

Admitting Where I'm At

Jacob Zimmer

A crowd gathers at an art gallery for Public Recordings' *Manual for Incidence*. Seven people leave the space. This exit is a beginning. They go down the stairs to the basement, into the bathrooms, into an electrical room. As they leave, it becomes clear that something has started. The music gets louder; the lights brighter. We are in a very long, very white room. It has a bar and a door in the centre that leads to the stairs to the basement; it has bathrooms and an electrical room. We (the audience) are newly aware of this architecture as we wait for the re-entrance.

When they come out they do so one at a time – out of the bathrooms, the stairs. They form a line along one wall and look, with us, at the space. They look at us also. The looking is also a beginning.

Later, the doors to the bathroom will be slammed, obscuring text; someone will shout from the basement; the door to the basement stairs will be climbed on, as will the bar; the floor will be slid on; a man will come from behind the bar with a bucket on his head, and another will hang from the rafters. At the end, they will form another line, looking at us again – different. The looking is also a beginning.

The space is there to be used. Everything in the space is there to be used. In rehearsal, the performers are asked to arrange the space. This is the first improvisation. To consider and then make the space into their own. That might have done it. From then on, it was theirs and everything – the bar, the doors, the ceiling – was game. The photographer, in for just one rehearsal, is integrated. The shows become weather-dependent, relying on the winter coats of the audience while in Montreal in February, as Erin, the performer, takes their coats as they enter the studio – later she'll wheel out the coat rack and fall into it.

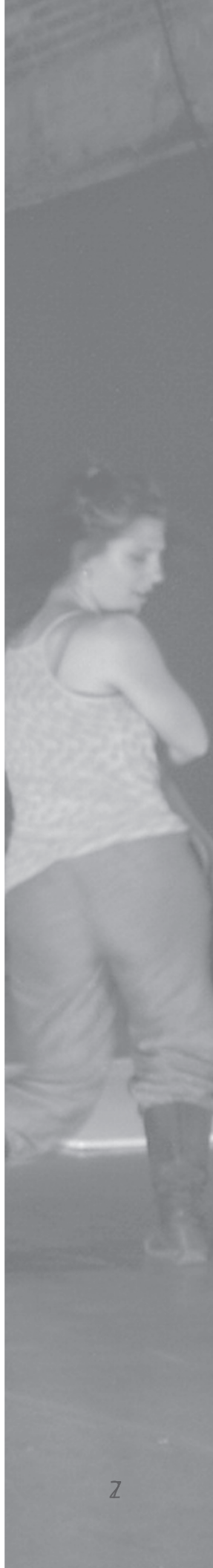
There is an over genre-ization of performance. In the rush to specialize, to target a niche and stake some ground, ideas are turned into slogans and we are left looking for categories. Rather than speak to site-specific performance as a genre, I wish to speak to it as an adverb and maybe an ethic.

My – admittedly personal – definition of the genre of “site-specific performance” places the site first: I find a site that excites me and I wonder what performance it would create. Learning what the site requires comes first – it points toward content, shapes the structure and is the design.

For the moment, let's place that work on the one extreme of a line.

On the other end, let's put the box set for a show rehearsed in a hall that shares no architecture with the final venue, a set that is built to fit in the back of a truck.

The box set attempts to replicate itself in every new venue. The performance also seeks to replicate itself within that set.



Some Basic Exposition Regarding the Events of *Manual for Incidence* (14 February 2005 to 5 June 2005)

Ame Henderson (choreographer) and I (dramaturge) travel to Montreal to work with Katie Ewald, Claudia Fancello and Erin Flynn. With Claudia and Erin, we rehearse at Studio 303, with Katie at the Conseil des arts de Montréal studios. We show their solos at Studio 303 (marking the first move as Katie shifts venue). Then we spend a week making and showing a trio at 303. Eric Craven (composer) attends the showings. Ame and I return to Toronto, where we make and show a solo with Stacy Hannah at Hub 14 and then with Chad Dembski. At which point, Inari Salmivaara arrives from Amsterdam and we make and show a solo with her, again at Hub 14. We begin work on a ten-minute trio with Chad, Inari and the not-yet-arrived Matija Ferlin (Croatia) and with music created by Eric through watching video and a brief visit from Montreal. When Matija arrives, we insert him into the structure that has been developed, and a few days later the trio is performed at Series 8:08, a move for which we have forty minutes in the new space. The next day, Katie and Claudia arrive from Montreal (Erin arrives a week later), and work on the group piece starts at Hub 14 and XPACE, the gallery where we will perform. Eric visits a few times and stays the final week. After Toronto, we immediately move to Montreal and the Foundrie Darling, where we have four days to put the show in a radically different space.

In between these two, let's put something else. Not quite either, this other is a *system* for performing and making. It is a system that applies equally to performance as to design, to music as to dramaturgy.

Every rock show, even the largest stadium show, contains the moment when the singer turns out and shouts "Hello [insert city here]!" This cliché comes from a recognition that the audience has gone through a great deal of trouble to share a room and that the least they can expect is a little acknowledgement.

Dance and theatre need to learn this lesson – that our strength, our separation from other media, is the shared space for a time. Not all shows can or want to be direct address, but an ethic of *performing site-specifically* provides an alternative to participation, to talking-directly-to. We are also in the same room: The bar you get your beer from is the same one we climb on; our bathrooms are the same; we too have braved the snowstorm to be here together.

Early, we (Ame and I) talked about location. About how where you were affected what you did. Am I a different person in Halifax than I am in Toronto? I have different social habits; I talk about different things – but there are as many if not more similarities. I am not quite the same, not quite different.

First, moving to Vancouver from Halifax, I tried to find the replacement cafés. Not being able to find Café Mokka, I found the Pofi Bar. Moving to Toronto, I found Il Gatto Nero; moving back to Halifax I tried to find Il Gatto Nero.

Arriving at the vastness of the Foundrie Darling in Montreal, we realize an early impulse of Ame's: small people in a big space. It is almost overwhelming. Twice as wide, even longer, and with forty-foot ceilings, the brick and concrete room shares very little with XPACE (Matija, looking at photographs of Toronto while still in Montreal: "It looks like we're in someone's apartment.") There is no bar or basement, dropping from the rafters would probably kill you. Clearly, the show must change.

In the first moments of looking, there is only lack and difference – we see what is missing, what we cannot do. However, this is not looking site-specifically, and quickly, we turn our gaze to see only possibility – there's no lack; only a chance to do something new with the same systems.

Replacing is different from making do. It is also different from symbolism. The ladder in Montreal does not represent the Torontonians stairs; it is not emblematic of the washroom doors of XPACE. Replacement is about consideration without preciousness. Every choice, every switch is considered and debated, but we are not precious about keeping things the way they were. We are in a different city – things are not as they were.

The performers would replace each other in rehearsal – borrowing material they had watched the day before, altering it to make it their own, yet still maintaining a difference: *I am not the original*. I can no longer track the layers of replacement – no longer identify the original. Living again in Toronto, Il Gatto Nero is simply a café on College Street.

Systems are ways of understanding a performance. A system can be (though is not limited to) a set list, rules for responding, a series of tasks.¹ Systems may be tight or loose, but they leave a space for variation and difference. If my task is to pick up a chair or find something perfect on the radio, I still have options.

This understanding comes from (at least to me) sixties postmodern dance (Judson Church, Ann Halprin, Grand Union²), a period of our collective



Manual for Incidence, Toronto; (L-R) Katie Ewald (running), Erin Flynn (on doorway), Matija Ferlin, Claudia Fancello, Inari Salmivaara
 Photo credit: Daniel Arcé

performance history that is woefully under-examined in Canada.

Anne Bogarts' viewpoints³ are a system: seven points of concentration that, when applied to time and space, can result in a beautiful, unpredictable order – an order that can then be “set” or not.

Intentionally, we move between rehearsal venues – a dance phrase created in the studio is expanded to fit the performance venue, then re-condensed and re-expanded. This creates a vocabulary of difference, of probable change. From the start, “doing it again” is a creative act, an issue of translation and improvisation.

Ame and I used to argue over repeatability. Coming from a neo-formalist background of Bogart, Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman and the like, I argued in favour. “If it wasn't repeatable,” I would argue, “where is the craft?” This is probably when Ame started talking about systems and, to be honest, I didn't buy it.

Systems, my little neo-formalist says, are improvisation, and improvisation is for the rehearsal hall – it has no role on stage in front of an audience, who should be able to expect at least that we have done this before.

Sameness is no longer the purview of performance. In this age of digital reproduction, performance refuses all attempts. Systems offer a way to embrace this reality – a way to move toward the not-the-same, to perform *site-specifically*, to stop pretending we are not mere feet away – we are performing, yes, and that performing can include imaginings and transformations, but we are performing in a real space and that space is different from other spaces.

“The familiar, in a different place, might be strange. We also wonder about the inverse.”⁴

The formulation comes from Viktor Shklovsky through Brecht⁵ – that art has the ability to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar.

When approaching a new space, we become familiar with it – to be comfortable performing there. We learn its echoes and dry spots, where we can hide and where we are the focus of attention. We tease out its secrets and idiosyncrasies, since these are what make it different from the other.

We are also, simultaneously, making it strange: looking at it so particularly that it is revealed to

us in new ways. (How we look at something changes it, both Duchamp and Heisenberg have taught us.) When those familiar with the space in the habitual everyday way come and see us they will see in the space what they have never seen before. The space will be awakened. I will never look at the bar at XPACE without seeing Matija standing on it wearing plastic gloves; I will never enter the back door of Hub 14 without remembering Chad falling through it ten times.

The performers would replace each other in rehearsal – borrowing material they had watched the day before, altering it to make it their own, yet still maintaining a difference: *I am not the original.*

If things are not (and are encouraged to not be) the same, is a performance repeatable? By these acts of replacement, by understanding what is essential – even that is the wrong word – what are we repeating? Certain elements repeat, certain don't, but it is the same show. Isn't it? How different can a show be and stay the same? Is a book in another language the same book? Is the unplugged version of the rock song the same song? Audiences can change a show (a broad farce one night, with laughs, and a serious drama the next, with none), but we would never call that a different show.

Dustin Harvey (see “Theatre for Small Audiences” in this issue), rightly pointed out to me that all good actors are repeating within a system – that blocking objectives are systems that allow for variation night to night. Accepting this as true, there remain important distinguishing features – including the nature of the basic material. Within the “traditional” theatre,

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the script acts as that basic material, providing an immovable and privileged grounding. I propose that an alternative is to promote the relationship between the performer, the audience and the site: that this trinity be dynamic and engaged – and deeply considered – and yet allowed to change at all stages of development.

There is something very utilitarian about all of this replacing. We talk about how movements *function*, whether new architectures *work*. These judgements are not arbitrary but difficult to articulate – we know when we see it – a knowing based on an understanding of why *that* movement at *that* time. Of knowing that Katie pulling Matijas’s shirt down in Montreal is the same as her moving a mat for him to fall on from the rafters in Toronto – two gestures radically different

but fundamentally the same, within the system.

I am nervous of where this “different yet the same” understanding leads me – to speak of a core or of essence, of Hélène Cixous’ truth:

[T]he truth, toward what calls me, attracts me magnetically, irresistibly. Of course, I circle “the truth” with all kinds of signs, quotation marks, and brackets, to protect it from any form of fixation or conceptualization, since it is one of those words that constantly crosses our universe in a dazzling wake, but is also pursued by suspicion. I will talk about truth again, without which (without the word truth, without the mystery truth) there would be no writing. It is what writing wants. But it “(the truth)” is totally below and a long way off ... Giving oneself to writing means being in a position to do this work of digging, of unburying ...” (6)

Is there an ontological truth of an action that can be kept constant while the scenery shifts dramatically?

And after I have nervously spoken of this “(truth),” I find myself proposing that to perform site-specifically is an honest and effective means to move towards it. The awareness of systems, with their combination of looseness and rigour, allows me to imagine a performance ethic that stays open, that cannot sink into deadly repeatability, that allows each performance to be a pursuit of the truth.

There is nothing new in this – once upon a time all performances were site-specific – but in these times of digital transmission and cookie-cutter black boxes, performance can



Manual for Incidence, Montreal; (L–R) Inari Salmivaara, Matija Ferlin (background), Claudia Fancello
Photo credit: Daniel Arcé



Manual for Incidence; Final line up in Montreal; (back to front) Inari Salmivaara, Katie Ewald, Matija Ferlin, Stacey Hannah, Claudia Fancello, Chad Dembski, Erin Flynn
 Photo credit: Liam Maloney

and must stand for embraced difference – not out of nostalgia or luddism, but with our eyes set on a future that includes presence and variation.

Notes

- 1 See Halprin.
- 2 See Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers* for a good overview of the period.
- 3 See Dixon and Smith, *Anne Bogart: The Viewpoints*.
- 4 A ten-minute trio with Chad Dembski, Inari Salmivaara and Matija Ferlin was performed at Series 8:08, 30 April 2005. As part of the series, they asked for an introduction and some questions for the audience to think about and reflect on in their written feedback. This is a line from the text that I wrote and performed in my role as dramaturge.
- 5 “The formula [*Verfremdungseffekt*] is a translation of the Russian critic Viktor Shklovskij’s [*sic*] phrase ‘Priem Ostranneuja,’ or ‘devise for making strange’” (Brecht 99). For more on and by Shklovsky, see Lemon and Reis 3–57.

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Jacob Zimmer is a writer, dramaturge, director and occasional performer. He is currently involved in a long-term dramaturgical collaboration with choreographer Ame Henderson and her company, Public Recordings (<http://www.publicrecordings.org>). As director of Small Wooden Shoe (<http://www.smallwoodenshoe.org>), Jacob has created or co-created and directed *Do You Have Any Idea How Fast You Were Going* (Rhubarb! 2006), *Perhaps in a Hundred Years*, *No Secrets*, *The Mysterious Death of WB*, *The Orchard v.1*, *The Delayed Knee Jerk Reaction Series I–IV*, *Hold on Tightly*, *Let Go Lightly* and *Chalk Circle Trial* as well as directing Heiner Müller’s Quartet. As a founding member of sabotage group he assembled and directed *WasteLand*, *Pleasure is so hard to remember, ...Open Wound* (Rhubarb! 2000) and the directed reading of *Other than War*. He has also worked across the country as a dramaturge, designer and technician. Jacob studied at Simon Fraser University’s School for the Contemporary Arts.