

## Crying in Public

June 14, 2011

**HAIRY EYEBALL** Weaving my way through the groups of slower moving shoppers and tourists ambling out of the Powell Street BART Station, I realized I was already too late.

I had wanted to be present for the June 11 noon kickoff of Market Day — the large-scale public art event tied to Allison Smith's current Southern Exposure exhibit "The Cries of San Francisco" — but when I reached Mint Plaza and had been handed a schedule I saw that my timing had been off by an hour.

Oh well. The point of Market Day wasn't to necessarily be at a certain place at a certain hour to see a certain something. The "something" was supposedly happening all around me. The nearly 70 Bay Area artists, performers, and craftspeople Smith had gathered for this ambitious public art project had dispersed throughout Mint Plaza, and up and down Market Street between Fifth and Third streets, to peddle their wares (many homemade), offer more ineffable "services" (such as owning the expletive of your choice or telling you a story), or to simply "perform" in "character."

The criers were to be like tiny pebbles subtly altering the fast-moving watercourse of weekend foot traffic. Granted, participation is hard to measure for something like "The Cries of San Francisco," but wherever I turned, people seemed engaged even if the number of folks documenting a given artist seemed to greatly outnumber the members of the public they were interacting with.

I decided I needed a little more intimacy if I was to get my feet wet. I started back toward Market and ran into a woman dressed in steampunk-ish attire. Her name was Jamie Venci, a.k.a. the Questing Choreographer (each participating artist conveniently had a large nametag). She offered me an informative pamphlet about one of three historic buildings in the vicinity that had survived the 1906 earthquake if I promised to carry out the site-specific choreography contained within.

I agreed, and for convenience's sake, I went with the Mint Building. Not five minutes later, I was on the steps of "the Granite Lady" attempting to convey the shape of its crenellated outline with my arms — per a step in Venci's cutely drawn instructions — in what must have looked like a particularly inept approximation of tai chi.

Conceptual art requires a suspension of disbelief on the part of its audience. I was not merely being ridiculous in public, but was publicly enacting a new relationship to a space I had not really considered too closely before. I, as much as Venci, was the Questing Choreographer, and together we had collaborated on a piece.

The satisfaction I took in my demonstration of good faith was fleeting, as questions took over. What had passersby thought about what I was doing? And how could they really have anything to think about without some context for my undertaking? If a person dresses up in a colorful manner in San Francisco and carries on in public does anyone raise an eyebrow, let alone pause to consider the host of artistic and economic concerns that "The Cries of San Francisco" aimed to bring to the streets?

Materials for the event cited Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian street vendor who set himself on fire to protest police harassment, as well as Carol Reed's 1968 film version of the musical *Oliver!* as representational precedents. But despite



**"The Cries of San Francisco" artists filled Mint Plaza with performance-art hijinks.**  
PHOTO COURTESY OF SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

the presence of Art for a Democratic Society's Class War Store cart full o' Marxism, the tenor of many of the criers was more playful than revolutionary. Whimsy was the order of the day.

Ha Ha La (Nathaniel Parsons) pushed around an "amusement park," a steep ladder that participants would gingerly climb up and down while Parsons bellowed a New Age-y chant affirming their bravery and blessedness through a conch shell. After I took my turn on the rickety structure, I chose a souvenir badge that read, "You don't have to behave you just gotta be brave."

Also hard to miss was Maria de los Angeles Burr, who, as the Unsellable, had transformed herself into a walking pile of paper bags. "I have become burdened by too many possessions," she muttered to me, as confused shoppers exiting from the Westfield Centre stopped to take pictures or gawked while hurrying on their way.

I wondered if they got the visual pun, or would simply move on and tune out the other criers much in the same way many of us avoid other solicitors like petitioners or canvassers.

I also wondered what the Market Street regulars — the men who sell cheap earrings, bootleg Giants merchandise, and faux-cashmere scarves from tables or the young hip-hop dancers who busk near the Powell Street cable car turnaround — thought about the criers. Did they view them as competition? As a friendly change-of-scene? Or did they see them at all?

By 4:30 p.m., all the criers had reconvened at Mint Plaza. They seemed tired from their day of art-making and being "on." Continuing at a full clip, however, were tweens Colin Cooper and Cole Simon, by far the loudest and youngest hawkers, who had set up shop as the Masters of Disguise (one of their parents informed me that their after-school art teacher, a California College of the Arts student, had encouraged them to get involved with the project).

I walked away from our genial encounter \$1 poorer but with a pair of plastic pink sunglasses and an orange mustache to my name. I felt braver with them on.

The carnival continues: the gallery installation component of "The Cries of San Francisco" is up until early next month and will host a series of performance events. Future Saturday marketplaces are scheduled for two Saturdays, June 18 and July 2 (noon to 6 p.m.). And on Wednesday, June 15 at 7 p.m., various criers will present a showcase of musical storytelling, speeches, and other forms of public address.