

## SOME THOUGHTS ON TEACHING PERFORMANCE ART IN FIVE PARTS

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Marilyn Arsem, *Water Falling Pepper Rising*. Image Credit: Kristina Lenzi/Bob Raymond  
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### Introduction

I have been teaching performance art at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, a visual arts college, for more than 20 years. The longer I teach performance art, the more I feel compelled to create an environment that allows the broadest exploration of human actions as art. In my teaching I attempt to honor the radical roots of the medium, with its history of expanding notions of how we make art, how we witness art, and what we understand to be the function of art.

# 1. The Nature of Performance Art

## 1.1 Real Time

In the classic understanding of the medium, performance art is the act of doing. It is not representing, not recounting, not re-enacting, but simply doing. It is live and it is real. It is direct action. It is not about rehearsing a text or recreating a narrative, but rather it is an experiment with a portion of one's life. It is not about entertainment, but about the desire to learn. Ideally, the performance artist is always generating a new challenge for her or himself, never repeating an action. Performance is driven by curiosity, and the quest is discovery, transformation, knowledge.

Working directly with the elements of time, space, materials, and actions propels an ongoing examination of what might be considered art and art making. Since the work cannot be separated from the body who makes it, a number of questions continually surface about the medium of performance art. For instance, what distinguishes an action as art? Is it different from an every day action? If so, what signals the difference? How does one know when the art begins and ends?

The context in which the action is done strongly influences whether or not it is considered art. An action done in a gallery cannot help but be read as an intentionally constructed work of art. But what of an action done on the street? What kind of framing allows a viewer to interpret it as art? And, if they assume that it is art, how does that change the way the action is viewed?

These considerations lead to the question of what actually constitutes art. A live action can't be an investment object. It occupies space and time only temporarily. Nevertheless, it can challenge someone to imagine operating in the world differently, as they witness another body in action. What is true is that a live action can be generated nearly instantly in response to a situation, and it can happen anywhere. The performance artist is able to infiltrate and respond to a broad range of contexts.

## 1.2 The Witness

Witnesses serve a critical function in the live event. In coming to a performance, they have, as Kathy O'Dell articulates in her book, *Contract with the Skin*, entered into a contract with the artist. They are committing a portion of their lives that they will never recover, in order to be present for an action that has not yet happened. It unfolds over time, taking place in the same timeframe for both the artist and the viewer. Neither knows the outcome in advance, rather, they arrive at it together.

Why do the artists want someone to watch them do something? What does their action offer the viewer? What does a witness allow them to do? Is there an equal exchange between the parties, or does one take and the other give? Who is depleted? Who is enriched? Can both feel both simultaneously?

The presence of a witness to an action can heighten the stakes, holding the artist to her or his stated intentions, with the expectation that the action will be fully completed. The witness can provide moral support and encouragement when the artist is doing something that is difficult or challenging. The witness can also serve as a safety net, potentially stepping in to assist if something goes awry. They can also serve as the artist's eyes, reflecting back what has happened. They can verify that the action occurred, since they were witness to it, even after all physical evidence of it has disappeared.

Why would someone want to witness an action? For myself, curiosity about other people, how they think, what concerns they have, what they want to try to do, drives me to see performance. The opportunity to

witness activities that are not normally seen or ones that I would not do, pique my interest. At the same time I am also anxious. Will I be asked to do something, or to touch someone? Will I be given something to eat? What will I hear? What will I be asked to watch? In a live event, I am never sure what risks will be taken, what mistakes might happen, whether I will be put on the spot in some way, exposed or challenged or embarrassed. Will I react as I would wish? The risks are real, and the situation is never completely known nor in anyone's full control. Anything can happen.

### **1.3 The Collective Experience**

Live bodies, especially in an intimate setting where everyone is in close proximity, create a volatile dynamic. Viewers identify with the person in action, whether they are conscious of it or not. Their own bodies begin to mirror the same muscle tension and breathing patterns as the body they are watching. In turn, the artist is aware of the viewers watching, feeling their response to what is happening, seeing it through their eyes. This can create a heightened sense of awareness for the artist, making them feel both inside and outside the action simultaneously.

The experience is visceral. All one's senses are in play. Waves of feelings - excitement, anxiety, boredom, relief, laughter, fear, sadness, move between the artist and the viewers. Physical tension and release, elation and exhaustion, are mutual. All are sharing the same amount of time passing, inhaling the same degree of oxygen in the air, adjusting to the same temperature in the room, smelling and tasting the same odors, and hearing the same sounds. They are actually inhaling each other's breath, ingesting each other's molecules, becoming a part of everyone else during this shared time.

To witness a live action can feel a privilege: it will never happen again. One might tell other people about it, but it is not the same as experiencing it. Only those who were also there truly understand. And even then one discovers discrepancies. As viewers compare notes in retrospect, they discover that each had a unique experience. No one remembers everything, nor in precisely the same way.

### **1.4 Impact On The Body**

There are real consequences to every action in which one engages. Any action affects one both physically and psychologically. It is happening by and to one's body, and its impact cannot be discounted simply because it is called art.

Meanwhile, life does not stop while art occurs, so how are the two melded within an action? Why do we even need or want to make a distinction between life and art? What does the label of art sanction? For whose benefit is that label? What permission does it give the artist, or the viewer? What rules are suspended? What is allowed? What boundaries become more elastic? What is forgiven?

None of these questions have easy answers, but I would say that these are the central dilemmas of a performance artist. I would suggest that a performance artist uses the practice of art to give her or himself a context in which to do things that one wouldn't do in one's daily life – or perhaps not do as thoroughly or as publicly or with as much attention.

One of the compelling aspects of doing performance art is the opportunity to practice living fully in the moment. When one's senses are fully engaged and one's awareness is heightened, time slows down, and a kind of out-of-body experience occurs. The thrill is being able to shape the moment, control it, while being near the point of sensory overload. If everything is in tune, the experience can create a kind of ecstasy, and, with that, a sense of timelessness occurs. In other words, one feels, at least for that moment, omniscient and immortal.

And at that very same moment one also perceives the nature of time. One becomes acutely aware of the immediate loss of the moment that has just passed, of the disappearance of the work, of the fading of the memory of the work, and of the eventual vanishing of one's self. Nothing remains.

This constant reminder of the ephemerality of existence is humbling. It keeps one anchored in the reality of the moment, in feeling the profound limits of one's body, and conscious of the fragility of time, the specific qualities of the place, and the uniqueness of the witnesses. We are only here and it is only now.

## 2. Limits

### 2.1 A Teacher's Limits

How does one guide a student without directing the outcome? How does one respond to work that challenges one's own limits, aesthetically or ethically? How does one expose one's own biases without imposing them? My strategy is twofold. I ask the students to make work, rather than teaching them *how* to make work. And I focus on assisting them in articulating their own criteria for evaluation of success.

I have purposely avoided teaching techniques of performance. I do not want to teach a system or a method of creating work. I do not want the students to rely on my way of making work, but to devise their own approaches. I offer a combination of theoretical readings and examples of other artists' work, and pose questions to be examined through performance activities.

Nevertheless, one's own artistic values invariably impact what is done in the classroom. Increasingly I have tried to pay attention to the unspoken conditions or constraints that I put on the class and the work that they do. How can I actively acknowledge my own personal preferences, while at the same time providing space and respect for difference?

I am least interested in having students make work that looks like my own. While it is flattering to see one's work reflected in students' work, it really only serves the teacher's ego while doing the student a disservice. Our job as teachers should be to assist them in finding their own voices as artists.

I take it as a good sign when I am made uncomfortable by a student's work. It is an opportunity to consider what assumptions drive my preferences. To be challenged by work that I can't categorize, that feels completely unfamiliar, that is nothing like my own, that asks questions I never even considered, that pushes the borders, known and unknown, can only benefit me as both an artist and a teacher. It is my opportunity to learn.

### 2.2 A Student's Limits

It is a rare student who works outside of conventions. The majority of students come to school with quite conservative understandings of art. The work that they make resembles what they already know. It is always safer, and more comfortable, to create work that is familiar, and that fits into a niche that is already recognized as art.

How then do I help students to begin to work outside the frame? What are ways of giving them tools to create work that goes beyond the known, that is truly unique to themselves and their specific concerns? How do I encourage them to try things that can feel strange and unfamiliar? How do I help them estab-

lish the anchors that allow them to take risks in their work? How do I help them to accept that failure is part of the process, and that it is something from which you can learn?

I want students to be stimulated by the possibilities of the medium of performance, and use the immediacy of performance to experiment. What other practice can engage all the senses? What other medium allows such a range of materials? Where else can you work with such variables of time -- from seconds to years? The choice of spaces in which to show work is limitless. But perhaps most importantly, it remains grounded in the constraints of one's own body, in the here and now.

The value of the process of conceiving of an idea, doing it in front of others, and then analyzing the impact of the action on the self, the witness and the environment cannot be underestimated. The immediacy of the direct response of viewers, even while still engaged in the action, is invaluable feedback. Perhaps the most important aspect of live action that students learn is bravery: taking risks, trying something new, potentially failing. They learn that one can fail in front of others and survive, that it is possible to retain one's self respect as well as the respect of others. Learning that no one is perfect and that one's effort can be respected, no matter how fully or successfully the idea is realized, is ultimately freeing. When one is open and willing to discuss what didn't happen, or what happened instead, then one has entered the territory of learning, of gaining more knowledge of other possibilities than what was understood initially.

In this kind of learning environment it is important to establishing fair and respectful methods of discussing work and ways of analyzing one's intentions in order to evaluate the success of the outcome. If each person's work is unique to their own goals, then the final evaluation sits most directly on his or her own shoulders.

### 3. Classroom Practices

#### **3.1 Analysis Of Process Through Writing**

I encourage students to develop a practice of self-reflection. I ask them to write privately about their work, recording their initial ideas and plans for executing the work, clarifying their process or approach to developing the work, describing what actually happened, recording viewers' responses, and analyzing the process.

Writing immediately after the work, as well as days or weeks later, allows them to more fully examine the sources and outcomes of their work, as well as identify what they have learned and possible new directions to explore.

At the base of this endeavor is the task of evaluating one's own goals, in order to identify one's personal signs or guideposts of success. These may not resemble the more popular notions of success, so it is important for the artist to have a clear idea of why one makes art, for who one makes art, and what one wants out of the experience of making and showing art.

The activity of self-reflection through writing is a tool for the students to learn how to read their own work, in relation to their needs as a person and their goals as an artist. Engaging in this kind of deep analysis is the only way to develop their work to its fullest manifestation.

### **3.2 Analysis Of Work Through Discussion**

When work is shown in the classroom context, I ask for silence immediately after the performance is completed. In this silence, I ask the artist and viewers to write down their initial impressions, what they did or saw, what it made them feel, and what other associations it triggered. After that transition out of the work, we discuss it as a group, with the artist beginning the conversation. In classes with younger artists I direct that process and ask the artist to begin by talking about their intentions, what they were happy with, what surprised them, what they would do differently if they were to do it again, finally suggesting that they pose some questions for response from the viewers. With more experienced artists I simply inquire, "What do you want to tell us, and what do you want to ask us?" I also ask the more experienced students to write a day or so later on a class blog, responding to the discussion, and reflecting on how they will continue with the work and what they might do next.

As is evident, I try to keep the artist at the center of the process of evaluation. I believe it is critical for artists to learn to assess the progress of their work, and challenge themselves to develop it further. This is particularly useful in periods of time when their work does not fit the trends of the art world or the interests of curators and institutions.

Different strategies are required to succeed in different arenas, be they commercial galleries, international festivals, or community settings. Each type of venue in which one shows work has a different audience, a different critical community, and different steppingstones to recognition. Artists need to find ways to sustain their practice without becoming too reliant on validation by outside authority figures, who rarely have the same focus or agendas as the artist. The more clarity that one has about one's goals, the clearer the avenues of options become.

### **3.3 Reading Assignments**

The readings that I give students are often drawn from contexts outside of the art world. For example, in teaching a class on documentation, I have used texts from the cognitive sciences and anthropology that examine concepts of history and theories of memory. In teaching a class on durational performance, we study notions of time from different historical periods and other cultures. Texts on sociological experiments in non-verbal communication, short stories, media theory, communication theory, literary theory, as well as contemporary performance theory are also used in classes. All are incorporated in an effort to encourage the students to consider how and why they think about the world in the way that they do.

Artists' texts and video documentation of historical works provide the students with a context for their work. Learning about the more radical and conceptual work in performance that takes place around the world also serves to challenge them to think beyond the more familiar theatrically-based performances that are often seen in the United States. Discussions about physical risk, ethical and moral issues, the responsibility of the artist and the role of the audience are part of this study of other artists' work.

## **4. Class Activities**

### **4.1 The Classroom**

I think of each class as a kind of performance. I consider it my responsibility as a teacher to design experiences that allow the students to experiment and learn in relation to their own contexts and their own needs. Therefore the task is to create exercises that give space for many different approaches, without being so open-ended that no challenge exists.

Anyone who has done improvisational work knows that it is most difficult to make choices that move beyond what you normally do and what is comfortable to do. Posing particular questions or suggesting specific constraints often provide the incentive that allows someone to step beyond the familiar into something new. I have tried to stop using the words 'performance' or 'art' in my classes, to speak more directly about actions and communication.

What follows are a few examples of exercises that I have devised, with some observations as to what elements allow the students to move into new territory when they do them.

#### **4.2 Exercise: Demonstrating And Doing**

In one exercise that I have done with beginning students I give a simple set of instructions:

- a) demonstrate something that you know, and
- b) do something that you have never done before.

I ask them to use real materials, pretend nothing, and engage in a minimum of language when presenting the work.

The conversation afterwards quickly explores the psychological differences between knowing and not knowing, and what the role of a witness is in both versions. The students discuss how they feel about doing something in front of others, and how it feels when they know what they are doing vs. when they don't know what will happen.

This exercise allows one to practice, to develop trust. If one is going to take risks, then one must be prepared to fail. It is important to experience being less than successful in an endeavor, to understand that one can survive it. And generally the public will retain respect for the effort, recognizing perhaps better than one's self that no one is perfect. It is also probable that one learns more from something that hasn't worked as envisioned than if it had gone exactly according to plan. Other possibilities open up that probably hadn't been initially considered.

When an action does not go according to plan, it is generally because materials or tools don't behave as imagined. This is a good opportunity to consider whether the failure is where the actual dilemma of the work resides. Often what we resist the most, the aspect that we try to avoid or slide over, is the real center of the endeavor. Rather than ignoring or avoiding the parts that are difficult, confronting those challenges might be when the work becomes most interesting and revealing. Witnessing an action that is done easily and perfectly is generally less engaging than watching someone work to overcome an obstacle. What falls away in this approach of simply doing is the affect of performing, and the inclination to make the action look artful, based on preconceived notions of what art or performance should be.

#### **4.3 Exercise: Relationship To The Audience**

I have used this exercise in the first weeks of a beginning performance class. It focuses more specifically on the relationship that the artist creates with an audience. The assignment, for which they have a week to prepare, is:

- Design a pleasurable activity to do with the entire class.

I ask that they not use the sense of sight, but instead work with the other senses.

On the surface, this appears to be a very simple task. The immediate challenge for visual artists is to work with their other senses rather than sight. The second challenge is to find an activity that allows the whole class to be involved. Sound can emanate throughout a space, but anything that incorporates smell or taste or touch is a more individual activity, and suddenly the complication of working with a group of people

becomes an issue. How do you orchestrate a group event that continues the idea of pleasure over the time that it takes to engage with everyone? What do you do with the people who are waiting to participate? What happens afterwards to those who have already engaged with the activity? How do you ask and receive permission to do something that is intimate? What happens when you bypass the cultural norms involving touch? How do you convince someone to ingest something that they have received from a relative stranger?

Perhaps the most telling aspect of this exercise concerns notions of pleasure. What the students quickly learn is that whatever each of them considers pleasurable is probably not pleasurable for everyone. It is a good lesson in understanding that one can never anticipate the past experiences and personal preferences that each person in an audience brings to the situation. What one offers as an artist is only a single perspective. How others receive it or understand it, and what they get out of it, is never in the artist's control.

#### **4.4 Exercise: On Experiencing Ephemerality**

In a course on documenting ephemeral work, I begin by examining the reasons that we try to hold onto the past, as well as the ways that our memories are fluid and elusive. Early in the course I give this task:

- Choose a place nearby that you have always wanted to visit and see - but have not yet gone.
- Go there, taking as much time as you wish to explore and experience the place.
- Before you leave, choose one object to bring back as a souvenir. Only one.
- And finally, you must agree never to return to that place again.

Initially this exercise appears mundane, until the final stipulation of never returning is added. The most revealing part of the process is each student's debate on where they will go, knowing that they can't return. The ones that choose the place they most desire have the most intense experience, and those who play it safe have the least meaningful experience.

I designed this exercise in an effort to replicate the experience of making a performance or other ephemeral work, and the profound feeling of loss that can occur when it is over. In particular, I am interested in pointing out that it is not unlike one's own life, in that you cannot return to the past, but only save a relic or memory of it.

The students report on their experiences the following week, bringing their souvenir to show to the rest of the class. I ask that they keep the object throughout the semester. In the final week I ask them again to tell us about the excursion. In just a few months, their memory of the activity has already changed. Different aspects of their experience have risen to the surface, shifting their understanding of the event.

The question of investment of oneself in the work is at the heart of this exercise. It is my desire not to waste anyone's time or energy with meaningless tasks. It is important to make full use of our time and our experiences, in order to learn as much as possible about ourselves, and the world in which we live. The final instruction provides the chance to take the challenge seriously, as a real life experience. We will not be here forever. An experience is only as intense as we allow it to be, and the degree to which we learn something from it about ourselves has everything to do with how much we put into it.

#### **4.5 Exercise: Experiencing A Site**

This is a multi-part exercise, which can take hours or days. I have expanded it in different directions, depending on whether I have been working with experienced practitioners or young beginning students.

I ask that the students work in silence, refraining from idle conversation with each other, even between the different stages of the exercise. I ask that they use the activity as a kind of meditation, and to maintain an inward awareness and focus even as they engage with the world around them.

*Part One:*

The exercise is really a series of excursions outdoors in the nearby vicinity. In the initial walk they are asked choose a route through an area with which they are less familiar, and to pay attention to everything around them, making use of all their senses. They return and are asked to write about everything that they remember from their walk. The next questions for writing are more specific. "To what were you most attracted? What was most interesting? What was most surprising? What did you ignore? What did you resist?"

After writing, they are asked to close their eyes and recall the walk: which places were the most charged, had the most energy, or the most unanswered questions? In other words, to which places in the walk did they want to return in order to continue their examination?

*Part Two:*

On the second excursion they are asked to return to one place of interest, paying attention on the way to everything that they had overlooked the first time. But once they arrive at the chosen place, the instruction is more specific. They are asked to stay in that location and let the site enter and change them in some way. I ask them not to anticipate in advance what might transpire, nor try to do or make something occur, but instead to go there and be open and wait until somehow, something in the place changes them. I assure them that they will recognize when it happens.

On their return, they again write about the experience. And then they answer another set of questions: "How did you know when something had happened to you? Could you be open and wait, or did you make something happen? How do you understand the notion of 'being open?' To what are you able to be open? To what do you remain closed? What does that reveal about yourself? What did you overlook?"

*Part Three:*

The final task is to return to the site in order to give something back to it. In the explanation of this action I suggest that since they have gotten something from the place, this is an opportunity to give something back in exchange for what they received. It doesn't need to be the same thing, but somehow be its equivalent. A suggestion of another way to think of it is that if the place gave them something they needed, then what do they think it might want or need in return? How does one manifest reciprocity?

On their return, they again write about what they had done. The following questions are then asked: "How did you feel about what you gave? Was it sufficient, and appropriate? How was it received? What does your choice reveal about yourself?"

The most unusual and generally the most difficult part of this exercise is the task of waiting for something to happen to oneself. We more often think of art as proactive, as doing something that we want to do, telling others something that we need to express, showing them something that we understand. But how is it possible to make a response if one doesn't allow the world to enter and affect one in some way? No discovery happens without being open to that which is unknown. And once that collision with the unknown occurs, change happens... This is how we learn, and it is the only way that we grow, by adjusting our thinking in light of new information. The encounter with something new might seem to be minor, but it is never insignificant.

So, the practice is of waiting, of being open and paying attention to what is happening around oneself and to oneself. How does one willingly allow oneself to be vulnerable? This is another kind of risk. How does one assess and trust one's own boundaries of safety? And then, how does one measure change in oneself?

Again, this is another activity in which the degree that participants learn from it is related to how much effort they put into it. If they engage with it seriously, and in particular if they take the time to fully answer the questions in their writing, they can use this activity to interrogate their practice, not only as artists, but as people – how they operate in the real world.

## 5. Some Practical Issues When Teaching Performance in an Institution

How does one teach a medium that, in theory, knows no bounds and has no rules within the context of an institution of higher education? In following health and safety mandates of the institution, as well having 'in loco parentis' responsibilities, our job as teachers is to establish a safe learning context. But our students in performance are making work with their own bodies. Given the history of the medium, as well as the feeling of invulnerability that youth have, risk-taking is invariably part of the work. How does one set up guidelines that establish safe and ethical boundaries, while maintaining the highest degree of freedom within them?

Needless to say, creating a safe environment is an ongoing endeavor, requiring continual discussions with the students. It is not as simple as giving a list of chemicals with which to avoid contact, or when to wear masks. Each action that a student chooses to do, every material with which they choose to work, has to be evaluated. Helping them to understand the limits of their own bodies in relation to their work is key. Knowing when to trust the students' knowledge of themselves and what they are doing vs. intervening and stopping an action can only be the result of ongoing analysis of the content and methods of working. Discussions with the students need to move beyond a superficial understanding of the student and her or his motives for making art to more substantive discussions of their understanding of themselves, their views of art, of the art world and beyond, and the place they desire in it. Nevertheless, risk is always present – and I try to always remain alert so that I don't make the wrong call and fail to step in soon enough to stop something that has become too dangerous.

Ultimately, I ask students to not only be responsible for themselves, but to remember their responsibility to others and the world around them. We live with, and in relation to, others in the world. I believe our obligation as human beings on this planet is to respect others, and leave the world a better place than we found it. While performance artists might take certain risks that others don't consider taking, being artists does not absolve them from responsibility. If anything, they need to be more cognizant of the impact of their actions, both on themselves and on others. The impact may not only be immediate, or simply physical. Long-term effects can occur as well to the psyches of all involved.

## Last Thoughts

Regardless of my desires to the contrary, my approach to teaching still reveals my own preferences in art making. While much of art is about showing or telling others what one knows, or attempting to convince them to agree with one's own viewpoint, I am more interested in an art practice that is about discovery. What is the point of doing something that you already know? Perhaps the intention in that kind of work is to practice until it is perfect, or simply to impress others with one's authority. I am much more interested in the risk of the unknown, in devising actions as experiments, in order to learn something that one doesn't already know. That seems much more challenging, and ultimately more satisfying. Besides, why are we here in this world, if not to learn and change and grow?

Teaching has given me that opportunity to continually ask questions - both of myself and of the students. And the field of performance art, by its nature and history, has provided the perfect context for continual exploration and experimentation and discovery.