

Nina Yankowitz: Searching Sacred Texts

The completed installation transformed Guild Hall's Spiga Gallery into a virtual sanctuary or "theater in the round,"

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Slightly frazzled, toting coffee in a takeout container, Nina Yankowitz admitted having been up until 4 a.m. — not partying but working — as she welcomed a Sunday-morning visitor to the Sag Harbor home she shares with her husband, Barry Holden. While Mr. Holden, an architect and sometime collaborator, disappeared, laptop in hand, for a conference call, Ms. Yankowitz led her guest to an upstairs living room overlooking Noyac Bay.

It was a week before she was to begin the installation at Guild Hall of "Criss-Crossing the Divine," a gallery-sized piece of enormous technological complexity involving collaborators in Sweden, Austria, and the United States. Her lack of sleep was understandable.



Nina Yankowitz is illuminated by her Vortex Paint Game, one of two interactive games in her Guild Hall installation, "Criss-Crossing the Divine," that invite viewers to engage in a dialogue with sacred religious texts. *Mark Segal*

The completed installation, which will be on view through July 27, transformed Guild Hall's Spiga Gallery into a virtual sanctuary or "theater in the round," as Ms. Yankowitz called it during a visit to the museum two weeks later. A video of a rapidly revolving and mutating building — the artist refers to it as "Houses of Warship" — is projected across the east wall of the gallery. Three robotic figures, Hindu, Catholic, and Buddhist priests, appear to levitate above the gallery floor in the middle of the room, while two more, a Muslim woman and a Jewish man, flank the video projection. The figures' movements suggest the ways in which they worship.

Interactive games are projected on the gallery's north and south walls. Visitors, using an infrared wand, are invited to select words that appear in the sacred texts of all five religions. Each time a word is selected, color-coded excerpts from the texts containing that word appear on an adjacent screen.

Both games function similarly, though with different visual configurations. Each is essentially a complex search engine that not only chooses from more than 48,000 scripture selections but also organizes and reorganizes them in a way specific to the player's direction. Once finished, participants can save their search results, retrieve them from a website, and learn from which religions the color-coded texts originated.

The intention of "Criss-Crossing the Divine" is to emphasize the similarities among the different scriptures and their tendency to change over time. Ms. Yankowitz will discuss the project and related issues with Christina Strassfield, the museum's curator, on Sunday at noon.

The project, funded by a grant from European Mobile Lab for Interactive Media Artists (e-MobiLArt), was a life-changing experience. "We met in five different countries," Ms. Yankowitz said, "and I made my presentation each time." Mauri Kaipainen, a Swedish professor of media technology, designed the interactive multi-perspective search engine; Peter Koger, an Austrian media technology professor, designed the software/hardware interface. Other collaborators were Mr. Holden, who served as project coordinator, and Qing Tian Chen and Mark Klebach, the

robotics team. The project was developed almost entirely on Skype.

Ms. Yankowitz was born in Newark and raised in South Orange, N.J. While still in high school, she said, she would cut classes to hang out at the folk music venues in Greenwich Village, where she first heard about a collective of artists, musicians, and poets called Group 212. She spent the summer of 1968 with the group in Woodstock, N.Y. (the famous Woodstock Festival happened the year after), where she met Juma Sultan, a percussionist who played with Jimi Hendrix, Archie Shepp, Sunny Murray, Dave Burrell, Kenneth Werner, and Bob Dylan.

It's no wonder that much of Ms. Yankowitz's work, ever since she earned a degree from the School of Visual Arts in 1969, has involved collaboration, interactivity, politics, and technology. She had her first exhibition in New York that same year at the Kornblee Gallery, where she showed "Oh Say Can You See: A Draped Sound Painting," created in 1967-68. She painted the first few notes of the national anthem on cloth and hung it loosely on the gallery wall. It was accompanied by a recording of the notes, distorted by Mr. Werner on a synthesizer. The work combined an implied antiwar message and what was then cutting-edge technology with pushing the boundaries of what a painting, or any artwork, could be.

Only four years out of art school, Ms. Yankowitz was selected for the Whitney Biennial in 1973. At the same time, she was a founding member of the Heresies Collective, a feminist group that gave rise to Heresies magazine, which was published from 1977 to 1992 and called into question many of the assumptions and practices of the art world. "I was never interested in having work that used 'female' imagery or methodology," she explained. "I totally respected it, but it just wasn't my thing. But Heresies opened a lot of doors for disenfranchised artists, and I realize now it was necessary to take one thing, in that case female imagery, and push it through in order to make a change."

Ms. Yankowitz moved into a loft building on Spring Street in 1973, and two years later, while a visiting artist at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, she met Mr. Holden. They met again in 1980, when he moved to New York, and were married in 1986. Their son, Ian, graduated from Northwestern University in 2012 and is a cinematographer and film editor. They purchased the Sag Harbor house in 1993.

Ms. Yankowitz has long been involved with public art projects, many of them in collaboration with her husband. Their last joint project was Interactive Poetry Walk, completed in 2009 in East Cleveland. Granite spheres embossed with texts conceal speakers which, when activated by passersby, speak poetry by admired poets who lived or worked in Cleveland. The spheres appear to be skidding to a halt, leaving behind imprints of poems inlaid along granite paths for visitors to read. The project combines technology, interactivity, language, and visual elegance.

Houses have figured prominently in Ms. Yankowitz's work since 2000. The basic structure is constructed from glass panels and aluminum framing. Like the house in Jennifer Bartlett's paintings, it is a schematic, iconic image that remains constant through various iterations. The glass walls of "Kiosk.edu," which was exhibited in Guild Hall's sculpture garden in 2005, consist of quotations from artists, actors, architects, and writers. At night the quotations are illuminated from within. "It's about playing with words and contemplated concepts providing windows into creative minds and the creative process," said Ms. Yankowitz.

"One night I woke up and told Barry I was going to make a cloud house," she recalled. "He thought I was crazy." Intrigued by the idea of bringing the outside inside, Ms. Yankowitz read that ultrasound could produce mist from tiny droplets of water. She placed water on the floor of the glass house and an ultrasound generator inside. "Depending on the moisture outside, the barometric pressure, the cloud would move and change. I put little LEDs in the generator so it would be lit at night."

In 2011, at Galapagos Theater Space in Brooklyn, Ms. Yankowitz directed an interactive performance film with five other collaborators. Titled "The Third Woman," the starting point of the piece consisted of film clips shot in Vienna by Pia Tikka and Martin Rieser, some of them in the same sewers where Orson Welles was pursued in the climactic

scene of Carol Reed’s film “The Third Man.” The Algorithmics, a group of models wearing costumes with QR codes on them, circulated through the audience, whose members could click on the codes and receive films clips and questions to answer on their cellphones. Through their responses, the audience determined the outcome of the final film via communal voting on a shared Wi-Fi network.

Ms. Yankowitz’s work has taken many forms over the course of her career. In addition to her exhibitions here and abroad, she has executed many public projects, including an M.T.A.-commissioned tile installation in the 51st Street Lexington Avenue subway station, two rooftop gardens at I.S. 145 in Queens, and public seating projects in Denver and Santa Monica, to name just a few. Her work is in many public and private collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, and the Bank of Boston International.



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