

Performing Paces, Sandrine Schaefer's Embodied Know-How

by Didier Morelli

I first witnessed Sandrine Schaefer's work at the 2017 edition of *VIVA Art Action!*, a performance art biennial held at Les Ateliers Jean-Brillant in Montreal. On the final day of the festival, Schaefer performed *Pace Investigations No. 7* between 12 p.m. and 6:27 p.m. This most recent iteration of the piece showed the artist methodically accelerating and decelerating a set of actions, while carefully manipulating pre-selected objects. Some of the interventions included Schaefer lifting a chandelier above their head with one arm, holding an open book with their face while looking upward, and mouthing a prosthetic eyeball with one eye shut. In every iteration of *Pace Investigations*, the actions are adapted to the site and context in which they take place. In the raw workspace with concrete flooring and red-brick walls, the performance took on a post-industrial feel as sunlight trickled through the old factory windows and cast dramatic shadows.¹ The work was precisely timed, with each series of gestures being executed fifteen times over the course of the event, and each cycle increasing or decreasing its pace by half of the allotted time: "What begins as a 1 minute performance incrementally becomes a 2 hour 13 minute performance, then incrementally becomes a 1 minute performance again" (Schaefer). Certain actions necessarily sped up or slowed down with each cycle, while others were transformed and became different entities altogether. Elevating ordinary acts in a repetitive manner, *Pace Investigations No. 7* evoked and distorted habitually embodied rituals, as performance artists are often drawn to do.

Tugging at kinesthetic social structures associated with ability, coherence, and normality has historically been part of the performance artist's playbook, yet this propensity for 'strange behaviour' has also moulded a certain kind of archetype. One result of the medium's relatively new-found visibility in popular culture is the growing trend in North American punditry of designating displays of social buffoonery as types of performance art. As live art continues to respond to our Shakespearean era of public gaffes and micro-dramas, notions of performance and performativity have gradually been co-opted by political operatives, for example, when *The View* co-host Meghan McCain ridiculed the "performance art" of Adam Schiff, or when conspiracy theorist Alex Jones's dangerous assertions were laughed away as solely "a performance."

While the artists who are practitioners of this art form might themselves be somewhat to blame, having cultivated images of

performance art as brash public spectacle, often framed with a deskilled improvisational aura, the inclination to use the term 'performance art' as a shorthand for 'gross incompetence' is a limiting mischaracterization.

These popularized ideas have only reinforced the mythmaking around the field of performance and favoured false equivalencies



Sandrine Schaefer, *Pace Investigations No. 4*.
Photo by Daniel S. DeLuca, danielsdeluca.com

with other abrasive social, political, and cultural actions that are deemed performative because their physicality differs from social norms. This lack of nuance flattens performance art into an attention-grabbing headline, scandalous for its own sake rather than as a tactical choice. Yet when we look at the breadth of practices and practitioners, at the ways in which the medium has evolved over a hundred years of infiltrating everyday spaces and warping recognizable bodily patterns, it becomes apparent that performance art is about more than thrill and astonishment.

Schaefer's performance art practice has all of the visual and kinesthetic trappings traditionally associated with the popular intrigue that surrounds the medium, yet their deployment of the discipline's often-chaotic aesthetic is anything but uncertain, unthoughtful, or unskilled. Presenting site-specific and sensitive pieces, Schaefer's durational approach to processing human and non-human relations demands a particular form of care and patience from their audience. This includes riding an escalator camouflaged by a work suit printed with the image of a moving stairway (*Escalate/De-Escalate*, 2017), inhabiting the space of a revolving door and negotiating the flow of incidental spectators (*Wait/Eight*, 2015), and enacting a state of continuous suspension at the edge of a windowsill (*Suspended in Freefall (time as a circle)*, 2014). These kinetic installations gather texture through temporally driven object- and gesture-based accumulations, Schaefer's motoring force tinkering and carefully adjusting the construction of each event depending on the context. The resulting performances are moving tableaux that often feel out of sync with recognizable exterior forces, syncopated instead to a series of interior rhythms humming imperceptibly below the surface. In a contemporary art world attracted to the easily commodifiable flash and sex appeal of performance art's quick sensationalism, Schaefer's embodied refusal to entertain or cater to the expectations of *liveness* is transgressive.

In *Pace Investigations No. 7*, the tightly knit score and the sparingly precise use of props created a palpable tension in the cavernous room. As audience members trickled in and out throughout the day, mostly seeing parts of the work, the artist's sustained energy and endurance transcended the event. While most of the performances throughout the festival had been executed within thirty-minute time slots, a temporal crunch that favours rapidly paced and easy-to-digest actions, Schaefer's prolonged occupation of the main space felt considered and weighty. Creating an immovable temporal framework that governed the distribution of their actions, a pacing so foreign to the natural rhythms of a performing body that it recalled other forms of institutional constraint, like the biopolitical moulding and remoulding of our bodies by art museums or universities,² Schaefer's incisional movements felt calculated yet still filled with vulnerable uncertainty. In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Sarah Ahmed describes paths of disruption made available by bodies that intentionally break with inherent patterns shaped by repetition: "When bodies take up spaces that they were not intended to inhabit, something other than the reproduction of the facts of the matter happens. The hope that reproduction fails is the hope for new impressions, for new lines to emerge, new objects, or even new bodies" (62). Throughout the piece, Schaefer inhabited spatial, temporal, and contextual thresholds as a means of unsettling the coherence of the festival experience. Intentionally



Sandrine Schaefer, *Pace Investigations No. 7*.
Photo by Paul Litherland, lux.ca

short-circuiting reproductive acts of performance, their work embraced the inevitable failure of expanding and collapsing actions. This process gave life to new lines, objects, and bodily assemblages as each gesture gradually shifted as a result of varying paces.

Spatial and kinesthetic competence is a product of repetition, enforced by social routines and rituals that come to form recognizable behavioural codes. In *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*, Shannon Jackson describes socially engaged performance as an art of "interpublic coordination," calling to attention that "no one can ever fully go it alone" (9). Speaking of normative spatial motion and order, she points to the ways performance can underscore the contingency of bodily ability, a reminder that physical capacities can be interrupted at any instant (5). The ability to hold the attention of a generally distracted public for extended periods of time while performing quotidian tasks, thus focusing in on the invisible social forces that unite us, is one of Schaefer's gifts. During *Wandering with the Horizon* (2015), a site-sensitive installation composed of five performances occurring over three months at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Schaefer interjected in the museum's public sphere with ephemeral actions that transformed the norms of interpublic coordination. One of these actions, *Acclimating to Horizontal Movement*, consisted of a six-hour durational event in which the artist rolled and unrolled their body in a 120-foot-long piece of grey office carpet spanning the length of the gallery floor. Lying prone in the middle of a bare museum hallway, Schaefer upended normative flows of spatial order by interrupting the calm of a space meant explicitly for looking out at panoramic views of the Boston Harbor. The performance cut across floor-to-ceiling glass windows on one end and pristine white walls on the other, refocusing the beautiful architectural view of the outdoors manufactured for the audience by designers Diller Scofidio + Renfro. In the final moments of the day, Schaefer emerged nude from the carpet and donned a garment printed with an image of the Boston Harbor water visible just outside the windows and introduced the second action of the series.

Perceptually elevating mundane objects and gestures to become exquisite aesthetic signifiers, Schaefer's activation of space, context, and the bodies and items that compose them cogently identifies and subverts the recognizable behavioural codes that unite us. This dialectical tension between 'art and real life' is at



Sandrine Schaefer, *Wandering with the Horizon | No. 1 Acclimating to Horizontal Movement*.
 Photo by Nisa Ojalvo, nisaoyalvo.com & kellymarhaugooyalvo.com

the core of performance art's transgressive appeal, which in today's media ecosystem, hungry for sensational divertissement, makes it an alluring placeholder for anything outrageous and abnormal. In her essay "Outside the Frame: Performance, Art, and Life," Robyn Brentano describes the common impulses that seem to drive the discipline, from the futurists and Dadaists to contemporary performers: "the desire to disrupt or change the status quo, to transform conventional attitudes and perceptions, and to introduce a more fluid, open, and creative outlook to social life" (56). This view, which positions performance art as necessarily avant-garde, countercultural, and often uncomfortable to experience, has contributed to practitioners balancing on the fine edge of defending their professional competence while embracing the uncertainty of their medium. In a cultural climate in which the prevailing perception considers the performance artist as 'unserious' and therefore wrong or 'playful' and therefore harmless, artists like Schaefer parry with the utmost know-how. Prodding at the invisible boundaries that divide us all, their concise deployment of a performance-based practice rebuffs claims of gross incompetence.

like universities and mental hospitals. Daily activities are organized according to a routine shaped by structural surroundings, generating a 'proper path,' a 'right destination,' and an 'acceptable' physicality.

Works Cited

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Notes

- 1 It should be noted that I also performed on the same day, a few hours after Schaefer completed their work.
- 2 In his essay "The Pedagogy of Negating the Institution—Some Reflections on the Antihospital and the Antiuniversity" (2012), Jakob Jakobsen describes how bodies are coerced by institutional environments

About the Author

Didier Morelli is a PhD candidate in performance studies at Northwestern University, Chicago. His dissertation focuses on the relationship between the built environment and the kinesthetic nature of performing bodies. His work has been published in *Art Journal*, *Canadian Theatre Review*, *C magazine*, *Esse*, *Performa*, and *TDR: The Drama Review*.