

Performing Meditation: small gifts and other interventions

Rajni Shah, February 2007

I've been thinking about performance as public intervention for quite a few years now. I'd often see pieces of theatre or dance that I found technically or conceptually exciting but that became rather repetitive in their choice of presentation. I'd lost heart at the types of audiences these events would pull in – often people who were involved in making the same type of work already, no-one who might be surprised, delighted or shocked by what they saw; there seemed to be almost no room for transformative experiences.

While watching these pieces I'd often daydream about coming across the piece I was watching unexpectedly, discovering it on the street, or being allowed to experience a small part of it in a public place. I don't mean large-scale street theatre or even work that's designed for the streets; I'm more interested in the juxtaposition of an anonymous busy public space and the private, unafraid intimacy that one finds in performance venues. So I've set out on a mission, a questioning really, to see where I might take this idea of public intervention, to test whether it really can bring about change, revelation, whether we can somehow transpose these experiences so that they sit in the 'real world' without losing intimacy or quality.

On a related note, I've become fascinated by the idea of art as gift, recognising that some of the most beautiful acts are performed, written or received for and by other people as the gesture of a friend on some level. So this is where I have begun: art as gift meets art as intervention. And this document is the first in a series of thinkings about how this meeting takes place and what its legacies might be.

My first two interventions have taken place in the public areas at arts festivals. I've tried to capture what happened in this document without spending too much time on why or how. The second two will take place in town centres and will feed into another document later in the year. I hope you enjoy reading these thoughts, and would welcome any thoughts you might have in response.

Rajni

Alternate ROOTS annual meeting, North Carolina (USA)
August 2006



performance intervention at ROOTS
photos: Theron Schmidt

I woke up early and went into the breakfast hall before anyone had arrived. One half was set up for eating; the other for the morning meeting that takes place daily after breakfast. The latter took the form of a large circle of chairs with nothing in the middle. This was where I decided to set up. I lay down, naked, surrounding my body with mulch. Around the mulch was a larger circle of pennies, which I had taken from the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination installation at Performance Studies International in London earlier in the summer. I lay perfectly still while everyone came in for breakfast, then during the meal I discreetly arose and walked away, leaving the outline of my body in mulch and a note: read me. On opening the note, it read:

Please take a penny and make a wish for someone else in the world

Responses were varied. Some people found it to be a very meditative space, some were delighted by the gift, some pleased that I had not been afraid to be naked. The Lutherans who run the camp where we were staying found the presence of a naked body offended their religious beliefs. This sparked conversations on an individual and organisational level about respect, belonging, rights and expression.

National Review of Live Art, Glasgow (Scotland)

February 2007

This was a series of interventions which took place over the last three days of this five day festival, at different times of day. For the duration of the piece, I took a vow of silence and tried to keep a silent mind; I did not make eye contact with anyone, I did not read anything, write anything, or engage in any activity other than meditation.



images from days two and three
all photos: theron schmidt

Day one: over the day, in all kinds of public spaces (hallways, corners, public toilets...) there would appear a small stereo and a bundle of tiny envelopes, addressed *for you*. The stereo played my voice singing 'There's no business like show business...' repeatedly for an hour and a half. Inside each envelope was a sticker with my likeness (dressed up, as on day two), a tiny piece of writing from my diary (different in every envelope), and a note reading:

*each gift is unique and this one is for you –
please keep it or offer it to someone you've
never met before rajni xx*



day one: small gifts at coffee table

Day two: I entered the venue at around 3.30pm, wearing a peach dress, white gloves, with my hair in ringlets and my face pale and made up. I walked around the venue slowly, until I found a space that was slightly out of the way, at the top of a staircase in a corner. I sat down, opened my suitcase, and took out a bundle of tiny envelopes, which I attached to my dress. Inside the suitcase, the same stereo played my voice singing "There's no business like show business..." over and over again. I sat and meditated. This time the notes read:

*each gift is unique and this one's for you.
please leave something of yourself (a lock
of hair, a thought, an item you are carrying)
at the site where you found this gift.
rajni xx*

When the tape finished, I turned it over and changed position. People left gifts and took the envelopes. When all the gifts were gone, it was evening, and I left.



day two: people taking and leaving gifts

Day three: I entered the venue at around 12pm, wearing simple dark clothes, no make up and with a shaved head. I walked around the venue slowly until I came to the same space as the day before. I sat down, and took gifts out of the suitcase. These gifts were the clothes, make up, ringlets of hair and the tape that had been making up my appearance on day two. Attached to each gift was a note, as on the day before, reading:

*each gift is unique and this one's for you.
please leave something of yourself (a lock
of hair, a thought, an item you are carrying)
at the site where you found this gift.
rajni xx*



day three: gifts and audience (both images)

I meditated in silence. People sat with me, some took and left gifts. I left the venue at 4.30pm, leaving the remaining gifts at the site. This is how the piece ended.

This piece existed in layers. Some people only observed me walking through the performance venue during the festival, a silent body in a busy, animated space. Some saw me meditating, and enjoyed the spectacle of the piece but did not participate. Many engaged by taking a gift and most also left something of themselves, either in thought or in object. And those who encountered the piece on several days saw yet another layer of the piece, the open questions around identity and giving that my changing physical appearance presented.

Before I went to Glasgow, I asked myself: is it possible to meditate as performance or will I simply be performing meditation? The two seemed to be opposites, one actively demanding attention and the other giving it away. But as it turned out, I was able to enter a completely meditative state within the warmth of other bodies. I don't think that I was 'performing meditation'. Instead, other people became a part of the space I had created, so the very act of giving and taking meant that they and I were creating a space together. My presence felt more like a catalyst, a license for others to create their own space, leave their own trace, their thoughts and objects.

In the next few months I'll make unannounced interventions in two UK town centres. I imagine the experiences will be different. But I hope that some elements will remain.



gifts from day two



gifts from day three

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