

Teaching as learning

- *Body, Image and the Other (a Performance Art Workshop in Valparaiso, Chile)*

(written for Perfo Puerto, Chile 2007)

For me, Performance Art is the deepest way of meeting other people. The possibility of sharing the same space in a given time which is the "here and now", offers a special quality of meeting. Since many years I am working as a Performance artist in different collective structures like Black Market International (currently an association of 12 artists from 9 different countries) or System HM2T (a Performance Art Duo together with Marco Teubner) and as a solo artist. I feel that Performance Art is a way to deal with the outside world in a direct communication which is mostly body related. Performance Art can function as a kind of translation of different cultural, personal, political or sociological meanings into an image of pure clarity.

In workshops -- and long-term teaching sessions -- I have worked with different groups of people (such as dancers in St. Petersburg, Russia, art students in Quebec City, Canada, and children in Koshoku City, Japan) on performances. My general questions are: What inspires a person to become creative? How do the processes get started that may lead to a work of art, in this case to a performance work?

This all has to do with the political and cultural backgrounds where the people come from and where they are educated. In dialogues I always try to find out, what mark people have made in their own society. Sometimes it is important to break "unwritten rules" of this surrounding and "play" with taboos or social law. The participants have to look on themselves from inside and outside as well.

My theoretical experience and my diploma in cultural studies allow me a interdisciplinary view on a lot of aspects in art and cultural life. I try to encourage the students/participants to use different media, different art disciplines and different ways of intellectual research to find out what may be most appropriate for them to use as tool to communicate in an artistic way. For me the level of *how* they do try to reach the goal is more important than *if* they reach a goal! To work in a concentrated way, always keeping in mind a kind of presence that should be held on a high level is most important for performance art and all other live elements as well.

The most important aspect in teaching Performance Art is that it is no one way communication. There is no "leader" in a workshop. It is more that the one who shares his or her experience in producing images in a performative context is learning a lot from the participants through watching *how* they deal with the specific questions and tasks that are actual in the context.

Since early 2006 I have the pleasure to work together with Jamie McMurry from the USA and Alexander Del Re from Chile on our shared concept "Body, Image and the other". A Performance Art workshop that introduces the students to three different cultural and personal approaches to the wide field of Performance Art.

In this practice based workshop concept, we give the participants the possibility to develop a deep insight into three different views of performance art. In group cycles the participants take part in different exercises that deal with main issues in performance art like the space-body-relation, the meaning and function of time and the concept of the "other".

We create a workspace for the participants that has got a unique possibility to get an insight into different ways of performance art which culminates into an overview of the wide field of time-based-art.

Main teaching issues are to work with space as a given frame for the process and the boundaries of the work. Working in a special "performance time" that is different to "normal time" Examining ones own speed in how to produce images, how to set up a process, how to present a personal, authentic dynamic. Learning about the boundaries, about the limitations, about gestures, movements. Learning about the other person, the audience, the partner. About the role of the body in becoming the image in performance

and the research of that body as a tool, an artistic field and as a source of our intellectual and emotional behaviour

Beside this, the autobiographical as muse in time-based practice is greatly informed by better understandings of our own perceptions. Seeking to see better our individual centrisms and the influence of our own personal histories onto our view of others, while at the same time pursuing a better understanding of certain social conditionings we all embrace.

To work with the role of identity in art practice with an alternate approach; how and what makes us see ourselves the way we do, not how others see us. To acknowledge the idea that most human identities are pre-formed and embraced through vehicles of religion, nationalism and materialism and to temporarily pursue the shedding of these pre-packaged identities in an effort to discover something new about one's self and in turn, using that new knowledge to form action based exchanges within the context of the workshop.

Also, this Performance art workshop is centred in the investigation of the relationship between ourselves and the others; the mechanisms of the interaction, and the defined borders of the interaction through the use of current technology.

The workshop seeks to propose a methodology of analysis of the dynamic relationship among our being (the "I") and the human environment that surrounds us (the "Other"), and by this way to help us find a model, in conceptual and media terms, of our interaction with the world.

Jamie McMurry uses autobiographical experiences and objects that represent the "typical" American way of living and its icons in his personal performances. The images and actions he creates are powerful, aggressive but also deeply grounded in knowledge of art theory and art history. His teaching in our workshop concept is very much related to questions like: What does autobiography mean if we want to produce a live action? How are our relations in trying to convince others about a deep personal idea or concept? Jamie has got lots of teaching experience through his work at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, where he taught a Performance Art class. Alexander Del Re is widely known for his performances which deal with modern surveillance cameras. His interest is how a society might produce a kind of "the other", may it be through differences of class, gender or race. Alexander has got a deep interest in feministic theories because he sees the question of gender as one of the first possibilities to divide a whole into "others". In his workshop teaching, the students are confronted with their own ideas how to create "others" between themselves as a group or a defined inside and outside.

After doing a first workshop version in Germany with students coming from the University of Hildesheim, we had the pleasure to be the guests of the PerfoPuerto-group and the Universidad Vina del Mar in Valparaiso in Chile between 27th of November and the 2nd of December. For the first time we were able to create an intensive and long version of our workshop concept. If possible, the three of us try to introduce ourselves through a solo performance in another context before we invite our participants to join our workshop cycles. This time, we were happy that we could do our pieces at the Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de Santiago. During his introducing performance "Liminoide", Alexander Del Re was working with one of our future participants from the upcoming workshop, Macarena Ruiz-Tagle. Alexander was showing different images through a video projection accompanied with a self-created soundtrack. In these videos, the meaning of travelling and meeting "others" was communicated and brought into context with the actions he was doing inside the museums space. Del Re divided the audience into men and woman. A line of salt created a kind of "border" between these two groups. Then he placed the icon of men and woman, which can be found on toilet doors everywhere in the world on both sides of the groups. The people were asked to do different actions, divided into these two groups of "others". As a link between the three of us, Alexander and Macarena brought each a hand of salt that was used in their work to the outside of the museum, where I was waiting to start my work "You can run, but you can't hide". This works follows a series about forgiveness and the weight of guilt that I am working on since some years. I filled salt in the mass of my own weight (around 80 kilos) into a huge sea sack and carried this on my back.

Also I had 15 sharp kitchen knives and black markers. I went to strangers in the audience to ask them to place a personal guilt on one of the knives with the marker and stab it into the sack I was carrying. The metaphorical loss of their burden also helped me to lower the weight through the holes the knives left into the sack and gave way for the salt to drop out. After all the knives were used, I placed them in front of Jamie McMurry, who used the statue in front of the museum as a starting point for his performance "Gold Rush". This work was loaded with many different images that are related to McMurry's personal autobiography and also the more "national" meaning of being a member of the society in the USA. It is nearly impossible to describe a performance in a kind of storyline but especially Jamie's work does not allow this structure of analysis. His aggressive behaviour and self-destructive body actions are accompanied with gentle moments and poetic compositions with strong iconographic relations to both art context and personal past. "Gold Rush" included the beautiful images of a chair on a long plastic rope that was brought into total tension before the artist let it go. The chair "flew" through a path the audience was leaving and was smashed against the statue upon the leftovers of McMurry's performance, including an image of a Native American in a glass frame that Jamie broke with his hand before, some bird feathers, plastic horses and lots of paint. This performance with its final image can be seen as kind of general idea of what was to be happening within the next days during the workshop: A lot of very different characters will work together under a kind of positive, highly concentrated tension until all burst into one last day of presentation...

Day one: Meeting the students. Having a small introducing round with them to know who we are when we will spend the next days with each other in different rooms of the University, trying to organise as much precise images out of one's own experience as possible. The first group exercise is a test in patience and awareness. Or is it a meeting with one's own fear and anxiety? The participants sit together on the floor, back to back with their eyes made blind by some fabric. We ask them to trust us. No harm will happen to them but they may experience things that might make them feel uncomfortable. During a period of over half an hour they listen to the sound of a metronome, without any visual sense. Jamie, Alexander and me let them stay in this limbo for some time. Then we start to confront them with slight touches, slapping sounds, objects that are placed in their hands or even with placing some students a different spots in the room. Our observation is that some of them are very calm and really relaxed but others are quite afraid of any touch, any material or even any small breathe of air that passes by.

A chain is put around 5 students, their fingers slowly move across the steel...they do not fear anything. A lot handclap is destroying the rhythm of the metronome; two students seem to fall together as if they were hit by a bullet. Screams are heard. Feathers are given into the hands of some people; others get the hand of the neighbour into their own hand. An image between carefully meetings and strict deny. A young woman behaves as if she would like to disappear into herself; she is getting smaller and smaller the longer the action takes.

This exercise is an important step into a different area for the next days. With it, we try to remove a kind of relation to the all day life of the participants without being too esoteric or playing too much with the idea of mostly dilettante ideas of meditation. It is more about being open for things that normally slip out of our consciousness: Without being able to see our surrounding we have to try to get into another contact with what is around. Who is sitting next to me? What is this noise I am hearing? Where am I in this space?

Also we believe that this first exercise is a good way to open a discussion between people who mostly do not know each other, so that an important step is made to believe that it is worth the time to be together.

It is impossible to write about all the things that are happening during the next days. I do have some images in my memory that appear from the different tasks in the different cycles. One interesting aspect is that none of us workshop "leaders" will ever be able to see the cycle of the two others. Our concept includes that the students split up during the days and experience the different ways of teaching

with each individual artist in his cycle. Then we exchange the groups so that each group goes through at least three different cycles. I think that this is a really interesting structure because we break the cycles with group exercise where all the students come together to do some tasks as a whole. These group meetings show the different stadiums of development after each of the different cycles and it is always amazing to see the people you met individually as a small group changing after days and developing more and more amazing images.

Day two: On day one each of us was giving a short introduction to our own body of work. The themes we feel that could be interesting in this workshop context are presented in form of videos and images from different performances. For the next exercise the performance series "365 Performances" from Jamie McMurry can be taken as a kind of framework. How is it possible to cross the borders between art and life? What is the meaning of work in the life of a performance artist? How does an individual change when it pushes itself to do a performance piece every day? From the 23rd September 2005 till the 22nd September 2006, Jamie investigated these questions and even more in 365 daily actions. The "365 Performances" carry his general ideas to another aesthetic level: The goal is not to create an intimate atmosphere between his audience and the images he creates daily in this project. It is more about the definition of taking performance seriously as an important, main part of ones own life and also, on a second level, push oneself to create an action every day as if it was a part of a "normal" labour activity.

We were asking the students to bring one piece with them that has a personal value for them. With this object that should try to do an image or an action that lasts not longer then one minute. Of course this has got a more experimental touch then the quite demanding work of "365 Performances" but in a sense there are a lot of links that might appear to the participants if they try to take the relation to their material as serious as possible. One of the most impressing actions was a simple work from Alejandro Leonhardt, the only male participant in our workshop. He placed a harmonica in his mouth and did some push ups until the sound of his heavy breath produced music through the instrument. After tiring seconds he went to the air condition fan and placed the harmonica in front of the machine. The audience could hear a very gentle, calm sound, too. All his action with the object was well developed and the simplicity of the "concert" was working perfect with the given space. It was also interesting that he was placing the chairs in a special way to "arrange" his audience. So for Alejandro the whole situation was belonging to his image and he was aware of each small element that could influence his action.

Other images that stayed in my mind were produced by Cristina Olguin, who used a camera to photograph each of the participants during the period of this one minute. She did not get into direct contact with anyone. The camera replaced her personal contact and it seemed that this machine could help to create an atmosphere of intimacy that would not have been possible for her without this object being placed between her "real" body and the mechanical extension of the photographic eye.

The autobiographical or even traumatic images of Johanna Alvarez who was combing her hair brutally during the sound of a small musical box could give a small sense of the sensibility that is necessary to let these kind of personal experiences lead into a moving image. Sometimes it was not easy or even not possible for the students to talk about their work. And in the opinion of all the three of us, we do not believe in the necessity of explaining a performance. The images and actions have to appear in the medium that is best to reveal their content. If this would be language, it would be perfect to speak but if its action, just do it!

Some students were more experienced then others and we could recognize a kind of performative language already appearing in the one minute performances. Marla Freire, who already performed "outside" of the workshop context, used a very erotic, quite feministic imagery in all of her actions during the workshop. In the one minute work, she was painting her lips in a deep red colour. Then she used a speculum to open her mouth as wide as possible until the edges of her lips nearly started to rip. In this image and in other actions, there was a strong question about gender relation, power and the wounds that might be done to each other in terms of love.

Also the different cycles started on day two. For this article it seems to be much too detailed to speak about our work inside each of our cycles. For myself I can just add that the students in my cycle worked in a very basic body related way and also had the possibility to communicate with each other through different duo or trio-exercises. It is relevant for me to give them an idea what possibilities we carry with us all the time and how easy it can be to develop images with a human body that are just THERE and which only have to be opened, like Boris Nieslony would say.

Day three: Beside working with ones own body in a given space and in a given time, it is also an important task in Performance Art to work in collective ways. To see how we could arrange "groups" or teams within the whole collective of all participants, we tried to see how some people are more similar but also how some people could provoke each other inside a performance. So sometimes it is more useful to put together people who come from very different backgrounds and have very different approaches for images.

Alejandro Leonhardt who performed very structured in his one minute piece was put together with the more music and poesie sonore orientated Pia Sommer and the autobiographical approach of Johanna Alvarez. It was obvious that the musical content was a main issue of this collaboration but led to some destructive and aggressive actions, too. All members made sounds with each others objects but treated the material of the others without much respect: The musical box of Johanna was kicked by Alejandros feet and empty bottles Pia used in her one minute action were thrown against each other from Johanna. An amazing element of anarchy appeared in this short experimental collective. Of course the workshop situation is a huge challenge: People who maybe never met before are forced to produce a piece of art in during a very short duration of production and creative development. But anyway: There were amazing moments in some of the collective meetings: Sofia de Grenade, Marla Freire and Valeria Vidal choose three different positions in the room and created three different very physical actions which came together through the relation in time and space. There was no direct contact between the three of them but their actions communicated to each other through the constant timing and the strong presence of each them. This kind of presence and concentration were two of the main important issues that had to become clear in the awareness of the students if they want to go on and produce own pieces of Performance Art: Even if one is just slowly eating a very personal love letter from the childhood of a co-performer, a second one is "listening" to the silent pages of a dictionary and the third one lets the speculum "wander" through the legs of her own trousers, there can be a strong atmosphere and intensive imagery. All the three worked with questions of language, communication and its destruction and did this in an intensive, highly concentrated way. Other collectives did not "work" but exactly this question of failure and loss is another important thing to hold on to: Performance Art is not an art form of perfect, clean images. It is absolutely fragile. If some "ingredients" do not belong together, the whole "taste" might switch into bitterness. But sometimes this bitterness is a quality that has to be taken. The connection between life and art is maybe nowhere else as clear as in this point: If we try in life or performance there is always the possibility of failure. And the audience is there to see the whole process. We have to stand their nearness and be aware of the "wrong" images that we just gave birth to. Then we have to move on to the next step. No turning back!

Another main thing for the whole experience in Chile was communication: After each long workshop day there was a possibility for the students to spend time with all of us and the great crew of PerfoPuerto, especially Alejandra Herrera, who saved my life in questions of translation and helping me in an amazing way to bridge the language gaps in my cycles. In these long evenings we had the chance to learn about the lifes and backgrounds and all the different autobiographical backgrounds and dreams and problems from these young people. I believe that the aspect of spending time together is one of the most important in a workshop situation, especially if you are forced to be as present as in Performance Art. I guess that through these talks and drinks together there is a deeper connection that is to be made between human beings.

Day 4: More images: Somebody climbing a roof of a toilet. The audience is forced to see only parts of the climbing figure. An arrangement between architecture, urban surrounding, the body and the given space on a campus that is not made for art. Two people crawling above each other by rolling down a long stony staircase. Elements of danger and pain appear in some of the students work. They start to stop playing and force themselves to take a glimpse of a darker side inside themselves and their world. Someone puts a huge stone on his tongue so that it is pressed brutally between a table and the stone: Language does not live here anymore. Nothing to say.

After the last cycle we talk about the next two days. The students get aware that they have to present a piece of work to a real audience on the campus and in different spaces in the University. Each of them has the chance to meet Jamie, Alexander or me for one-to-one-meetings. In these meetings we get a deep inside in their thoughts and their development throughout the last days. We also learn about our mistakes, our communication problems and of course also about things that were well done.

Day 5: Production day. One important thing that was also a main goal of Jamies teaching in Boston: Performance artists need to learn all about their material, all aspects of the production of their piece and where and how to get the material. Maybe this one of the hugest things to learn. How can I let my idea that is existing in my head come to life? How can get an intellectual process into the world of images? Where do I choose the right place for my piece? Where do I want the audience? How about the duration, the colours, the smell, the light...

This is a stressful day for everybody...The tension rises!

Day 6: The final presentation of all the performances of the workshop participants. It was a big surprise and a great honour for the three of us how intensive and strong all the pieces appeared on this last day of the presentation. We were filled with great respect for "our" students which became friends during this intensive time. It is not necessary to analyse the works that happened. We also decided NOT to give them feedback after this last pieces because this was their work and we did not want to appear as "teachers" after they worked so hard. Also: They did not need our feedback anymore.

A hot rooftop in the middle of the campus. A woman in a blue dress walks slowly on the roof. Sometimes she does not move. Then she bends over and places an object on small pins that appear in a regular structure all over the roof. When the observer stand close to the roof, there is only her blue dress and the deep blue sky and her slow movements. Sometimes a drip of sweat falls from her head. It is amazingly hot. This duration piece from Sofia de Grenade goes on for nearly 2 hours. The roof is marked with small plaster balls. S constant installation.

A tent. A woman in one to one meetings with members of the audience. The people fill out a paper. They receive letters that they have to pin onto their close. Maria Jose Salvo Troncoso steps into the field of interactive performance in her work Examen fisico para un colectivo de Personas". We all share the same pain, the same body and the same air. Maria Jose is trying to mark us all as the ONE, there should be no OTHER.

An embryo-like figure, it looks like it escaped straight out of David Lynchs "Eraserhead", crawls over the concrete floor in front of the library. It is Johanna Alvarez, sewed into a white piece of beds cloth. She was using her musical box again, playing a melody of her childhood. She makes her way to a huge bowl of milk; she starts to bleed because she has to pull all of her body with her naked arms. Once she reached the bowl, she drinks the milk like a starving animal. An impressing and painful image. A metaphorical journey, back to what is lying behind her and might still influence her here and now.

Marla Freire uses a very interesting space for her piece "Et create sunt": the men's restroom. Dressed in a black negligee she walks on her knees through the unlikely space, only some members of the audience can see her. With her mouth she picks up 10 red thimbles from the ground and places them on her fingers...blood red hands. In front of the mirror she uses thick red lipstick and undresses until she is bare breasted. The thimbles fall down like small drips of blood. To veil her naked breasts she uses scotch tape and found coat hooks that look like huge nipples. The whole performance is loaded with strong sexual

content. Now her body looks deformed and masked, carrying all the signs of erotic cliché in a chaotic, despaired way... There is a big red apple, hanging in front of a pissoir. Is it human hair that forms the rope on which it is hanging? Freire eats the apple in a manic, theatrical way and smears her body with its leftovers.

Behind the glass windows of the library sits a woman with long red hair on a wooden chair. In front of her are many black and white photographs of human faces. The woman, Valeria Vidal, sits on the chair and holds up her feet. She is not touching the ground. Next to her is a bowl, filled with a white substance. During the next one and half hours, Valeria whitens her hair with the substance from the bowl and stares on the images in front of her. After some time, her body starts to shiver and she cries. The images reflect in the glass of the entrance, mix up the image of her sitting figure with us, the audience. This was an image that was so clear, so pure and so strong. It made several people in the audience cry, too. What I got to know later was, that the people on the prints were "lost" persons that disappeared during the Pinochet Regime. This political context, accompanied with the clear and concentrated presence of the performer made the work to one of the most astonishing performances in the context of our workshop. Nothing to add, nothing to get rid of.

Macarena Ruiz-Tagle walks a path, down from one part of the campus. To her feet there are lots of things attached and her way looks unsafe. She wears glasses that make it nearly impossible to see straight. A walk like on eggs. Unfortunately a knife cuts the strings which are attached to her feet and the flow of the work is broken.

Colour! Green grass, red high heels, a red vacuum cleaner, green eye bandage, yellow trousers and green watering can. Ana Maria Blanchard creates a firework of explosive colours during her work "Cleaning on cleanness". An ironic, humorous and amazingly original work that reminds on the works of Pipilotti Rist, but with sharp edges. The domestic wife, trying to keep everything in its place, cleaning on cleaner grounds and even making them cleaner than clean. The laugh sticks in the throat when she spits the chocolate sweets back into a bowl and tries to let rice grow with the help of a watering can on artificial grass. The madness is here, a feministic statement with a great sense of humour.

Time to play with Pia Sommers piece "Flauta a prueba". A perfect fluxus concert with members of the audience becoming musical instruments in the hands of the performer. The performer herself sticks to the role of a conductor.

Constanza Pina leaves the safe place of the University to use the street, like in some of the exercises already tried as a way to use public space as a special area to develop a work with unexpected things to happen. From the bottom of the street the audience can suggest a sound, like glass rolling on the street. After some time, the performer appears, carrying 4 glass bottles filled with water attached to red strings on her body. The bottles roll over the concrete of the street and are in constant danger of being smashed by the movement of the performer who is barefoot. In front of the building Constanza starts slow dances like the Turkish dervishes do. She spins round and round, careful that no bottle might break. Then she cuts each bottle from her feet and pours the water over her body. A quiet, slow and body concentrated work of silent beauty.

Alejandro Leonhardt gives us then a "Lesson of Silence". To communicate with the audience he only uses a black board. The whole space is build up like a seminar room. He gives us candy and asks us to eat it. Then he puts a heavy piece of concrete, like in his action in a former exercise, onto his tongue and asks us to hurry up to finish the candy. The first one who finishes is the one to release him from his burden. The whole situation is well organised and the image of the stone destroying his ability to speak is an image that reminds of a linguistic examination that was done by the Viennese Performer Peter Weibel in the late 60s. A woman moves slowly, nearly invisible. Her body movements let her cloth fall to the ground and she stands naked in the middle of the city of Valparaiso. She walks over a Zebra crossing to an old leather saddle and puts it around her naked body. "Mental Geographics" is the title of this strange but beautiful and also a little nightmarish image. Together with the atmosphere from the city of Valparaiso with its hundreds

and thousands of wild dogs, this "Cyborg-like" mixture between human and animal stays in my mind for a long time now. I do not know how to decode this image and maybe I should not even try...Just remember the silent, but warm personality of Cristina and this riddle that she gave to the audience at the end of this long presentation day.

The final work from Priscilla Santis with the title "La Ciudad y su Flujo" was inspired by a complicated story from a book that she had researched before. The artist used black wool to shut down the only staircase that led from an upper part of the campus to the lower end. By climbing through the more and more chaotic structures of the black net, Priscilla used a metaphor that dealt with all our binds and connections that we carry through our urban existence. Even if the material was not working in the way that she expected, she created something that could stand for the whole week in Chile: We came together as strangers, slept in a spooky hostel where strangers appeared in the night and nobody else was living in. We took Taxis to the University that drove like it's the last day on earth, tried to find something to eat after long days of work. But what were the most important things, thanks to PerfoPuerto and its warm and wonderful people, were the 12 people we met during "Body, Image and the other." They taught us what their lives were until the time they met us and gave us a small insight in the images they created out of their "nets" they lived in so far. I deeply wish I could see all of them again and spend more time to learn more about their imagery. They are no "others" anymore, they became friends.

Helge Meyer, July 2007