

M.K. GUTH

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THE COSMOPOLITAN OF LAS VEGAS

by *kirsten swenson*



LAS VEGAS Among the megaresorts that line the Las Vegas strip, gambling is increasingly being recast as just one of a dozen forms of entertainment and culture. Now, slot machines and blackjack tables are something to navigate on the way to celebrity chef-branded restaurants and performances of Cirque du Soleil. Art has become a major tool in the rebranding of Vegas as a destination for the "creative class." And, taking cues from the biennials, triennials and fairs of the contemporary art world, some of the work offered is of a relational nature. Yet art that homes in on human relationships and prompts heightened awareness of place and community is, of course, a complicated proposition for what is still, in essence, a casino, whose business model is predicated on customers' losing touch with their everyday values.

M.K. Guth's 20-day interactive performance, *Best Wishes*, set in a glass-walled gallery amid throngs of pleasure-seekers at the Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas casino/resort, demonstrated the possibility of such a site as fertile territory for cultivating a "microtopia," in the parlance of theorist and curator Nicolas Bourriaud. The piece was Guth's third and final installment in a series of participatory works that involved braiding viewers' intimate written statements into skeins of synthetic hair. (The first such work was staged at A Gentil Carioca gallery in Rio de Janeiro in 2007, and the second at the Park Avenue Armory for the 2008 Whitney Biennial.) In each iteration, Guth became the custodian of hundreds of personal revelations.

In Las Vegas, Guth, playing part siren, part carnival barker and part sideshow freak, charismatically solicited passersby in the busy casino thoroughfare. Those entering the gallery were invited to write a wish on a white ribbon, which was then braided by young female attendants into a pair of blond hair extensions that were continually lengthened and worn by the artist day and night throughout the performance. After 20 days, the extensions were 300 feet long and contained a total of 750 wishes. The braided extensions were strung daily around the gallery, creating installations evocative of Duchamp's *Mile of String* (1942) or Eva Hesse's *Untitled (Rope Piece)*, 1970.

As visitors jotted down personal desires and watched their wishes become incorporated into the braids (and appended to the artist's body), they were drawn into conversation with Guth and her attendants as well as with other participants and hangers-on. An unlikely community was formed, defined by a moment of personal exposure and reprieve from the naked commerce outside. Bourriaud's famous description of the temporary communities engendered by relational art is an apt assessment of Guth's Las Vegas performance: "It seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbors in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows."

Photo: View of M.K. Guth's performance/installation Best Wishes, 2011; at the Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas.