XI COLÓQUIO DE OUTONO

Estudos Performativos
Global Performance · Political Performance

ORGANIZAÇÃO

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(Revisão de textos de Bernarda Esteves)
I've been making performances, installations, and videos since the early eighties. For this presentation, I focus on a track in my work that explicitly explores gender, beginning with work done when I was a (post)graduate student at Rutgers University and ending with current work-in-progress. This series of feminist performance projects in my work runs parallel to a number of other lines of investigation including ongoing work on employment, material culture and, most recently, trauma memorials.

All of my projects on the performance of gender treat identity as a position that is negotiated within social constraints but the early projects are more polarized and reductive. Whereas the earlier projects stage circumstances of “either/or” the more recent work is framed as “both/and”.

Figure One: A Real Woman, New Brunswick, New Jersey (1983)
In *A Real Woman*, the female "protagonist" has the option of a relatively privileged and isolated life or a socially engaged and vulnerable one.

First produced as a *performance* and then as a video, *Five of Swords*, offers a more complex world view. The project was developed collaboratively with five performers, each a decade apart in age, the youngest a teenager and the oldest in her fifties. It examined the hopes and subsequent disappointments that women experience as they enter the workforce, and asked specifically whether there are ways to avoid becoming embittered by these experiences.

*Veracity* considers a set of questions around the performance of credibility. In this interactive video, I explore the negotiations of culture, context, and positionality as they are manifested in conversational, theatrical and institutionally-matrixed performances. I am interested in the ways our performances of credibility are constructed and constrained by societal expectations and contextual factors, as well as by performance abilities. Standards for believability differ substantially depending on both cultural practices (gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, region) and institutional contexts (legal, religious, psychoanalytic, ethnographic, theatrical). Moreover, credibility in personal truth narration, even in the most ordinary, conversational contexts, is often as much a matter of "acting" or "performance" skills as it is a matter of verifiable content.

How do the specifics of syntax and diction frame one's claim on credibility? Should we really afford any less credibility to the stories that move us as their constructedness is revealed than to those whose believability reindexes cultural norms for performance?
To develop *Veracity*, I worked with six women in what I call the “truth professions”: the law, psychoanalysis, literary criticism, religion, acting and documentary video. The women appear in the tape in two performative modes: they are interviewed as professionals in diverse contexts for the production of truth in contemporary culture and they appear as their social “selves” talking about their fathers, all of whom are deceased. By offering “authentic” testimony regarding a collaborator’s relationship with her father and simultaneously critiquing the premises of personal truth narration through a continuous theoretical text, the tape negotiated the “both/and” of testimony and its critique.

In formal individual interviews, the participants—actor/director Patricia Boyette, video documentarian Rosemary Bodolay, Dominican sister Clare Wagner, attorney Mary Fons, literary critic Susan Bernstein, and psychoanalyst Rita Clark—discuss both their personal and professional stakes in truth. The prepared interview questions were designed to explore a gap between truthfulness (honesty, veracity) and its performance (believability, credibility). But some unanticipated issues emerged as well, including the pervasive concern for “abiding truth” or the recurrent discussion of fiction as more “truthful” than “facts.”

The women also met in a far less formal setting and were recorded together showing each other pictures and having a conversation about fathers. Subsequently, I recorded actresses telling the same stories in audition format. Some of the actresses actually deliver more convincing performances of the roles than the story’s real author. Through the video, competing claims for our empathy are mixed with more theoretical and analytic perspectives on truth value and credibility.

In some ways, the choice of fathers as the subject for storytelling was arbitrary or coincidental. When my father died in 1992, leaving me with the responsibility for the care of my mentally unstable mother, I was both moved to make a work that remembered him and skeptical about the devices and genres I might use to do so. But certainly as the tape progressed, resonant links between truth telling and paternity or patriarchy emerged, differently depending on each woman’s relationships with her fathers and on her professional perspective.

In theater and in art, as in other disciplines, testimony has become a primary vehicle for the retrieval and transmission of neglected and marginalized histories. *Veracity* addresses the ascendancy of first person testimony as a stylistically prominent form in video art. Video art as a genre relies heavily on testimonial or confessional discourse. Typically, an imagistic collage is accompanied by a sound track in which a narrator, presumably the artist, tells her own story directly to the video audience.

While first person narratives promise to deliver authentic experience, they often mask their own constructedness. Spectators are drawn into such narrative styles by literary devices and through psychological structures of identification. It is my argument in *Veracity* that, while all autobiography is socially constructed, video testimony must be regarded with particular suspicion because the powerful combination of the mesmerizing video screen and self-validating subjective content tend to overpower, rather than invite, critical thought on the part of the spectator.

The performance of truth is not just a semiotic, linguistic, or structural issue, it is also an issue of culturally and contextually specific performances. The proliferation of art works that express identity by making recourse to fundamental truths (appeals to rationality and justice) and to individual truths (autobiographical narratives) have sparked volatile controversies over who has the right to speak “truth” for a community.

[An essay by the author can be found in the back of this volume. It is an interactive DVD that allows the viewer to create a unique track through the narrative. Pressing the ENTER button on your remote will switch content streams.]

I did not start out production on *Veracity* with the intention of creating a dyptic. However, in doing research for the project, I came across as much (perhaps more) interesting literature on lying as I found on truth telling. Moreover, it was not lost on me that while I had no particular issues associated with my own father and his truthfulness, I had some weighty ones about my mother’s compulsive lying. I am currently in the early stages of a partner project, *Mendacity*, which looks at social lies that emerge around race, class, and gender. This project explores both the pathological and sociological dimensions lying through a consideration of my mother and her relationship with her Caribbean-American caregivers.

My mother has always lied, though when I was a teenager it was harder to tell the difference between out-and-out lies and the ways her creative exaggerations simply embarrassed me. Most of my mother’s lies, like her tumor, are benign. They’re the socially misplaced creative confabulations of a frus-
trated writer, choosing details that she thinks will make a better story, rather than those that conform to fact. But there is a fundamental lie at the heart of my mother’s life that cannot be so easily explained, that of the nature of her interracial dependency on the succession of black women who have lived with her throughout her adult life to help with childcare and domestic chores. This lie, in which my mother trivializes and dismisses some of the most important relationships in her life, mirrors a social lie at the heart of U.S. society about the interdependency of women across boundaries of race and class. That an upper middle class Jewish woman in New York should employ an African-American woman from the South, or more recently an Afro-Caribbean woman from Jamaica, as a domestic worker is relatively commonly known. That she should rely on her for emotional stability and practical information about the world is less documented. Coming to terms with this kind of interracial dependency is, I believe, a vital task of contemporary scholars, artists, and activists.

In developing this new project, I will be exploring the growing body of theory on the class and race politics of domestic economies and I will be collecting and studying film and television representations of women’s cross-racial interactions, as cultural representations are the backdrop against which we negotiate our social relations. Not only are race, class, and gender minefields where every interaction may explode in unexpected ways but the project’s premise of pairing a pathological with a sociological lie raises another concern. Using what is ostensibly a personal problem for my mother as a metaphor through which to explore a cultural problem, while in keeping with the feminist dictum “the personal is political” still risks falling into a trap of reductionism that has been so effectively criticized in disability studies. I share all this with you not to undermine my own project but rather to give you a sense of the ways in which a self-critical meta-discourse not only informs that production of my work, but also appears within it as an integral component.

Options for Contemporary Dance Criticism

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At least since the nineteen-sixties, dance has acquired a heightened visibility in our culture. This was especially true during the period of the dance boom in the United States—which occurred roughly from the nineteen-sixties and into the eighties—and with the emergence of dance-theatre in Europe especially in the late nineteen-eighties and nineteen-nineties. During the last fifty or so years, there are probably more people seeing theatrical dance and more dances to be seen than ever before. And a corollary of this is that the critical activity surrounding dance has expanded vastly. Until recent challenges to the existence of print journalism, a substantial number of newspapers stateside had people covering dance. But even with the decline in dance journalism, academic dance criticism has continued to grow, spawning graduate programs in dance history and theory which, in turn, produce an impressive amount of dance writing. It seems fair to conjecture that overall the critical writing on dance has never been as plentiful as it is now.

The change, however, is not only quantitative. It raises qualitative issues as well. For it is felt that the numerical rise in dance appreciators should be accompanied by great refinement and sophistication in the realm of dance appreciation. There is a certain predictable, institutional logic there. The expansion of the size and consequent social importance of dance appears to call for an increase in the seriousness with which dance is regarded. Or, to state the case somewhat differently, if dance is now a major art, the pressure is upon...