



Dara Friedman,  
*Musical*, 2007.  
Performance view.

## Dara Friedman MIDTOWN MANHATTAN

Beyond the notion that an art activity may be consummated through social exchange, subsequent to the historical institutionalization of “dematerialized” conceptual practices, have we reached a threshold of *art as rumor*? The art-as-life/life-as-art dynamic has always been a beautiful contradiction, yet as certain art activities become increasingly phantomlike, it is incumbent upon us to tease out new critical criteria to evaluate these dispersed processes and situations. In a sense, we are invited to become “actors” in the construction of a conceptual framework, even if we don’t necessarily encounter what might be recognizable as art per se. This can be one of the most provocative tendencies of art practices conjugated within the public sphere.

A case in point: Dara Friedman’s Public Art Fund project, *Musical*, 2007, the artist’s first foray into live, performance-based art. “It’s just around the corner,” I kept telling myself as I traversed the streets of Manhattan for an entire afternoon recently looking for the work, which required a number of individuals to burst into song at unspecified times in unspecified midtown locations. Friedman advertised for the performers online and in local newspapers and selected about sixty people to participate in the three-week event. Setting out from Grand Central Terminal, I crisscrossed the grid of streets while pondering a recent statistical report that characterized midtown Manhattan as the unhappiest place in the US. Perhaps Friedman’s aim was to administer a little musical acupuncture.

The late Allan Kaprow considered his “Activity” Happenings to be the most challenging of the series, describing them as “directly involved in the everyday world,” engaged in “unconscious daily rituals,” and “risky because [they] easily [lose] the clarity of [their] paradoxical position of being art-life or life-art.” This kind of conceptual framework has undoubtedly influenced recent projects by younger generation artists, such as Mans Wrangle (*The Good Rumor Project* at inSite\_05) and Dora García (*The Beggars Opera* at the 2007 Skulptur Projekte Munster), both of whom utilized socially participatory methods designed to trigger something down the line, perhaps ultimately

imperceptible to us. Here, art becomes thoroughly embedded within the social, and vice versa, to the point of symbolic conflation.

On the evidence of *Musical*, Friedman appears to be conversant with these tropes, which carry the scent of participatory aesthetics. Her project might be understood as a kind of fugitive, anti-street theater that leaves the door open for us to generate our own performative renavigation of the urban flux. After hours of pounding the pavement, *Musical* evaded me at every turn. I became increasingly anxious; what if I had somehow been in the presence of a performance but had not registered it consciously? Had I been immersed in an inadvertent Cage-like situation, in which the songs drifted into an undecipherable mélange of urban sounds? How would I be able to identify something as a component of Friedman’s project, and not just the routine of a street entertainer?

In the end, the performances remained elusive for me, and undoubtedly for others, and surely Friedman anticipated this outcome, which does not undermine the conceptual integrity of the project. Subsequently, I would learn more details, for instance that a performer named Jordan Stovall offered his rendition of “Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk” by Rufus Wainwright on Central Park South on September 18, and that Yo Smith Kwon sang a traditional Korean ditty at Thirty-fourth Street and Fifth Avenue the following day. Friedman documented the performances, so there may yet be a postevent reconstruction. Yet when art seems to melt so utterly into the quotidian fabric, it becomes apparent that maybe, just maybe, there really is no intended audience in the traditional sense, only an accidental public of distracted passersby. We can live with the paradox: Art is when/where one encounters the songs, and also when/where one doesn’t.

—Joshua Decter