

Working with extended duration

Prior to making *How to save your skin when disaster strikes without warning*, Low Profile had not attempted working with such a long duration (12 hours) (10am – 10pm) – previous pieces had never stretched longer than 2 hours.

In previous pieces we have struggled with the notions of ‘beginning’ and ‘ending’, often making choices about duration with reference to some kind of external constraint (sometimes using timers, the length of time it takes a kettle to boil, or the length a DV tape). In the case of *HTSYSWDSWW*, we were interested in the idea of the text/the book itself suggesting the length of the piece (returning to this idea of an external constraint) - estimating how long it would take us to read the whole book (from start to finish) out loud. This notion of there being a start and a finish to the book, a ‘wholeness’, holds an interesting parallel with our (LP) assertion that there are “no parameters or edges to this thing called preparedness” – a kind of faulty logic or inbuilt failure in the idea that this book (or the resulting performance) could ‘contain’ all of the ‘answers’.

Working with extended duration inevitably suggests ideas about endurance - “the ability or power to bear prolonged exertion, pain, or hardship” (Encarta® World English Dictionary - 1999) – and in this case, this staying power is more to do with persistence rather than a test of physical exertion, something which is re-iterated throughout the text of the performance, with its insistence on the importance of ‘not giving up’, not panicking and remaining clam, ‘no matter what’.

This particular interpretation of endurance is intentional and feels like a useful tactic in highlighting the difference between this performance (along with much of our work as LOW PROFILE) and the traditions of body-focused performance (with references to practices like Marina Abramovic, Franko B, Kira O’Reilly, Ron Athey) – and the importance we (LP) place on a less ‘spectacular’ type of “ability or power to bear prolonged exertion, pain, or hardship”, and its relationship to our on-going investigations into the timely and persistent themes of a more ‘everyday’ survival and preparedness.

In this way, the structure of the performance itself also interrogates or ‘pushes to the limit’ our ability to process and retain information, our ability to know or learn the ‘right’ thing to do and tests our commitment to ‘not giving up’.

Breaks, and should you take them?

Working with a duration of 12 hours also throws up some practical problems that needed to be addressed. When thinking about breaks, we discussed ideas about these breaks becoming ‘part of it’ rather than simply ‘a rest from it’. In response to this, we developed a set of flags (see bookwork) that would be used in the performance space during the piece. These provided us with a straightforward way of communicating with each other without disrupting the performance too much and we felt this would also allow anyone who had just come in to ‘read’ the situation more simply.

When trying out this flag system during the performance of *HTSYSWDSWW*, it seemed a bit over-the-top. It seemed strange that either of us (the performers) would leave the space for these periods of time, that we could ‘escape’ the demands of the performance so completely – that we could just stop and be ‘outside of’ what was going on.

Although originally we wanted these breaks to be some kind of event – (thinking of something like Lone Twin’s break in *Ghost Dance*, where a raised hand signals the ordering of 2 pizzas that are then eaten in the space) allowing the ‘stopping’ of the performance to become a kind of intense ‘refuelling’, rather than a traditional break – we found that after the performance we need to re-think how this functions for us (cross ref: how we handled this in *MacGyver’thon*).

Could someone take over from us?

Throughout the performance, there is a subtle (unspoken) invitation for the audience to write their own questions for the ‘tester’ to ask the ‘reader’. Once or twice this invitation was used to ‘cover’ breaks by one or other performer – setting up a situation where the audience member is almost ‘tasked with’ making sure nothing is missed – ‘filling in’ for the missing performer and undertaking their role.

This throws up quite an interesting position where a balancing of ‘self-sufficiency’ (of the performers) and wanting to encourage members of the audience to recognise that there is no reason why it couldn’t be them making/doing this performance. (cross ref: this is something we returned to in *MacGyver’thon* – appealing to the audience for their help “We’ve been here since 6am, it’s getting hard to concentrate).

During the performance, there were also points when the roles of reader and tester were swapped. Initially, we had decided that we would clearly define these roles - Hannah would be the reader and Rachel would be the tester – as we were interested in the dynamic this might set up. Usually (in previous performances), any clear roles that are set out have been swapped/interchangeable. The swapping was partly a response to the fatigue of reading out-loud for such a prolonged period, but also meant that the audience would see the differences in how each performer ‘played

with’ or reacted to the situation of being either reader or questioner. This led to moments of repeated ‘testing’ – each performer having ‘favourite’ questions they asked of the other, building a new kind of tension.

On reflection, we also identified that we need to develop strategies for the situations where there is only one performer in the space (when there is repeated questioning with no answers, or solid periods of reading with no questioning).

What happens when there is no audience?

For stretches during the performance, there was no audience. With regards to the task involved in *HTSYSWDSWW*, it makes sense to continue whether there is an audience or not, as the reading and the writing of questions is a cumulative activity, reliant on both performers carrying out specific tasks. However, we continued to take breaks during these periods of no audience (maybe consciously/subconsciously) – leaving only one performer in the space, carrying out their part of the task, either reading aloud from the book (to no-one), or asking questions from the existing collection (to no-one). It is hard to know how these parts of the performance function – are these like pauses (although never silent)? Are they still visible to/imagined by the audience? (cross ref: Macgyver’thon – having an invigilator: a constant audience)

In this case, the audience for the performance came and went, some people only coming for the last hour or two, while other people who had dropped in during the day returned for the last few hours. We were aware of this possibility (people coming for “the end”) and in our experiences as audience members, it is something we have done too.

This relationship between us (as performers) doing it (the performance/reading/questioning) for as long as it takes, not giving up, going on until the end and an audience that are particularly interested in engaging with the performance towards its limits (in terms of time), throws up questions for us:

- » why do it for so long? (especially if people are only going to come for the last few hours?)
- » what happens after this length of time? (are the audience ‘testing’ the performers resolve?) (also, that we adapted the text/reading of the book/script slightly, knowing in the moment of the performance the estimated time it would take and not wanting to make it longer than the time we had allotted)
- » the expectation of the audience that we are genuine in our task, that we are telling the truth about what we are doing (and how long it will take us)

Returning to more ‘task-oriented’ approach

In developing *How to save you skin when disaster strikes without warning*, we (LP) returned to a pared-down, task-oriented approach – developing a conceptual task that focused the audience’s attention on our on-going investigation into preparedness. Using “The Book Of Survival” as source material and ‘a text’ for the performance, we set up a situation (see the instruction piece) where our exploration of the text (and the ideas contained within it) would be ‘played out’ in front of an audience.

In this way, the performance is formulated but not finalized – there is not a rehearsed, scripted or practiced way of delivering the text or composing or answering the questions – this is instead dictated by the requirements to ‘read’ and ‘test’ (as the roles are laid out in the instruction task) and the means of doing this is ‘worked-out’ as the performance unfolds. In preparation for the performance, we made minimal ‘try-outs’ to work out how the ‘reading’ and ‘questioning’ might work - reading a passage from the book (to allow us to estimate how long it would take to read the whole book out loud), formulating three or four questions (to test how questions might be derived from the text) and made agreements on aesthetic decisions (like the posting of the questions on the wall once they had been asked, using grey A5 paper, markers and masking tape).

We were keen (and often are) to allow specific qualities, habits, ‘ways’ and idiosyncrasies to develop during the performance of the piece – in a way re-inscribing the text we used, actively producing something ‘new’ in public, with an audience rather than behind closed doors (a writing/re-writing through reading). This also means that the text remains foreign to us (as it is to the audience). In the essay I wrote on Rancière’s *The Emancipated Spectator*, this notion of the “mediating spectacle” (Rancière, Jacques (2007) “The Emancipated Spectator” *Artforum International*, March 2007, p.278) – something ‘foreign’ that all parties can refer to – becomes particularly important in setting up “an equality of intelligences”.

If the text for the performance (“The Book Of Survival”) is something ‘foreign’ (not necessarily unknown or previously unseen, but something that you are not ‘at home with’) to both performer and audience – both are learning, neither is the ‘master’

of this knowledge. The book has its own set of logic, sometimes contradictory to common sense or prior knowledge one may have. In the reading and questioning that happens during the performance, there is never an indication as to what the ‘right’ answer is – the audience is testing the ‘reader’ (and themselves) as much as the ‘tester’ is.

We (LP and audience) are involved in this active space of observation, comparison, repetition, telling and verification - comparing what we read/hear in the book (or any book), the questions asked and the answers given to what we already ‘know’, through experience, through memory and through a process of trial-and-error.

Very little manipulation of source material prior to performance

The book that we use in the performance is the same one you could buy in the shop – it is untampered with (has not been modified). There is something particularly attractive to us about the ‘availability’ of the text to anyone – not just us. We are not in the position of ‘readers’ of this text because we have a particular authorisation to use it – it is simply something we have found.

However, it is not functioning as a readymade (in a Fine Art/sculptural sense) – the object itself is not reified, transformed or transmogrified through the process of it being re-presented to an audience – the object does not become an artwork (cross ref: the DVD in *Macgyver’thon*). It is also not important for the audience to have any prior knowledge of the book or its contents - it is not simply a cultural reference that the audience need to have a contextual knowledge of to ‘get the joke’ (not that any of this aims to be a ‘joke’).

Our ‘attending to’ this book (the extended reading of and the repeated questioning of the reader) marks it as important - it is obviously a book (a text) that we have carefully selected – we couldn’t just be using ‘any’ text. The text provides a structure/framework for us to unpick ideas about there being a ‘right thing to do’ and a ‘right moment’ in which to do it – the tone of the text itself offers a certainty, a level of authority and a sense of incontrovertible truth and conviction in what is stated (the advice given).

“The Book Of Survival” is written by ‘an expert’ – no doubt is expressed. Each passage is written as though it should be followed to the letter – this book has ‘the answers’ and all the information that any of us would need to survive.

[A]fter reading this book you will be mentally equipped. Equipped to escape the immediate danger. Equipped to stay breathing until help arrives. Equipped to survive.

(Anthony Greenbank (1967) *The Book Of Survival*, London: Wolfe Publishing p.7)

By presenting this text (in its entirety), without (manipulation, editing) analysing or posing challenges to the ideas expressed, we offer it to the audience - to consider the merits of the guidance given and to make their own judgements about how appropriate, rational, reasonable, absurd, incongruous or inconsistent it seems.

“The book contains nothing but information. Tight packed, factual information. No cheap thrills. No heroes. No heroics.” (Greenbank :1967, as above). Much like the book, our performance contains nothing but information – a dry run, giving over space and time to consider how all of these scenarios, actions, responses and possibilities might relate to each of our own situations.

Cataloguing/processing/generating text during performance rather than before

Alongside the reading of the text from the book, throughout the performance, we are engaged in the production of a new written text – the questions asked of the reader. This collection is developed ‘in the moment’ of the performance, through a picking out of statements read from “The Book Of Survival”. Prior to the performance, we don’t know exactly what it is we will be collecting. We are instead relying on a kind of un-scripted, un-spoken, intuitive response to the text. This is the stuff that just sounds right (or feels right) – the stuff that helps to articulate our particular concerns as Low Profile.

It is difficult to unpack this intuitive processing of the text, and the ‘training’ we undertake as artists in spotting “the stuff” we’re interested in (that has a particular aesthetic or feeling about it). In an attempt to describe it, I would say that (within the text) we are drawn to counter-intuitive information and the possibilities for absurdity or incongruity. We are also aware that the texts we generate (as questions in this space) are designed to be spoken.

Hannah, are you ever lonelier than when buried alive?

Hannah, when should you consider stopping very, very, very abruptly?

Hannah, is there any substitute for learning to swim?

Rachel, name four types of tent?

Hannah, what is the golden rule?

Of course, this making of the ‘work’ during the performance (rather than beforehand) could be quite a risky strategy – I think this is where the long-term nature of our engagement with the subject matter (with ideas around ‘dry runs’ and ‘preparedness’) and a careful editing of the task (preparation of the instructions for the piece) comes into play. In this way, we can hopefully retain the status of the text as ‘foreign’ to us and re-enforce the importance this “equality of intelligences” between ourselves (LP) and the people who come to watch/engage with our work.

It does however mean that we need to be particularly mindful of what steps we take to get our ‘quality control’ right, to avoid things going really badly (or just presenting crap!).

The performance created an installation trace that is indexical of the performance itself

When the questions in the performance have been written/composed and spoken/asked, they are then posted on the walls around the space of the performance itself. This develops into an ‘installed’, indexical trace of the performance that is not only used/re-activated/referenced during the piece (questions are repeatedly asked - the questioner drawing from the questions on the wall as well as composing new ones) but could also remain in the space after the performance itself has ‘finished’.

The generation of these written questions during the performance also means that there is a new set of “stuff” (physical pieces of paper and the ideas/questions/quotes captured) that is produced by the live work. This is a new element for us (LP) to work with – previously we have been bringing “stuff” to the live situation (eg equipment, props, videos, texts etc), and now we are faced with having “stuff” to take away from it. For us (LP), this presents us with a new set of challenges – working out the status of these texts and physical/ephemeral objects:

- » What can we do with these by-products/leftovers?
- » Are these ‘relics’?
- » Should they be retained or discarded?
- » Are these things the start of a new performance?
- » How do these things operate on their own, or left in the space as a trace of ‘what has gone on there’?
- » What can the collection, as a by-product of the ‘act of collecting’, tell us about the ‘act of collecting’? What does it tell us about the collectors?
- » Is it important that the resulting piece that re-uses the text does not start to ‘stand-in’ for (or replace) the live piece?

DRY RUN part 2: How to save your skin when disaster strikes without warning

This was first performed at The Royal Standard (an artist-run space in Liverpool) alongside the gallery’s main exhibition *Navigator*, in the newly opened Project Space. The space was given over to us for 4 days to try out and test both this performance and to facilitate the development and installation of *DRY RUN part 3: Scale Of Emergency* and *DRY RUN part 2: How to save your skin when disaster strikes without warning*.

DRY RUN part 2: How to save your skin when disaster strikes without warning marks a number of changes of approach for Low Profile including:

- » working with extended duration (12 hours)
- » returning to more ‘task-oriented’ approach (where there is not a particular running order, or script in that sense)
- » very little manipulation of source material prior to performance
- » cataloguing/processing/generating text during performance rather than before
- » the performance created an installation trace (text on walls) that is indexical of the performance itself

This piece of writing will start to un-pick and examine the performance through these areas with attempts to evaluate and learn from the experience of making/showing the work.