
Raphael Montanez Ortiz

Raphael (Ralph) Ortiz was involved in the Judson Gallery
in 1967–1968.

The year was 1967, one year after my participation in the “Destruction in Art Symposium” in London in 1966. My Pratt Institute schoolmate, artist colleague, and friend Al Hansen, who also participated, had informed me of the symposium and given me the London phone number to call.

It was again Al Hansen, ever helpful to his artist friends, who spread the word of the performance and installation event that was being planned at the Judson Gallery. The person to talk to, said Al, was Jon Hendricks. The event was being called *Manipulations*. I met with Jon, who was already familiar with my work in destruction-ritual performance-art. He was enthusiastic about my project, a mixed media, audience-participation event in which the audience destroyed objects within an aesthetic appropriation of ancient biblical and indigenous culture rites, as in the sacrifice for redemption from sin in the book of Leviticus or the release from the vanity of possession and greed of the Potlatch ceremony of the natives of the Northwest.

The title of the ritual installation was “Destruction Room.” It would consist of the fall-out of all sacrificed and destroyed objects, wherever they fell.

I was assisted in the performance work of “Destruction Room” by Jean Toche, Lil Picard, and Jon Hendricks. In the large, front gallery room, participants milled around exploding paper bags and tearing up books and furniture, while Jean, Jon, and I stood in the semi-darkened smaller back room, each with a single-edged razor blade in one hand and a cup of cow’s blood in the other. We poured the blood into incisions made into and through two hanging screens each consisting of three layers of suspended white, three-by-four-foot sheets of paper, with nine-inch spacings between them. On each of the screens was projected a three-foot-wide color slide, one the image of a brain and the other of a heart. Like master surgeons, we carefully made our incisions, thereby exposing the projected image into deeper layers of

paper and by illusion deeper layers of the brain and the heart. Throughout the performance a strobe light flashed on a hill of bubbles in continuous overflow from a washing machine. The bubbles formed a mountain next to the screens. Participants were assisting in the surgery while others took cups of powdered soap and threw the contents into the open, top-loading washing machine.

Lil Picard was under a small spotlight at an ironing board in the front room, teaching people how to burn clothing they helped her iron.

Through all this, a Zen incantation at double speed sounded over the loudspeakers, joined by the sound of heavy breathing and a loud heartbeat and the commentary to the world of potential and arriving immigrants on the plaque of the Statue of Liberty: Send me your suffering, your refuse, etc., followed by the racially biased statistics of which people from what race were admitted from where.

In my performances at the Judson Gallery I wanted to make clear the radicalness of the experiment in performance-installation art at the time of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War protests.

The *Manipulations* event of 1967 inspired Jon, Jean, Al, and me to design and publish the first and only issue of the Judson Church Art Magazine, which we also entitled *Manipulations*. I still have a copy.

Can you imagine any other church on this planet that would open its doors to the Destruction in Art Symposium? It was spring 1968. The event was organized by Jon Hendricks, Al Hansen, and myself. I had proposed the idea to Al Hansen after our participation in the Destruction in Art Symposium held in London in 1966. Al and I then talked to Jon. The idea of a destruction in art symposium at Judson made him blink, but then he said it could probably be done if a lot of details got ironed out. (While we engage in the exercise of remembering Judson House, we must pay special attention to Jon Hendricks, who played an important part in the history of art at Judson.)

The list of artists that shared their obsession at Judson is long and full of Who's Whos in contemporary performance and visual art history. I can only reference a few of the performance artist participants in the Destruction in Art Symposium USA 1968 at Judson.

The list includes Charlotte Moorman, Al Hansen, Lil Picard, Nam June Paik, Hermann Nitsch, Jon Hendricks, Jean Toche, and myself. At the height of the symposium, someone came running into the lecture room and announced that Dr. Martin Luther King had been murdered. Stunned, we stopped everything, bowed our heads in a silent prayer, and canceled the remainder of the symposium.

I do not know how many artists thought of Judson as a church or were even conscious that they were on church grounds. I was, and at first I felt awkward and self-conscious, as if GOD's eyes would be more sharply focused on me. I wondered if my art would be a desecration on church grounds. I was young enough also to imagine, in my naïveté or perhaps wishful understanding of the Bible, that in some way our art would serve a spiritual purpose. My wondering was all resolved when a small voice spoke in the quiet of my mind during a prayer meditation of mine at Judson Church. The message was clear and simple in its compassion: "Welcome, Prodigal Sons and Daughters, Welcome."

In my own interpretation at the time, I imagined myself as an artist practicing some Old Testament ritual, some Levitician redemptive sacrificial rite, a releasing of sin through the sacrifice of mattresses, sofas, pianos, and other objects.

I will admit that I was amazed that a church would so eagerly engage avant-garde art, culture, and politics: civil rights, the Vietnam War, etc., etc. I grew up in an orthodox Catholic church and was an altar boy in the 1940s. Later, I attended a high Episcopal church for several years. Of course, if anyone would open the doors of his house to us crazy experimental artists—some of us doing very weird stuff—it would be Jesus, certainly in the 1960s. To put the radicalness of it in perspective, you have to imagine a Renaissance church opening its door to the heretical Alchemists, during the Inquisition yet. In the infinite compassion and patience it represented, the Judson Gallery was an experience that reawakened in me a long dormant connection with GOD.

Events such as *Manipulations* and the Destruction in Art Symposium were not exceptions in the cultural programming at Judson. By permitting radical art to enter its doors, Judson Church has sponsored, baptized, and blessed as much art that is still relevant today as the churches of the Renaissance.

The last event I attended at Judson was a performance event in 1995 dedicated to the Joyful-Mourning of the Wonderful-Art-Life of Alfred Hansen.

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