

Intimate Inter-actions: Returning to the Body in One to One Performance

by
Rachel Zerihan

One body to an-other. Spanning time, sharing space, marking place, blending breath, sensing touch. An emerging inter-face addresses both parties in this mise-en-scene of togetherness. The function and development of the encounter is reliant upon shared economies of exchange, identification and understanding.

One to One performance foregrounds subjective personal narratives that define - and seek to redefine - who we are, what we believe and how we act and re-act. Refused the inherent anonymity that traditionally structures the shield of mass spectatorship, in One to One we are lifted out of the passive role of audience member and re-positioned into an activated state of witness or collaborator, or more subtly energized into 'acting' voyeur. This gift of explicit responsibility could be considered an extended elevation of the spectator's participatory role recognised in other forms of performance including cabaret, interactive theatre, forum theatre and psychodrama. My position in this paper derives from the assertion that the One to One performance format cultivates an especially intensive relationship in which an intimate exchange of dialogue between performer and spectator can take place.

Heightened response-ability and intensified perceptual awareness personalise the complex layers of semiology imbedded in the politics of the performance event, stripping bare and simultaneously problematizing the relation between one and other. Scheduling 'alone-time' with the performer carries with it the implication that the performance will be *your own* - a special-ness composed of sacred intimacy. Like the (felt) difference between a briefest encounter and a one-night stand, the temptation to romanticise or imagine the presence of intimacy when face to face with another can potentially reinstate its presence and re-empower its affect. Who carries the intimacy, where it resides, who sustains it and who or what has the ability to destroy it are all subliminal questions that flutter at the core of this paper's analysis into the lure of One to One performance. The intertwined notions of *self-giving* and *self-losing* in intimate environments are mapped onto the economies of exchange in this formal encounter. Negotiating this relationship involves adopting

strategies of overcoming or accepting risk, succumbing to multifarious displays of what might be considered challenging scenes through exposure to motifs of otherness such as taboo and the (shared) creation and maintenance of an environment of trust. Personal belief systems structured around cultural, psychological, social, sexual and ethical ideologies might be reconfigured and reconsidered. Empirical assumptions and prejudices are frequently teased out and/or wrestled with in the phenomenological-led experience of intimate inter-action, exposed and explored in One to One performance.

The significant rise in One to One - or 'Audience of One' performance works as they are sometimes referred to, throws up some interesting questions in terms of *our demand for* together with *artists' use of* this format in contemporary performance, body and live art. Over the last few years especially, live and performance art festivals as well as independent commissions are much more likely to platform One to One performance pieces. The queue to book One to Ones at performance festivals such as the National Review of Live Art is undoubtedly getting longer with each passing year and in May of this year Nottingham Trent University's *Sensitive Skin* season showed works by fifteen artists, seven of which used a One to One format. Interrogated by emerging artists and experimented with by established artists, this radical play on form is gradually being recognised as an exciting and important development in the ever-changing score/s of contemporary performance practice. The trend to make it One to One - a kind of compulsive monogamy with the other, has seemingly been especially nurtured by British and European artists since the turn of the Millennium.

In One to One, consumerist formal anxieties are shot through with therapy culture's promise of a talking cure as the politics of power between one and other are tangled and tugged upon in this live autopsy of the inter-relationship between performer and spectator. The formal politics of One to One performance are subsequently riddled with another 'set' of questions that work to intensify the nature of the act both parties take part in separate from - or more frequently inter-tangled with, the nature of the content. At the *Sensitive Skin* festival an acutely provocative piece by artist Juliet Ellis confronted such critical questions that played into concerns around the nature of performance via her use of the One to One. "Silent Sermon" asked her other to "think of a moment when you wanted to cry and didn't". The potentially purifying meeting between us that invited me to consider this stifled trauma was dirtied with her instruction to join her in grating a raw onion for one

minute. Ellis's invitation to a form of faux catharsis expertly and intimately re-minded her other of the omnipresent states of artificiality and reality in performance. The emergence of One to One as a form of performance - an ostensibly packaged, consumer-led 'performance-for-one' appears, paradoxically, to have originated via the art form that most disparaged the idea of art as product, defining itself as vociferously 'anti-art-as-commodity' - performance art.

In April of 1971, American artist Chris Burden made a performance work entitled "Five Day Locker Piece".



Five Day Locker Piece
University of California, Irvine: April 26-30, 1971
I was locked in locker number 5 for five consecutive days and did not leave the locker during this time. The locker measured two feet high, two feet wide, and three feet deep. I stopped eating several days prior to entry. The locker directly above me contained five gallons of bottled water; the locker below me contained an empty five gallon bottle.

Made at a time of feverish cultural experimentation in explicitly testing physical endurance through performed acts that extended perceived corporeal limitations, Gina Pane, Marina Abramovic, Vito Acconci and the Viennese Aktionists were amongst Burden's visceral-led body artist contemporaries. As one of Burden's earliest recorded performances, C Carr observes, the act produced unexpected responses - most notably for the artist himself;

[H]e just expected to curl up and *endure* for five consecutive days. But to his surprise, people he didn't even know came unbidden to sit in front of the locker, to tell him their problems and the stories of their lives. (1)

Confining himself, without food or drink, to a two by two by three foot locker for five days established an environment that his audience read as encouraging *their* communication with him in a secure and outwardly intimate space. Barthes' "Death of the Author" comes to mind as symptomatic of the shared ownership – one could even argue 'spectator-owned' space - of the performance act that Burden's piece (intentionally or otherwise) can be read as generating. In Oliver Grau's study of Immersive Art (2) he articulates the radical shift in performer/spectator dynamics post-Happenings which Burden's piece can be considered as attending to as it:

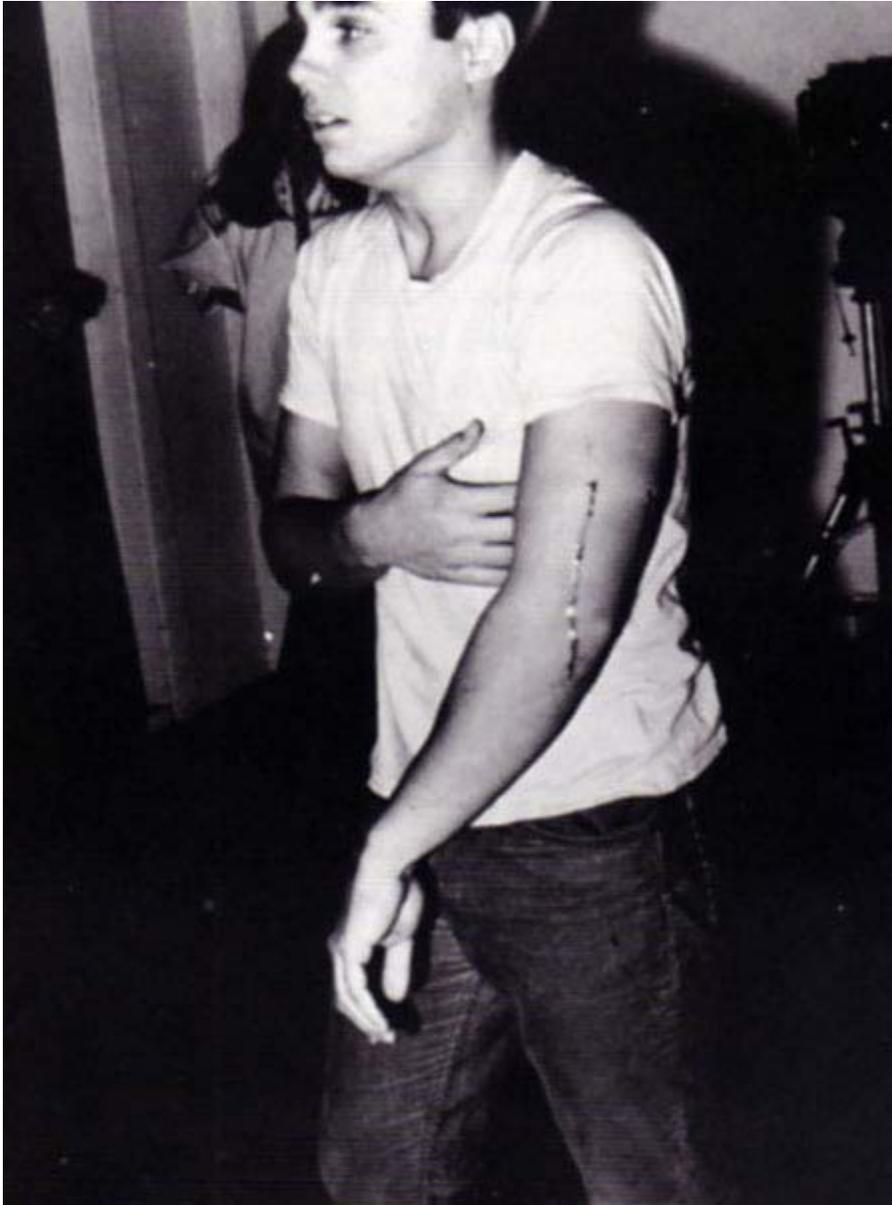
encouraged the trend toward *dissolving* the fixed spatial and temporal limits of the work, *dislocating* the central position of the author, and enhancing the work through harnessing the imagination of the participating spectators (3)

Re-imagining and in effect re-defining Burden's performed role to that of priest or healer, judge or lover, spectator psychology and behaviour became instrumental and affective as *their* secret intimacies (fantasies and fears) were projected onto him, re-casting Burden *confidant*. The audience's act of (re)claiming the space and re-appropriating Burden's role to suit their own means can be seen as evocatively pursuing the performer/spectator analyst/analysand politics of therapeutics that shadow this confessional scene. Since, as Lauren Berlant has argued; "therapy saturates the scene of intimacy", roles of analyst and analysand float and settle onto each player, denoting what Peggy Phelan terms the 'psychic stage'.

Performed while a student at Chicago School of Art, it is notable that less than six months after making this piece, Burden performed a radical act, the nature of which severely problematised easy audience reception. The piece I am referring to in which he asked a friend to shoot him in the arm (the intent was for it the bullet to graze his arm) is his now notorious performance entitled simply "Shoot".



Burden's resistance to sharing the ephemeral liveness of this performance is doubled through his guarded 'capture' of the violent act on film. The corporeal and aesthetic shattering that takes place in *Shoot* saturates the scene of logical or easy interpretation.



In this way, *Shoot* can be read as Burden's impassioned response to his previous audience's (arguably) abusive or sadistic treatment of his confined state in *Locker Piece*. In *Shoot*, Burden ruptures potential for any intimate relationality. Burden's trend towards making works that seemingly distance himself from his audience or disrupt or antagonise this relationship can also be seen in the stream of works that followed *Locker Piece* in which he played out violent acts (inviting electrocution, crawling over broken glass etc) that provoked through their force a re-evaluation of the nature of violence. Burden's well-documented interrogation of his relationship with his audience continued to be a driving force for his investigative practice, although it was never as explicit as during the period shadowed by the Vietnam War. Recognising his examination of intimacy in the

performance space through a direct manipulation of form, I am proposing Burden's Locker Piece as the first recorded piece of One to One performance. Considering the relationship between artist/performer and other in *Locker Piece* therefore provides a useful analytical framework for exploring the complex politics of intimate interaction in contemporary One to One performance.

With the intention of articulating potential states of inter-corporeality and re-embodiment that emerge from intimate encounters of 'proximal' or 'presence-led' One to One pieces, I will now briefly articulate two recent experiences I had that spurred my deeper investigation into the efficacy, presence and lure of the One to One in contemporary performance. A response to my One to One with *Random Scream's* choreographer and performer Davis Freeman follows the next section. Performed in February of last year at the NRLA, I would now like to share with you my One to One experience of "Untitled Bomb Shelter" by and with live artist, Kira O'Reilly.



As I entered the small white room, my gaze became fixed at Kira O'Reilly's bare back; scored, marked, and slightly bloody. Looking ahead I saw a reflection of myself still half inside the door. A huge television screen faced us, relaying the live video-feed of O'Reilly sitting on a white towel covered chair beside an empty seat, mirroring our image back to us. My clammy hands had discoloured the surgical gloves I had been told to put on before entering the room. The energy seemed electrified, my fear was paramount as she invited me to sit beside her.

O'Reilly did her best to put me at ease with vocal reassurances, the tone and syntax of her voice like that of a counsellor's as she calmed me, making our shared psychic stage as secure and comfortable as it could be. The reason for her uber-supportive stance was to allow me to consider accepting the invitation given to me in a sealed envelope as I sat outside the room, waiting 'my turn'. If I wanted, I could make the one short cut on her body that the invite clearly instructed. A highly secure space for a tender act; the surveillance did not dilute or dissipate the tension; it felt magnified.

I sat next to her naked body, almost clothed by the hundreds of scars from incisions made into her skin by various performances since her graduation piece of '98. Some markings were old and left the sign of a 'healing' wound, others were fresh, some still stained by fresh or drying blood. A few had been covered by plasters. "Some people want to make the mark, others use plasters" O'Reilly said. I knew I didn't want to cover up a wound. I did not want to erase another's (act of) marking. I also decided then that I did not want to use the scalpel I was holding to make my own mark into O'Reilly's skin. I said I wanted to soothe them. I gently laid my fingers over the various openings. "What you're doing is lovely" she said. I didn't know what I was doing.

After this exchange she asked if I would hold her in a stylised pieta pose as we both looked at the mirror image of our scene. The meaning of 'pain' and 'sufferance' was indelibly written into this scene, however much I tried to remove it - like the cuts in O'Reilly's skin, I could not 'cover-up' their signs of trauma, as I searched for something in my presence that I hoped relayed healing. My insecurity was buffered by my instinctual attempt to heal or nurse. This moment was extremely tender, broken up by my restless hands looking for a place to rest, not covering the scars yet intuitively drawn to them, acknowledging their presence with the warm trace of my hand. It is this occasion of extraordinary social

inter-action that O'Reilly offers her collaborator / other.

When our eyes met, both looking, both surveying, the intimacy was sliced through by my unsettled inability to transcend the cuts' representation of pain and suffering. My response was unable to move beyond the act of marking, stunted by my inability to extrapolate its fixity from the taboo of wounding. Spurred by a study into the sensibilities that signal distance or inquisitive minds that attract us to taboo act or acts of risk, O'Reilly offered (me) an enquiry into the heart of attitudes of love and violence and the difficulty of our (my) response-ability in marking or addressing these intimate states of conflict.



O'Reilly's extraordinary performance works have been fuelled by her desire to:

make things that felt real rather than a kind of representation...to make work about things that I didn't have words for...like language failed me...or words are failing me. (4)

Her commitment to playing out this gap in verbalization - a possible rejection of the (male) constructs of language - can be seen figuratively throughout her process-led enquiry into body art works, formally through her liminal performance practice and literally via her performance 'trade-mark' of breaking through the fabric of her skin in performance to 'make a hole' from which such meanings might emerge. However, the opening of this gap reveals O'Reilly's (abject) display of hysteria, a dis-ease once considered "much ado about nothing". This "gap" filled with "nothing" is evidently far from empty. The rupture of the body spills a complex collection of disparate meanings and consequences that contribute to the cultural politics behind the sign of the cut and that which it might reveal. Anthropological, sociological, religious, psycho-analytical and political histories and narratives are all heavily invested in this mark and in the making of this mark in performance, demanding analysis and articulation of these threads of knotted meaning.

O'Reilly's use of the One to One format in this performance allows her to (metaphorically and literally) bring you face to face with your own thoughts and contemplations about the opportunity she affords you with. The account detailed above was my own personal response to our unique encounter. The invitation to cut is an intensely personal moment that forces you to reconsider your own attitude toward another's body, your body and the skin that contains it, drawing on subjective and collective responses from a myriad of references that might include religious iconography, the practice of scarification, cultural appropriation of aesthetic notions of beauty and politics of trace, of wound, of memory together with the host of personal responses your narrative would call you to reflect. Some consider O'Reilly's invitation as a gift, others use pathological manifestations of what Victoria Pitts terms 'the Western psychiatric gaze' to spill accusations of self-harm, judging it a horrific and disturbed act. Pitts argues;

Women's subcultural discourses represent marginal ways of knowing and strategizing the meanings of lived female embodiment. Rather than suggesting self-hatred or even indifference to their own victimization, the subcultural discourse of women's body modification, as I have shown here, explicitly identifies *empowerment and rebellion against oppression as integral to their body projects*. (5)

My difficulty in separating the act of marking from the (imagined) harm it would inflict is a common response. The fear I felt at the prospect of cutting/permanently marking O'Reilly made me reconsider the complex politics of power between one and other in terms of economies of exchange. The opportunity of relinquishing responsibility becomes a critical factor in our immersion into or acceptance of the shared scene. Sado-masochistic undertones surface and submerge as pain and pleasure become inextricably inter-twined.

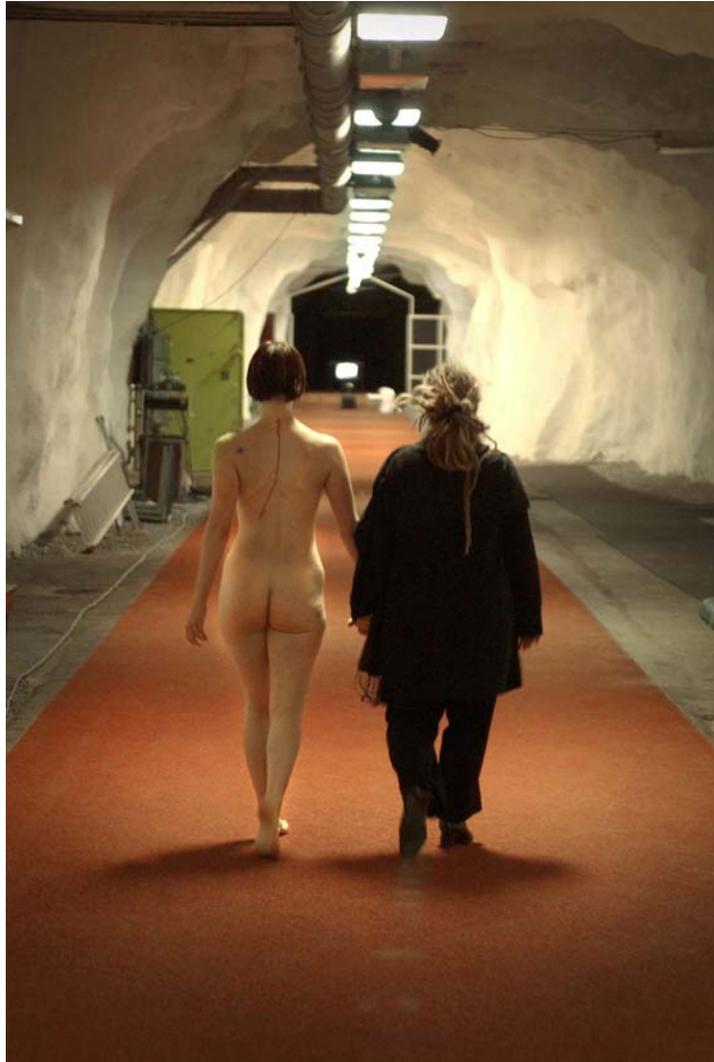
Lyn Gardner, Arts Correspondent for The Guardian wrote of a later One to One she encountered with O'Reilly, her January 2005 piece, "Inthewrongplaceness Sleeping bio beauties" performed at Home gallery, London;

The breakdown of the barrier between audience and performer may create feelings of anxiety and uncertainty - but it also inspires a sense of risk and opportunity. (6)

O'Reilly's refusal to 'fix the meaning of her work', reaffirms her desire to allow the 'shared moment' between her-self and other to 'be' the performance, loosely bordered by the frame she describes as 'A highly stylised, highly structured, heightened social interaction'. The One to One of O'Reilly's provocatively ambiguous and challenging works re-asserts and re-questions our desire to be in this uneasy space that considers the body as flesh and the skin as canvass for the other's invited act. The environment O'Reilly cultivates undoubtedly produces a conflicting sense of risk and opportunity that for me intimated inter-corporeal introspection.

O'Reilly's reference to Michel Foucault's writing around the panopticon as focal agent of heightened surveillance can be seen in her playing out of the abjection of her-self - exploring where she ends and where she begins. In turn, we are re-minded of our physical, emotional, inter-corporeal endings and beginnings, ruptures and unions. This space of mutual surveillance, acute watching and witnessing, immediately situates the performance event in an intense immersion of corporeal intimacy. O'Reilly's (hysterical) refusal to define the border between 'subject' and 'object' combined with her design of risk-perforated intimacy within this shattered frame (of meaning), further pushes responsibility of the readability of this act onto the witness / collaborator. Issues of surveillance, inter-action with other-ness and the visceral nature of bodily states continue

to feed demonstrations of abjection, compulsion, rejection and transgression that mark and re-mark the shared experience of inter-corporeality in these intimate acts.



I would like now to touch upon the most therapeutic piece of performance I have ever experienced, a feeling echoed by many participants in response to *Random Scream's* One to One piece, "Reflection". The company - Davis Freeman and Lilia Mestre - had been invited to perform as guests of Forced Entertainment's twenty year anniversary celebrations that took place at Riverside Studios, London, in late 2004. Called to have my photograph taken a short while before my performance "slot", a sense that my own part in the piece would be *on show* began to emerge. A short wait in the vestibule ended when a bulb turned from red to green and I entered the darkened space. Soft lighting on an armchair and free-standing lamp guided me to take a seat. Settling into my surroundings,

I found myself facing an identical chair and lamp at the other end of the dark studio space; the mirror image of “my” set, the only part missing in the reflection was “me”. From the opposite corner of the room, a man gingerly appeared. His movements were slow and considered, tenderising the fact that he was wearing the photograph of my face.

For five minutes, Freeman’s acutely sensitive movements and gently reassuring gestures moved himself/myself closer towards myself/other. His seemingly intuitive episodes of *tableau vivant* were led by a gliding momentum that demonstrated his conviction and self-assured behaviour. Freeman’s mastery in adopting my form (face) was led by his ability to do so in a way that felt liberating and secure rather than jarred and intimidating. At one moment he slid to the floor and positioned himself (myself) into a playful yet provocatively seductive pose, his hands stretching over and down his body and an odd sensation of being the object of my own desire stimulated my senses and dilated my pupils in desire and confusion in equal parts. That my gaze at this moment was filled with the reflection of myself enabled a tender desire and will for re-connection with my-self. As Freeman’s movements gradually brought him closer to my place, his sensitivity in representing my own being/body grew and emanated with each gesture and step closer. His trained dancer’s total control of his/my body re-sensitized my feelings toward it/myself. Standing tall above me, Freeman took my hand and placed it on his thumping heart. This brief moment of touch was charged with an inexplicable sensory electrification as, looking down at me, Freeman gestured towards solace, peace and an overwhelming expression of love; I felt re-embodied.

Dis-played and freed from my own thoughts of cognitive self, my time of 'Reflection' had allowed the fixity of Cartesian duality to be released and with it the ever-present sense of my own responsibility. Unlike O’Reilly whose works appear to me to strive for closeness in moments of acute tenderness, Freeman (fitting name) invited his other to relinquish responsibility so that an intimate immersion (of myself?) might take place. Further research into the efficacy and effect of activated states of enquiry and submersed states of immersion in contemporary One to One performance now beckon in light of these two significant works. Freeman allowed me to indulge in facing my-self as other through which a re-connection begun that had - setting aside Lacan’s Mirror Stage, never happened before. Responding to his immensely gentle and simplistic movements and gestures, an extremely safe environment played host to the most intimate and liberating performance

experience I have ever encountered. My senses were liberated and simultaneously stimulated through his non-threatening adoption of my (corporeal) self. The opportunity to re-embody ones own corporeal sense of self is a rare invitation that provides with it the possibility of re-establishing our awareness of our mind/body, self/other relationship. Freeman's gift of a form of corporeal catharsis provided the opportunity for an intimate self-sharing and self-discovering that, I believe, is unique to and lies at the core of the lure of inter-action in One to One performance.

My passion for engaging (with) performance works frequently falls into the unsettling and provocative experience of the moment of corporeal and psychological inter-action with an-other. Intrinsic to the attraction of One to One performance works is the opportunity of immersing oneself in a truly subjective experience. One to One heightens this invitation to immerse oneself. Whether this entails a form of psychological release that might be gleaned from Burden's (mis-read?) offer of a confessional, a visceral journey into the tangled space of incorporation and inbetween-ness that O'Reilly's sensitive interactions offer me or the re-embodiment I desired at Freeman's fleeting gesture of giving me "a break" from myself, the outcome of such intimate motions in One to One of (self)giving offer an improved sense of clarity, understanding and awareness of our-selves and 'others'.

Connections such as these begin with another's corporeal display of the possibility of intimacy as visceral closeness and phenomenological responsiveness mark the encounter and lure of this other/our own mind's agenda. The essence of my attraction to this nearness is framed by non-verbal communication that gestures to the human experience of inter-action in a similar way to what Vivian Sobshack describes as "...the carnal, fleshy, objective foundations of subjective consciousness as it engages and is transformed by and in the world" (7). Bodily presence in terms of embodied corporeality and proximal closeness mark important strategies for continuing to interrogate the politics of the gaze in performance, pressing into individual / cultural / political narratives and their openness to dialogue, fuelling my refusal to allow the corporeal body to "become obsolete" from contemporary performance works. For me, made explicit in the phenomenological experience of One to One performance, immediate, sensory, responsive relations are tested and re-evaluated through our body's instinctive physiological impulses and sensory reflexes together with our mind's cognitive and considered reflexive consciousness. The

impact of a One to One does not necessarily need to be as forceful or affective as the ones detailed in this paper. Rather, the potential of this form to enable a shared and intense desire to connect, engage and discover another elucidates something about the ephemeral liveness of what might lure us toward this close encounter.

At the Performance Studies international conference (June 15-18) that pressed into the relationship between Human Rights and Performance, the keynote speaker from Amnesty International suggested that heightened protection of state borders is being prioritized over the protection of human rights. The effect of this condition increases our sense of alienation, segregation and loneliness. The current explosion in our desire for One to One performances might be seen to embrace the touch, connectedness, titillation and inter-actions that expose and address feelings of isolation and otherness whilst imbedding the viewer and viewed in an aesthetic journey of intimacy and togetherness.

Rather than polarising experiences of proximal and telematic, intimate and collective encounters into binaries of real and artificial, actual and artifice, my article seeks to elucidate contemporary culture's intense and specific concern with our relationship with intimacy as exemplified in the current trend to make it One to One . At this time of acute political unrest and infused as we are with a sense of global fear, it seems that the cultural interest in exploring states of embodiment and disembodiment, security and displacement offer pertinent matter for demonstrating the human desire for and re-assessment of the nature and strength of intimacy and closeness with the other. Strengthening our human relation to the other, One to One performances have the ability to establish a unique corporeal and psychological connection with an-other, the 'foreign body' marked by an invitation to respond.

Endnotes

- (1) p.18, Carr, C (1994). On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century. London & New York, Routledge.
- (2) Grau, Oliver (trs Gloria Custance) (2003) Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion Massachusetts, MIT
- (3) p.205, Grau, Oliver op cit., 2003

- (4) O'Reilly, Kira, Personal Interview, Bristol, 03/11/04
- (5) p.77, Pitts, Victoria (2003). In The Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification. New York, Palgrave MacMillan Publishing,
- (6) Gardner, Lyn (2005) "I didn't know where to look" in The Guardian, 3 March
- (7) p.2, Sobchack, Vivian, (2004) Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London

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