

Te Adam
Pātaka Art
Toi Gallery

FACING THE MOMENT: ON PERFORMANCE AND THE POLITICS OF PRESENTNESS

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In February 2007 two performances took place at the same time, on the same night, in two different galleries in central Auckland.

The first performance, by *Raised by Wolves* (a performance art duo that consists of Biddy Livesey and myself), was called *Mall wall walk talk task bask bark park*, and as the title suggests, it was a display of progression from one state to another. We moved concrete blocks, stacked-up in a wall in one corner of the gallery, to the opposite corner, where we placed them in a step-like structure. We then climbed the steps, reaching up to touch contact microphones, triggering a range of sounds and notes.

The other performance by Tao Wells was timed to coincide with an exhibition he was having at Gambia Castle. Tao's performance consisted of him humping a mattress on the floor for the duration of a Sonic Youth song. The room where the humping took place was small and the floor was covered with semen paintings that Tao had made prior to the event.

Biddy and I missed Tao's actual performance, since we were at our own, but soon after we arrived at Gambia Castle we saw Tao's performance being replayed on a TV that he held on his shoulders, a Herculean extension of the performance.

Our *Mall-Wall* performance was an example of a work of art that had a political objective – there were specific political outcomes that we would have liked to be fulfilled – outcomes relating to sustainability and environmental consciousness. Our performance illustrated the urban design principle of *active edges*. The brick wall at the beginning of our performance illustrated an inactive edge, and the steeped formation, on which we could eventually climb on in order to trigger sounds, was an active edge.

An active edge is an urban design term that describes varied, approachable human-sized spaces. A market bazaar contains a multitude of active edges; a bank that is all glass and concrete and stretches most of a block is an inactive edge, as is a car parking building. The sound element in our performance aimed to reflect the pleasurable experiences that are more likely to come out of active spaces than out of isolating sprawl.

We used the concept of active edges to consider wider social trends – to illustrate how urban places have certain ideologies embedded within them, how they embody beliefs of how a society should function. An urban space can either benefit commerce and efficiency or benefit community. Active edges tend to encourage people to walk around instead of driving. Active edges are a sign of a culture that promotes long-term sustainability over short-term profits, and similarly privilege public good, and public spaces, above private ones.

We attempted to balance the didactic element of the performance with general entertainment. As well as creating a big swell of improvised sound we had the sight of us preforming the brick lifting, physical work causing straining, sweating. But the issue of environmental consciousness pervaded our performance, and as time goes by and the performance is remembered and recalled, the sound and the sweating seems less easy to explain compared to the message of environmental consciousness, and the idea of active edges. Tao's performance was more about presentness – that is being in the moment, and creating a sense of immediacy. Where as our performance consisted of two women with what we considered a positive sustainable message, Tao's work felt more like an improvised splurge; an experience over which he didn't entirely have control and didn't want to. His body, and its movements were central to the action. He was simultaneously putting his body under stress, and it letting go wherever it wanted.

Tao's performance was trying to achieve a kind of literal and symbolic nakedness. It was consciously trying to build embarrassment. Whether or not one enjoys becoming embarrassed, as an audience member witnessing a performer in an embarrassing state usually means joining them in that state. Through that combination of embarrassment and excitement, Tao's

performance created a unifying effect, a feeling of immediacy, of being in the moment.

I'm not really interested in making art about sex or virility or a lack of it, and I'm not sure if Tao is either, but seeing his performance, I became aware of how his experience and the audiences had been swept up together.

Having an underlying concept that you want the audience to absorb, detracts from the immediacy of the action. When it is working best, performance brings you into the moment, while an underlying political imperative often takes you out of it. My interest lies in considering if it is possible to achieve presentness – really drawing an audience into a moment of a performance – while still retaining a political element to that performance.

The American poet Jorrie Graham combines the power of being present as an artistic goal and simultaneously as political action. She calls for people – society – to have the confidence or the freedom to exist in the moment, with out demanding that the moment produce results. In a conversation with Michael Silverblatt, Graham calls for us to 'become more humble in our need for consequence, and more willing to act without a sense that action has to have an outcome – more willing to act for free'.

In light of such a statements I have come to recognise that when an artwork relies on changing peoples political views to be successful, then it will most likely fail. However when art reminds one of the present, first and foremost, and provides space for reflection of ones own present, then people are more likely to be open to receiving information, and to judging that information rationally.

Jorrie Graham argues that to be present, is to realise that one has complex, and even contradictory emotions, rather than having unilateralist emotions, such as the patriotism required immediately after 9/11. Art can be an antidote for such simplicity; it can call for emotional and ideological complexity. Graham asserts that to be 'completely present at the borders of one's being is ... a work, is a practise, it is not something that is given. Just because one has a body doesn't mean that one is inhabiting it. Just because one is of the flesh doesn't mean that one is incarnate. To be incarnate is.. to be inhabiting the whole of your emotions, the whole pallet of your emotions'.

Graham acknowledges the benefit of being present, but also that it is a difficult state that required much work to achieve. A parallel to the difficulty of being present is the difficult in accurately describing the state of being present, and the shortcomings of language to do so. In her short story *Grammar Questions*, Lydia Davis systematically lays out the inadequacy of language to be able to describe the state of being alive, and moving out of this state towards death.

Now, during the time he is dying, can I say, "This is where he lives"?

If someone asks me, "Where does he live?" Should I answer, "well right now he is not living, he is dying"?

If someone asks me, "where does he live?" can I say, "He lives in Vernon Hall"? Or should I say, "He is dying in Vernon Hall"?

When he is dead, everything to do with him will be in the past tense. Or rather, the sentence "He is dead" will be in the present tense, and also questions such as "where are they taking him?" or "where is he now?"

But then I won't know if the words "he" and "him" are correct, in the present tense. Is he, once he is dead, still "he", and if so, for how long is he still "he"?

Art's role can be the task of reminding us all to engage and to enjoy engaging – to be aware of the moment that we're in. Through facilitating such engagement art can achieve political results, while not succumbing to being defined by political objectives. Being in the present can create a better

awareness of reality and therefore better-informed political decisions. Being willing to act and experience things without aiming for specific tangible outcomes, thereby becomes a political action.

Graham has asserted that global warming presents us with a very particular challenge – one that requires that we act with the future in mind while not expecting to get any reward for this consideration, as the rewards for mitigating global warming will largely occur outside our lifetime.

Art does not have to literally tackle political problems, because as Graham argues, art has the ability to connect people to the moment – remind people that they are sharing the same moment – to really experience a moment means to be grounded in a specific environment. Being in the moment thereby enforces and confirms our shared conception of the environment, which will ideally lead to a fuller consideration of how we should treat it.

Challenges to being present

Modern technologies are moving people's everyday lives further and further away from an awareness of the importance of inhabiting the present moment. Internet social networking site Facebook is not necessarily evil or even useless, but Facebook and digital social networking do privilege expectation and recollection over presentness. This is partly because the documentation of people's lives and the self-categorisation of those documents becomes data that can then be sold, where as present-ness can less easily transformed into a commodity.

Socialites have always existed. Putting a lot of effort into being seen, and being recorded being fabulous, has always happened. But institutions like Facebook are alluring because, they mean that there is no longer a limited number people in charge of displaying visual trinkets of social hubbub. Facebook offers the democratisation of celebratory.

In the world of Facebook, actions and events gain their worth through their re-presentation, usually in photographic form, to others. In this process, the act of experience – of being in the moment – is constantly deferred. There is a similarity here with tourism where the experiences of travel becomes

secondary to the documentation of that experience. In comparison to Tao's performance, Facebook is about as far away from sex and dance, and the live experience as you can get. With Facebook, the live experience is sometimes constructed purely so it can be documented. Photo albums can be constructed to show the best moments, and to string together these moments into a desired narrative. One has power to re-imagine, and reconstruct an event – without the nuisance of what the event's reality actually consisted of.

One of my favourite phrases of our current era is, 'Won't you sit on my Facebook!' which I once heard yelled in gest. The phrase sums up nicely the vast gap that exists between the momentary pleasure of sex (immense, intense, condensed) and the highly edited, post-the-moment experience of Facebook.

The antidote is dance.

Dance is the opposite of posing for a photograph, or stopping to be photographed. It is a form that inhabits the moment of its own production. A video of dance makes you want to be close to the real thing, experiencing the tactile-ness, the present-ness of the dancers body. Good dance reminds one of the joy of being present, to the edge of ones body, like good sex. Even 'solitary sex' is about the act of concentration on oneself, on the moment of yourself. Tao's solitary sex dance wasn't ever aiming for the tangible outcome of reproduction.

Art continuously has to justify its importance; art in every generation comes under scrutiny, self-scrutiny, and a pressure to explain itself. Political matters, ideas about our society, community and culture, shouldn't be absent from art, but they shouldn't be driving factors. And they don't need to be the driving factors, because art can achieve political impact in its own way, and should not be held accountable against cruder tests such as community involvement or popularity brought about by spectacle. Such measures are less important than individual emotional responses, which can in turn become collective experience, and the possibility of more improvised collective change.

Being in the present is itself the product, and paradoxically, being in the present helps us to reflect more readily on the future and its needs.

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