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**PERFORMING IDENTITY:**

**THE POLITICS AND PEDAGOGY OF WITNESSING THE SELF**

A Thesis in

Art Education

By

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## ABSTRACT

Within the heritage of Western art, an historical shift has occurred with respect to representations that address the self. The traditional self-portrait, dominant in the modernist era, has in recent years given way to the postmodern practice of performance art.

This study examines performance art as a means of exploring identity. In particular, it investigates the unique strategies that performance artists utilize to interrogate the social, cultural and political forces that construct identity and thus bear upon subjectivity. At the same time, of equal interest to this inquiry is a discrepancy that seems to exist between such contemporary practices and the field of art education. For an exploration of the latter reveals that current pedagogies remain largely faithful to earlier traditions.

Drawing on the work of postmodern and poststructuralist theorists, developmental psychologists, critical educators, contemporary performance artists and age-appropriate students, the study formulates a three-pronged theoretical hypothesis in order to explain this historical shift. The conjecture consists of the following: first, identity may be viewed more accurately as *performative*; second, giving and witnessing testimony has political and pedagogical implications, and; third, such practices generates criticality, which in turn cultivate personal agency. Central to the verification of this hypothesis, the author presents an original work of performance, analyzing the ways in which it corroborates it.

Through this combination of methodologies, the study finds that, because of its unique use of the body as a site of discourse, and due to its ability to pose rhetorical metaphors that elicit greater criticality, performance art may yield a richer art of identity. Because of these uniquenesses, the study further finds that performance art may bear particular relevance for adolescents and young adults. As this population is known to grapple with specific issues surrounding identity formation—including race, gender, religion, sexual orientation and other forms of difference—an emphasis on performance art may constitutes particularly valuable pedagogy. For through it, students examine, verbalize, critique and renegotiate their perceived discordances within their respective socio-political realities, and thus are likely to cultivate a greater sense of agency. The study concludes that such findings expand the possibilities of an art of identity, beyond those afforded by traditional strategies. As such, it recommends that these findings be incorporated into current art education studio pedagogy.

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What can look at itself is not one  
and what is one cannot look at itself.

Jacques Derrida  
*Of Grammatology*

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Problem Statement: Problematizing of the Self-Portrait**

By now, Western art has approximately five centuries of a self-portrait tradition. From Dürer to Warhol, the practice of artists representing themselves constitutes a significant genre in the visualization, and indeed the evolution, of Western consciousness. However, the last third of the twentieth century, with its great political, social, and ideological volatility, altered that tradition. The historic struggles for liberation staged by women, African-Americans, gays and lesbians, environmentalists, students, anti-war protesters, counter-culturists, AIDS activists, and others, were such that artists who came after Warhol took it upon themselves to redefine the purposes of, and the means by which, art could address the self. Thus, although the impulse to self-represent renews with every generation, postmodern artists were now searching not so much for the corporeal-existential-phenomenological self of eras past; rather, they were articulating and exercising *politicized identities*.

Procedurally, the strategies of artists interested in the socio-political dimensions of identity have been myriad. However, a significant number of artists addressing marginalized and disenfranchised experiences have gravitated toward performance art. This unique interdisciplinary practice—born of the social and political dislocations, the technological alienations, and the paradoxes and urgencies of twentieth century experience—quickly became the preferred tactic as it literally enabled voices to be heard, presences to be felt, and more direct critiques to be leveled. Noted artists of the era, from

Carolee Schneemann to Eleanor Antin, Vito Acconci to Rachel Rosenthal, Guillermo Gómez-Peña to Tim Miller, have all opted for timed-based, performative means by which to interrogate the unfolding, multi-faceted, complex nature of identity within a world often punitive of it.

What these and other contemporary artists have produced are *autobiographical texts* that matrix through social, political, cultural and historical forces, so as to critique them. What emerge are complex case-profiles of identities struggling to be situated and grappling with their own sense of agency. Such tactics represent both aesthetic and critical maneuvers meant to lay bare the disjunctive and kaleidoscopic assemblage that is the self: the self subject to the experience of politics and to the politics of experience.

Despite the fact that four decades of such vital cultural work has significantly altered studio practice, a review of current professional literature in the related field of art education reveals a curious and considerable lag. While countless contemporary artists committed to an instrumentalist, emancipatory ethic have made the case for addressing identity *performatively*, American art education, as we shall see, still largely demonstrates a trenchant adherence to verisimilitude in the exploration of the self. For adolescents in the latter high school years, and young adults in college—populations which grapple with difficult issues surrounding identity formation, including race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and so forth—the traditional self-portrait project may be particularly limited, as it ostensibly by-passes all such content.

In this study, I will examine this historical shift, from objectified self-portrait to a performed art of identity, as it unfolded, and continues to unfold, in the postmodern era. However, of special interest is the pedagogical implications of this shift and its potential

applications for the field of art education. Based on the problem statement outlined above, I pose my central query as such: *How is performance art better-suited to help us shape and enrich an art of identity? And, how does an emphasis on performance art, as a studio strategy for an art of identity, constitute valuable pedagogy?*

### **Definitions**

In order to compare the practice of self-portraiture with that of a performed art of identity, certain key concepts require distinction. In this section, I provide definitions for terms such as *identity*, *autobiography*, *self*, and *subjectivity*. Much of this discussion is based in postmodern theory—a body of knowledge about which I elaborate more extensively in Chapter 2.

## **Identity and Autobiography**

Psychology is primarily concerned with individual experience. Our understanding of the individual is centered on identity, the individual's unique sense of who she or he is. Webster's Dictionary (2002) defines identity as "unity and persistence of personality; unity or individual comprehensiveness of a life" (p. 312). However, in order to understand the individual and his or her sense of identity, clearly we must understand the social context within which it is formed. Thus, while a dictionary definition may emphasize unity, implying a kind of interior comprehensiveness to identity, the social sciences and the humanities help us to understand the more complex ways in which identity is forged: chiefly through social experience. As psychologist Janis S. Bohan (1996) explains, unique individuals notwithstanding, "each person's sense of self is framed by the meanings provided by his or her culture" (p. 92).

Our individual identities are constructed through our interactions within overlapping and intersecting communities to which we belong. As art educator Kristin G. Congdon (2002) explains, "Identities are factors of identifications with and...relationship to religious, gender, geographic, family, age, economic, political, recreational, aesthetic, racial/ethnic, occupational and health communities" (p. 108). Thus, our sense of self results from a unique combination of memberships, as well as non-memberships, in various communities. This brings about a condition of being in the world; physical, psychological and emotional. However, as membership and non-membership in various communities also results in differing attainments and possession of power, identities also bring about a condition of being in the world which is political. In this dissertation, the terms *politics* and *political* will refer to such various and differing possessions of power

by individuals and groups, and the consequences that such discrepancies produce (Giroux, 1992, p. 172 ). As some individuals and groups maintain less power, and are thus disposed to a sense of *disempowerment*, a discussion of individual and group agency will accompany definitions of the political throughout this document.

If identity results from membership and non-membership, that is, identifications and non-identifications, then identity results from differentiation. So long as a cognitive understanding of the environment is operant, this differentiation is inevitable (Levinson, 1999). When cultural theorist Stuart Hall claims that “identities are constructed through, not outside, difference,” he underscores the social dimensions of identity, over its isolation (Hall quoted in Atkinson, 2002, p. 19). Identity is thus a complex construction of biological, psychological, and cultural factors. However, most important is our understanding that it is indeed and primarily, a construction. I return to this most salient of points when I review postmodern, poststructural and performance theories in the next chapter.

How does autobiography relate to the concept of identity? Are they synonymous? In its most general sense, autobiography is an account; “the biography, or life history, of one’s self, narrated by oneself” (Webster’s, 2002, p. 48). However, while autobiography may be regarded as consisting of a series of personal incidents, it is its telling or re-telling, its *narrative* aspects, which are most pertinent. Psychologist Kenneth Gergen (1994) explains that autobiography may initially be thought of as a matter of “retrieving from memory the most accurate possible record of events as they actually occurred, unbiased by rhetoric or passion” (p. 78). However, he goes on to suggest that, because such a narrative is primarily a factor of memory, autobiography cannot possess the kind

of documentary disinterestedness that it may imply.

Autobiography is thus a narrative constructed by and through memory. In this regard, psychologist Greg J. Niemeyer (1994) views the individual as a sort of “personal scientist or personal historian, whose efforts are directed toward the evolution and preservation of a meaningful sense of self” (p. 128). For Niemeyer, then, the function of autobiography rests with this “retrospective teleology,” an explanation of the past and thus a meaningful construction of the purpose of one’s life. While the narrative focus is on the past—the project largely an archeological one—it is its function in the present which is significant. As literary theorist James Olney (1972) explains, “An autobiography...is more than a history of the past...it is a monument to the self as it is becoming, a metaphor of the self at the summary moment of composition” (p. 35). Thus, in our autobiographical reconstructions, we desire “not merely a knowledge of the past, nor of an external and distant object, but a knowledge of ourselves, now” (Olney, p. 35).

While Niemeyer (1994) believes that autobiographical remembering is an essential way of giving meaning to our lives, he also notes that remembering is a socially motivated activity. He explains:

Different occasions must, should, and do elicit different accounts of the past. If the remembered event seems to have played a significant part in the life of the rememberer, it becomes an example of autobiographical memory and may form part of a life narrative. (Niemeyer, 1994, p. 128)

In this sense, life narratives are significant because they are one way of defining the self. However, it is their essential *editorial* nature which is critical to a broader understanding of identity.

Autobiography is an enormously flexible genre of self-representation. There is not just one, static ‘remembered self’ that is permanently established by a fixed set of memory traces. Rather, as psychologist Jens Brockmeier (2001) explains, autobiographical remembering varies “according to the target audience in function of which the plot of a life and an identity is fashioned” (p. 19). In that sense, autobiography may be viewed as contextual and opportunistic; a function of usage, not excluding politics. Thus, in contrast to the ‘personal scientist’ or ‘historian,’ Brockmeier (2001) characterizes the individual as “a sort of ‘ad hoc self-theorist,’ one who continually engages in ephemeral accommodative changes in response to the vagaries of immediate contextual demands” (p. 129). In support of this, postmodern philosopher Roland Barthes similarly views selves as “preeminently textual construction” (Barthes quoted in Brockmeier & Carbaugh, p. 80). As Gergen (1994) explains, Barthes believes that the control of narrative allows us to “oversee, purify, banalize, codify, correct and imposes focus” in such a way that authorship of self is “subverted as an ontological claim and revealed as a sociopolitical act” (p. 80). It is thus possible to view personal remembering, not as an intimate portrayal of one’s uniquely configured interior, but, in the words of Gergen (1994), as “a deployment of a public resource”—a social strategy (p. 95). The question then becomes, when and how do we use autobiographical narratives, and for what purposes?

Such self-narratives, resulting from autobiographical remembering, begin to shed light on questions of identity. This is so because the narratives fashioned—the episodes and incidents told—invariably bespeak membership and non-membership statuses in various communities of identification. In this regard, Niemeyer’s (1994) definition of

autobiography as “a personal record of discrete experiences arising from *participation*,” is more helpful, for it underscores the social dimensions involved (p. 105, my emphasis). That is, if identity is a factor of self-narratives, fashioned through autobiographical memory, and arising from *participation*, then it is participation and non-participation, membership and non-membership, that contributes to the defining of one’s identity. If that is the case, we may witness once again, that underlying the purported personal nature of identity is indeed a strong dose of politics.

Niemeyer (1994) concludes that personal identity is thus contingent upon autobiographical memory in the developmental process of self-construction (p. 105). Thus, in answer to our question regarding the distinction between identity and autobiography, perhaps it is best phrased as such: identity does not tell its autobiography, but rather, autobiography, in its telling, constructs identity. In such a way, identity is formed by the self-narratives of autobiographical memory (re-)constructions, regardless of their veracity. As we shall see, this is both a problem and a reality in the postmodern critique of representation.

### **The Self**

Another term that requires definition is ‘the self.’ As concept, how does ‘self’ relate to identity and to autobiography? “The self” is a more literary term that encompasses aspects of both identity and autobiography. Yet, as concept, ‘the self’ often remains ambiguously general. In light of the critique of self-portraiture below, it is important to examine this ambiguity.

For a preliminary and still-fascinating ‘theory of self,’ many researchers, from diverse fields of inquiry, are still largely indebted to the pioneering work of Sigmund Freud. While his understanding of ‘self’—as having an ultimate core that maybe accessed, released, and sometimes repaired—remains firmly in modernist thought, his emphasis on the operational multiplicity of the self serves as an early echo of postmodern conceptions. Indeed, many postmodern theorists who have considered the concept of ‘self’ seem to emphasize its multiplicity, and thus disagree about its mistaken solidity, singularity and accessibility. This deceptive nature of self seems to result from the general appearance or perception of the body as a single and solid unit. Cultural theorist Nick Mansfield (2000) explains that while the oldest duty of Western thought—the Socratic/Platonic command, renewed in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment—is to ‘know thyself,’ postmodern critiques of the concept of self have rendered any such definitive self-knowledge problematic (p. 6). At the root of this bind is the flux that characterizes the self—a flux that results from such practices as autobiographical remembering and continuous self-narration. Literary critic Daniel Albright (2001) explains that “the overt visual self puts to shame the thousand inflections and subtleties of the self we remember” (p. 25). When he quotes Virginia Woolf’s description of the self in her 1927 novel *To The Lighthouse*, as “a wedge-shaped core of darkness,” he underscores its elusiveness, its invisibility (Albright, p. 25). “The self,” Albright (2001) explains, “is [rather] a plume of smoke that assumes an illusory solidity, an impressive volume, only when beheld from a great distance” (p. 21). Within this metaphor, Albright refers to the distance of *time* as that which enables us to grasp the self. Thus, Albright

might concur that the “retrospective teleology” that solidifies a self—the meaning-giving narration of autobiographical remembering—is always but an objectification of the past.

As Albright (2001) explains, we do not like to think of ourselves as essentially plural (p. 22). Although the evidence of the body as solid and singular would make its plurality seem disconcerting, perhaps illogical, Albright likens the notion of self as singular, to the “still frame in a film that includes all selves,”—again emphasizing retrospection over perception (2001, p. 22). Mansfield (2000) supports this notion when he argues that “our experience of ourselves remains forever prone to surprising disjunctions that only the fierce light of ideology or theoretical dogma convinces us can be homogenized into a single consistent thing” (p. 6). That is, according to Mansfield, we fancy solidity and singularity for, as suggested, there is ideological investment in such self-cohesiveness: one person, one philosophy. However, if we were so fixed, we *would* be merely still frames, unable to embrace the unfolding multiplicities and multimodal nature of experience. In that regard, perhaps dogma might be understood as a denial of a general condition of flux.

Albright’s and Mansfield’s suspicions of the unity and coherence implied by the word *self* may all be understood when we consider their emphasis on *time* as constitutive of self-construction. While the physical body, the image of that body, is always contemporary, time divides us against ourselves and makes us *discontinuous*. As Albright (2001) explains, “My face may seem impassive, but beneath the calm exterior, I am shifting, shifting, shifting, growing unrecognizable from moment to moment” (p. 8). In other words, the body and its representations deceptively affirm the unity of being that time makes unattainable.

In effect, what Albright and others are suggesting is that people are, in a very basic way, temporally extended. They are extended as such in both direction: into the past via memory, but also into the future via anticipation. When Albright (2001) remarks that “we may be small in space, but we are each of us giants in the dimension of time,” he underscores this expansiveness (p.16). Thus, as he approaches the question of identity, Albright suggests that each of us carries around “a videotape, or a kind of timedoll, painted with our own features, continually taking shape from infancy onward, continually becoming inflected with significant experiences until it triumphantly culminates in our present form” (2001, p. 17). Likewise, in reflecting on the role of time with regard to the self, Neisser (1994) concludes that being human “means to know that we have a past and a future. The sense of being in time, of living through time, has a special and central status in human lives” (p. 5). Thus, as an ever-unfolding event-in-flux, the self may be thought of as a time-based project. These important ideas will play a significant role when we critique the ‘still frames’ of traditional self-portraits.

### **Subjectivity**

How does the concept of ‘subjectivity’ relate to the aforementioned ideas about ‘the self?’ How is subjectivity distinct from ‘the self’ and, furthermore, how does it relate to identity and to autobiography?

To begin, I turn once again to a dictionary definition as a means of gaining initial insight into normative notions of otherwise complex concepts. Webster defines ‘subjectivity’ as follows:

Of or belonging to the real or essential being; of, related to or determined by the mind, ego, or consciousness; arising from within or belonging strictly to the individual, often as contrasted with something modified by the physical or social environment; arising from conditions within the brain or sense organs and not directly caused by external stimuli, peculiar to a particular individual, modified by individual bias and limitation. (p. 817)

These definitions are essentialist in nature. They imply that subjectivity spontaneously arises out of an individual's sole attention to his or her own states and processes. Connoted positively, subjectivity is 'the personal' and 'unique;' connoted negatively, it is merely bias, idiosyncrasy, and hermeticism. In both cases, these types of definitions support the theories described above, affirming a strong cultural inclination to think of the self as singular, but also as 'authoring.' Art educator Dennis Atkinson (2002) observes, "Frequently, when we use the phrase, 'in my experience,' it is as though we are referring to something which is not open to question" (p. 169). Through this simple observation, Atkinson reveals how subjectivity comes to enjoy a kind of a priori authority: ownership of experiences is such that, while sharable, it is not really open to discussion.

As with identity, autobiography and the self, postmodern theorists have argued for the *constructed* rather than the originary nature of subjectivity. The Cartesian model of a subject, possessed of a free and autonomous individuality, has long been discredited by many, including Foucault, Derrida, Barthes and Butler (Mansfield, 2000). That our subjectivity may be constructed and not wholly ours, flies in the face of our assumptions about the self, which Mansfield speculates, "probably derive from popular

representations of nature described in Darwin and other evolutionary theory...that the most intense of our feelings must be innate, natural or instinctive” (Mansfield, 2000, p. 11). However, as Mansfield points out, “although ‘self’ and ‘subjectivity’ are often used interchangeably, the word ‘self’ does not capture the sense of social and cultural entanglement that is implicit in the word ‘subject’” (Mansfield, p. 2). After all, to have subjectivity is to be a subject, to be subject *to*—and that is a matter of politics.

We have gained much of our current understanding of the concept of subjectivity from French historian and cultural theorist Michel Foucault’s pivotal critique of the manner of its formation. For Foucault (1979), subjectivity is something that is “already deeply structured by processes of power” (p. 79). Interpreting Foucault, cultural theorist S. K. White (1991) explains, “The logic of societal rationalization and management in modern life penetrates deeply into the consciousness and behavior of the individual, such that dominant discourses and institutions structure public meanings and social relationships” (p. 120). That is, the operative mechanisms of the society in which the individual exists plays a greater regulating role than had been previously imagined. But Foucault (1979) goes beyond merely identifying these forces that bear upon our subjectivities; he proposes something more insidious. Foucault believes that our modern condition is such that we have been made to *think* of ourselves as possessing our unique subjectivities, while in reality, we have surrendered them: they have been constructed for us (p. 79). This analysis underscores the ‘subjugated’ in the word ‘subject;’ it aims to reveal subjectivity as a mirage, as a pacifying form of social control and social management. Such theories may be difficult to take up due to the impotence they bestow upon us. They run contrary to founding humanist tenets such as individuality—the same

tenets which give rise to concepts of subjectivity like the ones cited in Webster's dictionary. Nevertheless, as we shall see in Chapter 2, such theories are prevalent and indeed constitutive of the postmodern critique of the individual.

Another example of social and cultural entanglement with respect to the construction of subjectivity, comes to us from French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. For Lacan (1949), the principle force that shapes subjectivity is language; an external force which he refers to as 'the symbolic order' (p. 454). According to Lacan (1949), "it is not that subjects exist in the world and then use language as their tool, [but that] language existed before any of us was born, and we must locate ourselves in the field of language in order to take up a place in the human world" (p. 454). Lacan theorizes that subjectivity is inaugurated when the child enters into language (or the symbolic order) in a phase known as the Mirror Stage. In it, the initial euphoria of believing one is a distinct whole, a complete unit, is significantly disrupted by the realization that the mirror image of the self is *outside* oneself, external and thus other. For Lacan (1949), the entry into subjectivity entails a loss of the intensity and unity of the original euphoric state which becomes an "imaginary," and the longing for a return to this unity is called "desire" (p. 452). Thus, according to Lacan, selfhood is subverted and alienated when one realizes that the systems of meanings from which one's selfhood is derived is not one's own. That is, the subject's sense of itself is lost in the very field of signs that seemed to provide it in the first place. It is this paradox, Lacan argues, that governs human subjectivity. Or, as Mansfield (2000) simply explains, "Language inhabits the body *as* the subject" (p. 43). Daniel Alright (2001) remarks that, according to Lacan, "...we all turn into slaves of language, swaddled, stifled in self-images...trading our divine...being, for the prison of a

finite, objective self, the armor of an alienating identity” (p. 27). In other words, selfhood is never spontaneous; it is rather wholly derivative.

Both Foucault’s and Lacan’s theories of subjectivity leave the individual somewhat at a loss, as he or she is conceived as ostensibly subject to systems over which there is no control but without which one cannot participate in social life. If we accept such theories of alienated and mediated subjectivities, is there any use engaging with our subjectivities? Is there a way out of such a predicament?

One may argue that even if such conditions exist, an individual may still wish to interrogate the forces that shape his or her subjectivity. That is, one may conceive of one’s subjectivity as alienated and mediated, yet still wish to understand the manner in which it is so constructed. While a certain melancholy and resignation may accompany such theories, an encumbered subjectivity should not necessarily lead to an abdication of responsibility from critically responding to the forces which act upon it. Such a project might be termed a *politicization* of one’s subjectivity, and we may devise methods and strategies for its undertaking.

In cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu, we find an alternative understanding of subjectivity. Bourdieu (1977) believes we may engage in the world in ways that neither abolish subjectivity (by seeing our choices as made for us by fixed social structures), nor idealize it (as the source of purely free individual choices) (p. 78). Rather, Bourdieu believes subjectivity should primarily be understood within a political context. Bourdieu (1977) theorizes that it is the *political context* of the subject that produces its range of possible behaviors (p.78). If the individual is attuned to particular conditions in the world, inevitably made up of material situations and relationships, he or she has a repertoire of

possible practice with which to respond. This condition is what Bourdieu (1977) calls *habitus*, defined as “a community of transposable dispositions” (p. 79). It represents a range, a space in which to maneuver, such that subjectivity is neither fully spontaneous nor fully detained, but is rather a consciousness which gains its meaning through *usage*; not within the mind, but within social relationships (Mansfield, 2000, p. 123). In other words, subjectivity is strategic.

A subjectivity that matrixes through the social world, through the community of other subjectivities, leads us to the concept of ‘intersubjectivity,’ about which several theorists and philosophers have spoken. Like identity—formed in complex ways through membership and non-membership in communities—subjectivity cannot be conceived of in isolation. As Mansfield (2000) explains, “Our interior lives inevitably seem to involve other people, either as objects of need, desire and interest, or as necessary sharers of common experience. In this way, the subject is always linked to something outside of it—an idea or principle or the society of other subjects” (p. 3). Simply stated, Mansfield suggests that access to self must necessarily detour through others. German philosopher Edmund Husserl, founder of modern phenomenology, first introduced the concept of intersubjectivity when he concluded that “self-consciousness and consciousness of others are inseparable” (Husserl quoted in Brockmeier, 2001, p. 26). This concept suggests that, in addition to being existentially personal in character, human knowledge is also essentially interpersonal. In this very basic way, Husserl argued that the intersubjective character of all human knowledge is the foundation for the construction of human society.

French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1978) affirms that individual subjectivity, as well as identity as a whole, is an effect of differentiation contingent upon others, what he terms *differance*, “an effect inscribed in a system of *difference*” (p. 203). To support his notion that subjectivity is “always in relation to difference,” he gives the following example. With regard to colonialism, he explains, “...It is the settler who brought ‘the native’ into existence. ‘Native’ subjectivity is not a pre-existing thing that encounters the colonizer but a bestowed status arising out of the ontology of difference” (Derrida quoted in Mansfield, p. 4). This example illustrates the social dimension, the reciprocity (or the adversariality) inherent in constructed subjectivities—an *intersubjectivity*.

Thus, the concepts of subjectivity as proposed by Foucault and Lacan, and intersubjectivity as understood by Husserl and Derrida and Bourdieu, all support the social and therefore the political dimensions of the subject. In terms of placing subjectivity in relations to identity, autobiography and the self, we may propose the following: *subjectivity* may involve a critical positioning of one’s self in relation to one’s *autobiography*—the knowledge of which contribute to one’s *identity* and to the continuing unfolding of the *self*. Or, in other words, the manner through which our unique presence is conceived of in relation to our stories, in the context of communities, is our subjectivity.

### Self-portraiture

Now, throughout the history of art, artists have often dealt with various aspects of identity, autobiography, self and subjectivity. However, historically, they had mostly resorted to the practice of self-portraiture as a means of tackling these issues. Before exploring more contemporary practices that address identity through art, let us trace the origins, and the rationale, of the self-portrait.

As art historian Jill O'Bryan demonstrates in her article "Saint Orlan Faces Reincarnation," (1997) there is much in Western philosophy, literature and image-making that supports the notion that the soul has a form that directly resembles the image of the body. According to O'Bryan (1977), the ancient Greek word *eidolon* referred to the soul or psyche after it had departed the body. She explains:

While [eidolon] had no substance, could be seen but not touched, its image was identical with that of the departed body. This directly corresponded to the belief that the Greek gods inhabited their man-made idols because the idols resembled the forms of the gods. The concept that a painted or sculpted image could act as a receptacle for a soul that resembled it was carried over into the Christian tradition of image-making. (p. 54 )

Thus, an early relationship of correspondence was set in place, between soul and image.

Its metaphysical foundations are significant to the sense of reverie which develops around the Western traditions of (self) portraiture.

Once portraiture was no longer simply of gods, its practice was meant to situate any given individual, including the self, within a web of well-defined symbolic meanings, outlining an often hidden system of reference to the social, religious and intellectual

culture the person belonged to or wanted to be seen as belonging to (O'Bryan, p. 54). This was a way, as Brockmeier (2001) points out when he quotes Stephen Greenblatt, of “‘textualizing’ one’s life; transforming a life story into a visual text that was readable by others” (p. 260). In representing themselves, some artists did ‘textualize their lives’ in ways that engaged socio-political dimensions. However, in the cult of the artist-genius that characterized the post-Romantic era, self-portraiture had come to possess a more mystical aura of heroic individuality. The ‘selves’ in the self-portraits of such artists as Van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso and others, tended to transcend rather than locate their socio-political contexts (Brockmeier, 2001). This approach to self-portraiture reflected, and reified, modernist concepts of individuality and subjectivity. Nevertheless, as the dissonance of twentieth century experience began to be felt, eliciting artistic responses of a more critical nature, a growing dissatisfaction with traditional self-portraiture precipitated new concepts and new means of self-representation.

Art Historian Roanne Barris (online) surveys the steady disintegration of the tradition of self-portraiture in artists over the twentieth century. Her focus is particularly on women because, as artists, women have had a greater contributing role in the rethinking of self-representation. (An extended discussion of the many reasons for this will resume in Chapter 2.)

Barris begins by looking at Helene Schjerfbeck, an early twentieth-century Finnish painter. She explains that, while in form, Schjerfbeck’s self-portraits are characteristic of the genre as a whole as it existed until the early twentieth century, there is also evidence of a new search. Barris explains this search as an examination of inner space, a search for representations metaphoric of emotional and psychic states. What is

significant for Barris is the artist's tacit acknowledgement that a core self is elusive.

Representations of self by artists after Schjerfbeck repeatedly echo this sense of elusiveness. More often, artists begin to depict an exterior space rather than an interior one; an exterior "inhabited by a protean or changing self, a self which may lack a stable inner core" (Barris, <http://www.caspercollege.edu/rbarris/art1010spr03/selfportraiture/webhtml>). In this way, self-portraits become a metamorphic journey in search of an inner core, at the same time as they acknowledge and even insist on the possibility that no inner core exists.

Barris goes on to discuss Audrey Flack. In her photo-realist style and in her subject matter, "Flack has long pursued the theme of mirror images." She explains:

In addition to mirror images, Flack frequently includes photographic images, perhaps an ironic commentary on her photo-realist style, but ironic or not, they introduce another level of reality into the painting. Mirroring and photographs bring into question the issue of who the viewer is as well as the meaning of reflections and representations. In other words, can we trust the mirror image? If we can't trust it in a painting, should we trust it in real life? (Barris, <http://www.caspercollege.edu/rbarris/art1010spr03/selfportraiturewebhtml>)

While not a self-portraitist in the strictest sense, Barris believes that, because Flack centralizes mirrors, photographs, reflective surfaces, and vanitas symbols in her paintings, she raises questions about the reality and stability of vision as a way of knowing the world. This kind of questioning contributes to such erosions as the postmodern critique of representation takes hold in painting.

Barris then refers to Marina Abakanowicz's 1985 cycle of self-portraits titled "Incarnations." As Barris notes, these were made in bronze yet contained "traces of their process...the liquid state of the bronze." Of these faces, Abakanowicz herself suggests:

They tell a nonverbal story about something that is fluid in time and in material consistency; many times passing all at once in the same face; many existences side by side, together with experiences etched in the skin....These faces unveil elements of the inner chaos hidden behind the living face. Each of these rigid, metallic faces is a real or potential fragment of my own reality.

(<http://www.caspercollege.edu/rbarris/art1010spr03/selfportraiturewebhtml>)

Abakanowicz's references to the multiplicities of time, the simultaneity and multimodality of experience, the concealed chaos behind the impassive face and its attendant fragmentation, all echo the understandings of Albright, Mansfield, and others, regarding the elusive contingencies of the self.

Barris also examines Cindy Sherman's Film Stills. In this well-known series of fabricated photographs, the artist presents herself in casted scenarios (which she has also photographed), depicting herself as victim, as dismembered, as covered in dirt, and so on. Through these works, we come to understand that Sherman is not engaging in self-portraiture per se, but rather, is centralizing questions of identity within a social world of representations. Barris concludes, "In the end, that is not Sherman we see in her photographs but [an artist engaged in] questions about self-definition, role-playing in life, and the loss of integrity over time"—echoing Foucauldian concepts.

(<http://www.caspercollege.edu/rbarris/art1010spr03/selfportraiturewebhtml>)

Representations of the self and questions of identity, as anchored in a social and political context, become central themes in art by the last third of the twentieth century. While Sherman chooses the final embodiment of her critical inquiries to be photographs, similar inquiries by many artists interested in identity and the forces that bear upon it, come to us in a different form. What Performance theorist Peggy Phelan (1997) calls “the implicit anthropomorphic longing that haunts mimetic art,”—the need to objectify the self through imaging it—has in the last several decades, given way to an exploration of identity, of subjectivity, of a ‘textualization of the self’ through the practice of performance art (p. 156).

### **Performance Art**

The practice that has come to be known collectively as performance art in the post-1970 era, may best be understood by tying it closely to twentieth century experience. Harrowing, exhilarating and disjunctive all at once, this era spawned new forms of representation so as to reflect its many paradoxes. The origins of performance art may be traced to the ‘avant-garde tradition,’ more specifically to the proto-futurist work of Jarry, and later to Futurism and Dada (Goldberg, 1979). Delirious from the alienation of late industrial, urban life, disillusioned by the horrors of World War I, and seeing a return to traditional aesthetic practice as absurd, the Futurists and Dadaists wished to challenge the art establishment by questioning the very purpose and definition of art. This was by nature a rowdy undertaking. Rather than using the canvas or the chisel to launch such an attack, these painter, writers, and poets resorted to using their own bodies, voices, and gestures as the preferred vehicles of communication. The anarchic and confrontational

nature of the resulting acts matched their indignant temperaments. In their irreverent experimentations and disdainful unconventionality, artists such as Hugo Ball and Marcel Duchamp amplified the “noise” of visual art (1979).

Decades later in America—concurrent with the exhaustion of the conventional language of modernism—similar impulses, although not initially as politically scalding, brought about renewed interest in *live art*. These early time-based American works were referred to as ‘happenings’ and ‘body art.,’ and include such practitioners as Allan Kaprow, Jim Dine, Dennis Oppenheim and Vito Acconci. Artists often created simple, symbolic pieces that acted as spatio-temporal experiments. The live experiments emphasized the activities of the body in space and time, sometimes by the framing of natural behavior, sometimes by the display of virtuosi physical skills or extremely taxing physical demands (Carlson, 1996). It has been argued that, originally, performance art was a kind of testing ground, the live presentation of ideas by artists exploring concepts that might later be expressed in objects such as paintings and sculptures (Goldberg, 1979, p. 8). But these experiments proved so provocative so as to cause many to abandon the plastic shell to which their ideas may have been initially destined. The rationale supposed that instead of superimposing and then extracting metaphors from inanimate objects, artists *themselves* could embody the metaphorical ground on which ideas are exchanged. That is, rather than codifying human experience in plastic form and in essence creating a by-product, artists could literally *enact it*, and thereby implicate themselves as the primary inspiration and governing force of an artwork.

Within the development of performance art, a more theatrical tradition had also emerged. Although it diverged from theatre proper, its incorporation of such elements as

spoken text, character, dance, music and setting, makes the distinction somewhat useful. As opposed to body-based, the theatrical tradition was more involved with elaborate spectacle and a display of oral and visual idea, later complemented by technology and other mixed media strains. This trajectory might begin with the public platform readings of Twain and move on to Beatrice Herford, Marjorie Moffett, Ruth Draper, and later to Quentin Crisp, Spalding Gray, Whoopie Goldberg, Ana Deavere-Smith and Eric Bogosian (Bonney, 2000). Critic Richard Kostelanetz argues that this tradition is more typically (popularly) American because theatrical genius in this country might be said to gravitate to the informal, where the performer is the dominant figure (unlike England, for example) (Kostelanetz quoted in Bonney, 2000, p. 89). This would explain the dominance of the one-person-show genre in the United States. By the 1980s, those who shared concerns of a social and political nature naturally gravitated toward this vein.

Indeed, performance became a particularly favored medium by artists who considered themselves social activists in cultures which often marginalized them. Because artists who were members of race, ethnic, gender, sexual and other minorities, experienced lack of presence and lack of voice as continuous cultural conditions, it was their artistic strategy to elect a medium that allowed them, literally, to be seen and heard. Performance art enable them a more immediate, often more provocative manner through which to particularize and thus politicize their identity. Some of these artists include Holly Hughes, Karen Finley, Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Tim Miller. Art historian David Román (2000) observes that many artists who speak from marginalized positions have found performance art a particularly useful forum for interrogating issues of identity and representation. As Román (2000) he explains, “Its revitalization...by political artists

outside of dominant culture indicates the emerging recognition of performance as a political tool, effective for its immediacy, stripped-down cost effectiveness, and transportability” (p. 214).

Although both lineages or trajectories—the visual art avant-garde and the theatrical—reflect the different sensibilities of artists coming from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, all shared many qualities that eventually allow them to be subsumed under the rubric of performance art. Performance theorist Marvin Carlson (1996) sees some of the similarities in these two traditions as being: a) anti-establishment, provocative, unconventional, often assaultive-interventionist, b) strong opposition to commodification, c) a multimedia texture, d) an interest in the principles of collage, assemblage and simultaneity and, perhaps most unifying, e) autobiographical (p. 23). Not a discipline per se, performance art practices are best described as hybrid. Theatre historian Johannes Birringer (1993) explains that performance, as a radically *undisciplined* art, “creates processes that cannot be easily contained by aesthetic... theories that themselves depend on a disciplinary paradigm” (p. 35). While some rightly refer to it as *interdisciplinary*, Joseph Roach, former chair of the Performance Studies department at New York University best describes it as an *antidiscipline*, capturing its formal and conceptual, as well as its socio-political radicality (Carlson, 1996).

### A Performed Art of Identity

Given the historical fact of the development of performance art, and given that many artists have chosen it as a preferred means of dealing with identity over traditional self-portraiture, we must now ask: what might a *performed* art of identity achieve that the traditional self-portrait may not? Indeed, what constitutes a performed art of identity?

To link and juxtapose the self-portrait tradition with the practice of performance art, the work of French performance artist Orlan may be instructive. In many ways, Orlan deals with many aspects of self-portraiture, yet her work significantly departs from its traditions and goals.

For some time now, Orlan has been engaged in a project of self-representation that utilizes her face as its principle image. However, within this project, the artist has been immersed in a continuous process of self-modification through plastic surgery. Her features in a constant state of flux, Orlan has perhaps provided the harshest critique of the capacity of self-portraiture to represent the self.

In the beginning of all of her performance-operations, Orlan reads a quote by the Lacanian psychoanalyst Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni. This text relates a founding schism between external and internal appearances: the way one appears to the world, versus one's own self-perception. The passage reads as follows:

Skin is deceiving. In life, one only has one's skin. There is a bad exchange in human relations because one never is what one has. I have the skin of an angel but I am a jackal ... the skin of a crocodile but I am a poodle, the skin of a black person but I am white, the skin of a woman but I am a man; I never have the skin of what I am. There is no exception to the rule because I am never what I have.

(O'Bryan, 1997, p. 52)

While in a traditional self-portrait, an artist earnestly attempts to capture an essence of self, Orlan's chosen text implies that such a project, in effect, freezes only one of an infinite number of possible combinations of sliding interior and exterior images; a 'still-frame'. As O'Bryan (1997) explains, "By attempting to manifest a corporeal change reflecting her interior image of herself, [Orlan's] body is... mirroring the slippage of that interior image" (p. 55). Thus, in Orlan's work, visual correspondence and registration fails.

Through the work of Albright, Mansfield and others discussed above, I have proposed an understanding of the self as extended, evolving, porous. Orlan's performances affirm that understanding. Speaking of her work, curator and art historian David Moos suggests that Orlan is asking us to consider, "where lie the boundaries separating what we are able to distinguish as internal/external, visible/invisible, self/----?" (Moos, <http://www.stanford.edu/class/history34q/readings/Orlan/Orlan.html>).

Provocatively, the dangling end of Moos' statement leaves us to wonder what could be or should be the antithesis of 'self?' It is this incompleteness, Moos suggests, that is the core of Orlan's project. Moos proposes several options to complete the equation, including 'non-self,' 'other,' and 'world.' However, in the end, he finds the most appropriate completion to the open-ended proposition of "self/----" in the word 'portrait.'

Significantly, Moos suggests that a self-portrait may be an oxy-moron: the self is a very different thing from a portrait, or, the self can never be portrayed.

(<http://www.stanford.edu/class/history34q/readings/Orlan/Orlan.html>).

Orlan's performances are able to speak to such ideas in ways that traditional self-portraits may be limited. As Moos explains, "A traditional self-portrait works against the self in a way, always facing the dilemma of replication...given to fits and fancies of empiricism and objectivity" (<http://www.stanford.edu/class/history34q/readings/Orlan/Orlan.html>). Daniel Albright (2001) concurs when he suggests that "all models of the self derived from portraiture, sculpture or photography are misleading because an image can be treated as a genuine object... But the self can never be opaque as a scientist would like; instead of remaining fixed in one place as a sensible thing, susceptible to study and analysis, the self is disturbingly translucent" (p. 35). To extend these scientific metaphors, self-representation may be understood as a mode of inquiry, but only one which tests rather than demonstrates its validity. Speaking of the art of the personal essay, writer Philip Lopate (1994) explains, "our understanding that human beings are surrounded by darkness with nothing particularly solid to cling to, [leads] to a philosophical acceptance that one must make oneself up from moment to moment...skeptical and tolerant of inconsistencies" (p. 8). For Lopate, this literary genre is the enactment of a process by which "the soul realizes itself even as it is passing from day to day and from moment to moment" (Lopate, p. 8). Likewise, Atkinson (2002) argues for a shift from representation concerned with "the fidelity of registration of the world,"—where representation is concerned with reproducing as closely as possible the appearance of a world *out there*—"to an idea of signification where the emphasis is placed upon the production of a [subjectively constructed] reality" (p. 9).

In her continuous states of becoming, (from pre-operative, to incision, to healing bruises which turn from blue to yellow, and so on, with no end), Orlan enacts a denial of

corporeal completeness or unity and produces a new reality. As Moos suggests, her work challenges us to recall how her face and body previously appeared, asking what being lies beneath/within her self-depictions. Performance theorist Philip Auslander (1997) points out that Orlan's work "...contributes to the definition of a post-humanist self, a self for which identity is mutable, suspended, forever in process" (p. 128). In such a way, he echoes Barris' understanding of the shift from a modern to a postmodern self, as manifested in her survey of self-representation cited above. One of French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard's (1993a) definitions of the postmodern involves "that which would put forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms...that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable" (p. 1014). Orlan's performances seem to be exemplary of such postmodern artistic practice. In the words of postcolonial critic Greg Dimitriadis (2001), Orlan's work "vigorously challenges... models of verisimilitude and technologies for truth which had previously preserved the unity of the Western subject" (p. 19).

Beyond the metaphysics of an elusive self and its problems of representation, the work of Orlan is rich with other content. We may speak of the manner in which she 'textualizes' herself in a socio-political context, launching wide-ranging critiques of such things as cultural forces on self image and standards of beauty, gender construction, modern medicine, and so forth. However, these open-ended interpretations notwithstanding, what is salient in this instance is the realization that one could never imagine Orlan's many preoccupations sustained by a traditional self portrait. As we have seen, its very definitional nature would entirely undermine Orlan's multi-layered

concepts and concerns. Ultimately, what performance art gives Orlan that a traditional self-portrait does not, is an opportunity to explore, meddle with, and represent the embodiment of time and space. Herein lies a possible answer to our initial question, ‘what may a performed art of identity achieve that a traditional self-portrait does not?’ Because of the fleeting, transformational character of the self and the continuous deference of identity and subjectivity which results from it, artists need ways to interrogate such complexities in ways that the arrest of image-making does not afford.

Peggy Phelan (1997) explains, “what is preserved in the still image...is the compression of the present and the resistance to releasing the moment into the past without securing its return” (p.157). Whereas once a traditional self-portrait is executed, it becomes an artifact, a remnant—indexical of an occasion that has passed, artists who perform the self have an opportunity to address identity as a live and still unfolding event: not just ‘who am I,’ but ‘who may I *become*,’ how and why? As Olney (1972) suggests, “time carries us away not only from others but from ourselves, and we are all continuously dying to our own passing selves” (p. 29) Utilizing the medium of time allows artists to confront these contingent conditions.

In *The Magic Mountain*, German novelist Thomas Mann (1927) presents us with the axiomatic truth that time is the medium of life. Because time is a continuum, it is the life of the individual in relation to this continuum that defines experience. That is, it is the unfolding of a life, as defined by its temporality, which shapes personhood. Time is the thing that drives us most, it is the thing we fear most, it is at the very heart of the human experience. In such a way, one could argue that time defines life, and life defines time. If all selves are constantly evolving, transforming, and becoming different from themselves,

and if all selves are only subjectively experienced (that is, we may experience other ‘selves,’ but then only as objects, not as proper selves), then how is it possible to comprehend or define the self, let alone give others any sense of it? While vexing, the most promising manner through which to attempt it, is *temporally*.

Referring to the epistemology of time, Phelan (1977) states clearly that “temporality constructs causality” (p. 159). When we interrogate the self, we theorize that “I became such and such the person of today because x, y, and z happened in the past.” In such a way, the question of ‘who am I?’ is causal, and thus temporal. Phelan concedes that causality is of course interpretive, but that it is, at the same time, the impulse of autobiography (1997). As we have seen, autobiographical construction is archaeological in nature. Because time stands as the major obstacle to a possession of one’s self, memory and narration become central to interrogations of self and thus, to an art addressing identity. As Phelan suggests, a temporal art form such as performance enables us to perform the ‘working through’ in the work itself (1997). In this way, performance art may be better-suited to an exploration of self and identity for, in its structure, performance echoes the means by which self and identity are formed: *in time* and *performatively*.

### **Survey of Literature**

What bearing does this research have on the field of art education? How are concepts such as identity and autobiography, self and subjectivity, addressed within the practices of studio pedagogy, particularly at the secondary and post-secondary levels? Has art education taken into account contemporary art’s apparent critique of the genre of

self-portraiture? Has it examined the more pervasive practices of performance art in addressing question of identity? Has it attempted to integrate these practice into curriculum and instruction?

In this section, I survey the literature on adolescent development, largely from the perspective of cognitive psychology. Then, I compare its findings with the practices of self-portraiture within art education. As we shall see, the juxtaposition of what we understand about adolescent development, with what we find in art educational practice, reveals notable discrepancies. In the closing of the introduction, I attempt to reconcile these discrepancies by turning to critical pedagogy—the principle educational philosophy underpinning my research. I will argue that, as a form of critical pedagogy, performance art is able to engage issues of identity and autobiography, self and subjectivity, in ways that support a general critique of traditional self-portraiture as viable studio pedagogy.

### **Adolescent Development**

Eminent German psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (1963) recognizes identity formation as the critical task of adolescence (p. 50). He explains that, at adolescence—more so than at any other point—individuals need to experiment with roles in order to develop a sense of self. This experimentation may be seen, in part, as an attempt to integrate past roles with roles that may wish to be adopted in the future. That is, the adolescent, having realized that his or her previous constructs are no longer relevant, works to reconstruct the self in a dynamic process of adjustment and adaptation (Erikson, 1999, p. 358). Researchers have long noted that adolescents are prone to emotional turmoil and negative affective states because of these changes (Levinson, 1999, p. 381).

Their increased emotionality may best be understood in a larger context of biological, cognitive and social changes. Biologically, adolescents are adjusting to puberty and hormonal changes; cognitively, they are developing new capacities for abstract thought; socially, they are developing greater intimacy and self-disclosure with peers, and are moving toward increased autonomy. Developmental diversity is such that the time frames of adolescence may extend into their twenties, that is, into the college years (Levinson, p. 357).

In terms of identity formation, it is primarily cognitive changes that allow for adolescent evolution in self-concept. Thinking tends to involve abstract rather than merely concrete representation, and thus conceptions of knowledge become multidimensional and relative, rather than absolute and limited to single issues. These capacities bring about greater self-reflection and self-awareness (Karlavage, 1998). Thus, cognitive changes enable teenagers to distance themselves from the immediacy of experience and to take the self as an object of thought. This capacity for taking an autonomous perspective on the self creates possibilities of evaluating and integrating conflicting aspects of the self (Levinson, 1999, p. 382).

Psychologist Daniel Keating (1990) emphasizes the multiple self-concepts that characterize adolescence (p. 64). During this stage in development, adolescents not only detect inconsistencies across their various role-related selves (with parents, friends, romantic partners, and so on), but are also extremely troubled and conflicted over these contradictions. He explains that cognitive relativism (the ability to detect contradiction), and the resulting skepticism, destabilize the world of the adolescent (Keating, p. 70). However, at the same time, Keating suggests that these changes allow adolescents to

generate, recognize, and evaluate a range of alternative possibilities. Those alternatives are in effect “possible selves;” hypothetical future selves which adolescents commonly act out, donning the characteristics of desired and at times, undesired, alternative selves (p. 73). While the conflict of possible selves gets resolved as dynamic multiplicity by adulthood, psychologist Susan Harter (1990) explains that the search for values and criteria that may resolve multiple or conflicting perspectives on the self is the hallmark of adolescence (p. 355). Thus, with these multiple realities, creating conflict and search, adolescence may be regarded a disjunctive experience. The seeking of self-relevant information to establish and confirm identity commitments is thus a dynamic undertaking because it is projected temporally. These findings from developmental psychology echo the concepts of the temporally extended selves proposed by thinkers such as Albright and Mansfield.

Experimenting with one’s persona through various social behaviors (for example, gossiping) and social activities (for example, smoking), is typically an emotional experience for the adolescent preoccupied with the challenge of self-definition. However, as Harter (1990) reminds us, these processes do not occur in a vacuum (p. 357). The embrace or rejection of possible selves very much depends on whether such choices bring about affirmation or denigration from others. Thus, external, motivational functions have a determining role in identity formation, such that social-contextual factors must be taken into account (1990).

In her research, art educator Kerry Freedman (1997) emphasizes a sociological conception of development where sociocultural influences on the student are taken into account (p. 100). She criticizes as myth modernist developmental theories which view the

child as a free, self-expressive being. Freedman explains that sociocultural attributes necessarily confound that myth, for the child is always situated: in family, schooling, mass media, gender- and ethnic-specific experience, socioeconomic class, and institutional environment (Freedman, p. 100). In her discussion of the effects of school on adolescent development, psychologist Doris R. Entwisle (1990) states more succinctly that “The major effect of secondary school is to create an environment that brings economic, political and social forces to bear on all phases of development” (p. 197). According to Entwisle, high school is a period during which a particularly glaring gap appears between America’s ideals of social equity and its disturbing failure to live up to those ideals (1990). The task of identity formation in such conditions may give rise to a variety of conflicts. For instance, ethno-cultural differences are such that students’ origins from diverse communities often conflicts with the largely white, middle-class, Protestant, Eurocentric, heterosexual male norm dominating school culture (Karlavage, 1998). This may express itself in clashes of customs and values, different learning styles, different approaches to discipline, and so forth. Discrepancies between the academic agenda and any number of personal concerns on the mind of the adolescent may lead to frustration, boredom or estrangement, such that the student may unconsciously reject the kind of learning that is not helping him or her to construct personal meanings or to effectively integrate their inner needs to promote growth. Social discordance during adolescence may result in a whole constellation of ailments, including substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and violence, as well as depression and suicide (1998).

Thus, when an adolescent deals with the turmoil of identity formation, it is never private. Identity formation is confounded by social factors, such that the teen must

negotiate the transitions from—or the contradictions between—one site of identity formation and another.

Through these struggles and transitions, a fundamental shift in self-understanding takes place. In her research, Susan Harter (1990) is interested in how adolescents themselves characterize this shift (p. 355). To this end, Harter conducts studies in which she asks of her adolescent subjects for a ‘verbal self-portrait’ (p. 353). Analyzing the data in her questionnaires, Harter find the responses very introspective but also significantly contradictory. Adolescent responders seem to speak of many different selves; of different moods and states which are context-specific (changing in the company of friend, family, teachers, and so forth (Harter, p. 353). Increasingly in these verbal self-portraits, adolescents also integrate internal cues that involve memory; assessing the self reflectively, and retrospectively. Thus there is considerable evidence to suggest that there is a developmental shift from relatively concrete description of one’s physical, social and behavioral exterior in childhood, to more abstract self-portraits that describe one’s psychic interior in adolescence (Harter, 1990, p. 376). That is, the self-reflective gaze is turned inward, toward those private attributes of the self that are largely invisible—inner thoughts, feelings, wishes, motives, attitudes, beliefs or aspirations. Such research may also demonstrate that adolescents may be less invested in their outer appearance than is often thought, and more in tune with interior psychological and moral processes (Keating, 1990, p. 73).

Harter (1990) plainly concludes, “selves are not empirical” (p. 355). That is, through her research, she comes to understand the hypothetical self of the adolescent as not observable, nor verifiable through observation, as the scientific term ‘empiricism’

suggests. In fact, with regard to her own usage of the term ‘self-portrait’ to characterize her questionnaires, Harter understands its limitations. She says of adolescence, “At this stage of life, the creation of one’s self-portrait is shifted to a *larger canvas*, where broad brush strokes are used to define occupational and gender identities as well as the religious and political identities that one will assume” (Harter, p. 376, my emphasis). Significantly, a renowned adolescent psychologist who initially chooses the self-portrait metaphor to describe her research, rejects it. Even more interestingly for our present discussion is the fact that, at the end of her research, she opts for a different metaphor. Harter (1990) concludes, “‘In Search of Self,’ therefore, defines a major drama that unfolds on center stage during adolescence, with a complicated cast of characters who do not always speak with a single voice” (p. 353). Thus, Harter’s use of a performance metaphor to describe the identity formation of adolescence, represents strong support for my position vis-à-vis the relevance of traditional self-portraiture to this population.

### **Self-portraiture in Art Education**

Of the field in general, art educator Vincent Lanier (1975) comments that “while art education theory varies over time, classroom practice is surprisingly consistent and resistant to theory” (p. 180). Atkinson (2002) attempts to explain this phenomenon by pointing out that “Teachers are concerned with getting their students to develop personal response and personal investigation but equally, teachers are expected to initiate students into conventional practices and techniques” (p. 4). Thus, Atkinson affirms Lanier’s findings by underscoring the tension between the mandates of cultivating ‘personal response and investigation,’ and the requirements of imparting ‘conventional practices

and techniques.’ That these forces are at odds may be confirmed in our case: for despite the voluminous literature on adolescent development, with its emphasis on the psychological and socio-political dimensions of identity construction, art educational studio pedagogy seems, more often than not, to translate issues of identity and autobiography, self and subjectivity, into traditional practices of self-portraiture. If, as Atkinson (2002) suggests, pedagogy may be defined as “a *considered strategy* for teaching practice,” it ought to evolve continuously, benefiting from theoretical regeneration (p. 8, my emphasis).

To support this claim, I reviewed several current art education periodicals where self-portrait projects are presented and discussed. These periodicals include *Art Education*, *School Arts*, and *Scholastic Art*. As these are published for wide circulation within the art education community, one may assume that the material selected represents a cross-section of concepts and approaches belonging to professionals at the forefront of their field. However, as we shall see, most of the projects discussed tend to approach self-portraiture in ways that privilege resemblance and favor static objects, thus detouring a whole range of viable alternatives for dealing with the complexities of identity in the art classroom. To give us a sense of these approaches, and their rationales, I quote extensively from these publication. Following each of the four entries selected, I provide analysis and critique.

Example 1 - *Scholastic Art*: “Modeling a Self-Portrait” by Ned J. Nesti, Jr., high school art instructor.

As you’ve seen in this issue, ceramic artist Robert Arneson did many portraits of himself at various times throughout his life. Each of the artist’s self-portraits

reflects a different mood—playful and funny, or thoughtful and serious. Arneson usually placed his self-portrait on a pedestal or base which he integrated into the work's theme. In this workshop, you'll sculpt an expressive self-portrait and set it on a base that complements the head and facial expression. Think about the aspect of your personality you wish to express. Whether the shape of your head will be long or short, thick or thin, will decide the size of the armature. Begin building your self-portrait. Work slightly smaller than life size so clay can support itself. You can use magazine or newspaper images or toilet paper for surface variations. When the sculpture is thoroughly dry, you can sand and paint it. Color can emphasize the idea, mood, or feeling expressed in the portrait. You can use solid colors or abstract patterns. Finish by varnishing the surface. What kind of facial expressions—humorous, surprised, sophisticated, playful, serious, curious, bored—are suggested in the self-portrait shown above? Do any of the features seem exaggerated? Which appear realistic? When you model your own self-portrait, will you use concave (hollowed) or convex (raised) shapes? Will your textures be rough or smooth? Will the surface be shiny or dull? How will you create highlights and shadows? (Nesti, 1997, pp. 13-15)

In this instance, the teacher addresses issues of content and issues of technique, often in the same breath. While there is interest in the expressive potential of the self-portrait, these are immediately collapsed into formal decision-making (“will you use concave or convex...?”) Those suggestions regarding various moods and personal conditions are never fully interrogated so as to uncover what may have precipitated them, nor how they might function in a social context. For instance, the option of using

‘magazine or newspaper images’ is never discussed in terms of how these might function as signifiers for the presumed effects of popular culture on personal identity. In fact, these collaged elements seem to be of equal merit as ‘solid colors or abstract patterns.’

Additionally, when the teacher encourages to “think about the aspect of your personality you wish to express,” he is subconsciously implying at least two things. First, that ‘aspects of your personality’ are somehow discrete and organizable entities—with the word ‘aspect’ suggesting one category in a coherent system; second, that one can ‘wish to express this;’ that is, that one has access to this or that aspect of the self, that may be neatly extracted upon demand.

Example 2 - *Art Education*: “Images of Me,” by Mary Erickson, university professor.

Who am I? How do others see me? Who do I want to become? Who can I imagine myself to be? Some characteristics of who we are, we share with people throughout the world, for example, boy, girl, man, woman, daughter, son, parent, uncle, niece, granddaughter, young or old. We draw other characteristics of who we are from our culture, for example, Chicana/o, African American, French Canadian, Navajo, Amish or Cambodian American. Still other characteristics we draw from the roles we play, for example, basket ball player, movie buff, skateboarder, internet cruiser, political activist, religious leader or disciple, teacher, student, or friend. Other aspects of our identity are personal or based on our individual lives or dreams for the future. We can transform our identities as we move from one life situation to another, and as we choose directions for our lives. Artworks often express the personal and cultural identities of those who

make them. Through our activities, including the act of creating artworks, we can help to determine and shape who we are as individuals and as members of society.

[My] Interviews with experienced art teachers of middle and high school students reveal why the theme of self-identity is particularly appropriate for adolescents.

[interviewed teacher] Lorna Corlett remarks, “they are struggling for something that is acceptable for themselves, their community and their families. Youngsters at this age are taking a big risk as they learn new ways to socialize. Teachers need to create a safe environment for students as they examine their identities.”

Roxanna May-Thayer confirmed the appropriateness of the theme of self-identity for her high school students: “The theme is about finding out who they are and what group they belong to. Lots of their identity is based on wearing the right thing or having whatever the latest trend is. So much of their self-identity has to do with the images they portray and lots of that is sold to them by the media.”

Students may brainstorm characteristics of their own identity that they might use in constructing sculptures that express various aspect of themselves.

Students...view a variety of sculptures and analyze how mass and space interact in each and how sculptors make choices about mass and space to express meaning in their art. High school student Jacob describes his artwork from the unit: “My sculpture shows a boat escaping from the house-shaped piranhas. It reflects me trying to get away from home, school, problems, and to do what I want and be me. (Erickson, 2001, pp. 33-40)

Erickson describes an online lesson plan that she wrote, meant to assist adolescents students in reflecting on their own identities and expressing those identities in

sculptural form. In this example, Erickson does take into account the transformational nature of identity and its socio-cultural dimensions. She does quote other classroom teachers who refer to cultural forces on the shaping of identity. Yet, at the very end of her rich discussion, she offers a studio solution in the form of sculpture, emphasizing the importance of ‘mass’ and ‘space.’ One could simply ask, how does the theme of identity lead to the choice of sculpture? What is the conceptual link underlying this pedagogical leap? Why does an otherwise dynamic and multi-layered discussion end with an unproblematic codification of its themes and potentials in a traditional and static form? As pedagogical concerns, how do ‘space’ and ‘mass’ follow an interest in identity? Especially in the case of Jacob—a student identified as ‘wanting to escape from his house and his problem’—Erickson offers no critical maneuver, neither in form nor in content, to help empower him to interrogate, so as to alleviate, his social pressures. How does his sculpture, depicting metaphorical captivity, begin to engage that sense of frustration in ways other than to merely depict it?

Example 3 – *Art Education: “Encountering Student Learning”* by Mary Hafeli, university professor.

I visited Norman and his eighth-grade students as they worked on self-portrait drawings. I spent several weeks in the classes, observing students at work and talking with them as they finished their drawings. I wanted to find out what the students took as the ‘given’ of the assignment, what they were ‘supposed to do’ to make their self-portraits. Norman’s lesson was based on the paintings of Chuck Close. Using 8 1/2 X 11 photographs of themselves, students were to make enlarged 18 X 24 pencil drawings, based on the photos. They were to both

transfer lines from small-grid square to large-grid square and recreate through shading, the value contrast seen in the photograph. The emphasis was on transferring information accurately. The students seemed to understand and work towards the photorealism and accuracy outcomes of the lesson. Jane said, “one little mistake with a wrong line somewhere will blow the whole picture.” The self-portrait drawings told, in part, about both how the student wished to represent themselves and that they were able to represent themselves. The drawing lesson described here is one that seems to be a perennial in our field. (Halefi, 2001, pp. 19-24)

Once again, the author describes a popular self-portrait project without questioning its rationale. She explains that she “wanted to find out what the students took as the ‘given’ of the assignment, what they were ‘supposed to do,’” yet only concludes that this project allowed her to witness “how the student wished to represent themselves and that they were able to represent themselves.” There seems to be no questioning of how this formal exercise in transcribing visual information helped students to represent themselves in unique and personal ways, in the “manner they *wished* to represent themselves.” What did they wish to represent, and how did the assignment correspond to these wishes? The project seems to engage the students mostly in a pedantic exercise of dexterity, where the image of the self could be easily replaced by any other image. Little in the replication of the Chuck Close technique begins to address issues of identity, autobiography or cultural history, so salient to this population. An added sense of pressure to conform to prescribed expectation is revealed when the author quotes one student. Jane’s remark, that “one little mistake with a wrong line somewhere will blow

the whole picture,” bespeaks the preciousness with which the students—and presumably the teacher—approach the work, sidelining the idiosyncrasies and beneficial experimentation of young artists who wish to represent the self.

Example 4 – *Scholastic Art*: “Drawing An Expressive Portrait” by Ned J. Nesti, Jr., high school art instructor.

If you look again at this month’s cover, you may notice that Norwegian artist Edvard Munch used line in certain ways to communicate a particular emotion to the viewer. On Munch’s paintings like *The Scream*, nearly all the lines are curved. But many other painters—like German Expressionist Ernst Kirchner, who did the painting “Five Women in the Street”—used straight lines to create a harsh, angular feeling. In this workshop, you’ll use only straight lines as you create a highly expressive portrait. Set up a model so everyone can see him or her. (You can use a mirror and do a self-portrait if you prefer.) You might want to use a floodlight to emphasize the planes of the face. (Nesti, 1996, pp. 13-15)

This example is particularly telling. In addition to the central focus on the element of design of line as key to the portrait assignment, the final parenthetical comment demonstrates to us that the teacher sees the idea of model or self as unproblematically interchangeable. That is, it is not the specific content of ‘self,’ or identity, or subjectivity that is of interest, but a generic concept of facial expressiveness to be found *within* the element of design. The teacher’s ambivalence toward ‘the subject,’ revealed particularly by its placement in parentheses, speaks to his belief that expressive potential is inherent in form, and not in content.

Art educator Roger Clark (1998) plainly states that “Most existing elementary and secondary school art curricula in Canada and the United States are overwhelmingly modernist in terms of both content and intent” (p. 7). The examples above seem to confirm this statement. Even when projects seem to take into account more contemporary, postmodern concerns in terms of concepts of identity, the studio portion is invariably incongruent. If the examples above represent a cross-section of current practice, as suggested by Clark, we may conclude that classroom teachers remain operant within the confines of modernist values, ideologies and practices, assigning self-portrait projects in ways that may be considered retrogressive.

From these examples, we may conclude that self-portraiture in art education is still largely associated with at least two preoccupations of a modernist nature. The first may be termed a ‘utilitarian,’ where looking in the mirror is a means of exercising a facility for anatomical correctness and physical resemblance (characterized by rational, deliberate media such as the mechanical illustration in dry media used in the Chuck Close project.) The second preoccupation is with modernist concepts of ‘expressive individuality,’ where resemblance is optional and secondary to an exploration and expression of the essence of a unique emotive-psychic self (characterized by expressive media such as paintings and sculptures, as in Example 1.) The first approach objectifies the self as merely an opportunity to enhance skills of verisimilitude, while the second replays an *eyes-as-window-to-the-soul* sentimentality, also representative of modernist myths. Given our discussion thus far, both seem limited in nature. I return to the historical art education philosophies and pedagogies, upon which these projects are largely based, in Chapter 5.

How may we approach the important work of representing the self in ways that examine identity and autobiography, self and subjectivity as set against—and as functions of—a socio-political context? How may we empower students to critically respond to those forces that often bear upon their identities and subjectivities, even against their will?

### **Critical Pedagogy**

From what we have seen thus far in the introduction, we may conclude that while identity formation may be unique, it is not private. In order to meaningfully discuss issues of identity and autobiography, self and subjectivity, we must address the social world from which these things emerge and to which these things must adjust. Harter's (1990) proposal of a developmental progression in self-concept, from a physical to a social to a psychological self—"grappling with attitudes, beliefs and morals"—leads us to a discussion of the inevitable development of the adolescent's *political* self (p. 355). If it is indeed the case, as Doris R. Entwisle observes, that the major effect of secondary school is to create an environment that brings economic, political and social forces to bear on all phases of development, it is incumbent upon educators to inspire and enable students to critically respond to those forces and effects. The philosophies of critical pedagogy offer us ways to reflect on these priorities.

The history of 20th century education may be defined by reform aimed at solving social problems. Educator William Stanley (1992) claims that this largely mainstream legacy has mostly precluded the embracing of radical thought, but that educators in a democratic society have an obligation to explore it (p. 19). Stanley explains that, in

education, the ethics of social resistance have emerged in the form of critical pedagogy. He defines critical pedagogy as an umbrella term for leftist, revisionist education which is generally characterized by an embrace of reconceptualist curriculum theory, neo-pragmatism, cultural studies, critical theory, feminist scholarship and postmodern and poststructural thought—all serving to critique the nature of knowledge and its relation to power (Stanley, p. 19). Like those areas of thought, education too can participate in challenging directly the dominant social order in the name of democracy and social justice.

Radical educator Henry Giroux (1996) clearly states that the first principle of critical pedagogy involves an imperative understanding of education as producing not only knowledge but also political subjects (p. 696). At the heart of this understanding is a reproduction theory which stipulates that schools are microcosms for the dominant social order. They are thus ideologically laden and function with a ‘hidden curriculum’ that serves to perpetuate hegemonic structures that oppress the marginalized and limit opposition. According to Giroux (1992), “Schools are sites where knowledge and power enter into relations that articulate with conflicts being fought out in the wider society” (p. 203). In that sense, critical pedagogy encourages us to understand that underlying any concept of education is an understanding that the political and the pedagogical are one (Giroux, p. 203).

Giroux (1996) explains that an understanding of ideology is the underpinning of any critical thought or questioning on the part of students (p. 698). This understanding involves not only ideology in theory, but the ways in which ideology manifests in the social relations of schooling; producing and reproducing formations of knowledge,

power, desire and experience. In light of this, the pedagogical project is to provide students with the opportunity to develop the critical capacity to expose power relations, to examine the biases and partiality of all knowledge claims, and to appreciate the validity of different voices and viewpoints. In such a way, students may be inspired to challenge, so as to transform, existing social and political forms—rather than simply adapting to them. As Giroux (1996) explains, critical pedagogy involves giving students “the skills they will need to locate themselves in history and find their own voice” (p. 698). Helping students to understand how the world functions, and how they might function in it, renders pedagogy essentially a political vision.

Thus, in order to understand the political dimensions of one’s identity and subjectivity, a resistance theory comes as an emancipatory corrective. Students are encouraged to become critical questioners of social reality, ones who may take personal and collective action (Stanley, 1992, p. 19). In this way, critical pedagogy encourages the cultivation of human agency. Emphasizing that education is not a positivistic process of transmitting facts and skills, but rather a cultural practice that shapes identities and ways of being in the world, critical pedagogy strives to empower students to interrogate taken-for-granted aspects of society as a step toward creating a more just and egalitarian democratic community (Stanley, p.20). Indeed, as an overtly politicized, liberatory educational practice, critical pedagogy aims to reconfigure education as a form of social activism, underscoring the moral dimension of the undertaking.

### **Assumptions and Rationale for Research**

In the introduction thus far, I have reviewed findings from several concurrent fields of research. I now wish to attempt a synthesis of this diverse scholarship so as to solidify the assumptions underlying my inquiry, and to re-articulate my rationale for research.

Identity and subjectivity have been found to be context-specific constructions, formed as much by socio-political factors as by biological and psychological ones. Autobiographical formations have been understood as ways of strategically narrating the self in response to those factors. Additionally, developmental psychologists, as well as philosophers and cultural theorists, all seem to have concurred that ‘the self’ is a multiple, temporal, and highly dynamic phenomenon.

In the realm of contemporary art, we have found that traditional self-portraiture has declined, while in the field of art education, it remains operant and pervasive. This practice, invariably emphasizing resemblance or emotional expression, does not seem to correspond to findings in the field of adolescent development which emphasize multi-faceted identity formation as teenagers’ principle preoccupation. Nor does it seem to take into account the fact that many contemporary artists who address issues of identity, have elected the time-based medium of performance art. And finally, in its ability to expose and critique cultural influences on the self, and in its ability to afford its practitioners voice and agency, we have begun to draw interesting parallels between performance art and critical pedagogy.

Thus, a problem emerges. Current art educational practices may be limiting rather than aiding the project of identity exploration with respect to an art of the self. Art

Educator and performance artist Charles Garoian (2002) concurs when he states that, “Although art is commonly considered a discipline in which children can engage in self-expression, the ‘self’ is often overlooked or denied” (p. 124). He explains:

Art activities that are limited exclusively to the use of materials and techniques, art historical knowledge, and cultural clichés dismiss the critical content that students can introduce from their personal lives to create art forms that are relevant to their personal lives. (Garoian, 2002, p. 124)

Thus, the traditional self-project may be viewed as a re-enactment of dominant visual art discourses and practices that bypass ‘the self,’ or affirm, in the words of Garoian (1999), “the preserved aesthetics of cultural production” (p. 139).

As we have seen, an art of representing the self must take into account the many factors that shape, as well as curtail, one’s sense of identity and subjectivity. Addressing the self thus necessitates a critical evaluation and response to those cultural conditions in which it is formed. If we accept that the self-portrait is a kind of ‘research on the self,’ surely the mirror image becomes lacking in breadth and depth of ‘scholarship,’ because it precludes the examination of those cultural conditions and the ability to respond to them. In this instance, we may refer back to the image of Lacan’s mirror to help us understand what is and what is not being reflected. Lacan suggested that because the self is mediated through the social world (primarily language), looking in the mirror always presents a great irony: one must look outside one’s self to find one’s self. In that sense, the mirror is but a mirage, a spoiler—for it does not secure an image of the self, but only affirms the ‘otherness’ of the self, the realm outside of self where the self resides: in the symbolic order of culture. Thus, an art of identity is a much more complex undertaking than an art

of resemblance because it must afford its practitioners the tools with which to address that outside world, ironically faced in the mirror. In the end, those who take up the work of representing the self must reconcile to the fact that while physiognomy may be seen, 'the self' may not.

In its inability to exercise those capacities of responding to the world in which the self is situated, the traditional self-portraiture approach does not embrace the worthwhile goals of a critical pedagogy. While critical pedagogy emphasizes a rigorous questioning of social formations and a sense of social responsibility, traditional self portraits may be viewed instead as metaphors for separation and self-sufficiency. In its excessive focus on the visual or emotive self, the traditional genre may be viewed as an abdication from social engagement, a freezing of individualities who may otherwise function as moral agents. Of art education practices, Clark (1998) asks, "how well do studio activities attend to issues of cultural pluralism and social justice?" (p. 9). If we attempted to justify self-portraiture in light of this question, we realize that it does not fair well. Like Garoian, Clark believes that "learning begins with the lived experience of students. Cross-cultural perspective is used to emphasize the human dimension [such that] students are challenged to articulate alternative futures and scenarios for social change" (Clark, p. 8). So that this may take place, Clark suggests that studio activities based on the postmodernist conception of the artist re-focus energies away from the production of novel forms, toward the critical interpretation of cultural interactions: a critical pedagogy (Clark, p. 9).

In order to precipitate such a shift, away from 'novel forms,' and toward greater critical engagement with the world, it is necessary to clear away the reverent mysticism with which the long tradition of Western self-portraiture is shrouded (recalling

“eidolon”); a tradition to which many art teachers evidently still subscribe. Once teachers recognize that ‘gazing into the looking glass’ should be considered more a political and less a metaphysical project, it may be possible to inspire a more critical studio pedagogy with respect to an art of identity.

In the beginning of the introduction, I posed my central query as such: *How is performance art better-suited to help us shape and enrich an art of identity? And, how does an emphasis on performance art, as a studio strategy for an art of identity, constitute valuable pedagogy?* I bring the introduction to a close with some preliminary answers to these important questions—an extended discussion of which resumes in Chapter 4.

### **Performance Art as Critical Practice**

Henry Giroux (1996) explains that “central to the notion of critical pedagogy is a politics of voice” (p. 695). In order to have a true democracy wherein all citizens have an indelible sense of their own agency, students must locate and exercise a voice with which “to expose the power relations and bias in the formation and dissemination of knowledge so that they may contest dominant forms of cultural production across a wide spectrum of sites” (Giroux, 1992, p. 167). Within studio art pedagogy, ‘the politics of voice’ is an ethic which may readily be attained and practiced through performance art. Performance affords students the means by which to examine, name and negotiate their resonances and discordances within their respective socio-political realities. It enables them the means by which to verbalize and critique the often oppressive social and cultural forces to which their forming identities are subject, and it is therefore empowering. Thus, with respect to

an art of identity, studio pedagogy which considers strategies that allow students the opportunities to interrogate, affirm, and extend their understandings of themselves as culturally specific subjects, may be said to represent a critical practice.

Garoian (2002) suggests that “Autobiography is essential for children’s performance of identity because it exposes, authorizes, and validates subjective content in the classroom that is unique to their cultural experience in life.” He continues:

As children tell and perform about the past and present, they reflect back on it and construct it as they see and understand it from their critical personal perspectives. The expression of identity in this way enables their social and political agency in school because they learn to see themselves in relationship to academic (cultural) ideas, images, and activities and to engage them in critical dialogue. (Garoian, 2002, p. 124)

Performing their identity thus represents an ethic that is attentive to those contexts, which produce particular stories, struggles and histories (Giroux, 1996). It is better-suited to an expression of these stories and struggles, because as we have seen, the discursive nature of autobiographical narration contributes to identity construction in ways that images do not. Furthermore, in its temporality, performance art is more suited to addressing the disjunctions of those stories and struggles—the disjunctions of identity— in ways that allow students to speak and respond to them.

In its ability to address identity, performance art may be particularly suited to addressing issues of diversity and difference. With regard to difference, critical pedagogy encourages us to understand how student identities and subjectivities are constructed in multiple and contradictory ways. As Giroux (1996) explains, “Identity explored not

[solely] by students exercising self-reflection but as opened up to race, gender, and class specific construct to include the diverse ways in which their experiences and identities have been constituted in different historical and social formations” (p. 691). Like critical pedagogy, performance art represents a venue where forms of oppression perpetuated on the basis of cultural identity may be examined, put into language, and voiced. But furthermore, performance art is distinct in that the traces of those oppressive conditions are both literally and figuratively, embodied in the performer. As Garoian (2002) explains, “Unlike the conventional materials and techniques of the visual arts, the principle medium of performance art is the artist’s body and its identity. The performance artist uses her/his body as an artifact to perform the narrative material of its memory and cultural history to resist cultural assumptions and stereotypes” (p. 123). As we shall see in Chapter 2, with respect to identity, the body is often the primary metaphor for difference and thus the primary site for its politicization. Through performance art, an artist or student may utilize the body, replete with its histories, to enact what Brockmeier (2001) termed socio-political ‘self-textualization’ (p. 260).

Such embodied enactments of identity may engage viewers in more direct and impactful ways than, say, a painting or sculpture of that same body. When Giroux (1996) explains that “critical pedagogy aims to bring students to an *experiential* understanding of those deemed ‘other’ by their official culture,” we might suggest that no where may that experiential understanding occur more effectively than through the real, in-time, embodied presence of the performer (p. 687, my emphasis). The experiential implies the temporal, and thus performance is better-equipped to replicate its nature. When Bourdieu (1977) speaks of subjectivity as ‘strategic,’ as only meaningful in a socio-political

context, he may be referring precisely to the kind of voicing and presencing strategies afforded by performance art (p.78). These strategies politicize subjectivity and identity, enable others to hear their specificities and, in such a way, possess a potential for instigating open-ended, critical dialogue that may lead to better understandings of those different perspective. As Garoian (2002) states, “The value that [students] assign to their personal perspectives, and to those of others, fosters a culturally diverse community of learners” (p. 123). And thus, in its ability to embody voices of difference and empower them, performance art may be emblematic of democracy itself.

The relationality inherent in performance art, the proximity of artist to audience, is a key factor in our ability to consider performance as a critical act. From the Greek word ‘to judge,’ criticality necessarily involves an engagement with something else, something other than one’s self. Thus, to be critical is to enter into some sort of dialogue. While traditional self-portraits may be regarded as metaphors for a unique, autonomous self, the relationality of performance art carries a greater potential for instigating such dialogue. When art educator Melody K. Milbrandt (1998) suggests that, “rather than taking a stance that is against the larger audience, as in modernism, art may realize its purpose through relationships or a conscious collaboration with the audience to deal with a social agenda,” she underscores performance art’s unique position to engage an audience in such a critical, communal exchange (p. 48). Phelan (1997) affirms such a potential when she similarly states that “performance art, with its attention to the complex relationship between artist, artwork, and audience, is more democratic in spirit than other art forms and better suited to the consciousness-raising function that many progressive social movements have proscribed for radical art” (p. 165).

In his review of Amelia Jones's book, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, Henry Sayre (1999) explains that "for [Jones], the single most powerful effect of performance art (or, in her phrase, body art) is the interaction of spectator and spectacle, reception and production" (p. 112). Borrowing Husserl's term, Amelia Jones (1998) has called this merging of roles the site of intersubjectivity, a site in which "the subject means always in relationship to others and the locus of identity is always elsewhere" (p. 14). Jones' insights suggest that what is unique to performance art is its ability to activate viewer subjectivity and that multiple interpretations are in fact contingent upon this exchange. To further articulate the difference between performance art and other object-based media, Amelia Jones (1997) quotes Ira Licht: "Bodyworks do away with the 'intermediary' mediums of painting and sculpture to deliver information directly...The shift marked by performance, or body art, is that of the 'site of presence' from art's object to art's audience, from the textual and plastic to the experiential" (p. 13). Jones' emphasis on the experiential in performance art coincides with Giroux's same emphasis within critical pedagogy—both a function of dialogue. In performance (as in the classroom), the presence of live agents provokes an alertness, a response—setting off a dialogue-in-relationality, not awakened to the same degree by other plastic or disembodied forms.

If, as we have seen, identity and subjectivity are deeply social and political formations, it may also be concluded that they are relationally-defined. Whereas performance art replicates that relationality, traditional self-portraits—in their silence—foreclose it, keeping the viewer firmly outside of the frame and thus aborting rather than inviting critical dialogue. Philip Lopate (1994) explains that, "what is interesting about autobiographical work is witnessing how others respond to the world coming at them.

What we identify with, what sustains our interest, is *how* others field it, not simply that they do” (p. xvii). Lopate underscores the human need for relationality, the need to ally, so as to meaningfully connect the texts of others to one’s own stories and struggles. He concludes:

It may be that the nearest one can come to a definition is to look not straight to the self, which is invisible anyway, but sidewise to an experience of the self, and try to discover or create some similitude of the experience that can reflect or evoke it and that may appeal to another individual’s experience of the self...The trick is to realize that one is not important, except insofar as one’s example can serve to elucidate a more widespread human trait and make [viewers] feel a little less lonely and freakish. (Lopate, 1994, p. 29)

Lopate’s passage provides insights salient not only to an understanding of the potential of performance as an artform, but also to an understanding of its unique pedagogy.

### **Outline of Chapters**

To assist me in addressing the problem which I have identified in the introduction, four chapters follow. Chapter 2 provides a theoretical framework and rationale to support my proposition that performance art is better-suited to help us shape and enrich an art of identity. It draws on a wide variety of postmodern scholarship, including performance theories, witnessing theories and pedagogical theories. Specific performance works are cited to illustrate and support those theoretical claims. In Chapter 3, I present my own performance work as a case study, to illustrate the theories expounded in Chapter 2. The text of a performance entitled *Murmurs and Incantations* is provided, along with an

analysis of the signifiers and strategies used to address issues of identity, subjectivity and autobiography. Chapter 4 reflects on the manner in which the performance corroborates the theoretical framework, largely focusing on its pedagogical merits. Additionally, I provide in-depth analysis of one student performance to similarly argue for the manner in which performance art constitutes valuable pedagogy. Chapter 5 provides conclusions based on the research finding and proposes implications that those findings may have to art educational practice.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The research underpinning this dissertation is based in postmodern and poststructural theory. Before approaching specific performance and pedagogical theories, however, it will be useful to provide a general review of postmodern and poststructural thought. While these historical developments and philosophies are extremely wide-ranging in scope, certain of their themes are particularly salient to this discussion.

#### **Postmodernism**

Postmodernism is generally regarded as the philosophical and cultural movement which has been dominating Western thought since the 1960s. Roger Clark (1998) explains that as a cultural phenomenon, “postmodernism is perhaps chiefly characterized by skepticism, resulting from a gradual erosion of confidence in humanist ideals” (p. 7). In order to understand the extensive critique of postmodernism, it is of course important to contrast it with those humanist ideals which define the preceding historical period of modernism.

Perhaps the most basic departure begins with an approach to knowledge. Postmodernism understands all knowledge, all facts, as interpretation. Rather than holding knowledge as exterior to humans, postmodernism compels us to view knowledge through the lens of culture and its various semiotic representations, such as language. By the beginning of the modern period, traditional ways of understanding the world and society had collapsed; outmoded constructs needed to be replaced by broad philosophical,

scientific, cultural and political principles in the name of progress. These broad principles would reinvent, and reinvigorate humanity, re-anchoring us in such ways so as so as to better deal with the future (Sarup, 1993). Lyotard (1993b) has termed these broad principles “metanarratives” (p. 999) He has argued these to be explanatory strategies, stories, or narratives, the central theme of which is ‘mastery.’ As Sarup (1993) explains, metanarratives reflect “man seeking his telos in the conquest of nature” (p. 145). Examples of metanarratives in the modern period would be the Hegelian dialectic of Spirit, the Marxian emancipation of the worker, and the Capitalist accumulation of wealth, and so on. These historical developments—of political ideologies, national myths, social plans, economic models, or great aesthetic innovations—are the legacies of the modern era (Sarup, 1993, p.145). However, in postmodern thought, these historical developments are considered constructions; culturally-bound explanatory strategies or fabrications. Because of their absolutist nature, it is to these constructions that postmodernism has aimed its principle criticism. Skepticism toward the authority of metanarratives is thus a key factor in understanding the significant epistemological shift at the heart of postmodern thought.

The serious casting of doubt on the manner in which knowledge is formed has also affected postmodern approaches to the concept of research. The idea of rationality, so dominant in the modern period, has itself been brought into question as a narrative. Spawned by the age of reason—the Cartesian cogito, the Newtonian universe—rationality ushered in the age of the universal subject (Sarup, 1993, p. 146). In the modern period, human beings are viewed as transcendent over nature and therefore able to discover universal truths about the world by emphasizing the laws of reason,

calculation and measurement. By adopting such tried and tested methods of rational analysis and procedure, the inquirer could occupy a position of objective neutrality and thus come to know the world. In contrast, postmodern projects of inquiry are predicated on the understanding that the researcher is always already situated in the text of the world, and thus makes the world only according to and through the discourses and practices in which he or she is immersed (Cahoone, 1996, p.18). By denying the possibility of objective knowledge of the real world, postmodernism announces an end to the concept of rational inquiry. Modernist notions of subjectivity and objectivity, knower and known, thus become redundant (Cahoone, p.18).

Research leads to representation in that all knowledge is invariably transcribed into some sort of semiotic form, or text. Because of its critique of knowledge formation, one of postmodernism's recurring themes is an interrogation of meaning as generated by representation. Representation refers to all symbolic and semiotic systems that comprise culture, including language—textual, discursive and visual. Whereas modernism assumed a certain stable correspondence between knowledge and its representation, postmodernism rejects it. French literary critic Roland Barthes (1993) interprets representation as merely a reflection of its sources, therefore something refashioned (p. 944). Like the researcher, the representer is similarly already immersed in a field of representations, constructed by his or her predecessors. Thus, the clarity of any representation—with its aspirations of a one-to-one relationship of coherence, is subject to critique because it is never natural and always mediated. In such a way, representation, including language, is viewed as a structuring principle of human culture by its inability to precede it. The paradox of the impossibility of clear and unequivocal meaning thus

exposes a system of representation given to inaccuracies and bias (Cahoone, 1996, p. 18). For, in recognizing the contingencies of representation, we may also uncover the hidden modes of domination operating within it. Therefore, unlike modernism's preoccupation with the clarity of forms, postmodernism is primarily interested in the multiple interpretations of meaning which representations elicit.

Because of the instability generated by these concessions, postmodern thought has had to re-examine the individual and the concepts of identity and subjectivity. According to Lyotard (1993b), the phenomena of metanarratives, which question reality as a whole, has left the individual in a somewhat precarious position (p. 999). Mansfield (2000) explains that the effect is one of having left the individual subject, "wondering, without the big picture overview of the human place in world-time that would help it locate itself" (p. 167). Because basic principles of knowledge and meaning are unstable, unified concepts of self and identity become unfixed and contingent as well, for as we have seen, these are very much entangled in the exterior world.

For example, modernist philosophies were preoccupied with notions of alienated subjectivity. As Sarup (1993) explains, "the human individual subject or consciousness [was viewed] as alienated in contemporary society, estranged from his or her authentic modes of experience" (p. 180). He continues:

Whether the source of that estrangement was capitalism (for Marxism), the scientific naturalism pervading modern Western culture (for phenomenology), excessively repressive social mores (for psychoanalysis), bureaucratically organized social life and mass culture (for existentialism), or religion (for all of them), the idea was of a return to a true, free, authentic, unshackled self. (p. 181)

Thus, these modern theories presumed the existence of some kind of *core* in the individual, that simply required unencumbering. However, as we see, postmodernism rejects the focus on the self in favor of a focus on what Sarup (1993) terms ‘the super-individual structures’ of culture and representation, which make the individual what she or he is (p. 99). Thus, whereas modernist ideas emphasize the alienation of the subject, postmodernism speaks of *the fragmentation of the subject* (Sarup, p. 99). As Sarup explains, “In his work, Descartes offers us a narrator who imagines that he speaks without simultaneously being spoken” (1993, p. 1). That is, the transcendence that humans perceived over nature allowed them to suppose and secure a certain autonomy with respect to self-knowledge. However, in reality, the world had been bearing upon individual consciousness in very significant ways. With regard to the de-centering of the individual in postmodernism, Cahoone (1996) simply explains that today, we understand “it is not the self that creates culture, but culture that creates the self” (p. 4).

With the rejection in postmodern thought of universality came a greater attention to specificity. Thus, with respect to issues of identity, postmodernism is more interested in a recognition of pluralism, difference and indeterminacy—a relativity that modernism sought to disavow (Cahoone, 1996, p. 4). These philosophical and epistemological shifts have political implications. As Lopate (1994) explains, “the assumption of the universality of experience...is a colonizing tactic to mute the differences between disenfranchised groups and the dominant culture” (p. 1). Thus, in its attempts to reinvent new and absolute principles by which we could live, modernism’s universality may be viewed as authoritarian and exclusive, relegating to the margins those who cannot subscribe. Elaborating on Lyotard, Sarup (1993) concludes, “narratives are bad when

they become philosophies of history: big stories are bad; little stories are good” (p. 46). That is, a general incredulity toward metanarratives as articulated by Lyotard, allows Sarup and other postmoderns to embrace instead mini-narratives: modest, local, contingent, personal stories, unpretentious in their reach. Thus, the demise of concepts of universality in postmodernism frees up the infinite field of differences within humanity; not just one truth but the co-existence of many truths, of many voices, of many identities or, in a word, an *inclusivity* (Mansfield, 2000, p. 163).

The topic of postmodern cultural production is as complex as any other aspect of postmodernism. However, some of the same themes as discussed above manifest readily when we broadly compare modern and postmodern art. Generally speaking, art production in the context of the modern era, roughly from the period immediately following the French Revolution up until World War II, was viewed through the general lens of progress. Although the realm was aesthetic, art was regarded as the domain of an avant-garde, a creative community equally committed to progress and innovation. With a focus on its aesthetic merit, on the innate worth of beauty and form, art was regarded a worthwhile end in itself. Like work in other fields, art had universal, cross-cultural and transcendent aspirations, and thus may be said to have created its own metanarratives, as manifested in the legacy of an art historical canon of pertinent, ‘truthful,’ transcendent masterworks. With respect to the figure of the artist, these cultural conditions had an effect of prioritizing individuality, introspection, originality and authorship in ways that often resulted in an artist’s heroic and elitist retreat from the general or mass culture (Kissick, 1996, p. 453). Traditional and rarefied disciplines, such as painting and sculpture, were emphasized and, following scientific and academic models, their

boundaries were preserved. As a field of select and gifted specialists, artist (like scientists) was regarded with a certain amount of exaltation and reverence.

The significant intellectual and cultural shifts of postmodernism generated a very different practice with respect to art production. Its philosophical skepticism generally cultivated an ambivalence towards utopian ideals and a greater ethic of criticality. Artist and writer Martha Rosler (1984) explains, “After the cultural heresies of the sixties, art with a conscious political orientation was able to breach the neutralist cultural monolith [of modernism]” (p. 322) That is, artists were generally less invested in formal innovation and inquiry, and more concerned with the potential of their work as a form of cultural criticism. Because of this, focus on individuality and originality declined, and a greater, more extraverted engagement with real the world ensued. In its greater politicization, art was no longer viewed as an end in itself but rather a means of cultural engagement. When art critic Lucy R. Lippard (1984) attempts to formulate this shift, she notes, “artists are...trying to combine social action, social theory, and the fine arts...in a spirit of multiplicity and integration [and] dialogue...” echoing—as does Rosler—postmodern themes as discussed above (p. 342). Because art was now approached as a form of cultural response, it embraced mass or popular culture and became imbued with quotation, appropriation, humor, irony and a general eclectic nature (Kissick, 1996, p. 460). In terms of practice, greater experimentation led to new interdisciplinary forms, such as assemblage, installation, video and performance art. These practices became metaphoric of the new cultural and technological conditions, and functioned to persist in a blurring of the boundaries between of art and life. With postmodernism’s philosophical embrace of difference, what was once the domain of the culturally privileged and

empowered (specifically, white, Christian, heterosexual male), became a practice opened up to a greater plurality of voices, and thus to a greater inclusivity of political and artistic identities.

### **Poststructuralism**

As is evident in the preceding introductory remarks, postmodernism encompasses a diverse array of theories and phenomena. However, as Cahoon (1996) notes, “When most philosophers use the word postmodernism, they mean to refer to a movement that developed in France in the 1960s, more precisely called poststructuralism” (p. 2). As the forthcoming theoretical framework is situated more precisely in poststructuralist thought, let us examine its ideas.

As with postmodernism, in order to understand poststructuralism, we must attend to the preceding set of suppositions found in structuralism. Structuralism is a distinctly modernist school of thought which, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, came to dominate a variety of disciplines, most notably anthropology and linguistics. As a theory, it sought to identify objective laws which govern human thought by reducing experience to the meaning derived from structures. That is, structuralism analyzed phenomena in terms of parts and wholes, defining a structure as the interrelation of parts within a common system. Structuralists supposed that, by finding basic elements (concepts, actions, classes of words) and the rules by which they are combined, they could make known the rules of functioning (Eagleton, 1983, p. 127).

Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure was a central proponent of structuralism. He founded the science of semiotics, a study of signs. De Saussure argued that, as a sign

system, language is a crucial model of human behavior to be analyzed in order to understand the functioning of the human brain. He proposed that if one could form theory based on those hidden linguistic codes and patterns (structures), one could gain insight into whole range of communication practices (Eagleton, 1983, p. 127).

At the heart of semiotic analysis is a model comprising complementary components. A sign (be it textual, but also discursive or visual) has two components: a signifier and a signified. As Eagleton (1983) explains, the signifier is the external manifestation of the sign, while the signified represents the concept or idea to which it refers, also called the referent (p. 128). De Saussure saw this complementary or interdependent component relationship as absolute, the fruits of which were effective forms of communication: one thing said, one thing conjured, one thing communicated. Signifiers, he argued, are able to engage meaning because they preserve their difference from other signifiers. That is, meaning is constituted through a differential set of binary opposites, “a division or ‘articulation’ of signs” (Eagleton, p. 127). Thus, in studying the abstract relations and codes of cultural signs, one could discover the underlying rules which organize phenomena into a social system. The structuralist approach represented an attempt to treat human activity scientifically in order to devise a formal model of human behavior. In its extreme foundationalist approach, it is quintessentially modernist (Best, 1991, p. 20).

Poststructuralism, in general, represents a wide critique of modern theory. However, an understanding of its rejection of de Saussure’s research, represents a helpful starting point. In essence, poststructuralists refused the objective, scientific pretensions of de Saussure’s research (Cahoone, 1996). Most problematic was its essentialism, its

foundationalism, and its attempt at universality, certainty and truth through a reductivist cause/effect relationship. Like Jung's theory of archetypes, which postulates a universal, subconscious iconography, poststructuralists rejected the categorization and simplification of a sweeping explanatory theory which attempts to reduce experience to *meaning derived through a model of structure* (1996). This may be viewed as a rejection of one of many metanarratives.

The critique was launched against de Saussure on the basis of the proposed transparency with which he approached language. Specifically, poststructuralists questioned the proposition that communication shares a closed and stable system of signification—as suggested by the signifier/signified relationship. The notion of *the idea* as ever present in *the sign* was considered highly problematic by poststructuralists because, as they argued, that relationship is not scientific nor a result of first principles, but is rather socially constructed. As Eagleton (1983) points out with respect to language, poststructuralism emphasizes that shifting contexts alter meaning because temporal conditions modify interpretation as words are introduced in time (p. 129). Eagleton explains, “The signifier will be altered by the various chains of signifiers in which it is entangled, rendering language a much less stable affair than had been previously estimated” (Eagleton, p. 129). Hence, poststructuralist critique functioned to separate the signifier from the signified, affirming that *context* ensures that there will always be more than one of the latter for each of the former. Therefore, no solid, internal structure may exist in signs, as signs are never ‘pure.’ This finding also served to erode the concept of binary opposites for in reality, differentiation is contextual and thus tenuous. In such a

way, all communication may be understood as constructed rather optimistically around arbitrary factors and conditions, disproving de Saussure's theorem.

The poststructural critique was radical, for through it, language, and by extension all meaning, was understood as not necessarily proceeding along a teleological path with knowledge as its endpoint (Best, 1991, p. 20). Meaning exists solely through convention, and convention of course, is a function of social agreement. Social agreement begins to address the manner in which different people employ and deploy language (and other signification systems) in different contexts, for different purposes—and *that* is a function of politics.

Thus, the critique herewith had significant political implications. If language is contextual and elective, then it is not neutral. Rather, language plays an important role in determining social, cultural and political reality. The next implication in the critique cannot be far off. Because those in power are able to use and co-opt language strategically to serve their own interests, the production of meaning may be regarded as a function of unequal power relations in social life (Foucault, 1982). Thus, poststructuralism and politics went hand in hand; not only philosophically or ideologically, but in the course of historical events.

The poststructuralist critique helped to inspire and validate social upheaval. As Cahoone (1996) explains, “The attack of Parisian students and workers [in 1968] on the French government, on the university that was literally one of its branches, on capitalism...all seemed to resonate with the poststructural critique of reason and authority” (p. 9). Because poststructuralism stressed the entanglements of language, discourse and power in the understanding of social processes, repressive institutions

could now be viewed as ideologically constructed and ideologically-driven systems, borne of such entanglements (1996). The student uprisings of 1968 resonated with the understanding that ‘language is everything,’ and thus—the source of change. Art critic Laura Cottingham (1993) explains that the turbulent events of 1968, “while specific to the circumstances of various nationally and culturally organized groups, were also transnational. It was a moment of rupture throughout the industrialized West” (p. 33).

The protests were largely against the bureaucratization, depersonalization, routinization, and repression of social institutions. For instance, in their revolt, students sought to politicize the nature of education, criticizing the production of knowledge as a means of power and domination. They attacked the university system for its stultifying bureaucratic nature, its enforced conformity, and its specialized and compartmentalized knowledges that were irrelevant to real existence. But furthermore, the students analyzed the university as a microcosm of a repressive capitalist society and thus turned their attention to “the full range of hidden mechanisms through which a society conveys its knowledge and ensures its survival under the mask of knowledge: newspapers, television...and high school” (Best, 1991, p. 23). Beyond an attempt to undermine the claims to legitimacy by academic authorities and the state, the revolts were connected to a wider critique of Western imperialism and ethnocentrism: to the Civil Rights Movement, the American involvement in Vietnam, and eventually to the feminist critique of male power (Best, p. 23).

The exciting political struggles of the day politicized poststructuralist thinkers who feverishly attempted to combine theory and practice, writing and politics (Best, 1991, p. 17). It was through such struggles as waged by students and workers that

Foucault and others began to theorize the intimate connection between power and knowledge and to see that “power operates in micrological channels that saturate social and personal existence” (Best, p. 17). That energy, once stifled, went underground and manifested in discourse. However, political upheaval bred more intellectual upheaval (1991, p. 17).

In his extensive theorizing of the relationship between knowledge and power, Michel Foucault is perhaps the most influential of poststructuralist thinkers. For Foucault, knowledge is not neutral or objective but is a product of power relations. Of the 1968 revolts, Foucault (1982) explains that “the main objective of [those] struggles is to attack not so much ‘such and such’ an institution of power, or group, or elite, or class but rather a technique, a form of power” (p. 422). Power indeed manifests in epistemic and ideologic formations, but it is the effect which that power has over the individual that sustains Foucault’s principle critique, and which is most pertinent to our discussion.

Foucault believes that the social dynamics of power play a deciding role in the formation of individual identities and subjectivities. He explains,

This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. (Foucault, 1982, p. 420)

Foucault explains that there are two meanings to the word ‘subject:’ subject to someone else by control and dependence; and subject as an entity, tied to his or her own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge (1982). However, while the latter may suggest a certain

autonomy, Foucault asserts that both meanings are a function of forms of power which subjugate the subject (1982). While there may be an illusion of individual subjectivity, of liberty, Foucault explains that power structures such as schooling, medical, legal and family frameworks, function as regulatory forces which oppose individuality by disallowing difference. Foucault (1982) explains, “Our culture attempts to normalize individuals through increasingly rationalized means, by turning them into [seemingly] meaningful subjects and docile objects” (p. 422). As Atkinson (2000) explains, the humanist *individual* which assumes an autonomy prior to the social world is replaced by the materialist *subject* which is formed within already existing social and cultural processes (p. 96). Thus, subjectivity may be understood as the process of becoming a subject within specific discourses and practices, and it is in this process that the subject acquires particular identities.

From this we may conclude, in the words of Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982), that for Foucault, “the interpretive diagnosis is that the increasing organization of everything is the central issue of our time” (p. xxvii). While poststructuralism would claim that there is no way to achieve ideological emancipation from these forces, Foucault (1982) does suggest that one can struggle against the “government of individualization” and the “deforming and mystifying representations which have been imposed on us for several centuries” (p. 420). Foucault offers hope when he begins to discuss ‘strategies of confrontation.’ He explains:

At the heart of power relations, and as a permanent condition of their existence, there is an insubordination and a certain essential obstinacy on the part of the principles of freedom... There is no relationship of power without the means of

escape or possible flight. Every power relationship implies, at least *in potentia*, a strategy of struggle. (Foucault, 1982, p. 431)

Thus, we are somewhat optimistically reminded that while subjectivity is acted upon, it is not *fixed*. For if subjectivity is a product of the knowledge/power equation, is also a dynamic thing.

Poststructuralism's strategy of confrontation is set in motion by the practice of deconstruction. Although our experiences and our subjectivities are mediated by and thus constructed through language and other cultural representations, it also follows that whatever is constructed may also be deconstructed. A form of textual analysis within literary criticism, deconstruction was initially proposed by French philosopher Jacques Derrida as a strategy to expose built-in contradictions within a given text (Mansfield, 2000, p. 11). In its wider use, deconstruction refers to an analytic strategy that enables us to critically engage the sources of culturally-bound formations. Using the appropriate analogy to literary criticism, poststructuralism demonstrates that experience is similarly 'textualized,' and as such, may be probed and exposed in order to reveal its epistemological and ideological undergirdings within specific socio-cultural frameworks. The poststructuralist ethic of exposing reified meanings within political contexts and formations has also resonated with various cultural workers. Their efforts have been inspired by, but have also helped shape, important forms of cultural criticism.

### **Poststructuralism in Practice**

As we have seen, Foucault, Lyotard and other postmodern and poststructural thinkers, persistently critique sweeping theories of emancipation. However, as we have

also seen, there are ways in which individuals may activate resistance to struggle against the dehumanizing effects of dominant social forces. Foucault (1982) explains that the discrediting of modernist emancipation theories follows when one realizes that, “there is no ‘central power’ to rebel against, because power is everywhere” (p. 422). That is, power is not ‘held’ as such, but rather, dynamically permeates all sphere of human interaction. Thus, as Foucault proposes, “one can interpret the mechanism brought into play in power relations in terms of strategies” (Foucault, p. 423). Effective resistance, acceptable forms of political action, must therefore be of the local, diffused, *strategic* kind.

Because ‘power is everywhere,’ so are the many strategies that citizens may devise and deploy in order to secure *or* resist it. Whatever those strategies may be, they invariably are at odds with each other in the socio-political world. However, the term ‘strategy’ suggests a micro-level engagement in *specific* occasions of power relations, in ways that begin to address possible action. Indeed, Foucault (1982) asserts that in order to ensure more relations between theory and practice, we must use “resistance as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, and find out their point of application and the methods used” (p. 422). That is, rather than analyzing power from the point of view of its internal rationality, it consists of analyzing power relations “through the antagonism of strategies” (p. 419). This more pragmatic approach is similar to Bourdieu’s (1977) understanding of ‘subjectivity as strategic’ (p. 78). That is, both thinkers discourage abstractions and generalization in favor of locating instances of potentially oppressive formations, in context.

To bring the discussion back to historical developments, examples of strategic antagonisms were numerous in the period during and immediately after the articulation of these theories. The 1968 student and worker uprisings in Paris should be seen within a greater context of socio-political agitation which included the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the gay liberation movement and others emancipation struggles. For instance, the women's movement, which advocated the rights and equality of women, devised certain methods for addressing patriarchy as political power. Their historical dispossession of power, their subjugation, had worked to silence their voices. Thus, one 'strategy of antagonism' came in the form of consciousness-raising, a pervasive language practice consisting of naming, exposing and sharing experiences of marginalization and disenfranchisement. The feminist motto, "the personal is the political," is thus an example of local, diffused strategies of resistance: it is the praxis of Foucault's and Bourdieu's theories.

As poststructuralism's initial and principle critique was linguistic in nature, let us review one more example that maneuvers more precisely in the strategic terrain of language. In her book, *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties*, Margo Perkins (2000) cites Assata Shakur, a Black female activist who, in a famous murder trial, used language in a startling way. Shakur delivered the following defense:

The true 'criminals' in a society are not those who steal a box of Pampers to clothe an infant, but heads of state and CEO's of powerful corporations who have been known to oversee the devastation of entire communities of people in the name of war and profit." (p. 70)

Shakur's strategy in this decidedly 'untheoretical' context, was to take up and redefine the word 'criminal' —the concept of criminality. In doing so, Shakur manages to draw attention to the way language shapes our understanding of reality. In effect, Shakur is critiquing binary opposites such as good/bad, criminal/lawful, dangerous/benign, just/unjust, as upheld by the state in setting itself against political activists. Thus, her address to the jury is essentially an exercise in deconstruction: a fine example of the political applicability of poststructuralist critique and poststructuralist strategies. As Perkins (2000) comments, "The words used by political activists in stating their cases acquire the status of weapons in their potential to challenge and destabilize dominant ways of knowing. Activists' conscientious manipulation of language/rhetoric to alter ways of seeing reveals...an appreciation of language as both a terrain of domination and a field of possibility" (p. 90).

The work of postmodern artists has also been heavily influenced by the poststructuralist critique. Much postmodern art, but especially as produced by artists of marginalized identities, may, in a sense, be viewed as a visualization or an enactment of poststructuralist strategies, most notably deconstruction. As visual art is a signification system, it too is and has been subject to the biased formations of power relations. Thus, one recurring theme in postmodern art is the problematization of representation. In the 1960s, a concern with language and representation was ushered in with conceptual art. However, that interrogation primarily concerned itself with language and representation with respect to art, and thus remained insular. (An example may be cited in a work such as "One and Three Chairs" (1965) by Joseph Kosuth, where 'chairness' is explored through various signification systems.) However, soon thereafter, the language of

conceptualism and its critical potential, was adapted to social concerns. As art critic Eleanor Heartney (1992) explains, “Artists turned their attention to larger issues surrounding representation, the construction of social meaning and the institutional framework of politics generally” (p. 14).

For example, feminist political activism found its parallels in the work of feminist artists. In their efforts to subvert the gender bias of the art historical canon, some feminist artists based their attack on poststructuralist theories, so as to expose the inequities embedded in language and representation. For instance, in the photographic works of Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger, gender and gender roles are examined as social constructions. Through Sherman’s *Film Stills*, and such works as “We Won’t Play Nature To Your Culture” (1983) by Kruger, we are led to examine the ways in which we are engendered through socialization; by family, schooling, the media, and language—as Foucault and others suggest. Their work critiques patriarchal structures so as to expose ingrained sexism perpetuated in unequal power relations. Unlike earlier artists such as Miriam Shapiro or Judy Chicago, whose work addressed gender through body-centric representations—emphasizing biological and therefore experiential uniqueness or essence—these artists seek to undo such binaries as man/women and nature/culture, as culturally constructed (Linker, 1984, p. 413). Thus, these artworks utilize deconstructive methods, and arguably, have succeeded in aggravating specific ‘strategies of antagonism.’ Thus, in the postmodern era, poststructuralism helped set the stage for art as a form of critique.

It is within this context that performance art develops. As art historian Moira Roth (1997) observes, performance art evolved “in the 1960s, a highly theatrical as well as

political decade, in the context of experimental theatre...happenings, the conceptual art movements...and a deep questioning of art institutions and the role of the artist” (p. 73). Whereas experiments with live art were undertaken previously in the century, it was in this climate of political and intellectual agitation that performance art cultivated its more critical edge. By the 1970s, performance art was deployed more and more by artists who wished to politicize identity as an oppositional strategy. The medium provided such artists new strategies through which to infiltrate, subvert, and re-negotiate power relations within dominant culture. With its formal and aspirational similarities to political protest, performance art became a ‘strategy,’ in the Foucauldian and Bourdieuan sense, wherein artists could present their marked bodies as sites of oppression, reclaim their historically disenfranchised and silenced voices, and thus contribute to the struggle of the day for equality and social justice. Furthermore, in its direct re-engagement with the social world of the viewer, performance art became another enactment of poststructuralist theory. Because poststructuralism recognizes the production of meaning as a social process, artists who subscribe to its philosophies must take into account the interpretative activity of the spectator as much as their own creative capacities. Performance art enabled this democratic co-mingling; situating discourse and signification back in the political world which both artist and viewer inhabit.

### **Theoretical Framework for Inquiry**

Thus we have examined postmodern and poststructuralist ideas. It is through these philosophies that I am able to conceptualize and propose a more specific theoretical framework for this study. I proceed by drawing knowledge from, and parallels between,

three fields of poststructural inquiry: performance theory, witnessing and testimonial theory, and pedagogical theory. My aim is to create and then substantiate new and meaningful links between these three research areas in order to justify my central hypothesis regarding the preference for performance art—and for its valuable pedagogy—in the realm of an art of identity.

### **Performance Theory**

Not a postmodernist himself, William Shakespeare had nevertheless observed long ago that the world is a stage and that we are all actors upon it. In his play, *As You Like It*, Shakespeare (1599) pens the famous words, “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players: they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts” (p. 30). For centuries, that notion was regarded as poetic; through poststructural thought, that notion has been *theorized*. As we have seen, postmodernism and poststructuralism interrogates of all modes of representation for their constructed nature. Such inquiry has focused largely on language. However, in examining identity and subjectivity, some theorists have extended deconstructive strategies to reveal representations of *the self* as similarly constructed. The work of several of these preeminent cultural and performance theorists supports my first theoretical contention: *identity is performative*.

In addressing the ‘government of individualization,’ Foucault (1977) suggests that part of the object of social discourse is to discipline the body, to make it manageable (p. 279). As Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982) point out, Foucault places a “unique emphasis on the body as the place in which the most minute and local social practices are linked up

with the large scale organization of power” (p. xxvi). According to Foucault (1977), our modern-day bodies were in large part produced by the ideological discourses of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (p. 279). Much of the social detritus heaped on the modern body has been oppressive, alienating, de-sexualizing and degrading. As a result of this dynamic, Foucault describes the body as “the inscribed surface of events” (Foucault, p. 279). This theory allows him to contend the following: if the body is our chief arbiter of experience, the individual’s experiential seismograph, as it were, then the *identity* of that body is discursively produced by those outside forces. That is, the body speaks, but it is also spoken, and consequently constructed. In the context of an art of identity, Foucault’s assertion raises the following question: why should artists dilute the immediacy of the discursive body by re-assigning its speech to inanimate objects such as paintings and sculptures? While this is presumably the metaphorical process underlying the production of object-based art, I am suggesting a *linguistic* tactic specific to the discursive body. If the body is so inscribed, and identity is the sum of those inscriptions, then it is the *body*’s responsibility to know itself by exposing the ideological discourses that have produced it. It follows that in the tension between those inscribed codes lies the body’s ability to name and negotiate the dislocating effects of social and private experience, out of which may rise its potential as instrument of counterhegemonic strategy.

Extending Foucault’s discursive corpus, linguistic philosopher Judith Butler (1990) flatly rejects any kind of essentialism with regard to notions of identity (p. 136). Working from a phenomenologically-infllected feminist poststructuralism, Butler suggests that rather than enjoying any authentic, a priori status, identity is in fact entirely

performed (Butler, p. 136). The subject itself, Butler argues, is constituted by performance and does not precede it. In other words, it is not that the subject autonomously and purposefully decides to act out various personae, like an actor, but that the subject is actually formed by a repertoire of context-specific identities which are always in flux and to a great extent involuntary (1990, p. 136). With the recognition that our lives are structured according to repeated and socially-sanctioned (read: oppressive) modes of behavior, Butler, like Foucault, makes a convincing case for reflex performativity as a human condition. Just as poststructuralists have suggested that we are linguistically constituted, mediated to ourselves through language, Butler is suggesting we are *performatively constituted*. That is, we are mediated even to ourselves through the social and cultural codes we enact. Butler thus implies that we cannot be purely present in any real sense, and while she would not deny us, nor view as contradictory, the realities of intimate sensual experiences, Butler argues that when it comes to *identity*, all we can do is attempt to unravel the mediating web spun constantly around us by culture.

Performance theorist Richard Schechner (1977) corroborates Butler's theory by stating that identity, like acting, is 'twice-behaved behavior,' or 'restored behavior,' something acquired, learned, and rehearsed (p. 315). Schechner explains, "When we act in every day life, we do not merely react to indicative stimuli, we act in frames we have wrested from the genres of cultural performance" (Schechner, 1977, p. 315). From political campaigns, holiday celebrations, religious ceremonies and children's make-believe, to the most subtle and intimate of human interactions, we could always be said to have a script to follow. Such observations further theorize the self as 'ritualized production,' supporting the notion of the centrality of performativity to our understanding

of identity. Thus, in demonstrating its constructedness, Schechner—like Butler and Foucault—assists in the steady erosion of concepts of a priori identities in poststructural thought.

In *The Predicament of Culture*, anthropologist James Clifford (1988) speaks of ethnography's growing awareness that the field is, from the beginning to end, enmeshed in writing, and that writing, like any form of representation, is never innocent, but always involved in specific historical relations of dominance and dialogue (p. 112). Clifford's metaphor illuminates the ideas of Butler and Schechner: identity is, from beginning to end, enmeshed in *performativity*, and identity, like any form of representation, is never innocent, but also always involved in specific historical relations of dominance and dialogue. In short, identity depends on 'who's asking.' As Amelia Jones (1998) has pointed out, phenomenology has taught us that "the subject 'means' always in relation to another and that the locus of identity is always elsewhere" (p. 14). With respect to identity, the question is no longer 'what is it,' but 'where is it?' In other words, when it comes to identity, we are pragmatically opportunistic: whatever suits a given strategical-relational situation is the identity we invoke and assume, albeit unconsciously.

Most people would not admit to such a proposition, for the elective quality of identity which these theorists propose, might be interpreted as tacitly deceptive. Furthermore, such concepts disallow any notion of stable identities and by extension, unique and ethical selves to which most people would like to subscribe. However, what scholars such as Foucault, Butler, Schechner, Clifford and Jones remind us is that we are not consciously, intentionally or maliciously engaged in self-misrepresentation, but that this is a pre-existing *social* condition. The fact that identity is performed does not make it

fraudulent, but rather more complex. The fact that there *is* no such thing as a real, authentic, true identity is thus a great pretext for a performance artist. Because the individual subject does not invent him or herself but is rather constituted by patterns imposed by culture, performance art represents an opportunity to re-orient those forces back to a social and cultural context so as to critique the very site of their construction.

If postmodern and poststructuralist theories have successfully de-stabilized and de-centered notions of the self, exposing it as a borderless, contingent construction—temporally defined and performatively constituted—it has been performance artists who have demonstrated it. From Marcel Duchamp's early gender-bending inquiries in the form of his performed alter-ego Rose Selavy (1921), to the work of Feminist pioneer performance artist Eleanor Antin and her alter-ego ballerina character (1974); from Anna Deveare-Smith's (1991) embodiment of dozens of racially diverse characters who enact, so as to come to terms with, racially charged incidents, to Tony Tasset's (1997) hiring of an actor to play himself in his video self-portrait; from Kate Bornstein (1995) presenting/performing her pre- and post-operative transgendered body to undermine the notion of sex as fixing gender, to Orlan's continued questioning of the immutability and 'originality' of our culturally-constructed identities (as invested in their appearances) by her presenting its alterations as performance—performance artists have critiqued identity as both profoundly elective and radically performative (Sobel, 1997, p. 14). In the context of poststructuralist thought, their work may be understood as a collapsing of such binaries as male/female, black/white, interior/exterior and self/other, and thus represents a continued critique of identity. Furthermore, such projects are witness to and reflect Foucault's notion of 'body as inscribed surface of events,' as all have experienced the forces of

social discourse encoding and disciplining their bodies and, in response, all speak back—critiquing identity as rhetorical.

Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner (1982) provides more insight. Strikingly, Turner adds that if any solidification of identity is possible at all, it cannot begin to form *until* it is performed. An experience, Turner argues, is “a process which ‘presses out’ to an expression which completes it” (p. 24). An experience is never truly complete until it is “expressed,” that is, until it is communicated in terms intelligible to others. The etymology of the word ‘performance’ here is useful; it derives from the old French “parfournir,” ‘to complete’ or ‘carry out thoroughly.’ A performance then is the proper finale of and for an experience. The more remarkable the experience, the greater the impulse to ‘frame it’ by re-performing it. Thus, according to Turner, and as corroborated by the various artists mentioned above, experience—the well of identity—achieves closure performatively. Based on these theoretical positions, supported both by scholars and artists, I reiterate my first theoretical hypothesis: *identity is performative*.

### **Witnessing Theory**

Through research and findings in the field of testimonial studies, I wish to propose a second theoretical contention: *testimony and witnessing is political and pedagogical, both for artist and viewer*.

In order to better understand the concept of testimony, let us briefly review the concept of narration. Brockmeier (2001) quotes David Carr who explains that, “In as far as all human reality, including experience and memory, is inherently temporal, it is also inherently narrative” (p. 14). Carr continues:

We do not have experience if not in a form of sequences that are structured teleologically from a beginning to an end. Put differently, we do not have access to reality, including the reality of our own lives, if that reality is not narrated.

(p. 14)

The word 'narrate' is related to the Latin 'gnoscere,' to know. To create a narrative is thus a way of seeking knowledge and understanding. As psychologist and educator Jerome Bruner explains, "whenever it comes to matters of identity and, inextricably interwoven with it, autobiographical memory, story-telling is needed" (Bruner quoted in Brockmeier, 2001, p.10).

Central to performance work which deals with identity are the notions of testimony and witnessing. In such work, the artist offers testimony by narrating and relating autobiographical experiences and, at the same time, stands witness to his or her testimony. At the same time, audience members become witnesses to the testimony given and to the artist's self-witnessing. This type of performance—a public hearing of sorts—often results from the performer having undergone some type of critical experience. Its restoration, as Schechner (1977) suggests, is meant to assist both the restorer and his or her witnesses to better understand not only themselves but the times and cultural conditions which compose their general experience of reality (p. 315). If—linking Turner to Schechner—we restore experiences in order to complete them, then we bear witness in the process. Thus, to provide testimony is to speak the experience; to tell, but also to listen to the story: to witness. Doing so achieves at least two things: it implicates both performer and audience politically, and it invariably imparts knowledge.

Testimony and witnessing is inherently political because the telling and the hearing have strategic bearing upon power relations, as Foucault (1982, p. 422) and Bourdieu (1977, p. 78) suggest. As we know from feminist strategies of consciousness-raising, the naming of experience is not neutral or anecdotal, but can have serious ramifications on the balance of power in terms of its potential to instigate action. According to author Louise Steinman (1995), “testimony, sharing stories, involves a whole set of cultural values that are genuinely subversive: sharing stories builds a sense of community...it triggers, informs, inspires and gives the psyche the strength, the courage and the connection to take action in the world” (p. vi). In this way, giving testimony and having it be witnessed may be understood as a form of political agitation. Likewise, when performance artists give testimony in front of viewers (witnesses), it may be similarly understood as a form of political intervention, as audiences presumably recognize themselves to be a part of those various political and ideological contexts invoked by the performer. In *Autobiography as Activism*, Margo Perkins quotes Barbara Harbow when the latter discusses the resistance strategies of the Black Panthers during the 1960s. Harbow explains, “the exploitation of knowledge by the interests of power to create a distorted historical record, is central to resistance narratives. The struggle to control the historical record is seen from all sides as no less crucial than the armed struggle” (Harbow quoted in Perkins, 2000, p. 70). This powerfully underscores the need for testimony, the vested interest in speaking, especially by those who are or have been systematically oppressed.

At the same time, when artists provide testimony, they are also engaged in a form of inquiry which activates a pedagogical dimension. Literary critic Shoshana Felman

(1992) explains that testimony is a multi-layered, communicative act, a performance intent on carrying forth memories through the conveyance of a “fraught and fragile engagement between consciousness and history” (p. 55). This telling—through memorial enactments—is inherently pedagogical because it clarifies to its witnesses what has led those individuals to arrive at this particular juncture, with a compelling need to narrate and thus share, their lives.

To explicate these theoretical claims, I refer to performance artists who regularly provide testimony in their work. When Spalding Gray sits before his audience to tell them about his life, his narrative always culminates in the sharing of special insights he has managed to glean. When Rachel Rosenthal re-lives the memories of war-torn Europe and the atrocities perpetrated upon her family, she searches to reclaim those events by having their painful re-telling teach us. When David Drake takes us through the harrowing experience of gay life in New York at the height of the AIDS crisis, he does so as a living testament; to his anguish, to his resilience, to his many dead friends, but at the same time, he wishes to impart a lesson with which to empower.

Through these examples, we may infer that the pedagogical aspects of giving testimony and of witnessing, reside—both for performer and audience—in the concept of redemption. Historian Saul Friedlander (1993) wonders whether all historical interpretation is somehow “fraught with redemptory potential,” giving meaning to terrible events by saying them (p. 61). That is, finding a past that one can live with, and coming to terms with the past, are the necessary acts of the individual who wants the past not simply rediscovered but redeemed. In this sense, testimony is political, while its *redemption* is pedagogical. This reciprocal dynamic, with its liberatory potential through

redemption, bears an interesting relation to psychoanalysis. Garoian explains that Shoshana Felman's theory of testimony is similar to psychoanalysis in its pedagogical potential (1999). Garoian (1999) draws this parallel not to suggest that testimony in performance art is somehow primarily therapeutic, but to suggest that both share pedagogical potential in aiding "the expression of subjectivity and the construction of identity through language" (p. 101). At the heart of both psychoanalytic and performance art methodologies is a dialogue; between analyst and analysand, as between performer and witness. In both cases, the testimony-giver requires a witness to emancipate the self. But furthermore, as Garoian observes, when spectators see themselves in relation to the testimony-giver, this may also "trigger an *internal* dialogue...which provides [viewers] with a sense of agency and responsibility" (p. 110, my emphasis). He continues:

"Exposing, challenging and performing the repressed and suppressed experiences [allows us] to imagine new myths that make cultural acceptance, understanding, and coexistence possible." (Garoian, 1999, p. 101)

Thus, the reciprocity of the critical dialogue may be transformative. Performance theorist Kristin Langellier (1995) corroborates Garoian's understanding when she suggests that, part of what turns stories into testimony, and testimony into ameliorative pedagogy, "is the call made upon the listener to receive that testimony;" that is, the collective promise, but also the collective responsibility, of the exchange (p. 176). Counter to epistemic traditions that grasp consciousness as singular, and learning as taking place 'within' individuals, radical educator Roger Simon (1992) likewise reminds us that historical consciousness always requires another, a witness (p. 41). Thus, the attempt to engage people in the development of a particular form of historical consciousness by having

them witness significant accounts is an inherently pedagogical practice, as it is inherently social.

Much of the work of performance artists who deal with identity and autobiography is testimonially constituted as a form of remembrance; a living monument or memorial, if you will. It seems often the case that the *need* to testify, on the part of the performer, is directly related to the impact of the episodic impetus. Hence, much testimonially-driven performance invariably recounts difficult and painful events. Roger Simon (1992) terms these traumatic experiences told ‘psychic shatterings’ and suggests that although they cannot be redeemed as such, their *pedagogy* is redeemable; “that which one learns within the disturbances and disruptions inherent in comprehending horrifying events” (p. 41). Shoshana Felman (1992) also addresses the pedagogical potential in crisis. According to her, the confronting of a witness with a harrowing account becomes pivotal, almost indispensable in their ability to form new-found consciousness (p. 55). In this way, tackling crisis through the reciprocity of the testifier-witness relation, may be transformative. When Simon (1992) explains that witnessing testimonials of this sort has the ability “to teach us the unteachable...how to live with and in relation to loss, even without consolation,” he affirms Felman’s understanding of the pedagogical occasion (p. 41). Schechner and Turner too envision performance as an important means for the cultural transmission of painfully achieved modalities of experience. In fact, Turner (1982) concludes that culture itself “is the ensemble of all such individually restored experiences, made available to society and accessible to the sympathetic penetration of others’ minds” (p. 90). Thus, in the presence of ‘sympathetic minds,’ remembrance and testimony may be regarded as pedagogical in the ways in

which it can unite people in hope for the future. As poet and Holocaust survivor Elie Weisel (2003) eloquently observes, “Memory lends an ethical dimension to aspiration” (p. 1).

Turner (1982) explains that in performance, what is normally concealed, inaccessible to everyday observation and reasoning, in the depth of socio-cultural life, is drawn forth (p. 24). Because of that, every type of cultural performance is an explanation and explication of life itself. According to Turner, theatre (and by extension, other types of performance), may owe its genesis to an attempt on our part to ascribe meaning to, and thus to learn from, life’s events (Turner, p. 24). That is, theatre (or performance), not as mere replication of the “natural,” but as imbued with an investigation, a judgement, a lesson. The event of a performance thus represents a site at which people convene to provide testimony and to witness. But furthermore, both performer and audience tacitly regard the experience as made up of material to be interpreted, to be reflected upon, to be engaged in. As performance theorist Marvin Carlson (1996) explains, “This particular sense of occasion and focus, as well as the over-arching social envelope, combine with the powerful and efficacious procedures that human society has developed for the endlessly fascinating process of cultural and personal self-reflexion and experimentation” (p. 161). In his remarks, Carlson underscores the curiosity and inquiry attendant at such events, and thus its pedagogy and transformative potential. Based on these findings, corroborated by both scholars and artists, I re-articulate my second theoretical hypothesis: *witnessing is political and pedagogical, both for artist and for viewer.*

### Pedagogical Theory

The philosophies of critical pedagogy were briefly introduced in Chapter 1.

I now examine critical pedagogy through a poststructuralist lens so as to support my third and final hypothesis in the theoretical framework: *criticality cultivates agency*.

Through his work with illiterate Brazilian workers in the 1970s, philosopher of education Paulo Freire formed the concept of *consciousness through critical co-investigation* (1970). Freire calls for the elimination of a preachy and unilateral approach to education where the teacher is regarded as holding the knowledge and the student is but a ‘bank,’ awaiting its deposit. Instead, he advocated a generative dialogue, a constant dialectical relationship—between the teacher, the student and the material being taught—that is *critical*; that is to say, stubbornly resistant to the easy transmission of ready-made academic knowledge and value (Freire, 1970). This joint effort between teacher and student, this critical *co-investigation* is intended to cultivate a way of being in the world that is alert and empowered (a consciousness), able to resist various forms of colonizing and de-humanizing factors from the greater culture. In this sense, pedagogy is understood not as a style of teaching, but as a political philosophy.

Freire’s liberatory pedagogy coincides with the larger political climate of the 1960s and 1970s. His educational philosophies may be seen as resonating with the many and concurrent liberation movements which engaged in similar emancipatory discourse. Critical pedagogy may be seen as stemming from the work of Freire, as well as from the political agitation and general liberatory promise of the era. Indeed, critical pedagogy’s principle philosophies and practical objectives represent a pedagogical equivalent to the aspirations of political activism.

Critical pedagogy asks what knowledge is being produced within particular sets of social relations. It encourages, in the words of Giroux (1992), “dialogical knowledge as a result of critical dialogue, which enables its practitioners to expose power relations and possible injustices in order to claim cultural voice and agency” (p. 243). In other words, if students are critically exposing the way knowledge is formed in society and taught in school, they are being encouraged to produce meaning rather than consume and reproduce culture. As such, critical pedagogy seeks to awaken students’ moral, political and civic responsibilities so that they may vigilantly uphold the ideals of a democratic society—liberty, equality and justice. In making its objective the ongoing production of responsible, critically engaged citizen-agents, critical pedagogy re-envision education as an *intervention* in the public realm.

Parallels may be drawn between such educational theories and the theories expounded by several postmodern and poststructural thinkers. For example, one of critical pedagogy’s principle aims is to expose the bias in power/knowledge formations—a theme so prevalent in the work of Foucault. Thus, as recommended by Foucault, critical pedagogy indeed takes up a local site—*schooling*—to examine its mechanisms of power and thus begin to challenge and critique them. In its attention to the contingencies of the educational setting, and to the diversity of its participants, it envisions a pedagogy that undermines such over-arching, modernist concepts as ‘universality,’ ‘knowledge,’ and ‘truth.’ That is, critical pedagogy may be said to resist ‘grand or master narratives’ by empowering students to examine their constructed nature within the educational setting. Furthermore, in its revised understanding of the epistemology of learning, as inspired by Freire, critical pedagogy collapses long-held binary opposites such as teacher/student,

knowledge/ignorance, and school/world. In such ways, critical pedagogy activates Foucauldian ‘strategies of antagonism,’ and may thus be viewed as a postmodern and poststructuralist pedagogical theory.

Putting into action the Freirian-Girouxian ethic of deconstructing knowledge/power formations and affording agency through criticality, performance art becomes a praxis of these theories. As previously stated, when artists perform their identities, they are narrating autobiographical memories and histories often within oppressive political conditions. For their testimony to be redeemed, artists want their work to teach and to empower—both themselves and their viewers. Thus, with respect to a performed art of identity, if agency is the ultimate end for all involved, then *criticality* is the means. That is, in order to redeem testimony by way of cultivating agency, a performer must engage an audience in *collaborative criticality*, the way a critical educator would engage students in the classroom.

For example, when performance artist Janine Antoni uses her hair, soaked in commercial hair dye, to mop a gallery floor in her 1993 performance *Loving Care*, she provides a sweeping critique, at once, of cultural standards of beauty, of women’s traditional work, and of women’s questionable ‘role’ within the art world (Weintraub, 1996). Toiling at the feet of her viewers so as to engage them, Antoni performs her body as contested terrain, as the metaphorical battleground on which to publicly wage struggles of difference and power. In such a way, she begins to unencumber the body’s inscriptions, in the Foucauldian sense, and initiates a critical process which aims to claim cultural presence, voice and agency. In other instances, the environmentally-minded performances of Mierle Laderman-Ukeles (*Touch Sanitation*, 1978-79), and the symbolic

rallies of entire communities which constitute Suzanne Lacy's *Inter*-performances (*Crystal Quilt*, 1984), represent occasions that similarly collapse the distinctions between artist, performer, and critical educator. They do so in that these events are participant-driven and participant-defined, aiming to cultivate in all who collaborate a sense of agency which may then be translated into political will. Likewise, Gran Fury's 'public zaps,' quick yet stinging symbolic gestures executed at the height of the AIDS crisis (for example, the air-dropping of an over-sized condom over Senator Jesse Helms' suburban Virginia home in 1987), represent similar pedagogical-performative strategies. A powerful rhetorical metaphor is selected to engage the public in critical debate (is Helms' house 'safe?' Who needs protection? and so forth.) The fact that its wide exposure through media coverage is specifically sought by its instigators, underscores its critical-pedagogical potential within the community. All of these artists-activists-educators opt for forms of radical critique which, in the words of Jennifer Fisher (1997), "deploy practices of aspirational agency,"—affording them empowerment in the face of oppressive cultural conditions (p. 29).

Thus, the overlaps between the aims of such artists and the objectives of critical pedagogues become clear. Like the critical educator, the performance artist agitates rather than assuages, contests rather than pacifies, so that—with a collective, empowered sense of agency—those democratic ideals of liberty, equality and justice may be achieved. The work of the artists that I have mentioned above, as well as those in the previous sections, is not pedagogical in any instructive, prescriptive or didactic sense. It is pedagogical in the way that it involves and implicates the viewer in a more dialectical, more critical model of interpretation. That is, viewer/participants engage their own experiences,

relying on their own resources, so as to initiate a consciousness of critique which may potentially recast their relationship to the socio-political reality anew. For example, what effect did Antoni's performance have on its viewers, as they were slowly driven out of the room by the progress of Antoni's task? What thoughts and emotions were evoked in viewers as they were implicated in a power differential, set up by the artist: they sipping the champagne that is customarily served at artworld openings, while she engaged in a demeaning task? How did those audience members who use hair dye respond differently from those who only enjoy it on others? If Antoni's actions precipitated such questions, then they may be said to have engaged viewers in critical consciousness, and may thus be potentially transformative. Performance artist and educator Allan Kaprow calls this dynamic between artist and viewer "participation experience," a phenomenon that results in "emergent content:" meaning that arises through an experience of participation (Kaprow quoted in Kelley, 1995, p. 226 ).

Other critical educators offer us useful metaphors for performance art's pedagogy. When Stanley Aronowitz (1994) values a 'problem-posing education,' where one develops the "power to perceive critically the way one exists in the world and the ability to see the world not as a static reality but as a reality in the process of transformation," he too underscores the pedagogical potential of performance art in the ways to which I have spoken (p. 219). Similarly, when Roger Simon (1992) explains that "Education should participate in a social transformation that is aimed at securing fundamental human dignity and radically reducing the limits on expression imposed by physical and symbolic violence," we may draw plain and obvious parallels to the testimonially-driven, critical artists of identity (p. 42). Educator and cultural critic Carol Becker (1994) indeed unites

performance art and pedagogy by suggesting both ensure that “neither the mind in education, nor the body in performance, is colonized,” casting both education and performance art as sites of political consciousness and resistance (p. 105). By noting both performance art and pedagogy as sharing criticality as a means to agency, we may confirm both as emancipatory practices, not only inciting a consciousness of critique, but of hope to achieve those democratic ideals.

As cultural projects, there have always been certain parallels between education and art: both practices aim to communicate, to inspire, to enrich, to transform. However, with artists who perform their identities, those overlaps take on a greater significance. In their urgent call for agency and in their ability to inspire collaborative dialogue, performance artists effectively blur the distinctions between what might be considered performative and what might be considered pedagogical. Thus, my third and last theoretical contention: *criticality cultivates agency*.

### **Conclusion: Postmodernism and Liberatory Discourse**

The skepticism which pervades postmodern and poststructural critique has elicited pessimism and resignation in some of those who subscribe to its philosophies. In its general assault on epistemological formations, and in its exposure of the mediated nature of our reality, postmodern theory has emphasized relativism as a human condition to such an extent so as to induce a certain nihilism and political inertia. For instance, when cultural theorist Jean-François Lyotard (1993b) suggests that “what is revolutionary today is to hope for nothing,” he underscores the irrelevance of liberal social theory, characteristic of modernist thought, and negates its prized concepts of revolution and

progress (p. 1001). While it is true that political hopefulness in the name of progress is associated with modernist thought, there are some postmodern thinkers who do emphasize the liberatory potential of new social and political understandings in our era. I conclude the theoretical framework by turning to them.

While modernism relied on certain myths or grand narratives (such as truth, universality and progress) to construct its liberatory rhetoric, there are certain basic aspirations in its philosophies which are worthwhile salvaging. In this regard, political philosophers Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) view modernity as an unfinished project. In it, they identify the progressive possibilities of democratization, humanization and individualization as an unfulfilled heritage that is yet to be realized (p. 63). What is unique about these thinkers is that they are able to take up such aspirations, while at the same time, embrace important findings from postmodern and poststructural theory in ways that are not nihilistic or depressing.

Laclau and Mouffe reject the kind of radical poststructural theories of resigned relativism and indeterminacy which pulverize and thus undermine society into radically disconnected fragments. Instead, they emphasize poststructuralism's understanding of the differential and plural nature of society and the autonomy of various oppressed groups, as key to political struggle (Best, 1991, p. 195). Laclau and Mouffe explain the embrace of the politics of identity and difference in postmodern and poststructural thought as necessary to begin a social process defined by alliances. In such a way, we benefit from a postmodern understanding of multiplicity, of the discursive conditions of identity formation, and of politics and power functioning on a local, strategic level—as suggested by Foucault and Bourdieu. In fact, for them, it is precisely *through* constituent political

movements (such as feminism, environmental groups and gay and lesbian formations) that we are able to resist over-arching social theories, and examine multiple sources of power and oppression as the authentic terrain for democratic political struggle. In such a way, Laclau and Mouffe embrace socialist ideals from the modern liberal tradition, but engage postmodern positions to defend it. This enables them to reconstruct and redefine politics in terms of 'radical plural democracy' (Best, 1991, p. 291).

Best (1991) points out that while universal emancipation was a modernist discourse, there were some attempts early on to provide the kind of reconciliations that Laclau and Mouffe suggest. Best explains that the earlier Frankfurt School attempted to develop theories of solidarity based on shared human needs and suffering, and that this approach "provided at least the basis for an ethical theory... grounds for critiques of existing norms, practices and social relations" (Best, p. 283). Thus, such aspirations depended on the ability to be critical and on the need to devise a critical theory. Best quotes Herbert Marcuse as saying, "Political practice still depends on theory... on education, persuasion, on Reason" (Marcuse quoted in Best, 1991, p. 291). This leads Best to a particularly insightful conclusion: although postmodernism provides a harsh critique of rationality (as when it results in grand narratives and systems of domination), "being critical after all is a form of 'Reason'" (1991, p. 291). Regarding Laclau and Mouffe, Best concludes:

One of the valuable lessons of [their] work is to show that postmodern theory does not entail a rejection of modern political commitments to freedom, democracy and mass political struggle...The [Foucauldian] idea that 'power is

everywhere' and that resistance is always possible, is rather exhilarating than depressive, and may help politicize new areas of social and personal existence.

(p. 287)

As a critical practice, how does art figure in the political struggle? Interestingly, in theorizing political practice, Herbert Marcuse also emphasizes the need for a distance between art and life. He qualifies the role that art could play in a political movement as “unable to change reality.” That, Marcuse argued, can only be achieved through “political education and a mass political movement” (Marcuse quoted in Best, 1991, p. 291). However, when Marcuse assigned to art a benign and ineffectual role within politics, he was probably referring to the silent, inanimate nature of traditional forms, such as painting and sculpture. For, in its embrace of criticality as discussed above, performance art *is* a practice that engages politics, and may be viewed, in Marcuse’s terms, as ‘political education.’ Within the context of postmodern thought—in its ability to politicize identity, to expose the oppressive forces of discourse, and to elicit critical dialogue and agency—performance art narrows Marcuse’s alleged gap between art and life.

Aesthician Arthur Danto (1992) points out that Western culture has been engaged in a systematic effort to disenfranchise art from any practical role in life. Marcuse’s words represent one example of such an effort. However, Danto argues for a radical re-examination of such efforts. He explains, “I am proposing the thesis that our art and our political reality are made for one another; that each, one might say, is the same set of symbolic forms differently embodied” (p. 181). That is, Danto argues that art may serve as a probe or indicator of social and cultural tensions and complexities; it may

address conflicts inherent in given definitions of the social reality—conflicts among but also within, individuals and groups. Artist and curator Robert Storr echoes similar understandings when he remarks, “Art [may serve as] a series of leading questions, looking not so much for answers as for responses that complicate their initial statement” (Storr quoted in Heartney, 1992, p. 17). Like Danto, Storr is suggesting that art is not so much an expression of political opinion, but rather a form of debate, of dialogue, of engagement, and as such, it may be instrumental in personal and collective transformation.

Suzi Gablik is a writer who has effectively theorized the liberatory, socially relevant potential of art in a postmodern world. Like Laclau and Mouffe, she sees an unfinished project in the social and political aspirations of modernism, but criticizes modernist art for not fully realizing them. For Gablik (1992), “The mode of distanced, objective knowing, removed from moral and social responsibility, has been the animating motif of both science and art in the modern world” (p. 177). That is, modernist art failed its utopian mission of social transformation by having been, according to Gablik, “organized around the primacy of objects rather than relationships...set apart from reciprocal or participative interactions” (Gablik, p. 177). Gablik believes there is a corrective for this within the context of postmodernism, but her solutions leads her to theorize that there must be (at least) two *kinds* of postmodernisms. While postmodern and poststructural theorists have emphasized deconstruction as a strategy of relentless exposure and skepticism, Gablik emphasizes *reconstruction* as a strategy of hope. Her alternative, reconstructive postmodernism focuses on “an aesthetic of interconnectedness and social responsibility,” rather than on theories of alienation which are pessimistic and

apathetic in tone. She proposes that art can be redefined and reinvigorated through values such as collaboration, social responsibility, interconnectedness, empathy, and relationality (1992). Such an understanding emphasizes the “connective self” and works toward its restructuring as “self-plus-other, or self-plus-environment...thoroughly transfiguring our world view and self-view” (Gablik, p. 177). This, for Gablik, is the basis for what she terms ‘the reenchantment of art.’ A reconstructive social theory, wherein art is organized around the ‘primacy of relationship,’ critically prioritizing social responsibility, may be exemplified in the postmodern practice of performance art.

## CHAPTER 3

### PERFORMING IDENTITY: A CASE STUDY

#### Introduction

Theory begets methodology. Addressing of the major contributions to research methodology by feminism(s), cultural theorist Richard Johnson (1997) writes:

I want to argue for the importance of recognizing—that is of really registering in our practice—our deep, daily, personal, and social complicities in our subject of study... Recognizing the intimacy of subjects and objects in research is the beginning of wisdom in questions of method. (p. 55)

In similar spirit, cultural theorist Noam Chomsky explains:

People don't behave in random ways, and people don't behave in logical ways. People behave in mysterious ways. And we don't know any more about why people behave the way they do than the Greeks did when they first asked the question. But, when I really want to understand the human condition, I read a novel, not a psychology book. (Chomsky quoted in Pistolesi, 1996, personal correspondence)

In this chapter, I present and analyze my own performance work. In writing and presenting a performance as a component of my doctoral dissertation, I wish to follow what Johnson and Chomsky recommend. That is, by employing a non-traditional methodology in the form of a studio project, I am suggesting that evidence for what I contend theoretically is, in this case, best found in practice.

Thus, the text and ensuing discussion of a performance piece entitled *Murmurs and Incantations* will help me to corroborate my hypotheses that identity is indeed performative; that testimony and witnessing is indeed political and pedagogical for artist and viewer alike; and that criticality does in fact cultivate agency. In this way, the studio component is an argument for performance as a form of inquiry and as a site of new knowledge formation.

### **The Limen and the Metaphor of the Interview**

Since my undergraduate days as a painter, I have been in the self-reflexive practice of periodically interviewing myself—via video and in talk-show style—as a form of ‘check in.’ In any given piece, I would converse with myself on topics mostly related to my own direction and effectiveness as an artist. In *Stage of the Stars* (1985), my spotlight on myself was a way of granting myself my own ‘fifteen minutes,’ testing out myths of art stardom. *Die-ologue* (1988), made at the height of the AIDS epidemic, was a preemptive measure of sorts: I enacted a career in case there wasn't going to be one. *Interview* (1995) explored the difficult transition as an artist, from modernist painter to postmodern cultural worker—in my case, to performance artist. This self-conscious hovering over my own artistic production, which I had considered private and auxiliary, in the end *became* my work. Because at the heart of performance art lies a meditation on, and a reclamation of, identity, presence and voice, the format of the interview seemed a logical and effective vehicle, since by definition it provides the individual being interviewed a platform for reflection and speech. However, the added ‘playing’ with the form allowed me to ask myself and my audiences necessary questions about which I

elaborate below. Thus, because interviews have proven useful as forms of self-critique and as means of exploring a complex and disjunctive identity, I have continued to revisit the format.

In his observations of largely non-Western cultures, it became clear to Victor Turner that certain key events in the life cycle are what one might term *liminal* (1982). A limen is a margin or threshold, an *in-betweenness* that explicates not so much a geographical divide as much as a temporal-metaphorical condition. The limen is an intervening phase of transition, a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent statuses or states. (Turner, p. 44). Of the limen, Turner (1982) explains, "It is an interfacial region, an interval, when the past is momentarily negated, suspended or abrogated and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance" (p. 44). Anthropologically, Turner found that the limen is best exemplified in rites of passage; for instance, from childhood to adulthood, when "the initiand is neither what he has been nor what he will be" (1982, p. 44). While these events exist in Western culture in the form of confirmations, bar-mitzvahs, weddings, and the like, Turner found that non-Western cultures explore and exploit this transition time to a much greater degree. For them, the liminal period is a significant time and space between one context of meaning and action (say, childhood) and another. Turner (1982) also found that characteristic in this phase is the appearance of marked ambiguity and inconsistency of meaning and "the emergence of liminal demonic and monstrous figures who represent within themselves ambiguities and inconsistencies" (p. 113). As ambiguous entities, these demonic and monstrous figures embody the unknown, helping to mediate between

alternative or opposing contexts, and thus are important in bringing about the transformation.

The event of an interview may be viewed as occupying such a liminal space. Actual interviews take place in neutral zones set aside from the mainstream of productive or political events (although they may refer to these.) In that sense, interviews exist in a kind of vacuum or no-man's-land. Interviews are often conducted at significant junctures in the interviewee's life and thus might serve to underscore a transition (an important job interview, an actor being interviewed after landing a big role, and so forth.) These events represent intervals of reflection that may have as much potential to significantly transform their participants' lives, as other rituals in the culture. Thus, one way in which interviews may be viewed as liminal is *temporal*, in that they form a divide between 'normal life' before and after its occurrence.

Another way in which to conceptualize the liminality of interviews is in their *resistance to classification*. Interviews are a combination of fabricated and spontaneous event, an ambiguity which renders their categorization elusive. Interviews illustrate Richard Schechner's (1977) model of liminal ambiguity, otherwise known as the "not/not-not" bind: as in, they are *not life*, but they are *not not life*, or, they are *not theatre*, but they are *not not theatre* (p. 42). Just as in other rites of passage when one may find one's self 'temporarily undefined,' an interview is an occasion of neutral self-reflexivity that may be equally disconcerting, for in it, "the subject plays with the elements of the familiar but eventually de-familiarizes himself through the process" (Turner, 1982, p. 27). In other words, the end of an interview may be a significantly different place from its beginning. The transformation that occurs in its midst is

characteristic of the unstable, chaotic, or to use Turner's term 'anti-structural' nature of the limen (1982). Despite its seemingly organized form, an interview is an anti-structural interval because it "liberates human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, and creativity from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses" (Turner, 1982, p. 44). In this sense, we may be able to speak of the subversive potential of the limen in general, and of the interview as liminal act in particular. The limen disrupts the structural norm but at the same time, it allows for much creativity and renewal. In both cases, "it raises basic problems for social structural man, and invites him to speculation and criticism" (Turner, 1982, p. 47).

A third way to conceptualize the liminality of interviews is simply to regard the threshold between its participants, the metaphorical gateway between interviewer and interviewee. As in all dialogue, there is an invisible push-pull field or force between people who are engaged with one another; in an interview, that force intensifies. The word "interview" connotes a mutual process of looking inward—*inter* meaning between. As journalist and author Paul McLaughlin (1986) points out, the word derives from the French *entrevue/entrevoir* meaning to see one another, an important distinction not usually associated with its English counterpart (p. 23). Herein lies the key to one of the most overlooked aspects of the interview: the opportunity to find out about one's self through the discovery of the other, their ideas, and your responses to them. In this regard, the interview corresponds to Shoshana Felman's psychoanalytic pedagogy of testimony and witnessing, for in both cases, helpful revelations are a function of dialogue. Thus, the limen is a *meeting place*, a site of and for *inter*-action. Schechner (1977) describes this relationship when he suggests that it is "like peering at someone through a window, an

interval when you can see both yourself and the other at the same time” (p. 42). The ambiguity of that temporary superimposition is the limen.

Employing the interview format with all its liminal possibilities as described above, and then corrupting it, has enabled me to render self-reflexivity visible. Out of the absurdity of these short-circuited events, what I wish to term *autodialogues*, the act of the interview emerges as a metaphor for internal discourse, a performed portrait of the self. Daniel Albright (2001) reminds us that there is a literary term for the fractured, dialoguing self. Psychomachia, or soul-battle, is a theme which, according to Albright, has been echoed often in literature, but also in psychology—the most recognized example of which is Freud’s triad model of consciousness in the form of the id, ego and superego (p. 21). As philosopher Stuart Hampshire (online) further explains, “it is natural to enter into dialogue and disputes with others, because it is natural to enter into disputes with oneself” (Hampshire, <http://caae.phil.cmu.edu/cavalier/forum/meta/background/hampshire.htm>). Such notions, coming from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, affirm the presence of internal dialogues and a plurality or multiplicity of voices, often at odds.

When searching for the self, we are all confronted with multiple, often contradictory voices, memories, histories, identities. Our concept of self is thus negotiated and constructed as a result of this life-long internal discourse. In a sense, we spend our daily conscious and unconscious lives ‘interviewing’ ourselves; we debate, we self-examine, we self-interrogate, we self-critique, as in “what do you want to do, where do you want to be, how do you feel about this, that or the other, and why?” My performances enact that consciousness: they visualize introspection. Insofar as identity and subjectivity are partly functions of this internal discourse, the self may be said to

consist of ‘interviews in disguise.’

Thus, in addition to the ways that I have suggested interviews as liminal thus far, (temporally, as resistant to classification, and as meeting-place thresholds), my own corruption of the form (interviewing the self) introduces another layer of liminality, a liminality with and within the self, or an *intra-liminality*. While identity construction is contingent upon external factors, identity *processing* may be said to take place intra-liminally, in a dark no-man’s-land, through a series of private ‘rites and rituals’ that are equally liminal to other externalized ceremonial transformation events. Identity construction precipitates the same kind of ambiguity and undefined state that is necessary in order to ‘re-grow’ (a term whose use Victor Turner found pervasive in Africa, referring to these rites of passage) (Turner, 1982). While liminality is usually and most clearly understood as existing between two discrete conditions, I am suggesting that liminality may also be a psychic state one visits: not just a holding ground before the next station, but a destination, a place to go to *be* undefined, as manifested in my performances. When audiences witness the performer/individual speaking to/with himself, they realize they are privy to the nuances of one individual standing at the edges of his own thresholds, to meet himself half way—an *intra-liminality*. Thus, intra-liminality acknowledges the margins between various layers of one’s own identity, the many veils that can be drawn: the *limens* inside.

With conventional interviews, viewers experience the drama-voyeurism-catharsis of an exchange between two personalities. In the instance of my autodialogical interviews, all of those aspirations and psychic needs in the viewer get short-circuited and are deflected back at him or her, complicating but not circumventing, the

spectator/spectacle convention. Here, the absurdity of the spectacle is meant to induce the viewer's own introspection and perhaps desire to descend to his or her own world of autodialogical liminality. That is, in the performer asking himself various questions, audience members may be led to reflect on the kinds of self-inquiries in which they themselves are or have been engaged. When dramatist Augusto Boal (1979) coins the term 'spect-actor,' he similarly underscores the potential for active critical involvement on the part of the viewer. For Boal, theatre is, after all, "the art of looking at ourselves" (p. 37).

My subversion of the interview form is thus an interruption of its linear logic. This disruption is essentially a Brechtian device intended to keep audiences conceptually alert. Theatre historian Edwin Wilson (1998) explains that German dramatist Bertoldt Brecht believed theatre ought to be an occasion of critical engagement, "posing social questions to audiences in such a way so as to elicit objective consideration with an intelligent conclusion" (p. 452). To this end, Brecht felt that emotional involvement and emotional identification, on the part of spectators, would be detrimental. Thus, he deployed various artistic devices, such as an actor directly addressing the audience, in order to induce in spectators emotional "alienation" from the action on stage (Wilson, p. 452). Breaking fourth wall conventions of representational theatre would result in the audiences' consciousness of artifice, and thus enable them to adopt "an attitude of inquiry and criticism" (Wilson, p. 132).

Other theatre artists have adopted such strategies. Speaking of his own aesthetic sensibilities, Richard Foreman (1993), an experimental theatre artist who is master of the "built-in interruption," explains, "No work of art is absolutely truthful about life; it is

rather a strategic maneuver performed on coagulated consciousness” (p. 6). When Foreman uses the phrase ‘coagulated consciousness,’ he underscores the opaque nature of human inquiry and the similarly opaque strategies that are necessary in order to communicate it. For example, in ensemble pieces like *Pandering to the Masses* and *Book of Splendors*, Foreman, as playwright and director, would run a tape of his voice throughout the entire show which directly addressed the audience, asking them for their opinions about the manner of presentation by the performers and on their perceptions *as* the audience. In turn, the performers would record and playback their own voices, as an extra-textual layer, so as to engage Foreman in dialogue about his text and intentions (Foreman, 1993, p. 6). This *author-thinking-out-loud* brand of self-consciousness echoes poststructural preoccupations with authorship, reception, and interpretation, and becomes an effective tool with which to engage in postmodern skepticism regarding representation and meaning. By Foreman utilizing what Schechner describes as ‘building into the performance text its own reflexive double,’ he is able successfully to penetrate the audience’s consciousness and thus have them adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism. As Foreman (1993) explains:

Human beings are to a great extent unknowable to themselves... I find it useful to employ ‘double binds’ in my plays, because the frustration they create demagnitizes the spectator from normal avenues of conceptualization. Paradoxically, bafflement can clarify. (p. 7)

It is these kinds of tactics, as suggested by Brecht and Foreman, with which I have a great affinity and which I utilize in the *Murmurs and Incantations*. My brand of interruption—such as witnessed when, for instance, a live character on stage pauses or rewinds a

character speaking on video—serves to keep audiences firmly unstable as they sort through the metaphoric predicament of the performer conversing with himself. Speaking to myself is, as Foreman terms it, ‘baffling;’ yet, as a strategy for a performed art of identity, it becomes strangely elucidating. I elaborate more specifically on the construction of meaning in *Murmurs and Incantations* after presentation of its full text below.

Another influential artist who has subverted the interview/talk show format in ways similar is John Jesurun. Like myself, Jesurun is a media-generation artist whose work exists at the (dis)juncture between television, video and performance art. Jesurun steps inside film and television conventions so as to oppose their realities, or, in his words, to “juxtapose the truth-telling and lie-telling” (Goldberg, 1979, p. 195). He manipulates the powerful presence of a technologically-constructed reality to highlight the precarious nature of human language and expression. In *Deep Sleep* (1985), a six-person show, four characters begin on stage while two appear larger than life on film screens suspended at either end of the performance space. One by one, each is drawn onto and *into* the film, like genies through the lip of a bottle, until a solitary figure remains to tend to and maintain the projector. Such performances bespeak the current cultural fear that our lives are being ‘sucked up’ by the pervasive reality of screen projections and virtual displays, and thus continues a postmodern critique of modes of representation and communication. Similarly, in *White Water* (1986), live figures on stage converse with ‘talking heads’ on twenty-four closed-circuit monitors surrounding the audience. All are engaged in a verbal battle over illusion and reality, including that of

their own identities. This is yet another fine example of Schechner's 'building into the performance its own reflexive double,' in ways which embrace the liminal.

In Danitra Vance's performance, *Television Talk Show*, a guest comes on a popular talk show and takes the opportunity to criticize the host's attitude toward and treatment of people with AIDS. At the commercial, the host accuses the guest of maligning and misrepresenting her. As the conflict does not resolve during the commercial break, the host runs off the show right before they return on the air, leaving the guest to her own devices (Hughes, 1998, p. 13). This performance presents another breakdown of the interview, suggesting that without careful orchestration and control, the interview, as a system, may tailspin into chaos, leaving us perplexed as to whom to listen and whom to believe. While these performances are structured differently from mine, it is the way in which they play with the form of the interview and comment on its authority, that inspires me to continue appropriating it for purposes of exploring 'the truth' of one's story.

### **Murmurs and Incantations**

In this performance, I—Dahn Hiuni, a gay, Jewish performance artist searching for meaning after having survived the AIDS epidemic—summon the spirit of my great-grandfather and interview him. Rabbi Yitzchok Dovid Shulevitz, who served a small shtetel community on the Russian-Polish border, was burned alive inside a synagogue in the summer of 1941, at the hands of the Nazis. Through a candid and often contentious conversation about art, sex, god and exile, 'the two' verge on embracing each others' lives, unexpectedly learning more about catastrophe, compassion and hope.

MURMURS AND INCANTATIONS<sup>1</sup>

*The stage contains one chair. Facing the chair is a video projector. Behind the chair is a large screen.*

**PART I**

*House to black. From the darkness, a large projected image slowly fades in to fill up the screen. The image is of an old, sepia-toned photograph of a turn-of-the-century family. This is accompanied by a sonorous, dissonant melody, tinged with an Eastern mysticism. Dahn is sitting in the chair, in front of the screen—becoming part of the family portrait. After a moment, he lifts a remote control and presses ‘PLAY.’*

*An older relative, framed head-and-shoulders, appears projected on Dahn’s chest. They have now all become part of the family portrait. Other than an old-style hat, there is no attempt to conceal that Dahn is also portraying the older relative.*

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<sup>1</sup> The version of *Murmurs and Incantations* included in the dissertation is a revised one. The present version differs in several ways from the live performance, given at the University Park campus, March 19, 2003. For discussion, please see *Evolution of the Artistic Process: A Critical Reflection*, in this chapter.

## INTERVAL ONE

DAHN: Shalom Yitzchok.

YITZCHOK: Shalom.

DAHN: How are you?

YITZCHOK: You... you look familiar.

DAHN: They always told me about you.

YITZCHOK: I ah...

DAHN: What?

YITZCHOK: I...

DAHN: What? I hope you don't mind...

YITZCHOK: No... I'm... not really sure who you are.

DAHN: Oh. I'm sorry. I... thought you would know it was me. It's Dahn. Hinda's grandson.

YITZCHOK: Oh. You're a grown man.

DAHN: I think so.

YITZCHOK: Where are you?

DAHN: I'm in New York.

YITZCHOK: America?

DAHN: Yeah. Yitzchok, I... I thought it was time we spoke. I'm sorry it took me so long...

YITZCHOK: Whose son are you?

DAHN: Amatsia's.

YITZCHOK: The baby?

DAHN: Yes.

YITZCHOK: Hmm.

DAHN: He... spoke to me about you.

YITZCHOK: How is your father?

DAHN: He was good. He... passed away.

YITZCHOK: Very young.

DAHN: Yeah. The last time I saw him, I mean, I didn't know it would be the last time... but, I asked him to do a family tree with me. We sat in the kitchen and put several pieces of paper together. He knew everything.

YITZCHOK: And where are they now?

DAHN: What, my family?

YITZCHOK: Yes.

DAHN: Well, they're... spread out.

YITZCHOK: Hmm. And you have a family...

DAHN: Of my own?

YITZCHOK: Yes...

DAHN: Uh... no. Anyway, I'm not sure if you knew, but there was a book about you.

YITZCHOK: Oh...

DAHN: It was published after you died.

YITZCHOK: In Poland?

DAHN: No, in Israel. Your daughter Hinda and all the people from Ostrow-Mazowiecka, when they arrived, they put it together.

YITZCHOK: An honor.

DAHN: It's a beautiful book.

YITZCHOK: Hmm. You read it.

DAHN: Of course. Of course.

YITZCHOK: We didn't call it that.

DAHN: What?

YITZCHOK: Ostrow-Mazoweicka. We called it Ostrova.

DAHN: Yes. That's right. Ostrova. I did research.

YITZCHOK: Yes. Of course... you're interested...

DAHN: Yes. And, you know, I couldn't believe it, in preparation for this, I thought I'd look you up and I found you. In the Polish State Archives.

*(Pause)*

I... uh... I also found pictures of the synagogue.

YITZCHOK: Ah ha...

DAHN: I'd like to go there sometime. You know, just to see...

YITZCHOK: How did he die?

DAHN: Who?

YITZCHOK: Your father?

DAHN: He... died of... what most people die of. A broken heart.

YITZCHOK: And your mother? Who did he marry?

DAHN: Her name was, Ettie. Esther.

YITZCHOK: Like the Queen.

DAHN: Yes.

YITZCHOK: And you stay close to her now.

DAHN: Well. She... passed away as well.

YITZCHOK: I see. Very young to be an orphan.

DAHN: I suppose.

YITZCHOK: Why now?

DAHN: What?

YITZCHOK: Why did you want to speak to me now? The truth is, I thought you would have done this a lot earlier.

DAHN: Yitzchok, I've been meaning to do it for a long time.

YITZCHOK: Yes...

DAHN: But I... I could only deal with one tragedy at a time.

YITZCHOK: Well, are you sure you want to do this?

DAHN: Yes.

## INTERVAL TWO

YITZCHOK: So, I'm not sure I understand. They were in Palestine. And, you're in New York now?

DAHN: It's a bit... complicated. Your daughter, Hinda, and actually, your two other daughters...

YITZCHOK: Shayve... and Shayne-Liebe...

DAHN: Yes, well you know, they all came earlier. When was it, I think...

YITZCHOK: 1922.

DAHN: Yeah...

YITZCHOK: It seemed a little crazy at the time, but... they wanted to go.

DAHN: Right.

YITZCHOK: It was very difficult. But, I encouraged them.

DAHN: Well, anyway, my father was born there, in Palestine. He was the last of Hinda's five children.

YITZCHOK: That's right.

DAHN: They, you know, they pretty much built up the place from scratch. Worked on the land. It was simple. They were happy. But of course, while we were gone for 2000 years, other folks had kind of... established residence there.

YITZCHOK: Yes...

DAHN: Yes, well, so... it wasn't good. People had to be... displaced. Out of their homes. And... we know how that feels.

YITZCHOK: Yes. It was a problem.

DAHN: Well, it started a bitter struggle. I mean, I know they left a troubled place, in Europe, but I'm afraid they came to an equally difficult place. Suddenly, they had to fight. I mean really fight...

YITZCHOK: 1800 years.

DAHN: I'm sorry.

YITZCHOK: It was 1800 years we were gone. Not 2000.

DAHN: Yes, well, a long time.

YITZCHOK: How was it settled?

DAHN: Settled? Well... You were a judge, Yitzchok. What do you think would have been fair?

YITZCHOK: It is difficult to say, but I would think they should have shared it.

DAHN: That would have been good. But... that's not what happened. There was not a spirit of... sharing. You know, when I grew up there, I liked them. I like them so much. They seemed so familiar. But, they didn't feel the same way about us.

YITZCHOK: What happened?

DAHN: They began to fight. All the time.

YITZCHOK: Your family?

DAHN: Well, my father was too young, but his older and only brother Moshe...

YITZCHOK: Named after my father...

DAHN: Right. Well, he was 19, and... he fought. This was 1948, so you had passed away a few years earlier. Anyway, we had to fight for independence. But a few days after the war was over, Moshe took an army jeep with his girlfriend and two other friends. They went on a trip. But... the jeep was ambushed, and... he was killed.

*(Pause)*

I'm sorry Yitzchok, to tell you this.

YITZCHOK: What, eh, how...

DAHN: As the ambulance was bringing him back to town, an open vehicle in those days, my father—who was 15 at the time—happened to be there as it sped by, and he saw his brother—his mangled, bloody body, gasping for life.

YITZCHOK: Good God.

DAHN: He grew up... numb with anger. Broken. It took another ten years, but the first chance he got, he left. He sailed to America. Here, to New York.

YITZCHOK: Why?

DAHN: To study. Film.

YITZCHOK: Cinema?

DAHN: Yeah. That was his passion.

YITZCHOK: Hmm. And the rest stayed there?

DAHN: The rest stayed there. To fight. They're still fighting.

YITZCHOK: Well. One day it will be free.

DAHN: No, Yitzchok, it is. It is free.

YITZCHOK: Palestine?

DAHN: Yeah.

YITZCHOK: What about the British?

DAHN: They left. It's Israel now.

YITZCHOK: Israel?

DAHN: Yes. Yitzchok. After what happened... there was enough horror, and guilt... It was declared. It was fought for. Moshe fought for it. We have our own country.

YITZCHOK: I can't believe it. And everyone went there?

DAHN: Eventually. Not everyone, but... many.

YITZCHOK: How, how did everyone get there?

DAHN: It was amazing Yitzchok. What started with Hinda and Shayve... became like... a second exodus. You know? Maybe bigger. Everybody went all over the place, from Europe, from Russia, to Israel, to America. A lot of disrupted lives...

YITZCHOK: But it was established.

DAHN: Yeah...

YITZCHOK: With cities and towns...?

DAHN: Yeah.

YITZCHOK: So... I don't understand. You're in America. How... how could your father leave?

DAHN: He didn't want us growing up there. Fighting. Killing. Being killed.

YITZCHOK: But... after all this? You cannot just walk away.

DAHN: Think of what he saw. A man only has one life. He wanted to live it as he saw fit.

YITZCHOK: This is not about one man...

DAHN: Well...

YITZCHOK: And you are in New York?

DAHN: Yitzchok, please understand...

YITZCHOK: Let me tell you. Because you seem to want to know... I spent my whole life in a cold place... a place that wasn't mine. Wasn't ours. Somehow... a terrible mistake of history, we ended up in a foreign place. Guests in an inhospitable house. We did our best to... endear ourselves, to make ourselves useful. For a thousand years we lived there. A thousand! Only in ancient Israel did we live in one place for longer. Do you know that in 1920 they discovered a one thousand-year-old synagogue in Wronki? One thousand years old! Built before the Christians arrived. We were here. We helped. To build the towns, the factories. We fought their invaders. We helped in every way, with industry, with trade. With charity. But it was not enough. Never enough. We were

always... foreigners. Often they were nice, but always... afraid of us. No matter how much we did, we always occupied a... suspicious place in their... mythologies. Yes. And once you are mythologized, do you know what happens?

DAHN: What?

YITZCHOK: It brings trouble. Great trouble. Because people don't think anymore. And then... they hurt you. And they let others hurt you. And every young generation, you would think, worldlier and more tolerant. But no. Just as unwelcoming as their parents. Maybe more so. For forty years, I was a rabbi in Ostrova, forty years, a judge and a teacher. I would pray and sing and pray—to the snow, to the sky, to all that emptiness there that wasn't ours... Please, please, one day, let us leave this place and go back. Let us be. Not asking more than our share, just to have our own place, like all other peoples. So here, you tell me that it has happened. That day has come. We have a place. And you left it.

DAHN: I didn't leave it, Yitzchok. I was taken. Moved. Please! Understand. He *did* go back. After he studied, he went back. He met my mother here, they married and when she was eight months pregnant, they were homesick. They went back.

YITZCHOK: They went back?

DAHN: Yes. But it was impossible. No sooner had they gone back when they realized they made a terrible mistake. It was as hostile there as what *you* describe... Anyway, I was born there, but by the time I was 6 years old, they left again.

YITZCHOK: They left twice.

DAHN: Yes. And then they went back again. This was the craziness. They went back again, and then left again.

YITZCHOK: I don't understand.

DAHN: I don't either. But the third time... it was for good. Yitzchok. These were very torn people. Understand them, as I do. They loved their country, but they also loved their children. You can understand that. They made a decision. And it took a great toll on them. And on us. Always... new schools, new friends, new language. Always falling between the cracks. Trying to explain to people where I'm from. Yitchok, there are little pieces of me scattered everywhere, fragments... of *their* endless search, endless disappointment, endless escapes. Sometime I wish your daughter would have just come here instead. It would have made things a lot easier.

YITZCHOK: I don't know what to say to you, Dahn. I really don't know. What happened to him? Your father?

DAHN: Too much commotion. Too much leaving and arriving and packing and unpacking. A man can only start over again so many times.

YITZCHOK: Did he die before his mother?

DAHN: Yes.

YITZCHOK: So my daughter buried both her sons.

*(Little pause)*

And she of course is no longer alive.

DAHN: No. She passed away. But she lived to a hundred.

YITZCHOK: Do you go back?

DAHN: Not very much.

YITZCHOK: What... What was it like?

DAHN: It's... hot. Very hot. And despite everything, there is much joy there. I mean, it's a place of... suntans and beautiful people, and beaches and... parties. But it also breaks your heart. I remember one day my father bought me a record. It must have been my first. I couldn't have been more than... five maybe. And I remember, there was this one song. It was about... who watches over the soldiers at night, and it had such a beautiful melody. And I stood there in the middle of the living room and burst into tears. And my father asked me what's the matter. I mean I was five, I had nothing to be sad about. But I just cried and cried.

*(Pause)*

Anyway, too many people ascribe to this place too many meanings. It's just a small and fragile place, and it collapses under all that weight. Anyway, it's no longer mine. I mean, it's mine, but... my life is here.

YITZCHOK: In New York.

DAHN: Yes.

YITZCHOK: How absurd.

DAHN: Not a day goes by when I don't think 'how absurd.' But for me, this is home. Felt like home the moment I arrived. I love it here, Yitzchok.

YITZCHOK: I know.

DAHN: I walk out of my door everyday and I'm in the center of the world. It's exciting and big and... And it embraces me.

YITZCHOK: And Israel?

DAHN: I do, I often wonder what life would have been like there? Even with all the pain, the heat. And I have my moments. Even after 30 years, just when I assure myself that I am an American, I'll still stumble for a word that I only know in Hebrew. I miss... the food!

*(Pause)*

There is a sadness, I can't say there isn't. When they sing Hatikvah here, I have to leave the room. I do sometimes feel like a stranger. Like you did. But, not too often anymore. Life takes over.

*(Pause)*

It is an odd predicament. It's all one big disconnect. But... I'm too used to exile by now. To living in between. Having a place now would only confuse me.

YITZCHOK: I see.

DAHN: Besides, I'm not really the army type. So, they're doing fine without me.

### INTERVAL THREE

DAHN: Yitzchok. I love that you were a rabbi.

YITZCHOK: Yes?

DAHN: Yes. And a teacher. I love that.

YITZCHOK: Well. I don't mean to make it sound all bad, you know. We had a good life there.

DAHN: Tell me. Tell me about Ostrova.

YITZCHOK: Well. It wasn't New York. It was a small town... several thousand. Life was simple. Everything was in place. I married early. We all did. But I was blessed

because... I loved her very much. We had a blessed life together. She gave me eleven children.

DAHN: Wow.

YITZCHOK: Two boys and nine girls. But I was also lucky because I was able to study. Not everyone was able to study. But my father, rest his soul, worked very hard so that I could go to yeshiva... so that someday, I could become a rabbi, like his father.

DAHN: He didn't want to become a rabbi?

YITZCHOK: He wanted. But, uh... he couldn't. So, I would be the one. Eventually, I had my own congregation. I was very happy. Very happy, to pray, to teach, to counsel. Nothing makes a man happier than being respected in his community.

DAHN: That sounds great...

YITZCHOK: Friday nights were especially beautiful. The services were tender and quiet. Everyone... together. Our house was near the synagogue, so afterwards, we would all walk together, on a beautiful evening, the whole family... like a procession. I was in front, with Rueven and Yisroel at my side, and the women behind. We were greeted. The Poles greeted us. Those were moments when we were happy.

DAHN: Hmm. You know. One of the reasons I always wanted to talk to you is because, I'm... I'm a teacher too.

YITZCHOK: Oh yes?

DAHN: Yeah...

YITZCHOK: In a school?

DAHN: At a university.

YITZCHOK (*smiles*): Oh. Blessed is the man who finds his work. Ah? This is very good.

DAHN: Yes. I love it too. So, I always felt that, you know... we had a... connection. You know, studying, learning, sharing... with... an audience.

YITZCHOK: Nothing is greater. Are you nervous when you get up in front of the students?

DAHN: A little. In the beginning. But then we always have great debates. I love the exchange.

YITZCHOK: Yes. Yes. It is a great thing. What do you teach?

DAHN: Art.

YITZCHOK: Sorry?

DAHN: Art. *Art*.

YITZCHOK: What do you mean art? Like, craft? decoration?

DAHN: Well, I teach the history and... theories of art, and sometimes I teach, you know, drawing, painting...

YITZCHOK: I see. And so do you... teach it or do you also... make it?

DAHN: No, I make it. I'm an artist.

YITZCHOK: You're, you're... an artisan?

DAHN: An artist.

YITZCHOK: And what do you make?

DAHN: Well. I... I used to paint.

YITZCHOK: I see.

DAHN: Not good... ?

YITZCHOK: No, no... it's just that, this is... not really... part of our tradition. What... what do you paint?

DAHN: I don't know. When I painted, I painted... pictures. You know, people, landscapes, abstracts...

YITZCHOK: For what purpose?

DAHN: Maybe we should talk about something else...

YITZCHOK: No, I want to know. For what purpose?

DAHN: Well. I guess back then, it was for... beauty.

YITZCHOK: For beauty?

DAHN: Yeah.

YITZCHOK (*deliberates*): Well. This is fine.

DAHN: What do you mean?

YITZCHOK: I suppose there is nothing wrong with beauty.

(*Little pause*)

It's just that if you start to get carried away...

DAHN: Carried away? What do you mean?

YITZCHOK: Well, it hasn't... It isn't really part of our culture, to make... images.

DAHN: Didn't you have craftsmen and "artisans...?"

YITZCHOK: Of course. We had very accomplished men. They made very beautiful things.

DAHN: So...

YITZCHOK: Useful things. Not objects of contemplation.

DAHN: Yitzchok...

YITZCHOK: One needs to be very careful.

DAHN: What are you talking about?

YITZCHOK: Surely you are familiar with a little commandment.

DAHN: What?

YITZCHOK: Graven images.

DAHN: Yitzchok! I'm not making golden calves. I'm an artist. I show in Chelsea.

YITZCHOK: I understand. I'm not saying you are making golden calves. That certainly wouldn't be very good. I'm just saying... Look. I appreciate... art. I'm not an uncultured man. We had a lot of literature and a press, and a Yiddish theatre. And there were a few occasions when I went to Varshava. I saw the museums. It was not... unimpressive.

DAHN: So...

YITZCHOK: So but art, paintings, sculpture...

DAHN: What...?

YITZCHOK: This is what Christians do. They paint, we speak. We sing! We tell stories. No, think for a moment. This is how we've passed down our history. If we drew pictures, where would we be? Who would have carried them I ask you? Well, it's true.

DAHN: Yitzchok. This is very antiquated.

YITZCHOK: Well, tell me. Who are our great artists?

DAHN: What?

YITZCHOK: Name me a few of our great artists?

DAHN: Well. There aren't very many.

YITZCHOK: No. There aren't. Rembrandt, Leonardo... Not Jewish.

DAHN: Art has changed, Yitzchok. It's not just crucifixions. And I'm not trying to... compete with other 'creative powers.' It's personal, it's just about me.

YITZCHOK: About you?

DAHN: Yes. My... vision. My... expression. It's secular.

YITZCHOK: You think I'm very old-fashioned.

DAHN: I understand. But, it's different. An artist today is someone who... interprets his world, not just someone who sees it. And there's a great need to share this. Really, it's not all that different from what you did, is it?

YITZCHOK: My interpretations of the world did not come from me.

DAHN: Well, I'm sure some of them did. I'm sure you had to be creative, engaging, no? Sometimes... entertaining?

YITZCHOK: Well, I was sometimes a storyteller, yes. But not with pictures.

DAHN: It doesn't matter. Pictures, music, stories—isn't it the impulse, to respond to life? Well. Anyway, I don't paint anymore.

YITZCHOK: Why?

DAHN: I stopped.

YITZCHOK: Why did you stop?

DAHN: Well, for reasons... not far from what you said.

YITZCHOK: I don't understand. You were just defending your...

DAHN: I was just arguing. I wanted you to understand.

YITZCHOK: So... what *do* you do?

DAHN: Oh boy.

YITZCHOK: No tell me, I want to understand.

DAHN: Well, I came to a similar conclusion about painting, about images, but for very different reasons. I stopped, not because it's blasphemous, but, because it's... silent.

YITZCHOK: Silent?

DAHN: Yes. Silent. I became a painter in the first place because I didn't want to speak—in case I might say the wrong thing. I loved to draw and paint, so that's what I did. But then I couldn't remain silent anymore. I had things that I needed to say, and the pictures just wouldn't say them for me.

YITZCHOK: I see. So, what did you do?

DAHN: I began to speak. I became a performance artist.

YITZCHOK: A what?!

DAHN: A performance artist.

YITZCHOK: What is that?

DAHN: It's... an artist... who speaks. I make art, but it's... live.

YITZCHOK: Live?

DAHN: Yeah. I'm in it.

YITZCHOK: So, you paint in public and you speak?

DAHN: No. No. No more painting. I just speak.

YITZCHOK: Hmm. You speak.

DAHN: Yes.

YITZCHOK: *Where* do you speak?

DAHN: Ok. How can I explain this? It's like theater...

YITZCHOK: Yes...

DAHN: But *I* write the words, the story, and then I tell it in an interesting way.

YITZCHOK: Like an actor.

DAHN: It's kind of like an actor, but I'm not pretending to be anyone else. I'm just me.

YITZCHOK: You're just you.

*(Little pause)*

DAHN: Yes.

YITZCHOK: Hmm. And... what do you speak about?

DAHN: I speak about... me. My experiences. Things we've been speaking about here. Family, identity... you know, struggles... I try to communicate with people about... things that matter.

YITZCHOK: What matters?

DAHN: What matters to me?

YITZCHOK: Yes.

DAHN: Ethics. Justice. Responsibility. Important things. Like you, you would talk to the congregation, give them ideas, ask them questions right? Get them to think? I do the same. I ask questions, through my art.

YITZCHOK: Hmm. And do they answer you?

DAHN: Sometimes. But even when they don't, I know they are answering in their heads.

YITZCHOK: I suppose there are certain similarities.

DAHN: Yitzchok. You... you were a performance artist!

YITZCHOK: I was?

DAHN: Of sorts. You stood in front of an audience, you performed rituals. You spoke.

YITZCHOK: I was not an entertainer.

DAHN: No. But you raised questions for your listeners. And... you know what else? We both do it with our students too. So. No, it's no longer about beauty... or objects. I had to reject silence. Silence... is immoral. Especially in bad times. We need speech. My making art—or whatever you want to call it—it's a struggle... for truth.

YITZCHOK: I think I understand, but it's your own truth.

DAHN: Yes. It's my own truth. It's how I cope.

YITZCHOK: It's not God's truth.

DAHN: No. No. It's not God's truth. I'm afraid I don't have access to that.

YITZCHOK: You're obviously not a... religious man.

*(Dahn shakes his head)*

YITZCHOK: No. Well. Have you had much success?

DAHN: You mean with my art?

YITZCHOK: Yes.

DAHN: Well, I've been in a couple of shows of emerging artists.

YITZCHOK: Emerging. But you're 36.

DAHN: I've been emerging for a long time. Yitzchok, I know some of this is somewhat... bizarre for you. But, I still think you and I... have a lot in common.

#### INTERVAL FOUR

DAHN: Yitzchok. I want to tell you how happy I am to be talking to you.

YITZCHOK: You're a character.

DAHN: I realize some of the things I'm telling you, you're not exactly... thrilled about.

YITZCHOK: It's interesting. Hearing about you.

DAHN: Really?

YITZCHOK: Well you're certainly a man of principles.

DAHN: Thank you.

YITZCHOK: But it doesn't have to be so hard you know.

DAHN: What?

YITZCHOK: This search. For truth.

DAHN: Yeah?

YITZCHOK: For some things... there are answers.

DAHN: There are...?

YITZCHOK: Yes.

DAHN: Well. That's good to know...

YITZCHOK: Dahn. Do you... read the Bible?

DAHN: I was afraid you might ask me that. Yeah, I've read it.

YITZCHOK: You have.

DAHN: Yeah. Well, you know... not cover to cover, but... I got the gist of it.

YITZCHOK: And...

DAHN: It was good.

YITZCHOK: Good...?

DAHN: Yeah. I loved it. I love all the stories, you know. It's very wise. Very beautiful.

YITZCHOK: Which story did you like?

DAHN: Which story?

YITZCHOK: Yes, which one?

DAHN: Well. Let's see. I liked... I like the one about the whale and... the fellow.

YITZCHOK: Jonah.

DAHN: Yes. That's a fun one. And, well, Moses of course. Brilliant, brilliant man. I... I like the story of uh... David and Jonathan...

YITZCHOK: Yes?

DAHN: Yeah. I liked their... friendship.

YITZCHOK: They had a great love for each other.

DAHN: I know. Yitzchok, I have nothing against the Bible. It's just that... I read it as a book, just like any other book.

YITZCHOK: Well, it's... not just like any other book.

DAHN: I better tell you now, I kind of tend to... resist, you know, this kind of...

YITZCHOK: You say that you are interested in ethics, in justice...

DAHN: Yes.

YITZCHOK: Well, I have always found the Bible to be... quite a reliable reference.

DAHN: It has some good parts.

YITZCHOK: Well, like you said. You haven't read the whole thing.

DAHN: No, I haven't read the whole thing. But, I also know it has some parts I... uh, disagree with.

YITZCHOK: There's a long tradition of commentary and discussion there. There's nothing wrong with that.

DAHN: No, I don't mean the... nuances of interpretation. I mean the pronouncements.

YITZCHOK: Ah. Like no graven images.

DAHN: Well. Yeah. That's one.

YITZCHOK: But you yourself said you came to agree with it.

DAHN: I came to agree with it from my own perspective. I don't think it's what the Bible had in mind.

YITZCHOK: Maybe it did.

DAHN: What do you mean maybe it did?

YITZCHOK: Maybe somehow, the book knew. Maybe you resist the pronouncement, as you say, the strictness of the prohibition—which I know can be difficult—but in essence, you agree that it is right.

DAHN: Yitzchok. This is not a good road to go down.

YITZCHOK: Why? We are teachers. Let's have ourselves a lively debate.

DAHN: Look. I love the Bible. I love the tradition. OK? I have a lot of respect for it.

YITZCHOK: So...

DAHN: So, it also happens to contain a lot of stuff that... does not resonate with me.

YITZCHOK: Like what?

DAHN: Yitzchok...

YITZCHOK: Tell me. What? What do you disagree with?

DAHN: Shellfish!

YITZCHOK: Shellfish?

DAHN: Yes, shellfish. I like shellfish. I want to eat... scallops.

YITZCHOK: Why? Why do you want to eat scallops?

DAHN: I don't. I don't want to eat scallops. But if I wanted to, I want to be able to have them...

YITZCHOK: There are so many other things to eat...

DAHN: It's not the scallops, Yitzchok. It's... unilateral instructives that I don't respond to.

YITZCHOK: But this is part of the tradition.

DAHN: You see, *that's* what I don't like. 'We don't eat it because we don't eat it.' That makes no sense.

YITZCHOK: We don't eat it because it's a custom in the Torah.

DAHN: Which really began as a health tip...

YITZCHOK: Customs are not there to make your life in New York miserable. They're a symbol of one's faith.

DAHN: Yeah...

YITZCHOK: Yes!

DAHN: Well, what if you just can't keep them? What if there are things in the Torah which go directly against you—who you are...

YITZCHOK: Against me?

DAHN: Yeah, let's say. What if the Bible said, I don't know, what if it said that... all people who lived in Poland were sinners.

YITZCHOK: The Bible wouldn't just say such a thing.

DAHN: What if it did?

YITZCHOK: Then I would leave.

DAHN: You would just leave?

YITZCHOK: Yes.

DAHN: Because it was a symbol of faith...

YITZCHOK: Yes.

DAHN: What if you were too old to leave?

YITZCHOK: You mean, if I was sinning without being able to help it?

DAHN: Precisely.

YITZCHOK: I would have to accept my fate.

DAHN: Wow. That is amazing. Even if the prohibition made no sense.

YITZCHOK: Faith is not always logical. That's why it is faith.

DAHN: Yitzchok!

YITZCHOK: What.

DAHN: Yitzchok.

*(Little pause)*

I'm... gay.

YITZCHOK: What?

DAHN: I'm gay. I'm gay. I like men.

YITZCHOK: What do you mean? Of course you like men.

DAHN: No... I sleep with men.

YITZCHOK: You lie with men?

DAHN: Yes.

YITZCHOK: As you do with women?

DAHN: Well, not exactly as I do with women. Well, anyway I don't... lie with women. I only lie with men.

YITZCHOK: Why?

DAHN: Because... that's who I'm attracted to.

YITZCHOK: You're testing me on Leviticus...

DAHN: No.

YITZCHOK: You're serious.

DAHN: Yeah.

YITZCHOK: You know the Bible forbids it.

DAHN: I know. That's why I brought it up.

YITZCHOK: It forbids it in very clear terms. I don't understand. Why... why would you engage in something so... abominable? This is the outside influence...

DAHN: No, Yitzchok. It's not the lustful gentiles. It's me. It's who I am.

YITZCHOK: It's not who you are.

DAHN: Yitzchok. Don't tell me it's not who I am. It is who I am.

YITZCHOK: No. You are choosing to partake in something forbidden.

DAHN: You see! This is what I meant. What if it's something you are not choosing?

YITZCHOK: But you are!

DAHN: No. I'm not. *This is who I am.*

YITZCHOK: The Talmud says...

DAHN: No. Listen to what I'm saying...

YITZCHOK: The Talmud says... a man may not claim to commit a prohibited sexual act involuntarily, for there cannot be—forgive me—*arousal* against his will!

DAHN: Well, I beg to differ! There's plenty of arousal against his will. The only thing in your control is what you're gonna do with it.

YITZCHOK: So?

DAHN: So, I choose to act on my desire, yes. But I didn't choose my desire.

YITZCHOK: Every man chooses...

DAHN: His acts. Yes. Not his desire.

YITZCHOK: This is an act!

DAHN: No. That's where you're wrong. It's not just an act. It's who I am. Yes, certain acts—sinful acts—are a question of choice. Of course they are. But where there is no choice, there can be no sin. And if you didn't choose something, you're shouldn't be liable for punishment. That's where the Torah is wrong.

YITZCHOK: You can choose not to engage in abomination.

DAHN: The only thing I can choose is to suppress what is naturally there. And that is not a good idea.

YITZCHOK: Self-discipline?

DAHN: Self-denial. Yitzchok. Look, I understand how you feel. But you need to understand something. The truth is... there were no gay people when the Bible was written. Back then, it was considered... like you say, a behavior. When the Bible forbids it, in every case it refers to heterosexuals... "This is what the Caananites or the Egyptians do, with their cult prostitution, their ritual sex. This is not us!" But there is not a single case in the Tanach that deals with homosexual acts in the context of homosexual *love*! It doesn't say "you shall not love," it says "you shall not *lie*." The Torah was not talking about *me* because it had no awareness of the possibility that a person like me exists... someone whose identity, whose very essence is defined by his capacity to love men, and not merely to sleep with them. The Torah did not prohibit what it did not know.

YITZCHOK: The Torah... knew very well. That's why it prohibited it!

DAHN: OK... You want me to give you another example? OK. The Torah also condones slavery. Right? But we don't do that anymore. You wouldn't sell your daughters into slavery.

YITZCHOK: You can't compare these things.

DAHN: Why?

YITZCHOK: Because it's not the same thing. Bondage was a fact of life in the ancient world.

DAHN: Right, which no longer applies to today.

YITZCHOK: That's right.

DAHN: So why does the prohibition on loving other men apply.

YITZCHOK: Because, that still stands. It's unnatural. It goes against the laws of nature.

DAHN: That's simply untrue. Homosexuality is often observed in nature.

YITZCHOK: Well... When Noah took...

DAHN: Oh boy...

YITZCHOK: ...every kind of species into the ark... he took one male and one female.

DAHN: Yes, but evidently some of their little offspring turned out to be gay.

YITZCHOK: This is ridiculous.

DAHN: Well, it's true.

YITZCHOK: In any case, it defies the structure of the anatomies! They just... don't fit.

DAHN: I have found some very nice fits...

YITZCHOK: You're dishonoring me.

DAHN: Why? Why am I dishonoring you?

YITZCHOK: Because... this is vile!

DAHN: I'm not saying this to upset you. I'm telling you the truth.

YITZCHOK: Well. I don't want to hear it.

DAHN: Why?

YITZCHOK: Because! It's disgusting.

DAHN: Well, I'm sorry. The... aesthetics of sexuality is very subjective, you know. *I* happen to find it quite unappealing that the wife of a rabbi has to be bald. I mean, what the hell is that about?

YITZCHOK: What?!

DAHN: Yeah! What's that about?

YITZCHOK: It's a tradition. It's about humility. Something you don't practice.

DAHN: Fine. I find *that* disgusting. And not only to look at, but also... what it means. Taking away a woman's beauty for the sake of a man's ego...

YITZCHOK: Women are very happy to do it.

DAHN: Sure, once they're convinced of their second class status... properties of their husbands. And what's this horrible prayer, thanking god for not making us women?

What... I mean... do you know how horrible that is? Do you have any idea how... hurtful that might be?

YITZCHOK: So you're going to take apart the Bible now, according to you!

DAHN: Yeah, well. I want to know what you think of that?

YITZCHOK: What I think of it?

DAHN: Yeah.

YITZCHOK: Women do not take this personally. They understand it has no offensive intentions.

DAHN: Oh boy, Yitzchok... It's a terrible, terrible prayer, written by chauvinist, ancient... assholes! And what about the disabled? The Bible says these people are basically disposable. Well, I have news for you. Your eldest grand-daughter was in a wheel chair!

YITZCHOK: Alright! Things were understood differently in the Bible.

DAHN: That's right. That's all I'm saying! These codes need to be updated. We've survived all these centuries because we've been flexible. Times change. We no longer burn animals for sacrifice. Surely, you've trimmed your hair in your lifetime...

YITZCHOK: There are some things that cannot be... adjusted. What if every man were to say, that he is going to... be with other men because this is his 'identity?' Where would we be?

DAHN: Well that wouldn't be very good. But that's not the case. Gay people are a small minority. They don't threaten the continuation of the species. Look. I'm not asking that we all move to Sodom and Gomorrah. I'm just saying... allow for some variety. It's a minority. This is the compassionate thing to do. Why? Why are you willing to be flexible on other issues but not on this one?

YITZCHOK: I don't know...

DAHN: Yitzchok. Please. I have so much respect for you. I know you are a great scholar. I don't presume to criticize your knowledge of the Bible. But the one thing I'm saying is, you can't pick and choose certain things from the bible arbitrarily. It's not fair. It can have terrible consequences. Nothing strengthens prejudice more than having some way to ascribe it to God.

YITZCHOK: I am not here to question what He says. I did not invent it. It's His word.

DAHN: Yitzchok. It's 3000 years old! I'm not a cult prostitute. I'm an art teacher. And I'm your great-grandson. If He created all of us in his image, then... I'm a part of that equation. I swear to you, Yitzchok. This is not a choice. It just is. Yitzchok. We know about persecuted minorities...

YITZCHOK: It's not the same.

DAHN: Why? Why is it not the same?

YITZCHOK: We are an ancient, sacred people. We have been humiliated and hounded for thousands of years for no good reason.

DAHN: So have we.

YITZCHOK: Do not compare.

DAHN: Yitzchok. People are people. And oppression is oppression.

YITZCHOK: No.

DAHN: Yes. For 2000 thousand years we too have been burned at the stake, locked up in mental institutions. Excluded from our faith, excluded from our families. Is that not persecution? Having to direct all your energy toward hiding, toward lying, toward merely surviving in a... in a 'host culture?' It's the same. We didn't choose to be Jews, and you didn't deserve the kind of suffering...

*(Little pause)*

That's why when you quote from this book, it causes me a lot of pain. How am I supposed to accept it when the same book that tells me that I was created in His image, also tells me that my loving acts are punishable by death?

YITZCHOK: You are not killed for who you are.

DAHN: Wrong Yitzchok. Every day... we are bashed and beaten and killed. You and I know what it's like to be thought of as... intrinsically diabolical. Nothing in the world you say or do can change their minds. And nothing is more frightening. That, that is why I rejected silence, Yitzchok. Yitzchok?! Silence is complicity. If you don't stand up for them, why should they stand up for you?

YITZCHOK: Well, where were they?

DAHN: What?

YITZCHOK: Where were they, when it was time to stand up for us?

DAHN: Where were the gays? What are you talking about? They were in the concentration camps, along with the Jews.

YITZCHOK: Nonsense!

DAHN: It's true!

YITZCHOK: This is your propaganda!

DAHN: Ah!—What do you think, I'm making this up? Gays were exterminated too! It wasn't just our Holocaust!

YITZCHOK: Cover! Cover your mouth!

DAHN: You think only we suffered? They had it worse. They were ridiculed and tortured and raped.

YITZCHOK: Stop!

DAHN: That's right! The SS men would shove scalding hot iron rods up their asses!

YITZCHOK: Please stop this...

DAHN: We! We were the lowest of the low. We cleaned everybody else's shit. Even the other inmates were against us. The *Jewish* inmates.

YITZCHOK: This is a lie.

DAHN: No, it's true! Not very flattering for the Chosen People. No-one was treated with more contempt than gay men, out of everyone. The most rejected, the most hated, the first to die. If you wouldn't act to save them, then why the hell should anyone act to save you?

YITZCHOK: HOW DARE YOU? Who are you accusing? Do I need to listen to this? That you lie with other men? That you left your country? That you make... strange art? You obviously don't believe in God. And now you compare your... "friends" to us?! How would you have liked it if *you* were in those camps?!

DAHN: I would have been the first to go.

YITZCHOK: You would have been the first... Well let me tell you...

*(Dahn grabs the remote and pauses the tape)*

DAHN: Oh, shut the fuck up!

*(Suspended moment with image of great-grandfather frozen on Dahn's chest.*

*Once he has calmed himself, Dahn slowly unpauses the tape)*

YITZCHOK: Why did you pause me?

DAHN: I wanted to talk to you because I thought we had things in common. But you don't get it. In your eyes, I'm some godless, image-making, sodomite! Why? You're a rabbi. You're supposed to be wise and learned. A judge? If *you* don't stand up for me, who will? Please. You... you were a courageous man, you were so brave. Please. Stand up for what's right. Reject the silence, Yitzchok.

## PART II

*A short interlude of the same music plays while house lights fade to black. Family portrait fades in. For Part II, a switch takes place: the great-grandfather is now present on stage, while video of Dahn is now projected on the older man's chest.*

*Yitzchok takes hold of the remote and presses "PLAY."*

## INTERVAL FIVE

YITZCHOK: It's not nice to yell at the dead...

DAHN: Please... forgive me.

YITZCHOK: Children always have surprises for you. And they always want you to understand and accept immediately. Well. It's not easy for me. I'm sure it took even for you some time to adjust...

DAHN: You know what? You're absolutely right.

YITZCHOK: Yes. Well, I do not agree with it. But, out of curiosity, because... you are my great-grandson. I would like to ask you some questions.

DAHN: OK.

YITZCHOK: When...? How old were you when you realized this... "uniqueness?"

DAHN: About... five.

YITZCHOK: Five?

DAHN: Well, I mean, I didn't know what it meant. I didn't have a word for it. But I knew something was different.

YITZCHOK: If you say that it isn't a choice—which I don't believe—but if you say it isn't... then what caused it?

DAHN: No one really knows for sure. I stopped trying to figure *that* out a long time ago.

YITZCHOK: Why do you say that?

DAHN: Waste of energy. I mean, does it really matter? Even if I could tell you, it wouldn't change the fact that... nature is variant. Lots of different things, not always explainable. I know you believe in answers, but I've had to learn to live without some. Learned just to accept. It's like being Jewish. A small portion of the population are, and the rest are not.

YITZCHOK: I really wish you would stop making these analogies.

DAHN: Yitzchok, it's just the concept of a minority...

YITZCHOK: Well, then... how... when did you...? Forgive, but I wish to ask, how did you finally... act on these urges?

DAHN: Well...

YITZCHOK: I don't need to know the details, but... where, where, how did you find... like-minded... men.

DAHN: Well, I didn't have to look very far. Adolescent boys do all sorts of things together, you know. Eventually, most everybody went their separate ways, with girlfriends and so forth. But I didn't.

YITZCHOK: Where were you at this point?

DAHN: Back in Israel. We lived in Tel Aviv, right on the beach. And spread out over the cliffs was a park. Independence Park. It was quite notorious. I knew what went on there at night because my family would always makes jokes about it. One day, I guess I was about 14, maybe 15, I decided... it was time. It took a lot of courage to go in there, but... the pull was too great. I'll never forget that first night, thinking how unbelievably beautiful it was. Seeing the ocean *at night* for the first time was like... a rite of passage... It was perfect. Moonlit. Sounds of warm waves breaking. This ravishing scent of pink and mauve and red flowers—I've never seen since. And from everywhere, the sound of laughter and singing! It was a party in there. Beautiful Israelis boys, college students, fathers, soldiers on leave, and tourists from everywhere. It was 1980. That night, I had my first experience... with a grown man. He came right up to me in the dark. He smiled, sensed I was new, and scared. Gorgeous. A Palestinian. He asked me if I wanted to go for a walk. Gave me gum. I followed him into a secret little cemetery, half way down the ravine. I remember swimming and playing there as a boy, but never knew this cemetery existed. It was from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Not big. Maybe 20 or 30 graves. On one of those graves was my first sexual experience. I apologized to the dead.

*(Pause)*

He was very nice to me. Afterwards, we climbed onto a rock, perched high above, and watched the ocean at night. And I cried. A lot. I cried because I was scared out of my mind. I didn't want to be doing this type of thing. I was so afraid of the ostracizing and the pain that I knew was ahead. Of course I didn't know the half of it. And I was so broken-hearted thinking of my parents who would one day need to know. This lovely Palestinian boy, couldn't have been more than 19. He put his arm around me, and in his best Hebrew, he said, "Never cry. Never cry. This is who you are..." He kept saying it over and over, and I kept crying and crying. Until I stopped. And when I did, I began to realize, this is not going to be easy. I'm gonna need to be very strong.

YITZCHOK: Did you tell anyone?

DAHN: Eventually... I told one friend. Then another. And you know what? Everywhere I went, no matter who I told—from the Palestinian guy that night, to my friends, to the one psychiatrist I took myself to once when I was 17—everywhere, I was met with understanding. When I finally told my parents, do you know what they said?

YITZCHOK: I can't imagine.

DAHN: Well... they told me that when they got married, they had made a vow. They agreed that they would continue to love each other and stay together as a family, no matter how their children turned out. Disabled, mentally ill, whatever. They'd stick it out and do their best. And you know what they said to me? They said "we never thought of 'gay.'" They had thought of everything, but never of this. You see, they had the right attitude, it's just that their... 'list' needed to be expanded. And it was.

*(Pause)*

YITZCHOK: And what about... a family?

DAHN: Sometimes I think I would have made a good father. Other times, I have grave doubts. I guess like everyone. But... I don't think it'll happen in this life time. I have other projects.

YITZCHOK: And you don't regret that?

DAHN: No. I know that sounds horrible to you. But I don't. Yitzchok. I love being gay. I know you don't like it when I compare but, like being Jewish: difficult, but I would never change it.

*(Little pause)*

The only thing I would change is what happened afterwards.

## INTERVAL SIX

DAHN: In those years when I started going to the park, something terrible was coming. But I didn't know it. We would have a few fun years, and then it would be over. Boys... started to get sick. No one knew what it was. And there was nothing you could do. Suddenly, in the middle of our very modern lives, it was the Middle Ages. A plague. Visited mostly on us.

YITZCHOK: What do you mean? What happened?

DAHN: It wasn't good. News reports. More deaths. With every picture I saw of the strange lesions and the emaciated bodies, all I could think was, this is me. I'm the person on the news. And that's how it was, for the next 20 years. My life consisted of... standing on a train track, watching the train speeding towards me...

YITZCHOK: You were very young.

DAHN: I would wake up early in the morning to go to the doctor. They would test me. They didn't really know what they were testing you for, so they tested you for everything, twelve needles at a time. I would try to cover up the marks on the way to school. I was 17. And all I kept thinking was, fuck. I'm gonna die young.

YITZCHOK: Why, why if this existed would you take risks?

DAHN: I was 17. This is what it means to be at the wrong place, at the wrong time.

YITZCHOK: This is quite unbelievable. But you're still here.

DAHN: Yeah...

YITZCHOK: So? You were one of the lucky ones.

DAHN: Yeah. I... I was the caretaker. The strong one. That's funny. There when friends got bad news. At the hospitals. The endless visits. Endless flowers. Always the same silence at their bedside. Lying, saying they would be OK. Joking with the nurses, giving them their pills that I prayed to God I would never have to take. When I was younger, I never understood why my mother would visit sick people she didn't know. Eventually, that's all I did. And then. I was the eulogizer...

*(Little pause)*

Something so unnatural about a young man dying. Especially in summer. But, that was my role. And I took it on.

YITZCHOK: What? Good heavens. What caused it?

DAHN *(smiles)*: Hmm. A virus. Poor little virus... trying to survive. Had every right to. Unfortunately, it just wasn't compatible with human life. Anyway. You can imagine what was said.

YITZCHOK: Yes. I can.

DAHN: Terrible things. And you know what, that's fine. But the meanest ones were also the ones in power. And they could decide whether they were going to help us or not. And they decided 'Not.' They decided to ignore, to turn away...

YITZCHOK: You can understand why...

DAHN: Because they were ignorant! Because we didn't matter.

YITZCHOK: They probably saw it as... a consequence of...

DAHN: What?--punishment? Is that what you think?

YITZCHOK: I can't answer that.

DAHN: Try.

YITZCHOK: I have told you, it goes against his will. But so does abandoning the sick. In any event, I cannot presume to know God's judgment.

DAHN: Well, irrespective of "God's judgment," governments have an obligation to care for their citizens. They basically left us alone, to die. So... you know what we did? We became very angry. We decided to take matters into our own hands.

YITZCHOK: What do you mean into your own hands?

DAHN: When I wasn't going to hospitals or funerals, I was on the street, shouting, demonstrating, demanding action. There was injustice, and it had to be fought. Mean politicians. Greedy pharmaceutical companies. Bureaucrats. Nobody gave a shit. And I was genuinely shocked. *(Laughs.)* That's when I stopped painting. Activism, Yitzchok. Resistance. It's another thing we have in common.

YITZCHOK: Why do you say that?

DAHN: Well I... kind of... modeled myself after you.

YITZCHOK: After me?

DAHN: Yes. Resistance... at all costs. In the end, it kind of worked. You were my... inspiration.

YITZCHOK: Well. I think yours was a very different situation. With our... adversaries, we couldn't shout and run in the streets. Everything had to be very careful, through reasoning, and showing humility.

DAHN: But you fought. You fought back.

YITZCHOK: Listen. Over the years, there were many incidents. Too many to count. And in most cases, maybe in all, we had done nothing wrong. But we always managed to keep

things under control, not to let their anger get out of hand... by... appeasing them, reassuring them that we indeed knew our place. I wouldn't call it resistance.

DAHN: It was psychological resistance.

YITZCHOK: If you wish.

DAHN: But what about later?

YITZCHOK: Well... What happened later made the Poles seem quite a bit more reasonable...

*(Yitzchok loses thought)*

DAHN: Yitzchok.

YITZCHOK: Yes...

DAHN: What happened? Tell me.

YITZCHOK: Well, I wasn't a young man like you. I was 66 by the time they came. And... as you will discover—if you haven't already—the spirit of resistance... fades. But, we knew the situation wasn't good, so we organized.

DAHN: What, what did you do?

YITZCHOK: Well. We never expected them to come so fast. They were already in Ostrova by September. A few days later... they started with the violence...

DAHN: That's when you left?

YITZCHOK: When I heard what had happened in the forest, that was it. We packed what we could, and yes, we left.

DAHN: To Bialystok.

YITZCHOK: That's where the ghetto was. We knew sooner or later we would have to go there. It was quite big and, at least we could be with the others, so we went... of our own accord.

DAHN: Everyone went?

YITZCHOK: Yes. Well, except your grandmother and her two sisters of course—they were gone already thankfully. But yes, everyone else. Once we arrived in the ghetto, we heard what had happened to those who did not leave, so...

DAHN: What was the ghetto like?

YITZCHOK: Dahn, why do you want to hear this?

DAHN: I don't know. Because it's important for me to know.

YITZCHOK: Well. For one thing, there was a plague. Several different plagues. And terrible hunger. And no, there was no government help. I too read many eulogies. But... we were lucky. Most people got sick because they lived in very small quarters, but I knew a rabbi in Bialystok, so we lived with him. Me and Rueven and Yisroel, and the rabbi and his three sons in one room, and Rochel and the rabbi's wife and all the daughters in another.

DAHN: What did you do? I mean, what did you do... during the day?

YITZCHOK: Not very much. We tried to continue on. Mostly we were busy knowing where everyone was at any given point. Who left the room, where they went, when they would come back. And we tried our best to keep up morale. We would have Shabbat, we celebrated the children's birthdays. We would joke. We called it 'the kingdom...' Everyone called it that. They would come and go, the Germans. But when they were there, you had to work. Everybody had to work. At night, we would meet.

DAHN: Secret meetings?

YITZCHOK: Yes...

DAHN: What about?

YITZCHOK: About... what to do and what not to do. It created a lot of tension between us. Unfortunately, not everybody was... as afraid as they should have been. We begged people not to gather around the gates, but there were always those who wouldn't listen. They wouldn't leave, even when the Germans would chase them off. Also, you had to wear the badge in the proper way. And always, always, someone would forget. One man would forget it in the front, the next would forget it in the back.

*(Yitzchok shakes his head)*

And there was a curfew. One had to go to bed at 9 o'clock. But several times, people went out for a walk after the curfew, as though they were on vacation. This brought very bad consequences. One night a whole house was lit up for a celebration after 9 o'clock.

DAHN: What happened?

YITZCHOK: They shot through the windows. For ten minutes. So... no. There was not much resistance. You did what you could, and most of it was... out of your control.

DAHN: Why... why didn't you leave, Yitzchok?

YITZCHOK: Ohhh... Where? Where was I going to go? It was impossible by that point.

DAHN: No, I mean earlier?

YITZCHOK: That is a good question. Had I been more of... the pessimistic type, I suppose I would have made more of an effort before. But, by then it was too late. In any event, I was too old to leave.

DAHN: Well. But you resisted... at the end.

YITZCHOK: How so?

DAHN: In the synagogue.

YITZCHOK: Resisted...? They came back so much more ruthless than before. It was quite hopeless.

DAHN: What happened at the end, Yitzchok?

YITZCHOK: We got used to it. We had been there for almost 2 years. We thought, 'We can do this,' we'll just stay here and abide by the regulations and wait until it's all over. The joke was, who would go to New York and who would go to Hollywood, after it was over. If you chose New York, it meant you wanted to be a serious business man, and if you chose Hollywood, well, you wanted to be a star. Anyway, that day, started out like any normal day. Depressing. But nothing out of the ordinary. Until sometime in the middle of the day, around 1:00 o'clock, everyone started running around outside. It was very unusual because everyone was out that day. It was just me and the rabbi. So we slowly made our way downstairs to see what all the fuss was about. And when we got to the street... it was terrible. They were coming back, by the hundreds. Army cars, guns, everything. They started beating people in the streets, hitting women with their rifles—yelling. The rabbi began to shout and hold his head. So I put his arm in mine and started the climb back up the stairs. But we didn't get very far. They stormed the building, maybe ten of them. They shouted very loudly and kicked us, behind the knees, so we would fall down. This poor man began to plead... My whole life, whenever I thought of the enemy, whenever I pictured myself in danger, I always imagined I could reason my way out of it, somehow show them that I am human, like them. But when they arrived on that day, it was much beyond... reason.

DAHN: What did you do?

YITZCHOK: As it was actually happening, I realized, I did not *want* to reason with them. I did not want to give them the satisfaction. When you are being hit, you are... stunned into silence.

DAHN: Jesus. Where did they take you?

YITZCHOK: They took everyone to the Great Synagogue.

DAHN: I... I thought you were already there.

YITZCHOK: No. They took us there. From every street, they marched us down there. Yelling, always yelling. I had lost the rabbi along the way, so we just continued to walk, and walk, until the synagogue came into view. It was Friday, and I realized, this was it. We had a good two years. The next place we would go would not be good. They filed us in. Pushing. Their presence inside the synagogue was obscene... shouting in German. Inside it was pandemonium. People charging everywhere, tripping over each other, looking for their families. I too ran, looking for Rochel, for the children. I figured they were here somewhere, but I couldn't find anyone.

DAHN: Yitzchok. This is not what they told me.

YITZCHOK: It isn't?

DAHN: No. They told me you were there already. They said it was your congregation and that you were already leading services when they came.

YITZCHOK: I wasn't leading services. I wasn't leading anything...

DAHN: They said it was barely a minyan...

YITZCHOK: What are you saying?—There were at least a thousand people in there. At least. Maybe twice that much. And I was waiting for a roll call, for a division into groups, something. But it never came. They just rounded everybody in, and began to leave. Then... there was an inexplicable moment of silence. And we could hear them starting to barricade the doors from outside. People started running to the door, pounding. I... looked up. And I remember thinking, what a beautiful building. It had stood there for 400 years. The largest wooden synagogue in Eastern Europe, right here in Bialystok. It had one of the most beautiful Torahs in all of Poland. And then they set us on fire. Some started smashing the windows and jumping out, but we could hear them being shot immediately. Others ran to the yetziah, where the smoke was thickest, which seemed a good idea—one could suffocate more quickly. A few young boys tried to put the fire out... And someone ran to get the Torah and, then I must have passed out...

DAHN: Yitzchok. That's... that's not what they told me. They told me... they said that they had ordered you to vacate the synagogue and that you refused, that you refused to leave the synagogue!

YITZCHOK: No...

DAHN: But that's what they said...

YITZCHOK: They said it for you.

DAHN (*very slowly processing*): I... I just always... I thought you chose to stay. I've grown up my whole life with this image of you... burning. Defiant...

YITZCHOK: Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you. I passed out. My body burnt afterwards.

DAHN (lost in thought): ...holed up in there, like the Macabees...

YITZCHOK: I did think... God has sent fire down from the heavens many times.

Sometimes to show his wrath and jealousy, other times to test the faithful, but also, in Isaiah, he says, "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through

the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.” A shining light, to lead and guide, and protect his children. And... sometimes, though not very often, God sends fire, great unquenchable fire, to reveal himself.

DAHNS (*astounded*): Which... which one was it?

YITZCHOK: It was none of these things.

## INTERVAL SEVEN

YITZCHOK: That’s what happened.

DAHNS: Oh man... I’m sorry. I’m... I just need some time to digest all of this.

YITZCHOK: Yes...

DAHNS: So... it wasn’t your congregation.

YITZCHOK: Dahn. Of course it wasn’t my congregation. We had left Ostrova two years earlier.

DAHNS: Right. Of course. And there were a thousand people inside the synagogue...

YITZCHOK: At least. Probably many more.

DAHNS: Holocaust. Literally.

YITZCHOK: What do you mean?

DAHNS: Ancient Greek. Means sacrifice by fire.

*(Little pause)*

Why? Why were you sacrificed by fire?

YITZCHOK: Sacrificed? ...I’m not certain.

DAHNS: What do you think? Yitzchok. Please. Explain it to me.

YITZCHOK: I’m afraid I can’t.

DAHNS: Please. What about the answers. You said answers. Explain it to me...

YITZCHOK: To some things. Not to everything.

DAHNS: Well, if he wasn’t shining a light on you, or testing you... what was he doing?

YITZCHOK: I don’t know.

DAHNS: You see. This. This is what I don’t get.

YITZCHOK: I cannot answer you because—I don’t know.

DAHNS: Because you can’t presume to know God’s will...

YITZCHOK: God’s ways are... mysterious. We have to live with that mystery.

DAHNS: But, what... what’s your best guess?

YITZCHOK: I don’t guess. I accept.

DAHNS: Wow.

YITZCHOK: Yes...

DAHNS: Amazing. Even with all the evidence to the contrary. I... I just don’t understand.

YITZCHOK: I don’t understand either. I would have preferred if it didn’t happen. But it’s not for you or me to understand.

DAHNS: He let you down.

YITZCHOK: No...

DAHNS: But he let it happen. Tell me! I beg you!

YITZCHOK: Just like you don’t have answers for certain things. You just accept. This is faith. You accept what you do not understand. Especially when you do not understand...

you don't just abandon everything. Faith is not something that you are simply given. It's something you struggle with.

DAHN: Even after this.

YITZCHOK: Especially after this.

DAHN: Yitzchok. I understand a person needs faith. Faith, hope. Whatever. And as deceitful as it is, it carries us to the bitter end—I understand that. But, you're dead. He can't do anything to you now. Let's just discuss this rationally...

YITZCHOK: Rationally? So that you can conclude what?

DAHN: So that I can ask you, with all due respect in the world to you, Yitzchok. Why? Why, if he exists, would he do this to you? To your children?

YITZCHOK: He didn't do this. God is not someone you turn to to explain *this*. God is... something... within you... that allows you to forgive the terrible deeds of other men.

There, on that day, there were only people. Behaving monstrously.

DAHN: And he was absent!

YITZCHOK: God is not a policeman. He had nothing to do with their... infatuation with killing.

DAHN: But he was absent?

YITZCHOK: In *them*. In them he was absent.

DAHN: You know what I think? I think God is for people who can't accept man's evil but ultimately meaningless acts. I understand it, but...

YITZCHOK: That is quite arrogant.

DAHN: No.

YITZCHOK: Yes. You're basically discrediting... my life.

DAHN: No, Yitzchok. You, you lived a beautiful life. Goodness. And charity.

Teaching... helping. That was you. You want to give the credit to someone else, fine! But it was you. It was all you.

YITZCHOK: You're doing the worst thing in the world, Dahn. You're judging.

DAHN: I'm not judging. Please. Who am I to judge? I just find it so unbearable... because... if you believe, you necessarily must be terribly disappointed. That's what kills me.

YITZCHOK: Again, you have the logic of a Godless man... looking to blame. It is *because* I believe, that I am able to forgive what I cannot excuse.

DAHN (*searching*): You know what? Maybe you're right? What do I know? I've been wrong about so many other things. I mean, look at you. The composure, the peace that you're at. I've given it thought over the years. Don't think that I haven't. I've often thought how much easier it would be, if I could leave the explaining of all the suffering, all the holocausts, to some greater force. But I can't. I've tried. I can't. I can't do it. It must be a gift, to believe. Like a talent that I... just don't have.

YITZCHOK: I don't think it's appropriate.

DAHN: What?

YITZCHOK: For you to use the word.

DAHN: What word?

YITZCHOK: Holocaust.

DAHN: Why not?

YITZCHOK: Because it's... inappropriate.

DAHN: Why is it inappropriate?

YITZCHOK: Because! Not everything bad that happens is a Holocaust. It should be used with... great restraint.

DAHN: I use it with the utmost care.

YITZCHOK: There are other words you can use.

DAHN: But not this one...?

YITZCHOK: That's right.

DAHN: Ahh...

YITZCHOK: I don't think you should use the term to describe... natural catastrophes.

DAHN: What natural catastrophes?

YITZCHOK: The... illnesses of your friends.

DAHN: Why would you say such a thing?

YITZCHOK: I think I've been very understanding. I've listened to your stories, which are not easy to listen to. I tried not to judge. But I'm afraid I must draw the line here and ask you not... *not* to compare. I think it's very difficult, the times you live in, but...

DAHN: Oh, you're fucking kidding!

YITZCHOK: You cannot compare... your... mysterious outbreak to intentional human slaughter!

DAHN: My God. You weren't listening. I'm not saying... the disease is a holocaust. I'm saying it's the lack of a response, all the useless suffering—that's the holocaust. My holocaust!

YITZCHOK: There's a difference!

DAHN: Why? Why? What does it matter what kind of human suffering it is? It's both official, government-sanctioned murder.

YITZCHOK: I regret *all* human suffering. But it's not the same.

DAHN: Why? Why is it not the same?

YITZCHOK: Because it isn't!

DAHN: Oh man. In the end, even you. Ranking tragedies? Ranking?

YITZCHOK: They didn't kill you!

DAHN: Yes, yes they did!

YITZCHOK: They didn't burn you.

*(Pause)*

DAHN: No. No... They didn't burn me.

*(Longer pause)*

I've. I've been very selfish. Huh? Very self-absorbed. You're right. For years, I've just been... enjoying the uneventful luxury of my life. Completely ambivalent. Towards you. Toward the rest of the family. For so long, I couldn't relate to it. I wouldn't. It was too much. And it was easy, thanks to the... benevolent conspiracy of silence that was my childhood. Surrounded by all these people who made the journey to hell, and returned—never saying a word. So, I ignored it. Because who was I? They looked at me with disdain. Who was I? Some latter-day offspring. Someone born after the end of history. Someone who could never know. Well. It was difficult... to live after the end of history. Nothing but unspeakable, incomprehensible events which you were spared. Nothing, except guilt and numbness and ambivalence, about having missed it. So, I did, I kept myself detached. From your story, from everybody else's story. Because God knows I had other issues to deal with. But, once I got my very own personal tragedy, everything

just kind of... exploded. The barriers came down. The more destroyed I was, the more... emotional room I suddenly had to deal with other people's tragedies. Yours.

*(Pause.)*

You see, Yitzchok. I've... I've had a lump in my throat most of my life. And, no matter how much I tried... to swallow, it was always there. You're right. Not a holocaust. Just... loss. Just a steady stream of loss. Of everything. People. Family. Friends. Lovers. Careers. Places. Country. Language. All. Lost. So I just started to live...in an unbearable abstraction—of memories, of contingencies. Times and places and experiences that have eluded me. Never really belonging anywhere. Always ready to flee. And then, one day, quite unexpectedly, I turned a corner. And there he was. Not necessarily waiting for me, but I was the one who turned the corner. And for the very first time, I *was* in the right place, at the right time. How many times in your life does that happen? Once, if you're lucky. For me it felt like coming home. Safe. After all the the terror, the disappointment...the fatigue of all those dress-rehearsal relationships. Would we be the lucky ones? So... we held each other tight. And it was lovely. You see, I always knew it would be over when I found the person who had the one quality I cherish more than anything. Pete had that quality. It was unmitigated kindness. He was so wonderful in so many ways. Such a charmer. Made me laugh till I was on the floor. But it was his kindness, his thoughtfulness. The gentleness and care that he reserved for his nieces and nephews... It overwhelmed me.

*(Pause)*

We had such a great time. We freed each other, freed all that excitement about life that had been beaten down. But now, we were flying. Being in love is such an incredible thing. It really is so amazing. This person that you love so much, you could die—actually says he loves you back. We'd be sitting in a restaurant and he would just turn to the next table and say, "You know, I'd been in relationships before, but I was really always alone... until now," and people would just nod and smile. One night, while we were making love, he started to cry and plead with me, "I want to make you so happy," he said, "Please, let me succeed." Please. Let me succeed. And I thought, yes, I'll let you succeed. I should be so lucky.

*(Pause)*

Seven months. And then he got sick. Very sick. I took him to the emergency room. "You're very sick, Mr. Fielding," they said. "We're going to admit you." Admit? All the emergency room visits I ever had always ended with... going home, feeling like I'd wasted everybody's time. I'd never heard of being admitted. But we were. And in the space of a few days, it was amazing. I didn't recognize him. The proportions of his face started to change. His eyes became too big for his head. Every once in a while, when he was lucid enough, he would say, "Please. Let's leave. I want to go now." One particularly long night, I just collapsed into a chair in the waiting room and fell asleep. Around 3 o'clock in the morning, I was startled awake by the nurse, shaking my shoulder. "Come. Quick." When I turned the corner, there were at least... 8 or 10 people around him. One doctor vigorously pumping his chest. 'Pete, what the fuck are you doing? Stop it.' And they just kept pumping and talking amongst themselves. 'Oh be careful.' I thought. 'He's not a big guy. He's easily breakable.' And after about 45 minutes or so, the young intern came out and said, matter of factly, "I'm sorry." "I'm sorry."

*(Little pause)*

“I’m sorry.” I heard her. But I thought she was wrong. I thought they would fix him, cause he was 37. Family members of *other* patients started coming over. I guess they had been watching the whole thing unfold all night.

*(Little pause)*

How could he die, just like that? He was just alive a few hours ago? I had to see. So I went in. And I approached the bed, his body looked so tired. Like it was hard work dying. I just sat and looked at him, like I did when he was sleeping. I said some things, but I can’t remember what. I took his glasses and put them in my pocket and on the way out, I asked the nurses not to take his body away, to just leave him in the room, so that when the brothers came, they could just sort of see him sleeping. And then I left.

*(Pause)*

What happened afterwards with his family was much worse. Anyway. I cried every day for a year. And for the first time in my life, I kind of understood this desperate need to believe that they’re not just gone. That it wasn’t just... bad luck. That there’s a reason why they had to leave. That they’re up there, somewhere, watching you, waiting for you to join them. All that shit. So I would speak to him. And it comforted me. It really did.

*(Little pause)*

So. I understand... the need. But I don’t buy it. Cause... if God was there, he would know that there was already enough pain, and surely he wouldn’t object to my having this... small measure of happiness. Not a lot, just... a little. A little longer than seven months. You see? Why so short?

*(Little pause)*

That’s when I suddenly started to understand the deep, slow pain... of everybody else. Including you. Especially you. And at my worst moments, I would think, I’ll speak to Yitzchok. He’ll understand. I was kind of holding out hope that you would be... the link. I felt we were kindred spirits. I think we are. That’s why I wanted to speak with you. Nothing, I know, Yitzchok, can ever compare to what happened to you. If we compare, I’ll always lose. You’re right, they didn’t burn me. I’m here.

## INTERVAL EIGHT

YITZCHOK: Dahn. I... ah... I don’t know what to say. I, I really... can’t imagine. I loved my wife so much. I... I wouldn’t have been able to bear such a thing. An unfulfilled soul is the most egregious fate. Who knows what happiness awaited...right? Who knows... what gifts they would have brought. All of them. The ones who jumped out of the windows. My children. Your uncle.

*(Little pause)*

Pete.

DAHNS: Yitzchok. Thank you.

YITZCHOK: No... No. At the moment I feel like I don’t know very much. You are a very courageous man. And you’re alive!

DAHNS: Yes. I am. You know why? Because people saw to it. Just a few people, stuck with me, helped me. The ironic thing about your partner dying is that... they’re really the main person who would otherwise help you get through such an experience, who would care enough. But, of course, they’re unavailable. Thankfully, there were others.

YITZCHOK: Well. Bless them.

DAHN: Yitzchok. You know, they tried to get you out.

YITZCHOK: I know.

DAHN: I read all the letters.

YITZCHOK: Yes. They tried very hard. It was just... bad timing.

DAHN: Do you want me to tell you what happened?

YITZCHOK: Yes. Slowly.

DAHN: Yitzchok. Everybody else was hiding. It was only you in the synagogue.

YITZCHOK: It was?

DAHN: Yes.

YITZCHOK: What happened to everyone?

DAHN: Your wife died peacefully, of natural causes. I swear, Yitzchok. It's true. At least that's what they told me. Everyone continued to live in the ghetto, but they were separated now and, eventually... Well. Hadasah and Freidle, I believe, died of a fever. And... the next year, the rest were taken to Treblinka.

YITZCHOK (*grieving*): Do you know... if they died together?

DAHN: I don't know. I don't know. I just know that Rueven and Shifra did not go. They stayed in hiding and helped organize an uprising.

YITZCHOK: An uprising?

DAHN: Yeah. It was very big, and very courageous. And Shifra and Rueven helped plan it. I think. They... ah, were overpowered. But they died very heroically. After that, the ghetto vanished.

YITZCHOK: I see.

*(Yitzchok mourns the loss of his children)*

Are there... tombstones?

DAHN: In Israel. For everyone.

YITZCHOK: Funny. I lived in Poland my whole life. And I'm buried somewhere I've never been.

DAHN: Yeah, well. It was impossible in Poland. They kept digging up the graves, searching for gold. They would use the headstones to pave side streets... with the Hebrew letters still visible. So. No. The graves are where they should be.

YITZCHOK: How many of us did he manage to kill?

DAHN: Many.

YITZCHOK: Tens of thousands?

DAHN: Yeah.

YITZCHOK: How. How do you kill so many people?

DAHN: With great tenacity. A young German once told me, in bed—he said, “It's terrible what happened to your people in my country. But please remember,” he said, “there is evil in all our hearts. The Germans were just organized...” Amazing. If only he'd have been accepted to art school, to channel his pathologies into his painting, like all other art students.

YITZCHOK: He didn't want to create. He wanted to destroy. He was killed?

DAHN: Killed himself.

YITZCHOK: Hmm.

DAHN: Who? Who are these horrible people of history, Yitzchok?

YITZCHOK: Hmm. They ask the same thing about us.

DAHN: Sometimes, when I look over my class list and see the German names, I'll look up at them, and imagine they are looking at me, strangely. For a moment... I shudder. They *were* accepted into art school, and they're now devoting their lives... to beauty. And I can't help wondering, whose grandchildren and great-grandchildren might they be? Who am I teaching?

YITZCHOK: It would have been a very different experience to teach in Israel...

DAHN: Yes. It would have...

YITZCHOK: Well. As long as you're there... teach the ones you have.

DAHN: Yeah.

YITZCHOK: Any teaching, to anyone... is good, no?

DAHN: They want to make pretty things, but I end up teaching them about history and social justice—in the guise of art.

YITZCHOK: Hmm... Just be careful not to upset the administrators. Always a nice a balance. And humility.

DAHN: Yes...

YITZCHOK: Mine was a bad world. poisonous. Yes. You come from a sad people... with a sad history. Never forget. But... go! Teach! I see you've suffered. You have terrible ghosts. Mourn them. But eventually, you must let them go. The Koran says, and very wisely, "The ink of the scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr." You teach. And let the dead alone.

DAHN: I do both Yitzchok. I mourn as I teach. There's... a verse. From the Bible. That I love. I think from Deuteronomy. It says, "Only guard yourself and guard your soul carefully, lest you forget the things your eyes saw..."

YITZCHOK (*joining in, simultaneously*): "...and lest these things depart your heart all the days of your life. And you shall make them known to your children, and to your children's children." Well. For you, not *your* children, but... other children.

DAHN: You know. I've never used my middle name. Unlike here in America, we don't really use our middle names in Israel. Maybe because they're too painful. But, mine is Yitzchok. I love it. Not only because I'm named after you, but because of what it means. 'Will laugh...' Dahn Yitzchok. 'Dahn Will Laugh.' It's kinda corny.

*(Little pause)*

Everything ends with me Yitzchok. The only thing I will leave behind is a little bit of art. And it will always bear your name. No matter what's happened, I still have this never-ending desire to make things... to look, to listen. To tell. It always excites me. I'm still... curious. But, more important... there's a greater force that guides me. You know what it is, Yitzchok, in the end?

YITZCHOK: What?

DAHN: Compassion. Many people were unable to offer it to me. Or to you. But, fortunately, a few did. And it was just enough.

YITZCHOK: You know what I think? I think God *was* there. That in the worst possible moment, people still show each other great kindness, hold each other's hand... shield one another. Faith is compassion.

DAHN: Compassion...

*Yitzchok nods, then slowly removes hat and puts it in his lap. Video image of Dahn fades to black. Slide fades to black.*

### Construction of Signifiers and Analysis

In this section, I discuss the construction of signifiers within the performance, and their intended and possible meanings. This analysis will serve to demonstrate the ways in which the performance corroborates my first theoretical claim, that *identity is performative*.

One could imagine adapting *Murmurs and Incantations* to the theatre as a two-character play. From a purely narrative/story-telling standpoint, the material represents a rather solid dramatic situation. However, in constructing this performance, my aim was to create and sustain conflict, not for the traditional theatrical purpose of propelling the action toward resolution, but rather, to explore conflict in itself as a signifier for the wrestling with identity. Because of the short-circuited nature of the conflict, a conflict with(in) the self, it is my hope that the conversation is understood as a metaphor for a delirious encounter with one's history, cultural memory, and ghosts—a few component parts of identity for which the progenitor is merely a sign.

The performance thus expands and questions the very concept of identity. The essential contradiction of having the performer speak as both personalities renders the search for identity elusive and paradox-filled. In *Murmurs and Incantations*, identity is none other than *conflict performed*. The conflict—driven by the two men's different values and beliefs, as expressed in their ideas about art, faith, and sexuality, and as witnessed by their inevitable clash in comparing tragedies—is understood as the performer's inner struggle in exploring, situating and coming to terms with a fractured and unresolved self.

To perform that inner conflict, I resort to the liminal, dialogic form that would allow me to stage it: the interview. As mentioned earlier, actual two-person interviews already occupy a liminal, rupturing space in that they represent a form of reflective time-out from daily life, in that they resist classification as either authentic or fabricated event, and in that they are, structurally, a meeting-place threshold. In *Murmurs and Incantations*, I utilize a corrupted interview form to allow me, in the words of Charles Garoian (1999), to “expand the parameters of the liminal” so that I may “dwell in its polemical space” (p. 53). That is, corrupting the integrity of the form (interviewing the self) introduces an antagonistic or argumentative intra-liminality which I find useful and appropriate for an expanded exploration of identity. Turner (1982) explains that, in general, “liminality flies in the face of binary thinking” (p. 44). By sabotaging the binary structure of the traditional interview, I am able to challenge notions of identity and subjectivity in ways that corroborate poststructuralist understandings of the self. Here again, Schechner’s liminal ambiguity model, the *not/not-not* bind, is useful: the great-grandfather is *not me*, but he is *not not me*. He is not me in the sense that *I am me*, but he is not *not me* when I pose the question within the performance, *who am I?* While the exchange to some degree promotes the illusion of a conversation, the intellect invariably intervenes to protest its inherent absurdity. This strange oscillation cues the audience toward the concept of *performed introspection*.

Generally speaking, the performance has, built into it, a kind of ongoing, low-grade form of incongruity. Playing both parts is of course the main strategy of deception, the obvious ‘trick’ upon which the performance relies in order to stage the intra-liminal exploration of identity. However, in order to further ‘expand the parameters of the liminal

so as to dwell in its polemical space,' I employ strategies of disruption within the performance structure that may be more specifically understood as a toying with the elements of time and space as metaphor for liminality. In the narrative, for instance, there is the chronological time that exists between my great-grandfather and me, the 60-odd years that separate us. However, in the performance, there is no time separating us. As playwright Tony Kushner explains of his characters' time-travelling encounters in *Angels in America*, "By mixing both past and present simultaneously—and even mixing several different pasts—you can create a kind of hyper-time. It's neither past nor present, but a limbo that can embrace centuries without blinking an eye" (Toscan, <http://www.vcu.edu/artweb/playwriting/>). This kind of strategy creates a liminal situation between the past and present, but also, by extension, between absence and presence—all of which become metaphoric of inner psychic states.

Another liminal-metaphoric strategy is created through the temporal structure of the unfolding conversation; the time intervals between one of us asking a question and the other responding. However, since the conversation consists of the same person in a rehearsed schedule of inquiry and response, the metaphorical question becomes, '*where is that time located?*' Here again, these temporal disruptions are intended to underscore the disjunctures inherent in identity formation.

Likewise, space is another element subverted in order to thwart illusionism and heighten metaphor. For example, the interplay between actual and virtual spaces (live and video segments) results in a generalized spatial shiftiness that disperses the locating of self. This is especially heightened by having one character projected on the chest of the other. The superimposition results in the literal and figurative query, '*where is he to be*

*found?* Another example lies in the spatial discontinuity between the first and second parts of the performance. In the first half, I am live on stage while the great-grandfather is on video; in the second half, the set-up is reversed as the great-grandfather is now on stage and I become the talking-head projected on his chest. The spatial displacement that confronts the audience as they return from intermission underscores the *interchangeability* of the voices, and thus further reinforces the strange oscillation between the illusion of a conversation and the strange reality of one man speaking intraliminally.

In at least one instance, the low-grade incongruity of which I speak erupts into all-out disruption. At the end of the first part, at a moment when viewers are swept up in the rising conflict between the two men, I elect to radically expose the artifice of the operation by having the young man ‘pause’ the older man on video-tape, in mid-sentence. From a dramatic point of view, this is understandable, as the great-grandfather is saying things which the younger man finds wholly objectionable. However, the moment when one character pauses another becomes mostly jarring when it registers as that of performer pausing himself; cutting off and disallowing his own speech. Metaphorically, this reverberates as a psychological conflict within the self, resulting from the imagined confrontation with the great-grandfather, and thus, it elicits reflection and analysis. Historian James E. Young (1988)—commenting on Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986) (a comic-strip conversation between the writer and his father, a Holocaust survivor)—explains that the son’s attempt to grapple with and then represent the father’s legacy results in “a continuous narrative rife with the discontinuities of its reception and production” (p. 676). He explains that what results is

...a historiography whose narrative is disrupted by the sound of the historian's own self-conscious voice. Such commentary disrupts the facile linear progression of narration, introduces alternative interpretations, questions any partial conclusion, withstands the need for closure. Such narrative simultaneously gestures both to the existence of deep, inarticulate memory and to its own incapacity to deliver it.

(Young, 1988, p. 668)

In a similar way, in *Murmurs and Incantations*, the preemptive attempt on the part of the younger man to imagine how his great-grandfather would or would not reconcile with his great-grandson's secularism, choice of being an artist, and homosexuality, represents the performer's own self-consciousness—a psychic discordance signified by the pausing of the tape. It is an imagined anguish which, as Young points out, resists closure, for its resolution forever remains elusive, or in Young's words, 'undeliverable.' All the while, the pausing of the tape has jarred the audience out of their emotional involvement, alienating them—in the Brechtian sense—so as to have them proclaim the whole venture absurd and begin to engage its intentions critically. This is an example of Foreman's built-in 'double bind;' effective in that 'the frustration demagnitizes the spectator from normal avenues of conceptualization.' This frustration is a strategic one; for, when I apply Foreman's motto that 'bafflement can clarify' to my own work, I realize that the *clarification* here is not of a resolved interpersonal dynamic between the two men, but a clarification of *the elusiveness of the performer's project*. In the end, strategies of disruption are useful in that they represent similar fissures and ruptures to the kind identity sustains. With the various examples cited above, metaphors of time and space

within the performance function both as unifiers *and* as separators, as real *and* as unmeasurable phenomena—otherwise coherent systems subverted to expand the liminal and dwell there.

In wishing to expose the precarious nature of identity, the performance provides for me a fundamental critique of all notions of its stability and authenticity. While most individuals (etymology: *indivisible*) may have great stakes and investment in their *individuated*, i.e. *whole* selves, the performance embraces the ambiguities and contradictions of the non-essentialist, borderless, and divisible self-in-flux; laying the deck of identity on the table, as it were, and examining the role of performance in it. My own identity has been nothing if not liminally-defined and performatively constituted. In the course of my life, I have been a *border-crosser*; my experiences have caused a steady erosion and exposure of the myths of boundary and containment. In my navigations as a social entity, I have intermittently and invariably performed—often simultaneously—as gay/straight, masculine/feminine, Middle Eastern/North American, Jew/gentile, ethnic/assimilated, cosmopolitan/regional, artist/academic, student/teacher, and a whole host of other seemingly binary or discrete identities. Thus, when I examine identity—posing the question *who am I*—I concede I am the sum of those spaces in between my various performances. My identity, and consequently my subjectivity, are constituted by and through the transitions, the voyages, the departures and arrivals—the fissures and disruptions—and by my ability to negotiate them.

Therefore, as someone who has had multiple perspectives on the naturalness and indeed the necessity of performing identities, I believe the performance corroborates the poststructural theories of Foucault and Butler which expose identity as discursively-

constructed. As an intra-liminal exercise, the corrupted interview in *Murmurs and Incantations* is but a metaphor for the desire to ‘talk through’ identity, suggesting that it is not so much one’s voice that speaks identity, as much as it is the voices inside that *talk back*. Garoian (1999) articulates such metaphors as the “struggle of multiple identities in the singular space of [the] body” (p. 66). In the performance, the two voices represent such warring authorities within the self, each vying for influence, as it were, within the same jurisdiction, and on the same body. F. Scott Fitzgerald (1964) once remarked that “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function” (p. 40). With respect to the old ethic of ‘knowing thyself,’ the interviews at the heart of my performance works allow me to put such aspirations to the test.

### **Evolution of the Artistic Process: A Critical Reflection**

As the footnote to the performance text explains, this version of *Murmurs and Incantation* differs from the original, as performed at the University Park campus on March 19, 2003. That performance had several significant problems which I hoped I would have the opportunity to address. Since the March, 2003 performance (but before the final submission of the dissertation), I did, in fact, have the opportunity to perform *Murmurs and Incantations* again, as part of a visiting artist engagement at Towson State University in Maryland (November 5, 2003). For that performance, I made several changes, both to the text of the performance and to its physical structure. The changes were largely driven by discrepancies between the theory I espoused and the practice I

enacted. In this section, I reflect on the evolution of the performance, on the reasons for the revisions, and on the pedagogical occasion that this process itself represented.

Up until *Murmurs and Incantations*, I had largely created short works; mostly under twenty minutes—usually shorter. When my proposal to include a performance as part of my doctoral dissertation was approved, I became very excited, but at the same time, very anxious. I felt that with such an opportunity at hand, I had to rise to the occasion in ways that I had not previously. With many ideas and much to say, I embarked on what I perceived would be, or should be, my ‘magnum opus’—as though this would be my ‘one shot’ at creating a truly enduring work. Despite the fact that all of my life, I had heard of the pitfalls of writing one’s first ‘major work,’ I did not properly heed them. That is, all of the clichés about young writers feeling compelled to include ‘absolutely everything,’ did in fact play out—again, despite the well-known warnings. Some time shortly after the performance experience, an acquaintance of mine who is a theatre professional, stated with great clarity that, from his experience, “you don’t *write* a play; you re-write a play.” Deflated and somewhat regretful, I began to reflect on what went wrong.

Examining the performance with some distance, I realized that the main problem resulted from wanting ‘to give’ the audience as much as possible, as much as I could. Initially, I felt that if an audience was willing to give up a night of their lives in order to spend it with me, I must ‘pack’ as much as I could into it, like a humble restaurateur heaping huge portions. This resulted in a number of clear problems.

First and foremost, the performance was too long. Its length resulted from an inability to properly edit because everything seemed so ‘critically important’ at the time

of the writing. And despite several drafts, I did not see it. When, during the performance, I could see out of the corner of my eye audience members looking at their watches, *I saw it*. Second, and very importantly, the performance was too much of a ‘closed’ or ‘fixed’ system. Despite my extensive theorizing about contingency, ephemerality and liminality, I ended up creating a piece that was rather rigid—and both structurally and thematically predictable. While in theory, I truly value my ideas about ambiguity and its ‘kaleidoscopic’ possibilities, in practice, I did not seem to have enough trust—neither in the audience, nor in myself—to allow those things to occur. This resulted in excessive control over ‘the content’ of the piece, which I felt needed to be imparted with clarity. This lack of trust also resulted in a need to provide resolution—again for myself and for the audience—so as to bring the project (and my intentions for it) to some legible sense of closure. Fantasies of redemption and reconciliation thus brought the performance to an ‘easy end,’ such that I lost an important opportunity to meditate on how and why the *absence* of such things may be more interesting in our lives. To develop these points further is to identify the third and perhaps greatest shortcoming of the piece: the passivity of the audience.

The performance was too hermetic to allow for the kind of active audience engagement which I espouse in my writing. Again, while I valued and honored their presence, I felt that it was up to me ‘to carry’ the messages of the piece, and to carry it *to them*. By partially disallowing audience members to construct their own meaning out of the material in it, the performance thus became didactic. To my dismay, I enacted what Freire might have called ‘banking performance,’ where I had the knowledge of how and where things ought to go, and the audience was simply there to absorb it. This was further

symbolized by the sternness of the seating arrangement, where the audience was literally ‘on the sidelines.’ The spatial separation of the two men—one live on stage, the other a talking head on a television monitor—left the audience gazing back and forth, like uninvolved spectators at a long tennis match.

Realizing all of these things in the weeks and months that followed, I started to think not only of my performing, but of my teaching. I wondered, “Is this what I do in the classroom? Is this how I am *as a teacher*?” Before I became rather despondent, I realized: “No, it is not...”

My classroom, and my pedagogical strategies within it, is a markedly open space. As a teacher, I pride myself on creating successful ‘critical laboratories,’ where pertinent questions are generated and continuously bounce around, without the need to provide immediate answers. While I do come into class prepared with certain objectives in mind, I manage to keep myself flexibly attuned to the inquiries and directional pulls of the day. Having internalized long ago Freire’s ideas about the importance of rigorous *co-*investigation, I am often content to share with students my inability or unwillingness to answer their questions with absolute authority. And then I remind them that, in the words of Robert Storr, a good teacher—like a good artist—is one who “asks a series of leading questions, looking not so much for answers as for responses that complicate their initial statements” (Storr quoted in Heartney, 1992, p. 17). This allows students to recognize that my teaching will not follow a rigid set of decrees but that rather, as a set of *assumptions*, my teaching is subject to the same kind of reflexivity and evolution that I ask of them. Thus, when I compare my work as a teacher to my work as a performer (at least in the present piece), I realize that, for the most part, I do enact a successful critical

pedagogy in the classroom that is contingent, liminal and fully participatory. Why then didn't this happen in the performance space?

Through the experience of *Murmurs and Incantations*, and subsequent reflection, I came to a key realization: I aestheticized the performance because it was 'a performance' in ways that I do not aestheticize the classroom. That is, because I viewed the performance as 'art,' certain 'walls' went up that were unfamiliar. While I rely and indeed thrive on the multicentric energy of the classroom in order to instigate dialogue, the performance brought out in me deeply ingrained theatrical traditions which caused me to resist direct interaction with the audience. While I extol 'discursive chaos' in the classroom, the prospect of 'aesthetically unruly behavior' during the performance made me very nervous, and so I avoided the contact. As a teacher, I often witness transformation in my students (sometimes immediately) as a result of their empowered participation in impromptu critical dialogue. How may I facilitate such a dynamic when I perform?

Happy to have had a second opportunity with the performance, I regrouped and began making modifications for the Maryland engagement. I wish to describe some of those changes; how some 'reconstructed signifiers' functioned differently there, and how audience response changed accordingly.

The first major change involved duration. I cut the performance down by close to an hour, so that it now ran one hour and half, instead of two hours and a half. Given the first experience with the performance, the editing was easier this time. I still managed to include all that was important to me, but in a much more economical fashion. Realizing that I needn't finish every last thought *for* the audience, passages became shorter but

more open-ended. The audience seemed more alert in their desire to ‘complete’ the material through their own psychic interventions. More trust was exercised.

Second, I changed the dynamic of the performance space by: 1) projecting the video image of ‘the other speaker’ onto my chest, rather than having him speak from a far-off monitor; 2) allowing for an organic seating arrangement where audience members could sit, stand and/or be as close as they wished to the performer, dismantling territorial separations; and 3) placing an item on every chair in the audience. (These included family photos, a print-out of Holocaust victims’ names I had found on the Polish State Archives website, letters that family member sent to the Polish authorities in 1940, appealing for the great-grandfather’s release, and an unfinished family-tree which I had drawn up with my father shortly before he passed away.) With these changes in place, I received different kinds of feedback from the audience, than I had at the University Park performance.

One young female student expressed the sense of intimacy that she felt, sitting on the floor several feet away from me, as I spoke with my ancestor. She explained that sitting on the floor and listening as such, reminded her of sitting at her grandmother’s feet when she was young, and listening to her grandmother’s stories. This was apparently a close and special connection that this viewer managed to conjure, and, according to her words, it created a direct link between her experiences and mine, with respect to the meaningfulness of inter-generational exchange.

Of the projection on my chest, another female student mentioned that she felt she was ‘seeing double,’ because of the proximity of the great-grandfather’s face to mine. She explained that this led her to experience an odd sensation of ambiguity; intermittently

uncertain as to whom she was looking at, or to whom she was listening. Through the animation and wonder on her face, I realized that this kind of indeterminate sensation managed to engage her and to sustain her attention.

A male graduate student came up to me after the performance and asked that I explain the meaning of the letter which he had found on his seat. I began translating the Hebrew letter (the one requesting the rabbi's release) while he stood in silence, listening intently. When I finished, he asked if he could keep the letter and I told him that it would honor me greatly if he did.

A number of the professors remarked that they were most moved by the passage relating my encounter with the Palestinian youth. They did not express it in so many words, but from their facial expressions, it seemed that this story *surprised* them. One professor mentioned something about the media portrayal of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. I did not hear the rest of his words but sensed that he was perhaps trying to express that television is where he gets his information about the Middle East. Nevertheless, I was pleased that this professor seemed genuinely surprised to learn of a different aspect of Palestinian/Israeli relations; an aspect that does not conform to the media portrayals of which he spoke. In this instance, an audience member witnessed an account of intimacy, of camaraderie and respect—as when the Palestinian youth attends to the Israeli teen's struggle with his sexuality. The text of the performance explicitly states that Dahn's uncle was killed by a Palestinian terrorist and that Dahn attributes his father's departure from Israel, and his own life-long sense of displacement, to that tragedy. And yet, it was this encounter within the text of the performance—of 'enemies' in an act of love and empathy—that seemed to capture the professor's imagination. His

comments reflected a need to sort out new information, to embrace new constructs, with all their attendant contradictions. This new knowledge—perhaps of the ability of gay men to transcend their prescribed nationalist hatreds—may have transformed his understanding of minorities, or of the human compassion that stubbornly resides within political conflict. From this exchange, I realized that this particular passage—replete as it is with contradiction—is neither predictable, nor in need of naïve resolution. As confirmed by the discussion with the professor, it served as an instant which generated in him critique.

By my estimation, the second performance of *Murmurs and Incantations* was more successful than the first because of the problems considered and the modifications made. The participants' post-performance curiosity, along with their desire to track me down so as to share their thoughts, made me feel that, this time, it *was* more of a *co-investigation*.

I foresee in the near future a third and fourth performance, with further modifications and adjustments. The process itself, with its failures and its recuperations, has been a very pedagogical one for me. It has led me to make different choices as I attempt to realize my goals of creating more engaging, more participatory performances. Moreover, the experience of *Murmurs and Incantations* has been instructive in that it has forced me to assess the relationship between theory and practice. For me, the unexpected distance between the theory I expounded and the practice I performed, has now generated a closer look at these two realms and their often contradictory association. Rivals though they may sometimes be, an examination of their coexistence in imperfect humans represents yet another pedagogical occasion.

## CHAPTER 4

### PERFORMANCE ART AS CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

In the last chapter, I discussed the construction of signifiers in my performance, as a means of affirming my first theoretical claim that *identity is performative*. In this chapter, I continue with a critical reflection on the experience of the performance in relation to the two remaining theoretical claims that concern pedagogy. That is, did the performance demonstrate that *witnessing is political and pedagogical* and did the performance demonstrate *that criticality cultivates agency*? Once again, I account for the differences between the first and second versions of the performance. Following this discussion, I present and analyze the work of a student, enrolled in a university performance art course where I served as instructor. This discussion serves as a means of further supporting my theoretical hypotheses. I conclude with a wider discussion to address my initial query as set forth in the introduction: *how does performance art, as a strategy for an art of identity, constitute valuable pedagogy?*

#### **Political And Pedagogical Aspects of Witnessing**

As Neisser (1994) observes, the human condition is such that “wherever there is a present moment, the past is also present” (p. 2). This observation echoes Daniel Albright’s (2001) notion that while “we may be small in space...we are each of us giants in the dimension of time” (p. 16). Through these observations, both Neisser and Albright underscore the manner in which we are temporally extended in our experiences, carrying forth with us rich and accumulated histories. While in the broadest terms, my

performance is a journey into the past, the revisiting is driven by the assumption that the past has much bearing upon the present, as it does upon the future. Therefore, in exploring my identity, the past, present and future are triangulated in a way that emphasizes their interdependence. The performance becomes a site for this collision. As Garoian (1999) notes, such a performance represents an instance where “one’s cultural history and contemporary cultural experiences collide” (p. 167). Garoian uses the term ‘collision,’ to underscore the notion that a past—involving historical predicaments, family relations and so forth—may often be discordant in relation to the individual’s present experiences and aspiration, thus causing disjuncture. However, in grappling with the present, and looking toward the future, it seems a natural human impulse to want to benefit from an examination of, and a reflection upon, past events.

At the same time, the past may be elusive. A ‘past’ does not sit calmly, awaiting visitors like a well. Any past is a function of interpretation, subject to the attendant present conditions and desires of those who wish to unearth it. In my case, the past has always held a vexing combination of mystery, trauma and myth. However, I have always believed that the past also holds lessons, and as a student of life, I quest them.

And yet, the past is hard to access and often harder to understand; especially when it is marked by absence or erasure. As a grandson and great-grandson of victims of the Holocaust, there is a reality (and an unreality) about the past that is always there. As such, my endless need to know and understand the truth of ‘what happened,’ is always impeded by the untruth of how it is remembered—a dusty and sorrowful re-enactment of my imagination.

Alan L. Berger (1982), professor of Holocaust and Judaic studies, calls the writing of survivors' children an attempt to cope with "the presence of absence" (p. 12). The absence to which he refers may include physical absence, but more broadly, it denotes an *absence of narration*; the lost stories which would have otherwise attested to the historical record. Berger's observation coincides with Shoshana Felman's and James E. Young's understandings of the need of such descendants to stand witness to absence. All seem to concur that, in the face of the impotence one feels toward the relentless impenetrability of such a past, witnessing is all that is left. Witnessing becomes a form of respect, of mourning, of commemoration and, as we shall see, of redemption.

Author David Marguelis (online) understands the need to revisit and witness the past as a form of filling in those gaps; not just of memory, or family continuity, but of 'the gaps within.' He explains:

If some of the people in your family have been erased—for religious reasons or for what they have done—that means that part of yourself has been erased. . . . I was trying to restore [my great-uncle] in the book of life, and, ironically, the only way I could do that was to invent a life for him, a lie of a life, but it's the only life I can give back to this man. (Marguelis, <http://www.vcu.edu/artweb/playwriting/>)

Marguelis, author of a work which similarly gives fictional life to a deceased ancestor, is speaking of the need to empower one's self through a constant ethic of remembrance: the need to be a witness. Although in such cases, the restoration must involve fabrication, it is the need to witness which remains significant. In *Murmurs and Incantations*, I give my great-grandfather a voice, to allow him to speak 'for the record,' as it were. However, in doing so, it is really I who benefits from it.

In my performance, my need to make sense of the past in order to explore my identity in the present, places me in the advantageous role of witness. Felman (1992) explains the re-creation of the icon of the deceased as “embarking on a performative act so as to establish and maintain ‘an internal witness’ who substitutes for the lack of witnessing in real life” (p. 87). Thus, the psychic, emotional or spiritual gaps of which Marguelis speaks may, according to Felman, be filled through the commemorative act. When James E. Young (1988) similarly refers to this phenomenon as “keeping watch over absent meaning,” he underscores the vigil-like and protective dimensions of the gesture (p. 669). Thus, in order to be a witness, to keep watch, one must find various ways and means to *perform* it; identifying gestures that may concretize mourning and commemoration—a natural impulse in response to loss. However, while witnessing may be understood as an intimate psychic act, its externalization through various performative acts reifies it as an event. When this event reaches beyond the private, that is, witnessing in the presence of other witnesses, it becomes a *political* act.

Part of my own process of mourning and remembrance involves a desire to impart it through public speech. While loss is always in the end personal, when it results from the perpetration of injustice, in all its myriad forms, its communication may be regarded by some as a moral imperative. The witnessing that takes place in *Murmurs and Incantations* represents a desire to situate that speech in the real world of history and politics, the domains from which such injustices emanate. While, according to Felman, it is I who benefits from the restoration, the fabrication involved in the witnessing also grants the ancestor a form of protesting speech. If we understand the political as a balance of power—a wielding or a dispossession of it, and its historical implications—the

performance may be understood as an opportunity to *tip* the balance of power in favor of the ancestor, affording him a public voice, albeit in absentia.

By my estimation, the witnessing that takes place within and through the performance is highly political because its content is deeply historical. When viewers come to understand that the events relayed in the performance are based in the historical record, its status as a political event solidifies. As we recall, according to Foucault and Bourdieu, a public examination and critique of the historical record is ‘a strategy of antagonism;’ a local form of resistance which cannot be dismissed as benign speech. Thus, the encounter with the ancestor is not merely anecdotal or sentimental—although it may be those things at times; the encounter is staged for the purposes of investigating how and why very real events in the political-historical world impact family, community, collective memory and individual identity. In that sense, through witnessing, the performer confronts the very real moral dimensions of historical events and the ways in which these events have impacted identity.

If the witnessing within the performance is political, then it is also pedagogical. As we have seen from the literature on critical pedagogy, when we wish to query what knowledge has been or is being produced within particular sets of social relations, we must embark upon a critical dialogue which enables its practitioners to expose power relations and possible injustices (Giroux, 1992, p. 203). We also know that such an exercise, if successful, may result in the claiming of cultural voice and agency. Thus, if we are witness to public speech that exposes injustice—as I believe we are in the performance—then we are also witness to critique. If that public speech engages viewers

in critical inquiry and reflection, the exposing that takes place is a potentially transformative one.

As reviewed in Chapter I, Paulo Freire understood the goal of education as humanization through critical co-investigation, a process wherein individuals achieve self-empowerment and dignity by cultivating a capacity for critical, reflexive dialogue. Freire's critical co-investigation is intended to cultivate a way of being in the world that is alert (a *consciousness*), able to resist various forms of colonizing and de-humanizing factors from the greater culture. Arguing for the pedagogical merits of the performance from a critical pedagogy perspective, I now turn to a discussion of the concept of critical dialogue: first, as it exists within the consciousness of the performer; then, as it is shared with the viewer.

The goal of exploring identity in a performance is partly achieved through a critical dialogue, or critical co-investigation, *with the self*. Pedagogically speaking, interviewing the self represents a strategy which allows various internal voices to intermittently alternate between 'teacher' and 'student.' That is, the exploration of identity that I perform is *multivocal*; no single, over-arching meaning is allowed to emerge unchallenged. Instead, the consciousness and counter-consciousness of the internal dialogue generate meaning through their critical encounter. It is, in effect, the concept of Freire's critical co-investigation, but here, the 'co' refers to the plurality of the conflicting voices inside.

What is generated by and through the dialogue between the internal voices, one of which is symbolized by the great-grandfather, is new self-knowledge. The dialogue, or autodialogue, results not so much in new knowledge about war or history or genocide,

but in a fresh understanding of how the consciousness of such things impacts identity. The experience of writing ‘against myself,’ of working through the oppositional dialogue, afforded me an understanding of the contributing influences on identity. In that sense, the writing has been pedagogical. Again, speaking of his play, Margulies (online) explains:

In a way, tackling the problem of writing about the Holocaust was not to write about it per se, but to write about what it has done to us. What I wanted to do was dramatize the problems inherent in both remembering and forgetting, and to see what this insoluble problem has done to succeeding generations.

(Marguelis, <http://www.vcu.edu/artweb/playwriting/>)

In a similar way, I stage a critical dialogue with the ghost of the ancestor to face the way I come to the story, as much to learn about myself—my modes of operation, my struggles, my choices as an artist, my identity—as to learn about history.

In this manner, the witnessing which takes place is pedagogical for the performer. It is pedagogical on the basis of an inverted or internalized critical pedagogy: a critical dialogue with the self—another manifestation of intra-liminal engagement of which I have spoken. If one were to keep such a dialogue private, it would amount to meditation or therapy; however, turning the autodiologue into public speech makes its witnessing potentially political and pedagogical for viewers as well.

I realize that there are as many different experiences with a performance as there are spectators. The idea that each viewer takes up and interprets the rhetorical metaphors embedded in my performance in keeping with their own subjective position, is of course a central one about which I elaborate in this section. Nevertheless, in presenting *Murmurs*

*and Incantations* to an audience, I wished to instigate a critical dialogue with viewers, with some general goals in mind.

Through this performance, I wanted to provide viewers an opportunity to hear an inner conversation in a way they had never quite heard one before. I wanted to create for them a moving and visceral experience of what it is like to reside inside someone else's head, and inside someone else's history. Through the short-circuited interview format (speaking with myself), I also wanted to present the material in such a way that would involve some sorting through on the part of the viewer. Victor Turner (1982) believes that "we have something to learn by being disorderly...[disorder] invites social structural man to speculation and criticism" (p. 47). Taking my cue from Turner, as well as from Foreman, I elected to face the audience with disorder, with bafflement; a sort of performed psychological puzzle that I believed would induce active, ongoing inquiry. That is, by being 'disorderly' in form, I hoped to dissuade viewers from settling into a comfortable aesthetic distance so as to inspire in them a deeper, more critical engagement with my project. For instance, throughout the piece, I wished for viewers to continuously ask themselves questions such as: *Why is this person talking to himself? How and why is this conversation taking place? If the great-grandfather is dead, how did he die? Why does the younger man want to speak to him? Why now? What do they know about each other? What secrets are they keeping from each other? What will be revealed? What are the emotional consequences of this confrontation? How will they change? Will they accept one another? Will he accept himself?* In wishing to elicit such inquiries, I presumed that the more 'disorderly' the form of the performance, the more inquisitive its interpreters would become.

In general, I believe that exposing the volatility of the content in *Murmurs and Incantations* as public speech, has political ramifications for its viewers. Naming experience—experience which is registered contentiously in the historical record—is not neutral speech, for it exposes, critiques and resists real power relations which directly or indirectly implicate all viewers. Being witness to stories from the real world is always a political event, for viewers must invariably face the moral dimensions of those historical events, their consequences, and how they themselves respond to them.

As an occasion of public speech, with its high degree of personal self-disclosure, the performing of *Murmurs and Incantations* generated in me feelings of vulnerability. Nevertheless, I undertook the project because I wanted, in fact *needed* for people to hear it; to stand as witnesses, along with me, to the lives of those in their midst. Through all of our witnessing, mine as well as the audience's, I wished to stage what Roger Simon (1992) called 'psychic shattering.' By provoking, in Simon's words, "disquietening inquiries of the most moral kind"—about the reality of anti-Semitism, the cruelty of the Nazis, the struggle against discrimination at the height of the AIDS epidemic—I wished to face the audience with moral dilemmas that would awaken moral consciousness surrounding these issues (p. 41). My hope was that viewers would critically engage their own understandings and perspectives regarding the morality and immorality that is part of our shared history.

Additionally, I instigated these moral and political inquiries while being cognizant of the audience in context-specific ways. That is, given the demographics of my audience—what I assumed would be a relatively liberal, well-informed university community in the United States—I presumed they would espouse such values as

democracy, liberty and justice. As a political strategy within the performance, I devised inflammatory public speech in counterpoint fashion, so as to have viewers examine their presumptions about those values. That is, in the performance, I presented the audience with information about *a lack* or an abuse of these values, so as to create in them psychic tension. This enabled me to raise, albeit subtextually, the following questions: *Is democracy truly important to you? Do you agree with one of its central tenet of majorities protecting their minorities? Do you believe in pluralism? Do you believe that painting's silence in times of crisis is immoral? And more incendiary: how do you respond to anti-Semitism? Do you think AIDS is a punishment for sin?* And so forth. The unavoidable presence of these questions in the subtext of the performance involuntarily involved its participant in a political project and in critical reflection.

In that sense, I believe the experience of the performance was potentially pedagogical for viewers as well. It was potentially pedagogical in at least two ways: by providing new historical information; but, more importantly, by initiating in viewers a criticality that may result in a *repositioning*, in relation to the social-political world to which they would inevitably return.

In Victor Turner's (1982) words, "To perform is not only to restore an experience, but to assist others to understand better not only themselves but also the times and cultural conditions which compose their general experience of reality" (p. 75). In the broadest sense, the performance may have imparted to viewers information of which they may not have had prior knowledge. In that sense, all personal accounts expands our understanding of human experience and historical events. However, it was important for me to avoid preaching or being didactic with respect to history. As a postmodern cultural

worker, I am sensitive to the distaste audiences have acquired toward the heavy-handedness or self-centeredness of some art which explores identity. In that respect, I fully wished to avoid the pitfalls of an exhausted model of what has often been referred to as ‘victim art.’ When the issue of victim art is raised, the discussion often leads to an examination of the concept of narcissism. At this point, it may be instructive to draw some important distinctions between narcissism and an art which focuses on the self.

In traditional psychoanalytic theory, narcissism is understood as “extreme love of self” (Levinson, 1999, p. 46). More colloquially, narcissism has connotations not only of self-absorption, but of that at the expense of others. In her book *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, Amelia Jones (1998) provides a differently qualifying understanding of narcissism within the context of performance art. Jones (1998) argues, as others have, that self-definition is always in relation to another (p. 46). Her concept of intersubjectivity (as introduced in Chapter 1) thus implicates *the other* in the constitution of identity in ways that re-interpret narcissism as a potentially positive phenomenon: an opening of the self to the other (1998, p. 46). Jones concept of intersubjectivity is reminiscent of Lacan’s understanding that one’s sense of self is always formed against a context of culture and society, and is thus relational from the start.

While performance art is often, and sometimes rightly, criticized for its narcissism, Jones (1998) believes that the exploration and fixation on the self is also an *externalizing* of the self; a turning inward, but simultaneously and paradoxically, a turning outward (p. 48). For Jones, speaking one’s personal experience in the public domain—that is, politicizing personal experience—is a way to proclaim our needs and particularities as subjects. If identity is always relational and implicates the other, an

interest in exploring the self has political implications that go beyond pure self-absorption. Thus, Jones views narcissism's dependence on the other to negotiate subjectivity, as a positive aspect of some performance art.

What differentiates artistic narcissism from more clinical manifestations is that artistic narcissism is tactical. If a performance artist uses self-exploration in a way that elicits critical response from the audience, she or he may achieve what Peggy Phelan (1997) calls "strategic recuperation of narcissism" (p. 113). In such a way, the use of the self as cultural framework, becomes *a means*, not an end. As a performance artist who deals with the self, I am able to describe the process of exploring one's self with an audience, as an invitation for such a critical discussion. Because it places me in a position of extreme vulnerability, one which is scarcely associated with instant gratification and self pleasure, it cannot be compared to colloquial narcissism.

It was also important for me not to be in any way condescending, for in the end, I cannot presume to know what my audiences know or do not know about the subject at hand. Therefore, the impetus for the telling of the story was not to impart a history lesson per se, nor 'to catch history by the tail,' as it were, so as to pin-point an empirical cause for certain consequences. Rather, my delving into history was a way of exploring the benefits of a general ethic of *linking the past with the present*; of valuing, in a public way, the ethics of historical memory and thereby, by implication, devaluing cultural amnesia.

As discussed in Chapter 1, critical pedagogy assumes as its main objective the ongoing production of a responsible, critically engaged citizenry who may continue to fulfill the ideals of a democratic society—liberty, equality and justice (Giroux, 1992).

Roger Simon (1992) explains:

At its best, critical pedagogy provides students with the competencies needed to develop and experience a pluralistic conception of citizenship and community that dignifies democracy as a forum for creating unity without denying specificity.

(p. 42)

Like critical pedagogy, where students are critically exposing the ways in which knowledge is formed in society and taught in school, performance art too may invite viewers to critically intervene in their own knowledge formations in ways that awaken their moral and political consciousness within a democracy. A pluralistic conception of citizenship may be equally and successfully inspired in a performance context (as it is in the classroom) if problems are posed and questions are raised such that a more critical and dialectical relationship between performer and viewer is activated. When Simon (1992) remarks that “Education should participate in...radically reducing the limits on expression and achievement imposed by physical and symbolic violence,” he too underscores the pedagogical potential of performance (p. 42). For in exposing and exploring those limits, a performance may equally inspire in its viewers moral positions which repudiate them. Thus, like the classroom environment proposed by critical pedagogy, in which students may resist forms of institutionalized oppression based on gender, ethnic and class-specific experience, the space of a performance may similarly become a site of resistance and intervention. In it, participants may be collectively inspired to expose and dismantle the debilitating and dehumanizing effects of such oppression, and to embrace the reparative goals of valuing the heterogeneity of cultural experience. In its critical but ultimately ameliorative goals, the pedagogy inherent in performance is therefore, like critical pedagogy, an emancipatory practice.

### Criticality and Agency

To verify the third and last hypothesis that *criticality cultivates agency*, I turn once again to the experience of the performance, comparing personal reflections to the corresponding theories in Chapter 2.

Among other things, the performance was an occasion to raise questions. The inquiries were directed both at myself and at my viewers. These questions ranged in theme from history to politics, to concepts of morality and justice, to the impact that these have on identity. However, rather than providing answers (and thereby, *closure*), as I had attempted in the first performance, the second performance enabled me to present more open-ended and engaging *questions* with respect to the themes and issues I raised. By rupturing the closed system of the first performance (through the structural modifications of which I spoke earlier), it seemed that viewers simply felt a greater investment in my inquiry. The audience engagement that took place immediately after the performance seemed to have a distinct critical nature, whereas after the first performance, criticality was absent. Generally, a sharper, more expansive critical consciousness was directed at such questions as, *What lessons may be learnt from ancestral legacy? What are the responsibilities inherent in historical memory? How does one's cultural history impact one's present conditions, choices and behaviors, and why?* I believe that this time, our joint inquiries felt more empowering because *a community* of questioners had been successfully formed. With the personal and revealing comments that followed, I felt as though audiences' sense of agency might have been awoken more so, because of the extent to which they internalized my project, and perhaps began to form their own. In

turn, the audience's level of involvement afforded *me* a greater sense of satisfaction and efficacy as an artist, and thus a greater sense of agency.

Out of the experience of the revised performance, three specific understandings emerge which function to solidify a new-found sense of agency: these understandings are of *empathy*, *redemption*, and *hope*. In discussing them below, I shed light on what I believe to be the transformative powers of the performance.

### **Empathy**

Psychologist James T. Tedeschi (1999) remarks that empathy is a complex, socially relevant emotion (p. 31). He explains that the cognitive aspect of empathy is “the ability to take the perspective of another person,” while the affective component is “the vicarious experiencing of the emotion felt by the other person” (Tedeschi, p. 31). Tedeschi identifies empathy as a socially relevant emotion because the more one understands the reasons for another person's actions, the more understanding and tolerance there is. Furthermore, Tedeschi (1999) states that “if a person experiences the other person's distress or pain, she or he may be motivated to relieve the distress of both the other (and by extension, the self) by undertaking some pro-social action” (p. 31). Thus, the outcomes of empathy can be both interpersonal and intrapersonal; that is, empathy may cultivate compassion, but may also help in relationship-building. This is what is known in psychology as ‘reciprocal altruism;’ promoting mutually beneficial exchange relations among non-kin (Tedeschi, p. 31).

The fictitious exchange in *Murmurs and Incantations* provided for me great catharsis. Through the performance, I was able to locate speech and begin to examine and thus unencumber myself from the often debilitating grip of history. Dramatist John Franceschina has noted that the conversation between the two men in *Murmurs and Incantations*, is “really an expression of Dahn’s subconscious mind.” He continues:

[It is] a kind of confessional for a repressed guilt for not being what the older man might have expected. The real account of the story [of the rabbi’s death], unlike the one on which Dahn built the entire myth of his ancestor, [is thus] a liberating influence, freeing the younger man of repressed guilt or feelings of unrealized responsibilities. (personal correspondence)

As Franceschina explains, there is a purging that takes place through the various disclosures within the dialogue of the performance. This purging is constructive for it illuminates the complexities of the past, the clutches of its legacies and, in such a way, helps to ease the younger man’s psychological predicaments. This permission to hear myself speak is an intrapersonal empathy; an empathy toward the self. With it comes a sense of release but also a sense of empowerment, forged through newly-discovered self-knowledge. In that sense, intrapersonal empathy is transformative.

However, more important than listening to myself, the performance enables me to listen to *the other*. Speaking the older man’s voice, that is, *hearing it*, precipitates a whole new order of empathy which is the truer locus of the transformation.

In the initial stages of writing the piece—that is, of attempting to find the great-grandfather’s voice—I felt a certain degree of alienation, even hostility, toward him. After all, the ancestor (at least in my mind) stood for everything that I am against:

conservatism, religious indoctrination, staunch heterosexism, and fear of creativity. Yet, through the inquiry of writing, the commonalties between us became striking and unavoidable. Across the generations, both of us struggle with exile, displacement, discrimination and loss; both of us are public figures, teachers, and active leaders in the community. These realizations—again, found only *through* the writing and the performing and not before it—assisted me in dismantling the binary essentialism to which my trans-historical antagonism was often given. Thus, locating a voice for the ancestor required a new kind of empathy, and its location was transformative.

And yet, there was a moral dilemma inherent in my writing *for him*. How could I put words in the mouth of a man over whom I hold cultural power. How could I undertake such a manipulative and presumptuous task? In *Theatre of the Holocaust*, Berger (1982) explores this question. He ponders:

Taken to its logical conclusion, the premise of Holocaust theology implies that no writer who is the beneficiary of a power differential ought dare to imaginatively construct a member of a less powerful group, that Plath ought not have written her poem, “Daddy,” because it uses Nazi images as analogies for a relationship between an American father and daughter, that Tolstoy ought not have written *Anna Karenina*. (p. 9)

However, in valuing and wishing to allow for such writing, Berger finds resolution. He quickly retorts:

Surely the plain, ruthless, terrifying test of whether a white should be allowed to write a novel about a black, whether a man can depict a woman, or a free American can imagine a second-generation Jewish survivor, is whether the author

does it well, whether the author's understanding of the character convinces those he or she purports to represent. Indeed, spending years writing about a person you hold cultural power over can be some of the most laborious moral work of all, the fundamental work of recognizing an 'other.' Tolstoy intended to rain judgment upon the adulterous Anna, but his narrative revised itself into empathy as he came to fully grasp how few options a thinking woman in that society had. (Berger, 1982, p. 9)

Berger's words resonate with me deeply. For it seems that the first portal to understanding 'an other' is to try empathetically to project one's self into the other's life. In the name of interpersonal empathy, such an undertaking should be considered morally permissible as it is culturally necessary. Much may be learnt and imparted through these efforts—what Berger (1982) calls the 'most laborious moral work of all' (p. 9).

Indeed, much is learned by both men in the course of *Murmurs and Incantation's* candid and contentious conversation. The older man learns about sexual minorities, about other victims of the Holocaust, and about expanding his definition for art; the younger man gains an understanding of the necessity of family myths, of his egocentrism surrounding his own pain, and of the decidedly unthreatening beauty of faith. What propels both men's transformations is their development of a greater empathy for one another. In the end, both realize that what is most important, and indeed what unites them, *is* the need for empathy—as witnessed in their parting words at the end of the performance. Their shared sense of empathy allows them to bid each other farewell in peace.

In the process of creating the performance, *I* found the empathy necessary within me to enable these men to acknowledge each other and to come to accept one another. Of such issues faced in playwriting, theater professor Richard Toscan (online) explains that “Themes come from your personal values.” He continues:

Be they moral, social, political, [themes are] expressed through a play’s plot and characters. In a sense, they are your moral or ethical conclusions about the story you’re telling. (Toscan, <http://www.vcu.edu/artweb/playwriting/>)

To me, empathy is the most important aspect of the transformation; it is my ‘moral or ethical conclusion about the story I am telling.’ If the performance imparts the transformative powers of a greater-felt, interpersonal empathy, that would perhaps be its greatest accomplishment. Thus, my own expanded and deepened empathy has been a transformative experience; it sends me back into the social-political world as a more empowered agent of compassion and change.

The revised performance seemed to elicit greater empathy from its participants as well. In general, the audience in the second performance had greater *proximity* to the performer and his project: both physical proximity through seating, but also emotional proximity through the sharing of the family photos and letters. Still yet, a deeper *psychic proximity* was achieved by my willingness, this time, to eliminate ‘safety barriers,’ previously manifested in didacticism and excessive control. I believe these changes generated more empathic responses from individuals; individuals who may had been motivated by what Tedeschi’s calls ‘reciprocal altruism.’ If indeed it was their reaction to want to relieve me of distress (and, according to Tedeschi, to similarly relieve themselves), this pro-social action represents agency.

### Redemption

Historian Saul Friedlander understands redemption as an effort to recover, to compensate, so as to fulfill and make amends. In his book *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe*, Friedlander (1993) often wonders whether all historical interpretation is somehow “fraught with redemptory potential,” giving meaning to terrible events by saying them. He explains:

Finding a past that one can live with, and coming to terms with the past, are the necessary acts of the individual who wants the past not simply rediscovered but redeemed. In this sense, testimony is political, while its *redemption* is pedagogical. (1993, p. 61, my emphasis)

That is, for Friedlander, naming history is not simply an act of excavation; rather, it is an opportunity to counterbalance the injustices of history by recognizing the moral lessons we have learnt from it. In extracting some worthwhile lessons from the furies of history, we may regard the undertaking as potentially transformative and potentially empowering.

Educator Roger Simon concurs that the attempt to engage people in the development of a particular form of historical consciousness by having them witness significant accounts, is an inherently pedagogical practice. As noted earlier, Simon (2000) terms these traumatic experiences told ‘psychic shatterings,’ suggesting that while they cannot be redeemed as such, their *pedagogy* is redeemable; “that which one learns within the disturbances and disruptions inherent in comprehending horrifying events” (p. 22). Similarly, in her essay “The Confiscation of Memory,” Czech writer Dubrovka Ugresicw remarks, “Learning to comprehend other people’s loss, and calculating the cost

of that comprehension, is itself a kind of pedagogy of the imagination” (Ugresicw quoted in Goulis, 1996, p. 5). Thus, both Simon and Ugresicw emphasize the provocation of witnesses’ imagination as a redemptive pedagogical moment.

As public speech which triggers the imagination, performing identity is a strategy for acknowledgement. When I make a performance, my goal is for audiences to acknowledge; to say, as it were, “*Yes, we heard you. We heard you tell us your story. We witnessed your testimony, and now it is out in the world. We acknowledge that.*”

Whatever material is being tackled within a performance, to have it acknowledged is also to begin to have it redeemed. In *Murmurs and Incantations*, my concretizing introspection, my conjuring history, with all its pain and loss, represents a desire to render those experiences not in vain but somehow useful in the public realm. If, through the performance, I manage to expand the consciousness, the inner moral dialogue of even a single audience member, the telling is a pedagogical event and is thus redemptory. It is redemptory because it may recast the witness with respect to his or her understanding of the socio-political world. Furthermore, it may grant them a new sense of agency and lead to a variety of previously unintended or un contemplated actions. The sense that my performance may be effective within a political context, and not merely within my own personal and artistic journeys, grants me an enormous sense of agency. It allows me to act as conduit for important tellings and thus renders me an instrument of transformation.

In this sense, performance art—like critical pedagogy, or political activism—represents a form of intervention in the public realm, a cultural practice guided by moral imperatives: to expose injustice, alleviate oppression and unencumber agency.

Performance art may be viewed as redemptive in the same way as education or political

engagement for it represents a deep moral conviction to inspire in all the citizens of a given society, a vision of empowerment and dignified selfhood—despite, or perhaps *because of*, the brutalities of the past. Referring to Adorno’s assessments of a post-Holocaust world, Peggy Phelan (1997) concurs: “The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption” (p. 23). As a form of political pedagogy, performance art may be viewed as contributing to a philosophy of redemption and may thus be regarded as an emancipatory and transformative practice.

Once again, in the instance of the first performance, despite all of my hopes for such a redemptive scenario, I had shot myself in the foot. From the point of view of redemption, if I could not act with generosity toward my audience, what motivation or generosity would they feel ‘to take the story on?’ While I regretted a lost opportunity in University Park, I did feel the promise of redemption in Maryland. That performance seemed to have the potential ‘to live’ long after it ended. For when I think of the 1940 letter, now in the possession of a graduate student (possibly a future artist or teacher), I feel that my performance had consequences, repercussions—as small-scale as they may be. That the performance was able, this time, to leave some kind of ‘trail,’ and that that trail was forged by one of its participants, heartens me enough to suppose that, somewhere, somehow, humans—if not history—make amends.

### **Hope**

In concluding the discussion of an afforded agency, I wish to address the important understanding of *hope*, for it is difficult to identify one’s self as an agent

without it. Psychologists Kimberly A. Babst and Linda J. Levine (1999) define hope as “a discrete human emotion marked by a yearning for amelioration” (p. 356). One of hope’s unique characteristics is its ability to serve as a protective factor for individuals facing adverse situations. According to Babst and Levine (1999), “a person assesses the likelihood that there may be an alternative, more desirable outcome in the future; this appraisal elicits hope...facilitating the person’s use of adaptive coping strategies” (p. 356). Through this understanding, we may view hope as *a change in consciousness*, prompted by some form of critique. That is, critical engagement with a given predicament may begin a process of imagined amelioration.

Babst and Levine (1999) speak of hope in art. They observe hope’s most poignant use in art as its ability to hearten others, to give them, in their words, “messages of perseverance and inspiration” (p. 357). Similarly, Langellier (2001) clarifies that the dynamics of hope in art involve “the interplay of personal imaginative processes with the possibilities of one’s historical situation, as these are made available and communicated through potent cultural symbols and social practices” (p. 171). Thus, hope in art—which precipitates a change in consciousness—is contingent upon an artist’s ability to spark necessary imaginative processes that would presumably generate it.

As Nesseir remarks earlier that the past always hovers over the present, Babst, Levine and Langellier seem to imply that the future does the same. Similarly, within my performance, the theme of revisiting the past is also very much taken up with a hopeful eye to the future. If, as we have seen, identity is performative and thus forever in flux, *hope* may be regarded as one factor which may contribute to its continual reconstruction. That is, while *Murmurs and Incantations* looks back, it does so not only to ask, ‘who am

I?’ but also, ‘who may I become?’ In this way, the performance sets in motion ‘personal imaginative processes’ in order to meditate on such a future. Linking redemption to hope, Shoshana Felman (1992) explains that the act of witnessing is invested with redemption, as reckoning with the past is ethically-driven; it beckons us to the possibilities of the future and, in such a way, it is transformative (p. 55). Thus, all these scholars seem to conclude that an examination of the past or present is not quite complete without a reconfigured consciousness toward the future; without *hope*. Louise Steinman (1995) articulates a similar understanding when she observes, “the artist gathers fragments of the past, and integrates them into the present, as an act of faith for the future. The making of [such] performances is soul work. The loss of memory is related to the loss of soul” (p. 144). In this way, Steinman, like Felman, makes hope for the future contingent upon an understanding of the past.

In like-minded fashion, Victor Turner (1982) explains that, “although experience is both ‘living through’ and ‘thinking back,’ it is also ‘willing and wishing forward’” (p. 71). That is, experience allows us to establish goals and models for the future, in which, hopefully, “the errors and perils of past experiences will be avoided and eliminated” (Turner, p. 71). Here too we witness a link between redemption and hope, between the pedagogical dimensions of history and their ability to generate new optimism.

I concur with Steinman, Felman and Turner. There would be little point presenting such a performance as *Murmurs and Incantations* if I did not somehow invest in its redemption a potential for instilling hope: hope for a more empathetic society, hope for a more dignified humanity, and hope for more personal insight in the future. Despite the fact that, in many ways, *Murmurs and Incantations* is about what Henry Giroux

(1992) calls “the trauma of identity formation,” it is also, again in Giroux’s words, “an enactment which serves as a source of empowerment, dignity, and hope—a portal to agency” (p. 26)

While *Murmurs and Incantations* has a marked somberness, the performance is hopeful precisely in its dealing with notions of hopelessness. Again, Roger Simon (2000) is instructive when he tell us that witnessing testimonials of this sort has the ability “to teach us the unteachable: how to live with and in relation to loss, even without consolation” (p. 65). While this may at first sound dismal, a sober realization such as the notion of ‘loss without consolation,’ renders hope more realistic. In his experience of writing *Blue Room*, David Hare (online) explains that, “The trouble is, show business peddles the sentimental piety that you can always get over your problems.” He rather concludes:

To go to the theatre and be told, no, there are certain problems which you cannot get over—grief, separation, loss, aging, the need to part from people you love—to go to a play where these things are faced seems to me to be a bracing way to spend an evening, not a depressing one.

(Toscan, <http://www.vcu.edu/artweb/playwriting/>).

Like Hare, I believe the embrace of loss, or any other human suffering, may be the beginning of a journey of hope; a departure point for discourse which may be creative and liberating.

The discussion of hope within art echoes some of the theoretical writings of Gablik, and Laclau and Mouffe, as introduced in Chapter 2. All of these scholars, we recall, are still hopeful regarding the progressive possibilities of democratization,

humanization and individualization. Laclau and Mouffe base their hope on a reconciliation of the socialist ideals of the modern liberal tradition, with poststructuralist understandings of the differential and plural nature of society. Their hopefulness resides in our ability to reconstruct and redefine the social in terms of alliances. Those alliances may be regarded as a function of ‘reciprocal altruism’ and empathy.

Within the context of art, Gablik too believes that a reassessment of our relation to the future is a highly important factor that requires creativity, as well as a sense of hope. Of skeptical postmodern theory, Gablik (1992) explains, “When everything is relativized, including ethics—feelings like compassion, reverence or a sense of responsibility lose a meaningful context” (p. 177). That is, insurmountable relativism dilutes moral positions that would seek amelioration. As a corrective, Gablik identifies hope as possibly the most potent factor to be found at the deepest level of an artist’s consciousness (Gablik, p. 178).

With regard to *Murmurs and Incantations*, I do believe the performance ends on a hopeful note. While I followed Roger Simons notion of ‘psychic shattering,’ providing witnesses with harrowing accounts from history, I believe this shattering may have played a role in forming new consciousness. Thus, like Hare, I do not come to the end of the performance feeling depressed or paralyzed; rather, I feel empowered when I sense that its telling may have made a difference. It is my hope that viewers too are transformed in the aftermath of the witnessing, in ways that may alter perspectives, strengthen convictions, and instill greater capacities for empathy. Perhaps I could claim to have awakened in viewers hope, as well as a sense of agency, if the performance somehow inspires and empowers them to initiate similar dialogues with figures of their choosing.

At the very least, the second performance did make me believe that I had managed to create a community that evening. And though it was a temporary community, the very human alliances that I managed to form with several audience members, provided me—and hopefully them too—with hope.

### **Student Performance Work**

As part of my doctoral work at Penn State, I had the opportunity to teach a performance art course. This experience provided for me an occasion to witness the unique and valuable pedagogy of performance, from the perspective of teacher. In this section, I provide in-depth analysis of one student work, engaged in the performance of identity. The discussion will serve to further substantiate the theoretical hypotheses that testimony and witnessing is political and pedagogical, and that criticality cultivates agency.

The semester was spent studying the history, theory and practice of performance art. Particular attention was paid to the use of the body as a site and as an instrument of metaphoric signification. That is, students were encouraged to conceptualize and experiment with corporeal gestures, in conjunction with other textual systems of representation (such as language and image), so as to engage critically in ideas and issues of significance to them.

This practice culminated in a final performance. For their last assignment, students were asked to identify an overtly political issue in which they were personally invested, and to create a performance that situated their identities and autobiographies in relation to that issue. That is, students were encouraged to think of how their performance

may function as an intervention in, and as a critique of, their own respective socio-political and cultural realities. In answer to this challenge, students dealt with a variety of issues, ranging from popular representations of women, eating disorders, infertility and abortion, to friendship, lost love, sexuality and religion. Students were able successfully to take up their bodies as metaphoric battlegrounds upon which to wage, and through which to negotiate, oppressive cultural conditions with respect to their identities. That is, their performances allowed them to take a stance on a given issue, often provocatively, and thus launch a critical consciousness around that issue, in ways that facilitated newly-found agency in their lives.

For her final performance, Lynn Thompson, an English major at Penn State, chose to deal with the issues of sexual orientation and homophobia. I choose to discuss this particular performance for a variety of reasons. First, as Bohan confirms, identity development in adolescence and young adulthood is focused intently on sexuality (1996). Given that these developmental stages are the focus of my research, it represents an appropriate subject of analysis. Second, I am personally familiar with the disjunctures and difficulties of forming a gay identity. As psychologist Anthony D'Augelli (2003) observes, gay and lesbian identities are still perhaps the most unaccepted of identity rosters, as evidenced by “normative homophobic messages in schools, religious settings, the media, and the home, and by the absence of protective legislation” (p. 23). Thus, as an artist, educator and political activist committed to social justice, Lynn's project resonates with my own first-hand experiences, knowledge and political aspirations—as they do with many of the poststructuralist thinkers' concern with pluralism and local politics. Finally, I am interested in juxtaposing Lynn's performative solutions regarding

sexual orientation and homophobia, to my own strategies utilized to address these issues in *Murmurs and Incantations*.

**How Pat Robertson Changed My Life by Lynn Thompson**

Lynn's performance began with her seated on a chair, under harsh lighting, in the middle of the performance space. Slowly, Lynn began to roll up her pants to her knees, revealing graffiti-like inscriptions on her legs. Bold and multi-color, these inscriptions read, "Dyke," "Whore" and "Baby-killer." This was followed by a similar rolling up of her shirtsleeves, again exposing more derogatory terms such as "Bitch," "Freak," "Cunt," and "Hag." By the time Lynn was through exposing her limbs, a picture was registered of a person whose entire body is riddled with epithets; permanent, tattoo-like markings, inscribed directly on the body. All the while, Lynn had another student follow her every move with a video camera. The camera scanned her body at close range as each inscription was revealed. This scanning was projected as a live feed onto a large screen, such that viewers were able simultaneously to see the inscriptions in detail as they loomed large over the entire performance space. Upon completion of the textual revelations, Lynn continued on to the second portion of her performance. In this portion, Lynn began applying commercial bandaids over the inscriptions, as if to cover up the slurs. The bandaids, however, were small in size relative to the inscriptions, such that they could not fully cover or conceal them. This process of concealing was methodical, taking several minutes to execute. The camera, for its part, continued the close-range scanning until it was completed. Finally, in a third and last portion of the performance, Lynn took off her shirt—remaining in bra and rolled-up pants—and with magic markers,

began writing new inscriptions on her arms and legs. These new words included, “Political Activist,” “Feminist,” “Caring,” “Considerate,” “Intelligent,” and “Loving.” These new words were now intermingled with the old, bandaid-covered one, but they seemed to take precedence.

### **Cultural Context of Performance**

Before providing an analysis of the performance and its signifiers, it is important to characterize the general cultural conditions within which Lynn’s performance operates. Understanding the social and political realities which gave birth to the performance will afford us a better understanding of the cultural conditions to which the performance responds, and thus a more full appreciation of the significance of its critique.

As we have seen, the primary developmental task of the adolescent is the achievement of a sense of identity. A secondary, derivative task is to learn to manage the social roles that accompany identity; to master the demands of one’s particular place in society (Bohan, 1996, p. 12). As Bohan explains, the achievement of these tasks rests on two basic requirements. First, the adolescent must have an opportunity for exploration and role testing, allowing for the assessment of a variety of qualities—a distinctive constellation of traits—that might comprise a uniquely individual identity. Second, the adolescent must have the availability of social relations that support and assist him or her in forming that identity. That is, he or she needs a peer group within which to gather feedback about their own performance, build self-esteem, and master the social skills that are the basis for interpersonal relationships (Bohan, p. 93). Because adolescence is a crucial time for the consolidation of gender identity and sexual orientation, all of these

crucial elements as described above, become distinctly problematic for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) adolescents.

In general, adolescents are helped along in their identity-seeking by cultural scripts which describe how life is best lived and what expectations society holds. Teens are socialized to match their own personal life scripts to these societal ones, a process sometimes referred to as *anticipatory socialization* (Bohan, 1996, p. 95). However, in our culture, a script such as heterosexuality is revered, while a homophilic script is devalued. LGBT adolescents internalize this devalued script, replete with daily homonegative attitudes and pejorative stereotypes, and thus are faced with a profound deficit in their preparation for the role they face. According to D'Augelli (2004), as their experiences with personal and institutionalized homophobia increase, their experiences of social isolation and humiliation increase, and the prospect of positive role identifications decreases (p. 83).

This discrepancy with the cultural ideal makes the task for the LGBT adolescent quite complex. Not only must they negotiate a 'role exit' from the heterosexual life to which they have been socialized, they must also create a positive sense of themselves that incorporates a re-defined identification as an LGBT individual and must do so essentially without templates for that identity (D'Augelli, 2004, p. 85). Thus, the tools for optimal identity development are not readily available to such individuals. Rather, the process is marked by a constant fear of discovery which often leads to a profound sense of social withdrawal. It is important to remember that during the course of psychological development, LGBT adolescents face the same tasks that characterize development for all

individuals. The particular issues raised by LGBT identity, therefore, must be addressed in addition to and not instead of the usual developmental tasks (D'Augelli, p. 90).

This incongruity between heterosexual normativity/assumption and one's own experience of cultural condemnation, leads to disavowal, denial, self-rejection and self-denigration, and may result in *identity foreclosure*, or a suppression of one's otherwise burgeoning sense of self (Bohan, 1996, p. 94). For LGBT teens, acceptance often becomes contingent upon such things as secrecy, evasion and deception—with peers, family, and in other contexts. Because of a general absence of visible LGBT role models within a culture dominated by heterosexuality, youth see themselves as members of a small group in society and experience 'minority stress'—in this particular case, stress resulting from living in a social environment characterized by homophobia, heterosexism and stigmatization (D'Augelli, 2004). All this may be further complicated by other factors. For instance, the realization that homophilic identity is so closely connected to HIV/AIDS is such that fear and stigma may result in further identity forestalling, postponement or indefinite deferment (2004, p. 90). For those holding multiple, intersecting minority identities, there can be dual stigmas: the emergence of homophilic identity may create a sense of betrayal if one already has established another strong minority identity/community (Bohan, 1996, p. 145).

The consequences of all these factors may be serious. Frequently, stigmatization leads to sexual orientation victimization. In a study of 350 LGBT youth, D'Augelli (2004) found over half reported that they had been verbally abused in high school because of their sexual orientation, and 11% indicated that they had been physically assaulted (p. 91). The risk of depression for this population is three times as high, and the

rates of suicide attempts by LGBT adolescents ranges from 20 to 40 percent. That is, 30% percent of completed suicides among adolescents are LGBT teens (Bohan, 1996, p. 50). At great risk of psychological difficulty and with only rudimentary coping mechanism, adolescents thus approach the possibility of LGBT identity from an extremely vulnerable position.

As Bohan points out, it must be emphasized that the psychological difficulties depicted here, the sense of difference, inferiority and social withdrawal, do not point to psychopathology on the part of LGBT teen; indeed, they are not uncommon conditions among adolescents in general. Thus, Bohan concludes, the problem is not homophobic identity in adolescence, but rather, homonegative attitudes in society; the response of the culture to the identity in question (Bohan, 1996, p. 13). For many LGBT adolescents, identity acceptance— with a thriving sense of normalcy, belonging, and validation—is thus hard to reach. Any sense of identity pride and self-affirmation, with a successful integration of public and private identities is, for most, a process which takes them well into adulthood. Research indicates that disclosure (coming out) is considered the epitome of healthy identity development and that it indeed correlates with mental health (1996, p. 13).

### **Construction of Signifiers and Analysis**

In her performance, Lynn is responding to these oppressive cultural conditions. Through a discussion of the signifiers within the performance, we may witness the maneuvers, the ‘strategies of antagonism’ that Lynn stages in order to critique these cultural conditions and thus afford herself dignity, integrity and agency.

As we have seen, those coming to terms with LGBT identities must deal with the omnipresent stigma attached to homophilia. In its literal meaning, the term ‘stigma’ refers to a physical mark identifying an individual or group as deviant or outcast—examples of which are the scarlet “A” that branded Hawthorne’s character an adulteress in *The Scarlet Letter*, or the yellow star worn by European Jews during the Nazi regime (Bohan, 1996, p. 101). In a broader sense, the word also encompasses invisible traits and may include any attribute that causes others to label an individual as aberrant. Thus, in its high likeliness to elicit condemnation if detected, LGBT identity carries a stigma. As adolescents’ burgeoning identities are framed by such a label within a heterosexist society, the development and expression of homophilic identity necessarily centers on managing the stigma this designation bears (Bohan, p. 101).

The primary signifier within Lynn’s performance is represented by the inscriptions; the derogatory labels which seemed etched onto her body at the beginning of the performance. Thus, right from the start, audiences must be witness to the fact that the individual before them inhabits a body which may be viewed as ‘a terrain of insults;’ a body which is inscribed with and is archiving a personal topography of slurs. Lynn’s performance derives one of its principle meanings from ‘performing stigma’—in its literal sense—so as to re-direct attention to the original meaning of the term, and to its consequences. By revealing the inscriptions, Lynn invokes prisoners, people in concentration camps, and all those whose bodies are invaded by involuntary markings of difference. In her case, the etched slurs also suggest the ravages of internalized homophobia, as the challenge of living a stigmatized identity in a heterosexist culture leads to a sort of auto-inscribing of these outside messages.

Among its many merits, Lynn's performance is effective in that she literalizes Foucault's metaphor of 'the inscribed body' in a most provocative way. As Foucault suggested, the body is the 'inscribed surface of events,' the site onto which all oppressive discourse attaches itself and festers. By presenting this corporeal predicament, Lynn is able to de-bunk the assumption that our sexuality is dictated to us by nature, and redirects her inquiry to the complex set of power relations, social norms and dominations that lurk behind our sexual identities. In such a way, she is able to expose that fact that, in Langellier's (2001) words, "identity is a performative struggle over meanings of experience, as discourse navigates the body and the body anchors discourse" (p. 147).

As a corrective, Lynn utilizes the bandaids as signifiers for the desire to heal the body of injurious speech. While the bandaids begin to signify this attempt at self-healing, they may also be interpreted as insufficient, in that they only partially conceal the wounding marks. In that sense, the signifier of the bandaid is less a solution, as much as a 'bandaid solution' to a complex problem—suggesting that other, more comprehensive solutions are sought. When viewers witness the partial effectiveness of the bandaids, as they did the injurious speech, they begin to cultivate a critical consciousness—perhaps searching their imaginations for other solutions to the problem at hand. At the same time, the video camera amplifies their inspection, heightening viewers' sense of their own cultural surveillance. While it may evoke sympathetic responses, the surveillance also problematizes their gaze as possibly complicit in the performer's cultural predicament.

Lynn herself begins to offer a better solution when she is empowered to begin writing new inscriptions on her body, inscriptions that better describe her own sense of who she is. As Garoian (1999) suggests, "to 'de-scribe'" is to reclaim the body as the slate

upon which cultural codes are *in-scribed* through [various] forms of institutionalized culture” (p. 57). That is, by Lynn replacing the inscriptions with *description*, she is able to reclaim the body from the multiple stigmatizing forces of discourse. Garoian (1999) explains that “through such performances, both artist and spectator play with language in order to deconstruct its authority” (p. 44). According to him, this represents “a linguistic strategy to critique those cultural metaphors that codify and stereotype the self and the body in order to emerge a language of identity” (Garoian, p. 44).

In his article “Adolescents and Graffiti,” Koon-Hwee Kan (2001) explains that, in most civilizations throughout history, the creators of graffiti were usually oppressed individuals in society, such as slaves working in monumental construction, or prisoners inside jail cells. According to Koon-Hwee, the adolescent gravitation toward graffiti (as witnessed by its pervasiveness in locker rooms, bathrooms, bedrooms and indeed on the body) may function as a similar form of protest against larger systems that alienate their needs (p. 19). In such a way, the oppressed individual is able to speak back, resist, and re-negotiate needs pertinent to an emancipated identity. Similarly, in *You’re Marked: Breast Cancer, Tattoo and the Narrative Performance of Identity*, Langellier talks of Rhea, an individual who—in response to her breast cancer and subsequent surgery—tattoos her mastectomy scar (2001). Of Rhea’s case, Langellier (2001) explains:

The body needs a voice which disease and illness take away. The wounded storyteller narrates a story *of* the body *through* the body...reclaiming the capacity to tell, and hold on to, her own story, resisting narrative surrender to the medical chart as the official story of the illness. (p. 145)

Rhea thus claims the mastectomy scar as a site of signification and struggle over (her new) identity and its meaning. In a similar fashion, Lynn begins to repair her damaged sense of identity by claiming it as her own space of authorship and agency.

As we know, poststructural theory attempts to acknowledge and legitimate different significations of experience in a more localized and context-dependent manner. As Atkinson (2002) observes, there is “a concern [in poststructuralism] to show how normalized constructs of experience exert dominance over marginalized constructs” (p. 11). Through her performance, Lynn deploys the poststructural practice of deconstruction to expose the dominating factors to which her identity is subject, and thus to oppose them. Through a well-chosen sequence of effective signifiers, she is able to set into motion a critique which tackles, in the words of Dimitriadis (2001), “center-periphery relations” –exposing its inherent imbalance and its consequences (p. 13). In the very title she chooses, *How Pat Robertson Changed My Life*, Lynn wishes to remind us that she is responding to a real political world ‘out there,’ where elected officials practice the kind of bigotry and exclusion that she herself experiences. Yet, at the same time, in her title we also find the hopeful ‘*Changed*,’ signaling a transformation. In that she allowed her personal experience to ‘speak back’ to the culture, and in that she very likely triggered viewer’s critical engagement with “center-periphery relations,” Lynn performance demonstrates that testimony, and its witnessing, is both political and pedagogical.

Furthermore, on the occasion of her performance, viewers not only witness Lynn’s public opposition, they also witness her public self-empowerment. Of pedagogy, Garoian (1999) reminds us that “a prescriptive and monocultural one creates a ‘culture of

silence' where the subjective voices of those who are marginalized in a society are restricted by their acquiescence to a dominant ideology" (p. 60). Here, through a performance art pedagogy, Lynn is able to rupture that silence and allow her unique subjectivity to be heard. In Langellier's (2001) phrase, Lynn is able 'to come to voice,' reaffirming the significance and worth of her own experiences in ways that began to afford her identity pride, rather than identity shame and disjuncture (p. 145). Again, Garoian (1999) is instructive when he explains that "it is this critical-thinking dimension of performance art—the desire to experience, question, and respond to contemporary culture [that empowers students] to create culture anew from...intercultural perspective" (p.19). Thus with her new-found and palpable sense of felt agency, we may also affirm that it was her courageous and insightful criticality which cultivated it.

As teacher, I was able to witness, through Lynn Thompson's work, the possibilities inherent in a performed art of identity, and the value of its pedagogy. I now present the conclusions to which my research has brought me, and their possible implications for art educational practice.

**CHAPTER 5**  
**CONCLUSIONS OF RESEARCH AND IMPLICATIONS**  
**FOR ART EDUCATION PRACTICE**

**Conclusions of Research: The Pedagogy of Performance Art**

Throughout, I have been arguing a three-pronged theoretical hypothesis. The work of poststructuralist theorists, critical educators, and contemporary performance artists—as well as my own work and the work of a student—has allowed us to affirm that, indeed, identity *is* performative, testimony and witnessing *is* political and pedagogical, and criticality *does* cultivate agency. To conclude, I now return to my initial query as outlined in the introduction, to answer the first of the two broader questions posed: *How is performance art better-suited to help us shape and enrich an art of identity?*

Keeping in mind that art education practice has been seen as still largely favoring traditional self-portraiture in studio instruction, let us discuss the question of how performance art may enrich an art of identity, by contrasting it to more traditional practice. A review of the major guiding theories in recent art education history, will help us to contextualize performance art pedagogy, and thereby understand its important departure.

**Performance Art Pedagogy in Historical Context**

Art education historian Arthur Efland (1990) explains that between World War I and the mid-1960s, art education in the United States was largely steered by two

opposing theories of the progressive education movement: Constructivist and Social Constructivist theory (p. 192). The Constructivist stream was primarily influenced by Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget's theory of developmental stages. It viewed the child/student as undergoing a series of intermittent and predictable transformations, expressing his or her inner developmental processes. In the context of art education, pedagogy thus emphasized self-expression (as championed by prominent post-war art educator Victor Lowenfeld) where the teacher's role becomes one of facilitator; helping to reveal the child's creative potential as he or she progresses along a developmental trajectory (Atkinson, 2002, p. 10). Constructivist approaches were further reinforced by Freudian theories, which advocate the liberation of the 'authentic' child from the repressive influences of the environment, and by the philosophies of existentialism and phenomenology, which similarly privilege a rich interior world of individual motivation and perception, respectively (Efland, 1990, p. 192). In contrast, Social Constructivist theories placed a greater emphasis on social engagement, with cultural factors taking precedence over biological ones. The understanding of social experience as key in the reconstruction of knowledge, as articulated by John Dewey, led thinkers such as psychologist Lev Vygotsky and philosopher George Herbert Mead to emphasize the interaction between the child/student and his/her environment, advocating art's direct involvement in social issues and its greater transformative potential on society as a whole (Efland, 1990, p. 204).

From our understanding of postmodern and poststructural thought, such theories clearly reflect modernist ideologies. While the Constructivist/expressionist model relied on a biological determinism that seems to pay little attention to social processes, Social

Constructivist theories relied upon a cultural determinism, speaking little of the idea of individual agency within the socio-political dimensions of cultural frameworks (Atkinson, 2002, p. 8). Given the research on autobiography and identity, self and subjectivity as examined in Chapter 1, the viewing of the child/student as either a wholly natural entity (whose innate creativity is cultivated in solitude), or as a wholly social entity (shaped primarily by outside influences) becomes problematic. For, as we have seen, child/student identity and subjectivity may be more fully understood as ideological products of particular discourses, and thus, as culturally constructed phenomena (Atkinson, 2002, p. 10).

When we examine later pedagogies within art education, we find that vestiges of modernist thought remain. The curriculum reform movement of the mid-1960s is one example. As more intellectual rigor was sought during this time, researchers turned to an examination of professional *disciplines* as more appropriate bases for curriculum development. For instance, psychologist and educator Jerome Bruner came to reflect on the real-life structures of various fields of inquiry (disciplines), and found that they are distinct bodies of knowledge, confirmed by professional consensus (Efland, 1990, p. 237). Thus, in anticipation of such real-world structures, curriculum could play a greater, more accurate preparatory role. Within art education, a curriculum was pursued (most notably by educator Emanuel Barkan) which more closely resembled the *content* of the visual arts' various fields of inquiry (Efland, 1990, p. 241). By the 1980s, this undertaking translated into the curricular project of Discipline-based Art Education (DBAE), wherein visual art education was segmented into its supposed respective disciplines: studio practice, art history, art criticism and aesthetics.

While attempting to reinvigorate and professionalize art education, Discipline-based Art Education has its own shortcomings. As Efland (1990) explains, while DBAE sought to transmit “knowledge of great works and past cultural achievements... certified by credentialed experts,” it created a rather passive form of educational engagement (p. 254). Within the DBAE model, content is viewed as ‘out there’ in the world, awaiting absorbment, and thus reenacts dubious educational suppositions, reminiscent of Freire’s (critique of) ‘banking education.’ Because of its prescriptive nature and ostensible conservatism, art educator Jan Jagodzinski (1997) refers to Discipline-based Art Education as “a late modernist project” (p. 192).

Yet more recent developments in art education seem to reflect modernist tendencies. The philosophies of Visual Culture represent an approach to curriculum that seeks to democratically encompass all modes of signification as worthy of study and reflection. While it is informed by postmodern and poststructural methodologies (most notably deconstruction)—and is certainly more inclusive and multiculturally-minded than previous pedagogies—its continued reliance on object-based analyses replays a distant, anthropological gaze that conjures modernist ethnographic approaches (Smith, 1996, p. 215).

Thus, when we review past (and, in some cases present) art education theory and practice, we find approaches that are centered around the *student of art* (and his/her creative expression or social influences), the *content of art* (in its various disciplinary manifestations), and the *object of art* (which requires analysis.) But the question remains, as Atkinson (2002) puts it, “how can we initiate work in art education that is relevant to and located within children’s and student’s socio-cultural life-worlds...?” (p. 16). That is,

how may we refocus art education practice in ways that allow students to meaningfully link their identities and subjectivities to their social and political realities? How may we enable students to intervene in and critique their cultural predicaments, with a renewed sense of agency? It is to these concerns that performance art pedagogy is uniquely positioned to respond.

### **A Performed Art of Identity Versus Self-Portraiture**

Art educator Jan Jagodzinski (1997) remarks that “schools are institutions of the humanist tradition: patriarchal, ordered, and disciplined” (p. 108). He further suggests that art education has had a history of attempting to conform to those traditions. Echoing Lanier’s (1975) findings cited earlier, Jagodzinski (1997) affirms that “by and large, art educators have ignored poststructuralism to preserve art as the last refuge of humanism, celebrating hidden meanings and transcendental ideals (p. 203). These ‘hidden meanings’ and ‘transcendental ideals’ maybe directly related to the earlier pedagogies which emphasized personal expression and enduring content. In response, Jagodzinski (1997) proposes that we “shift...the fictive, self-expressive genius account of the student-cum-artist to [focus] on the representational technique which produce and organize meaning, so as to provide an understanding as to how subjectivity is created” (p. 194). Addressing performance art pedagogy specifically, Jagodzinski concludes that it is “performance art...where art texts put in question the subject in process” (Jagodzinski, p. 108). That is, for Jagodzinski, performance art pedagogy begins the process of demythologizing long-held beliefs about identity and subjectivity, by examining their dynamic nature within cultural processes.

In his 'Manifesto for Art Education in Postmodern Times,' jagodzinski (1997) advocates what he terms 'Talk Back art' (p. 139). He explains that "'Talk Back art,' works with the already *present*, with the dominant present [where] students' own self-conscious intervening narratives should be given first billing" (jagodzinski, p. 139). It is readily apparent that performance art pedagogy is well-suited to encourage students to 'talk back;' to resist passivity by actively locating their voice and agency.

Let us return to Lynn's project in order to illustrate, more specifically, the differences between jagodzinski's ideas and the traditional practices of earlier pedagogies.

Let us imagine Lynn, as a student, subject to a traditional studio pedagogy, wherein traditional self-portraits are held in high esteem. Given the socio-political discord to which her performance responds, and given the critique she enacts in order to identify and thus begin to unencumber herself from its oppressive forces, it is hard to imagine all of these issues being addressed through a traditional self-portrait. While such mediums as painting, sculpture, printmaking or photography may indeed signify a political project, they would not be able to afford Lynn the kind of oppositional voice that she was able to locate and make heard. On the other hand, Lynn's *performed* identity invoked effective rhetorical metaphors, such as "stigmatized body," "bandaid solutions," and "cultural surveillance," in ways that allowed her to foreground her live body as a site of political struggle.

In Lynn's performance, we witness what jagodzinski refers to as 'Talk Back art.' Lynn was able to 'talk through' her predicaments, 'talk with' her audience, and thus 'talk back' at dominant, institutionalized culture, which presumably 'problematized' her

identity in the first place. The discursive conditions which Lynn set up surrounding her identity, elicited a rhetorical relationality with the audience which would have been less effective through other forms. While there is always a relationality between viewer and any work of art, the real-live relationality of performance is more pressing, more unrelenting, both in its desire and ability to critically engage. Thus, through this strategy, Lynn was able to engage her audiences in a critical consciousness regarding her cultural conditions in more urgent, evocative and dialectical ways than would have been afforded by an image or inanimate object. In the context of the traditional art classroom, the personal disjunctures inherent in coming to her particular identity, would not have received the proper, in-depth, *participatory* interrogation which Lynn's performance was able to launch.

In a similar comparison between traditional forms and performance, Amelia Jones (1997) remarks:

Unlike formalist modernism, which veils the body of the artist to occlude its supplementarity (such that its transcendence...seems obvious and natural), body art performances *exacerbates* the body's supplementarity and the role of representation in momentarily securing its meaning through visible codes signaling gender, race, and other social markers. (p. 14, my emphasis)

That is, Jones in effect suggests that traditional self-portraiture is, in a sense, an occasion "to hide" behind the body, to take it for granted, whereas bringing the live body front and center in performance, allows us to see for ourselves the wounds and scars which its marginalized identity sustains. However, according to Jones, presenting the body is in a sense ironic, for it is the way in which it signifies loss, not its own possession, that we are

led beyond acknowledging its mere presence. She concludes, “Body art flaunts the body itself as loss or lack; that is, as fundamentally lacking in the self-sufficiency... that would guarantee its plentitude as an unmediated repository of selfhood” (Jones, 1997, p. 14). Lynn’s live, performed body exposes this loss or lack, such that its presence before us begins to evoke in us a consciousness about the reasons for its impairment. It is this which would be hard to conjure through a painting or sculpture, because that palpable sense of rupture that the live body presents, would be subsumed in the silent wholeness of an object. Peggy Phelan (1997) articulates this concern when she remarks:

Maybe bodies come to be ‘ours’ when we recognize them as traumatic. Sensing they need a foothold, we take them in to us. Sooner or later, we are burrowing into them. The holes in them help us feel attached” (p.18)

Phelan’s understanding—again, ironic—demonstrates that it is the holes (of experiences) and not the wholes (in the mirror) that may speak to identity more effectively.

While in the lineage of art education theory and practice, explicit critical dimensions of political engagement are uneven, performance art pedagogy—because of its unique discursive nature—emphasizes such engagement as one of its distinguishing qualities. In it, all of the elements that seemed isolated in previous pedagogies—the expressive individual, the ‘artwork,’ the social context, and the viewer—achieve a unique interplay, set against the real political world within which all are situated.

As an educator who has successfully implemented the pedagogy of performance art, when Garoian (1999) explains that, “the representation of identity through the interdisciplinary and intercultural strategies of performance art provides students with an opportunity to inscribe their voices upon the ritualized narratives of mainstream art

instruction in the school,” he affirms the limits of outmoded pedagogical practice, while expounding the merits of new ones, better able to address identity in particular (p. 37). His use of the phrase, ‘*inscribe their voices*,’ resonates with jagodzinski’s ‘Talk Back’ ethic, such that both may be seen as emphasizing response and criticality over previous notions expression.

Again, to contrast this to previous understanding is helpful. Art educator Maurice Barrett (1979) explains that art education “is concerned with the development of the senses as our ways of *receiving* our world, and the process that we use to symbolize, externalize, understand, order, express, communicate and solve its problem” (p. 45, my emphasis). When Barrett uses the phrase, ‘receiving our world,’ he connotes events and experiences as somehow external to the individual. From postmodern and poststructural perspectives, as advocated by jagodzinski, Garoian, Phelan, and Jones, we would be remiss if we were to uphold this dualism of ‘individual/society.’ For, in order to expand the possibilities of self-inquiry, we ought to favor an understanding of the *fusion* or the *folding* of these two things, whereby the ‘outside is already inside’ (Atkinson, 2002, p. 144). Furthermore, as Barrett connotes this external world, he speaks of the art student’s ability to ‘order’ it, echoing modernist ideas of art as a ‘sense-making tool’ that somehow ‘tidies’ the world. Jagodzinski (1997) regards such views as attempts to pacify and reassure the student as s/he stands before a tumultuous reality. He critiques the ‘art-as-order’ concept, as an attempt to provide “an ‘antidote’ [to] alleviate the chaotic flux” (p. 194). With respect to our discussion, the traditional self-portrait might be regarded as one of those ‘antidote project,’ for in it, the turmoil of identity—as constructed in and through that ‘chaotic flux’—is evaded. Such a project upholds the ‘self/world’ dualism which

Barrett implies, foregoing the important opportunity to examine and critique the *complicity* between personal and cultural conditions.

Gay Leigh Green is another art educator who has successfully utilized performance art pedagogy in her classroom. Green (1999) remarks that, “when used for the purpose of social inquiry, performance art is especially suited to express the intimate realms of personal and communal identity” (p. 8). She goes on:

The pedagogic possibilities that performance art offers become vividly apparent, especially when compared with traditional curricula... Particularly significant to education [is the realm of] corporeal inquiry... Addressing the importance of the body is vital, especially for students in the... high school years when both their peers and the media place impossible expectations on their appearance. [It] helps students understand the physical, emotional and cultural dimensions that affect body perception. Moreover, such inquiry makes art education relevant to students' lives and educational experiences. (p. 9)

Green too underscores the need for a more discursive studio practice in which students may locate and vocalize a greater consciousness of critique with respect to their socio-cultural experiences. What she terms ‘corporeal inquiry’ indeed defines the unique discursive possibilities of a performance art pedagogy. Keating (1990) explains that teaching the value of critical thinking requires opportunities for substantive and meaningful discourse (p. 84). He observes that “barriers such as class size, narrow test-based accountability and time constraints reduce the opportunities for real discourse in schools to less than 10% of instructional time—and in some cases much less” (Keating, p. 84). A performance art pedagogy, defined by discourse, would thus contribute to its

rise, and to the critical thinking which it fosters. Conversely, the silence of traditional forms would contribute to its decline.

A continuation of traditional self-portraiture as studio pedagogy, would also signal a rejection of the theoretical paradigm shift from the modern to the postmodern. Cahoone (1996) identifies four major themes in the postmodern critique: a critique of presence (or presentation), of origin, of unity and of transcendence (p. 30). As we have seen through poststructuralism, all of these have been effectively dismantled as modernist myths. Yet the traditional self-portrait, which examines and transcribes resemblance, precisely upholds such concepts in that it a) courts presence through presentation; b) substantiates notions of origin; c) encourages fictional unity and d) aspires toward transcendence. In this way, self-portraiture bypasses all of the important critiques postmodern scholarship has afforded us with respect to identity, subjectivity, authorship, and their culturally-situated and context-contingent character. Thus, with respect to identity, Atkinson (2002) rightly observes, “we need to understand how individuals *actively* engage with and take on or reject particular identifications rather than allow themselves to be passively determined by them” (p. 114). The pedagogy of performance art allows us to interrogate those conditions in ways that afford us greater insight into ours lives and thus a greater sense of agency over it. In that regard, performance art and its pedagogy duly corresponds to postmodern theory. As Garoian (1999) concludes, in that “performance art pedagogy resists cultural conformity and domination by creating discourses and practices that are multicentric, participatory, indeterminate, interdisciplinary, reflexive, and intercultural... [it] is the praxis of postmodern theory

(p. 10). Thus, a rejection of such findings by art educators may be seen as theoretically, as well as historically regressive.

Let us also recall the importance of autobiography in forging a sense of self, and the constitutive role that narrative plays in that construction. Most of us, if asked ‘who we were,’ would hardly be satisfied by simply handing over a picture of ourselves, even an artistically well-executed one. As we saw, the relaying of an experience serves to complete it and thus the telling of stories is an integral part of coming to our sense of identity. As Gergen (2001) explains, “by the age of 21/2 years, children are participating in various narrative projects” (p. 172). That is, from early on, we have daily practice in both speaking and performing ourselves, as we are engaged in an endless cycle of deriving meaning through telling—and in such a way—negotiating experience. Furthermore, critical is the fact that we do it with others. Again, as Gergen (2001) remarks, “the narrated self is a relational self;” a well-practiced story-teller within social contexts such as family, school, friendship and the like (p. 172). For most of us, then, speech seems to extend our interpretation of ourselves more so than other systems of representation, simply due to its naturalness and practice. And while some of us are adept at other forms of representation, such as literary or visual, for most, those forms become less and less viable as they enter adolescence. As Gaitskell (1954) confirms, “as children enter adolescence, their critical faculties far outstrip their abilities to produce artwork” (p. 28). Thus, while not all students possess facilities with traditional visual arts practices and techniques, *every* student has an autobiography, a narrative impulse, a forming identity, and the developing criticality to interrogate it. Therefore, to the extent that we are all story-tellers, performance art pedagogy democratically encompasses all who wish

to ‘come to voice,’ with respect to their unique (discursive) identity. As Garoian (1999) remarks, “it is through the performance of language, the speech act, that the subject is able to express its identity, in the first person, to itself and others” (p. 112) He continues:

In doing so, the self does not function as an entity unto itself but as a construction that is linked to all others in the society through language. Performance art pedagogy, which represents this work of subjectivity, facilitates agency through self-expression and acknowledges identity work as significant content in arts education. (p. 112)

Thus, the practice of performance art pedagogy, with respect to an art of identity, differs most from traditional self-portraiture in that, through narrative and speech, subjects reach *out* as they reach *in*; seeking to provide for viewers greater points of entry into a discourse which, in the end, addresses the self as a negotiated narrative. In that regard, making traditional self-portraits that are unable to enjoy the relationality of narrative, (except for ‘one frame at a time,’) might be considered an affront to the richness and complexity of the self.

As we have seen, a performed art of identity seems to have the ability to present multiple questions to its viewers. Through its discursive and relational nature, it possesses the ability to draw forth inquiry and engagement. On the other hand, the traditional self-portrait seems, in general, to aspire more to answers than to questions—valuing as it does correspondence, registration, and confirmation of the known. Through my research, I have come to view these two practices through the use of a metaphor. I regard the traditional self-portrait as I do the gazing through the lens of a microscope. Microscopes aspire to truth; to the mechanical and transparent revelation of something which is

already there. Like the scientific instrument, the project of the self-portrait is fixed on a centered core—on a nucleus of the self, if you will. In a moment of trusted empiricism, it searches for what it believes is authentic, stable, ‘see-able,’ and thus, for something that simply awaits discovery. On the other hand, I liken the postmodern practice of performing identity to a gazing through a kaleidoscope. With this playful and unsettling orbit, an array of multi-colored, multi-shaped fragments continuously twirl in haphazard fashion. While all the elements are there, they are not fixed, nor do they ever coherently coalesce. And while the microscope focuses down and on itself, the kaleidoscope *looks out* into the world, depending on outside illumination as an interactive function of the image one will see. That image is complex—both irreducibly shifting, and irretrievably dispersed. I believe the view through the latter to be more striking than the view through the former for, in it, we are engaged in the infinite possibilities of views and of the infinite possibilities of its choices.

In her book, *Vision and Difference*, Grizelda Pollock (1988) offers us a useful definition for the concepts of ‘paradigm’ and ‘paradigm shift.’ She explains, “a paradigm defines the objectives shared within a...community, what it aims to research and explain, its procedures and its boundaries... A paradigm shift occurs when the dominant mode of investigation and explanation is found to be unable satisfactorily to explain the phenomenon which it is that...discipline’s job to analyze” (p. 2). The electing of performance art, by artists who are concerned with disjunctive identity, giving testimony, and cultivating agency, represents a paradigm shift in the history of art. As we have seen, many artists in the postmodern era have helped to facilitate this shift in their search for more provocative and dialectical means by which to critically engage their viewers. As

this is the case, it would be reasonable to argue that resorting to more traditional, object-based forms of cultural production in order to address living politicized identities represents an old paradigm, as these do not afford the kind of discursive investigation that identity formation warrants.

### **Criticality, Agency and Democracy**

Thus, we see that performance art may be better-suited to help us shape and enrich an art of identity. I now turn to a final discussion of the second, over-arching query outlined in the introduction: *how does an emphasis on performance art, as a studio strategy for an art of identity, constitute valuable pedagogy.*

Like many of the critical educators cited earlier, postmodern cultural critic Frederick Jameson also believes that, as a whole, we need to develop a pedagogical political culture. He explains:

The modern culture-industry robs individuals of ‘languages’ for interpreting self and world by denying them the media for organizing their own experiences. We urgently need to provide individuals and social groups with public ‘spaces,’ in which they can deal with subliminally-felt experiences and learn to understand these experiences on a more conscious, critical level.

(Jameson quoted in Sarup, 1993, p. 186)

In his remarks, Jameson underscores the passivity to which we are assigned by the spectacle of popular cultural representations. At the same time, he points to a paucity of ‘languages’ and ‘spaces’ through which we may begin to respond to such cultural formations. Absent any critical strategies of appeal, Jameson suggests it is difficult to

identify and sort out the cultural conditions to which we are subject, and thus difficult to situate the self as an empowered and critical agent within them. The pedagogy of performance art provides both the 'language' and the public 'space' for the kind of important examinations for which Jameson calls. As we have seen, performance art pedagogy cultivates the kind of critical consciousness that enables students to interrogate cultural conditions and devise ways to intervene in their operations. Performance scholar Henry Sayre (1999) seems to respond directly to Jameson's plea when he suggests that through performance, "the artist [/student] is acting out what has been culturally sublimated...something we all recognize in ourselves but which has remained, up until that moment hidden" (p. 113). In his remarks, Sayre emphasizes the liberatory potential of performance pedagogy; its ability to expose and thus critique those cultural forces which bear upon us. Likewise, in response to Jameson's call, critical educator Maxine Green (2001) proposes that performance art pedagogy represents a "methodology that teaches students to confront societal values and beliefs [through] critical thinking strategies that compel them to define complex issues, analyze data, identify assumptions, infer solutions...and finally to conceptualize new forms of evaluation" (p. 8). Thus, one of the principle uniquenesses of a performance art pedagogy is its encouragement of an enacted criticality, and thus a more 'pedagogical, political culture.'

As Mansfield (2000) points out, at the end of his life, Foucault recommended that the best way of managing subjectivity was to be rigorously aware of the forces that had constructed our interiority for us, and then "undertake an aesthetic renewal of ourselves by experimenting with the infinite possibilities of feeling and the artifices of identity" (p. 179). Performance art pedagogy is uniquely positioned for just such a project. For

through its methodologies, it has both the ability to resist those forces that ‘constructed our interiority,’ but it also allows for ‘an aesthetic renewal,’ through creative experimentations with one’s identity—which, as we have seen, is performative. Thus, performance art pedagogy links resistance to (creative) renewal, as Foucault recommends. This renewal may only be achieved through stubborn resistance, contestation and transgression, ethics characteristic of the ‘unfinished’ liberal, democratic traditions of social progress to which thinkers like Laclau and Mouffe referred.

Garoian (1999) explains that “as a postmodern pedagogical practice, performance art is predicated on a history of critical resistance” (p. 11). That ethic of resistance is a key factor in locating the kind of critical voices of which we have been speaking. More than other studio pedagogies, performance art emphasizes artwork as a site of resistance and transgression. As opposed to addressing aesthetic concerns as an end, performance art pedagogy rather arrives at aesthetic solutions, but only as functions of the more important practices of resistance and critique. Like activism, performance art pedagogy relies on contention; on posing rhetorical representation that provoke and complicate, so as to facilitate transformations in consciousness. And as in activism and political protest, it requires that the contentious body be present. In the words of Garoian (1999), performance art pedagogy allows students “an awareness and understanding of their own body’s function as cultural stage...crucial to their desire to reclaim their bodies as sites of cultural resistance and production” (p. 69). The emphasis on transgression and contention is not gratuitous. For if, as Jameson’s observes, our culture ‘robs’ us of our critical consciousness, the response to that form of violence indeed requires an equally strong strategy of reclamation. Thus, to Jameson’s plea, a performance art pedagogy acts as

antidote, allowing students to “to make spectacles of and with their bodies, to challenge the normative and authoritarian spectacle of reified culture through the spectacle of their private experiences and knowledge” (Garoian, 1999, p. 97).

To be an agent is to recognize one’s self as a catalyst for some sort of change. The resistance and transgression necessary to cultivate critical consciousness all serve the greater goal of achieving agency. Within a greater context of education, a performance art pedagogy values personal agency as it strives to educate not only artists but critical thinker. Performance artist and educator Jeff McMahon (1995) explains that “it is critical that students, the creator and consumers of the near future, are given creative tools...to create a dialogue with the physical world...We are not just training artists, but citizens who need new ways to respond and react to culture” (p. 127). As we have seen in the case of Lynn, and in the case of other artists who perform identity, citizens are affected by and bear the markings of an often intolerant culture. As Garoian (1999) has noted, the “pedagogy of performance art...repositions artists, teachers, and students to critique cultural discourses and practices that inhibit, restrict, or silence their identity formation...by calling attention to and acting out the effects of culture on the self” (p. 54). In such a way, the student is “transformed from being the resigned object of culture to a reflexive subject, from mere consumer to that of critical producer” (Garoian, 1999, p. 54). Both McMahon and Garoian understand that locating and performing identity and subjectivity is a means by which students can attain political agency in the face of a culture that is prone to ‘robbing’ them of it.

Returning to the political project of critical pedagogy, we recall that education is viewed not as an occasion to transmit ready-made knowledge, but as a context for

preparing citizens to engage in the larger project of democracy. Dimitriadis (2001) believes that as we enter the 21st century, the great task of teachers and educators is “to address pedagogically the radical reconfiguration of educational and social life brought on by the proliferation of multiplicity and difference” (p. 115). To this end, he concludes:

We must find the subtle links of affiliation between self and other, acknowledging the relationship between our insistent particularity and the interdependence and multiplicity that define the modern world. (p. 115)

Dimitriadis acknowledges, as he describes, the ever-changing face of democracy. Education being one of its central institutions, Dimitriadis wishes to recognize the plurality of subject positions operating at any given moment within it. In the human encounter that is the pedagogical setting, Dimitriadis (2001) calls for an integration of “the interests, needs, and desires of the full plurality of educational actors...and their own unique mini-narratives” (p. 118). Performance artist and educator Matthew Goulish (1996) concurs when he observes that “where we find more than one individual, we also find more than one culture. Our pedagogy—our teaching and learning—is after all part of these cultures” (p. 12). Thus, like other critical educators, both Dimitriadis and Goulish view democracy as a function of pedagogy. Within this context, the postmodern pedagogy of performance art may be regarded as wholly committed to such democratic values.

As we have seen, many postmodern performance artists who address identity, do so with the aim of destabilizing and renegotiating the cultural domination to which their identities are subject. Each represents a ‘cultural actor,’ with his or her own ‘mini-narrative’ that may concern issues of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and other

forms of difference. Writer and cultural critic bell hooks explains that “the discourse of confession and memory [is effective when it] can be used to shift the focus away from mere naming of one’s experience...to talk about identity in relation to culture, history, politics...so that they can be connected rather than severed from broader notions of solidarity and struggles” (hooks quoted in Giroux, 1996, p. 696). For hooks, the personal experience—and the contentiousness with which it is often delivered—may be helpful in the continuing struggle for democracy. However, as hooks notes, it is helpful not by merely naming it, but by *theorizing* it; that is, subjecting it to critical analysis in order both to understand its underlying causes and to assess its usefulness in our collective work for transformation.

As studio pedagogy, performance art may again be regarded as particularly suited for the struggle for democracy, for through it, subjective experience may be theorized in the way hooks recommends. Its promise lies in its ability to generate effective critique which in turn engenders public discourse. Such critical discourse is a form of cultural activism; an essential element of a cultural democracy (Garoian, 1999, p. 133). Furthermore, in its ability to inspire the breaking down of binaries and barriers, the pedagogy of performance art is democratic because it is liberatory. As a teacher who has tested its practice in her classes, Gay Leigh Green (1999) confirms, “when used for social reconstruction, performance art addresses viewpoints outside the mainstream world, thereby fostering inclusivity and tolerance” (p. 11). While traditional art forms and mediums may evoke the values associated with democracy, they are positioned less advantageously, as public, relational, critical *discourse* is not their domain.

The ability of a performance art pedagogy to foster greater tolerance and respect for diversity, and thus greater inclusivity, may be a function of its uniqueness in allowing new alliances to be forged. On the occasion where I served as teacher of a performance art course, I did witness first-hand the unique social dynamic of the class, which indeed were characterized by newly-found camaraderie and respect.

With respect to social relations within the class, the students in my performance art course had unanimously favorable views of their experiences. While each student came to the class with his or her own identity and autobiography—and thus with his or her own uniquely-focused critique—students were able to confirm a kindred critical spirit toward their collective sense of discordance within the greater culture. That is, while their narratives differed, their sense of injustice and their corrective strategies resonated with each other. As the semester went on, students developed ever-more intense, intimate and trusting interrelations, allowing for a true sense of community to emerge. Again to emphasize: the community was not marked by demographic similarity; it was rather, a community of criticality.

One of the key factors in developing such successful relations was the students' willingness to take risks. Psychologists Wyndol Furman and Duane Buhrmester (1999) report that adolescents are more likely to take risks with—and rely on emotional support from—their peers rather than adults (p. 381). The atmosphere created in the class enabled me to witness this. As Garoian (1999) has remarked, such a unique atmosphere “assures [students the] safety...of having a different point of view without the threat of being ostracized” (p. 67). Additionally, the trust that enabled emotional risk-taking also led to aesthetic risk-taking, resulting in often poignant and provocative artworks. But perhaps

most importantly, the trusting and intimate environment that the students created, empowered them to become critical educator themselves; sharing unique personal knowledge in ways that elicited fellow students' openness and understanding.

A generation ago, educator Robin Barrow (1975) posed a simple question: *can we teach students to care?* (p. 162). That is, within the context of the classroom, are there in fact ways to teach such things as empathy, tolerance, and respect for difference? In her article "An Ethic of Caring and Its Implications for Instructional Arrangements," Nel Noddings (1994) responds to such a call by articulating a vision for a *moral* education. According to Noddings' (1994) definition, a moral education is one that focuses on "relational ethics; an affective awareness of "how we are with each other" (p. 173). This awareness may result in the recognition of our fellow human's humanity in ways that sensitively anticipate its operations in the social world. However, the question remains, what would motivate us to enter into relational ethics, so as to care? Educators Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman (1983) suggest that the only motivation powerful enough to surmount "the unknowability of *the other*, to take a leap of faith and *to care*," is friendship (p. 576). As they remark, "the only appropriate and acceptable 'condition' under which people become allies in struggles that are not their own... the only conceivable motivation for following Others into their world, is friendship" (Lugones & Spelman, p. 576). What Lugones and Spelman suggest is that to truly understand the situatedness of the other is not (only) the domain of theory: it is a one-on-one proposition, a human-scale project that requires integrity, commitment, and the nuances of human intimacy.

My understanding of the concerns of Barrow, Noddings, Lugones and Spelman, leads me to link education to friendship in the following way. That which lies at the heart of successful pedagogy might be the same as that which fosters a successful friendship: *dialogue*. Although of different parameters and conduct, that which is nonetheless elemental to both the dialogue of teachers and students, *and* to the dialogue of friends, is partnership, reciprocity, a dynamic exchange of hopeful engagement with the other. The capacity for dialogue—and by extension, for friendship—invariably incubates in the social laboratory that is the classroom.

Paolo Freire believes that to be fully human is to self-actualize. By extension, to be less than human, to be oppressed, is to be subjected to the hindering, by another, of one's own pursuit toward self-actualization (Freire, 1970). Believing this to be the case, Freire identifies the capacity for dialogue as the critical factor that tips the scale either toward oppression or toward self-actualization. For Freire, true dialogue, the ability to internalize and then aid in *the project of the other*, is the role of education. He speaks of a generous mutuality and a constant dialectical relationship as characteristic of the relations between a teacher and a student. I believe the very same ethics may govern the forging of friendship. From my experience as a teacher engaged in performance art pedagogy, I was able to witness critical, respectful dialogue, forging not only new friendships and alliances, but wider and more inclusive cultural understandings. In this regard, performance art pedagogy is exemplary of democracy-in-action.

### **Implications for Art Education Practice**

What are the implications of our research findings to art educational practice?

That is, if we accept the conclusions that performance art *is* better-suited to help us shape and enrich an art of identity, and that an emphasis on it *does* constitute valuable pedagogy, what applications to studio practice may we propose?

As we have seen throughout, identity is a deeply social and political construction. As we have also noted, the years of self-discovery, self-evaluation, and self-critique that characterize adolescence, are often fraught with an anxious search for psychological and emotional emancipation through various forms of self-expression. Performing the self, witnessing and giving voice to fragile and still unfolding identities may hold one key to greater and earlier opportunities for such emancipation. Through it, students are able to identify, verbalize, and perform their perceived resonances and discordances within their respective socio-political realities. For the adolescent and young adult populations in general, and for those among them who may be grappling with specific issues of difference regarding gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, religion, ability and so forth, a performed art of identity may assist in the cultivation of agency and self-empowerment in ways that other, more traditional pedagogies may not. For, as a pedagogical strategy, performance art practice enables students to examine, critique and thus renegotiate the forces that they believe might be curtailing, obstructing or otherwise rendering elusive their understandable goals of self-knowledge, self-confidence and peer recognition.

In light of this, it is reasonable to suggest that such findings ought to be reflected curricularly and pedagogically, in art education studio practice. And yet, as the review of art education literature in the introduction demonstrated, there exists a considerable lag between such research findings and school-based practice with regard to an art of identity. Professionals in the field of art education itself concede that such a lag does in fact exist. Atkinson (2002) explains that “indeed it might be argued that education processes in general are by and large conservative and slow to change” (p. 45). Art educator Mary Ann Stankewicz (1998) corroborates this observation by stating more specifically that “postmodernism [only] entered art education literature in the early 1990s...Many K-12 art specialists find the topic difficult, boring, or irrelevant to classroom life” (p. 4) Thus, in this pretext, it is further reasonable to suggest that the discrepancies between contemporary theory (and contemporary art practices), and K-12 art classroom practices need to be identified and corrected.

As epistemological formation, outmoded curriculum maybe as much a hindrance to education as other uninterrogated social institutions are to the culture at large. When Atkinson (2002) explains that “curriculum organizes, identifies, disciplines and regulates a particular body-in-practice,” he invokes cultural conditions wherein curriculum may serve to dominate and oppress individuals—reminiscent of Foucault’s critique (p. 10). Atkinson continues:

One consequence of this kind of curriculum is that it creates a form of inclusion and exclusion that generates a specific politics of ability, representation and identity. (p. 10)

This observation may be readily applied to the contrast offered between traditional, modernist-affiliated, school-based self-portraiture practices, and postmodern practices of a performed art of identity. As we have seen, while the former emphasizes the originary and often metaphysical self—and the ability ‘to capture’ it through honed skills of visual representation, the latter foregrounds students’ unique cultural experiences and the discursive means by which to critically respond to them. While the former curriculum may serve to alienate students who are not artistically inclined, the latter represents “a curriculum...concerned with heterogeneity, variety, diversity and heterodoxy (Atkinson, 2002, p. 163). To further make his point, Atkinson quotes philosopher Paul Ricoeur:

Narrative identities which constitute us can contemplate the possibility of an infinity of...semiotic expressions, in relation to diverse forms of life (experiencing). Semiotic diversity provides a powerful antidote against the regulative power of normalization and orthodoxies of practice which develop in conservative systems such as curriculum. (Ricoeur quoted in Atkinson, 2002, p. 163)

Performance art pedagogy represents such ‘semiotic diversity... in relation to diverse forms of life’ for it liberates art curriculum and pedagogy from prescriptive and outdated practices. Garoian (1999) corroborates this when he states, “performance art represents a model for curriculum, instruction and evaluation that is divergent, open, complex... Rather than universal absolutes, [it] seeks a diversity of images, ideas, perspectives, and interpretations” (p. 5). In light of these observations, it may be argued that traditional self-portraiture, as curriculum and pedagogy within an art educational context, represents

and *reproduces* orthodoxies which are exclusive, as they are conservative. In its emphasis on skill, on resemblance and invariably, on product, its deficits become apparent.

Among other things, contemporary art is defined by its mixed means, its semiotic diversity or, in a word, its interdisciplinarity. The historical reasons for this development are complex and myriad, and extend beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, we may make a general observation that the legacies of late 20<sup>th</sup> century experience—marked as they are by social, political and philosophic dislocation, as well as by unprecedented technological innovation—have been such that tradition has given way to experimentation in various forms of cultural and aesthetic production. As this is the case, it is also reasonable to assume that students need to be aware of, and participate in, the interdisciplinary world of contemporary art. In this respect once again, current art educational practice seems to demonstrate a lag.

As we have seen, adolescent behavior is characterized by risk-taking and experimentation. Art educator Gaitskell (1954) observed long ago that “youth usually differ little from the artist in the matter of receptivity to new experiences...because young people are normally equipped with a daring, seeking, inquiring mind, avid for experience to which [they] react with intensity” (p. 31). Given this, and given the pervasiveness of experimental and interdisciplinary forms within contemporary art practice—including performance art—it also stands to reason that engaging in a performance art pedagogy may be more meaningful to, and resonant with, adolescents and young adults on those grounds.

Art educator Brent Wilson (1997) has proposed that art education expand its concept and scope of student art, to include activities that are common to the youth of

today (p. 93). This view would encourage art educators to broaden their curricula and pedagogy by incorporating new art forms that are more engaging to young people (Wilson, p. 93). As technology evolves, it is invariably youth (as it is—according to Gaitskell—invariably artists) who are more open to embracing its challenges and its promises. With the proliferation of, and relative easy access to, electronic and digital technologies (ranging from pocket camcorders to the infinite zone of possibility represented by cyberspace), youth are known to be quick at incorporating these into their lives, and quicker at exploiting their possibilities (Dimitriadis, 2001, p. 89). As Garoian (1999) notes, adolescent experimental behavior, which represents improvisational and exploratory actions, are most often found outside institutionalized contexts (p. 30). That is, familiarity with such technologies are probably obtained more so in the home and other informal contexts. However, the interdisciplinary nature of a performance art pedagogy is such that it is able to harness that experimental and exploratory energy by inviting it, and thus valuing it, within the art classroom.

Henry Sayre (1989) has observed that, as a time-based medium, performance art has “a particular interest in the principles of collage, assemblage and simultaneity” (p. 34). Given this, interdisciplinary technologies are well-positioned to experiment with such concepts. Furthermore, because youth already gravitate toward concepts of collage, assemblage and simultaneity—as is witnessed by such pervasive postmodern practices as downloading music, text and images from the internet and ‘sampling’ or re-arranging it according to their own sensibilities—they may, in a sense, already be well-versed and well-prepared to engage in performance art’s multimedia texture (Dimitriadis, 2001). As Gaitskell (1954) remarks, “The pupil is receptive to educational practices which he

considers to be of value to him in meeting his present needs and in attaining his goals (p. 114). By inviting students to bring with them the skills and sensibilities of their personal semiotic representations, we may again value and affirm their informal cultural production in the more formal setting of the school. This kind of hybridization ensures, in the words of Gay Leigh Green (1999) that, “no source seems insignificant...Such interrelationships provide students with a variety of ways to express themselves by affording them multidimensional venues for experimentation that more closely resemble [their] life experiences” (p. 19). In this respect, when we revert back to traditional mediums as prescribed pedagogy, a certain disconnect becomes clear. As Atkinson (2002) concludes, “Drawing should only be seen as one semiotic production [or] system of signification, not privileged...whose efficacy [should be measured] in terms of how it functions for the...student” (p. 11). Thus, the inherently interdisciplinary approach and semiotic inclusiveness of a performance art pedagogy gives student a broader sense of options and opportunities; it affords them the more *kaleidoscopic* means by which to arrange, and thus shed light on, their personal experience.

Additionally, as we have seen, because the concerns of this population are such that their critical messages maybe more radical and contentious, it would seem odd and counterproductive to constrict these to traditional forms. The radical nature of a performance art pedagogy thus seems better-suited to allow students to experiment with and locate modes of signification that correspond—in equal radical fashion—to the often radical content of their works. It provides them greater, more flexible tools, and therefore more latitude with which to take risks. Dimitriadis (2001) observes that the availability of new representational technologies “means that people now express their sense of past,

present and future, their very destinies and their senses of self, in terms of the ever-expanding sense of possibility in the landscape of the new media” (p. 1). Through this observation, Dimitriadis underscores the unique advantages which new media possess for dealing with identity—defined as it is by its temporality. Speaking of such new media, Atkinson (2002) observes, “these developments have made art education a more contested field of study, invoking a questioning of traditional value and practices” (p. 13). That this contestation has begun is probably a positive development; it may lead, in Gay Leigh Green’s (1999) words, to the “contemporizing [of] art education through the inclusion of contemporary art forms, [making] instruction relevant and compelling” (p. 12).

### **The Role of Teachers**

It is important to suggest that all of the implications proposed herewith for art education, benefit teachers—and not just their students—in significant ways. To conclude, I would like to demonstrate the ways in which this research addresses the empowerment, the agency, and indeed the *identity* of the teacher.

In his article “Dangerous Art,” aesthetician Arthur Danto (1992) explains that, for a long time, there seemed to be an illusion that “the concept of art interposes between life and art a very tough membrane which ensures the incapacity of the artist to inflict moral harm, so long as it is recognized that what he is doing is art” (p. 183). That is, Danto believes the illusion has been the notion of art as harmless, benign, of no real consequence in the true world of reality. According to Danto (1992), that illusion has also led to a mistaken concept of art’s freedom; for if it is of no real consequence, it may

innocuously go about its business, without much concern. However, Danto points out that, if one is trapped in this ‘inconsequential activity,’ always separate from and having no bearing on life, it does not truly represent much of a freedom (1992, p. 194). Danto of course is of the view that art is *very much* connected to life and that such freedom as described above, is what defines the illusion of which he speaks. “The power of art,” he argues, “is the power...of rhetoric, and rhetoric, aimed at the modification of attitude and belief, can never be innocent and is always real because minds are” (1992, p. 194). Thus, according to Danto, art *can* bring about real consequences. By extension, its practitioners—and those who aid them—ought to take heed.

When art teachers elect conservative, time-tested projects such as the traditional self-portrait, they are in effect upholding that membrane between art and life; perpetuating the disconnection that serves to keep art innocuous and benign. The result may be that they cut off not only their students, but themselves, from the world of culture and politics and identities. As professionals in an intellectual domain, that eventuality would surely be stifling. On the other hand, if art educators internalize Danto’s message, that art very much matters, they may begin to revive an excitement and vitality in their practice. Specifically, by electing to experiment with a performance art pedagogy, teachers may have an opportunity to witness the unique ways in which performance art indeed bridges the divide between art and life, and thereby reconceptualize their practice in the following ways.

Through a performance art pedagogy, with all its potential as noted, teachers may find new motivations to embrace contention, to exercise resistance, to inspire novel student presentations, and to instigate critique that renegotiates democratic culture.

Through such findings, they may thus recast their roles, in the words of Giroux (1996), as “transformative critics” or “transformative intellectuals;” activists in the name of democracy, social justice, liberty and hope (p. 629). Because, as we have seen, schools (including art classrooms) are sites of selection and exclusion—and therefore of legitimization of things from the wider culture—art teachers ought not to view themselves as neutral conduits of traditional studio and art historical knowledge; rather, they ought to assume the active and responsible role of linking criticality to transformation and renewal. If art educators embrace the fact that the political and the pedagogical *are* indeed one, and redefine their pedagogy as a form of cultural criticism, they may find this to be empowering and cultivating of agency—not only for their students but for themselves. For, in such a way, they would change the esteem with which they hold the roles that they play in their students’ lives.

In light of these goals, I wish to propose that professionals committed to an updated, critical art education, undertake a re-examination of the traditional, school-based practices of self-portraiture, in order to explore the merits of the interdisciplinary, intercultural and liberatory pedagogy of a performed art of identity. I believe the outcomes of such a shift may be significant, in that they would enable students to address and to anticipate the complex, multivocal, temporally-extended and politically-engaged assemblage that will become their identity. However, such a shift might also facilitate a renewed and reinvigorated interrogation of the identity—that is, of what it means to be—an educator.

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