

# Victoria Stanton

## PERFORMANCE AND THE ART OF TRANSACTION

1 Discussion with the artist, Montréal, March 2011.

2 Discussion with the artist, Montréal, March 2011. [fr. appartenance / eng. membership]

3 See [www.bankofvictoria.com/performance/group.php](http://www.bankofvictoria.com/performance/group.php).

4 Discussion with the artist, Montréal, March 2011.

**Since 1994, Montréal-based artist** Victoria Stanton has been inserting intimate gestures into physical and psychic spaces in an effort to investigate the performative nature of our everyday actions and interactions. Through these interventions, she seeks to transform her own relationships to place, and to foster intersubjective connections with others. In addition to performance, Stanton works with film and video, photography, spoken word performance, installation, collaborative projects, and scholarly research and writing. Influenced by seminal performance artists Allan Kaprow and Linda Montano, together with contemporaries Sylvie Cotton and mentor-turned-collaborator Sylvie Tourangeau, Stanton explores the impossibility of demarcating the act of performance from everyday life itself. She describes her work as being art as practice for life, a practice dedicated to exposing the multiple ways in which we perform the quotidian.

Stanton's performances are often created in direct response to the transactions that constitute our daily routines, in particular, the process of negotiation of public space with strangers on a day-to-day basis. Getting from one place to another, running errands, and feeding ourselves are experiences we can all share and relate to, consequently eating, walking, and performing subtle gestures in public spaces are recurring themes

in Stanton's work. Her performances often require an awareness of the self and the other, and as such are heavily invested with "compassion and consciousness about the self and about the world around us."<sup>1</sup> They mine the actions of everyday life in an effort to foster more intimate—if fleeting—connections with others, often bringing people together to "enact some kind of moment of profound *appartenance*."<sup>2</sup>

She often works in series, staging performances in different cities and contexts including festivals, academic conferences, gallery installations, artist residencies, and interventions in urban and rural sites. Series such as *Cake Feeding* (2001–2008), *Essen* (2003–2008), *Welcome* (2003–2008), *Roadside Attractions* (2008–2010), *Bank of Victoria* (2001–2005), and *Relationships in Residence* (2010–ongoing), are performed over periods of several years, and in diverse contexts and locations across North America and Europe, evolving over time and in response to different audiences and settings. Stanton is thus able to experiment and develop the works over extended periods of time, thereby exploring the durational and performative nature of performance itself—a process she also considers through critical writing.

Many of Stanton's performances draw upon her experiences of travel and having to negotiate personal space in her daily interactions. As a woman, these experiences are also connected to self-assertion and to rightfully taking up public space; many early performances grew out of everyday experiments with claiming public space. One of Stanton's central objectives is to use performance to "hold" a space: to maintain presence in a given space, and be as present as possible regardless of whatever else may be happening there, so as to attain a heightened sense of mindfulness and paying attention to things.

In *Welcome*, staged as part of the larger series of performance-interventions titled, *(Being) One Thing at a Time*—Stanton invited artists and non-artists to join her in creating living tableaux. "[T]hrough the performance of meditative, physical actions" they inserted unexpected gestures into the urban environment.<sup>3</sup> Performed in Montréal, Ottawa, and Saint John's, participants stood silently at busy sites and intersections, holding welcome mats in an effort to greet passersby with a familiar message, encountered unexpectedly in an unfamiliar place. We often become so familiar with our surroundings that we cease to pay attention to them; *Welcome* used micro-interventions to disrupt our daily routines by inviting performers and viewers alike "to experience a familiar place in an unfamiliar way."<sup>4</sup>

*Roadside Attractions* also involved the insertion of micro-gestures into public spaces. The series grew out of Stanton's experiences of travelling extensively to exhibit, perform, and participate in artist residencies, and it explored the process of constantly having to acclimate and become familiar with new places. Like *Welcome*, this series explored situated presence and being in the moment in a particular place. Stanton performed a series of subtle, physical gestures such as leaning, kneeling, and

VICTORIA STANTON *Sharpshooter*

crouching on roadsides around the various locations where she was living and working, in Canada and abroad.<sup>5</sup> By inserting gestures into places where one would not normally encounter them, *Roadside Attractions* explored parallels between performance and travel, a process that for Stanton involves a “potentially destabilized relationship to place.”<sup>6</sup> The series also constitutes a type of performance-research through which she attempted to respond to questions about place and belonging, about the ways in which we develop connections to place, such as: “How do you show a transitional space? Where are the interstices between leaving and arriving? What are our strategies for getting there?”<sup>7</sup> Stanton’s roadside interventions were filmed and subsequently screened as experimental video loops, accompanied by her live performance of repetitive gestures and narration exploring the process of being in transition. Like many of Stanton’s performances exploring site, presence, and subjectivity, *Roadside Attractions* seeks to invest multiple spaces with a compassionate presence.

#### Performance and the Art of Transaction

Transaction provides a framework for much of Stanton’s work, whether performed on stage, in a gallery, or at a performance festival; in public spaces; for the camera; or increasingly, in intimate spaces of encounter between the artist and a single viewer. As Stanton observes, “our lives are made up of multiple transactions.”<sup>8</sup> Transaction can be defined as an exchange of goods, services, or financial instruments. Transaction can also be a record of something transacted, for example, the meeting of a business or association, or a financial transaction. Transaction can be consensual and mutually beneficial to the parties involved; yet it can also be non-consensual and exploitative of others. Transaction can also be understood as constitutive of selfhood itself: our subjectivities are formed in part through transactions with the surrounding world. Importantly in the context of Stanton’s performance *œuvre*—described by the artist as “the art of transaction”<sup>9</sup>—transaction often requires agreement, “a communicative action or activity involving two parties or things that reciprocally affect or influence each other.”<sup>10</sup> Transaction, for Stanton, involves a consensual and mutually beneficial exchange that highlights our relationships to the surrounding world and to each other. Transaction is thus a form of encounter that allows us to reflect upon our relationships to place, and it can help foster and sustain interpersonal relationships.

Transaction is most often associated with currency and the exchange of money for goods and services. Unlike these financial transactions, Stanton’s work mobilizes non-monetary, consensually negotiated exchanges that unfold between the artist and each individual participant, as well as among the participants themselves. Her performances take the form of “a literal transfer of goods and services from the artist to the audience,”<sup>11</sup> what artist François Deck terms “a certain immaterial system of trade.”<sup>12</sup>

5 In Carlton-sur-Mer, Gatineau, Toronto, Saskatoon, Gabriola, Leeds, Berlin, and Sardinia.

6 See [www.bankofvictoria.com/performance/videoperf.php](http://www.bankofvictoria.com/performance/videoperf.php).

7 See [www.bankofvictoria.com/performance/videoperf.php](http://www.bankofvictoria.com/performance/videoperf.php).

8 Discussion with the artist, Montréal, April 2013.

9 See [www.bankofvictoria.com](http://www.bankofvictoria.com).

10 See [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transaction](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transaction).

11 Ted Purves, in Ted Purvis, ed., *what we want is free: generosity and exchange in recent art* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), p.x.

12 François Deck, “Reciprocal expertise,” *Third Text*, 18: 6, 2004, 632.





Stanton's *Cake Feeding Series* enacts such a transfer. Unable to eat chocolate cake (one of her favourite foods) due to food intolerances, Stanton created a series of performances in which she feeds cake to others. Her inability to experience eating chocolate cake is transformed in the act of feeding others: the viewer can experience pleasure in the act of eating the cake, and the artist can experience their pleasure vicariously, through the act of feeding. By negotiating the placement of a fork or spoon in someone's mouth, *Cake Feeding* breaks down social barriers and creates trust and intimacy. These exchanges bridge a range of experiences and differences, because, as Stanton notes, "we all have a relationship to food."<sup>13</sup>

In the performance series *ESSEN* ("to eat" in German or Yiddish), pairs of participants are invited to sit across from each other at a table and to feed each other a meal, one mouthful at a time. Performed at restaurants in Montréal, Ottawa, St. John's, Toronto, and Vancouver, *ESSEN* invites us to savour the moment through the act of feeding and eating. Food is deeply connected to our everyday experiences, and provides the framework for transactions among participants. For Stanton, food provides "a quotidian, seemingly banal act as a site of negotiation."<sup>14</sup> *ESSEN* asks participants to collectively negotiate and create conditions for feeding and being fed, for exchange, and by extension, intimacy, thereby enacting "some kind of moment of profound human contact."<sup>15</sup> As in *Cake Feeding*, Stanton provides a framework for collective exchange, hoping not only to feed but to nourish social bonds. The provision of food—and by extension the conditions for social exchange and negotiation—are closely linked to notions of giving and generosity. As such, the performances belong to what curator Mary Jane Jacob considers "art-as-offering"<sup>16</sup> that feature gifting and service exchanges.

In response to the exploitative aspects of banking and its impact on artists—many of her peers were experiencing substantial amounts of debt—Stanton founded the "Bank of Victoria" in 2001, and branded it "The Bank of Good Intentions." "The Bank" invests in personal, one-on-one relationships, trading on human exchanges, rather than futures and toxic assets. As CEO of the Bank of Victoria (2001–2005), Stanton met with "clients" who wished to secure financing for their art. At the end of each consultation, Stanton wrote the artist a Bank of Victoria cheque to cover the costs of their proposed project. While the sums provided are symbolic, the investments support local actors, and reflect Stanton's belief in the importance of community and healthy local art economies.

Stanton asserts that, "transaction is predicated on capitalist economy,"<sup>17</sup> one too often characterized by non-consensual transactions and the exploitation of others. In contrast, her transactional performances are reciprocal, and they provide a very different kind of transaction or exchange. Stanton enacts a performance economy based not exploitation, but rather, on egalitarian relations among all participants—*fair trade* performance. Stanton's transactional performances can be located within



a framework of the gift economy. As writer and artist Ted Purves observes, "The audience that is involved in a service exchange or that receives a gift becomes crucial to the manifestation of the piece; without them, it might be possible to say, the work cannot exist."<sup>18</sup> As artist Antonia Hirsch asserts, the gift can also "instantiate a social bond."<sup>19</sup> The gift economy is therefore generative of new transactions and exchanges: "In a gift economy, transactions are never really over, because each one produces more reciprocal ties."<sup>20</sup>

The economy may be "considered as a system of exchange."<sup>21</sup> It "requires actors that perform this exchange.... economic dynamics operate as an articulation of social structures that, in turn, are based on actual individual relationships."<sup>22</sup> As such the economy is also linked to what philosopher Gilbert Simondon terms transindividuality—the qualities that transcend our individual lives and "link us in differential relations to one another."<sup>23</sup> Stanton's most recent series *Relationships in Residency*, explores transindividuality in a series of one-on-one encounters with a single participant at a time over the duration of various artist residencies. Being in a residency situation over an extended period of time allows new interpersonal relationships to unfold over several hours, days, or

**VICTORIA STANTON** *Roadside Attractions*

13 Discussion with the artist, Montréal, March 2011.

14 Artist's website, *op. cit.*

15 Discussion with the artist, Montréal, March 2011.

16 Mary Jane Jacob, "Reciprocal Generosity," in Ted Purvis, ed., *op. cit.*, 4.

17 Discussion with the artist, Montréal, March 2011.

18 Ted Purves, "Blows Against the Empire," in Purves, ed., *op. cit.*, 43.

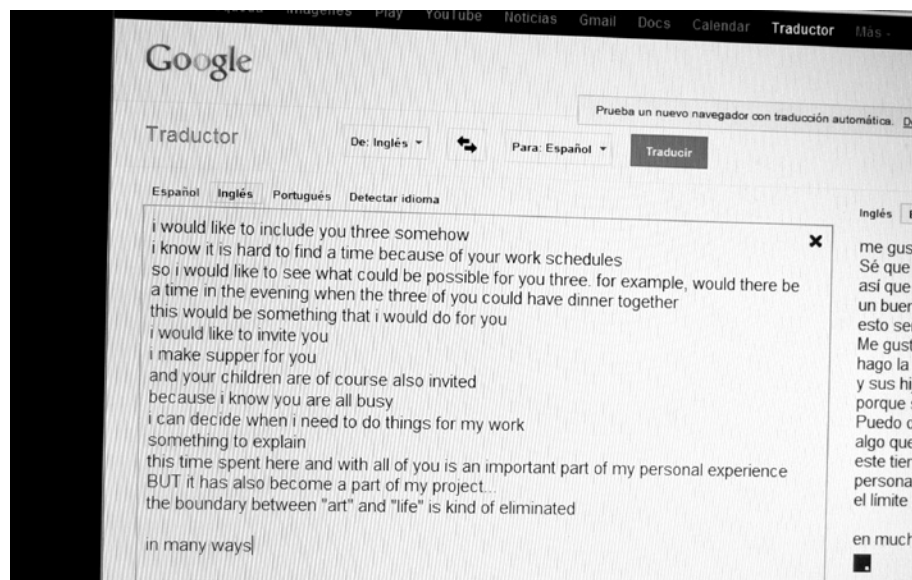
19 Antonia Hirsch, "Intangible Economies," in Antonia Hirsch, ed., *Intangible Economies* (Vancouver: Fillip Editions, 2012), 14.

20 Ted Purves, *op. cit.*, 43.

21 Hirsch, *op. cit.*, 17.

22 Hirsch, *op. cit.*, 17.

23 Melanie Gilligan, "Affect & Exchange," 41, in Hirsch, *op. cit.*, 25–49.



24 See [www.bankofvictoria.com/performance/relational.php](http://www.bankofvictoria.com/performance/relational.php).

25 [www.flickr.com/photos/victoriastanton/sets/72157633146531371](https://www.flickr.com/photos/victoriastanton/sets/72157633146531371).

26 Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: performing art, supporting publics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), 13.

27 See Dwight Conquergood, "Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics," *Communication Monographs* 58.2 (June, 1991): 179-194, and D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance* (Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi: Sage, 2005).

even weeks. As Stanton observes, "When time allows for the creation and repetition of a routine, the prospect of meaningful contact that is mutually exchanged and acknowledged becomes possible."<sup>24</sup> This type of interpersonal exchange or transaction is negotiated through activities and routines such as shopping for groceries, taking walks, and sharing meals and stories.

During artist residencies in Real del Monte, Mexico (2012), Saint John (2013), and Ste-Thérèse (2013), Stanton created a connection to place by establishing relationships with the people who live there and know it intimately. Building relationships requires negotiation, and Stanton's primary concern was to create the right environment for conversations and exchanges to take place. In Mexico, Stanton relied upon daily routines such as using the Internet at a local cafe, eating quesadillas, buying food at the local market, drinking tea, taking walks, and cooking meals to build relationships with local residents. In Saint John, she invited members of the community to accompany her, one person at a time, on a walk through the city to a site that was meaningful to them. In Ste-Thérèse, she used the local public library as a meeting point for taking walks with local residents; the one-on-one encounter provided an intimate context from which to

explore the city. By way of these daily actions, Stanton became part of the community, and got to know her local surroundings through the eyes, stories, and experiences of local residents. As Stanton asserts, "Getting to know a landscape in connection with someone else creates a whole other dimension and relationship to place."<sup>25</sup>

Many of Stanton's relational performances are contingent on active audience participation for the work to unfold, and as such are part of a larger social and participatory turn in current contemporary art. They also connect back to experimental theatre and art-life experiments, and belong to a post-Brechtian trajectory of performance art—what scholar Shannon Jackson also terms "post-dramatic"—that seeks to eliminate the audience/performer divide by actively involving the viewer.<sup>26</sup> Her performances are also linked to participatory performance strategies deployed in critical performance ethnography and anthropology that foster mutual understanding and community building through durational exchanges with members of local communities.<sup>27</sup> These various frameworks of performing with—rather than performing for—have enabled artists, scholars, and researchers to embed themselves within diverse communities, building and sustaining relationships over time. Stanton considers much of her

**VICTORIA STANTON** *Mexico Residence*



performance work to constitute *research* that allows her to deepen her understanding of relationships to place and to others.

In 2007, Stanton and Montréal-based performance artists Sylvie Tourangeau and Anne Bérubé formed the TouVA Performance Art Research Collective in an effort to collectively explore notions of the performative. Through performances, workshops, critical writing, and performative lectures and presentations, the trio enacts an active model of exchange and dialogue among themselves as well as with members of the public. Call and response techniques, automatic writing, performance instruction, diagrams, placards, and exaggerated gestures serve to open up spaces for exchange, and to reflect on the performative nature of performance art itself. All three authors have parallel writing and performance practices. Stanton emphasizes the fact that their individual and collective writing endeavours are an extension of a rigorous performance practice; importantly, these writings emerge from practice and provide a means of better understanding and developing a cohesive performance practice. In 2016, the TouVA will publish a collectively authored book titled, *Le 7e sens: Practicing dialogues / Practicing workshops / Practicing the daily performative / pratiquer l'art performance* (éditions Sagamie), which explores the daily practice of performance and the performative.

Victoria Stanton's performances mobilize everyday transactions in the service of interpersonal and transindividual exchanges, and serve to create new types of community. Christian Kravagna observes that community can be fixed and pre-existent, and it can also be a “temporary phenomenon with a potential for development that emerges in the course of a project [art work].”<sup>28</sup> The creation of community is contingent on what Kravagna calls “co-determination”—the willingness of all parties to participate.<sup>29</sup> Understood in the context of Stanton's work, co-determination is bound up in a “dynamic of reciprocity”—a negotiated process of give and take that produces a collective agreement to come together, albeit temporarily, as a community for the duration of the performance.<sup>30</sup> Community can take the form of, for example, two people sharing stories about an object or taking a walk together; a group of participants feeding each other or holding welcome mats; or residents connected to each other in new ways through the presence of a visiting artist. Community is produced through exchanges that unfold within the realm of a transactional framework created and tailored by Stanton for each and every performance, one that simultaneously mobilizes and extends the boundaries of our everyday actions and interactions.

28 Christian Kravagna, “Working on the Community, models of participatory practice,” in Eipcp.net, trans. Aileen Derig, 1999, unpag., available from eipcp.net/transversal/1204/kravagna/en.

29 Kravagna, *op. cit.*, unpag.

30 Kravagna, *op. cit.*, unpag.

## DARKNESS AND RESISTANCE:

### THE ABSTRACT PHYSICALITY IN

# the performances of Julie Andrée T.

*A skeleton in the arms of a woman. She is opening the skull of the small bony figure. Red cherries appear. Slowly she grabs one and puts it in her mouth.*<sup>1</sup>

**There is a provocative tension** in the whole appearance of the artist I want to talk about in this text. A tension that might frighten people or make them aware of the limitations that society puts onto them. Maybe some feel envious because they recognize that freedom is too risky for them and that the artist in front of them is free — free to take physical risks, free to touch darkness, and free to resist taking the easy way.

Working with Julie Andrée T. over the last ten years has taught me to be ready for anything: physical collaboration, destruction, borderlessness, humour, loss of direction, and the overwhelming beauty of the perfect moment... to be ready for the unexpected in the Here and Now!

Every time the collaborative Black Market International performs (T. has been an associate member since 2003),<sup>2</sup> I sense the difference between a meeting where Julie Andrée is present and one where she is missing. If she is there, all performers have to be ready to be overthrown by her anarchic approach, her physicality, and her wish to bend the borders of the possible. If BMI is creating rules, T. is ready to break them. Not easy for everybody to

1 Image from *Rouge*, 2012.

2 Other collaborations of Julie Andrée T. include the collective PONI from Brussels, where she was a co-artistic director from 2007 on; the choreographers Benoît Lachambre, Xavier Le Roy, Dominique Porte, and Martin Bélanger; the filmmaker Dominic Gagnon; and *Physical Triptych* (with Jamie McMurtry and Helge Meyer).