

## HOLLY FAUROT & SARAH H PAULSON: AN INTERVIEW

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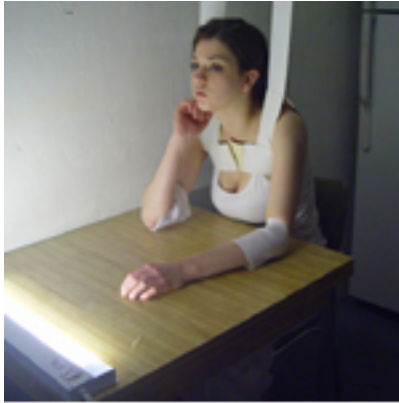


*Ducts Art Gallery's interview series continues with printmaker/artist, Hoang Pham in conversation with Brooklyn-based performance artists, Holly Faurot and Sarah H Paulson. She communicates with them via email from her studio in Richmond, Virginia.*

**Hoang:** I'd like to start off by talking a little bit about your relationship. I know you two have been together for some time now—the baby years going back to college. Something that has mostly eluded me as an artist is this role of the collaborator. How are each of you posited in this relationship? What characters do you work through?

Sarah: Oddly enough, I've always viewed Holly and myself as extremely independent artists. Then I realize that we've been working together for the whole of our professional careers. I must admit, that each time I think about my relationship to Holly and our work, I'm amazed. There's a running joke that people must think we're secretly a couple. But in all seriousness, I think for anyone to work together in such a close way, there has to be a connection that is so strong and natural that there is an equal and tremendous amount of room for time and space.

About seven years ago, we thought it would be interesting to do something together—to merge our interests in performance in some way. We did a performance called *In/on strap[ing]* in our Brooklyn loft. We brought in about 8 performers (dancers and non-dancers), many of whom my sister Susie drove in from the SUNY Purchase Dance Dept., to improvise with movement. Meanwhile, we had also just met Joel Mellin via an ad we had posted on Craigslist for a sound artist; he played an electronic musical score for the piece. The part of this piece, which would set the stage for a series of about 5 more future performances, were these elastic strap-like components which were attached to the performers in various ways, holding them back from full freedom of movement.



*In/On Strapping*, 2003

After about 5 or 6 of these, we stopped working in this way. The pieces were too perfect. We got exactly what we were looking for. Something was missing, so we brought back the things we did in our individual performance work and the components that characterized our individual works from those baby years. From there, and from the beginning, we melded into whatever it is we are today.

When we're preparing for a piece we sit around in the studio talking and waiting for something to happen. We have what we've described as a "net". We're collecting tons of stuff in there...from our jobs, from our personal relationships, from our joint experiences, from our walks on the streets...everywhere. It all goes in the net, and that's what we have to work from. Then we start stripping it down. Even though all the components might not be in the final piece, they're all there. It's collective, honest, and natural. I can't think of another place from which we could work. The work is about our collaboration and our friendship and our individual relationships to the world. It's autobiographical, but the finished product ends up being something more expansive.

Holly : For some reason, this may be cheesy, but I always think of the life's work of Bob Dylan. One year it was bluegrass folk, the next rock n' roll, the next country, the next jazzy-swing, but all along you always can hear his true voice in the music. I think Sarah and I work in the same way. Sometimes I am electrician, sometimes Sarah is webmaster, but all along we can see both our voices in the work.

**Hoang: Time, as it has passed, as it is happening, as it is coming back around again, how do you deal with this in your work? Are you conscious of an audience dealing with this in your work?**

Sarah: I would say that time is one of the main components of our work. In preparing for a piece, we wait. We've become aware of time in a way that isn't focused so much on hours or days, but on a certain feeling or period that evolves between the time that we begin working and the time that we complete a work session. We've become conscious of when we will get somewhere and when we will not. Sometimes the timing is wrong... Things don't match or feel right. There's no reason to force it. But if it's right, sometimes we'll have to work all night long. I've often been a little envious of artists or choreographers who work in a studio during designated hours.

During the performances, I believe it takes a certain amount of time to really get into something—to drop one's insecurities and become a part of the system of the performance. With each new work, I've found that it takes me less and less time to really find this space. If I had to give a guess, though, I'd say I need at least 15 minutes to begin to feel the right intensity or to feel fully immersed. That's just the first stage, though. Different levels of immersion happen throughout the work. At the same time, our performances seem to want to get longer.

**Hoang: Can you elaborate on what this means?**

Sarah: I mean that it becomes obvious during the performance that time helps us to get deeper into something. It sort of works that way with anything—reading, working, being in a relationship, learning something new, learning something for the millionth time, etc. You learn that what you thought you knew as the deepest place might just be getting under the surface. You can always get in there further, so to speak.

Holly: With the performances, ultimately we want to cover the same 'conceptional' ground whether it is a 7-minute or a 12-hour piece. We could use a tortoise and hare analogy here and say that "slow and steady wins the race." But with our work there isn't necessarily a race to be won, there isn't any "prize" at the finish line. My yoga teacher says very often in class "the more gradual you move, the further you'll be able to get." Once you get to one "finish line" you see that there is actually another one down the road. And this isn't frustrating. It is in fact motivating. Long performances force me to see with honesty everything I'm experiencing— whether it is boredom, self-consciousness, intense focus, poignancy, joy, etc.

**Hoang: Are you conscious of an audience dealing with this time in your work?**

Sarah: I feel like I am beginning to come to terms with my relationship with people coming to see our work. I used to want to jump out of a 2-hour piece and say, "Don't worry; you don't need to stay the whole time. It's okay if you leave." Many of our works are made so audience members can enter and exit the viewing space any time. We've wanted people to feel comfortable, to be able to talk, and to be able to take away something totally different than the next person. We've wanted people to feel comfortable in what can be a potentially uncomfortable environment due to the duration, lack of seating, etc. At this point, though, I'm realizing that all my concern about the audience's ability to feel free to do as it pleases, could actually be pushing people away. In the last year or so, I've learned to trust that the audience can deal with the endurance factor on its own. People often stay the entire time and are silent. I am learning that they are going through something between the beginning and end of the piece. They are finding a certain zone, as well. Of course, this is the point, but I'm finally beginning to trust it. Holly recently said her yoga teacher told her to trust that certain things are universal. That really hit me; I think it is a good lesson for us.

Holly: Making art is very personal; so much of one's life is exposed and brought to the surface whether directly or indirectly. I don't always like to admit to that part of the creative process, but it is true. With that in mind, Sarah and I can't hide from each other in the process of making a performance, and therefore neither of us can hide from the audience.

**Hoang: You've just been to Beijing for the Open Performance Festival, Sarah physically and Holly virtually. Can you tell us about the piece you performed there? How was it received, how did it translate?**

Sarah: We presented a new piece, *Us, the Divine, and the Homeless*, during the 5th week of the 10th anniversary of the OPEN Performance Art Festival. Each week was curated by a different international curator. Our week was curated by Jill McDermid, Director of Grace Exhibition Space (Brooklyn, NY).

It was a really interesting experience to work in the festival environment in the Beijing 798 Art District, because we're not used to moving our work around. We typically make performances for specific spaces, and obviously we weren't able to see the space beforehand. However, the help and assistance that we received from the Open Art Gallery really blew me away.

Holly: I wasn't there for the performance in Beijing, but I was in the video that served (as all our videos do), as a "director" of the performance. Performer, Anthony A. Austin, directed me in the making of the video through having me copy, to the best of my ability, a series of improvised movements that he executed.

Sarah: I was in the piece with Anthony and 3 other volunteers who were working for the festival. During the piece, I took movement cues from Holly, and Anthony took cues from me. Therefore, there was this component of translation, and the movements sort of came full circle. As in most of our work, the subject of translation through different media was absolutely present, but being in China where I did not speak the same language as many of the viewers, this topic of translation was especially apparent.

I think it went over really well, and the reaction was similar to the reaction we receive at home. Some people had no idea what to make of it, and others had very complex interpretations, which I was able to hear via translators. Of course, that was quite fascinating to me because the original message always goes through some kind of filter, so I was in a similar position as the audience. It was a beautiful coupling of performance and environment.

The 3 other performers, Lisa Bauer, Li Linxuan, and Zhang Rui really jumped right into it. I loved that and am grateful for their willingness to do something that must have seemed pretty absurd, since they didn't know our work. That issue of universality seems to apply to this situation as well.



'Us, the Divine, and The Homeless'

**Hoang: Yes, it comes up again. You seem to be drawn to this idea of the universal. Is it easy to put into words what certain things might be universal in your work? Does it vary from piece to piece, are there certain things that are constantly universal?**

Sarah: I've only consciously thought about the idea of the universal for a short time, even though it has always been in our work. Holly has been giving these teachings to me as practice for her yoga studies. The messages and anecdotes that she uses shed a lot of light on certain aspects of our performances and our collaboration. This is good for me, because it forces me out of this ambiguous language that Holly and I often use with one another for work that is actually quite specific. I believe that language is the closest thing we have that makes us human. There is great failure in this, but we all give it our best shot. Within this concept, I feel like performance, or movement or the body, is the closest mechanism we can use to match the intentions of language. In folding this idea in on itself, using the body in performance is the closest thing to what it means to be human. How can the universal not be present?

Holly: I would say that by using and presenting our bodies as part of our work, this makes it universal. Everyone knows what it is like to have a body, to feel its fragility and vulnerability. The physicality of the body doesn't always have to be exploited and pushed for this to be evident. Like, water is water-whether it is a leaky faucet, or Niagara Falls.

**Hoang: Did this physical separation have an effect on how the piece was developed and consequently performed?**

Holly: Maybe you have someone in your life that you see here and there and you always wait for him or her to say "hi" to you first before you acknowledge them? In a sense this was like us saying "hi" first, and for the first time, to the possibility of something larger in our work, to it being able to carry and hold not just us.

Sarah: I agree with Holly about this separation opening up the possibility for something larger. It was indeed hard for me to be in Beijing without Holly, but the difficulty was more emotional than based in the execution of the work. Of course, I was nervous about making certain decisions, and found myself consulting Holly in my head, but for the most part, I just missed her and the security of our relationship. Though I'm sure the piece would have been different if we were physically there together, the difference is insignificant in the end. It is like wondering if the video component would have been different if I directed Holly's movements. We began this piece before I left for Beijing, so it was just a matter of filtering information and working with the materials that were available. The physical part is the easy part.



Video Still: Us, the Divine, and the Homeless

I think we've been asking for this ability to be in multiple places at one time, and the Beijing piece was the first step. It really expands the potential of our work and prohibits us from being on top of it—suffocating it. I want the performances to be able to breathe. I still want to be able to breathe into them, but I want them to take in new air at the same time.

Holly: Knowing that we would be apart, when I made the video with Anthony, my intention was to be as clear with my body as possible. And by clear, I mean honest in the hopes that this would lend firm support to Sarah. Honest in how I interpreted and translated Anthony's movements, which meant completely surrendering to him and his instruction. It's funny, because this always comes so naturally to me when we're working on a project—I don't even think about it. It was interesting to actually be literal with myself about my intention. I knew that any hesitancy or possessiveness on my part would come through. But, this ended up being so easy—to surrender and be honest, and I think the video captured this.

**Hoang: I am a voyeur. I can't help suspecting that you both might be as well when I think of your work. There is something performative about being voyeuristic. Do you find any inspiration in this sort of practice?**

Sarah : Looking, observing, following, controlling, triggering, and mimicking are all within our work. We can't avoid it. It's around us in our day-to-day lives, and so we've magnified this in our performances. Holly and I have accumulated a large collection of surveillance cameras, multi-channel surveillance systems, live video feeds, and other components which have an obvious connection to voyeurism.

The audience also factors in to the elements of voyeurism. The performers and audience members are meeting one another at different points or levels. I like to avoid what I call the "infinite dancer's gaze." Instead, I like to make eye contact with audience members and with other performers. It allows for exchange rather than a simple presentation, and often these moments of watching beyond the confines of the performance space are the moments that I remember most. I think this applies to so many aspects of living.

**Hoang: Do you see your work having any connection to the more literal meaning of voyeurism? That is, a fascinated observer of the body and/or bodily acts, often doing this in secret.**

Holly: Well, I looked up voyeur in the dictionary because I was wondering what the actual literal written definition is, and most if not all had to do with taking pleasure in watching others engage in sex acts. I think that this applies. Not that we're watching other people have sex, but there is such intimacy in how another person moves and relates to their own body. Our working process always begins with making videos where someone is copying the movements of another. In this process, you are humbly tapping into an aspect of another person that is incredibly private and intimate.

Sarah: Sure, we're all looking at things in secret. We often do certain minimal gestures or movements that we've seen people do on the subway or in the office. We collect these little bits of information and make them public. It's celebratory. We can put these simple acts on a pedestal and frame them. The private is significant and special.

**Hoang: Yes, yes. I really appreciate that last statement as a point of closure to our conversation, "the private is significant and special". It is fitting that this should illustrate your work, as so much of it is a celebration of things private and otherwise unshared. In turn, I thank the both of you for sharing with us.**

*Editor's Note: Please join us next issue for a continuation of this series, when Holly Faurot and Sarah H. Paulson conduct the interview.*