



Compelled by Human Difference

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Subject to Ongoing Change

14 days of live performance art by The Performance Collective
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Five live artists over fourteen working days created a dense and fervid experience for audiences in the Galway Arts Centre during the Galway Arts Festival this year. *Subject to Ongoing Change* was a marathon of durational performance totaling 76 hours 30 minutes over two weeks by The Performance Collective, a Dublin based group of artists – Pauline Cummins, Michelle Browne, Alex Conway, Frances Mezzetti and Dominic Thorpe – who have been working together since 2007. The Collective performed together in various combinations day-by-day, creating an extraordinary live exhibition in the Arts Centre’s space which was part improvisational and durational performance, part sculptural installation of the cumulative and peculiar materials used as props and creative matter for the live action. Enriching the distinguished Galway Arts Centre’s programme of visual art events for the annual Galway Arts Festival, the daily live performances provided an alternative to the popular festival’s more easily digestible menu of narrative, text or music based shows this year.

Both hesitant and bold viewers entered the first floor rooms, some unsure of the rituals of viewership in the context of this interdisciplinary genre of performance that sits somewhere ‘un-neatly’, but vividly, between visual art, experimental theatre, contemporary dance and participatory or socially engaged practice. For some attendees the encounter with these performers and their multifarious materials in the gallery was exciting and stimulating; for others it was a baffling experience that subverted the normal expectations and obligations between performer and audience to generate a space of unfamiliar and radical relationships.

Without pre-constructed dramatic content, narrative or characterization, the free-form improvisations of the performers were liberated from the traditions of theatre. Without prevalent beauty or a necessary focus on the body, the performances were freed from the conventions of dance. If the viewer expected contemporary visual art conceptualizations, they were hard to find in the moment-to-moment actions and interactions the performers developed as the hours and days inexorably advanced. These artists seemed let loose from society, normality and practical function. They behaved and appeared like the inmates of a psychiatric hospital:

exceptional human beings who are liberated from social norms and purpose, who live and act for their own inner truths and necessity, independent of the collective aspirations of civilization.

As a child I often visited large psychiatric institutions in Dublin where my brother resided and I was deeply affected by the myriad diversity and the emancipation of human mental and bodily expression of his fellow residents. In our society we find extreme examples of human difference problematic and tend to lock these people away and limit unusual appearance and behavior through social control and stigmatization. Perhaps because of this we are also compelled and fascinated by difference and strangeness, desiring to witness its performance and suspecting we are each of us strange and broken too, desiring to see the beauty and freedom of the inexhaustible potential of otherness.

In the infamous asylum of Bedlam in late eighteenth century London, the inmates organized and ran their own public performance of madness for paying publics. Throughout human history we have always been fascinated with the performance of alterity and difference – it provides us with an unlikeness to our own communally agreed identities so we understand our self-construction more acutely. It produces images of mental and bodily freedom we cannot rehearse or enact easily within the limits of our social worlds. Shamans, witches, fools and artists have eternally provided this reflective and cathartic benefit to culture and The Performance Collective with “Subject to Ongoing Change” are good service providers in this lineage.

The fourteen days of performance were divided up daily into one hour thirty-minute sessions whereby different combinations of the five performers worked in shifts alongside a four hour full group performance. This daily practice achieved a prolific creativity and inventiveness in the artists’ performances. Over the days the actions and interactions of the artists changed, often morphing from one image or action in a clearly related sequence, such as Dominic Thorpe’s ‘drawing’ in parallel lines along the gallery wall with chalked tongue and graphite finger, that slowly developed into his conduction of an invisible orchestra with delicacy and omnipotence of tongue and black forefinger. In another related series Frances Mezzetti repeatedly jams a chair up against a line of groaning screaming metal boxes. With wild abandoned silver hair, she then drapes over the boxes like Manet’s *Olympia*. Michelle Browne lies over Mezzetti’s prone body as she breathes deeply, her exhalation labored and intolerable with the resonance of



a death rattle. Mezzetti then cups Browne's face tenderly and penetrates the wheeze-whistles into her open mouth. The actions evolve glacially over one hour, poetic, mysterious and strangely connected. In another succession, Conway shoves a rolled up foil potato crisp bag behind his grinning lips with a demented smile. Later, with a fixated stare, he drops his trousers as a decoy around his ankles, to then stand naked behind a door, the same empty crumpled packet now tensely covering his genitals.

At times the performances generated startling and unexpected developments such as the movement of Cummins' snapping elastic bands off the walls with a profuse and punishing intent – to one hour later – Cummins in a translucent coat, lovingly and tenderly hangs chairs from ceiling strings. A week later Browne covered in dust hobbles through the rooms using debilitated chairs as crutches; then stuck inside a chair, she wears it like a skirt defiantly. Another extract of performance shows Thorpe balanced across the same unstable chairs as he precedes to lay his vulnerable head out the window, tapping the glass insistently, his toes encrusted with the debris and wreckage from previous actions in the space. On another occasion as an audience member, I find I am sitting on the same abused seats, in intimate and resonant contact with the remnants of such voluble actions.

Boredom assailed some viewers during the long hours of slow moving performances, but those who survived the tension between the immutable and the mutable that produces the emotion of *ennui* were rewarded with some stunning evolutions of improvised ideas in action. The artists stated they had no game plan beforehand except a provision of objects in the space to work and play with. During one of the sessions, the materials provided were flour, string, metal boxes and latex gloves for example. The audience observed and intellectually engaged with the creative and cognitive processes that happened through the actions and struggles of the performers with intractable time and the limits of such materials. Although the Collective claim their improvisational work is empty of prepared content, the strange actions and images generated transform into resonant metaphors in combination, or in juxtaposition with others. As with the group performances of the pan-European performance group Black Market International, a non-narrative structure emerges like a plot with no linearity. But perhaps we impose a sense of structure, like a projection upon the series of supposedly unconnected actions and somehow the mind of the viewer pursues links and meaning.

In the galleries – scarred and inscribed with the remnants and history of the 14 days of performance – I performed with the Collective as a guest artist for the last four hour stint and it was the sense of connectedness within the abstract flow of action and interaction that surprised me. The Performance Collective are always working in relationship with each other and to experience this creative intercourse as participant was to dissolve in the boundlessness of the group mind,

supported but free. The awareness of each other in the space was pervading like spilt perfume and there was a sense of convincing unity to the machinations of the Collective in their relationships with each other and with their committed audience.

Dr Áine Phillips is a performance artist and academic based in the West of Ireland. She is Head of Sculpture at The Burren College of Art in County Clare and has exhibited and performed her art work internationally since the late '80s. She has had articles and reviews of performance published in Performance Art Journal MIT Press, Circa, The Printed Project and Visual Artists Newsletter in Ireland.