

Abandoned Practices, Chicago 2011

PERFORMANCE RESPONSE

By Daniel Sack

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A Compendium of the Garden

Recorded voice announces "start" to begin the reading, then proceeds to announce the number of each passing minute until reaching "14-end" at the conclusion. With each announced minute, the reader must crumple up the page he is reading regardless of his position in the text. The final text is recovered from the pile of discarded sheets, flattened out and read.

1. the Garden

I start at the end, at the resting place, because we can only know the beginning of an event through a backward glance, only know what we've started once we've ended. I start with the *garden*, because it is an ordered version of the nature that we see as our other. A practiced form of nature.

Foucault wrote of the *garden* as the oldest example of what he calls a *heterotopia* (see Foucault, "Of Other Spaces"), an enclosed site in which contradictory spaces are contained and juxtaposed. A heterotopia is a space outside of real, everyday space and that represents within it all the forms and shapes of everyday life, but transposed into a different key.

As in the performances you presented, I will speak in 14 parts each one minute long. And since I haven't really practiced this, I will abandon my writings whenever the time necessitates a departure.

2. Eden

In his essay on the origins of Language (see Benjamin, "On Language as Such and On the Language of Man"), Walter Benjamin writes of how in Genesis the language of God instantaneously creates that which it speaks. When Adam is called upon to give names to all the animals of the peaceable kingdom, this comprises a *second* stage of language. Here the word displays a pure and immediate reference to the world of sensation that now only exists in the paradisiacal power of poetic metaphor. Then, after Eve's arrival, the birth of knowledge, and the fall from grace, we live amidst a *third* register of language: human communication divorced from the singularity of the world as such.

At the beginning of the performances a question "Do I look like a girl?" starts time moving. An announcement from a voice hidden behind the curtains as if it were the space itself speaking or a divine presence, wondering aloud what it looks like. Is this a god speaking, not knowing to what the name "girl" refers, where it looks? We see a leg parting the dark of that void of the beginning, a hand rending the veil. A birth of the body.

Or later, a voice occluded by raw whistle and rattle, contradicted by a pose more fitting of that founding father Adam. The announcement and its contradiction.

Or in the third piece, no voice, but the question left hanging in the air.

3. Labyrinth

Often found in formal gardens, the *labyrinth* offers a single winding path towards paradise, the practice of walking the line a meditation on how time expands between two points, between a beginning and an end. However close these two points may be, a whole territory of undulations circle around the center. All one can do is trust in the present experience of that passage towards the sudden arrival at the end of the garden.

He raises an invisible token in his hand and calls out “you may need to follow me,” then walks with purpose in a circle, to arrive back where he started. We follow him as one follows the chance geography charted by the toss of a coin, as all these performers put a remarkable sense of trust in committing to the complicated path of the present, wherever it takes them, safe in the faith that they will arrive at an end.

4. Maze

Where the labyrinth asks only commitment and attention to a single path, the *maze* offers many branches and ways, possibilities. The wandering individual plays with the idea of getting lost while finding reassurance in the fact that somewhere out there a “correct” line leads to the heart, to the end.

Was Daedalus’ structure a *maze* or a labyrinth? Was there any choice for those sent forth as sacrificial victims? There stands a minotaur at the center of our arrival, but because this is America, not Greece, she is more Bison than Bull and she is prepared for slaughter. Statuesque, boldly staring off into the distance of some lost era, does she see the shape of the maze that contains the inevitable path to her tattered remains? Does she know that it is Theseus who stands in front of her singing some jingoistic anthem for the charge, antiquarian and almost quaint, but so full with the promise of all kinds of violence?

The minotaur is killed again and again: A whole herd of bison, a whole western state, felled. She returns in the white dress of victory, hammering on a gilded horn. Nietzsche wrote that the affirmative destruction of his iconoclastic philosophy concerns “*eternal* idols which are here touched with a hammer as with a tuning-fork.” He destroys the image in order to release its potentiality, to sound the call to the herd within once more.

5. Folly

Noun. A fantastical building or structure in a garden built as a decorative feature solely to add interest to the landscape. Never inhabitable or functional, the *Folly* is “fake” architecture.

We could say that of all the arts the theatre is most closely tied to this artificial construct, in that nearly all its buildings are mere façade, from the flats of the illusionistic stage with its doors in canvas walls to the infamous helicopter descending from the rafters in Broadway's *Miss Saigon*. But it seemed here that there was an insistence in making every object not only functional, but inhabitable. From the undercarriage of a chair, to the interior of a rolling suitcase, even the investigation of the hollowness of the walls, of a dry eraser board.

6. Ha Ha

Noun. Primarily found on the estates of the 18th century, the Ha-Ha is a boundary to a garden of such a kind as not to interrupt the view from within, and not to be seen till closely approached; consisting of a trench, one side sloping, the other perpendicular, the *Ha-Ha* kept livestock at bay.

Originally the *A-ha!* of surprise when one discovered the sudden dropoff in what seemed an uninterrupted view. The epiphany of hidden exclusions or ruptures in a field. But with time, ah ha became ha ha! Perhaps after watching so many unsuspecting walkers trip over that sneaky precipice, it just seemed more appropriate. The tension of surprise released with the fall into laughter. Likewise when the woman crawling across the floor over there began to sniff, then heave, then laugh in gails that wracked her whole frame, we couldn't quite determine how or when what had seemed a wail became a hoot of laughter. Or when another attacking the immovable walls gasped for breath between words her panting body told of a kind of emotion that she couldn't control, didn't feel. We saw tears where there was only sweat. The body signifies through its exertions in unseen slips and falls.

7. Sundial

A hand that points out the passage of time.

If the name tries to hold an object in its hand, these performers seem to have difficulty doing so. The thing keeps slipping from their mouths, from their grasp, as they outline an invisible log or a welcome mat under the blue light from a projector. Or say “I am jumping” when they are falling half the time. They fence with pens and even try to inscribe words to tongue. But time seems to keep getting out of hand. As Saint Augustine said, and here I paraphrase: “I know what time is until you ask me to explain it” (See Augustine, *the Confessions*, Book 11).

Instead this mass resorts to the word as index, or even to their index finger pointing around the room. They resort to words that only have meaning in this place and time, in reference to that over there. “I...as...I...in...for...of” What linguists call shifters: the I taken up to say I does not belong to me, it shifts the shadow it casts

with each passing hour, with each passing voice. And when I point at you and say there. It inevitably becomes here.

8. Weeds

Attempts at isolation, at keeping the island garden apart from the lawn, inevitably fail. The root structure slips under beds and pathways, pushing shoots up into this patch and another and another. Deleuze and Guattari find the exemplary body without organs in the field of grass, or perhaps, a *weed's* proliferation (see Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*). I spread my own network of associations and attentions underneath everything I see, sending shoots between different figures and movements, many of which I've carried with me from further fields, from different constellations of thought. I see common strains between the drop of a single coin and a handful of pennies, passing on to a pocketful of pills, and papers spewing from a silent mouth, to the crumpled pile of note cards, to the line of sheets crossing the stage, to the performers crossing the stage in lines, to the agreement "let's say these words are islands." But underwater the island is a chain of land, a field breaking surface in certain parts, certain breaths before diving under again.

9. the Field

See John Berger's essay "Field." (In *About Looking*)

The *field* is the container within which the grass is given free reign, where anything may appear from a common ground. We like to believe we have enclosed the field and its tangle of becomings, so we practice tracing its outer edges again and again and marking the territory in which indeterminate can play out. A rope binding in chance's roll of a die or toss of a coin. A circumscribed ground for us to possess—say mine. Or, unfolding sheets, we throw the length of fabric into the air, but hold tight to one end. Mine. We collect it in neat folds of smaller and smaller rectangles, little properties, then cast out again. Washing linens, makings beds, the daily habit of marking the range of our nightly wanders.

See that woman covering herself over and folding herself in the sheet, in the sleep, an unconscious practice of washing out the day. See that other trying to cover her, to keep her sleep.

10. Outside

When I was a kid and my sisters and I were acting in a particularly chaotic fashion, my mother would always tell us to go *outside*. *Outside* to the realm of that free play or at least the transition zone between the civilized domestic and the wild beyond. The outside is the unknown unknown we so desperately want to make known. For if we do not make it part of our “backyard” then we do not know where to locate our own house.

The relation is promised when recorded voice repeatedly demands “Out” and the performer repeatedly responds “In.” And she is inside now, but setting herself in relation to that *outside* that gives this inside its outer edge, like running a hand over

one's skin to remember where it ends. The inside needs to exclude the *outside* in order to hold its own consistency in place. It is what Agamben would call "a state of exception," the other that is included in the definition of the self (See Agamben, *State of Exception*).

In and Out. Pointing at her wrist, it is clear that she is also telling time, that her momentary announcement against the pressure of "Out" is as much an insistence of "Now" against the recorded reminder of "Then." We keep trying to know living by referencing what is *outside* of living.

11. the Wild

Thoreau referred to *the Wild* as the capacity or potentiality of inanimate things to animate, to produce an effect: trees, mountains, skies, each can become an actor (see Thoreau, *Walden*). But I also think of how *the Wild* may be the freedom of the human being to become a common relation with the inanimate or the imaginary. *The Wild* joins inside and outside to stretch beyond what is deemed natural or possible. The way that that dancer's hands, red and glowing, seemed to twine vine-like into new configurations beyond the possibilities proper to joint and bone. The way another strains high enough that I really do think that she will actually break with gravity

and escape. But those wild hands restrain themselves to her side, flexed like Degas' little ballerina, proper and maintained. Or the cresting reach on high curls back into a smiling wave that slowly falls to the mound of "earth" at her feet. The way that "you are becoming what you say you are" just long enough for me to wonder if you did leave that ground—coffee grounds?—in the blink of my eye, turn wild, before falling back into form.

12. Seasons

The come and go game of Fort-Da that Jane spoke about was transposed by the Greeks into the myth of Persephone's yearly voyage under the earth and Demeter's yearly mourning. No Freudian, it is the mother that waits the daughter's return. As the last pair departs through that door of light, I look back onto the space

scattered with the remains of performance. Three mounds of coffee grounds, small piles of perfect dirt, stand as emblems of the bare season to follow, burials of those actions that have reached their end. The room stilled. Yet, richer than the darkest loam, they also offer invitations to—what?—bury seeds for the new *season*, make a fresh pot for the new morning? This seems the way with all that remains—especially in this world of spiraling action—they act themselves as seeds for future re-enactments.

13. Landscape

With the rise of Romanticism in the 18th century, there arose an accompanying interest in seeing the unruliness of Nature composed into a sufficiently interesting single view: the *landscape*. A transcendental prospect, really, as it approached the comprehensive capture that a divinity would see from above, where all of time

and Nature suspends itself in a perfect moment of grace. The three performances conclude with such a *landscape* in which we finally see all of the figures in relation to each other, maintained on a common ground. Their actions wind down as time winds down to the end of times and into that perfect tableau that tells the entirety of their story in a single glance.

14. Eden (A return)

So we end where we begin. For according to biblical Messianism it is not only the

case that all begins in the perfection of the garden, but that the chosen will find themselves back in that paradise of transparent and immediate communication, where time and space are joined in eternity. In Dante's vision of paradise, not only does time stand still in the approach of perfection, but language, too, fails to record or witness the glory of god. The beauty of the divine presence blinds the poet, his words fail before the leveling splendor of that shadow-less superlative. We—those of us watching—are watching from afar, however, from the other side of this thin skin of glass. We are now the outside to the perfection that each gesture finds in its moment of stillness, of silence.

But how isolated they seem, how full of their own potentiality, looking off into other yards, through distant windows. This is no end of time, but a promise that each has taken upon his or herself, possessed.