

Some notes on 'Silence backstage'

This piece explores notions of performance, performativity and ritual as well as (lack of) audience. I improvise every day and do a lot of ritual work. This often happens without an audience (although I have a potential, or imagined, audience as I record the audio of most of these workings for my Daily Sketches project). For me, the experience of improvising in many ways has the same quality with or without an audience—my process centres on 'giving voice' to whatever arises and while 'what arises' feels quite different depending on the audience, or lack thereof, the skill of staying present and voicing feels fundamentally the same. For me, ritual work feels grounded in the *intent*. And ritual work—at least in the western esoteric tradition as I understand it—can equally happen alone, with others, or with or without an audience. But the intent and the sense of focus constitutes the fundamental difference between a ritual and non-ritual interaction with the world. Eating a meal can function as ritual—whether alone or in company—as can singing, and it depends on the state or mind, body, of the ritualist.

I feel very comfortable with silence as a performer in solo and collaborative improvisation settings (and the more explicit ritual performances that I have explored). I have at times 'remained silence' for a considerable percentage of my time on stage; but I feel sure that this silence contributes something to the performance. And because I have the frame of a 'performer' the silence has a certain 'marked' quality—it feels different to the silence of the audience member. (I have a recurring fantasy about performing in a group improvisation and remaining silent for the entire set, not out of a lack of anything to say, but because saying silence feels like the right thing to say for the duration. But I have no desire to force this, or make it a gimmick.)

This piece explores what it means to 'contribute silence' to a performance. To really listen to a piece and consider your silence as one of the voices of the performance. How does this change what you hear? How does this change the power dynamics of the piece? How does this affect the quality of your experience of the moment? To what extent does this constitute meditation? Or ritual?

The piece also explores what it means to perform without an audience and it explores what it means to ‘hold a space’ for a performance as an audience member—even if as an audience member not in the designated audience space. In part this piece manifested out of my frustration at times with other performers conduct backstage at performances, during pieces that they did not perform in. I felt, sometimes, that the casual social interactions and lack of focus or of attention undermined the performance and/or my own experience of wanting to feel present in a performance or ritual space both during someone else’s performance—out of respect, as well as believing that I could gain something from staying present with their piece, even if I could not experience it as directly, or immediately as someone sitting out front. I also often desired a space conducive to cultivating a sense of ritual or performance in myself for my own performance which felt somewhat undermined by ‘idle chitchat’ from other folk backstage.

This should not constitute judgment of other people’s conduct, however, simply a statement about my personal preferences for pre-performance spaces. Other people seem perfectly capable of having subdued social interactions while another performer has the stage and then walking on themselves and playing well. I often find the world of socialising somewhat challenging—at the very least I seem to find it a little harder than some to move from this mode to performing. (Although as I write this I remember times that I have walked on stage and easily slipped in to a meditative performance or ritual mode. Perhaps this has more to do with how I would like to a space which has performance happening in it—a desire to ‘respect’ the ‘sacredness’ of performing; again, my own personal preferences.) In any case, this piece performs my idealised experience of ‘waiting backstage’—one that cultivates a sense of presence and attentive listening that I enjoy, and perhaps find conducive to my own work.

The piece can also function as a methodology for engaging with the power dynamics (and gender politics) of performances. I have performed this piece several times backstage at performances when the program had significant gender imbalance. While performing this piece to/for oneself should not replace taking action to right these imbalances, it can provide one with a tool for self-empowerment in these all-too-common spaces.