

Confessions of a performance artist: excerpts from a conversation

Liliefeldt, Louise. Canadian Theatre Review Issue 86, (Spring 1996): 29-31.

In my first performances I was really frustrated because I knew that this was the place I needed to be but I didn't know what to do. So much of it was physically aggressive, letting out all of those frustrations, letting it go blah, and feeling embarrassed because I just exposed myself to everyone not even knowing what I just did up there. I shook my body and moved around a lot. It was really disturbing in a way, but I was very sure that I had to keep going.

That was really important but often unsatisfying. Satisfying in that stuff was being let out, but unsatisfying in that I hadn't figured out what the relationship was with the audience, or even if there was one. I went that way because I felt I needed to go that way, but I couldn't have explained what it was or where it was going at the time. The feeling is not a choice, but it's a choice to go with it or not.

These physically aggressive performances slowed down because I was finally calming down and breathing. I began to take the time to think about the performances I wanted to do and that I had ideas that I wanted to work with. I began formulating those ideas. I was coming to terms with where I was, becoming more comfortable. At first, I was so unaware that people were actually paying attention. I was very much in my own body and mind; I could have done anything not realizing what I did. I could have taken a shit on the stage, kept dancing and finally got off and blocked out that I took a shit because I was not aware of them even watching me. I thought I was alone; it was as though the audience was there by default. As I became more aware that they were there, I realized I could choose to show them anything that I wanted. I began to realize my power. I also began to be aware of the elements of time and space and my power to choose how I used those essential elements in performance. I became completely still.

You see, I have this machine, my body, its functions and moves. I find sitting still for hours at a time, as basic as it is, so complicated and so intense. I feel every single muscle and nerve, so it makes it that much more real and so raw. You are actually there experiencing.

The first of these performances I stood on a stairway, one arm on the railing, one hand where my heart was/should have been, with a goat's heart on the step at my feet. I held this for five hours. (I took a one - minute break.) In the piece I did this summer, "Ethel", I was in a room that people had to walk into. Everything was painted including myself. So when you entered the room you were completely surrounded. I was in the space for an hour before people entered. Each performance lasted five hours. I did it three days.

I've continued doing this kind of performance in different locations - in public spaces, storefronts, not only in galleries. I want to do places like malls, parks - basically spaces where people just are - the street.

It takes us time to realize things. I will sit there for three hours until people get it and until I

get it. Some people will come back after having passed by my performance. There is confirmation that "yes, I'll be here for three hours if that will help you understand it," because sometimes it takes that long for me to get into it. In the first hour, often my body will freak out because it doesn't want to do what I'm telling it to do because what I'm doing is quite unnatural. A body is constantly moving and I'm telling it that it cannot for a number of hours. It uses every part of my body to control the movement. At first, my legs may hurt because they want to move and I have to convince myself that everything is OK and I talk myself down, in turn that energy has to relocate itself so now my legs are OK but my back hurts and so I do the same and now it has moved to my arms and I keep talking it out so my arms don't give way. Finally, it is all in my head and I feel insane because there is all this tension that has accumulated in my head which was where I was talking to the rest of my body from and now I have the task of having to release all the energy out into the space. At this point it may be into the second hour of the show. The energy within the space is now different than it was moments ago, and all this went on internally while appearing completely still.

I love to create a space that is enclosed because you have no choice (while you are within it) but to forget the outside world and experience this strange surreal one. It's not forcing people because they have chosen to come into the space, but I am, in a way, forcing them to feel and experience my environment. It has been constructed down to the very last element. You know, if I really wanted to, I could incorporate aromatherapy into my performances and people would have to deal with that.

When I was a kid I always created my own world while seeing the other worlds that other kids created. I preferred to watch things and inspect them while always seeing it for what it was, not by changing it. In a way I am doing the same thing as an adult in my work. I'm saying, "yes this is my space, sure come and see it, feel it and respect it." What's fascinating to me is that people seem to be comfortable looking at things because they're interesting and unusual to them, and that's OK, but so often when I make eye contact with people they feel the need to look away or at a different part of me instead of my eyes or my face. It seems that it's OK for someone to look at you but when they realize they are being looked at, it becomes different. It's as though my stare is saying, "Hey, I'm here too. You can look at me but I'm as real as you are, and I'll look at you just the same because you are here in front of me while I'm doing this thing." A lot of people don't allow themselves to experience contact in this way. It's always OK to look, but to be looked at implies something. This raises the issue of being female - of how you are being looked at as a woman. I have been putting myself on display and part of that is to help me get over or through or around issues of my own that I need to deal with. But part of it is to say, "OK, if you're going to look at it here it is, but now I'm going to decide what it will look like and how you are going to look at it because you've been looking at it all along not as Louise but as a Woman."

I cannot deny the energy that actually connects me to the audience, so I have a responsibility to be sincere and to be honest about what I'm feeling. In a way I put myself on the spot. My art is based solely around how I feel and is very personal. When people want to come and see me, I feel that I actually want to give them something back. There is an exchange and when this exchange doesn't happen it's not equal. I am being confrontational - it's not just a room with no one in it. I am in it, and I am here, and this is work for me, but

you are going to do some work also, you're going to feel something too. You will know if I'm not being real, and I will know the same about you.

If I were providing a service it would be one that gets people to connect with their own decision - making process. In a sense allowing them to connect with their intuitive selves. I can't decide for you what to think about this piece, but I can make it so you get to the point where a decision needs to be made and that process is often not apparent to someone just looking.

If someone comes into the space and we are not connecting at all it hurts because I feel as though they are turning away from me or not wanting to be around me. But in fact, it's just fine because often energies just simply do not connect and often that feeling is brought on by my own insecurities. Not everyone is ready to understand the work on the spot or I them.

I don't expect that people are going to take what I have given them with them at that moment or even that day because it's more subtle than that. They may remember someday. While moving their cup from the table to the sink they see for only a second something that reminds them of my performance. They may remember what they felt at that moment whether that's two years or two weeks from it.

What amazes me are the people that will stand looking at me for as long as they can, and those moments are often the peak of my performance because of the dynamic it creates. It is so exciting, and I want everyone in the space to witness it. I think they will, even if they're not watching it directly. That energy fills the space and shifts it to anybody ready to accept it.

It is interesting when you allow people into a room with Art - there is a code of respect that is acknowledged - no one will touch you out of this respect. However, in my storefront performance, surrounded by glass, people felt free to think that they could touch me. People touched the glass and pressed up against the window to try to look down my top. It became a psychological interaction. The glass provides safety for them, they are confident that I will not lash out at them as I might one on one, unprotected by glass. People act up and seem to forget that I am watching them too, but once eye contact is made, they stop and catch themselves in the middle of a ridiculous act. I'm thinking, "yes I see you just as clearly as you see me so do whatever you like, but remember you're putting yourself on display as much as I am."