

*BODY AS PLACE:*  
Durational Performance As Activist Practice  
by Nala walla, 2009

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*"The pitcher cries for water to carry,  
and a person for work that is real."*

*-Marge Piercy*

*"Beware that dance as...performance art in  
the theater, is a minute fragment of dance  
in the true sense of the word."*

*-Min Tanaka*

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## 5.1 INTRODUCTION: ON MEDIATIZATION AND PERFORMANCE ADDICTION

All across the modern world, the human being is malnourished—and I am not referring just to the poor. In Western nations, even the bodies of the obese, the rich, and the highly-privileged betray obvious signs of starvation, both physical and spiritual. We certainly have no lack of stuff to fill ourselves with, yet spiraling consumption of things devoid of nutritive value only whets our hunger. Wasn't 'consumption' the 14<sup>th</sup> Century name for a disease of wasting-away? Today we are not so different: consumption is consuming us.

Even culture and the arts have been commodified into an item we purchase. But the bland fare of modern pop culture is as empty of soulful nutrition as bag of Cheetos, and about as addictive. In the frenzy to sate our cravings with media, we often forget that this hunger for performance is an ancient one, a deep human need for participatory, unmediated ritual and ceremony, for cultural transformation—the original purpose of the arts.

Cut to our contemporary scene: legions of the culturally anemic, voraciously consuming lonely performances on iPods and laptops, Youtube and Twitter, attempting to capture the magic on our cell phone cameras, in a collective gasp for the nutritive value of the arts. Yet, because we can never be “virtually” satisfied, the cycle of addiction rambles on. Performance scholar Baz Kershaw asks:

Is drama now an unconscious addiction, a programme so deeply ingrained that we do not even recognize it as a need? And is performance becoming an addictive matrix of consciousness, a new kind of paradigm crucially inherent to human ecology?...It arrives in a very personal guise through anxieties about our own performance—in career, lifestyle, love...Or we become fascinated by the performance of people we will never meet—in the media, sports, politics. Or we are drawn to more abstract domains of performance—the FTSE, the GNP, the RAE, the hundred best of everything, the ten worst... The perfusion of performance...then generates various pathologies of perception of social process.

---Baz Kershaw, *Theater Ecology* (2007)

We are a culture obsessed with performance. Perhaps this fact can shed some light upon where our needs truly lie? I believe that we can remedy the addictive mediatization of society by returning *per-form-ance* to its roots—giving tangible and actual *form* to the sustainable and healthy

culture we so desperately need. My own work as an embodied artist seeks to mitigate the intense flood of media and hard technology into our lives by renewing a performance tradition which truly nourishes, truly transforms our people and our culture.

This video “essay” provides a view into the Bcollective’s site-specific performances in which we are invited outdoors to physical connection with people and place. We recover the art of meaningful work in the landscape, the art of honoring the body, the art of actively building and sculpting a vision for a healthy, modern village.

#### 5.1.1 VIDEO: “Nest”

date: 2009  
editing: Nala Walla  
camera: Keeth Apgar  
performance: Nala Walla

In this short film, a computer weary-woman seeks solace outdoors in a bed made of sticks and branches, a nest to rest tired eyes and recharge with birdsong.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNXAb0co-k>

#### 5.2 DURATIONAL PERFORMANCE AS ACTIVIST PRACTICE

A friend and colleague, Tamara Ashley (Newcastle, UK) is currently researching her PhD in dance with a focus upon artists for whom the land and landscape is an integral part of their work. This summer (2009) she asked to visit the Bcollective in order to document my work as part of this research, and I agreed.

She received a grant, bought her plane ticket, and arrived on a hot day in July. We spent two weeks together, dancing in the garden, at the beach, even on old military grounds, where we had the distinct intention of helping to transform a place built for guns and war into a place for art making. Many conversations were had about the role of performance and art in people’s lives today, interviews recorded, videography captured.

In working with her I have been given an incredible gift: by seeing my life reflected in the eyes of a witness, I have come to view my activist

work as a type of *durational performance*, one which has as its aim the creation of a model for an ecologically sane and humane way of living.

### 5.2.1 WHAT IS DURATIONAL PERFORMANCE?

Durational performance is a performance format in which the very agency of time is brought to the forefront. The time-span of the performance exceeds the average length of a standard performance, which, in Western culture, is 1.5 hours. A durational performance is designed to let time physically affect or thematically inform the performer's practice of his/her art form, as well as the audience's reception...By exceeding the normal time-span...durational performance challenges habitual Western patterns of consumption of cultural products.... Thus, durational performance could be considered as a culturally healthy pause from the 9 to 5 routine, a break for bodily reflection upon existence.<sup>1</sup>

Central to ecosomatic work is working towards ever-greater respect for the "body" at all levels—the individual body (soma), the social body (community) and the greater body of Earth (Gaia). This respect favors the natural rhythms of the body and the seasons and can often come into conflict with the sense of time and body as a commodity in our society:

[Industrial society] attempts to break the barriers of nature by lengthening the working day beyond the limits set by the sun, the seasonal cycles, and the body itself as it was constituted in pre-industrial society....Marx....sees the alienation from the body as a distinguishing trait of....transforming labor into a commodity....the worker "only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working and when he is working is not at home." (Marx, 1961) This too leads to a sense of dissociation from the body...<sup>2</sup>

Ever since I committed to using the tools of the embodied arts to guide how I live (I rarely use an alarm clock!), I have been astonished at my increasing inability to distinguish between work and play, between life and art, between ideals and activism. In a world which tends to keep rigid walls between disciplines, this synaesthetic blurring of lines between art and ecology can be quite disorienting. Putting my integrative work in the context of *durational performance* has been a most comforting remedy.

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<sup>1</sup> extract from University of Copenhagen's panel abstract "Challenging Smooth Consumption: Durational Performance as Cultural Misfit" June 25, 2009, panel chair Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen.

<sup>2</sup> from Silvia Federici's, "The Struggle Against the Rebel Body," in *Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (2007) Autonomedia, NY.

### 5.2.2 VIDEO: BODY AS PLACE

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F6jXDmryaPA>

A related coping strategy I use frequently is to remain open to continual revision of my definition of art. Recently I have discovered art to be a technology that evolved with the human species to help keep us healthy, attuned and calibrated to a rapidly changing world. If art (like everything else) is subject to a whole-systems analysis, then for me, anything that does not help humans to attain a sustainable and just culture cannot be considered art. For this reason, I keep goals of ecological sanity and social justice central to my art making process.

I recommend adding these strategies--a whole-systems view of art, and the ability to view ecological activism as a durational performance--to a kit of tools for surviving in a today's compartmentalized, commodified world. My collaborations with Tamara have helped me to see my work with the Bcollective as a type of extended performance in which we practice get back in touch with our bodies, in touch with community, in touch with place.

Go to the link below for an example of durational, site-specific performance by Maureen Freehill: One Dance Every Day for an Entire Year, documented on youtube by 365 short dance videos.

<http://www.youtube.com/user/YearOfButoh>

### 5.2.3 WHAT IS SITE-SPECIFIC PERFORMANCE?

Site-specific is a type of performance in which artists and audience interact with and gain a deeper connection to place.

In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in the use of non-theatre spaces for performance: from empty garages and automobiles, to underground tunnels, cafes, lakes, laundromats...the list is practically endless....As a general rule, "site-specific" is a term used to describe artwork that has a relationship with its surroundings, architecture and/or landscape. Its many permutations intersect with land art, performance art, conceptual art, installation art, community-based art, public art, and experimental dance and theatre. It is a practice with many modes of actualization, disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> From "Site Specific Performance Symposium," City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center (2009.)

<http://web.gc.cuny.edu/MESTC/events/s09/site-specific.html>

With this definition in mind, it may be helpful for ecological place making and village building projects to consider how they might incorporate the arts to engage more deeply with a place. At the Bcollective, we are experimenting with this concept: designing healthy social ecological systems by using the arts. Please watch the following videos (sections 5.2.4 and 5.2.5) for examples of place-making ritual performance.

#### 5.2.4 VIDEO: “de-composition”

date: 2009  
editing: Nala Walla  
camera: Tamara Ashley  
Nala Walla  
performance: Tamara Ashley  
Nala Walla

This short film was the result of a weekend-long exploration of a decommissioned, decomposing military base near the Bcollective homestead. This place holds a very deep place in my psyche, as a place of beauty and power, but also a place of displacement and loss.

Historically, since 1857, the US Navy spent decades clearing native people, trees and animals from this and several other strategic sites in the area—arguably some of the most beautiful places in the world—and importing millions of tons of concrete to bury massive bunkers, guns and munitions in the Earth. The idea was to protect the waterways from foreign invasion, but the bases became obsolete with the advent of air warfare after being open for just a few years. Not one hostile shot was ever fired.

Though the trees onsite have grown back considerably, the landscape has been drastically altered and the masses of concrete will remain in a state of slow decay for a long time. Ironically, the bunkers are popularly used today for singing due to their resonant qualities, and in our case, for photography and film.

For me, one of the purposes of my work (and play!) there is to help transform the place from one dedicated to war, to one dedicated to art, healing, and possibility. I have often envisioned a village of people thriving there in turning the old barracks into villager housing, the parade grounds into permaculture gardens—those underground bunkers would make ideal root cellars to store all the food that we’d grow! So may it be.

A site has history. People have owned it, lost it, died on it, made love on it. It is not the neutral black space of the theatre stage, which excels at make-belief. However, it doesn't mean that site-specificity is all about actuality. Sites have histories, and this certainly informs the production. However, the job of theatre is to imagine a possible history (and hence future) for a site. Theatre can uncover memories and stories hidden in the space which no humans have witnessed and documented.<sup>4</sup>

### 5.2.5 VIDEO: “Clay”

date: 2009  
editing: Nala Walla  
camera: Keeth Apgar  
dancers: Tamara Ashley  
Nala Walla

This video contains footage from a day-long site-specific dance on a beach very near the Bcollective Homestead, a sacred place to which I often come for refreshment and renewal. We spent most of the day in silence, bathing in clay, seaweed, and the sounds of wind, birds and sea. It is very important to me to get in touch with the elements in this way.

The images in this film serve as a reminder that every human being has indigenous roots. Although, for many people with European ancestry, these roots have been obscured by successive waves of colonization over time, it is possible--and indeed essential to our health--to begin the process of *re-indigenization*. Although we may never experience the relationship to the landscape in the same way as people who have resided in a particular place for thousands of years, we can create rituals to connect us again with Earth, and re-establish the respect of place that characterizes indigenous thinking and cosmology. For more on the topic of re-indigenization, and ecological place making, please see my essay “Body As Place: A Somatic Guide To Reindigenization.”

<http://www.bcollective.org/html/writing.html>

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<sup>4</sup> Acty Tang, from “Amakweerkweer: A Physical Theater Body Search”  
<http://people.ru.ac.za/sdct/site.html>

### 5.3 OUTSIDE-IN: SITE-SPECIFIC PERFORMANCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Every year during autumn, the Bcollective organizes site-specific performances to honor the turning of the seasons. We usually gather an enormous amount of leaves to incorporate into the ritual, a fun, and pleasant-smelling activity. And, when the performance is over, we have the added bonus (stacking functions) of mulch for our garden, effectively creating a biodynamic preparation from the energy harnessed by the performance. This year, I decided to experiment with sharing a site-specific performance (which is by nature a very local experience) with the outside world by using web cams and SKYPE. Please watch the video in section 5.3.1, then read the “behind the scenes” information on the performance.

#### 5.3.1 VIDEO: “Outside-In”

editing:	Nala Walla
camera:	Jane Hawley
performance:	Aimee Ringle Aimee Spencer-Kelly Aura Muunta Dean Dava Hester Leigh Senna Wheaton Linda Case Nala Walla
technician:	Joe Breskin

Go to the link below to watch “Outside-In”

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9NSuO3kuF8&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9NSuO3kuF8&feature=player_embedded)

#### 5.3.2 BEHIND THE SCENES of “Outside-In”

In October 2009, Tamara Ashley and I continued our work together by creating a collaborative performance which used web casting technology. Tamara organized an urban venue in Newcastle UK (Dance City) for creation of a globe-spanning interactive performance. The outdoor, ritual performance in Port Townsend, WA was projected upon a 16 foot tall screen onstage at Dance City via Skype. The UK dancers were able to let the movements of the US dancers influence their composition, effectively creating a duet, in real-time between the two groups of dancers.

For the live audience in the UK and the US, the attempt to bring "outside

in" as they viewed an outdoor dance landscape superimposed upon the indoor urban landscape, highlights a feeling of being "out-of-place," and the awkwardness of substituting a "virtual" connection for a physical one. In Port Townsend, the "outside" was brought "in" through a very different experience--one of being embedded within and related to place, though participation in an autumn ritual. The juxtaposition of these two calls all who were involved to questions our relationship to place and to technology.

It amazed me that we were able to carry out the technological requirements of this experiment with nothing more than a couple of laptops, a projector, and a high-speed internet connection--tools which are commonly available in Western Countries and easily operated by laypeople. As far as we know, this may be the first dance experiment of its kind. The resulting images in the UK were dithered and blurry, which added a certain kind of dreamy effect. However, it might be interesting to try this experiment again with expert web and video technicians on both ends of the "wire."

For me, the most compelling part of this performance was my participation in the ritual with my friends and peers--feeling the wind and rain on my face, being buried under autumn leaves, connecting with place. Whether or not cameras are involved, I will continue to make work which creates a sense of place in community.

## 5.4 WATERHOUSE: ECOSOMATIC MOVEMENT REPATTERNING

### 5.4.1 BACKGROUND INFO

The *Waterhouse* was the second ecosomatic, durational performance collaboration between Mark Lakeman and Nala Walla. The first, called *Dwell*, occurred in August of 2008, at Earthdance's SEEDS (Somatic Experiments in Earth, Dance and Science) Festival. In *Dwell*, a sacred teahouse was built over a week's time by a group of dancers. Embodied practices were part and parcel of the construction process on this "somatic job site." In this reweaving of art and architecture, both disciplines experienced their roots in place making, sacred ceremony and village life.

Go to the link below to watch *Dwell: The Reweaving*  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGLTm7WAVPU>

The *Waterhouse* Project was a similar durational performance project that took place on the Bcollective Homestead in July 2009. By bringing the body-centered skills of dancers onto a natural building job site, both these projects are hands-on examples of *applied ecosomatics*. For more information on Ecosomatics, please see my multimedia report:

“playGROUND: Ecosomatics At Work and Play in the Landscape”  
<http://bcollective.org/gaia/output4/>

We explored *movement repatterning* both in the sense of our personal, bodily “movement”– squatting, lifting, bending, hammering, sawing, etc– and in the sense of the larger sustainability “movement,” as well. We shared song, story, dance, ritual, food together; live drawing, painting, a hammock for napping, and a bodywork table were set up as different “stations” to visit throughout the project. All of these things are designed to add play, enjoyment and celebration to our movement, making it ultimately more healthy, and more sustainable.

#### 5.4.2 VIDEO: “Waterhouse”

date:	2009
editing:	Nala Walla
camera:	various participants
artistic director:	Nala Walla
architectural director:	Mark Lakeman
performance:	various participants

Go to the link below to watch “Waterhouse”  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fmn8bYFynFg>

#### 5.4.3 THE MINDFULNESS BELL

One specific technique we used for repatterning was so simple, it deserves special mention here: **the mindfulness bell**. At the beginning of the project, people agreed to participate in a game--a bell holder would ring a soft mindfulness bell every five minutes, at which point, everyone on the job site would take a pause for a breath, and to check-in with their bodies, even just for a moment or two. Each person would serve in the role of ‘bell-holder’ for a half-hour before passing the bell on to the next person.

For me, this score was very effective, staying with me for weeks and even months after the event ended. Though, there is still much room for

improvement, as everyone noticed a desensitization to the bell after a period of time.

In addition to rotating the role of 'bell-holder,' we also rotated the photography and videography of the event among participants. This gave a variety of people the chance to step back and view the project from a visual arts perspective. Instead of having a designated videographer, many people got to expand their capabilities in this area. The camera also gave people a reason to take a break from some of the more strenuous tasks, as we shared all the different roles involved in the collective effort to build the *Waterhouse*, as well as document the process for the benefit of others.

#### 5.4.4 GOALS, CHALLENGES AND ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

Several goals were achieved during this project:

- The intimate connection between art and activism was explored.
- Conventionally separate disciplines were rewoven.
- The moving arts demonstrated their practicality to village building by applying ergonomic knowledge to the building site in a pragmatic manner—i.e. how to best use a shovel or a drill without injury to the body.
- Architecture took on a kinetic aspect, deeply rooted in place-based ceremony instead of merely cold abstractions of straight-edges and numbers.
- Both disciplines explored a rediscovery of their original roots in village life, where no lines between dance, song, storytelling and the daily labors of shelter and sustenance were drawn.

All in all, I found this project both invigorating, and challenging. We all enjoyed one of the most lighthearted and playful work parties we'd ever been to. When a couple of people began dancing with the building materials, someone joked, "usually this is the point at which the boss says, 'you're fired!' " Everyone laughed. However, I had assumed that dancers would be able to apply embodiment concepts to a job site more easily, but this was not always the case. Perhaps this is not surprising, since dancers are not immune to the deeply ingrained cultural patterns which separate dance and architecture. However, we all could see how much work still needs to be done in this area. If you are interested in this research, I invite collaboration!

After the project, I sent participants a feedback form in which I asked several questions about the *Waterhouse* experience. Below, I have sampled some of this feedback in order to outline some of the main

achievements, as well as the main challenges and room for improvement.

#### WHAT WENT WELL/WHAT WORKED FOR YOU?

- the opportunity you are providing for others to contribute and feel like they are part of something bigger than each individual is rewarding, as well as being part of a long term useful creation that will sit on your land for many years. Everyone can look back on the structure as a reminder of their participation.
- the way you inhabit your body, walk dance, chop, showed me more about a potential bodily relationship to strive for than all of our learned exercises combined.
- the bell and the morning exercises were the most potent experiences that made the Waterhouse construction different from a typical barn raising.
- To have the exercises and discussion in the morning helped me to create a tone for the entire day and I would heartily welcome as much of that as you could fit into the building process.
- The Bell was a wonderful tool. No matter which sweet thoughts and ideas were stirred during the morning exercises and conversations, it was difficult for me to hold onto them through out the day. When the bell rang, it reminded me of my intentions, and also to see our friends take a moment and respond to the bell was a sweetness remembered.

#### WHAT WAS CHALLENGING?

- It was unfortunate that we all seemed to gain a tolerance to the bell, so that we stopped taking moments, stopped ringing it as frequently and seemed to have a more lackadaisical response to the bell's request. Too bad, not sure how to address this, but if there was a way... Perhaps if it seems that a group is becoming less attuned to the bell, to gather everyone around and renew a commitment to it..
- During the last work party there was very little physical room for everyone interested to participate and so some were out doing supportive tasks, while the majority of production was done by a few men.
- It seems to me that you are interested in developing a community building paradigm that currently does not actually exist, and so there is very little to grab hold of to pull it forward.
- I knew we were crunching on time so was reluctant to ask to learn the use of a few electric tools (like a chainsaw or skill saw). It seems that at most workshops the guys take the lead because they already know how to do the stuff we're doing.

- I felt a bit crowded in that smallness of the building itself.
- I also didn't feel safe with tools resting overhead on the skeletal roof.

#### WHAT IMPRESSIONS DID THE PROJECT LEAVE YOU WITH?

- Of course, many hands make light-er work. In an ideal world we would help each other to build , as it is a heavy and impossible load for one person.

- I was impressed with how all the wood was easily put in place and joined in such harmony. I loved smelling the freshly stripped wood and the forest. It really is amazing to see what was accomplished with natural wood guiding us. I was left with the spirit and beauty of the project from impressions captured on paper. The awareness of how we use our body in everyday use is still present as I sit typing this.

- Speaking to the Earth's ability/willingness to consume our tension. (brings a beauty and depth I can't really write to, but it feel like a slice of some glorious pie I want to live by, could dance my whole belly round.)

- The commitment to inhabit our bodies, to listen when they need to stretch, sing or dance, wildly exciting possibilities - perhaps we could live forever, or at least stay healthy in our bodies for much longer.

- The communal aspect, working with each other to correct posture, massage, breathe, remember presence.

#### ANYTHING YOU'D LIKE TO SEE INCORPORATED INTO FUTURE PROJECTS?

- More body and singing exercises. I would like to have seen a sketch of the project/building/idea for what is to be constructed and the opportunity to speak/hear any input from everyone on their ideas as well.

- In order to facilitate a freer expression of creativity I would like to see the least experienced and those most uncomfortable with their building skills work more on the next phase of hands on construction. During the last work party there was very little physical room for everyone interested to participate and so some were out doing supportive tasks, while the majority of production was done by a few men. Lets put the guys in the kitchen and let them feed everyone, at least for the first several meals, and let the women see what kind of associations they form without the guidance of a "boss". Let it evolve like a birth process where delivery is supported, not controlled.

- Respect each contributor even if they never pick up a tool or a piece of material to place within the sculpture. Everyone is valuable no matter what they do, even the visitors who only watch and say hello.

- I realize that Mark is a powerful resource and a focused accomplisher,

but even he will benefit from sitting back and watching so that his greatest talent, which is his creative imagination, can romp, rather than be occupied with the next piece of wood that gets screwed into place.

A hearty thank-you to everyone who participated in the *Waterhouse* project. Please stay tuned for future ecosomatic work parties!

*“We put the party back in the work party!”*

## 5.5 CONCLUSION: BODY AS PLACE

*“In almost every culture and civilization, dance was born out of agricultural life... Farm work, in a creative sense, is closely connected with dance. That our body is exposed to the outside environment, to wind, light, heat...is in itself a creative factor....A place....is, in this sense, an archetypal landscape for dancers. So there is an economical and pragmatic merit, but also a creative value in being exposed to and a part of the natural process of reproduction. The whole process may be called dance.”*

*--Min Tanaka*

Since our bodies are indeed our primary home, any endeavors for creating a healthier a sense of place must include strategies for getting to know our bodies more deeply. As infants, our sensation of gravity provides our very first experience of a sense of “place.” Our relationship with Earth is primary, forming the basis for development of every other movement we make. Accordingly, any sound ecological habitat design will plan to optimize bodily health and strive to take basic bodily patterns into careful consideration. By serving the health of body and community, the embodied arts are very useful tools to place makers, to cultural regenerators, and to village designers.

Through ecosomatic, site-specific performance, we take responsibility for the fact that thriving, sustainable villages and gardens will not build themselves. Ours is no armchair movement. We cannot simply sit back while someone else does the “dirty work” for us. To create ecological habitats, we will need to rid ourselves of the outdated stigmas attached to manual labor, including the silly notion that this work is not fun. Village building projects can be the most enjoyable and meaningful work of all. Because the embodied arts can make village building fun, enjoyable and healthy they are an essential practice for ecological activists. And because the arts, like everything else, are embedded within an ecology, ecological thinking an essential practice for any artist. Viva La Gaia!