

THE WOUND FOR A GENEROUS REVOLUTION

SOME REFLECTIONS ABOUT GINA PANE AND MALIN ARNELL'S WORK
AS EXPERIENCED BEING PART OF THE RE-ENACTMENT OF PANE'S *DISCOURS
MOU ET MAT* PERFORMED BY ARNELL UNDER THE NAME
REFLECT SOFT MATTE DISCOURSE.

Clara López Menéndez



Gina Pane, *Discours mou et mat*, performed at De Appel, Amsterdam, 1975, featuring Gina Pane and “the body of an unknown woman.” Photo by Françoise Masson.



Malin Arnell, *Reflect Soft Matte Discourse*, performed as part of “LIKA - a performance evening,” KAMARADAE, Stockholm, May 24, 2011. Featuring Malin Arnell and Clara López Menéndez. Photo by Alex Woodward.

“Performance occurs over a time which will not be repeated. It can be performed again, but this repetition itself marks it as ‘different.’ The document of a performance then is only a spur to memory, an encouragement of memory to become present.”

— Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*¹

As I was preparing for the Art History class I am teaching this semester via Zoom—like most teaching this weird year—I was reminded (by Phelan’s critical text on the ontology of performance) of what the documentation of a performance piece is—hopefully!—set to do: to spur one’s memory and, I would add, to inspire one’s fantasy in the absence of experiencing first-hand the event that is depicted, that is being described.

Fantasy and memory are two things I wrestled with when I wrote the piece that summons me here today: the text reproduced below, which I wrote between spring 2011 (the majority of it and its structure) and spring 2021 (tweaks and edits, here and there, throughout the years). The text explores a re-enactment of Gina Pane’s *Discours Mou et Mat* (1975) by Swedish artist Malin Arnell as *Reflect Soft Matte Discourse* (2011).² Fantasy was the idealized, ethereal and atemporal expectations I had before re-performing the piece based on the ‘score;’ memory is how to put together my experience of it, the remaining fragments of the sensorial and emotional overload that took over me the day we performed the work. All the feelings and reactions it generated and that I couldn’t predict, that exceeded any written account and photo documentation that tried to mimic the performance on paper. This text became my best attempt at doing justice to the piece and its complexity, the breadth of emotions it instigated in everyone involved in its unfurling. However, as Phelan also reminds me, language is always kind of painful, for it is that permanently unfulfilled desire

1 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 146.

2 Interdisciplinary artist, researcher and educator Malin Arnell is a frequent collaborator with other artists, activists and writers. She completed an MFA at Konstfack, University College of Art, Crafts and Design, Stockholm (2003) and has a PhD in Choreography from Stockholm University of the Arts / Lunds University (2016). She was a Participant in the Studio Program at the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program, New York (2009–2010) and was a visiting scholar in the Department of Performance Studies at the Tisch School of the Arts, New York University (2012–2015).

of plenitude—of understanding, communication—that consumes itself searching for a cure from the wound of words in other words. An ouroboros of valences that we are so accustomed to by capitalism and that seldomly stalls.

After that performance in 2011, my naïve twenty-four-year-old self found herself deep in that “stalling,” baffled by the insufficiency of words around the experience of the performance, that could only be partially narrated, always a segment, never the “truth.” In the introduction to *The Birth to Presence*, Jean-Luc Nancy writes about “experience” as “transversal to the limits, transversal as knowledge, and no knowledge of the transversal if not that formed by ‘transversing’ itself.”³ When I received your email inquiring about this piece a few weeks ago, I couldn’t help but to nostalgically half-smile, almost as if a smile from 2011 sneaked from the past onto my 2021 lips, a recall of memories I thought were sedimented at the bottom for good. But again, if I have ever learnt anything is that time and memory work in mysterious ways, and that there might be something in the words from then that reverberates now, in a year of collective arrested present, suspended and disembodied presence, and abundance of absence and death.

It was interesting (I hesitate to write “fitting”) to receive the visit of this presence from the past as a reminder that making sense is a transitive process, traversing and transversal, through time and space—the action in 2011, the *Rehearsals* performances in 2012 and 2013, the video about my quandaries that I made in 2014 for the American Studies Association conference I couldn’t attend—that stretches to now, 2021, ten years later, when presented with the possibility to publish this iteration of the text. All of them different, all of them the same: the performance of a longing—for love, for words, for meaning, for sense, for transcendence—that continues in intervals of memory and oblivion. I offer this as another chapter, another fragment to spur the memory of those who participated in some part of the process, and to arouse the fantasy of those who only have the absence to work with.

3 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 3.

For what do all the photographs taken of any performance really add up to when one considers that each photograph reveals, depending on the camera’s f/stop setting, only 1/15th, 1/30th, or even 1/60th of a second of the performed action? This question points to a fascinating, yet complicated problem at the heart of performance art. An epistemological problem...: How can knowledge of a performed work of art be gained through a document which, due to the technological limitations of the apparatus producing it, so vastly delimits information?

— Kathy O’Dell¹

Hello, my name is Clara. I performed as body of an unknown woman, who was part of the performance *Discours Mou et Mat* by the Italo-French artist Gina Pane, in the re-enactment

of this work by the Swedish artist Malin Arnell on May 24, 2011 in Stockholm. The woman who performed this role in 1975 remains still unknown; her identity has not been recorded in any bibliography written about Pane.

The performance instructions describe her as “a naked woman whose back had been decorated with blue stars,” a brief reference in a sentence that enumerates the different props that are part of the staged scene in which the performance happens. “In order to enter the performance space, visitors first had to sidestep a motorcycle that blocked the entrance. In the room several objects had been placed as the scenery of the forthcoming performance: a tennis racket, boxing gloves, knuckledusters, a gold painted golf ball and razor blade, plus a naked woman whose back had been decorated with blue stars.” The woman’s participation is reified by positioning her at the same level as the inanimate objects that make up the scene, while at the same time pairing her existence with the audience, the

1 Kathy O’Dell, “Displacing the Haptic: Performance Art, the Photographic Document, and the 1970s,” *Performance Research*, 2, no. 1 (1997): 85.

visitor, the one encountering these objects, among them, that woman.

I am here today, in the textual stagnant present, as the art historian tackling the meanings of this twice-performed scene, the author inside this text, the voice of my own reflections. I am also still that woman, the privileged subject whose identity has been acknowledged in the re-enactment as a result of the political battles of a history that connects us both. I have a name, a face and a skin, as it is noticeable in the images of the event [opposite page, bottom image]. For me, it feels hard to believe that the woman who performed that part in the original incarnation of the action that brings us together today has no name, her existence is not registered except in the photographic documentation. She has no agency, no face and no part in this history apart from this tangential encounter with the recording of visual arts.

It feels hard to believe partially because her incarnation, the act of becoming her, is one terrible and important experience that has imprinted itself on me. I didn't know beforehand what I was agreeing to. My agreement to be in the performance was based on my relationship with the artist and the information contained in the aforementioned score—a literary approach which is typical of art history in its aseptic description of a context.

*“Composed of ephemeral acts, lasting traces, and ritualized gestures centered on the wound, they guide one's consciousness beyond the path shown to us by words, into that area in which new languages are invented, and in which signs are devised to change the rules of artistic discourse.”*²

Words. I was somehow told what was going to happen. I knew. Yet I had no idea, or just the “idea,” not a hint of the phenomenological dimension of the event. The abrupt realization that our contract revealed my ingenuity, my trust in words and their capacity to actually transmit some certainty. Even though we are supposed to question them, words—signifiers, their construction and lack of specificity—they reveal the urgency obscured by routine and necessity, uncovering our unwitting complicity with the mechanism of detachment that is “wording” realities. When words turn into corporeal sensations, emotions are catalyzed. Sharing is painful. Emotions are strong, transfixing, dangerous, and irritably indecipherable.

*“Emotions play a crucial role in the ‘surfacing’ of individual and collective bodies... Emotions are not simply ‘within’ or ‘without,’ but they define the contours of the multiple worlds that are inhabited by different subjects... Emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities... We need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective.”*³

After the performance Malin asked me what emotions and memories it had brought up in me. My immediate answers were “shaken and confused,” as the atmosphere in the room was thick and increasingly heated. I felt a sense of loss, the powerlessness experienced in perceiving someone else's suffering—the person I loved—and that affected me. I experienced this suffering in an unusually physical way

that emphasized the bond that binds us together through the gap that determines us as individuals.

*“She (the wound) is the IRRUPTION OF THE SCREAM at the center of the discourse.”*⁴

First, the unexpected amputation of my sight rendered me unable of any action. I found myself facing the wall that I knew I was going to face. I knew what was going to happen, step by step, like the sequence of a ritual. However, without the ability to see I felt like I had lost all control, like I couldn't grasp the limit of the situation, an impression that was enhanced further by the audience's rising concern about the event that unfolded before them. The reality of what was happening made me want to turn against the position which I had agreed to be in. Frustration and anger were provoked by the inevitability of the pain.

*“Le corps Transindividuel.”*⁵

The need to restrain suffering, my own and that of others, via an uncanny violence, performed through the transformation of coordinates we recognize as *normal*, peeling away the artificiality of common perceptions by pointing out their fragmentary nature, constructed by a paralysis of objects, conventions, and small complacencies. But then again, of course, we still found ourselves in that «privileged remote space,» the belly of a gallery in the center of Stockholm, where the extreme without control still remains within some boundaries.

The decision to stay was mine though, to give my back to what was happening—shattered glass, blood on the floor, air thick as water—and keep my word, my verbal agreement.

*“Thus, manifesting myself in a given space, I eliminate the spatial distance, it becomes a real fact; during the process of the action itself I also eliminate the affective distance through the wound. It is a focal mechanism, in other words, it alludes to a precise part of the body: face, back, navel, eyelids, etc., with the aim to clearly orientate the reading of the discourse. The wound directly becomes part of the lived reality: the pain, destroying all mythical attitude in communication.”*⁶

Pain. What does it mean to cause yourself pain? How does it work in relation to an audience?

*“It is through experiences such as pain that we come to have a sense of our skin as a bodily surface, as something that keeps us apart from others, but as something that also ‘mediates’ the relationship between internal or external, or inside and outside.”*⁷

Pain comes, pain is and was. In its contingency, pain reminds me of my vulnerability, of my body. How soft it is (my body), how soft I am, easy to penetrate in a non-verbal way. It brings me closer to an earthly perception, an awareness of myself that I rather tend to forget. Pain is something I generally don't miss. Pain is something that happens, as existence does, and that goes inseparably with it. Pain can bring pleasure as part of the body's inevitability. Pain scares me. I am not sure of how pain works for an audience, as I am still not able to discern if I was part of the audience or not. There was a tissue involving all of us. It feels impossible to address the precise implications of pain for that specific audience. But I know it works. I know it hits, as it hit me

4 Gina Pane, *Lettre à un(e) inconnu(e)* (Paris: École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 2003), 26. Translated from the French original by the author.

5 “The Transindividual Body.” Pane, *Lettre à un(e) inconnu(e)*, 64. Translated from the French original by the author.

6 Pane, *Lettre à un(e) inconnu(e)*, 26. Translated from the French original by the author.

7 Ahmed, “Communities that Feel,” 12.

2 Anne Tronche, “Scenographic Body,” in *Gina Pane: Opere 1968–1990* (Milan: Charta, 1998), 41.

3 Sara Ahmed, “Communities that Feel: Intensity, Difference and Attachment,” in Anu Koivunen & Susanna Paasonen (eds.), *Affective Encounters: Rethinking Embodiment in Feminist Media Studies* (Turku: University of Turku, 2000), 10.

being there. Pain is a good reminder. It performs transformations as it reminds us, brings up everyone's pain. One's own and that of the person beside you. The possibility of pain, the fact that it hurts, touches us and brings us together. We suffer alone but when we share the object and subject of suffering, suffering is common and it links us together. A matter of communion. An element of involuntary complicity. It creates memories more powerful than visual facts, and echoes of feelings that help us to be closer. Pain is a dangerous connector, revealing itself as a social equalizer, as not an option, not even for the privileged. "How do the circulation of emotions allow us to understand the materialization of collective bodies, for example, the 'body of the nation.'"⁸

As I mentioned before, I experienced conflicting desires. My desire was to leave the room and I didn't do it, since I also shared a desire towards the agent of the performance, the artist staging this re-enactment. Malin's desire seemed so inaccessible, absolutely focused on the accomplishment of those bold actions, regardless of the reactions they provoked in the audience, which was no longer an audience but one whole *body* in its experience. There was a hard-to-pin-down sense of cruelty to this relentless implementation, this unstoppable *carrying out* by an artist who was *carried away*. An artist, Malin, who is surgically concerned with the implications of power dynamics and mechanisms of oppression. A feminist and a queer, a defendant of radical solidarity, momentarily became a perpetrator. The accomplice of orders. A torturer.

"It is true, I remain SILENT in my actions, the word empty of its meaning. We use it [the word] as an image obeying the structural laws of language, knowing it has no actual meaning in relation to the object of the discourse anymore."⁹

The hygienic distance that plays out in the complacency of visual arts was somehow broken by the evidence of this shared precariousness, by the care shown in the audience's responses, the impossibility to remain indifferent. "Violence is here,"¹⁰ one could say, though we very often tend to forget. "Each situation has to be turned into a spectacle to be real to us"¹¹ when reality has abdicated. An unforeseen plea for art that hurts, that reminds us that we don't have the luxury of patronizing reality. "Citizens of modernity, consumers of violence as spectacle, adepts of proximity without risk"¹² were brought to the edge of this possibility, pushed by the artificial and contrived recreation of a set of actions without a predetermined meaning. A script pulled out of rather obscure pockets of history. The threat was there, and its concealing manifestation enhanced the perception of its danger.

"The images that express the bourgeoisie's praxis prevent the class that it dominates from having its own experience of death, which would no longer be understood as natural and universal (bourgeois attributes), but as outrageous in its disparity; the conscience about this fact will become a revolt's weapon."¹³

There is something profoundly impressive in the effectiveness of that re-enactment, maybe because I thought of it more as an aesthetic fact—again, intelligible through

its visual perception, safe, *an object*—and I was surprised by its impact. "[W]hat sticks may also be what resists literalisation."¹⁴ This reconstruction, this re-enactment, nevertheless stemmed from a textual approximation: a script, a score, notes from a *then*. The insufficiency of such (literal) transmission triggered an inquiry into the reasons behind this ritual of socialized pain, research on effects and affects, on the accomplishments of instructions as orders, on the possibility of the translation of meanings or interpretations through time and space. A way of getting to know that the documentation responds to the realization of acts whose power and dimension cannot be apprehended through their mere visual recording. How did it feel to be there, although it was not there, but here, and now. There was a potentiality waiting to be unraveled. Even if this manifestation turned out to be painful and politically complicated, it also felt necessary: to approach actions buried in archives through practice and brutal honesty, "transversing" emotions without an already written meaning, to know how it feels, and to know that it feels.

Choreography is defined as the art of designing sequences of movements in which motion and form are specified, the sequence of a ritual, which in this case was inherited. It came from a rudimentary text from 1975 where those props and actions were sparingly described. We attempted to double these movements in 2011, to reproduce an unreachable original in which the body from today found its way into the past, bodies from the past were dragged into the present. Motion and form are supposed to be the elements that are orchestrated in performance. Instead, I would say that in this case emotions, power relations, and tacit interactions were put into play, as well as other unspecified elements such as affection, intimacy, history, or sexuality, all of which contributed to the tensions that held us together. Because there was something that happened that Tuesday. There was no "we" when the room opened its doors that evening, but we were a "we" when we left it. We went through something together, something necessary and terrible that rendered us wordless. And we remained as a "we" for some time, when running into each other in different places, extracted from that space and fragmented the awkward bond that tied us together, but still able to recognize each other as part of that transition. It created community. Wherever people feel safe, there will be indifference. We cared for each other. We were not safe.

"SI J'OUVRE MON 'CORPS' AFIN QUE VOUS PUISSEZ Y REGARDER VOTRE SANG, C'EST POUR L'AMOUR DE VOUS: L'AUTRE"¹⁵

"LA FORME de la Société, c'est VOUS"¹⁶

8 Ahmed, "Communities that Feel," 14.

9 Pane, *Lettre à un(e) inconnu(e)*, 16. Translated from the French original by the author.

10 This is a statement offered by Malin Arnell during a performance.

11 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 109.

12 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 111.

13 Pane, *Lettre à un(e) inconnu(e)*, 24. Translated from the French original by the author.

14 Ahmed, "Communities that Feel," 15.

15 "IF I OPEN MY 'BODY' TO YOU TO SEE YOUR BLOOD IN THERE, IT IS DUE TO MY LOVE FOR YOU: THE OTHER." Pane, *Lettre à un(e) inconnu(e)*, 16. Translated from the French original by the author.

16 "THE FORM of Society, it's YOU." Pane, *Lettre à un(e) inconnu(e)*, 21. Translated from the French original by the author.

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