

Why I Don't Memorize, Exactly: Autoperformance as Elaborative Praxis

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Short of praise or derision of its queer subject matter and “Did that really happen?” inquiries motivated by its autobiographical mode, no aspect of my work generates more discussion with audiences than its relatively open textuality. Seeing two performances of a piece or comparing a script to a live performance often prompts requests from audiences for me to provide an account for differences in what I say. Sometimes the requests seem to seek advice for performers hoping to work in such a mode, sometimes they seem to demand that I provide an alibi for what some experience as an artistic crime. After viewing the video clips and looking at the script, should you find yourself wanting such an account, I happily offer one here.

For the most part, I develop my work orally, influenced by sources as diverse as Allen Ginsberg and James VanOosting. I do not pretend that oral composition precludes revision; it transforms revision. To revise becomes a question of developing and articulating a new preference for the representation of a certain image or action in the story. This new preference embodies and attempts to operationalize a cognitive shift that does not necessarily precede that embodiment so much as emerge from it, morphing as performance

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choices morph. Text and performance carry and modulate one another, virtually indistinguishable, neither reduced to the cause or effect of the other. This process involves much more than changing the language on paper. In fact, there may not be any paper at this point—although I do often write phrases on scraps of paper (a question to myself about a memory, an audio/visual possibility, etc.), gathering such scraps in an envelope or taping them in a journal. My process at this point has a scatteredness to it, a surplus. It avoids commitment to a particular phrase for as long as possible. In this way, I often think of collage artist Claudia von der Heydt’s manifesto, “Everything counts in large amounts,” in which she says, “Just what it is. Scrapheap. A cache. The accumulated snippets of where you have been. Now released from context and searching for another. Some things have been cut loose and are breathing. Some things have been joined and are healing” (paragraph 1).

Next, I often begin to work up a written text that serves more as a diving board than a rollercoaster track. I think of this text as a mock-up before rehearsals proper. During rehearsals and the run itself, I take the position that I can say whatever I want to in the moment, taking a side trip, adding a metaphoric turn, responding to audience responses, etc. As I work up this text, then, I believe that it indicates, but neither determines nor exhausts, the possibilities for relationships between the audience, the materials of the performances, and me. The script published here is that kind of script.

By then condensing that text into a mnemonic outline for eidetic rehearsal, I begin to test the flexibility of the board, if you will, orienting toward it as a necessary and enabling hazard: No board, no dive; be sure to land back on it in the spring, but avoid hitting your head on it in the spin. Much as visualization works in athletics or as a common strategy for dealing with stage fright, I use the outline, composed of key words representing the primary images of a piece, as something of a mantra, rehearsing by visualizing the sequence of events the piece presents. This outline is the closest thing I have to the function typically served by a traditional script, but even this changes as new elements come into the piece at this stage. I make the outline in the margin of the text, having printed it out with a very

wide right margin (four inches) to allow space for a lot of writing. For a period of time, I rehearse with that outline-on-the-text, but soon move on to reproducing the outline from memory on new paper. Over time, this outline becomes something I repeat verbally, image by image, always working to maintain a mental image of the experiences described.

Finally, I present each performance—to the best of my ability—as a lived encounter with a given audience on a given evening. This means that what gets said varies, more than some people might feel comfortable with and less than others might suppose. I do believe, however, with storyteller Jack Maguire, that if a story doesn't change when you tell it, it really isn't a story. It's become something else. That something else may very well be lovely, but something has been sacrificed. Contrasting strict memorization with what he calls “coming to know a tale by heart,” Maguire argues that the latter, with which I identify my praxis, is more “prolonged, ambiguous, and intangible [than strict memorization]—attributes that our cultural conditioning trains us to reject” (170). These rejections of the unfamiliar and “undisciplined” remind me of the rejection of queer subjectivities on the basis of the uncertainty they inspire among the dominant group. For this reason, I commit to this intangible praxis for reasons stemming from a politics that values some forms of indeterminacy more than prefigured reproduction of familiar or acceptable meanings.

Sometimes the variations in actual performances feel “right,” by which I mean they tap into the excess potential of the piece as an open field of possible relationships with audiences, and I consider this fabric of relationships (always plural because an audience is not a singularity) my primary medium. Other times, the variations simply feel like any other mistake one might make when one's attention short-circuits or self-consciousness intrudes. I work my way back from such moments like any errant performer. And, of course, sometimes these two formulations—excess and error—pose two poles in a false binary better understood as a creative double bind (Peterson and Langellier). I exceed that double bind by accepting both the rewards and the risks of such a praxis in a given enactment

less *of* that praxis (as a whole) than *within* it (as a contingent encounter).

Strictly speaking, then, I also sacrifice things by committing to this praxis, not the least of which are positive associations, in some audience members' minds, with certain core theatrical values, particularly those emphasizing the reproduction of an autonomous work of art, viewed as textually bounded and fixed. This view grants the work of art an ontological status of its own that transcends any incarnation of it—the way *Hamlet* (allegedly) survives any one production of it, however horrific. I also sacrifice associations with some versions of mastery, particularly those identifying an ability to make an old performance *feel* new. This version of mastery involves a retinue of stylistic codes and interpretive pretenses allowing audiences to imagine so-and-so, as a “trained actor,” is just so good that she really made them believe the character was getting that diagnosis for the very first time. The location and “reality” of this impression, given its voicing in a statement conscious of its falsity, has always seemed fairly strange to me. What does it mean to so embrace an illusion? How does that celebratory embrace of a misperception compare to the obsessive repetition of the corrective that the autobiographical persona is always only a construction of the autobiographer, something we must never take at face value? (As if the concerned critical persona uttering this corrective weren't *also* a construction).

In graduate school, my performance partner in crime, Scott Dillard, and I decided that such a view of performance, like that which said the best oral interpreters could make one forget the book in their hand, amounted to a kind of handicapping, in the sports sense. We figured that this economy viewed textual fidelity (and the book) as a form of *drag*, in the physical sense, that the performer strove to overcome as s/he took to the sky. If so, this valorizing of drag could take other forms. We could, for example, make people perform with chickens on their heads, confident that the very best performers could make us forget the chicken and the chicken could reveal the very worst performers as less interesting to watch than the bird. It seemed perverse, to us, to so fetishize what one hoped to make disappear, to center praxis on something one wanted to render

invisible. This dynamic also seemed strangely at odds with a view of performance as a reflexive act of critique, one aspiring to account for as much of its production as possible. So I try not to pretend with audiences that I'm doing the show for the first time. I also try to avoid anything that suggests that pretense, for example, a line like "Hey, I just thought of something . . ." unless I really did just think of it in that moment.

As I began performing at the end of the 1980s, this perspective on avoiding pretense seemed consonant with my background in forensics and my emerging interest in performance art. I had benefited—at least to my mind—from several individual events coaches who forbade word-for-word memorization of my persuasive or expository speeches, almost to the point that attempting strict memorization now seems heretical, deeply strange at an embodied level, forcing me to work against nearly a quarter century of experience. That *almost* back there is important: obviously some modes of performance require absolute memorization. But when I began reading about performance art, I quickly recognized another mode, one more sympathetic with my preferred praxis, in the work of artists I came to admire. Karen Finley, for example, supposedly does not rehearse at all, but performs in a trance (Levy), often responding to audience members directly (Muse). Adrian Piper describes much of her performative conceptual work as occurring in an "indexical present" constructed in the unpredictable sense-making interaction between audience members and her. David Antin describes his talk-pieces as improvisations for which "the preparation is not formalized" (par. 10). Tim Miller routinely interacts with audience member responses, viewing performance art as exciting because "artists are getting rid of a lot of the bullshit and the smallness of the idea of what it is to be an artist, especially a performance artist, which is by nature a social act" (139). Each of these artists, to varying degrees, acknowledges what I'm framing as excess as a productive component of their work, often as a key element of its distinction from traditional theatre.

As performers, however, we rarely have the luxury of presenting our work solely for audiences of like mind. This, too, distinguishes us from, say, a Broadway performer. Such a performer may reasonably

expect that the audience, a few disgruntled relatives in tow aside, actually likes musicals and understands why everyone pretends to break out into the same ludicrous song at the same time—or at least doesn't care *why* and just enjoys it *for its own sake*.

Some of us enjoy open work for its own sake. Audiences encountering an open work encounter difference in several locations. The performer is an other, the text is other to itself, the unforeseen message of the piece presents itself as difference, and the formal experiment of the piece's structure (at least from the perspective of an audience member more versed in *The Sound of Music*) undercuts the taken-for-grantedness that conditions a typical night in the theatre. But this encounter with difference doesn't delight everyone. Inevitably, people ask, "How much of that was memorized?" Unfortunately, I do not possess a mastery of the peculiar calculus required to answer this question in the quantitative register some audience members use to pose it. I want to ask them, in return, how much of their intimate conversation at dinner before the show they had memorized—you know, the inquiries about the day or plans for the summer, the revealing anecdotes about the funny or annoying coworker/child/cat, the cherished story told (again) about how one could discern the time of day in one's home town (in the summer anyway) by which kind and color of dragonfly flew by, etc. I never do ask this question. I usually just say "90%." I hazard a guess. This tells them what they want to know in the familiar and soothing language of numbers. In this way, I am a coward. It's just that I've been telling them things they didn't want to know for about an hour by then, and I'm often tired, falling into a passivity by that point, and just wanting to be legible to them.

By which I mean I want them to be able to read me.

Which implies I want them to see me as a fixed text.

So you see, I have so much more work to do.

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