

Jill Greenhalgh

Practising Proximity

*So I practise walking in the
dark, metaphorically.
I practise the navigation of
what I cannot see or
understand. Not knowing
knots my stomach.
The process of trying
to form
what I don't know,
can't see,
can't guess,
into palpable performance,
is practically impossible.*

*"Alice laughed: "There's no use trying," she said;
"one can't believe impossible things."*

*"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen.
"When I was younger, I always did it for half an hour a day.*

*Why, sometimes I've believed as many
as six impossible things before breakfast."*

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

To practise is to retry, to return, to repeat, to remember, to resist, in order to reveal. It is also said that repetition is the death of art.

I think I have been practising all my life, but I still don't really know what for; or why. No-one has ever asked me to define my practice; nor why I do it. No one - it has to be said - really cares. Why should they? This is my journey, across a map I am drawing: it is my practice I am perfecting.

I could say I am practised, in some areas at least. At fifty years old, I should be. I think I have practised and perfected strategies that ensure the survival of my family. With the Magdalena Project, I have found strategies enabling precious meetings with the others; those with whom I want to share, test and develop ideas and work.

But before and behind the interaction with that world lies an ever present, often nauseous, existential yearning: "There must be more to 'it' than this". I am ravenous for meaning.

I understand that meaning might emerge when I am engaged in activity beyond that which simply secures my existence; when I am attempting more than is necessary for survival. This activity, beyond need, is practice. This is the understanding that leads me to a practice of digging in the darkness in search of that flicker of meaning. The tool I dig with is performance.

I define performance, sometimes, as somewhere I have been attempting to construct since I outgrew the parameters of theatre. It is where I have the possibility to shape a language on rules that I, and my collaborators,

invent; rules that define a structure within which I position myself. As I dig in the dark, I gather fragments of action, sounds, silences and objects - material stuff - to form sequences and shapes in an attempt to disrupt, challenge, reflect, defy or resist the expectations and routines of everyday life. The expectations that we have become too accustomed to, and have come habitually to consider reality or, worse, truth.

I want my performances to be acts of resistance against the status quo and the daily repression of the dreaming of children and the imaginings of adults who believe in the impossible. I want my performances to sever the roots of acceptable behaviour, without causing damage to anything except assumption.

This is the desire, rarely satisfied.

So I practise walking in the dark, metaphorically. I practise the navigation of what I cannot see or understand. Not knowing knots my stomach. The process of trying to form what I don't know, can't see, can't guess, into palpable performance, is practically impossible.

I hold on fast to a refusal to know because as soon as I know I suspect myself and disbelieve what I am doing. This state of mind can be intolerable, disabling; it claws at everything I try to do. But it is this that impels me and is I think an essential part of my practice. Walking with, and facing, what I am most afraid of: the unknown.

RETURN

I notice that age has me returning to books and ideas that I first encountered in my twenties and my teens. Revisiting the unresolved with, I hope, a more discerning intellectual perception of recurrent concerns.

When I was young I read Andrea Dworkin's astonishingly powerful book *Pornography. Men Possessing Women* and it had a huge effect on me. It enraged and

changed me. I have condemned and opposed pornography in any form since: I want it censored, banned, blasted off the face of the planet and I make no apologies for my fury at its existence.

Andrea Dworkin died this year. She was a brave, fierce and incisively eloquent feminist. Her death reminded me of the influence her work has continued to have on all my practice. At the end of that particular book she writes a concluding testament on the research and writing of her book.

She speaks of being immersed, for years, in piles of awful images; her home infested with pornography of every type; of being infected and literally becoming ill from the daily witness to images depicting an endless degradation of the female body. She acknowledges that an accumulating despair overwhelmed her and yet she completed the work.

Concluding she writes: "Writing is not a happy profession. It is viciously individual. I, the author, insist that I stand in for us, women. In so doing, I insist on the ultimate social meaning of writing; in facing the nightmare, I want another generation of women to be able to reclaim the dreams of freedom that pornography has taken from me".

Dworkin spent her life articulately denouncing an endemic culture of violence against women. Yet for most of her professional career she was derided, labelled an extremist and her work was censored. She remained unpublished in the USA, her home country, until long after she had been published elsewhere. I would argue that it was the clarity of her work that seemed dangerous; its implications frightened the status quo.

By the time we are women, fear is as familiar to us as air. It is our element. We live in it, we inhale it, we exhale it, and most of the time we



Jill Greenhalgh at Magdalena Sin Fronteras, Santa Clara, Cuba, 2005. Photo: Carolina Vilches

do not even notice it. Instead of "I am afraid," we say, "I don't want to," or "I don't know how," or "I can't".

I don't want her to be right about this, but I fear she is.

I need to know if the same fear and paralysis is still carried by the next generation of young women. If they have more confidence and less "I can't" pumping through their veins, then perhaps some of the work we have been doing in the Magdalena Project, as our contribution to facing the foe, has been worthwhile. But if not, then what have we achieved?

Have you ever tried to search the pictures on the inside of your eyelids? Sometimes this is the only way I can get to sleep. Close your eyes. Concentrate for at least two minutes, look at the inside of your eyelids, empty your mind of all other thoughts. Pictures will start to zoom into the foreground; landscapes, shapes and colours unknown, faces; another life rushing in from the darkness; life from

the other side of consciousness.

These pictures are known as hypnagogic images and they often commence with flashes of light. When we enter the hypnagogic state, the alpha rhythms of wakefulness are progressively replaced by slower "theta" activity and as we descend further into sleep itself, the outside physical world retreats to the fringe of consciousness and the new reality becomes the internal dream world.¹

I have often wondered if this is the optimum state to be in, in order to encounter those images and ideas that are so elusive to us during our daily wakefulness - our alpha activity. Perhaps, like the shamans, we need to acknowledge that this might be where our elusive visions are residing; this place on the edge between sleep and awakening.

Sometimes I feel art is a war; a war against mediocrity, assumption, satisfaction, knowing, repetition, boundary. Why do we engage in this war? Is art so important? And is practice preparation for this war; the activity that prepares us for the balancing acts on the edge between ourselves and the unanswerable questions; the impossible tasks?

This summer I was in New York and visited the art museums. I love them. I had a strong flashback to an experience which I now realise was the moment painting became an essential in my life. I was about twenty-six, and in New York for the first time, alone. I walked into one of the galleries of the Museum of Modern Art and found myself directly confronted by a huge wall sized painting by Jackson Pollack. This was the first time I had ever seen his work, and it took my breath. The experience was physical and sudden; a feeling almost like fear

1. Ronald K. Siegel, *Fire in the Brain*.

spreading through my veins; it was as though I had been pounded in the chest. I felt myself crying. I found a place to sit down, to get my breath back to normal, and stared at the work for a very long time. This work transformed what I understood painting to be.

It is said the mark of real genius is that it leaves its own domain permanently changed. Pollack in some way negated, whilst standing on the shoulders of, all who went before him. He redefined what painting could be, and having done that left his contemporaries floundering in a sea of new possibilities. He had discovered how to mark the actuality of a moment, he had moved beyond representation, and the energy, fury and beauty of that discovery was, and still is, startling. His most important work was achieved over a very short period, just a few years, but in that time he went to the edge and succeeded in a re-mapping of the possible; he extended and redefined what painting could be.

Seeing his painting again this year was no less marvellous; and it was a powerful reminder of the endurance of work that succeeds in the battle to push beyond the borders and boundaries of known and accepted practice. Jackson Pollack's practice was to paint and drink prolifically. Drink killed him. It could be said he killed painting; his war.

What he achieved for painting, I want for performance. I want moments of work, acts, images that have the capability to shock and seduce; but primarily, I want work that subdues the violence that I see and see and see. I don't yet know how to do this, which is why I continue to go into rooms and try stuff that I know will probably fail; but at least in so doing, knowing what doesn't work, brings me one step closer to what might.

I sometimes wonder if it is the privilege of the safe to yearn for the sake of it; to climb the Everest, to beat the best, or form the yet un-thought idea. We, the rich and

safe, do not experience a daily closeness to death; but I wonder if a part of us yearns for this proximity. Do we need, even in just tiny ways, to know we are daily defying some peril, in order to affirm our aliveness? My daughter tells me it is good for the heart to have a fright every day - an acknowledgment of the edge at least? We acknowledge that many artists have stood at the precipice of their sanity.

I have begun a new piece of work. The embarkation point is the border of Mexico and the United States where crimes involving the abduction and violent murder of hundreds of young women over the last twelve years remain unsolved. It is a hideous and evil situation. Many are campaigning and protesting against the ineptitude of the authorities; many theories abound as to the root of these crimes and many brave souls are risking their lives to excavate evidence and bring the killers to justice. But the complexity of social and political collusion, and the protection of the perpetrators, seems impenetrable.

We know the hugely profitable pornography market is dependent upon satisfying the demand for an ever more diverse and perverse supply of images and performance of sexual subjugation and degradation. Pornography is addictive, and so by definition, the pornographer's appetite is insatiable. The snuff movie industry needs constantly feeding. Where does the supply of performers come from?

With these questions haunting me, I have to ask: "What is the practice, the preparation, for a performance work addressing these issues? What can a performance be, do or say, that is of use in response to these realities?" These questions are difficult to face, let alone answer. And of course I am in the dark, again; digging, again. And hearing my

demons telling me, "I can't," again.

But these days I am practised enough to know that this is exactly where I have to be. I know, by now, that if I approach making work by embracing repetition, perfecting a specific methodology, then perhaps it will be easier, even more productive. But if I catch myself doing this I will have to start again.

I couldn't convince myself that going into a room everyday, and accepting the discipline of training, took me any closer to what it was I was searching for. So one day I just stopped. It's all a question of the parameters one gives oneself to work within, what bullshit detectors one devises for oneself; one's own rules are what are clarified and honed through failure.

I know that, in fact, it becomes more difficult to start work each time. This is because the precipice is higher; the edge more precarious. And the fall is further; vertigo more entrenched.

The "Mexico" work as I call it, is only just beginning; and it is unwise to speak out loud too early in a new process. But in facing the complexities of this new process I acknowledge that I do have practices that allow me to start. I go into a room with a performer. I know what I am looking for, but I cannot name it because I have not yet seen or heard it. I don't know what it is called, but I will recognise it when I see it. And that, in fact, is the point. I am looking for something I have never yet seen. And I rely on patient collaborators who trust my instincts.

I know it is not what the performer does, but the way that it is done: how the doing is enacted. So I can begin to search for what I am looking for, by working with any action or act offered. I work to mould the 'how' of the proposals offered.

Because I need some firm ground to hang onto, this time I find I am returning to the first things I learnt, the principles I am

most sure of; stuff I know I know.

I know that everything has its opposite; that to speak of evil, I must speak of its opposite - good. To evoke the horror, I must find something extraordinarily beautiful; and to work with the concept of death I must consider resurrection. To provoke fear I must create a place that is safe.

I am interested in working with the performer in the moment when the body has fully prepared its whole self for the completion of one unique action, in readiness for execution. The moment just before the fall, just before the jump, just before the cut, just before the kiss, just before the smile, just before goodbye, just before the scream, just before the shot, just before the race begins; ready, steady. This is the moment that interests me, not the action itself. The intention, and the clarity of the intention, is where potential lies. The spectators are held when they want to know what will happen next; they are not held when they have already sussed it.

Watch the predatory animal in the moment before a kill; a lioness - her body in motionless vibrancy, a gathered, taut stillness - the moment before the death of her prey, or its escape. It is a life or death moment. Is it this readiness that attracts my attention; the fact that at this moment anything can still happen; there is no foregone conclusion; despair can be conquered, death is not inevitable, and can be cheated.

In working with this concept of "the moment before", I have always to work with that which will prevent the fall, whilst taking us to the edge of that fall... The energy of a moment of danger averted transfers to the spectator. Alfred Hitchcock said: "There is no suspense in a scream, only in the anticipation of a scream."

So in working with this concept, I am trying to find the opposing force of expectation, when falling is stopped from falling.

And I want to start here. This is the place I keep returning to; this is where I sense I may be able to reveal something - a flicker of meaning.

I want, through my practice, to take control over the outcome of a moment; transgress the outcomes that have hitherto been perpetrated; oppose with the opposite.

The piece I am making has to be beautiful and frightening.

When I was eighteen I attended circus school for a short time and loved every minute of it. I became particularly attracted to the tight wire. As others perfected the trapeze or juggling, I tried, for hour after hour, just to walk from one end of the tight wire to the other, turn, walk back, without falling. My body was learning so much more than I understood at the time. My body had to sustain a state of alertness and balance. The slightest movement in one direction requires its equal and opposite in the other; a constant and continuous minute changes of direction in order to stay upright on the thinnest of paths.

If I didn't think enough I would fall off; if I thought too much I would fall off.

I think probably for the last thirty years, I have been practising how not to fall off - simply that.

JILL GREENHALGH (Britain) is a producer, director, performer and teacher. In 1986 she founded the Magdalena Project and has remained its artistic director since. Her current performance work includes different groups of women performers across the globe. *Water[wars]* is one of her ongoing projects which has been presented in ex-Yugoslavia, Britain, Denmark, Colombia, Australia and the USA. She has recently taken up the post of lecturer in Performance Studies at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. She is married and has two daughters.