



## *Catch As Catch Can: Anissa Mack at Wave Hill*

By Dominique Nahas

In *Pies for a Passerby* Anissa Mack put on a fifties homemaker's dress and an apron, tied her blond hair up in a bun and baked pie, leaving each one on the window sill to cool. The kitchen's oven was located in a cozy walk-in cottage in front of the main branch of The Brooklyn Public Library. You could see Anissa Mack's gift-giving in action and talk to her on weekends in May and June of 2002. While you may not have been lucky enough to make off with one of her pies, leaving empty-handed, no one left the site empty-minded. If you were charmed by *Pies for a Passerby's* premise or were put-off by its lore you knew it instantly. And you knew why. What became perhaps alarmingly clear over time were the staggering range and numbers of negative and positive projections of home, hearth and "traditional values" this piece generated. Mack relates that she was drained and exhilarated after the project because of the large number of public interactions over the course of *Pie's* run.

*Something Borrowed, Something New* the artist's summer project responds to Wave Hill as a popular site for summer wedding receptions. The current work shares some of the aspects of Mack's earlier work yet it is vastly different. What binds both projects together is the impermanence as well as Mack's unique ability to pinpoint a certain designator or signifier of shared belief or concern by the public and to bring unexpected responses out from it. In *Something Borrowed, Something New* Mack is fascinated, with the very subject of exchange between individuals. Another parallel is the artist's speculations on the shared realities of roles and role playing, and with the rules and categories set up to promulgate, what Pierre Bourdieu has identified as "the production of belief...[and an] economy of symbolic goods." [1]

Mack's new work looks at the ideals and rituals embodied within marriage celebrations. By focusing on the custom of the bouquet toss and the belief of good fortune associated with it, she attempts both to draw attention to diverse responses attached to the culture of (not the nature of) weddings. She points out "...I'm not just giving people an experience, I'm inviting viewers to produce their own individual narratives. This project will bring out the best in people and the worst in people...the audience catch is the most important thing in *Something Borrowed, Something New* ... The action which goes on within the project itself is the artwork, nothing outside of it matters." [2]

In this project Mack delves into the bride's bouquet toss and the inherent contradictions of this act meant as a joyful, exhilarated gesture of good will and good luck on the part of the bride the toss is also a sanctioning act of authority. The toss is democratic and blind yet it is also in some ways exclusionary and controlled. Fraught with anxiety on the part of the catchers, the toss is often dreaded by many participants. It is a touchstone for conflicted feelings. Considered harmless if not meaningless fun by some participants the activity might on some level be considered dangerously propitious by the very same celebrants.

Numerous wedding ceremonies and receptions occur on the sumptuously sited 28-acre grounds of Wave Hill every year. Mack is intent on referring in some measure to the decorum and charm of such activities that are usually high-end catered affairs. She has no wish to parody or mock the traditionalism of these events. Quite the contrary, she wants her artwork to reflect on these real-life situations and to give us an opportunity to observe ourselves in light of such occasions, to ponder what meaning we find in them and the feelings they bring out. Keeping this in mind the artist has developed a straightforward five-week routine.

Mack's performative rules of engagement for *Something Borrowed, Something New* are few, open-ended yet precise. Mack herself will be the tosser on some days, and not on others. This is in variance with her earlier pie-maker role that demanded her daily attendance. *Something Borrowed, Something New* allows the artist to create a living tableau without being involved physically. As Mack relates, relinquishing a certain type of control, has allowed her greater distance and detachment, which in turn has given her more creative insights into her work.

A woman, either the artist or a volunteer tosser, veiled and attired in a white wedding dress will walk out of Glyndor House's main entrance at 1:50 am. Participating tossers will be drawn from Wave Hill staff and trained by the artist. The bride will slowly walk down the front steps, turn left, and proceed 220 feet down a stone path. The performer will arrive at a pergola platform that is twelve feet above the lower lawn facing the Palisades. Turning east, her back to the catchers below, the pretend-bride will toss the bouquet with a backhand flip at 2pm. A new and different bouquet arrangement will be tossed every day, to emphasize the variety of wedding ceremonies, made expressly for each toss by a local florist, in consultation with the artist. All members of the public (men, women and children) are invited to catch the bouquet. If there are no catchers, the toss is still in effect. The sighting of an unclaimed bouquet will generate its own special meaning.

There is nothing like catching the bridal bouquet—and, like catching a falling star, there's nothing to it—you just catch it, if you can. You can do this only if you believe you can, and should. And must. But what if it works out? What if it doesn't work out? Anissa Mack looks at collective activities or actions too-often taken for granted. She examines how our lives and thoughts are fitted to the world, framed by often unexpressed needs and desires. Her work's freshness and pungency recalls anthropologist Victor Turner's observation, "One has the feeling that rituals are magical, and that for some reason as yet unknown to science they can communicate to people, not despite their artificiality, but because and through their artificiality... it's obvious from all this that I've been thinking about the question of doubt, in an Augustinian sense, as the basis of ritual." [3]

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#### Footnotes

[1] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp 74-86.

[2] Anissa Mack, interview with author, June 8, 2004.

[3] Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1986), p. 150.