The collaborative bog

A glass of water on the table is not a glass of water in the sand dunes, nor is it a glass of water under a descending human back. I want to explore a micro moment in a collective performance presented at “Unsettling Conversations,” a wonderfully ‘edgy’ conference held by the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia in the summer of 2006. In preparation for the conference, our collective, a team of graduate students under the initial facilitation of faculty member and drama/literacy specialist Carmen Medina, trudged through the bog of a collaborative process with no parameters other than the title of the conference.

Our conversations were indeed unsettled. Individuals would spring to action with confidence and vitality, inspired by a breath-taking idea, only to be met with troubled expressions weighted with scepticism. Creative impulses would periodically pierce through the fog of our ‘don’t-want-to-appear-like-a-control-freak’ manner of engaging with each other. In one moment the dancer in our group would leap about the middle of the room demonstrating an embodied concept, in the next, an overhead projector was hauled out casting illuminations of more ideas under construction. A graduate student would dramatically fall to the floor proving a point with kinaesthetic
exclamations, another would complain, “we need a focal point,” and so it went for several weeks. Suggestions of images, sounds, movements, and texts were tossed into the playing field with the best of intentions. We were all relentlessly polite, overly analyzed, hyper respectful and progressing very, very slowly, if at all. As many ideas propelled us in a multitude of directions there were countless more kept under wraps.

This ‘bog’ of hypersensitivity and often, restrained impulses carried on until one day one of us slammed a fist down (uncharacteristically) and shocked us all into production. As a result, the performance became a window into this constrained, troubled, and yet exhilarating collaborative arena. I consider this paper to be a moment of reflection revealing the complexity and vitality of the creative process in collaboration. Although it is tempting to re-visit this journey as a whole as my recollections begin to gather momentum, I am committed to write about a 27 second moment, a meta-performance within the presentation.

**Interruption**

I can feel the thick silence of the room. My hair creates a curtain over my face, drawing my focus inward. My breath is slow and steady. I can distinguish barely audible groans that seem to help sustain the muscularity and precision of my movements, I can see through my peripheral sightline that my colleagues are descending in their chairs at the same tempo. I can feel the wetness of a smashed tomato under my left foot and the remains of the one in my hand will soon drop to the table as I begin to release the muscular tension in my torso in its slow sustained (10 minutes) journey of collapse. I have a long way to go before complete surrender to gravity. Not only are my muscles in the lower part of my body starting to retaliate but my mind is becoming anxious knowing the various obstacles on the table of which I was standing on; glasses of water, tomatoes, papers, will need to be navigated without conscious intent along the (arduous) way. My body has almost completed its journey of descent as it moves from a sitting position to recline. This is one of the most challenging points in the descent as my abdominal muscles are engaged full throttle in supporting the weight of the torso as it incrementally and smoothly descends towards the table...

**Sandbags and tea cups**

For a long time now I have been interested in the work of visual artist Robert Longo (1986) and, in particular, his Man in the City Series, a series of stunning models dressed in urban I-mean-business apparel—crisp white shirts, tight black skirts and pants completed with ‘don’t-mess-with-me’ stilettos. Soft objects were thrown at the models and the resulting photos captured the authenticity of the body kicking into the protective survival mechanism—with eyes closed, head flung back, elbows raised in the immediacy of protectiveness. A buckling and crumpling of austerity was captured through moments of instinctive impulse.
images. Could we, I asked them, create a piece that embodies the authenticity of our collaborative engagement together?

My work as a dancer/choreographer for the last 30 years has always embraced the authenticity that lives inside of risk. Often I would build this state into my dances. For example, in one dance, I asked the dancers in my company to first have their heads shaved on stage as the audience was arriving and then move through the choreographed adagio balancing small china tea cups on their heads (the programs stated if the cups should fall the performance would be suspended for a moment while the shards of porcelain were swept away from their bare feet).

![Image](image.jpg)

**Organs**

*Photographer Jens Hemmel*

*Dancers – Thomas Eisenhardt & Lars Ottosen*
Another example entailed covering the stage with sandbags creating a state of emergency in the dancer’s playing field both with associative images as well as the dancers’ reality. Holding balance on one leg with an unpredictable shifting in the foundation creates the necessary tension in the dancer’s reality thus integrating the concept of inherent tension. The props (sandbags and tea cups) and actions (balance and sustained movement) created a necessary tension within the dancer that was then transmitted to the audience cultivating immediacy, an urgency and most importantly an astuteness where I believe transformation occurs. Urgency/safety are tenuous concepts, privileging the unknown and affording profound possibilities.

My stage managers were constantly reprimanding me: “next time can you consider not using real sand—not using real porcelain and couldn’t you not have one of your dancers play the role of the blind man in that particular part?” My answer only fuelled their constant exasperation. The tension that lives inside of crisis and the risk that is entailed in holding and navigating that tension is what produces the vitality that actually fuels the work. Tennessee Williams once wrote of this tenuous relationship in an introduction to one of his plays. The trajectory from his sudden success of Glass Menagerie shot him from the single dingy bulb of off/off Broadway to the bright neon of expectation. A lavishly furnished penthouse was to host the commission and expectation of his next great work but instead came desolation of inspiration and cigarette burns in the carpet. Williams (1947) wrote,

The sort of life which I had had previous to this popular success was one that required endurance, a life of clawing and scratching along a sheer surface and holding on tight with raw fingers to every inch of rock higher than the one caught hold of before but it was a good life because it was the sort of life for which the human organism is created.

I was not aware of how much vital energy had gone into this struggle until the struggle was removed. I was out on a level plateau with my arms still thrashing and my lungs still grabbing at air that no longer resisted. This was security at last.

(New York Times, 1947)
Relocation to a small shack in New Mexico recovered this absent vitality thus enabling the creation of William’s next work *Street Car Named Desire*.

In my examples of teacups and sandbags there is a notion of bringing authenticity to the construct of the stage. What I loved about the audience’s engagement with the teacup or the sandbag pieces was the *engagement*. They stopped unwrapping the lifesavers, stopped coughing for fear of coughing, stopped rattling the programs, and indeed for even a moment stopped breathing, there is a genuine impulse to engage on an immediate and yet deep plane. Breath suspended. These are the openings in performance—the ruptures in our conventions of spectator/performer that I was and am currently the most interested in.

I enthusiastically convey the value in these arrests to my collaborative team working on the Unsettling Conversations conference piece as I speak to the space/time vitality within these crisis points. I demonstrate the first 3 minutes of a slow descent to the floor, my arms hang limp, as my limbs shift gently realocating weight as gravity slowly devours my mass. A slow descent is just that, as we would watch sand steadily drop in an hour glass, we witness gravity pour through the muscle tension of the body pulling the muscle mass down to the floor increment by increment. It is not possible to move into this journey without embracing an altered state of consciousness as the room recedes and a heightened sense of internal awareness is replaced. During my demonstration to the group, I transcended in descent from the florescent and linoleum of the seminar room and when I opened my eyes and stood up I could see that the event had also provoked a ‘state’ in the room. Time had slowed down, critical analysis had taken a ‘coffee break,’ and breath had deepened — our thick politeness had shifted. The demonstration inspired an ensemble of varied descents in our performance at the conference, *Gravity in Fugue*, a kinaesthetic cacophony of earthbound pioneers searching for a silent, collective voice.

**A continued interruption**

I recall the moment before this slow movement descent in our performance. I had just finished delivering a poem exploring the substance of creative process as having no core—

**How To Eat A Poem**

Don't be polite.

Bite in.

Pick it up with your fingers and lick the juice that may run down your chin.

It is ready and ripe now, whenever you are.

You do not need a knife or fork or spoon or plate or napkin or tablecloth.

For there is no core

or stem

or rind

or pit

or seed

or skin

to throw away.

(Merriam, 1990)

I recite the poem aloud as I simultaneously devour a large, luscious tomato—I am standing barefoot on a long conference table in order to make my point completely clear. The table is ‘conference’ set, covered with white linen and punctuated with tumblers of water, paper, and pens. This is the perfect territory for the academic paper delivery— ‘formal academic–performative’ —but not this time, there is mess and disruption that replaces the pristine scene. I finish splattering tomato guts from my emphatic last line, sputtering pulpy red bits in all directions. I am only vaguely aware of a mixture of expressions in the room ranging from shock, admiration, and disbelief, even repugnance. I then join the others in the slow pull to the floor…
We created a collective time capsule, time slowed down, stood still, and then seemed to hover, contained and yet determined. It was approximately at the 7 minute mark when my weight unexpectedly shifted forward and then back again, marking the final excruciating stretch of the journey. An essential rule of this exercise—or as I like to call it, this ‘kinaesthetic prayer’—is to remain true to the physical path as bones, organs, muscles, and breath collectively navigate gravity, surface, space, and time. My body had chosen a path that involved extreme attention towards stabilizing my core. I was reclining on the table—feeling the remnants of my tomato extravaganza on my legs—controlling my upper body in its slow descent to the table—when a slight draft indicated that something quick had moved in and then out of my kinaesthetic sphere. I marked a difference in the audience’s engagement and knew that something had changed. I was not sure what had happened but knew that it was a significant moment and it indeed it was. A glass had been removed.

The moment of intervention was almost imperceptible in terms of my descent but time altered perspectives in this event, magnifying each micro impulse. Like a strawberry seed in a tooth, I knew a minuscule shift had caused a magnanimous effect. This particular audience member must have been swift and lithe as a cougar when he sprung from his seat and efficiently extracted the glass of water from behind my back, confident that by his action he had just prevented a potential disaster. A heroic intervention! This is the moment that resonates still.

This penetration of the fourth wall shifted the defined positions in the room between spectators and performer to what? Perhaps an awakening of an unsettled conversation... A rupture was created, we were no longer operating within two forms adjunct but rather had entered a liminal space of meaning-making, and there was no turning back turning back to what had been unfolding prior to his intervention.

Not to worry—in my opinion this is the moment where creative inquiry begins; this is the point which philosopher David Appelbaum (1995) calls the stop. We as spectators and audience are attending to the habits of the conventions of performance, peeling back known surfaces and unwrapping the safety of spectatorship.

Surface is inter-face. Surface is a reminder of relation, a tangible sign of the fact that inner and outer mutually penetrate each other and that the distinction is a functional convenience. Surface is a concentrated meeting ground, a place where centrifugal and centripetal tendencies are momentarily held in balance. (Appelbaum, 1995, 81)

A welcome intervention! Or was it?

This audience member had predicted a moment, or perhaps many, of extreme unsettledness. Let’s speculate what this/these could have been? What or who had he rescued? The glass could have toppled onto the floor, shattering, thereby disrupting the presentation, alarming the audience and myself. Or perhaps I would have simply knocked the water glass over—soaking both the white tablecloth and myself—and proceeded without interruption into a final but soggy position. Either scenario, my descent would have been an event occurring simultaneously within and outside the performance as the audience was, by my body’s proximity to the glass, already alert to the tenuous relationship between the glass and me. Will she sense the glass and avoid it? Will she topple the glass over? What is going to happen?

By his decision to actively remove the glass, this audience member invites us all to ponder and speculate around the possibilities of engagement between the glass of water, the performer, and the spectator who actively enters with intent into a performance. Who is to say the glass had not already been an active partner (despite its quick abduction by a safety conscious audience member) throughout the presentation by reason of its relationship with my descending body? If I had actively sensed the glass in my descent and slowly averted my path, the glass would have still played a significant role. Would my path of descent have been entirely different had the glass been absent?

The audience member’s choice of action to intercede on my behalf reminds us of our own choices of engagement as members of an audience within performative events. At any moment anyone of
us, spectators all, might engage actively within a performance. Was his action a performative event? A performative disruption? Or simply a disruption by an audience member who could not bear the tension of remaining in his seat, to see how things would unfold as others were doing? He was, by his actions, stepping simultaneously in and out of performance.

I am grateful for this provocative intervention to our performance even though I know it caused great perplexity within the intervener and those watching. Evidence of this consternation was extracted from my email correspondence with the audience member who had removed the glass. I asked him how he felt about his action.

It was a risk to move the glass and look like a fool or hero... or ignore the glass and potentially injure a friend and have a heavy conscience. I decided to bring it to the attention of other spectators and ask them what I should do.

He then asked me an interesting question,

Did you not notice the water glass in the performance or did you perform this as a test for the audience?

(permission granted from audience member)

A test for the audience? Now this is an interesting concept. The presence of the glass had not yet entered my kinesphere (psychical proximity) to be noted so I can’t answer whether or not I would have used the glass to play with the audience. Nothing was constructed in this descent other than my commitment to be in the astute ‘presence’ to embrace the unexpected. The removal of the glass was like a rupture in the sustained silent journey of my body in descent. Miller (1986) writes about a rupture in our continuum as a gift. I see the continuum as being our habits and in this case the habit of how we view performance. Miller writes of Jacques Lacan who proposes that our history is implicated within an emptiness created by rupture in this continuum (Miller, 59).

The important thing is that at a given moment one arrives at illusion. Around it one finds a sensitive spot, a lesion, a locus of pain, a point of reversal of the whole of history, insofar as it is the history of art and insofar as we are implicated in it; that point concerns the notion that the illusion of space is different from the creation of emptiness.

(Miller, 1986, 10)

The removal of the glass calls attention to the complacency we are accustomed to as spectators. This is the give-it-to-me-ness that constructs the chasm between audience and spectator. In the removal of the glass, the chasm was bridged. But, I wonder, in the interruption, in the act of entering into the performance to remove a perceived impediment to the performance, was the performance enriched or disrupted? What about the tension of anticipation, held within the actions embodied by the performer in relationship to his or her context, surroundings, environment? The engagement of audience became focused on whether or not I would, in my descent, topple the glass of water or deftly avoid it by sensing its presence and altering the course of my descent. The relationship between the audience and I was similar to that in my earlier choreography between the dancers and audience members as they sat on the edge of their chairs waiting for the teacups to fall.

Celant (1998) writes about performance artist Laurie Anderson as someone who dismantles the conventions of performer/spectator relationship by constructing what he calls a ‘passage.’

All of Laurie Anderson’s work is directed toward attempting to divine the principles of an “other” performativeness, where the stage is not a threshold that cannot be crossed, but rather a passage, an access to a dialogue between the vital core of life and the audience as a whole. Every event, musical or visual, is for her, an open, transparent instrument not only bound to her identity, but ready to dissolve, to give way to a powerful current of real energy. She thus keeps a distance from the visual ostentation of self and narcissistic self-gratification and favours instead the irruption of a hidden condition of being. This brings Anderson, in her relationship with
theatricality, to conceive the stage space as a participatory perimeter, in which the profound reality of life offers itself to perception and to the gaze of all. (Celante, 1968, 15)

The borderless region created in this dialogue between watcher and performer is also reflected upon in Heidegger’s analogy of the jug: the potter who shapes the jug does not only mould the clay but shapes the void, the emptiness. “The vessels thingness does not live at all in the material of which it consists, but rather in the void that holds it” (Bhabha, 1995, 19).

The void in this case was the space created in crashing the fourth wall, the invisible wall protecting the spectator from “active” engagement. In this moment of the performance there was an inversion of perception in our cognitive patterns where Heidegger claims that we begin to decipher signs in a new way. To see the void as emptiness embraced by a tangible form is to be misconceived by the signs. The void is in fact neither fixed with form nor freed by emptiness but is holding a temporality that is understood by artist Kapoor as the potentiality of expanding the ‘available space.’ This collision of the recognizable and familiar with radically new ways of recognizing signs is what cultivates this third liminal space. Bhabha (1998) writes about the tension between the relationship between spectator and performer (i.e. spectator/performer) as both a doubling and displacement.

They come together, in this uncanny relationship, by virtue of the difference that holds them apart; a contest between surfaces, elements, materials or meanings that conjures up one, or the other, through a ‘third’ dimension. This is the dimension of doubling and displacement.

(Bhabha, 1998, 19)

The conflict between the forms of performance conventions rests on the habits of perception and actions opposed to boldly moving into the uncharted territory.

There is a moment in which personal or cultural history stands before two diverging pathways. One leads to a repetition of the known, the tried and true, the old, the established. It is safe, secure and stable. The other finds a renewed importance in the unknown, the uncharted, the new, the dark and dangerous. Unfettered by accepted categories of thought, it might be immediately hidden away from view, out of fear or repugnance. The moment I speak of is not choice in the sense of deliberative reason but an action that choice stands on.

(Appelbaum, 1995, 16)

The removal of the glass left an imprint with those of us in the room. A trace of that particular history remains, inviting us all to question. We were provoked to venture into a new questioning of relationship and responsibility between spectator, performer, and action. This brings me back to Jacques Lacan's writing of “the moment one arrives at illusion…” (Miller, 10, 1986). Lacan speaks about illusion not as misconception but rather as a disruption—a suspension of patterned historical associations—to problematize the obvious, the habitual and in this way to bring new understandings to our points of view. Physicist Piet Hein recalls an incident that exemplifies this way of understanding illusion. In a conversation to Einstein, Piet Hein reflects;

A physicist is walking along a beach and sees a five-year old child throwing flat stones onto the sea, trying to make them skip. Each stone makes no more than one or two hops. The physicist remembers that he, in his childhood, was very good at this game. So he shows the child how it is done. He throws the stones one after the other, showing how to hold them, at what angles to cast them, at what height over the surface of the water. All the stones thrown by the adult skip many times: seven, eight, even ten times.

“Yes” the child then says, “they skip many times. But that isn’t what I was trying to do. Your stones are making round circles in the water, but I want mine to make square circles.”(1968, n.p.)

Einstein responded in the following way:
Give the child my compliments and tell him not to be concerned if the stones don’t make square circles in the water. The important thing is to think the thought. (as cited in Barba, 1995, 92)

This is what Appelbaum (1995) refers to as the stop. Appelbaum believes that the stop lives in the interstices of action and that it rests in the moment before the action creating an arrest which is the fuel for transformative moments. Katsuko Azuma, Japanese Noh master, writes about this stop as a motive to achieve the same quality of physical/emotional astuteness.

“Kill the breathing. Kill the rhythm,” Katsuko Azuma’s master repeated to her. To ‘kill’ breathing and to ‘kill’ rhythm means to be aware of the tendency automatically to link gesture to the rhythm of breathing, speaking and music, and to break this link. The opposite of linking automatically is consciously to create a new connection. (Bhabha, 1998, 32)

Appelbaum (1995) also speaks about awareness as action unto itself when viewing the divide between patterned and repeated habits and the unknown. This awareness is seen as the action of choice. Pina Bausch (1984), German choreographer, reflects upon her interest in dance as being in the body not with the body. She watches her dancers with great satisfaction even though they may be absolutely motionless on their chairs. Homi Bhabhi writes about our notions of stasis and action merging when “the material and non material tangentially touch” (1998, 18) If we can look beyond the illustration we allow the material in this case the body, to transcend this to a new plain of meaning. Kapoor speaks to this through the word availability.

In the end it has to do with issues that lie below the material, with the fact that the materials are there to make something else possible; that is what interests me. The things that are available, or the non-physical things, the intellectual things, the possibilities that are available through the material. (as cited in Bhabhi, 1998, 18)

This notion of working through a material, penetrating the surface of the obvious does not imply that the material itself is a transmitter or vehicle as my body is not solely the delivery person to the metaphor below the surface. It is rather the technique that locates the interstitial space, the in-between temporality, or as Viktor Shklovsky would say “the act of making strange” (as cited in Heathcote, 1984, 127). This is the dynamic space of stillness, the brimming of emptiness where conflicting spaces meet to form new meanings. This is when the dance has the courage to be motionless.

The true void—out of balance, caught between one temporality and another—becomes such a gathering place that stands in an oblique relation to itself and others. As a ‘diagonal’ event it is, at once, a meeting place of modes and meanings, and a site of the contentious struggles of perspective and interpretation. (Bhabha, 1998, 30)

Shakespeare’s ‘removal of ground’ is a beautiful example of the complexity, depth, and treasure that lives in disruption, crisis, and loss. “Like Hamlet’s Father, the ghost walks the night, wafting us to a more ‘removed ground’ (Bhabha, 1998, 23). Who is the ghost and who is the father? Who is the spectator and who is the performer? Both Jerzy Grotowski and Constantin Stanislavski, two of the most prominent theatre figures responsible for the major shift in looking at their discipline as theatre of transition, speak about the contingencies at work in a performer and the organic consistency of playing between ‘organization’ (the craft and skill demanded of an actor) and fortuitousness (the availability to stop moments in a performance journey). (Appelbaum, 1995).

In relation to my performance—the craft is the intimate knowledge I have of my body and its muscular capacity to sustain a 10 minute descent and linger and yet to be available for the ‘fortuitous’ unexpected moments such as the removal of the glass. Grotowski explains the voluntary disorientation we allow as performers, the moving into a dark room to find the furniture, which results in a dilation of our senses and sensibility, an alertness that supersedes knowing one’s lines. It would be useful to know if I, the dancer, would have toppled over the glass. To know whether or not I was indeed saved from a serious accident or the performance disrupted by a spilled glass, water to be mopped up, or whether the glass would have been gracefully avoided in
my descent. Or would yet another rescuer have leapt to his or her feet to intervene? However, a far more important inquiry and recognition is left in the wake of the removed glass that is the as yet unresolved, the unknowable, a challenging location for researchers to dwell as Davis, Sumara, and Kieren (1996) acknowledge,

> It is not easy for us to talk about moving forms and dynamic structures; it seems that it is the nature of our language to freeze, to fix, to isolate and to present in one word after the other a thread of some interpretation of the world.

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Although it seems the ultimate of an ‘unsettling’ to finish a lengthy thought process with such open-endedness, that is exactly what I will do here and now. Is it not far more interesting to be left with the resonating questions as to what would have happened if the glass had not been removed and to ponder what did happen as a contingent of this event? It is precisely this query, these curiosities we carry into our investigations that call forth in us the thirsty pioneer who is relentlessly propelled forward towards the quenching.

References


About the Author

Kathryn has been working for the past 26 years in the field of movement and visual arts. Her work has been presented throughout Europe, South America, Africa and Canada. Kathryn ran her own company (ricketts dance co) in Copenhagen Denmark for the 10 years and later a 3 year professional dance training program called MainDance as well as her professional company Plan B Dance Productions. For the past 10 years Kathryn has been working with a focus on social /political issues in schools, galleries and community centers with movement, creative writing and visual art as the languages. She completed her Masters at the University of British Columbia on the topic of identity and place with personal stories interpreted through embodiment and is in her
second year of her Doctoral program at Simon Fraser University furthering this research into notions of literacy through Embodied Poetic Narrative.