

Performance, Art and Ethnography

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Key words: performance, contemporary art, ethnography, reflexivity, social constructivism **Abstract**: The history of performance art can be compared with the social sciences pursuit of cultural critique and commentary. Methods and theoretical frameworks are borrowed from anthropological field research throughout this analysis of Montreal artist Olivia BOUDREAU's 2007 performance *Salle C*. Exploring performance art through ethnography provides reflexive, context-dependent renderings of time-sensitive work—acknowledging both artists' and visitors' perspectives. This is an interpretation of performance (not limited to traditional formal and material culture analyses) that seeks to demonstrate an ethnographic rendering of performance, and performative appreciation of audience and artist.

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1. Salle C

Before entering *Salle C* of the Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, I found my path obstructed by a floor-to-ceiling projection of someone's jean-clad seat. From wall-to-wall, the blue-jeaned bottom appeared alternately as a still and a slightly moving image; I noted the sitter's goose bumps, but wasn't sure if I was free to go behind the screen or not. [1]

There I found the source of the image: a woman, approximately my age, in the center of the room between a camera and a reverse image of her lower torso. Her posture adjusted as I entered the room. As she crossed her legs and leaned her head on her fist, she appeared to me at first as Rodin's *Thinker*. [2]

I was shocked by what could be a confrontational scenario. Now in this woman's presence, with the screen behind me, and no barrier between us, I felt an enforced intimacy. I had no choice but to go forward and experience, thus become part of the piece—yet still without understanding what this commitment entailed. It took me a minute to gain my bearings and to reconnect the image with this real person. While only seconds before the woman's image was exponentially larger-than-life—here she was small, somehow fragile for the lack of interface

between us. The vacuum opened by this Wizard of Oz-like anticlimax occurred as an expansive doubt, the scenario itself so counter to expectation. I found no familiar signs to guide my next steps. She avoided my approach, shifting her gaze from the projection and away from me. Lacking invitation or instruction from this person in the center of the room (who, it turns out was the artist: Olivia BOUDREAU), I hesitated to break the loop connecting her, her image and the camera. [3]

Several questions occur at once. First, what were BOUDREAU's expectations of the audience? Should visitors adopt the modernist stance of distanced contemplation? Should they behave as participatory, interactive agents? Despite some prior knowledge of the piece, the ontological shift was disturbing. Other visitors might have assumed for a few moments that BOUDREAU was another, particularly intense gallery-goer. How long would it take to deduce that, as the artist, she was the situation's author? On the far wall in a finished wood case with sliding glass doors, I found an expansive series of mini-DV cassettes. The first had been dated and marked hourly, with lapses overnights and on Sundays. Here was the artist, determined to remain under her own and others' surveillance from May 5 to June 9, the duration of the exhibition.



Figure 1: Olivia BOUDREAU, Salle C, video still, 2007, courtesy of the artist [4]

Reluctant to leave, I broached a careful "Hello? Are you Olivia?" Nothing. Another gentle prod: "Salut? C'est toi l'artiste?¹" Again. Nothing. [5]

Throughout the weeks, memory of Olivia BOUDREAU's presence returned. I couldn't shake that moment of impact, her physical presence so dwarfed by the scale of her digital projection. I couldn't keep from thinking of *Salle C* as an expression of humanness: of patience, endurance, dedication and calm. What was most intriguing was what the piece would not reveal. How would it be to sit for 150 hours in these contexts: on display, vulnerable to public scrutiny, yet

¹ In Quebec, use of the *vous* form among those of the same generation is considered too formal. I use the familiar form of *tu* because Olivia BOUDREAU seems to be a similar age.

alone, faced with your own every movement magnified on screen, with only the hourly exchange of video cassettes to break the continuity of now? I wanted to know other visitors' responses. Was everyone as careful and mystified as myself? What were the others thinking when they stepped so defiantly near to BOUDREAU, when they called out at her, and when they overlooked her? I wanted to know the internal revelations brought through the process. Was BOUDREAU reciting a list of things to do? Thinking of her mundane obligations: the groceries, phone-calls ... or experiencing herself as an artwork: thinking of next projects, some earlier visitors' remarks and behavior? I assumed she must go through alternating periods of intense inspiration, epiphany, anxiousness, and longing. Was there an overall pattern to these thoughts, feelings and sensations variable over the extended duration? How is it to consider being itself as a work of art? [6]

In a 2005 performance entitled *Vaches*, Olivia BOUDREAU tied herself to a cow in an open field. Video documentation shows the pair alternately far in the distance, then passing by quite near. In other scenes both artist and animal are absent, the point of view a gray rural landscape. Salle C addresses similar themes of process and duration. BOUDREAU enacts a simplified, yet determined and persistent submission to the passing present. As a result she reveals a profound variety and complexity within human interpretation. Here, video documentation of Salle C reflects the shiver-inducing contexts of the gallery to underline visitor reactions to scenarios devoid of normative relational roles.



Figure 2: Olivia BOUDREAU, Salle C, installation view, 2007, courtesy of the artist [7]

2. Ethnography

Before continuing, I would like to elaborate the ethnographic method I propose. As the late performance studies guru Dwight CONQUERGOOD has said: "The rethinking of ethnography is primarily about speaking and listening, instead of observing ... [shifting] emphasis from space to time, from sight and vision to

sound and voice, from text to performance, from authority to vulnerability" (1991, p.191). [8]

Reflexivity is really the key. A reflexive ethnography answers questions of how cultural phenomena (environments, artifacts, groups, etc.) construct selves, so that the "new ethnography ... author[s] a *self* within a *context of others* ... through the textual construction of, and thoughtful reflection about, the *lived experiences* of that *self*" (GOODALL, 2000, p.191). This writing is unabashedly self-conscious considering objective knowledge and documentation of reality impossible. We can only know the world through our perceptions of it: combining our culture, history and notions regarding the future to reveal as much about our selves as my other. In this method of cultural inquiry, acknowledged and inescapable subjectivity provides evidence not only of the contexts and communities in which I interact, but also of my self as their product. [9]

Always at issue with this approach are the histories of museums and anthropology. As the ethnographers who advocated the textual turn in anthropology: Clifford GEERTZ, James CLIFFORD and George MARCUS, we broach the divide between self-awareness and narcissism with caution. While I would discuss the globalized art industry as an arena of free expression and creativity, the problems of representation across cultural, national, religious and linguistic barriers, issues related to the dominant ideology of what art is and who produces whose culture—may forever need to be addressed. My principle responsibility, my central intent, here, remains to amplify the voice and concerns of the individuals and communities I describe, to contribute my fiction to a continuous and growing intersubjectivity. [10]

In this case, *Salle C* is situated in Quebec, 2007, and is attended by a primarily academic audience. Many of its visitors are students, faculty, and administrative or service staff from the gallery's host, Concordia University. My own experience at Concordia was framed by bachelor's studies in cultural anthropology, perhaps most characterized through Professor David HOWES' emphasis on multisensorial expressions of art and aesthetics in anthropology, and extra-curricular interests in experimental documentary film. The gallery, under the direction of Michèle THÉRIAULT, aims to present intelligent conceptual exhibitions of emerging and established artists, exploring ways of thinking sensitive to issues and discussions relevant within the international contemporary field, yet emphasizing the local Montreal context. [11]

An important complement to purely formal analysis—especially with performance art—ethnography includes use-based and tactical descriptions of events, reaping the possibilities inherent in the gallery as a space for cultural critique. Through artists' and curators' creation of places where roles and expectations are obscured, we gain important insights into groups' cultural assumptions, so that fields of creativity provide a prime resource for qualitative sociological experimentation and study. [12]

Through addressing the arts from a visitor-level we further understand structures of the global art industry as one part of a broader social milieu. Exhibitions are no longer didactic expressions, but generative models, wherein the best examples provide multiple access-points to dialogues between structures (even when overtly artist-authored or hypothetical) and agents (whether or not characterized by roles and assumptions manifest by previous knowledge of the arts). Ethnographic interpretations need not reject the artists' intents in exchange for audience reception—the point of contention between the two can be so insightful. This, again, is why it is important to protect cultural institutions from commercial-or market-driven programming, and to be wary of privileging one form of creativity over others. [13]

3. Performance and Practice

Following the ideas of Victor TURNER through to Homi K BHABHA, CONQUERGOOD traces the trajectory of performance art as it flows from *mimesis*, to *poesis*, to *kinesis*—through zones of contention to theorization as "true for the everyday resisting performance practices of subaltern groups as it is for performance studies programs." No longer tied to the theater or as inauthentic play-acting, performance comes to a point of actualizing reconstruction, referring to "action that incessantly insinuates, interrupts, interrogates, antagonizes, and decenters powerful master discourses" (CONQUERGOOD, 1995, p.138). Performance, inasmuch as it is lived, is as real, truthful, and authentic an experience as any other socially-scripted context or rite. It is being, as art. [14]

In the social sciences, French theorist Michel DE CERTEAU describes thetraces the trajectory of performance art as it flows importance of critically analyzing everyday cultural systems from both levels of tactics and strategies. The significance of user-based perspectives, as explored in the *Practice of Everyday Life*:

"The presence and circulation of a representation (taught by preachers, educators, and popularizers as the key to socioeconomic advancement) tells us nothing about what it is for its users. We must first analyze its manipulation by users who are not its makers. Only then can we gauge the difference or similarity between the production of the image and the secondary production hidden in the process of its utilization" (1984, p.xiii). [15]

Reading performance art through practice (or reading practice theory through performance art) we render both birds' and worms' views of a given context. Through praxis, we gain the possibility of performance as lived scenario— actualizing experimental and alternative cultural modes. When we postulate alternative ontologies through their hypothetical engagement, we find ourselves resolutely within their contexts. [16]

Salle C occurs within a growing history of performance-based work, variously beginning with the Futurist and Dada artists, gaining momentum through 1960s Situationist, FLUXUS, and conceptual artists. Yet, as media, performance has

consistently (perhaps by definition) resisted definition. RoseLee GOLDBERG, historian and director of New York's PERFORMA festival notes: "performance art has been a medium that challenges and violates borders between disciplines and genders, between public and private, and between everyday life and art, and that follows no rules" (GOLDBERG, 1998, p.20). As pioneer contemporary performance artist Adrian PIPER explains: "It seems that abandoning discreet forms is, for me, the only way of preserving the idea within the reality of art-making activity" (1970, p.48). Following trends echoed in other post-industrial disciplines we might read these statements as evidence of the increasing mediation between individuals—both a critique of the rigid scriptedness of the everyday, and a grateful absorption of thing-determined subjectivities—harnessing the capacities of our designed environments to construct our very humanness (DILNOT, 2005). [17]

Enveloped within a context created by the noise and movement of electronic and documentary works—the whirring, clicking and grinding of Peter COURTEMANCHE's *Preying Insect Robots*; Liv STRAND's amplified and swooshing *Pipeline, Salle C* is a central element of the *Start* exhibition. Two works by Adrian PIPER: *Seriation #1: Lecture,* and *Seriation #2: Now,* both 1968, interject repetitive, rhythmic recantations of the time through which BOUDREAU is (or, was) projected. Guest curator of the two-part *Start/Stop* exhibition, Christof MIGONE describes BOUDREAU fixed in a "perpetual present," as she "stages her continuous presence through every hour of the exhibition run ... a persistent viewer of her own projection" (2007,

http://ellengallery.concordia.ca/2006/en/expositions_start.php). [18]

In interview, BOUDREAU explains the object of *Salle C* was to exert as neutral a presence as possible, allowing the context of the exhibition to do the rest. Superficially passive, her actual, active construction of the environment highlighted the capacity of the gallery to author reality, writing according to the anticipated social codes of the time and place. BOUDREAU's role activated and underscored this subjective faculty. This explains her choice of banal, popular imagery—the lion-crested label on the back of her jeans becoming an absurdist index of her presence. As she states: *Je mets les forces en presence puis en suite je me retiens* (BOUDREAU, personal communication, July 26, 2007)—striving with the simplest constraints towards the magnification of micro-events. [19]

4. Situating Reactions

Here, through the benefit of notes and interviews, I describe a variety of reactions to *Salle C*, revealing a sharp contrast between independent and guide-led experiences. [20]

Generally, although *Salle C* was not conceived as an interactive work, visitors tried to break BOUDREAU's silence, repeatedly interrupting the camera angle to leave traces of their own presence. BOUDREAU recounts intimidating scenarios of "jeu de pouvoir" attempts to reverse visitor/creator roles. Several violently demanded her attention, while others stayed in Room C for extended periods—up to two hours—in one case applauding when she moved to replace the mini-DV.

Near the end of the exhibition a visitor sat quite near to BOUDREAU for 45 minutes, making hand-signals and placing objects, like a keychain, before the camera. [21]

I could postulate a range of motivations for these reactions as broad and as various as the number of visitors. In their search for meaning, many interpreted *Salle C* like the changing of the guards in London. Engaging the installation as a game, the object became to break BOUDREAU's silence and concentration. Implicit in these interpretations is a critique of and resistance to the very white cube protocols the context of *Salle C* would underline. For visitors versed in the history of avant-garde experiment and the discourses of contemporary art, the gallery is already an opportunity for critique, play and bending boundaries. [22]

Expectations of engagement perhaps also reflect the increased use of interactivity in museums and exhibitions. Museum etiquette is consistently in flux, now, in relation to the experience economy, we might also look to the incorporation of consumer narratives in advertising. In *Start*, Toronto-based artist Marla HLADY's mildly interactive set of cocktail shakers, *Mixer* (2005-7), which needed to be picked up to be turned on, may also have influenced visitors' assumptions when entering *Salle C*. [23]

Feminist critiques of social construction of women as passive aesthetic objects of contemplation might also have been embedded in visitors' upset at BOUDREAU's silence. After generations of work to breathe life into the gallery and to liberate the human form from static statuesqueness, it may very well be considered outrageous to appropriate a mute and unmoving stance. [24]

After all, human presence alone might have been enough to suggest interaction. As explored by Peggy PHELAN in *Unmarked*:

"The relationship between self and other is a marked one, which is to say it is unequal. It is alluring and violent because it touches the paradoxical nature of psychic desire; the always already unequal encounter nonetheless summons the hope of reciprocity and equality; the failure of this hope then produces violence, aggressivity, dissent" (1992, p.4). [25]

5. Leading Reactions

I should divulge it was as a gallery guide that I had the opportunity to revisit *Salle C* several times each week, always with a different visitor or group of visitors in tow. When accompanied by me as their guide, visitor's reactions were markedly less aggressive. Quick to offer their evaluations and commentary regarding the screen projections when I suggested they were recorded in real-time, having traversed the representational boundary to be situated with the living artist most were hushed to a whisper, asking, "What am I supposed to do?" I like to imagine how widely reactions would differ across cultural and historical boundaries. [26]

From the ensuing conversations I interpreted visitors' shock at BOUDREAU's presence as though indicating a conceptual leap from abstract notions of duration, to more tangible appreciation for the actuality of time. In realizing the expanse encapsulated by *Salle C*, many echoed my own initial process, calculating all they needed to accomplish in the ensuing hours, sometimes recounting their task lists. However, this shock may also reflect some embarrassment at offering so direct and straightforward a commentary of the piece within hearing range of the artist. This hesitancy to speak about BOUDREAU reflects her heightened status as the artist, and shows a resistance to speaking frankly about someone who is within hearing. [27]

Concluding there was nothing to "do," visitors questioned the artist's very humanness, asking: "Is she real?" This, I would ascribe BOUDREAU's silent stillness, especially juxtaposed by visitors' haste in moving through the gallery, or to assumptions springing from the context of *Salle C*. (I should note that Concordia staff and students had been recently drawn into the gallery by Alain BENOIT's 2002 *Étalon*, an extremely lifelike urethane cast of his model's body. This too, may have influenced visitors' remarks.) [28]

In an isolated case, a large, unscheduled group of grade-school students flooded *Salle C*. Irrespective of any gallery-inscribed protocols, they laughed and jostled their way between the living and projected image of the artist. Having discovered the relationship between the camera and screen, the installation became an opportunity for projecting their own funny-faces. Their exhausted chaperons gave rein to the group, neglecting to convey even the title of the piece. In an attempt to somehow order the experience, I posed leading questions to which some children shouted possible titles and the location of the artist. For my part, I was delighted to see them enjoying the work in so various, dynamic and exciting capacities. They chased and mimicked each other's interpretations, not in search of the "correct," but the most fun answer. In this case, I would suggest these children were either blissfully ignorant of social constraints, or, indeed, were rebelling against codes of decorum they had discussed with their chaperons. [29]

Highlighting the intent against intent as an essential tension in the piece, BOUDREAU describes her upset with this chaotic disrespect for *Salle C*. Despite these and other frustrated searches for more *apparent* reciprocity BOUDREAU was always present to visitors. While hers was not an overtly interactive work, it is important to remember *Salle C* recorded visitors' aural contributions. With respect to the artist I quote BOUDREAU at length:

"Malgré tout, et outré leurs déplacements, les spectateurs ont investi *Salle C* de leur parole. Par leurs reactions spontanées, les discussions qu'ils menaient entre eux, leurs tentatives de m'adresser la parole et parfois leurs monologues à mon endroit, ils on manifesté leur participation à *Salle C*, on fait entendre leurs voix. Plusieurs d'entre eux m'ont dit ce qu'ils ressentaient dans l'installation, une femme qui parlait fort m'a dit sa surprise de constater que j'étais l'artiste de la pièce et que j'étais là tous les jours. Elle m'a communiqué son admiration devant ma persévérance. Une autre femme, plus aggressive, s'est placée directement devant moi et m'a demandé,

presqu'en criant, de parler, voulant briser mon silence. Un jeune homme s'est assis par terre et m'a parlé pendant plus de vingt minutes de son experience, me posant des questions sur la pièce, cherchant à savoir qui j'étais, me confiant son désir de me brusquer, de me faire réagir. Un professeur et deux de ses étudiants ont mené, longuement, une discussion sur leur vision de la pièce et sur les questions qu'elle soulevaient. En réalité, je recevais quotidiennement la parole du spectateur. Et cette parole, elle est audible dans la sequence qui résulte de la performance et insère à meme le corps de l'œuvre, l'état de sa reception, un propos, voire un discours, sur sa nature. Ainsi, *Salle C* génère un propos sur *Salle C*, et le récupère pour produire *Salle C*" (2007, p.4). [30]

In this excerpt from her project's thesis BOUDREAU describes that despite appearances she was always attentive to visitors—she was in fact recording them. I paraphrase: In reality, I received the voices of spectators daily. This dialogue, also audible in the resulting video of the performance and which inserts itself over the work, is its own proposal towards the reception of the piece. BOUDREAU's reflections on the work exemplify current experiments combining performance, art and ethnography. Far from passive or inert, she designed the entire experience: reverting the camera after visitors' adjustments, and noting each passing hour on the DVs within the case. While we might see her tethered to media, she is nonetheless master of her own means of production. [31]

Amid this variety of reactions and the day-to-day presences of gallery staff, BOUDREAU remained unflinchingly consistent. To me, a student and gallery employee, her presence became surreal in its unchanging repetition. This static reality undermined superficial distinctions across days. It emphasized the expanse of time encapsulated in those weeks, in one respect mocking those of us racing back and forth through the university atrium, and in another, standing for our efficient run of the institution. [32]

At base, the installation provokes investigation into social roles at the ephemeral level of the everyday, as well as a philosophical interrogation of being and self. Who am I in the context of the gallery, based on my unique and personal history? And how do I reconstruct that self, using elements provided by the artist and in a field of contorted social expectation? Here, BOUDREAU's performance subverts the boundary between image and reality, reconnecting what PHELAN describes as the real "read through representation, and representation ... read through the real" (PHELAN, 1992, p.2). Shock and emotion inspired by Salle C and emergent in visitors' reluctance to connect image and author reveal how she could become reified as an index of presence, rather than actual presence. The monumental scale of the filmed representation and its striking familiarity were perceived as profound indications of the real. In turn, her actual presence was critiqued for being unresponsive, or it was mistaken for an inanimate sculptural representation. "By exposing [this] blind spot ... it may be possible to construct a way of knowing which does not take surveillance of the object, visible or otherwise, as its chief aim" (PHELAN, 1992, pp.1-2). [33]

6. Conclusion

Performance art draws us, by definition, to those evanescent and inaccessible realms: the psychic, the subjective, proximal, emotional, and intuited. Human interaction, although occupying a range of tone—in some cases overt and dramatic, while in others subtle and removed—is always potentially revelatory. [34]

Where concerns performance art, ethnography is a viable method for context-rich interpretation. Borrowing discourses from the social sciences we theorize the gallery as a site primed for cultural critique and commentary. [35]

Although perhaps drawing distinct publics already versed in contemporary art or art history, the gallery can contribute a great deal to our understanding of our selves and of each other. In this sense, the fine arts contribute as much to social science, as social sciences to art. [36]

It is important to note that this approach invests a great deal of agency in visitors and staff, shifting creative authority from the sole direction of artistic genius to potential networks of communities and institutions. It is perhaps ironic, then, that while my reading of *Salle C* emphasizes a variety of tactical interpretations, I need to maintain the artist's intentions as my primary responsibility, if I'm to remember the role of larger concrete structures and their histories in shaping these micro-events. [37]

From this point we need to question if the art world can or, indeed, whether it should provide a large enough sample for analysis. We must continually recognize and describe the characteristics determining a field. Here, I hope to have illustrated *Salle C* as an essentially cosmopolitan, academic space, where the artist's presence engaged, accentuated, and provided some record of the social prescriptions associated with the fine art gallery. [38]

In all cases, Olivia BOUDREAU's performance/installation work inspires an uncertainty worthy of further investigation. [39]

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