

The Performances of Diana Burgoyne

Burgoyne's artistic practice is complex. Her performances rely on the body, on labour, object-hood, and tension; they move through the intersections of human, non-human, and more-than-human identities. This interview is a conversation about labour, feminized bodies and technology. It is not declarative—it is a practice in talking and documenting and archiving. In this interview, Burgoyne cites her practice as a means of creating generative conversation that reflects the questioning nature of her performance practice.

Let's chat about your current practice

I haven't been near as active as a practitioner as I was in the first 20 [years.] I've been dealing with electronics in performance since 1980. The context from 1980 to now has changed hugely in the way that I [make work.] When I started I was really looking at asking a series of questions, and wasn't really looking for answers. What I was dealing with was the relationship of the body and the relationship of humans to technology, and how we fit into systems and networks. The relationship of how we've become interconnected [with technology] wasn't as obvious [in 1980] as it is now. So I wasn't thinking of how things would be in the future, I was more looking at our changing relationship with technology and raising questions about it, because nobody really knew how it would change.

Are you continuing to practice?

The last work I made is a piece where, well it was conceived at graduate school. I took grad school as an opportunity to do a whole series of sketches [of performance concepts] that I felt weren't completely resolved. And I did them really quickly in that way so I could go back and revisit them and resolve them. So I took a [concept] that I had never resolved and remade it. It starts off as a performance -- you walk into the space and there are five buzzers, 10 altogether, placed on opposite walls. And they are emitting high frequency sounds, so the gallery is really uncomfortable. To shut the buzzers off, the performers have to push their knees against the walls, their palms and their hands against the wall, and their heads against the wall. So essentially, the performer has to be stuck to the wall to shut them all off, to alleviate the tension and the stress that's being created by the uncomfortable sound. The two performers do that...and they hold it as long as they can. At a certain point it becomes impossible for them to hold that position. When the performer hears that the other person has failed, and one of the buzzers come back on, the two performers face each other, all the buzzers come back on, and they cross [the gallery] and push again on the other wall. This continues for as long I feel like we can continue to do it-- usually about 20 or 30 minutes of high frequency sounds.

[This performance] related to one of the first pieces I did, which coincidentally was at Open Space, where I strapped five buzzers onto my body and walked into a space with this high frequency, uncomfortable sound. Then I would move around the space to find the position that would shut the buzzers off. It would leave me in this very awkward and very tense pose, which was difficult to hold because it was difficult to shut all the sound off. Once I couldn't hold it anymore, I would completely relax and the sound would come on again and I would leave the space.

There's a tension, a stress from the sound. To alleviate it, [I] twisted [my] body [which became] a visual stress, or empathetic stress, of watching another human being put their body into a

contorted position to do something for the common good of the room. So I was looking at it as a metaphor for that kind of relationship with technology, of tension, sound, to the body.

I'm interested in the way that you use sound to disrupt the gallery.

A lot of artists integrate sound and visual work, and have the visual aspect change based on how the viewer moves in the space.

I've been using sound metaphorically as a kind of technological communication, but more, I've used it as a way of creating tension. Because you can use sound so much to give [the viewer] a visceral response, you're going from taking something that exists in the space, to create an ongoing tension in the viewer. I've used that a lot in my practice--giving people a visceral response, then taking on the role to respond and alleviate [this tension] through movement.

So what is it about embodying that tension for the audience?

Haha. That's a good point. What is it about making them uncomfortable?

Well, I understand the discomfort, in terms of disturbing a space that can have certain conventions, like a gallery.

Again, I think I'm talking about the relationship of the body to technology, because those are the two things that are either controlling or creating of those sounds. So I really wanted to create metaphors of tension, a conscious tension. Using sound that way, well, it just seemed like a bit of an easy trick actually, because it does have this ability to change the tension from the audio into a physicality.

I think it's interesting that you embody that tension to alleviate it for the audience. You disrupt them, you create that visceral tension for them, but in turn, it's also entirely visceral for you.

See that's exactly the point, especially of that first piece. And I think what I realized, was that I was talking about systems. I started creating systems and layers of technology and control. So I did a series of pieces where I was hanging in the space. In the context of those [pieces] I was physically putting my body into a system of manipulation, and I was just one element of that system of manipulating the technology. And I'd also put the viewer into that system. So it kind of became a relationship of my body and their body being mediated by mechanics.

You mentioned a lot of people weren't interested in engaging with that piece.

It became for me a reflection of a social relationship of how people interact with each other. I did it in Holland, and nobody would [participate]. The only people who [participated] were kids. I was in a show with two other Canadians, we had gone to Holland to do this show. And of course as my studio mates, they [participated], but other than them and the kids, the only other person who did, was the woman who had invited us to exhibit. When she went to [engage with the work,] she couldn't even face me. The whole idea was that [the viewer] would face me and do this back and forth action with [their] head. She couldn't face me, she turned her head and did it without looking at me. And then when I did it in Cleveland, [the viewers] were lined up. And they broke it. I had built in a slip mechanism, so that if someone got too aggressive, the wheel that was the mediator between them and me would slip so they could no longer pull on my body. I gave a tool to someone in the gallery, and said, if it starts to slip, just tell that person to be more gentle. Well, it slipped constantly. It was really interesting place to place, very different. When I

did it in Canada, it was almost exactly in the middle of the experience in Holland and the experience in Cleveland. I had people [participating] fairly steadily, but when I finished [performing], I had people come up to me to explain why they would not [engage with the work.] They said, because I was so vulnerable, hanging in that way, and because I was female, they didn't want to put themselves into that position of power. So they were able to verbalize that. It made me realize that even by not interacting with the work, [the viewers] were still affected. They had to have a conscious, cognitive discussion with themselves as to why they wouldn't [participate.] And them making the decision not to put themselves in that position, to me, was as much about that relationship of viewer and performer as it was about body politics between male and female.

Was it mostly men who wouldn't engage or everybody?

It was both. But it was men that were more upset. There was a man that was actually physically shaking. [The man] was another artist [who] came up and said, *I really wanted to do it, but I really couldn't do it...* It was like he viscerally couldn't be in that position, or a visceral reaction to even the thought process of putting himself in that dominant position. [In that performance] I'm suspended with a helmet on, and I'm holding onto a stick. There's a button in front of me that I can't touch by myself. There's a rope around my waist that goes to a wheel, and another rope that goes to a helmet. And if the viewer pulls back and forth on the helmet, then I start to swing back and forth, and through the swinging I can hit the button with the stick. There are audio circuits in the space, this time ranging from very low frequencies to very high frequencies. It was set up in a digital progression. When it starts the viewer hears very few sounds, then the more I hit the button, the more sound comes on. The longer the viewer participated, the more circuits came on. There was a huge cacophony of sound in the space, then if I hit the button one more time, suddenly there was nothing.

When I swung, I actually had to watch the other person carefully. My body had to move with theirs, because if I didn't, I could pull them back. It was about co-operation, but nobody realized I could jar their necks by just stiffening my body. But that wasn't part of the piece. It was really about this relationship of control. It was meant to be a system of co-operation and with that co-operation the viewer was able to build a crescendo [of sound] and then work back down again.

I had a chat yesterday about performance art being a consensual experience for the audience, in that they choose how they engage in a performance, and choose how they engage with controlling the performer or being controlled

Well yes, that work falls exactly into that category. It was never really a performance, but an engagement with no beginning, middle or end. It was only called a performance because it had a duration for the amount of time I was in the piece. But the duration wasn't controlled by something happening. People were meant to come in, experience and leave. They weren't meant to sit for the whole time and watch me hanging there. Most of the time I tried to hang for an hour. Then I would take a video camera, and record the whole thing. So if I weren't performing, I would just install the [mechanical part from where I hung] and the video of the hour long performance, and leave my clothes hanging to represent my body. That way people understood that the installation wasn't the engagement, it was just the residue of the performance.

Another thing about performance art is that it's inherently ephemeral. I wonder how you feel about documenting performances?

There's very few documentations of my performances. I was really adamant about not video-taping my works, because they are entirely ephemeral and about experience, rather than standing back and not participating. The viewer can't experience the work without actively engaging, because it's all about the physicality of being within the system, and you can't be within the system through video.

And the whole point of your performance is to cause that visceral experience that the audience is active in.

The viewer isn't meant to be passive. Even if you stood back and watched the performances where other viewers were interacting, you were still experiencing the sound. And still being a voyeur and watching the experience of others. So you always got something. I assume everyone came away with an experience, but it was totally different depending on how the viewer participated.

I had an experience when I did the piece for Open Space, that made me not want to do performances in uncontrolled situations. At Open Space, I walked outside with five buzzers attached to my body and I walked along the street. My idea was I would go to all the busking areas in the downtown core, and stop in these locations to shut off the buzzers by contorting my body, and then go on. As I was doing this, somebody grabbed me and tried to push me across the street without looking for traffic. I ended up having to resist him and fight him, before someone across the street came and told him to get off me. It made me realize that my performance was so out of context, that it didn't have the effect I intended. The viewers were reading it in such disconnected ways that I felt they were missing the point. I just became totally bizarre, a bizarre person walking down the street. I went to dinner at a friend's house a few days later, and when I walked in another guest approached me. Apparently she had seen me on the street, so at dinner she said, *oh thank god, I thought you'd had a terrible accident and you were being controlled by the buzzers, and I just couldn't go up to you and ask you what had happened, then I felt so bad that I didn't ask why these things were controlling you.* She said she felt awful for days. I realized that she couldn't read it any other way. I didn't want to control the way the piece was read, but I didn't want to give people a bad experience if they hadn't asked to have a bad experience. She hadn't volunteered to see me by walking into a performance space. So after that, I decided the only time I'll perform on the street is if it's in a context of a defined space where people come for performance.

It's interesting that the gallery space, an institutional space, can offer the most comfort and consent for the viewer. It's in total opposition to how the gallery historically has also completely exclusive to so many artists and audience members.

In this particular case, it's a safe space. It's not that it's safe actually, it's that it's a consensual space. People are giving their consent by coming into the gallery. I also think about the way people read art, and how it has to be within a context. Without the context, any object could be art. That made me think about how I want my piece to be read, which is within a defined context. It's the only way that art makes sense for me.

Do you preserve the material pieces you make for your performances?

No. That's the other thing-- well, in my graduate piece, at the end of it, I basically paid somebody to make sure that the piece was properly destroyed. Because what would happen was, there was a big pile of scrap metal, and people would throw their old art projects into the scrap metal to be recycled. Then all of the sudden, you'd see these metal pieces in other artists pieces and they would sort of evolve like that. But I didn't want my pieces [in other artist's work.] I told someone to cut them up and put them into the recycling so they didn't resemble anything I'd done.

Could you speak to the use of your body and labour in your performances?

I think it was really important that my body was always in my work. I felt it was wrong to pay anybody to be that uncomfortable. So part of the labour, I felt had to be done by the artist, not by monetary [outsourcing.] I thought it was important that if anybody saw my work, it was me, the artist [performing,] not somebody who was disconnected. It also had a lot to do with the way I perform. I understand it, not cognitively, but-- when I start to perform my body goes into a different place. I hold my body differently. So, when I've hired other people to perform, it felt wrong. My body becomes so objectified, and I feel so objectified. I go into almost a trance, I understand how I want to project whatever it is that I'm projecting, and I think my body responds to that understanding. Whereas I can't communicate to another person what that is.

Do you feel like that objectification and visceral understanding has anything to do with your womanhood?

Maybe, because, in the piece where I'm lying on the ground, I had people touch me. The idea of the piece was that people would stand at my feet, and their shadow would fall on [the light sensors] on my body, and that would turn the [sound] off. Talking about control, and the relationship of the viewer and performer, in that position the viewer can ease the tension by putting themselves in control. But of course, people caught on about the light sensors, so sometimes would have a crowd of people around me, not touching me but [hovering their hands above me.] I did this piece at UVIC where I laid and somebody came and grabbed my feet and pulled me out of the rectangle of light. Because the room was completely dark, and the sound was turned on by the light, when they pulled me out of the square, the piece shut off. So I was just lying there in the dark thinking, now what am I going to do. I never thought anybody would physically drag me. But this [viewer] felt compelled. I put my body in that position of objectification, and I actually am objectifying myself. It might be because I know there's the possibility of objectification that I'm not relaxed when I'm [performing.] My body is completely intense, and that's what people have said to me, that there's a tension in my body.

Do you feel like you're re-appropriating your objectification by putting yourself in that position?

I wanted to ask the questions about that. All the work I made wasn't to tell people that *this* is bad, or, *don't do this*. I just wanted to bring some questioning about objectifying the body, about our relationship with technology, about immersing ourselves into these systems of technology and becoming part of the cog. It wasn't, and it still isn't about me telling people that women have been objectified. But, by putting myself into those contexts, I am doing that. Hopefully I'm engaging people in some cognitive questioning. Like with that hanging piece, people are questioning putting themselves in that kind of system, and putting themselves specifically into a system where they are controlling a female body.

Do you consider yourself a feminist?

That word is loaded with so many different definitions. I wouldn't answer that because I wouldn't say I'm a feminist per say. Of course I agree that we should have equal wages, but does that make me a feminist? Because I think we should be treated equally? No.. Or yes.. I haven't done the work within the context of a feminist reading. I've always been extremely cognizant that I am female, and that when I'm doing this I am read as female. I know the pieces would change dramatically if it were a man [performing.] Within the context of my work I have a deep understanding of what it is to be female, and what the female form is loaded with--all the baggage and information that comes with it. If that's your definition of [a feminist,] then yes. But I never made work trying to make a big statement. I think it comes back to what I was saying before, that I've never done anything thinking I was going to make a statement. I've always thought I was going to put out a question to which the viewer is invited to answer.

This interview was conducted at the artist's house in Victoria BC, June 2017, by Greta Hamilton, Curatorial Assistant (YCW) at Open Space, and is transcribed here abridged, edited and revised.