

PERFORMANCE ART AS ZEN-LIKE EXPERIENCE

(Or For those who think they do not understand performance art)

I am at Sculpture Square for the last day of performances of the 6th festival FOI (Future of Imagination). As I am writing, Black Market and a few guest artists invited by the organisers, are performing in a productive collaborating ensemble. Each one performing in his/her own immediate space and with his/her own body and yet moving and sharing the larger space of Sculpture Square main hall. They move, stop and interact with each other and deal with each others' props, propositions and bodies, not trying to understand them but offering an immediate response, bringing their years of experience as such artists to a fruitful endeavour, presenting their being in all their vulnerability, including exposing their bodies. There is no beauty as such, just a glimpse of sublime, which transcends the restrictive parameters of beauty and ugliness.

The space changes continuously and is as dynamic as the protagonists. Sounds fill the space, sometimes creating a cacophony almost unbearable, some other times offering an unexpected harmony, which is all the more enjoyable, because of the element of surprise.

I like performance art. I cannot explain why, but then again do I have to? Our minds have always a tendency to find reason and meaning everywhere and the truth is that in life this is an extremely arduous endeavour, yet we keep on trying and being naturally unsuccessful, we feel the failure all the more stressful. We fight against something bigger than us and never stop, even though we keep on losing. Abandon is the answer. What is the sound of a one-hand clap? Let's draw from the Zen Buddhist experience and let our minds flow freely, without the restraints of the reason and we may find ourselves in a paradise of endless possibilities with previously forbidden fruits, now totally there for us to pick.

Why is Alasdair sitting down with a white silky cloth surmounted by a shoe mould on his head? Why is Norbert then sitting down specularly opposite Alastair but with a black cloth on his head? Jason ties their presences together with transparent tape and they are enclosed now, as if in an eternal yet distant embrace. But this does not last, the cloths are removed almost simultaneously and the scene changes again: Norbert dots his face with orange stickers, even on his eyelids, so that when they move, we detect the movement more clearly. Alastair, eyes closed, has placed another object on his bald head: he looks like a black-dressed monk in deep meditation, as if shutting the visual around him would make him more sensitive to the nearby space via the various sounds that fill it. Meanwhile Elvira has left her red thread and is now airing a large transparent piece of plastic thus creating waves of sound visually pleasing in the up and down movement of the plastic. Ah so lyrical! Oh, now Alastair and Norbert are each pulling the tape that united them: the chairs are sliding noisily and the men are getting closer and this closeness allows them freedom as the tape falls down onto the floor gently at their sides. Norbert now places dots on Alastair's chest and in his deep state of trance, Alastair lets him do so. Elvira's plastic is now securely attached at one angle onto the red thread that hangs from the beam above and she is placing it over the Norbert-Alastair space. Meanwhile Jason is unspooling white thread over the green tent under which lies the body of Roi, his head and feet exposed outside. Lee Wen walks slowly side to side to a wind-up lion puppet with a bell on its head. I turn my head

left and the two chairs are empty, I am frantically looking for Norbert and Alastair: the former has moved to the end of the space with another chair, it looks as he is having a rest, whilst the latter is walking slowly away from the previously shared space, eyes still closed. The space is full of sounds now and I try to locate them without using my eyes: perhaps if I close my eyes and let my senses guide me, I will do it better. They are all on my right, they are all indistinct, but if I concentrate hard I can individuate them: drummers tools on a step of a ladder (Jacques), a prettily decorated conk shell blow (Jurgen) and an indistinct recording.

Marco has been standing tall and still for an enormous amount of time, almost testing how far his own body can go in this position. And often we see that in performances, where the artists instinctively test their bodies, without intention to test them, perhaps, and push them through the boundaries of what is not their usual life.

The scene changes so continuously that it is so difficult to catch it in its entirety. But no, I am not supposed to catch everything, just enjoy what my eyes decide to lie upon. Enjoy and let myself go and who knows like bamboo to the wind, enlightenment may befall upon me like an unexpected present.

There is no script. Often the artists themselves do not know how or what they will perform, or so some of them tell me. Sometimes they do not bring anything and work with their body. Sometimes they bring one prop and work with that one, emotionally and instantaneously. Sometimes it is more than one. Sometimes, coming from another country, they work with what the new, often unknown environment has to offer, just like Jacques did last night impersonating the fat laughing Buddha and proposing the female audience an exchange of shot of alcohol for a touch on his belly. I did that, very shyly, in truly typically Western middle class woman style. But the Asian Jacky, Amanda, Lynn Lu and another lady did better than me, causing the audience response in laughter. Interaction with the audience is also on the menu as a possibility. There is no script: anything is possible. There are no restrictions. This is a new-found land of endless opportunities. And it also about the reaction to the space: Amanda was walking backwards just now and hit drum plates causing a sound in the now relatively quiet space. Well, no it was not an embarrassing event, it was a surprising opportunity for more interaction and so she started tapping the soles of her feet on those plates causing a cacophony that woke the whole space up, artists and audience alike. There is silence now, the movements are slow. These artists – with the occasional rests – have been performing non-stop for almost 3 hours. It is a demanding experience.

And in this space, in any space the artists perform, they can be anything they like with the performance-art-given privilege of not having to explain absolutely anything, because ultimately there is nothing to explain. Last night I told Angie my immediate thoughts about her performance and asked her what she thought. She looked at me with lost eyes and told me that she did not know, that she had yet to think about it. I felt like a fool, trying to capture the essence of what she did and encapsulate it in the pigeon-hole of my reasoning, so that my brain could deal with it, assimilate it and feel safe in the knowledge that there was something else I could grasp, I could understand and collect in my mind. How wrong! What an illusion! My attempt is too limiting, as it is any definition. This is an explosion of life in its powerful essence (and the audience can partake this: how lucky to be here! It is a choice and a privilege), denied to the mere mortals who do not appreciate it. And the audience is the necessary context for this practice, as it is with all the arts. There is no art without audience. When I arrived today, I

was a little later than 14:00 o'clock being the time for the start of the performance, as per programme. When I asked Lee Wen, if they had started he said no; he said that there was no audience yet. How telling! Artists and audience are as important as each other: there is no art without an audience and most certainly there is no audience without art.

But to the unbelievers, to those who ridicule contemporary art practice, and primarily performance art for its seemingly unintelligible language, claiming it is so simple they can do it themselves, I say: do it! Stop talking and do it! But not once, not twice, do it many times, as it is a way of being, of expressing yourself, of interacting...Change job and dedicate your life, the whole of yourself to this with care and love, as these artists are doing most days of their lives.

This is a privileged explosion of continuous stimuli: a live painting where all the protagonists move to offer the viewer the maximum artistic experience, more satisfying than the 3 average seconds we are supposed to spend in front of a painting. Hell, maybe that's why I like performance art...