

How to Be When We See: Social Codes, Spatial Domestication, and the Performance of Viewing

by Sky Fairchild-Waller and Cara Spooner

In 2014, we attended *Envisioning the Practice: International Symposium on Curating the Performing Arts* in Montreal to present a cumulative and critical reflection on our experience as artists who had studied dance but developed practices more aligned with “alternative” performance contexts, whether through the frame of performance art, installation, intervention, or media-based work. At the same time—and in order to pay our bills—we also worked (and continue to work) in a freelance capacity, performing in work created by visual artists and exhibited in a predominantly visual arts context, whether that be a gallery, riverbank, library, foun-

tain, or ditch. From these experiences, we endeavoured to capture and distill insight from the vantage point of both performer-as-artwork and performer-seeing-artwork in terms of the questions, considerations, and interrogations that might empower the curatorial process when engaging with contemporary performance.

In this context, we maintain that the concepts and discourses pertaining to contemporary performance curation are best elucidated outside of the confines of a proscenium-based structure, or theatre. The theatre—big *T* and little *t*—is a Goliath of its own, and while much of what we consider is both implicitly and explic-



Publicity image of *8037* by Cara Spooner and Sky Fairchild-Waller, *stromereien11 Performance Festival Zürich*, 2011.
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itly related (if not defiantly so) to the entirely unique and incredibly complex social codes and spatial domestication that theatres enact on viewers, our interest lies in what can be found beyond these structures. Even now, many seasoned viewers of performance still struggle with what we like to call a “theatre hangover,” or the theatre-based behaviour viewers assume whenever they identify themselves as being proximate to a site of performance. For the purposes of considering how contemporary performance can be curated in contemporary contexts, however, we’ll be trying our best to put this hangover to bed.

We believe that to curate performance is to curate the performance of its viewing. The temporal and phenomenological experience of inhabiting a space in which performance occurs subjects individuals to pre-existing codes which directly affect how viewing occurs, or how performing one’s viewing is executed. By encountering a work of performance, viewers become charged with engaging and negotiating the curatorial invitations provided for them: where to move and look, when, before and after what, and for how much time. By choosing how to navigate in/through/around/out of a work as well as the frameworks that contain it, the viewer-cum-agent *performs* the viewing. Whereas a theatre might conjure passive responses, performance spaces, in this sense, foster active impulses. Ultimately, curating performance has the ability to mirror, translate, and/or displace the pre-established dynamics of power and agency found in the performance of viewing.

When we view performance in a gallery, street, or other alternative site, a distinct system of codes becomes activated and reinforced by both the construction of the space as well as its temporary inhabitants. As Josette Féral explains, one form of theatricality includes “a process that has to do with a ‘gaze’ that postulates and creates a distinct, virtual space belonging to the other, [...] framing a quotidian space that [we] do not occupy” (97). In recognizing this space *of/as other*, the viewers’ presence and implicit compliance frequently engages them in an unwritten and code-dependent contract wherein the audience understands and assumes the role of an audience. Ultimately, this is a role that the viewers—who constitute this audience—must undeniably perform.

So what are the practical implications of performing one’s viewing? Ultimately, a curator of contemporary performance must interrogate each and every hypothetical way in which a viewer could choose to perform their viewing. Is it useful, for instance, to treat a performance as any other object a space? Might a curator be able to establish conditions where interactions are explicitly integrated within the gallery-going experience? How might a curator capitalize on the excess and limitations of the pre-existing social codes and spatial domestication found, implicitly, in any given space? Within these frames of consideration, we maintain that when contemporary performance curation engages and negotiates with the concept of performing one’s viewing, the opportunities may become as endless as the outcomes.

Work Cited

- Féral, Josette. “Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language.”
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