

WHY PERFORMANCE?

PAUL COUILLARD



Paul Couillard, *Sitting With The Mountain*, 2007. Image Credit: Miklos Legrady

Prologue: A Well-Rehearsed Story

Performance art saved my life. In the early 1980s, I was living in Ottawa and working for Canada Post as a Writer/Analyst. My job was to answer correspondence addressed to the President of Canada Post, primarily from people with complaints about their mail service. Working from a file that contained the original letter and a report from the field, I would generate a response that would be signed by a machine and sent to the complainant. My productivity was measured not according to how successful the Corporation was in addressing the complaint, but by how many letters I managed to answer each day. The job paid very well, but for me it was an Orwellian trajectory toward 1984. I felt like my soul was dying.

The glimmer of a solution to this crisis came when I attended a performance by Rachel Rosenthal.¹ To say that I was impressed by this event would be an understatement. When the piece ended, and the audi-

¹ *Gaia, Mon Amour*, presented on November 12, 1983 at SAW Gallery, 55 Byward Market Square, Ottawa.

ence got up to leave, I sat in my folding chair in a state of awe – reluctant to leave, unable to speak – and thought to myself, “I guess this is what I have to do to heal myself.” To use an old-fashioned turn of phrase, I responded to a calling. Within a year, I quit my civil service job and began working in Canada’s artist-run centre network as a creator and organizer. I tell this story because it reveals values that are central to my art practice. Inspiration, faith, and duty are key principles that organize my understanding of what I do as an artist.

A Two-Fold Approach

*To someone unacquainted with water, snow, ice and steam would seem like three unrelated materials, rather than one substance in three differing states as a result of specific conditions. These conditions can change. I query unthinking adherence to questionably fixed, arbitrary, and ‘applied’ values in art. What and where’s the underlying ‘substance’? How fixed is it?*²

This essay, originally written in support of my MFA thesis exhibition,³ unfolds in two parts. One is this text; the other is a recorded artist talk. What you are reading now engages its audience in the manner of a written, somewhat academic text. The artist talk – an audio recording of an actual event dubbed over photo and video documentation from past performances – is narrative, descriptive, conversational and responsive to the conditions of its recording. In speech, I try to give listeners a sense of past performances through descriptions of what happened, conveying the experience as story rather than reflecting in a theoretical way about what informs or motivates the work. The recording includes intonations and vocal glitches – pauses, repetitions, contradictions – that carry their own affective weight. The recording conveys a sense of “liveness” that the written text does not, if only because I have tried not to tamper with its immediacy as a recording, whereas this text has undergone substantial editing and revision.

Using two different forms, which I weight equally, is an attempt to open up a space of possibility (an excess) that generates both gaps and links between sensorial experience and intellectual conception. Both ways of knowing are crucial to the research and learning process that I call making art. I am not suggesting that the recording produces a purely experiential event, or that reading the text is a strictly conceptual exercise. I acknowledge that reading includes moments of lived experience, and that watching and listening engage thought. Nevertheless, the mechanics of their production inspire different types of expression, and I use one to assist me where the other seems to fall short, because these two ways of knowing are implicated in each other.

Knowing extends to both mental and physical processes, as evidenced by language metaphors such as “grasping” a concept. For me, performance art is a theoretical research into the conditions of existence, a research that must be conducted with and through our bodies, and that produces meaning by exploring at the edge of known or posited limits. Imbricating writing and audiovisual materials is an attempt to hint at a key characteristic of performance art, which engages multiple senses for their synergistic effect.

² From an unpublished set of lecture notes by Alastair MacLennan.

³ *Sitting with the Mountain*, a 30-day performance installation work (activated eight hours a day) presented at Toronto’s offthemap-gallery, April 6 – May 5, 2007. Exhibition documentation here: http://www.ccca.ca/performance_artists/c/couillard/. Artist talk available here: <http://totalartjournal.com/archives/2747/sitting-with-the-mountain/>

Why Performance?

*It takes weeks, months and years for images to 'settle', for resonance to fully evolve in mind... or less than a second... to 'see' beneath societal Facelift.*⁴

Current art historical models trace performance art's lineage through various modernist movements beginning in the early twentieth century, an approach perhaps most successfully popularized by RoseLee Goldberg.⁵ To put it simply, performance art is identified as a recurring phenomenon in visual art movements beginning with the Futurists. My approach to understanding performance art has relied less on tracing its progress in Western art history than on exploring the basic elements of all performance practices – time, space, the performer's body, and the relationship between performer and audience – thus opening up possibilities for linking what I do as a performance artist not only to art history, but also to other practices such as performing arts, ritual, sports, social gatherings and public behaviour. In this sense, my view of *performance art* corresponds closely to the understanding of the broader term *performance* put forth by Richard Schechner in the introduction to his seminal collection of essays, *Performance Theory*.⁶ For me, performance art consists of a contested set of practices – always in negotiation and changing according to time and place – that consider or use all of these basic elements, while at the same time exploring or approaching one or more of them in ways that call into question our cultural expectations around how they can be brought together to create form.⁷

It may seem accidental that my calling came in a visual arts context. *Gaia, Mon Amour*, the work that galvanized my attention, might easily have been presented in a theatre rather than a gallery space, with its narrative conventions and Rachel's virtuosity as a performer. In my formative years, I grew up immersed in theatre and music, while the visual arts only seemed to emphasize my clumsiness when it came to constructing objects or manipulating materials. I had always found the process of rehearsal exhilarating, and my shyness in everyday life vanished on the stage. My faith in theatre had been stymied, however, by my experience as an audience member. I loved being *in* theatre, but rarely enjoyed *watching* it, because I was disquieted by a sense of exclusion as a viewer. Part of what drew me to *Gaia, Mon Amour* was the intimacy of the gallery setting: Rachel was physically near to me rather than on a raised stage, and I felt something of the force of her as a living person inhabiting a role.

Certainly, what I do as a performance artist is not exclusively visual. I tend to create works that appeal to many of the audience's senses – aural, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, proprioceptive, kinaesthetic – usually with an underlying imperative to explore possibilities for intersubjective experience. Where many visual

⁴ MacLennan, *ibid.*

⁵ See, for example, Goldberg's *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, although there are also other notable texts, including Kristine Stiles' chapter introduction "Performance Art" in *Theories and Elements of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, eds. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz.

⁶ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* second edition (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), xvi-xix.

⁷ It is my insistent belief that art is precisely about form – art is a practice that attempts to *form* elements in a meaningful way. Form is what allows us to attach meaning to our experience; form is what reveals. I am not suggesting here a fealty to the Greek idea of a universal form that precedes or supersedes matter. Form is not necessarily universal; rather, form is something temporary and in-the-moment, a contingent and conscious attempt at shaping or becoming that generates a recognition, a feeling of insight or a sense of meaningfulness.

artists might describe themselves as object-makers, I say that I create situations.⁸ Yet most performing artists tend to describe themselves as storytellers, while in my work the story is something that only exists in retrospect, as a kind of documentation. My meeting ground with the visual arts comes through the idea of the *image*; that is, I create situations through the use or construction of images.

The word *image* has a variety of meanings, several of them tied to optics, some to representation, and some to the broader notion of an idea or impression.⁹ While I realize that the visual arts tend to focus on the former meanings, it is in the link to the latter, and in the common root between image and imagine, that I stake my claim. An image may well be a picture, or a visual representation, but in my lexicon, an image can also be a mood, a sound, a texture. An image may be a specific detail (a small slip of paper with a name on it, balanced halfway over the edge of a table), a sensory experience (the smell of rot emanating from dead fish and pigs' ears), a duration (the accumulation of 30 hours of focused attention on the setting of a 30-foot long table), or an overall affect (a feeling of sorrow or dread generated by these images in combination).¹⁰

On the level of perception, images can (and do) represent, allowing them to act as signs. What images also carry, however, is an excess, a *presence in the moment* that cannot be fully contained or apprehended within the realm of the symbolic. Images' material presence appeals to the senses, stimulating the production of new meanings that are contingent on the time and space of the present. By conjoining sense and perception, images offer potential points or moments of mediation; they provide an opening for translating sensation into representation, and, significantly, also for translating representation into sensation. Images *remind* us, associating sensory information with particular thoughts or theoretical understandings, but images also *affect* us.

In their book *What is Philosophy?*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe a work of art as “a *bloc of sensations* [that is to say a compound of *percepts and affects*].”¹¹ In such a “bloc of sensations,” they assert, affects and percepts¹² are bound together. It is in this tension – between the imagined signs (the meanings identified in the mind through perception) produced by an image and the sensual liveness of the image's presence (with its affects not yet contained as representation) – that new meanings can be produced or generated. What begins as an inassimilable remainder – a gap or an excess – has the potential to *become* mean-

⁸ *Situation* as a term has been used to theorize a turn within visual arts toward context-specific, site-specific and socially engaged and relational art practices, most notably in two anthologies compiled by Claire Doherty, *Contemporary Art from Studio to Situation* (2004) and *Situation* (2009). Performance is one of many visual art practices that are considered in these books. In using the term ‘situation’ to describe my own work, I am thinking not only of the spatial contingency (i.e. site) suggested by the term's etymology, but also an implied temporal contingency, an openness to unfolding. To ‘situate’ is to focus one's attention on a set of circumstances in which one finds oneself; or, to put it another way, to announce a becoming. This suggests that to create a situation is to draw attention to one's place within a trajectory; with the intent of being mindful to the as-yet-uncertain paths that trajectory may follow.

⁹ E.g. “image, n. Artificial imitation of the external form of an object, e.g. statue (esp. of saint etc. as object of veneration); optical counterpart produced by rays of light reflected from mirror, refracted through lens, etc.; form, semblance; counterpart, as he is the very ~ of his father; type, simile, metaphor; idea, conception.” From *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English Fifth Edition*.

¹⁰ This selection of images is taken from Alastair MacLennan's performance *Emit Time Item*, presented by Fado Performance Inc. as part of the series *Time Time Time* in Toronto in 1999.

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 163. Emphasis in original in all quotations unless otherwise specified.

¹² Their use of these terms is meant to suggest the transcendence of the personal: “Percepts are no longer perceptions; they are independent of those who experience them. Affects are no longer feelings or affections; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them.” *Philosophy?*, 164.

ingful through a negotiation or navigation of the overlap of sense and perception. Indeed, it is the excess itself that, as a point of intersection, provides a ground for the recognition of new sensations and the formation of new meanings.¹³ Thus, for the Cartesian subject whose ‘body’ and ‘mind’ have been split, images offer a potential translation mechanism for these two loci of knowledge to communicate. Put another way, I am suggesting that images can operate in a way similar to metaphor, making links between experience and meaning that can be recognized or understood by both our bodily senses and our intellect.

The Way Things Are Going / They’re Gonna Reify Me¹⁴

*If one takes seriously the idea of mediation, [...] the idea that form and matter are really moments which can only be conceived in relation to each other, the question as to which of them comes absolutely first or is ranked absolutely higher becomes transparent as a false abstraction. And one will then trace the forms of the concrete mediation of these moments, instead of treating the product of abstraction which keeps them apart as the only rightful source of truth.*¹⁵

*To the degree that live performance attempts to enter into the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology.*¹⁶

The images that visual artists create tend to take the form of objects. This primacy of the object often proves to be a stumbling block to understanding how performance art might be situated within a visual arts matrix. Despite a tradition of conceptual art that has championed ideas – with or without physical objects attached to them – as artworks, performance art still tends to be categorized and theorized in ways that relate back to objects. Body art, for example, focuses on the physical insertion or use of the performer’s body as part of the artwork. Fluxus works often take the form of physical texts, scores or instructions. Installation performances may persist as sculptural environments after the performance has ended. Documents of performances – video, stills, and physical remainders – are displayed in galleries beside original artworks such as paintings and sculptures, suggesting that they carry the same value as works of art. In a similar way, works originally designed with an experiential component such as Yoko Ono’s *Ceiling Painting (YES Painting)* (1966) are now redefined as sculptural objects.¹⁷ This relentless focus on the objects of performance obscures the objectives of performance art. In performance, I may or may not make objects as part of my process. Documentation may or may not be produced or persist after the event. Such

¹³ For a description of how such an excess can function to produce meaning, refer to my essay on Mimi Nakajima’s *Wind doesn’t blow branches*. [insert hyperlink <http://www.performanceart.ca/index.php?m=pubarticle&id=9>]

¹⁴ To be sung to the tune of *The Ballad Of John and Yoko*.

¹⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 41.

¹⁶ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 146.

¹⁷ When this work was included in *YES YOKO ONO*, a retrospective show that toured North America (presented in Toronto at the Art Gallery of Ontario from February 23 to May 20, 2002), it was displayed as a museum piece on a raised platform behind a barrier, available for visual inspection but pointedly not for bodily interaction in the manner that was critical to its conceptual underpinnings.

residue should not be understood to be the essential material of the performance.¹⁸ They are not the intended end result of my process. Rather, they are images, or layers of an image, that contribute to the creation of a situation tied to specific times and places.

Further, I suggest that even the positing of individual performances as *works* (i.e. as objects) is somewhat misleading. The work, which in this case should be understood as a *verb* rather than a *noun*, happens in the situation, rather than existing *in* or even *as* a produced object. In writing this, I butt up against a bias imbedded in our language, an operation or utility that language performs that is so pervasive as to be invisible. This bias is the very process of reification. The English language expresses experience, process, thought, duration – not to mention all verbs in the form of gerunds – as things. In doing so, these phenomena, occurrences that occupy not space so much as time, are reduced (or translated) to three dimensions. Time as an essential quality of these occurrences' being or suchness is erased; indeed, time itself is transformed into a noun, a spatial concept, into something that has three-dimensional *thingness*.

Duration and Becoming: Little Facts With Big Meaning

Time reveals itself in the changes enacted in material; it is not material in and of itself. Time flows; time progresses. What we name and record as time is not really a fixed thing, but rather, the fixed *effects* of time that reveal an occurrence: time's presence and passage. In the words of Henri Bergson, time must be "*lived*,"¹⁹ not observed as if we were outside of it. According to Bergson, "Instead of attaching ourselves to the inner becoming of things, we place ourselves outside them in order to recompose their becoming artificially. We take snapshots, as it were, of the passing reality."²⁰ This false understanding is a "cinematographical" way of thinking in which we imagine time as a series of frozen moments strung together. As an alternative to this, Bergson describes what our consciousness experiences as duration: "our duration is not merely one instant replacing another. [...] Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances."²¹ For Bergson, reality is not static, but a becoming. This

¹⁸ As Philip Auslander does when he argues for the 'performativity' of documentation: "The purpose of most performance art documentation is to make the *artist's work* available to a larger audience, not to capture the performance as an 'interactional accomplishment' to which a specific audience and a specific set of performances coming together in specific circumstances make equally significant contributions." Philip Auslander, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation," *PAJ* 84 (2006): 6. For Auslander, a staged document involving the artist's body – he uses the photographs of Cindy Sherman as one example – can be viewed as a performance. "It may well be that our sense of the presence, power and authenticity of these pieces derives from perceiving the document itself *as a performance* that directly reflects an artist's aesthetic project or sensibility and for which we are the present audience." Auslander, 9. While it is true that as images, objects can exert a certain sense of presence, and that the act of encounter with an object involves duration, I disagree with Auslander. True, the residual documents of a performance can exist as artworks in their own right. Further, it is quite possible to use one's own body in the staging of an artwork without requiring a live audience, and to experience the feeling that the recording instrument (e.g. camera, tape recorder) enacts an audience-like presence in relation to the activity; however, the use of the word 'performance' to describe these events demonstrates how far current notions of 'performativity' have strayed from the aspects of performance that, for me, are critical, i.e. precisely the *interactional accomplishments* that cannot be adequately captured or reproduced by documentation.

¹⁹ "If I want to mix a glass of sugar and water, I must [...] wait until the sugar melts. This little fact is big with meaning. For here the time I have to wait is not that mathematical time which would apply equally well to the entire history of the material world, even if that history were spread out instantaneously in space. It coincides with my impatience, that is to say, with a certain portion of my own duration, which I cannot protract or contract as I like. It is no longer something *thought*, it is something *lived*." Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (Mineola: Dover Publications Inc., 1998), 9-10.

²⁰ Bergson, 306.

²¹ Bergson, 4.

becoming can be understood as a continual transformation whose individual points are states one passes through without ever *being* in.

While Bergson equates duration with consciousness rather than inorganic materials, I believe that if we adopt an understanding of experience as becoming, we can begin to perceive how all objects, even those that appear to be fixed, are also continually becoming. A bronze sculpture acquires a patina over time; the surface of an oil painting eventually begins to crack. Even a conservator's best efforts to preserve an object can only temporarily forestall the inevitable transformation of material that is being effected continually, and that maps (but does not constitute) time. The fact that these durations may be longer than those of an individual consciousness only creates an *illusion* of fixity. Where objects appear to support the illusion of timelessness, performance art, with its imbedded temporality, points to an acknowledgment of becoming. This quality of becoming, which reveals all of our understandings to be contingent, underlies my faith in performance art as a tool for transformation. If we are always becoming, then transformation is not only possible, but inevitable and continuous.

Responsiveness

*One concentrates on what one's doing as one does it, to 'fuse' with the activity, at the same time keeping mind open to the potentiality of what might develop. One can, by remaining 'receptive', make ongoing alterations, as appropriate.*²²

Every performance operates across time, and therefore offers possibilities for movement, change and transformation. Time's inflection has a broad significance within performance, in that it opens up the possibility of producing knowledge in a context that includes an acknowledgment of its continual becoming. Additionally, every performance involves a *specific* time and space that is not only imagined or represented, but also inhabited.

In his *Metaphysics* lectures, Theodor Adorno notes how the timelessness we tend to attribute to things (as when we consider space without time) is an artificial abstraction; disregarding the unique spatial and temporal character of a situation can fool us into falsely attributing essential or timeless qualities to that situation.²³ I make a similar claim in relation to performance art, arguing that the particular space and time of its enactment is crucial to what it is.

The performing arts tend to be constructed (and marketed) on the notion of repeatability.²⁴ In most performing arts forms, a particular set of transformations – developed through various generative, organizational and interpretive processes in advance of the performance itself – are displayed, simulated or represented. Thus, transformation is acknowledged, but its outcome, or trajectory, is fixed. Time appears to be performed rather than *lived*. This is as much an illusion as the fixed time or timelessness of the object. Indeed, it is an inherent paradox of theatre that even though a performance may be rehearsed for weeks or months, and then re-enacted a thousand times, it is never exactly the same twice. Time does not repeat itself.

²² MacLennan, unpublished lecture notes.

²³ See Adorno, 70-71.

²⁴ Texts – e.g. scripts, scores, and choreographies – inherently suggest that the elements considered necessary to reproduce an individual work can be codified, while rehearsal processes attempt to regulate timing, gesture, emotional timbre and so forth so that they will progress identically from performance to performance. I would argue that this is another a form of reification in the way it proposes to shape experience as a material and to fix its mechanics through language.

Of course, not all performing arts events rely on repeatability. The word improvisation is often used to describe works that are performed without reliance on a text or a rehearsal process. In these cases, however, the focus tends to be either on working within a predetermined set of rules, or on the performer's command or virtuosity of her technique. What is being improvised is the actor's acting, the dancer's dancing, or the musician's music. This implies that improvisation is informed by a pre-existing context provided by a recognized body of extant, scripted works. In this sense, improvisation is a dialogue with the genre, discipline or form that supports it.

I prefer to describe my approach as *responsive*, a word intended to bring attention to the idea of performance as exploration or process rather than as product or result. When I work, I do not seek to represent a particular, fixed trajectory (as, for example, in storytelling, where the conclusion is predetermined). Although I begin with a set of intentions, impressions, images, actions, tasks, parameters, I do not know what they will become. My only enduring imperative is to explore the limits of my own responsiveness to the specific qualities of time, space and audience that occur during the interval of existence that I designate as encompassing the performance. The images I develop, the situations I construct, are questions more than answers. I think of them as propositions, part of whose potential I discover by inhabiting them in my body in relation to a particular time, space and audience. Sometimes I am compelled to abandon my given task in the course of a performance. Usually I am led to redefine my understanding of what it is I think I am doing partway through its duration. Generally I cannot accurately predict what discoveries will emerge from doing what I do.

Nearness

Saturday, 12:30 pm – I take a break from writing my text on Friday night's performances to go in search of Alastair MacLennan, who I am told is doing something along A Street. It's a desolate patch of road, lined with industrial buildings and punctuated by the occasional passing vehicle, but there are no shops to create a sense of street life. I don't see Alastair's familiar presence – long black coat, black trousers, black shoes – anywhere, only a few traces that evoke his liminal touch. A black plastic bag floats along the street, tossed in unexpected and beautiful patterns by cold gusts of wind and the air currents of the passing cars and trucks. Could Alastair have left that bag there? Could he have calculated its course in this wind? Could he be the wind? I find a ragged bit of videotape on the sidewalk, trailing from a fist-sized black rock. Could this be a sign of his presence? Is he watching from a window, or from behind one of the truck containers parked across the street? I cast a glinty stare at them, just in time to see the plastic bag's flight reach an unceremonious end as a gust of wind flattens it against a stretch of chain link fence. No, it's unlikely that he is here. I have no time left to search, I must return to work. Walking up the street toward the Midway Theatre, I see a woman in a long black coat running in the distance. Her back is to me: she is getting farther away with each step. This is not an image that I would consider characteristic of Alastair's work, but the way she is dressed takes me back to his work. Alastair is not here, but my awareness of his presence, somewhere near, permeates everything I see.²⁵

Time allows for the possibility of transformation, with its particular qualities of duration and becoming. However, performance occurs not only in time, but also in space. Space offers a position, a place of mate-

²⁵ From "Saturday Day/Night, November 4, 2006," a blog entry produced as part of a commissioned commentary on the 2006 Mobius International Performance Art Festival.

rial agency where one can take up relationships with something “other.”²⁶ If time is *how* we exist, space is *where* we exist; or, to transpose what I am saying to a set of terms considered by Emmanuel Levinas, if time allows *existence* to occur, then space allows the *existent* to manifest. Space is the realm of *things*, the ground that allows us to imagine the notion of form – a recognizable shape or territory that carries meaning. Space is where the existent (the somethings undergoing the process of becoming) can be found, the plane of matter and of stratification. It is in space, where positions can be fixed²⁷ and whose multiple planes offer the possibility of movement in all directions, that we can posit the idea of relationships, of *relative* positions. Form consists not only of substance, but also of relationship. And in our language, these spatial concepts are also linked to notions of concern or care.

Matter is substance, but to say that something matters is to suggest that we attach importance to it, that it interests or concerns us. At the same time, proximity is linked linguistically to one’s level of concern: to say that I am close to someone is to suggest that I care deeply for that person. Levinas equates nearness with a sense of ethical responsibility for an other,²⁸ extending the French term *proximité* beyond its spatial meaning.²⁹ The sense of *closeness* that space allows is a key characteristic of performance art. Thus, liveness and being in direct contact with an audience generate qualitatively different feelings than those associated with other time-based arts such as video. It is important to me that when my body and the bodies of audience members gather together in a space, we breathe the same air. I seek, in this physical proximity, the *proximité* of Levinas, believing that this shared concern and sense of responsibility for each other will also facilitate the possibility of finding a collective coherence of meaning or understanding – a form that *expresses*.

In the performing arts, conventions dictate the audience’s physical position relative to the performer and each other. In theatres, an audience member’s body is generally quieted and stilled. Audience members are most often seated in a darkened space. Further, the audience is set apart from the performer and grouped close together, creating a sense of the audience as a single, collective Other to which the performer plays. The performer is placed on a delineated stage, often raised. These conventions assume that it is the performer’s actions that constitute the event, and that the ideal sensory relationship to the performer involves visibility and audibility. They also assume that the performer’s primary source of relationship is through his or her script or to fellow performers, since the audience is rendered invisible.

In the image-based situations that I create, however, these assumptions rarely hold true. The event is seldom centred on communicating a fixed message that the audience receives through a contained set of

²⁶ Here I am extending my meaning beyond the psychoanalytic use of the term Other, to suggest anything that appears to have a manifestation outside of what we understand to be our individual selves, including other bodies, the space around us, and even all time outside of the present.

²⁷ Indeed, it would appear that this ability to fix a position in space is an experience so powerful that, as Bergson suggests, it even leads us to *imagine* that somehow time might be conceived as fixed in the form of instants or moments.

²⁸ “The other concerns me as a neighbor [*prochain*]. In every death is shown the nearness of the neighbor, and the responsibility that the approach of proximity [*proximité*] moves or agitates [*meut ou émeut*].” Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 17. Also, the translator’s note that accompanies this passage: “Nearness,” or *proximité*, is the mode by which an other concerns me ethically. Therefore his “nearness” can approach me without being tautological. – Trans.” *God*, 246.

²⁹ “[T]he proximity of the Other is not simply close to me in space, or close like a parent, but he approaches me essentially insofar as I feel myself – insofar as I am – responsible for him. It is a structure that in no wise resembles the intentional relation which in knowledge attaches us to the object – to no matter what object, be it a human object. Proximity does not revert to this intentionality; in particular it does not revert to the fact that the other is known to me.” Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 97.

representations. Rather, the performance as a situation provides an experiential mechanism for us – performer and audience together – to develop shared meaning. This is true even in cases where the work is not overtly interactive. I often attempt to engage the audience’s haptic and interoceptive senses, de-emphasizing visuality and encouraging movement through the space. I organize actions in ways that allow audience members to take up various perspectives in relationship to my body and to the situation (including positions within or as part of the image). I may encourage intimate (one-on-one or small group) interactions. I may touch audience members. These tactics promote proximity and the audience’s sense of involvement and investment in the image.

Ethics of the Witnessed

*One’s very aware of the physicality one’s in. I’m not transported to a ‘beyond’. We are in the here and now. ‘Entertainment’ as art attempts to take spectators out of their situation and transport them ‘elsewhere’. It’s a form of escape. I want people more alert to the actuality we’re in.*³⁰

Linda Putnam, a teacher who has had enormous influence on my development as an artist,³¹ says – and I agree with her – that the role of the artist is to be the moral conscience of society. The question of ethics as it relates to the practice of performance art is an abiding concern for me, particularly in the relationship between performer and audience. I work from the basic principle that when I create a performance, the audience members are my equals – which is to say that I feel compelled to engage with them *as if any one of them could be me*.

We are equals, and the presence of an audience is essential to the creation of the performance – but the respective *positions* of performer and audience are not equal. As the performer, I am the one who actively defines the parameters of the situation: I pose the questions, I set in motion the process by which the images of the performance are constructed, and I must take responsibility for considering any risks that might be incurred, for myself or for the audience.

For me, the audience’s primary role is to witness, a position I understand as being dynamic in terms of the production of a performance’s images and meanings. This role does not preclude audience members from actively claiming agency in determining their perspective and influencing the experiential conditions of the performance. It neither requires nor excludes the possibility of direct interactivity between performer and audience. Significantly, it is not a role that challenges audience members to intervene, or to shoulder responsibility for my actions as the performer.

What I offer the audience-as-witness is an opportunity to experience a particular situation and to share in a collective production of meaning. Reciprocally, *being witnessed* inspires in me a sense of moral obligation. In designating a particular interval of my life as public performance, I take on the responsibility of being witnessed. This position is always charged, and for me, it comes with a profound sense of duty to approach the task at hand with honesty, humility and integrity, even during the times when there are no witnesses physically present. In performances of long duration – my usual preferred form – I almost inevita-

³⁰ MacLennan, unpublished lecture notes.

³¹ I worked with Linda Putnam in private and group classes sporadically over a period of eight years (1993 - 2001). Based in Massachusetts, Putnam is a master teacher of the curricula of Jerzy Grotowski, who collected and consolidated numerous oral performing arts traditions from different cultures into a system of actor training. Linda specializes in training performing artists working outside the safety net of institutions.

bly encounter a state of doubt, a point where I lose confidence in the task that I have set for myself, and I cannot conceive how it could be possible for me to continue. In these moments, it is the physical or potential presence of the audience that inspires the will to persevere. It is as if being witnessed strips my personality bare, until the only recourse left to me is to find whatever action I can still perform faithfully; in other words, to find an action in which I have faith.

My performances often deal with personal and social traumas, which are evoked through inquiries that appear to test bodily limitations. I seek images that suggest ways of relieving trauma without reliving it. How can we begin to address trauma without replicating it? What can alleviate the suffering associated with loss? How do we come to terms with the death of those we love? What can grief teach us? Trauma is an area of research that demands particular caution in considering how the subject matter, and the way it is presented, might affect an audience. In creating situations through images that engage my own body in a live, responsive process, I often find myself in a situation where I take on the role of the witnessed. In this dynamic, one is frequently tempted to seek catharsis by replicating, constructing or confronting images of abjection. I believe, however, that such an approach usually generates more trauma than it relieves. As a core value, I do not wish to cause or contribute to suffering. I do not wish to cause the audience to suffer, and I do not want the audience members' responses to the images they experience to be dominated by the singular thought that they are images *of* suffering.

Testing Limits

While there is a large history of performance work that deals with putting one's body in peril, my intentions are never to expose myself to any serious risk. According to my principles, harming myself, or an audience member, is a grievous error. At the same time, my lived experience has led me to believe that the moments of physical resistance – when the body encounters struggle, when it must find its way through or around an arduous or impossible obstacle – are among the most productive moments of learning, of creativity and artistry, and of the generation of meaning. To 'live' images through my own body, and through time, is intrinsic to the way I understand, create and learn from the art-making process. For me, an idea cannot be fully understood until it is linked to a physical and temporal understanding: a body knowledge. This knowledge is gained *through* a testing of physical resistances. I engage in situations that may be psychologically or physically challenging, but that can be safely withstood or borne by my body (which is most decidedly not superhuman or obsessively trained).

Still, I have discovered that my own assessment of whether an action is safe – of whether or not the way I produce an image puts my own body at risk – does not always match that of those who witness these actions. Audience members cannot anticipate my strategies for alleviating what may appear to be a looming risk. More than one audience member has felt concern for my safety, or been compelled to ask me whether I am alright. This leads me to wonder to what degree this perception of risk is potentially traumatizing for audience members, as well as the degree to which an audience member's fixation on my safety might stymie the possibility of generating deeper or more positive meanings. These are ongoing, unresolved questions.

It has been suggested that I push the limits of my body in my work, exploring thresholds of pain, fatigue, endurance; but I suppose what I am really testing are the limits of my awareness and faith. I was inspired in 1983 to believe that performance art is what I needed to do to heal myself because Rachel Rosenthal's performance provoked a sense of immanence. Experiencing *Gaia, Mon Amour* connected me to Rachel, to the audience around me, to the world at large, to something greater than myself – not only in the proxi-

mal way of feeling a sense of responsibility for an other, but also immanently, in a de-stratified way, as if all of these things were inseparable from my sense of self. Sometime and someplace within the interval of that performance, my consciousness superseded its sense of isolation within a discrete body. This release from a feeling of isolation transformed my understanding of the world, on both a sensual and perceptual level, and established a personal benchmark for understanding performance art's possibilities for an audience.

Uncertain Knowledge

I am often asked whether I see what I do as being therapeutic, either for me or for the audience. I am also asked what message I expect the audience to take away from a performance, particularly when I attach deeply personal meanings or motivations – that an audience could not be expected to know or share – to actions. When I show documentation of performances, it is very common to be asked: How did the audience react? These questions suggest several things to me. They imply an intrinsic understanding that there is a qualitative difference between performance and the documentation of performance. They also point to a generalized belief that in performance, the audience is involved in the production of meaning, at least to the extent that their reaction forms part of the material (or perhaps the value) of the performance. At the same time, it strikes me that these questions are ones that are seldom asked of other kinds of visual artists. It is as if the direct relationship between performer and audience places an expectation or burden of responsibility on the performer-as-artist not only for the transmission of meaning, but also for its reception by the audience. This expectation is not placed in the same way on the object-maker-as-artist. I cannot recall ever being at an artist talk by a painter, for example, where I heard someone ask how the audience had responded to a particular painting.

I do not think it is my place to speak for an audience in the way that such questions seem to ask me to. Even though the audience is present when the work is created, and that presence informs the work; even though my work involves a response to the particularities of the moment of its making, including the audience; even though I strive to create an event that will carry collective (if contingent) meanings; even though the audience might clap or stamp or hiss or catcall to express their level of appreciation for a performance: ultimately I can only speculate about exactly what message is received. I cannot know what meanings are actually generated, or even when they were or will be generated. I do not know if a performance has a positive therapeutic effect. Indeed, I cannot claim to know anything with certainty about a performance's effects.

Despite all my stated ethical principles, this leaves me with a dilemma. The concept of becoming may suggest that transformation is always possible – even inevitable; but there is no guarantee that any given trajectory of transformation will be positive. Perhaps, despite my best intentions and most conscientious efforts, the situations I create will prove to have detrimental effects. After all, to embrace the notion of becoming is to believe that knowledge, too, is contingent and offers no certainties, only tendencies or probabilities.

What I have to rely on is only an intuition. I trust my initial calling to performance art. I trust my principles. I trust my ability, assisted by duration, to be responsive to conditions in the moment. I trust the care that I take. I trust an occasional experience of immanence. I have faith.