

ARTivism:
An Interview With Performance Artist Beatriz Albuquerque

DAVID MOSCOVICH



Left: *Beatriz Albuquerque, Performance Colour, Gallery G2, 2007*

Right: *Beatriz Albuquerque, Work for Free: Street Performance, Chicago, 2005*

Image Credits: Beatriz Albuquerque

Back in March of 2011, I attended an opening at Macy Gallery on Columbia University campus called *Desperate Acts*, which still remains in my mind as memorable for three reasons. One, Gerald Pryor's entertaining and playful baby powder and Vaseline body prints, Fluxus in a kind of wordless Warholian zen poetics of printmaking verve. His words echoed through the gallery while pressing his petroleum jelly covered chest, underwear and face onto glass mounting of his work, then cascaded baby powder on top. Two, because it was curated by Maurizio Pellegrin. And three, because I am obsessed with the work of a Portuguese artist who touches on themes of capitalism, crisis, value, perception, and art as community or commodity. Beatriz Albuquerque has worked in animation, video art, performance art, printmaking and installations, just about every medium. Her video work, *ACTivism*, features an avatar with an automatic

weapon shooting at signs, words relevant to an activist dialectic, posted on billboards – a playful dissection of ideals, catchphrases and belief systems. Her new book, *Video Games + Glitch = Learning*, (Lambert Academic Publishing, 2012), examines art and art education in a DIY self-learning video game context and presents new academic research in the realm of video game art and education.

Beatriz Albuquerque's Work For Free project asks the question, *why isn't art more affordable?* by making it free. How does she do it? In this project, she signs contracts with audience members who wish to commission her to do a work of art for free. It could be painting, sculpture, video, performance, it's anyone's guess. She asks them to fill out a form, to be specific as possible with the desired project, and to provide supplies for the art.

What follows is a conversation we had over the telephone a few days before she returned to New York from a run of installations and performances in her native Portugal, in August 2011.



Left: *Beatriz Albuquerque, Work for Free, Galleria 3+1, Lisbon 2008*
Center: *Beatriz Albuquerque, Work for Free: Street Performance, Chicago, 2005*
Right: *Beatriz Albuquerque, Work for Free, 2nd Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art, 2009*
Image Credits: Beatriz Albuquerque

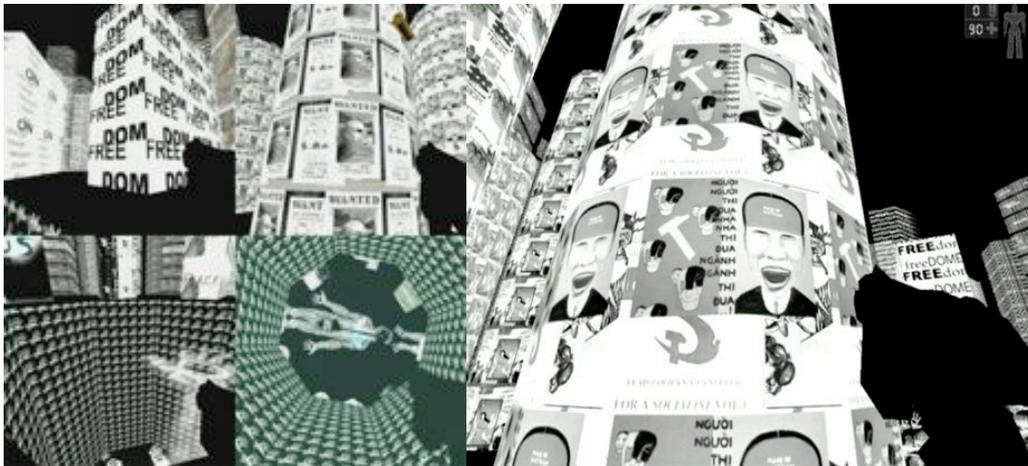
MOSCOVICH

I first saw your Work For Free project in March 2011 at Macy Gallery at 120th and Broadway in

Manhattan. Can you tell me a little about the project?

ALBUQUERQUE

It's a project I started in Chicago in 2005, where basically I offer myself to work for free on any artwork that the public desires. I think art should reach everyone, even if they can't afford it. What you saw in that exhibition were two layers of the same project. There are two aspects to Work For Free – first, the outside performance or consultation with the participating audience, and second, the gallery photography installation and video documentation. Outside Macy Gallery I set up on the street and held a billboard saying that I work for free, and I had different interactions. For instance, a policeman came to me, and at first I thought he was going to give me a hard time like they did in Chicago, but once I told him about the project he actually participated and wanted artwork, a black and white photograph. The second part of the project, the installation part on the walls of Macy Gallery, was a repetition of postcards, the documentation of this project, 150 photos lined up closely together in a 10x15 grid.



Beatriz Albuquerque, Video-Art ACTivism, Chelsea Art Museum, New York, 2007 (Video Stills)

Image Credits: Beatriz Albuquerque

MOSCOVICH

What are the photos of?

ALBUQUERQUE

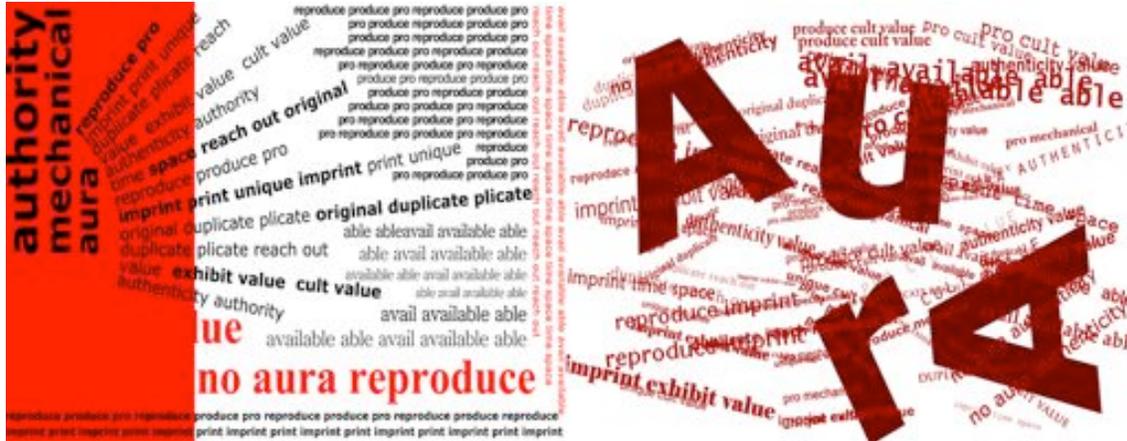
They were mounted as an installation based on postcards which were made to document my Work For Free event in 2005 in Chicago. Unfortunately, I found around 60 websites and blogs, lawyers, even a website for a self-help book, economists, businessmen, etc – all of them used my photo without crediting me or the project.

MOSCOVICH

How did you find out about the websites which used your photos?

ALBUQUERQUE

A friend of mine e-mailed me some links, then I did a google image search and found about more than 60 websites which used the same image.



Beatriz Albuquerque, Video-Art W.B., Site 110, New York, 2011 (Video Stills)
Image Credits: Beatriz Albuquerque

MOSCOVICH

Have you contacted anyone from the websites?

ALBUQUERQUE

I asked them to either remove my image or contextualize it and credit me, but so far have had little response.

MOSCOVICH

What kind of responses have you had?

ALBUQUERQUE

I've only had three responses until now. One of them, Jeffrey Tucker, emailed me saying sorry, that he will remove it from their website but he never did. Another one removed my image and then created another that is a copy of my original image. The third one only replied with my own email.

MOSCOVICH

What type of art are you typically asked to do for the Work For Free project?

ALBUQUERQUE

I've done many different mediums, from installations, animated performances, digital art, web art, video, acrylic painting; it depends on the person. I've noticed that different audiences desire different artwork. In Portugal it's different than in England. Portuguese people tend to ask for more physical artwork, in Greece and the UK more people wanted digital work. In the United States it's about half and half. I've had people ask me to clean up backgrounds for photographs of deceased loved ones, or they want to give their father a birthday present of an expressionist house painted on a canvas. Some of them have never had contact with galleries or owned any artwork and I always encourage them to be an active public and participate in observing me while I'm creating their piece.

MOSCOVICH

Tell me about touching up the photographs of loved ones.

ALBUQUERQUE

I did have one person who wanted me to alter a photograph of her niece, who was in the hospital and

died there, so the last photo she has of her niece was in the hospital, which was depressing. She asked me to clean up the background so it's not a hospital, so she could have a printed picture of her niece in a happy place.

MOSCOVICH

What is the process like for Work For Free?

ALBUQUERQUE

I start with the performance. I gather the information. The people tell me what they desire. I tell them the more specific they are, the more specific I will be in the final piece. We both sign a contract and then I create the artwork. I also encourage the persons to be present and see all steps that an artwork pass by before become the final, concluded piece.

MOSCOVICH

Is there anything you will not do?

ALBUQUERQUE

Yes, there are some clauses in the contract – I will not harm myself, I will not do nudity, sex, anything with blood, or fluids. In relation to medium I won't do sculpture or music. Someone asked me to beat them as a performance, and I don't do that.

MOSCOVICH

The person who asked you to do the work in that moment, during the performance or consultation part, what kind of work was that?

ALBUQUERQUE

A drawing. Draw me the way you see me, and you do it now. That's what they asked me. And the policeman asked me to send him a black and white photo by email. Another person asked me to do a drawing session, another one wanted me to make a puppet.

MOSCOVICH

What was the puppet used for?

ALBUQUERQUE

He used it for a performance.

MOSCOVICH

Did the performer credit you for making the puppet?

ALBUQUERQUE

I do not know.

MOSCOVICH

Does it cost you money to make the work?

ALBUQUERQUE

No, only labor. Actually some of the work is virtual, I do it on the computer, which requires no material. The person has to bring me the material. For example, if you ask for a blue sky but you do not bring me blue paint, it cannot be blue. If you ask for a painting, then you don't bring brushes I will still do it with my fingers, but it would be different if you had brought the brushes. Unless you choose digital work. For example, I offer *décollage*. I do it with posters on the street. Then I take a picture

with my digital camera and send it to you.

MOSCOVICH

How does that work, exactly?

ALBUQUERQUE

One person asked me to do something with animals and the color pink. It took me a long time to find, but I finally found it by ripping posters on the street, in Portugal. The posters are pasted on top of each other like dozens of layers of old wallpaper. I started tearing off the posters and found the face of a cat and a pinkish design from Carnival. You rip one, then two, three, you get different cross-sections of posters, and I guess I got lucky. It's hard to find what they ask for when they are more precise.

MOSCOVICH

How are the typical requests different from country to country?

ALBUQUERQUE

I've noticed that audiences are different in different countries. In Europe, once I start I have a line in front of my table and everyone participates and asks for an art piece. For example, in Lisbon, in 3 hours I had 37 people who participated in the project. At my Chicago event, people were worried there was a catch, that I would ask for money. There are laws that remain from the depression era in Chicago which state that if you do labor you must be paid, and there have been cases where people were sued in court over labor costs. A lot of people wanted to pay me because of that. Some people would ask if I'm against the system, others took offence. They said, why would an American need anything for free? I also did this project in 2007, again in Chicago, at a residency at The Institute for Community Understanding Between Art and The Everyday, (InCUBATE), in which I presented the project in a commercial neighborhood. There was window facing the street in which I built an office. There was a waiting area which I painted electric blue with red theatre chairs. I had about 70 visitors but only 25 wanted work, and some still wanted to pay me or insisted on trade. One person brought me cake, another gourmet chocolates, yet another straight cash. But New York is different, I've noticed that. On the street, a lot of people interacted with me. Within half an hour outside Macy Gallery, three of them asked me for an art piece, one of them wanted me to do it right now, and I did his portrait. New York is a different case.

MOSCOVICH

Did you have a lot of people ask you if Work For Free stands contrary to Capitalism?

ALBUQUERQUE

Yes. In Millennium Park, for example, there was a limousine that stopped in front of me. Two ladies came out and said, why do you think we need anything for free? We can pay you anything. That was an engaging conversation. For me the question is that art should reach everyone, whether you can afford it or not, but also that it should be art the way you want it to be. I can give it for free. I always ask the person to engage in the process so they are free to come and see me do the painting or doing the installation, so they can see how the creative process works.

MOSCOVICH

Do you see Work For Free as outside the capitalist system?

ALBUQUERQUE

I think it's a little outside, because there is no exchange of money or goods, but I do not know exactly what will happen to the work once I give it to them. Will they sell it or exchange it. I think the process between myself as creator and the customer I think is maybe a little bit outside capitalism, yes. I say a

little because if the person bought the materials, then you have capitalism.

MOSCOVICH

Right. It's hard to say if anyone profits from the art.

ALBUQUERQUE

It depends what you consider a profit. Feeling good about a gift – is that a profit? It is, but would it be capitalism? I know that in my interaction with the participating audiences I have no capitalist intentions, it is more a subversive critique of the art market. What could I sell when doing this project? I offer everything for free. The only thing saleable is the documentation of the performance. All the rest is for free.

MOSCOVICH

Thank you so much for answering my curiosities, Beatriz.

ALBUQUERQUE

My pleasure.



Beatriz Albuquerque, Work for Free, 2nd Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art, 2009

Image Credits: Beatriz Albuquerque



Beatriz Albuquerque, Project: Work for Free, Macy Gallery, New York, 2011 (Performance Stills)
Image Credits: Beatriz Albuquerque and Eva

Beatriz Albuquerque (www.beatrizalbuquerque.web.pt) lives and works between New York and Porto. Albuquerque was awarded the Myers Art Prize: mix media, Columbia University, New York (2009) and the Ambient Series Performance Award, PAC / edge Performance Festival, Chicago (2005). In 2011 she was highlighted by the magazine Flash Art 281 (November - December 2011) by Giancarlo Politi and Helena Kontova as one of the top 100 artists under the age of 45. She has shown around the world in multiple places in solo and group exhibitions, including: Museum of Contemporary Art of Chicago, Chicago Cultural Center, Chelsea Art Museum in New York, Emily Harvey Foundation, New York NY, 10th International Istanbul Biennial, 2nd Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art, MUBE Brazilian Sculpture Museum in Sao Paulo, in Ghana National Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art Bogota, Museum of Contemporary Art of Caracas, Trama Festival in Porto, Cabinet Magazine Brooklyn, MASS MoCA in North Adams.

<http://beatrizalbuquerque.web.pt>

David Moscovich's fiction and interviews have appeared in ArtVoice, Word Riot, Rain Taxi, Dark Sky, The Rumpus, Fringe, The Collagist, and others. He performs both live and on the radio, fragmenting, ricocheting, and refurbishing language until it meets its own devolution. He lives and works in New York City.

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