

passenger Art

tracking ideas and assertions in contemporary art

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Notes on Performance Art: Risk, Resilience and the Art of Starting Over

Until recently, neither of us had engaged very closely or exhibited much interest in contemporary performance art. Of course we pay due respect to the medium in the historical rearview as a force and practice that helped to propel major expansion in art and thrust bodies – in particular women’s and other marginalized bodies – into the forefront of political, theoretical and social consciousness. Bodies that were so often relegated to the margins and subordinated to what was perceived as the higher powers of the mind began to demand recognition and gain dimension in the highly charged performance art of the 1960s and 70s, and the medium contributed to feminist and civil rights movements in ways that cannot be underestimated. And there have, of course, been undeniably important works in the intervening decades that have evolved from and expanded upon this history that even skeptics such as us cannot overlook. But, for the most part, our tendency has been to avoid contemporary performance art or regard it with suspicion or annoyance.

There are good, if not always fair, reasons for why performance has struggled with legitimacy and relevance in recent decades and why it often makes us roll our eyes. At times it seems driven more by a fragile but hungry ego than by discipline and a compelling concept or idea. Sometimes it is seemingly assumed (or merely hoped) that the political element of performance art *historically* will somehow persist even in the absence of new content. Nakedness, silence and stillness become stock and trade and imitative or false vulnerability easily override the risks taken by artists who’ve come before: we’re confronted with something like refried [Yoko Ono](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYJ3dPwa2tI) (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYJ3dPwa2tI>), [Schneemann](http://www.caroleeschneemann.com/works.html) (<http://www.caroleeschneemann.com/works.html>) or (early) [Abramović](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marina_Abramovi%C4%87) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marina_Abramovi%C4%87). Instead of innovation, there’s often a literalizing or aping of “political” in art that ultimately renders the work impotent. And beyond the actual content, there are obvious reasons for why the medium can be so irritating. It’s definitely more difficult to walk away from a performance than a painting, even if one wants to. You might not want to risk getting called out for abandoning ship or being pelted with insults, tomatoes or paper planes. These may be irrational fears, but it’s likely happened before.

For a couple of admitted eye-rollers, we seem to be writing a lot about performance art these days. From being captivated by [Heather Cassils’ *Becoming an Image*](http://passengerart.com) (<http://passengerart.com>)

[/2013/03/20/the-agony-and-the-ecstasy-of-becoming-and-image/](http://passengerart.com/2013/03/20/the-agony-and-the-ecstasy-of-becoming-and-image/)) to opening the Pandora's box of Marina Abramović's recent renaissance (<http://passengerart.com/2013/06/28/putting-the-cult-back-in-culture-marina-abramovics-new-world-order/>) and railing against the artist's cheap exploitation of her own politically vibrant career to cash in on a new (low) level of art celebrity, we seem preoccupied with precisely that which we proclaim to have so little interest.

Last spring we were drawn into a [lengthy debate \(http://passengerart.com/2013/08/18/back-and-forth-between-passenger-art-and-the-marina-abramovic-institute/\)](http://passengerart.com/2013/08/18/back-and-forth-between-passenger-art-and-the-marina-abramovic-institute/) with the team at the Marina Abramović Institute over the validity of the artist's current activities and of our own interpretations. Since then we have found ourselves consistently questioning the political potential of performance art. Beyond its power in the past, how might the medium be generative of social or political thought, action or change today? If this is possible, might its potentiality not be undermined by the megalomania increasingly exhibited by its most famous and celebrated living icon?

We find ourselves better equipped to address these questions after having recently witnessed a three-day "[Performance Lab \(http://huguescharbonneau.com/en/maria-hupfield-performance-lab/\)](http://huguescharbonneau.com/en/maria-hupfield-performance-lab/)," created by Brooklyn-based Anishnaabe artist [Maria Hupfield \(http://mariahupfield.wordpress.com/artist-statement/\)](http://mariahupfield.wordpress.com/artist-statement/) in collaboration with a number of Montreal-based artists and curator Rhonda Meier. At the risk of forcing an analogy between two very different artists working in very different contexts, we couldn't help but draw parallels between the Performance Lab and the purported vision behind the [Marina Abramović Institute \(MAI\) \(http://www.marinaabramovicinstitute.org/\)](http://www.marinaabramovicinstitute.org/), a [Prototype \(http://luminatofestival.com/events/2013/mai-prototype\)](http://luminatofestival.com/events/2013/mai-prototype) of which we visited in Toronto. Both attempt an opening up and expansion of the performance space and invite greater audience participation and both are about advancing, work-shopping or elaborating upon the medium, albeit in different ways and on different scales.

Of course the contrasts between the two are plentiful and telling: while MAI is highly polished, strictly controlled and costs cash money, the Performance Lab was open and improvisational, and asked of spectators to give only their time and attention. MAI has celebrity endorsement and has already accumulated at least \$600,000 from [crowd sourcing \(http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/maihudson/marina-abramovic-institute-the-founders\)](http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/maihudson/marina-abramovic-institute-the-founders) to design a state of the art Institute with the involvement of world-renowned architects, engineers and scientists. The artists contributing to Performance Lab were unpaid and the events took place in a commercial gallery space loaned out for the event by [Hugues Charbonneau \(http://huguescharbonneau.com/en\)](http://huguescharbonneau.com/en) while he, himself, was off at the Toronto Art Fair (to add another layer to the complex relationship between ephemeral experience, creative experimentation and the economics of art).

Whereas participating in MAI felt a little like a retreat organized for the constituents of an upper-class cult who were willing to sacrifice individuality and chance for the opportunity to commune with crystals and meditate on the serenity and conformity of the space's IKEA-aesthetics, Performance Lab felt raw, experimental and delightfully haphazard. During the three days and nights of the Lab, all bets were off and each and every body in the room was implicated and engaged. Not to say there weren't uncomfortable silences or stutters from audience members unprepared to interact or asked a difficult question. It was often tense, in part because it was outside learned social conventions. In short, Performance Lab arguably encompassed the contingency and potentiality that MAI believes itself to contain, but which is ultimately curtailed by its strict regimentation and commercial framework.



(<http://passengerart.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/>

[/plmilk.jpg](#))

Photo by Nadia Myre

reference to important contemporary issues. Foremost among these was the politics and precariousness of languages that persist despite persecution (here, Anishinaabemowen) and the necessity of collaboration, cooperation and participation to ensure such resilience. During the three days of the Lab, the space changed and evolved with the actions of the artists and spectators who occupied it. While we attended much of the event, it was the third and final evening that has stuck with us.



(<http://passengerart.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/>

[/plaanjimaajitaawin3.jpg](#))

Photo by Skawennati Fragnito

Having been absent the previous night, we returned to the space to see what looked like the aftermath of a particularly odd party. There were chairs and balloons and thumb tacks littering the floor along with the pulp and peels of oranges crushed by collaborator Karen E. Spence. There was a growing feeling in the room of convergence, that things were coming to a head: Hupfield assumed an athletic stance and held a felt blanket against the wall for what felt like an excruciatingly long time.

Emma-Kate Guimond (<http://www.visualeyez.org/festival-2013/artists/emma-kate-guimond/>) x-ed out her eyes with masking tape like a deceased cartoon and began repeatedly reading an Anishnaabe phrase off of a small piece of paper: "aanji maajitaawin." Emilie Monnet (<http://onishka.org/en/bio-2/>), who had been quietly standing near Hupfield up until this point, began walking and then running her body into the opposite wall, hitting it hard, regaining her footing, backing up and repeating the action. She started calling the word out as well, sometimes whispering sometimes wailing, and continuing to throw herself against the wall until she was beyond the point of exhaustion. And neither of us—nor most others present—being able to speak Anishinaabimowen, didn't learn until after the event had finished that aanji maajitaawin means "the art of starting over." It's a beautiful sentiment violently and emotionally conveyed by the artist's wracked voice and warring body and the phrase retroactively informed every action we were confronted with.



(<http://passengerart.files.wordpress.com/2014/01>

[/pl-scope.jpg](#))

Photo by Skawennati Fragnito

and supplied by [Scott Benesiinaabandan](http://benesiinaabandan.com/) (<http://benesiinaabandan.com/>). She rolled it back up and looked through it like an explorer might peer through a telescope. Hupfield approached, took the other end of the roll and the two, each keeping an eye on the other, began a process of slow circling. Hupfield then, still holding her end, sat down on the ground and was dragged across the room by Guimond. Monnet unrolled another poster. The three artists continued to do this like some incredibly grueling relay race that encompassed insinuations of communication, exploration and the shifting power dynamics of confrontation and interaction.



(<http://passengerart.files.wordpress.com/2014/01>

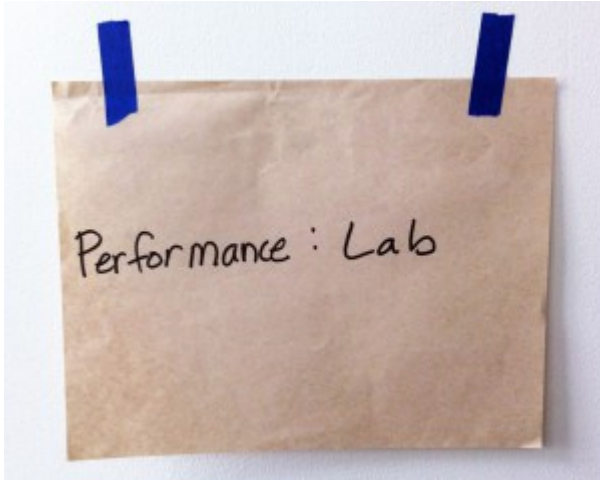
[/pldrag.jpg](#))

Photo by Skawennati Fragnito

Repeated six times, we spectators watched as all three women grew increasingly enervated, but persisted, driven by ever-greater determination. They sweated and strained; the action appeared at times aggressive, at others erotic, even a combination of the two. When the process was complete, Monnet approached spectator after spectator putting them on the spot and asking a series of questions about why we liked performance art and why we were there and countering every answer with another "why." It was stressful and infuriating and yet arguably productive. It is of course reminiscent of the way that children never tire of asking why, often to the exhaustion or exasperation of adults who become dumbfounded by their own lack of answers. The interesting thing was that the question actually proved inexhaustible, even pushed far beyond its usual deployment.

Whether it was blurted out desperately or composedly suggested, many spectators opined that performance art's unique facility is to section off a separate space for interaction and experimentation that is rarely afforded in everyday life. Performance facilitates new forms of social engagement wherein all expectations are overturned and the various rules, regulations and constructions that govern our daily methods and movements are done away with.

or avoidance, endurance, awareness and even irritation. All of these things are, of course, constant companions in everyday life, but are rarely given the attention they deserve. Due to the very necessary challenge that performance art poses for the spectator, it tends to elicit a wider spectrum of viewer response than other arts might, as everyone in the room is implicated in some way, whether the artists' actions inspire awe, introspection, boredom or fury, sometimes in combination. And the only means to these responsive ends is the willingness to put oneself in the situation, accept the risk and discomfort, enter into a collective confusion and be prepared for the unexpected.



(<http://passengerart.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/performancelab.jpg>)

Photo by Maria Hupfield

Documentation of Performance Lab is currently on view at Montreal's [SBC Gallery](http://www.sbcgallery.ca/) (<http://www.sbcgallery.ca/>) as part of *Stage Set Stage: On Identity and Institutionalism* (<http://www.sbcgallery.ca/>), an exhibition/research centre/event series curated by Barbara Clausen. The SBC show interrogates performativity and the relation between identities, actions and institutions. There is an experimental or laboratory feel to *Stage Set Stage* that makes it the perfect venue for further interaction with Hupfield's collaborative processes and, in fact, the artist herself will be performing in the space on the evening of January 17th (<http://www.sbcgallery.ca/#!/maria-hupfield/c20r1>).

In the press release for *Stage Set Stage*, Clausen argues, "the Self, as a contingent entity, continuously rewrites itself into – as well as out of – various cultural, educational and urban socio-political contexts." It is that sense of contingency and the art of starting over, encompassed in each of us, that performance artists like Hupfield and her collaborators put into action and make evident. Starting over doesn't necessarily mean re-writing everything, erasing what's come before and starting from scratch. Rather, it's about reinventing oneself and one's interactions, regaining ground and reclaiming space. It's a decolonizing statement that opens opportunities for action, engagement, for language and for change.

We don't need MAI or [Koolhaas](http://www.marinaabramovicinstitute.org/mai/architecture_1/2/) (http://www.marinaabramovicinstitute.org/mai/architecture_1/2/), levitation rooms or [Lady Gaga's approval](http://vimeo.com/71919803) (<http://vimeo.com/71919803>). We just need to open up space in our lives and be open to the potentiality and possibility that comes with artists and thinkers, and bodies interacting in space. In fact, following that, MAI seems destined to fail in its intentions (clearly we mean ideologically, rather than financially), if only because of how exclusive, controlled and contrived it all is. But the work of artists like those involved with Performance Lab provide another avenue for feeling, not just thinking about, the current of contingency and the excitement of witnessing something emerge that's new. Of course it would be great if there was more space set aside and more time allotted for this type of experimentation and maybe even some remuneration for

the people who put their bodies to work in this way, but even without the endorsement or enfranchisement, artists do this – people do this – and it *does* have social or political implications.

Stage Set Stage occupies SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art until February 22, 2014 and Hupfield will be performing her work “Present–Absence” in the space on Friday, January 17th from 6:00-9:00pm.

Reilley Bishop-Stall and Natalie Zayne

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