

AM I WILLING TO DIE?

Musings on the politics of generosity and sacrifice in durational performance

Within the context of performance, generosity, and sacrifice may intersect, however, I propose that they are not the same; nor are they interchangeable as one can and often does exist without the other. This writing is an attempt to consider both in the context of performance and is an exploration of the role that sacrifice plays in durational performance.

GENEROSITY + SACRIFICE

Many understand **GENEROSITY** as the willingness and ability to give something that is valued and/or desired by the recipient. Oftentimes, said value is appraised through the lens of **united states ©apitalism**.

SACRIFICE: understood as an offering of something of value, in exchange for something that is believed to be more important or worthy. Give up one thing, for “the good” of something else.

Fast as a means of spiritual awakening.

Pass up on sleep for a promotion at work.

Deny sugar to lose weight.

Give up time with friends to study a new language.

Sacrifice one thing for a gain that is *believed* to outweigh the loss. It is different to define and act on a perceived need if the need is personal and if the value is self-defined and maintained. What if the need has to do with the “Other”?

This dance is precarious.

If a need is believed to exist, the danger lies in assuming that what one has is what **anOther** needs. When one assumes to have what another wants, and the Other is uninterested, does not want, or need what is being offered, then there is a disconnect. I propose that it can be dangerous and violent for one party to assume and define the needs of **anOther** and act on these notions. The ability to articulate the *need(s)* of another individual or group of individuals places one in a position of power over another; hereby reflecting the hierarchical nature of **united states ©apitalism**, consumerism, and philanthropy. For example, many view the rural African through a lens of need and assume that African folk want and need American comforts, when in fact we (Americans) may want to consider the environmental harms of philanthropic tourism.

Tim Jeeves, who explores the politics of writing in his creating performance and writing practice, likens a gift to an organ donation in which a successful gift is one that “*bridges identities and affirmatively increases the capacity of the recipient(s)* (my emphasis) Jeeves, Tim, *Towards ‘Economies of Generosity’ in contemporary live art practice*. 2017).” When one’s life is lengthened with an organ donation, then that gift is *successful*. However true, this is a binary appraisal. Should a bone marrow transplant not take (and is therefore unsuccessful), it does not suggest that the donor was not generous with their time, comfort, and means, nor does it suggest that this donation was not a sacrifice of their

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time, comfort and means in the hopes for something of value – a life. It also does not deny the recipient's need, or desire for the transplant to be successful. u.s. ©apitalism cannot be the only filter through which we determine value, nor does the success or failure of an exchange exclusively reflect sacrifice. Let us keep these relationships in mind and shift our thinking to durational performance.

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Notions and questions of generosity and sacrifice often come up in consideration of durational performance. There is an obvious giving of time, mental and social energy. Audiences also give and receive. I will use nudity to share my thoughts on generosity and sacrifice as it pertains to my personal creative practice.

While I am not uncomfortable with nudity or being nude, and I am often nude in much of my performative work. Some may describe this as the element of generosity in my work. **I do not.** If I did, it could be implied that I place a distinguished value on my nakedness and recognize someone's gain in consuming it. Nope, despite being comfortable in my birthday suit – not about that life. On the other hand, I do view my consensual nudity as sacrificial. When an audience sees my naked body, they are not being given a gift. They will read and consume my nudity as they see fit, take what they want and leave the rest, regardless of my own intention(s), and/or whatever needs (social, political, sexual) for which I believe my sacrifice is made.

Then for what am I sacrificing my modesty (as defined by a certain social standard)? I *believe* that in my attempt to articulate *and* problematize the ways in which the Black female body is consumed by and within a Capitalist society and economy, I also challenge and point out these relationships. To do this, I am willing to give up my comfort and safety in exchange for what I *experience* as a social need. To do this, I forfeit the idea that I have control over the ways in which my body is consumed as and by the Other.

If an artist is willing to present their naked body before strangers for the “greater good”, of themselves, or their audiences, then sacrifice comes far before curtain call. Before I begin a performance, I am always considerate of the ways in which audiences may respond to the work as well as ways that I may be endangered. I know that a piece is ready because I understand and believe the gain is worth the sacrifice of my safety – the value is placed upon society and the loss of value is my own life.

When Marina Abramović lay naked on a table, surrounded by objects for her audience to use upon her (and each other) she did so with a willingness to die. Most did not hurt Abramović, but some did. She once noted that the only reason that she was not raped “is because their [the male's] wives were in the room.” Sexual violence against women did not suddenly exist because Abramović was naked on a table. Were that the case, she could have just stood up and put clothes on. The legacy of violence

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towards female bodies precedes this performance and is why this work was an is so provocative. Abramović merely pointed it out – both generously and sacrificially.

It is at this small intersection that the lines between art and life blur in performance art and is the space that I strive to be when I ask myself if I am willing to die.

I *must* be willing to die – within the parameters of the work. What this does not mean is that I would not resist death should it threaten. Instead, what it means is that if – within the frame and structure of the work – my life is threatened, I would welcome and accept that and relationship(s) that I have successfully within the context of the work. The presence of my body, my actions, and the relationships presented simply are simply unveiled.

As we near the end of my musings, I'd like to muddy the water a bit and liken the politics of sacrifice and a "willingness" to confront death to some of our well-known political leaders. As we all are experiencing in one form or another, politics is one of the most performative arenas on the planet, trite with theatrics, they are a prime example of durational – but will leave that discussion for another time.

Civil Rights leader Malcolm X understood what it meant to live and perform with the risk of death. When he would begin a speech, take his children for a walk, lay his head down at night, he recognized that death was at his heels at all time. He lived and performed his self-identified (God-given as experienced by him) duties with the risk of being ridiculed, shot, attacked, resisted, fought and bombed. In fact, he was all of those things. However, he continued his work because he was willing to die for it. He said himself, "I live like a man who is dead already (Brown, DeNeen, Washington Post, February 2018)." However, it was the parameters of Malcolm's work that placed him in this position. Yes, he would take protective measures, however, within those parameters, he will willing to give his life. His work's intention was not simply to point out those relationships and provoke them, but his existence and the system within which he operated pointed out that which he was working so diligently to change.

not my president ~~donald trump~~ is unwilling to die for his work

When trump enters an arena to begin a speech, he is surrounded by protection and his audience is required to also submit themselves to security vetting. Again, pointing out preexisting and operating **completely within the very power structures that put them in place**. Journalist Zoe Williams writes, "he [trump] has a long-term fear of being poisoned... Trump's answer to the poisoning threat is to eat McDonald's, by preference, all the time; the burger chain never knows he's coming, and it's all premade (The Guardian, January 2018)". Easily scared and on edge, he is easily startled by an all too enthusiastic fan or audience member. He may perform acts of acts of generosity, yet he is sacrificing nothing for no one and is unwilling to die for his work. It would be nearly impossible and certainly life-threatening to threaten trump's life. Many want it, but most will not attempt, and anyone who

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does need to be completely willing to die and/or be prosecuted. The individual that does that is willing to die for their work, as was Abramović and as was X. was.