



# Last Exit Magazine

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## A Little Human Touch

Artists Jason Rhoades and Walter De Maria wrestle with certain displaced agrarian urges in two installation sculptures.

By Jessica Baran

The late Jason Rhoades' *Black Pussy* – the artist's final 2006 all-over installation, currently reconstructed at David Zwirner – is a consumer-shaman's cave stocked with dream catchers, black lights, cowboy hats, Chinese philosopher stones, torn-up tee-shirts, multi-colored rag-rugs, porcelain peasant-and-donkey-cart tchotchkes, black and white party photos of pudenda, glass bongos, Venetian glass vegetables, chrome restaurant-grade shelving and a single silver Casio camera dangling from its looped gray strap. The bought-in-bulk inventory crowds the silver shelves in taxonomic heaps; the shelf units form a large open circle around a dark empty stage. In this rug-and-photo-strewn inner-sanctum – cordoned-off by primary colored woven belts – 10 *Black Pussy Macrame Soirees* once took place. Now, the area remains unpeopled. In the publicly accessible periphery, new appliances in a non-functioning snack bar shine with lack of use; a dinner table offers a bong-glass bouquet of fake and still price-tagged pussy willows. *The Black Pussy Coffee Table Book*, documenting the piece and the once-lively parties, lies open next to celebrity gossip magazines on the table.

To say that Jason Rhoades' *Black Pussy* is sexy is to say that Gertrude Stein's "a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" is a vivid description of the flower. Rhoades' piece works on Stein and any wily child's principle that if you repeat a word enough times it becomes empty of conventional meaning and free for play. All the serial objects and numb-skull rhymes – mint-condition dream catchers on mini address books; the Shugurt Dispensor, Pussy Word Harvest, the *Black Pussy Soiree Macrame Cabaret* – in their jumbled accretion and illogical juxtaposition, achieve a kind of ecstatic froth of absurdity that transforms the whole dark lot into a toy-filled playpen, open to new forms of senseless pleasure.

But what is pleasure without the senses? Of the piece's 185 neon synonyms for pussy, *rose* is not among them. The posthumous, post-party installation is an orgy of longing: for real play, the perfect party missed, the true artist that once was, the truly religious ritual, the last exotic taboo, the most desirable lay, or, as the desperate hoards seems to say: *just something, anything*. At one corner of the piece, a white down comforter lays un-mussed over immaculate white sheets; in the space's center, a custom-made white Egyptian-cotton sheet suit hangs emptily on a hanger. For \$80 you could walk home hugging a *Black Pussy Coffee Table Book*, which you could peruse later for all of the piece you'll never claim.

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Walter De Maria's *New York Earth Room* occupies the narrow second floor of 141 Wooster Street like an inverted forest preserve. The thigh-high streetside-to-rearwindow coverage of soil – bunkered down since 1977 – has kept the tall-ceilinged Soho space open to the public and safe from human habitability for three decades. Standing at the viewing archway where a short glass plate separates you from the lateral press of 280,000 pounds of earth, you lean in to survey long black rows of rake ridges, neon ceiling fixtures, the seam where soil joins wall and curves around white window molding – all of the installation's thorough dominion and the intricate handiwork of its maintenance. Nothing natural grows in this big room of displaced dirt; the outside din of cars distracts you from the moist scent of humus. The *New York Earth Room* is a commissioned replication of two former earth rooms now extinct. What seeding occurs in this last-of-its-kind eighth of an un-arable acreage is of fantasy and nostalgia: about former art worlds, flood dreams, the probably exorbitant ways the room would be furnished were it emptied of dirt, the real possibility that in this city your neighbor's apartment could literally be soiled, the real feel of soil were you able to crawl onto the piece and dig your hand into it. Back on the street, in the fast boutique-bag crush between the North Face and Poltrona Frau, 141's second floor row of frosted windows appears strikingly like any other series of pulled curtains: marking room after unknowable room after unknowable room.

