Eleanor Antin in one of her Great Roles, 1973

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A number of important developments in the contemporary visual arts converge with exceptional clarity in the work of Eleanor Antin. She is a forerunner among those younger artists who are expressing a new interest in narrative content. Often this interest encompasses the use of autobiography as subject matter and, in a lively reinterpretation of the tradition of self-portraiture, sanctions the use of their own bodies as the preferred vehicle for the presentation of their work in a public art context.

Consequently, most of these artists choose the less traditional media of photographic documentation, video tape and live performance.

Referring to herself as a post-conceptual artist, Antin uses the narrative art form to illuminate what she feels are the fallacies which attend factual documentation. Insistent that all history is really one brand of fiction or another, Antin sets out to create her own histories. A consummate storyteller, Antin has created a series of lyrically flamboyant pieces which are so boldly imaginative, so earnestly preposterous and so carefully executed that they have come to hold a special place in the art of this decade.

Antin's earlier work includes a number of biographical pieces. Perhaps the best known of these is a series of 51 postcards, 100 Boots, mailed to about one thousand artists, critics, curators, etc. from March 15, 1971 (the Ides of March) to July 9, 1973. 100 Boots stands today as a landmark gesture in the free distribution of a work of art through the mails rather than through the conventional gallery system.

However, Antin's interest in this format went considerably beyond the circumvention of the art world's commercial network. She conceived of 100 Boots as a "picaresque novel" and, with the means of the U.S. Postal Service, she was able to present the dramatic episodes sequentially and over a considerable period of time.

As if a theatre curtain has been opened, one hundred black rubber boots are presented standing on the California coastline, near the home of the artist. Initially they participate in routine activities. They go to a church, a bank, and a market. The plot soon thickens as they "turn the corner" and "trespass". Suddenly they are fugitives "on the road". They "get a job", loose a job, and "try again". Midway in this saga, the boots, clearly dejected, mill about a graveyard. (And for the next six weeks there was no further word. Postcard recipients worried. Was this the demise of the boots?) Good news arrives with 100 Boots Move On. But danger lurks in a Western sequence in which they board a riverboat and meet up with a crooked gambler (two Aces of Spades!). A lynching is hinted, they hide under a bridge. Joining forces (though we cannot say armed) they take the hill. Why do 100 Boots Go East? Antin has been invited to exhibit the postcard series at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. The next five cards mark their entrance into Gotham. The work concludes with a photograph Antin took the first day she started the piece. In this image, the boots take a long-deserved vacation and bare their soles.

Since the artist's sense of timing became integral to this work, postmark dates are included on the gallery labels to indicate the exact intervals between mailings. As the sample verso in MATRIX shows (100 Boots Facing the Sea), Antin prominently printed the date, location and precise time the photograph was actually taken. But like the order of "takes" in the shooting of a movie, these are often out of sequence with the story line. This is fine with Antin for it serves to confirm that such documentation (or historical "fact") is not neces-
sarily relevant or even useful.

Antin's energies over the last four or five years have focused almost exclusively on autobiographical pieces. Invoking artistic license she has created an extraordinary series of works which "document" her autobiographical fantasies. To date she has created and publicly nourished four selves: The Ballerina, The King, The Black Movie Star and The Nurse.

The work on view in MATRIX (beginning in mid-October) shows selected aspects of Eleonora Antinova, prima ballerina. In the tripartite Three Choreographies the artist is photographed exercising at the bar and performing in both tutu and long gown. To all but informed balletomaniacs this "documentation" suggests that her technique and accomplishments are impressive. Her true gift, however, lies in having created the visual evidence which convinces us that this must be true.

A near frenzy of activity takes place in the video tape, The Little Match Girl Ballet, as the artist's monologue references back and forth through various times and places, realities and fantasies. Antin tells us an autobiographical fiction and we willingly suspend our disbelief. So captivating is her performance that some viewers are surprised to realize afterward that throughout the entire presentation Eleonora Antinova never dances a step.

Born in New York City, Eleanor Antin attended the High School of Music and Art, received a B.A. from the College of the City of New York where she majored in creative writing and minored in art, and did graduate work in philosophy at the New School for Social Research. She also studied a two year full program at the Tamara Daykarhanova School for the Stage. Antin lives in Solana Beach, California and teaches at the University of California at San Diego. She is represented by Ronald Feldman Fine Arts of New York City.

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Works in MATRIX, on exhibition from late September through late October:
100 Boots, 1971-73, a series of fifty-one black and white postcards, 4 1/2" x 7" each, photography by Philip Steinmetz. In the collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum.

Works in MATRIX, on exhibition from mid-October through early December:

a. Exercises at the bar, 7 black and white photographs, 6 3/4" x 4 3/4" each.

b. Dance in a long gown, 19 black and white photographs, 6 3/4" x 4 3/4" each.

c. Dance in a tutu, 15 black and white photographs, 13 are 6 3/4" x 4 3/4" each, 2 are 6 3/4" x 9" each.

The Little Match Girl Ballet, 1975, color video tape, 27 minutes. In the collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum.
Notes on transformation

... I am a post-conceptual artist concerned with the nature of human reality, specifically with the transformational nature of the self. I began with biographical explorations before moving into autobiography. In 1965, I collected blood specimens from 100 poets. The Blood of a Poet Box was intended to suggest relations between a smear of blood on a laboratory slide and a name. I soon discovered that blood isolated from the body is at best merely a metaphor except to certain esoteric specialists like doctors and policemen. Preferring a more complex set of informational cues, I began to construct semantic portraits of people, sometimes real, sometimes fictional, out of configurations of brand-new consumer goods. A lush lavender bath rug, a noisy electric Lady Schick razor, a patch of spilled talcum powder and a scattering of pink and yellow pills was a portrait of Molly Barnes. Since this system had variable readings built into it, I experimented with systems seeming to present more rigid limitations on interpretation, so in Library Science I used the LC (Library of Congress) classification system which is used to classify the world of books in large American libraries, to classify a sub-set of the world of people.

About this time, I made use of the possibilities of a new art distribution system, the mails, to disseminate narrative information to 1000 people over a period of 2 1/2 years. I placed 100 rubber boots into the natural landscape, had them photographed and documented the time and place of the event. The resulting photographic image was printed onto postcards which were mailed out at intervals ranging from 3 days to 5 weeks depending upon what I took to be the "internal necessities" of the narrative. Since they always appeared together, 100 boots were quickly transformed into "100 BOOTS", the hero of a fictional biography, and the continuity of his adventures was dependant upon the ability and interest of the recipient to hold the installments together in his head, since each postcard was part of a sub-set of anywhere from 2 to as many as 6 images forming a narrative ensemble, the single adventure. The whole work was a sequence of these conceptual adventures, a kind of conceptual picaresque novel.

Around this time I began to use myself as material and I must confess to an almost voluptuous pleasure in moving from biography into autobiography. Carving: A Traditional Sculpture was a naturalist transformation, a piece consisting of 148 sequential photographs of my naked body "carving" down 10 pounds over a period of 37 days of heavy dieting. Domestic Peace was a transformation of myself into an alien image - "the good daughter" - as a device to accommodate my mother so she would leave me alone to freely pursue my real interests. After a number of such works, I began to view the relations between literature and fact, truth and fiction, in a new light. I began to see that a human life is constructed much like a literary one, and, in any event, the documentation is the same for both. A person writes his autobiography about past events. After the fact there is only history and history is always fiction. But the fact that he takes the trouble to go back and construct that historical fiction proves he is a passionate person living very much in the present. He has, one might say, something to sell, whether he is St. Augustine or Billy Rose. It is his self-image or rather what he wishes to establish as the correct one. The
early conceptualists were primitives. Contrary to their belief, documentation is not a neutral list of facts. It is a conceptual creation of events after they are over. All "description" is a form of creation. There is nothing more biased than scientific documentation. It presents a non-psychological image of the "natural order" with no more claim to "objective" truth than William Blake's symbolic universe. But consequences of this position are not so simple as declaring a relativistic theory of the universe nor a trivial question of honesty or dishonesty. There is the literary nature of the human mind and the pragmatic nature of the human soul and together they do a number upon the world. I began to see that my interests in transformation were inextricably bound up with the nature of the documentation process itself. If I am known mainly by hearsay, for others there is no easy way to separate myself from the public report of myself. I could therefore announce myself to be anything I wished, were it not for the accumulation of previous reports. For example, I am free to claim that I am Charles I of England but the claim comes up against a previous report of a short, egotistical man whose head was removed on January 20, 1649. But what if I appear to press my claim in force as plain as the beard upon my face? Is not this new, more recent report, bearing the weight of visual testimony (photography, video, personal presence) more powerful than the gossip of history?

I am interested in defining the limits of myself. I consider the usual aids to self-definition - sex, age, talent, time and space - as tyrannical limitations upon my freedom of choice. I have projected 4 selves - The Ballerina, The
100 BOOTS FACING THE SEA, Del Mar, CA, Feb 9, 1971 2:00PM mailed 3.15.71
100 BOOTS ON THE WAY TO CHURCH, Solana Beach, CA, Feb 9, 1971 11:30AM mailed 4.5.71
100 BOOTS AT THE BANK, Solana Beach, CA, Feb 9, 1971 10:00AM mailed 4.26.71
100 BOOTS IN THE MARKET, Solana Beach, CA, May 17, 1971 9:30AM mailed 6.7.71
100 BOOTS PARKING, Via de la Valle, CA, May 17, 1971 11:00AM mailed 6.28.71
100 BOOTS CIRCLING, Lomas Santa Fe, CA, May 17, 1971 12:30PM mailed 7.19.71
100 BOOTS TURN THE CORNER, Solana Beach, CA, May 17, 1971 2:00PM mailed 8.9.71
100 BOOTS TRESPASS, Highway 101, CA, May 17, 1971 2:30PM mailed 8.30.71
100 BOOTS ON THE ROAD, Leucadia, CA, July 12, 1971 10:30AM mailed 9.7.71
100 BOOTS IN A MEADOW, Rancho Santa Fe, CA, July 26, 1971 10:45AM mailed 10.4.71
100 BOOTS AT THE CORRAL, Black Mountain, CA, July 26, 1971 12:00 noon mailed 11.3.71
100 BOOTS ON THE PORCH, Sorrento Valley, CA, Oct 8, 1971, 12:15PM mailed 11.29.71
100 BOOTS IN THE GROVE, Sorrento Valley, CA, Oct 8, 1971 11:00AM mailed 1.3.72
100 BOOTS CROSS COUNTRY, Miramar Road, CA, Sept 8, 1971 4:10PM mailed 1.31.72
100 BOOTS AT THE POND, Mission Gorge, CA, July 12, 1971 2:00PM mailed 3.6.72
100 BOOTS OUTSIDE, Del Mar, CA, Oct 14, 1971 10:30PM mailed 4.7.72
100 BOOTS INSIDE, San Diego, CA, Oct 13, 1971 1:30PM mailed 5.1.72
100 BOOTS ON THE WAY DOWN, Del Mar, CA, Oct 13, 1971 3:00PM mailed 5.30.72
100 BOOTS IN THE WILD MUSTARD, Solana Beach, CA, June 19, 1971 3:00PM mailed 7.7.72
100 BOOTS IN THE MARSH, San Elijo Lagoon, CA, Oct 8, 1971 8:00AM mailed 6.10.72
100 BOOTS ON THE JOB, Signal Hill, CA, Feb 15, 1972 12:15PM mailed 9.11.72
100 BOOTS OUT OF A JOB, Terminal Island, CA, Feb 15, 1972 4:45PM mailed 9.18.72
100 BOOTS IN THE STREET, Long Beach, CA, Feb 15, 1972 3:00PM mailed 9.25.72
100 BOOTS TRY AGAIN, Del Mar, CA, June 24, 1972 11:00AM mailed 10.10.72
100 BOOTS DOING THEIR BEST, Del Mar, CA, June 24, 1972 11:30AM mailed 10.16.72
100 BOOTS UP, Del Mar, CA, June 28, 1972 1:30PM mailed 10.24.72
100 BOOTS DOWN, Carmel Valley, CA, July 6, 1972 10:50AM mailed 10.30.72
100 BOOTS MOVE ON, Sorrento Valley, CA, June 24, 1972 8:50AM mailed 12.9.72
100 BOOTS BOARDING, San Diego, CA, June 13, 1972 9:30AM mailed 1.2.73
100 BOOTS IN THE SALOON, San Diego, CA, June 13, 1972 10:15AM mailed 1.8.73
100 BOOTS ACE HIGH, San Diego, CA, June 13, 1972 10:40AM mailed 1.15.73
100 BOOTS IN A FIELD, Route 101, CA, Feb 9, 1971 3:30PM mailed c. 1.21.73
100 BOOTS UNDER THE BRIDGE, Sorrento Valley, CA, July 26, 1971 1:30PM mailed 1.29.73
100 BOOTS OVER THE HILL, Sorrento Valley, CA, June 24, 1972 9:40AM mailed 2.5.73
100 BOOTS ON THE MARCH, La Jolla, CA, July 6, 1971 11:45AM mailed 2.20.73
100 BOOTS ON RECONNAISSANCE, Sorrento Valley, CA, June 24, 1972 9:30AM mailed 3.5.73
100 BOOTS IN THE BUSH, Solana Beach, CA, June 19, 1971 4:00PM mailed 4.2.73
100 BOOTS BY THE BIVOUAC, "The Pillbox", CA, Sept 8, 1971 8:30PM mailed c. 4.9.73
100 BOOTS TAKING THE HILL (1), Lomas Santa Fe, CA, June 13, 1972 2:00PM mailed 4.16.73
100 BOOTS TAKING THE HILL (2), Lomas Santa Fe, CA, June 13, 1972 2:20PM mailed 4.19.73
100 BOOTS TAKING THE HILL (3), Lomas Santa Fe, CA, June 13, 1972 2:45PM mailed 4.23.73
100 BOOTS TAKING THE HILL (4), Lomas Santa Fe, CA, June 13, 1972 2:47PM mailed 4.26.73
100 BOOTS TAKING THE HILL (5), Lomas Santa Fe, CA, June 13, 1972 2:50PM mailed 4.30.73
100 BOOTS TAKE IT, Lomas Santa Fe, CA, June 22, 1972 2:30PM mailed 5.3.73
100 BOOTS GO EAST, Del Mar, CA, Sept 8, 1971 2:00PM mailed 5.11.73
100 BOOTS ON THE FERRY, Upper Harbor, NYC, May 16, 1973 11:20AM mailed 5.30.73
100 BOOTS CROSS HERALD SQUARE, 35th St. & Broadway, NYC, May 13, 1973 8:10AM mailed 6.6.73
100 BOOTS VISIT THE EGYPTIAN GARDENS, 29th St. & 9th Ave., NYC, May 15, 1973 4:45PM/mailed 6.13.73
100 BOOTS IN THE PARK, Central Park, NYC, May 16, 1973 2:40PM mailed 6.20.73
100 BOOTS ENTER THE MUSEUM, 11 W. 53 St., NYC, May 15, 1973 10:50AM mailed 6.27.73
100 BOOTS ON VACATION, Torrey Pines Park, CA, Feb 9, 1971 4:30PM mailed 7.9.73
Selected one-woman exhibitions: Portrait of 8 New York Women, in the artist's studio, Chelsea Hotel, NYC '70; Library Science, Brand Library Art Center, Los Angeles '71 (travelled extensively); 100 Boots, serial mailings of 51 postcards by the artist '71-'73; Museum of Modern Art, NYC '73; Everson Museum, Syracuse '74; The Kitchen, NYC '75; The Clocktower, NYC '76; M.L. D'Arc Gallery, NYC '76; La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art '77; Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, NYC '77.

"Reading Ruscha", Art in America, vol. 61 no. 6 (November/December '73), p. 64+.
"Notes on Transformation", Flash Art, no. 44-45 (April '74), pg. 68+.
"Letter to a Young Woman Artist", Anonymous Was A Woman California Institute of the Arts, Valencia '74, pg. 58+.
"Dialogue with a Medium", Art-Rite, no. 7 (Autumn '74), p. 23+.

Lippard, Lucy. Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972... Praeger Publishers, NYC '73 (see index).
Nemser, Cindy. "Four Artists of Sensuality", Arts Magazine vol. 49 no. 7 (March '75), p. 73+.

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