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Two Live Artists in the Theatre

A DIALOGUE WITH TANIA EL KHOURY & DEBORAH PEARSON

Two women in their 30s are each facing a laptop.

Deborah: Habibti! Are you around? x

Deborah: Maybe we should arrange a different time to Skype habibti?

Call started

Call ended 30 seconds

Call started

Tania: Oh hello, am I talking to the first world?

Deborah: Oh hello.

Tania: The connection in Beirut is bad today so we have to type.

Deborah: That's cool; I type fast.

The two women fall silent. They begin typing.

Tania: Ha. So did you get that email from The Venue?

Deborah: What?

Tania: Check your email.

Deborah: The one about wanting artist testimonies?

Tania: What did they write?

Deborah: Hold on. I'll copy and paste.

Dear Deborah,

How are you? It's been a while. We hope all is going really well! It would be great to catch up soon and hear more about the projects you're currently working on. We are putting artist testimonies on our new website and we were wondering if you could answer a few questions about why you've found it valuable working with us. We'd love it if you could write one statement about how you value making theatre with us. We really hope you're able to help out as we'd love to have your unique

voice and perspective included on our site. The testimonies will be used for marketing purposes and in our upcoming fundraising applications.

Warmly,

Tania: *(laughs.)* I knew it. I got the exact same email, but they replaced your name with mine. They are clearly interested in our 'unique voice and perspective'!

Deborah: Maybe we should send a collective response because they sent us the same email?

Tania: Sure. First of all, I don't like my work being called 'theatre'.

Deborah: Why's that?

Tania: Theatre for me is very much about the space. The theatre space dictates a certain relationship between the spectators and the performers. It calls for a passive relationship in which, as a spectator, you pay to lie back and watch other people on stage feeling, moving and sweating, hoping that this will somehow move you. I don't relate to this relationship because I think at its core it's problematic.

Deborah: Really? For me thinking of my work as 'theatre' is a really important part of my practice. I'm really inspired by the conventions and expectations that come with a term that is as old and loaded as 'theatre'.

Tania raises her eyebrows in disbelief/confusion.

When I go to see a piece that is contextualized as theatre, I become preoccupied with certain things. I bring a 'theatrical gaze' to the situation. When I apply the term 'theatre' to a piece I'm making, as an artist I can use these theatrical preoccupations to be inventive with my work. One example is that piece I made,

The Future Show – it came as a result of me thinking about my own preoccupation with re-presentation, both in theatre and in narrative. In *The Poetics*, Aristotle defines tragedy as '[t]he mimesis of a praxis', and 'mimesis' is frequently translated as 'representation'.¹ This question of whether or not a performance re-presents an event that preceded its telling began to really bother me. So I conceived of a show where I challenged this basic declaration by Aristotle. I tell the audience a story, which in the performance situation I treat as the truth (using my real name and the topography of my life). I am explicit about the fact that the story is a pre-presentation, rather than a re-presentation. The story is just an account of everything I will do after the audience applauds, so 'the reality' of what I have depicted with words only begins as soon as the performance finishes. In this sense I am pre-presenting – and this form came to me entirely as a result of interrogating some of our very basic assumptions about theatre.

Tania: Yes but the *Future Show* is a good example of a piece that could be described both as a theatre piece for the preoccupations you mentioned above and live art performance because it is simple and innovative and does not fit with the traditional hierarchy in theatre because you created it, wrote it and performed it.

Deborah: (*beat*.) I don't know, I think the way that we view work is defined by context. You've shown your work in a lot of theatre festivals and theatres. Your piece *Gardens Speak*, for example – it's an interactive installation but by showing it in a specific set of festivals you end up contextualizing it as theatre instead of 'installation' or 'visual art'.

Tania: Just because *Gardens Speak* can be presented at a theatre venue or at a theatre festival, it does not mean that I contextualize it as theatre. When Tino Sehgal presents a performance at the Turbine Hall, his piece does not automatically become visual arts because it is at the Tate and yet/

Deborah: Really? I think it does.

Tania: (*types slowly and deliberately.*)

I understand that there is an important element of an audience's expectations in a particular venue. For example, people expect to see visual art at Tate Modern and might consequently read Tino Sehgal's performance in that respect. But some artists work against these expectations. Tania Bruguera wanted to bring a scene exercising crowd control in a public space or during a protest into the Turbine Hall in her piece *Tatlin's Whisper #5*. Reflecting back on her piece, Bruguera said that the performance didn't work because there is a sense of safety in museums and galleries that can take the element of risk out of the performance.²

Deborah: So do you think we need a different kind of venue? One that is not for visual arts or for theatre? One that allows that element of risk that Bruguera is talking about? Is that even possible?

Deborah seems to be reflecting by scratching the back of her neck and Tania seems to be excited by moving her hips on the chair as if correcting her seating position or as if dancing.

Tania: Yes, it is possible – it could be a Live Art venue: a venue that is as flexible as the practice itself. Ideally the curator–producer–artist–audience relationship would be re-invented with every live art piece because our practice is one that changes. And this is how we need to be supported and paid. The absence of such venues means that we end up working with venues set up on theatre work ethics or visual arts work ethics and these don't necessarily fit our practice. For example, my work cannot have a box office split because I often make performances for one person, which means that I will not get any money. So the payment needs to be a set artist fee regardless of the number of audience members. Similarly, if I were to present my work in a visual art context, as it very rarely produces objects that could be bought or collected, it would remain on the financial periphery of that industry.

Deborah: (*grimaces.*) Tino Sehgal seems to make a living out of selling what he calls 'constructed situations' as works of art.³ His use

¹ Aristotle believes both painting and poetry to be forms of mimesis, a word I shall translate as 'imitation'. Many scholars would object to this rendering and prefer 'representation'

² Menezes, C. (2013) 'Our voice as protagonist: A meeting with Tania Bruguera', *Studio International*, 11 November, In Bruguera's words: "In a museum, there is a safety that you don't have on the outside. Even if it is something aggressive, offensive or transgressive, you can always turn back and go home, you have the option to ignore it." www.studiointernational.com/index.php/our-voice-as-protagonist-a-meeting-with-tania-bruguera, accessed 28 April 2015.

³ Tino Sehgal, November 30, 2007 - January 10, 2008 Marian Goodman Gallery, New York. For information see: http://www.mariangoodman.com/exhibitions/2007-11-30_tino-sehgal/

of the word ‘constructed’ is quite deliberate, I think, to suggest that there is something object-like, that is, built/constructed, about a performance. But I wonder if the financial model he’s created where he sells his performances as objects would work for less established artists. As an artist whose name is so well recognized, I’d argue that Sehgal’s name has become objectified into a kind of symbol or brand. His name is a commodity and is part of what galleries are investing in when they buy one of his ‘constructed situations’. But I think that less recognized artists would really struggle to sell their work in that way.

Beat. Pauses to think.

It’s especially difficult when it comes to valuing work for intimate audiences. Remember a few years ago there was that ‘trend’ in making one-on-one performances? A lot of venues, including my own collective, Forest Fringe, caught on and began trying to find suitable financial contexts to show that kind of work. It was often by grouping several one-on-one pieces together so that they could accommodate as many audience members as possible. This was particularly true of BAC’s (Battersea Arts Centre, London) one-on-one festival, where they even billed the work as they would bill a meal – one artist’s piece was ‘the appetizer’, and another was ‘the main course’. Of course, when they relegated a piece like mine to the category of ‘appetizer’ I worried that there was a suggestion that the work could not survive on its own. The word ‘appetizer’ suggests that something better is on the way. But what I found more difficult was the idea of comparing this kind of work to a meal. One of the reasons I am interested in one-on-one performance is because of the depth of engagement between the performer and the audience member, and the ways that this more horizontal relationship challenges audience passivity. There’s a quote I like by Ang Bartram – the audience member in one-on-one performance is ‘conspicuous by being alone ... they acknowledge their own role in the work in one-to-one performance in a way that can be ignored as part of a group’ (cited in

Zerihan 2009:17). By contextualizing this as a meal, the relationship between the performer and the audience member becomes less subversive: it is about artists performing a ‘service’ for the audience, the same way that they may cook for them.

Both women think about food and look momentarily hungry. Deborah continues typing. Tania gets up and starts making a salad.

This is a worrying way of looking at this work, as part of an industry of experience. The playwright David Greig referred to the one-on-one form as ‘decadent’ in the face of the economic crisis (cited in Higgins 2011). Given that the stereotype applied to Western theatre since the eighteenth century has been one of a middle-class art form or the pastime of the wealthy, if we think of one-on-one as a service, one can make a legitimate argument that this work is elitism under capitalism taken to extremes. Having worked as a producer for Forest Fringe and SummerWorks, however, I also understand how difficult it is to properly support this kind of work. It’s made me question whether or not relational work is best suited to a theatre context – as both a producer and an artist. Perhaps it is an awkward fit.

Tania: (*Eating and typing.*) It’s funny that I don’t remember which meal my piece *Maybe if you Choreograph Me, you Will Feel Better* was presented as at the same one-on-one festival you mentioned! I must have forgotten about it out of embarrassment. Though I do remember the pain of having to perform such a demanding piece so many times in a row in one day, many days in a row. The piece was contextualized as a full performance for one person as it runs for about 30 minutes and requires a lot of energy. The idea of the piece is that I pass underneath a man’s window in the street. The man who is the participating audience member dictates my movements and choreographs me (by speaking to me through wireless headphones) while I’m in the street. This performance was difficult for what it is and it was made more difficult when I had to go through it many times in a row. My producer and I struggled with how to make the

show worthwhile for festivals that were programming it and flying us abroad without it being such a damaging experience for me as a performer and maker. The question of elitism you raise is key in thinking about intimate performance.

Deborah momentarily admires her shoes. Tania continues typing while eating.

It is important to note that this is not the case with all intimate performances. For example, my work is both intimate and political. It intentionally uses language, concepts and ideas that can be felt and understood by everyone, from the art snob to the average human being. In that sense, it is not elitist though it clearly has a limited audience. Having a limited audience has been a necessary choice for me as an artist, having invested in creating embodied experiences for audiences. These experiences ask audiences to make political choices, to take a side and to become part of the narrative they are encountering. It is also about being true to the concept of the piece. The piece we're discussing here is for male audiences, as it explores gender dynamics and oppression in general. I've tried it with female audiences but it simply didn't work for me as a performer. I needed to hear instructions by a male stranger to work with or against them. Of course this meant severely limiting our possible audiences.

Tania pauses to clean the laptop screen with a furious scrub. She begins typing again.

I use the term 'Live Art' for relational reasons. It offers a more flexible space between maker and performer, artist and spectator. Also, importantly, live art is not necessarily centred on the existence of a performer. It could be a live experience that happens between an audience and sound.

Deborah: *(Deborah starts to play music on iTunes. 'Transformer Man' by Neil Young.)*
I totally agree.

Tania: If you agree, why are you typing so loudly? It sounds like you're using your keyboard as a percussion instrument for that weird song you just put on.

Deborah: Hey this is Neil Young in his experimental phase! I do sometimes worry that the term 'live art' can alienate audiences who haven't heard of it before, even though it's an empowering way for artists to think about their work. But of course the frustration in trying to define live art to those who haven't encountered it before is that the term's major strength is that it resists definition. It's about work that requires the audience to think about ephemerality and their presence. But other than that it could be a lot of different things. That vagueness is very appealing to artists, but before walking in to a piece, it can be alienating to audiences.

This said, for many people theatres are incredibly alienating places, too. In truth one of the most satisfying pieces I was ever involved in didn't come under either of those headings. It was an advice booth that my partner Morgan and I set up on the street, offering advice in exchange for £1. We were packed all day and received a relatively large amount of attention for what was quite a small project, simply because we put our booth in a market with market traders, rather than a context where it would be called live art or theatre. There was no barrier between what we were doing and the participants, and the variety of people who came to talk to us was really wonderful and much more diverse (and generous and curious) than I've experienced in an institution.

Tania: *(Tania puts her plate down. She has finished her meal. She types in a satisfied way.)*
In Lebanon, I co-founded a research and live art collective named Dictaphone Group. We create site-specific performances based on urban research. When spaces in the city are so rich with history, are contested, fought for, reclaimed, securitized and shut down, it seems like a shame to try to recreate such intensity in sterile places such as studios, galleries and theatres. In the context of post-war Lebanon, we are battling with reconstruction plans and privatization of our seashore that disempower people and push them out of the public spaces. Making performances in these contested public spaces is our way of forming a collective



■ *Gardens Speak*
 (above) Photo Jesse Hunniford
 (below) Photo James Allan

memory in these spaces, hoping that this would act as a resistance tool against their possible closure. Going back to Tania Bruguera's thoughts on the implication of making political art in venues, I agree with her that these venues offer a sense of safety that gives audiences a way out, a sense that it is all fabricated.

Discussing the notion of the right to the city at an art venue such as the Beirut Art Centre keeps the conversation in the intellectual realm. Discussing it in Dalieh, a seashore land that is being currently shut down from the public for the construction of a luxurious hotel, makes a totally different performance. There, there is no place for hiding in the dark. We are faced with the space history, its current use and its alarming future plans.

Deborah: (*furrowing her brow.*) That's absolutely true. That said, I'm glad that buildings exist. Making work out on the street can be very empowering, but I feel really grateful for the fact that it's a choice. They're easy to complain about, but I feel really grateful for the existence of galleries and theatres.

Tania: Each public space offers a multitude of potential relationships between audience, passers-by and artists. And that's what I like about it. Performing in public space and encountering what can be called 'accidental audiences' has taught me a lot about my work, about stereotyping, about sexual harassment against women, about how much our cities are policed, about surveillance, about fear, about racism, about affect, about solidarity and about generosity.

Deborah: (*types in a concerned way.*) But I remember when you were harassed by that

man in Toronto when you showed *Maybe if you Choreograph Me* at SummerWorks in 2012. Even though your piece was part of a theatre festival, when you were actually out in the street, passers-by didn't know you were performing. You were subject to the same social codes as anyone else walking in the street, and sadly in our world those codes can self-regulate in extremely violent and oppressive ways.

Tania: (*types angrily.*) Yes, and I was racially abused while performing it in Edinburgh, and stopped by the police for 'looking suspicious' in Lisbon. Of course all these unfortunate encounters are part of what the piece itself is interrogating.

The music shuffles.

Tania: Okay, so what are we going to write as our sentence about why we found working with The Venue so valuable?

Deborah: I genuinely don't know.

Tania: (*Beat. Smiles sneakily.*) I think we should just send her this conversation. We can write, 'As artists we are never invited to conferences or discussions about artistic policies at your venue. Therefore, we decided to discuss this now on Skype and send you the transcript. Feel free to add it to your fundraising dossier.'

Deborah: (*Laughs.*) Good idea.

Music plays. Deborah and Tania sign out of Skype and then bow.

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