

**Struck Stupid:  
21<sup>st</sup> Century Theatrical Performance and the Limits of a  
Discourse**

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to Michael McConnell, my brother the artist. He said to me one day, when we were younger than we are now, “You know, the word ‘mother’ means a completely different thing to every single person in the world,” and forever changed the way I think.

## Abstract

This dissertation is a critically creative response to contemporary U.S. devised theatrical performance and the relationships it instantiates between artists and spectators, and artists and critics. In order to tease out the complexities of these relationships, I theorize stupidity as an integral element in the creation of devised performances, their reception by spectators, and the critical methods best used to engage with them. I develop the concept of stupidity seriously and paradoxically as thought that cannot be thought. Stupid thinking is thought that interrupts discursive structures such as conscious thought that is shaped like language and is grounded in our storehouses of knowledge. Stupidity sustains the affective possibilities of non-knowledge that would otherwise be foreclosed by the drive for knowledge production. I attempt to answer the questions: how do I write *of* devised performances rather than *about* them? How do I attend to the embodied complexity of devised performances as I transmogrify them into scholarly discourse? To answer these questions I performatively write alongside devised theatrical performances and deploy methods that take their cue from ethnographic practices. My writing also takes cues from the work of the artists I engage: Ann Liv Young (New York), Every House Has A Door (Chicago), and SuperGroup (Minneapolis). Together my chapters argue that by relying on stupid tactics—such as chance, incompetence, and obscenity—in their own creative processes these artists all instigate a reconfiguration of the relationship between artwork and viewer, and thereby a simultaneous reconfiguration of the

relationship between spectators and their own presumed-to-be-stable subject positions.

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## **Chapter One: An Introduction**

*To write is to collude, but the issue is how.*

--John Law from "And if the global were small and noncoherent? Method, complexity, and the baroque"

How do I collude with theatrical performance practice as a theatre scholar? Specifically, how do I write about contemporary experimental theatrical performances in all of their performed noncoherent complexity? How do I write about devised theatrical performances that are fragmented and fractured, non-narrative, bricolaged, and have little concern—if any at all—with making meaning, drawing conclusions, answering questions, or communicating a clear message? If they are not telling stories, or transmitting meaning from performance to spectator, then what is it that these contemporary theatrical performances perform? Why are they performed at all? How do I transmogrify the complex live and bodily processes happening in these theatrical performances into written text that in some way honors that complexity without streamlining and over-simplifying those complexities in the name of semantic intelligibility? If I acknowledge that any act of criticism is an act of collusion where the critic acts in relation to that which they critique, then how do I enact this relationship in such a way that opens up further possibilities through my writing rather than foreclosing those possibilities and limiting them in syntax? To write stupidly is the answer that I am putting forth in this project that engages the question of how to collude with contemporary theatrical performance. In this project I paradoxically imagine

stupidity as a kind of thought that cannot be thought. Stupidity is thought in process, always already on the move, and that sustains creative moments of encounter—encounters between artists working together to devise theatrical performance and encounters between devised theatrical performances and spectators.

Before I get to the performances that I focus on throughout this project, I want to set the scene with a personal narrative that recounts the instance I first became self-reflexively and critically aware of my stupor in relation to a theatrical performance. In September of 2006, I was struck stupid at a performance by Dorky Park. Dorky Park is an international performance collective based in Berlin, Germany. Since 2003 Dorky Park has been led by artistic director/choreographer Constanza Macras and dramaturg Carmen Mehnert. The performance of *Back to the Present* shown at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis was one of only two appearances by the Berlin-based collective in the United States that year. *Back to the Present* was like an ill-behaved and unruly child who refused to sit still. *Back to the Present* would not settle easily into any predetermined generic category of theatrical performance. It was a performance with an identity crisis on multiple levels. *Back to the Present* was part theatre, part rock concert, part contemporary dance, part (auto?)biographical solo performance, part video, part reality TV parody, and all fragmentary, all non-narrative, all non-linear, and ultimately resistant to any easy process of critical classification or descriptive totality. Where could I begin to describe this

beautiful, and sprawling mess of a show? How could I say anything about it? As I watched *Back to the Present* it was as if my mind was speaking and then stammered, or suddenly got stuck in a stutter. The word that would come next was there on the tip of my tongue, but unable to finally be articulated. The words remained just out of reach and caused a discomforting feeling of an over-extended, irresolvable mental reaching. It was as if the familiar had suddenly become so very, very strange, and I had become so very, very stupid.

As I watched it, the fragmented, non-narrative, messy quality of *Back to the Present* made it impossible for me to get mentally ahead of this stupefying performance by rationalizing possible outcomes. Additionally, because each new performance fragment seemed disconnected from that which had come before it I was unable to recall what had just happened on stage moments ago. The performance demanded that I become incredibly present in the theatre space. Within such unfamiliar territory my mind's ability to draw conclusions by associating new input with its storehouse of accumulated knowledge was thwarted. I did not *know* what I was seeing, and yet I was deeply *affected* by the performance. I did not *understand* the performance, and yet I was caught up in a *process* of understanding it. The evidence of this highly affective quality was materially presented through my bodily reaction. Throughout the performance my stomach hurt from laughing, tears rolled down my cheeks from crying, and yet I could not say that I was feeling happy or sad. I did not understand what I was feeling at all, and yet something was taking its course between the performance

and myself all the same. The theatrical performance instilled a bodily empathy as I stupidly felt knocked off balance sitting physically grounded in my chair. Where was I? What was I watching? Who was the I that was watching the what where when? My sense of subjective selfhood was destabilized in such a way that there was no ground for my thoughts to gain purchase.

*Back to the Present* appeared to resist knowledge formations both internally—which indicated something about its mode of production—and externally—evidenced through its reception by spectators. Within the labyrinthine structure that shaped it, it was constantly disrupting itself. There was a sense watching it that I was always being lead down a dead-end, only to find the next wrong turn leading me deeper and further along an outwardly spiraling movement of thought. The various fragmented sequences appeared in some ways complete unto themselves, but when placed next to each other they tripped up any logic that seemed to be generated within and amongst them. This tripping-up of internal logic was made most obviously apparent throughout the performance by a recurring gesture of the performers literally tripping over both visible and invisible obstacles, and crashing to the floor. *Back to the Present* began with Yeri Anarika Vargas Sanchez dancing a solo dance center stage. Like most of the bodily movements in the piece, she moved with a frenetic de-centered athleticism—throwing her body through space, and often times awkwardly at the floor. Unlike most of the piece, this was one of the few moments where there was only one action being performed at a time, and the

visual focus wasn't split. Sanchez danced for a bit with no sound other than her own labored breathing, and the white noise of the theatre. Then, an up-tempo classical music piece began to play as Nir De-Volff entered through one of the doorways in the upstage platform-set. The two danced a duet, he lifted her around his body, and then as the music built to a climax the rest of the ensemble, dressed in costumes that were made to resemble street clothes, entered from various doors on the platform-set.

At this point, with the entrance of the entire company, several things started to happen all at once. A man crashed cymbals. A woman wearing a handkerchief as a bonnet rode a stuffed toy cow on the platform-set. Small panels on wheels that stood about three feet wide by six feet tall were rolled through the performance space. The entire ensemble then performed a series of synchronized choreographed movements that included holding their hands up in the air and banging their heads as if at a rock concert. The stuffed cow was kicked in the air, and one of the men fell to the ground. Next, the entire cast, except one woman, formed a clump of bodies stage right. The woman who was not part of the clump went off to make a call on a cell phone, rolled on the floor, and kicked off her boots. As she spoke on the cell phone, another woman detached from the clump, and threw her body at the floor repeatedly. As if responding to the action of the woman on the cell phone, the rest of the ensemble robotically said in unison, "Please hold the line" and then they sang in unison a short melody, "Just a little bit more love. Just a little bit more passion.

This is how it should begin. Skin on skin.” The woman on the cell phone continued her conversation, and she talked about the rock band The Doors and their song “The End”. The ensemble dissolved their clump at stage right and began to mill around the entire playing space. Jill Emerson, who had most recently been throwing her body on the floor, began to act as if she were recording an audition tape for some imagined reality show like MTV’s *The Real World*. Maike Möller, concurrent with Emerson’s imaginary reality TV audition, dragged a gaudy floral patterned futon mattress out from under the platform-set that she then jumped on, and smashed a stuffed animal against it repeatedly. The cell phone call, the stuffed animal smashing, and the imaginary reality show audition all were taking place simultaneously. The performance would continue for another two hours in this confused and confusing manner. Where was I to look? How could I take this entire visual and aural stimulus in at one and the same time? I felt like no matter where I looked I would be missing something.

The frenetic performance that was built out of interruptions was also interrupting my ability to survey it visually and form a stable spectatorial relationship to it. I had to constantly shift focus and accept that I would not be able to see it as a totality. I could not know it as a whole, and each perceptual shift that resulted from its disruptive, spastic composition instantiated a constant reengagement with the performance for me as a spectator.

*Back to the Present* is not unique amongst theatrical performances in these stupefying aspects. There is a long history of theatrical performances that

present similar difficulties of interpretation and understanding for scholars and non-scholar spectators alike. *Back to the Present*, however, became a contemporary point of contact and ricochet for me with this kind of theatrical performance that poses so many challenges to spectators and critics. I collided with *Back to the Present* and then was launched along a line of flight into the field of theatrical performance on a search for performances that shared similar stupid qualities—both internally in their composition and externally through their relationship to spectators. I imagined that when I encountered them I would need to be ready to approach thinking about them not in a new way, but perhaps in a different way. Once I had given up the desire and drive to know them I had to ask the question: how would I critically engage with them? “Stupidly” seemed to be the obvious answer to that question, but what would that mean and how would I do it? Could stupidity be an answer to a research question? Could stupidity be an answer to any question at all? To discover if it could, and what that might mean, I embarked on a search in my home of the Midwestern United States for theatrical performances that shared similar stupor-inducing qualities as *Back to the Present*. I wanted to find the familiar in the stupidly strange and the strange in the stupidly familiar.

As my primary concern was with writing that engages theatrical performances, in some ways the performance sites I chose could be any theatrical performances. I chose to focus on contemporary devised theatre, however, because of the emphasis its practitioners place on process, and the

investment in prolonging the closure of the creative process into a product that its practitioners espouse. Once the decision was made to place my focus on this kind of performance, the very practical restraints of accessibility impacted my selection of sites. I engaged with performances that I had access to, were devised, and invested in stupidity in their own creative tactics.

What this project contributes to the field of theatrical performance discourse is a narrowly focused recent history of and creative critical response to three contemporary U.S. performance artists/groups, and their stupidly complex devised theatrical performance works all performed within one year of each other: *Sherry Vs. P.S.1* by Ann Liv Young (Feb. 2010, New York), *Let us think of these things always. Let us speak of them never.* by Every House Has A Door (Feb. 2011 Chicago), and *Shouldwetitleitnoworwait* by SuperGroup (Feb. 2010 Minneapolis). When these performances are considered together they offer a snapshot of creative practices circulating in the contemporary U.S. theatrical performance scene at the start of the second decade of the new millennium. A snapshot doesn't claim to offer a panoramic view. That is, the artists whose works I consider in this stupid project are all genealogically related to the tradition of avant-garde performance practices with their roots in Europe and further development in the mid-twentieth century U.S. There are many other historical and contemporary performance practices that this narrow snapshot doesn't bring into focus. These excluded practices occur in the aesthetic register in theatrical spaces where artists participate in creative genealogies not directly linked to the

historical European avant-garde (and often in resistance to it), but also in the register of everyday life where performance is not bounded by aesthetic formal conventions—such as a visit to a fast food restaurant, or the bureaucratic Kafkaesque stupidity of the training I underwent to work for the 2010 U.S. Census.

In addition to their genealogical, geographical and temporal similarities, Ann Liv Young, *Every House Has a Door*, and SuperGroup have captured my critical attention because they do share in common a commitment to placing stupidity as a central feature of their devising performance practices. For me to suss out stupidity in creative practices I have engaged with it where it has been indulged and placed center stage as a primary factor in artistic creation, rather than a subsidiary factor. What I have come to discover is that by relying on stupidity in their own processes these artists all challenge the certainties maintained by spectators who attend their performances. This challenge manifests in the content of the performances, but also through formal processes that shape them, such as: foregoing a reliance on narrative, drawing on media culture to comment on and destabilize theatrical convention, and mixing a broad range of performance genres from conventional dance to performance art. While they each share these aspects in common, each takes their own idiosyncratic stupid approach to them. Considering these three similar sets of performance practices together reveals multiple ways that stupidity can manifest in theatrical performance creation and through the relationship instantiated between performing artists and spectators.

Devising as a creative practice is as difficult to define, as I will demonstrate momentarily, as stupidity is to define as a theoretical concept. The authors of *Making a Performance: Devising Histories and Contemporary Practices* note this difficulty when they suggest that, “the appeal of devising performance for practitioners lies in its pliability and porousness. The invented tradition of devised performance has, of course, no single aesthetic or ideological objective; its strategies and methods are indebted to a wide range of cultural fields including political and community theatres, physical theatre, performance and live art” (4). Within the narrow sampling of devised work I concentrate on in this project, by choosing the sites I have I still am able to engage with three incredibly varied approaches to devising as a means of theatrical production. The core generative relationship at work within Ann Liv Young’s *Sherry Vs. P.S. 1* is self-contained until the moment she appears in front of the audience. She is a solo performer who solely makes creative decisions internally in the composition of the work, and then executes them externally and improvisationally with her interactions with the spectators. *Every House Has A Door* maintains a somewhat conventional theatrical relationship with Lin Hixson serving as a director who prompts the performers to respond to her, and for her to continually respond to them in a reciprocal relationship of disruption. Unlike conventional theatrical practice, however, there is not a pre-existing script that Hixson is interpreting and making choices about. The performance is discovered as it is made between directors and performers responding to one another. *SuperGroup* works as a

leaderless team. The relationship that structures their internal mode of production is one of collaboration with none of the four of them having more say than any of the others. While all of these theatrical devisors do share similarities, they have been selected because they each enact a different internally organized mode of production that allows different possibilities for engaging with the stupidity of devising.

Another aim of this project is to produce a working and fluid conceptualization of stupidity evidenced through creative processes and the relationship between performing and spectating bodies. In the conventional Cartesian formulation of subjectivity the body is another object that is known by the subject that thinks it. In her analysis of contemporary performance art, *What the Body Cost: Desire, History and Performance*, art historian Jane Blocker acknowledges the difficulty in dislodging this Cartesian formula, and indicates that even if we understand our knowledge of the world as embodied and sensual we still presume a subjective “I” and a body that is an “it” as the presumed object of that “I” (7). Blocker goes on to complicate this by suggesting, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, that no matter these presumptions the “I” never quite belongs to the body and the body never quite belongs to the “I” and our bodies become “a theater of romantic conflict wherein is staged a sense of impossibility, of ‘never knowing’” (7). As this romantic conflict of never-knowing plays out perpetually, our Cartesian subjects are never quite secure in our bodies—not knowing where “I” end and my body begins, or my body ends and “I” begin. Examining bodily

performance practices becomes a leverage point to further destabilize notions of the Cartesian subject anchored in its self-validating knowledge of itself. I conceive stupidity as a process that paradoxically opens latent epistemological and ontological possibilities in everyday life through impossible aesthetic encounters of never knowing between spectating and performing bodies. These possibilities are not judged here as negative or positive, nor are they predictable in any way. I will not be able to trace all of the shapes that the possibilities take in the everyday once opened by encountering these stupid theatrical performances. I will only hope to demonstrate that stupidity plays a vital role in opening them.

The evidence of generating possibilities becomes most immediately palpable in the forms that the case-study chapters following this introduction take. As one spectator of these performances, they have opened for me possibilities for alternative forms of critical engagement with contemporary performance work. In this way, this project is also an intervention into the field of theatrical performance discourse and the dominant methods practiced within it. It is an intervention that not only offers a critique, but also imagines and experiments with other possible models for doing theatrical performance scholarship grounded in stupid performance as a methodological component. I have endeavored to make my writing another productive site of encounter rather than a calcified catalog of knowledge. My writing documents my encounters, engagements and collusions with the performance practices of Ann Liv Young, *Every House Has a*

Door, and SuperGroup rather than presuming to be able to objectively document some essence of the performances themselves. The models I experiment with vary in their level of efficacy, and of course are open to further critique. I intend to not only theorize stupidity or show how it is operating in the theatrical performances that are my research sites, but by following their lead I also intend to *do stupidity* in my writing of them. I offer these methodological experiments that I have devised as models to be further enacted and experimented with, or discarded altogether. As with the performances I emulate, I expose myself to failure in a way that intends to open processes of thought in unpredictable and under-determined ways.

The burden of critiquing conventional scholarly practices and the conceptual work that provides my basis for attempting alternatives to dominant scholarly methods is placed almost completely on this introductory chapter. This means that this dissertation is front-loaded, and this long introduction is overloaded with argumentation, conceptualization, and historical contextualization. The case-study chapters that follow this introduction are freed of this discursive weight, and will not follow conventional argumentative procedures. Similarly to the performances they emulate and engage, the case-study chapters are then able to move nimbly through, and play with other stupor-inducing forms and possibilities. Also similar to the performances they borrow from, they will pose difficulties to the spectators—or here the readers—who engage them. Therefore, the case-study chapters that make up the latter portions of this dissertation are

entirely dependent upon the conceptual, argumentative, and historical groundwork that constitutes the remainder of this introduction. An idea may be introduced here and not mentioned again, but its impact will ripple throughout the chapters that follow like the concentric circles that form around a stone's impact in a pool of water.

### **Getting to Know Stupidity**

While there is no single cohesive theoretical body of literature on stupidity, isolated scholars in diverse disciplines are producing concepts directly or indirectly related to stupidity in their rethinking of critical models and methods. I will engage these concepts and methods drawn from my home disciplines of theatre and performance studies, and also related fields such as art history, literary criticism, sociology, anthropology, psychoanalysis, and philosophy. Drawing on this array of concepts, this introduction is a kind of rehearsal that then is performed in the case-study chapters that follow it as each chapter enacts its own idiosyncratic manifestation of stupidity that takes formal cues from the performance practices of Ann Liv Young, *Every House Has a Door*, and SuperGroup.

The goal of this introductory attempt at defining stupidity is not to fix it in a gesture of frozen identity, but to present it in a fluid complexity as a concept that ebbs, flows, and leaks throughout this entire text; stupidity is ultimately resistant to any hard and fast definitions. In *The Encyclopaedia of Stupidity* (sic) Matthijs

Van Boxsel writes, “There is a danger that we create stupidity by defining it, while stupidity lies in the difference. Stupidity is always somewhere else. Once defined and named, it loses its baffling quality. Stupidity recognized is an additional bit of wisdom. All we can do is put up road signs pointing to dangerous locations” (27). Similarly, cultural theorist and literary critic Avital Ronell indicates in *Stupidity* that, “it (stupidity) switches and regroupes, turns around and even fascinates” (3). Ronell goes on to write that, “All we know at this juncture is that stupidity does not allow itself to be opposed to knowledge in any simple way, nor is it the other of thought” (5). *Stupidity* is Ronell’s 2002 book-length exploration of stupidity as a complex literary trope in western discourse that she suggests is formative to the process of generating literature and writing itself. Ronell’s conceptualizing of stupidity is always a process, or possibly multiple processes. She never depicts it as only one thing. She observes that it is incomplete and can arrive at many destinations. Some of these destinations are clever and creative like poetry written by the likes of Rilke, and some of them are the dark monstrosities of World War II. In this way Ronell complicates her conceptualization of stupidity that she largely argues has positive creative outcomes by suggesting it also opens possibilities with negative, oppressive, or violent outcomes.

Ronell produces a concept of stupidity that she suggests is primary to our subjective experience of the world through texts written by canonical authors of western literature, such as Flaubert, and Dostoevsky. She suggests that stupidity

is so primary to writing practices that, citing Roland Barthes, it arrives on the scene prior to our individual subject formations (11). In this way the experience of feeling stupid marks a moment-before that is crucial to the creative act of writing that is always both an act of the writer writing a text, and simultaneously writing the subjective self who writes the text. The text that is written can be thought of as knowledge produced that produces a knowledge of a subjective self. In the moment-before of stupidity prior to the production of these knowledges, both the thinking that will take shape as writing and the stabilized subject that appears through the writing are in flux. As Ronell reports, this causes Barthes great anxiety about his status as a subject who writes (11). This flux-space of uncertainty in the stupid moment-before of creative practices that question subjectivities will be my focus throughout this project that is itself taking shape in writing. The artists' theatrical performance work I'm considering here does not begin with staging completed written texts such as plays, sketches or skits. The "scripts" of their performances are devised through a variety of bodily practices. These practices that simultaneously form the subjects that create them are not limited to the solo practice of writing or reading words on a page. The writing literally happens collectively on their feet through improvisation structures, games, and interactions with spectators. In the work of Ann Liv Young, *Every House Has a Door*, and SuperGroup the writing that writes the subject into knowledge of itself happens through collaborative encounters performed with others. It includes the work of theatrical performers as well as spectators

encountering theatrical performances that refuse to offer a conventional viewing, and demand an active engagement on the part of the audience.

If creative practices take shape by passing through a stupid moment- before that also shapes the subject that practices them, then the encounter between spectators and theatrical performers is a place where subjectivities on the move can come into relation, collaborate with and destabilize one another. In *Knowing Nothing, Staying Stupid: Elements for a Psychoanalytic Epistemology* the Lacanians Dany Nobus and Malcolm Quinn explore another practice where subjectivities on the move come into contact with each other. Nobus and Quinn attempt to reinvigorate Lacanian psychoanalysis through an emphasis on clinical practice. Nobus and Quinn take issue with Ronell's notion of stupidity. For Nobus and Quinn, Ronell's stupidity is too clever (5). They argue that stupidity is not marked by an absent relationship to knowledge, but is a kind of knowing that is no longer relational to any discursive structures (5). For Nobus and Quinn stupidity "is a modality of knowledge which evacuates the inter-subjective relations that structure the epistemic field" and for this reason, "psychoanalysis does not make someone stupid, but allows someone to stay stupid, inasmuch as it allows one to experience and acknowledge the non-relational character of stupidity again, and again" (5). The talking cure that takes place between analyst and analysand does not confirm or validate the subjectivity of the analysand through discourse. The talking instead repeatedly acknowledges and enacts the displacement between experience and language, or experience and conscious

thought that is structured like a language. Therefore Nobus and Quinn argue that there is no moment-before that somehow congeals into an arrival of the certainty of subjective knowing in written, spoken, or thought language. For Nobus and Quinn there is only the ever-spiraling experience of existence that stupidly disrupts the relational quality of any discursive structure. The inability to speak a subjective self calls such a stable subject position into question. The implied stakes of their argument is that there is something therapeutic and truth affirming about acknowledging stupidity. Nobus and Quinn suggest that in psychoanalytic terms the analysand cannot ever really know themselves and the norm is to be stupid. Therefore, all of the knowledge that analysands learn about the world and the objects that constitute it is suspect because it is grounded in an always already stupid subject. In this way, Socrates's two maxims, "Know yourself," and "I know but one thing, that I know nothing" undo each other and dissolve into processes of stupidity.

My inability to say something about *Back to the Present* is how I experienced the stupor it struck me with. My own subject position was destabilized, or as Nobus and Quinn suggest evacuated. There was no intersubjective exchange between the performance and myself, but rather the relationship between the performance and myself destabilized my presumed subjective knowledge of myself as a stable position. By presenting an intensely formal challenge *Back to the Present* did not reaffirm what I already knew about the performance and spectator relationship but insisted that I actively try to keep

up with it as it careened through its labyrinthine structure. As I attempted and failed to keep up, I was thrown into a flux-space of uncertainty. This stupefying insistence on thwarting expectations could be spectacularly overwhelming to some spectators and prompt their disengagement with this kind of performance. I found it exhilarating, and so have sought out performances and performance practices that have instilled a similar sensation in me as I encountered them. Nobus and Quinn suggest that this stupor is part and parcel of our existence in the mundane register of everyday life. In this discursive formation the singular stupidity stands in for multiple, varied, and unsayable processes. As processes they are never completed, they always fail to cohere, and they are always indeterminate. This is an aspect of experience that cannot be known or communicated by explaining its meaning, or explaining it at all, an immanently affective aspect to experience that bypasses language and thought and thought as language.<sup>1</sup> To struggle to say what the experience is results in stuttering and stammering and circling around and within frustration. I am suggesting that the high intensity and focus of the theatrical frame placed around theatrical performance events allow this mundane condition of experience to become visible and tangible through the aesthetic encounter between performance and spectator. The gap between theatrical performance and the language available

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<sup>1</sup> The complex notion of affect and how I am producing it as a concept will be discussed further on in this introduction.

for spectators to think through and describe performance is a fecund space for stupidity to seep in, reverberate and be approached.

My formulation of stupidity as performed bodily processes hopes to circumvent the negative formulation George Bataille offers for his concept of stupidity in his *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*. The unfinished system is a non-systematic collection of essays, lectures, and other uncategorizable writings that have been sutured together. Throughout this collection of writing, Bataille acknowledges his own failure at coherence in explaining what nonknowledge is (129). He fails because the means of communication are based in language, and language is produced through knowledge and is how knowledge is produced. As Bataille has it, “we are at the point when knowledge yields and what appears is that the major game is nonknowledge—the game is the undefinable, what thought cannot conceive” (131). Bataille conceives of stupidity only through a negative relationship—the non—to knowledge. He says he cannot positively define what nonknowledge is, but that we are fully immersed in this game as the primary condition of lived experience. Echoing the argument of Nobus and Quinn regarding the non-relational disruption of stupidity to discursive structures—including conscious thought that according to Lacan is structured like a language—Bataille writes, “generally, existence seems under water to me, subsumed in stupidity—in error? That is the condition; this is the condition of consciousness, at the limit of the laughter that denounces it” (88). Here Bataille posits that existence is shrouded in the stupidity of consciousness.

Conscious thought stands as a barricade between a subject and its experiential existence. The only way to access experience is through conscious thought, and yet that is riddled with error. The claim of consciousness's ability to access experience is laughable. Laughter becomes a metonymic symbol for Bataille of the non-discursive eruption of stupidity that interrupts the discursive structures of conscious thought.

While I am unable to definitively say what stupidity is, by elaborating on the work of Van Boxsell, Ronell, Nobus and Quinn, and Bataille I will evoke two primary conceptualizations of stupidity throughout this project that manifest in the theatrical performance practices I engage. These two ways of evoking stupidity are closely related and often can operate simultaneously. One way to imagine stupidity is as a cognitive, epistemic disruption. This disruption is marked by the skips and stutters of the mind at work underneath and alongside conscious thought that result from a kind of mental overload or shorting of mental circuits through encounters of radical difference. In this way presumed knowledge that is maintained by subjects—including self-validating knowledge of the subject itself—becomes suspect and falls back into registers of sudden bouts of stupidity. The other way that stupidity will be evoked is as a constant underpinning of human existence in the world; humans experience the world as non-subjective body-things that dwell amongst other radically different things. This visceral condition of existence is outside of registers of human sociality and consensual regimes of knowledge. It is the overwhelming affective experience of a

stubbornly and ultimately unknowable world and our place within it as a thing of it. Unlike magic, mysticism or other alternative epistemologies that have existed alongside, and challenged rationality and reason, stupidity never coheres into an alternative systematized way of knowing, but it is instead a movement of thought that is also a moment of feeling. It can be a sudden jolt that happens in a moment of rupture that evacuates subjective conscious knowing, or it can be the ongoing stroll of pre-subjective thought that we persistently amble along in.

### **Stupid Historical Context**

Although it has not been discursively marked with the word stupidity, a concept similar to the one I've outlined as a disruptive and non-rational mode of thinking that is capable of destabilizing subjective knowledges has long been circulating through histories of avant-garde theatrical performance. In his *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History* (2000) Arnold Aronson argues that while it has since devolved into a hollow shell of itself there was a thriving theatrical avant-garde in the United States, primarily based in New York City, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s. Aronson suggests that performances in this period by John Cage, Alan Kaprow, The Living Theatre, The Open Theatre, The Performance Group, The Wooster Group, the Richard(s) Schechner and Foreman, Robert Wilson, Spalding Gray, Carolee Schneemann, and Vito Acconci all created strategies that would “undermine theatrical competence” for spectators (8). Aronson argues that this undermining of theatrical competence

happens through formal shifts in theatrical performance that transform “the way in which the spectators view themselves and their world” (7). He says that this does not happen through a “straightforward presentation of ideas but through a fundamental restructuring of perception and understanding” (7). In other words, it is not the content of the performances, but the forms they take that disrupt the inherited knowledge that spectators share of what makes a theatrical performance a theatrical performance. It also isn’t only the form the performance itself takes, but the way that the shift in its form shifts the structured relationship between the performance and spectator. By reevaluating their understanding of what theatrical performance is spectators also have to reevaluate their own position in relation to that performance. Aronson quotes Lyotard by saying that this reevaluation requires, “letting go and disarming all grasping intelligence”(7). In other words, avant-garde and experimental theatrical performance have a history of striking spectators stupid. This stupor provokes a reevaluation of spectators’ subjective understanding and in that reconstitution of the self other ontological and epistemological possibilities are opened.

The work of the U.S. artists that Aronson offers in his avant-garde history share similar formal aspects and performance devising practices as the work of Ann Liv Young, *Every House Has a Door*, and SuperGroup. Additionally, Aronson’s theorization of their work certainly resonates with my concept of stupidity. While I have already acknowledged a genealogical link, I still hesitate, however, to label the contemporary work I’m considering here as avant-garde.

To label the work of these contemporary artists avant-garde draws direct associations with the modernist movements of the historical avant-garde and elides the shifts in practice and thinking that have emerged in the post-modern, or in specifically theatrical terms what German theater scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann has labeled “postdramatic theatre”. To this end, rather than label them explicitly as avant-garde, I choose to categorize the theatrical performance works of Ann Liv Young, *Every House Has a Door*, and SuperGroup as experimental in the way that Sarah Jane Bailes has described a similar set of contemporary experimental performances in *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service*. Similar to Aronson’s depiction of the avant-garde, Bailes offers this description of experimental theatrical performances, “they play with and examine the limits of (theatre) form, putting pressure on certain conventions and prescribed rules in order to stretch or invent others” (13). This categorical distinction being made, I would still like to continue tracing stupidity’s covertly winding path through experimental performance history and follow the lead of other experimental performance historians who have gone before me—RoseLee Goldberg most notably—and trace the stupid contours of the historical avant-garde.

The European artists of the Symbolist, Expressionist, Futurist, Surrealist, and Dada movements desired to seek out different forms and challenge the inherited understanding of how art functions. I will primarily focus on the Dada movement that began in Zurich and then erupted in Paris, Barcelona and New

York. Dada, as Mel Gordon asserts, has in some ways become the foundation for all post-modern art (7). In addition to this foundational status, I am focusing on Dada because of what Bert Cardullo writes in *Theater of the Avant-Garde 1890-1950* that if the outcome of the rationality of Enlightenment philosophers was the barbarism of World War, “then the means of protest against this society would have to be irrational” (11). Likewise, Hal Foster in *The Return of the Real: the avant-garde at the end of the century* has observed that by framing everyday practices and objects as art the avant-garde threatened “languages, institution, and structures of meaning, expectation and reception” (16). Duchamp’s Dada ready-mades, for example, were ripe with the irrational threat of stupidity. A spectator who encountered *Fountain* at the New York gallery in which it was displayed in 1917 had to undergo an intense mental scrambling to re-conceptualize the urinal as art object. An encounter with *Fountain* required the repositioning of the subjective self and a creative act on the part of the spectator in an attempt to reestablish a relationship to the irrational representational object. This repositioning happened in the flux-space of uncertainty or the action zone of stupidity.

While the influence of Dada has been given great consideration by art historians, Mel Gordon points out that Dada has struggled to be taken seriously by theatre scholars who have historically valued dramatic texts over performed practices. The play texts written by Dada artists are mostly nonsense, resistant to any interpretative hermeneutic, and for this reason often dismissed. For

example, this first line spoken by Mr. Blueblue from Tristan Tzara's *The First Celestial Adventure of Mr. Antipyrine, Fire Extinguisher*, "penetrate the desert, hollow out our path howling in, the sticking sand, listen to the vibration, the leech and the cocktail-beetle, maaoi lounda ngami with the hug, of a child suicide" (Gordon, 53). The nonsense and break down of symbolic language into the sound fragments "maaoi lounda ngami" demonstrates Nobus and Quinn's claim that stupidity is a kind of thinking that has failed to forge a relation to discursive structures. Here we can see that Tzara has fully embraced the stupid aspect of language as never being able to be the thing it hopes to represent, and the words are assembled under some guiding principle that has little to do with generating meaning through established knowledge of relations between signifiers and signified. Jochen Schulte-Sasse has noted this aspect of Dada theatrics when he writes in his forward to Peter Bürger's influential *Theory of the Avant-Garde* that, "The writing practice of artistic modernism has always tended to deconstruct meaning by questioning the author as a center who provides meaning to the artistic process of creation and shifts the accent of creative praxis from the chain of the signified to the chain of signifiers. It has favored linguistically productive texts over representative texts" (xxii). The interaction between artist and spectator becomes one of provocation through this turn from texts that represent to texts that produce. The audience is expected to not only engage in the act of production with the performance by watching, listening, or receiving, but is provoked to perform a mental doing. Tzara is not offering a space of passive

contemplation and reflection where a lesson is to be gleaned from the encounter with the play. The artwork tries to communicate the meaning of meaninglessness by doing meaninglessness, and places the audience into an active role as creator and collaborator with the artwork. The act of spectatorship becomes not one of recognition and confirmation of what is already known. Instead the spectator is challenged to engage in an act of heuristic thinking that spirals out from the artwork as a point of encounter. Thinking as a continual process of nonknowledge that fails to cohere is stupid thinking.

The same stupor-inducing tactic is seen in what can be considered a performance ready-made by Tzara. In January of 1920 he staged *La Crise du Change* at a venue in Paris that contained a box-set that had been left behind on stage by a theatre company. He treated this set as a ready-made backdrop and the performance that was enacted in front of it included a reading of a found text—a transcript of an address that had been given to the French parliament. Audiences were outraged that the speech, like Duchamp's urinal, was primarily understood as art only because it was being framed that way. This destabilizing of the relation between the everyday and the aesthetic realms ungrounded knowledge formations that had been in place for centuries thereby disrupting the discourse of mastery, virtuosity and the genius of the artist. The role of art and the artist had to be completely re-thought, and that required becoming stupid facilitated by encountering these Dada artworks. The audience was not expected to know something about the performance, but to think differently after

encountering it. This is the gift of the possibility of stupidity—albeit sometimes an unexpected, unwanted, and frustratingly challenging gift.

Blurring the lines between art and the everyday, a reliance on chance operations, and the notion of the ready-made are all aspects of Dada that were picked up and elaborated on by U.S. artists in the mid-twentieth century and carry through unto the present day. The authors of *Making a Performance: Devising Histories and Contemporary Practices* note that Hal Foster has marked a shift in practices of the historical avant-garde of the early twentieth century and the later movement in the U.S. They characterize this shift as a change from the desire to destroy artistic institutions to extending them beyond the boundaries that separate art from not-art (Govan 15). These mid-century artists and their concern with the division between art and not-art will serve as the next genealogical antecedent I discuss as I continue to map out the historical terrain through which Ann Liv Young, *Every House Has a Door*, and SuperGroup stupidly maneuver.

In 1952 at the Black Mountain College in North Carolina John Cage orchestrated an unnamed performance event that had theoretical foundations in the ideas of Artaud, Duchamp and the “Huang Po doctrine of universal mind, which, according to Duberman, held that the ‘centricity within each event is not dependent on other events’” (Aronson 38). This 1952 Black Mountain College performance has had a seminal influence on U.S. experimental theatrical performance. The event was made up of several actions arranged through a

process of chance operations that lasted a total duration of forty-five minutes. Participants in the 1952 Black Mountain College “avant-garde” included: Robert Rauschenberg, Merce Cunningham, David Tudor, Charles Olson, and Mary Caroline Richards. Cage’s description of some of the actions give a vague sense of what this performance entailed, “Robert Rauschenberg was playing an old-fashioned phonograph that had a horn and a dog on the side listening, and David Tudor was playing a piano, and Merce Cunningham and other dancers were moving through the audience and around the audience [eventually followed by a stray dog]” (qtd. in Aronson 39). Chance operates as an organizing principle that is not concerned with a rationally prescribed arrangement of events that would lead a spectator from one point to another predetermined point. I am not arguing that this event organized by chance had no structure, but that structure’s destination is indeterminate as is the reception of it by the spectator. Of course any artwork’s reception by spectators is ultimately unable to be determined by the artist no matter how carefully thought out or rationalized is the artist’s intent. Through a reliance and openness to chance the 1952 Black Mountain College performance, however, worked that indeterminacy into its form. Stupidity was both an outcome of spectating the performance, and also part of what constituted the shape of the performance itself.

Evidence of the intellectual rigor and deliberate turn to stupidity as a process that promotes a reimagining of the relationship between artist and spectator is found in Cage’s writings. In a diary entry published as part of his

collected writings, *A Year From Monday*, Cage writes, “Art instead of being an object made by one person is a process set in motion by a group of people. Art’s socialized. It isn’t saying something, but people doing things, giving everyone (including those involved) the opportunity to have experiences they would not otherwise have had” (151). Cage and Cunningham would continue to experiment with the stupid possibilities enacted by chance and ready-mades in their musical and dance compositions throughout their solo and collaborative careers. Cage invited chance into his work by using the *I Ching* as a compositional tool while Cunningham rolled dice to shape his choreographies. Cage found the musical equivalent of Duchamp’s urinal in the ambient noises of the performance hall as he sat at the piano without pushing a key in his notorious 4’33” composition. The relationship between art and the everyday enacted through the practice of ready-mades for Cunningham manifested in his turn to pedestrian movement. He explains, “It occurred to me that dancers could do the gestures they did ordinarily. These were accepted as movement in daily life, why not on stage?” (qtd. in Goldberg 124). By rethinking the distinction between art and non-art enacted by these practices, there is also the stupid possibility opened of moving creative practice from a precious realm of mastery and virtuosity into a realm of everyday accessibility. With the line between them blurred, the possibilities that artistic practice opens up for other ways of thinking about the world and becoming in the world could gain traction in the practice of everyday life.

The stupid blurring of the distinction between creative artistic practice and creative life practice is foundational to the work of Alan Kaprow. Kaprow was in attendance at the 1952 Black Mountain performance and greatly influenced by the work of Cage and Cunningham. Where Tzara and the Dada artists had a militant quality to their creative practice that challenged audiences aggressively, Kaprow's *Happenings* invited spectators to participate in the challenge. If they were moving through and becoming the performance themselves then it was not as formally confrontational as Tzara reading a parliamentary transcript from a position on the stage to spectators sitting on the other side of what they had come to understand as a fourth wall dividing them from the action. The challenge to rethink art and its forms through chance operations and ready-mades was still present in Kaprow's *Happenings*, but there was an invitation to take up the challenge instead of it being thrust on the spectator. Seeming to anticipate the communal lifestyles that developed in the 1960s U.S., Kaprow literally sent out invitations for his *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* that read, "you will become part of the Happenings; you will simultaneously experience them" (qtd. in Goldberg 128). Michael Kirby notes that even though they were invited the spectators at *Happenings* only engaged them on the superficial level of entertainment, or had the "tendency to view everything in terms of traditional categories, making no allowance for significant change" (Sandford 1). Experimental theatre and performance art from the mid-twentieth century until the present would continue to become preoccupied with negotiating and renegotiating—or stupidly rethinking

as it were—this relationship or contract between performance and spectator. Change is difficult to enact, and change that makes a spectator feel stupid is especially so. Although it is perhaps only through this discomfiting experience of stupidity that change is possible at all. Stupidity does not reaffirm what we already know, but challenges us to think and think again.

Similarly to their contemporary counter-parts central to my project here, indulging in stupidity was a privilege for the U.S. experimental performance artists of the mid-twentieth century who were predominately white, college-educated and middle-class. It is their artistic indulgence in stupidity that I am tracking, and that brings my focus onto them. Stupidity's domain is not exclusively bounded by the parameters of the experimental theatrical performance artists I consider here, nor the historical avant-garde. A desire to perturb the relationship between theatrical performance and spectator were certainly at work in other mid-twentieth century performances that have not been the focus of histories like those written by Goldberg, Aronson or Bailes that I am entering into conversation with. Performances made by the Black Arts Movement headed by Amiri Baraka or Teatro Campesino founded by Luis Valdez, for example, experimented with forms that intended to destabilize the conventional relationship between performance and spectators. Running parallel to and working in tandem with the civil and workers' rights movements, however, they had a predetermined and tactically specific political agenda imagined as the outcome of such disruptions. These groups were engaged in battles fighting the

very privileges that afforded artists like Cage, Cunningham and Kaprow the ability to indulge their stupid thinking through stupid artistic practice without addressing immediately pressing, and overtly political concerns. This is not to suggest that the stupid explorations of experimental theatre artists are devoid of politics. I argue exactly the contrary, and hope to tease out some of these stupidly political stakes through the chapters that follow this introduction.

It is a marked difference that while Kaprow, Cage and Cunningham were all white, college-educated, middle class men, *Every House Has a Door*, *SuperGroup*, and, obviously, Ann Liv Young all have women in primary decision maker roles. *Every House Has a Door* and *SuperGroup* are both ensembles where each member offers creative input. In the case of *Every House Has a Door*, Lin Hixson maintains her position as director and final decision maker that she established through her work with *Goat Island*. *Goat Island* was a theatrical performance company that Lin Hixson and her partner Matthew Goulish were primary collaborators in from 1987-2009, and has since disbanded. *SuperGroup* is comprised of two men and two women and for each project they try to devise ways of not placing the responsibility of final decision making on any one of them. Ann Liv Young makes two types of performance work. She is a choreographer who sets work on her collaborators and she also performs solo as a character she has developed named Sherry. Her Sherry performances are devised improvisationally in real time through her collaboration directly with the spectators. The shift from a primarily male-dominated experimental performance

scene to one where women have become more and more prominent is made visible by shifts in performance practices in the second half of the twentieth century. Two exemplary experimental performance groups underwent this gender power shift in the mid-1970s. In 1975, JoAnne Akalaitis first took on directorial responsibilities with Mabou Mines that had been held by Lee Breuer since the group formed in 1970. Perhaps the most notable gender shift took place with the spin-off of the Wooster Group headed by Elizabeth LeCompte from Richard Schechner's Performance Group. This process lasted about five years with the Wooster Group renaming themselves in 1980 under LeCompte's direction. The formally challenging work of Mabou Mines and the Wooster Group with Akalaitis and LeCompte at the helm indicated that in the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century women theatrical performance artists working in the U.S. could indulge in stupidity too. My intent in writing through this stupid historical terrain is not to provide a complete and comprehensive map.<sup>2</sup> Instead I intended to show that there has been a history of experimental performance practices that have

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<sup>2</sup> If you would like to try to piece together a more comprehensive map, each of these histories of contemporary performance contain different, and often over-lapping pieces of it: Croyden, *Lunatics, Lovers and Poets: The Contemporary Experimental Theatre* (1974); McNamara and Dolan (ed) *The Drama Review: Thirty Years of Commentary on the Avant-Garde* (1985); Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (1988); Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970* (1992); Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art since the 60s* (1998); Vergine, *Body Art and Performance* (2000); Shank, *Beyond the Boundaries: American Alternative Theatre* (2002); Heathfield (ed), *Live: Art and Performance* (2004); Heddon and Milling *Devising Performance: A Critical History* (2006); Carr *On Edge: Performance at the End of The Twentieth Century* (2008).

indulged stupidity in their forms and tactics for engaging with spectators even if it hasn't historically been identified as stupidity.

If experimental theatre has historically turned to deploying stupidity in its processes and forms, and has turned away from trying to present meaning for spectators, then a form of critical practice that is not concerned with producing knowledge about these performances is required to engage them. By examining the methodological possibilities of stupidity I am elaborating on the body of theoretical criticism that has been empirically labeled as “postmodern” to work through a potential set of tactics to discursively wrangle unruly artworks such as these experimental theatrical performances that are central to my project. These tactics include concepts of initial forgetting, abandonment of grand narratives, deconstruction, and *différance* to name a few of the most relevant and widely circulated.<sup>3</sup> While certainly these postmodern discursive tactics challenge empirical notions of knowledge, the argumentative formal tools that postmodern critics use to critique are themselves inherited from positivist knowledge production practices. In writing *The Post Modern Explained*, Lyotard tries to disprove the feasibility of grand-narratives. In doing so, however, he establishes yet another grand-narrative—one of postmodern fragmentation and meaninglessness *explained* by his text. In a similar maneuver, in *Limited, Inc*,

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<sup>3</sup> For his conceptualization of initial forgetting and the abandonment of grand narratives see Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Explained*, and for the first mention of *différance* see Jacques Derrida's essay “Cogito and the History of Madness” from *Writing and Difference*. Deconstruction is most notably produced in Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, but percolates through the majority of his thinking and writing.

Derrida suggests that an aberrant phrase such as “the green is either,” which appears not to follow grammatical logic still does so as an example of agrammaticality (12). It is nonsense that still makes sense in that it signifies nonsense. In this way, the unknowable dimension of existence gets folded into the known that is established by postmodern theorists’ argumentative claims to the unmooring of meaning-making.

While the postmodern critical theorists do much to dislodge empirical notions of knowledge and rational meaning-making, their emphasis on written textual procedures limits their ability, however, to account for the affective dimension of bodily experience. The concepts of postmodernism become a set of critical tools that get applied to various research objects, instead of beginning with an encounter with the object that in some way prompts the shape that the critique that colludes with it should take. As Simon O’Sullivan points out in *The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art Beyond Representation* the deconstructive tactics of “The New Art History” often are unable to ultimately dislodge the modernist drive for closure and meaning and formally these postmodern methods still inhabit a “general explanatory framework” (125). In other words, if I took a postmodern approach I would still be writing argumentative explanations about the performances, and flattening their affective potential instead of engaging in practical discourses *of* them. By acknowledging the idiosyncratic and affective difference of things of the world and allowing thought to spiral out from them instead of being placed on them, there is a move closer to allowing the things’

enunciatively qualities to be expressed. This does not erase entirely, but does limit, the unavoidable discursive violence of forming the objects of which we speak—or write.

### **An Affective Interruption Alongside This Introduction**

*What we can acknowledge is that art is not about knowledge, conveying 'meanings' or providing information. Art is not just an ornament or style used to make data more palatable or consumable. Art may well have meanings or messages but what makes it art is not content but its affect, the sensible force or style through which it produces content. Why, for example, would we spend two hours in the cinema watching a film if all we wanted were the story or the moral message?*

--Claire Colebrook from *Gilles Deleuze*

Affect has become one of the most fecund concepts across a number of disciplines, and despite its popularity remains one of the most difficult to articulate. I will now turn to affect as Patricia T. Clough suggests many critical theorists have turned since the mid-1990s. In her essay “The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedicine, and Bodies” Clough indicates the potential in theorizing affect as a shift from the postmodern treatment of “bodily matter” as “constructionisms under the influence of post-structuralism and deconstruction” to “a dynamism immanent to bodily matter” (Clough 206). This re-conceptualization of the body indicates that it is a dynamic thing in process rather than a structured thing to be deconstructed. Some scholars have suggested that because affect and its relation to the dynamics of bodies as processes is so difficult to conceptually pin down in discourse it becomes dangerous to use the term at all

no matter the potential it opens up (Thompson 119). Other scholars elide the difference between affect and emotion in a discursively and conceptually violent maneuver. This eliding happens in the introduction to the multi-authored *The Affect Effect: Dynamics of Emotion in Political Thinking and Behavior* edited by W. Russell Neuman, George E. Marcus, Ann N. Crigler, and Michael Mackuen. As an editorial multiplicity they offer this footnote on the first page of their introduction, “In this chapter we use the terms emotion and affect interchangeably, although some scholars attempt to make distinctions among those terms as well as the term mood” (1). I would argue that such distinctions are important because whatever affect may be, it is not emotion or mood—they are distinct phenomena and should be treated as such. Later in their introduction, the editorial multiplicity rhetorically ask, “What is affect?” and then answer the question by providing what they call a working definition, “Affect is the evolved cognitive and physiological response to the detection of personal significance”(9). I would suggest, vis-à-vis Deleuzian conceptions, that affect is actually the something-like-a-force acted upon the body by any other object in the world prior to the evolved cognitive and physiological response of personal signification.

The responses that the editorial multiplicity enunciate as affect are actually the effect of affect, and how the human body/mind registers and symbolizes it. The response is not the affect. The affect is the condition of potentiality that acts upon an object prior to it being interpreted cognitively as personal or subjective signifying experience. Stupidity operates here in that once an object that is a

human body is affected, there is a movement of thought in-between the affective encounter and the arrival of knowledge in the discursive structure of conscious thought. Spatially, following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's formulation of where affect resides, we can think of stupidity in action *beside* both affect and knowledge (8). Beside them both, stupidity is caught between them. If stupidity is thought that lacks a relation to any discursive structure, and if our conscious thought is structured like a language, then stupidity is the movement of thought from affect to knowing. This is a never-ending process that never comes to rest as we encounter and re-encounter things that affect perpetually. Stupidity is not the absence of thought. It is thought in motion that travels from the affective encounter that disrupts the symbolic register of knowledge as language. Temporally we can think of stupidity as arriving after affect but prior to or disruptively in the middle of knowledge. My body touches the world, I am stupid, and then I have a conscious thought that takes its shape in language.

Affect is apersonal. When we have an affective experience—which as I've noted is a never-ending condition of existence, except perhaps in death as the greatest unknown of course—our subjectivities then translate it into consciousness as thought through the process of stupidity. As with anything that gets translated, much gets lost in this process, but also an excess is produced through that same process of translation. Conscious knowledge is generated in excess of the affective encounter and attaches itself to the subjective translation in excess of the affect. That excess, however, was already always immanent

within the affective moment, and as part of it cannot be in excess of it.

Knowledge is produced as only one potential excess of the affective encounter where other possibilities lie latent, and perhaps are activated through stupid disruptions of this process gone otherwise.

Lauren Berlant has written a great deal on affect and has answered the dangerous (and possibly impossible) question of what affect is by describing it as a “cluster of promises” and potentialities. She suggests that as we attach to objects of desire with these clustered promises the encounter is always optimistic. She goes on, however, to suggest that it may not always *feel* optimistic (Berlant 93). There are not negative or positive affects. That is, there is not a happy affect or a sad affect. There is affect, and it is in the in-between-space of encounter and possibility between objects in the world—including humans that claim a self-subjectivity—and that these encounters of possibility are then translated or understood in the subjective register as positive or negative. Affects reach knowledge by traveling through stupidity and arrive in the body as thought or as emotion—as happy or as sad. It is when the promise of the cluster and the potential of the attachment is realized and limited that thought or feeling (knowledge) complete the process of affective encounter. This process never reaches an end or rest, however, because there is always another set of objects that any object—including a human subject—is in proximity too. Each object generates its own affect and while these are not identifiable as good or bad they do have specific qualities that are germane to the specific object. A

never-ending wash of affective response to each and every different thing of the world that is not tied to a conscious knowing, but a stupid process of becoming is the way we perform our lives through the medium of existence. The promise of existence as existence is optimistic, although not overtly good or bad.

Brian Massumi grapples with the difference between emotion and affect in his *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. I say grapple, because he points out that affect “is not ownable or recognizable and is thus resistant to critique” (28). Massumi is among the scholars who insist on a distinction between affect and emotion. He does, however, draw an equal sign (=) between affect = intensity (27-28). He suggests that the cognitive and physiological responses that detect personal significance or undergo subjectivization happen after the affective moment. He indicates the difference between emotion and affect, or intensity when he writes that, “Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized. It is crucial to theorize the difference between affect and emotion” (28). An encounter between two objects is experienced first in the affective register prior to being experienced subjectively—by humans for example—in the symbolic registers semantically or semiotically. When we are able to think the experience, when it becomes thought, it is through a language-based process and therefore in the symbolic register. There is a stupid moment prior to that, and Massumi draws on the

findings of scientific experiments in the field of cognitive science to suggest that the moment lasts for approximately half a second, that in that half second of encounter all is affective and pre-symbolic (28-29). Massumi references two medical experiments. In the first experiment, after cortical electrodes had been implanted in patients “mild electrical pulses were administered to the electrode and also to points on the skin. In either case, the stimulation was felt only if it lasted more than half a second: half a second, the minimum perceivable lapse” (28). In the second experiment an EEG machine monitored subjects. They were asked to “flex a finger at a moment of their choosing and to recall the time of their decision by noting the spatial clock position of a revolving dot. The flexes came 0.2 seconds after they clocked the decision, but the EEG machine registered significant brain activity 0.3 seconds before the decision. Again, a half-second lapse between the beginning of a bodily event and its completion in an outwardly directed, active expression” (29). Descartes got it wrong, or only partly right. His dictum should have read, “Something-like-I-that-is-my-body affects, and something-like-I-that-is-my-body is affected, then something-like-I does something like thinking, then-something-like-I knows something like knowledge, and therefore something-like-I might become for a while.” The affective response is involuntary. It is apersonal. This obliterates the mind/body duality and places the I am of experience in the body/mind as a singular—yet of course always a singular *multiplicity*—entity in a field of objects that can be acted on affectively and act upon other objects affectively. Any object can have an affective

experience but it takes a subject—for example a human subject—to recognize it. Affect is the force of encounter and potential between the worlds of things. Our body/mind is a stupid thing before a subject consciously aware of its own thingness.

Kathleen Stewart is another scholar who attempts to make a distinction between emotion and affect in her book *Ordinary Affects*. The similarities between her, Berlant's, Massumi's and my conceptualizations of affect do not end with this distinction between emotion and affect. Like Massumi, Stewart also articulates affect in terms of intensity when she writes:

They (ordinary affects) work not through 'meanings' per se, but rather in the way that they pick up density and texture as they move through bodies, dreams, dramas, and social worldings of all kinds. *Their significance lies in the intensities they build and in what thoughts and feelings they make possible.* The question they beg is not what they might mean in an order of representations, or whether they are good or bad in an overarching scheme of things, but where they might go and what potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to things are already somehow present in them in a state of potentiality and resonance. (emphasis mine 3)

Stewart's state of potentiality and resonance is experienced in that half-second lapse that Massumi described via scientific experimentation. What I would like to make clear is that this half-second lapse is continuously happening in any encounter our body/mind has with any other thing in the world. That means simultaneously with multiple multiples. In an ordinary way, there are certain intensities and potentialities that open in our day to day. Massumi posits that these half-seconds are not empty, but overfull. These over-saturated half-

seconds carry the potential of the virtual, and are immanent to the affective experience of the actual. In order to be functionally or actually expressed our “will and consciousness are subtractive” (Massumi 29). Social worldings of all kinds get limited by our stupid thought process to what can functionally be expressed by our subjectivities always lagging half a second behind the body/mind experience of multiple simultaneous affects. The world(s) we live in are so resistantly unknowable.

A question that I’m posing here is what if there were things—a work of experimental theatrical performance art for example—that produced extraordinary affects in the encounter with them?<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Schneider has called the theatre an “affect-assemblage machine” (*Remains* 64). Any theatrical performance with all of its component parts—a thing made of multiple things—generates affect at an exceptional intensity. Theatre is always becoming intense. What if there was such a build up of those half seconds of time that Massumi details that there became an affect overload? The closure of affect into knowledge becomes an intensified suspended state of encounter with experimental theatre performances. It would be like turning the affect dial to eleven ala Spinal Tap’s amplifier to get an extra-intensity of volume above the ordinary limit of in-ten-sity. That is what I’m proposing the performances made by Ann Liv Young, *Every House Has a Door*, and SuperGroup do. They boost

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<sup>4</sup> I do want that hyphenated difference of extra-ordinary instead of the non-hyphenated extraordinary. They are not special affects, or precious in any way, just more in terms of their specifically vibrant intensities.

the intensity of the ordinary affective encounter beyond the limit at ten to an eleven—at least. This overload is what I was struck by in my encounter with *Back to The Present*. That affective response of being struck stupid was an affective overload in which processes of nonknowledge affectively bombarded my body/mind and it was caught in a feedback loop. Abandoning explanatory formal frameworks that remain prevalent in academic scholarship up and through the postmodern, I turn to and borrow stupor-inducing affective tactics from Ann Liv Young, *Every House Has a Door*, and SuperGroup to enact a method of scholarly writing that is a creative critical response appropriately suited to collude with the complexity of these performances.

### **Though This Be Stupidity, Yet There Is Method In't**

*To write is to approach the painting from a theoretical point of view, which is tantamount to adopting the discourse of the Masters. This discourse about painting is an 'academic' one, a discourse that divorces the theory of painting from its practice. [...] What I have in mind here is the opposition established above between the discourse about painting and the discourse of the painting itself. 'Theoretically,' the question raised by this distinction is important: how does one write a discourse that is not a discourse about the painting but a transposition (translation, transversion) into language of the discourse that the painting itself engages in?*

--Louis Marin from *To Destroy Painting*

Critical thinkers from the diverse fields of complexity theory, feminist theory, art history, performance theory and ethnography have elaborated on and extended post-modernist interventions through their critical practice in an attempt to collude with their objects of study in ways that limit the discursive violence

imposed upon them. Similarly to Marin's approach to painting, I am likewise attempting to find a methodology that does not divorce the theory of theatrical performance from the practice of theatrical performance. To do otherwise would risk discursively destroying the theatrical performances I'm researching in my project by flattening the practice of them into a distant theorization about them. I will now build on the stupid conceptual and historical groundwork I have laid out through this introduction as I shift to a discussion of method. I will continue to draw on a diverse array of disciplines and thinkers to begin to discern and practice a methodology suited to engaging the extra-ordinary affect-generating stupid theatrical performances of Ann Liv Young, *Every House Has a Door*, and *SuperGroup*.

These performances are resistant to methodologies grounded in empirical strategies of description, categorization, interpretation, analysis and argumentation. For me to make an argument about them would be imposing a rationalized meaning on them and not engaging them on the intensely affective level on which they operate. Following notions produced and practiced by the feminist literary critic and writer Hélène Cixous, I will, "borrows freely from the discourse of satire and polemic, humour and philosophy, psychoanalysis and sexuality—weaving these discourses in and out of her(my) own discoveries, using whatever she(I) feels that she(I) needs to put her(my) ideas across" (3 Blyth and Sellers). In this way I can move through channels of stupidity that destabilize and refract discursive meaning into multiple processes of

nonknowledge. This textual maneuvering that I enact is reminiscent of Cixous's practice of an *écriture féminine* that Ian Blyth and Susan Sellers note has a "general ambivalence towards 'meaning'" (24). Blyth and Sellers also suggest that for Cixous, "Patriarchy seeks to reduce all things to a singular, 'phallic' meaning. In *écriture féminine* multiple, or even contradictory, meanings and forms of expressions are sought after and valued" (24). In this way I am playing the *écriture féminine* bricoleur seeking multiple forms of expression and assembling this dissertation with knowledge fragments I find at-hand that help put my ideas about stupidity and contemporary theatrical performance across. As I suture these fragments together I may not adhere to their singular meanings in their original discourses and scholarly projects. Additionally, while I do question and challenge it, I don't quite manage to destabilize the writerly-"I" in a way I would need to in order for this project to be an actual manifestation of *écriture féminine*. Like so many aspects of this project it is something I approach, but never quite arrive at.

By indulging in my own privileged stupidity I turn away from argumentative procedures deployed in theatrical performance criticism that attempt to write theatrical performance through "direct signification" and fail to "enact the affective force of the performance event again" (Phelan *Mourning* 11). I would like to offer an example of the kind of academic theatrical performance scholarship that I am chaffing against. It is a specific example of theatrical scholarship that uses a popular contemporary theoretical discourse to think through a performance. It is

written by an established scholar in the field and is representative of dominant (although not exclusive) methods and conventions that shape contemporary theatrical performance discourse. In her 2008 *Theatre Journal* article “‘Defying Gravity’: Queer Conventions in the Musical *Wicked*” about the Broadway musical *Wicked* Stacy Wolf writes an incredibly well crafted and deftly convincing argument that the relationship between the two female leading roles structurally works to transgress, subvert and queer the book musical form. It is a conventional queer reading of a straight work. It is exceptionally well written with descriptions of the performance to support her claims. When I talked through the article with my students in an Introduction to Theatre class who *love Wicked* it became apparent to me, however, that something had been missed in Wolf’s analysis. How did the performance generate the love and adoration affectively palpable in these students? My students were resistant to thinking about it in Wolf’s purely analytical terms because it did not get at their experience of spectating the musical. While I will concede that *Wicked* is an indulgent performance of another kind, and not overly concerned with stupid creative tactics as a product of commercial Broadway. *Wicked* is also a conventional piece of commercial theatre that honors the expected performer/spectator contract and is not nearly as challenging to spectators as the experimental theatrical performance work I’m considering in this project. *Wicked* generates affect never-the-less, but the still largely explanatory framework of Wolf’s article is not queer enough in its formal aspects to engage it or her readers with a

related affective intensity—Wolf’s argument values closed effective argumentation over intensely open affective engagement. It values knowledge production over queerly stupid thinking.

From the disciplines of Sociology, Contemporary Art Theory, Performance and Theatre Studies, John Law, Simon O’Sullivan, Peggy Phelan and Matthew Goulish all explicitly or implicitly suggest that there is some disconnect between conventional argumentative academic writing—what Cixous has identified as patriarchal and phallo-centric—and some other kind of writing that would be better suited for writing of artworks and the work that art does through its associated complex practices. While Law, O’Sullivan, Phelan, and Goulish are all making this suggestion recently, the anxiety about how to write in relation to experimental artworks has been marked since at least the 1960s with Susan Sontag’s “Against Interpretation” as but one notable example. These thinkers all conclude that there is something that artists do, and then something that people writing about what artists do do. Again I ask, how is this critical writing of the artistic doing to be done? Once again I ask, how do I collude?

Law, and O’Sullivan make compelling arguments for another kind of writing to be culled (called?) forth from the researcher of the arts in *After Method: Mess In Social Science Research*, and “The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art Beyond Representation”—a book, and a journal article respectively. John Law is a sociologist and complexity theorist. He is a pioneer of what has come to be known as “actor-network theory.” ANT (as it is commonly abbreviated) as a body

of concepts—contrary to what might be indicated by the use of the word *actor*—has little to do with theatre scholarship or practice. ANT, however, certainly can be used methodologically to think through the complexity of theatre and all of the bodies, material objects, and their relations amongst each other that constitute theatrical performance as a creative practice. My encounter a couple of years ago with Law's *After Method: Mess In Social Science Research* soon after spectating *Back to the Present* was fundamental to my unsettling of what scholarship might do concerning the work of theatrical performance. How scholarship might do its work in ways other than making arguments that produce knowledge outcomes about artworks or reveal some hermeneutic interpretative code contained within the representations they enact in the world. In *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* Law writes:

Poetry and novels wrestle with the materials of language to *make* things, things that are said to be imaginary. It is the making, the process or the effect of making, that is important. The textures along the way cannot be dissociated from whatever is being made, word by word, whereas academic volumes hasten to describe, to refer to, a reality that lies outside them. They are referential, ostensive. They tell us how it is out there. How, then, might we imagine an academic way of writing that concerns itself with the quality of its own writing? With the *creativity* of writing? (12, original emphasis)

In the name of knowledge production, academic writing tries to hide itself. Unlike the poet, novelist or playwright who use the materiality of words to make their imagined worlds manifest, the academic writer glosses over words and uses them as a conduit for information and knowledge—the *what* that is being said

takes priority over the *how* it is being said. I am not suggesting that academic writing is totally devoid of any creative impulse and practice. I am also not suggesting that form should take priority over content. I am suggesting, following Law's line of questioning above, that form and content need to be actively addressed simultaneously through the writing process—particularly, I argue, when writing of performances that stupidly resist discursive formations.

As I experiment in this dissertation with some kind of shift from what I understand conventional method to be I also want to explicitly state that I am not calling for an abandonment of these other conventional research procedures. I am just investigating what happens when some other kind of method—that at this point has no name to attach to it other than stupidity—is practiced. Similarly, in *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* John Law is not advocating for a wholesale abandonment of conventional research methods (7). He argues that there is room for these conventional methods to exist along with some other kind of method that if practiced requires a shift in research habits. The methods that he specifically names beyond referring more generally to the Enlightenment products of empiricism and positivism are Neo-Marxism, Foucaultism, Communitarism, and Feminism (5-6). There is certainly still much to be gained by investing in these critical procedures, and my approach would not have been possible without the history of critical turns that these methods deployed.

Simon O'Sullivan is an artist/scholar who shares my concern with the particular complexities involved in writing about the arts. The call for critics to

practice another way of understanding art, and expressing that understanding of art through writing is echoed yet again when O’Sullivan writes:

A certain kind of art history might disappear: that which attends only to art’s signifying character, that which understands art, positions art work, as representation. [...] And the business of art history changes from a hermeneutic to a heuristic activity: art history as a kind of parallel to the work that art is already doing rather than as an attempt to fix and interpret art; indeed, art history as precisely a kind of *creative* writing. (130, original emphasis)

The parallel work of art history that O’Sullivan desires is affectively beside the work of the art, and not divorced from it. In this marriage between the artwork and the discourse written of it, the academic discourse does not replace the artwork, nor is it at perpendicular odds with it. O’Sullivan’s argument for some kind of scholarly creative writing when dealing with artworks is compelling, and supports my project here. I have to expose the fact, however, that O’Sullivan does not exercise this kind of “creative writing” practice himself—at least not in this article where he makes the explanatory argument to do so. This shift to embracing different forms requires a willingness to play with possibilities and to risk failure.<sup>5</sup> As anthropologist Dale Pesman writes in her paper “An Engaged

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<sup>5</sup> The hesitancy to play, and the risk of failing involved in practicing these explorations became palpable for me at my Preliminary Exams Oral Defense. My dissertation committee voiced a willingness to support me and advise me on my project, but they also voiced a collective unsureness of how to go about doing that. I assured them that non-knowing how was just fine. That was, if there is one, *the point* of my research after all. They then expressed through their participation in a movement exercise called “flocking” that they had my back and were going to follow my lead. Flocking is an exercise where one mover is positioned at the head of a formation—usually a V shape like a flock of geese heading south for the winter. As that mover at the head of the formation moves their head, arms, legs, body in space the other movers in the formation mimic those movements. The idea is to move as one collective body following the leader. The leader can change depending on which way the flock faces. We didn’t have

Critique of Imagination/Imaging Engaged Critique” presented at the 2003 *Engaging Imagination: A Multidisciplinary Conference Towards an Anthropology of the Imagination*, 2003, “But ‘play’ opens the door for sloppy, irritating self-indulgence, doesn’t it?’ Well...that would be bad and that’d be boring. But the didactic tone is a failure too, just less embarrassing around other people who also write that way.” There are several scholars writing in the broad discipline of performance who abandon the didactic tone and risk failure—Rebecca Schneider, Della Pollock, and Marta Savigliano for instance—but it is the work of Peggy Phelan and Matthew Goulish that will provide me with the models that I’m going to explore in detail here. Phelan and Goulish actually practice some possibilities of other kinds of creative scholarly writing with *Mourning Sex: Performing public memories* and *39 Microlectures: In Proximity of Performance*—a book and an elevator respectively.<sup>6</sup> In this project, I am attempting to piece-together a methodological how-to manual-festo by drawing heavily on the arguments against argumentation sketched out by Law, and O’Sullivan, and the examples of some other kind of writing as performance put into practice by Phelan and Goulish.

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the words, but our bodies enacted the pact to fly into uncharted territories with me in the lead. I’m guessing it is one of few Prelim Oral Defenses in the history of our program—if not the only one—that ended with an improvised dance routine danced by the faculty mentors and student.

<sup>6</sup> A description of *39 Microlectures: In Proximity of Performance* printed in blue ink in the opening pages before the pages get numbered reads: “You may think of it not as a book, but as a library, an elevator, an amateur performance in a nearby theatre.” I have come to think of it as an elevator more often than not.

While I must heed the words, concepts, and archival procedures produced in Michel Foucault's *The Archeology of Knowledge & The Discourse of Knowledge*, and I must acknowledge that discourse forms the objects of which it speaks, I argue that this discursive formation can never fully stand in for, nor replace the object, event or phenomena itself in the world. The object, event or phenomena still exists in the world, alongside and near the discursive formation that we write to represent it.<sup>7</sup> How do we shape objects discursively by doing as little violence to them as possible? The practice of performative writing is one answer that has been offered to answer this question. Della Pollock is a notable performance scholar who has advocated for and experimented with performative writing. In "Performing Writing" published in *The Ends of Performance* edited by Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane, Pollock outlines six discursive techniques or "excursions" into performative writing. Noting the irony in prescribing such a list, Pollock suggests that performative writing is: evocative, metonymic, subjective, nervous, citational and consequential (80-96). Peggy Phelan is perhaps the most vocal advocate for performative writing and argues for and experiments with performative writing in *Mourning Sex: Performing public memories*. In her argumentative introduction Phelan writes, "Writing about performance has largely been dedicated to describing in exhaustive detail the mise-en-scene, the physical gestures, the voice, the score, the action of the performance event. [...] The

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<sup>7</sup> "Saying that nature is discursively constructed is not necessarily the same as saying that nature is *in* discourse" (39 Massumi).

desire to preserve and represent the performance event is a desire we should resist” (3). Phelan argues for writing that extends the affective qualities of the art working into the writing of the artwork. One key aspect that Phelan adds beyond the arguments of Law, and O’Sullivan is a discipline specific notion. She argues that in trying to describe body-based performance artworks in order to preserve them performance scholars run the risk of preserving “an illustrated corpse” (3).

I am not ultimately concerned with the evoked argument of chapter three of Phelan’s *Mourning Sex: Performing public memories*, “Immobile legs, stalled words: psychoanalysis and moving deaths” (pages 44-72). While incredibly compelling it has little bearing on my argument about creative academic writing of performance. I am instead interested in *how* Phelan writes it; how she tangles and entwines form and content in order to untangle and loosen an affective response in the reader. She writes in the voice of a ballet dancer—a fictional voice that dances with the voice of a fictional critical lecturer who “prefers to remain an unmarked presence in my text” (49). She is a ballet dancer interested in statistics and sits through a statistics lecture that she is intellectually lost in, and remains sitting in the lecture hall until a psychology lecture is given for the next class that shares the lecture hall space with her statistics class. The writing that follows this lecture hall mix-up set-up is a combination of the psychologist’s thoughts and the ballerina’s, but the lecturer prefers to remain unmarked. Her voice is instead mediated through the ballerina’s voice. The ballerina has “entwined our thoughts” (49)—the “our” here being, of course, two fictional

characters that Phelan has created. After some discussion of Freud and Breuer's 1895 *Studies in Hysteria* the ballet dancer interrupts to say she is going to dance solo for a few paragraphs. The ballerina then says she will step "offstage" (56) until the "end of the collaborative analysis of the first case histories of psychoanalysis" and will return in the end. When she returns the ballet dancer takes some "Solo Steps Again" (68) as the final section heading boldly announces with bold font and caps locked. In this chapter Phelan invents these two fictional characters to "dance" discursively with each other to advance her argument about feminine subjectivity, the body and psychoanalysis. Her argument is about moving bodies and she discursively invents two dancers to generate a similar affective response in the reader. Her writing becomes something other than argumentative. It creatively becomes another dance.

As I leave the dance, my forehead and back sweaty, my hand reaches forward with the pointer-finger extended and I tap the little round button so that it illuminates the "down" arrow on it and wait for the elevator to arrive. Only to find I'm already standing inside of it. Or next to it. Near it. In proximity of it. Dancing with it? I would argue that *39 Microlectures: In Proximity of Performance* offers little by way of argumentative explanation, but is incredibly thoughtful, insightful and provokes and promotes complex ways of thinking of performance. I also would not call it performative writing in the vein of Phelan's work. Goulish acknowledges the affinity between his writing and performance, however, when he writes:

Consider this book like an interrupted performance. The writer left the stage because of a sudden illness, which has now become prolonged. The writer will not return. I have been asked to stand in. Thank you for this distinction and this honor. I will do my best to complete the performance, to patch it together, and fulfill the writer's intentions. Please remember I am only a substitute. In order to fulfill those intentions, I will not imitate them, but only point to them. (4)

Maybe instead of performative writing he is practicing performance pointing?

Performing penning? Penning pointing? He is performing pointing for sure. It is

an example of a technique called "creative response" that Laura Cull outlines in

an article that she co-wrote with Goulish in the book she edited, *Deleuze and*

*Performance*. Their chapter is titled, "sub specie durationis" and is broken into

two sections. Goulish writes the first section and then Cull responds, creatively.

In her response, seemingly buried in a footnote—unless you are the kind of

reader (or writer) who understands the importance of footnotes and that the ideas

there are not buried beneath the rest of the text but in proximity to it, pointing

back to it, trying to push the button to make the elevator go—Cull describes

creative response, "A creative response does not imitate or represent an

'original', nor does it seek to critique it. Rather, Goat Island advise us to 'Think of

a creative response as your own work that would not have existed without the

work you are responding to'" (144). Through this technique of creative response

we have several threads that I've been following up to this point coming together

in a knot. Writing as creative response becomes a kind of writing that is entirely

dependent on the work being responded to, without re-presenting it or

discursively replacing it. It is both inside and outside of it—thereby making these spatial terms meaningless. It is inside it and on the other inside of it. It is immanent to it and with it. It engages the work affectively and generates further affective responses.

What is Goulish creatively responding to then in *39 Microlecture: In Proximity of Performance*? As a stand-in writer finishing the book that was abandoned part way through its writing he only “points to” various objects, events, texts and phenomena that could be what he is responding to, and that he and his text are surely in proximity to. In this way, through this lack of clarity, Goulish inadvertently answers a call that Law announces in his *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*, “Perhaps we will need to rethink our ideas about clarity and rigour, and find ways of knowing the indistinct and the slippery without trying to grasp and hold them tight. *Here knowing would become possible through techniques of deliberate imprecision*” (emphasis mine 3). Not using the hands to grasp, clench, or strangle the slippery indistinctness of the things in the world we are in proximity to, but using the hands to point at them—keeping them safe by keeping our safe distance that is as close to them as possible. The pointer finger extends and presses the down arrow button. A process of noncoherent thinking replaces coherent knowledge. An elevator ever-shifting its position. Up and down and everywhere and nowhere in between. Instead of producing knowledge, academic or critical writing becomes a creative response or a practice of non-knowing processes. In my other words, it becomes

the answer to the question of how to collude: stupidly. Stupidity becomes a key methodological component for writing of contemporary experimental performances through tactics of deliberate imprecision.

Ethnography is a useful methodological tool for my stupid project because it can more readily account for performing bodies in a way that documentation in the archive struggles to do. In *The Archive and The Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* performance scholar Diana Taylor troubles notions of what gets archived—and therefore legitimated as knowledge—and what ways of knowing remain bodily present, and re-presented in a difficult-to-trace repertoire of experience. Taylor asks the question: how does the condition of embodiment complicate what we think of as knowledge? This question is echoed in the work of the dance scholar and choreographer Susan Leigh Foster who writes, “A body, whether sitting writing or standing thinking or walking talking or running screaming, is a bodily writing. Its habits and stances, gestures and demonstrations, every action of its various regions, area, and parts—all these emerge out of cultural practices, verbal or not, that construct corporeal meaning” (*Choreographing* 3). Taylor and Foster are working to account for the body as a site of knowledge where it has conventionally been ignored. I am not trying to rein the body into these larger knowledge structures. Instead I ask: how does the condition of embodiment complicate what we can and cannot think of as nonknowledge? What stupid practices are made visible by practicing attentiveness to performing bodies as they perform? Taylor and Foster both draw

on a feminist critical lineage. By re-inserting the body through performances of knowing they destabilize the foundation of contemporary conventional academic systems that are grounded in archival research and still maintain dominance by under-privileging, or even neglecting the body as a site of knowing. It is not my intent, nor do I believe it is Taylor's or Foster's, to reverse the Cartesian mind/body binary and suggest that the body is somehow stupidly better suited at knowing than the mind. My goal is to further problematize this artificial and discursively violent philosophical split and account for the stupid body that works in tandem with the mind—the body/mind as affective site of experience—as another contributor to the ways in which we come to know, not know, move towards knowing, and move away from knowing as exemplified in the stupidly creative practice of making theatrical performance.

There are conventionally two primary discursive processes in ethnographic practice that I have experimented with in my research method: the writing down of fieldnotes as data collection and the writing up of conclusions based on that data. Anthropological ethnographic method has historically been an empirical practice with direct historical links to processes of colonization. In colonial practice, the discursive representation written by the Western scientific-colonizer stood in for the colonized (Denzin 6). The discursive corpses generated in these ethnographies were not of dead theatrical performances but of dead people with real lives at stake. The dominance of the discursive representation over experience in the history of ethnography is completely

antithetical to my project that hopes to thwart conventionally academic methods of writing critical performance discourse. For a methodological model that still has a vested interest in this historically colonizing practice of ethnography but attempts to undo it as it is done, I turn to a danced performance ethnography written-up by Marta Savigliano. In *Angora Matta: Fatal Acts of North-South Translation/Actos Fatales De Traduccion Norte-Sur*, Savigliano troubles the entire ethnographic empiricist enterprise by deploying fiction as a critical methodological strategy. The scholarly appeal of ethnography has conventionally been that by writing down “actual fieldnotes” some truth claim to an objective, empirical reality as *the* reality can be made in the writing up (Fabian 214). By writing up her field observations on Argentinean tango in a fictional structure Savigliano draws into sharp relief the fallacy of this claim to objective reality made by those who would practice ethnography in the empirically realist tradition. Her constant fluctuation between lived experience and fiction in *Angora Matta: Fatal Acts of North-South Translation/Actos Fatales De Traduccion Norte-Sur* — part of which is written as an opera — causes the reader to interrogate on a highly critical level both notions, and particularly how they are shaped in discursive registers. Through its form it challenges the reader in a way that is not dissimilar from the way experimental theatre practice challenges spectators — potentially striking the reader stupid and opening up an intensely affective encounter.

Taking cues from ethnographic practice, I have devised a methodological approach based in the performance practices of Ann Liv Young, *Every House*

Has a Door, and SuperGroup that is specific to each based on my affective encounter with their work. In order to conduct my research of the stupid creative performance practices that Ann Liv Young, Every House Has a Door, and SuperGroup practice I entered the field of performance as it is in process. With SuperGroup and Every House Has A Door I sat and observed their collaborative practices and interactions as they created their performance work in rehearsals and workshops. I often felt stupidly intrusive in their process as I attempted to be present with them, and attended to their work. I experienced the awkward feeling of being an outsider in the room, and stupidly in the way. I had to constantly renegotiate my position as participant-observer to not interfere or disrupt their work that was being generated through their own intentionally disruptive practice. My presence in the room, however, has to be overtly marked in the writing of their work so as not to claim a false sense of objectivity. I took fieldnotes on discussions they had in process, bodily movements and actions they made in process, and other material details about the settings and atmospheres of the spaces they worked in that they may or may not acknowledge as contributing directly or indirectly to their creative work. I also engaged in both formal and informal conversations with the artists, asking questions about the way they view their own work and the processes that led them to it. In this way I treated the process of making the performances with as much care and attention as the “finished” performances themselves.

My encounter with Ann Liv Young's process followed a different trajectory than with the other two groups. Instead of tracking the processes that led to the creation of her performance, I more carefully tracked the aftermath of her performance through online blogs, reviews, and video documentation. If theatrical performance is considered as a process, then that process is not fully contained within the moment of cohesion into the "actual" performance from lights up to lights down. The theatrical occurrence exceeds the spatial and temporal boundaries that mark it as a performance as it bleeds into the everyday lives of the spectators who were present. I relied on these archival documents in an attempt to access the real-time or "live" experience of the spectators that were present. This allowed me to not have the awkward experience of being an outsider in the room and obtrusive to her work, and yet it provided another awkward experience of a kind of scholarly voyeurism as I watched her performance from afar without her knowing I was watching. The distance between her and I has played a major factor in how the chapter written of her work has been shaped, and will be discussed shortly.

### **A Final Re-cap and Brief Introduction of the Chapters To Come**

Rather than try to objectively write the performances that are my case-studies into this discourse and in an effort to minimize the critical violence done to them, I have instead stupidly written my relationship as critic and the shifts in my own subjective position instigated by them into this text. In this way, each

chapter takes its own form because the relationship between the performers, performances and my subjective repositioning in response to each performance was different. My stupid reimagining of myself was specific to the affective encounter with each. The writerly “I’s” struggle to stabilize itself is made visible by the persistence of this “I” to be heard through my writerly voice even as the following forms that each of the case-study chapters takes is markedly different from one another. For each of these case-study chapters I will experimentally write an ethnography that is formally tailored to the work of the artists and their relationship to spectators. In this way, my research sites are not only the theatrical performance works of the artists, but also my stupid writing of them that affectively colludes along beside them.

Ann Liv Young is a choreographer and performance artist and has made work in New York City for over ten years. She is originally from North Carolina, has studied at the Laban Center for Movement and Dance in London, and at Hollins University where she earned her degree. The dance program at Hollins is known for its rigor under the guidance of Donna Faye Burchfield. Other notable choreographers to come out of the program include Shani Nwando Ikerioha Collins and Jillian Peña. Burchfield, however, has called Ann Liv Young, “the hardest working student she ever met” (Kourlas). New York critics have drawn comparisons between Ann Liv Young’s sexually explicit work and the work of other female performance artists like Karen Finley and Penny Arcade. Ann Liv Young’s deliberately imprecise but rigorous work follows two different trajectories:

group choreographed pieces and solo performances as her alter performance ego Sherry. In the chapter written of her work I creatively respond to digital recordings of one of her solo pieces—*Sherry vs. P.S. 1*. In this performance, Ann Liv Young aggressively disrupts the implicit contract between performer and spectator through sexually explicit tactics, stupidly amateurish failures at representation, and direct address of the audience, which directly and explicitly implicates them as witnesses to all she does. Her performance opened a stupid rift in the performance space that prompted P.S. 1—who attributes their actions to a concern with safety—to cut off the electricity in a censorious action that brought the lights down on her with six minutes of her allotted performance time remaining.

In direct response to her request for feedback at the end of this Sherry performance, I've written of Ann Liv Young's work in the form of a letter that has been sent to her via the U.S. postal service. The letter is a textual representation that at one and the same time forms her and me in its syntax, and acknowledges that we are never captured in the text as departure and destination points that the letter travels between. As her performance work breaks the implicit contract that establishes the performer/spectator economy, so too does the chapter written as a letter break the implicit contract between critic and reader. It is a convention of scholarship to imagine a collective reader that is addressed as the audience of the criticism, but typically it is not so specific as one person. Even an open-letter is written to an imagined audience that is actually being addressed in the feigned

response to one person. My chapter here, however, is written for an intended audience of one. In this way, your voyeuristic eavesdropping on our epistolary conversation may put you at an affective risk of stupid frustration as I refuse to address you directly as you read.

In 2009, after devising nine original works and gaining much critical acclaim, the performance collaborative Goat Island disbanded. Former Goat Island company members Matthew Goulish and Lin Hixson went on to form a new company called Every House Has a Door. It is part of Every House Has a Door's mission "to retain Goat Island's narrow thematic focus and rigorous presentation, but to broaden the canvas to include careful intercultural collaboration, and its unfamiliar, even awkward, spectrum" ([www.everyhousehasdoor.org](http://www.everyhousehasdoor.org)). The unfamiliar and the awkward zone of the collaborative spectrum is also where my stupid interest in their work falls. In February of 2011 Every House Has a Door presented their first full-length performance in the U.S at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago—having already presented the work in September 2010 in Rijeka, Croatia. *Let us think of these things always. Let us speak of them never.* was devised with two Croatian collaborators—Selma Banich and Mislav Cavajda—and three U.S. collaborators—Stephen Fiehn along with Lin Hixson and Matthew Goulish. This project was the first time that this particular group of people worked on a performance piece together, and they worked on it for about two years in which they would meet two weeks at a time in workshop residencies. *Let us think of*

*these things always. Let us speak of them never.* draws on the films of Ingmar Bergman and Dusan Makavejev as source material, as well as an essay by Stanley Cavell. One of the early generative prompts that Hixson assigned the group of collaborators was to think about the question, “Where does performance emerge?” The piece itself asks, and performs the question, “Where does performance end?” Attempting to answer these ultimately unanswerable questions that blur the realms of ordinary and extra-ordinary affect will be taken up in the chapter dedicated to and written in proximity of *Every House Has a Door*.

Central to *Every House Has a Door*'s process is the encounter between Lin and Matthew with some other artist collaborators. In making *Let us think of these things always. Let us speak of them never.* the specific encounter revealed the problem of cross-cultural communication and engaging in collaborative dialog. The problem was eventually overcome by relating to what they have identified as an equidistant third entity. The equidistant third entity between the United Statesians and the Croatians working on *Let us think of these things always. Let us speak of them never.* became the work of Ingmar Bergman. They arrived at Bergman as the equidistant third entity by encountering an essay by Stanley Cavell that talked about the Yugoslavian filmmaker Dusan Makavejev, who assembled his own unmade Bergman film. In this way the cross cultural creative dialog was facilitated by this encounter with the essay by Cavell. Dealing with their notion of equidistant third entities, in this chapter I arrange text

in three columns, the two poles being myself, and my discursive formation of Every House Has a Door and the third space between us shaped by that which we share in common at an equal distance.

SuperGroup is comprised of three graduates from NYU's Experimental Theatre Wing and one graduate from the dance program at Skidmore College, NY. They all returned to their hometown of Minneapolis after their studies were completed. In one of their early performances each of the four members of SuperGroup was costumed with a specific color and these color distinctions have lingered on past the performance where they first appeared. Jeff Wells is Orange. Erin Search-Wells is Pink. Sam Johnson is Green. Byrd Shuler is Blue. It is their second full-length devised work called *Shouldwetitleitnoworwait* that will serve as a case study for this project. *Shouldwetitleitnoworwait* debuted in February of 2010 at the Southern Theatre in Minneapolis presented as part of an evening of performance titled *New Breed*. The Southern's website described the *New Breed* event as:

Three new works, presented by three innovative local performance groups that blur the lines between dance, performance art and theater. Not easily defined, Lamb Lays with Lion, Mad King Thomas and SuperGroup challenge the norm and stand testament to the vibrancy of Minneapolis' next wave of experimental performance, revealing a new breed on the local and national stage.

The four members of SuperGroup function as performer/collaborators with no director or other hierarchical decision-making structure. In projects they worked on prior to *Shouldwetitleitnoworwait* they found that the only way decisions were

made was by group consensus. As they began work on *Shouldwetitleitnoworwait* they wanted to practice a collaborative process without a primary decision maker that did not leave group consensus as the only way to make decisions, and allowed each of them to follow their individual artistic drives. The solution they came up with was to divide the creative work into four major aspects: music/sound, text, movement and design. Each of them would be responsible for one of these aspects and they would have final decision-making authority over their assigned aspect. Jeff/Orange was responsible for music. Byrd/Blue was responsible for design. Sam/Green was responsible for movement. Erin/Pink was responsible for text. The decisions made did not have to be shared with the other three members of the group until the final phase and months of the development of the project. This deliberate lack of communication early in the process meant that each held some knowledge about one aspect of the performance they were making, but then remained intentionally stupid about the other three aspects.

As chance played such an instrumental role in creating *Shouldwetitleitnoworwait* it factored prominently in my process writing of the chapter on SuperGroup. The Southern Theatre gave them forty performance minutes, so I wrote forty pages of fits and starts in no carefully pre-determined or particular linear narrative order. These fits and starts are divided into four aspects: my field observations of SuperGroup's process, citations from theoretical and historical materials, my own commentary about SuperGroup's

work, and Misc. Once I generated these fits and starts, I numbered each fragment and used a random number generator to order them. To define a bit more structure for the chapter, I added a skeletal conclusion that these fits and starts interrupt or are interrupted by throughout the chapter.

In place of a conclusion, I offer some stupid after thoughts that turn both outward, and inward from the register of theatrical performance practice. The outward turn attempts to address some of the implicit stakes of this project for the world outside of the theatre, and I think through the productive stupidity of the Occupy Wall Street Movement that erupted during the course of writing this dissertation. The inward turn allows me a moment of critical self-reflection to assess the project and the possibilities it managed to open up, or foreclose even further as I attempt to resist conventional scholarly procedures and protocols. I am stupidly attempting to find the possible in the impossible: the impossibility of knowing what a body is, of knowing what affect is, and of knowing anything at all.

## **Chapter Two: Dear Ann Liv Young**

December 27, 2011

Ann Liv Young  
292 Pacific Ave Apt. 2  
Jersey City, NJ 07304

Dear Ann Liv Young (or should I address Sherry?),<sup>8</sup>

### **Introductions Are In Order**

Hello. I am writing you and/or Sherry this letter in an attempt to rethink the way the relationships between artist and critic, and art and criticism are performed through writing. The way I am attempting to rethink this relationship is by using stupidity as a method, and taking my performance cues for how to do this from stupid theatrical performance work. I'm writing in response to your 2010 Sherry performance that has come to be known as *Sherry Vs. P.S.1*. Sherry has been described by Claudia La Rocco of the *New York Times* as your "outré persona, a trashy Southern blonde who never met a confrontation she didn't like" ("Provocative Artist"). In this 2010 performance at P.S.1 you and/or Sherry appeared to be censored by the contemporary art museum when the electricity running your sound and lights was turned off with 5 or 6 minutes of your allotted performance time still remaining. The cause for the lights being turned off

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<sup>8</sup> I would like to note that when I have a submitted draft of this chapter I will then transcribe the typed document into my own handwriting and mail it to Ann Liv Young. Everything that appears in the typed chapter will be in this handwritten version, with the exception of this footnote, and I will update the date depending on when the transcription happens. In this way I am imagining the typed version as a rehearsal for the performance of the handwriting.

remains unclear. Some spectators and commentators have suggested it was because of the fight that erupted and escalated between you and Georgia Sagri—the Greek-born female performance artist who performed immediately before you—while others assume the lights went off due to the sexually explicit nature of your performance. Throughout the course of the performance you stripped naked, masturbated and urinated into a dish that was accidentally spilled all over the floor as you attempted to sell the urine for one thousand dollars after the lights were turned off. I was not in attendance at the live performance, but I have seen the digital video recording of the performance both on the internet—a facebook friend of mine reposted a video of the performance a day or two after it happened—and on a DVD that I purchased from your website. I am responding to the prompt you shouted in the dark before you left the performance space, “If you have any questions or concerns *or criticism* or feedback about my work for me and Thomas please e-mail us cause we take everything into consideration” (*Sherry* emphasis added). I’m writing to tell you that your performance was censored because it was stupid and struck the spectators stupid.

Please don’t take offense to the invocation of the word stupidity in relation to your creative work. As the cultural theorist Avital Ronell has pointed out in her book *Stupidity*, while we tend to think of the word as the “ur-curse” it also can, “body-snatch intelligence, disguise itself, or, indeed, participate in the formation of certain types of intelligence with which it tends to be confused” (10). I’ve been trying to work through my own definition of stupidity and how I see it working in

contemporary theatrical performance as a way of thinking that disrupts calcified normalizing knowledge structures. I will try to give you a thumbnail idea of how stupidity relates to your work, and why I'm investing in it as a method to write of performances like your *Sherry Vs. P.S. 1* performance.

The performance work you make does not assume an authoritative and knowing position on the stage. It attempts to mimetically represent or reflect a reality that exists outside itself only so that it may fail at this attempt. It persistently acknowledges and performs its own displacement between itself and anything it fails to represent. Your failure is made evident through your Sherry performances where you do very little to encourage spectators to suspend their disbelief, and imagine that you are the character embedded in a narrative behind some fictionalized fourth wall. You put on an obviously fake blonde wig, a blue dress, call yourself Sherry, but your acting fails to convince. These acting techniques add up to little more than holding a placard in front of yourself that has "Sherry" written on it. You do perform under the pretense of character, however, so this failure of becoming the character itself takes center stage as you collaboratively devise your performances improvisationally in real time with the spectators. The performance theatre scholar Sara Jane Bailes has argued that failure does not have to be a negative outcome of a devised performance event, but can be what constitutes the event. "Failure *works*," Bailes emphasizes, and also suggests that representational failure stupidly, "challenges the cultural dominance of instrumental rationality and the fictions of continuity that bind the

way we imagine and manufacture the world” (2). Your work hesitates and fails in its claims—if it makes any claims at all. The formal tactics of your performances enact the inability to conclusively know anything about anything. I’m attempting to in some way imagine stupidity as a method that embraces the inconclusive, the unproductive, and the useless through its multiple repeated failures at coherence. Failing to understand stupidity may be, however—perhaps paradoxically—extremely necessary to our experience of contemporary life. Attempting to understand but failing to do so may be necessary because such processes of stupidity are rife with affective potentials for other ways of unthought and unimagined ways of becoming in the world. As the theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht, “once noted that intelligence is finite, but stupidity, infinite” (Ronell 43). Intelligence runs up against a limit of what can be thought, while stupidity trips over the limit and falls on its face beyond it.

A similar failure of representation that stupidly takes center-stage in your Sherry performance is always at work in any act of criticism where written words attempt to stand in for something they are not. Scholarly writing often tries to keep this failure waiting in the wings and obscure it under the guise of knowledge production. The fraught relationship between performing bodies and methods for responding to them through writing is revealed through the problems and failures of translating or transmogrifying performing bodies—stupid or otherwise—into texts. The writing about the performance is never the performance itself. The performance studies scholar Peggy Phelan has theorized this problem in her

book *Unmarked: the politics of performance* where she has written, “To attempt to write about the undocumentable event of performance is to invoke the rules of the written document and thereby alter the event itself. [...] so too must performance critics realize that the labor to write about performance (and thus to ‘preserve’ it) is also a labor that fundamentally alters the event” (148). That displaced alteration between the thing and the textual representation of the thing is a place for stupidity to multiply and assert itself. I have not only acknowledged that displacement, but have tried to place it at the discursive center of my critical method. As I write this letter to you, it is not the you who will read this letter, but stupidly my discursive formation of you—no matter how thick my description I can never get you and your performance art on the page. Likewise, I can never write me onto the page either. Again, quoting Phelan, “To doubt the subject seized by the eye is to doubt the subjectivity of the seeing ‘I’” (1). The “I” of this letter is as suspect as the “you” and they are mutually constituted through failure: your failure in performance and mine in writing of your performance. Following your lead, I will continue to perform behind my own Brechtian placard that reads “critic,” and play my discursive role. I am failing with each word that I write to you, but stupidly continue along. I am directly addressing the you that I doubt I can ever address through writing.

Even though the vast majority of theatre and performance scholars agree that live performance is a way to know something about the world, knowledge is still legitimated in the U.S. Academic institution primarily through, and as writing.

There have been several scholars, however, from the artistic disciplines of dance, art history, and performance studies—I could name Susan Leigh Foster, Amelia Jones, and Diana Taylor as one representative example from each discipline—who have made convincing arguments in recent years for the epistemological role the body plays in processes of knowledge formation. They have formed their arguments about the knowing-body by elaborating on interventions made throughout the history of feminist literary criticism. The French poet, professor of feminist philosophy, and experimental writer Hélène Cixous argued in her influential 1975 essay “The Laugh Of Medusa” that the co-dependent relationship between knowledge and writing exists, is based in an unequal historical distribution of power across genders, and should be destabilized. She argues for a writing that accounts for the particular body that writes it through a bodily writing practice.

In modernist terms, following the dominant tradition of the Cartesian notion of subjectivity, there is a duplicitous understanding of the body—men *have* a body, while women *are* their body. The body that writes, even a male body, is associated with the feminine. For men the body is a servile supplement in excess of the masterfully rational mind. This positions the body as an excess of rationality, and for women—in this schema—conflated as they are with their bodies they are instantiated as all irrational excess. Therefore the writing body throughout modernity has historically been obscured, ignored, veiled, and subjugated by textual production as knowledge under the domain of the

masculine rational mind. Cixous makes note of the relationship between rationality and writing in her feminist critique “The Laugh of Medusa” where she writes, “Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis.” (31). Cixous along with other feminists, and postmodern theorists, have repeatedly critiqued the Cartesian formulation of subjectivity and its fallout within textual modes of knowledge production. In fact, Amelia Jones argues that the dislocation of the Cartesian subject is “the most profound transformation constitutive of what we have come to call postmodernism” (*Body Art* 1). The self-validating subject secure in the knowledge of itself still arguably remains, however, as a dominant organizing principle across many disciplines within the U.S. Academy that continue to struggle with practicing another approach to subjective knowledge. Theatrical performance art as a bodily practice then, at least according to the dominant constraints of the phallo-лого-centric U.S. Academy, is always already operating outside of the masculinized realm of reason and textual knowledge production. If this schema remains unperturbed, then the feminized body gets incorporated into the rational realm when it is written up through the effects and support of texts, and therefore violently de-feminized. In this gendered formulation, the body—male or female or otherwise—as excess to rationality remains stubbornly stupid and outside of knowledge registers. Rather than trying to violently incorporate your bodily practices into knowledge, I am trying to disrupt conventional discourse and stupidly write along

beside them in a discursive embrace of desire that short circuits knowledge production and opens up intensely affective potentials similarly to your work.

Artist and scholar Simon O'Sullivan echoes a belief in the stupid possibilities of contemporary art I have expressed when he writes, "Art, it seems to me, might be better thought of as an event that interrupts knowledge—that breaks information. In fact, art is one of the very few things we have left that is able to creatively make this break" ("Stutter" 250). This breaking of knowledge is linked to Phelan's insistence that writing alters the performance event, and that performance events are resistant to documentation. Writing as the vessel of knowledge breaks down when it tries to capture performance. I can't really conclusively say how knowledge is interrupted or what stupidity is because each time I know something about it, I form it in language, alter it, and then leave it behind. That continual flux between knowing and non-knowing seems fecund. I'm trying to reveal and extend that fecundity by writing *of* performances like yours that interrupt knowledge(s) and break information, rather than *about* them. In this way my writing intends to interrupt knowledge with thought on the move instead of producing it as a fixed object.

I should reveal that this letter to you is also part of my dissertation project. Within my own discourse of academic scholarship, writing a dissertation chapter in the form of a letter addressed to the object of study is not the dominant mode of production. But even in the disciplines of theatre and performance studies writing in some form, and not performance, is the dominant scholarly modality

through which knowledge is produced. As I contemplated how to write of your work, you presented me with a solution at the end of your *Sherry Vs. P.S. 1* performance where you ask for comments and feedback to be written to you. Your request kept the performance open for a continued response so it didn't cohere into any kind of cathartic closure with any potential "ends" of the performance—either the lights coming down, your exit from the performance space, or the eventual dispersal of the spectators back into their everyday lives. The performance would remain open waiting for an unknown amount of direct responses. My criticism taking the form of this letter volleys the performance back to you through my own creative critical response that is enacted through my performance as critic. My hope is that you will return the serve and this performance will continue to dance along these circuits of call and response.

I have accessed your performance work through documents, and I have not encountered you directly in the face-to-face field of ethnographic research, but I am still drawing on critical performance ethnography as a methodological basis for my write-up of your performance work. Performance ethnography is a writing method obsessively concerned with the question of how to transmogrify lived experience into writing. Critical performance ethnographers have argued against the distinction I mentioned previously between performance and writing, and they view writing itself as performance. The Cultural Studies scholar and critical ethnographer Norman K. Denzin has suggested that in our contemporary moment of global capitalism where all experiences are mediated "everything is

already performative” and the lines between “person and character, between performer and actor, between stage and setting, between script and text, and between performance and performativity” have blurred or even “disappeared” altogether (26). The writing process itself becomes marked as performance through self-reflexive tactics and autoethnography. Through my writerly performance I am able to dance alongside your staged performance in a melding of forms, and yet simultaneously acknowledge that my writing performance is not your theatrical performance that will always remain elusive to this text. We meet at a point where performance cannot quite become text, even as I try to make it so, and where text cannot quite become performance, even as I mark it so. We meet in this letter as the space between a you that is not you and an I that is not I and a performance that is not a performance and a text that is not a text.

It is my hope that in writing you this letter we can begin performing a conversation. It is my hope that this critical monologue will become a dialog. Even though I was not present at the live *Sherry Vs. P.S.1* event, I’m an observer from afar who is trying to participate actively by writing you this letter. The performance ethnographer Dwight Conquergood has described five “performative stances” that an ethnographer can take as they write their ethnographic subjects into discourse (5). He charts a “moral map” and places four of these stances in problematic territory: the “custodian’s rip off,” the “enthusiasts infatuation,” the “curator’s exhibitionism,” and the “skeptic’s cop-out” (5). Squarely (or rectangley if you ever see the chart) in the middle of these lies the stance that opens up the

most possibility of “genuine conversation” and that is the stance of the dialogical performer (5). In this way, writing itself does become a kind of performance and blurs the performance/written-knowledge distinction—the binary becomes untenable. Following Conquergood’s schematic, the custodial and skeptical positions both are shaped by their detachment between the ethnographer and their research subject. This letter is attempting to abolish and close the distance between us—even as it generates gaps between us and the representations of us written into it. It constantly, and repetitively marks itself as a stupid failure. I have to take care to strike a balance between the remaining two stances if I hope to open this dialog with you through this performance autoethnography. I cannot appear too enthusiastic to identify with you (even as I attempt to borrow your creative performance tactics to help shape my critical response to your work). Nor can I put you on display like a wild animal captured. Conquergood writes that, “Instead of bringing us into genuine contact (and risk) with the lives of strangers,” the curatorial performance mode shapes others as, “exhibits, mute and staring” (7). By writing this letter as a direct address to you, and answering your call in the recorded performance, I hope to establish a back and forth between us that does not leave you muted by my discourse.

By addressing the you that exists outside of this letter I am directly addressing, and marking the fact that a you *does* exist outside of this letter. I am not trying to write the last word and have final say on the matter. The letter responds to you, and then opens and asks for another response from you. It

remains open in stupid conversation instead of closed into a knowledge product where I, as the critic, tell you, as the artist (and a broader audience of informed readers that I imagine) what your work means. Instead, I'm hoping to open a space where we can stupidly think through it together.

Your *Sherry* performances open up and sustain the affective moment of possibility by embracing, and indulging stupidity as an aspect of creative process. Your work is not unique in its ability to open this affective encounter. In fact, any thing—art thing or non-art thing—that touches another thing—art thing or non-art thing—generates affect. Your performances, however, dislodge knowledge formations with such ferocious intensity that they not only touch me, but *strike* me stupid. As I encounter your performances-as-things the process of affective closure into knowledge structures is prolonged, and the intensity of affective touch becomes more strikingly forceful. You knock the sense out of me, and then when meaning is evacuated something else rushes in. In that process—in that influx of that something else that is thought-on-the-move and is not linked to conclusive knowledge—lays possibilities that if I could name would no longer be what they are. I can only ever hope to stupidly point in their direction as I stand or sit or walk beside them. Performance scholar James Thompson stresses the beside-ness of research methods as opposed to the top-down perspectival view that pins research subjects to the page like insects to a display case. He writes, “Rather than being masters of the work, insisting on a horizontal method for researching performance affects ensures an examination of ‘systems of

possibilities' rather than assertions of certainties" (134). I hope that brief description of how I'm uncertainly and stupidly thinking and writing of your performance work and the stupid possibilities it opens will smooth over any offense taken by invoking the ur-curse in relation to your performance work.

My encounter with your performance work has caused my thinking to spiral outward from it—thought on the move that has failed to cohere. After seeing the facebook video of *Sherry Vs. P.S. 1* I sought out other recordings of your performance work. I have found similarly striking stupid tactics at work in all of your performances I've seen—*American Crane Standards*, *Melissa is a Bitch*, *Solo in Utrecht*, *The Bagwell in Me*, and *Snow White*—and read reviews that indicate stupid tactics working in others—*Cinderella* and the *Mermaid Show*. These stupid tactics include: sexually explicit actions or nudity in some combination with your successful failures at acting, rigorously choreographed amateurish dancing, off-key and out-of-tune karaoke style singing, predictably unpredictable direct confrontations with spectators, toilet humor and body functions of all kinds, repetitious patter that goes on and on and on and on and on and doesn't lead anywhere, technical malfunctions of all sorts, and simultaneously aggressive and vulnerable self-deprecation. These tactics make it appear as if your performances are always on the verge of falling apart, and yet they don't quite because that falling apart is what constitutes the performance itself. Susan Leigh Foster, following the concept as the philosopher Michel De Certeau produced it, identifies tactics as gestures enacted in the trenches of

everyday life that resist and loosen the seemingly iron-clad grasp of panoptical institutional structures and strategies that restrict possibilities. Foster writes, “Tactics have no goal beyond the sometimes playful, always critical exposure of the workings of the normative. However, in order to seize effectively the force of the strategic and suspend momentarily its influence, tacticians must assess the direction and flow of force and devise moves that incapacitate power, at the same time revealing its usual path” (“Unnatural” 6). As you stage the failure of performance through stupid tactics you challenge the audience to rethink what performance is, and reestablish their relationship to performance. This causes a similar mind-scramble to that experienced by spectators who first encountered toilet humor of another kind with Duchamp’s *Urinal*. How do they read and understand your stupid performances as performance? How do they read you as Ann Liv Young/Sherry, not-Ann Liv Young/not-Sherry? How is the disruptive nature of a work of art amplified when the artwork is not an object like a urinal but a subject/object like another performing body?

The performance of your body that has come to be known as *Sherry Vs. P.S.1* was censored because you tactically opened a stupid rift in the museum space that threatened the inherited and dominant understandings of the role of art and the artist from within the strategic institutional frame of the art museum. This rift was largely opened through performance tactics that you deploy that are grounded in disruptions of spectators’ gender performance knowledges. *Sherry Vs. P.S.1* challenged the spectators, the museum, other artists, and critics—me

included—to reevaluate and rethink our own normative knowledge formations as your performance stupidly failed to enlighten, and imploded into literal darkness.

### **The Stupid Body of this Stupid Letter**

*When I use the term body here I am referring, in the most basic sense, to that condition of not knowing, which results in the conflict between what we undeniably are and yet remain distanced from.*

--Jane Blocker from *What the Body Cost*

In addition to this letter, the failure of thought to cohere in relation to the February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010 Sherry performance at P.S. 1 is evidenced by the flurry of online chatter that it instigated. The New York performance art scene blogosphere lit up with the question: were you censored or were you not? If you were censored, what does that say about the relationship between P.S. 1 and performance art? The only statement to come from P.S. 1 regarding this matter was reposted online by Claudia La Rocco three days after your performance. It reads: “The decision by the Director of P.S.1 to curtail the performances near the end of Saturday Sessions was made to safeguard the audience, performers, and P.S.1 staff from an escalating and potentially volatile situation. The performers' actions were not previously discussed with or planned by P.S.1” (qtd. in La Rocco “P.S.1 Responds”). Was P.S. 1 genuinely concerned about audience safety, as their official statement claims? What was the danger to audience, performers, and staff instigated by your performance that was part of the cabaret event *Brooklyn is Burning* hosted by P.S.1?

Sarvia Jasso, one of the curators of the *Brooklyn is Burning* event, addressed the censorship issue by writing and posting a comment in response to La Rocco's online article. Jasso suggests that before jumping to accusations of censorship, "the framework (content and context) for any ensuing discussions should take into account the complexities of experiencing a live performance within an institution, instead of jumping to the conclusion that the impetus for removing power during the event originated in an attempt at censoring the performers" (La Rocco "Censored at P.S.1"). Jasso goes on to point out that no one was asked to leave and all of the performances that were planned did occur, even if perhaps not exactly to plan. And in the dark, of course. She also suggests that to call the actions of the museum against you censorship would lead to a "self-serving mythology with its own inertia" that would downplay the total *Brooklyn is Burning* event. Presumably you are the self being served here, but Jasso doesn't name you specifically. The framework that she suggests should be taken into account, that of the relationship between the institution of the museum and the work of the artist who has been invited to perform there, does nothing to dislodge the understanding of the lights being turned off as anything other than censorship. In fact, to consider it specifically in those terms makes the claim that it was censorship even more clear. Turning lights off on a group of strangers assembled in a strange place with strange things happening is not a move made in the interest of physical safety. The key phrase of P.S.1's statement to understand why the lights were turned off is not the opening bit

about safety, but instead the final part that reads, “The performers' actions were not previously discussed with or planned by P.S.1.” The performance could not bear P.S.1’s sanctioning stamp of institutional approval, and so it became a threat to the normalizing structures of artistic order. Your Sherry performance becomes a highly visible instance of the power of the performance artist as a perceived threat to institutional power, and how instantaneously the institution can reestablish itself as the arbiter of what will, or will not become intelligible as art. In Jasso’s words, the institution “removing power” from the artist appeared as easy as flipping a switch and killing the electricity. Of course, you did not disappear silently into the darkness, but continued to move and speak in the undiscussed and unplanned manner that brought the lights down on you to begin with. A “potentially volatile situation” became an actualized volatile performance made even more volatile by adding the dangerous element of darkness.

In this moment of institutionally imposed darkness we see illuminated the constant re-negotiation and re-enactment of power that theorist Judith Butler has articulated in her seminal, and oft-quoted, work *Bodies That Matter*. Butler writes, “For one is, as it were, in power even as one opposes it, formed by it as one reworks it, and it is this *simultaneity* that is at once the condition of our partiality, the measure of our *political unknowingness*, and also the condition of action itself. The *incalculable effects* of action are as much a part of their subversive promise as those that we plan in advance” (241, emphasis mine). You fully embrace the incalculable effects that you cannot possibly plan in

advance, as you later told an interviewer regarding the P.S. 1 performance, “It was a terrific show and I didn’t even really make it, just guided it” (“This Better Be Decent”). Likewise during the performance, in the dark and with electricity no longer reaching your microphone you shouted, “You tried to sabotage my show, well it ain’t possible. Come on, seriously is there something wrong? That little European girl (Sagri) went and pulled the plug. Didn’t she? That’s okay though, because you know what? We can withstand pain because you know what? Art is sometimes about confronting women and other people that are not as strong as me and you, okay?” (*Sherry*). While Sagri left the space, the majority of the other spectators stayed strong in the dark watching what they could not see and listening to what they could barely hear—without electrical amplification—until you were finished performing. This action on your part demonstrates the simultaneity of circuits of power between artists and institutions that mutually constitute each other. Power was not concentrated in the institution to such an extent that it could unilaterally silence and suppress you. Likewise, you were not able to resist the museum’s actions so absolutely that the lights came back on. The relationship and production of power between you and the institution became visible as a complex negotiation that didn’t easily cohere into a power that is as easy to control or resist as direct electrical current. Instead the workings of power were revealed as alternating currents that continually fluctuate between tactics that disrupt strategic structures, the regulatory measures of those

structures, and the incalculable effects that delivered on the subversive promise of your actions.

Sarvia Jasso's focus on her own stakes in the event as curator, and her desire to maintain relationships with P.S. 1 and her audience-base are revealed by her concern that censoring your work would obscure the larger event. Her comment also reveals her compassionate desire to protect the other artists that she invited to be part of this event from being cast as minor players in your leading drama. The video artist Julia Oldham participated in an earlier portion of the *Brooklyn is Burning* event, and described it on her blog the next day. She called the *Brooklyn is Burning* event "one of the most emotionally charged art events" she ever attended, described your work as "raw and aggressive" and a "strange kind of focal point" of the evening, and noted that, "I don't yet know how to wrap my head around the attack on a fellow artist." Oldham reports that you were third in the performance line-up and once power was cut it did not come back on for the final performer. This refusal of the museum to turn the lights back on meant that Morty Diamond, who performed after you, also had to perform in the dark. Instead of threatening his performance piece with obscurity, however, the disruption you caused that brought the lights down highlighted his performance. Oldham called Diamond's performance the "emotional climax of the night" as she described the audience coming together to use the light from their cell phones to illuminate Diamond's naked body as he performed a call and response piece that, "focused on an intimate look at his body and his questions

about gender.” Diamond could not have known that the lights were going to be turned off in response to your piece and thereby bringing him into an even more intimate engagement with his audience than he had planned. The stupid disruption you instigated spread like contagion to the performance that followed you, and affective possibilities to tactically shape and alter the relationship between performer and spectator manifested in the cell-phone lit collaboration that ensued. Jasso is right that both Sagri and Diamond may have gotten swept up in the myth-making of your stupid performance, but without your stupid disruption there may have been no myth to make at all.

Paradoxically, by grounding your performance in failure and indulging in stupid tactics your Sherry performance at P.S. 1 successfully performed what both Sagri’s and Diamond’s performances knowingly attempted to do—expose the workings of representation and raise questions about gender. Writers for Artnet.com were still writing about the *Sherry Vs. P.S. 1* incident several months later in Sept. of 2010. They reported that, “Sagri’s ‘Jane’ performance is expressly designed to examine the loss of identity in media culture” (“Young vs. Sagri”). Artnet.com quotes Sagri in the same write-up saying that her piece was “actually commenting on all these character fashions, and the image industry that eliminates the person and creates brands.” Like your performance as Sherry, Sagri’s performance involved her putting on a character as well. Sagri entered as Jane and repeatedly asked, “Where’s Georgia?” Jane said that Sagri would not be showing up and that Jane had an announcement to make in her stead.

Jane never made the announcement, or had she? The announcement that Sagri was a no-show was itself the announcement. Sagri attempted to mark the failure of representation through the distance she performed between herself and her “Jane” brand, but she did not risk that failure herself. She had already thought through the performance and presented her knowledge about the failure of representation and identity. It was all thought out, and performed to plan. She represented the failure instead of orchestrating an occurrence that allowed the possibility for the representation to somehow fail in an unpredictable and unknown way.

Your performance as Sherry, however, got away from you. Although it never can quite get away because it getting away from you is how it fails, and it is through its failure that it works. You entered the performance space, and began your Sherry performance by asking the audience if they knew who you were. You did not expect them to say, “Ann Liv Young”, but the expected response was “Sherry.” A key distinction for what followed. You clearly don’t disappear into the character of Sherry, but neither are you speaking as Ann Liv Young. You purposefully play with this role-playing aspect of performance in your Sherry work—the veneer of character that allows you to simultaneously occupy the dual persona of you and Sherry-not-you. The persistent tension between those two positions causes a non-coherency of identity.

You directly engage spectators and open your performance to the unpredictable unknown that they enact as they devise the performance with you.

This already marks a difference in your approach and Sagri's desire to over-determine the spectators' reaction to her work. You did not offer your own or Sherry's opinion about Sagri's work first. You began by opening a dialog, and asked the spectators what they thought. Several of them had a positive reaction to Sagri's piece, and you did not argue with them. You did, however, express your own opinion through your Sherry veneer when you remarked that Sagri's performance, "was just plain terrible" (*Sherry*). You went on to lambast Sagri's performance further and said, "First of all, I don't give a fuck where Jane or Georgia are" (*Sherry*). Sagri did not appreciate this part of your performance aimed at her work and she made it known by vocally interrupting your performance. Even after her performance was over she was still trying to over-determine the reception of it by not allowing your critique of it to be the last thing the spectators would hear on the matter. You then offered to have a discussion with her in front of the audience, so that she could address your complaints. She refused to engage in the open dialog with you, and instead chose to heckle you. Her and her partner shouted, "You're shit" as you performed (*Sherry*).

Sagri and her partner persisted in heckling you once you had moved on from discussing her piece, and you presumably returned to the performance you had planned to present—your banal patter that involved discussing current events like the recent orca whale attack at Sea World, and singing and dancing to a pop song through a series of technical difficulties. It was taking you a few minutes to start the song and dance because the music was not loud enough.

These kinds of technical difficulties have become a hallmark of your performances and because of your embrace of failure it is difficult to discern—and therefore irrelevant—if they are intentional or not. Sagri and her partner, however, would not let you move on with your presentation and continued to show their dissatisfaction with your work while you were in the middle of performing it. Even though you thought her work was “just plain terrible” you did not interrupt her performance of it, but used your distaste for her piece to improvisationally build a confrontation with her and the spectators that sent your piece stupidly spiraling into unknown territory from its opening moment.

The confrontational nature of your work could not be what caught P.S.1 off guard, and resulted in their censoring action of cutting the power to your performance. Within the New York performance scene—in which P.S. 1 is an active participant—your reputation for confronting other artists was confirmed in the other of your two most notorious Sherry solo performances. This other notorious Sherry piece was performed in July of 2009 at P.S. 122 where you participated in a night of performance called *Why Won't You Let me Be Great!!!* The event was organized by downtown contemporary performance art darling Neal Medlyn and Brendan Kennedy as a kind of tribute to Kanye West and his 2008 album *808s&Heartbreak*. Kanye was in attendance in the audience at the event. For your piece, in the character of Sherry, you responded to Kanye's song “Love Lockdown”. As Sherry, you put pork in your vagina, removed it, and then ate it as you told Kanye that you didn't think *808s* was his best work. Kanye,

“barely flinched”, and did not heckle or disrupt you as Sagri would do months later—no matter how directly confrontational or sexually explicit or stupid your performance was (“Kanye”). Kanye kept it cool.

Reminiscent of the Kanye event, you merged the directly confrontational and sexually explicit tactics of your performance practice at the 2010 P.S. 1 performance. After Sagri’s refusal to engage you in a conversation, you attempted to continue with your performance as planned/unplanned. Sagri and her female partner’s heckling escalated to the point where you dropped any pretence of going on with the performance as planned, and you asked her, “You wanna fight? Cause I’ll rip your bloody ass right in half in front of everybody and we’ll have big blood splattered walls. Wouldn’t that be some art for PS1? Wouldn’t that?” (*Sherry*). Neither Sagri nor her partner engaged in the bloody battle royale with you—and I doubt you actually wanted them too—but they continued to heckle you in an attempt to sabotage your performance. As I’ve already quoted you saying, sabotage is impossible with your work. Sabotage is impossible when you’re willing to stupidly risk complete failure. In response to their continued harassment you removed your dress. The blue dress was one of the visual markers that indicated you were inhabiting your Sherry persona, but the most important one, the obviously fake blonde wig, still remained on your head. Once totally nude you laid on the floor directly in front of Sagri and her partner with your legs spread towards them, and began to aggressively masturbate. Then you turned over on all fours with your ass facing them, and

inserted your finger into it. Here is the anti-climatic climax of the implosion of the performance and my engagement with it as a critic from afar. I say anti-climatic because after Sagri and her partner stormed away from your sexual display, and you stood up to continue with your performance a spectator shouted out to you, “Did you cum?” You pithily responded, “No. I did not” (*Sherry*). I say it is the moment of climax because it is the moment that Sagri and her partner left the space, and then the lights were shut off by P.S. 1 shortly thereafter. It was this post-climatic censoring resolution that drew me to your work, and unveils a series of problematics that revolve around writing of sexually explicit performances performed by female performance artists.

Feminist critical debates about the efficacy of sexually explicit performance art have raged for the last three decades. In the late 1980s and early 1990s the theatrical performance criticism that constructed sexually explicit feminist performance art as its object of study focused on evaluating the efficacy of the performer revealing her nude body and performing sexually explicit actions to accomplish the goal of enacting subjective female agency. Some of this scholarship was highly critical of sexually explicit performances with some feminist theatre scholars, notably Jill Dolan in her article “The Dynamics of Desire: Sexuality and Gender in Pornography and Performance”, taking the stance that nudity and sexually explicit performance tactics should be abandoned by female performance artists because of the unavoidable role that desire plays in theatrical representation. While Dolan conceded that these sexually explicit

performances could be successful in disrupting gender roles, they reinforced the oppressive flows of desire based in dominant heterosexuality. From the other feminist camp, critics like Jeanie Forte championed the transgressive possibilities of sexually explicit performances with her essay “Women’s Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism.” Still others, like Catherine Schuler in her essay “Spectator Response and Comprehension: The Problem of Karen Finley’s ‘Constant State of Desire’”, took the critical guidebook approach. In her essay, after interviewing audience members and concluding that they had missed the point that Finley was enacting her subjective position and disrupting objectifying spectatorial practices, Schuler attempted to explain through her article how the performance was working and the meaning Finley’s bodily acts generated that spectators had missed. Her criticism presumed it could provide access to the work because she had hermeneutically unlocked the meaning of it through scholarly interpretation. Her act of criticism, while arguing for Finley’s subjective enactment, turned Finley into a silent object that her (Schuler’s) criticism was speaking definitively for, as it simultaneously eliminated other possible interpretations for the spectators who Schuler argued had failed to understand.

In her 1997 book *The Explicit Body in Performance*, the performance scholar Rebecca Schneider reinvested in the transgressive possibilities of the performance work of radical female performance artists who use explicit tactics, although she cautions that acts of transgression often reinforce the right-wing status quo as something to be transgressed (4). She argued that historically in

avant-garde artistic practices transgression was possible for men to enact, while “Female transgression presented a structural impossibility—almost a double shock” (4). Schneider draws attention to the fact that just as women were starting to make radically transgressive artwork in the 1960s postmodern theorists declared transgression impossible, and that instead of transgression the postmodern stance became one of resistance to institutional power structures. Schneider posited that the explicit nature of performances by female artists, such as Carolee Schneeman, Karen Finley and Annie Sprinkle, worked to disrupt and resist the “invisible barricades which had, for so long, kept women marginalized as subject seeing, central as object seen—marginalized as artist producing, central as art produced” (38). The point that Schneider makes here is not that explicit performance somehow does or does not allow women performers agency, but rather that by performing explicit acts of transgression they draw the entire object/subject binary into question. By making the body of the artist the work of art itself, the objectified body becomes the site of subjective enactment. The binary collapses into itself. Central to Schneider’s argument is the suggestion that instead of reinforcing this oppressive binary split and claiming a subject position for the female performers, it is possible for explicit female performance artists to disrupt the binary, to puncture the invisible barricades it produces, and to disrupt or possibly over-turn or break this socially constructed knowledge set. By performing sexually explicit acts some female performance artists are able to strike spectators stupid and undermine this gender-normative

knowledge about object and subject positionality. Schneider describes this stupor as, “the terror that accompanies the dissolution of a binary habit of sense-making and self-fashioning (that) is directly proportionate to the social safety insured in the maintenance of such apparatus of sense” (13).

Perhaps it was this social safety that P.S. 1 hoped to maintain by turning off the lights on you, rather than a physical safety? You had threatened the social apparatus of sense when you lay on the floor masturbating aggressively in front of Sagri and then stuck your own finger in your own ass. In enacting these gestures your ability to claim agency was not in question. The explicit gestures were another performance of failure in that you failed to perform a normalized understanding of a sex act that was neither titillating, nor arousing but rather grotesque. Mary Russo points out in her study, *The Female Grotesque* that the phrase “female grotesque” is in danger of becoming a tautology since women are already marked as other to the norm that is men (12). She does elaborate on Mikhail Bakhtin’s notions of the grotesque, however, to indicate that a grotesque female body “is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing; it is identified with non-official ‘low’ culture or the carnivalesque, and with social transformation” (8). Within the high-art frame of the museum, your body was revealed in an unplanned and undiscussed state of openness, where it secreted urine in your simultaneously multiply-occupied personas of Ann Liv Young and Sherry. You were exceeding your own excesses and this threatened the propriety of the terror stricken spectators and the binary habits of sense-making.

Your work provoked a disorientation effect in spectators who had to rethink their understanding of your place as a woman and a performer into the apparatus of sense, as well as their own subjective positions as spectators in relation to your grotesquely performing body as object becoming subject. The effects of this affective disruption are impossible to trace in all of the spectators, but evidence of the transgressive potential of your actions as a threat to the museum is made visible by its censoring actions that sought to conceal your grotesquely performing body in darkness and reinstate the very constrained space of normalization (Russo 11).

As your performance began to implode from the very start when you asked the spectators what they thought of Sagri's piece, so too mine has been imploding since I began responding to your request for criticism. My critical performance is becoming untenable. Unlike Jill Dolan, Jeanie Forte, Rebecca Schneider, Mary Russo, or even Catherine Schuler I am not just any critic responding to your call for feedback, but I am a male critic and you are a female performance artist. In their editors' introduction to *Performing the Body/Performing the Text* art historians Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson remind that the modernist history of art criticism is grounded in the interpretative genius of the professional art critic who has conventionally been the, "heterosexual, white, Euro-American male" who "overlooks the 'unnaturalness' and the incongruities of his position as a subject (and one who desires to identify particular meanings for particular, highly invested, reasons)" (3). The question

becomes more specific than the general: how do I as a critic write of your artwork? The question becomes how do I as a heterosexual, white, Euro-American male write of your artwork? I have tried to suggest that my own understanding of myself is suspect, and I have tried to indicate the incongruities in my subject position as the writer of this text that is forming you as an object. I have offered stupidity as a way to level the playing field between writing subject and written object. I have tried to make this formally palpable by writing this critique of your work as a letter in direct response to your request for criticism. In this way, I am not imposing my thoughts and critique on you unasked, but am entering into a conversation with you that you initiated. I am ashamed to say, however, that this imposition of my thoughts—no matter how stupid—on your work is still taking place. I am still monologuing in this failed attempt at representing dialogue.

This letter enacts a discursive face-to-face encounter whereby your reading of it brings my private scholarly shame into the realm of public embarrassment. Performance scholar and theatrical director Richard Schechner has argued that nudity requires public recognition to constitute it (88). Taking Sherry's dress off in public revealed Ann Liv Young's nude body and the interactions with the spectators and P.S.1 that followed captured my scholarly desire. Your nudity and my embarrassment are linked through a public encounter that engenders them both. Theatre scholar Nicholas Ridout has argued that embarrassment, like nudity, requires recognition by an external viewer. Ridout

posits that shame is something we experience in private, but embarrassment is publically performed and “embarrassment is ashamed of itself as shame has no shame” (84). Embarrassment is shame recognized and validated by an other. Ridout relates his experience at a 2000 Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Richard II*. The actor Samuel West, who played Richard, broke the fourth wall and addressed some of his lines directly to Ridout. Ridout’s investment in Brechtian tactics aside, this moment of direct address caused Ridout to feel embarrassed. Ridout argues that embarrassment is *the* predicament of the audience in attendance at any theatrical performance event as spectators empathize not with the characters represented, but rather with the performers who are always failing to represent the thing they hope to. As Ridout puts it, “The whole edifice of theatrical representation collapses and it’s my fault for setting it up in the first place, or at least going along with the project. I feel conned and found out at one and the same time” (87). If it is possible for dialog spoken directly to an audience member by an actor trying to inhabit the dual-position of actor and actor-as-character to be cause for embarrassment, how much greater the potential for embarrassment when a female artist performing her Sherry character gets down naked on the floor and masturbates in front of a spectator? How much more embarrassing to see you fail at not only representing Sherry, but also the grotesque failure of representing some conventional notion of sexiness? How much more embarrassing is that sexually explicit act when it is part of a public dispute being carried out between performance artists in front of the

spectators who are attending their work at an art museum? How embarrassingly voyeuristic does the relationship between critic and artist become when this is a performance moment that gets criticized and written up? How embarrassing for me to fess up that both my heterosexist and critical desires were activated by this moment? I say that this letter enacts my embarrassment because as I was not in attendance at the live event, my witnessing of these explicit sexual acts could have remained private and I could have remained secluded in my shame. I also could have written behind your back, and wrote this critique as an essay that allows me to avoid the direct face-to-face discursive encounter with you. Part of Conquergood's previously quoted formula for opening genuine conversation between ethnographer and ethnographic subjects, however, is that both are brought as strangers into "genuine contact (and risk)" (7). By acknowledging my shame through this embarrassingly composed letter I hope to reveal myself as vulnerable within the aggressive act of criticism of your sexually explicit performance that this letter performs. Of course, by directly addressing you through this letter I run the risk of turning this embarrassing situation back on you. This may be *the* predicament of performance artist and performance critic—mutually constituted through a repetitious cycle of embarrassing, stupid, failures.

Self-reflexively examining how I am implicated in the spectatorial economy of desire and exchange between performer and critic is in tune with a scholarly trend of recent years. Amelia Jones has shifted the focus from the artworks

themselves to the role the critic performs in engaging with such works. In her 2000 essay, "Acting Unnatural: Interpreting Body Art," Jones writes:

In cases of body art, where the artist overtly solicits spectatorial desire through erotic and/or sadomasochistic acts, the art critic or art historian will generally find it even more difficult to ignore the implication of her own desires in her interpretation of the work. The performative—especially as projected across/through the body of the artist in body art projects—thus has a particular and profound efficacy in throwing into question conventional models of interpretation. (12)

I am writing this letter as criticism to you to directly and formally question conventional modes of critical interpretation. Yet, as I've already indicated by outing my shame so it becomes embarrassment I am having great difficulty ignoring my own desires in my interpretation of your sexually explicit performance work. Even by calling it stupid and suggesting that it opens up possibilities that I cannot accurately name I have still imposed this non-understanding as a kind of understanding on your performance art. I am caught in a catch-22 the moment I sit down to type anything in response to your request for criticism. A possible way out of this feedback loop is to understand this writing as the performance ethnographers do. That it is itself a performance that obsessively marks itself as such and is not trying to stand in for you and your work. The failures of representation and stupidity collide and multiply. My hope is that it somehow stupidly works because, similarly to how your performances work, it is explicitly marked as a failure. This letter is set to self-destruct.

## By Way of a Conclusion

This letter is getting long and racing to entropy. Have you ever gotten a thirty-some-page letter from a stranger in the mail before? I feel like a critical stalker. As I think about bringing this letter to a temporary close, I want to introduce one more concept to you. It is related to stupidity, and perhaps a more apt description of your work than stupidity alone. It is the concept of stuplimity—a hybrid concept wrought through a collision of stupidity and the sublime. It is a concept produced by literary scholar Sianne Ngai in her book-length study *Ugly Feelings*. Responding to the critical theorist Theodor Adorno’s critique of the political potential of aesthetic practices, Ngai suggests that thinking the aesthetic and the political together is perhaps a “prime occasion for ugly feelings” (3). Ngai argues that paying attention to noncathartic ugly feelings, such as envy, anxiety, irritation and stuplimity, reveals the ability of art to produce and foreground “a failure of emotional release” as a form of “suspended action” that is a kind of aesthetic politics (9). She counter-poses suspended action to direct action, but considers it a kind of action none-the-less that can be affectively accounted for.

The noncathartic aspect of the emotional response to your work has already been evidenced by Julia Oldham’s blog posting that called the *Brooklyn is Burning* event the most emotionally charged art event she had ever attended, but also that she was unable to later “wrap her head” around your performance with Sagri’s unexpected collaboration. Oldham was charged up but unable to discharge those feelings/thoughts into a sense of closure. Likewise, the lingering

failure of emotional release is made evident on the blog of Karen Archey writing for Artinfo.com. Archey writes that after a meal with friends in January of 2011 (almost one year after your *Sherry Vs. P.S. 1* performance) she announced that she was planning to attend your new *Mermaid* performance piece. Archey writes that, “The man sitting next to me, an art fair staffer, dropped his fork, mouth agape, and asked if I was crazy. Considering I was in attendance for Ann Liv Young’s pee whipping fiasco at P.S.1 last year and that I’m returning to witness her antics a second time, my answer should clearly be yes.” Psychosis is one explanation for why Archey would re-engage with a performance artist whose work she described as a pee whipping fiasco. Another reason is that she may have still been, one year later, so deeply affected by your performance and its generation of stuplimity that she was driven to try and experience the catharsis that failed to arrive through her first encounter with your performance work. She describes her encounter with your ineptitude in performing the *Mermaid* piece. She describes your, “gaudy mermaid tail,” “tacky presentation,” your intermittent slippage between the Mermaid character and Sherry character, and, “endless technical failures.” After cataloging her discomfort with your stupid performance tactics, she reveals the affective impact they’ve had on her as she goes on to write, “On a somewhat positive note, I’ve never been more engrossed in a performance in my life. Young clearly has a knack for manipulating the emotions of her audience, however bearing the talent to fuck with the minds (sic) shouldn’t necessary be thought of as a *good* thing” (original emphasis “Mermaid

Meltdown”). Archey makes a valid point here as she confirms that her frustration with your *Mermaid* piece was also accompanied by a highly charged emotional shock. Her point bears consideration that your tactics that stupidly challenge spectators and disrupt knowledge structures should not necessarily be thought of as good. The possibilities opened by such encounters could result in oppressively or violently other ways of thinking and becoming. This is a danger. I have tried throughout this project to not over determine and suggest what the specific possibilities opened by stupidity can be. Only that possibilities and potentials are opened as a kind of suspended action that could have political potential through their ability to disrupt the oppressive knowledge structures that we already experience and participate in.

Stuplimity, according to Ngai, is a result of experiencing an artwork that both sublimely shocks and bores the spectator. Ngai shifts the notion of the sublime, vis-à-vis the philosopher Immanuel Kant, which can only be experienced through contact with overwhelming natural phenomena to encounters with aesthetically constructed phenomena such as works of art. Ngai offers Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of American’s* and Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust* as two literary examples that “unbalance syntax,” and instigate “a critical journey not into the self, but into the more complex problem of the self’s relationship to a particular kind of linguistic difference that does not yet have a concept assigned to it” (254). *Sherry Vs. P.S. 1* and its failures upon failures unbalanced the expectations and structure of the performer/spectator

relationship. It has also caused me as a critic—a spectator of a specific kind—to re-imagine my critical self in relation to your performance work. Your *Sherry Vs. P.S.1* performance was shocking in its failures, confrontations, and sexually explicit tactics, but yet it was also boring as nothing much happened other than your repeated failure to represent Sherry through bad acting. It did not offer a story, or a theme, it did not even offer much in the way of spectacular images like some of your other choreographed pieces from earlier in your performance career. You wore a wig and talked into a microphone—when it was working—and chatted with spectators. Of course your pissing into a pan, fighting with Sagri, and exposing your nude masturbating body grotesquely punctuated these boring aspects. You also performed after Sagri's repetitive *Jane* performance and so the spectators were already potentially lulled into a state of boredom that you extended and disrupted. The frustration with your stupid tactics was made evident when one audience member shouted out, "You'd better be good!" and instead of trying to convince him that you were and assuage his fears of boredom, you self-deprecatingly confirmed them, "You know what I'm not good I'm going to tell you that right now, I'm just not, and that's why I insult other people" (*Sherry*).

Ngai relates the feeling and experience of stuplimity to a temporary paralysis and explains it as, "not merely a state of passivity; rather, it bears some resemblance to what Stein calls 'open feeling,' a condition of utter receptivity in which difference is perceived (and perhaps even 'felt') prior to its qualification or

conceptualization.” Through your Sherry performances you break the expected contract of spectators when encountering performance. This breach of contract stuns, but also shocks. Ngai asks, “In what ways do contemporary artists engender this affective dynamic through their work?” (261). By stupidly challenging your spectators to rethink how performance and representation function through your sexually explicit failures at representation is how I’ve tried to answer this question through my failed attempt at writing of your work and my stupid response to it in this letter. Whereas Sagri and P.S.1 refused to engage you in dialog, I hope that my epistolary response to your call for criticism opens up a stupid conversation between us that can continue to complicate and deepen the interactions between artists and critics and artworks and criticism. As I bring this letter to a close and enact another institutional turning off of the lights—this time a representative of the academic rather than the artistic institution is sending you into the dark—I hope you continue to shout, or in this case write back through the darkness. Thank you for your performance work, and for taking the time to engage with mine.

Stuplimely yours,

George McConnell

**Chapter Three:**

**Let Us Think Of These Things Always. Let Us Speak Of Them Never.**

<p>This chapter, like the previous chapter of this dissertation, does not stand-alone from the introduction. I have used Every House Has A Door's concept of an equidistant third entity to devise these three columns. I will discuss this concept in more detail as this chapter unravels. I am not going to explicitly state here, but rather reveal over time what the three points of triangulation are as I think of these things always but speak of them never. The reveal of what would become our equidistant third entity happened to me over time, although it should have been obvious from the outset of my encounter with Every House Has a Door's work. In an early outline of this chapter, I imagined that the equidistant third entity between me and Every House Has a Door would be Stanley Cavell as he wrote the essay that</p>	<p>They didn't know how to put the sky where.</p> <p>When Tim Ingold came to the University of Minnesota during the Spring of 2010 he presented his current research on psychological studies that traced a problem of representation. Ingold is a British social anthropologist, and currently Chair of Social Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen. The work he presented were the findings of several psychologists' studies working with children. They were researching the gap between experience and representation. They asked children to draw a picture of the Earth. We all know that the Earth is round. We <i>know</i> this. Often the children would draw a circle, the familiar view of the Earth that none of us can actually see without recourse to space travel. After drawing the circular Earth, the children were then asked to draw the sky.</p>	<p>This chapter is written of Every House Has a Door and their first performance as Every House Has a Door—<i>Let us think of these things always. Let us speak of them never.</i> While Lin Hixson and Matthew Goulish are both important players in the history of Goat Island and Every House Has a Door, this chapter will not explicitly consider the work they did with Goat Island, or that chapter of their history. For some excellent materials with such a consideration, please see: <i>Small Acts of Repair: Performance, Ecology and Goat Island</i> edited by Stephen Bottoms and Matthew Goulish, <i>Performance Theatre and The Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island and Elevator Repair Service</i> by Sara Jane Bailes, and the chapter titled "sub specie durationis" by Matthew Goulish and</p>
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<p>Matthew Goulish came across that eventually lead to Ingmar Bergman being the equidistant third entity that Every House Has a Door engaged with in making <i>Let Us Think Of These Things Always. Let Us Speak of Them Never</i>. Cavell ultimately wasn't what was presented to me as I thought and wrote more of Every House Has a Door's work. What would become the equidistant third entity of this chapter was sitting right in front of me, and I stupidly couldn't see it because <i>I thought I knew</i> that it was Cavell. Only when I reentered a state of stupor did I find what I needed to allow my thinking to move forward, backward and stay right in place.</p>	<p>To draw the sky the children in these studies most often abandoned their first circular drawing and then drew a second drawing of a line representing the ground and another line parallel to and above that first line representing the sky—a representation that strains to be more haptic than perspectival. One drawing for the Earth alone, and a second drawing required to show the sky, and also a flat Earth. But we all <i>know</i> that the Earth is not flat. Some children drew another circle around the first Earth circle that they had drawn. Did this mean that the sky is round like the Earth? That didn't seem quite right either. Neither of these approaches to the problem of where to put the sky seemed adequate.</p> <p>How do you put the sky where?</p>	<p>Laura Cull in <i>Deleuze and Performance</i> edited by Laura Cull.</p> <p>I note that this is their first performance as Every House Has a Door not as a matter of origin, but as a matter of movement and shift—as a becoming other than what they were.</p> <p>Working on <i>Let Us Think of These Things Always. Let Us Speak of Them Never</i>. Hixson and Goulish were investigating a representational</p>
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<p>In a matter related to this project, I have asked and continue to ask:</p> <p>While I do not intend to repeat the entire argument presented in the introduction to this dissertation on which this chapter stands, I will remind you that central to</p> <p>is the concept produced by Louis Marin in his <i>To Destroy Painting</i> where he suggests that critics should</p> <p>I have elsewhere acknowledged that a naïve reading of Marin's concept would suggest that, contrary to Foucault's notorious formulation, discourse does not form the objects of which it speaks. That objects would be able to take</p>	<p>How do we stage an essay?</p> <p>How do I essay a staging?</p> <p>how they would go forward in making their work.</p> <p>my methodology</p> <p>write <i>of</i> artworks and not <i>about</i> artworks.</p> <p>Central to my writing <i>of</i> and not <i>about</i> is committing to processes of nonknowledge—via Bataille—that I'm calling stupidity. The theatrical performance groups that serve as case studies in this project, including Every House</p>	<p>question:</p> <p>After Hixson and Goulish devised their last piece as <i>Goat Island</i> in 2009 they weren't sure</p> <p>Then a way of becoming <i>Every House Has a Door</i> presented itself when Maren Blazevic from Croatia suggested</p>
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<p>shape objectively in discourses of them. What I am suggesting is not this complete naïve objectivity. Rather I am suggesting that after acknowledging that performance discourse is only ever in proximity to the performance itself, it is possible for that proximity to vary.</p>	<p>Has a Door, commit to similar stupid practices. It is here in our shared commitment to stupidity as a process of thinking on the move that we meet and my writing becomes of their work.</p> <p>Is there a way to not stand at and keep an objective discursive distance but instead allow for a subjective entanglement to emerge by allowing thought to be tripped up with the thing(s) being written?</p> <p>an ethnographic interview conducted and noted on 6/23/10 and typed on 12/6/10 and read today.</p>	<p>that Hixson and Goulish collaborate on a theatrical performance piece with some Croatian artists. There was also a funding opportunity here from several Croatian arts organizations. It seemed too clear of a next step to not at least try and trip over.</p> <p>This way of working on a project-by-project basis with other artists in collaboration with Hixson and Goulish would become the template for how Every House Has a Door would make work. Goulish said that he wanted some time after <i>The Lastmaker</i>—the last Goat Island piece—to think about what would be next, but “it was presented to us” he told me in</p>
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<p>Similarly to writing <i>of</i> and not <i>about</i>, the editors and contributors to <i>Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically</i> suggest a different</p> <p>Things is intentionally not defined by the</p>	<p>methodological approach to anthropology that doesn't require the ethnographer to think <i>about</i> the things they are studying but rather to think <i>through</i> these things.</p>	<p>And so Hixson and Goulish set out to work in this other way that was not dependent on forming a standing company of collaborators but rather a contingent company. The Croatian artists that joined Hixson and Goulish for the first Every House Has a Door process were Mislav Cavajda and Selma Banich from Zagreb. Rounding out the performer/creators for <i>Let us think of these things always. Let us speak of them never.</i> was Stephen Fiehn of the Chicago-based performance group Cupola Barber.</p> <p>Through a series of residencies in both</p>
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<p>editorial multiplicity of <i>Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically</i>. For them “thing” is used instead of “object” as they argue that object has a history of discursive baggage that they would like to circumvent. They offer instead thing in place of object to allow a more fluid definition that the editorial multiplicity actually refuses outright to define prescriptively. Offering instead that, “Things, it is suggested, ought not to be delineated in advance of the ethnographic encounters from which they emerge. To preempt an ethnographically defined understanding of what constitutes a thing would be to simply offer an alternative <i>theory</i> of things” (Henare, et al 5 original emphasis ). They suggest that the things that emerge are theory themselves. In the essays that compose the book theoretical things emerge and run the gamut from a Cuban powder that has unrecognized powers, to the actions of cigarettes</p>	<p>This second directive was derived from Alan Read’s proposal for a cross-disciplinary study of abandoned practices and endangered uses. Goulish wrote a piece for the program for the PSi #15 Conference held in Zagreb that quotes from Read’s proposal at length. Here are some excerpts from Read’s proposal about abandoned practices from this program text: “most research into practices, such as that conducted in theatre itself, but also much more widely across the material and social sciences, has</p>	<p>Chicago and Zagreb from 2008-2010 the group would meet and devise work. The first performance prompt that Hixson offered to the group to work with had two directives for the others to respond to: “1.)At what point does a performance emerge? Devise an event out of a non-event that is no longer than 3 minutes. 2.)Construct a dance for the members of the group that is no longer than 3 minutes and uses an abandoned practice as its source.”</p> <p>For the first residency, and in response to Hixson’s directive, Fiehn wrote a ballad that culled together several phrases from the</p>
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<p>in a prison, to the seeming abstraction of the “law” in Sawatzland. These things bring forth multiple ontologies by worlding different worlds into realities that are not just locked in representational registers or the epistemic realm of the symbolic. Again, this does not mean the things can somehow naively speak for themselves. Of course my discourse that tries to engage with theatrical performance process things is not the theatrical performance process things, nor is it entirely not not them. My discourse is a further becoming of or a creative response to the thing that is the theatrical performance as my thinking moves through it and takes shape in my writing of it. Writing that could not exist without the encounter with, of, and through the thing. My thinking and my writing both becoming other things that can heuristically engender further thought in the minds of others. Both my thinking and my writing world different</p>	<p>been disproportionately interested in those practices which have ‘survived’, continued or been successful in impacting upon contemporary operational modes”; “Rather than privilege those practices that ‘endure’, the research focus here will be on those that are eliminated. By shifting attention in this way to the lost, the redundant and the marginalized, the initiation of an alternative history of practices will be possible—one that will throw a properly critical light on those practices that have temporarily won their place in the pantheon at the expense of others. The objective here will be to gauge what has been gained in the rejection of what has been lost and to measure what would be gained in recovering what has been abandoned.”</p> <p>I too am drawing on a proposal from Alan Read. On page 52 of his <i>Theatre and Everyday Life: An Ethics of Performance</i> he writes, “For in writing</p>	<p>American West of the Gold Rush days for lyrics:</p> <p>pull in your horns</p> <p>it’s time for us to go now</p> <p>get a wiggle on</p> <p>offish curly wolf</p> <p>it’s time for us to go now</p> <p>apple knocker</p> <p>you’re full as a tick</p> <p>it’s time for us to go now</p> <p>four flusher</p> <p>hobble up your lip</p> <p>it’s time for us to go see the elephant</p>
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<p>worlds into becoming.</p> <p>Throughout this dissertation I have attempted to mark my writing practice explicitly, even hyperbolically—just look at the layout of these three columns on the page—and move away from research as argument enacted to prove something beyond a reasonable doubt. Instead, I am invested in practices, or as I have said processes of non-knowledge—stupidity—that I borrow from the theatrical performances and the theatrical practices that led to them. I am stupidly writing a thing through a thing.</p> <p>For each of them to become a student of the</p>	<p>there is thought to be the need for stability of meaning throughout an argument, whereas practices depend upon both the interpretation of situations and the constant need to change them.”</p> <p>an ethnographic interview conducted and noted on 6/23/10 and typed on 12/7/10 and read today that before they devised Ingmar Bergman as their equidistant third entity,</p> <p>I have asked a question closely related to one that the editorial multiplicity has asked in <i>Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically</i> when they collectively write, “The question then becomes not just how</p>	<p>As Fiehn’s textual assemblage above demonstrates, the United Statesian collaborators would draw on their knowledge and history of abandoned practices that are rooted in the geo-political memory of the United States. Likewise, the Croatian collaborators would draw from their cultural memories rooted in Eastern Europe. As Goulish would tell me in</p> <p>“It was a little weird. We were forced to play out cultural clichés. Once we came across Bergman, and this notion of an equidistant third entity, and it happened purely by accident, nobody was an expert any more. Everyone had to become a student of the work.”</p>
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<p>work and for the cross-cultural block to be cleared the Every House Has A Door collaborators—like sea squirts with newly resurrected brains—had to unanchor, and detach themselves from their culturally rooted rocks and boat bottoms and once again enter the stupid flows of processes of non-knowing.</p> <p>This awkward cross-cultural encounter that appeared as the devising process unfolded became central to how the work was made. In order to go forward, the collaborators had to re-imagine what working across different cultures may become. Likewise, the social worker Ruth G. Dean suggests a re-imagining of practice in her article “The Myth of Cross-Cultural Competence.” Her practice is in the register of the everyday practice of counseling and not in the aesthetic register of theatrical practice. I here do want to introduce the notion of the everyday and its relation to theatrical</p>	<p>human phenomena may be illuminated (through structuralism!, no, semiotics!, no, phenomenology!, no, Marx showed the way!, etc.) but rather how the phenomena in question may themselves offer illumination. How, in other words, the ways in which people go about their lives may unsettle familiar assumptions, not least those that underlie anthropologists’ particular repertoires of theory” (Henare, et al, 8).</p> <p>an ethnographic interview conducted and noted on 6/25/10 and typed on 12/7/10 and read today that</p>	<p>In their transitional incarnation as Every House Has a Door, Hixson maintains her position of director that she had firmly established with Goat Island. Goulish has now officially taken the role of dramaturg. The accident that happened and led to everyone becoming a student of the work was that Goulish happened to be reading an essay by Stanley Cavell. The essay was “On Makavejev on Bergman” from <i>Themes Out of School</i>. For Hixson, every thing that she encounters during the process can potentially change it, shift it and move it in other unforeseen directions. She told me in</p> <p>“One person comes in, I see it differently.” It isn’t only people entering her directorial space, but also other things, ideas, gestures, still other things. For Hixson, as</p>
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<p>practice, but I will wait and discuss this relation in more detail further down in these columns. For now, I would like to quote Dean who writes of her social work practice, “I question the notion that one could become ‘competent’ at the culture of another. I would instead propose a model in which maintaining an awareness of one’s lack of competence is the goal rather than the establishment of competence. With ‘lack of competence’ as the focus, a different view of practicing across cultures emerges” (624).</p>	<p>an ethnographic interview conducted and noted on 6/25/10 and typed on 12/7/10 and read today that</p> <p>How does shifting practices to a focus on a lack of competence resonate with John Law’s practices of “deliberate imprecision” (<i>After Method 3</i>)? Could lack of competence itself be an abandoned practice? Similarly, could committing to processes of nonknowledge be an abandoned practice where driving to discover and knowledge production have replaced stupidly thinking through things? Could drawing on these</p>	<p>she told me in</p> <p>“When Matthew brought in the Cavell essay, it really blew everything open. Matthew likes to stay very close to the sources with this work in order to differentiate it from the work with Goat Island.”</p>
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<p>discourses written of theatrical performance devising practices?</p> <p>For discourse, thinking through a thing could not become the dogmatic image of thought based in Cartesian logic that is conceptually produced by Deleuze in his <i>Difference and Repetition</i>. I turn to Deleuze, yet again, in this dissertation concerned with stupidity by taking another cue from Avital Ronell. In her <i>Stupidity</i>, she writes, “The other motivation for a meditation on stupidity involves Gilles Deleuze. While I was resolutely not learning the Tai Chi vocabulary, Deleuze had ended his life. In the memories and papers that remained, Deleuze, it was reported, had called for a thinking of</p>	<p>abandoned practices lead to another practice of writing not based in argumentation? What would thinking through a thing look like? Or to get out of the rhetoric of the visual, what would thinking through a thing become in</p>	<p>theatrical performance devising practices and in</p> <p>For theatrical performance devising, thinking through a thing might become something like staging an essay by Stanley Cavell in which this United Statesian author writes about the Yugoslavian filmmaker Makavejev. Cavell relates an incident where Makavejev presented a film montage at a Harvard conference titled <i>Bergman and Dreams</i>. The hour-long montage consisted of several sequences without dialog spliced together from eleven films made by Ingmar Berman. According to Cavell, who was actually in attendance at this</p>
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<p>stupidity” (32). Ronell answered this call with her literary analysis in <i>Stupidity</i> and I am answering this call here through my consideration of theatrical performance devising practices.</p> <p>and I suggest it applies to devising a dissertation written of or through theatrical performances as well:</p> <p>Wait, wasn't I doing something over here? Wasn't there a plan or map I was following? Oh, right. I got carried away by the streaming rapid downhill currents of the other columns. I was doing Deleuze and the image of thought and the relation to stupidity</p>	<p>“It's also a process which refuses to know, at the outset, what it is looking for. Remaining, rather, a journey undertaken, in which the territory unfolds, as much of a surprise to us as it may be to anyone else. We say without hesitation that it takes us time to find out what a certain piece of work</p>	<p>conference, Makavejev introduced his montage dressed in drag of sorts—he wore a cape and a woman's bright red hat. What became integral to the process of <i>Every House Has a Door</i> is that once this essay was introduced, the concept of Ingmar Bergman as an equidistant third entity revealed itself and the cross-cultural work was able to proceed. Tim Etchells, another theatrical performance deviser and contemporary of Goulish and Hixson, has this to say about making such discoveries when devising theatrical performances:</p> <p>The United Statesian and Croatian collaborators all had a passing familiarity with Bergman, but none felt like an expert. Once they positioned Bergman in relation to themselves, then things began to come together—a theatrical performance thing</p>
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<p>he produces in <i>Difference and Repetition</i>. In Chapter III, pages, 129-138, bearing the title “The Image of Thought” Deleuze produces his concept of this dogmatic image. He begins with a discussion of Descartes and exposes the presuppositions “presumed that everyone knows, independently of concepts, what is meant by self, thinking and being.” (129). The primary presumption that Deleuze identifies is that thought itself is taken as a universal notion and not subjected to philosophical interrogation by Descartes. Deleuze suggests that philosophers after Descartes—Hegel, Heidegger, and Kant namely—take the Image of Thought as an unperturbed Image that is “supposed to be naturally upright because it is not a faculty like the others”—the faculties of perception, memory, imagination, understanding—“but the unity of all the other faculties which are only modes of the supposed</p>	<p>might mean or even be concerned with, and that this discovery, if it comes at all, is made by doing—making, talking, touring—a discovery based on risk and uncertainty, not by our adherence to a plan” (Etchells, 17).</p> <p>I had not yet entered the ethnographic field so I was not</p> <p>I actually only began my ethnography of their process for their final residency at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art in June of 2010. I will now present some of my ethnographic fieldnotes written on 6/15/10 and typed on 12/8/10 and read today.</p>	<p>began to emerge through a cross-cultural collaboration.</p> <p>at the residency where the unplanned Cavell/Bergman/Makavejev breakthrough broke through.</p> <p>When I arrived at the MCA I spoke with security. I asked for Every House Has a Door. I asked for Matthew Goulish and Lin Hixson. I asked for the company manager John Rich. All of these requests were met with blank stares from the security guards on duty.</p>
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<p>subjects” (134). Deleuze writes that it is by looking through this stable and fixed Image of Thought that other philosophers have oriented their philosophical analysis of “what it means to think,” and that “(S)uch an orientation is a hindrance to philosophy” (134). For Deleuze the hindrance is that thought oriented this way stops only at recognition. “On the one hand, it is apparent that acts of recognition exist and occupy a large part of our daily life: this is a table, this is an apple, this the piece of wax, Good morning Theaetetus. But who can believe that the destiny of thought is at stake in these acts, and that when we recognize, we are thinking?” (135). Elsewhere in this dissertation I have indicated the problems with trying to describe performances and that much performance scholarship has turned into a kind of reportage. This is the problem that arises when thinking stops at writing recognition. The writing convention I am chafing</p>		<p>I finally said, “I’m here for the theatre.” And this got me in the door. A security guard even escorted me through the back halls of the MCA and into the theatre space. As I am whenever I first enter the field, I was very nervous to meet everyone. I was the first one to arrive. So I sat in an empty theatre and my anxieties were allowed to grow. The next to arrive after me was actually another ethnographer from the University of Middlesex who had spent some time interning for Goat Island, and was now researching Every House Has a Door and particularly Hixson’s directorial process. I jokingly wondered if there would have to be some kind of academic rumble between us where only one of us could lay claim to writing of this process. I made a joke about us battling to the academic death, and she did not find it amusing. Next to arrive was John Rich, who had been to Michigan for a visit the weekend before. After him, Goulish and Hixson</p>
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<p>against is that: I recognize this about this performance and write the description of it and thought stops there and coheres into one of Phelan's discursive performance corpses. Scholarship becomes an anatomy lesson where the different organs are named and identified, but little more is done to infuse these corpses with the lifeblood of incoherent and coursing thinking.</p> <p>"Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object..."</p> <p>"...not of recognition but of a fundamental <i>encounter</i>. What is encountered may be Socrates, a temple or a demon. It may be grasped in a range of affective tones: wonder, love, hatred, suffering. In whichever tone, its primary characteristic is that it can only be</p>	<p>"What counts as criticism? What is Academia?"</p> <p>Or just some thing perhaps?</p>	<p>arrived. They had just returned from a trip to the annual PSi conference. Hixson said, "They're doing these long shifts now. With performances and performative papers. I like that they're trying to mix it up. They're asking:"</p> <p>Hixson and Goulish and the rest of the company were all so friendly and welcoming that my nerves pretty much disappeared and I settled in to watch them work. Trying to attend to the affects my encounter with their process had on me.</p> <p>The first thing I make note of and underline is that they are not using the actual MCA's proscenium theatre seats for the showing that will take place at the end of the week. They have instead set up chairs on the stage in a thrust-like configuration with audience on three</p>
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<p>sensed. In this sense it is opposed to recognition” (original emphasis 139 <i>Diff and Rep</i>).</p> <p>Then on pages 148-151 Deleuze introduces the figure of error in relation to the image of thought. Error becomes the negative of recognition as misrecognition—mistake only. “It is noteworthy that the dogmatic image, for its part, recognizes only <i>error</i> as a possible misadventure of thought, and reduces everything to the form of error” (original emphasis 148). What dogmatically gets reduced to error and therefore dogmatically subsumed by the image of thought is madness, stupidity and malevolence. This reduction to error of these three other modalities of thinking is a problem for Deleuze as it is for me. He notes that philosophers have “always had a lively awareness of this necessity” to seek structures of thought for stupidity in figures other than error (150). “Cowardice, cruelty, baseness and stupidity</p>	<p>The first chair that I chose to sit in had a broken back, and I almost slipped out of it when I leaned back. I changed chairs.</p> <p>While no copies of the film montage that Makavejev spliced together and presented at the Harvard conference exist, Every House Has a Door did find a copy of a written outline of the montage. How do you put the sky where? They used this</p>	<p>sides and a central performance area that faces stage right. The audience for the showing at the end of the week will have to sit on the stage with the performers.</p> <p>The four performers stretch and warm-up in their own time. It is a group warm-up in that they are all doing it at the same time, but they are each doing their own thing.</p> <p>When they are all warmed up, they have a brief meeting with Hixson about performance times later in the week. Then they begin work on a section called the Bergman Montage.</p>
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<p>are not simply corporeal capacities or traits of character or society; they are structures of thought as such” (151). Deleuze suggests that in literature, the best writers are able to deploy stupidity in such a way that the texts they wrote approach philosophy, “The worst literature produces sottisiers, while the best (Flaubert, Baudelaire, Bloy) was haunted by the problem of stupidity. By giving this problem all its cosmic, encyclopaedic and gnoseological dimensions, such literature was able to carry it as far as the entrance to philosophy itself. Philosophy could have taken up the problem with its own means and with the necessary modesty, by considering the fact that stupidity is never that of others but the object of a properly transcendental question: how is stupidity (not error) possible?” (151).</p> <p>If the dogmatic image of thought contains within it error it reduces stupidity to nothing more than mistake. This anchors</p>	<p>discursive representation of the image assemblage as a script to make a theatrical performance stand-in for the missing film montage. The outline became a starting point for devising a choreography of movements that the performers gestured in a creative response to the textual description of the missing film. For this staged version of the montage ten seconds of time passing in the live performance is equal to one minute of the missing Makavejev/Bergman film.</p>	<p>Even though I joined the process of making <i>Let us think of these things always. Let us speak of them never.</i> late, it was still certainly in process as it will remain through its showings in 2011. This last Chicago 2010 residency was the first time that they had worked with their lighting designer in residence. It was his idea to introduce a large spot light on wheels that the performers would pass back and forth as they struck poses and spoke</p>
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<p>stupidity to knowledge schemes concerned with producing accuracy instead of enacting processes of thinking. If, as I have been suggesting throughout, we can turn our backs—yours, mine, and some others—on the drive to produce knowledge then the tie that binds stupidity to error and thus the dogmatic image of thought can be severed and processes of thinking that are non-productive and useless, based as they are in nonknowledge, can be unteathered. What yet unthought or maybe even abandoned possibilities can be opened for thinking when producing knowledge is no longer the desired outcome?</p>	<p>Here the thing itself required a different type of choreographic encounter that emerged when the light on wheels was introduced into the dance. There was also no way to finally predict or set the choreography of the two cords. They would land where they would. Even through the performance showings at the end of the week, the stupidly dancing cords would mark the process as becoming</p>	<p>into a microphone during the Makavejev/Bergman montage. This intensely bright light aimed directly at the performers' faces gave an effect similar to that of a film close-up such as Bergman's films are rife with. The light needed to be plugged in to a power source, so it was always bound by its trailing power cord. It became part of the choreography of the performers to whip this cord out of their way and out of the path of the rolling light at the same time they passed the microphone and dealt/danced with its attached cable.</p>
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<p>I have already pointed out several times in this dissertation that providing a hard and stable definition or image of stupidity is a problem, and the best I can do is offer a</p> <p>To discursively give shape to an image of stupidity that stably stands counter to knowledge would result in a similar dogmatic freezing of the gesture of thinking that Deleuze is working against.</p> <p>From <i>Difference and Repetition</i>: “Do not count upon thought to ensure the relative necessity of what it thinks (139).”</p>	<p>what it ought not.</p> <p>stand-in.</p>	<p>At the end of the Makavejev/Bergman montage—where ten seconds equaled one minute—Fiehn played a</p> <p>Fiehn stood in for Makavejev, by standing still, and grinning for three minutes of live performance time. Which of course is never still as he breathes and his blood flows and his eyes blink. He wore a cape and a woman’s bright red hat. This was how Makavejev was said to silently respond after he showed his Bergman film at the Harvard conference. After working this montage section, they broke for lunch and in the afternoon ran the entire piece.</p> <p>From <i>Difference and Repetition</i>: “Rather, count upon the contingency of an encounter with that which forces thought to raise up and educate</p>
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<p>In <i>After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance</i>, the editor Gavin Butt writes in his introduction that “in this respect we might alight upon the <i>ethics</i> of the essays collected in this volume: for they do not impose a model of criticism from without, but discover or produce one out of an engagement with—and a response to—the contingencies encountered whilst undertaking the act of criticism itself.” (17 original emphasis)</p>	<p>From <i>Difference and Repetition</i>: “The conditions of a true critique and a true creation are the same: the destruction of an image of thought which presupposes itself and the genesis of the act of thinking in thought itself” (139).</p>	<p>the absolute necessity of an act of thought or a passion to think (139).”</p> <p>In addition to the Makavejev/Bergman montage theatrical performance stand-in, there are several other film moments that get staged in <i>Let us think of these things always</i>. <i>Let Us speak of them never</i>. For example: Banich performs a series of gestures that she mirrors as she watches a trailer for Bergman’s <i>Persona</i>; Fiehn, Goulish, and Cavajda hold hands and strike an iconic pose from Bergman’s <i>The Seventh Seal</i>—Cavajda and Fiehn each uncomfortably holding an apple in their teeth as they strike these extreme full-body poses; and all four performers watch a scene from Makavejev’s <i>Sweet Movie</i> and</p>
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<p>As I have acknowledged earlier in this dissertation, in my response to encountering contingencies while undertaking the task of criticism itself I am modeling my writing practice on some of the notions of</p> <p>While I strongly agree with her challenges to</p> <p>I want to challenge Phelan’s actual—and oft quoted—notions of performance that are anchored in absence, death and disappearance.</p>	<p>Film images becoming some other thing(s) through the moving gestures and bodies of the <i>Every House Has a Door</i> performers.</p> <p>performative writing that Peggy Phelan has advocated for.</p> <p>dominant and conventional methods of writing performance scholarship based in descriptive analysis</p> <p>I would like to suggest, that rather than thinking of theatrical performance as a return to the abandoned practices of necromancy, what if instead theatrical performances were</p>	<p>improvisationally transmogrify the film images into performed gestures.</p> <p>Two of these presentations of film moments were really difficult to experience as an audience member. I say experience instead of watch because the discomfort of one of these moments affected me in the aural register. Both of these moments affected an experiential response in me as spectator that made me squirm in my seat and skin. During the <i>Sweet Movie</i> sequence the foursome watch a feast scene from the film, which is the enactment of a communal ritual of the Viennese Aktionist artist Otto Muehl. The <i>Every House Has A Door</i> performers watch as the <i>Sweet Movie</i> performers eat, vomit, urinate, one of them pulls a beef tongue from his pants and pretends to castrate himself with a cleaver, food is thrown, wine runs like</p>
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<p>The expressed goal would not be to change the form of things into gold, but that through a series of continuous becomings theatrical performance things don't disappear but continue to appear and appear again in ever shifting forms. Like a ghost light in an empty theatre that never goes out all the way or dies, but instead shifts in intensity.</p> <p>In her article titled "Rabbits, Machines, and the Ontology of Performance", Aleksandra Wolska makes a similar suggestion to work against this notion of theatrical performance being laden with absence, lack and death. She astutely writes, "In performance, however, the action onstage does not glide uniformly toward the void. It also directs itself toward transmutation and change, flowing away from nothing toward an ever-expanding material</p>	<p>thought of as something like a return to abandoned alchemical practices?</p> <p>As they watch the film, they can present to the live audience watching them—with their bodies and gestures—any of the roles/gestures/tasks that they see performed in the filmed feast. The four Every House Has a Door performers use large, red, plastic flowers that become the beef tongue, the flying food, the plates worn as hats, and somehow still always remain the large red flowers—arriving where they ought not. While there is a set underlying structure, the specific choreography is not set and they improvise their way</p>	<p>blood on a slaughterhouse floor, and plates of food become hats. As Goulish writes, "They turn themselves inside out, and prove that they are most definitely alive" (34 <i>MISperform</i>). The audience does not see the film footage, but hears it. It is played back on a couple of upstage-facing MacBooks that sit on a table placed far upstage. The Every House Has A Door performers do face downstage and watch the scene.</p>
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<p>appearance” (84). As I work on this chapter it is winter in Minnesota and we just experienced a blizzard that dumped about two feet of snow on Minneapolis. Did this blizzard disappear? Or did the weather thing shift and the blizzard become something else? Never fully freezing into a stable identity position—no matter how many degrees below zero the temperatures dropped. A thing on the move. Always on the move. Brian Massumi writes in <i>Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation</i>, “Use your imagination: no single logic, geometric or otherwise, is flexible enough to encompass the concrete abstractness of experience in all of its ins and outs” (207). For theatrical performance to disappear, it would need to solidify into a concretely concrete thing that could then melt into air. If theatrical performance is always an assemblage of various processes becoming in time and space then there is no disappearance. The</p>	<p>through this sequence even in performance. They allow the things that are plastic flowers to emerge as other things through the improvised choreography.</p>	<p>The live performers’ gazes are intently focused on the MacBook screens as the sound of screams and the awful, literally gut-wrenching sounds of vomiting reverberate through the live performance space.</p>
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<p>blizzard becomes gentle flurries, the gentle flurries become the breeze, the breeze becomes the sky? A dragon? A sea squirt? A plastic red flower?</p> <p>“During rehearsals,” Wolska writes, “neither actors, directors, nor designers are concerned with disappearance, but with its opposite—how to make things happen, appear, take place. For them time is anything but ephemeral, for it merges with the bodies of the actors and the elements of design. Functioning like a psychic substance, it can be stretched, contracted, immobilized, and accelerated; it shapes the performer’s body and saturates the mise-en-scene” (87).</p>	<p>The blizzard becomes theatrical performance discourse written of a theatrical performance that improvised with red plastic flowers and film images?</p> <p>I will now present some of my ethnographic fieldnotes written on 6/16/10 and on 12/15/10 and read today</p> <p>“Mislav, how can you do that without coughing? Is that possible? I don’t want you to be coughing through that.”</p>	<p>During a rehearsal at the MCA--</p> <p>--Hixson gathered the company for notes after an afternoon run-through. “I have very little notes,” she said. Regarding the other major discomforting affective film stand-in moment in the piece where Cavajda, Fiehn and Goulis strike the iconic pose from <i>The Seventh Seal</i>—Fiehn and Cavajda with apples in mouths—Hixson asked:</p> <p>The way this sequence</p>
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	<p>In <i>The Seventh Seal</i> this scene was shot with stand-ins. The actors had already been released for the day and Bergman was struck by the beauty of the light of the sun as it began to set over the hilltop. Not wanting to miss shooting the stunning light that had presented itself, Bergman had some of the crew put on costumes and he shot the scene with these stand-ins.</p> <p>Excerpted from an ethnographic interview conducted and noted on 6/25/10 and typed on 12/16/10 and read today.</p>	<p>worked is that Cavajda and Fiehn struck the “Dance With Death” pose from <i>The Seventh Seal</i> where the characters hold hands and frolic on a hilltop with Death. Cavajda and Fiehn left a gap between their two outstretched arms that would eventually be filled by Goulisch joining in the death dance image. As Cavajda and Fiehn held their uncomfortable full body poses with apples held in their jaws, Goulisch performed a solo dance with the red, plastic flowers in the downstage right corner of the performance space. In the development of the piece, Maren Blazevic—who was providing funding for it—kept suggesting to Hixson that the piece needed a “radical moment.”</p> <p>Hixson didn’t just want to put something “radical” in for the sake of attempting to be “radical”.</p>
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<p>To deliberately try to overdetermine what is or is not “radical” or to stabilize a radical image seems antithetical to the commitment to stupidity and seeing what things present themselves that is central to</p> <p>As Wolska suggests, the merging of time and the bodies of the actors in the process of becoming a theatrical performance in the hope of making something happen or appear and not disappear</p>	<p>devising process.</p>	<p>Every House Has a Door’s</p> <p>would inadvertently open conditions of possibilities so that a radically and not prescriptively known affective moment could stupidly present itself to Hixson and company.</p> <p>Hixson and Goulish both felt that the solo dance with red plastic flowers that he performed down stage right before joining Fiehn and Cavajda in <i>The Seventh Seal</i> “Dance with Death” pose needed to last longer. Goulish wasn’t sure if he needed to slow down the moves he had already</p>
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<p>I am presenting this excerpt exactly as it appears in my notes. Except that here it is typed and it isn't handwritten, so I guess not exactly. "Writing offends the corporeality of theatre by its limited range of representational forms, which, though dependent on manual dexterity, are slight in comparison to the performer's flexibility" (Read 13). The performer's dexterity and flexibility is also what allows theatrical performance to be so well-suited to thinking through a concept of stupidity because the</p>	<p>Excerpted from my ethnographic fieldnotes written on 6/25/10 and typed on 12/16/10 and read today.</p>	<p>choreographed, or add additional moves. Through a combination of both adjustments the solo became elongated and in doing so it increased the amount of time that Fiehn and Cavajda held the gap open for Goulis by maintaining the extreme physical full-body poses with apples in their mouths.</p> <p>"Mislav in that awful pose.</p> <p>While Matthew dances—tension.</p> <p>Not able to stand it much longer."</p> <p>I do not know if it was the extremity of Cavajda's full-body pose or the size of his apple compared to the size of his mouth, but he seemed to be struggling so much more with this than Fiehn did. Cavajda's entire body would shake with tension. Sweat formed pools on his face. A puddle of drool, sweat, and apple juice collected</p>
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<p>body does not coagulate into a stabilized image. The movement of thought that is stupidity in action is enacted through the theatrical performance devisors' bodies and processes.</p> <p>However, to not discount the affective potential of writing entirely, I will now perform a slight of hand—with the limited dexterity these hands can muster—and enact a different tact in thinking through the way devised theatrical performance things can open up affective possibilities for audiences. I want to momentarily turn to the ideas of a theatre maker who does not devise work, but writes plays, and makes arguments. In his <i>Arguments For A Theatre</i>, playwright Howard Barker argues that playwrights need to challenge the imaginations of audiences and that writing plays that easily cohere into knowledgeable meaning-making and recognition is like leading the audience to an already consumed and digested meal—lacking all</p>		<p>on the floor under his mouth. I cannot describe the affect other than saying it made me squirm in my chair, and my own skin. As I noted, that I was “not able to stand it much longer.”</p>
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<p>possible nourishment. Barker writes, “To take an audience seriously means making demands on it of a strenuous nature. There are people who wish to be stretched, challenged, even depressed by a work of art, and who make considerable efforts to experience those things. [...] the actor’s skill, the writer’s invention, together release the mind of the observer from the blockage of unfreedom which is characterized in the feeling ‘I don’t know what this is about, therefore I reject it.’ Instead the writer and the actor conspire to lure the mind into the unknown, the territory of possible changed perception” (34-35).</p> <p>A wonder-filled shift in perception that allows affective possibilities to open in the realm of the everyday encounter with the aesthetic practice of theatrical performance devising.</p>	<p>In an ethnographic interview conducted and noted on 6/25/10 and typed on 12/16/10 and read today.</p> <p>Throughout this project I have, admittedly, held a bias against text as the originary impetus for making theatrical performance.</p>	<p>Hixson takes her audiences seriously and said</p> <p>that she is, “Interested in marking performance as an event. An event that forms the attention of the spectators. I want to somehow share a moment where there is attentiveness that is meaningful, but leave things with a sense of wonder in them.”</p>
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<p>I have brought Barker into this conversation above as a last-ditch effort to acknowledge that while I have chosen to focus in this project on devised work, it is certainly possible for playwrights to explore and invest in the same affective possibilities that those who devise work are interested in. As Alan Read notes, “It is not writing that is the problem and I do not endorse a witless physicality. It is the existence and promotion of categories derived from literature which simply mean very little to a theatre which values the relationship it has with people’s everyday lives and the vastly more complex panorama of the body and its practices that theatre of any worth has to command” (11).</p> <p>For the remainder of these columns’ descent to the completion of this chapter</p>	<p>Particularly completed play texts that are written ahead of the rehearsal process’s start.</p> <p>I would like to think through</p>	
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<p>this relationship between theatrical performance practices—abandoned and not—and the everyday where changes in perception that result from encounters with artworks that take their audiences seriously become possible.</p>	<p>In an ethnographic interview conducted and noted on 6/25/10 and typed on 12/17/10 and read today.</p>	<p>When I asked Hixson about her role as director and its history of power and privilege in the theatrical creative process, she had this to say in response:</p> <p>“I think the power of the director thing is a little misleading. A little bit of smoke and mirrors. If a teacher doesn’t have students, they can’t be a teacher. If a director doesn’t have others to direct, they can’t be a director. It is a more symbiotic relationship. I’m not naïve or ignorant. I’m well aware of a construction of power that precedes me. I feel it is my responsibility to organize the ecosystem of the workplace. I articulate my intentions. I think there is a difference between responsibility and</p>
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<p>“For theatre is an act of presence and presentation, and if relevant it confronts and confounds pretence and representation” (Read 61).</p> <p>“To find performance as a mode of becoming, we have no choice but to look for it in the ‘very manifestation of life.’ To do so, we have to leave the theatre building, for it is only there that a performance begins and ends. Wrought out of stone, with ticket booths and marble foyers, theatre as a cultural edifice offers a testimony to art as a revived corpse. On its stages, performances expire</p>	<p>in an ethnographic interview conducted and noted on 6/25/10 and</p>	<p>power. The performers put their trust in me. I’m the one seeing it. There is an element of terror with that, but we do the best we can do as a group. I think what also helps is that I’m present in the room.”</p> <p>“I work at this practice of presence in life outside of the work also. I think it is important to be philosophically present to one’s life. I practice this attentiveness not just in the rehearsal room, but also in everyday life.”</p> <p>The final moment of <i>Let us think of these things always. Let us speak of them never.</i> stages the blurry line between theatrical performance and the everyday. It was a fragmented sequence that Goulish brought in for the first residency in response to the prompt referred to far above in this column. As Hixson told me</p>
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<p>within the linear time, cut off from the modes of their production. However, the premise that time is a continuum inseparable from spatial extension allows us to see that a performance does not stop with the fall of the curtain, but continues in the body and mind of the viewer” (Wolska 88).</p> <p>Stupidity not an image of thought but an affective condition of everyday existence. Processes of nonknowledge that we engage with and are subsumed in like water on a continual basis (Bataille 88).</p> <p>They couldn’t be experts about the others, and also not about themselves in order to make anything arrive out of the encounter. Only when they acknowledged their own lack of knowledge, and committed to stupidity did affective possibilities open up.</p>	<p>typed on 12/17/10 and read today, “It’s always a fragment brought in. It cannot be complete in itself because it needs to fit with other pieces.”</p> <p>Not only does the performance not stop with the fall of the curtain, but as one audience member asked at the MCA showing talkback— taken from my ethnographic fieldnotes noted on 6/17/10, typed on 12/20/10 and read today—“Where does theatre begin?” I have tried to trace some of these beginnings and endings beyond the time of the performance with my turn to ethnography. Placing these moments of start and stop at fixed times is impossible, and yet I’ve let things emerge and allow me to think through the attempt anyway.</p> <p>The focus could be on lack of competence, deliberate acts of</p>	<p>For the final fragment of the performance, Banich stands center stage. Fiehn and Cavajda approach and flank her. Fiehn, standing stage left of her, speaks first, and smiling gently he says, “Selma. I’m going to leave the theatre and I’m going to yell your name. Then I’m going to come back and I want you to tell me whether you heard me or not. Then I’m going to do it again but from further away. And I’m going to keep doing it until you can’t hear me any more. This way we’ll establish where the theatre ends. Ok?” Cavajda then speaks in Croatian and no translation is provided, but I assume he repeats the same text Fiehn spoke because it begins with “Selma” and ends with “Ok?” Of course, I don’t know that it is the same text for sure.</p>
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<p>Extra-ordinary affects not special to theatrical performance but more of the ordinary. Not quantitatively more but of a higher intensity. The Every House Has a Door performance stages this link as the performance extends to the worlds outside of the theatre and opens up the affective possibilities throughout, and beyond. “Like the actor who doubles up parts but then finds both characters meet in a final denouement, talking about theatre and everyday life together apparently demands rapid entrances and exits. But this does not mean that the terms of both mean merely different things or that they are completely disconnected—there is on the contrary a subtle and interesting relation between their conditions of meaningfulness” (Read 51). Or perhaps stupid meaninglessness?</p>	<p>imprecision, processes of nonknowledge—all stand-ins for stupidity.</p>	<p>When Cavajda finishes saying “Ok?”, the two men walk up and out of the theatre. Just outside the door, and in unison, they yell, “Selma!” They return and walk all the way back to standing at her flanks to check and see if she heard them. This long cross back to her flanks is comical. The audience for the work-in-progress showing at the MCA chuckled enthusiastically. After Banich confirms that she could hear them, the two men turn and begin the long walk out of the theatre again. The air becomes thick as the audience finds themselves listening along with Banich for where the theatre ends. Their attention harnessed and intent on listening for the place where the everyday takes over and the theatre is left confined. “Selma!” Again the two men return to her flanks before asking for confirmation that they could be heard. Banich confirms this, and off they go again. The</p>
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<p>The theatre extending out into the everyday indeterminately.</p>	<p>The audience straining to hear where the theatre ends and everyday life begins.</p>	<p>game has been set so that with each exit the men take the audience strains harder to hear as they imagine the space they are trying to hear across is growing ever greater. And it is. After a couple of these returns, and “Selma!” is yelled, the men exit a final time and do not return. Goulish had quietly left the stage earlier, and all that remains is Banich, straining to hear the men yell her name.</p> <p>A noise that never comes, but is perpetually moving ever farther out, receding further into untraceable becomings. The line that separates theatrical performance practice from the everyday is ultimately unknowable as we think of these things always on the move.</p>
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## **Chapter Four: SuperGroup's *Shouldwetitleitnoworwait***

Process is the immanence of the infinite in the finite. There is no reason to hold that confusion is less fundamental than is order.

--Mathew Goulish from *39 Microlectures: in Proximity of Performance*

### ***Shouldiconcludeit...***

*I have begun this chapter with a tentative conclusion. I will not, however, write a complete reversal of the standard narrative order and end with an introduction. That straightforward—or straightbackward rather—linear reversal would not derive from the creative tactics that SuperGroup enacted in making *Shouldwetitleitnoworwait*, and would not be of the fragmented performance that is central to the writing of this chapter. This conclusion is the introduction is the conclusion. I began this way because in conventional theatrical performance-making the performance, the production, or the show is understood to be the conclusion of the creative process. It is the performance as conclusion that the audience is invited to spectate, and often the first thing they encounter, as they are not usually privy to any of the performance-making process. The final performance is understood as the product of the creative process much as the writing-up of a scholarly text is understood as the product of the writing-down of field notes in the ethnographic process.*

*SuperGroup shares with *Every House Has a Door* a focus on process in their work. They do not view their performances solely as products for audience consumption in the form of entertainment separated from the process of their*

*making. SuperGroup views the performances of their work as a space where notions of process and product mingle, comment on, and trouble one another. SuperGroup's performance work—like the Dada artists and experimental artists in the U.S. from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onward—once again brings into question the entire medium of theatrical performance as a mode of becoming for performers and spectators alike. What exactly does the performance become if not only an entertaining product for consumption? What is the spectator's role, and how are they to engage with the performance focused on process if they haven't been invited to witness that process throughout? With Shouldwetitleitnoworwait the place where process ends and performance product begins becomes difficult to discern—if such a specifically locatable place exists at all—and each entwines and intermingles with the other. This chapter will be written of this imbrication of process and product. As such, this italicized conclusion will begin, end, and carry throughout the entire chapter. It will be interrupted by fragmented blocks of text from an earlier draft of this chapter, or perhaps this conclusion will interrupt the play of these earlier written fragments. My writing process and finished written product thereby are dancing together page to page within your first viewing as the reader just as SuperGroup's process and performance danced moment to moment together on the stage in first view of the spectators.*

**now...** 3/24/09 and 11/15/10 and 7/19/11 and 11/2/11 and today. Met with Byrd/Blue at Seward Café to discuss her solo performance piece *This Here Now* that I would write about for my graduate preliminary exams. I had only ever seen her on stage months earlier, and so I was nervous that I would not recognize her now off the stage in an everyday life setting. As I walked into the café, I saw who I thought was Byrd/Blue sitting at a table. I approached this woman tentatively. I was relieved to find that I was not stupidly mistaken. It was her. I sat at the table across from her and we chatted. Ethnographer on one side and ethnographic subject on the other—never the two shall meet? Is the length of a café table enough of an objective distance? Did sitting at the table with her count as participant observation, or just observation? She told me that the performance collective that she is part of, SuperGroup, was devising a new performance piece. “We want to work on it for 9 months.” Like a baby? “We don’t know what it will be. Thematically. It won’t have a theme. It won’t be *about* anything. We’re experimenting with process. It will be a musical though. Or there will be music in it anyway. We’re pretty sure about that.” ...**orwait**

*The rules for writing the chapter in the earlier draft that is now interrupting this conclusion—or that this conclusion is interrupting—were based on several factors that influenced how SuperGroup made Shouldwetitleitnoworwait. They were given forty minutes to present their work by the Southern Theatre as part of the New Breed night of performance. This was a night of performance that was*

*curated to showcase performance groups in the Twin Cities that were experimenting with form and content, and pushing the expectations of local performance conventions. There are four members of SuperGroup and each was responsible for one of four aspects of the total performance: music/sound, text, movement, or design. Chance played a primary role in making the piece in several of their individual aspects as well as how the aspects would line up together to form the total structure of the performance.*

*The rules for my writing of SuperGroup's work were as follows:*

*Rule 1.) Write forty pages of text—for the forty minutes of performance—as a series of fits and starts. These fits and starts document my fragmented stupid thinking that falters and fails to cohere in a body of a text. It just happened that there were 39 to cover the forty pages. The 39 fits and starts became a formal way to cite Matthew Goulish, and his 39 Microlectures: In Proximity of Performance as a model for some other way of writing of performance.*

*Rule 2.) These fits and starts will be divided into four aspects: 1.) ethnographic fieldnotes of SuperGroup's process and the performance of Shouldwetitleitnoworwait as an extension of that process 2.) historical and theoretical quotes from related sources 3.) my own commentary on SuperGroup's creative practices, and 4.) Misc.*

*Rule 3.) After I have written forty pages of text divided into my four aspects above, each of the fits and starts will be given a number. These numbers will be*

*fed into an online random number generator, and that will determine the ordering of the 39 fits and starts.*

*I have completely deleted one of the original fits and starts, but other than that I have maintained the original random order of these fits and starts with only one other exception. One of the fits and starts was removed and further fleshed out to make up a large part of this conclusion. Strangely, or not, it was the first fit or start that I initially wrote. The conclusion was always trying to work its way to the front of the line for this chapter, and stupidly appear where it ought not.*

*Stupidity played a central role in the process of making and performing Shouldwetitleitnoworwait. SuperGroup began from the notion that they did not know what they were making, but that they were going to make something. This inability to know the end when starting out in a creative process is not unique to the work of SuperGroup. Any new performance work, whether it is devised, choreographed, or even written by a playwright begins in a state of stupidity. In a text-based rehearsal/workshop process the discomfort of not knowing drives a desire to know. The phase of not knowing the outcome becomes a necessary evil to pass through and arrive at the final production. A playwright is pressured to finish a script. The director gets the finished script and starts to make decisions. These decisions are shared and negotiated with actors who also make decisions. Rehearsal becomes about “getting it right” and how best to communicate a story or theme or idea to an invited audience. The show must go on. SuperGroup did not rush to leave the discomfort of not knowing behind.*

*They lingered in it, found tactics to prolong it throughout their process, and opened up potential ways for it to percolate through their performance at The Southern Theater, a Minneapolis venue. By dividing the responsibilities into four, and choosing to not communicate everything with each other, stupidly not-knowing became the central hub around which their process rotated. It was the central shaky pillar on which their performance was built.*

**now...**At some point along the way I realized that what I was trying to do was to devise a dissertation. If the theatrical performance artists that I was researching devised their work, and I was attempting to write of them and not about them, then the performance of this dissertation would be a devised one. In some ways, most scholarship is devised as it is hobbled together from bits and pieces of the researcher's own thoughts. These thoughts are sutured with quotes and citations from other authors, and archival or ethnographic research. In devised performance there is a tendency to show the seams, stitches and sutures of the parts that have been assembled making a contingently performed whole. The process pokes through the façade of the finished work and mars its produced, smooth surface. In most scholarship, through the procedure of drafting over several revisions, these seams, stitches and sutures are often glossed over, polished, and the writing process is subjected to the finished or final draft as knowledge produced. It is the burden of the scholar and not the artist to produce knowledge, and yet if I am committed to writing of the work of SuperGroup and

not about it then I have to abandon conventional academic methods and explanatory outcomes. At the risk of looking more stupid than scholarly, as I devise this dissertation I want these points of assemblage that mark moments of encounter and the gaps between various modes of thought to become visible, and even intensely affectively palpable. ...**orwait**

*While embracing and dwelling in their own stupidity seemed to be a perfectly viable tactic for SuperGroup in making their creative work, my desire to do so has been met with some resistance given the constraints of conventional academic discourse and methods. This is not surprising as Brian Massumi has pointed out, "But perhaps in order to write experimentally, you have to be willing to 'affirm' even your own stupidity. Embracing one's own stupidity is not the prevailing academic posture" (18). To write of Shouldwetitleitnoworwait and not about it has demanded that I affirm my own stupidity. In Knowing Nothing, Staying Stupid: Elements for a Psychoanalytic Epistemology Dany Nobus and Malcolm Quinn echo Massumi's claim about the prevalent problem of academics adopting a knowing posture. They write, "Lacan's arguments suggest that under the condition of modernity only the analyst, the scientist and the artist have the potential to treat knowledge in an unfettered, unconditioned state. Academics, for their part, are condemned to rationalization, knowledge accumulation and the maintenance of an epistemological status quo" (emphasis mine, 118). I have been working to stupidly resist this condemnation and disrupt the maintenance of*

*the epistemological status quo by basing my academic research methodology in stupid performance practices. My hope is that in some way this chapter has generated a similar affective quality that is of Shouldwetitleitnoworwait. The fragmented, non-linear and non-coherent qualities of the performance were as frustrating and challenging for the audience as this chapter may be for the reader.*

**now...** 09/21/09 2:45-5:00pm and 11/23/10 2:00-2:30pm and 7/21/11 11:00-11:30am and 11/12/11 10:30-11:30am and today. Rehearsal begins on a concrete stage in Powderhorn Park. I show up and they are already working. They are working on Sam/Green's footphrase—which later became known as the "stepping section"—that consists of 100 different possible moves fed into a random number generator to determine the order they are arranged and performed in.

Airplanes fly overhead and make it difficult to hear in this outdoor space. It is in a public park, so they have free access to it. They did not have to pay any fee for its use, other than tax dollars as inhabitants of the city. It is a first-come first-served public access space.

Erin/Pink says, "Can we do it again shorter? I mean slower?"

Sam/Green says, "It should be about the moving leg."

Sam/Green asks the others, "Is this kind of language helpful? That I'm switching between different kinds of modifiers?"

Jeff/Orange replies, "It's working for me."

Erin/Pink suggests the notion of "anchor moves": "When you get attached to a move, you start to know the whole series of steps leading to it."

They then attempt to work another movement sequence, but are not familiar with it and get lost. They abandon this, and move on to something else.

They do the shake section for the first time. Sam/Green demonstrates a series of moves that have to do with shaking different body parts: first a hand, then the head, and then feet stomping wildly against the ground until the entire body is shaking. The sequence and the moves are meant to be uniform. When any member of the group decides to move on to the next shaking move in the sequence, however, is determined individually. This makes a kind of movement round in the manner of *Row Row Your Boat*. In this way each of them is responsible for determining their own duration of the shakes within the complete shake sequence. There is then an underlying structure that each is still allowed to play with, and will continue to play with in the final performance. This will allow the performance to never be set in a deliberate and finished way. They will not shake in unison even if they follow the same sequence of shakes.

A group of athletes appear in the park and are trying to have some kind of meeting that requires some of them speaking to the larger group of fellow athletes. SuperGroup decides that they will continue their rehearsal back at home and not try to compete with the athletes for clarity of sound. Also, it

seemed like rain was inevitable and the outdoor rehearsal would need to be moved indoors shortly anyway.

Inside Byrd/Blue gives her design presentation. She has taken suggestions from the others for how they would want their costumes to be. I find out that other than the forty-minute time limit the Southern has assigned there are no other official limitations on what they can present at the *New Breed* event. There are, however, unspoken limitations about being able to share the space with two other performance groups. Any scenery they use must be able to be set up and struck quickly, and not take up too much storage space. There is a fixed light plot. Etc.

The rest of the rehearsal is spent singing with Jeff/Orange at the piano leading the others through some music he is writing for the voice and marimba. There will be no piano in the final performance. There will only be marimba and drums. Similarly to the outdoor rehearsal space, they rehearse with the piano because it is available to them. A large part of the stupidity of any rehearsal involves using things and spaces that are not the things and spaces that will actually be used in performance—one thing or space standing-in for that which it is not. A willing representational mistake, and an act of deliberate imprecision.

**...orwait**

**now...** Pluto is not a planet. **...orwait**

**now...** 06/08/10 noon-2pm and 11/27/10 2:00-2:30pm and 7/27/11 and today.

Selections from my meeting with Jeff/Orange not at Pizza Luce but at True Thai a

couple of months after the performance to discuss his reactions. No tape recorder.

Jeff/Orange, "I had never composed for other musicians before, and I've never composed for the marimba before. I have mostly composed for the guitar with A-B-A lyric structures. This was not going to be like that."

Jeff/Orange, "With *Shouldwewait* I wanted to start from a place of non-emotion with the music."

Jeff/Orange, "I thought transportation was an interesting idea, but I wasn't sure how I would draw on it."

Jeff/Orange, "I made a code that would turn text into music. I gave each letter of the alphabet a number that had a correlating note on a scale. I was fascinated with the subway map in New York City. So I looked at the map and thought about places on the routes that were important to me, and I wrote down the station names. I transferred these names into music through the code. Then I shaped the coded subway songs into something that sounded nice to me. A lot of stuff never made the cut. I generated an excess of music to what was used in the actual performance."

Jeff/Orange, "I knew I didn't want music throughout the whole forty minutes. I wanted space for silence, or the silence of no music at any rate."

Jeff/Orange, "Another way I generated music was to play something, and have Sam, Erin and Byrd make musical notations of how they imagined what

they heard being notated. I knew they didn't now how to do this. So I used their attempts at it to then write new music."

Jeff/Orange, "I was aware of Cage and Meredith Monk and Cage's influence on Monk, sure, I thought of this, but I didn't directly research these artists for this particular project."

Jeff/Orange, "As a group we have a hard time staying on the same page together. We don't have a real solid paper trail both actually and metaphorically."

Jeff/Orange, "One of the drawbacks to working this way was that in trying to limit the influence we had on each others' aspects we moved away from any kind of group accountability."

Jeff/Orange, "We had to acknowledge that it would never be a pure process. We would need to make concessions and decisions that were outside of the structures we had agreed on to finally make the piece. We stayed with it as long as we could though."

Jeff/Orange, "I definitely felt fulfilled as an artist with my work. It gave me a nice balance of I'm responsible for this, but then taking in all of this other stuff I'm not responsible for. I enjoyed performing it. I was really into how hard it was to rehearse it. The rigor of it. It was weird to perform it in front of an audience. If I made a connection it would throw me off. If I caught someone's eye and then I'd lose balance. It was always on the verge of crumbling." ...**orwait**

*The performance of Shouldwetitleitnoworwait continues the process that SuperGroup underwent in making it. It is similar to a glassblower who crafts an art-object out of glass. The firing stage that melts the glass is the period of time where the glass—glowing reddish orange and dripping—is most obviously in flux and being shaped, but the final object is still moving as glass is never still. This is the lesson of glass (Goulish 44). Similarly, the final performances of Shouldwetitleitnoworwait never solidified into unmoving or stable objects, but were instead intensely distilled showings of the months-long process in one evening. In this way, the performance was not a marked different thing from the process but a further extension of it. This chapter has thought through this thing of the performance/process. As the performance was a series of fragments, so too this chapter is fragmented, and follows similar chance operations to those used in making Shouldwetitleitnoworwait. Like Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project in form, but not content, the chapter will leave much work to the reader to find meaning, or not, in the spaces between the fragmented musings, quotes, and anecdotes. That was the affective experience of watching the performance.*

**now...** A mutual friend of mine and SuperGroup's has asked a couple of times if I am going to write about SuperGroup's farting at rehearsal. A couple of the members of SuperGroup had asked this mutual friend about this. They felt that the farts were important to their process. As an ethnographer who wants to try to allow a space for the voices of my research subjects to be heard through my

discourse forming them as objects of which I speak, I figured I should make note of this somewhere. They often fart in rehearsal. I'm still not sure how to account for what impact that has on their performance practice. It does make visible, or audible, or smell-able that so often in performance discourse when "the body" is written of it is almost exclusively the surface of the body that is under critical scrutiny. How do we account for the interior movements of the body that directly impact the exterior? Intestines, digestion, lungs filling and emptying. How do we note and think about the choreography of our internal organs and their eruptions into and out of the performing body? The grotesque excess of our bodies.

**...orwait**

**now....** 11/18/10 6:00-8:00pm and 11/19/10 10:00-10:30am Pacific Time and 7/27/11 and today. I was at the annual ASTR conference in Seattle—this year a co-production with CORD—as part of a working group called "Bodies At Play." It was my first time in one of these working groups, and it was the first time I spoke publicly about stupidity. I came out as a stupid academic. I had submitted a paper to the working group that was written of SuperGroup's

*Shouldwetitleitnoworwait.* I was frustrated with some of the other members of this working group because what I felt they were practicing with their writing about performances was a kind of reportage. It almost seemed a kind of journalism rather than criticism or scholarship. They were so seduced by their objects of study, worked so hard to describe them, but then did little else with their writing. I was frustrated because—Peggy Phelan's warning about

descriptive discursive corpses aside—I wasn't interested in just hearing or reading descriptions of these performances (*Mourning Sex* 3). The descriptions, no matter how colorful, or rich would never allow me access to the performances. In a section of the *Encyclopaedia of Stupidity* (sic) titled "Three Stupid Maps," Matthijs Van Boxsel relates an incident from Lewis Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*. In Carroll's story a character named Mein Herr tells of a perfect map where one mile would equal one mile in scale. This makes the countrymen nervous that the map once unfolded will cover everything and block out the sun. In the end, they decide to abandon representation and use the country itself as the map. This would be Bataille's descriptive totality emerging and thus annihilating the description. Van Boxsel writes, "All order is beset with a totalitarian temptation. However, the quest for wholeness is undermined by a form of idiocy on which every type of organization founders sooner or later, an intangible madness that threatens to turn the whole system into a farce. Infinite regression also teaches us that ultimately it is the map itself that stands in the way of our successful mapping of the world" (58). What I could have access to was the thoughts of the writers after encountering the performances—a map of their thoughts that take shape in writing where the performances never can. I wanted to hear and/or read what these performances allowed the writers to think. How were the ASTR working group scholars affected by the performances central to their studies rather than how were they translating performances to written texts to be read and little else? What thoughts did the performances

engender? How could they respond to them creatively? Heuristic practices and methods opposed to hermeneutic practices and methods. I was very nervous but the rest of the group seemed very interested in both SuperGroup's piece and my thinking and writing of it through stupidity. I constructed my paper in a manner very similar to this chapter. After a brief introduction where I explained a little about why I was doing what I was doing, I then assembled a series of fits and starts in a random order. These text fragments included descriptions of SuperGroup's work taken from my field notes, and some conceptualizing of stupidity. The ASTR conference "Bodies at Play" working group allowed me a test track to take this experiment of devising my writing for a test drive. The engine did not blow up, and so I decided to use the paper as the rehearsal for what would become the first draft of this chapter. ...**orwait**

**now...** I have tried throughout this project to practice the notion of a trickster ethnography that Laura Bohannon produces in her *Return to Laughter* and that Kamala Visweswaran elaborates with the essay "Feminist Ethnography as Failure" in her book *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*. Visweswaran writes that, "This notion of the feminist trickster hinges on the supposition that we can 'give voice' and the knowledge that we can never fully" (100). Knowing that the ethnographer can never fully speak for the subjects of their research but attempting to anyway involves an owning up to stupidity as part of this process. Yet, as I have hoped to make clear by now, doing something stupid doesn't mean that there is no possibility for thought. In fact, it is how thought opens up, and

continues to open up. When I have quoted the members of SuperGroup in this chapter I have tried to always make visible the constructed nature of their speaking translated into my discourse and thereby showing my own hand in the construction of these dialogs. The use of the textual formula Name/Color is one tactic I have deployed in my attempt to keep this discursive formation visible so that it doesn't disappear into some false truth claim that I am re-representing what *really* happened just because I was in the room as it happened. Another tactic is reminding you of this as you read the previous sentence....**orwait**

**now...** Pluto is a planet again. ...**orwait**

**now...** Lyrics to the song "I Don't Know Which Train" by Erin Search-Wells:

"I don't know which train he came in on, or if it was a train at all. No horse at the bank, he coughed. Now as long as I know there were two kinds of people in this town. The first was the kind we already knew. They were always standing around the hardware store, or ordering cakes from the bakery. Whereas the other type of person was someone you never saw. I don't know which town or even if there was a town at all."

As she indicated in a post-show interview with me, Erin/Pink struggled with a similar problem as I do here in this dissertation. She felt that her textual responsibilities also carried an inherent responsibility of generating meaning for the spectators—as meaning is so often made in language through text. In her lyrics above, I can see some strategies she used within her own aspect to thwart the spectator's ability to draw conclusions about the text. In a discursive maneuver reminiscent of the writerly tricks that Lewis Carroll plays with language, a man is said to come in on a train, and then the existence of the train is

immediately questioned. There are two kinds of people, the known and the nonknown, and then the entire scene disappears in the possibility that the town landscape she has painted was never there at all. I draw attention to Erin/Pink's text to show evidence that in addition to the larger structure of the four aspects working together against knowledge production, within each of the individual aspects stupid tactics were also operating. The rug was constantly being pulled out from under the spectator's seats to generate affective possibilities of a higher intensity than those of knowable one-to-one symbolic signification. ...**orwait now...**At a meeting in September of 2010 with Erin Search-Wells where I was not acting as an ethnographer of her work, but rather was responding to her request to share information with her about graduate school, the discussion turned to my dissertation project. I do not have field notes to document this conversation because as I just said, or wrote actually, it was a friendly meeting and I was not on official ethnographic business. I left my ethnographer secret decoder ring at home. This was before I had started in earnest to write this dissertation and was struggling with where to begin. As I talked through the troubles with Erin she said, "Oh, so what you're really dealing with is how to show your writing process in the final document. You're jealous of us because we can just stage our process, but that doesn't work for you. You have to have this finished smoothed over document. You really want to show your *writing* and not just what you wrote." She was right. I wondered how to make a dissertation that acted like a Jackson Pollock painting, that actively documented my process in

writing it, was something other than a “rough draft,” but showed the anxiety-riddled and strained, striated nature of the writing into becoming of the document. This is the struggle of this dissertation. Erin’s words made it so clear to me. Her reflection of my problem allowed me an entryway in. I would need to find a way (ways) to write my process into the dissertation as it became a dissertation.

**...orwait**

**now...** 5/26/10 noon-1:50pm and 11/27/10 12:30-1:00pm and 7/27/11 2:00pm-3:00pm and today. Selections from my meeting at Pizza Luce restaurant with Erin/Pink to discuss her reactions a couple of months after the performance has finished. Gain insight into her process. I did not bring a tape recorder to this more formal ethnographic interview and chose to take notes by hand. When performance studies scholar Della Pollock came to visit a graduate seminar I was in years ago, she actually suggested that ethnography is about deep listening and not recording. She said ethnographers should get used to leaving the tape recorders at home, unless, as Pollock recounted, you are Studs Terkel who didn’t know how to use his tape recorder very well. Every time he tried to set it up he would struggle with the technology and thus mark the recorder’s presence in the space of the interview overtly. Stupid Studs.

Erin/Pink, “Early on, I viewed them as chunks of text in ways of generating material without knowing what it was about at all. Text conventionally communicates directly about ‘meaning’ and I felt the pressure of that in my aspect maybe more than the others. I tried to play with not doing that. I was

being playful with the audience. Some times during the performances I felt like the 'meaning' became trying to communicate the importance of what we were doing. About half-way through the whole process the texts I was writing were about class, like wealth class, and where does abstract art fit into that?"

I ask her about the lyrics to the song *Which Train* that she wrote and that Jeff/Orange paired with some music he wrote. I asked if the homophone of which and witch was intentional. Erin/Pink said it was not.

Erin/Pink, "Only during Jeff's *Aria* did the text seem to match the movement as I performed it."

Erin/Pink, "I wanted to let the audience decide between one interpretation of the text or the other."

Erin/Pink, "During one performance I got emotional because I really wanted to communicate directly with the audience but the choreography was such that I was not allowed to turn to you and talk to you directly but I'm trying."

Here we can see the two aspects in direct conflict with each other.

Erin/Pink wanting to speak her text directly to the audience, but having agreed to the process, following the decisions that Sam/Green made about movement that did not allow for this direct address. ...**orwait**

**now...** From Jalal Toufic's *Distracted*:

Many people think writers acquire a facility with written language. On the contrary. And the difficulty now extends even to writing a letter to someone to ask permission to film in his café. Is this gradual reduction of what one feels should be written an unavoidable facet of writing? The process is contagious, one saying little; walking to the other end of the dining table to get the salt instead

of merely saying salt; then doing away with salt and with...(how much does this ellipsis mark still contain!). (52). ...**orwait**

**now...** From Tim Etchells's *Certain Fragments: Contemporary Performance and Forced Entertainment*:

Twenty-six years after *Shoot* the audience/witness distinction remains vital and provocative since it reminds us to ask again the questions about where art matters and where it leaves its mark—in the real world or in some fictional one—and on whom it leaves its burden. The art-work that turns us into witnesses leaves us, above all, unable to stop thinking, talking and reporting what we've seen. We're left, like the people in Brecht's poem who've witnessed a road accident, still stood on the street corner discussing what happened, borne on by our responsibility to events. (18). ...**orwait**

**now...** If thick description were ever really thick enough the thing itself would emerge in space in front of the reader and words to describe it would become unnecessary. ...**orwait**

**now...** "The stupider one is, the closer one is to reality. The stupider one is, the clearer one is. Stupidity is brief and artless, while intelligence wriggles and hides itself. Intelligence is a knave, but stupidity is honest and straightforward," says Ivan to Alyosha on page 280, Chapter III, Part II, Book V of *The Brothers Karamazov* written by the same author who also wrote *The Idiot*. There was nothing about *Shouldwetitleitnoworwait* that conformed to the conventions of theatrical realism. There was not a narrative that was pulled from the headlines or based on the (auto?)biographies of the performers. There were no costumes that were meant to indicate something about psychologically able characters and their station in life—in fact there were no characters. There was no scenery that was meant to transport us from our grounded location in front of the dilapidated

proscenium arch of the Southern Theatre to some kitchen or living room. Rather than masking the structures and conventions of theatrical performance, *Should we title it now or wait* made these structures visible, and not exactly in a Brechtian sense. Brecht exposes the workings, conventions, and structures of theatrical practice to paradoxically make them disappear and prompt the audience to contemplate their socio-political existence outside of the theatre. He used the theatre as a mouthpiece to drive home his own political agenda. In this way, Brecht exposes the formal structures at work to enact an exchange in the content they support—an exchange of Capitalist deals for Communist ideals. By laying the workings of theatrical performance production bare, and not offering any explicit or unified agenda or suggestion to fill these structures, but only exposing the structures themselves, SuperGroup opened a space to critically think through the structures that shape our everyday lives. While each of the four members was in control of one aspect of the performance structure, they each gave up control of three other intentional aspects. In this way, they were able to embody their artistic agency through one aspect, but remained subjected to the other three aspects. Watching the performance at The Southern, I was able to reflect on the conditions of my performance of self in everyday life where I make certain subjective choices to enact my personhood while at the same time I am also subjected by larger institutional structures that shape me in regards to identity positions of race, class, gender, physical (dis)ability, nationality, and sexuality. These are the most notable, marked and interrogated of identity

markers within the field of academic theatrical performance discourse. By exposing the structures at work in the theatrical performance framework of the proscenium arch, SuperGroup did not then suggest an alternative set of structures—Communist or otherwise—but poked holes in the fabric of social reality to expose the possibility of other realities affectively. By establishing a set of rules and adhering to them throughout their process they in some way showed a reality that was stupidly more real and less knavish than any theatrical performance taking place in a box set with characters emoting in costumes that symbolize their profession, social class, gender, (dis)ability, sexuality, or race.

**...orwait**

*At the affective level lies the political potential of an equality of existence because at the affective level difference is absolute. That's the thing. Affect is the result of the encounter between different things and everything has its idiosyncratic individual quiddity—every single thing, each its own quiddity. Every thing is radically different from every other thing. At the affective level, it's all difference and what is in common is that difference and that paradoxically is an equality. A complete difference is completely equal. If you place a can next to a bottle one is not the object of the other, nor does one subject the other to it. They become equal through their difference—a can and a bottle beside each other. At the affective level they encounter each other and that encounter is predicated on that difference—the radical difference of two different things*

*instantiating each other. Heterogeneity. This also could be a can and me in relation to each other, or a bottle in relation to you, or you in relation to me. It could also be you in relation to tuberculosis or me in relation to traffic laws—the difference between any number of things and multiple things simultaneously. SuperGroup with Shouldwetitleitnoworwait tried to overload that affective space throughout their process and performance by dividing tasks up into the radical difference of things. Text did not subjugate movement, movement did not subjugate text, these things of performance were placed next to each other like a can next to a bottle in their radical difference. What they had in common was that difference, and then the entire process in the form of the show was placed beside the spectators at The Southern. This performance was not the artists telling the audience what they should think, or do, but they were placing themselves as the work next to the audience viewing the work and allowing the affective resonances to multiply—the affective potentials to resonate and multiply in unpredictable ways. The affective experience is pre-textual, it's pre-linguistic, it takes place prior to the symbolic realm of language in Lacanian terms, so it is tied to the Real. It will become translated into the realm of the symbolic through language and feeling and thought—as human subjects that translation will happen within us. That human subjectivity is a marked difference between you and me and the bottle or the can, but that does not mean that the affective encounter of thing to thing does not also happen prior to or simultaneously beside our human tendency to subjectivization. We just cannot access the*

*encounter at the affective level through our subjectivity, which is tied up in thought and feeling, which are stupid transmogrifications, stupid translations of the affective encounter. In fact, according to Lacan our subjectivity is reliant upon these affective encounters, as Nobus and Quinn remind us, "Lacan's conviction [is] that the subject is never the cause of itself (causa sui), but is always being caused by the Other" (54-55). Our subjective translations of the world we affectively touch make us who we are. It is based in a disconnect between the world itself and the world as we know it. We continuously mis-know the world and ourselves. Stupidly we roll along.*

**now...** First draft: 1=3, 2=7, 3=13, 4=28, 5=1, 6=18, 7=35, 8=36, 9=10, 10=26, 11=19, 12=32, 13=2, 14=31, 15=23, 16=22, 17=25, 18=8, 19=39, 20=6, 21=17, 22=37, 23=34, 24=11, 25=29, 26=20, 27=27, 28=12, 29=30, 30=24, 31=38, 32=21, 33=16, 34=5, 35=9, 36=33, 37=4, 38=14, 39=15

Later drafts: 1=3, 2=7, 3=13, 4=~~28~~, 5=~~1~~, 6=18, 7=35, 8=36, 9=10, 10=26, 11=19, 12=32, 13=2, 14=31, 15=23, 16=22, 17=25, 18=8, 19=39, 20=6, 21=17, 22=37, 23=34, 24=11, 25=29, 26=20, 27=27, 28=12, 29=30, 30=24, 31=38, 32=21, 33=16, 34=5, 35=9, 36=33, 37=4, 38=14, 39=15...**orwait**

**now...**6/29/09 7:45-9:45pm and 11/15/10 3:00-3:30pm and 7/27/11 2pm-3pm and today. Back at the Ivy Building for rehearsal with SuperGroup. This time all four members are present. They are waiting for the students of the Flamenco class that finished at 7:30pm to clear out of the space. It is annoying to them

because they are paying the Flamenco teacher for the space from 7:45-9:45pm, and they shouldn't have to wait. The Flamenco teacher is wasting their time/money that they have earned working day jobs as restaurant servers, personal assistants and massage therapists—all middle-class service industry jobs that largely serve the middle-class.

We chat in a little lobby area while they wait for access to the studio space they are paying for. Erin/Pink tells me that they have applied for some grants for the piece, and that one grant reviewer complained—in response to their desire to not work on a theme or pre-determined meaning in the piece—“Even performance art has to be ABOUT something.” I laughed. SuperGroup was committed to leaving this question stupidly unanswered and to only focus on their process, even if it cost them grant money. What is the product we should expect? Only investing in process.

They begin with a warm-up after the Flamenco class finally clears out. I wonder about warm-ups for other jobs. How, for example, does a dentist warm-up? What about a painter? Is it an actor and dancer specific practice? Does anyone research the warm-up? Maybe that will be my next project.

Sam/Green is wearing grey leggings with short purple shorts over them and a dark grey or light black T-shirt. Jeff/Orange is wearing a grey T-shirt with purple NYU lettering and black track pants with white racing stripes down each leg. Erin/Pink is wearing black tights that stop just below the knee and a pink T-shirt. Byrd/Blue is wearing a red T-shirt with black, loose cotton pants.

Each stretches in their own time and in their own space in the room. They form little islands of stretching each to their own. It is not a coordinated or synchronized warm-up, but still is done as a group within the total space of the Flamenco studio and for a shared total duration. In some ways, this warm up is akin to the performance that they will make with each having autonomy and proximity in a shared space with a shared duration. Even in their warm ups they simultaneously practice the tension between individual autonomy and collective accountability. As they move they make light vocalizations that mainly involve making sounds on an exhale or inhale of breath.

The Flamenco teacher is still lingering in the space at 8:05pm. She is watering the plants along the windows. Why is she still here? SuperGroup has paid money for access to the space. Space and time are hard to come by for performance groups making work outside of commercial channels. Access to each is always threatened, and this time by the very woman who is getting the money to make sure they have access.

Byrd/Blue does a handstand for a warm-up stretch. The gesture indicates her training. Not a warm-up that a community or amateur performer could likely do with such ease. Her body displays its virtuosity earned through her art school physical performance training.

For some reason, it seems less awkward for me to watch their reflections in the Flamenco studio mirrors than to look at them directly. What does that

indicate about the relationship between representation and the reality it is presumed to reflect?

Each has about 4 feet of space between them as they warm up.

Jeff/Orange holds his left hand in an “L” out in front of him and smacks his left arm with his right hand and then reverses this, holding out the L with the right hand and smacking his right arm with his left hand. He then lightly smacks his own face, back of his neck, head, chest, and legs as if he is beating his body awake.

Sam/Green must be a trained dancer. He is so graceful and buoyant in all of his moves. Long sweeping gestures of fully extended arms and legs. He moves in slow movements and then quick rapid movements showing his trained precision of muscle control. All four are good movers, but he seems to have a bit more of a dancerly quality to his movement. I’m not sure how to describe this quality... It seems to be about control and specificity of the gestures he makes. A body moving with little visible tension. A simultaneous interplay between tension and relaxation moving through his body and that his body moves through.

Byrd/Blue asks, “Are we alone in here now?” The other 3 nod. She isn’t referring to me. She is referring to the Flamenco teacher. I no longer feel like such an intruder after being included in this group alone-ness.

Every so often in the process each of them brings in concepts, and ideas, that they are exploring with their individual aspects. They share, but don’t discuss or judge what is shared. This way they can at least see some of what

each other is doing and not be totally cut-off from each other's individual explorations in process. They keep track of these to track their process over time. I have no notes of what was shared, and I don't remember if anything was or not on this particular night. This note may have been written because they just informed me that this kind of sharing does happen from time to time, and it may not have actually happened on this evening. The record makes no claim to completeness.

The rest of the workshop time was spent doing three twenty-minute improvisations. The rules for the first improv that could be followed, or not were: 1.) One straight man, must be one, no more than one; 2.) Four instruments, drums, marimba, electric guitar, piano; 3.) Deal with stillness/movement performance/non-performance; 4.) Basket of objects on far diagonal. These rules are neither arbitrary nor binding. They are also not explained much beyond being stated, so it is up to each of them to interpret them just as they are stated.

It is like watching kids play an elaborate game. Erin/Pink's head goes in and out of the basket. Then Jeff/Orange is standing in it. The play leads to a breakdown of habitual ways of moving/being in the world as their bodies twist and shake through contact with each other and the floor and objects in the room. Objects also get wrestled out of intended use. Head and feet in a basket for storing things, not a hat or shoes. A book gets a page torn out of it—it was the only object that Byrd/Blue asked to use caution with. Erin/Pink breaks into song, "I'm sorry about the book." She sings this into a spinning fan making her voice

sound distorted by the moving blade both part of the improvised performance and an actual apology to her friend and collaborator. The aesthetic practice is part of the everyday, and the everyday is part of the aesthetic practice.

They begin a second improvisation with a rule contributed by each. The rules: 1.) Jeff/Orange says, “vocalize, singing not speaking, Erin/Pink vocalize every minute, Jeff/Orange every two minutes, Sam/Green every three minutes, Byrd/Blue every four minutes”; 2.) Erin/Pink says, “pick someone, keep it secret, and describe what they’re doing physically as they do it”; 3.) Sam/Green says, “learning/teaching movement--flocking”; 4.) Byrd/Blue says, “I’m going to clap. When I do, make a tableau. It must dissolve as soon as it is shaped. Three of us must be in a celebratory pose in the tableau, and one other is off, and unrelated to what the other three of us are doing.” They begin this complicated game and I have a series of questions come to mind: How do they agree to work together or against each other given the rules? Both within the set structures and without them? Can these abstract ways of moving/dancing have political purchase in the world outside of the Flamenco studio? I answer this question with a “Yes” in my field notes, it will be my burden to prove this in the writing up of these notes later. How else will we think/invent/practice other ways of moving/becoming in the world? How much is it being broken down, however? And how much impact can short term change really have? There is potential in moving otherwise.

The third improvisation had a rule contributed by each. The rules: 1.) Erin/Pink said, “The message is the medium”; 2.) Jeff/Orange said, “vocal

repetition and echoing”; 3.) Sam/Green said, “play with four movement ideas from awhile ago: geometric lines, small specific abstract gestures, rhythm contained and (my notes are garbled and I don’t know what the fourth movement idea from awhile ago is); 4.) Byrd/Blue said, “Silverware” and had brought in several pieces of silverware for the group that is super to interact with. ...**orwait**

**now...** Reporting for the February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010 edition of the *Star Tribune*—the major news periodical in the Twin Cities metro area—Caroline Palmer writes about all three groups that performed in the *New Breed* night of performance in her review titled “Innovation is everything at somewhat uneven dance concert.”

In order to think through in a different way the affective possibilities that SuperGroup opened with their performance, I would like to reproduce and then compare/contrast some of her comments about SuperGroup’s piece with what she writes about one of the other groups performing that night—Mad King

Thomas. Of SuperGroup, Palmer has this to say:

In "Shouldwetitleitnoworwait" SuperGroup (Sam Johnson, Erin Search-Wells, Byrd Shuler and Jeffrey Wells) create controlled chaos through a shifting interplay of movement, overlapping narratives, showy vocalizing, semi-rants, marimba-rattling and, most significantly, sometimes revealing references to the performance methods behind their madness. But therein lies the problem with this piece: SuperGroup seems so preoccupied with achieving a certain level of absurdity that the actual result comes off more like an overly long and self-important theatrical exercise instead of anything authentic.

And of Mad King Thomas’s performance Palmer writes:

Mad King Thomas, on the other hand, is about as real as it gets. In "Like a Circus, Only Death," Tara King, Theresa Madaus and

Monica Thomas show just how adept they are at smart (and often hilarious) social commentary celebrating rebellious women. There's lip-synching to Ke\$ha and Queen, an "animal" act, "ideological boxing" (including a bout between Madaus as perky "idealism" and King as immobile "ennui"), and a lecture on Molotov cocktails. But it's not all playful -- throughout the piece Mad King Thomas also explores the relationship between exploitation and violence, which becomes especially clear in the final minutes leading to a "Carrie"-esque finale, complete with red glitter.

Palmer's brief description of *Shouldwetitleitnoworwait* aligns with the way I've been discussing it throughout this dissertation—its chaotically controlled fragmentary nature, and emphasis on process. What she identifies as the “problem with this piece,” however, is where I think it is affectively at its strongest. Palmer belies her desire to attend theatrical performance that reinforces what she already knows when her two descriptions are considered together. Her ability to draw one-to-one significations between the images of the Mad King Thomas piece and her own storehouse of knowledge reinforced the consensual “authentic” reality that she has come to know and understand. She takes her own knowledge of the world for that which is real and authentic, and what she fails to read as one-to-one signification she dismisses as absurd and mad—or perhaps she would say obtuse.

I here turn to the concept of an obtuse or third meaning that Roland Barthes produces in his essay “The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Several Eisenstein Stills” published as part of *The Responsibility of Forms*. In this essay, Barthes analyzes several still images from Eisenstein's films and suggests that the images allow for reading (or not reading) on three different levels of meaning.

The first meaning is that of information or communication. With SuperGroup's *Shouldwetitleitnoworwait* we will rely on Palmer to report this kind of meaning when she describes the performance as an, "interplay of movement, overlapping narratives, showy vocalizing, semi-rants, marimba-rattling and, most significantly, sometimes revealing references to the performance methods behind their madness." Barthes's second meaning is what is missing for Palmer in SuperGroup's work but is plentifully abundant for her in Mad King Thomas's piece. The second meaning is the symbolic level. The "ideological boxing" match that Palmer refers to had each of the contenders introduced by a voice over a loud speaker. The small-framed Theresa Madaus pluckily bounced around the ring and put up her dukes in her performance of idealism as the more physically imposing Tara King stood listlessly still, boxing gloves dangling at her sides, as an embodied representation of ennui. I can't remember if ennui won with a single knock-out punch or if idealism was the champ with her rapid-fire pugilistic barrage of gloved fists. At any rate, *Shouldwetitleitnoworwait's* lack of coherence did not allow this kind of second or symbolic meaning to arrive for Palmer or perhaps any spectator at all.

Barthes outlines these two kinds of meanings to lead to his argument for the third or obtuse meaning. To champion the third meaning, he writes:

I even accept, for this obtuse meaning, the word's pejorative connotation: the obtuse meaning seems to extend beyond culture, knowledge, information. Analytically, there is something ridiculous about it; because it opens onto the infinity of language, it can seem limited in the eyes of analytic reason. It belongs to the family of

puns, jokes, useless exertions; indifferent to moral or aesthetic categories (the trivial), the futile, the artificial, the parodic, it sides with the carnival aspect of things. *Obtuse* therefore suits my purpose well. (original emphasis 44)

If, as I have argued, the affective response is one of limits, that it is the case that our half-second encounters with the world are limitative and, in encountering things in the world that are outside of us and apersonal, our subjectivities rush to know instead of allowing the flood of possibilities to overwhelm us stupidly, then what would it mean to open up this third meaning and bypass the second level? To thwart the symbolic one-to-one correspondence of representational practices? Here again, I agree with Barthes when he writes of this kind of obtuse, or third meaning:

Ultimately the obtuse meaning can be seen as an accent, the very form of an emergence, of a fold (even a crease) marking the heavy layer of information and signification. If it could be described (a contradiction in terms), it would have exactly the being of the Japanese haiku: an anaphoric gesture without significant content, a kind of gash from which meaning (the desire for meaning) is expunged. [...] it does not even indicate an elsewhere of meaning (another content, added to the obvious meaning), but baffles it—subverts not the content but the entire practice of meaning. A new—rare—practice affirmed against a majority practice (that of signification), the obtuse meaning inevitably appears as a luxury, an expenditure without exchange; this luxury does not yet belong to today's politics, though it is already part of tomorrow's. (56-57)

I am suggesting that SuperGroup with *Shouldwetitleitnoworwait* opened up an obtusely affective gash and I have tried to provide further evidence of this by citing Palmer's review that is limited by popular discourse and the ways of thinking inherent in that practice. There is no consensus of how to read

*Shouldwetitleitnoworwait* and so it becomes an idiosyncratically stupid experience for the spectator that gets dismissed by those entrenched in their knowledges of the past. As Barthes would have it, however, an obtuse meaning affectively erupts in the present as it practices a politics of tomorrow.

In *Shouldwetitleitnoworwait*, Erin/Pink draws explicit attention to the meaning-making structures when she gives a monologue that references Marshall McLuhan's well-trodden phrase, "The medium is the message." In the performance of *Shouldwetitleitnoworwait* even this seemingly clear enunciation becomes garbled into third affective meanings by the dissonance between Erin/Pink's movement—choreographed by Sam/Green—and her text. The process of each of the members of SuperGroup being responsible for one aspect of performance worked to disrupt the ability for second meanings to congeal in any one of the singular aspects. As Erin/Pink spoke about the message and the medium as if she was addressing an audience from a lecture podium, she continued performing the de-centered and aberrant movement that Sam/Green had choreographed for her. Often this choreography had her facing away from the audience gathered in The Southern theatre, and instead she directed much of her monologue to the stage right wall. These two aspects—text and movement—not coinciding thereby causing an affective dissonance and rupture even between the meaning that is the medium of the theatrical performance. Also within her text, as it starts to congeal into the message of the medium, Erin/Pink opened a space for other possibilities to leak in past the affective reductive half

second gaps as she begins to spin into nonsense and addresses an angry and absent or imaginary Joaquin Phoenix. This incoherence and bypassing of Barthes second meaning prevents the audience from having the reductive experience they, like Palmer, may have had with the other two *New Breed* performances. Complex and non-reductive in their performance work, SuperGroup opened up extra-ordinary possibilities of stupid thought for anyone in the audience open to such affectations. Such stupid audience members who are willing to bear the responsibility and political weight of not just being audience members but witnesses to that which fails to eventuate in contemporary theatrical performance. ...**orwait**

**now...** Lightsey Darst sat in on a SuperGroup rehearsal and wrote a preview of the *New Breed* performance event for mnartists.org. It appeared online on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2010 with the title "Dancing Outside the Lines." She wrote about all three *New Breed* groups, but I here will reproduce several single-spaced long quotes from her report on SuperGroup:

SuperGroup turns out to be aptly named: I've never seen such smooth collaboration, such happy group-brain, as from this quartet of native Minnesotans who went out East for college, stayed a few years, then came back to our snow-bound paradise. As they warm up to *Hold On For One More Day*, the members of SuperGroup strike me as NewPeople: two men and two women steering clear of traditional gender roles, all skinny and limber as if they've been doing sun salutations while the rest of us eat bacon, seemingly trained in modern dance, acting, and voice, and comfortable doing all three at once.

Let me try to give you a sense of what they're piling together for their show. First, there's the dialogue -- or, more accurately, the text, since they don't so much talk

to each other or create characters as deliver rapid-fire the lines, without punctuation, sometimes right on top of each other. A sampling of their exchange:

"I clean up shit for breakfast."

"Your own baby's shit is different than other people's baby's shit."

"Oh my god I'm dry heaving all over my face."

"I want to eat my own face."

Etc: fancy fart jokes. They also throw in knowing critical theory references -- "The message is the medium and the medium is the message and the two are allegedly related" -- and social commentary. To deliver all this, they use silly voices, random accents, even singing. Sometimes, they stop speaking entirely and just vocalize: a nightmarish siren warm-up fills one section.

Then there's the motion. It's pedestrian movement -- arm semaphore, steps, lunges, hops, walking in straight lines, etc. -- the moves not linked in phrases, but cut apart. No obvious relation to the script governs the movement; instead, it's ruled by some hyper-complicated numerical system. Why, I couldn't tell. But that's SuperGroup: excessively smart, fundamentally absurd. Altogether, they come off as a strange mix of *enfant terrible* and good citizen. When they perform, who knows what will land face up?

**...orwait**

**now...** 06/03/10 3:30-5:00pm and 12/27/10 1:30-2:00pm and 7/27/11 3pm-

3:30pm and today. Selections from my meeting with Byrd/Blue at Pizza Luce a couple of months after the performance to discuss her reactions. No tape recorder.

Early in her design process Byrd/Blue was drawing inspiration from the Tarot.

Byrd/Blue, "I had thought about these Tarot inspired objects, but they started to feel stressful. Even though I didn't know all of the movement or what was driving Sam, we had to work on it as a group early so we had time to learn it and I could tell the Tarot objects working with the movement would be tough. I

self-judged and decided that the Tarot was not so useful as a design element but helped understand the process of SuperGroup.” She didn’t say more about how the Tarot helped her to understand their process. If I ever have a follow-up follow-up interview, I will ask her about this.

Byrd/Blue, “I decided I would use the SuperGroup colors as a design element in the costume design. And I asked each of them, ‘What would be your ideal costume at this time? What would be most fun for you?’ Sam and Jeff wrote theirs out and Erin told me verbally. Mine I just knew.”

Byrd/Blue, “With design, I ran up against my creative vs. technical ability. That was part of the weirdness of the design element. We didn’t have people to help us build things. So if I wanted it done, I had to not only design it but also know how to make it, and I didn’t exactly know what I was doing. And there were money limits. Design would be the most costly aspect. I was happy with the way the Styrofoam cairns turned out.”

Byrd/Blue, “I wanted the audience to be able to be aware of the process and why we thought it was interesting. Not just telling it. By the end of the process I didn’t really want to be involved in making up a bunch of rules and executing them. Artistically, I wanted to think about what needs to be talked about more and not really what do I need to speak for.”

Byrd/Blue, “All three of the others are great teachers.”

Byrd/Blue, “Figuring out communication. Moving past the discomfort of disagreeing. Let it be hard. Take a break. Move on.” ...**orwait**

**now...** Pluto is a planet. ...**orwait**

**now...** From RoseLee Goldberg's *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*:

Merce Cunningham who, like Cage, had by 1950 introduced chance procedures and indeterminacy as a means of arriving at a new dance practice. (124)

Goldberg reports of Cunningham's 1951 *Sixteen Dances for Soloist and Company of Three*: the order of the 'nine permanent emotions of the Indian classical theatre' was decided by the toss of a coin. (125) ...**orwait**

**now...** Is Pluto a planet or not? ...**orwait**

**now...** From Marta Savigliano's *Angora Matta: Fatal Acts of North-South Translation*:

How to write an ethnography and a critique of the ethnographic predicament at the same time? How to create ethnographies, the descriptions and interpretations of something exotic brought into the familiar or of something familiar turned into the exotic, while simultaneously addressing the ideological traps and the political stakes of the ethnographic enterprise? How to deliver an ethnographic product that retains the tension of the ethnographic encounter, the romance and the fallings-out, the fascination and the disgust, the wealth and the poverty of ethnographic knowledge—and the differences for its participating subjects and objects? (141) ...**orwait**

**now...** Part of a chart for Sam/Green to devise a stepping dance to:

	Right or Left	Change Facing	Bentness	Placement	Turn in/out
1	right	Stay	Ss	f2l1	i
2	left	Stay	Ss	f1	i
3	right	Stay	Bs	f3r2	i
4	right	change 1/8 right	Ss	f1	o
5	left	Stay	Ss	b2	i
6	right	change 1/4 right	Bs	f2	i
7	right	Stay	Bs	f3r1	o
8	left	Stay	Ss	b1r1	o
9	right	Stay	Bb	f2r1	o
10	right	Stay	Bb	b1r2	i

...**orwait**

**now...** From Govan, Nicholson and Normington's *Making a Performance: Devising Histories and Contemporary Practices*:

The appeal of devising performance for practitioners lies in its pliability and porousness. The invented tradition of devised performance has, of course, no single aesthetic or ideological objective; its strategies and methods are indebted to a wide range of cultural fields including political and community theatres, physical theatre, performance and live art. Theoretically, innovative practitioners have gained insights from cognate research in various disciplines including psychology, sociology and anthropology as well as theatre and performance studies. Practice has been informed by this inter-disciplinarity, and enriched by dialogue and cross-fertilization between practices and practitioners. Devised performance is closely connected to the context and moment of production, and new practices have been invented to extend contemporary notions of what performance might be. Devising has, therefore, the flexibility to enable theatre-makers to address matters of personal concern, to interrogate topical issues, and to extend the aesthetics and reception of performance. (4)

If devising is most accurately described in the plural—as *processes* of experimentation and sets of creative *strategies*—rather than a single methodology, it defies neat definition or categorization. (7) ...**orwait**

**now...** In an October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009 *New York Times* article titled, “How Nonsense Sharpens the Intellect” Benedict Carey reports that researchers at the University of Toronto, the University of British Columbia, and the University of California, Santa Barbara have discovered that encounters with “an experience, in short, that violates all logic and expectation” helps to exercise the rational and pattern-making portions of the brain. These researchers are looking at the relation between stupidity and knowledge. They are suggesting that stupidity is what ultimately makes us smart by helping us to recognize patterns. An example that Carey gives is that if a hunter suddenly encounters an easy chair in the middle of the forest her mind may then “turn its attention outward, the researchers argue, and notice, say, a pattern in animal tracks that was previously hidden. The urge to find a coherent pattern makes it more likely that the brain will find one.” Here

the researchers are concerned with folding the nonknown into the known. By shifting the focus from the easy chair in the woods—the thing itself—to the knowledge produced as an outcome with the uncanny encounter, the uncanniness of the easy chair is expunged and abandoned. The phenomenon is flattened into a learning experience where what is knowable is reinforced. The possibilities opened by the easy chair not being where it should be get lost in the drive to discover pattern recognition. This recuperation of the process of nonknowledge into the realm of knowledge production is what has the researchers in Carey's article excited. For SuperGroup, and myself the possibilities opened by the misplaced easy chair itself are far more exciting. As I watched SuperGroup work I found it, however, extremely difficult to respect the easy chair aspects of *Shouldwetitleitnoworwait* and not try to bring them into some larger knowledge schema. To not use their work to shift to some pattern that I wanted to establish about knowing something from their work. Once the different aspects were layered over each other I had to fight my inherited thought process of trying to read connections between things that were not meant to be connected. Like the hunter in the woods, I was looking for a pattern to emerge. It took a commitment on the part of SuperGroup to their betrayal of theatrical conventions to resist this same drive to congeal in coherence and remain affectively incoherent. To explore the easy chair for its uncanny aspects and not as a means to continue the ends of the hunt of the ever-elusive identification of reality. ...**orwait**

**now...** Even stupid scholarship has to be ABOUT something. But what if it were of it instead?...**orwait**

*Stupidity operates beside the affective level because it is prior to knowing. It is pre-language, pre-text, pre-feeling, pre-thought so it is operating before we know. Before we know what it is. It is thought that cannot be thought, or cohere into thinking. That's stupidity. Stupidity is just beside the affective realm. That's why I can't say what it is as I can't really talk about affect—all I can do is point to the effects of it. I can talk about the effects of stupidity. I can attempt to do stupidity. But I can't say I know what it is with any certainty of that knowledge. The fact that each member of SuperGroup was intentionally keeping themselves not-knowing things that the others were doing facilitated their commitment to this process of non-knowledge. The inability for SuperGroup and myself, and other spectators to say what Shouldwetitleitnoworwait was about, what it meant, why it was what it was points out a limit of performance discourse. It is a similar limit that Lacan suggests is tied to the idea that truth escapes us because knowledge is limited and in that lack is where truth lies ultimately inaccessible. Nobus and Quinn write, "In Lacan's outlook, truth refers to a human being's incapacity to master all knowledge owing to the absence of a knowing agency at the level of the unconscious. Truth is synonymous with the inexorable insistence of a non-subjectified, unconscious knowledge, which constitutes the very limit of knowledge" (49). The affective encounter is experienced by the unconscious*

*which cannot be translated to our conscious self in a direct way, but only through the symbolic register. That translation into the symbolic structures of language means that truth always lies outside of language, and outside of thinking as thought that takes shape in language. By committing to and enacting their own stupidity, SuperGroup arranged a space for the affective touching of truth that stupidly and unconsciously underlies our existence in the realm of conscious symbolic knowledge.*

*To arrange this space, they created a performance that dis-joined signifiers and signifieds. Actually, they created a performance that by breaking up the duties of theatrical practice, and leaving other elements to chance, never allowed the signifiers and signifieds to align to begin with. They enacted movement that was dissociated from text being spoken that was dissociated from costumes they wore that was dissociated from music that underscored most of it all. In doing so, they held open and amplified a dimension of stupidity that they and the spectators were able to dwell in together. Of course we are always in a dimension of stupidity whether we are spectating a performance or not.*

*Theatrical performance facilitates a concentration of what happens outside of theatrical space by placing a frame around it in the seeing place of the theatre.*

*This space of stupidity is, as Lacan argues, what we are immersed in constantly in our daily lives. Nobus and Quinn write:*

*Stupidity is not defined, here, on a sliding scale of intelligence running from extreme cleverness (genius) to abject doltishness (idiocy), but it is used to describe a universally familiar moment of*

*inversion, when thought encounters itself as something Other, runs up against itself, or blocks its own progress. The unconscious thinks, but not in a way that the conscious mind can recognize—it is as foreign to us a restaurant menu written in an unknown language. This is expressed as an incommensurability of two different ways of ordering language: firstly as a conscious communication and secondly as an unconscious signifying chain. Lacan states that stupidity ‘is a dimension of the signifier at work’, because at the level of the signifier there is an operation of thought but an absence of communication (ibid: 21). The paradox of the unconscious is that within its boundaries the relations of language continue, but sense fails or runs out. The signifier and its referent are no longer working in tandem. (109)*

*The place where thought runs up against itself, where a thought-thing encounters a thought-thing as something Other, is the space of stupidity between affect and conscious knowledge. The performance of Shouldwetitleitnoworwait intensified this dimension of the signifier at work by drawing on the expectations of the aesthetic event and deliberately severing the link that holds signifier and referent in tandem. Framed as a representational or symbolic practice, theatrical performance makes visible processes of stupification that we undergo on a regular basis in our everyday lives.*

**now...** From Peggy Phelan’s *Mourning Sex*:

Writing about performance has largely been dedicated to describing in exhaustive detail the mise-en-scene, the physical gestures, the voice, the score, the action of the performance event. This dedication stems from the knowledge that the reader may not have seen the event and therefore the critic must record it. *This urge to record has given rise to an odd situation in which some of the most radical and troubling art of our cultural moment has inspired some of the most conservative (and even reactionary) critical commentary (emphasis mine 3).*

**...orwait**

**now...** From Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*:

"In the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only in lightning flashes. The text is the long roll of thunder that follows. (N1,1)" (456).

"Say something about the method of composition itself: how everything one is thinking at a specific moment in time must at all costs be incorporated into the project then at hand. (N1,3)" (456).

"Bear in mind that commentary on a reality (for it is a question here of commentary, or interpretation in detail) calls for a method completely different from that required by commentary on a text. (N2,1)" (460).

"How this work was written: rung by rung, according as chance would offer a narrow foothold, and always like someone who scales dangerous heights and never allows himself a moment to look around for fear of becoming dizzy (but also because he would save for the end the full force of the panorama opening out to him). (N2,4)" (460).

"The Marxian theory of art: one moment swaggering, and the next scholastic. (N4a,2)." (465).

"To write history means giving dates their physiognomy. (N11,2)." (476).

What does the historically stupid face of SuperGroup look like?

**...orwait**

**now...** The four members of SuperGroup are white, middle class and college educated. They certainly benefit from the privileges of these identity markers, but they also betray their social class with the type of theatrical performance they make. With their extensive training they could readily choose to make commercial theatrical performance. Jeff/Orange has a great musical theater voice and Erin/Pink writes comedy that could play in a stand-up comedy club or even on a television sitcom. Sam/Green and Byrd/Blue could also easily shift

their training into more commercial forms of theatrical and dance performance. They collectively choose, however, to make this type of affect generating work that is not anchored in bourgeois realistic theatrical conventions or in show business careers. While I don't think any of the four members of SuperGroup would consider themselves Communists, I do want to think about betrayal vis-à-vis Benjamin and his essay, "The Author as Producer." Benjamin's essay is focused purely on the work of authors who write texts and I am suggesting that it is fundamental to SuperGroup's process that they don't foreground textual production, but rather theatrical performance processes. Never-the-less I find it both illuminating and reflecting to bring Benjamin's notion of betrayal into the conversation at this point. In "The Author as Producer," Benjamin begins his argument by reminding us that in Plato's "*perfect* community" the poets would be banished because of the potential political power of poetry (255, original emphasis). Benjamin goes on to argue that the intellectual/author who has received a bourgeois education has a decision to make about where she will channel her potential power. She can keep writing in service of the bourgeois class under the illusion of autonomy and a "freedom to write whatever she pleases" or she can make the decision, "taken on the basis of a class struggle" and "side with the proletariat" (255). Benjamin then draws a connection between the literary and political tendency of a work of art and gives as an example of this connection the Russian writer Sergei Tretiakov. Benjamin describes Tretiakov as an "*operating writer* that provides the most tangible example of the functional

interdependency which always and under all conditions exists between the correct political tendency and progressive literary technique” (emphasis mine, 257). Benjamin presents Tretiakov as an example of these operating writers and states that he will hold other examples in reserve. Later in his essay, Benjamin writes that, “The best political tendency is wrong if it does not demonstrate the attitude with which it is to be followed. And this attitude the writer can only demonstrate in his particular activity: that is in writing” (265). Having already acknowledged the risk of discursive slippages happening here, I side with Benjamin’s formulation of a political producer as the writer who demonstrates with writing. I would like to slip writer whose particular activity is in writing, however, to mean theatrical performance devisors whose activity is in devising as political producers. I am forwarding SuperGroup collectively as my own example of this type of theatrical performance devisor who produces politically. I would like to once again repeat Benjamin and his already quoted essay. Near the end of “The Author as Producer”, Benjamin writes, “It was thereby entirely correct when Aragon, in another connection, declared: “The revolutionary intellectual appears first and foremost as the betrayer of his class of origin”” (268).

**...orwait**

*I have previously suggested that by holding open a stupidly affective space to touch truth, and find equality through difference, SuperGroup tapped into the political potential of performance. In order to understand what I mean by*

*political potential here more clearly, I turn to the concepts produced by Jacques Rancière in his The Emancipated Spectator. Rancière wrote The Emancipated Spectator in response to a request from a Swedish choreographer Mårten Spångber. The request was for Rancière to shift concepts that he originally produced in The Ignorant Schoolmaster from the register of pedagogy to the register of aesthetics—specifically into theatre and performance discourse.*

*In The Ignorant Schoolmaster Rancière theorizes the life and work of Joseph Jacotot, an 18<sup>th</sup> century thinker and teacher whose method for intellectual emancipation started with the premise that each individual has the same capacity of intelligence. Rancière argues that what happens with a stultifying schoolmaster, not an ignorant schoolmaster, is a transmission of knowledge from teacher to student across a gap of non-knowledge. This one-to-one transmission of knowledge may mean that the schoolmaster herself need not have mastery of that knowledge. It becomes a straightforward exchange and there is little or no thinking happening for the teacher or student. The exchange is also perpetual in that the stultifying schoolmaster must always have new knowledge to impart to the student, and keep the student always ignorant to some extent. By continuously reproducing the gap in knowledge the stultifying schoolmaster sustains their own function pedagogue and the status quo. In The Emancipated Spectator, Rancière's focus is on those who receive art instead of those who produce it but he draws a direct parallel between artists and schoolmasters where he writes:*

*The playwright or director would like the spectators to see this and feel that, understand some particular thing and draw some particular conclusion. This is the logic of the stultifying pedagogue, the logic of straight, uniform transmission: there is something—a form of knowledge, a capacity, an energy in a body or a mind—on one side, and it must pass to the other side. What the pupil must learn is what the schoolmaster must teach her. What the spectator must see is what the director makes her see. What she must feel is the energy he communicates to her. To this identity of cause and effect, which is at the heart of stultifying logic, emancipation counter-poses their dissociation. This is the meaning of the ignorant schoolmaster: from the schoolmaster the pupil learns something that the schoolmaster does not know himself. She learns it as an effect of the mastery that forces her to search and verifies this research. But she does not learn the schoolmaster's knowledge. (emphasis in original 13-14)*

*The dissociation of cause and effect is at the center of SuperGroup's process in making Shouldwetitleitnoworwait. Having limited control over the total performance, it was impossible to know what effect their individual choices had on each other's choices until they were put together in the final stage of making the piece. The ignorant schoolmaster, or the stupid artist, does not practice simple stultifying knowledge transmission. They teach something they did not know themselves. Students and spectators then learn the schoolmaster's and artist's stupidity and not their knowledge. Ignorant schoolmasters and stupid artists give up their presumed authority as knowledge transmitters and enact occasions for thoughtfully stupid contemplation on the part of the spectator that can have emancipatory political power through the dissociation of cause and effect.*

**now...** I would like to think about and bring into conversation Michel Serres's concepts produced in his *The Troubadour of Knowledge*. In it, through philosophically laden metaphors after metaphors, Serres produces his concept of swimming in a third space. Serres suggests that the passage from one shore of knowing to another shore of knowing requires time in the middling space of not-knowing. If a river or body of water is wide enough so that the other shore cannot be seen then the departure from one shore launches a learner into a wandering state of knowledge seeking. Of course, in my thinking I would like to offer SuperGroup as troubadours of nonknowledge who stupidly set out to swim from one shore to another and intentionally never quite complete their journey. They get intentionally stuck doggy paddling around in the in-between or in the third space that is slippery, but "no one gets through without this slippage. No one, nothing in the world, has ever changed without just managing not to fall. All evolution and learning require passing through the third place" (Serres 12). SuperGroup get themselves lost in the process of swimming and circling around in the middle of the river and are not even sure of either shore to head forward to, or return back to. This enactment of a continuous swimming through uncharted waters is their process and is what they staged in *Shouldwetitleitnoworwait*.

**...orwait**

**now...** 05/26/10 1:50-4:00pm and 11/27/10 1:00-1:30pm and 07/27/11 3:30-4:00pm and today. Selections from my meeting with Sam/Green at Pizza Luce to

discuss his reactions a couple of months after the performance. No tape recorder.

Sam/Green, “We applied for Momentum in 2009 with the theme of geeks or experts in a field. I was thinking about ways I have been a geek in my own life. I’m interested in math things. I have Pi memorized to 80 digits. The geek theme was still lingering for me as we worked on *Shouldwetitleitnoworwait*.”

Sam/Green, “I made the decision to keep everyone on stage the entire time since at any time in the forty minutes anyone could be speaking or singing. I was the least concerned with theatre conventions and would have been ok to talk off stage, but...”

I asked Sam/Green to speak about a solo he danced in the show and how he made it. Sam/Green, “I had no external input from the others. I was not happy in the end with it. It wasn’t set but a structured improv that could reference anything in the show. I didn’t videotape myself as I made it. I judged it during the performing of it—I can put into words what it feels like to be into it, or not into it. No, I don’t think I can. There are mental breaks if I’m not into it and if I’m into it, I don’t think about it at all. I started to pre-judge what the audience watching might want. I wanted it to be faster than the tempo of the other movement sections.”

Sam/Green, “It was actually easy to add Erin’s text on top of the movement. I thought it might be harder since they weren’t made together.”

Sam/Green, "I'm the most into 'this is what we're doing, the process is the process.' If we were going to change that focus, I wanted a very good reason."

**...orwait**

**now...** 6/22/09 7:45-9:45pm and 11/15/10 2:00-2:20pm and 07/27/11 3:30-4:00pm and today. First time I'm in the room with SuperGroup as they work. I'm very nervous. I don't know what I'm looking for. I don't know what to write down. What if I note all of the wrong things? I only get one shot at this each time I'm in the room. I don't want to be in their way. They are rehearsing in a Flamenco studio in the Ivy building. The Ivy building is full of artist studio spaces. They are renting this space from a woman who rents it herself to teach Flamenco. They can't afford to rent the space outright from the landlord themselves. It is sort of a sublease deal.

Tonight it is just Byrd/Blue, Jeff/Orange and Sam/Green. Erin/Pink is not here. Byrd/Blue is responsible for the design aspect of the performance and she will be running the rehearsal.

The three members who are present warm up individually. Sam/Green is moving very slow. He is graceful in his movements. His arms and legs are long and extend far from his trunk. Jeff/Orange is shorter, but still moves with a trained precision. He sweeps the floor with a broom, and asks, "Do you think this is doing anything?" He is referring to his sweeping, but I can't help but think about performance itself. Is performance ever doing anything? What is it doing? How to attend to it? It is interesting to think about the dancelike movements of

Sam/Green juxtaposed by the pedestrian and task-based sweeping of Jeff/Orange. Byrd/Blue lies on the floor and breathes deeply. They are not amateur performers. They have attended art schools in New York. They also do not have a stage manager or director telling them to warm up. They do it because they know it is important to the work to come.

Byrd/Blue acknowledges the strangeness of having me present. They are all silently breathing together. She asks, “Do we talk more usually when we aren’t being watched?” This seems to break some tension between the threesome and me. Byrd/Blue also says, “I just had to say it.” After acknowledging my presence in the room their warm-ups got more dynamic and energetic. Larger movements. Faster. After Byrd/Blue broke the tension.

After warming up they began a group improvisation. Each of them offered one “rule” that can be followed, or not. The three rules: equilateral triangles, backs on floor, lines (in any plane). They moved like they are following pre-set choreography, but the movement was all improvised. They are very familiar with each other. I would later learn that Jeff/Orange and Sam/Green are romantic partners and that they along with Byrd/Blue and her romantic partner all live together. They know each other very well having met years earlier in a local Minneapolis High School.

I am not able to get many notes about the improvisation as I am lost in watching them work. It all seems very playful. Like there are rules to follow, then

they just play within them like a game, but there is no way to win. Play for play's sake?

Byrd/Blue then suggests another improvisation around the ideas of funeral/wedding/young love/long distance. They improv for a predetermined and stop-watch-timed five minutes. I make a note about time. The set time of the individual improvisation, the set time of the rehearsal that they have paid for from the Flamenco teacher, and the total devising time of nine months to a year for making the whole forty-minute piece. All of the markings of time. Duration being one of the primary components to live performance. Duration, space, bodies, objects, gesture, event? What is the duration of this piece? The forty minutes of performance or the entire months-long process?

The rest of rehearsal is spent generating lists of words. Byrd/Blue asks for lists of words that are associated with a funeral. Jeff/Orange and Sam/Green then walk around the room just to get their bodies more engaged and describe what is seen at a wedding as Byrd/Blue writes down the words the other two say aloud.

We say farewell at the end of rehearsal. Put our shoes on by the door as we had to take them off because of the wood Flamenco floor. ...**orwait**

*For a book that by request is intended to address theatre and live performance directly, Rancière does not offer many specific examples drawn from the theatre. The majority of his examples throughout the text are drawn*

*from the visual arts. I still think his concepts are useful, however, to thinking through theatrical performance directly. Rancière begins his argument by outlining two dominant conceptions of activity in regards to theatrical spectators. He presents the idea of a Brechtian audience that is active in that after seeing a performance they either are compelled to become scientific investigators who search for the cause of some social problem or they, “will be offered an exemplary dilemma, similar to those facing human beings engaged in decisions about how to act. In this way, he will be led to hone his own sense of the evaluation of reasons, of their discussion and of the choice that arrives at a decision” (4). Then Rancière goes on to discuss the Artaudian idea of an active spectator that is not separate from the performance, but becomes part of it as it takes place in the ritualized space of cruelty, “drawn into the magic circle of theatrical action where she will exchange the privilege of rational observer for that of being in possession of all her vital energies” (4). Rancière draws into sharp relief the fallacy that an audience is passive if the spectators are not active in either of these two ways referenced again and again in the pages of contemporary theatre histories. The act of looking and the thinking that takes place for spectators, and the response to affects generated by the performance are in themselves a kind of action. How then does this action become political?*

*Still following Rancière’s trajectory of thought, he continues by questioning the idea of community-building often associated with attending theatrical performances. He asks why is the group of spectators assembled at a theatrical*

*event different from those assembled to see a movie, or a gallery exhibit or the thousands in a shared spectating experience across distance watching a television program on any given night (16)? He concludes that it “is simply the presupposition that theatre is in and of itself communitarian” (16). This presupposition aside, Rancière suggests that there is nothing special about spectating in the theatre, and that playing spectator is “our normal situation” at all times (17). Later in the book, he astutely argues that works of art often act as if they operate under a different ontological structure and set of sensations that compose everyday experience, but there is no such difference (67).*

*The non-linear, fragmentary, chance-based nature of*  
*Shouldwetitleitnoworwait allowed for a proliferation of the interplay between associations and dissociations at a higher intensity than normally experienced in every day life, even though this interplay happens in any spectatorial experience on some level. Through SuperGroup’s embrace of their own stupidity and commitment to dwelling in it, they opened an aesthetic space for each spectator to undergo their own:*

*unique intellectual adventure that makes her similar to all the rest(of the spectators) in as much as this adventure is not like any other. This shared power of the equality of intelligence links individuals, makes them exchange their intellectual adventures, in so far as it keeps them separate from one another, equally capable of using the power everyone has to plot her own path. What our performances—be they teaching or playing, speaking, writing, making art or looking at it—verify is not our participation in a power embodied in the community. It is the capacity of anonymous people, the capacity that makes everyone equal to everyone else. This capacity is exercised through irreducible distances; it is*

*exercised by an unpredictable interplay of associations and dissociations. (Rancière 16-17)*

*The stupidity that was used in the process of making Shouldwetitleitnoworwait was multiplied and expanded as the audience encountered it. There was an impossibility of coming to a consensus of what it meant or what it was about, and so the separation of individual intellectual adventures upon encountering the performance were radically different allowing a groundswell of affective possibilities to open up. The stupidity of affect that is part and parcel—via Lacan or Ranciere or Bataille or Ronell or Van Boxsel or me—of our normal activity as spectators of the world was amplified and multiplied by spectating the adventure of Shouldwetitleitnoworwait which was vastly unlike any other adventure.*

**now...** 10/19/09 2:30-5:30pm and 11/24/10 9:30-10:00am and 7/27/11 4:00-4:30pm and today. SuperGroup has rented rehearsal space at Patrick's Cabaret. They begin by stretching and discuss a recent dance hip-hop performance they all saw by another local performance group called Battle Cats. Byrd/Blue talks about being late to work because she was listening to David Sedaris and laughing.

Sam/Green is leading a movement rehearsal. They are working on what they call the Pi section. Earlier, each of them improvised a solo dance, and from those solos Sam/Green in collaboration with each of the others distilled nine movements that were unique to each of them. These were numbered 1-9 for

each and then they use the numerical sequence of Pi to determine the order in sequence that each performs the gesture. So if Pi is 3.14...they all do their own #3 move, then their own #1 move, then their own #4 move and so on.

Sam/Green has the Pi sequence memorized to 80 decimal places. If there is a zero in the sequence, they all jump. This way each has their own specific sequence of movements anchored to the numerical sequence of Pi, and they share zero. Jeff/Orange remarks, "We have to scramble our minds to not think about the numbers."

Erin/Pink: Which direction is front?

Sam/Green: The curtain.

Erin/Pink: And that would be 38<sup>th</sup> Street?

Jeff/Orange: That would be the school.

Erin/Pink was trying to orient herself in this new rehearsal space.

Jeff/Orange's correction that the front was the school was referring to the space where they last worked on this particular movement sequence. In this new rehearsal space—always already standing in for the performance space of The Southern—the curtains become the school as the two spaces collapse into each other based on the orientation of the body.

They establish a pattern that doesn't add up to meaning but still structures a plan.

They begin a Pi section, and Sam/Green says, "Start with seven."

Erin/Pink asks, "Seven moves?" Sam/Green clarifies, "No. Start with move #7,

that happens before this new set of 8.” The numbers in language and the corresponding body moves are getting jumbled. Confusion is part of the process.

On zero all four jump. In this way, zero is made to enact not nothing, but a jump. A jumping together on zero.

This choreography is based on the structure of Pi. An irrational number. Does this choice fold the irrational into the rational? Are they rationalizing the number through their bodies? Or are their bodies suspended in the irrational space of the number?

Reassign the logic of numbers. They have their 1-9 gestures. The dance is counted in the 1, 2, 3, 4, 5...sequence, but here  $1=3$ , while  $2=1$ ,  $3=4$ , etc. according to Pi making a connection between the counting sequence and the Pi sequence. The numbers are reassigned a logic, and there is a pattern, but keeping these two logics present in the body, “Scramble the mind,” as Jeff/Orange remarked earlier.

Could we function in the world if really stupid? We have to know things in order to engage in sociality. What is this that we know? How to behave? How to get along? How to follow the status quo that is based in knowing social codes, and not following our own stupidity.

The systems in place can't be turned over in large scale but it seems possible to reassign idiosyncratic value and fashion self-systems that are within the larger system but not of them. The number system still holds, but they are bending it around Sam/Green's choreographic choices.

There is some guy working on the toilet in Patrick's Cabaret and the chemical smell is giving me a headache. ...**orwait**  
**now...** 2/13/10 noon-2:50pm and 11/24/10 10:00-10:30am and 7/27/11 4:30-5:00pm and today. This is SuperGroup's first rehearsal at The Southern. The actual theatre space they will be performing in as part of the *New Breed* event. When they arrive, Mad King Thomas—one of the other two groups in *New Breed*—are just finishing their rehearsal. The set for Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* currently playing at The Southern is mostly set up. They have to rehearse on this other set. Spaces overlapping with spaces.

Byrd/Blue is not present today.

The purpose of this rehearsal is to show The Southern's Lighting Guy and Tech Director their piece. They begin at the top with the shaking sequence.

They are not playing characters, and there is no imagined fourth wall, but they also don't directly address the audience. What is the self that performs vs. the self that acts out a character?

The Lighting Guy asks a question about the sequences, "I'm having trouble seeing the whole picture."

This is the first time I'm seeing entire sequences marked through in the order they will be performed. I'm thinking about how many hours of work go into making the final 40 minutes of the show. Which is still a continuation of the work.

The Light Guy asks about, "concept", "theme", and "coherence." These are the conventional ways of thinking that SuperGroup chafes against. How hard

it is for theatre to not make meaning and cohere into a whole, but this piece is of the holes? The Southern's Light Guy really makes audible the rationalizations and conventions that are brought into the theatrical space.

Watching them play their performance on the *Hedda* set is strange, but also not. There was always the possibility that Byrd/Blue could have designed such a set instead of her sparse design of three cairns made of Styrofoam. How would that change the reception of the work they do across it if it was a set like *Hedda*?

At the end, the Light Guy says, "It is much clearer. I don't have any more questions." I wonder what became clear for him? Questions are all I have.

**...orwait**

*The spectators assembled at the performance of Shouldwetitleitnoworwait became emancipated through their becoming what Rancière has called an aesthetic community. Through a rupturing of any determinate link between cause and effect, SuperGroup enacted aesthetic efficacy (Rancière 63). This efficacy is political to the extent that:*

*the loss of destination it presupposes disrupts the way in which bodies fit their functions and destinations. What it produces is not rhetorical persuasion about what must be done. Nor is it the framing of a collective body. It is a multiplication of connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies, the world they live in and the way which they are 'equipped' to adapt to it. It is a multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible. As such, it allows for new modes of*

*political construction of common objects and new possibilities of collective enunciation. However, this political effect occurs under the condition of an original disjunction, an original effect, which is the suspension of any direct relationship between cause and effect. The aesthetic effect is initially an effect of dis-identification. The aesthetic community is a community of dis-identified persons. As such, it is political because political subjectivation proceeds via a process of dis-identification. An emancipated proletarian is a dis-identified worker. But there is no measure enabling us to calculate the dis-identifying effect. (Rancière 72-73)*

*While there is no measure to calculate this effect in every spectator, this creative response to SuperGroup's work that is this chapter is hopefully one measure of the affective effect it had on at least one spectator. My hope is that a similar affective experience was the product/process of reading my product/process account of SuperGroup's product/process. Unless you write a creative response though, this too is probably an effect that is impossible to calculate. That would be writing of the work and not about it. That presents a challenge to you the reader much like the challenge presented to the spectators of the performance. It also offers an opportunity for emancipation as you fight your own way through this occasion of thought that was this chapter.*

**...orwait**

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion Some Stupid After Thoughts**

The artist as traitor prophet names a twin orientation: the betrayal of one world and the affirmation of a world-yet-to-come.

--Simon O'Sullivan from "From Stuttering and Stammering to the Diagram: Deleuze, Bacon and Contemporary Art Practice"

How to conclude this collusion? As the deadline for this project looms and I am frantically writing it to completion I have begun to have a great deal of anxiety about knowing what to write for a stupid conclusion. How could such a project that strives to remain open, and that strives to place incoherence centrally in its method suddenly come to a coherent and conclusive end? Clearly this project that is concerned with colluding alongside incoherent contemporary theatrical performances cannot have a coherent conclusion. To bring this stupid project to even a contingent close, however, there still needs to be a chapter that can stand in a conclusion's place. A chapter that can offer some parting glance or looking back at the ground we have traveled together as writer and reader, and then send us each along our paths into unknown worlds-yet-to-come.

I have argued that the theatrical performances I've highlighted in this project share a resistance to closure and are continuing their becomings through affective responses that are impossible to name or trace in spectators who have been struck stupid by them. Technically, however, the lights or curtains have come down on all of these theatrical performances. Through their performed betrayals of one world and embrace of worlds-yet-to-come they have each

reached a kind of contingent end that is not a singular point but a dynamic shift into something other than what they were—the name Selma continually shouted in ever widening distances. These are all theatrical performances that encountered their publics in a year's time between 2010 and 2011—one decade into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Following along similar world-betraying paths as those trail blazed in the social imaginary by these contemporary artists there is a stupid contemporary U.S. experimental performance of another kind that has been ongoing for about two months as of the moment I'm writing these words. It is a performance that lies beyond the aesthetic boundaries I've worked within for this stupid project. This other performance shows no signs of stopping any time soon. In fact, if it were to reach its full potential it would be a performance of everyday life that not only continues to remain stupidly open through the affect it sustainably generates, but would resist any kind of presumption of even a contingent closure. I could not have known that this performance would emerge when I began research on this project over two years ago, and so it somehow seems appropriate that the clearest performance of stupidity that I can point at would erupt and disrupt this project just as it approached a conclusion. This stupidest of stupid performances began on September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2011 in Zuccotti Park in New York City and created a rift in the U.S. social fabric that has allowed the epistemological and ontological potentials of stupidity to be made abundant and tangible on a massively global political scale. It is the Occupy Wall Street

movement (OWS). As a sign in the Zuccotti Park encampment reads, stupidly echoing the slogan of queer activists, “We’re here, we’re unclear, get used to it!”

From the beginning evidence that OWS had disrupted business as usual was manifest in the ways it has stupefied the mainstream media. The media has not known how to read the occupation. First ignoring it, and then asking questions: What do they want? Where is their leader? Who is their leader? Why the drum circles? What is the point? Where is the answer? As is admitted on [gawker.com](http://gawker.com) in a brief article titled, “The Best Sign That Occupy Wall Street is Working”, the movement that by design has no single demand “can be hard to figure out whether or not it’s ‘working’” and that “arguably it’s not supposed to ‘work’ at all.” Likewise, Associated Press reporters Chris Hawley and David B. Caruso have written in their article “Can ‘Occupy’ Protests Last Without Leaders?” that, “while the movement’s message against corporate greed has struck a nerve with many Americans, the lack of leaders in Manhattan and at other protest camps has baffled many”. This baffling everyday performance with highly political stakes is striking an entire nation stupid with potentials and possibilities that have for so long remained dormant in the security of knowing.

While some members of the media are pointing to the unclarity, noncoherence, or what I would call stupidity of the movement as a liability, others recognize those indeterminate aspects of OWS as its strength. Douglas Rushkoff writes in his report for CNN, “Think Occupy Wall Street Is a Phase? You Don’t Get It” that, “this is not a movement with a traditional narrative arc. As the

product of the decentralized networked-era culture, it is less about victory than sustainability. It is not about one-pointedness, but inclusion and groping toward consensus. It is not like a book; it is like the Internet.” Non-narrative, non-linear textuality, no single point or meaning, and concern for the process of groping towards consensus but not caring to reach it quickly are all aspects of the aesthetic performances I’ve considered in this project. These contemporary U.S. theatrical performance practices that indulge failure and stupidity responded to the reality outside of them that was being shaped by corporations and a political system in bed with those corporations that calcified them as “too big to fail.” The rigidity of certainty and adherence to success could not be sustained indefinitely by the socio-political economic system firmly in place in the U.S. at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It could not be sustained in a world where stupidity, as Bataille has pointed out, is the major game of existence (131). The citizen performers of the OWS movement are opposing the rigidity of those who are too big to fail by embracing the unknown and the uncertain, and indulging in their stupidity. The OWS members are risking failure at each step of the way, and in doing so they are opening possibilities that do not take their “cue from a charismatic leader”, express themselves “in bumper-sticker-length goals” and understand themselves “as having a particular endpoint” (Rushkoff).

Contemporary critical theorists and public intellectuals such as Slavoj Zizek, Gayatri Spivak, and Judith Butler have championed the possibilities opened by the stupidly noncoherent OWS movement. All three of them have

performed their support not only through writing, but have rocked the human microphone in Zuccotti Park. Spivak, amplified by the multiplicity of voices that constitute the human microphone—apparently yes, the subaltern can speak and when it does it is amplified through a cacophony of voices—related her recent travels and experiences of addressing students in Africa who wanted their leaders to end corruption. In a kind of post-post-colonial reversal, evidenced in a video posted on vimeo.com, Spivak told the Wall Street occupiers that, “I spoke in your name” (*Spivak*).

Youtube has videos posted of both Zizek and Butler addressing the crowd through the performed public address of the human microphone. Zizek tells the occupiers that in April of 2011 the Chinese government prohibited any movies, television shows, novels or stories that contain alternate realities or time travel. He says that this is a good sign for the people of China because the fact that it needs to be prohibited means that the possibility of dreaming of alternate realities still exists. He goes on to say that in the U.S., “we do not think of prohibition because the ruling system has even oppressed our capacity to dream” (*Zizek*). He reminds the occupiers that “our basic message is we are allowed to think about alternatives” (*Zizek*). He indicates the possibilities opened by the stupidity of the situation when he goes on to say, “We know what we do not want (Capitalism) [...] but what do we want?” (*Zizek*). He offers no answer beyond acknowledging that it will not be an easy solution to know and arrive at. That question will remain stupidly unanswered, but the performance in Zuccotti Park

and other OWS encampments around the world continue to grow in sustainable numbers regardless.

Judith Butler has marked OWS explicitly as a performance that is stupidly attempting to make the impossible possible. She used the collective voice amplification of the human microphone to say that they are standing in the street and in the square “together to make democracy. Enacting the phrase ‘we the people’” (“at Occupy”). She went on to point out the stupor inducing aspect of the movement and said that the critics of the movement “say there are no demands and that leaves your critics confused or they say that the demand for social equality and economic justice are impossible demands” (“at Occupy”). Butler continues to embrace this stupor inducing aspect of the performance by saying that “if hope is an impossible demand, then we demand the impossible” (“at Occupy”). This demand is carried out through a most “unprecedented display of democracy and popular will” (“at Occupy”).

A noncoherent, unprecedented democratically differentiated assembly of people groping toward the possible through enactments of the impossible in Zuccotti Park and around the world in other popular occupations, such as the Arab Spring that inspired and continues to perform in alliance with the OWS movement, marks the becoming of the multitude. In their highly influential treatise on the subject of war and democracy, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Michael Hardt and Anontio Negri articulate a double maneuver of the process of globalization that at one and the same time exercises

new forms of control and oppression through constant states of global conflict, but also allows “the creation of new circuits of cooperation and collaboration that stretch across nations and continents and allow an unlimited number of encounters” (xiii). Hardt and Negri adamantly point out that the multitude could not be based on sameness, but rather on ever-becoming difference. They write, “This new science of the multitude based on the common, we should be careful to point out, does not imply any unification of the multitude or any subordination of differences. The multitude is composed of radical differences, singularities, that can never be synthesized in an identity” (355). The triumvirate of critical theorists who I have quoted addressing OWS indicates much about the multifaceted and complex collective non-identity that has shaped itself into the human microphone as both affective form of address and affected addressee. It is a multitudinous body that is spoken to and spoken for by a Post Colonial Feminist theorist, a Queer Feminist theorist, and has continued to maintain a space even for the possibility of alliance and advocacy from a white, European male. It is a multitudinous body that is remaining largely noncoherent in all of its multifaceted complexity and is forging and enacting itself around what it holds in common—the impossible demand performed democratically for social equality and economic justice: an alternate reality that was so impossible to dream that it need not be prohibited, and that is now not only being dreamed, but performed.

I have hoped to show in the previous chapters of this project that such stupid embraces of the possibility of the impossible have taken shape on a much

smaller scale than the global OWS phenomenon. It has happened through aesthetic practices that are not reflecting the world around them, but politically responding to and reorganizing it. It has happened through experimental theatrical performance events that destabilize spectating subjects' knowledge about themselves by disrupting their knowledge about their relationship to works of art. The way that theatrical and performance art may be able to directly make change in the world is incredibly complicated to trace or prove. I don't believe a play has ever directly stopped a war, or directly prevented a person from losing their home, or that a gallery performance has directly brought racial or gender equality into the world. A play or performance that represents any of these things is not equal to that change actually taking place and gaining purchase in the world outside of the representation. Through its own structures and tactics, however, art can directly change the way spectators engage with art. That change itself is a noteworthy change that opens possibilities. Simon O'Sullivan writes that what I have called stupor inducing artistic practices "are not made for an already existing audience" but are meant to "call forth—or invoke—an audience. They do not offer more of the same. They do not necessarily produce 'knowledge'. They do not offer a reassuring mirror reflection of a subjectivity already in place" ("Stutter" 248). A stupid subjectivity that is constantly shifting and on the move through each affective encounter with absolute difference is the subjectivity of the persistently becoming democratic multitude.

Theatre scholar/practitioner Simon Bayly advocates for this stupid subjectivity-to-come and its relation to theatrical practice in his essay “What State am I in?” He writes that the ideal social actor and spectator will be “the idiot-philosopher, a Socratic identity that is not so much a role as a high level of *valency*, a capricious capacity for combination with other elements by which an essential identity is obscured in the formation of more complex compounds” (original emphasis 210). Subjectivities that are stupefied by the performances of Ann Liv Young, *Every House Has a Door*, and SuperGroup become such valencies. Knocked from the Cartesian surety of validating the self by thinking the self, spectators that encounter these works of art are in the flux space of uncertainty. In this way these artists and their art works that invoked an audience to come have anticipated the coming of the multitude that is being enacted after these aesthetic practices have come to their contingent ends.

I want to mark the process that was the writing of this dissertation, and end this act of collusion by reintroducing a biological metaphor that was cut from an earlier draft of my introduction. The OWS groups are swimming in the space of the social like schools of sea squirts swimming in the oceans’ waters. In his book titled *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*, Stuart Brown MD describes a creature called the sea squirt. The way Dr. Brown tells it, to look at the sea squirt in its adult stage it appears to be related to sea sponges or to corral. Dr. Brown writes, however, that in the juvenile stage the sea squirt is actually a kind of larva that is biologically related

to an early ancestor of the animal known as the human being. The reason Dr. Brown suggests that the sea squirt is more human than sponge is because in its juvenile stage the sea squirt actually has something like a central nervous system and a little brain. In this juvenile stage the sea squirt roams around freely in the ocean water. It is figuring out which nutrients are useful to its survival and where are the best places to hang out and attain these nutrients. It is exploring and learning about its world. In its adult stage the sea squirt then anchors itself to a rock or the bottom of a boat and as Dr. Brown puts it, “digests its own brain” (47-48). When the sea squirt eats its brain it does so because it has learned all that it needs to know. It has produced the knowledge it needs in order to survive the rest of its life in its world. The unknown for the sea squirt has digested into its known and it has abandoned its practice of swimming in the unknowable. It has become a know-it-all. It is as far from stupid as a sea squirt can be. As an adult sea squirt it has become too big and too smart to fail. When it has its little something like a brain and is exploring the world and playfully moving through the waves is when it is stupid. It is flowing (a process), and knowing (a process) through the channels of nonknowledge. As I write this colluding conclusion OWS is in its larval stage. It is stupidly moving in unknown waters and hopefully it will sustain this process and not calcify into coherency, drop anchor, and digest its stupid brain. It will instead continue to.....I awoke this morning (Tuesday, Nov. 15<sup>th</sup>, 2011) to the news that Zuccotti Park was being cleared by NYPD

under the orders of Mayor Bloomberg.....What happens next? I don't know, and that will stupidly have to do for now.

### **Before I End And Begin Again, Always in Process, Always in the Middle**

This project was an experiment. I opened myself up to failure and understood that the criteria to judge this project as a success would be difficult to determine. Similarly to the performances it emulates, I think that it was successful in its willingness to fail and that it is still a productive contribution to the scholarly conversation around contemporary experimental performance and creative research methods. It is though, perhaps, still very much a work in progress. I would like to take this last moment, our parting glance, to acknowledge some of the limits of my approach and my method that I had not foreseen at the outset. These limits impacted and stultified the potentials of the outcome of this project. I did not reach the full critical potential of the project primarily because of its limited scope of research sites, and because in addition to being struck stupid by my research sites, I also got caught up in them.

I was primarily concerned throughout this project with exercising as little discursive violence to the performances I engaged with as possible. Through the process of selection and exclusion of what sites to consider, however, I re-enacted a kind of discursive violence based on inclusion and exclusion—I valorized performance practices linked with the conventions of the historical avant-garde but neglected to broaden the scope. For a project concerned with

perturbing the limits of a particular discourse, I did little to avoid this limited and narrowly focused approach. If Occupy Wall Street is the example of possibilities of difference opening up and destabilizing subjectivities, the subjects of my research are incredibly similar and not very multitudinous. I don't here mean their identity positions as subjects, but their performance practices and the historical avant-garde genealogy that I placed them in. I acknowledged an academic privilege, and then extended and re-inscribed that very privilege. I want to be clear that this is not a problem or the fault of the artists who were my research sites themselves, but of my writing of them.

One of my desires was to engage with the artists I was writing of and experiment with proximity. Could objective critical distance be closed to a subjective closeness and still allow for a critical engagement? In colluding with them, I closed the objective distance between us, and became seduced by their work. It is telling that I wrote an earlier draft of the Ann Liv Young chapter specifically in the form of a fan letter. My criticism in this project borders on a kind of advocacy and cheerleading for the artists I engage. How is it possible for a critic to feel and think beside, and along with the artists they critique, without devolving into a kind of academic valorization? How does a fascination with, or being struck by particular objects drive the work of a critic without eclipsing a certain critical rigor practiced in tandem with that fascination?

As I concentrated on a creative critical response to their work my focus sometimes landed more firmly on creative concerns and less so on the critical

aspects. I got caught up in emulating the playful aspects of their work with my writing to the point that it teetered on devolving into a strictly formal exercise. My hope was to address form and content simultaneously. This is what I understand Ann Liv Young, *Every House Has a Door*, and SuperGroup to do with their theatrical performance devising practices. The form and content inform one another constantly as they each arrive in process. How can academic writing continue to mark itself overtly as writing in process without trying to disappear beneath the critical insights that the writing conveys?

I was working to challenge academic conventions, and I did manage to challenge some while still reinforcing others. Luckily for me writing is itself not quite as stable a process as I sometimes have depicted it to be, and there is always another blank page to fill. There is always the possibility of writing, “Chapter One,” and beginning again. “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better” (Beckett 7).

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