
The Image of the Moving Body as Cultural Change: Interrogating the Transformative Potential of Performance

Holly Masturzo

Florida State College at Jacksonville, U.S.A

Tremendous gratitude to the conference organizers and my colleagues from around the world for inviting and welcoming my participation in this dialogue. I am deeply heartened by the power of critical projects this year's forum topic, The Human Image in a Changing World, has brought forth from so many scholars. What I seek to offer today is a sample of how I have been thinking about cultural change and the potential role of community performance in furthering that change. My thinking has included the questions: How can we understand how and where we impact each other in collaborative, public art experiences? What makes these experiences potentially transformational and what gets in the way? How can we discern where we cannot, or where we should not go with others in contested public spaces? These questions cross through a variety of fields and disciplines from art and dance to ethics and political philosophy, and operate within a tangle of relational dynamics. To distill that tangle to a question that might serve as a lever for investigation, I offer more simply: How can we create transformative arts experiences together? Using the language of philosophy, I add: What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for relational art spaces and participatory art experiences to be created in community? I want to understand these questions not only because I like to think about them but because I also am engaged in relational art making. So while what I present today operates primarily at the theoretical level, my larger project is a pragmatic one.

Two major threads of thought frame and inform my thinking. The first thread is from feminist theory and theories of the body, represented incompletely by a quotation from Simone de Beauvoir writing in *The Second Sex* (translation provided by Toril Moi): "The body is not a thing, it is a situation; it is our grasp on the world and our sketch of our project." The body is always situated; it is a living, mediated space where concepts of self and other are not fixed; there is both a potency and vulnerability in that dynamic. This is not an uncommon position in feminist theory, yet giving weight to the relational aspect of that dynamic is increasingly important for understanding participatory art experiences. The second thread is from an approach to movement or dance sometimes placed under the umbrella of the 'postmodern,' yet more precisely would be described as improvisational, experiential, and expressive. About *Ceremony of Us*, a collaboration created

in 1969 between Anna Halprin, San Francisco Dancers & Studio Watts School for the Arts in response to the Watts Riots or Watts Rebellion in Los Angeles, August 1965, Halprin stated, “I wanted to do a production *with* a community instead of for a community” (152). In an interview with Nancy Stark Smith at her home studio in 1989, Halprin, who did not embrace the language of postmodernism, describes her project in this way: “One of the things about working with real-life issues is that it can be transformative. You work with an issue because it is unresolved, and through the dance, we hope to discover new possibilities. It’s not about the dancers and it’s not an interpretation of a theme, it’s real. And by doing it you get to a different place with that issue, and in your life. The dance changes the dancer. The purpose is to create change...” (14). There’s a rush of optimism in Halprin’s dialogue and we would do well to unpack the participants’ experiences in the workshop as well.

First, some framing: between the 1960s and the 1990s, art historical writing refined descriptions of the work of a variety of community-engaged artists. One development in this creative and critical activity was the naming of relational aesthetics in 1998 by Nicholas Bourriaud through a curatorial and theoretical project. Bourriaud contends that collaborative, public art projects can catalyze social environments and can create transformative moments (1998/2002) so long as such projects meet a criteria of co-existence. He suggests that we ask the following questions: “does this work permit me to enter into dialogue? Could I exist, and how, in the space it defines?” (109). In other words, his formulation gives at least equal weight between the community and the subject. Subsequent feminist critiques have questioned the quality of relationships cultivated in such activity (Bishop, 2004) and the degree to which such projects reflect and replicate or contest and resist prevailing cultural perspectives (Reckitt, 2013). Such critiques are interested in the quality of encounters created through relational art, emphasizing that the activity of encounter alone is not enough to determine if there is a communal capacity for exchange created or indeed anything like democracy in action. Claire Bishop writes, “The model of subjectivity that underpins [relational art] practice is not the fictitious whole subject of harmonious community, but a divided subject of partial identifications open to constant flux. If relational aesthetics requires a unified subject as a prerequisite for community-as- togetherness...” then she questions how this would be “adequate to the divided and incomplete subject of today.” She argues for a “relational antagonism” that “would be predicated not on social harmony, but on exposing that which is repressed in sustaining the semblance of this harmony. It would thereby provide a more concrete and polemical grounds for rethinking our relationship to the world and to one other” (79). This makes pragmatic sense, whether from the perspective of increasing attention to intersectionality and transnationalism or the complexity of body and our understanding of it through advances in neuroscience. Also Bishop’s work is focused less on greater societal transformation and is more about the moment or site-specific experience where micro-changes can take place for a participating individual. Her work in this vein therefore offers greater descriptive adequacy for the participant than for the possibilities of collective transformation.

Philosopher Erin Manning offers a more nuanced way of understanding art-informed relational encounters through a concept of elasticity (which she imports through her reading of Deleuze). She contends that in order for expression to have affective force it must be conjoined with thought in motion (2009). Relational movement for Manning always carries an element of the improvisational, what she poetical describes as the “elasticity of the almost.” “The elasticity of the almost is the intensive extension of the movement, a moment when anything can happen, when our bodies are poised in a togetherness beginning to take shape. The next movement has not yet come, the past movement is passing. No step has been taken, and yet in this elastic the micro-perception of every possible step can almost be felt” (32). Her elasticity is infused with an active imagination always conjoined with embodied experience. Manning asserts that “relation is always already elastic. Even a simple walk can feel elastic when the movement carries us, when the goal is not the first thing on our mind. The elasticity of the relation is perceptible in its affective margin, in the emergence of the unknowable where what is felt stretches and contracts into a propulsion of experience toward the unfathomable” (41). Her project’s strength is its descriptive quality of the complexity of relational encounter; however, in its descriptive nuance any application of what aspects of relational art engender healing and/or transformation become more difficult. The same elasticity that activates imaginative embodiment might also re-inscribe wound, or generate distance, avoidance, and deferral. From an ethical perspective, such an expansive elasticity clearly broadens the terrain of aesthetic experience, yet it also requires a higher degree of responsibility on the part of artists and participants.

A similar higher threshold for participants’ responsibility also is underlined by Derek McCormack who contends that in order for the therapeutic to be realized we must “learn to attend” (98). Highlighting the experimental and experiential qualities of creating affective spaces, he argues that only through collective mobility does the possibility of a fully-engaged (or fully re-membered) present emerge (2013). “Broadly defined, somatic therapeutic practices are organized activities that privilege moving bodies as the locus of transformative potential in subjectivities. They aim to generate transformative intervention in subjectivities by reworking somatic, affective, and cognitive processes” (91-2). McCormack acknowledges that aiming for healing in creative work may create a problematic performance positivity. He wonders about how to gauge the efficacy of participation and the role of abstraction in improvisational experience. For instance, might we understand any “good feeling” engendered through a relational arts experience “just an atmosphere?” He writes, “the affective and ethics-aesthetic value of therapeutic intervention lies in their capacity to generate contexts for experimenting with the refrain of experience” (115). In this way it is possible that even the experience of an atmosphere begins to encode new imaginative pathways that the embodied subject may internalize and grow to re-pattern; this possibility seems more suited for individual healing. Different criteria and/or higher levels of processing would seem to be necessary for community healing. Moment-to-moment awareness may not be enough for cultural transformation; a larger re-patterning likely is required.

When we read feminist writing on relational autonomy, applications of this sub-discipline to personal and public spheres are more common in arenas of family and workplace relations, hospitals, bioethics and are less frequently applied in the arena of aesthetics. In those subfields, feminist relational autonomy has offered important contributions in problematizing notions of consent, questioning what has been thought of as the moral minimums required in order for a person to give consent, and what counts as full participation. For example, to what degree can an ailing patient untrained in medicine truly ‘give consent’ to have an experimental procedure performed. Returning to Halprin’s *Ceremony of Us*, the question of informed consent within the improvisational, creative collaborative process is revealed to be layered and complicated.

There is quite a long section in an interview where Halprin describes how the collaboration between (white) San Francisco Dancers and (black) Studio Watts dancers had to work through highly charged gender and socially scripted sexuality dynamics concurrently with the racial content the collaboration aimed to create from and work through. Clearly dancers consented to participate on a race-responsive project, yet the emergence of sexually charged content that delighted Halprin (she saw it as essential work to reach authentic co-creation) could not have been consented to by the dancers; it emerged in process. The complexity of these performative experiences raises the question of what qualifies as full participation and when this participation can be understood to be autonomous, to be democratic, actionable, and not to be simply bodies following a pattern either suggested by an artist or materialized by a social structure, or desired as performance positivity. To respond to such situational complexity, Bishop’s relational antagonism mentioned earlier at least offers clarity of participatory will and gives weight to the autonomy of a subjective participation; that’s the benefit of the antagonistic stance, although we could problematize the potential for self-deception and for reposting limiting social scripts within this antagonism as well. Working before the time of Bishop’s writing, Halprin herself acknowledged the pitfalls of aesthetic expectations for unity in numerous interviews about *Ceremony of Us*; she describes how at the outset the white dancers improvised in ways that could be characterized as “trying to be too nice” and were hesitant to engage tensions even when “antagonism” or competitive tensions were overtly present within the group dynamics and favored moving towards wholeness and fluidity.

Bishop’s work raises the paradox of relational art and spotlights a main sticking point for understanding how and when a communal aesthetic experience can be or become transformative or healing. In the design of relational and participatory art, we must interrogate how we claim to be fully conscious of:

- The power of the organizing artist(s), the degree to which, through charisma or socially accepted role, her suggestions drive and shape collaboration;
- The power(s) of the participants, where they have agency, or where for example they may feel coerced, or even more problematically where consent to one aspect of collaboration becomes imbedded or distorted with another area where consent may not have been given;

expectations for discomfort to be accepted as “part of the creative process” and a given hazard of collaborative improvisation cannot simply be a blank check for transfer of consent;

- The limits of social structures and historical/cultural relational dynamics; in setting a container for a relational arts experience, physical and temporal boundaries may not be enough to exclude particularly pernicious power dynamics.
- The possibility of active imaging to influence creative process, and
- The potential of affective space to impact experience.

Astrid Breel in a 2015 article in the journal *Participations* encourages us to remember that “[a] distinction should be made between participatory processes and outcomes” (369). In thinking about relational art, I invite us to elevate the intentionality of artists and conveners, to continue to move beyond the ‘chance operation’ of the 1960s and the moment-presence of the 1990s to include a stronger pragmatism, an informed deliberateness in co-creative spaces of artful emergence and improvisational making. While not a one-stop solution, the emerging subfield of somaesthetics offers a tempering challenge to transformative claims of relational aesthetics that can work in dialogue with feminist critiques. Its origins most often credited to Richard Shusterman, somaesthetics emphasizes the experiential and resists the representational domain. Shusterman agrees with de Beauvoir’s description of the situated body: “Just as our world cannot make sense without a body, our bodies make no sense without a world” (129) yet is skeptical of transformational claims of relational aesthetics not only on feminist grounds but also on pragmatic ones. Shusterman’s somaesthetics queries to what degree a transcendent imagination is possible and the utility to which it can be employed toward cultural change. For if the body as ground is situated, it likely imports as many problems as it solves for it carries the world within it. And so the potential for transformation of social structures through bodies, even in motion, if the world order is already and always encoded within it is limited. While this pragmatism is a helpful corrective, it may leave us in a less optimistic place regarding our belief in the capacity of relational public art to foster healing; at best it may return us to the moment-to-moment elasticity as described by Manning and perhaps makes the therapeutic interventions of affective spaces described by McCormack merely aspirational at the collective level. I want to be optimistic, yet to collectively create from that orientation we must be able to bring and apply a higher standard of pragmatism and ethical reasoning to creative inquiry and aesthetic improvisation - neither “good feeling” nor dedicated relational antagonism is enough.

Our hope or eagerness for transformational personal and community experiences may foreclose our ability to acknowledge the persistence of social structures that operate on and through the material domain. Establishing truly experimental, affective spaces can feel dangerous and destabilizing for community (even the resistance of relational antagonism can operate in socially prescribed scripts; indeed this is some of the critique leveled at contemporary protest action whether on the streets or on social media). Aesthetic quality also may be seen to be negatively

affected by fully participatory process when an inclusive range of community participants who may not be perceived as meeting the standards of professional (high) art take equitable roles in shaping both process and outcome; yet such aesthetic limitations may be worth our patience in exchange for relational authenticity and the possibility to meaningfully foster an acceptable range of autonomy for participants. The arc of processes of engagement between artists-conveners and participants may well need to be longer, even slower, and may need to proceed through multiple creative cycles of conscious, active imagining if our aims are to fully activate the image-experience of public bodies in motion in order to prime our shared spaces for cultural change.

Compare for example the participatory scale, degree of embodied engagement and cultural impact of the AIDS Memorial Quilt which “changed public opinion through its mechanisms of publicity and meaning-making” (Gambardella 213). The individual quilt sections varied widely in traditional artistic quality, yet the transformative effect emerged in the volume of participants and the scale of loss expressed and represented, alongside the required activity of viewers of the project who had to move themselves in order to visually experience the various installations of the quilt. Or consider Ruth Sergel’s *Chalk*, a public participatory art intervention in memory of those lost in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911 which killed 146 garment workers the majority of them Jewish and Italian immigrants to New York City. The first year (2004) Sergel and a small group of artist friends chalked 140 names of those lost in the fire along with the word “unidentified” six times on the pavement in front of the old factory building. In the decade that followed, the memorial chalking activity grew to over 100 locations and now serves as a larger call for workplace solidarity. Sergel writes, “The work of the Coalition was to set up a process that invited participation while respecting autonomy. What people created was not nearly as important as the experience of trusting an internal passion, turning it into action...” (166). In order to create a transformative experience, Sergel contends the participatory art process “had to include the whole person” and as such the aesthetic product becomes less important than the embodied, affective experience the participants create together (48). To continue to “include the whole person” in transformative art experiences and for that whole person to be inclusive of divided or incomplete subjects as Bishop reminds us of many of our 21st century positions, we will have to recalibrate and change our expectations for the visual presentation of artistic works and performances as part of creating the necessary and sufficient conditions for community aesthetic experiences to emerge; we will have to re-evaluate and re-pattern the weight we grant to artist-conveners and to participants, to recognize a more layered elasticity to the communal creative process and affective moment-to-moment experience of that process, and accordingly to adjust our expectations, particularly spatiotemporal, for perceived quality of artistic presentation.

Works Cited

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