

Mutual Art

Heide Hatry on “Oil Spill”, Interview questions by Shani Rosenfelder



Shani Rosenfelder: What gave you the idea / motivation to initiate this project?

Heide Hatry: I had been thinking obsessively about the oil spill for weeks. I just couldn't imagine that something like this could happen and that there was no technical strategy immediately in place to address it. Like most people, I suppose I just expect the world to more or less function properly and when there's a problem it gets solved. I'm not so naive when it comes to politics or business, but I assumed that technology at least, at least when it's not killing us, was something we can rely on.

When I learned that Pierre Menard Gallery in Cambridge, where I've done several projects in the past, had nothing scheduled for July, I asked if they'd consider letting me use the space to do something about the oil spill, and they were very receptive, even though I asked only a few weeks before the show

would have to start. I wanted to address the spill through the experience of its innocent victims, the animals and ecosystem of the Gulf. As I worked on the art, I had the idea of turning the show into a benefit for them, and I spoke to the Audubon Society about it. I then solicited art from hundreds of artists I know for a silent auction, the proceeds of which would go to the Audubon Gulf Oil Response. Although the event would by necessity be a quite ad hoc exhibition, I thought that even a small contribution and an effort to make people see that each of them can actually do something about the situation, would be helpful.

I intended in my own work to evoke the tragedy being visited upon the earth and sea that is choking its life from it right now and to motivate people to help. It is difficult to not look away when you see an actual animal suffering, and I wanted, as I always do in my work, to demand awareness by putting the harsh truth directly in front of the viewer, unmitigated by distance.

When I look at beautiful innocent creatures struggling in a deadly mess that we've put into their environment, I am just appalled by our arrogance and greed and carelessness.

We all start as beautiful innocent creatures, too. Maybe it's the tragedy of what becomes of most of us that affects me so much about this little epitome of human behavior, the thought that everything could have been so different. That it still could be, but we are struggling in the mess we've made of our own human world and there's no one to take pity on us and release us from our folly.



How / why did you assemble the artists / artworks you chose to display?

I invited all of the artists I know and asked them to donate something. Some were able to make new oil spill related work, but I happily accepted donations that were not specifically made for the event. That part of the exhibition was more a way of saying that all of us care and want to help and want to transcend our individual ineffectual frustration and do something.

What is the main message you seek to get across with this exhibition, which is not easy to digest?

We have come to accept and live with the fact that the world is seriously wounded, and even now that it is bleeding to death before our eyes we are largely content to put the matter into the hands of the doctors who we believe are taking care of such things. But the whole technological complex and our relationship to it, as Heidegger pointed out long ago, is the problem, not the solution. Human beings acting in human ways, concerned, involved, aware, are the solution. In its power and simplicity, art can remind us of this.

What other awareness activities are you involved in related to the BP oil spill?

I am not involved in other oil spill related activities at the moment. I volunteered to work helping clean birds that had been affected by the oil, but I discovered that Audubon is accepting only people with experience dealing with birds, as they've learned in the past that, well-intentioned though many volunteers have been, their efforts often produced results that only exacerbated the situation when they didn't have certain skills. However, I am still planning to go to the Gulf and do what I can and to make a documentary about what I see happening there.

How has the project been received, anything surprising? Was BP in touch as well?

BP was not in touch. They seem more interested in spending their money to clean up the mess of their business than the mess they've made of the planet. I read that they spent 15 million dollars on their New York Times advertisements, which can only have had the most contrary effect possible for anyone who read them.

The project was received extremely well: artists donated amazing and valuable art work and were willing to start the bids for the silent auction at ridiculously low prices to make sure that things sold. Other friends of the gallery and of participating artists asked how they could support the effort, and they brought wonderful food and wine for the reception. I'd love to specifically acknowledge **Jocelyn McLaughlin** (Watch City Brewing Company in Waltham, MA.), **Erica Bernstein**, and **Len Walker**.

Franz Wright, the amazing Pulitzer Prize winning poet, read his deeply painful poem of outrage about the oil spill; **Nicole Peyrafitte**, Franco American artist and Performer sang very touching stanzas from a powerful poem by the great **Robert Kelly** which was especially created for this show and which gave the show its title: *Imagine It Thick In Your Own Hair*. **Sue Owen**, a poet from Louisiana read some of her intense Oil Spill poems and **Lutz Rath**, a German musician, did an astonishing performance of the first movement of **Kurt Schwitters**'s Ursonate -- that alone would have made the evening unforgettable. It was terrific, very profound and very touching.

Please describe some of the exhibition's highlights

For me the highlights are the works, which actually address the horrific situation, for example

Aldo Tambelini's photo poem: a photograph of a Pelican completely covered with oil, screaming accompanied by a poem which associated even more terrible thoughts.

The well-known Spanish artist **Antón Lamazares**' beautiful red lithograph "Itinerarium," which suggests two struggling birds being watched by many people who are doing nothing.

EIDA House (Paul Lamarre and Melissa P. Wolf) donated 2 T-shirts featuring a list of possible meanings of the initials BP, such as Big Pig, Boycott Petroleum, Beyond Plausibility, etc.

My own work for the show, which includes the corpses of actual animals whose bodies I found by the side of the road or were found for me by friends, tries to portray the whole planet's struggle for life in the person of these helpless individual creatures. I also made several unique artist's books using work provided by two of the great living American poets, Robert Kelly and Franz Wright.