

Richard Dedomenici Interview 2006

According to his web site, <http://www.dedomenici.co.uk/>, Richard Dedomenici is a one-man subversive think-tank primarily dedicated to the development and implementation of innovative strategies designed to undermine accepted belief systems and topple existing power structures. Engaging in acts of low-grade civil disobedience such as impersonating Boris Johnson in Liverpool or defacing fly posters illegally pasted onto public walls, Dedomenici asks us to question conventionally acceptable behavior by introducing an element of uncertainty into the social landscape. Was it Richard, or business as usual? For the National Review of Live Art (NRLA) 2006, which took place this year at the Tramway rather than the Arches, Richard, along with FrenchMottershead, was the Artist in Residence. As Artist in Residence, Richard facilitated review sessions every day at the artist's breakfast, did various subversive, covert acts to ease the transition from the Arches to Tramway, and performed his lecture Did Priya Pathak Ever Get Her Wallet Back? on the opening night of the NRLA to an audience of over 500 people. This interview took place on the last day of the NRLA, shortly after a short circuit in the microwave had caused the fire alarm to go off, resulting in the evacuation of the building and the arrival of the fire department. In keeping with his role as Artist in Residence, Richard pulled an official orange evacuation marshal armband from a small transparent plastic lunchbox that also held several copies of his recent book Richard Dedomenici Is Still An Artist (available for 5), adhesive moustaches, and other paraphernalia, which he continued to wear until everyone was back in the building, the fireman had left, and the interview was over.

Jennie Klein: Laughter. OK, this is the Richard Dedomenici interview, that's the correct Italian pronunciation, because he is half Italian

Richard Dedomenici: I wouldn't say that.

JK: Oh, OK. That's the correct British

RD: In Italian my name used to be two separate words - De Domenici - and it's only been since my family moved here post war that it's been Anglicized a little. So really, there's no precedent. No one really knows how to say it.

JK: So this is one of the issues that we have with Richard. Richard's last name is not really British not really Italian. So anyway, I'm going to ask you a few questions and the first one I would like to ask is how do you think that this year's NRLA has gone?

RD: Well, it's hard to say so soon because it's still happening and often the cumulative effects of these things are not felt for time to come. However, I think not badly overall. There were worries that it wouldn't work in this venue, and I think those were unwarranted worries. It seems to have come together and as a visitor and practitioner who is making work I've found the people here very nice. I don't think they could have done much better actually. I think that there is room for expansion here if we stay here in the future and that will increase the access to this slightly obscure medium that we are here to see and that can only be a good thing.

JK: I was wondering what you thought of the daily artist's breakfasts that you have been facilitating throughout the duration of the NRLA? You originated and facilitated the idea of having artist's breakfasts on each day of the festival (with the exception of Wednesday, since nothing had happened yet) in which the past day's work was discussed.

RD: Well, I'm delighted with the way the artist's breakfast have gone. It was a risk and I didn't know if anyone would want to come or discuss their work, and with me especially. I have no background in such facilitation and I don't know why I thought it was a good idea in the first place.

JK: laughs.

RD: Well I know why I thought it was a good idea in the first place. It was because nobody else was doing it and I thought why don't I try and do it. As a model I think it's worked effectively. People have come, that's the first thing, people have talked and some interesting issues have been raised. I'm sure that it's been useful for some of the artists that have come and I'm sure that it hasn't been useful for some of the artists who have come as well. Perhaps the criticism wasn't as critical as I would have liked. We've got to live in a civilized society we don't want to start telling people their work is terrible. I mean, who am I to say what is good or bad? But really it's gone very well and I hope they decide to keep it. I'm not proposing to present them in the future but if somebody else wants to take them on that would be lovely. Delegation, you know? I have these ideas and then someone else can do them and I can still get all the credit. That's the way forward.

JK: I agree. I noticed that the attendance at the breakfasts improved as the festival progressed. The NRLA did not have these reviews last year (they had one Artist's Breakfast on the last day of NRLA 2005) and I felt like it was a great way to be a part of the NRLA and a great thing to go to. I felt like last year I wasn't really as much a part of the NRLA as this year partly because I did show up at the reviews and met some people. The breakfasts were a great way to network as well.

RD: Yes, that's very important to these events. The term networking, it does upset some people but it's not even networking, or even count as networking. It's just meeting interesting people. It's a nice crowd of people, the live art community, because they are quite timid they're not like some artists who are very arrogant because live art is still an emerging medium and people are still at the stage of being nice to each other. As it becomes more established the arrogance will become more pervasive and that will be a sad day but at the minute it's quite nice to show up to the morning meetings. They were very early in the morning (The meetings began between 11 a.m. and 12 noon) and I know people can't talk at that hour; sometimes I had difficulty.

RD: My job was easy; I just had to hand the microphone around really and sit there and listen and make sure we didn't run over time. So yeah, the social aspects of the NRLA were one of its best points this year. I've been giving out these little name stickers as well which have helped with that.

JK: Let's talk a little bit about your work because I have been noticing these name stickers, which say, Hi, We've met before but I can tell you don't quite remember me. To save you any further embarrassment my name is _____. And you also have an evacuation marshal armband on and we just had a fire drill

RD: We just had a fire drill, yes. I'm interested in cause and effect. I like to think that the two are related somehow. I didn't set the fire alarms off.

JK: I thought you had.

RD: People think that I set the fire alarms off. They think I'm trying to be funny and everyone thinks I'm a bit of a prick. I didn't do it. It wasn't me. I was queuing for a performance and was a bit upset by it. I do happen to have an evacuation marshal fluorescent thing on my arm, which my friend who works in Whitehall - in the Cabinet Office - I think he nicked it from the Cabinet Office. It's from the government you see. (Richard has subsequently decided on his Blog to take credit for the fire alarm).

JK: It's a real one then.

RD: The next time they have some kind of biological attack, you see, they'll be running around saying Where's the evacuation marshal thing gone? Come on, this isn't a drill, come on this is the real thing. So it was useful today and I don't knowyeah, I don't mind claiming it as mine if people will say to me did you set the fire alarms off? I'll just say yes because I'm essentially quite lazy and it means that I get credited for something that I didn't actually do. And also, Art Speigleman, he had a good quote. He said that it's hard to be someone who is consistently seconds ahead of his time. I've taken that one to heart. I do believe that sometimes there is some kind of weird telepathic, shamanistic predictive sight that artists possess. Artists do things that they don't know why they do it until afterwards quite often. If they knew what they were doing and could articulate why they were doing it then there would be no point in really doing it. So art is almost shamanistic in its manner and it is a topic I intend to explore more deeply in a future lecture.

JK: And we should probably add here that you are available to do lectures for a set fee. For more information about booking Richard, please see his web site <http://www.dedomenici.co.uk/>.

RD: Anything really. I can perform to people of all ages. I can perform for everyone from school children to elderly people. I do a lot of lecturing as part of my practice. Part of my performance work - if you can even call it that - is ephemeral and transitory and not easily recognizable as art or as anything in particular, especially given the audiences that I reach (most of Richard's work is done in the street on unsuspecting pedestrians and police officers). It can often be very subtle. My work sometimes functions on a subconscious level. My sound installation, for instance, works on a subconscious level (the sound of trains that periodically played in Tramway to remind people of The Arches). This can be very difficult when you have to apply for funding because you have to tick boxes and things about how many people have attended this event, or they ring you and say, Richard you're going to have to change that box. We want to give you funding and everything but you're going to have to do something with these numbers because we're going to have to clear these with our line managers at the Arts Council. I don't like having to apply for Arts Council money. I do believe that artists should be self-sustainable although I think it's nice that the government gives us money sometimes. I know in other countries like Australia and America there's no such mechanism in place. Any time now we could have a Tory government in this country and

the Arts Council could be decommissioned. I think it helps to try and put in place multiple revenue streams that can at least help toward self-sufficiency and that is what I've tried to do with my books and my lectures which inform people of my performance work and also subsidize my performance work. That's my business model.

JK: The train sound installation (which is presently the soundtrack for Richard's website) is not the only piece that you did for the NRLA. You also made some air fresheners that smelled like cigarette smoke so that people who were formerly able to smoke whilst inside The Arches won't feel so homesick in the halls of smoke-free Tramway. I am afraid that I haven't seen or smelled these air fresheners. How did they work?

RD: They were modified plug-in air fresheners with a perfume reservoir that was drained and fumigated and replaced with cigarette ends and ash from the ashtrays outside the National Review of Live Art suspended in an alcohol solution produced from Tennents Lager, whiskey and a bit of Irn Bru. The devices are designed to acclimatize people to the smoking ban recently implemented in Scotland and due to come into effect in the UK next year. Tramway is a smoke-free zone. When you plug the air fresheners into an electrical outlet the mechanism disseminates the subtle aroma of stale cigarette smoke - so evocative of the old NRLA Bar at The Arches. I stopped smoking in 2003 incidentally, albeit for financial reasons. I quite like passive, passive smoking' though, that is to say inhaling third-hand smoke from a passive smoker nose and mouth. The only problem with my modified plug-in air fresheners is that I'm worried they might be a bit of a fire hazard.

JK: You have also been adding to your Blog while leading a very busy and exhausting existence as Artist in Residence here at the NRLA. Could you talk about that a bit, as well as the photographs of people in moustaches (including one of me, frowning in order to keep the moustache, which had lost most of its adhesive backing, on my face)? You seem to have taken some care to match the moustaches with the hair color.

RD: Yes, otherwise it doesn't look so realistic. I used to have an excellent moustache, but my girlfriend made me get rid of it. She said it tickled. So now I've externalized my moustache fantasies through the Blog photos. It's not all moustaches though, my Blog, there's more to it than that. I was commissioned to keep the Blog by Arnolfini in Bristol, who published my new book and where I was recently writer-in-residence. It's quite good, but I find it difficult to dedicate the time to updating it. Thus I'm developing a less labor-intensive, more intuitive way to upload my thoughts onto the Internet. But don't expect it anytime soon - the technology doesn't yet exist.

JK: In your lecture Did Priya Pathak Ever Get Her Wallet Back? you mentioned that your mother, a radical, autodidactic live artist immersed you in protest culture from a very early age. I know that you still live with your mother (something that Richard shared with the audience in his opening night lecture) so you don't have to pay rent

RD: Well I do pay rent actually.

JK: Oh, you do

RD: Yes, 50 a week, because she is not rich my mother. I don't come from a rich background you know. Some artists do and I resent them. I'm a working class boy and so is my mum (not a boy, but working class). So I pay my mum rent, but not as much rent as I would have to pay if I rented a place on my own.

JK: Do you live in London? I have lived outside of New York City and in Los Angeles, the two most expensive cities in the US and yet they pale in comparison to London, which is supposed to be the most expensive city in the world.

RD: Well, yes, this is a problematic issue. Technically I don't live in London but it all depends on what criteria you use to define London. Watford, which is the town where I live, is outside of London. It doesn't have a London telephone number but it does have a London Underground station. It's on the very periphery of London. It's also within the M25 motorway, which is often seen as the demarcation of the edge of London. It's only 20 minutes away on the train. So really it's a suburb but it's a very nearby suburb. So people don't really know what Watford is because of that. There is an uncertainty in Watford because of that, because of its identity, since it's not a very interesting place really and because it is best known as a sub-regional shopping center area - a population in excess of 2.5 million people come to shop in Watford. It's also being gentrified. The top end of the town, which has experienced a bit of economic stagnation is being gentrified and the Council described it as an Ibiza/Covent Garden Style/Caf Bar Quarter. This means that on weekends, busloads of boys from as far away as Milton Keynes, and even as far as Northampton, come to smash the town up and piss on the streets and beat each other up and stab each other. So there's not a lot of cultural activity apart from that. There's a theatre, which is all right, but there's no gallery. I'm trying to change that but I'm not sure how that will work.

JK: Well you do have a gallery on your hand.

RD: Oh yeah. On my wrist I've got the Black Cylinder Gallery. Maybe you can hear this - I'll press the button and, oh, mind your head, it will hit you

Richard proceeds to open his oversized wristwatch, which was initially designed to hold candy but now is no longer made because it could pose a terrorist threat.

JK: Oh, you have a new piece in there today.

RD: Yes, this is called Tailing Behind by an artist called Abigail Davey. She is a bit shy, but she is actually at the NRLA this year. This is a piece that she gives to you during one of her performance that takes place in a tent. I received mine at a performance that she did in the East of England in a church and I was happy enough to give her a one-person show in my gallery. She gave me permission. So this is another one of my revenue streams actually. I also collect sculpture and found objects from the people that I meet on my journeys because I do a lot of traveling as an artist and people give me objects and I display them. I've yet to sell any work actually, but there would be a 50/50 split between the gallery and the artist. There is a page at my web site and you can find and download application information for a gallery exhibition (You can also email Richard for information: richarddedomenici@hotmail.com). There are some rules. You are not allowed to

put in anything that is putrefying. Metal objects are difficult because of airports, you know. Sometimes the security guards get a bit worried about the watch and then I have to show them that it is a gallery. Most of the time I have no problems but if there was metal in it then it would set it off and cause all manner of problems for me.

JK: I think it's a start for a town without culture

RD (displaying his t-shirt): The Saddam Hussein t-shirt as well. This should never be worn while traveling on the airplanes. Also, I made a book a couple of years ago called How to Produce Dangerous Biological, Chemical and Radiological Substances from Popular Branded Household Goods, which is actually completely benign in spite of its controversial title and that is another book that you shouldn't have in your back pocket when you go through airport security.

JK: So best put it in your suitcase, or ship it.

RD: Keep it in your hand-held luggage.

JK: Speaking of that, you've done some performances that you showed in your lecture the other night where you have kind of put yourself in danger. How do you feel about that? You could really be injured.

RD: Hmm. Well you know risk is an important element of my artistic practice. I think I'm calming down, as I get a bit older. A lot of performance artists - and I don't necessarily want to follow this - but a lot of performance artists they get a bit old and they're like, hang on a minute, I'm too old for this and I need to make some money. So they stop performing and they start painting, or something, to make some money.

JK: Chris Burden.

RD: Chris Burden, Franko B's painting now and

JK: Well, he's painting with blood.

RD: He's painting with blood

JK: Chris Burden is disavowing his whole earlier existence.

RD: Is he?

JK: Well he resigned when the guy in Ron Athey's performance class at UCLA shot himself and it turned out that the guy used a fake gun made of wood, when Chris Burden had a friend use a real gun to actually shoot himself in the seventies.

RD: Really? And it functioned?

JK: No, the guy walked out of the room and someone banged a metal container. Then Ron gave him an A- even though he was supposed to fail him. So anyway, Chris Burden, who was shot and everything else, has turned away from that work and now he's making big objects.

RD: Well yeah. When you compare it to something like Chris Burden shooting himself I don't think my stuff is that risky really. Sometimes I do put myself in dangerous situations in order to illustrate grey areas that we encounter in the world. My Unattended Baggage performance (Helsinki Railway Station, 2005), which I think that you may be referring to?

JK: Which was in Finland.

RD: It was in Finland, in Helsinki and it was a calculated risk that it would be a fairly safe place to test out my new performance, which consisted of me climbing into a suitcase and zipping it up from the inside whilst outside Helsinki Railway Station and then waiting to see what would happen. It was about what happens when you see what you think is an unattended bag, but actually it's being attended but the person who is doing the attending is doing so from inside the bag. It's a grey area, it's a conflict of interest, there's potential there for someone to get hurt and I just think that we need clarification from whoever makes these rules before someone is hurt. So I tested it out. I remained in my suitcase for about 10 minutes before I got out. Actually no one

JK: They ignored you! At least that is what I saw in the video.

RD: Actually, the Finns have a very relaxed attitude towards health and safety. I really liked it over there. Their lifts don't have any doors. It's marvelous. You're just walking down the street next to a primary school playground and there are no gates or anything. Then you are at the docks and they are unloading coal and it's lovely, I like it very much. And well, they do have a very high proportion of domestic abuse, so we shouldn't say that it is perfect over there. We all have our problems. So I had expected to get stopped. But after about ten minutes it was becoming quite restrictive and a bit claustrophobic. There was probably more danger of smothering to death. I had some safety measures in place. I had a radio mike attached to me inside the suitcase so they could hear if I stopped breathing. So you have to be sensible about these things. I was also worried that some skaters might come and jump on the suitcase. Kids are unpredictable. You've always got to worry about the 12-year old children - they're always the ones that are going to mess it up for you. The suitcase was on wheels and I was worried that someone might just come along and pick it up and take me away, or push me in front of a bus. Luckily none of these things happened. The plan was to bring it to London and do it after the trial in Helsinki but then the 7/7 bombs happened.

JK: Yes.

RD: I decided against it. I thought that it is probably a bit risky.

JK: You still value your life.

RD: Yeah, I value my life. I don't have a death wish. I plan to live a long life if I can. Controlled risk is ok but I know from first hand experience how trigger-happy the British police can be.

JK: That's right, with your first performance that you discussed in your lecture when your friend caused the police snipers to point their gun at the car that you were in.

RD: Well that wasn't really a performance - it was me going to MacDonald's one day. It's a long story, but yes, I did nearly get shot in the head once. I'm glad they didn't shoot me.

JK: We are glad as well.

RD: Thank You the Police (during Richard's lecture, the punch line was either Thank you the Police or, No Thank you the Police), because they did have grounds. My friend did have a replica weapon and I'm not proud of it. He's one of those self-destructive friends that you hang out with but that always ends up getting you into trouble.

JK: What about some of other pieces you did, like telling pedestrians in Edinburgh that their mobile phones were going to be charged 1 (Pedestrian Congestion Charging, 2005), or dressing up as Boris Johnson and apologizing to people in Liverpool. No one was pissed off at you? If you told people in New York City that their cell phones were automatically going to be billed \$2 someone would beat you up.

RD: Yes, I had expected violence during Pedestrian Congestion Charging. The people of Edinburgh had just voted down a Congestion Charging Zone in the city, so tensions were running high. I was wearing a baseball cap with a congestion charging logo on it, which would have no doubt afforded me some protection against head injuries. You have to prepare for the worst but hope for the best and normally what actually happens occurs somewhere in between. I consider it to be a marker of great success if I don't get beaten up and/or arrested.

JK: I had another question regarding Escalator Chair, which you did this past January in Hamburg, Germany. The actual chair, which you used to ride up and down several steep escalators in Hamburg, has two very short legs in the back so that it will fit on the stairs of the escalator. In the video on your web site, which showed you riding up and down with the chair, it looked a bit dangerous, especially when you got near the top. Was it really dangerous? Do you think you would redesign it so you could face forward rather than backwards?

RD: I think that would be more dangerous because you could really fall backwards. If you were facing forward you would have no means of protection. I did consider it but out of the two choices facing backwards worked better. And really, the dismount is no more dangerous than being a gymnast or something.

JK: Maybe less dangerous. Gymnasts are always breaking their necks, or ankles.

RD: It does take a bit of training. One of my ideas was maybe to let members of the public test out the chair but I decided against that because there is an element of danger. But we are all responsible people, we have to make decisions and take risks ourselves. We're human beings with feelings and minds and

JK: and the phenomenological perception that allows us to tell when the chair is almost at the top. The other piece I wanted to talk about was Gulf Sale that you did in 2003. It has a collapsible sign that says Golf Sale and then you change it to Gulf Sale at opportune moments. Did you get into any trouble for this one?

RD: I did get into a bit of trouble. The plan was to have a protest sign that I could get through the police barriers when George Bush (president of the U.S) visited London. He was visiting London and he was staying with the Queen. The British security services had installed what they called a ring of steel around Buckingham Palace - a heavily armed security force.

JK: Well I guess they know that there is a lot of anti-Bush sentiment.

RD: Yes. They didn't want protesters outside of Buckingham Palace so I thought that the best way to try and get through this barricade was to have an innocuous sign that could then be changed. In London you often see these guys holding these big banners - they stand outside all day actually - and the signs say Golf Sale and it points down the road. You walk down the road and in some tiny little shop that you would never go to otherwise there is a big sale of cheap golf equipment. These shops are so out of the way that people would never know about them, so they had to have advertisements or no one would come to the sale. It is much cheaper to have a guy holding a sign in the street rather than having to pay rent for a real store. The administration is trying to crack down on it now. So, I used one of the familiar, innocuous signs that could be changed at a moment's notice. When changed, my sign could be a reference to the American companies such as Haliburton, who are making money on the back of the war in Iraq. The banner was an attempt to design a new kind of protest banner. People don't protest as much as they used to and I think that some of the problem is that protest banners haven't kept up with the times. The banner is still basically a bit of cardboard stapled to a bit of wood. It's bulky and cumbersome. It's not really sexy. You can't take it on public transport. So I'm trying to design a protest banner for the 21st century that is collapsible, portable and lightweight. This was my first prototype. I had a collapsible pole that attached to the back of the sign so that you could carry the banner around in one hand. Unfortunately, this pole system looked a little bit like some sort of pipe bomb. I hadn't realized this until I got to Buckingham Palace and all the police are giving me strange looks. So I found a flaw in my hypothesis and was forced to walk away from Buckingham Palace. I saw a policeman on a bike and I thought if I just go and explain to the policeman what I am doing then he probably would prevent anyone from trying to shoot me. So I did. He was quite impressed actually. He said it was a good idea and that I should patent the design, which I haven't done actually.

JK: You should.

RD: Yes, I think that this is another income stream. I've got a friend who is a lawyer and she has given me some advice because artists get ripped off all the time. We should set up a legal system for artists.

JK: One of the things that I think is interesting about your work is that it is a new way of protesting, which acknowledges media culture, the proliferation of images, the fact that you can

just go and protest and it doesn't do that much good. Back in the seventies, we had three TV stations and you would do a protest and get on TV and get a certain amount of news coverage. Now there are hundreds of news stations - sometimes several hundred - so now protests have to get a little bit more sophisticated. You also have to work on more of a local level trying to reach a very specific audience. You have to really think about how you're manipulating the crowd and be more sophisticated about that manipulation. If you just show up, so what? The trick is to undermine the discourse of the other side.

RD: It's true. A lot of the old tools of dissent don't work any more. You always have to think of new ways to do stuff. There is also an element of futility to my work - a strong element of futility, which is my comment on how we can or can't change the world. I had a person say recently to me art can't change the world but it can change the people that change the world. I thought this was quite good, but I would like to take it one step further and say that art can't change the world but it can change the people who can change the people who can change the world. It's hard as well. There are no structures in place to measure the effects of art actually. I'd like to try and design some. It's really hard to tell the effect of my work because a lot of it plays to an audience to which you can't hand out feedback forms when you are done. I've been experimenting with my name - I'm the only Richard Dedomenici that I can find in the world. It's a lonely existence, but, on the plus side, it does enable me to attempt to gauge reaction to my work by periodically noting my Google Rating - that is, the number of pages returned when someone types "Richard Dedomenici" into Google. By comparing the peaks in the data with my CV, it is theoretically possible to extrapolate the impact of my various projects. These results can then be used to ensure the development of increasingly potent work, with the power to change minds, alter behavior, shift paradigms and transform societies.

JK: Well, we can probably end on this note, unless you have anything else that you would like to say.

RD: Well, just that I am the only Richard Dedomenici in the world and you can find me at <http://www.dedomenici.co.uk/>. Don't forget my seven maxims, which are included in my book Richard Dedomenici is still an Artist.

Never put off until tomorrow what you can put off until the day-after-tomorrow. It's easier to apologize afterwards than it is to ask permission. It reduces the confusion about how to interpret a work of art if there are no signifiers to suggest that it's a work of art in the first place. Be a spanner in the works and a cog in the system. There's no substitute for a genuine lack of preparation. Some people deserve to be offended. If you see a three-light Hino Truck, get out of the way!

(This last one is only applicable if you're on a Japanese highway.)