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Passing a thought from one to another Unseen strategies of a performative practice: The background and development of the video work, *Clutch, clasp, grip, hold, hug, embrace, press, squash, squeeze...* (2010, 4'41'')

Abstract

This paper is based on a series of artworks produced as part of a project entitled *From one to another...* Working across the mediums of performance, video art, sound and installation, this project aimed to explore the nature of intersubjective experience. Each artwork involved the physical participation of other people and used performative actions to explore and illuminate the subtleties of physical and emotional exchanges ranging from the poetic, intimate or loving to the ambiguous, disturbing or violent.

During the process of collaboration, an additional intersubjective space was formed between participants and artist (myself). This new intersubjective space became a place of exchange; of passing a thought from one to another, a give and take between the artist and participant that remained 'unseen' in the final outcome of the work. My paper details the nature of these exchanges and highlights the way in which collaboration can prompt an exciting reframing and transformation of ideas. Furthermore, I outline the theoretical and historical context of this project by discussing how my exploration of intersubjectivity is informed by the writings of Emmanuel Levinas and Rosie Braidotti. I examine the art-historical precedents to my work from the 1970s onwards.

Background

This paper is based on artworks I completed as part of my visual art Honours project in 2010. My Honours project was entitled *From one to another...* and it aimed to

produce a body of work that explored intersubjective experience. I use the term intersubjective to refer to that which exists between conscious minds or is shared by two or more people, or is alternatively shared between the artist and audience/viewer. My research examines intersubjective 'space', an area I have tested using performative actions, video and installation.

From one to another... investigated the following research question: *What kinds of performative actions reframe intersubjective experience?* It primarily used performative actions to explore and illuminate the subtleties of physical and psychological exchanges. I choreographed, performed/enacted and filmed a variety of exchanges. These ranged from the poetic, intimate or loving to the ambiguous, disturbing or violent. Through the use of filmic devices in conjunction with performative actions I sought to reframe, accentuate and intensify particularly intriguing aspects of these exchanges; for example real moments of tangible intimacy, tension, ambiguity or humour.

My studio process in most cases involved the participation of and/or collaboration with other people in order to test, choreograph and perform specific actions or scenarios. These interactions resulted in another intersubjective space, one that was shared between myself (the artist) and the participants and other performers in my work. I discovered that this additional intersubjective space was rich with creative possibilities. It was the area in which I communicated my intentions for the work, where I gave instructions and where the performers responded to my intentions and instructions, giving their own opinions and ideas, sometimes questioning what I wanted. Fruitful conversations took place about the nature of the work and the most effective ways of exploring my ideas. This new intersubjective space became a place of exchange; of passing a thought from one to another, a give and take between the artist and participant that was crucial to the final outcome of the work, yet remained 'unseen' in the final outcome of the work.

The collaboration with contemporary dancers in the work *Clutch, clasp, grip, hold, hug, embrace, press, squash, squeeze...* provided the most stimulating example of creative exchanges between artist and participants as it allowed for a reframing and

transformation of my ideas through the different contexts brought about by this other art form. These exchanges, unseen by the audience of the work, will be discussed in this paper.

Before detailing the nature of these exchanges I will first briefly place this work in an historical and theoretical context. The content of my Honours project had precedents in performative explorations of self-other relations in the 1970s and engages with the writings of Emmanuel Levinas and Rosie Braidotti. The form and technical development of the works completed as part of this project can be seen to emerge out of the trend of an increasing diversity in use of media in performance art since the 1980s.

A number of artists working in the 1970s created works that focused on the relationships and tensions between one person and another. These works explored interpersonal relationships through performative actions. Studying the way in which these works highlight points of physical contact, exchange, conflict and intimacy between two people has given me an insight into how I might approach these themes in my own work, and how I might extend or add to this earlier work. Marina Abramović and Ulay's *Relation Series*, performed in 1977, tested the limits of physical and psychological exchange (Denegri, 1998). *Relation in Space* for example was comprised of the naked couple running towards each other and colliding until they were completely exhausted.

The intensity and drama of a number of works performed in the 1970s, as discussed by Loeffler & Tong (1980), allude to political and social issues. Vito Acconci's 1971 performance *Pull* is another pertinent example of this kind of exploration. It consisted of the artist trying to hold or 'pull' his partner's gaze as he circled her. Tension was built up over a period of time as Acconci and his partner maintained constant eye contact. Dennis Oppenheim's 1971 performance *Two Stage Transfer Drawing (Advancing to a Future State)* involved a whimsical exchange with his daughter. In this work, Oppenheim's daughter drew on his back and the artist tried to duplicate this drawing on a piece of paper in front of him. Another example of this kind of work is Tom Marioni and Petr Stembera's *Connection*, performed in 1975, in which connecting circles of condensed milk and condensed cocoa linked the torsos of the two artists. Ants were put into the middle of the circle and began to bite the artists.

This work was performed in Prague and has clear allusions to the East-West divide occurring in Europe at that time. My knowledge of all of the above performances has influenced my practice.

Lévinas's writings on the 'Other' and the 'face-to face encounter' inspired me to create a body of work which explored human interactions and exchanges. Lévinas suggests that our knowledge of 'being in the world' is shaped and brought about by the Other. For Lévinas, intersubjective experience, as manifested in the 'face-to-face encounter' is an essential starting point for philosophy. Levinas challenges the pre-eminence of ontology (the study of being) in philosophy and suggests philosophy begins instead with the encounter with the Other. For Levinas, the face-to-face encounter with the other has the power and capacity to induce in us a sense of ethical responsibility to this other (Levinas, 2006).

My practice has also been heavily influenced by Braidotti's (2002) conceptualization of the contemporary subject. Expanding on the ideas of Gilles Deleuze, Braidotti argues that rather than being fixed, the contemporary subject is in a state of 'becoming'. Braidotti (2002, p.2) claims it is important "not to know who we are, but rather what, at last, we want to become, how to represent mutations, changes and transformations, rather than Being in its classical modes." The contemporary subject is described as un-unified, nomadic and experiencing constant change.

The writings of Amelia Jones (1998) support Braidotti's argument specifically in relation to performance. Jones (1998, p.199) has suggested that while artists of the 1970s "focused on the body's role in self-other relations through structures of narcissism and the rhetoric of pose, younger artists tend to explore the body/self as technologized, unnatural, and fundamentally unfixable in identity or subjective/objective meaning in the world: indeed, they articulate the body/self as 'post-human'". Whilst my work does not offer a 'post-human' articulation of the 'body/self' it fits within this theoretical background by presenting 'subjects' which are ambiguous, fragmented, unstable and vulnerable.

The methodology of my work engages with a trend I have observed in the development of performance art. Since the 1980s, artists have increasingly used live performance in combination with a diverse range of other media such as photography,

video, installation, sculpture, electronic media, and interactive internet-based forms. The way in which performance art is disseminated has dramatically changed: increasingly performance art has used the forms of mass culture as a way to reach a wider audience. This observation is shared by theorists such as Jones, Phillip Auslander, Marvin Coulson and RoseLee Goldberg, who regard the hybridization of performance art as a symptom and manifestation of the post modern fragmented, split and unfixable subject encountering increasing technological and cultural developments.

Auslander (2008) has coined the term 'mediatized performance' to describe performance that is circulated on television, as audio or video recordings, through the internet and in other forms based in technology of reproduction. Today the Internet has become the major locus for the dispersion of performance art and its discourse. My research is situated within this field and aims to expand upon this trend by creating hybrid works that blur the boundaries between performance, video, sound art and sculpture.

The vexed question of the live presence of the artist/performer versus the documented/mediated 'presence' has also been important to my practice. Peggy Phelan (1993) celebrates the notion of embodiment in live performance and argues that only the live presence of the artist contains the possibility to transform both the artist and the audience as the event unfolds. In contrast, Jones (1997) and Auslander (2008) have argued that the live action should not be privileged and that archetypal works of live performance were, contrary to what is commonly assumed, actually staged for documentation at least as well as for an audience.

Auslander (2006) further proposes that performance documentation has been understood to encompass two categories: the documentary and the theatrical. The documentary category is the 'traditional' way in which the relationship between performance art and its documentation is conceived. Documentation is seen to provide evidence and access to performance. Theatrical performance documentation includes works in which the performances are staged exclusively for photography, film or video. Auslander argues that the identity of performance is not dependent on an audience and that performance art is instead constituted through its documentation's performativity. By documenting something 'as' a performance, the

artist frames it as performance. The studio process I have undergone has led me to be in agreement with Auslander's argument and allowed me to conceptualize my work as theatrically documented performance. Furthermore, I expand upon these debates by exploring the possibility for the video camera to enhance the 'presence' of the performer and the possibility for the viewer to have a relational and transformative experience through the use of video editing and framing techniques.

Development of the work *Clutch, clasp, grip, hold, hug, embrace, press, squash, squeeze...* - Preceding works

My Nanna participated in the video work *Let's put our heads together...* (2010, 7'25'') The performative element of this work involved a particularly intimate type of exchange between Nanna and myself: we stared into each other's eyes and moved closer together extremely slowly until our noses were touching. The physical intimacy of this action echoed the emotional intimacy between Nanna and myself and at the same time highlighted the generational distance- the distance of age and experience between us.



Figure 1 *Let's put our heads together*

The exchanges that occurred during the making of this work were crucial to the very intense, intimate feel of the final work and actually built a further bond between my grandmother and myself. This process involved first explaining the nature of the work and the way that we would go about creating the work and then making sure that Nanna felt comfortable and safe with this. I explained to Nanna that she could stop at any time if she felt uncomfortable. The action involved exploring a very slow ‘moving closer together’ movement in a variety of different ways, and asking Nanna to give her feedback and input into the movements.

In response to these performative actions Nanna told me she would like to read me the WB Yeats poem *The Stolen Child*. I documented her reading this out to me with video. The text of the *Stolen Child*, read by Claire Grose, is particularly pertinent to this particular video work:

Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

The poignancy of Nanna’s poetry reading added an extra layer of intimacy to the experience. Although this reading and the other exchanges we had in creating this work were ‘unseen’ in the final video work shown to an audience, they in fact dramatically effected the final outcome of the work. For example, the reading of the Yeats poem inspired a poetic sensibility in the final outcome and installation of the video piece. It directed my choice of the repeated soft flute ‘pulsating’ sound for this work and the cropping of the image to focus purely on our faces. The poem also influenced my choice to slow the movement in the video right down so that the entire work lasted 7 minutes. The installation of this work was also informed by the real experience of exchange with Nanna: In my Honours review this was projected large-scale to immerse the viewer in the intimacy of the action.

The video work *Poke* (2010, 3’34’’) explored a very different kind of exchange. *Poke* was part of a series of works in which actions arising from everyday exchanges (such

as those of childhood play) were drawn out and intensified. The exchanges I had with the participants whilst developing this work were essential to the way in which my ideas evolved into the final work. Initially, I had envisaged a work that began playfully but gradually became disturbing. I used the playful childlike action of the poke to the cheek as a starting point and workshopped this with two other Curtin University students. This started out extremely playfully, and I actually directed them in an absurd version in which the poking was done extremely comically. This was then developed into a more intense work in which I got the two participants to poke me on the cheek, until it became unbearable.

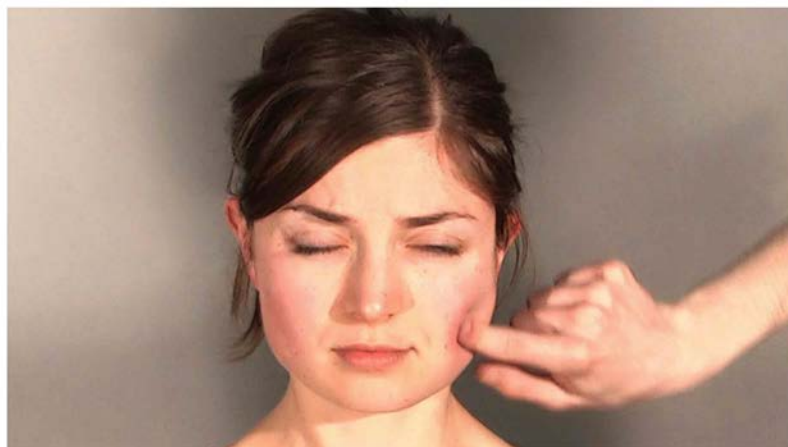


Figure 2 *Poke*

Again, this collaborative process in *reality* highlighted the notion of intersubjective experience between one person and another. The transferral of energy between myself and the other performers created a highly charged intersubjective space. This was quite confronting as the live experience of making the work illuminated something intangible and inexpressible about intimacy and human connection.

Clutch, clasp, grip, hold, hug, embrace, press, squash, squeeze...

Over the course of my Honours project my studio process revealed that the collaboration and participation with performers from other artforms not only created a rich, intimate intersubjective experience during the making of the work but also had potent creative possibilities for the development of hybrid artforms. The video work *Clutch, clasp, grip, hold, hug, embrace, press, squash, squeeze...* involved the collaboration with a group of contemporary dancers from WAAPA. The beginning of the process involved trying to work out how to pass on quite abstract ideas to the dancers: literally attempting to pass a thought from one to another and developing strategies to assist with the clear communication of my intentions.

Storyboards and sketches were used to describe my intentions for the dance collaboration during my first meetings with a member of this group. I also gave the following brief to the dancers:

I am particularly interested in using your physical capabilities as dancers to explore specific physical exchanges such as squeezing, pushing etc.. and to take these movements into a new dimension. Hopefully the resulting work will be an interesting hybrid between dance and performance art.

What I would like you to do is to explore and interpret the notion of a squeeze (for example a hug) between two people that begins gently but then gradually becomes unbearable. I would like the dancers to take this idea to its physical limits, and to explore the ways in which tension between bodies can build up unbearably and then be released. Feel free to explore this in both serious and humorous ways: perhaps the squeeze doesn't always become unbearable- perhaps it becomes funny, awkward and even absurd.

The process of making the work involved an all-day workshop and filming session during which the dancers were asked to interpret the following series of directive words: 'Clutch, clasp, grip, hold, hug, embrace, press, squash, squeeze...'

Over the course of the day many in-depth discussions with the dancers took place. We talked through each of the directive words in detail and I took on the role of director and described and mimed the kinds of movements I desired. They responded to my directions and were forthcoming with their own ideas, suggestions and alternatives. I also took on the role of movement coach and attempted to draw the most out of the dancers. We tried a number of different ways of interpreting the notion of the squeeze: some involved the dancers working in couples and others involved the whole group working together. The group of six dancers was at times split into three couples, dancing and moving at the same time. This was extremely interesting visually.

I wanted to have the technology available for dynamic and interesting camera work, so I gathered together the best possible audio visual equipment available including three high definition video cameras, one still camera and multiple lights. The high definition cameras allowed me to take extremely close-up footage that made it possible to hone in on the intimate aspects of the dancers' movements. Through the use of three video cameras and one still camera I was able to get multiple perspectives and angles on the dancers' work. Two assistants, Charlie Podbury and Jason Miller helped with the filming of this work and another; Jeremy Philips was additionally taking still photographs. Having four people document the work including myself created a situation in which we had many interesting and fruitful exchanges relating to how to most effectively shoot the work. Throughout the day we reflected on what was and what was not working and made changes and adjusted our filming techniques as we went along.

The experience of working with the dancers was fantastic; they had no inhibitions and were willing to try any direction I gave them. They were often at the very limits of what is physically possible in their efforts to thoroughly explore the directive words 'Clutch, clasp, grip, hold, hug, embrace, press, squash, squeeze...' Throughout the course of the day, we did however find it useful to develop imaginary narrative scenarios to help the dancers 'shape' and develop the actions over larger periods of time. For example, we developed the following role-playing scenario. In couples, the dancers would enact three stages in an imaginary relationship: carefree romantic love, anxiety, and then crisis (in which one person is struggling to get away). Although this

is obviously a clichéd scenario it was very useful in enabling the dancers to push themselves into creating extremely interesting movements.

Another scenario developed involved one member of the group trying to ‘get away’ from the other members. The others would try their best to keep this person captive. This was done both with contact and with non-contact. At the same time I called out directions such as ‘pause,’ ‘hold movement,’ ‘release,’ ‘faster,’ and ‘slower’ in order to develop an interesting sequence of action. In addition to this we developed other strategies for working together as a whole mass of bodies. For example I asked the dancers to try squeezing together and then releasing *as a group*, moving very slowly as a group and then gradually moving faster, and alternatively freezing a dramatic pose together until it became physically impossible.

About three hours of footage was recorded overall, which was edited into one two-part video work. As the aim of this project was to create a hybrid work of performance art and dance, the editing process has been extremely important. I wanted to get away from any sense that the movements had been choreographed: Cutting, splicing and editing the original footage to produce a ‘rhythm’ in the video work is one of the ways I have tried to achieve this effect. This following image shows a still from the resulting video work.



Figure 3 *Clutch, clasp, grip, hold, hug, embrace, press, squash, squeeze...*

Sound emerged as an important element in the work *Clutch, clasp, grip, hold, hug, embrace, press, squash, squeeze...* The raw sound of the dancers' gasps, and increasing heavy breathing as their movements became more energetic was quite striking in the workshop, and in order to keep this vocal utterance of physical exertion in the final video, I enhanced these sounds in the editing programme Final Cut Pro. In my practice, sound is not a 'backdrop' to the action, but part of the performance itself. The architecture and rhythmic structures of contemporary classical music particularly informed the editing of this work in order to create a sense of dynamic rhythm.

Future Directions

This project tested a variety of performative actions in order to explore intersubjective experience and to investigate the question: *What kinds of performative actions reframe intersubjective experience?* An experimental process of testing and

exploration with a range of other participants has resulted in a work which in my view to a large extent offers the viewer new perspectives on interpersonal exchanges.

The creative process with the dance group in particular provided me with the experience of exciting interpersonal exchanges in the development of performance art and video works. It has also shown me the ways in which collaboration with dancers allows for a reframing and transformation of my ideas through the different contexts brought about by the art of dance. Although this process has been unseen in the final outcome of the works, it has been fundamental to the nature of the work. For example, the dancers articulated movements and forms of expression I would never have thought possible. These new movements and forms of expression informed my editing choices and the final outcome of the work. I now recognize the rich creative potential of collaborating with other artists and performers and the possibility of creating hybrid forms through this process. This is a methodology that I would like to continue beyond this project in future research.

Overall, the studio process undertaken during the project *From one to another...* has revealed that simple performative actions, performed *by myself as well as a range of other participants*, in conjunction with a dynamic use of multiple cameras have been the most successful in reframing intersubjective experience. In the first part of my Honours course I attempted some complex performative actions and only used one camera with one viewpoint on the work. This was criticized and in response to this critique I attempted to focus on simple actions and used greater variety filming techniques such as zooming in, panning, using multiple cameras and camera angles to provide more interest for the viewer. I have discovered that basing performative actions on those of everyday life (sometimes from childhood play, such as the actions 'poke' and 'squeeze') have been more successful than attempting more complex actions. Using a simple action as a starting point gives the participants in my work and myself something familiar to work with. This approach constitutes a base from which I can tease out a new action, a new sensation and in turn a reframing of an interpersonal exchange.

My studio process has also revealed three main elements which create what I consider to be a re-framing of an interpersonal exchange: the way in which I 'choreograph'

these actions, the way in which I use the video camera and the way in which sound elements are used to enhance the work. Rather than just acting out movements, I have found that strategies such as repetition, intensification and exaggeration coupled with a more dynamic use of the video camera has produced the works which are closest to achieving my intentions. Cutting, splicing and editing the original footage to produce a 'rhythm' in the video work has received positive responses from viewers so far.

I have discovered that video has a fantastic potential for allowing a synthesis of sound, image and performance-something that I would like to develop further in the future. *Clutch, clasp, grip, hold, hug, embrace, press, squash, squeeze...* explored ways in which the interrelationships between the self and other can be communicated through the combination of performative actions, sound and contemporary video technology. This fusion of performance, sound and video is significant as it points to an expansion of earlier work by practitioners in this field and is in keeping with the rich interdisciplinary fusion of film, performance and sculpture in the contemporary works of practitioners in this field such as Matthew Barney.

I aim to extend *Clutch, clasp, grip, hold, hug, embrace, press, squash, squeeze...* into a live piece, which may include projection. It would be interesting to see how the hybrid of performance art and dance would work in a live performance. Highly experimental and imaginative processes would be used in order to develop hybrid artistic forms and create new kinds of expression for a live version of this work.

Following on from this I want to further extend ideas of intersubjectivity explored in works such as *Clutch, clasp, grip, hold, hug, embrace, press, squash, squeeze...* into the public domain by exploring and investigating the way in which art can and reframe and facilitate dialogues and interrelationships not just between two or more people within the safe environment of the filming studio but between the artist and members of the public, including those who are marginalized, disadvantaged and those who may not understand art. The artwork of Suzanne Lacy, for example, *The Crystal Quilt* (1985-87), in which the artist undertook a three-year community project with senior women that culminated in a performance, offers a precedent for an expansion of performance into the public arena. Works such as this indicate that contemporary performance art has not only diversified in terms of its use of media

and dissemination, but increasingly in terms of its engagement with communities. Future research will examine this current phenomenon within contemporary performative practices and investigate the possibility of using my own combination of performative actions, sound and contemporary video technology to establish meaningful artistic exchanges with members of the community. In this way my creative process would not be just about passing a thought from one to another. It would be about passing a thought from one to another to another to another...

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