

ANAT EBGI

PARACHUTE

revue d'art contemporain _ contemporary art magazine

TINA GIROUARD | TWO TREES IN THE FOREST

Interview with Liza Bear

October 27, 1976



1. Tina Girouard in San Antonio, Texas, 1972, with her father, Whitney L. Girouard Sr., a rice farmer who taught agriculture and mathematics in Louisiana and Texas. Photo: Richard Landry
2. Lucile, a black cat and family member since 1972, was rescued from Doyers Street, Chinatown, scene of the legendary Tong Wars, when more murders were committed per square foot than any other street in New York.
3. 1970, New York City. Tina Girouard after *Role Change I*, a video action in which she adjusted her self-image to reflect a psychological change by giving herself a haircut, using the TV monitor as a mirror, Photo: Michael Kern
4. *Moving Out* of Chatham Square, N.Y., Summer 1975. Facing out, left to right: Mary Heilmann, Tina Girouard, Facing in: Richard Landry, Liza Bear. They five-story Chinatown building served as a home base workshop for Tina and other artists and performers, and a checkpoint for migrant Cajuns from 1969 to 1975. Photo: Gerard Murrel.

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Part I

At WBAI Radio Station, New York, Oct 27, 1976

I announce:

This is Liza Bear at WBAI, New York, with Radio WAVE, an artists' program. Tonight's guest is Tina Girouard. We're doing this show live with a Cajun audience: potter Mercedes Deshotel, sculptor John Geldersma, and photographer Gerard Murrell. We've brought some things with us to Studio A: a table cloth from Louisiana, six red apples, chutney, walnuts, grape juice, Wasser brot, crisp rye bread, Danish cheese, carrots, Merce's home-made bread, Tina's juke box, and a wilting spider plant. In the background you should be hearing... you *should* be hearing... you should be *hearing* a tape of barnyard clucking sounds recorded at Indian Bayou. It's unusually hectic here at BAI; there are people in all the adjoining studios; we're going to try to cool down and take it easy.

I've just returned from Toronto, Tina from Geneva. I'm conscious of place and transition, airplanes and congestion. I have very little voice. Tina's given me some notes on her piece *Swiss Self*, a solo performance at a Geneva gallery. I read out her list of props which I translate from French and then I formulate what I want to know...

Liza Bear: *When you go to other places top do works, do you feel a need to redefine yourself in terms of that place?*

Tina Girouard: Well, *Swiss Self* was a current self-portrait taking place in Geneva... I'm interested in reality and in making reality stronger, and one way of doing that is to bring things from the place into the piece.

LB: *How did you want to present yourself to the Swiss?*

TG: Well, as myself in their place. I used Swiss money because we think of Switzerland as the bank of the world, and a cow bell, because that's very special to Switzerland. The Swiss bell their cows for the alps, and this bell was more like a church bell. It weighed about 14 pounds. I also used a scythe... I was staying in the country, and I got the bell and the scythe from the farmer down the road. They had something to do with me too... because they were from the farm.

LB: *Did you grow up in the country?*

TG: I grew up on a rice farm between DeQuincy and Lake Charles, in the country, a place that has no name...

LB: *What did the performance consist of?*

TG: The only experience similar to it is a sand painting. I made a kind of effigy with the materials—there were also a lot of wild flowers, raffia, lengths of cotton from Louisiana, bamboo rugs, a washboard, a watch, a bar of chocolate—at the places where my head, my hands, my feet, and the erogenous zone (the other brain) would be. And then I laid myself out on it and sprinkled 10 kilos of Swiss money over the whole thing, as another layer of the pattern. I just lay there for a while. There was a video camera on the ceiling facing down, so the audience was also getting an overhead shot... The scythe was really important, because the portrait is a kind of life-death portrait.

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LB: *Uhhuh... A lot of your work has been done with other artists. Could you say something about how that developed? I know we both came to New York on the same day, July 28, 1968.*

TG: Well, I'd come straight from undergraduate school in Lafayette, and within a couple of months of being in New York, I started working for other artists. I dance with Deborah Hay on and off for a year, and through her workshop I was introduced to Trisha Brown and Steve Paxton and the whole Judson thing. And during that first year I also got involved with the work of Keith Sonnier and Richard Serra. And of course, as I got a little more serious, I took over a more active role.... There's something about working with other people: you spend some time in solitary concentration and you know who you are and what you have to do. But that can also narrow you down, and I'm always opened up by working with others.

LB: *Do you ever think about what you've derived from particular collaborations? For instance, your Bridge proposal with Barabara Dilley?*

TG: ...what came from that? I think my whole idea of portraiture. This is two years after the fact, and I realize that, in a way, Barabara and I were trying to make portraits of each other. I was trying to do it visually and she was trying to do it with activity.

LB: *And did it work?*

TG: Did it work? Well, of course it did. It worked very definitely for both of us, for a couple of years. And it was a real kind of nurturing new experience. Our first performance, incidentally, was at USL... the last piece we did, we collectively got a group of sixteen people together. About half of them were professional, and half had never performed at all.

LB: *That was Juxtaposed-Contained-Revealed at The Kitchen, right?*

TG: Right. We presented psychological [portraits of persona projections. I worked closely with each person to develop an image of them using costume that released or revealed an aspect of their persona that they hadn't been able to... that hadn't come out in their life yet. We used geographic associations, characters from movies, that sort of thing. I wanted them to be perfectly comfortable. I didn't want them to be coat hangers. And Barabara gave them something to so, a role to play... In that work, everything that had to do with space, what the performers looked like, those were. All my decisions. What happened during the performance was Barabara's.

LB: *Have you ever gotten into a more active kind of dramatization?*

TG: Of course. Last year I did a piece called *Scenes* with four simultaneous scenes: *Work, Rest, War, Sport*. Certain elements like the timing were abstracted—we had a timing rehearsal—we called it a race. But each person had to develop his scene alone, for the scene to really be theirs. I can only give the simple reduced idea, and all the details, the camouflage has to come from them. If you try to choreograph someone's every move, it becomes a rehearsed piece, a theatrical piece, rather than an experience in its own right. And I want my performances to be experiences.

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LB: *You don't think of them as improvisations though, do you?*

TG: No. Not as free improvisation or improvisation on a theme. It's more that we develop a vocabulary of possibilities during the presentation, but the order in which its used, or which particular elements get called back, that's up to the individual performer. So the detail is what's improvised, the camouflage. And the detail's very rich and very important to me because that's what brings life to whatever you're doing, That's true in the stencils also... Basically I'm interested in in more than one thing happening at the same time.

LB: *In a performance or in your life?*

TG: In a performance, in my life, whatever. In terms of my art activity, I'm also simultaneously working with video, performing, making static pieces—drawing, stencils—and all that's my work...

LB: *You don't have any preferences.*

TG: I don't have any preferences.

LB: *You're very egalitarian about your art activity.*

TG: Exactly. An idea or a concept comes to mind and the way it reaches fruition is not really controlled. Video may be the most direct way, or if something has to be stated very statically, coldly, cleanly, then I use painting...

LB: *By "painting" you're referring to fabric, not canvas and oil paint...*

TG: Yes, I have *Salomon's Lot* here. It's eight pieces of silk given to me by my mother-in-law. It was left in her attic by Solomon Matlock, an Arab relative of hers and dry goods salesman in the early Forties. I do special pieces with Solomon's Lot, and it has inspired a whole visual interest in. pattern and the juxtaposition of pattern.

LB: *You've made at least six or seven videotapes: the Maintenance tapes, Mardi Gras Suite, Four Quartets.*

TG: The *Maintenance* tapes were made over the last six years. They're concerned with role change and in each one of them I'm giving myself a haircut. The hair is the one part of the body that alterable, and I'm also interested in the idea of maintenance. Even portraiture becomes maintenance for me.

LB: *In what way? Keeping up appearances?*

TG: Keeping up with your own—yes—images of yourself, or helping someone else keep up with theirs. The first few tapes are quite austere. There's no one in the room and I'm manipulating all the video equipment. It's rather intimate, like putting the viewer on the other side of the bathroom mirror. Whoops, I forgot. Suzie Harris and I collaborated on *Role Change III*. We discussed what kind of haircut I should get, It was midnight, also a night with no moon...

LB: *How does a haircut...*



Performance documentation from *Pinwheel*

TG: ...relate to the moon? I know the answer to that one.

LB: *No, change your identity. Does it really change you?*

TG: The haircut is after the fact. The haircut is necessary after a change has gone down.

LB: *How drastic were the haircuts? The first was from long, '60's-type hair to...*

TG: That one was *absolutely* essential. Down, ready to go, get to work, no longer drooping... video camera, indulging in whatever...

LB: *In what?*

TG: Indulging in Keith's fantasy, I guess. I wanted to get into my own fantasy, my own work, so I just said, Okay, let's shed the skin, shake off all this. I could make a similar statement probably behind each one.

LB: *So they marked a break in your life activity.*

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TG: Yes, it's something like catching up with yourself. First you change and then comes the physical broadcast... Using video for the *Maintenance* tapes was using it as a tool, making a mirror out of it. What I was trying to communicate to the witnesses is something....

LB: *The witnesses?*

TG: The people who would see the tape.

LB: *That's an interesting choice of words for the audience.*

TG: I've always thought of the audience as witnesses. They see my self-image, and at the same time they're having the mystery and myth of video taken away. I think the tapes reveal a lot about my attitude to the performer and the experience of performing. I don't think you need all that adrenalin. I tease and say it's non-adrenal performance.

LB: *Uhhuh.*

TG: And the way I direct my performers is to keep them really cool, so that when we're performing we're really doing this act that's... we're integrated to each other. The preparation is purely psychological. It's whatever you need to be there then—to be totally in the present.

LB: *Mmhhuh... Would you like to play something?*

TG: On my jukebox? Let's see if there's anything appropriate.

LB: *If not, we could ask Bill Kortum the engineer to play the next cut from... would you like me to do that? (I signal to engineer)*

TG: Yes. This is *Black Snake Blues* by Clifton Chenier...

PART II

At 93 Grand Street, a week later.

TG: The restaurant, *Food*, represents a real break in my scheme of things.

LB: *How?*

TG: Because for that year, 1971-72, that was my work.

LB: *The whole year, Food was the work?*

TG: Yeah, I'd have to say so. I did other things then, but maintaining the restaurant was really the primary activity. At the time I was also beginning to feel... I don't know... that the work was just too complicated.

LB: *Whose work?*

TG: My own.

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LB: *What were you doing at the time?*

TG: All my time was spent thinking and planning and arranging, and in the case of a performance, rehearsing. I wanted to really have a spot where I was alone and in total control; I wanted the power. I have that power when I'm making objects.

LB: *Yeah, I understand that... Let's go back to Food a second. What did Food do for you at that point?*

TG: It cleared the table.

LB: *It satisfied all your needs for organizing and being with people, a project...*

TG: Yeah, big project. All of my friends, all of the energy, was poured in there.

(PAUSE. The phone rings.)

LB: *...we left out of Chatham Square*

TG: Chatham Square was happening at the same time, reaching a zenith. Chatham Square is a space in Chinatown where about thirty different people lived over a period of about six years.

LB: *Including me... I'll say what it meant to me. I think it represented the best and also the most elusive kind of social energy for a certain period, because it was based on some shared values that were largely unspoken. There would never be any down talk.*

TG: That may have been the influence of the place. Chinatown is just thousands of people stacked right on top of each other but with an amazing oriental sense of privacy. It's amazing.

LB: *Isn't that a Cajun characteristic too?*

TG: Well, it is. Even in Cecilia, this tiny town with 600 residents, we don't know ten people. Town suicide, town murder are never spoken about really either. It's always, "Comment ca va? Ca va bien." Well, Chatham Square was a launching pad for a lot of us.

LB: *You did a lot of collaborative work there. At that time, the social and the performing energy were very closely connected.*

TG: Well, I like people, and I like working with large groups of people. I don't like seasoned performers; I much prefer to work with people who are naïve about performance, and who look on what I'm doing as a celebration of themselves or their ego or whatever.... I try to make the experience really good for them, and meaningful to them individually. With *Food* and Chatham Square I had about 15 primary relationships going: I was living with seven and working with seven more. There wasn't much time for anything else.

LB: *To be alone.*

TG: To be alone, to have a stretch of time where I could develop independently from the group.



Performance documentation from *Pinwheel*

LB: *Or to draw something out of the relationship.*

TG: Right, to conclude.

LB: *Instead of always acting it out.*

TG: Or always being caught up in the maelstrom of an energy like that, a big ball of energy. In my mind, there are two ways of working with people: with a lot fun people, someone must take command. And when there's collaboration on a much more concentrated level. They're completely different kinds of work. With a large group of people, I may pick up on certain individuals and what they're adding to my original plan, or to the general mood—the place always has something to do with that. In a collaboration, you *set out* looking for those things: you start outside for yourself. That's the difference.

LB: *Did you have a close relationship with your six brothers and sisters? Did you do things with them?*

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TG: Yes, I guess I really did have very private, one-to-one relationships with almost all of them. There was one sister who did the acrobatics from when I was very little. She would tie me in knots, which is why I'm so loose now. And another brother who's an engineer taught me perspective drawing. When I was 13 or 14, he brought back a Leica camera from Germany, and taught me how it worked, made me do an experiment. Another brother was a car freak, and at one point I had a lot of information on how to fix an automobile. A-frame to him at a very early age to lift motors out of cars... I think the most interesting thing that my father did when he was working for the government.

LB: *What did he do then?*

TG: He took Cung-Dinhquy, the minister of agriculture from Vietnam, all around the United States to look at agricultural achievements like the Tennessee Valley Authority; Louisiana for the rice. He knew Sukarno and taught Indonesians agricultural methods and... this is great... instead of sending a whole bunch of tractors to Indonesia, he just sent one John Deere tractor, a very simple machine. When it got there, instead of contacting the farmers, they contacted the blacksmiths and machinists. They took it apart, they all took a part home, made one identical to it and brought it back, and started making their own tractors... Then he went to start a school of agriculture in La Paz, Bolivia, near Lake Titicaca, and instead of living at The Embassy House, he moved out with the farmers. I've really gotten back to knowing my family in the last few years, and they've been listening to me. I talk about attitudes, social, political etc. that are broadcasting some aspect of the art community, and they're very receptive to those ideas.

LB: *Has your relationship to Louisiana changed in the last few years?*

TG: I think it's grown stronger rather than weaker. I do have this different cultural background, and going back there—I realize that now—is more about getting in touch with that. Maintaining my own root, my own base.

LB: *Do you feel closer to that than to the art activity around you in New York?... Or is it hard to say?*

TG: When I'm here, I'm there, and when I'm here, I'm here. I'm trying to be there more often. I go there to gather myself as well as gather materials, and right now I'm trying to make a working situation, to have a studio so that I can work there.

LB: *Well, that's a pretty strong commitment.*

(PAUSE.)

TG: I know what it is I'm trying to communicate on an abstract level.

LB: *A certain peace, or a certain stillness?*

TG: In most pieces that I've been working on recently, I've been wanting to get a world view, one that has a past, a present, a future.

LB: *That's very ambitious!*

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TG: Of course it is, and it's going to take me a long time to work out all the details.

LB: *It sounds like an encyclopedia... but that's not a feeling. What is the feeling that you're trying to communicate? That you're aware of being a part of something more than yourself?*

TG: Exactly.

LB: *It's a realization that you're part of history, part of geography, part of a nation, Part of a region...*

TG: Part of being on the earth...

LB: *As well as being an artist.*

TG: Or so that they can start to look at their life in a different way. The mood that you're talking about, that's being in the place at that time, and dealing with it as though it were a knife and fork and spoon.

LB: *Functionally.*

TG: Yes, I'm being very tough on myself with these still pieces where I just make a picture and lay it down there and it doesn't move at all.

LB: *You used to be very restless.*

TG: The audience now moves around like mad. They talk, they become very animated in a still piece. They hang right in there to the very end. The stillness becomes very powerful. I don't know if that's what I intended to do, but that's what it's happening. Now that I've done maybe thirty portraits, the people I've worked with are starting to see themselves in lots of different ways. So that the experience of having had one portrait made opens up the whole Pandora's box of portraits, a flashing on the shelf.

TINA GIROUARD, born May 26, 1946, De Quincy, Louisiana. Lives in New York. B.F.A. University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette, 1968. Is part of Holly Solomon Gallery in New York. Exhibits and performs in the United States and Europe.

LIZA BEAR, editor and producer of the contemporary art journal AVALANCHE founded in 1970. Liza Bear is currently working on her own videotape FALLACIES and a series of five programs for Public Television.

PINWHEEL

Pinwheel is a combination performance, sculpture and videotaping event. The title refers to the sculpture which was realized during the performance. This image was the cog at the center of the performance. This image was the cog at the center of the performance. This image was the cog at the center of the performance arena: it was made from Solomon's Lot, a collection of 8 lengths of silk. For the exhibition *Pinwheel* is installed in the Ella West Freeman Gallery of the New Orleans Museum of Art.

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The performance consisted of four square areas, joined together to make one square with *Pinwheel*, at the center. Each of the four areas represent a world, ie. animal, vegetable, mineral, and other. The activity was the making of the world images, similar to the American Indian ritual of sand painting. Each part or prop was added ceremoniously by the actors. The objects were introduced from a staircase located at the top of the performance arena. An example of some of the four images is as follows: a deus machina (a Greek god machine) to allow the performer to “fly” into place; and a fog-producing device to end the performance by obliterating all the images.

The video was used to give an overview of the emerging image, as though seen from the sky. Two cameras were used: one remaining completely stationary above the performance arena; the second recording close-up details to allow the viewer a more intimate experience. (One bird’s eye view, pone x-ray vision). The finished tape consists of edited material from each of the two tapes, with appropriate sound added.

I have been inspired by the religious paintings of Tibet, and by the rituals of the American Indian. It is an attempt to place myself and the actors in a context symbolic of the universe, and for a moment broadcast an image out, reflect the universe back to itself like a mirror. My own world view will be reflected in the choice of elements and participants. The participants will reflect their “self” view in that the accoutrements they desire for their representation were included. This is somehow connected to Mardi Gras, where people masquerade. Here we are masquerading not a thing, but all things.

TINA GIROUARD

STATEMENT BY A WITNESS

(Spectator-auditor) by Calvin Harlan

The spectator-auditor is slightly removed from spectator-auditor-operator in this event, but removed nevertheless. This means that he tries to tell what he saw, heard, felt, and understood from an outer circle. Another spectator-auditor would tell something a bit different.

The Preparation of the Special Place

Lengths of multi-colored flower-patterned cloth are lowered from two opposite sides of the balcony. The balcony is the World Above, the Sky Zone or Heaven. The cloth is drenched in the sacred. It is blessed and it carried its protective power to the World Below.

The lengths of cloth are caught by two performers below and are shaken and straightened out like banners-scattering the golden pollen?

The performers above, descend and help the ones below arrange the cloth in such a way as to form a square precinct with four quadrants.

It is now apparent that these four areas within the square will be occupied by the four performers in very special ways.

The Pinwheel

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The Performers, two males and two females, each dressed and made up in contrasting ways, ascend to the balcony world and reappear at the top of the stairs with a large golden hoop. They pause and then slowly descend. They place the hoop in the center of the square. It becomes a mandala or sacred circle.

The performers ascend once again as a group and return with eight shorter lengths of patterned cloth and cast them upon the stairs. These pieces are brought down in pairs and placed across each other, are then raised and lowered. Finally, they are tied to the hoop. After all eight pieces have been tied, in such a way as to fill the hoop, the whole is raised, lowered and centered in the square precinct. It becomes the hub, the cog-wheel or radial of the quadrants. It suggests a canopy, an ephemeral shield or shelter which will occupy a position between the upper and lower worlds — and under which the artist-performer or shaman may safely, secretly “make magic” or stage an event?

The Performers and Their Quadrants

Each performer claims his or her separate area or arena. Each ascends the stairs to the upper world and brings back objects — sacramental gifts?, power devices?, fetishes?, amulets?, — pertaining to his or her nature, role, and function. Person, costume, color and make-up, person and every detail of his or her area and activity within that area must correspond totally.

VEGETABLE Starting in the upper-left quadrant:

Green, Earth, the Present.

Foliage, Herbs, Fruit, Vegetables, Flowers.

Nourishment, Health.

Woman/Woman

Very Slow.

ANIMAL The upper-right quadrant:

Black, fire, the Past.

Fur, Live Creature in cage, Rocks, Wood, Rattles, Raffia, Fire.

Aggression, Protection.

Man/Man.

Swift.

MINERAL The lower-right quadrant:

Red, Water, the Future.

Metal Objects, Metal glitter, Manufactured things.

Balls, Diagrams, Concepts, Pictures.

Ego-centricity, conflict.

Man/woman.

Very fast.

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A Costumed Portrait, 1974, Evelyn Jain Gi Lee Lai in the persona of Black Knight



B Costumed Portrait, Terry D'Reilly as Mayan Runner



C Costumed Portrait, Tina Frye in the persona of Matilda Penelope Shunk



D Costumed Portrait, Nancy Lewis in the persona of Waltzing Wanda Willow



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OTHER The Lower left quadrant:

White, Air, the Eternal.

Abstractions, Disembodied Powers, Transparencies, Token Objects, technological devices, boxes, mirrors.

Veils.

Detachment, Control.

Slow.

The performers in the upper quadrants are stable, at one with their worlds.

The performers of the lower quadrants are in some conflict with themselves and their worlds. They are needy, greedy. They try to draw power from the upper-left and upper-right quadrants, respectively. They exhibit the most strange — but curiously familiar — behavior.

Mineral, dressed like a clown-priest, moves about erratically, pops fire crackers, photographs himself, draws a diagram about the procession of energies in world and cosmos (slowly increasing, mean correspond to Other, Vegetable, Animal, and Mineral), compulsively he studies his pictures and his charts, bounces a large red white and blue ball (earth) and a small black ball (moon) with hand or machete, waves his machete, talks to himself though a long phallic microphone, scatters glitter about his arca (in amusing contrast to *Vegetable*'s way of making neat mounds of cornmeal), mutters nonsense in contrast to *Vegetable*'s plaintive love song, lullaby.

Other, dressed like a male-female entertainer or ring master in white top hat and tuxedo, wearing high silver pumps and silver finger and toe nail polish, is the very opposite of *Animal*, she manipulates and controls her world and that of others with electronic devices and machines. She rules by powers and abstractions. Her realities are abstract or abstracted realities (money, jewelry, unseeable miniatures of all kinds, mirrors, watches, etc.). She is plugged-I to her world via microphones, amplifiers, television monitors. She rules at a great distance and by propaganda and network connections. She draws some of her cold energy from *Animal*, who lives in community.

What is happening here? The performers are not actors. They either never had or never needed a script, or, if they found one, it was in fragments.