

“Walking, Standing, Sitting Like A Duck: Three Instances of Reparative Behavior,” in *Congregation, PERFORMANCE RESEARCH*, Volume 13, Number 3, Routledge, England, 2009.

Walking, Standing, Sitting Like a Duck:  
Three Instances of Invasive, Reparative Behavior

The British critic George Steiner claims that art, like certain kinds of religious and metaphysical experience, is the more “ingressive,” transformative summons available to human experiencing... It is an intrusive, invasive indiscretion that “queries the last privacies of our existence”; “an annunciation that breaks into the small house of our cautionary being”, so that “it is no longer habitable in quite the same way as it was before.” It is a transcendent encounter that tells us, in effect: “change your life.”

In the traditions of monks and renunciates of both the East and the West, there are those who settle into a monastic community and spend a lifetime cloistered in one place pursuing a spiritual path. And there are those who are nomadic, moving from monastery to monastery, in a pattern that can take a decade to complete, stopping at each location for a circumscribed time - the journey, the pilgrimage, the ellipse of departure and return the defining principle of their lives. The desert fathers and mothers who lived in Egypt in the fourth and fifth centuries C.E. in the Roman Empire were a group who made a point of not settling anywhere for too long, meditating continuously, never taking comfort in a real home, family, or a traditional, stable community. They were attempting to achieve *apatheia* (detachment) and *amerimnia* (freedom from care). They hoped “to seek out the desert frontiers” in order to “become strangers to the world” (*Xeniteia*). By the fifth century there were reports of monks populating the desert. John, an elder known for “surpassing all other monks in virtue,” had stood motionless for three years under a rock in prayer.” But when his feet gave out, an angel appeared, healed him, and ordered him to move on. “Thereafter,” we are told, “he lived wandering in the desert, eating wild plants.” Although in practice such monks always needed to stay close to the towns for access to water and supplies, they essentially had moved from the comfort of community to the expanse of unpopulated wilderness. In the actions

of such monks we can observe the uniqueness of lives dedicated to the spiritual, in direct contrast to those of the “mundane shell,” as William Blake might call it. What function did these medieval monks and their individual struggles serve the adjacent communities? In their own terms, they were hoping to achieve a greater level of consciousness and to find God in isolation, as Christ had done in the desert. They saw themselves as sinners - poor, weak men - but others saw them as “Trees... purifying the atmosphere by their presence.”

In their refusal to work at any task other than that of achieving this type of spiritual elevation, these ascetics, not all of whom were monks, generated both adoration and disgust. Some people saw these monks as representing an ideal of purity in their attempts to make themselves Other to the world. But there were those who regarded the monks’ refusal to work while begging for food as indicative of nothing more than sloth.

What is the meaning of those who choose to live an un-earthly life on earth, a life dedicated to the task of turning the inside out - performing the public act of private contemplation? How is the circle of the ordinary broken so the extraordinary can be let in? We know that humans often live within multiple states of consciousness simultaneously, although they appear to be moving through space with the same intentions, with family and work supposedly at the core. Yet in each person there is an imaginary, intuitive, creative self filled with aspirations that usually remain hidden. Only when humans make small or large gestures within the public arena - personal acts of protest; public acts of protest, such as marches, sit-ins, strikes, and social actions; or art designed to shatter, to rupture the continuity - that we become aware to what degree the status quo for many has become a pressure cooker exuding steam. Right before the decision to invade Iraq was made public in 2003, there were massive protests in the U.S. and elsewhere. Millions of people in the U.S., at least, led mostly by high school and college students, took to the streets in an exhilarated manifestation of disapproval, reminiscent of the student movements of the Vietnam war years, and the free speech and civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s. These actions of “taking the streets,” “taking back the streets,” putting a stop to business as usual represent a type of urban domestic warfare against the power structures that recalls the notion of participa-

tory democracy as theater. These ordinary/extraordinary gestures of individuals generate collective excitement, allowing people to feel that the world could be renewed and reinvented and that they could be part of its transformation.

In Hannah Arendt's sense, true action is an assertion of palpable, spontaneous, grassroots power. She also writes, "action is risk." According to Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, Hannah Arendt held that the pre-Platonic Greeks, the original theorists of action, "understood that action was dependent not on organized or legislatively created spaces for action, or on political organization or governments," but "simply on people coming together to share words and deeds - 'the unreliable and only temporary agreement of many wills and intentions?... This coming together of actors is what Arendt called power..." To Arendt this power could be individual, shared and collective, or it could find its locus in a place where individual action and collective action work together as a common force. She wrote, "action is judged for neither its motivation nor its aim, only its performance..."

So when one participates in this type of action, the sheer unexpectedness of it, the outrageousness of it, the risk of it make one feel, on one hand, that it seems highly improbable that such actions manifest at all, that people ever come together with such bravado. On the other hand, one also recognizes that it is surprising that such ruptures do not occur more often, that people do not congregate regularly to change existing conditions, or that they do not assert more lone manifestations of social action. If we are unhappy with the status quo, such actions are exhilarating. If we are fearful of change, they are a source of anxiety, hence the repressive degree to which governments quickly constrain such actions to reestablish order when it appears threatened.

In America, a notoriously utilitarian society, art can function as a type of intervention in that it makes apparent the ephemerality and individuality of consciousness. Art that is spontaneous, risky, and placed in the public arena - not as permanent sculpture but as an organic response to particular historical, physical, or environmental conditions - is particularly unexpected in a market-driven economy and is therefore potentially transgressive. And even more rare is artwork that attempts to transform the solitary gesture of spiritual or political regeneration into a public performance. How does one come to make such work? How does

one access its results?

## I. Walking

For the last few years artist Ernesto Pujol has dedicated his artistic practice to performative acts of intermittently walking and standing still. Because he imagines a world in need of repair, torn to shreds by loss and war, he attempts to catalyze its regeneration in small ways through the simple act of concentrated, focused, deliberate walking that engages mind, body, and spirit.

The first of the series of Pujol's "walks" began as a solitary act in the Magnolia Cemetery in Charleston, South Carolina, in July 2005. That original, unpremeditated gesture was an attempt to comfort the dead buried in this Civil War cemetery and to mourn the loss of life through war with the simple movements of a reflective contemplative walk. Pujol, who was a Trappist monk for some years before leaving that cloistered life to become an artist, walked among the long-ago deceased dressed in a monk's habit - a garment from his former life.

This gesture began a respectful series of slow mournful walking movements and kneeling gestures with only the camera as witness. The next walk, a more deliberate and public act of mourning, found Pujol as a "character" of unknown origins at the McNay Museum in San Antonio, in June 2006, "barefoot, pale in butoh white face, dressed in a long robe suggesting a mortuary shroud, or a middle eastern garment," he wrote, pacing the small circle before the museum's Kohler Fountain. This was a private mourning in the manner of the traditional monastic discipline of walking meditation or labyrinthine pilgrimage walks. But this particular walk was positioned as an art event that was visible to an art audience, who observed him from a balcony. At first the visitors paid little attention, but they were soon mesmerized by the focused seriousness of Pujol's intent. He has written that this walk was inspired by watching the daily count of U.S. soldiers fallen in the Iraq war, which reached 2,000 in October 2005. He felt compelled to respond.

In his most recent and most sustained walk, in June 2007, he circumnavigated Spectacle Island outside of Boston. In this iteration, the walker has become the Aguador, the waterman, the water carrier. Here, as in many traditional pilgrimages, he has

walked the island, taking samples of water back to the mainland. Dressed in a nineteenth-century garment, fragile as the action itself, he spent a day moving around the island followed by spectators originally assembled for an annual marathon run. While he collected vials of water samples, he was followed by a cohort of faithful witnesses. Water, Pujol has said, and not oil - or, rather, the unequal presence and absence of water - will probably be the next great crisis humans will have to negotiate. Water is essential, primal to human and animal needs, and it is dangerous to take its healing, life-giving, cleansing, and quenching properties for granted. The “waterman” collects small vials, specimens that serve as documentation for this simple action of sampling and preservation.

Here he saw himself in the role of the Bodhisattva performing the “useless” task of selling water by a river. Why sell water by a river? Perhaps so that those who often go near or on the river will come to see and care for the river once again. The Aguador creates a strange intervention, a vulnerable figure imagined from another time, alone amidst a crowd. “The waterman will remain composed and silent at all times, as if in meditation,” Pujol writes, “transforming a public moment into an intimate contemplative moment. His eyes will be closed when he is not moving. (He may only selectively respond to children.)” By the end of this performance, Pujol’s antique garment had been battered by the wind and the sun. It was in tatters. And he had become part of the environment, attempting to melt into its space and time. His energy spent, he himself now was also in need of repair.

In these personas he has also walked the perimeters of fortresses, felt the interiority of buildings by running his hand deliberately and slowly across their skins. He had absorbed the animate and the inanimate, feeling the emotions of that which cannot articulate its pain. He has experienced that which appears fixed and inert, only to show us that it too is alive with memory and consciousness, if one can experience it as such.

These are ephemeral acts and interventions into the physical world with the intention of learning not about the otherness of the inanimate, but about its sameness - that all forms of matter are one and that the living human body therefore can respond to them all, must respond to them - an old Buddhist belief that all matter has the potential to liberate and be liberated.

In his most recent iteration of walking, Pujol staged a 16-person durational piece in the rotunda of the Chicago Cultural Center in October 2007, where for hours he and a group of young performers contemplated loss and manifested loss by the simple act of focused walking so that, by being the audience and the witness to their silent grief, we too could be healed.

## II. Standing

Kim Sooja, constructs offerings that become artworks and artworks that become offerings. She has sat silently in crowds in various parts of the world, with her arms outstretched, palms up, as in a mudra - A Beggar Woman - silently asking help from passersby. She has stood still and silent while groups of people encircled her, gazing. She also has performed isolate actions only recorded on film. Stretched across an enormous boulder for hours on her side in Kitakyushu, Japan, in 1999, A Needle Woman became an extension of the boulder while she silently contemplated nature. As the rock becomes part of her, she becomes the rock. She has not come to conquer the stone, but to enter into its vibration. Like Ernesto Pujol, she has merged with what would appear inanimate.

In *A Laundry Woman* (2003), Kim Sooja stands with her back to the audience, completely still, contemplating water while the Yamuna River floats by. This place in India is downstream from a crematorium where offerings are made daily to the dead - flowers, paper lanterns, candles launched in memoriam. As we watch, the offerings are pulled along by the current of the river. *A Laundry Woman* observes and witnesses the flow of the river, the force of life, and the cleansing rituals of death. In India millions come to the Ganges each year to die in an auspicious and sacred place. Here, motionlessness is juxtaposed to the slow hypnotic movement of life's detritus. This spectacle conjures the notion of infinitude but also of finality. These offerings move off the screen to a place we cannot see. The river takes away all trace of life and death - the smallness and particularity of our time on this earth. There is no end to its motion, but there is an end to ours, and even an end to the blessings and the offerings of grief that well-wishers lavish upon us after we are gone.

In the embedded metaphor, one has to traverse the river in

order to get to the other side, to cross the cosmic ocean to reach nirvana. Charon waits with his boat to take us across the Styx. Coins placed in the mouths or on the eyes of the dead were payment for his labor. We watch our own lives and our own deaths go by, as the figure stands with her back to us, simply, modestly, A Laundry Woman, watching as the remains of life and intent are cleansed. She does not determine the action, but she is its witness, using the physical body's capacity for stillness to transmit the spiritual. Kim Sooja puts herself into situations in often potentially dangerous places - Cairo, Delhi, Chad, Rio de Janeiro, Lagos, Tokyo, New York, Mexico City, Shanghai, Havana. She is a witness to the intensity of place, yet not always a participant. And when she stands silent in a dense crowd of moving people, her inaction is the enigma. She is A Beggar Woman, A Laundry Woman, or A Needle Woman weaving her persona into the fabric of matter. On the edge of a giant rock, in Kitakyushu, Japan, A Needle Woman creates unity with nature, maintaining stillness with the quietness of stone, expanding time. As Doris von Drathen has written, she is "a needle, barometer, seismograph and compass... indicating the everyday dramas that usually go undetected in our habit-formed lives." She calibrates her body to the movement or lack of movement of the stone upon which she rests. In these still pieces, she sees herself providing an "axis" for time and space, either vertical or horizontal, reminding us of the order of the world.

Ernesto Pujol traces the outlines of a wall. He feels the wall. And, if the wall is in trauma, has been in trauma, he embraces the wall. Or he becomes the Aguador, the waterman. Both artists, stripped of pretension and of earthly identities, work to make the divine "an aspect of the human world" - a prerequisite, according to Karen Armstrong, for the creation of archetype and myth.

### III. Sitting Like a Duck

How and when does the act of sitting become a gesture of provocation? Iraq-born artist Wafaa Bilal also puts his body on the line to remind us, as he says, that those who live in the "comfort zone" do not understand "the combat zone." Here the artist sitting creates discomfort, as he makes himself a target for a world anxious to decahctect its violence.

Under Saddam Hussein, Wafaa Bilal was labeled a political

dissident. Scheduled for arrest and execution, he escaped into Kuwait and was then transferred to a refugee camp in Saudi Arabia, where he spent two years. During that time, he felt unsafe in the tents that were provided, and so as an artist he set to work each day making adobe bricks, drying them in the sun until gradually he had accumulated enough to build a small hut where he could both sleep more securely and teach art to the children of the camp during the day.

In the spring of 2007, working closely with other high-tech artists like Ben Chang, Wafaa Bilal chose to create a virtual war zone with real-life consequences in the Flatfiles Gallery in Chicago. He titled the piece *Domestic Tension*, but had originally thought to call it *Shoot an Iraqi*, until he conceded that such a title might be too provocative.

Bilal's plan was to live in a room in the gallery for a month where he would eat and sleep and where, behind a Plexiglas shield, he could sit at his computer and maintain a continuous blog with those shooting at him. Participants watching him online via a live webcam positioned in the gallery could take aim and fire small pellets of yellow paint that would explode on contact. They could also engage him in dialogue or they could do both - shoot at him and then verbally insult him, which many people did. It never occurred to Bilal that instead of the anticipated few shots a day, he would actually receive 40,000 shots in the first 20 days and a total of more than 62,000 shots, with people from 128 countries attacking him.

The paint gun was mounted on an armature that scanned the room in a robotic motion. When it found its victim it would open up and fire a shot so loud that it resonated like a real rifle blast, then it splattered paint on Bilal and all over the room. In the early days, before the device was perfected, paint balls flew out of the robotic gun with such velocity that they shattered the plastic shield. The shield had to be adjusted so that Bilal's physical welfare would no longer be threatened.

The attackers were mostly video-gamers and paintball junkies "intrigued by the possibility of shooting someone hundreds of miles away with a click of their mouse," Bilal writes. There were also bloggers who would hurl racist epithets and recriminations at him online if he went out of their sight for more than a few minutes. And there were those who kept him up all night shoot-



ing. But there were others. A group called Virtual Human Shield succeeded in jamming the site for seven days, keeping away those hackers who were trying to shoot at him continuously. There was Matt Schmid, a former U.S. marine who heard about the installation on the radio, went online, saw someone shoot at and break Bilal's only lamp, and came to the gallery the next day with the gift of a pole lamp, taller than the range of the robotic arm. There were those who brought food: There was a high-tech professional who heard about the piece, and, anticipating the amount of virtual participation Bilal's web site would receive, came into the gallery and volunteered to connect the project to a larger server that could manage the unexpected volume of hits. He maintained the site for the entire run of the project. There were many friends and artist collaborators who helped Bilal develop the technology and actually build the device. They stayed close throughout. There was a very forward-looking, courageous gallery director willing to offer her white cube space for such an intervention and live with its destruction during Bilal's installation, when the room became a soup of splattered, sticky, smelly yellow paint. And there was Bilal himself, passionate and forgiving, whose attitude has always been that people simply need to wake up, to realize that the Iraqi war is not a virtual war, not a video game, and that real human beings, with real names and real lives on all sides of the conflict, are being killed daily in Iraq. Bilal has said, "Art doesn't have to change life, it just has to start something..." No matter what people thought while entering into this encounter, they surely came out of it "changed." Bilal positioned himself in the literal line of fire and waited. He did nothing while the world fought over him. In this he became representative of many things during his time online, but for most people his identity as artist was lost even though he positioned himself in a gallery and saw the entire action as performance - a deliberate inactivity of sitting still while the world took literal shots at him. Although it was a collaborative venture, he alone was the sitting duck. In the end he was so distraught by the gunfire, the lack of sleep, the randomness of the shots, the timing, the sounds, the no-escape, that he experienced the effects of post-traumatic stress syndrome, as if he had been in an actual war zone. And it was astounding too that such conditions of war could be replicated in a gallery while the outer spaces housed regular art shows and on weekends were rented out to weddings.

Each of these three artists has created an axis of action to intercept daily life. Yet their interventions are modest given the enormity of their concerns - war, reparation, life, death, the passing of time, the development of human consciousness and responsibility. They simply point in the direction of their obsessions, sadness, and impotence. But without actually meaning to, they come to reflect the unique ability of artists to engage the largest questions of life and society in their bodies, and to do so within mundane gestures of walking, standing, and sitting - in full consciousness, yet without judgment. In their metaphoric embodiments and personifications of grave social concerns, they are unwilling to blame. So in spite of their stated intentions, their actions actually render the rhetoric around most political concerns and activism as hollow and cowardly, because as humble as such performative acts may appear, they are courageous. These artists are willing to place their "bodies on the line." Nothing could be more dangerous or transformative, literal or metaphoric than this.

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