

## LONG-TERM

Co-curated with Sandrine Schaefer, the work featured in LONG-TERM investigated collaborative practices of various artist duos who create extended duration performance. Unfolding over two days (12-13 April 2014) the event addressed the complexities involved in creating, balancing, and evolving a shared creative process.

Presenting Artists:

Duorama\* (Paul Couillard and Ed Johnson)

JV (Jeff Huckleberry and Vela Phelan)

Miller and Shellabarger (Dutes Miller and Stan Shellabarger)

ROOMS (Marrakesh Frugia and Todd Frugia)

VestAndPage\* (Verena Stenke and Andrea Pagnes)

*\*Co-presented with FADO Performance Art Centre.*



Fig. 1. Duorama #115 (Paul Couillard and Ed Johnson). Co-presented with FADO Performance Art Centre as part of L&P's LONG-TERM. Photo by Henry Chan.

# Towards Anti-Disciplinarity: the (messy) hermeneutics of self-violent performance art<sup>1</sup>

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They need broken glass. And lots of it. At first, I don't give it much thought. Anyone who has organized performance art events knows that gathering strange materials is an integral part of the job. I add glass to the list, right after "bags of soil," "wood to make a coffin," and "a human-sized rolling cart." It's not until the middle of their performance that I begin to question how I will know.

Because it's hard to tell from here... how much blood is too much?

Academic scholarship has offered interesting and insightful studies of performance art work variously called "masochistic" (O'Dell), "wounding" (Jones), and acts of "pain and aggression" (Graver). Each of these terms is troubling to me, whether in its implication of sexual pleasure, the need to be "healed," or the assumption of sensation/intention on the part of the artist. Performance art wherein the artist enacts physical violence on themselves is as varied and nuanced as the number of artists who perform it.<sup>2</sup> These studies have tended to focus on the relationship between performer and audience, and the meaning making that might be specific to these types of events (see Jones; O'Dell; Graver).

As a curator and creator of self-violent performance art, I have begun to question my own frameworks for making and thinking these works. What follows is an attempt to denaturalize some of the common hermeneutics used in understanding self-violent pieces. In exploring the politics of interpretation, I propose anti-disciplinarity as a way to start thinking new modes of writing, making, and teaching performance.



Andrea Pagnes, one half of the performance art duo VestAndPage who are performing as part of L&P's LONG-TERM event, is blindfolded and seated at a small table. He's working with a lit candle and writing with a long feather plume, inked in his own blood. Verena Stenke, his partner, is across the room: falling flat as a plank, straight down towards the floor, catching herself each time at the last moment... her nose, just inches from the hard wood. Andrea is in the mound of broken glass, now. He holds larger mirror pieces across his shoulders and chest, like wings. He walks across the glass and the sound is visceral. The glass cracks and pops under his footsteps, his red blood streaking across the translucent slivers and shards.

During the two-hour performance, I see and feel audience members cringing. It's obvious that some are concerned about the fire-blindfold combination (they tell me as much later), and others are frozen by the blood. It's not till Andrea begins wrapping Verena, body-to-body, with fishing line that I, myself, become nervous. They're wearing masks that have



**Fig. 2. VestAndPage's *Dyad*. Andrea tightly wraps fishing line around himself and Verena. Artists co-presented with FADO performance art centre and co-curated by Sandrine Schaefer with the author, for L&P's LONG-TERM. Photo by Henry Chan.**

been cast from their own faces. Watching their precarious struggle to stay upright, balancing their platform boots on spilled bells and glass, I begin to wonder... will I know if Verena is choking? Will Andrea be able to tell through his mask?

In *Discipline & Punishment*, Michel Foucault illuminates the ways in which “disciplinary society” regulates the behaviour of individuals through the organization of space, time, and behaviour, enforcing this regulation through systems of surveillance. This management of bodies also occurs through pedagogical structures: “disciplines” in the academy or arts tend toward organizing epistemologies so as to control and distribute power in asymmetrical ways (read: colonial, white supremacist, patriarchal, ableist, classist, ageist, etc.).<sup>3</sup> This organization is a way of making knowledge legible—whether theoretical, methodological, or praxis-based. Which begs the question: legible to whom?

The varied systems of surveillance that reinforce disciplinarity (in the pedagogical sense) act on and through our bodies, voices, and minds. The systemic is comprised of the individual. We are the surveillance systems that keep ourselves in-check, enacting the systems we may simultaneously be oppressed by (this is not to say that we could simply choose otherwise). Academics, arts technique teachers, art critics, umbrella publishing companies that draw profits by maintaining the inaccessibility of texts like this one to those outside of the academic institution: all participate in systems of legitimization that are underpinned by social/political/economic power (for we cannot separate these imbricated strands).

These methods of surveillance, particularly in the arts but in academia as well, sometimes take the form of “technique.” (By technique, I mean in the specific sense of praxis-based methods that are taught, for example: acting technique, dance technique, writing style, grammar, etc.) Virtuosity is the end-goal of technique. Virtuosity—and thus technique—are also underpinned by systems of power designed to function invisibly via normalization (hence, what is called “good grammar,” for example, is actually the grammar of imperial whiteness,<sup>4</sup> among other things). In striving for virtuosity, technique necessarily births hundreds of “toos” (“too fat,” “too slow,” “too poor,” “too black”) that are expelled from the limits of the virtuous. Disciplinarity, technique, and virtuosity are actually methods of *interpreting* art in that they prioritize certain elements of art-making over others (for example, Stanford Meisner’s prioritizing of emotion over text<sup>5</sup>). These hermeneutics—as in, a method or principle of interpretation, or the study thereof—become a framework for art, planting it firmly within disciplinary realms via the naturalization of certain specific values. In this way, disciplinarity is reinforced in both the creation and reception of art and the rules of the game are already set by the teaching of technique. But what if one doesn’t want to play within the game as it is? What if we, as creators and thinkers, want to assert the illegibility of self-violence in performance by refusing frameworks proposed by techniques of praxis? Anti-disciplinarity is one way to start thinking new modes of teaching, making, and writing performance.

In order to discover what anti-disciplinarity in self-violent performance creation and reception might look like, we have to first turn our attention to identifying the hermeneutic lenses through which we tend to receive self-violent works. In my experience, three hermeneutic lenses are common, as I outline below.

The first is an art critical focus on the content of the work. Here, *content* refers to Susan Sontag’s argument, in *Against Interpretation*, that the very notion of content assumes the work,

in fact, “says something” (4). This content-obsession is thus a project of interpretation that requires the “message” of the work to be decoded and made legible. “[R]educing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that,” argues Sontag, “tames the work of art [. . .] makes art manageable, comfortable” (5). Specifying Sontag’s argument to self-violent works, I suggest that automatically interpreting them via the context of performance art’s precedent for self-violence can be a way of erasing what is actually happening in the now of the (performance) event. Art as content/meaning making/art historically situated, are all tactics of disciplinarity that organize self-violence into a legible (and thereby productive) technique of the discipline of performance art. In refusing (the decipherability of) previous performance art’s self-violence as a hermeneutic for receiving the work, we who receive the work are also refusing to turn performance art itself into a discipline; refusing to subscribe to a performance art canon and the systems of power that organize it. The inverse is true as well: in mobilizing the self-violent history of performance art as a way to make legible self-violent works in the present, we reify performance art into a discipline—a canon—with self-violence as simply one of its techniques. This is not to say that we cannot understand a work within its historical context, but rather that if this is to happen, it must happen at the demand of the work itself. What histories, what canons, is the work asking to be read through and in? (And by this, I am not centring the artist’s intentions—the experience of how a work is calling to be read is a subjective one.) To push any frame of reference upon a work forecloses all the other potential epistemologies that the piece may be working with and through.

The second hermeneutic lens I will highlight is that of “ethics.” Martin Rueff, in his introduction to Judith Butler’s *Qu’est-ce qu’une vie bonne?*, points out that the ethical and political are never separate. He states that, in fact, “la question éthique naît de la vie psychique imposée par une situation de pouvoir” (9). Could it be that our own ethical questioning of whether to stop a self-violent performance is actually the surfacing of a technique of power? Claire Bishop, in her 2012 book on participatory art, *Artificial Hells*, argues that a focus toward ethics in critical thinking on participatory works can hinder the possibility of attending to the works’ potential for destabilising shared ethical values. Since witnessing self-violence often implicates the audience, Bishop’s caution against becoming entangled in ethics is an interesting one to consider. The point here is not whether self-violent work is ethical, but whether the work itself is *asking to be received through an ethical lens*. Likewise, the point is not to discard the important work of ethical analysis, but rather to denaturalize ethics as a go-to framework for self-violent performance.

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Later, over drinks, Verena and Andrea tell me a terrifying story about a performance where Andrea had borrowed a knife and cut himself too deeply. They’d wound up in the emergency room. (I take a gulp of my beer.) The knife, Andrea says, is like a painter’s brush—a specific tool that the artist builds a relationship to... the borrowed knife was a bad idea—he always brings his own, now. I thank them for not telling me this story before they performed. But it does make me think. For weeks afterwards I wonder: am I too relaxed as an organizer? After all, if I don’t call an ambulance, who will? How much blood is too much?

In turning these questions over and over, I began to understand that, for me, VestAndPage’s performance was not asking for intervention—the self-violence was not about



Fig. 3. VestAndPage's *Thou Twin of Slumber: In Situ* (2013). Museo Universitario del Chopo, Mexico City. Photo by Jessica Salazar.

my relationship to them but their relationship to themselves and each other. So calling an ambulance would come down to my trust as an organizer in their agency (in this case, a complete trust built on previous conversations and gut instinct). Trust can become complicated, however, when you don't know how "in-control" a performer is. For example, in the 2014 iteration of Toronto's 7a\*11d International Festival of Performance Art, presenting artist Nathalie Mba Bikoro performed a work that included drinking copious amounts of wine over a period of three hours, skipping rope between drinks, while two video projections played images that I later learned are from *Les statues meurent aussi* (*Statues Also Die*).<sup>6</sup> We watched as she stumbled across the floor, red wine dripping from her mouth down her crumpled once-white shirt. Bikoro articulated this piece, in a panel the next day, as a healing act and the audience's witnessing of the work as an act of love. If Bikoro was proposing an ethical quandary through her work, it seems that it was not, for her, about intervention in *that* moment but instead a provocation to intervene in imperial historiography through witnessing her creation of a counter-history. But I remember watching an organizer, Bojana Videkanic, as she watched Bikoro perform—crumpled and dripping on the floor—and I remember reading deep concern in the creases and tensions of Bojana's face. I imagined her worrying about whether to step in or not, as I was. I wondered if she experienced her role as a "loving" one. Later, Videkanic told me she had indeed been "worried sick" and "horrified" that something might happen to the artist (Videkanic). As a curator, I understood: What responsibility do we hold for the well-being of artists whom we invite to perform?

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This question gives rise to the third hermeneutic: discourses of "sickness/health." Here it is important to remember that normalizing medical discourses have taught self-violence as "sickness" that must be "cured." Though the framework of "performance" may shift this under-

standing, there still seems to be an emotional residue that clings to self-violence as something to be *worried* about, that sees “injury” or even death as an un-favourable outcome. What if the artist expresses to the curator that they find the possibility for death an integral part of the work? (What if someone had stopped Bas Jan Ader?) Sontag, writing of Marx and Freud, points out that their doctrines, “actually amount to elaborate systems of hermeneutics” (4). In reminding us that (now generally normalized) Freudian readings of health are *indeed* interpretations, Sontag points us towards the important step of denaturalizing “health” concerns by asking who defines “health” or “wellness” and to what end. Perhaps this self-reinforcing version of a “suicide watch” is a way for social/political/economic systems of power to keep (hierarchically organized and valued) bodies in the more productive—and certainly less expensive—“live” position.<sup>8</sup> In the same vein, it is important to notice the ways in which discourses of “sickness/health” are continuously mobilized by imperial power to justify patronizing intervention on behalf of the helpless “other.” This does not mean that intervention to “protect” the performer is *always* patronizing; rather, I’m suggesting that it is important to denaturalize the hermeneutics one is using. Notice how we are understanding. In doing so, we open ourselves to the possibility of seeing how the performance itself is asking to be understood or whether it is meant to be “understood” at all.

An example: on the same evening that Bikoro performed, Terrance Houle presented the seventh and last performance of his *Friend or Foe* series. I’d met him walking on the street earlier in the day and we’d chatted about prep for the performance. He was worried—he wasn’t sure if he had enough people to help him—I offered a hand—he replied that my job would be to give him a “real beating”—I responded that I probably couldn’t... my heart and my politics wouldn’t let me do that to him. Later that night, I watched—and thus participated in—Houle being beaten with rolled up papers (photocopies of essays on contemporary Indigenous art). I also watched some audience members intercede on his behalf—one lay themselves out across Houle to protect his body from the masked beaters. Having talked to Houle, I initially had the sensation that for me to intercede would be to censor him, a way of stopping him from enacting his work. My job, I felt, was to witness something of the imperial violence that I, as a beneficiary of settler colonialism, am implicated in and enact. Yet, I later learned that Houle had instructed his beaters to stop only if two people intervened independently of each other (Videkanic). Perhaps the work itself was calling for an ethical-political intercession that turned on protecting Houle’s “wellness,” while at the same time it enacted the artist’s agency in making visible violence that is usually systemically erased. Interestingly, Videkanic was also one of the masked beaters, which she described as “traumatic” but “necessary.” When Videkanic took Bikoro back to the festival hotel that night, she shared that she had been one of the masked beaters... Bikoro was apparently “horrified” (Videkanic).

I highlight this example to show the faulty separation of hermeneutics that I’ve strategically made in order to better look at each. As well, the complexity of unraveling disciplinary techniques in this instance is made more complicated by the ways in which physical violence and systemic violence sometimes veer away from each other, further tangling these knots. Moreover, in writing about this work, I enact interpretation, myself. So, what can we do? Can we climb out of disciplinarity? How do we find anti-disciplinarity?

We can know anti-disciplinarity only insofar as we can think outside of the systems of power we are in and of. Anti-disciplinarity is somewhat utopic in the Muñozian sense: ever



Fig. 4. VestAndPage's *Dyad*. Artists co-presented with FADO performance art centre and co-curated by Sandrine Schaefer with the author, for L&P's LONG-TERM. Photo by Henry Chan.



receding but necessary as a horizon, an always not-yet, to work toward. The glimmerings and whiffs we catch now will seem crude compared to what we might learn to conceive of as we move towards the horizon (and of course this may not be in the forward/onward mode suggested by the metaphor). Though there can be no moment of arrival, the movement itself is generative: Let's turn our attention towards openings instead of solutions. Let's de-naturalize our hermeneutical concerns to continuously poke holes in our own methods of interpretation. As writers and thinkers, we are in a strange position: we can't *think* performance without interpretation. Instead of trying to un-think performance, let's strive to *unknow* it so that our thinking is always a new unfolding that honours the worlding(s) of each performance. Importantly, as teachers of performance art, we must keep nudging at the limits. We can choose not to form students in ways that mirror what we already know. We can push ourselves to find paths of guiding and supporting that don't entail moulding and emulating.<sup>9</sup> How might teaching in the mode of a radical unknowing<sup>10</sup> alter our limits and let our students discover their own, unique, way of creating? I find the anchor point of self-violent performance to be a fruitful way of thinking and feeling through these questions of anti-disciplinarity. Now, we just have to be willing to fall flat as we try and grope our way, unknowingly.

## Notes

- 1 I would like to acknowledge the generous help of Danièle Bourque, Lee Henderson, Louis van den Hengel, as well as Verene Stenke and Andrea Pagnes, Nathalie Mba Bikoro, Terrance Houle, and Bojana Videkanic.
- 2 In this text, I refer explicitly to actions that are self-framed as "performance" and cause actual physical "violence" to a body with the consent of that body. Performances that represent physical violence but in which the actors' bodies do not experience the physical violence represented—as in stage combat and other special effects—are not considered here (for further discussion of these differences, see Graver 1995). As well, I recognize "violence" as a varied and not always physically manifested relation of power and do not undertake an in-depth discussion of the complexity and instability of the term itself, here. For the purposes of this article, I simplify the term and refer specifically to physical violence (for example, cutting, piercing, or hitting).
- 3 For more on organizing and legitimizing epistemologies of art and the unknowing of the mis-spectatorial position, see Disman.
- 4 For more on the racialization of language see Bucholtz or Piedra, amongst many others.
- 5 American Sanford Meisner (1905-1997) was a member of the Group Theatre and developed an acting technique referred to as the Meisner technique. He is known for the following quote: "The text is like a canoe, and the river on which it sits is the emotion. The text floats on the river. If the water of the river is turbulent, the words will come out like a canoe on a rough river. It all depends on the flow of the river which is your emotion" (Meisner 115).
- 6 "*Les statues meurent aussi* (*Statues Also Die*), a 1953 anti-colonial film which examined the impacts of European collecting of African art and the commercialization of African identity" (Cooley).
- 7 Bas Jan Ader (1942-1975) was a Dutch performance artist. For his last performance, entitled *In Search of the Miraculous*, he attempted to single-handedly cross the Atlantic from west to east in a 13 foot sailboat. His boat was found ten months later off the coast of Ireland. His body was never found.

- 8 Though it is not within the scope of this article to unpack the specificities of how self-violence in explicitly *performance art* contexts differs from other, non-performance contexts, it is important to mention here that I am not championing all self-violence, nor do I take these proposals lightly. I understand that my suggestions could be upsetting for some readers and want to clarify that the work of this paper is to point to an underlying morality that can be a mode through which power operates, in the notion that *all* self-violence is *harmful*. This is not to say that there are not situations in which self-violence is, indeed, harmful. I am proposing that we question who determines the “harmfulness” of that “violence” and to what ends.
- 9 On this, see Marilyn Arsem’s wonderful text on teaching performance art, “The possibility of teaching performance.”
- 10 My thinking on “radical unknowing” has been influenced by Natalie Alvarez’s excellent forthcoming book, *Stages of Difference: Immersive Simulations, Performance, and the Politics of Knowing*, as well as a workshop on embodying Deleuzian thought entitled “Unthinking/Unknowing” taught by Danièle Bourque at The School of Making Thinking, Session B, Summer 2014.

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