

# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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](http://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,<sup>2</sup> 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](http://nisaoyalvo.com) & [kellymarhaugooyalvo.com](http://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.

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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

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*Responding to Site: The Performance Work of Marilyn Arsem*  
ed. by Jennie Klein and Natalie Loveless (review)

Raegan Truax

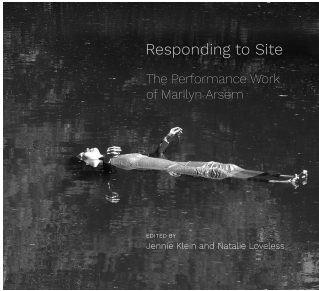
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***Responding to Site: The Performance Work of Marilyn Arsem.*** Edited by Jennie Klein and Natalie Loveless. Bristol and Chicago: Intellect Ltd, 2020; 316 pp.; illustrations. \$30.00 paper, e-book available.

Marilyn Arsem's performances are potent. Glancing at the decades of photographs throughout *Responding to Site: The Performance Work of Marilyn Arsem* elicits the unique stench of Arsem's oeuvre—fish scales, melting ice cream, seaweed, jasmine. With this long overdue publication, editors Jennie Klein and Natalie Loveless have successfully curated a volume that claims

critical space for Arsem's body and magnifies its distinct odor.

The monograph begins and ends with Arsem's manifesto, "THIS is Performance Art." We are immediately reminded, "Performance Art operates on a human scale. It exists on the same plane as those who witness it" (2). To avoid the spectacular, relish the void, and practice disappearance over a career that spans five decades takes guts. Arsem is pure grit with no bells or whistles. Engaging with her "uncomfortably lean" massive oeuvre (a reading offered by Sandra Johnston to indicate the complexity found in Arsem's stark aesthetic), *Responding to Site* offers new insight into durational aesthetics, performance pedagogy, and the ethics of site responsive work and political art.

The volume is organized in three sections: "Duration and Action," "Site and History," and "Performance and Pedagogy." The first set of essays includes "On Time at the Museum" by Lucian O'Connor and "Salt, Stones, and Stars" by Jeffery Byrd, both sculptural examinations of *100 Ways to Consider Time* (2015–16), a 100-day performance Arsem realized at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. O'Connor's essay opens up Arsem's performance work to art historians and provides astute observations about expansive, geological, and deep time (52). Byrd is hyper-attentive to the materials that coperform with Arsem during the 100 days, concluding, "our lives are shorter than stars but longer than flowers. It is the contemplation of our place within this grandeur and not our control of it that makes our existence precious" (67). The other two essays in this section by Sandrine Schaefer and Paul Couillard attend more directly to the body, performance analysis, and Arsem's mastery of durational performance as a precise medium. Schaefer's articulation of durational work as an engagement with the materiality of time, reliant on "moving through multiple temporalities" (69), stands out as the most nuanced analysis of the durational medium. The other notable contribution on duration that offers an embodied analysis of movement and temporality is editor Natalie Loveless's "Afterword."

The essays in the second section of the book coalesce at intersections of site, history, and memory. Klein describes these texts as illuminating Arsem's "ethical approach to global art making" (23). Kristine Stiles's examination of Arsem's Balkan corpus establishes the artist as a "visual poet" (134) whose research process manifests sculptural embodiments of time's perpetual return. Stiles's survey frames Arsem's significant contributions to site-specific and social practice while highlighting the artist's adeptness at recasting histories of violence, war, and transition with considerable care. In an opposite vein, El Putnam's essay "Impossible Totalities: Political Performance as Palimpsest" draws out the antagonistic qualities of Arsem's *American Foreign Policy* series to shed new light on "what it means to create political art" (149). One gift of this essay is that it is comprehensible for students new to discourse around aesthetics and politics and quite satisfying to teach. Essays by David P. Miller and John Dennis Anderson then shift the focus of the section from the global to the local. Site becomes Boston and Arsem's literal house-audience becomes neighbors, local shopkeepers, students, and fellow artists; history becomes personal, familial, and macabre; and body becomes the ancestral body, the ghosted body, the aging body. Taken as a whole, the section traverses incredibly diverse arcs in Arsem's career, offering intimate readings of each performance, while arguing that Arsem's method of "responsiveness" unfurls political sites and historical traumas in hauntingly vital ways.

In the final section on pedagogy, the impact of performance on the body is of central concern. Multiple authors, including Arsem, explore the role of witness, the interstices of duration and collective experience, the obstacles posed by making live art, and the unique joy in teaching, making, and witnessing performance. Arsem's pedagogy essay includes crafted examples of creative prompts and diligent strategies for teaching an artistic practice that is boundless. She writes, "while performance artists might take certain risks that others don't consider taking, being artists does not absolve them from responsibility. If anything, they need to be more cognizant of the impact of their actions, both on themselves and on others" (196).

Considering impact beyond singular or personal encounters, a reader will also find a productive tension in the ways Arsem's performances are framed to both suspend human-centric paradigms and produce unique bodily sensations. Analyzing *Orpheus* (1983), *13 Actions in Yellow* (1988), and *Red in Woods* (1991–1993), Miller describes how Arsem's shift from experimental theatre to longer durational works was borne out of a desire to extend encounters, produce more complex entanglements among audience, artist, and environment, and identify the impacts of performance far beyond the conclusion of a singular event. Sandra Johnston's "Dialogues with Absence: Reflections on Time and *If to Drift*" additionally registers varying moments of bodily impact in her encounters with Arsem's performances as seepages and retractions of time (199). Johnston's perspective sits productively at odds with O'Connor's reading of time in Arsem's work as it "self-consciously expands from a narrow focus on the present into four dimensions at vastly different scales" (50). In effect, each essay renders sense and impact differently, directing readers to contemplate the many ways Arsem's body operates on a human scale while also tipping, seeping, and spilling beyond normative and linear measures of time and space.

Beyond the critical essays, handfuls of performance photographs appear at the end of each section in the volume. Quite pleurably, these visual vignettes bring the tactile environments of Arsem's work into delicate focus. Yet similar to the limits of approaching performance solely through sculptural analysis or art historical discourse, each photograph signals the loss embedded in any art of translation, a loss arguably multiplied by the durational performance medium itself. As photographer Michael Woolley writes in his essay, durational performance resists capture. Rhythm, vibration, the smell and sound of a sea breeze, a snapping twig, sunlight, foggy dew, a woman barely moving but moving still, the photographs offer a small glimpse into a practice intensely crafted around disappearance, deterioration, and everything a body may never see but might learn to sense.

Beyond the section themes, some of the most palpable points of convergence across the volume coalesce around ecofeminist tactics, ghostly vibrations, and insight into the labor involved in cultivating a responsive body. By attending to the chasms of silence Arsem's performances orchestrate, a handful of essays additionally offer insight at the intersection of sound art and performance. The most notable include Paul Couillard's reading of silence in Arsem's work as extending beyond human speech to a "quietened body" (87); and Kathy O'Dell's turn to composer Pauline Oliveros's practice of deep listening, which provides a refreshing take on Arsem's work and pedagogy.

Fascinated by human experience and intent to facilitate discovery and growth within herself, her practice, and her audience, Arsem is indeed a composer who invites her audience into silence and deep listening in profound ways. For these reasons and many others, *Responding to Site* validates the work of performance artists who most often operate outside the bounds of traditional time structures and codified performance spaces. The book is an indispensable resource for anyone interested in performance art and an integral monograph about one of the field's most prolific makers.

—Raegan Truax

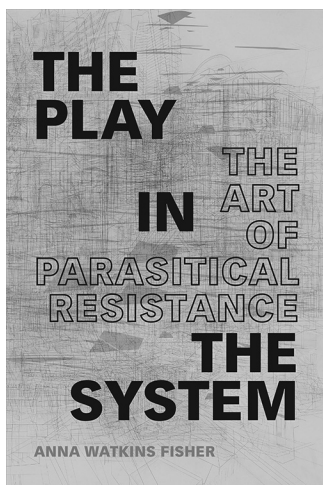
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***The Play in the System: The Art of Parasitical Resistance.*** By Anna Watkins Fisher. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020; 304 pp.; illustrations. \$27.95 cloth, \$27.95 paper, e-book available.

Materialized at the intersections of performance studies, feminist studies, digital media studies, and critical theory, Anna Watkins Fisher's debut monograph *The Play in the System* is a pivotal and provocative interdisciplinary meditation on 21st-century artistic resistance and institutional cooption of creative and political praxis. Fisher considers the politics and aesthetics of artistic creation when dissidence and disruption are seen as commodifiable, responding to trends in the neo-liberal economy toward a rise in automated technologies and the resultant insidious power that operates not by constraining its subjects but by inciting and allowing them to participate in the system. These powers, both sociocultural and institu-

tional, present themselves as open and flexible, with the aim of not incapacitating or debilitating their subjects, but optimizing them.

Fisher's proposed solution to artists working within these constraints is to embrace what she calls *parasitism*, adopting the behavior of the parasite as an undetectable subversive technique under neoliberalism. This book prompts the following questions: Is it possible to change the system from within? How has this cultural shift, from institutions condemning acts of resistance to embracing them, created new conditions for feminist and anticapitalist critique? Fisher's parasite feeds and grows within preexisting systems while doing nothing to help them function; by working from within the system, the parasite is able to redirect the mechanisms of power to gain and privatize access to its own power.

In one case study, Fisher examines the Ubermorgen tactical media collective, which in 2006 programmed a series of bots to trick Amazon's preview mechanism into supplying completed volumes of books to be distributed as free PDFs via peer-to-peer networks. The collective did not merely hack Amazon's digital library; instead, they exploited the company's invitation to preview their books at a much greater rate and volume. By adhering to, yet subverting the design of Amazon's platform, this artwork revealed the hypocrisy of Amazon's use of digital technology to privatize access to its content while failing to redistribute profits to the rightful authors. Fisher establishes parasitism as less radical than more overt forms of political intervention, such as protest and revolt, however she does not believe one can easily be replaced by the other. Fisher believes that protest and parasitical action can, and must, exist and work in tandem.

Fisher's thinking around concentrations of power within institutional as well as sociocultural systems is both articulate and deeply relevant. Pertinent for academics as well as students and practitioners, this timely publication has come at a crucial moment in the art world when operational funding, including grant money for independent artists, is sourced largely from corporate and government pools in the wake of arts council cuts and divestments from cultural sectors. Fisher takes particular interest in the tactics employed by artists of marginalized groups,