Lingering with performance: 
memory response as an act of remaking

In this paper I will very briefly introduce memory response as a method of approaching performance critique. I will first set out some principles defining the method, and will follow this with an experiment to produce a memory response to Eija-Liisa Ahtila’s moving image installation, The Annunciation (2010).

Instructions

1. Remember a performance moment and consider what delights you in this moment.
2. Make a short performance act in response to this moment using only your own personal experiences and everyday objects.
3. Document it.

This is the set of constraints I invented in order to experiment with writing about The Annunciation. I had arrived at these instructions through thinking about performance critique as a creative act. I wanted to respond to my own memory of a particular moment in this moving image installation with another performance. This memory response, I hoped, would be able to say something specific about what I had remembered, and about The Annunciation as a whole.
I am interested in memory because of its fickleness; its unstable, unreliable
and downright unhinged character. Memory fleets by, and in its wake leaves fragments and
traces not easily reproducible in the mind. It seems to me that memory is a process that
continues the life of a performance in a form strikingly similar to the original experience. As
a process, however, the memory of performance transforms, it metamorphoses into
something new. Rather than eulogise the disappeared event, mourn for the forever lost
performance, memory has potential for creation.

Henri Bergson’s theory of memory foregrounds this creative potential. For
Bergson, the moment of perception is a charged event. In perceiving, the whole of our past, in
the form of memory-images, floods the present. Memory-images travel back and forth from
the entire collection of our memories to the present, they contract and expand, testing out the
most useful selection of memory-images. In other words, until the appropriate memory-image
interprets the object of perception, the present is as if in limbo, lingering, unable to move
forward. Bergson suggests that this delay extends perception, and the “zone of
indetermination” (Bergson 1991:32), of not knowing, of loitering in the unmanaged thoughts
and associations that have yet to become, contain the potential for creative re-assembly, or in
fact ‘assembly-anew’ of past experiences. The new is produced by the surprising and
unforeseen connections that the delay enables.

Memory response therefore aims to extend perception by lingering with a
moment that has remained. The value of the memory response is to give space for becoming.
Not to fix meanings, not to try and close the case, but to allow for ideas to emerge unforeseen
and undetermined. In the spirit of the kind of re-performance which reaches out to the
original as a site of inspiration - lingering with it, reeling from it – memory response
positions the writer as inventor and imaginer.

This approach to critique is modelled on a Goat Island workshop method called “creative response” which, in responding to a performance act with another performance, results in a work of art “that would not have existed without the work [it is] responding to.”(Goulish 2007:211) The purpose of the exercise is to provide critique to the original maker of the act, but critique in the form of an act, a visual, sensory piece in its own right. Matthew Goulish suggests that the respondent concentrates on the “miraculous moments” (Goulish 2007:211), those instances in the work that in some way stand out, and creates a piece in response. This form of critique that responds to an act with another act, it can be argued, has the potential to tease out responses that may not have been immediately obvious.

Memory response shares its critical roots with art and performance criticism that has its lineage in Della Pollock’s “performative writing” (Pollock 1998: 78). Pollock’s seminal manifesto is not only elaborated by performance studies critics, but is evident also in recent contributions from other artistic disciplines, which recognise and embrace its value and serve as examples of the paradigmatic shift in art criticism. To name a few, in visual culture, Gavin Butt proposes to situate criticism side by side the work, as “paradox”(Butt, 2005:5) and Irit Rogoff suggests that “looking away” (Rogoff 2005:126) from the singularity of the artwork might produce a more contemporary account of participation in culture. Art critic Mieke Bal proposes “narrative viewing” (Bal 1999: 104) bringing the reader back to the artwork; whilst artist, writer and architect Jane Rendell practises “site-writing” (Rendell 2010:7) that in some way is ‘like’ the artwork; and curator Taru Elfving lingers with the work
as if she was “talking aloud” (Elfving 2009:144). Emily Orley’s “place writing” (Orley 2009: 159) similarly practices an encounter with place-specific work. (1)

These critics set up constraints, frame the engagement with critique as a task, simulate the affects of the work on the page and perform the writing. In a way they put to practice, on the page, what the Goat Island exercise does in the studio. They make a creative response to the object of critique. And that is what memory response strives to do also.

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This is the moment I remembered.

I saw The Annunciation, the Finnish artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila’s 2010 moving image installation as part of her most recent exhibition Parallel worlds at the Carré D’Art in Nîmes, France last October, 2012.

The Annunciation is a three-channel film installation projected onto three walls. The size of the projections is very large and the three moving images fill the walls on which they are screened. Due to the size and their simultaneity, it is impossible to follow the narrative on each of the three screens at once, leaving the spectator to choose their own focus. The narrative is based on the Gospel of Luke (1:26-38), depicting the Archangel Gabriel’s visit to Virgin Mary bringing her the news of her immaculate conception. The Renaissance paintings of the annunciation are the starting point for the enactment which is rehearsed and performed for film by a group of women, most of them non-performers, and the process of making the scene is the principle material for the film. Ahtila’s interest in Jakob von Uexküll’s idea that animals and humans live in parallel worlds has prompted her to
investigate the “nature of miracles” and to “reconstruct[…] the sacred and redefine the
human through the divine and the animal.”(Ahtila 2012: 123)

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This is the moment I remembered.

“So you want me to try and get horizontal?”, says the archangel Gabriel, with
her patterned top reaching for the ground, pulled by the Earth’s gravity, signalling the way
for her arms and legs to follow. But she pulls back, levelling her body, and even if it is just
for a moment, she manages to swing herself horizontal, parallel to the floor below, flying
through the air like an angel. She is ungainly and awkward, she is clearly uncomfortable and
a little bit afraid as she nose-dives head first towards the floor, swinging her legs up to catch
her fall, locking them around the ropes, now vertically hanging in the air, unable to move.
The technician holding onto the ropes of the harness comforts her, saying: “Sometimes even
angels get afraid.”

They laugh, the archangel’s deep belly laugh relaxing her. She laughs the kind
of laughter that the whole body gives in to, and it is impossible to hold any tension in the
body, it slackens, droops, gives up – and the angel laughs, and we know she will have to stop
to get back, to bring the tension back into the body and swing herself around, back to her
horizontal pose, back to flying. The technician laughs, the director laughs, both looking up at
the archangel, who gains her composure and tries again, asking for instructions below, then
rocking her whole body backwards to release her legs and she is back to where she started,
folded over the harness. She is pulled downwards by gravity.
And I laugh, not able to resist the hilarity of the moment and the invitation to take part with the people on the three screens. The technician, holding the ropes on the screen straight ahead laughs. The director, on the screen on my left, looking upwards, is laughing heartily and smiling encouragingly. On the right the Archangel, her laughter rippling towards us; the director, the technician, and me, screen-less, but still with them in the space, altogether laughing out loud. I enjoy the laughing, the sound of it, the feeling of it. I feel warm and elated and so much part of what is going on.

But others in the gallery don’t laugh. At least not out loud. I have a strange feeling at that moment of being inside the film, closer to the bodies on the screens than those next to me. It takes me by surprise. I am laughing with the film’s protagonists and the fact that I am the only spectator to do so seems to make the moment more important, more significant. It isn’t that I “get it” and others don’t, there’s nothing to “get”. I am laughing at the impossibility of the act, the simple pleasure of imagining how difficult it must be to become horizontal. I am laughing at the amusement of the director and the technician, laughing at their laughter as much as laughing with it. I feel a kind of camaraderie for the Archangel for making me laugh, I feel like I am with her, with them, included.

And then the scene changes and a white albatross flies in an azure blue sky. The bird’s flight, its anatomical purposefulness for the soar immediately ridicules the Archangel’s. Except that almost as soon as I register the glide of the bird, I focus on its feet running in the air, a rhythmical rotation of its yellow, webbed feet willing the flight, giving it extra boost, making it happen. The ungainliness of the feet, their clumsy tapping of the air connect with the Archangel’s efforts at getting horizontal. The Angel’s flailing arms and legs set alongside the running feet of the albatross bring the two flights closer together. Suddenly
this momentary shift of perception poignantly speaks of a parallel world, the equality demonstrated by a shared ungainliness.
Several months later I try and get horizontal in the playground. The task is simple. Climb onto a climbing frame, place your stomach on it and lift your arms and legs up. Be horizontal for three minutes. Take a strip of photos.

The ungainliness of the Archangel’s flight is replicated. I clamber, sway, lose my balance, several times, and staying horizontal is difficult. It hurts. Trying to do this makes me laugh, and in laughing the action becomes impossible just like I had anticipated. I sag, folding my body over the seat and let the laughter pass, then try again. The scar in my abdomen feels uncomfortable making me want to adjust, and lose balance again. My feet and hands can easily touch the ground, and gravity pulls me only a few centimetres, I am
cheating really. But then the climbing frame surprises me, it moves, unbalancing me even more, it twists and turns and I laugh again. I swing back, pushing with my feet.

What do the remembered moment and the memory response then say about *The Annunciation*? What are the critical openings that focusing in on a particular moment have produced? Have the openings produced the new, unforeseen connections that Bergson’s extended perception promises? I will not be able to respond fully to any of these questions here, so will only offer some thoughts that engaging with this experiment have produced.

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Thought. The ungainliness opens a wealth of critical material. Despite the grace of the albatross, its blinding white silhouette against the bright blue sky and his feet paddling across the air *surprise* me. This paired with the Archangel’s lumbering flight seems to bring the two species just a little closer to each other. This resonates, and makes visible Ahtila’s interest in Uexküll’s concept of the “*Umwelt,*” (2) which signifies the parallel worlds in which different species exist simultaneously.

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Thought. A further juxtaposition and critical opening is made visible in the flight of the Archangel. The Christian myths have circulated for centuries, and the sacred stories with their pious imagery have become part of the cultural memory for at least many of us residing this side of the globe. To enact a moment so crucial to the Christian narrative, and to add a scene in which the Archangel is learning to fly seems to also throw into relief some of our cultural prejudices. The clumsy woman with her patterned top and untrained body
against the depiction of the male angel with his ethereal, graceful and glorified poise in religious imagery deliciously questions the role of the sacred in our society.

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Thought. It is clear that a certain meta-narrative emerges in terms of my relationship to the instructions and the execution of the task. The simplicity of the performed response, playing with what was there rather than elaborating it further feels like an important decision guided by the moment. The memory response started from the horizontal; the impossible feat of flying; the ungainliness. And the laughter. There is something here.

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What unites these three remarks can be found in the humour that is embedded in the body’s efforts to perform an impossible task. The laughter associated with ungainliness seems to have been the driving force of this memory response. It also seems that there is a connection between the instruction to remember a moment that delights, the laughter of the memory and the potential for creation.

A moment that delights resonates with Roland Barthes’s *punctum*. Barthes introduced the notion of *punctum* in *Camera Lucida* (1980), his meditation on photography, which he wrote at the wake of his mother’s death. Barthes’s rhetoric is characterised by evoking a linguistic imagery of pain and grief. The language thus invoked is embodied as these corporeal attacks that “pierce” (Barthes 1980:26) and “wound” (Barthes 1980:27) and *penetrate* into the viewer of the photographs. *Punctum* foregrounds the individual experience, the individual memories and subjective perceptual connections, but for Barthes, their affect is embedded in grief.
Closer to Goat Island’s “miraculous moments” then, I would like to think of a punctum that, instead of grief, produces delight. For Gilles Deleuze, “the affects of joy are like a springboard, they make us pass through something that we would never have been able to pass if there had only been sadnesses.” (Deleuze 1978) (3) For Deleuze joy is an active force, a creative enabler, which pushes the limits of the body - and here we should consider the body that thinks as well as feels - so that what is joyful ignites a process. This is not to suggest that the Barthesian rhetoric is any less affective, but my own experience of things that linger include laughter and pleasure, and this is where I propose to reverse the punctum to a moment that delights, that stays with a memory of laughter.

Did I remember the Archangel’s clumsy flight because I laughed, then? Did the laughter produce the punctum and enable the moment to linger? Or, did the instruction to remember a delightful moment serve as a trigger to remember it? And moreover, in thinking about memory response as a creative act, did the laughter, the delight, indeed enable a creative response?

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Notes

(1) Emily Orley also presented at the ‘Performance writing’ panel at Performing Documents and is an artist, researcher and teacher, as well as a collaborator with the author on many projects, including the *Brief Encounters (or the breaking of images)* project.

(2) *Umwelt* is German and can be translated as “living environment”. Instead of an anthropocentric world view, Uexküll posits that “an infinite variety of perceptual worlds that, though they are uncommunicating and reciprocally exclusive, are all equally perfect and linked together as if in a gigantic musical score”, as Giorgio Agamben observes of *Umwelt* in Agamben, Giorgio *The Open: man and animal*, Transl. Kevin Attell, Stanford University Press, 2004, p40.

(3) This citation is from Cull, Laura *Theatres of Immanence: Deleuze and the ethics of performance*, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p129. The page number of the original citation is not provided.

References


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