Freezing Time:

Ice as a Metaphor to Duration in Performance Art

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SUNY New Paltz
MFA Sculpture Thesis | Spring 2022

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Introduction

We were hungry for some comforting Persian food that day, so we made the trip across town to the central bus station. It was early afternoon, the busiest time of the day, but it was strangely quiet. As we were around the corner from our destination a deafening sound struck- it sounded as if a truck was unloading tons of rocks over us- two steps further we were walking on a field of broken glass, someone crawling on the ground, looked right at me, his eyes I will never forget. It was a suicide bombing, a man blew up in front of the restaurant on a spring day in Tel Aviv of 2006, taking 12 more people with him, wounding dozens. Walking on a field of broken glass among human remains felt like eternity. Seconds later came the sirens and we were shoved to evacuate the area. I swore nothing will ever be the same. It’s strange how the human mind works, I rarely think about that day and wouldn’t have found it relevant to mention if it wasn’t for a sketchbook note I came across last week in which, following that event, I describe a future work where “I walk on a field of breaking ice, wearing a dress of ice, letting the ground and pain melt into one puddle”.

We are in 2022, in the Hudson Valley, NY. I have been a performance artist for over two decades now, and in my current performance work I am freezing time, metaphorically, yet also very much physically. In this text I examine phenomenological aspects in performance- I look at Bergson’s idea of materiality in time, Heidegger’s idea of object-at-hand (with a focus on it’s sound), and ideas of repetition in performance. I will also look at artists who addressed the temporality and quality of ice, as a weather art movement beginning in the Fluxus well into contemporary
examples. The questions that inspire this research are trifold, as an open letter to performance and its addressees:

- Can time as duration be made visible, for example: ice?
- What infrastructure(s) can support time-based performance, for example: mold making?
- Can a performance archive be a process-based mechanism, for example: buckets?

I address these questions through experimentation merged with theory, history, practice and weaved with autobiographical components.

**In Terms of Performance**

Before I dive into the ideas that inspire this work it is beneficial to draw the territory in which I work. The term ‘performance art’, as it is often noted in the past decade, has become a broad term that refers to an ever-expanding form that originates in performative disciplines such as dance, theater, music, sound, spoken word, etc. as well as social and participatory art, installation art, architecture, set design, film, video, social media, and the list keeps getting longer.

My work is rooted in a specific tradition of performance art, one that originated in Europe as a transgressive medium that disrupted and challenged mainstream culture structures. Aesthetically, my work could be viewed through the lens of ‘Bodyworks’, as identified by curator Ira Licht in 1975, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. This was the first exhibition of its kind in the United States, dedicated entirely to Bodyworks, a “new form of performance… the artist’s physical being which bears the content and is both subject and means of aesthetic expression”.

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1. Ferdman, Bertie and Stokie, Jovana (editors). *The Methuen Drama Companion to Performance Art* (Methuen Drama, UK 2020) p. 6

The exhibition attempted to draw a direct line between the Dadaist works of Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, through radical body works of the Viennese Actionists and the influential Joseph Beuys, to body-centered works of the younger generation of European and North American performance artists who were already well known at the time—such as French artist Gina Pane, Lucas Samaras, Eleanor Antin, Vito Acconci and Chris Burden. As a feminist artist, I can't help but notice the absence of some significant female voices of the time from such a survey exhibition. Carolee Schneemann was not included in this show, there was no mention to the Gutai movement, which was extremely influential throughout the evolution of performance art in visual art context. I was also missing the shooting performances of Niki de Saint Phalle, especially in the context of Burden. The exhibition hosted a weekly program of live performance events, presenting works by Vito Acconci, Dennis Oppenheim, Laurie Anderson and Chris Burden. In an interesting twist this exhibition might also have marked the end of a genre, at least in a museum context, following Chris Burden’s performance contribution to the show. In his performance for the exhibition, titled *Doomed*, Burden directly challenged the role of an institution when displaying performance art, exposing the potential risk in hosting radical live work that might have life-threatening consequences. I suspect many institutions took note of the event because, at least in the United States, from the perspective of the archeology of exhibition display in museums, there is no continuation of this practice.

**Performance Time**

After establishing the contextual framework in which I situate my work I find it relevant to consider the incremental component of time, because, time is for performance what material is for sculpture— an unavoidable point of reference. The ancient Greek used two words to describe
time: chronos and kairos. While chronos refers to chronological time, kairos signifies a time of action; chronos is quantitative, kairos has a qualitative, permanent nature. Kairos is what I refer to as “performance time”, a duration as force that liberates itself from time as counting and becomes felt time, or if to borrow the illusive Bergsonian term ‘\textit{elan vital}’, which Suzanne Gurlac beautifully interprets as an image that captures time as it moves, I look at the process of time as duration, time as a force that addresses and see performance as force that remains, beyond its framed eventness. The ‘elan-vital’ force of performance is what eventually led me to focus on ice as a metaphor to performance duration, specifically the visible thermo-dynamic quality of H2O. If chronological time is water and performance time is ice, what happens in the liminal state, when the performance is over, the audience has left? Does the physiological and psychological aftermath continue to unfold? This state of transition is the focal point of the works I created as my thesis. In many ways, my work is a display of the loss. The performance remains drip themselves into buckets until eventually evaporating into oblivion.

\textbf{Archiving Performance/ Becoming Display}

What is that loss I’m referring to? I find similarities between the temporality of poetry and that of performance. In ‘Finding Time’, Torno writes “Unlike so many subjects of literary inquiry, temporality cannot “stand still” long enough to be fixed in any stable place within the discourse. Awareness of its importance comes only after it has already been at work; in this way its self-


presentation initially takes the form of an absence"\textsuperscript{5}. Lately, a new exhibition of Marina Abramovic at \textit{Sean Kelly Gallery}, restaged \textit{`The Artist Is Present'}\textsuperscript{6}, minus the artist’s presence or live audience. The two wooden chairs from the original performance are centered in the gallery facing opposite each other, surrounding them are video screens documenting the sitters’ footage of the audience as they sat in front of the artist on one wall, a similar amount of screens displaying Abramovic’s deep gaze were mounted on the wall across; what remains in the center are the empty chairs, amplifying the presence of absence. If performance is presence, this current iteration displays the memory of a performance past.

\textbf{Materialized Absence}

Performance has an embedded nature of disappearance. Its preservation in personal or cultural memory, in history, begins only when it is “over”. Its mythology depends on its absence. In her essay, ‘Performance Remains’, Rebecca Schneider\textsuperscript{7} challenges performance studies scholars’ emphasis on the disappearing nature of performance art by questioning the methodologies that Western culture uses including the archive and its logic. Arguably, she notes, artists over the past decades repeatedly recompose remains in and as live performance\textsuperscript{8}. She further discusses how the performance becomes its archive “Through this “retroaction” of objects, we are reading the


\textsuperscript{6} \textit{`The Artist Is Present’} was a seminal retrospective exhibition of artist Marina Abramovic at MoMA in 2010, where the artist sat across from participating audience members in a mutual eye gaze throughout the three month span of the exhibition.

\textsuperscript{7} Schneider, Rebecca. \textit{`Performance Remains’}. \textit{Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History} edited by Jones, Amelia and Heathfield, Adrian (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2012) p. 145

\textsuperscript{8} Schneider, 139
archive as act – as an architecture housing rituals of “domiciliation” or “house arrest” – continually, as ritual, performed. The archive itself becomes a social performance space, a theater of retroaction. The archive performs the institution of disappearance, with object remains as indices of disappearance and with performance as given to disappear⁹. For Schneider, performance needs to seemingly disappear only to reenact itself as the performing archive. However, is it still the performance that we are seeing or its representation? Or rather even its unheimlich (uncanny) incarnation? Can performance remain through its remains?

If we follow the initial idea that performance is an enduring process of becoming, whose temporality is constantly in the present, then what would be its relation to its photographic documentation? Where do the present and the representational meet?

Amelia Jones writes¹⁰ “While the experience of viewing a photograph and reading a text is clearly different from that of sitting in a small room watching an artist perform, neither has a privileged relationship to the historical “truth” of the performance.” She continues saying “The body art event needs the photograph to confirm its having happened; the photograph needs the body art event as an ontological ‘anchor’ of its indexicality”¹¹. Jones relates to performance as past, but it is interesting, I find to now explore the photographic representation of performance, of presence, as an evolution of it, as another dimension of its becoming. It is almost essential at this point to consider the relation of performance and photography through the Bergsonian

⁹ Schneider, 144


¹¹ Jones: 11, 16
perspective, as the materiality of presence. Body artist Gina Pane described the role of the photographer in her performances as one that “creates the work the audience will be seeing afterwards. So the photographer is not an external factor, he is positioned inside the action space with me, just a few centimeters away. There were times when he obstructed the [audience’s] view!”\(^\text{12}\). This relationship with the camera, with the photographer, with the image is one that greatly shaped my own views of the archive of performance, or my need to expand the perception of what remains.

\[\text{In the Case of Ice}\]

I often repeat my performances. Certain materials appear in my works again and again. My thesis work re-examines some of my past performance vocabulary in the form of ice- a chain of bones, a *hallah* dress, a hairbrush- I cast these objects from ice, hang them for display, letting them melt into metal buckets, rhythmically. Above the ice sculptures are video representations of

a performed iteration. In ‘Freezing Time’ (2022) I emerge from a water hole in a frozen lake\textsuperscript{13}, dragging a chain of femur and tibia bones (our skeletal infrastructure for walking) anchored to its center. Walking in circles, the bones on my shoulders, I mark the Roman symbols of time with my freezing feet. The video performance ends when I complete the marking of clock time and cold plunge into the freezing lake. In the video performance ‘Biur’ (2017) I row a boat back and forth across Rosekill lake in Rosendale, NY, wearing a dress made of sliced hallah bread, tearing pieces of hallah and spreading them along my sailing path. I continue until the entire dress is diminished and spread over the lake, the bread crumbs will never lead “home”, they dissolve in the water and become consumed by the habitat. In ‘Probably Asking For It’ (2009) I stand holding a hairbrush and scissors\textsuperscript{14} allowing audience to choose which object to use and in what way. In contrast to the original objects which potentially outlive the performance, each of the frozen sculptures embody the fragile temporality of their own current state- presenting the deformation and liquidation of performance over time, measuring performance in buckets of water.

Performance art is often the subject and object of my practice- I explore its patterns and behaviors, map its boundaries, trace the bodies that embody it- my own and those of the audience. I observe its alchemy unfold. Whenever I discover a substantial finding I bring it into the artlifelab of Glasshouse, an art space I co-founded in 2007, as curated events, exhibitions, festivals and residencies. In recent years, sustainability of performance art informed my research in this medium that claims itself immaterial- considering time as matter, archive as process,

\textsuperscript{13} The lake is part of Rosekill, an art farm based in Rosendale, NY in which I have been creating work since 2015

\textsuperscript{14} ‘Probably Asking for It’ (2009-) is an homage to Yoko Ono’s Cut Piece (1964) in which the artist sat on a stage with scissors in front of her, allowing the public to cut her dress.
performance as structure- these notions led me to envision infrastructures and mechanisms that sustain performance and allow it to grow.

**Matter and Meaning**

It is with this vision of sustained mechanisms for performance in mind, that I approach material components that reemerge in my work. I find it relevant to map the origins of the first three objects in my socio-cultural landscape. The *Hallah* is a special bread of Jewish origin, typically eaten on Shabbat. In my work, it symbolizes ritual, tradition, and the Kabbalist rabbinic lineage of my Tunisian father, “cursed” with being *abu-el-banat* (translates as fathers to daughters only). I began creating Hallah garments in 2003, in video and live performances in which I eat my garment, creating a tension between two essential components of living- to eat and to dress.

**Bones**, in my work, sometimes symbolize ancestry and prophecy (*The Valley of Dry Bones*). In my video *Wish Bones* (2005-2009), I carry a chain of dry cow bones throughout various historical sites in Israel, from the *Sataf* ruins of a depopulated Palestinian village which sat atop of a 4,000 BCE *Chalcolithic* agricultural village, through the Jerusalem Forests and Tel Aviv beach at dawn; the odyssey concluded in *Akhziv*, the ruins of a Palestinian village which sat atop layers of excavated remains dating back to the Canaanite culture. At this site I stacked the bones into a cairn and let them drown in the sea. When revisiting the bones now, I decided to work with models of human tibia and femur bones to symbolize migration and walking. The **Hair brush** appears in my work as a participatory offering of an intimate gesture, in which audience brush my hair (it appeared in several iterations starting in 2007). It signifies delicate intimacy and the potential to reach out and connect with a stranger using a tool that is easily read as a call to action across cultures, without the need of added text. Each of the above three objects was
translated into a mold that allows casting the object in ice. The casting and moldmaking process took many months of trial and error because water has a low viscosity—meaning the molds required meticulous planning to hold water from spilling. Now that the molds exist, their cavities are ready to be cast in ice; the ice objects to be performed when called upon, only to then melt again, or better yet, evaporate.

**Readiness-to-hand In Performance**

Heidegger argues that we ordinarily encounter entities as (what he calls) *equipment*\(^\text{15}\), that is, as being for certain sorts of tasks (cooking, writing, hair-care, and so on). Indeed we achieve our most primordial (closest) relationship with equipment not by looking at the entity in question, or by some detached intellectual or theoretical study of it, but rather by skillfully manipulating it into action. Entities so encountered have their own distinctive kind of Being that Heidegger famously calls *readiness-to-hand*. Thus:

“The less we just stare at the hammer-thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly is it encountered as that which it is—as equipment. The hammering itself uncovers the specific ‘manipulability’ of the hammer. The kind of Being which equipment possesses—in which it manifests itself in its own right—we call ‘readiness-to-hand’\(^\text{16}\).”

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According to Heidegger, Descartes presents the world to us “with its skin off”\textsuperscript{17}, i.e., as a collection of present-at-hand entities to be encountered by subjects. The consequence of this prioritizing of the present-at-hand is that the subject needs to claw itself into a world of equipmental meaning by adding what Heidegger calls ‘value-predicates’ (context-dependent meanings) to the present-at-hand\textsuperscript{18}, making the object-at-hand ready to be re-contextualized and re-activated repeatedly. When I create molds for performance it is with Heidegger’s concept of “equipment” in mind. Cast in ice, these are performance tools, ready to be re-contextualized and re-activated, until they melt.

A Brief History of Ice and Movement

Arriving at ice as a metaphor for performance time, I was quickly drawn into its phenomena and substance, tracing its role in the formation, migration and preservation of culture. The winters in the Hudson Valley, NY sometimes feel endless, like the frozen lake I work on every winter at Rosekill performance farm in Rosendale, which extends to the shore and blends with the horizon into a visually unified glacial plateau. I find myself thinking of the last ice age, the end of which allowed migration by foot (and boats) between Siberia and Alaska, and thus America was inhabited by humans\textsuperscript{19} searching for mammoths and other large animals to feed on. The freezing temperatures allowed the meat to last for months and the cold served as a place of gathering.

When I emerge from the center of the frozen lake, walking barefoot and carrying a long chain of

\textsuperscript{17} Heidegger, p.132

\textsuperscript{18} Heidegger, p207

\textsuperscript{19} Meltzer, David J. \textit{First Peoples In a New World: Colonizing Ice Age America}. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2009. https://hdl-handle-net.libdatabase.newpaltz.edu/2027/heb.33869. EPUB.
bones connected to the broken center, I reference a clock not only as a counting mechanism but as one that marks the accumulation of time and an endless migration.

In 1993, the 2,500-year-old mummified remains of a woman were discovered in the frozen Ukok Plateau in Siberia. The mummy was buried in a wooden chamber and cast in ice, which preserved the 'Ukok Princess' or the 'Ice Maiden', thought to be one of the most significant archaeological finds of the 20th Century, but its excavation erupted a cultural conflict between the Altai community and the excavating expedition[^20] which raised issues in the problematics of preservation vs. displacement.

For thousands of years ice was used to preserve humanity, I use ice to preserve humanness, leaving traces that could teach future generations what it felt like to be human—what intimacy looks like, how fear or pain or loss feel like. I dug a hole in the middle of a frozen lake which was about twenty inches thick. The vast ice block reminded me of the lost industry of ice harvesting, which boomed in the area in the 1800’s, when ice was considered a cold weather crop, shipped to nearby cities and abroad. I tried to break through the ice using a traditional ice saw, but eventually found it easier to lean on the help of my gas-operated chainsaw. In our climate change era, ice became a visual symbol to the magnitude of our approaching disaster. We estimate humanity’s prospects by measuring melting icebergs. I measure performance in buckets.

Ice as an Artistic Movement

The more I work with ice I recognize a movement that references socio-political climates through ice\textsuperscript{21} or as Janine Randerson defines weather as movement\textsuperscript{22}. Starting with Fluxus artist Paul Kos, in ‘Sound of Ice Melting’ (1970), inspired by the ideas of Zen Buddhism, where he created a press conference mis-en-scene in which eight microphones surround two twenty-five pound blocks of ice. The microphones both record and amplify the sound of melting, but also serve as an image, a metaphor to the prevailing image of Vietnam wartime press conferences. A more direct image of the materiality of ice as metaphor to time could be seen in Valie Export’s Time and Countertime (1973), an installation that consists of a clump of ice placed in a bowl to melt and a video monitor which depicts the recorded melting process of the ice played back in reverse. The electronic counterpart recorded on video – the ‘countertime’ – inverts the natural process. A relationship of antithesis exists between the reality and the video image.

When referring to the appearance of ice in performance the image of Belgian artist Francis Alÿs in Paradox of Praxis 1 (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing), pushing a block of ice through the streets of Mexico City in 1997 until it completely melted, is one that echoes the quality of ice to carry meaning. After nine hours, the block was reduced to no more than an ice cube, so small that Alÿs could casually kick it along the street. In the tradition of body art, the

\textsuperscript{21} For the purpose of this essay I specifically focus on works that amplify socio-political issues through ice rather than works that are motivated by endurance such as Marina Abramovic’s 1975 performance ‘Lips of Thomas’ in which she lay on cross-shaped ice blocks for 30 minutes, exploring the physical and mental limits of her being. The reason is that I would like to discuss the power of ice as a metaphor and symbol beyond the personal experience.

\textsuperscript{22} Randerson, Janine. *Weather as Medium: Toward a Meteorological Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018) p1
work *Pilgrimage - Wind and Water in New York* (1998), by Chinese artist Zhang Huan comes to mind. This performance at P.S.1 in Long Island City was his first work in New York after being forced to leave China for political reasons. In this performance the artist was laying face down on a Ming-dynasty-style bed covered with large ice blocks, for about 10 minutes; a commentary on his uncertain place in his new home: instead of warming the ice with his body heat, Zhang Huan came close to freezing, raising questions about the kind of impact an immigrant may hope to have on his new environment.

In *Your Waste of Time* (2006), Olafur Eliasson shipped 6 tons of ice blocks from Vatnajökull, the largest glacier in Iceland thought be formed in part at around AD 1200, and presented it in a refrigerated space in Neugerriemschneider Gallery in Berlin. The work was later further transported to New York as part of Expo 1 at MoMA PS1 in 2008. On his website, Eliasson is quoted saying “It is a challenge to verbalize time itself, even though, paradoxically, talking takes time. Describing time in conversation tends to take away the duration from it, as it is mostly described as an idea or concept. For me, the idea of time becomes especially abstract when we consider the history of our universe… Suddenly I make the glacier understood to me, its temporality. It is linked to the time the water took to become ice, a glacier. By touching it, I embody my knowledge by establishing physical contact. And suddenly we understand that we do actually have the capacity to understand the abstract with our senses. Touching time is touching abstraction.” What for Eliasson began as a contemplation on time and fluidity shifted towards activism that directly referred to the climate crisis, bringing the melting icebergs to the public
sphere around conferences such as the UN Climate Conference COP21 in Paris where the artist installed ‘Ice Watch’\textsuperscript{23} in 2015.

*Tiresias* (2011) is a durational performance in which over approximately 3 hours Cassils melts a neoclassical Greek male ice sculpture with pure body heat, proving that identity is a process that can be shaped by determination and internal combustion. The name-sake and inspiration for the piece drew from the mythological figure of Tiresias, known as the blind prophet of Thebes, transformed from a man into a woman for seven years. On their website, Cassils explains that “by pressing their body against the ice torso, Cassils demonstrates both the instability of the body and desire for a certain unsustainable physique. Recasting the myth of Tiresias as a story of endurance and transformation, Cassils performs the resolve required to persist at the point of contact between masculine and feminine.”

Beyond metaphor, physics and metaphysics, ice is considered to have healing qualities. Tapping to the field of Cryotherapy, artist Taryn Simon created ‘A Cold Hole’, an indoor installation at Mass MoCA that invited audience to plunge into icy water simulating a frozen lake. The experience, she says, evokes shock that compares to birth, sudden death and sleep arrhythmia. “There is a mental blackout which arrests your ability to think, I am interested in enabling that obliteration.”\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{23} The first installation of *Ice Watch* was in Copenhagen, at City Hall Square, from 26 to 29 October 2014, to mark the publication of the UN IPCC’s Fifth Assessment Report on Climate Change. The second installation took place in Paris, at Place du Panthéon, from 3 to 13 December 2015, on the occasion of the UN Climate Conference COP21, and the third version of Ice Watch was on view from 11 December 2018 to 2 January 2019 at two locations in London – outside Bloomberg’s European headquarters and in front of Tate Modern.

\textsuperscript{24} Victoria Stapley-Brown, Mass MoCA takes the plunge with Taryn Simon’s ice-water installation, The Art Newspaper, 24 May 2018 https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2018/05/24/mass-moca-takes-the-plunge-with-taryn-simons-ice-water-installation
Chilling Intimacy

My cold plunge into the materiality of time in performance emerged at an exceptional time- it was the time of pandemic, a time which did not allow gathering, an essential element in the field of performance. I refused to give in to virtual performances and explored ways in person performances could persist, and so I began translating my one-to-one performance offerings into coronavirus compatible structures: I dedicated the first months of pandemic to a series of window performances (‘Your Breath on My Window’, 2020) which were performances for a single household, viewed through the window at Glasshouse. I continued with Specific Gestures (2021)- a series of performance-based sculptures which explore the fragility and impossibility of intimacy (sharing of a bowl of soup, hugging, sharing a bed) when a transparent surface is defining what is seen and what is felt, encasing intimacy as a posture rather than as sensation. The coldness of the separation and lack of human warmth led me to work with ice, first as a powerful metaphor for the materiality of performance time, creating molds for performances. Then my research expanded to the broad histories and metaphysics ice holds- working with this transient solid material remains open ended. Indexing my work in ice: dragging the ice bones, embracing the hallah bread against my body as heat, and my most recent work in this series, translated my one-to-one performance ‘Comb My Hair’ into a chillingly intimate offering- a hairbrush cast from ice becomes the tool-at-hand for a performance in which an audience member steps forward to offer an intimate gesture using the metaphysic quality of ice- healing, cooling, transient. A signifier to my true goal as an artist- reminding future generations what it feels like to be human, through fragility, generosity and intimacy.
Lital Dotan, Freezing Time (2021), video performance, photo by Eyal Perry

Lital Dotan, Freezing Time (2022), still from video

Lital Dotan, Freezing Time (2022), video performance, photo by Eyal Perry
Lital Dotan, Transient Shelter (2021), live performance, photo by Eyal Perry

Lital Dotan, To Melt, video still #2, video performance 2021
Bibliography

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