

PROJECTING THE UNDERWORLD

Miriam Weisfeld introduces the video art of Denise Marika

Something startling happened to the street crossing lights in Brookline in 1994: two new signals appeared at an intersection. Instead of "walk" or "don't walk," the red and green squares illuminated the image of a mother and child. In one, the pair embraced; in the other, the child struggled away. And in each image, the figures were nude.

The neighborhood went berserk. A distraught parent called the images pedophilic. One man tried to attack them with a hammer. Local newspapers published cartoons about them. A town meeting was called. A citizen stood up and protested, "This belongs in a museum, not on the street."

Denise Marika, the creator of the installation, laughs as she recalls this comment. "That was an apt, sad statement about the arts in our culture. 'It's fine to put it behind doors, but don't put it on my street.'"

Marika had devised the projections from photographs she'd taken of herself hugging her son. She distilled the images into classical lines that left the bodies more impressionistic than explicit. She meant to provoke reflection and invite diverse interpretations. By placing them in an unexpected frame - streetlights - Marika hoped to catch the viewer's raw response. She didn't anticipate how raw those responses would get.

"People flipped out because of the context," she explains. "It's all about expectation. Giant ads for Calvin Klein with the guy ripping his pants off were going by on the buses at the same time. But [in] advertising, you know the message: 'Buy underwear.' When you put people in a different circumstance or you ask different kinds of questions, they don't know [the message.]"

As she says this, Marika finds herself again negotiating a new context for her art. For the first time, this nationally recognized visual artist will co-create a play. Marika has exhibited her projections and installations at the [Museum of Modern Art](#), the [Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum](#), the [Fogg Museum](#), as well as in Edinburgh, Berlin, and Tokyo.

Except for a brief stint designing sets as an undergraduate at Pomona College, she's never tried her hand at theatre. But [Robert Woodruff](#) was intrigued by her exhibits, and he invited her to create the video component of [Orpheus X](#). "I'm bracing myself," Marika chuckles. "I'm not usually let out of the box."



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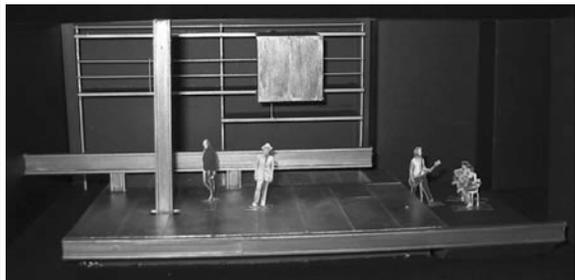
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In [Orpheus X](#), Marika will transplant some of her signature gestures from the gallery to the stage. In collaboration with Woodruff and the writer/composer [Rinde Eckert](#) ([Highway Ulysses](#)), Marika plans to devise a visual vocabulary for the play. By filming the bodies of Eckert - who plays Orpheus - and [Suzan Hanson](#), Marika will examine the hero's mythical journey to Hades in pursuit of Eurydice. Set designer [David Zinn](#) has incorporated some of Marika's favorite projection surfaces: coffinlike

enclosures and huge steel I-beams. This allows Marika to manipulate the scale of her images, confronting the live actors with magnified or miniscule visions of the other characters.

Placing her videos on a live stage has forced Marika to ponder the differences between acting and performance art. Those differences, she says, go straight to the heart of the viewer's experience. "Robert [Woodruff] saw a piece of mine called *Gnaw*. I'm eating my way through dirt and revealing my face. He loved it and was horrified. He was like, 'You didn't eat that?' And I was totally surprised he would ask. Because of course I wasn't acting it. I was in that situation. And that's the way I explore things, by putting myself in that situation. And then spending huge amounts of time examining what it is to be there."



As a theatre director, Woodruff had imagined Marika performing *Gnaw* as an actor might: with an edible substance that resembled dirt, or camera angles that didn't require her to swallow it. For Marika, that would be a waste of time. Whereas theatre creates an illusion to suggest that a real event is happening, performance art often confronts its audience with a real event to suggest open-ended questions.

The cast of **Orpheus X** has begun to toe the line between acting and performance art. "Whenever we put either [Eckert or Hanson] in a situation where they had a physical task, that got closer to what I wanted. Because I didn't give them a character. It didn't really matter if this was Orpheus." Marika glances at the computer where her assistant Leah Gelpé edits a fragment of recently shot video. On the screen, Eckert smears his face with a thick, dark goo: syrup? Blood? Gelpé whispers, "I don't think we should say," and both women burst out laughing.

"I don't usually give my audience any information until they walk in," Marika grins. "The images and the moments should be fresh and new. I'm very cautious about taking away from the audience's ability to go where they personally want to go."

Even before they had begun rehearsing, the co-creators of **Orpheus X** had already imagined ways that the actors and audience might relate to the video. They envision huge video images of Eurydice haunting Orpheus from the underworld. "What does that do to the actors in the space and how we perceive them?" Marika wonders. "Maybe we have more empathy because of the vulnerability, like Rinde in relationship to her [image]. I think the inability to connect becomes much clearer because you are dealing with the virtual. That disconnect is going to create a new kind of relationship that one normally doesn't have between a man and a woman, between two actors, between two people, that close but totally separated."

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Illustrations: the Brookline crossing lights; the set design for **Orpheus X**, with I-beams, metal square, and floor to serve as projection surfaces; a still from the video design for the production.

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