



Performance as an Act of Survival

by Claudia Bernal
translated by Meg Moran

THE LOCATION of art, rather than in institutions, must be within society itself, and art must consist of action rather than objects. To begin with, a place of communion must be created: a point, a circle, a line of horizon, an opening, a black hole, a mental space, or a real one, in which action and interaction can take place. Performance is at the heart of life within society. As an artist, I have a role to play in the process of social and political transformation. The meaning of a performance does not emerge only within the remote confines of the studio, but from interaction with others and the outside world. The performer must be a *medium* between the world and the spectator, between the interior and the exterior, between the subjective world and the social world. The performance space is a place of transmission of experiences and of communication between the individual and the community.

The essential material of performance work is without question the body. I explore it, manipulate it, muscle into it, deconstruct it, fragment it, transfigure it, square it, or throw it off centre, contemplate it, assault it, or take care of it. But the key is to make the body act, because performance consists of actions. I act out of necessity, out of conviction, out of generosity, out of empathy, out of an instinct of survival. Through gesture, in progress, in movement, the art of performance lends an existence to the body by bringing it back to the centre of attention. A performance is not the representation of an action; a performer does not embody a character, she stages her own body in the space that she has created in the present moment. In performance, the body is the means and the end.

Performance is *empowerment*. Over the course of the performance the spectator also becomes an actor. I wish to offer the spectator a unique and transformative

experience. What is crucial in a performance is that it takes place in the here-and-now. The spectator and the performer are face to face: it is impossible to close your eyes, to escape, to be disinterested, to change places. In the magical performance space, it is not a consumer or a client that is in front of me, but a human being that I hope to tame, into whose eyes I can look, who I can smell, who I can permit myself to touch, with whom I hope to share my energy. During the space-time of the performance there occurs a process of metamorphosis and transformation, which gives the participants the ability to acquire a new identity. At the end of this ordeal, each person will have survived, will have developed themselves individually and socially. Everyone will feel like they belong to a community through the sharing of a common experience. The performance will have required from everyone much generosity, courage, and strength. Performance is an act of survival.



Bernal in *Made of the Same Blood* at the Diagonale in Montreal, 2007. The installation combines many dozens of tresses, a fisher's net, water, and natural wool. Fear, isolation, danger, movement, social cohesion, liberation, aggression, wandering, uprooting are all contradictory sentiments that arise from the symbolic power of the installation's objects, which are brought to life as Bernal uses her body as a creative space through live performances.
Photo by Pierre-Yves Serinet



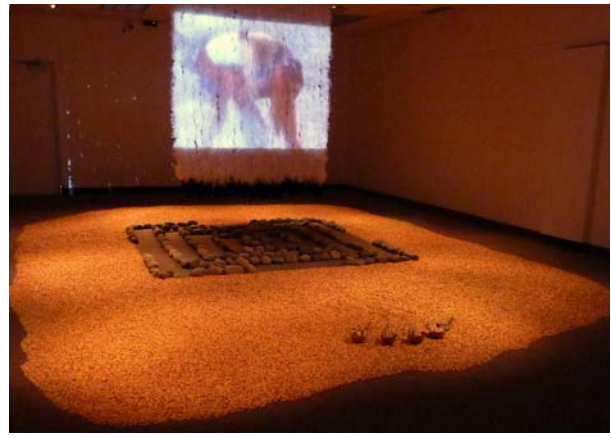
Bernal in *Made of the Same Blood* (2007) at the Diagonale in Montreal, a video installation and performance that resulted from reflections on what is considered a collective drama in Colombia but also in many regions of the planet: the forced displacement of entire communities because of armed conflicts and violence. The piece integrates a video projection, which many would tend to call experimental documentary. Yet, while the film features three victims, three survivors, three women who can transform violence into poetry, the artistic treatment of the images allows a renewed dialogue with the installation and the performance.
Photo by Pierre-Yves Serinet

An artist is fundamentally independent minded. They rebel against the will to impose an order on things. Performance is not subjected to an order that is alien to it, it must be left to organize itself. I therefore reject all attempts to mold and all attempts to construct a form that would be imposed from the outside. On the contrary, I propose to promote the body and matter, to show them for what they are, to benefit from their imperfections, and even to follow their tendency toward uncertainty and disorder. Performance requires the disintegration of languages and of structures outside of itself.

Compacency must be avoided, barbarity must be fought! Genocides, crimes, forced displacements, abuses, violence, war, gruesome deaths ... How can I express what I feel without falling into the macabre? Every object has a symbolic power, whether it is sculpture,



Bernal's *Chamanika urbana* at A Space Gallery in Toronto, 2010. Through this artwork, the body celebrates life, death, and transformation, leading us to think not only about the consequences of globalization on native cultures in Latin America, but also about cultural syncretism and the place culture and art occupy in contemporary societies. (Materials: feathered screen, corn, stones, textile, video projection.)
 Photo by Henry Chan



Claudia Bernal's *Chamanika urbana* at Le Gesù, Montreal, 2010. The video installation and performance were inspired by images of a contemporary shaman in Mexico City. In the videographic space, a hand-to-hand ritual with the shaman takes place, while in the exhibition's space, marginality and insulation break off as Bernal connects with others in a ritual of community.
 Photo by Pierre-Yves Serinet



Bernal's *Mouldy Green is the Colour of Forgetting*, an interdisciplinary artwork that combines, with strength, installation, printed arts, performance, and sound. Maison de la culture Côte-des-Neiges, Montreal, 2010.
 Photo by Pierre-Yves Serinet



Bernal's *Monument to Ciudad Juarez: Only Women Who Die a Violent Death Go Directly to a Paradise* at Toronto's Metro Hall in 2002. The video installation and performance were inspired by what at first were considered isolated events but now are clearly the expression of a historical sacrifice, a holocaust against women: the violent assassinations since 1993 of more than 300 women in the city of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. Located at the border with the United States, a "no one's and everyone's land," Ciudad Juarez is a city of transit where thousands of women survive dreaming of "paradise." This monumental artwork combines, with strength, ceramics, wood, ropes, fabrics, stones, corn tortillas, and a video projection.
 Photo by Pierre-Yves Serinet

sound, video, or text. Performance shows truth through metaphor, never directly. Truth lies in the space between opposites. I play with the polysemy of gestures, of objects, and of actions to make the truth re-emerge through performance that is intense, metaphorical, energetic, touching, poetic, expressive, and human.

Nothing in a performance is without importance. In the realm of performance, the body is at once rooted and angled toward the infinite; in a state of disposition, awake, unconscious, and alert at the same time. The gestures and actions of the performer take on meaning from relationships with their own body, their limits, their beauty, their memory, their temporality, their fragility, their impulses, their animalism, their fears, their instincts ... and with the Other. Performance must awaken what is dormant, must forge new paths, new possibilities, must show us the unknown about ourselves and about others. I aspire to a performance capable of expressing the conflicts of humanity in a poetic, personal, and universal way. I feel therefore I exist!



A video still of Bernal in *Mouldy Green is the Colour of Forgetting* at Maison de la culture Côte-des-Neiges, Montreal, 2010. Oblivion, uprooting, exile, social and political violence, madness, or solitude are all contradictory sentiments arising from the symbolic power of objects and words. Binding personal memory with social reflection, Bernal uses her body as a creative space during performances to evoke not only desolation but also hope and resilience.
Photo by Thierry Gauthier



Bernal in *Mouldy Green is the Colour of Forgetting* at Maison de la culture Côte-des-Neiges, Montreal, 2010. Drawing from her memories, Bernal re-constructs an atmosphere that fluctuates between dream and reality, creating a tension between innocence and tragedy, between youth and maturity, between the fear of a child and her tendency to be impressed, between the many actors who shape social relations.
Photo by Thierry Gauthier (video still)



Bernal in *Escritura X Escritura* performance in situ at Ex-Padelai, Cultural Center of Spain in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 2010.
Photo by Mercedes Fianza (video still)



A video still of Bernal's *Escritura X Escritura* performance in situ at Ex-Padelai, Cultural Center of Spain in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 2010.
Photo by Mercedes Fianza