

Writings on the Subject Worthy and Counter/Acts series

Created by Marissa Perel

For the Aux Curatorial Fellowship at Vox Populi

November – December 2013

On The Wounded Body in Performance, as part of the *Subject Worthy* series

November 3, 2013

Artists: Marissa Perel, Risa Puleo, iele paloumpis, Asimina Chremos, Eileen Doyle

Suspended in a moment of resilience.

Life is pain, right? Politically distributed, but universal. Oppression persists, like reproduces itself all the fucking time. The city and nature are trying to kill us, every day. It's numbing until it's not. Until assault, illness, enduring disability, or simply accumulated aging pushes through and unties all the knots. We are undone. As Marissa Perel said in her performance lecture, "what I had trusted lost its meaning and I needed to find a new meaning for it."

When iele paloumpis twists and falls through space, they speak with a raspy, gremlin voice, claiming identity after identity. It's playful and spooky. So is their articulation of humorously violent fantasies of audience members. Lying with Joanna Groom, the two sing the Talking Heads' "Heaven is a place where nothing ever happens," carving out thrumming, impossible spaces between their harmonies in a cry for an end to movement and process. The stillness of this moment collapses with the rise of a flung, cyclical pattern of movement.

Marissa's program avoided dramatizations of pain. Instead, my attention became focused on the sense of time, vulnerability, change, and healing power that performers are able to command. What happens when pain asserts itself as a condition of living? The urgency of the body becomes impossible to ignore, and also its process can become visible. One's body is continually unfolding, an expanding system, vulnerable to violence and intrusion. This process happens over time, while moments of acute pain interrupt, dispossess, catalyze. Both distorting time and marking it, these moments create gaps in the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.

The five performances reflected different political and representational territories approached by artists in their woundedness, practices of self-mythologizing, re-representation, and endurance. Although these performances involved the delicate display of a kind of breaking down, that same display is enabled by an extreme adaptability.

A wound exposes a body's vulnerability, but also its resilience. The pain, weakness, and vulnerability form an urgent break, but even already then, a new constellation of meaning begins to precipitate. Performance, particularly performance of the pain itself, can form a part of that new patterning. A beautiful resistance, but one which takes a toll. After recounting her sister's and then her own struggle with cancer, Eileen Doyle pinned a large heart-shaped brooch through her own skin above a tattoo commemorating her sister's chemo port. Her soft voice and patient persistence framed the moment, but her action spoke for itself. This was not a search for closure; it was a different kind of opening.

I think performance helps us give up on the idea of a whole body. We are there by and for each other. We are in pieces before we even begin. We break ourselves apart again and there may be a new beginning, but never recovery.

- Gregory Holt

crown uncovered, a poem after devynn emory's *This room this braid*
presented as part of the *Counter/Acts* series
November 10, 2013

in the sound of birdsong feeling distinctly non-bird
relating the circumference of bird bones to human ribs
sun streaks, shadows
in place of paint

amorous behavior
sun sketches with knuckles clenched on pale knees
this streaking does not come from one source of light

shielding one from the other, pulling
apart the grid of logic
forest to forest

what is one part war is two parts silence
what is grooming is taking
what is bred is practiced

waiting in the dark for what
can be felt by transapollo
alight on their canvas chariot

do you feel better
do you feel better
do you feel better
do you feel better

maybe i do, maybe i don't

maybe this room is a memorial
to the closed forest
that, once opened, called
the corners out for cover

this room
this ground
this grid we
cover

anthropomorphic dance: horse, diamond, heliotrope, helix

being night
being one's own story
being variant

tracing the formal to the animal

when glory is
shapes in the body
merging onto canvas

incidental tectonic shifts
form in the once subtle fight for non-linearity
until we've abandoned every matrix

-Marissa Perel

On Meg Foley and Sandra Parker, as part of the *Counter/Acts* series
November 17, 2013

In distilling my experience of witnessing Sandra Parker and Meg Foley's works at AUX in November, I am struck by what sticks...how what I consider to be a lot of information from each piece has lived with me over these months. Marissa Perel's bold curatorial pairings in the *Counter/Acts* series were consistently provocative, and I found this particular evening incredibly charged and somehow mystical, as if the two solos presented that evening were directly in conversation with each other from opposing sides of a mirror. This is not meant to denote a sameness, in fact they are radically different works. However, a shared set of concerns with audience experience and the language of gestures ride the surface of each piece.

Thoughts on Sandra Parker's 'Three Frames:'

Small televisions play videos of performers in brightly lit studios (alone, one per screen) moving through a series of gestures that range from small hand gestures to full bodied shifts. The pacing remains similar...pose/pause/pose/pause as a voiceover describes each movement for us. The descriptions tend to be slightly abstract and poetic. We hear this through headphones. The air in the room is casual now, people chatting, lining up to experience the videos, drinks in hand.

After a brief announcement and shift, most of the audience sits with backs against the wall in the black box of AUX Space. Benjamin Asriel takes a spot in the center of the room. A soundscore begins, a repetition of tones in short intervals. Asriel begins moving through a series of gestures, similar to those in the videos (one of which he is performing in). The room feels cool, the creepy black walls seem to fade and the feeling of being in a white-walled gallery overtakes me.

Asriel has become a living sculpture. The insistent march of pacing in the movements and the music open up a prism of thoughts for me. An artists' model, the object of beauty, That Obscure Object of Desire. I can assign names to each gesture in my head. The piece gives me time to and asks me to really look at Benjamin, to notice his body, his features. Viewing Benjamin Asriel as the piece of work and following the prompt to move about the space during "Three Frames" brought up Buñuelian references to the absurdity of conformity, the dark side of voyeurism, the power and the gaze of the auteur. I watched Sandra watch us. We passed by, approached and sometimes assumed the shapes that Benjamin embodied. Sometimes Asriel's face would register the heat of emotion, other times he was blank faced, cool, Apollonian. Why approach him? What is 'allowed' or invited? I feel the urge to disrupt rising in me. Are we objectifying him by participating in the work? Are we performing for each other or for Sandra by moving self-consciously about the room?

The layered tensions brought out by 'Three Frames' finally release when Sandra enters the center of the space, shut off the speakers and gave Benjamin a nod that his work is done.

Meg Foley's 'Lay of This Land' We re-enter AUX after a brief pause, Meg Foley already occupies the space and the audience again circles up, backs to the walls. She is humming, saying hello, talking about the unintentional glitter on her face. She meets everyone, learning the names of each person in the room. The room feels smaller now, warmer. She launches into movement, luscious, full, exacting. Meg marks the space

and the audience with her voice, her body, her sweat. She is here in the room with us, unmistakably. I think of how hard it is to dance, to carry this body through space, to be bound by gravity as I see Meg intentionally work too hard to rotate her body against the floor. She sweats and breathes and hides nothing from us, even amplifying gestures so much that it feels dangerous. I feel my corporeal heft through her glorious embracing of her own.

She frequently narrates her actions, from the mechanical to the dramatic and absurd. Her voice becomes a texture, bellowing or sweet, childlike or animal...all muscles are firing at all times. Is this rigorous dive into displaying her own consciousness and physical ability a pathway to empathetic viewing? In a stunning sequence, Meg makes her intentions of connecting even clearer as she slowly crawls around the perimeter of the audience, using the heat of her face to trace each audience member's body as she encounters it, low to the ground like a cat. We visualize a false ending with her, as she moves into a final stillness, taking an 'x' shape on the floor. Her effort echoes and reverberates onto the floor, spreading out like waves. She has wrung herself out.

-Christina Zani

Visioning/ Community: On Meg Foley and Sandra Parker, as part of the Counter/Acts series
November 17, 2013

The audience is invited into the space, in one corner two televisions are playing. Both televisions depict the same area but the performers are different. Each one is moving through a series of gestures with dissimilar audio. Time has passed and our focus adjusts, revealing a performer wearing clothes similar to those in the videos who appears standing only a few feet away from us. He begins to go through a series of gestures at an unfixed pace. We are encouraged to walk throughout the space, choosing to get inches close if that's our desire. Our relationship to him and others under continual fluctuation as we shift, as he shifts. Where I stood I saw the two televisions on the farthest side of the room, the performer in my center, and a crowd of people both stationary and moving around him. I saw the two performers on the screens cycling through gestures, never in sync with each other or with him. I saw deviation in the gesture. Lapse between the living body and the recorded body. The only thing fixed being clothing and the act of gesturing. We made choices in how we engaged with Sandra Parker's *Three Frames*. Not all of us would be seeing it from my vantage point, seeing all three performers engaging with time, engaging with us. However, I did not have the privilege of absorbing it being inches away from his eyebrows or inches away from the TV's. All vantages were valid. Eventually this work came to an end and chairs were set up along opposite sides of the room.

In any chair you could see everyone across from you and anyone to the right and left of you. She looked at us all, asking our names, individually seeking to remember them. She sought to remember you, find a way to identify you, and if she forgot she would apologize and begin again. She remembered everyone's name and thus began Meg Foley's *Lay of this Land*. It was a work that felt deeply personal yet wasn't shy in giving us the keys to walk inside. Meg Foley moved her body through space writhing and jolting. Mixing moments of extreme virtuosity in this intimate space with sweat inducing stamina. Moments and movements that gave herself to the ground, gave herself to us, and gave herself to the higher expanses of the space. She did all of this while interjecting this range of movements with questions. She spoke coolly. She spoke in a whisper and sometimes loudly, but she also spoke with a spirit of investigation. These moments were meant to be informative for her and for us.

Her prose felt like a diary - a text that is tender and seldom shared, "I'm afraid of ending... is this the end?" Foley created a work that allowed her to exist in multiple states of time, all being held in this container of the present. Her dialogue embodied the past, whether reflecting on a moment that happened one-second prior or one year before. This consciousness of past informed her present, her body moving throughout the room engaged with the task of doing, and as her movements elapsed became a catalogue and vessel of the past. Disrupting this pattern with inserting moments of the present, either by saying someone's name, or sending hopes into the future, "This is how I imagine it ending..." Meg Foley created a work that shifted how we engage with time while existing in the present and was intelligently self-reflexive.

Reflecting on Perel's *Counter/Acts* series, it seems so transparent that this idea of community building is a binding thread that made this series so strong. Marissa curated a series of events that brought together artists from different performative practices, different countries, and sometimes artists who may not have been aware of those they

engaged with prior to Counter/Acts. The acumen in which Marissa paired artists and themes together allowed me as an audience member to view the convergent threads of their works. I saw the fragility and variance in how we experience time more astutely in Parker's work by viewing Foley's afterward. I saw how Three Frames alluded unintentionally to the idea of "Past, Present, and Future," and the sensation of experiencing those places that Lay of this Land explored as a major thematic arc. Those kinds of convergences appeared so intuitively from devynn emory and Jules Gimbrone, to CA Conrad and Miguel Gutierrez in "ParaQueeratrix". Perel created nights of people coming together in intimate spaces, sometimes moving, sometimes standing, and sometimes sitting. Nights that left room for reflection and room to engage with ourselves and those around us in a heightened way. Perel's curatorial vision created nights of convergence, collaboration, and community.

- Michael Vincent Pusey

On Katy Pyle and J.Makary, as part of the *Subject Worthy* series
December 14, 2013

In out of the rain, indoors finally comes, along with that familiar gallery sawdust, white walls, and rough floors, and then the shock of the black performance space beyond. I am placed: despite the flattening of my body and world by fluorescent-lit train platforms in transit between New York and Philadelphia, the wet sleet along the walk from Market Street Station, despite never having been here before. Here in this dark room – two dancers stretching in the light that fills one half; a ream of folding chairs on risers peering tentatively out of the shadows; the precarious sound system on a low table by the wall –

I know where I am, even if I'm not quite sure why I've come here (something about a discussion, a panel, a post-show talk?).

Here, we are together and swallowed by the familiar anticipation these patches of shadow and light provide, a certain inside-ness, a space for doing and being. Even in this waiting time before the show and as I navigate my own intrusion into this evening, this city and its arts, I know how to be in this room, now. A space of play, an "open box:"¹ no matter how makeshift, drafty, or unrecognizable as such, we come here to perform selves, slip into proximity with each other and find in the rooms unveiled between us some small explosion or seepage of relation. In this dark holding-space we make ourselves ready.

Subject Worthy: subjects, subjected, subjecting, choosing to put ourselves into view or to witness each other's being here. Who is for who? Has the audience arrived for the performers or the other way around? The choice is to be here, this site, this entrance into the belly in which we become makers and doers and presenters and viewers of art. Subjectivity: a position in the world, in society, in relation to how others read, comprehend, and behave towards you. Also, an experience of a position in the world, a way of being in relation and response to others – an internally driven understanding and living of being. I'll rephrase the question: for whom does what we do here come into being? For its audience? Its maker? The doing of the thing comes to life. Let's do the impossible for the sake of a moment of possibility: drop the audience and the artist from the question, that either/or equation, and you are left with the navigation itself, the moving of the people, the action on the screen. Here is a negotiation of the undoable by doing.

Subjects are called to action. They move for/because of themselves and with what is already there in the world for them to be, losing neither. The incompleteness of the works in the evening creates another kind of unexpected "whole." Katy Pyle gives us an excerpt from her narrative ballet, *The Firebird*: the first encounter between Jules Skloot as the titular beast and Pyle herself as the Lesbian Princess. It is followed by Cat Tyc's documentary film-in-progress on the Ballez Company Pyle has assembled and the "community-oriented, gender-fluid, queer utopian vision of what is possible in dance" she is engaging through it. J. Makary's film, *Sung's Pilgrims*, enters next: still in the editing process, it is gifted to us as a long series of GIFs she manually activates. Its discontinuity is accentuated by both the repeating moves of its actors in this cyclical format and Makary's occasional verbal narration alongside our own internal reading of its subtitles (the footage is also yet to be sound edited). The effect is a reminder of Makary's crafting process, but also turns the room into a quiet temple of attention, mobilized stutturingly by her elegantly shot scenes as we hover close to catching, but

always just prior to or ahead of, the story as it is told. These whole parts indicate something important about, or beyond, what the two projects are doing and how they do it; their interventions are legible to us even without their full form, or perhaps because of this shared fragmentation.

There is an immanent social activism and inquiry here that does not purport to be anything else, nor does either artist absent the structures that make their interventions legible. Pyle does not erase ballet and all its attendant flows of gendering and desire. Rather, her creation requires that form's continued existence with its familiar morphology of bodies into virtuosic, formal caricatures of imagined humanity, fantastical creatures, and the like. Makary's project encounters one character's self-exclusion from historical reenactment of the U.S. Colonial period on the basis of her own Asian American body as anachronistic to the period and incompatible with the historical narrative.

It is in part a question of permissions and ownership: she is in a position as museum director to tell this history, but not in the way she most wants – as a reenactor. Is the accuracy of the story more important than the satisfaction of her own desires? A performer – a black man with costumes and set in tow – appears and liberates her into the self-permission to put on the costume, slip into character. Their reenactment becomes flirtatious play with self and each other that slips into a surreal logic of slow, mutually supportive, almost sacred movement: a being together in which the form (and their forms) is lost from name and narrative.

But is it “liberation” if they are playing the white colonists, foundational to the economic and social structure that makes such a trespass contentious for both historical purists who would preserve the accuracy of the image before them and objectors to the potential occlusion of the lived realities of such racialized bodies in that moment of history? Appropriation is not the word, but is self-colonization any more accurate for what Makary is producing here? Are they aspire to some aspirational selves in the form of oppressive figures, of whiteness, or perhaps for something else altogether: a playful questioning, the productive disjuncture and static noise produced by these people in these costumes?

Makary conjures the possibilities not of what these subjects represent when placed in these positions, but what they do and how they breath, act, exist here. This is a blurring, a navigation of two very real valences of being in the world: as it is defined in and by society and as it is lived. Freedom is not a loss of either for the other, but a being with that is at once utopian and incomplete, failing beautifully at its perhaps politically-incorrect aspirations, but better for its allowance of that act in the first place. For the conversation it allows and the ways of existing it affirms.

How to set into uncertainty a public sense of history without simply reversing it into an inverted version of itself. Peter Stoneley describes, in *A Queer History of the Ballet*, how modern, experimental, and avant garde dance are often historicized and analyzed as not only a reaction away from ballet, but as a kind of savior redeeming

Western dance from the politically incorrect, old-fashioned, unchanging form that has given us exaggeratedly normative gender roles, caricatures of exotic, foreign, brown bodies, and a questionable ethics of the body in both story ballet and studio. But this linear, causal narrative may obscure the problems inherent to dance's modernism, as well as the vital spaces within the (formulaic) form of ballet itself. The ballerina's form

“can project a bodily coherence” that may come as a welcome relief for those whose bodies and desires daily create an experience of “social incoherence,” he writes. What is possible in this way of being in the space? Perhaps ballet can be thought as a scene of visibility, a zone of permissions to act and self-present in ways that are managed by societal ideology as well as a structure of theatrical rules and strictly dictated physical expectations. At the same time, it has carried the potential to “grant presence” to presences otherwise considered “obscene” (literally unacceptable within the “scene” of the world) and “illegal” (engaging and acting in ways unacceptable to existing ideologies).

Pyle’s approach to the story ballet does not aim to rewrite ballet into instant political correctness, sweepingly inclusive of bodies otherwise disavowed, nor does it pretend towards a willful overlooking of difference for the sake of modernism or abstraction. Pyle and her dancers instead push into the form, the archetypes, and role-play. It is a self-assertion: of one’s desires for an invented role, for an imagination-space, an image of self that is enacted in and through the dance of the colonizer, despite or in spite of its normative and idealized imagination of society and its subjects, its brutal mastery of muscles and bones into an unforgiving vision of the human. There is a deep irreverence in her choreography, but it is infused with reverence for both the performers as they live and move here and now, and the dance form itself, history and all. This self-assertion is the asking – by moving and making – what they can do with this, how can it work for them and them for it.

“The time of the past helps mount a critique of the space of the present,” José Muñoz writes. But “[t]his is not a revisionary history or metahistory; it is a critical deployment of the past for the purpose of engaging the present and imagining the future,”⁶ a queer “utopian impulse” in which past, present, and potential all share a space. More than accurate history or its revisionary inversion, this is the performance of questions about history itself and the formulas we have produced with it. I believe in this space, this dark maw where we bring our selves into presence. I believe in the acts that happen here. Subject Worthy is the body in action, and “subject” (pesky word, instrumental word) contains both where we are located, and our experience of being there itself. What do we allow ourselves to be and what do we use – from the past that is both terrible and ours – in order to become? Failure is allowed, and it is the motion itself that matters: here is a “space for fucking up and holding each other accountable,” someone says, and it is luminous.

-Tara Aisha Willis

Gregory Holt is a Philadelphia based choreographer, improviser, and performer. Influenced by somatic approaches, he combines these with a social view of the body inspired by popular education and critical cultural theory. He works on many collaborative and community-based projects, and his work has been shown around the US, in Canada, and Europe.

Marissa Perel is an artist and writer based in New York. Her interdisciplinary work includes performance, installation, criticism and curatorial projects. She often uses collaboration as a platform for the exchange of disciplines, working methods and discourses with choreographers, composers and visual artists. She is interested in drawing from the polemics of identity and representation to create compositional models for performance and installation. She has curated performances, panels and talks at such venues as the New Museum, New York Live Arts and at the Aux Performance Space at Vox Populi where she recently served as Curatorial Fellow.

Christina Zani is a performance maker/doer/collaborator living in Philadelphia. She is currently working with Headlong, Subcircle, Nichole Canuso and Meg Foley. Her own work has been shown through the Parlor, Mascher Space Co-op, Thirdbird, The Painted Bride, AUNTS events, Movement Research, Atlantic Center For the Arts, Festival of Arts and Ideas.

Michael Vincent Pusey is a conceptual movement artist living and working in Philadelphia, PA. Currently pursuing his BFA at University of the Arts his practice exists in dance, film, and text. His work investigates group mentalities, queerness, and the politics of poverty and race. You can follow his projects at www.michaelvincentpusey.com.

Tara Aisha Willis is a dance artist and Ph.D. student in Performance Studies at Tisch School of the Arts, NYU. She worked as Movement Research's Program Associate from 2011-2014 and continues to serve as the coordinator of their Artists of Color Program. She has facilitated discussions for CLASSCLASSCLASS and the Movement Research Festival: Spring 2014, is a Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory editorial collective member, and is currently an editorial assistant to dance scholar Thomas F. DeFrantz. Aside from her own choreography, Tara has recently performed for Megan Byrne, Diana Crum, Macklin Kowal, Ethan Philbrick, and Jillian Sweeney.

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