

## A History of Performance Art at Gachet

*The Performance Art Program at Gallery Gachet* has encompassed the production of numerous works since 1998. Early works were process-based and took place in experimental workshops and monthly hosted 'open mike' events. Gallery members interested in performance art found a supportive and interested audience within the Downtown Eastside. There was no performance art specific audience for Gachet members, as the centre often operates peripherally to mainstream artist-run centre culture. Recognition came somewhat slowly over time, with the assistance of the Grunt Gallery, and often from sources outside of Vancouver, culminating in the inclusion of the Gachet Series *Transference of Sensation* in Canadian Art magazine by current LIVE Biennale Director Randy Gledhill. This series featured the work of Naufus R. Figueroa (Vancouver), Irene Loughlin (Vancouver), video works by Regina Galindo (Guatemala City) and Lucia Madriz (San Jose, CR), a photo installation of a performance by Guatemalan artist Jorge de Leon, First Nations' performance artist Reona Brass (Regina), Wolframio Sinué (Ecuador), Berengere Parizeau (Montreal) and Guillermo Galindo (California).

Experimentation was an essential element of the early performance art works presented at Gachet. Performance artist Naufus Figueroa remembered, "In 1998, I hosted a poetry night at Gachet...we had fifty dollar payments for artists. I took advantage of this, as no one really came to the poetry event. I invited others to experiment, it was a sort of experimental lab, I considered calling it 'The Lab'. It was built on the idea that you can't learn performance, you can only learn by doing. It was like a playground, and I could perform every month, rather than once a year. I wanted to do it a lot, and I had a freedom particular to Gachet, which was supportive. I didn't feel judged by the audience. I didn't have the idea I would get money or acceptance from performing. I did it, people said it was interesting, so I did it more." (*Naufus R. Figueroa, in an interview with Irene Loughlin, Feb 2006*)



Figuroa's early performances included *Fall of the American Hamburger*, a work where the character "La Abortada" was born. This aborted baby of Frida Kahlo "was raised in the sewers of Ohio, graduated in 1978 from Parsons and exhibited internationally. La Abortada currently lives in the Dominican Republic and works as a bathhouse chanteuse." (*Naufus RF*) La Abortada later reappeared in the *Fluid Sexuality* series' work *Sodomizing Diego Rivera* in 2001, to take revenge on her absent, narcissistic father in a gender inversion of the Freudian oedipal complex.

Another early performance work that emerged from the experimental monthly series was *15 Aneas*, which was billed as an interactive happening in honour of Francisco Ortiz and Naufus Figuroa's fifteen years of boredom and panic attacks in Canada. The work was a kind of debutante party in the genre of the coming of age parties held for teenage girls, from the campy vantage point of two transplanted Latino youth, who had experienced their own fifteenth birthdays within the numbing boredom and anxiety of adapting to North American youth culture. *Rose Blood Child*, a performance with Naufus Ramirez-Figuroa and ten year old Emilian Clerc, was "dedicated to the renewal and hope for suffering children". The performance elements were listed as " an inconsistent record player, a series of lottery cards illuminating the dark, 12 spanish onions from a wicker basket, the child Emilian, the dyembe, the performance artist, remolacha, six mason jars, crowns of roses and the liquid of blood red beets..." Marie Baker contributed the performance *Medsin Show* which examined constructs and assumptions regarding 'native spirituality', Karenza T. Wall created a work based on childhood memories, and a performative dance work by Samantha Zahorchak explored ideas of frustration and limitation, as the dancer consistently met with and hit the wall of the gallery. Zahorchak also later mounted the work *The Spirit of*

*(Left): Sodomizing Diego Rivera - Naufus Ramirez - Figuroa*  
*Photo Credit: Merle Addison*



*Beauty* (1999) which she described as "a celebration of wisdom and simple pleasures."

The openness of this kind of experimental lab/event that occurred monthly at Gachet attracted a certain aspect of youth participation and involvement, and provided a context for marginal, emerging young performance artists. Other visiting, young artists to Gachet included spoken word artist Hugh Phukovsky, and hip-hop poet C.R. Avery. At a later stage in 2001, visiting performance artist Lisa Deanne Smith from Toronto commented that she had never experienced a performance art audience with such a large percentage of youth. The group HIJOS (Children of the Disappeared/Vancouver) created performances at Gachet, including performative dance works by Paula Urrutia. Naufus Figueroa presented the work *Sugar Skulls for the Disappeared* at Gachet, a memorial performance that attracted an activist audience. He made sugar skulls and asked the children in the audience to assist him. He distributed the sugar skull recipe amongst the audience.

Emerging from this open and experimental monthly series, came the impetus to establish the first performance art series *Echoes and Labyrinths* at Gachet (2000). This was the first program by Gachet that received Canada Council funding, provoking a certain kind of institutional legitimacy for Gachet performance production. Previously, Gallery members had been involved in what I have called the 'internal dialogical' (*after Grant Kester*), and in participation in the neighbourhood regarding different issues related to "community art" (such as the *Walls of Change Project* facilitated by Sharon Kravitz at the Carnegie Centre), as well as other pressing issues related to mental health, addiction, etc. and the HIV epidemic in the Downtown Eastside. Some members

(p 32) Above: Lisa Deanne Smith, 2001 Below: (L to R) Irene Loughlin and Paula Potter, 2001. Photo Credit: Merle Addison

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took part in advocacy to improve health conditions, through working in a community context. Some of these activities included participating in depression screening testing and education at the Carnegie Centre, by creating a public art project with VANDU (facilitated by Paula Potter) or with the desmedia project, or in specialized “healing” workshops at Gallery Gachet that explored the role of alternative health practices (such as acupuncture) in alleviating pain. The member-defined “art and healing” context of Gachet has always been an important and necessary aspect of the gallery. The context of 'art and healing' may be defined through an interesting combination of practices, often spiritual in nature, that are hybrid and can be influenced by medical/psychiatric practices, alternative medicine, “outsider art” aesthetics, land art practices, deconstructions of globalization, local/global political activism, eco-feminism, deconstruction of racialized contexts, performance art and ritual, First Nations activism in the Downtown Eastside, queer culture, etc. The hybrid context of the art and healing aspect of Gachet, combined with the reality of many members' lives (that includes successfully navigating stigma, marginal housing and economically low standards of living) necessitates the differentiation between art and healing in a Gachet, peer-based context as opposed to the more privileged, class-based West Coast “new age” context, under which the genre 'art and healing' is generally understood. (*In conversation with Irwin Oostindie, former Director, Gachet*).

In 2003 I created the work *Piss On Pity* or *Poor Love* which incorporated the accoutrements of medical treatment as metaphor, for the LIVE Biennial Vancouver. The political context and emotional subtext of the Downtown Eastside and the socio-political situations locally and globally influenced the artists involved in the series *Echoes and Labyrinths* (presented in

(Right): Irene Loughlin, *Piss on Pity/Poor Love*, 2003





the summer of 2000). Some of the artists' works reflected the ecological and political concerns of the time. This was evident in the work produced by Pedro Guillen Cuevas, who created the piece *Vieques Plena de Bombas (Plenty of Bombs)*, a work about US military practice on the island of Vieques, Puerto Rico, which has resulted in extreme ecological damage and in high levels of cancer and other health problems for civilians. The artist embodied and then challenged the viewers in his portrayal of particularly obnoxious, racialized characterizations. Later, the viewers were invited to bomb the artist with water balloons, which they did with a particularly frenzied and relieved enthusiasm. When all the "bombs" had been exploded and the artist lay soaking in the fetal position, alone in the centre of the room, it became clear what we had done, and the performance quickly switched from frivolity to quiet contemplation.

Considering the late 1990's, Naufus recalled, "There was also the feeling of not wanting to speak for others, something that came out of the Lincoln Clarkes 'Heroines' photography series controversy at the time, as well as the internal awareness of external visual representation, and the stereotypes and problems that can occur in speaking for others." The desire was (and continues often to be) to talk about one's own immediate experience and environment." Within this series, there was increased involvement and input from the art community, more than had ever previously occurred at Gachet in the historical period discussed. Performance artists Archer Pechawis taught performance art workshops at Gachet, and Bryan Mulvihill participated in a tea celebration in Pigeon Park. Artists Kim Dawn and Alvin Tolentino presented works for the *Fluid Sexuality Series*.

Listings of the work at Gachet appeared in the book *LIVE At The End of the Century*, (sponsored by the grunt gallery), which was the first published context for the Gachet performance program.



In 2006, I facilitated and Naufus Ramirez-Figueroa curated *Out of the Rain: A Youth Against Homelessness Project* at Gachet. He described the experience of curating street-involved youth as an “amazing, amazing experience.” The youth worked together in workshops and their ideas were abundant and emerged from visual art, sound and poetry. In the second workshop, they came up with ideas for the actions that they would perform. The event was centred around rain, water and umbrellas. One of the youth stated “if you were homeless, once you got wet you couldn’t get dry again for days.” They ended up soaking the stage at the Earth Day youth celebration festival. Kaiya spun wet woolen sleeves that she had attached to her arms, Seb turned an umbrella filled with water upside down, Erin projected a video clip of flares that she activated one night in the area outside of the performance space, Matt combined movement and a soundscape of a fight that he had audio taped in the alley, and trans performer Sven Black smeared mud over his embodiment of Lucy Fur. Zola and Diane Jacobs, members at Gallery Gachet, provided a video backdrop of the landscape of the Downtown Eastside as a subtext for the work, as well as the performance video of Diane Jacobs, where she had attempted to crawl under a dumpster in the alley behind the gallery. In later works at the Gallery, Francisco-Fernando Granados performed biting into his skin as his landed immigrant papers were projected over his body. Erin filled a piñata with debris she picked up in the Downtown Eastside. We wore party hats and whistles. The celebratory feeling of the event plummeted heavily when the garbage fell out of the piñata. Matt created a work about generosity. He pushed a shopping cart in the gallery, recalling when he first arrived in Vancouver, a homeless man gave him new shoes from his shopping cart. He passed around oranges that he had found in the dumpster to the audience and recited a short monologue that he had created.

Visiting the gallery’s performance art events in 2006, I was struck by the cabaret quality of the work *Full Moon Performance* mounted by Zola, Diane Jacobs and Sven Black. The work

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emerged in relation to Diane's previous *Poor Bashing* performance. In this performance, Diane had created stages of experimentation, using mud as the performative material. She first experimented with connecting with the material on a private personal level in her garden. Two years prior to the event in 2006, she had asked gallery members to work with her on a poor bashing booth. The booth had a carnivalesque aspect, and she positioned herself inside the booth while members threw mud at her. Out of necessity, gallery members became the perpetrators and found the role interesting and uncomfortable, apologizing to Diane after the event, even though she had solicited their participation in the action. She wanted to explore ideas around the visibility of being poor and the public spectacle of humiliation surrounding poverty. She was also interested in the idea of the audience as cultural observer, watching the event with passivity, as is the case with many events that unfold in the Downtown Eastside. Diane was also curious about how she would react to the physicality of the event and to the video documentation.

After the mud slinging, she decided to move into the alley space behind the gallery, pushing the public performance boundaries further. At this point, she experimented with crawling under the dumpster, which was too low to the ground for her body to fit under. The action became an exercise in futility, as well as a compelling image of frustration. In the performance of 2006, the poor bashing became public and took place in the open gallery space. Diane wore a blindfold as a method of removing herself from the immediacy of the environment of public humiliation. The blindfold disallowed her body a kind of preparatory kinesthetic awareness, as she could not predict the moment in which the mud would impact her body. Zola and Sven Black/Lucy Fur stood beside Diane on each side of the mud-slinging pit. Zola was dressed to represent Gaia. Sven Black's body was painted black and he wore a huge purple wig and horns. Sven Black/Lucy Fur embodied gender dualism in him/herself, and together, Sven Black/Lucy Fur and Zola represented the duality of humanity. They called an end to the



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mud slinging, and led a procession outside into the alley where they washed the mud off of Diane with water. Diane saw this performance as containing three distinct stages, the abusive stage, the transition stage, and the external healing stage in the alley. Bathing under the full moon, Zola sang a song about freedom, and recited a poem about Beauty being beaten down and rising up again, as Sven Black enacted the night. The performance had an allegorical aspect, which investigated the nature of performance as a transformative act. The performance and the process of its creation spilled out into the gallery space, both literally and metaphorically, before and after the event. Diane stated that the act of poor bashing references violence against women, “which brings up stuff, so that people came to the gallery and put writing on the wall.” She also felt that Gachet was a safe place for experimentation, in that she felt that “if the performance fell apart it would have been okay.” The audience was very supportive of the piece, and participated in the chanting and processional aspect.

Zola's contribution to the piece came out of past experience supporting drag performance. Zola spoke of the performance's multiple archetypes that were embodied by each individual involved, and the importance of the qualities in these archetypes to rejoin with humanity as a metaphor for a kind of spiritual and ecological healing process.

The performance left an imprint on the physical and emotive space of the gallery prior to and after the event. Writing on the gallery walls was moving, such as the following piece of text, which was written on the wall in tiny letters at eye level in pencil.

“The only accommodations I could afford was a small room in an SRO. I got a small, mean, bare little room on the top floor facing the alley. It was right over an open, overflowing dumpster in June, so with my window open the room was perfumed with odor la garbage. I came home at night under a heavy cloud of depression. I shouldered past the drug dealers, climbed the narrow stairs lit with one naked lightbulb. The manager was



*Images: Zola Novak, 2006 Full Moon Performance  
Video Stills: courtesy of the artist*



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drunk and entertaining his posse of resident friends. They saw me and tried to get me to join them, but I said no, being the only female in the hotel, I didn't think that would be a good idea. When I opened the door to my room, it shocked me, how bare, stark and cold it was. I thought this is the most depressing room - the perfect place for a suicide. I sat and cried - I want to die, if this is how I have to live, I can't do it anymore, I 'm a fucking loser, waste of skin, ugly, useless, stupid bitch die..."

This text was later followed by the experience of a bright light in the hallway and a soothing voice bringing the woman to sleep. Even within such difficult circumstances, narratives such as these often suggest a future possibility.

The performance work at Gachet was, and continues to be, a truly experimental, collaborative program that is process-based and functions beyond traditional frameworks of the interdisciplinary. Using a supportive, peer based mode of production, the artists have crossed the boundaries of performance art as it relates to alternative and medical practices, and have addressed the tropes of healing and activism in which they are often submerged. The work is ground-breaking in that the ideology surrounding art and healing is often troubled by class-based and able-bodied disagreement as to the "legitimacy" of such work in an art context. In challenging and defining for themselves the connections between art production and "healing", the artists have created newly hybrid forms of performativity.

The able-bodied assertion that 'art isn't therapy' brings with it a whole unsettling set of questions as to the purpose, function and legitimacy of art practice in disability communities, where it may contain a self-defined and identified "therapeutic" aspect. The work *Art Isn't Therapy* I produced at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2008 with Gallery Gachet artists Sven Black, Diane Jacobs, Naufus R. Figueroa, and Danny Wickert reversed the patient/client and consumer/survivor/service provider

dichotomy familiar to so many of us in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. Gaget members offered free therapy and counselling to gallery visitors. Therapeutic sessions in this large art institution transgressed multiple boundaries with both a sense of humour and a seriousness by participants as to the intensity of our collective undertaking.

Not surprisingly, our findings concluded that in the public gallery, many of us are suffering.

As demonstrated in the Group Work of *Art Isn't Therapy*, and as described in the many examples in this text, Disability Art Practices that address the societal constructs surrounding mental illness are part of contemporary art practice and discourse in Vancouver and globally, have much to say to our contemporary condition, and should be engaged with as such. Perhaps at a future moment, contemporary art institutions will navigate this uneasy relationship between able-bodied assumptions and disability perspective in a less compromised manner than that of the past, where in so many instances such perspectives and contributions have been either co-opted or rejected (i.e. through biographical/curiosity exploitation resulting in financial gain by the ableist institution or through a disavowed position to any subject matter that might align historical, 'romanticized' notions of suffering or mental illness with artistic production). We call for a new paradigm that recognizes a neurologically and emotively diverse, creative climate. This document serves as a witness and as a contribution to the history and development of such an aspect of contemporary art production and discourse.

Irene Loughlin