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BREAKING THE FOURTH WALL

Avenues for Empathy through Participation and Interaction

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Abstract:

Theater is used as a lens through which I view the act of role play in participatory and interaction based artworks. I examine the elements of Action – in participatory or performance works—and Set—in immersive installation works – for their effectiveness in creating avenues for empathetic relations in my own work and that of contemporary artists. I distinguish between the overblown spectacle of Peter Brook’s *Deadly Theater* and connect the mission of the Holy Theater to that of my own art practice. Performance, immersive installation, participation and interaction thereby serve to allow the artwork’s participants to engage in role-taking and play to connect with the uninhibited self. I discuss the limiting impact of life experience and social acceptability in enforcing us to become self-guarding and distrustful of our community. My work upholds a reconnection to childhood experience and seeks to break down the barriers for connection that form over our lifetimes. I propose that the key to truly connecting with one another and forming and maintaining community is learn to trust and depend on one another again. My work strives to be a opportunity to break the walls between us and allow freedom of interaction.

Introduction:

Theater as Liberation

"I regard the theatre as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being."

— *Oscar Wilde*

Each of us is built of layers. Identity is a collection of masks that are worn, tried on, and cast off. A façade is not always a lie. Often, a façade is a protection of sorts; a barrier that holds off things we don't trust others with. We protect our soft underbellies every day. The more we get hurt the harder it becomes to see what's underneath. The more vulnerable the interior the harder or more complicated the shell. For some, that shell becomes hard, unbreakable and severe. My body of work has saved me from that.

I believe that we exist to connect to one another. The hazard of that is that once people are allowed in closely, they can hurt us deeply. I offer my work to the public through a lens of initial frivolity. Presenting my work in a less serious light invites people in; it reduces the initial stakes of the encounter. The lightness attracts, but my true intent is to establish a meaningful interaction between people. I invite an audience to play a role in my pieces. Objects, environments and costumes capture moments and feelings from my life and present them to others for interpretation. I am continually examining how to connect to people, how to feel understood and what it means to me to build a community. My work encourages me to break down my own walls, while I create situations that allow participants to do the same. I aim to build communal understanding, and for me, that starts with feeling accepted and

understood. Allowing the audience to take a role in the work is my invitation to the public to my vulnerable private space. My practice is a means of continually disarming myself.

Abstracting my difficult emotions and experiences into a participatory form allows me welcome others into understanding me by stepping into my shoes. This filtering allows me to discern what is important from my life and gives me the courage to share it- my art allows me to stay open.

Life has been filled with adages about theater for ages. If we are all just acting though, the question begs: what is the truth? In Peter Brook's book *Empty Space*, he examines what he believes to be the four meanings of theater. There is a kind of theater, he states, that gives performance a bad reputation; he calls it "Deadly" (Brook 8). When theater becomes Deadly it seems disingenuous, over the top, and unconvincing. It has all the sparkles and exuberance of a show but none of the heart. Spectacle plays an important role in theater, but when nothing deeper can be found, it simply rings as a trick or a lie. This is the fine line where the art of performing teeters. A good performer, in the same hand as a good artist, knows that a that acting is not a lie. It's an opportunity to tell a new truth. It is a chance to reach an untapped part of yourself – something you didn't know you were. Brook refers to this as the Holy Theater; the theater where the "invisible can appear (and) has a deep hold on our thoughts" (Brook 49). This is where the theater becomes art. It reaches and illuminates something real. The spectacle becomes a glimpse into something profound that life is never capable of composing so beautifully. Stepping into a role or assuming a new position is a kind of façade that isn't a lie; it is a process of recognizing a new truth. Acting is simply channeling a different part of ourselves to understand someone else.

I aim to align my work with the Holy Theater. I cast light on a stage that I build and provide a loose script for participants to follow. My work uses humor, levity, color and spirit to draw people into a meaning and depth of life that can connect them. I have explored the media of costuming, installation and participatory works to illuminate the dark corners in myself and present them as something to be shared.

Act I:

Play on a Play

“Whenever children say, “Let’s pretend” A new landscape of possibilities for learning is revealed. When children pretend, they try on new feelings, roles and ideas. They stretch their minds along with their imaginations.”

-Curtis & Carter

Interaction and Participation on the part of the audience is the most direct form of an artist reaching people. Artworks that rely on or include others for activation or completion

insist on breaking the fourth wall. Viewers become actors with an incomplete script looking to illuminate the meaning for themselves. In my work, I use this tactic to comment on how the individual relates to and effects the group. Keetra Dean Dixon has accomplished several works commenting on the power and necessity of interdependence in group action. In her 2012 piece, *Swing Hall, Swing All*, (Figure 1)

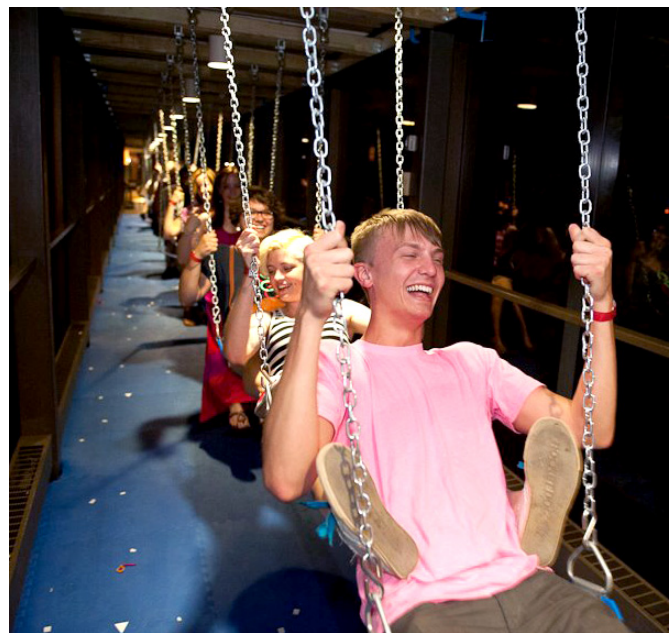


Figure 1. Figure 1. Keetra Dean Dixon, *Swing Hall, Swing All*, Minneapolis College of Art and Design, 2012, Installation

Dean Dixon transforms the solitary sensation of swinging into a group action. For the participant to have a satisfactory full swing, everyone involved in the installation must move in sync. The consequences of going rogue involve collisions between individuals and a domino effect on the entire populace. The sense of glee evoked by the successful completion of the task results in a group success of what essentially is an absurd, pleasure seeking activity. The feeling of being involved, however is one of triumph, joy and release. The participants are placed into a moment subtly intimate; they rely on bodily touch and connection for that perfect swing. Participants are illuminating the experience of cooperation and group achievement for themselves, innocently invited by the easy pleasure of swinging.

The artist engineering and experience that encourages audience participation takes careful composition. To construct a work that will ultimately illuminate a deeper lesson or truth; you must play on their desires. It's not so much deception or manipulation, rather, it's an intimate examination of what entices a person on a gut level. There is an automatic response of action when the public is prompted with an activity they are familiar with. The comfort of innocent and familiar activities promise the childlike freedom of Play. Play Theory suggests that everything in animate nature possesses more energy than is required to sustain life (Rau 299). This abundant energy can be channeled into many different things, but the most effective and exploratory is the act of play. Play is distinct from work in the freedom of both body and mind (300). The activity initially seems, simple and comfortable, the audience is challenged with the discovery of finding out what the catch is. The action can be as uncomplicated and delightful as swinging or blowing up a balloon.

Much like my counterparts working in play, I have found myself repeatedly drawn to the balloon as an object of action. In *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*, (Figure 2) I examine



Figure 2. Grace Zajdel, *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*, 2018, Participatory Performance

the capture and release of worries using the balloon as vessel to symbolize levity.

Dale Carnegie's 1940's self-help book (namesake for the piece) was meticulously skimmed for every mention

of worry, pain, anxiety stress and sadness. Those words

were then manually cut out and collected in 75 clear balloons. Carnegie's suggestions are overly formulaic and outdated. He suggests an air of ease in removing worry from one's life; when worry is cut out all that will remain is tranquility. The remainder of the book serves to act as a counterweight, speaking to the delicate balance of holding worries at bay. The remaining content of the book holds the worries down and the bundle is left floating in space. I invite a group of participants to cut the strings of the balloons and release the worries together, fulfilling the success of the novel. The activity illuminated both an incomplete simplicity in Carnegie's guidance and an actual release of worry in the activity composed. Each participant is given a moment of personal release in the cut and ascension of their balloon, and as a group we released each other.

Play acts as a release, but social standards prevent free play. Everyday acceptability in instructions, competition and exploration opens people up for a chance to experience play. In my recent work, *UnBlocked* (Figure 3), I combine instruction with absurdity to bring down the social standards that obstruct play. The Unblocks are elevated, oversized building blocks



Figure 3. Grace Zajdel, *UnBlocked*, 2019, Interactive Sculpture

fabricated in soft sculpture. An abundance of these blocks is collected in a space and presented for the participants to build together. Five different instructions – Gather, Settle, Rest, Ascend and Connect – provide both concrete instructions and a suggestion of how participants

can transcend and better connect to one another. The innocuousness of the medium of soft sculpture and the cotton material incites people; unable to resist the tactile and emotional draw in the nostalgia of the object. I want to encourage the breakdown of social barriers and participants reaching the purity of interaction in their inner child. Groups joined together to construct the objects I suggested and assemblages only they could have thought of, including igloos and beds. Participants not only responded to the piece by playing in pairs and groups but also worked individually. The freedom of solo play allowed a therapeutic channeling of excess energy into an imaginative purpose. Single people spent time actively engaged in building detailed labyrinths and the tallest possible towers.

The potential to activate art, much like the potential in sharing one's inner secrets, can seem like a high stakes interaction. A lot can go wrong and no one is exactly sure how to make sure things go right. There is a pressure and a power in agency. A participant must choose to accept their own role in the collective goal. Making the choice to participate is accepting the possibility of looking like a fool. An active participant must be open to being wrong and trust their community to help carry the responsibility of a task. Unfortunately, life experience teaches us, as we grow, put up more barriers. Therein lies the beauty and power of the naïve, childlike, uninhibited state. There is a purity of intent that is genuine. To allow ourselves to be jaded is allowing opportunities for connection to pass us by.

Act II:

Set and Spectacle

"Life is a theatre set in which there are but few practicable entrances."

– Victor Hugo

During the rise of the Futurist movement, performance art rose in prominence and respect as an "art for all" (Goldberg 370). The Futurists believed that performance was a potential for a public examination of deep emotional dilemmas. Performing is received by the community as an event that draws people in for its rarity, or rather oddity, in society. No performance is the same twice; the experience of being involved in it is magnetic. There is an element of spectacle in art that is performed. When the public is addressed in any form of art, there is a focus on interaction with society. The public becomes an activating factor in completing the comment the work is attempting to make, and is required for the work to

complete itself. The public – the participants – need to be attracted in. When successfully designed, a community can be drawn into a meaningful, personally based experience made public.

Artist Rosemary Meyer provides a precedent for a public, performance-based sculptor who deftly utilizes the element of rarity and awe to involve the public. In her series of weather balloon works, entitled *Some Days in April* (Figure 4), Meyer creates a personal, private monument to important people and moments

that occurred in her life during the month of April. Although the piece has no captive audience in mind, Meyer's piece straddles a line between personal and public. Meyer describes *Some Days in April* herself as a “temporary monument” (Meyer 14). The description of a



Figure 4. Rosemary Meyer, *Some Days in April*, 1978, Multimedia Installation

sculptural installation a monument inherently implies a public reception or notification, meaning, in short, it has a message that is intended to be publicly received. In the frame of personal monuments, public sculptural interventions or installations serve as a space that holds specific personal meaning to the artist and provides a filtered, abstracted experience for the public recipient. The very act of sharing a personal meaning in a broadly received public space is a rarity beyond the beautiful materiality of the artwork itself. The public spectacle acts as a communicated set in which the viewer can receive a message of personal narrative.

Spatial artworks act as an open line of communication; a place where the viewer can assume the role of the maker and enter his or her mental space. The projection of mental and emotional space into shared physical space is

communicated in Karyn Olivier's spatial and object works. In *It's Not Over Till It's Over* (Fig. 5) Olivier utilizes a recognizable and nostalgic form of a carousel. The vacant content of the interior, however, poignantly communicates an absence of the merriment involved in the

activity. On the deserted platform is a single chair where only one can sit as the carousel

spins slowly and dismally. The ride is decidedly unamusing and rather bleak in the context of the height of blissful childlike one immediately associates with the space. The piece is a public space reserved for only one to receive Olivier's psychological and emotionally charged message. Olivier makes an effective use of childhood references to open her participants to being involved and receiving her work.

In my own work, I make frequent use of a similar childlike sense of spectacle in the materiality and installation. A recent immersive installation entitled *Are We Having Fun Yet?* (Figure 6) explores the use of spectacle and awe to attract participants to an entirely un-fun experience. A white picket fence pens in a pool of multicolored balloons with a wooden rope swing hovering in the middle. Participants are asked to form a single file line and take off their shoes. Then, one at a time, I, as the attendant, place slippers covered in needles on their feet.



Figure 5. Karyn Olivier, *It's Not Over Till It's Over*, 2004, Multimedia Installation

In effect, this makes the sweet, simple, irresistible act of swinging decidedly not fun. The echoing, shotgun blast noises of the balloons popping shock the participant and the audience repeatedly. My emotional and psychological space is projected into space as I allow my participants to quite literally step into my shoes. There is an implicit responsibility for the comfort of the rest of the community in the room; the longer you swing the more discomfort is on everyone involved. The more the swinger tries to enjoy themselves, the more consequences are gathered, and the environment deteriorates. There is only so much fun to be had in an environment that never had any to give in the first place.



Act III:

On Resilience

“One of the greatest barriers to connection is the cultural importance we place on ‘going it alone.’ Somehow, we’ve come to equate success with not needing anyone. Many of us are willing to extend a helping hand, but we’re very reluctant to reach out for help when we need it ourselves. It’s as if we’ve divided the world into ‘those who offer help’ and ‘those who need help.’ The truth is that we are both.”

— Brené Brown

We balance pain every day. It takes time and experience to figure out what we can carry and what we need to let go of. The challenge lies in the letting go. Yes, we exist to connect to one another, but, often, that pain we have not let go of will block us. Coping takes many forms and we must respect how others have adapted to carry their own demons. I believe there is something significant in carrying others pain, and allowing your own pain to be carried. Support is what forms a community, understanding and acceptance is at the core of what we need to emotionally flourish. We need to learn to be persistently vulnerable, to resurrect a trust in people most of us lost long ago. I am learning to share what I need to through my work. I push through a terror of allowing a crack to be open in my emotional life every time I share a piece. I smooth over my pain with humor, color and softness, but I refuse to let the crack close. I force it wider with each new work. Open more, share more, learn more; and never stop trying to understand.

Image List

Figure 1. Keetra Dean Dixon, *Swing Hall, Swing All*, Minneapolis College of Art and Design, 2012, Installation

Figure 2. Grace Zajdel, *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*, 2018, Participatory Performance

Figure 3. Grace Zajdel, *UnBlocked*, 2019, Interactive Sculpture

Figure 4. Rosemary Meyer, *Some Days in April*, 1978, Multimedia Installation

Figure 5. Karyn Olivier, *It's Not Over Till It's Over*, 2004, Multimedia Installation

Figure 6. Grace Zajdel, *Are We Having Fun Yet?*, 2019, Multimedia Installation

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