A Response-able Search for Coherence

Denys Blacker in Conversation with Victoria Gray

Victoria Gray has developed a difficult-to-define, embodied thinking in her performance practice. In the work, 'Ballast' (2015), Gray attempts to change the physical structure of her body, through a cellular consciousness, in which she experiences her organs, muscles, fluids, and fascia, as dissolving into energy.

Although her attention is focused inward, much of what happens to Gray during Ballast is happening beyond the conscious self, where she has an intuitive sense of transcending the material restraints of the bounded, singular body. Her experience of the transformation of her physical body through nonconscious processes, can be understood as a kind of apprehension. In such an apprehensive state, where consciousness is focused on an inner space of cellular function, Gray experiences her physical body as existing within an equally complex, energetic network of other feeling bodies.

Gray's experience of the body, as a receiver or processor of energy in a web of interconnected relationships, could be understood as (a) being 'in nature' - a holistic experience of life-force, that permeates every cell of the body. At this cellular level, the separations between body and environment become difficult to define, and matter is transformed into energy. In Taoism, this vital energy is called Ch'i, and is associated in ancient texts with mist, fog and moving clouds. Ch'i is the energy that runs through the human body along meridians or energy channels. It is in the food we eat, and the air we breathe. It animates nature, and is present in intangible perceptions like intuition or foreboding (Khon, 2015, p.18). This energy, for Gray, whilst having a deep interiority, moves beyond the body.

In the Taoist text, 'The Secret of the Golden Flower', this paradox, whereby the body is in a deep meditative state, whilst at the same time, experiencing a degree of alterity, is described as such;'[I] try to find [my] body, but cannot find it' (Nagatomo, 2012). For Gray, this experience, whereby the physical body loses its heft, and becomes, as in Ch'i, like mist, fog and moving cloud, can feel destabilising, even distressing.

When such vital energy is set loose within performances such as Ballast, it can have unexpected consequences. As Gray reflects, opening yourself

to (becoming) such energy can feel potentially dangerous, particularly when such experience borders on parapsychological and paraphenomenal dimensions. For Gray, this has led her to think deeply about the "status" of her works, and performance more broadly, particularly those that wilfully court such destabilising experiences.

In an extended interview, Gray and I discuss the stakes of making such work, and in the process, uncover a set of emergent questions for Gray in relation to the politics of her practice 'post-Ballast.'

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Denys Blacker: I'd like to begin by reading you a quote by Emilios Bouratinos and Vasilis Basios,

'What matters in both science and society is the ability to keep informing the mostly measurable fragments of what appears on the surface with the quality of their immeasurable inter-relatedness under it. What can be seen and understood and what can be measured and not measured.'

I'm interested in the way you experience these fragments of immeasurable, inter-relatedness in your practice.

> Victoria Gray: I understand and measure everything through my body. Initially, I trained professionally as a dancer (1998 - 2004), and developed a non-verbal mode of communicating and sense-making, by attending to, as described in your quote, the 'immeasurable fragments' below the surface.
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> It's my sense that these intuitive, subtle sensations are attributed to an affective mode of experience, but are often presumed "pre-conscious," or, outside of conscious perception. For me, the nature of affective experience isn't binary - either conscious or nonconscious - but a fluid continuum. When an experience, such as affect, is presumed nonconscious or immeasurable, this

highlights a lack of techniques for apprehending those qualities below the surface of appearances. For me, then, performance is about inhabiting that pensive space of the "pre" as much as possible, and being able to move fluidly between the fragments of conscious and nonconscious states.

DB: Could you say more about how you do this in your performance work, in the lived-embodied moment of doing?

VG: Training as a dancer, I understood that from birth, and in gestation, the kinaesthetic sense - our internal sense of movement - is the way we develop our ability to apprehend, communicate and act in the world. It's through observing movement and responding to that movement that we develop a sense of relation, self and agency. And so, for me, the kinaesthetic sense is primary to inhabiting this affective consciousness. Particularly, because it isn't defined as one sense or another, it combines all senses; sight, sound, smell, touch, movement … It's almost synaesthetic, a-sensory, or a-modal.

To take Ballast as an example, I'm attuning to the organs, the glands, and the autonomic branch of the nervous system, so-called because it's largely thought of as operating automatically, i.e., out of conscious control. An ability to apprehend this is vital, as the autonomic branch has a bearing on the regulation of hormones, metabolic rates, and energy levels within the body. In many ways, Ballast, as well as being a performance, became like an "experiment" of sorts, in inhabiting these different layers of consciousness. For example, for at least three years, I've experienced secondary amenorrhea - the absence of a menstrual cycle in a woman of reproductive age - which has been puzzling, but also traumatic. Without a "measurable" haematological reason "why," it was obviously an endocrine imbalance. So, to speak again to your opening quotation, whilst being an artwork, Ballast was also an attempt, in and through the performance, to activate a measurable change in the immeasurable (nonconscious) processes of organs, glands and nervous system.

DB: It sounds as if you're bringing subliminal processes of change - emotional as well as physiological - closer to the surface, and allowing the audience to come with you in that process. Are these changes visible to an audience?

VG: Over the last ten-years I've instinctively performed with my eyes closed. By reducing my visual sense, I have a heightened awareness of subcutaneous shifts in my body.

In parallel, I've noticed that audiences often "watch with eyes closed" too. This tells me that, whilst performance art is usually considered a visual art form - particularly in its historical relation to the visual arts - in practice, performance registers in other modalities of sense that aren't necessarily visual. In felt registers, in kinaesthetic registers. This raises interesting questions about the "aesthetics" of performance, especially if performer and audience have their eyes closed! It's a kin-aesthetic artform!

That said, whilst my body is the primary locus of the performance, the "material" I'm working with can't be reduced to the physical, visible body, but intersects with an "immaterial," largely "invisible" energy-body; you could say that energy is the material. In that sense, I no longer worry about whether an audience can "see" these kinaesthetic processes and instead, I'm interested in whether they can feel the shifts and changes in their own bodies too.

DB: And since we don't see it, but feel it, where exactly do you feel this energy shift in your own body?

VG: For me it's registered through a kinaesthetic feeling. Some might say a "gut feeling" whereas in my experience, I feel it in my back, especially across my shoulder blades, as a kind of bristling or tickling.

I've wanted to understand why I have such a connection to my

back, and found a strong resonance with a somatic practice called Body-Mind Centering (BMC), developed by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen. According to BMC, the back is so full of nerve endings, in fact, we receive much of our sensory information through the back. This has special relevance in the context of trauma, for example. I'm simplifying here, but in terms of BMC, if too much information is received by the body, particularly sensory information that is challenging, this can get "stuck" in the dorsal nerve synapses, and doesn't get processed or integrated properly in a safe way.

So, my experience of the back as a charged space seemed to make a lot of sense, especially if we think of this "stuck-ness" as an affective backlog of sorts. In many ways, I intuit and make decisions in the performance in and through my back, it seems to have a special intelligence or consciousness.

DB: I also have this experience. There can be this absolute certainty when a performance decision feels right, yet it's also very intuitive. How do you develop the strength of intuition to the point where you can trust those moments?

VG: In BMC, there's an exercise, or 'somatization' as Cohen would say, that seeks to process "stuck" sensory information, by "sitting in the synapse" of the dorsal nerves. The instruction is so simple; to sit with an awareness of the back and see what arises, and to allow that "stuck" information, or energy, to pass through the front body. There's no effort required, just to sit with this awareness. From the outside, it looks a lot like meditation, and I suppose it is, but the somatic awareness is more targeted to what is "behind;" in the anatomical sense of the back, and the temporal or psychological sense of the past and memory. For me, practicing this exercise of waiting and listening, in the live moment of performance, has developed my intuitive sense.

Also, in the sense of trauma and kinaesthetic memory, this "stuck" energy or sensory information might be pre-birth or

transgenerational. That's to say, it's not only mine, but might be passed down to me from my mam and my mam's mam. For example, I had a difficult birth, and forceps were used. I guess I didn't want to come out! I can bet that my first breath was a gasp, which would activate a certain tension in my spinal cord that's likely to endure to this day.
My mam's dad also died a few months before I was born, so there was a huge amount of stress when I was in the womb. Coincidently or not, I have chronic back and sciatic problems, and issues with breathing and anxiety that I strongly believe are shaped by pre-birth experience and foetal consciousness.
In that sense, I trust what arises, since, this seemingly spontaneous and unconscious intuition carries with it many generations of kinaesthetic memory and collective intelligence.

DB: I wonder whether we articulate this kind of performance as art and/or start to differentiate this as moving it into the therapeutic realm. It seems that there's a thin line separating the two, but nonetheless, they're obviously different. How do you experience this difference?

VG: This is a fraught question for me right now, because what differentiates the therapeutic dimension from the artistic dimension is not always so clear, particularly in the case of a work like Ballast, where I'm drawing on somatic techniques like BMC, to make and stage the work. In BMC, as with Authentic Movement (AM), the applications are manifold, and the principles can be applied in the context of body-mind psychotherapy, as well as in a creative context. It gets complicated, and I think interesting, when these lines blur, particularly in my experience, when say, BMC is "staged" as a performance, and the "somatization" is live.

In the case of Ballast, as I explained earlier, I'd been experiencing secondary amenohrrea for several years, and in the absence of any successful medical intervention, I wanted to see if, through making and performing Ballast, I could bring about some material differences in my cycle. By staging somatizations that

activated the organs and glands of the reproductive system, etc., I was both making an artwork, but I was also making a therapeutic, perhaps even clinical intervention in the regulation of my hormones.

DB: It seems the performance was therapeutic, in the sense that there was an attempt to regain a degree of awareness and control, rather than become a "victim" of unconscious processes. By inviting an audience to witness that work, I imagine your clarity of intention, regards the therapeutic dimension, was paramount.

VG: In Ballast, there was clearly this sub-therapeutic dimension for me personally, but I didn't frame the performance this way, and so audiences weren't clear of this at the outset. I've been wondering about the ethical questions that this raises, particularly given what I've said about the energetic relationship between performer and audience. Does an audience need to know this before the performance, or is this dimension something that can potentially unfold?

I use the word 'potentially' because this kind of transmission isn't a given. I don't invite audiences to have a therapeutic experience, not least because I'm wary of conflating the term therapeutic with therapy. Disclaimer, I'm not a trained somatic or psychotherapist! That said, in the way a bath, or a walk in the mountains can be therapeutic, performance can have therapeutic qualities too, e.g., communion, deepened awareness of body, breath, sensation, heightened senses, holistic connection between body-mind, self and environment.

In my experience, these qualities unfold and are not something that can be "guaranteed" in advance of the performance. This would be problematic, since, it's only in the experience that this could be felt. Also, who am I to say what kind of experience is or isn't therapeutic for prospective audiences? Conversely, an audience member might come to performance precisely for this reason. They might anticipate the performance as a

therapeutic space, when I might have no such intention. Is there an argument, then, for clarity of intention, not only on the part of the performer, but the audience member too?

I'd prefer less disclosure and more fluidity, but from experience, this lack of framing and consensus has sometimes meant that certain visceral qualities, and the memories that they might trigger, are not integrated safely.

DB: It's a difficult balance, especially because we have a degree of responsibility to the other. Equally, when you open yourself to the audience to such a degree, there's a responsibility for self-protection too. As a performer, is there a practice of self-protection in place?

VG: To be honest, over the last ten years, I've performed without any buffers, and without any methods for self-protection, and it's starting to have real consequences!

Each time I performed Ballast, I felt very messed up immediately afterwards. I'd gone so deep into the energies of the organs, glands and nervous system, without any strategy for grounding, that I felt like a plug with no earth wire! I'd also really exposed myself, not only by performing with my torso bare, but more so, in the tone of the postures and gestures that often pressed on vulnerable places; glands, organs, breasts, vagina, abdomen etc. Going back to the idea of making the performance a live BMC "somatization," this kind of work is often contained within the privacy of a studio, is guided by a trained practitioner, and often has a therapeutic aim. In hindsight, it was naïve of me to think that I could perform this live, without any psychosomatic consequences. These feelings of complete exhaustion, overstimulation and almost flu-like sensations, lasted well after the performances, sometimes for weeks. It's clear now that something in my body was shifting energetically, and whilst that was my aim, I wasn't prepared for the fall out at all.

DB: I experience this risk too when working in the street for example, because

I don't feel safe. Yet, how do we take risks in performance without putting ourselves at risk?

> VG: A conversation that I had with the performance artist Sandra Johnston after the final performance of Ballast, in Montreal, has stayed in my mind. I'm paraphrasing, but she said, 'you can't do this forever… you have to find ways of making it safe.' So, my task right now is to find strategies of opening myself out to that same degree, but also, to make it safe and sustainable. It's no coincidence, then, that I haven't made a performance since 2015, except for under the cover, and relative safety, of group improvisatory actions! In Ballast, the affect of the performance wasn't contained, it's completely leaked out. In that sense, Ballast wasn't "just" a performance, because it's precipitated some physical and psychic changes that I'm grappling with to this day.
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> To go back to the discussion of energy, you might receive or unlock qualities of energy in performance that are uncomfortable, but nonetheless, they carry over in your body-mind. So, I think there's a further conversation about the definition of risk in performance, particularly, material risk in the context of supposed "immaterial" energy transmission.

DB: I'm interested then, in whether we might think of performance as a frontier, where energetic transmission happens as a kind of pollination?

> VG: I really love your description of performance as a kind of frontier, perhaps an energetic frontier. What I feel is, by inducing, or wilfully creating a threshold experience, a transformation of energy is likely to take place. And it's not necessarily about good vs bad energy, good vs bad transformation per se, but rather, that different kinds of energy pollinations will produce different qualities of energetic transformation.
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> Words like 'energy' and 'transmission' are in fact neutral, but it seems to me there's an implicit assumption - in the discourse

around kinaesthetic empathy and immersive performance - that they are inherently “good,” even emancipatory goals. For example, increased somatic awareness and radical empathy are often regarded as superior forms of consciousness and relationality. But in my experience as a performer, and as an audience, these value judgements aren’t self-evident. In fact, hyper-awareness and radical empathy has often ruptured something, and the feeling is less a kind of ‘body-mind centering,’ but instead a ‘body-mind decentering.’ Less synergy and more discord.

For me, then, performance is about opening the psychosomatic frontier, so much that it’s like peeling off your skin, making yourself raw so that you have the potential to feel everything. When I think about it energetically, the sensation of toothache comes to mind, or sciatic pain; like when you pinch a nerve ending and there is a metallic bite to the quality of awareness.

Said in those terms, it sounds almost painful, and risky!

DB: How do you deal with the risks of working at these frontiers, if you like, that are beyond the body?

VG: Judging from my disclosures, I don’t think I’ve dealt so well with this risk! Historically, when we theorise risk in performance art, the discussion often turns to works that incur obvious physical harm, e.g., through extreme exertion, cutting practices, blood work, etc. It’s perhaps not as obvious, but radical empathy and vulnerability is risky too, especially when what unfolds in the performance resonates after. An analogy might be that we’re cutting into the psyche, or the nonconscious, and instead of blood, energy leaks out! At least for me, this tentacle-like awareness has been at times, debilitating. It would be interesting to instigate a dialogue about this in performance art, where artists and audiences can talk openly about their personal experience of these risks. The affective perils of radical empathy!

In that sense, my statement about “energy being my material” is a sober one. Although, the language used could easily be trivialised as rhetoric, or taken as a pseudo-spiritual statement. So clearly, language is a stumbling block when translating ‘beyond the body’ experiences of consciousness.

DB: The mode of affective consciousness that you’ve described, particularly in terms of BMC, comes close to meditation, yet it’s not meditation exactly. I’d be interested to hear your thoughts on how spiritual practices might intersect with your approach to performance.

VG: Yes, the two absolutely intersect, but the connection up until recently has been implicit. In many ways it’s always been there, I just hadn’t named it as such. It’s perhaps no coincidence that I’ve been drawn to BMC, because a Western anatomical frame of reference is hybridised with Eastern philosophical and spiritual practices; for example, Buddhism, Taoism, Yoga and energy Chakra’s.

It seems to me, that, whether in the context of performance or daily living, each of us intuit our own techniques, develop our own idiosyncratic rituals, to frame this deeper spiritual connection or consciousness. This could be as simple as taking special care over mundane tasks, like sustaining a specific quality of attention when making a cup of tea, or a certain physical awareness when walking. So, this kind of consciousness isn’t special to performance and performance artists. The more I sustain this deeper connection in my daily life, the easier it is for me to carry this into performance; the two merge.

DB: What I’m seeing now, in some performance artists, is a desire to be more explicit about this connection to spirituality. Do you feel this shift in the way you define your own practice?

VG: I’m working on ways of making the connection to spirituality more explicit, rather than implicit. But in my experience, spirituality isn’t discussed an awful lot in performance art,

perhaps for fear of collapsing the term ‘spiritual’ with ‘religion.’ When I think the term spirituality, I understand it in a plural sense of “spiritualties,” not necessarily aligned with a single religion or scripture, although occasionally this may intersect in a hybridised, fluid way.

Also, experiences that might be classed as parapsychological or paraphenomenal, you know, the things we just don’t talk about in society, also fall by the wayside, or aren’t trusted. In the end, consciously or unconsciously, you start to avoid using language with this kind of association. In turn, these rituals are often kept very private and personal, secret almost.

But the term spirituality, like performance, evokes a sense of communion for me, whether that be with self, audience, nature, energy … universe! So, I wonder at what point does performance become a place for facilitating spiritual communion with other performers, and of course audience? To make an analogy, it could be akin to a meditation group or Sangha, for example, where you practice in community. The energy is very different alone than together, and we need both. Difference is, one is framed as performance, the other as a meeting for prayer. As we discussed earlier in terms of the therapeutic, I’m wondering, beyond a change of language, what shifts for myself and audience if I frame performance in this way?

It’s interesting, but in the absence of performing since Ballast, I’ve been attending a Quaker Meeting, and the links to performance art are striking, especially the principles of unknowing, silence, community, and waiting for Ministry. As a religious formation, it’s the least dogmatic in my experience, and at its core there seems a sense of openness, contingency and awareness that I find in performance art. For that reason, I’ve been thinking that currently, Meeting is my practice. I feel fed by it, so much so that I don’t feel the “need” to make a performance, at least for now!

DB: Your description of Quaker principles, especially unknowing and contingency, is making me think of techniques of improvisation in open-form performance, particularly group performance. There's an ability to be with time, and open to whatever comes next, that is crucial. How do you deal with this radical openness in performance?

> VG: It can be terrifying. The way I'm grappling with this is to have a reverence, or just a deep respect for the mystery of performance, or more-so, the body. I'm thinking about a specific rune called 'Teiwaz,' known as 'Warrior Energy.' The guidance of this rune is to have 'certain knowledge that the universe always has the first move,' and to intuit that is 'to stay out of your own way.'
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> Or in relation to Quaker, to "hear" spirit, we need to shut up and listen! In many ways, this resonates with my experience of performance. It seems however much "I" prepare "my" body-mind, perhaps even prepare actions in advance, the event of the performance, like the universe, always seems to have the first move.

DB: Indeed. And so, to work within this radical openness, there's often some kind of modest structure, or parameters, for example, a loose score, an agreed space, duration or intention. It's like a scaffolding that maintains a degree of form, without curbing the formlessness of the energy. I'm wondering, what is your scaffolding?

> VG: The term scaffolding is interesting in relation to the title Ballast. The word ballast is defined as a coarse substance, such as gravel or concrete, used to stabilise a moving object, like a ship for example. The title had significance to the concepts within the work, because I was thinking through what the equivalent substance would be in a body. So, we could think of the glands as ballast, because they regulate the hormones. Likewise, the musculoskeletal system provides ballast, in that bones are very much like scaffolding in their architecture. The organs provide ballast too, in that their volume and tone prevents the

musculoskeletal structures from collapsing. And then there are other forms of ballast, less coarse, less concrete, less visceral, such as energy channels, that also promote homeostasis. In my work in general, this focus on certain bodily systems gives a somatic scaffolding.

In Ballast, for example, the scaffold was the organs and glands of the reproductive system, so the ovaries – their shape, size, location, function, and materiality - helped me to direct my intention and give form to the energy. Crucially though, like a ship in a landing, the body never fully stabilises, and whilst there is a clarity of intention towards the ovaries for example, what emerges is often unknown. There were several times in Ballast where I'd finish the performance and be amazed at what unfolded, not only in terms of spontaneous movement, posture and gesture, but also in vocal sound. On occasions like this, it can feel magical, and whilst what emerges can be unexpected, it can also feel so right! Is this intuition, the skilled awareness of the performer, luck …

It seems to me that the contingency of performance art is excellent practice for dealing with the unpredictability of life. In my experience, these somatic strategies, or scaffolds, are a critical form of ballast, even survival. They give meaning, shape and form to living, much in the same way that therapy, spirituality and faith might. I'd like to instigate an open conversation within the performance community about the kinds of life-art scaffolds each of us perform in private, as techniques of self-care.

DB: Following on from this notion of survival and self-care, and earlier, the therapeutic, I'd like to talk about your practice in relation to personal experiences of mental health, which I know is important to your work. Often this aspect of our experience is not considered relevant to the artistic process, if talked about at all. Mental health can be a big part of an artist's life, but isn't always present in the artwork. How does this intersect in your practice?

VG: My own experience of mental health does intersect with my work, but not in a straightforward way. For example, my performances aren't "about" mental health, in the sense that I'm not trying to portray certain experiences, perhaps in a narrative form. I'm more drawn to exploring how in performance art, I can inhabit and celebrate my neurodiverse mode of sense-making, which, in a clinical and societal context, is pathologised.

For example, I've had at least one clinical nervous breakdown in my life, and over a decade of accessing mental health services. I also have a formal diagnosis of Autism. I've always described my "symptoms" in terms of sensory sensitivities and sensory overload, such as acute perception of light, sound, and movement. And in terms of energy, I've related feelings of intuition, déjà vu, and energy pathways or blockages in my body. Sat in front of an Occupational Therapist, Psychiatrist, Counsellor, Physician, Nurse, GP etc., as I have been so many times, my sensory worlds, and experiences of altered consciousness, are viewed as symptoms, and are diagnosed as a disability.

I've lived most of my life feeling this sense of alterity, that my sensory experience was being misunderstood, or at least, 'lost in translation.' At times this has been traumatic. Performance art was liberating for me in the sense that I could invent my own language to express and reclaim this experience.

DB: I'm also trying to find ways of expressing the unsayable. Perhaps rather than speak about art forms, then, we could think about performance as a space for sharing these "visions" of different kinds. And yet, even in art or spirituality, there is this judgement. Someone can have a psychic experience, a sort of "visionary ecstasy," and that's generally considered a good thing, whereas if you have an "anxiety vision" it's considered bad. In a clinical context, there's also a pharmaceutical interest in medicating people who have these experiences, both psychic and mental health related.

VG: I agree, and the issue seems to arise in terms of language and context. To echo your terminology, when I've described my own "sensory visions" in a clinical context, this has been interpreted as mental illness, and there's been an impasse or breakdown of communication, where I've been prescribed anti-depressants and sedatives to "manage" this.
However, if I explain this to a yoga practitioner, an acupuncturist, a Buddhist Sangha, or a performance artist, like yourself, it's seen in a more holistic, positive sense.

Medication can be a lifeline for many people, I simply want to point out that, in different contexts - spiritual, clinical, artistic, or holistic healing – the language for talking about neuro-diverse experience is different, and is met with different responses.
I feel strongly that my gravitation to, first dance, and then performance art, reflects my need to find a physical language to integrate these sensory experiences in a non-pathologised way.

Likewise, I've had many conversations with artists at festivals over the last ten years who echo this, whether it be in relation to parapsychological experience, trauma, anxiety, or disability, for example. Whilst these issues might not be explicit in the content of the work, and for whatever reason, the artist might feel the need to keep these experiences confidential, it seems to underlie the urgency to make performance art.

DB: I've heard this again and again too, and it seems that the tendency towards keeping these experiences more private seems to be falling apart out of necessity. Particularly, as consequence of the toxic political landscape right now. I'm interested, then, in talking about the political aspect of your work. Is it political and if so, how is it political, in relation to the world we live in?

VG: To go back to my experience as an autistic person, my so-called "inability" to "function" within a society that, structurally, assumes neurotypicality as the norm, makes me "disabled."
I see this differently. If my "non-normative" sense-making is

symptomatic, it's symptomatic of my refusal to speak in "that" language; the language of neurotypicality, neoliberalism, ableism, patriarchy, etc. In the performance communities that I've engaged with over the last ten years, the attempt to problematise, if not, dismantle these value systems that we see in neoliberal formations, has been central to the politics of the artform. In so far as performance art allows me to develop a new language, and interrupt this normative mode of sensing, then it's certainly political.

I can speak to these issues now, but when I started making work, I was self-conscious that my work wasn't political enough because it wasn't issue-based, or about governmental politics - politics with a capital P - for example. For me, it was political, but as a form of sensory activism; a 'politics of the senses' as Rancière would say, or 'distribution of the sensible.' This kind of sensory governance is a form of conditioning, effecting what can and cannot be seen, heard, felt, and said. Which makes me think of your opening quote, about what can be seen and understand, measured and not measured. Perhaps this strategy of numbing is also a choice, whether conscious or nonconscious, as a matter of survival in the face of ecological crisis, rising political fascism, and a mental health epidemic, for example. Awakening a hyper-sensitivity to these issues, essentially, awakening our conscience, is political, but it's also draining. Performance art, as a practice of radical empathy and a redistribution of the sensible order, is for me, its politics.

DB: To close I want to bring all the parts together. Performance art is definitely a plural activity involving many intelligences; the psyche, the emotional, the spiritual, the physical, the political, the environment … the whole community. It seems there are many performance artists who are feeling this and saying, 'you know what, call it what you like, I'm doing this, and this is what it is, and this is my practice.' Given the ground we've covered – art, spirituality, politics, therapeutics, mental health – do you have a sense of how you'd define your practice in relation to those domains?

> VG: I'm asking myself this question more and more. Am I a performance artist? Maybe not. Maybe I'm doing something else which is a hybrid of energy work, spirituality, therapy, art, politics. I don't know, but it doesn't feel straightforward. I think as I get older, and more experienced, I've started to let go of the baggage of defining. This might sound simplistic, but what I'm invested in now is not the definition or naming of the artform, but the experience, and somehow, finding forms of language - physical and linguistic - that come close to articulating, or honouring that experience; particularly, those that move beyond the physical body and exceed language. I'm also drawn to expanding my idea of what practice is, so that it's not limited to privileging the performance art festival, or the studio, as instances of art making, but that prayer, politics, health, and wellbeing are my practice too. Whatever it is, it's more than the sum of its parts.

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In dialogue with Gray, a set of urgent questions, applicable, but not limited to Gray's practice, emerge; How does the performance of energetic work, as art, begin to merge with therapeutic and spiritual forms of communion? What of the artist as therapist or facilitator of such dimensions? And, what are the affective politics of making such work in times of biopolitical and neoliberal regulation of the senses?

These are questions that require deeper thought, if we want to fully understand the work of artists like Gray, for which the transformation of self and other is an intrinsic part of the motivation for making embodied performance art works. Works transmitted and received in a nonverbal immersion of the energy of being, where conscious and unconscious co-exist.

In Ballast, and in her performance practice broadly, Gray finds ways to go underneath appearances, connecting to a less appreciated level of existence

that she sees as atrophied or neglected. The ineffable aspect of such experiences is not only artistic, but spiritual and therapeutic. It is, for Gray, a political act to reconnect to these ways of sensing and making sense in her work.

It is in the political context of feeling, beyond the physical limitations of the body, and beyond the frame of art, that I sense, in Gray's work, the possibility of a political/spiritual/feminist approach to re-doing our world. A 're-worlding' as Donna Haraway puts it (2016), in which, through performance, we challenge the definition of sensory normality, and ask ourselves how we wish our worlds to be.

This is more than an existential, artistic preoccupation with a 'being-in-the-world,' but rather, an ethical imagining. A desire to forge new ways of 'being-for-each-other,' in what I call a relationship of 'porous generosity.' In this sense, Gray's work can be understood as a tentacular experience of body that breaks through the confines of a singular body defined by the Capitalocene.

Being for the other is opening your space - mental, emotional, spiritual and material - to the possibility of communion and intra-reciprocity, where personal gain is not the primary aim. Rather, it is in trusting this spontaneous ethical sensing - making sense and becoming sensitised - that we resist the numbing and demoralising effects of neoliberal politics. Through performance, as in Ballast, our small but accumulative gestures of intra-active engagement articulate a new approach for surviving the contradictions and anxieties we live with, in a response-able search for coherence.

Ballast
Victoria Gray

Supported by Artsadmin Artists' Development Bursary, Live Art Development Agency, and Arts Council Grants for the Arts.

Design by Nathan Walker
Photographs by Henry Chan

Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND