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Territoriality and choreography in site-situated performance

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Epilogue

Visiting Hours

In 2019, I was invited by curator Kim Simon to produce a performance exhibition¹⁵⁹ at Gallery TPW (Toronto Photographers Workshop). The project, which I titled *Visiting Hours*, moved my research from the personal realm of residential spaces to the institution of a publicly funded gallery space.

To extend the techniques of guesting and hosting to this new context, I needed to turn my attention toward the potential of creating relationships within the work. The “white cube” of the host gallery intimidated and disoriented me with its presupposed “neutrality.”¹⁶⁰

I decided I would need to approach artists working in the city to get a feel for what practices were already happening around the gallery. The resulting series of “studio visits”—understanding the Toronto context through the artistic processes happening there—was rich and exciting for me.

I developed the choreographic proposition of “visiting” another artist’s work for the exhibition. I cultivated relationships with six artists associated with Toronto, spending time with their practices in order to catch details and understand their work in depth.

After some months of conducting interviews, viewing works, and exchanging much

¹⁵⁹ The performance exhibition takes on the modality of a contemporary art exhibition, in which dancing is experienced through the apparatus of a gallery. The format “contests the dichotomies of object and experience and introduces a notion of exhibition-as-performance.” Cramer, “Experience as Artifact,” 25.

¹⁶⁰ One of my first moves was to ask the artist who had exhibited before me at Gallery TPW, Erika DeFreitas, if I could install in the gallery without repainting over the yellow wall colour she had chosen for her exhibition. She kindly agreed, and so my exhibition included the tiny holes where her photographic works had hung, and the field of yellow on the walls.

written and oral correspondence, I found myself lost in the intricacies of each artist's commitments, methods, ideas, and practices. How to visit another's experience? Another's point of view? Another's world? What right did I have to enter these worlds?

I arrived at the concept of visiting a single image from each artist's work. The notion of a single image seemed like a careful approach—a necessary limit in order not to trespass on another's work. I approached each image as a “site” and worked from a position as guest in their work, using the occasion of visiting to carefully activate and receive the layers of history—“to unstill the affects and possibilities held within the image's frame.”¹⁶¹

An image, of course, also provokes operations and conditions of ways of seeing. What would it “do” to the images, I wondered, to choreograph different ways of looking at them? And how could my visit offer something to the artist in exchange for their giving me access to their work, and creating a space for my experience?

An image is a capture, a moment, a fragment of the broader project of the artist. Attached to a whole world of making and thinking, it functions almost as a citation. The notion of visiting a single image opened up space for articulating a relation, a way of seeing the image, and not an assumption in which I re-enacted the work of the artist in some way. The gallery visitor would be given one clear but very limited element of an artist's work, so that the process of looking (always experiential, always incomplete), not the “image itself,” would become the subject of focus.

I hired six performers, and together we became host-dancers of the images. I developed six installations/choreographies to guide the gallery-guest's visit to each

¹⁶¹ Solomon, “k.g. Guttman in conversation with Noémie Solomon,” 9.

image. In collaboration with the dancers, I developed ways of touching surfaces, ways of looking from various viewpoints and proximities/distances, ways of entering and exiting the frame. The installations/choreographies proposed a “labour of embodied looking” and investigated how one might look/touch/listen/hold/move with an image.

Each artist that I selected has an investment with movement. Not all of them identify as dancers in a strict sense; however, the images I selected may be considered as documents of their actions. In this sense, the images are “stills,” each a brief surfacing of the artist’s ongoing practice and perspectives. Each image’s fragmentary aspect “intensifies, perhaps, the very limits in accessing or transmitting a given artist’s work or practice. It makes tangible what we cannot see: the many absences inscribed in the shadow of visibility, what constantly escapes the seen.”¹⁶²

The notion of the unseen dimensions of the image supplied the exhibition’s ethical and aesthetic operations. The installations/choreographies addressed a process of seeing as movement, always contingent, always in an embodied conversation between moving and sensing, sensing and moving.

Visiting Hours included sensorial cues and props for the visitor: oral instructions, handheld optical devices, simple digital greenscreen effects, comfortable mattresses and pillows, chairs on wheels, and oversize gloves with dangling fingers. All of this was developed to enrich and trouble the notion of access to another’s work and to heighten the temporal and experiential dimension of each image for the gallery visitor. The work examined the ethical dimensions of “visiting,” wherein the guest is always a bit lost to the depths of intimate knowledge connected with host and site, and is thus not in a position to

¹⁶² Solomon, “k.g. Guttman in conversation with Noémie Solomon,” 9.

“master” the content. I express this partial access to the work of others as the process of becoming guest.

Jacques Derrida has proposed that which constitutes hospitality is to be committed to seeking the not-yet-known, the unknown, the never-to-be known. He writes, “We do not know what hospitality is. Not yet. Not yet, but will we ever know?”¹⁶³ The not yet, not perhaps ever, is the call for openness to the other, openness to not knowing unforeseen possibilities yet to arrive. Visiting is positioned as a technique to heighten seeking, to become sensitive and alive to what is happening, to navigate the yet-to-be-known qualities of places to which you have yet to move.

My visits to each image involved distinct modes of negotiation and approach with each artist. This technique enabled me to work within many sets of constraints, to look carefully to potential as a way of considering someone else’s practice. It was a process of sustaining the yet-to-be-known or yet-to-be-understood aspects of the artist’s practice in relation to the yet-to-be-known aspects of my becoming in the encounter with the image. The process has taught me how to make work as a guest in this particular ecology of circumstances.

After working in this relational manner in developing the exhibition, on the opening day a drastic fold occurred. Not only was I still a guest to these images, but I became host to them as well. I felt an enormous responsibility and an anxiety that the artists who had offered their images would be disappointed or disturbed with the final version of their visits. (As a host, I was responsible to the commitments I had made to others).

¹⁶³ Derrida, “Hostipitality,” 6.

In a public dialogue about the exhibition held on July 31st, 2019, the artist Jessica Karuhanga (who had contributed one of the images) mentioned that for her, this process was one of “letting go”—of her practice in relation to another person, and of her specific expectations. This release was quite interesting to her, since in order to receive something new, she had to let go of what the work had been.

All the participating artists, lo bil, Seika Boye, Jessica Karuhanga, Matthew-Robin Nye, Joshua Vettivelu, and Francisco-Fernando Granados, expressed a general feeling that this experience was at once a demand and a gift. This reciprocity of relations and exchanges that the project had generated was revelatory.

How does one even attempt to step out from a system of pre-given economy—of transactions, choices, images, and identities—thereby to seek new ways of encounter, new relationalities? How does one “swing from stratification to experimentation”?¹⁶⁴

The technique of *visiting* foregrounds relations as being valued as much as the material site itself. In *Visiting Hours*, visiting animates relations by placing focus on acts of reception. As a guest, a mode of receiving is foregrounded. Receiving is a transformative process, a way to engage with relations that have yet to take form.

Visiting animates the immediate, the present moment, but also intensifies the past (the telling of how a place came to be) and excites the future (the telling of how a present place may shift and become something new). Visiting, I would suggest, not only heightens the reception of the present moment, but also activates a mode of receiving, at once, the world of the past and the world in becoming.

In *Visiting Hours*, as with the entire body of research discussed in this thesis, I

¹⁶⁴ Manning, *Politics of Touch*, 139.

carry with me, wherever and however I move, my subject-position as a settler (Canadian) artist and researcher, a cluster of forces and histories folded into my position, with which I engage, however tenuously, however impossibly, but persistently. Through this engagement, moving in these roles, guest and host, will lead me to new, as-yet-unknown relations.

My embodiment—comprised of a collision of dancer-host-guest-site-settler—makes the ground of *Visiting Hours*, and of all my projects, a specific one. This ground does not support or advance the abstraction of the site (white cube gallery, residential space, etc.) as a terra nullius, a homogenous space lodged within the colonial/settler-colonial framework wherein movement assumes a seemingly ahistorical, innocent quality. Rather, it is a way of working quite distant from the extractivist operations of settler colonialism, one that values reception as urgent and generative.

I engage with these urgent questions on the inflection of choreographic practice with the territoriality that is generated through the relations of guest, host, and site. These are ongoing questions—questions with the potential to deepen practices of receiving and offering, and to open up micro-trans-individual worlds of exchange.



Visiting Hours, Documentation, Gallery TPW, 2019 (photo credit: Henry Chan)



Visiting Hours, Documentation, Gallery TPW, 2019 (photo credit: Henry Chan)



Visiting Hours, Documentation, Gallery TPW, 2019 (photo credit: Henry Chan)

Link to video documentation: <https://vimeo.com/415156570> Password: Visiting1