Critical Acts

Transferred Flesh
Reflections on Senga Nengudi’s R.S.V.P.

Rizvana Bradley

Each body has its art, its precious prescribed Pose, that even in passion’s droll contortions, waltzes,
Or push of pain—or when a grief has stabbed, Or hatred hacked—is its, and nothing else’s.

—Gwendolyn Brooks, “Still do I keep my look, my identity...” (1944)

When the Performa Institute announced that its 2013 season would include one of Senga Nengudi’s performance-based sculptures, it seemed an auspiciously timed revisitation of the artistic moment in which sculptural form would merge with the uniquely improvisational aspects of black performance art. A collaborative performance of Senga Nengudi’s R.S.V.P. was featured as part of the larger exhibition Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art, originally organized by Valerie Cassel Oliver for the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston. Part two of the show traveled to the Studio Museum in Harlem, one of the locations to host Radical Presence in New York City, the second being New York University’s Grey Art Gallery.

The exhibition, which highlighted black performance art over approximately the past 50 years—from the period of Fluxus events and performances to early conceptualism, from the 1960s to the present day—consisted of more than 100 works by some 36 artists working in a range of mediums like video and photography, as well as photo documentation of performances, performance scores, installations, costumes, and interactive works. Senga Nengudi’s R.S.V.P., largely unrecognized until now, is part of the larger “R.S.V.P.” series of objects and performances, begun in 1975. Nengudi’s sculptural work has

Figure 1. From left: Regina Rocke, Maren Hassinger, and Marya Wethers. R.S.V.P. at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 14 November 2013, Performa 13, New York. (© Chani Bockwinkel, courtesy of Performa)

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to be activated by two or three people, and
three dancers initiated the movement in the
performance at the Studio Museum.

The show that was running concurrently
with Radical Presence at the Studio Museum
in the fall of 2013, titled The Shadows Took
Shape, explored the representational power
of Afrofuturism as both a key moment in the
black aesthetic tradition and also an ongoing,
emergent aesthetic. Together the two exhibi-
tions constructed a long view of black artist-
ic innovation and poetic inscription across
five decades, providing a more textured sense
of a black aesthetic tradition that has expanded
across the literary, visual, plastic, and perfor-
mance traditions. The continued evolution of
this aesthetic tradition continues to inform
recent conversations that have been taking
place in both the academic and the art worlds,
particularly with respect to the overlapping
concerns of race, conceptualism, politics, and
form. The Studio Museum has consistently
traced the diverse historical lineages of black
performance, illuminating for us what Amiri
Baraka once called “the changing same” ([1968]
1998) in reference to black musical expression.
The aesthetic continuity that Baraka insisted
could be traced across radically different black
cultural aesthetic forms was evident in Radical
Presence, which considered the political poten-
tiality of blackness as an aesthetic, alongside
critical questions of identity, racial aesthetics,
and the ongoing evolution of black expressive
forms.

Those of us who were present at the Studio
Museum in Harlem on that brisk winter night
in November in the midst of a flurry of other
Performa events happening all around the city,
encountered R.S.V.P. as a performance full of
introspection about the body’s imaginative and
physical limits, as well as a visual, embodied
disruption that challenged our general percep-
tion of how a body moves through space. Most
of the spectators, myself included, had just experienced Tameka
Norris’s provocative Untitled (2012)
immediately prior, in which the art-
ist cut and then scrawled with her
tongue, dripping with blood and
saliva, across the museum’s gal-
lery walls without pausing. After
that intensive viewing experience,
we collected ourselves and shuffled
into an equally small adjacent space
on the upper level of the muse-
um’s main gallery area, where a
few rows of chairs had been set up,
near the top of the stairs. One sil-
ver bell had been placed on each of
the seats. We cupped the small bells
in our hands, until instructed to
ring them later in the performance.
The expectation of sound led to a
heightened degree of visual antic-
ipation, as any slight move from
the audience could potentially trigger a sonic
disruption. Some of us managed to sit, while
others hovered around the area cleared out for
the performance. The intimate and slightly
unsettling feel of bodies huddled together in
the gallery, bearing witness to the potential
for movement in other bodies, resonated with
the haptic sensation of Nengudi’s collectively
activated performance. The piece discloses an
event of passage and movement through sculp-
ture that actively provokes the physical limits
of form.

R.S.V.P. is an organic web-like composi-
tion of black, tan, and nude nylon women’s
pantyhose stretched taut, filled with sand,
and attached to a portion of the wall that the

Figure 2. Marya Wethers. R.S.V.P. at the Studio Museum in Harlem,
14 November 2013, Performa 13, New York. (© Chani Bockwinkel,
courtesy of Performa)
museum had designated for the live sculptural event. There appeared to be little give, if any, to the material, contributing to the web’s contradictory texture, its diaphanous quality, and its apparent restrictiveness. The sand-filled stockings looked disturbingly like distended body parts twisted and knotted uncomfortably beyond the threshold of physical possibility. Also miraculous was the endurance of the mesh material and its resistance to compression and weight.

The work was activated by Maren Hassinger, Regina Rocke, and Marya Wethers, all dancers and choreographers. Though Nengudi did not perform that evening, Hassinger and Nengudi are longtime friends and collaborators, and have worked together on a series of pieces, among them, *Flying* (1982), *Spooks Who Sat By The Door* (1983), *Mail Art* and *Long Distance Conceptual Exercises* (1999), *Side by Side* (2006), *Kiss* (2011), and *Walk Tall* (2012). Hassinger has often invoked Eva Hesse as an influence, and her work with Nengudi conveys similar investments in fibrous matter and the affective potentiality of form.

It was perhaps fitting then that Hassinger opened the performance, meticulously working her way through the web-like structure in which she and her accompanying dancers would spend the next 20 minutes entangling and disentangling themselves. All three were dressed entirely in black spandex. Rocke and Wethers, along with Hassinger, would intermittently enter and exit the flexible structure. They performed overlapping solos that looped and folded in and out of each other; their recurrent entrances and exits created their own rhythm. The movements of the dancers were lyrical, almost balletic, and depended upon the continual transference of weight, balance, and emotional expression. Weaving in and out of the web’s open structure, bending, dipping, and stretching their arms, legs, and torsos against the currents of fabric, the dancers continued to test their own physicality against the sculptural form. Inhabiting and exiting Nengudi’s sculpture, brushing up against it and each other, their bodies would briefly coalesce, and sometimes embrace, before passing through to the next danced phrase.

In this particular work, Senga Nengudi sustains a delicate pas de deux between sculpture and performance, in order to see what a collusion of these different forms, or approaches to form, might bring to bear. This work performs an investigation into the scientific conditions of possibility for modernist sculpture and contemporary dance. *R.S.V.P.* requires the dancers who inhabit its structure to experiment with the mechanics of tension and suspension as they move—to test the limits of sculpture against the rules of gravity and physics. As the artist Robert Morris said, writing about the sculptor Claes Oldenburg’s strategic manipulation of materials: “The focus on matter and gravity as means results in forms that were not projected in advance [...] Disengagement with preconceived enduring forms is a positive assertion. It is part of the work’s refusal to continue estheticizing the form by dealing with it as a prescribed end” (1993:46). The permutation of form as unprescribed end that breaks away from form’s aestheticization proliferates in Nengudi’s open work.

The art critic Rosalind Krauss once argued that having lost its proper “site” or “place” in the second half of the 20th century, sculpture passed through a series of “structural transformations” (1979:43). If we include performance in Krauss’s list of structural transformations, *R.S.V.P.* exemplifies sculpture’s transition by employing formalist and minimalist approaches to art, but also departs from these approaches by integrating aesthetic production with performance. Here we encounter the combined sensuality of making, doing, and enacting as a means of resisting the practice of formal aesthetic making. The collective activation of sculpture by figures in motion facilitates a reevaluation of the relationships between the sculptor, the audience, and the performing ensemble, at the same time that it interrogates the very fabric of sculptural practice in a fundamental way.

*R.S.V.P.* can be situated within the revitalized genre of postmodern sculpture, which Krauss insists should be grasped through its expressive negativity; as “not-landscape” and “not architecture,” sculpture continues to situate itself within what Krauss famously termed...
“the expanded field,” which “provides an expanded but finite set of related positions for a given artist to occupy and explore” (1979:44). Apropos Krauss, we might understand Nengudi’s practice as “not defined in relation to a given medium—sculpture—but rather in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms, for which any medium—photography, books, lines on walls, mirrors, or sculpture itself—might be used.” Krauss writes that “whatever the medium employed, the possibility explored in this category is a process of mapping the axiomatic features of the architectural experience—the abstract conditions of openness and closure—onto the reality of a given space” (41). But if dance and choreography can be identified here as central to the logical operations that expand the domain of sculpture, _R.S.V.P._ pursues practiced techniques of corporeal expression and revelation that have emerged in the wake of a long history of bodily deprivation.

Nengudi’s sculptural practice touches upon the difficult embodied aspects of black life, history, and culture. In this respect, black performance practices might be said to offer a corrective to Krauss. The “axiomatic features” that supply those “abstract conditions of openness and closure” that structure a given space are not universally prescriptive. Those who have been historically and culturally barred from the “lived body” that figures so centrally in the conceptualization and experience of architectural space, must work out another line of “axiomatic features”—alternative compositions of space, weight, depth, and physicality. _R.S.V.P._ actively interrogates the spatio-temporal dimensions black bodies have passed through and been barred from, illuminating figures that move through and occupy space differently. By negotiating the physical parameters of depth, space, and time, Hassinger, Rocke, and Wethers rupture and unsettle this expanded field. Within the confines of the gallery, we witness the making of what José Gil calls “the space of the body,” a “secretion” of space, or “corpification of space,” an abstract process of exchange in which the body and space become one another (2006:25–27). Gil’s statement illuminates the abstract imperative of _R.S.V.P._ as a sculptural performance that requires moving bodies to “respond” to its materiality by merging with the sensual figurations of space they themselves secrete or create.

Nengudi and Hassinger initially performed _R.S.V.P._ in the 1970s, and its recent reproduction in some way signifies a committed return to an earlier feminist artistic practice that evidenced the overworked female body through a strategic manipulation of materials. Nengudi’s sand-filled nylons look like bulbous compositions of flesh. Sand mimics the weight of the human body and also marks its uncanny disfigurement. The over-stretched nylons resemble deformed droplets, or bulging lumps, semi-transparent globules. _R.S.V.P._ presents us with an abstract exploration of a body reduced to parts and limbs, fragmented, stretched and dispersed, weighed down—figurations of flesh under duress. But the abstract material forms that circulate within _R.S.V.P._ also query the representational status of the “black body” in contemporary performance.

Nengudi’s disassembling of the body in _R.S.V.P._ correlates with the deconstructive force bodies bear in Hortense Spillers’s critical examination of the violent history of black bodily subjection. Explaining how the violent exposure of flesh was made possible by the historical devaluation of racialized and feminized bodies, in her pivotal essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987:67–81), Spillers maintains a crucial distinction between body and flesh in order.

_Figure 3. Marya Wethers moves out into the audience. R.S.V.P. at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 14 November 2013, Performa 13, New York. (© Chani Bockwinkel, courtesy of Performa)
to get at what she calls the historical “ungendering” of the black female body. According to Spillers, the historical violence exacted upon the black female body evidences the material precession of the flesh in relation to the body: “Before the body there is flesh, that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse” (67). In other words, the body can signify; the grammar of the body is gendered. The flesh however, resists discourse and precedes any gendered bodily economy.

Arguing that this distinction between body and flesh “must be imposed upon captive and liberated subject positions,” Spillers’s larger claim is that the violent reduction of the black body to mere flesh caused an epistemic rupture in the normative economy of black subjectivity. R.S.V.P. re-activates this symbolic rupture between body and flesh in its metaphorical and physical reengagement with the body’s raw material. Nengudi retraces the black body as a sort of open archive, underscoring an effort to wrest the black body from a set of overdetermined representations, in order to “rehistoricize black flesh” (Brooks 2006:335) as a quintessential abstract gesture of experimental black aesthetics. R.S.V.P. suggests that the materiality of this historically ungendered flesh continues to structure, organize, and inflect performances of blackness in the present.

The performative valences of flesh that circulated within R.S.V.P. uncovered and recovered this “ungendered” flesh as a resource for an alternative mode of sensuality, corporeal inhabitation and experience. Nengudi’s work provokes the sensual registers of the flesh; her ensemble massaged delicate skeins of nylon mesh between fingers, toes, and over shoulders. These irregular part-objects were passed and shared within the trio’s loosely comprised dance circle, as Hassinger, Rocke, and Wethers glided them along their backs, hands, and feet. Together they tested the body’s physical and conceptual limits within performance, and worked their way toward an open and extended corporeality.

The three women then passed the sand-filled stockings over unassuming audience members. Carried through in these final gestures was a plea to the audience to “respond,” and an invitation to bear witness to this process of bodily divestiture as an act of transference. Where the body once entered, a motional, improvisational, and fleshy figure exits. In the gradual slide from body to figure to flesh, something is not lost, but exchanged, and the collective inhabitation of flesh on a gallery floor draws us close.

These fleshy sculptural forms activated by figures in motion, direct us to flesh as a special site of material recovery. The material force and “radical presence” of the flesh has to do with its generativity, its capacity to persist as a site for staging a retrieval, a recovery, and a reclamation of a certain worth and dignity that has been lost. In these last moments, we cupped our silver bells and rang them in unison, becoming part of a larger, commemorative choreographic desire. We were now a part of the transference, the arrangement, the score of R.S.V.P. We were musically knit together in Senga Nengudi’s rhythmic return to flesh.
I am in Christchurch, Aotearoa/New Zealand, visiting and collaborating with performance friends. On 22 February 2014, the three-year anniversary of the big Christchurch quake, I became part of a walk organized by the City Mission—a Christian organization with a Missioner at the helm. Not my usual companions. But a friend’s partner, a Quaker, was the organizer of the walk, which incorporated many people with histories of mental health difference, in an active relationship to substance abuse, or in recovery. It is a disability culture scene, and I am staying in the organizer’s home, so of course I come along, steering my yellow power wheelchair.

Taking you on a walk through the streets makes deep sense as a performance scene in this city of fallen down buildings and gaps. With many theatres in Christchurch seriously damaged by the September 2010 and February 2011 quakes, a lot of performance actions in the city took to the streets. Some of the most well known of these, like Gap Filler, emerged as a social practice/performance series that specifically dealt with the changed and shaken scene. As Sharon Mazer writes:

For many artists and activists (and artist-activists)—notably Gap Filler and Arts Voice—the collapse of the city’s buildings has opened up a liminal space for ongoing experimentation with and debate about the potential of theatre and performance to create new ideas about community and citizenship. (Mazer et al. 2013:70)

So I am walking in this Christchurch pilgrimage as a performance scholar thinking bodily about community and citizenship.

A vaguely penitentiary, sacrificial quality infused my participation in the walk, as it reminded me of my own Catholic background, of long, forced, childhood pilgrimages to Kevelaer, Germany’s Chapel of Grace,

**Disability Performance in the Streets**

**Art Actions in Post-Quake Christchurch**

**Petra Kuppers**

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References


praying for release from pain and disability. My Christchurch walk became, at times and in small glimpses, a walk of passion, the strange intertwining of sacrifice and pain, pleasure and intensity, the kind of “passion” that marks so much Christian ritual.

I also saw the kiwi stiff upper lip and delight in physical prowess all around me: I participated in that day’s 22km walk, of which I wheeled the last 8—about the range of my wheelchair in heavy terrain. The temperature was in the 90s (Fahrenheit) and the sun beating through the thin ozone layer was grueling. The walkers set a harsh pace, and our field of about 30 walkers was well spread out. Twice I had to suggest to people I was walking with that they might want to go onto the buses that our helpers were driving; one walker seemed about ready to vomit by the time she finally accepted a ride. A third person, with a painful cramp in her upper thigh, point-blank refused to take a break and go ride for a bit. What was this persistence about?

The walk wasn’t a pilgrimage, it wasn’t holy, or in silence. But it held meaning for us, clearly, and to be survivors of it seemed very important to my co-walkers. I found myself caught up in their determination: my wheelchair made navigating the terrain nearly impossible, but I persisted, increasingly aware of how hard the uneven ground must have been on the walkers’ knees, too. The wheelchair slalom, bouncing over the broken streets that were signs of the city’s rupture—and were ubiquitous even three years on—made me near seasick. As my world was reduced to climbing yet another mini street mount, I meditated on how the chair’s low point of gravity made me experience something akin to a quake, shaken and rattled about: not a re-creation, of course, but a strange taste of the event. Endurance as a memorial.

An hour into this, I had moved into durational performance mode, a way of witnessing myself in distress that attained an artful quality and allowed me to see my fellow walkers in the same light. I was walking near a blind woman, and she and I had initially spoken a little bit about disaster preparations and disability, and about how she was involved in sharing what has been learned in Christchurch with other international organizations involved with assisting disabled people, in particular blind people. I also caught glimpses of some of the challenges, as she paid constant attention to her guide dog’s well-being, thinking about where the pavement was too hot for too long a time for her helper’s paws, or gravel too sharp. But our highly rational and goal-focused discussion quickly fragmented, as we were all, humans and non-humans, challenged by the terrain and its demands. I didn’t get to interview her about how it felt to live in a changed city with a non-normative sensory apparatus, although we did talk a bit about how, for instance, purely visual “change sidewalk” signs where sidewalks had ruptured didn’t address the needs of people like her, or her guide dog’s ability to keep her safe. We didn’t speak much more, just walked in each other’s company for three hours.

I brought the City Mission up again the next day, in the studio with my performance collaborators. I was there to visit with A Different Light, a well-known company that creates disability performance work in the context of cognitive difference, complex layered work related to the practices of Back to Back Theatre (Geelong, Australia), Mind the Gap (Leeds, UK), l’Oiseau-Mouche (Roubaix, France), Maatwerk (Rotterdam, Netherlands), Theater HORA (Zürich, Switzerland), and others.1

One of the performers attended meetings at the Mission as part of their women’s group for mental health system survivors. She really valued the Mission and its quiet work, done without fanfare, without the self-congratulation that can be part of service provision.

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1. I have written in this journal about another part of my recent international disability culture meanderings, and about watching work by Back to Back and HORA (Kuppers 2014). See also Leon Hilton in another Critical Acts essay, also on HORA (2014). Our work is intersected and interdependent, and much of these writings emerge from intense discussions with other disability arts scholars and practitioners like Tony McCaffery, Bree Hadley, Yvonne Schmidt, from other Aotearoan researchers like Sharon Mazer and Nancy Higgins, and the Disability Performance working group at the International Federation for Theatre Research.
And indeed, the walk with its 30 participants, without a single press photo, had a private quality. And as we walked, we saw many others involved in quieter rituals. We passed a few tables set up by the River of Flowers Project. These tables held cards one could sign and then tie to trees standing by the Avon River, in neighborhoods much affected by the quakes and riddled with red-zoned buildings—buildings deemed uninhabitable. At 12:51 p.m., the time of the February quakes, the volunteers at the tables and people coming to the river kept silent and threw flowers into the waters.

The City Mission walk ended with a sausage sizzle at the mission, and a waiata, a prayer song sung by the crowd in te reo Māori. Sunburned, exhausted, and in the main looking a bit footsore, everybody dispersed. I wheeled back, not ready to climb onto a bus. Instead, I went back to the river and ambled along its banks, at my own slow pace. It was filled with flowers, floating petals lusciously strewn over the surface, ducks bobbing between them. Families and neighborhood groups had grill-outs going, quiet scenes of whenua (te reo for “land” and “placenta”): family and earth. There might have been bigger, more official scenes of nationwide recovery going on elsewhere, but I didn’t see them as I was glad and bodily caught up in the scenes of the minor, the local, the performative gesture of sadness and hope. The only time I heard the national anthem was the next day, at A Different Light’s Sunday rehearsal meeting, where Andrew Dever, someone deemed to have a cognitive disability, sang it for us. He had gotten engaged on the 22nd, he told his fellow performers. We whooped and applauded, celebrating his very direct evocation of whenua’s continuity.

Everybody in the circle shared what they had been up to that Saturday. Some had also been at the River of Flowers event, some at grill-outs, and one just at home, sleeping. Tony, the director of the troupe, had been at work, writing in his office with his wife. He shared that, having personally known some of those who had died in the quakes, he didn’t need communal minutes of silence to remember. But many among the troupe had been at a small-scale event somewhere and no one had chosen to go to the big official memorial event in Hagley Gardens, where the politicians spoke and the cameras flashed.

In the black box studio meeting space, quite a few talked about where they had been when the quakes happened. One performer shared how he still went to counseling groups to help him deal with the anxiety and stress of it all, information up to that point unknown to the others—the stiff upper lip at work yet again. The moments in the round were quiet, but real; people sharing themselves. And then here was Andrew, rousing everybody to sing Aotearoa/New Zealand’s anthem. And we all sang it, first in te reo, then in English.

In all these moments, from pilgrimages to the troupe meeting, from flower memorials to anthems, refiguration and contact become my reading lenses. Disability configures itself anew, as it always does when I am on the road on my disability culture journeys. Here, moments of difference, health, healing, and survivance created a vision of disability as luscious growth in a garden of many flowers. There were many connections: between the company director’s ongoing struggle with the social institutions that surround disability, his logistic attempts to wrestle his performers out of their McDonald’s work schedules or group homes, and my friends’ organization of the march in the sun—ensuring water, a ride for a tired dog, a schedule of buses to accompany walkers—all the quiet repeated steps across broken terrain.

The many messages tied to trees speak of frustration with insurance companies, loss of livelihood, and the dramas of rented housing. They speak of disorientation in a city that has changed shape, where many buildings have gone down and where “go left at the place where that pub used to be” has a new ring now.

Memories and space, bodies in space: traversing the city of Christchurch on 22 February 2014 makes me experience settlerhood and resilience, not (in that moment) in an oppositional place to indigeneity, but in an embodied relation to a young earth, ready to shake and remind people of their bindings, of chosen and other familial relations.
A Christchurch Masquerade

A Different Light Company consists of performers deemed to have developmental disabilities, people who make use of psychiatric services, and others. They have been in existence since 2004, under the directorship of Tony McCaffrey, and operate out of the Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology, with access to the resources of the theatre department. They are sometimes folded into the activities of the Free Theatre, an experimental research–focused company associated with the University of Canterbury. On–site theatre is a familiar working method for the performers.

In our work together in February 2014, we expanded upon this vocabulary in performance workshops that incorporated invisible theatre, costuming, and the camera as a staging device. Our first performance workshop took place in the company’s regular rehearsal space, the black box theatre where we had sung anthems earlier. As a preparation for going out in public, we used a photo shoot to work with masquerade and display in the privacy of the theatre. The photo shoot shows experienced performers, comfortable with display, able to project presence and to be vulnerable in front of the camera. We had raided the costume store and everybody chose their own costume and decided how to present themselves—to me, the photographer, and ultimately to the public. In these photos, the performers play in subtle ways with issues of sexuality and mythology, a process that formulates their own commentary on their position in a society that often excludes and devalues them. Power dynamics around personal appearance and narrative are revealed through the sophisticated ways in which they address me, asking me to place myself in relation to them in particular ways. We reviewed the images together, eventually agreeing on one photo from each performer to share in public.

For our public engagement, A Different Light met me in the Re:START mall. The Re:START mall, built on the site of the destroyed City Mall, clusters itself around cafes as anchor points, has food trucks and public art areas, and is always busy and lively. Its liveliness does not quite cover up the trauma of having the heart ripped out of a city, and one performer commented on the alienness of this neoliberal “by the bootstraps” response and the hip establishments where op shops (second-hand shops, including one run by the City Mission) used to be.

We met in the Hummingbird Café and agreed on little performance sequences to enact as we moved through urban space. Christchurch post–quake, surrounded by ruins and anti–EQC signs, is always already a set for political performance. (EQC is the Earth Quake Commission, a notoriously slow and overwhelmed arm of governmental assistance.) As Richard Schechner wrote a long time ago about Washington, DC, that city’s scene was politicized and aestheticized by the 1963 march on Washington: “The streets were no longer places which one used to get from here to there. They were public arenas,
testing grounds, stages for morality plays” (1968:55). It’s this heritage we are stepping into in the Re:START mall, riffing on and playing against and with public scripts of revitalization and survivance.

The performers brought clothes to change into, ready to transform themselves into new public beings. I was interested in acts of masquerade and carrying one’s shell on one’s body, and was using this notion as an impetus for performance. Everybody was game, had plenty of ideas, and off we went. The first mini-performance took place outside a youth-oriented shop selling fancy clothes. Ben engaged in an elaborate performance of tying a necktie—large swooping gestures, getting ready to go out in style. Next, Tony chose to act in front of a building site, an ordinary site at this half-emerging mall, and told the story of his jacket, bought in Toronto, Canada, and the complications of zipping things up.

Louise found an empty store, a sign of the economic instability of the much-celebrated mall, and modeled her jacket, telling a family story about channeling anger into consumption and gifting practices.

Liv, a local visual artist who creates growing installations with plants in rubble sites, took us to one of her planting sites, showed us where she had placed healing plants of sage, thyme, and lavender, and then performed wearing a dress gifted to her by Louise. Liv moved among the rubble of the site, and picked up stones. She pulled these under her dress, as if to imprint them in the dress’s fabric memory, and held the cloth near to the lavender, as if drying it or infusing it with scent.

This first section of our performance walk articulated complex feelings about being in the destroyed center, and our progress was quite pensive through still playful. The atmosphere shifted with the emergence of the first prop, something we had brought in from the weekend’s costume photo shoot: a joker’s hat, giant and animalistic, multiple horns extending into space, sprayed silver and with thistles growing from it. A strange sculptural object, not quite carnival, not quite animal, but a border thing. It became what-
ever we wanted as we worked with it. At one point, Ben donned the hat and moved through a large area of weeds and rubble in front of one of the newly commissioned murals that adorn the rebuilt Christchurch—sanctioned street art–esque work on the tax payer’s dime. Ben became a mythical creature, seeking a way out (I read him like a Minotaur, and he later shared that he thought of himself as an underwater creature). Ben took his time, really entering into the performance space, traversing this rubble site, crawling in it, making it his own.

We all played with the head, and with the meditative space we settled into when we donned it. Many of us commented on the peacefulness of the heavy object resting on our shoulders, anchoring us down.

We walked triumphantly back through the mall, shouting at passersby, making jokes like “earthquake stress did it to him,” and “driven mad by the EQC” in response to the many strange looks our gear attracted.

Then we took a final photo with the security guard of the mall, a Ngai Puhi man in a theatrical uniform complete with great coat and epaulettes—our group taking control even in the face of the last bastion, the police. Even talking with the guard and finding out about his ancestral connections was a big step for some of us in the group who usually have highly antagonistic relationships with enforcers of normality. Louise commented after our joker-head experiments that, for the first time since the quake, she felt at home in the city center again.

**Therapy and the City**

That evening, in a performance workshop I lead for PhD students and members of the Free Theatre, we talked about therapy and performance. What are the ameliorative effects of this minor-key performance work? What homeopathy, medicine, theory of influence underpins why we are doing what we are doing?
Theorists of activism and emotion, Gavin Brown and Jenny Pickerill, address directly the means we used for our Christchurch masquerade and put these art-framed acts into contact with the energetic shifts of activism.

Activists employ tactics that seek to change the emotional resonance of certain places and political messages. Thus, just as ‘negative’ emotions such as hate and disgust can reconfigure social and bodily space, so too can the use of humour (Ahmed, 2004). Street theatre is used to transcend activist boundaries and create common ground between activists and audiences which “allows activists to release emotions such as rage and frustration, while at the same time providing positive, enjoyable experiences for audiences” (Branagan, 2007, 470). This performativity and embodiment of protest can also serve as sustaining emotional experiences for activists. Expressing opposition through performance (such as the use of puppets during protest, dancing in costume, or more simply, by acting with one’s body during direct action) enables activists to intensely feel and express their protest, perhaps more powerfully than through instrumental mobilisations (such as the more formal street march with placards) (Eyerman, 2005; Wettergren, 2009). (Brown and Pickerill 2009:28)

In our masquerade actions, we were both audience and participants, even though other Christchurch people and tourists certainly took note of us. We were also activists, recharging ourselves through our performance actions, giving ourselves much needed energy, grounding, and a sense of precarious communitas.

In Mapa Corpo (2007), one of Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s Border Collective performances, the actors use acupuncture needles to point to national borderlines and their shifting. Participating in the performance, I was invited to place needles in a performer’s body (with another performer’s assistance). Our actions in Christchurch reminded me of the energetics of acupuncture. We pressed where it hurts, in the destroyed city, right in the memory spaces that had become empty and diffuse and laden with negative energy as people dealt with the Earth Quake Commission, insurance companies, and the many problems of resurrecting a city that did not seem to be recognizable or hospitable to all of its citizens. Donning costumes and shifting energies became an act of citizenship, of a performative re-engagement with shifted space.

Of course, these acts of theatre can always already be reincorporated into business as usual, with disabled actors seen as nonperforming guarantors of authenticity, sans sarcasm. Tony McCaffrey has written about the Different Light performers who participated in a Free Theatre production, The Earthquake in Chile, which took place in St. Mary’s Anglican Church, Addington, Christchurch. The show is based on Heinrich von Kleist’s short story about an earthquake catastrophe followed by a man-made catastrophe, a lynching in a cathedral. The play was directed by Peter...
Falkenberg and created in collaboration with Richard Gough, the artistic director of the Wales-based Center for Performance Research, and celebrity chef Richard Till. The Different Light actors were part of the scene:

[T]heir presence was resonant within the performance, giving a sense of the city’s new-found precariousness coming into contact with the more longstanding precariousness of the social, legal, medical, and economic positioning of people with disabilities. The performers were, again, both highly visible and in a way invisible. One reviewer mentioned the Different Light performers: “and then mentally and physically handicapped people from the Addington community walked up the aisle” (Phillips, 2011) as if they were not performers. Presumably he did not associate the performers in the church (who had by then shed their high-visibility clothing) with the guides of San Precario who were so clearly marked both in their clothing and their disability and assumed that in the church these people he saw must have been “playing themselves,” even though he got it wrong about who they were playing. Interestingly he saw in the people he thought he saw the guarantee that this performance was local and indicative of community. (McCaffrey 2014)

For the reviewer, Jock Phillips, disability becomes the site of the non-artful, the “real” or ordinary of the local, and hence the guarantee of “community.” This danger is a highly familiar mechanism in disability performance work.

Is there more juice or less juice in placing ourselves into the registers of the street, much more closely aligned with non-art-framed activist actions? Fewer people take note, certainly, but the potential for a double-take at the sight of disability seems worth the effort. And remember Louise’s comment about the performance making her feel at home again in her own city, allowing her access to a cityscape that normally just makes her angry about welfare cuts and regulation. Performance is for all of us, performers and witnesses. Reshaping our public spaces, shaking them up again, is a durational task, one we engage in again and again when we navigate how people look at our faces, our wheelchairs, our rags, our choices in how we self-present in public.

Later in the week following the memorial festivities, we met in the swimming pool of Jellie Park: a riotous group of disabled people out for a lark, taking photos of each other and having a great time in the water. There was no masquerade, barring the faces and bodies of difference we always present to the world. We are always already in masquerade, in a public assertion of space and in our insistence to be together, hard won from institutions and their health and safety regulations, and even from lifeguards and their rules for using lifts to lower us into the pool.

We can rehearse in the black box studio, and we can put it all out there, in masque, or stripped down, in swimming gear, inviting the public to see us as citizens of this world.

In the evening performance workshop with the Free Theatre members, the fact that so much of my work was within disability frameworks, quiet and often near “invisible” in public, led people to ask about whether the work is not “just therapy,” with “therapy” being negatively connoted. I lobbed the question back, asking what kind of healing might be needed in what kind of spaces, and who is providing it for whom.

In the context of our Christchurch experiments, issues of healing, intervention, and therapy were pressing concerns. Everything felt like an intervention, an act of ritual, whether in the ruptured streets, on a pilgrimage, or participating in more consciously art-framed actions; or in the swimming pool, watching people care for each other with tenderness and play. After the earth has shaken, and after lives have been destroyed, and with multiple attempts to make it better, the healing and critiquing aspects of performance work seem necessary, both supporting and questioning new publics.

With A Different Light, I witnessed the ability of socially engaged art in a minor key to shake things up, to shake up concepts of disability, concepts of healing performance, of being alive and present in public. Listening to the performers of A Different Light and...
witnessing their artful play in the city, I saw how we can recharge ourselves through the energies of performance. We can learn to swim among the riotous beauty of the weeds.

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Turbulent Communisms

Raqs Media Collective’s The Last International

Ethan Philbrick

Walking into the Raqs Media Collective’s The Last International on 23 November 2013 was like walking into a party already underway. (Or perhaps it was a meeting? Or a carnival for leftist intellectuals?) There was a chaotic polyphony of voices, objects, bodies, and media in the Perfora-commissioned piece: screens with disjunctive images on a loop, a grove of potted lemon trees, a stack of white plastic lawn chairs arranged with what seemed like careful disorganization, and a balcony that was home to a raucous dinner party of actors sitting around a fully set table drinking wine and having a meal of words—notecards with conversation prompts and quotes on their dinner plates rather than food. There was a sense of indeterminate abundance in the air at the reconfigured Connelly Theater on Manhattan’s East 4th Street. Audience members wandered around the theatre and its adjoining rooms and hallways aimlessly, looking and tuning-in to what we wanted to see and hear. It was a spectatorship that felt a bit like reading a Tumblr feed—jumping around on the page, no apparatus to force your undivided attention in any one location. There weren’t predetermined

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paths or a set of trajectories to travel through as we made our way from room to room. In comparison to the hyperdesigned and pre-planned immersive performances and interactive installations saturating the contemporary cultural market (think *Sleep No More* and its many derivatives), this was a different sort of gathering.

Our focus and movement weren’t completely administrated; we could wander in and wander out, check in and check out, pay attention or not. No one thing called for attention with an imperative or a demand. Sometimes we followed the aleatory drift of the group in front of us up a staircase that didn’t really lead anywhere. Sometimes we found our way into a darkened space with a six-by-four-foot screen playing rather static, looped clips of a structure either in the process of abandonment or construction, perhaps in North Delhi or perhaps in Queens, next to what seemed to be a burning billboard. The repurposed rooms of the Connolly Theater were a cacophonous assemblage of bodies and screens — language and signs passing and drifting about, never quite resting in the weight of meaning or knowledge, spreading out with a sort of diffuse generosity. The video loops evoked the cracks and fractures of contemporary urban ecologies and global inequities — objects abandoned and left aside, remnants of infrastructural collapse, neon signs pointing towards nothing, parts that no longer added up to wholes, shadows of structures, measuring systems turned inside out, and signals full of noise.

The primary node of focus for this initial ambulatory section of *The Last International* was the dinner party staged on the balcony of the theatre. It was a gathering of eight performer-participants, each with a place setting, a glass of red wine, and a glass of water. They each also had a booklet of prompts, instructions, and snippets of information about a variety of historical events that were flashpoints in what could be characterized as the long history of class struggle. At one end of the table was a flat screen TV displaying the desktop of a Mac computer with the Notepad application open. As the performers flipped through their packets of prompts — reading questions to each other and responding to each other’s questions between sips of wine — the computer hooked up to the TV (whose operator was not visible) acted as a log of what they said, a sort of simultaneous and ever shifting archive-in-common, a newsfeed of sorts.

As art historian Pamela Lee reports in an *Artforum* profile of the North Delhi–based collective, the “Raqs” in their name holds multiple meanings. On one level it stands for “rarely asked questions,” their witty, critical take on the FAQ page of websites; on another more geopolitically located register, *raqs* is also a “Persian, Arabic, and Urdu word that translates as ‘dance’ but more specifically indicates the state that dervishes enter when they whirl” (Lee 2009:186–87). The “rarely asked questions” whirling among the performer-participants at this dinner party never met their answers. It was hard to hear, microphones were clumsily passed, audience members who had gathered around talked among themselves. The extemporaneous conversation of the performers played out as conversation generally does:

Figure 1. Volunteer participants in a dinner party of words. Raqs Media Collective, *The Last International*, 23 November 2013, Connelly Theater, New York. (© Paula Court, courtesy of Performa)
inarticulate and disappointing. This scene of communication was most interesting in its misunderstandings and misrecognitions—all the remarkable ways in which people can go on talking without really hearing or getting what each other is saying. As audience members, we were distracted witnesses to a conviviality of inarticulateness. We stood around the dinner party, straining to listen, to get a sense of what was going on, trying to impose some sort of logic on the travails and mishaps of the conversation, at least until we lost interest and traveled elsewhere.

This wandering persisted until we were called to gather around the pile of white plastic chairs in the center of the first floor and asked to find one of the black seats arranged in a more properly spectatorial semicircle around it. Even as the performance settled into this more focused arrangement, the object world of the space remained cluttered and kept the flows of attention turbulently bouncing between chairs, ladders, trees, flat-screen TVs, microphones, amplifiers, desks, and chalkboards. As we sat down, members of the collective began to manipulate the initial pile of inexpensive lawn chairs—stacking and restacking, assembling and disassembling, organizing and disorganizing, until an amorphous, chaotic, and heaping pile of plastic white lawn chairs lay in the center of the room. Chairs typically imply a particular organization of subjects. They are structures of support, objects that direct particular modes of gathering, forms of spectatorship and performance, and relations of passivity and activity. Setting up and arranging a configuration of chairs is a call to order. If you want something to get done, gather a bunch of people together, pull up some chairs, and hold a meeting. If you’re ambitious, perhaps even gather together a whole lot of chairs and hold an International.

An “International” refers to a global association of workers engaged in founding a planetary revolutionary movement against the capitalist organization of the world, initiated by Marx and his cohort of activists at the so-called First International of 1864. The story of the Internationals that Raqs engages with in The Last International is not just a story of associations, assemblies, gatherings, congresses, and parties, but also is a story of splits, disolutions, fragmentations, and disagreements. It is a story of the First through the Fifth Internationals—conflictual associations that came together and fell apart, enduring attempts amidst repeated failure.1

Figure 2. The ground floor of the Connelly Theater viewed from the balcony above, a stack of white lawn chairs awaiting turbulent reorganization. Raqs Media Collective, The Last International, 23 November 2013, Connelly Theater, New York. (© Paula Court, courtesy of Performa)

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1. Internationals were various genres of gatherings: meetings, parties, congresses, plenums, committees, rallies, and reports. The First International of 1864 to 1876 was followed by the Second International, which was active from 1889–1916. The Third International, otherwise known as the Communist International (or the Comintern), was active from 1919–1943. It was a product of Lenin and the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 and was centered in Moscow and the newly formed workers’ state of the Soviet Union. After Lenin’s death in 1923, Stalin seized power and in 1938 Trotsky declared the formation of the Fourth International in opposition to Stalinism. Since WWII, the formation of a Fifth International has been called for by various figures from among the fragmented hold-outs of Trotskyism, and more recently, by Hugo Chávez since he was elected president of Venezuela in 2007.
The white plastic chairs in Raqs’s gathering in the name of the International were never filled. They were stacked at every angle, balancing precariously every which way, remaining beyond utility and unfillable. The sculptural pile of chairs was a gathering for a virtual assembly, an immanent meeting yet to come, an impossible meeting always in the making. In an interview for Humanities Underground, Raqs stated, “We often find ourselves working with and towards the idea of a ‘missing crowd,’ a gathering that is yet to collect itself, a crowd that will get constituted” (in Biswas 2011). The configurations of this assembly of potentiality—this missing crowd, this assemblage of vacant chairs—never coalesced into a circle, row, or any other spatial configuration germane to a particular genre of gathering. The configuration of chairs remained turbulent in relation to organization—an irregular pattern, chaotic and ever changing. The sculptural performance was an impossible seating chart for a virtual gathering, an International that wasn’t taking place, but was indeterminately in the air. While performances often attempt to stage collectivity (think of the oft-evoked image of a group coming into a circle, experiencing the rush of proximity and togetherness), these performances run the risk of reproducing contemporary forms of administered relationality and coercive intimacy (think of the contemporary scene of capitalist labor marked by the proliferation of facilitated brainstorming sessions, collaborative projects, and enforced extracurricular team-building exercises). By staging and sculpting a gathering of empty chairs, Raqs anticipated a missing crowd and resisted staging a coercive togetherness that prescribed what a coming together in the name of the International might look like.

I avoided the black chairs meant for spectators and found a spot on the floor in the corner in the grove of mini–lemon trees. Performers began to speak into microphones from desks and from blackboards arranged on the edges of the pile of white chairs. They were soft-spoken and rigorously un-presentational, as if speaking out loud while writing a letter or delivering a lecture to an empty classroom, corresponding with no one in particular—perhaps the audience, perhaps the other performers, perhaps an imaginary class, perhaps themselves, perhaps no one, perhaps the past, perhaps the future. I felt as though I didn’t have to listen, but that there was an open invitation to tune in or tune out. As I squatted on the floor near the diminutive trees, I quickly transcribed snippets of the script into my phone, tapping what I could onto my screen with my thumbs as the words streamed by:

can you smell a whiff of the Last International
the question of when to dive into the thick of things
find a rift
there is a contest between dead labor and living labor
tumult churning
a runaway rhinoceros
a whale that sinks the ship of the State
time out of joint
the promise and the prison break
when nothing happens
when something happens
we saw each other again for the first time
horizons are swirling around us
here is a place without measure
the last international has departed
its time is now

As my attention shuttled between my glowing phone screen and the event taking place around me, *The Last International* meeting was both there and not there. Its time was “out of joint.” It had already “departed,” a “whiff” of something that had already come, and yet “its time is now.” But this “now” was a disturbance in time, a “rift,” a swirling of horizons. There was a “tumult churning,” a turbulence of different times and histories. The engagement with last-ness was not a last-ness of finality. Instead it was a sort of beginning again, a folding of lasts and firsts, a last-ness that was about reimagining and reenacting the First. It was a disruptive dwelling within the tumult of history’s repetitions, a gathering when time is out of joint and history swells up. Raqs has described its approach to time as an effort to create surprising contrapuntal rhythms within the “heaviness of inevitability.” This tumultuous contrapuntal time—the dissonant simultaneity of multiple temporalities—produces an “encounter with the dust of other times.” It offers an opportunity to revisit the “abandoned routes of experiments, of imaginations, of thwarted attempts”:

What if we could fold time in the same way as we can fold a piece of paper? Supposing we could fold it into a boat or an airplane, what kind of voyage would we find ourselves embarking on? Would we realize that our sense of our time, the time(s) we live in today, are also amenable to being folded in a way that can make us sense other times in a way that is suddenly up close and personal even as they retain their chronological distances? (in Biswas 2011)

Raqs positions the politics of this temporal project as an investigation of the “off-modern.” The off-modern is the space and time of the postcolony, the global south, spaces always relegated to the not-yet modern, the out-of-step and out-of-time, the always available-for-conquest and in-need-of-develop-
ment. The off-modern is neither pre- nor post-; it is simultaneous with the modern, but “off-track”—traveling alongside at a different speed and in a different way (in Biswas 2011). *The Last International* was an attempt at an off-modern International in the midst of the New York art world, a gathering that was off-track not only in terms of the norms of artistic events but also off-track from gatherings in the name of communism that are stereotypical to our contemporary moment. It was not some bunch of aging white men in the basement of a Lower East Side radical bookstore bemoaning the lack of a truly universal workers’ movement and the apparent absence of zeal for recognizable political action among today’s youth, nor was it some participatory art event celebrating a prescriptive togetherness in the present.

Over the past several years there has been a resurgence of critical writing and organizing around reinvigorating an idea of communism. For example, the French philosopher and playwright Alain Badiou argues in *The Communist Hypothesis* (2010) for reimagining communism not as an already determined historical entity, but as an emancipatory and persistent hypothesis that the logic of class is not an inevitable one and a different collective organization is practicable. Over the course of the performance, *The Last International* felt like an experiment with the persistent promise of a particularly off-modern communism—a communism that staged disjunctive encounters between off-track elements that never cohered into a monolithic social entity: balloons released from the top of ladders noise-fully deflated as they swerved around the room; a figure in an antique submersible suit rode a motorbike in a circle around the space; readings of the story of a fugitive rhinoceros wandered between letters of 19th-century utopian socialists based in New York City. The call of *The Last International* was to find an “out-of-joint” jointed-ness—an unforeseen combination, a surprising encounter across turbulent and conflicting spaces and times. It experimented with an off-modern communism that eschewed communist imaginaries that rely on

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an image of a fully reconciled society bound together by harmony and absolute consensus. Instead, *The Last International* proposed the potentiality of a communism within the turbulence of being together, a communism in which the moment of togetherness is a moment of distance and difference.

Towards the end of *The Last International*, a member of the collective marked a curving arrow on the floor with tape. She then stood where the arrow pointed, marked a box with tape surrounding her, and proclaimed, “Here is a place without measure.” For José Esteban Muñoz, there is something about the sense of a place without measure—a place that exceeds logics of exchange based on the ultimate commensurability between all things, a place that can’t be captured by normative logics of measurement—that helps us consider what we might mean by a more radicalized notion of communism. In an essay on the turbulent collaboration among antagonisms of race and gender between Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and the poet Gary Fisher, Muñoz turns to the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy to develop a sense of their collaboration as an experimental attunement to the politics of “an ineffable ‘sense of an incommensurable,’ an ‘incalculable sense,’ a ‘nonequivalence,’ an ‘unquantifiable integer,’ that goes beyond logics of equivalence towards a communism of incommensurabilities” (2013:104).

To relate in a “communism of incommensurabilities” is to gather in a place without measure and assemble in a turbulent polyphony of incalculable particularities. *The Last International* provided an opportunity to experiment with what a communism of incommensurabilities might mean.

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3. Nancy’s formulation of the sharing of incalculable sense helps Muñoz re-approach queer politics as an impossible politics (a sense of the political beyond politics) that reaches beyond the pragmatic, rights-based, and representative realms of contemporary politics.
feel like. Parts didn’t add up and meaning never rested in surety, and yet a gathering took place. Difference and particularity weren’t transcended through fantasmatic union, or abolished through dramatic battles, or submitted to a reductive logic of comparison. Difficult-to-follow language and gestures diffusely spread out and extended between subjects, objects, and screens, and the performance gave a sense of what the aftereffects of an indeterminate rupture might feel like.

Almost every person I’ve spoken to who attended The Last International didn’t actually “like” it. The primary complaint was boredom. It seemed that gathering in a place without measure ended up being rather dull. Things never quite lined up, there wasn’t much to hold onto, and the evening dragged on. Yet boredom also leads towards undetermined elsewhere. It is the feeling you feel just before you decide to do something else. In the case of The Last International, boredom led to people talking among themselves, turning to whoever was next to them to give sighs of exhausted attention and a well-timed eye roll. Boredom was an impetus for an improvisatory sociality. Performed within the context of the boredom of post-Occupy leftist politics in New York (or in other words, the nondramatic living through of the non-evental aftermath of the political event), the boring unfolding of the gathering at the Connolly Theater resonated with the political milieu of the moment. It felt strangely similar to the sort of post-Occupy boredom endured at a leaderless public assembly where the meeting procedures were not yet decided and there wasn’t quite a plan. And yet what was shared at this meeting was the inefable of incommensurability—an assemblage of singular signs and relational configurations that pointed enigmatically beyond the political logics of the present. From within these swirls of boredom (which comprised much of what I enjoyed about the piece), The Last International took up the seemingly impossible task of thinking and experimenting with an idea of communism in the 21st century. It approached communism not only as a theory of the State, but also as an aesthetic—an unfixed imaginary, a formal experiment, a series of relational and organizational tactics, a not-quite-articulated and still emergent structure of feeling. The Raqs Media Collective initiated a place where the past swelled up and the future felt not yet decided, no one was on the same page or fully there, and yet a radical remaking of the world felt possible. It was an experiment with the potentiality of a turbulent communism to come.

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