature of our everyday encounters with other people's lives.

Regardless of the style and format of the individual performances, the elements of community interaction, improvisation and intimacy are integral at every level of Schwenk's experiential art events and at the heart of her practice.

Barbara Dowse Curator

- I Marcel Möring, In Babylon, (Holland; J M Meulenhoff bv, 1997) p144.
- 2 Gianni Romano, Francis Älys: Streets and gallery walls, Flash Art, 2000, p211.

	She says prostitution is her choice.	When she G
	She likes being with men and having contact with them. Anja says she has been working in the <i>Tippelzone</i> , 'the tone', for the last 5 years. She says Zone is easy and safe, and she has ial contact with other women. She	night she wrong, Th
	is she only does what she feels nfortable doing when she prostitutes, has a lot of self respect.	My reality
	and a stand of the second of t	Anja is th
	r clients are mainly younger men, -25 years old. e says she likes the attention and elationships she has with them. ometimes they pick her up from her nome and spend time together before having sex. She says she works for 1 hour every other day and earns 6500 an hour. She says sometimes her boyfriend who she met at the Zone is jealous of ter prostitution.	She wears delicate. notice tha one half o moves alot She believ me.
	she is detoxing. She says cocaine for a long time	During our friendly, doesn't go need a bre
	nd she says the last roin was 4 days ago.	h. the last

Sylvia Schwenk, Anja's reality, 2009 (photo of installation, detail, Gallery of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawarhalal Nehru University, Delhi, India) Vinyl lettering on wall, 112cm x 84cm



Sylvia Schwenk, Boots for Rising Water I: on the stairs of the Dom Cathedral, Cologne, 2008-09 Ultrachrome inkjet print on Ilford satin paper, 90cm × 68cm



Sylvia Schwenk, Remember the importance of SELF V, Schöppingen Germany, 2009-2010 Ultrachrome inkjet print on Ilford satin paper; $68 \text{cm} \times 90 \text{cm}$

All images appear courtesy of the artist.

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ISBN: 978-0-646-53023-9