

Coming Undone

by Adrian Heathfield

I went with a friend who hadn't seen much performance work. After the show we were drinking at the bar, trapped in a hesitant, stuttering conversation. Finally she said, "It was difficult to watch. But not without its pleasures. There was something of me, and of my world in it, reflected back. Small things ... but also something fundamental ... I can't say what. I'll have to think about it ... Maybe I'll know in a day or two." The statement seemed replete - I had nothing else to add. We finished our drinks and went off into the night.

Where to begin when speaking of the work of Goat Island? A company whose art practice is bent against the very idea of beginnings and endings, whose spare performance aesthetic seems at times so dense and complex that it trips up your tongue and ties it in knots. But I must say something, so why not start in the experience itself: extreme self-consciousness, physical discomfort, confusion, frustration, near boredom, vague recognition, *deja-vu*, fleeting identification, strange epiphanies, an entranced or mesmerized state, a creeping accumulation of emotions, subterranean alteration. Perhaps you have felt one, or some, or all of these conditions while watching the work of Goat Island. You might also have found these things 'difficult', against some other desired effect. Traditions of watching within live arenas may lead us to expect that such experiences should and will have been cut down or out. And when we find ourselves inside them, that voice in our heads - at once natural and deeply conditioned - tends to ask, "I have paid for this. Where is the pleasure? What is its meaning, its utility?". Goat Island's work holds you inside the duration of these experiences, then asks you to return to them again and again. It asks you to suspend your viewing habits and stall that inner voice, to linger openly in its moments, which are difficult to evaluate, identify and know. Made in and against a high capitalist culture where speed has become an agency of value, time often seems to slow or extend in their work, giving a space to its constituent elements so that their relations are exposed. Each performance quietly requires you to phase-shift your perceptions, and move into a state of *being with* the work that is sensory, associative, contemplative and unresolved. This work is not without its pleasures. Despite the dominant metaphor of performance as labour, its use of physical endurance, regimentation and repetition, the work is also full of play: spiraling logics, ingenious sparks and spontaneous meanings. Running under the surface of its routines is a dry wit, that is made manifest in the work's momentary dark ironies, its confusions of sense, and its recognition of human foibles and strangeness.

There is however, something more at stake in Goat Island's formal, perceptual and sensory ploys and their careful alteration of their spectators. Their aesthetic is deeply engaged with an ethics of performance. This ethics has been present in much of their previous work, but in *It's an Earthquake in My Heart* it is an explicit matter of content. As with their immediate contemporaries such as the Wooster Group and Forced Entertainment their aesthetic arises from a sustained practice of living with the material with which they work, so that a 'final' piece takes the form of an organic melding of elements, a life-world which the performers inhabit. *Earthquake* is an enacted meditation on the art of living, a work that *does* the asking of that timeless ethical question "How to live?". Over the long gestation of a performance piece Goat Island sift through, copy and transform multiple sources: fragments of text, sound, images, objects and gestures. One such source for *Earthquake* was Harun Farocki's extraordinary film *How to*

Live in The GDR: a collage piece which edits together found footage of product tests conducted by machines, interspliced with recordings of a range of professional, therapeutic and personal training sessions. One might think of Goat Island's work as a similar practice, but utterly without an instructional objective. For what we see in the work is a group of performers, re-moving themselves from the daily flow of life in order to enact a considered rehearsal of that life, oriented towards its improvement. Here the similarities end. Goat Island's repetition of habitual practice is one which utterly undoes its logic in order to excavate its hidden structures of meaning. One might say then, that Goat Island's ethics of performance is resident both in their process of creation and their aesthetic: the two are inseparable.

The approach to making a performance work is one which does not set out with identified objectives of meaning, but involves instead a negotiation of intentions and knowledges through collaborative practice. Though the work is clearly marked by Lin Hixson's directorial imprimatur, their process is more free from hierarchies than most contemporary companies and reflects a complex collective conversation. Sources enter the evolving aesthetic and are then interrogated within it, until their place and relation is solidified. Here their use of sources is akin to the use of found objects in visual arts practice, in the sense that rather than being directly sought out, sources seem to come towards the artists. There is a deliberate giving over of the aesthetic to these objects, whose continued presence is negotiated through a communal process. This is perhaps best described as a process of hearing and response in relation to the members of the group and the sources that arise through them. They do not set out to deliver the meaning of their work, but rather they undertake a process of the discovery of meaning *in* their work, and implicate their spectators within this process. (It is no accident that as an audience we watch ourselves watching the work - the round or traverse staging makes us a physical and visual dynamic within it). One might say then, that they are working without rules, in order to find the rules of what will have been done. The dependency of the aesthetic upon this exploratory lived practice contains an ethical dynamic, not simply because of its use of relation in collaboration and its negotiation of sources through collective processes, but because the orientation of these processes is towards the discovery of otherness. This is both an unearthing of the otherness of the other members of the group (the qualities that emerge in their givings, their unconscious performances), and also the alterities of meaning resident in the combination of materials with which they work. In this sense the work becomes an examination of the collective unconscious of the group and its products, and through the group, an examination of the political unconscious of the culture from which they come. The aesthetic implicates its audience in this social and cultural questioning, and invites us to continue its labour.

Earthquake is perhaps the company's most complex work to date. It leaves behind the long durational actions of earlier pieces such as *Can't Take Johnny to the Funeral* and *It's Shifting, Hank*, and the more character-based and scenic devices of works such as *How Dear To Me ...* and *The Sea & Poison*. These traits are replaced with a restless aesthetic, whose theatrical, choreographic, and actional elements are densely interwoven, so that the work is constantly changing shape. Framing itself as both a life-lesson and an account of an actual earthquake, the piece then proceeds to lose its espoused plot and flit and fall through a series of vaguely recognisable but intimately connected scenarios; moments from a childhood, a revelatory hallucination, an instructional radio show, a dialogue with a dying man, a call from a phone box, a church ceremony. The amorphous 'scenes' of *Earthquake* and its leaps of time give the impression that the whole work is a kind of communal re-treading of an unstable landscape of memory. It would seem that in this piece the dilemma of 'how to live?' is rephrased as 'how to

remember?'. These questions are pursued through a highly physical enactment, so that the question of remembrance is itself always a matter of embodiment, of physical residue and resonance. What is left in the body by events? Why must the body re-trace its memories? What new sense is unearthed in this somatic replay?

The heightened physical nature of Goat Island's work and its ambiguous formal status perturbs categorisation. It's hard to locate this work as dance (a label the company reject), though it is certainly choreographed movement. In *Earthquake*, the formal status of this movement, is even further undermined by Goat Island's explicit copying of multiple but minute sequences from the work of dance-theatre practitioner Pina Bausch. As with all of Goat Island's copying, there is a pronounced translation into a different context and language. Perhaps the best that we can say of its physical language is that it draws on the traditions of ritual theatre, dance, 'real-time' action and task-based performance to create a unique synthesis of these forms. This results in a kind of faltering physicality that is poised between stasis and flow - think of those strange revolving animate tableaux, or the moments where performers get heavily stuck in the groove of a particular gesture. It's no accident that the performers occasionally seem to be moving like puppets, or rehearsing a set of moves that they do not yet know. The movement is exposed as a repetition. We are watching them learning how to move. That the performers only 'half-inhabit' the movement is crucial to the work since it creates a question over the source of the movement and the performer's volition. Their physicality seems to originate simultaneously from outside and inside the performer: from some notional instruction, pattern or plan, but also from a psychic force, which grips the performer within a repetition of a gestural form. This unresolvable ambiguity opens the question of the cause of human action, poised between interior (psychological) drives and exterior (social or cultural) determinations.

Watching their rehearsals over these last few months, I have often felt that the ideal position from which to see *Earthquake* when it is finally finished would be from above. Here the full extent of its intricate patterns, its complex spatial and physical logics might be better mapped. But this is of course Goat Island's point: the ideal place is unavailable. There is no location from which to see the work in totality; there are only subjective and partial positions, fragments of a whole, that remains, no matter how many times you see the work, stubbornly out of reach. The gestures they use often seem to have a dream-like symbolism: body-forms whose meaning is inchoate, but which seem to repeat lost states and emotions, as if they were shards of body-memory. Goat Island are enacting a radical form of commemoration: one that returns to phenomenal memories in order to undo and reform the memory found through thought, language and image. Their uncanny aesthetics, forever combining the animate with the inanimate, performs an incomplete recovery of senses and feelings found between mind and body, self-image and self-experience. In this respect one can think of Goat Island's work as a kind of physical testimony, but one that side-steps and comments on the foundations and pitfalls of contemporary testimonial culture; the belief that we can return through a cathartic telling to an authoritative version of a traumatic event, the belief that in this telling we might arrive at an essential or truthful version of our selves. And though it sometimes uses spoken testimony, the work is less concerned with the delivery of buried truths, than it is with the opening of the process of their finding. Just as it does not matter that the story with which I began this essay is not true. It is just a likely fiction. I played a ruse to get you reading and to untie my tongue. What matters is that it could have happened, that in its telling it opens the possibility of a truth. In Goat Island's work this final truth remains forever inaccessible. This is the hole that takes the name of 'earthquake' in *It's an Earthquake in My Heart*. And Goat Island are at pains to point out that earthquake is just a word for it, like 'rain' or 'broccoli', or

whatever word you choose. Earthquake is a good name, but the hole itself remains unspeakable. Their silence enables *you* to bring an idea of a hole to fill *their* hole. Perhaps your hole is an actual earthquake, or a forgotten event, a lost love, or a car crash; you can rest assured it will be welcomed here.

It is possible then to think of all of the actions that take place in *Earthquake* as given and felt in the wake of some unspeakable and multiple trauma. A sense of catastrophe hangs over the piece.¹ This is why the question “Are you afraid?” seems to echo so resonantly throughout. The catastrophe has already happened, but it may also return in the future. Is this why the performers stumble and stall? The fear of return threatens to still action, to paralyse the body, and to prevent a generative movement. The life-rehearsal threatens to crash into the stasis of death. But there is something else in Goat Island’s invocation of the threat of stillness. The whole aesthetic of *Earthquake* is filled with strange slides and transformations: a hand falls like a dead leaf, a cloud becomes a wedding guest, a walk follows the trajectory of a car crash, confetti falls like hail, an electric fan circulates like the blood inside a heart. These shifts may at first seem to follow no particular logic, but it is soon made evident that nature itself is being re-ordered through a series of becomings. One source that found its way into *Earthquake*, and is now buried in the depths of the rubble, is Jean Luc Godard’s *Weekend*. The film takes the motor car as a symbol of ‘civilisation’ and presents instead its latent catastrophe in the figure of the traffic jam. The tail back soon becomes a monstrous pile up. The social consequences of the car proliferate into an orgy of alienation, individualism and violence, and as the social order decays, the characters turn increasingly towards their instincts in a kind of becoming-animal. You might hear an echo of Godard’s film in *Earthquake*’s rude car horns, but you are more likely to feel its trace in the bodies of the performers. Goat Island take *Weekend*, strip it of its psycho-sexual content, and turn it towards the invocation of another kind of becoming: the becoming-machine.

Perhaps this is the dominant logic of *Earthquake*’s strange transformations from the animate into the inanimate: the human becoming automata (the engine in the heart, the body as a car). Here Goat Island suggest that our need and incapacity to ask and find answers to that ethical question, is traversed not only by the dilemma of memory, but by the problem of the machine inside our hearts. How to live when the late-capitalist complex has buried its mechanisms deep inside our flesh? What to trust in if we cannot trust ourselves? How to judge, if our judgement is always emoted? How to feel, in the knowledge that our emotions are both genuine and synthetically produced? Towards the end of *Earthquake* Goat Island adjust their image of the engine inside the heart, placing a burning flame at its centre. For me this is the most shattering and haunting image of the piece; the heart both fabricated and real; the flame, a flame of passion but also of destruction. Could it be that the catastrophe of which the piece speaks, the catastrophe in whose shadow we must ask again and again ‘how to live?’, is not simply happening *to* our hearts but coming *from them*. How to live, then, with the knowledge that personal and social destruction emanates from the same place as love? It’s an earthquake, an earthquake *in* my heart.

Rather than as an origin, an initiative or a beginning, the company often speak of the work as a response, an answer to a call from elsewhere, either within or outside of the self. For Goat Island making art is a life-practice of rehearsal - something done again in the hope of making it work - but also a reciprocal and unending cycle of call and response, of gift and counter-gift between themselves, and between themselves and us, the spectators of their work. All we require is an attention to their echoing call and the faith, perhaps, to proffer an answer.

Notes from a Process.
March 2001. Chicago.
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Coming Undone is included in Goat Island's *Reading Companion to It's an Earthquake in My Heart* (see **Publications** for more details), and will be published in a future edition of *Frakcija*.

¹ *It's an Earthquake in My Heart* and this writing were completed before the events of September 11th 2001, and though the imagery of the work is uncannily resonant in relation to these events, it is not reducible to them.