

STORYTELLING

Fairy tales and literature in Devon Dikeou's art

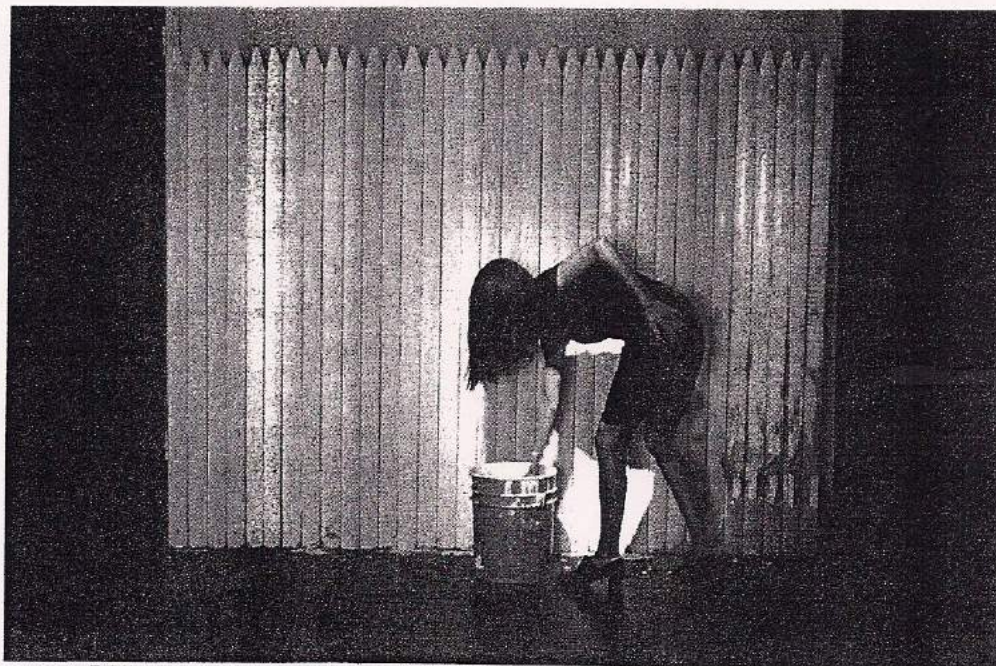
BY EMILY TSINGOU

Fairy tales and childrens' literature have so many interpretations, resonances, and insinuations that only when one reaches adulthood are they actually in a position to unfold. Devon Dikeou's shows "Once Upon A Time" and "Strong Temptations, Strange Movements, The Innocents Beguiled" are based on a strong awareness of these qualities of fairy tales and literature.

The visitor to the gallery space of Dikeou's show "Once Upon A Time" stepped on pressed plate metal ceiling tins that were used to carpet the gallery floor. The seemingly hard surface was actually an image of fragility that managed to hold the footprints of each visitor like a membrane. The presence of life within the exhibition space was therefore signaled like an alarm sign (an intelligent way to mark the inauguration of Ice-box Gallery, where the show was presented). The artist's statement (statements always accompany her works) quoted fragments from childrens fairy tales suggesting interpretations and revealing the stream of thoughts that led to the creation of this work. Fragmented sentences from childhood such as "Step on a crack, break your mother's back!" or "I know you are, but what am I?" reveal some of the associations the viewer was called upon to make. The exhibition was intelligently put together so as to provoke reactions, evoke experiences, and even elicit a sense of unease from the viewer. The "noisy" sound effects of the floor could suggest a variety of purposes, from behavioral control of the viewer within the gallery space to social commentary (the tin floor being a mass-produced item that originated in the U.S. in the 1860's and affected bourgeois plaster ceilings and moldings) to the implications that a fairy tale imprints in one's mind, which can be translated into almost anything.

A more overly specific approach to storytelling was the show "Strong Temptations, Strange Movements, The Innocents Beguiled." This show was an installation of a picket fence and a bucket of whitewash. The narrative of the installation was actually directly taken from the second chapter of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, where Tom was ordered to paint 30 yards of fence white one Saturday. Choosing the specific book was not at all accidental. Although *Tom Sawyer* is a significant part of the American literary tradition, simultaneously its worldwide popularity has granted it universal fairy tale caliber. The viewer is invited to paint the fence just as Tom's friends paid him to allow them to paint his fence. The issues raised by Dikeou in this particular installation are interlinked with obligation, work, and play (these three elements being seminal parameters of the book). As the viewer is invited to paint the fence, a large number of issues are raised. Just as Twain induces understanding in the reader regarding Tom's fooling kids into doing the work for him, Dikeou "invites" her viewers to actually paint the fence for her, i.e., the viewer replacing the artist. By participating, the viewer blurs the roles of viewer and artist (he not only is invited to see the work, but actually produce it.) Through this, the authorship of the artist, the concept of artistic identity, and art making are challenged and questioned by both Dikeou and the viewer. Even purchase of the art piece fits like a glove to the Tom Sawyer narrative—those who paint the fence pay for it as well.

The oral and literary traditions of storytelling are at the center of Dikeou's work. Stories are treated as the grid on which her art works are placed to walk. At the same time the stories she chooses are well-known since



DEVON DIKEOU "Strong Temptations, Strange Movements, The Innocents Beguiled" From *The Adventure of Tom Sawyer* 1993-Ongoing 15' of thirty yard fence being whitewashed by viewer.

an important element of her work is recognition of the story and eventual participation of the viewer in it. Through active participation, the viewer becomes part of the process of art making—a figure in the narrative that Dikeou sets up and in which the viewer performs. Therefore the viewer has highly personal experience with the art that has almost theatrical dimensions. (Although Dikeou eloquently avoids the "flamboyance" of stage effects by putting viewers in rather simple or everyday actions—painting a fence white or stepping on a tin floor.) Dikeou has here reversed the roles—the viewer, in place of the artist, becomes the performer.

The way that the story is told is an amalgam of narration and action. The viewer has only to go through the physical continuity of the motions presupposed by the elements provided (he paints the fence, or walks on the tin floor). These are infinitely reproducible patterns that set the place as well as perpetuate the story told and its flexibility of repetition. An otherwise passive audience is in this case transformed into an active one. As well as "actor", the viewer becomes "creator" when he becomes the storyteller himself. There is only voluntary detachment from it (i.e., the viewer can choose not to step on the tin floor or paint the fence—but in this case he would have to refuse to enter the

gallery space altogether). Dikeou's works interact with the audience. They cannot be forgotten upon passing—their physical presence is in a peculiar way overwhelming (how can one forget looking for art works on the gallery's empty walls, only to realize the sound of his feet on a tin floor?).

For Dikeou, the exhibition space becomes a site of definition and redefinition of artistic creation and identity as she gallops through adventure stories and fairy tales. Her storytelling functions as the essential backbone and the fundamental element for the viewer to shift his focus from what he sees (or does) with the art work to the artist's intentions and real approach to an art piece. The viewer is found exploring the grid of representation and that of identity through Dikeou's storytelling. A highly personal relation is encouraged between the viewer and the work of art—one that touches upon childhood memories and perhaps evokes long-forgotten experiences and desires. After all, the most striking element of Dikeou's work is that as much as she evokes childhood memories, the various interpretations of a fairy tale or literary fragment remain so personal and unique—like a tin footprint or some paint splashed on a fence—that her work evokes the experience of our childhood storytelling memories, as much as that of art in the making.

D o w n T o w n

Art

Devon Dikeou

Το μικρό ξωτικό,
της Τέχνης

Devon Dikeou: "The Little Ghost Of The Act."

Devon Dikeou is 32 years old but she seems like 15. She is one of the young artists from New York who lives in a such competitive world, full of difficulties, trying find their way and—why not—leave their personal imprint in history. Devon has graduated from the School Of Visual Arts in NY as well as Brown University. She has already participated at several group shows in Europe and USA as well as one person shows in Los Angeles, New York, Köln, and Athens. "My creations have a uniqueness," Devon says, "they have their own life, they develop by themselves. It is impossible to predict the result of creation from the beginning, due to the audience participation element."

I met her at Ice Box, Venetia Kapernekas' gallery. The exhibition "Between The Acts" will last until the end of February. Devon who has curated this exhibition, participates with one of her own pieces among other artists like Janine Antoni, Spencer Finch, Brendan Quick, Pauline Daly, Paul Ramirez-Jonas and Matthew Ritchie. She brings to Athens the live American Act of the 90s.

Devon is shy and sensitive like the heroine of a romantic novel of the 19th century. This is exactly the sense that she passes through her creations. There is no sex, or violence. The work does not try to impress others, something that we

see in so many contemporary artists. She only cares for this "thing" that will let the audience discover her work: through the images and the intellectual connection: that come from phrases in a book or even sometimes through the incorporation of a book itself, each piece "opens" at a "particular page."

The work she now presents at Ice Box is a relic and exists after interaction. It is constituted of metallic tiles which were used many years ago by the Americans as a cheap solution to decorate the ceilings of the industrial buildings, and in an effort to imitate the European plaster ceiling moldings. Devon brought these tiles from Brooklyn, coincidentally from the last factory which produces them, and she installed them on the floor of certain galleries around the world as in London, and Athens.

The audience participated by walking on the tiles which made a terrible noise (squeaking), and left their imprints. At the end the tiles were installed in a stack and placed on a podium which constituted the complete art piece. What are the meanings? None and many. The title of this piece "Once upon a time..." is inspired by the classical start of every fairy tale in every language. Here the inspiration is a forgotten fairy tale of the 70's, the *Silver Crown*. "As far as notoriety is concerned, it is not what I am really looking for—to tell stories and continue to create things as another means of expression, that's the story, I am interested in."

Besides this it is the simple story of the Act.

Μαρία Περόδση

Artist's Book Beat

Between the Acts also accompanied an exhibition, curated by Devon Dikeon for the Ice Box in Athens (1996, \$5; available from Dikeon in New York); the show also appeared at C/O in Oslo. Text and credits read from the centerfold outward, amplifying the theme of the show, borrowed from the title of Virginia Woolf's last piece of fiction. A slender book, not much bigger than a pamphlet, but printed in full color on heavy, coated stock, it forces a scant dozen works, by a diverse group of American and European artists, into uncaptioned, unbordered proximity. Among the works reproduced are a greatly enlarged detail of one of Janine Antoni's gold brooches, made from casts of her own nipples, and half a dozen stills from a video by Beth Haggart called "Choose Your Own Suffering: Preparation for the Rest of My Life," in which the artist eats live earthworms. Dikeon, artist, curator, and editor of *Zing* magazine, contributed a turn-of-the-century lace and satin dinner dress, borrowed from the Museum of the City of New York. The meaning of each work shown—and reproduced—is meant to ramify greatly in conjunction with its neighbors: as Dikeon's quotation from Woolf suggests, the show's animus is the friction born of intimacy's inherent instability.

Nancy Princenthal is an art critic who will write this column regularly for On Paper.

Between The Acts

Gallery c/o Oslo

(Icebox Gallery, Athens)

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Just before she committed that most willed and controlled of all acts – the act of suicide – Virginia Woolf paradoxically wrote “Between the Acts,” a novel illustrating the truism “life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.” As a group of people assembles to watch a play, everything but the play itself seems to catch their attention. Focus is continually off-kilter and communication stumbles as it proceeds. One is reminded of the well-known complaint that a great many theories of language do not really deal with unsuccessful communication, with what happens despite your plans or “between the acts.” Yet this lack of success, the metastases of mistakes and misunderstandings somehow seem the most vital instances of “life itself.” The quite sensual oblivion of this perspective seems attractive at a time when terms like “information” and “communication” have reached a level of unprecedented self-referential glory. The sophisticated nature of the “endless possibilities” of the Internet, for example, seem to instill in you a moral duty to communicate as though communication was, *a priori*, a guarantee of success.

Obviously the happy ideals of the computer network have a lot in common with the happy ideals of tourism: If you go on a charter tour to Gran Canaria, and it happens to rain as you arrive, you can simply bracket out the

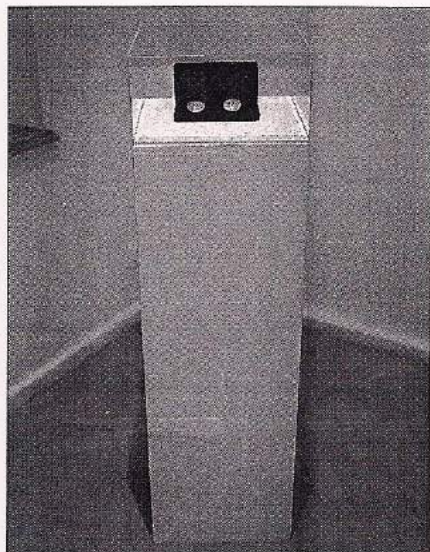
experience as a singular mistake, quite irrelevant to Gran Canaria as such. If tourism and migration are the informing modes or paradigms for the end of the century, then on some level, the computer is the metaphor of these modes, condensing and internalizing the ideal structures of traveling as information/experience. This at least seems the perspective offered by Rainer Ganahl, whose whole body of work mimics the structural model of a computer operating system (eg. Windows). Within a system of files and directories, different subjects are developed and presented. For “Between the Acts,” he pursues one part of a larger project on “traveling linguistics,” focusing on the acute linguistic no-mans-land of “trying very hard” to learn a new language, of trying and maybe failing to understand or make yourself understood. On the large storefront “window” of the gallery the public is invited to write the Norwegian words they think any immigrant should learn. Obviously, the various shades of success/failure are also structured by the position of a given language in the global power hierarchy. The complications, delays, detours and plain dysfunctions cast a melancholic spell on the go-getter ideals of traveling/communication, revealing how one is bound up in the other as its fundamental splitting, its failure to become what it “should” be.

The eerie thing is that the structure of this particular work in many ways mimics or reflects the structure of “Between the Acts” as a show, and so potentially introduces a similar split in its foundations. Curated by the New York-based artist Devon Dikeou, it is pointedly unpretentious; the title is just a “title,” not an organizing concept. The 13 different works/artists are then apparently unconnected and are committed to no other standard than that of being “good” (individually many of them are). From the secretive ideological/historical mappings of Matthew Ritchie to Terri Friedman’s equally secretive but beautiful plans for a garden cosmos, from the nausea of a videotape of a worm-eating Beth Haggart to the stupid delight of Janine Antoni’s nipple jewelry or the deceptively innocent and abstract figurations of Spencer Finch, there are more differences than similarities. There are no real hooks on which to pin a “story,” except, of course, the ones you will make out during your

labyrinthine criss-crossing between the works. A meta-text is nevertheless, inevitably, produced. It is an increasingly widespread one and its “headline” is “curating.” Dikeou, the publisher/editor of *Zingmagazine*, a publication that calls itself “a curatorial crossing” (artists/critics/curators are invited to curate presentations on its pages), apparently cherishes the idea of curating as networking. Always slightly self-referential, the autonomous force of networking seems to have increased as the last threads of topicality or broad “tendencies” are vanishing from the exhibition scene. What is left is an incredible “will to communicate,” to present, to exchange, to inform, to be informed – across countries, genders, language barriers...etc. This “will to curate” in order to network, or to network in order to curate, is nothing if not startlingly optimistic about the horizontality and non-hierarchical possibilities of its approach. If the current art scene at times seems vital it is probably due to this optimism (if not to the dizzying secularity of yet another self-reflection). The only source of angst is the lack of access and if the access is not universal, the Internet as a powerful model of eventual access keeps spirits high.

As if framing this happy scene, Rainer Ganahl opens another window, a window to the handwritten idiosyncratic, arrogant, fun-poking, even plainly sadistic suggestions towards a “first” Norwegian dictionary: How come all the proposals (surely written by liberal-minded gallery-goers) somehow involve the humiliation of immigrants? Is this less a function of the choice of words than the embarrassing vision of the immigrant “trying very hard” and the universal comedy of this vision? In front of the open landscape of networking, Ganahl raises a transparent wall of noise, of helplessness, of prejudice – as painfully confusing or speechless as any abstract expressionist image, a systematic all-over exploration of potential failure parading as information, in fact, truly between the acts.

Ina Blom



Janine Antoni, installation view from
“Between the Acts,” 1996.

Art

Selections & Reviews

Art: Preview

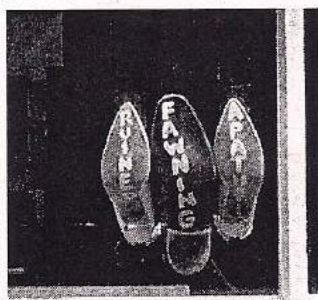
46 Time Out June 22-29 1994

'Rock my World'

IAS

I've heard it said that Americans are less precious about materials than Brits, with the result, ironically, that their materials are more interesting. Here, in addition, it's hard to tell which artist did what, and it doesn't seem to matter, so relaxed is the show. This, I suppose, is 'Scatter Art': some Americans strewing things about on the floor. Why does it seem so intelligent? This time, as if to show as much perversity as possible, the ceiling has been put on the floor: American-style tin ceiling tiles (which imitate plaster mouldings) lay wall to wall. This floor - lumpy, silver - crunches noisily under the feet. It's ridiculous. It's the work of Devon Dikeou. To make things worse two of the four artists (the men: Frank Schroder and Sam Samore) have bought large rocks and 'scattered' these. Another sculpture - or whatever these pieces call themselves - resembles a prison bed: a metal grid, sticking horizontally out from the wall, mattressed with varicoloured foam. The same artist (Schroder again) shows a blank rubber 'canvas' with a tray, like a window box, full of bird droppings - alluding to Damien Hirst's famous butterfly installation, and implying a grotesque hatching of flocks of birds off the canvas.

Perhaps the intelligence of it all lies in the evocation of activities - not of objects or states or abstract ideas. I find it important to try to exhibit the thought process, the "How's it Going" rather than



the "How it is", writes Christine Hill, who gives us, among other things, Erving Goffman's 'The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life' with passages marked with Post-it stickers and underlinings in Biro. How direct can you be? She also shows photos: the artist at work, the artist gazing at herself in a mirror. Plus a miniature, Super-8, home-made pop video (the Zombies); forms for viewers to fill in; maps of the world, and some type-written text about an East German typewriter which is given a space, but isn't here. Sam Samore has stuck shoes to the window marked 'brave, jealous, laconic, droll...' Schroder also shows white pebbles and white ducks swimming on a piece of grey cloth, and spring-style doorstoppers stuck to the walls. What's odd about the whole thing is that it doesn't seem pretentious. Delightful.

David Lillington

Critics' Choice

1. Jeff Koons

Anthony d'Offay

2. David Lauder

Photographers' Gallery

3. Rock my World

IAS

4. Michael Krebber

Marc Jancou

REVIEW

Polly Apfelbaum, Nicole Carstens, Devon Dikeou, and Hai Knafo

ST. MARK'S POSITION
through October 26

In this show, each of the four artists uses one room in the apartment-gallery, while still essentially retaining the household function of that room. In the living room, hang Polly Apfelbaum's disposable white paper tablecloths, which are covered with taped clusters of small, black oval "stains." Entitled collectively, *Table Drawing* and stamped with the days of the week, six hanging tablecloths cover virtually all the available wall space in the room, and the seventh covers a dining room table in the center, on which sit a vase of flowers and an extra set of tablecloths, neatly folded as if waiting to be put away.

The black ovals appear to be the products of many generations of Xeroxing, and have become hopelessly abstracted from whatever they once represented. The tablecloths, still impressed with the marks from their folds into lines and columns of rectangles, read as minimalist grids on which sit clusters of black information, each rectangle similar and yet different from the next, in themes and variations. Yes, it's feminizing *Minimalism*, but that's not quite all it does. The fragility of the paper and the casual, straightforward use of clear tape to affix

the black ovals, make reference to domestic rituals and small battles in a delightful spirit of exploration, often missing both from *Minimalism* and the many backlashes it provoked. Besides that, one simply gets the feeling one could look at the shapes all day without ever getting tired of them.

The bedroom gallery, assigned to Hai Knafo, is empty except for a drafting table on which sit assorted household items titled *Arrangement For Still Life with Record Player and Brush*. Most of these items conform to normal expectations of an artist's work table: paint-stained cups, an empty wine bottle, an architect's lamp and colored pencils. But several items in the installation stand out, including not one, but four copies of a bright yellow book entitled *How to take 20 Pounds off your Man*. The centerpiece of the drafting table installation is a paintbrush, dangling by a string from the lamp, which chimes as it bounces against several cups which revolve on a record turntable. The visual effect is nice, and the resulting pleasant noise can be heard throughout the gallery. However, it is difficult to ascertain what Knafo was trying to communicate; he refers to his works as "systems," but I was left without understanding why.

The kitchen and bathroom are even more subtly transformed. Devon Dikeou has covered the kitchen floor in white impressed tin of the sort usually used for ceilings. This slight inversion results in a strange crunchy sound and sensation as one walks on the kitchen floor (as the entrance to the gallery is through this room), and apparently refers to the often precarious distinction between art and decoration.

The bathroom, altered by Nicole Carstens into her installation called *Wet Spirits*, is left intact except for spattered blue liquid in the sink and bubbling red foam in the bathtub. The accompanying short text by the artist speaks to a childhood home where "the bathroom was located at the heart of the house . . . The bathroom was a house in a house." Despite

— Jennifer Dalton