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Five (failed) attempts at a feminist revolution

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Johanna Householder

Five (Failed) Attempts at a Feminist Revolution

On November 19th I got the following email from Carla Garnet—hi, Carla, thanks for inviting me—saying, “For expediency, I’m giving your presentation the working title.”

[*Laughter*]

Histories of Performance and the Body, Re-Performance, and the Effect that Performance has had in Contemporary Art and New Media.

[*Laughter*]

“Yikes,” I said. So, I won’t attempt to cover all that in my presentation, but I would certainly like to consider all these things in the discussion period and work groups. So, let me come out as a lateral thinker.

The title for my contribution became *Archiving Bodies: Performance, Re-Performance, Ephemeral Art Practices and Exhibition*. Then I replaced the word “ephemeral” with the word “transient,” because, as many times as I have heard performance art referred to as ephemeral, I have never quite believed it. Fairies and wood nymphs are ephemeral. Posters, leaflets, and fliers may be ephemeral.

PARTICIPANT: Woo-hoo!

HOUSEHOLDER: PowerPoint presentations are ephemeral. My car keys are ephemeral, but performance is corporeal. It is (a la Carolee Schneemann), *Meat Joy*. Both of those words, “meat” and “joy,” are perhaps antithetical to the institutional mandate. Though, to be fair, joy or *jouissance* is a motivating factor in the construction of art experience. Meat usually causes an uproar. Performance is also demanding in ways that institutions are not prepared for; performance is an at-this-moment rather than months-pre-planned event, and therefore its intersection with the institution is protean.

There is also something about the intersection of feminism performance and the institution that is protean, not *protein*—a complex marginal substance that has high molecular weight and a globular or fibrous structure composed of amino acids linked by peptide bonds. This sounds like a dynamic third-wave state that I hope Allyson and Emelie will illuminate. The unruly bodies of women and performance artists have made work outside, inside, alongside,

in opposition to, and in complete or willful ignorance of the mechanisms and institutions for the collection and exhibition of contemporary art. Women have no trouble making work. So I have re-titled this presentation *Five (Failed) Attempts at a Feminist Revolution*.

#1. 1979. All men. I'm sorry, so sorry that I was such a fool. I didn't know that love could be so cruel.

When I began teaching performance art in 1987 at the then Ontario College of Art, there were about five books on the subject, and two that were Canadian: AA Bronson and Peggy Gale's, *Performance by Artists; Performance: Text(e)s & Documents*, edited by Chantal Pontbriand; RoseLee Goldberg's mistake-riddled *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present*; Gregory Battcock's excellent anthology, *The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology*; and (thank God), Moira Roth and Mary Jane Jacob's *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America, 1970-1980*.¹

While they are all important for their perspectives, *The Amazing Decade* was the only one of these that framed performance art as a political practice. That is, it framed performance art not only as an art practice with occasional political tendencies, but as an agent of social change, paralleling political strategies in the non-art world, in this case, cultural production through feminism.

#2: Ronald Reagan, 1981-1989. A brief herstory.

In November 1981, the Pauline McGibbon Centre—the space for women's cultural activities that, through the largesse of the City of Toronto, leased the former city morgue for a dollar a year—closed. The demise was not only the result of financial mismanagement, according to Svetlana Zylina, who had been the dramaturge of the Centre's theatre program. Toward the end, there was a division between the upper-class volunteers and the active cultural workers, said Zylina, who, along with twenty or so other women, was a member of the Women's Cultural Building Collective (WCB). By 1982, the collective decided to “continue to use the word ‘building’ as a verb,” and held public meetings to discuss directions and initiatives to be undertaken by the local women's community. A thousand people received printed material on the role of women artists in major galleries, and the WCB sponsored a panel

¹ The full citations for these publications are as follows: A. A. Bronson and Peggy Gale, *Performance by Artists* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1979); Chantal Pointbriand, ed., *Performance: Text(e)s & Documents: Actes du Colloque, Performance et Multidisciplinarité: Postmodernisme* (Montréal: Éditions Parachute, 1981); RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979); Gregory Battcock, ed., *The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1984); Moira Roth, ed., *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America, 1970-1980* (Los Angeles: Astro Artz, 1983).

discussion in response to the exhibition of Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* (1974-1979), called *After the Dinner Party's Over*. The proceedings were subsequently published in *Fireweed*.²

A benefit to pay the legal costs of the women charged during our "disarm rapists" graffiti campaign was held, and the collective rented a space at 563 Queen West as a base for a two-month-long festival (of which I was one of the coordinators), in a range of venues along Queen East and West. "Womanfilm" was held at the Bloor Cinema; "Women and Architecture," three major art exhibitions, including an edible art show, and the first Five-Minute Feminist Cabaret were held; T-shirts, buttons, and the infamous Terrorist Kit were sold; and the feminist hotline was activated. In an article in *NOW* in 1983, Ellie Kirzner made the point about the sociopolitical heart of the WCB. She said, "The commitment to re-ordering the social world in favour of women is the thread which binds the seams of this collective."³ To illustrate this point, one woman in the collective stated, "My understanding of the group is that it is part of a movement for the re-organizing of society and the artists are part of that. Within that it is a group to give support to women in the arts but one always has to be aware of the higher goal."⁴

In 2000, we donated the archives of the WCB to WARC (Women's Art Resource Centre) and mounted an exhibition of ephemera, documentation, and process, which included quotes from the minutes of our meetings. My favourite is, "The six hours just sped by."

[*Laughter*]

#3. Brian Mulroney, 1984 to 1993.

Since Brian presided over many of the Queen Street years, I began to think about the development in the late '80s of right-wing performance art. In Peggy Phelan's book, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, she describes the performance-like strategies used by Operation Rescue, anti-choice, and anti-abortion demonstrators, who carefully choreographed demonstrations in which men would speak for the fetus.⁵ They would address the women entering clinics in high-pitched baby voices, saying, "Mother, please don't kill me." The right-wing uses ventriloquism; the left-wing uses lip-synch.

#4. Jean Chrétien 1993-2003. Bag Man/Bag Lady

² See *Fireweed* 15 (Winter 1982).

³ "Feminist Art Hits the Streets," *NOW* 2, no.25 (March 3, 1983): 7.

⁴ Cynthia Grant quoted in *ibid*.

⁵ (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

Performance art is, at its root, an oppositional practice. It seeks to de-institutionalize art, and therefore its existence as a subject within teaching and exhibition institutions might be seen as oxymoronic. In its anti-disciplinarianism, it takes up temporary residence somewhat uneasily along the side of formalist concerns; it is tolerated but, like a “lavender menace,” it is possibly misunderstood. In a teaching practice, it is important to convey this tentative position to students. Perhaps it signals to us the coarse nature of teaching institutions—something that might give us hope. Acres of books and everyone’s Ph.D. theses on performativity have now been published, though very few apart from Charles Garoian’s work *Performing Pedagogy: Toward an Art of Politics* have dealt with pedagogy at all.⁶

Garoian identifies three attributes of cultural production in which performance art pedagogy was founded. The first, *performance*, “represents an expanded, heterogeneous field of cultural work within which the body performs various aspects of production, socially and historically constructed behaviours that are learned and reproduced.”⁷ Teaching, learning, and putting out fires are three of the activities Garoian cites as constituting different examples of professional and domestic cultural performance.

The second attribute of cultural production, *performativity*, “represents the performance of subjectivity, a means by which students can attain political agency as they learn to critique dominant cultural paradigms from the perspective of personal memories and cultural histories.”⁸

Performance art,

the third attribute of cultural production, is the performance of subjectivity that originates from within the context of the arts. For the early Modernists...performance art served as a liminal space, a virtual laboratory where the body’s preexisting modes of art production were challenged with the dynamic ideas, images, and processes of modern industrial culture. Having embodied the disjunctive character of the machine age...artists developed the interdisciplinary strategies of performance art to...create a new aesthetic for the 21st century.⁹

⁶ (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1999).

⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 9.

Garoian continues, “As compared to the...practices of modernist art, the function of subjectivity and agency for postmodern performance artists is the production of critical citizenship, civic responsibility, and radical democracy.”¹⁰

5. George Bush, 2001 to now.

In my experience, it was feminism and the women artists of that time who retroactively confirmed performance as a political practice. This is a stain with which it will forever contend; however, at the point where I began, not even Moira Roth’s text dealt with performance as a learned discourse. So it was up to us—Suzy, me, the first generation of performance art teachers—to create the conditions through which students might consider performance not only as a viable medium for art ideas, but as an almost-viable life strategy. I bring up my own history not only because I’m an egocentric performance artist but because I still want to think about the struggle to articulate the inchoate ideas about performance, its pedagogy, and its status as both art and politics.

Teaching the future, in one sense, is about the concerns of an area of study, theory, and production that is always in the process of becoming. The parallel challenge is to teach what for me is an essentially political practice—performance art—in the context of the apoliticized classroom, and the common sense ideology of the art school. And, in another sense, it is still about a kind of grandiose notion of changing the way we look at and engage with art. This is what I understood performance art to be: a radical rupture in the façade of art and its systems of collection, commodification, and distribution; a liberation from the market; and a restoration of the tools of art to the proletariat.

6. There were no Stephen Harper masks left, and there didn’t seem to be much point at all in a Stephane Dion.

[*Laughter*]

What performance art was already known to be was something that the Dadaists had done, as had Vito Acconci. Not General Idea—they were too close, they lived just down the street, and they were Canadian. No Tanya Mars, Suzy Lake, Vera Frenkel, David Buchan, Lady Brute, or Bruce Barber. Even Moira Roth described Martha Wilson in 1972 as, “living in total isolation in Nova Scotia, with neither feminist support system nor audience feedback”¹¹—just lobsters and artists in loincloths I guess [*laughter*]; although, I do take

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *The Amazing Decade*, 17.

seriously the legendary male hegemony at NSCAD (Nova Scotia College of Art and Design). It's the presumed total isolation of any artist in Canada in 1972 that struck me as dumb.

The known artists were the aforementioned Acconci and his ilk; it was the Chris Burden, Dennis Oppenheim kind of guys who did things with their bodies that were written about. As if *I* should reference this kind of work—work that, as a junior feminist, I resented—just because they had slides in the library, and books and videotapes and articles. After all, I had come to performance art without knowing about this work. I was informed by postmodern dance and by considerations of the body as containing a brain while I grappled with the extremely complex situation of a performing female body. There was a congruence between performance and feminism that was nowhere articulated in print in a Canadian context, so I took a position of willful ignorance and decided to reject all of that and start from scratch.

I do not think I have been successful; in fact, I am highly critical of the way in which I feel I have often knuckled under to history, in a sense smothered by better documentation. This wondering has come about in the academy, where I felt—perhaps because I had not gone to art school myself—I was on unfriendly ground. I felt that I had better teach what performance art was already known, or have a lot to back me up on why I didn't think that that was the way it was.

I did a lot of rummaging around and research to prepare for this talk, which I did not in the end give—the one about archiving bodies and re-performance and such. I have some slides and material about interventions and performance that I would be happy to share in working groups. Thanks.