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Postcards to the President? Performance Art.

By JOANNE KAUFMAN
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New York


Looking for Sheryl Oring? You can't miss her. She's the one in the corner office. That is to say, at the corner of Liberty Street and Church. Seated at a metal drop-leaf table housing the essential equipment -- an Erika manual typewriter that's got way more than a dozen years on its 38-year-old owner, a roll of stamps, index cards and an embosser -- Ms. Oring, a performance artist and journalist, is ready to take a letter to the president. By dint of her project "I wish to say," she has become an ad hoc amanuensis to antagonists and advocates of the Bush administration. Consider this from one Alexander Steppke: "Dear Mr. President, My impression is by fighting so much against your enemies you've become them." Or this from Kirk Adams: "Dear Mr. President, Thank you for your strong leadership in making America safer."

"I wish to say" is one of 200 events and installations in the Imagine Festival of Arts, Issues & Ideas, a New York City-wide counterpoint to the Republican convention. "My co-founders and I thought the RNC coming to town afforded us an opportunity to focus attention on what we all face," says the festival's executive producer, Chris Wangro. "We really believe that the leadership of both parties has failed us in addressing the issues of our day."

Ms. Oring's way of addressing the issues? Addressing postcards to 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. "Would you like to write a letter to the president," she asks a passerby who's casting a dubious eye on the whole setup -- on the American flag behind the table, on the sign reading "I wish to say....," but mostly on the posture-perfect Ms. Oring in a vintage red suit, pearls around her neck and on her earlobes, red-dipped fingernails poised on typewriter keys. "Maybe after lunch," he mutters, scurrying away.

No matter. Here's David Mattson from Brooklyn plopping himself down on the white cushioned stool opposite Ms. Oring and saying, "Dear Mr. President, We hope you lose in November." And now here comes Terence Kaliner, an accountant at Gerber Capital, a registered Democrat and a 9/11 survivor. "Dear Mr. President," he says to the snappy accompaniment of hammers striking keys. "Thank you very much for your courage, your faith, leadership and guidance, and hopefully and prayerfully we will win the war on terrorism and World War III. God bless you and your family." Postcards can be stamped -- your choice -- with "rush," "urgent," "past due," "return receipt

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Domaso Reyes

Sheryl Oring and her Erika typewriter.

requested" and "final notice." Donations are welcome. Ms. Oring still talks with some awe of the Bush supporter who praised her for her patriotism and gave her a \$10 bill.

The Grand Forks, N.D.-born Ms. Oring, who's been described as looking like a Republican wife -- "I don't know if I should take that as a compliment" -- taps out 60 words a minute on the Erika despite a balky "o" key. This does not fail to impress observers. They're even more impressed by the Velveeta-bland expression she sustains for all comers, whatever their mindset or message (in one instance, a correspondent's aspirations for Mr. Bush tilted toward the pornographic, but Ms. Oring pecked steadily on). Her own political views? "I tell people I won't talk about my views, that it's about them, not about me."

The "I wish to say" project is a product of the six years Ms. Oring spent in Berlin. "Traveling around, I met dozens and dozens of Europeans who thought that all Americans think alike and that we're all war supporters," she says. "I wanted to do something that would give people a chance to express themselves, but also to show the rest of the world how diverse Americans really are in their beliefs."

She first set up shop this past February as part of a First Amendment project in California. The response was sufficiently enthusiastic to send Ms. Oring on the road again -- have typewriter, will travel -- this time to Utah, Nevada, Arizona, Texas and New Mexico. So far, she's typed more than 600 postcards, most about the war in Iraq. These include missives from a woman whose husband, a soldier in Baghdad, has yet to see his baby. "Bring my husband home," she dictated simply. "I voted for Reagan twice, I voted for your father. Your administration troubles, angers and outrages me....Please vacate your office and apologize to the American people," was the word from Kenneth Gross, 60, a New York high-school math teacher, whose invective required two index cards. One correspondent in Ms. Oring's files went on for three. "It would be nice if there were a response from the White House," says Ms. Oring. "I'm sure they're curious that all these typewritten postcards are coming in. But does President Bush ever see them?"

New Yorkers, who are reputed to take freedom of speech more seriously than most, have had ample opportunity this week to exercise that right. Even so, mid-afternoon on Monday, the lower Manhattan Freedom of Speech National Monument, an enormous red megaphone designed for sounding off, was unattended save for eight-year-old Sergio Baerga, who told a joke; Julia Buckley, age three, who said hello and announced that she would be four in October; and Forest Markowitz, an administrator with the Health and Hospitals Corporation of Greater New York, who let forth with a simple "Vote Democratic."

That evening, as part of the Imagine Festival, there was a double feature of sorts on upper Broadway at Symphony Space: the "Thalia Follies," a tepid political satire of song parodies and readings from the work of E.L. Doctorow and Calvin Trillin followed by a live broadcast of the convention. Few audience members stuck around for the feed from Madison Square Garden. Those who did stoutly ignored urgings from management to throw popcorn at the screen. "I came because I was hoping for interaction," mourned Steven Bluestone, an elementary-school math teacher, who offered a futile hiss to galvanize the assemblage.

There was no such reticence the next day during Ms. Oring's office hours near City Hall. Almost two dozen people spoke their pieces to her; a few were turned away when she was ready to move to her next location farther uptown. "There is something very powerful about the one-on-one

interaction that happens at my office desk," says Ms. Oring, who is planning to keep her project going until the election, perhaps beyond, and hopes to make the postcards the basis for a book. "People have a very emotional reaction to the experience of sitting down, looking me in the eye, telling me what they're thinking and feeling like they were heard. A few people have gotten very weepy."

"People leave and I think they're a little unburdened. They've said what they have to say and they're lighter for it. It's a little bit like therapy."

Ms. Kaufman last wrote for the Journal about new films.

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