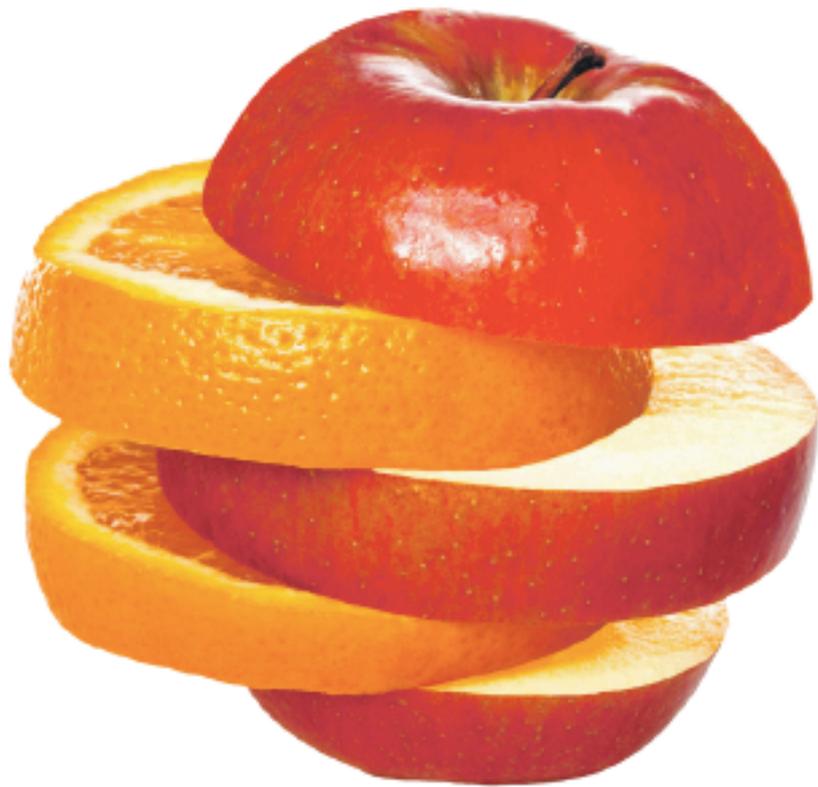


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BILSAS DAKAM

Performance Art as Pilgrimage and Penance

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Abstract

This paper is the record and evidence of a personal investigation into the artistic and poetic possibilities inherent in the medium of performance art. I will begin by introducing the main themes of my work and how they led me to this physical, performative medium of art making. I will then go on to explain how my art practice guided me through various explorations into the ways and means of making art related to the landscape, which is a favoured topic in my home country of England. Through time spent making drawings and sculptural works, the sheer physicality of the work led me to what now seems a natural development – actually moving through the landscape as a way of making art. It occurred to me that this method was perfect for investigating and representing the experience of our daily lives. We attempt to travel from one place to another, there is a struggle involved, effort is spent in order to reach our goal and during that time we are at the mercy of the elements and our time seems no longer to belong to us, we have given it up in exchange for the reward waiting for us at the journey's end, wherever and whenever that may be.

This seemed an ideal way to simultaneously investigate the concept and physical experience of everyday life. It will be an objective re-creation of the time we spend in activities that are not of our choosing.

Through performance art I wish to represent everyday life in a symbolic, ritualistic way. It is a method to bring out the absurdity of our everyday actions and routines that are taken out of context in order to draw attention to that absurdity.

As I explain how I formulated this performance piece I will refer to such subjects as the concept of the pilgrimage, religious rituals and the development of the theatre. Somehow, these activities embody the essence of what I want to explore. The physical penance, time and energy sacrificed for a worthy cause. I will finally describe how I drew on these references and created a performance that could refer to and symbolise aspects of our daily life and at the same time retain a sense of unity and composition as a piece of art work. In conclusion I will also describe how the weather and geographic location of the performance unexpectedly enhanced the performance and amplified the experiential quality of the piece.

Introduction: 'The Artist is Present'

At 5:00pm on Monday 31st May 2010 the performance entitled 'The Artist is present' closed to the public. It had begun on March 14th and during the intervening time performance artist Marina Abramovic had invited members of the audience to sit opposite her in the Marron atrium at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

Her aim was to engage in an “an energy dialogue with the audience”. There were rules for the audience to follow: no talking, no touching and no overt communication of any kind. It was the longest duration solo work of her career, both physically and emotionally demanding. For some the experience had been more significant than that normally gained from visiting an exhibition or even a music concert, in fact it had been similar to a religious experience. Members of the audience had felt personally ‘touched’ by Marina’s presence. For some, the time they had spent in the artist’s presence had moved them in such a way as to cause them to describe the experience in terms similar to those used at religious festivals or during religious pilgrimages. In fact some participants had travelled long distances in order to be there, for them it really was a pilgrimage. “People who sat with her more than 10 times formed their own club, and a group of New York artists gave out badges – ‘I cried with Marina Abramovic’ – to those who had broken down before her”. As Abramovic herself said “I give people a space to simply sit in silence and communicate with me deeply but non-verbally. I did almost nothing, but they take this religious experience from it. Art had lost that power, but for a while Moma was like Lourdes.” (O’Hagan, 2010)

Pilgrimage and Penance

Around the year 2003, paradoxically after recovering from surgery for a snapped Achilles tendon, I began running competitively in Hong Kong and I subsequently became chairman of the running club: *Athletic Veterans of Hong Kong* and also race director of the *Reservoir Cup* series of local races. I saw and felt the benefits of running, both physical and mental during that time. Within each race there are a very small number of runners who feel that they can win something, for the rest of the field there are a variety of reasons to join the ‘race’. Some wish to shave a few seconds of their PB (personal best), others run to keep fit and healthy while others run for the experience of the event, the camaraderie of the ‘journey’. I was particularly drawn to races of longer duration. Not being a tall person I realized that my legs were not long enough to compete in short events so I opted for the long distance events that required endurance, determination and a little stubbornness to succeed. As an ‘Ultra Marathon’ runner I felt firsthand the spiritual quality of long distance running. Sometimes I could be running practically nonstop for several hours and during that time it was common for me to withdraw into my mind where I would explore many ideas and thoughts to pass away the time. Also, as many of these types of race are held in the country parks of Hong Kong, I felt that I became part of the landscape – at one with nature. Despite the arduous nature of the sport, which was indeed physically challenging, it became like a kind of meditation session for me. Being fascinated with the ritualistic nature of performance art, a practicing artist and also an experienced long distance runner, I knew that there would come a time when I could put all these aspects of my life together and find a link which connects them.

Art students and lovers of art and architecture make 'pilgrimages' around the world to favoured examples in order to experience the reality of an image or building only previously seen in books but the term here has been borrowed and is intended to demonstrate the travellers' serious and determined, purpose-driven journey.

Many people assume that a Pilgrimage is essentially a religious experience as it is with the 'Hajj' pilgrimage to Mecca that is a religious duty to be carried out by all adult Muslims who are physically and financially capable of undertaking the journey and which is encapsulated in the name 'Hajj', which combines the outward act of a journey and the inward act of intentions. But, although the majority of examples that could be cited are religious in nature, it is not necessarily always the case, "A pilgrimage is an inherently personal journey that is enacted within a broader social context and the notion of pilgrimage is central to all cultures and all religions...but this spiritual journey takes many different forms." (Peat, 2005). Considering probably the most famous Christian pilgrimage trail in Europe, the centuries old Camino de Santiago (or Way of St James) there have been between 183,000 to 273,000 participants from around the world during the last few years and 'in 2012 only about 40 percent of pilgrims walked in the name of the Christian faith. Others walk because they're in a time of transition...or simply need a space apart from their life's routine' (George, 2015). It is this manifestation of the urge to pilgrimage that I am most interested in. It is not a command or a duty; it is an uncontrollable urge emanating from within.

The physically demanding aspect of the activity is a cathartic experience, an emotional discharge, leaving a state of liberation from anxiety and stress. (catharsis being a Greek word meaning cleansing).

The aspect of penance and the sacrifice of precious time is a crucial aspect of the performance and the duration of time expended during the performance is the material I worked with.

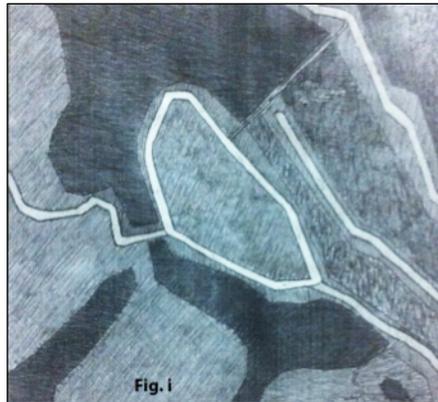
The Performance Part 1: Planning

Trying to find a way to extirpate the feelings that time has been wasted, of having to engage in work that gives no reward, and only serves to rob you of precious time that will never return, I was thinking of hamsters in play-wheels that run continuously on the spot. Like a scene from the film '*Groundhog Day*', everyday seems the same with the same actions performed in the same way, in the same order. The overwhelming feeling is of 'going round in circles'. So many people around the world have jobs that they do not enjoy. They work in order to afford a living and in return they sacrifice a large slice of their life. The hours they spend at work belong to someone else, they are owned by their employer. This sacrifice of precious time is one of the methods pilgrims engage in to emphasise their piety.

I began by drawing, searching, feeling my way around the landscape through the process of drawing. Building up a sense of the journey by 'walking' the pencil around the image. I had to accumulate this 'experience' in order to work out what I should be doing once on location (Fig. i). On this occasion I knew the

location very well indeed, having run around Tai Tam Country Park on countless occasions in the past, otherwise I would have needed to undertake a series of site visits to develop the piece further. This familiarity of the specific location speeded up the development process and allowed me to proceed quickly from concept to physical activity.

I eventually formulated the basic components of the performance: The traverse of the route and its pacing, the intervals and the symbolic objects (tools) I intend to carry and a note-books for recording the completed circuits of the hill.



(Fig_i)

The Performance Part 2: Execution

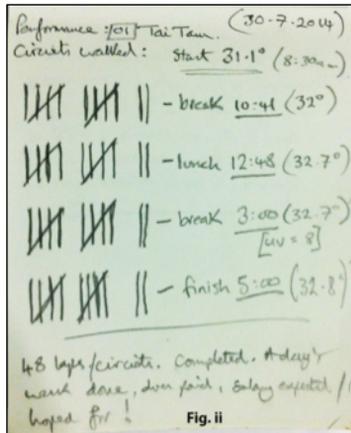
On Wednesday 30th July 2014 I travelled to Tai Tam Country Park in Hong Kong, specifically to a small hill that had a footpath all the way around, pretty much level for the whole circuit. I set up a base near to a small dam as my starting and finishing point. Nearby was a wooden shelter that would be very conveniently located for my breaks and lunchtime.

I walked around the hill clockwise from 9 to 5, the typical working day, stopping for tea breaks in the mid-morning (roughly 10:30am) and mid-afternoon (roughly 3:00pm) plus a one-hour break for lunch (at around 12:30). I treated the whole day seriously as work.

There was no script for the performance beyond the start, break times and finish.

As I walked (worked) I carried a bag containing essential worker's tools as well as my packed lunch and something to drink. I also carried a small note-pad to record the circuits i.e. the passing of time (Fig. ii).

I notated the circuits of the hill in simple form with one short, straight line for each circuit and a cross bar to complete each group of 5 circuits.



(Fig_ii)

The working day is often measured by the worker's output and this is often compared day by day in order to take stock of productivity. I adopted a strict work ethic and my production for the day was the expiration of energy into circuits of the hill and these were measured in order to take stock of the sum of my day's labour at 5pm when my working day ends.

During the performance I became tired and a little distracted. This mirrored the real experience of work, especially work that is menial in nature. I reacted to these feelings instinctively and my reaction became part of the performance. I found myself clock-watching, calculating how long I needed to walk before I could allow myself a break and my mind was cast back to the days when I had to hold down jobs I didn't enjoy and which robbed me of invaluable amounts of my time. My consolation during these times was the salary that allowed me to pay my rent and therefore survive. I needed that kind of mentality now, the knowledge that I had committed myself to walking this path, (See Fig. 1-8). When the 5pm 'clocking-off' time came, I felt a sense of relief as I walked back up the steep hill to Park View and Wong Ngai Chung Gap from where I could catch the bus back to Central. I had completed 48 circuits of the hill; I ended exactly where I had started meaning that after a day's walking I had not gone anywhere. My bag contained tools but at 5pm they remained unused in my bag. There was a sense of satisfaction at having completed a planned activity; I had maintained a steady pace throughout the day and put in a good day's work.



Fig.1 The First Bend

(Fig_1)



Fig.2 The Waterfall

(Fig_2)



Fig. 3 The Reservoir

(Fig_3)



Fig.4 The Large Dam

(Fig_4)



Fig.5 In the Shade

(Fig_5)



Fig.6 Approaching the Start Point

(Fig_6)



Fig.7 The Final Bend

(Fig_7)



Fig. 8 Lunchtime / Break Shelter

(Fig_8)

Review

During the course of the day nobody came to see the performance take place. I had informed my students and along with a brief description I had attached a map showing the location of the performance inside Tai Tam Country Park. I had also sent descriptions to a few local critics / writers and they had wished me luck but didn't make the journey to witness the performance.

The only 'audience' I had was a large spider, the local black and yellow ones to be found out on the trails in the country parks of Hong Kong (Fig. 9). After arriving at my start point in the morning I found a shaded spot to prepare and I quickly noticed the spider, which had also located this shaded spot and was sitting about 2 feet from my face. This observation made me think of the legend of the Scottish king Robert the Bruce, who it is said had observed a spider trying make a web in a cave in which the Bruce was taking refuge after being defeated in battle by the English army. The Bruce observed the spider trying again and again until it was finally successful, an experience that inspired him to go on and defeat the English at the Battle of Bannockburn. Despite this being a legend first published by Sir Walter Scott, I took it as a poetic sign that could inspire me in my endeavors on this hot August day.

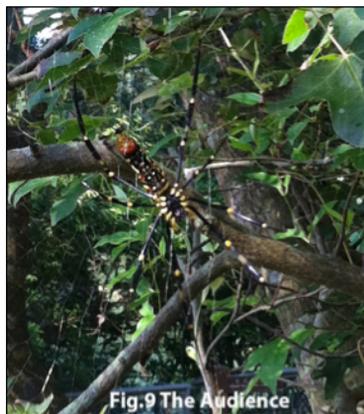


Fig.9 The Audience

(Fig_9)

The fact that I was totally alone presented a very important situation for me. As there was no audience, how should an artist respond? I had learnt a lesson about this very subject many years ago in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK.

While I was studying for a BA (Hons) Fine Art at Newcastle upon Tyne Polytechnic (now Northumbria University) I attended the opening of a work by performance artist Alistair Maclennan.

He began his 24-hour performance piece (or 'actuation' as he calls them) at around 12:00pm mid-day and many art students and members of the local art scene had turned up to witness it.

Alistair was wearing very little clothing, some body paint, and had a small box hanging around his neck. The floor of the art space (known as The Basement) was sprinkled with some kind of powder that allowed him to wear a circular trail as he slowly circumnavigated the room. He walked incredibly slowly, feeling each step from the heel touching the ground, to the sole of the foot resting flat, to the toes stretching as the foot once again slowly raises from the ground...and on he walked, slowly but steadily.

After a while the audience began to dwindle and as people left I also left with my friends. Later that Saturday, shortly before midnight I was on the way home, still in the company of a couple of friends and we hit on the idea of calling in to the art space again to see how Alistair was doing. As it was a 24-hour performance we began to wonder what would happen if there were no audience, how would the artist react to this occurrence? Upon reaching the art space, we slowly and quietly opened the door only to find Alistair totally alone, still slowly walking around the circular trail he had made, his concentration undiminished. This left a deep impression on me. What I had witnessed was not theatre, was not pretense or illusion, it was real. I never forgot it.

This lesson came back to me on that hot August day in Tai Tam. The performance was planned and had begun; it must happen and take its course. The fact that there was no audience should not affect the progress of the work. I was there and was aware of what did and didn't happen. If I finished the performance early and later misrepresented what had happened, I would know that it had not been 'real' and therefore I would have failed. In a way, the fact that I was alone added an extra layer of meaning and also added the 'reality' I was searching for.

This experience made me realise that the performance had been successful. It had become real and I lived it in a natural way. It also represented a new artistic path for me and I have begun to see other solutions within the field of performance for unresolved pieces of work. The day spent walking round in circles had opened up the possibility of a new, long lasting artistic journey.

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