

# THE MORE YOU IGNORE ME THE CLOSER I GET

Notes on socially engaged practice  
Robert Pacitti

“

*The more you ignore me the closer I get, you're wasting your time,  
The more you ignore me the closer I get, you're wasting your time  
I will be, in the bar, with my head on the bar;  
I am now a central part. of your minds landscape,  
Whether you care or do not, yeah I made up your mind.*

*The more you ignore me the closer I get, you're wasting your time,  
The more you ignore me the closer I get, you're wasting your time  
Beware I bear more grudges, than lonely high court judges;  
When you sleep I will creep into your thoughts, like a bad debt  
That you can't pay; take the easy way and give in.*

*Yeah and let me in; oh let me in;  
Oh let me oh, oh let me in, Let me in...*

”

Lyrics by Morrissey  
Taken from the album 'Vauxhall & I' 1994

# THE MORE YOU IGNORE ME THE CLOSER I GET

Notes on socially engaged practice  
Robert Pacitti

	Page:
Introduction	3
Section 1: Bigmouth Strikes Again	4
Elia Arce	I Have So Many Stitches 5
The Hittite Empire	The Punic Wars 6
Nao Bustamante	America the Beautiful 7
Annie Sprinkle	My Body Is A Temple 8
Section 2: How Soon Is Now?	9
Ron Athey	Four Scenes In A Harsh Life 10
Various artists	PSi Manifestations 11
Section 3: What Difference Does It Make?	12
Pacitti Company & Guests	Finale / Grand Finale 13
Summary	14
Robert Pacitti – short biography	15

## Introduction

This study room guide focuses on artist's practices that seek to question and transform institutions of power. These practices, both historical and contemporary, may be referred to as 'socially engaged'.

Some makers (myself included) identify their work as 'political' and 'activist' because it is in service to, or is an expression of, socio-political resistance, defiance, agendas, issues or aims. Often this is as true for the making process (or 'means of production') as it is for any eventual public outcomes.

This study room guide is certainly partial, and its content offered from a personal perspective. The examples of work given are, in the main, pieces I attended live as an audience member, or campaigns I was involved with.

The first works examined here were all performed at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London during the early to mid 1990's. The importance of the ICA live art programme at that time, and its subsequent far-reaching influence, is discussed in more detail further on.

The examples given are not necessarily works that I consider to be the *best*, but rather are indicative of the way work felt at that time. I have tried to assemble for you a selection which seems to smell right, that really holds the essence of what activity was going down there for a while.

The middle section of this guide highlights action based practices that occur outside of the 'art house' – either because they transcend, reject or simply don't need it in order to thrive or create challenge.

The final section of this guide looks at a piece of my own work called *Finale*, which is offered here as an example of what can be gained when artists form temporary coalitions. As a radical model of politicised distribution 'Finale' also led me to strategically develop the SPILL Festival.

The quality of some of the older documentation selected here is sometimes quite poor, and unfortunately this can threaten to obscure the careful crafting of many of the performances. But a word of caution: do not be fooled by 'back of the room' camera work, or low lighting conditions, into thinking that these are simple autobiographies parading as low budget polemic. Many of these pieces are constructed around that aesthetic fragility one only encounters in the truly new, when previous models have exhausted their use, and the only way forward is uncharted.

Remember then that this is direct action, motivated in each instance by fierce feelings of an urgent need to force change. Some of the pieces presented here work well formally, others less so - but what is undeniably clear is that all were well worth the risks involved in their making.

## Section 1 – Bigmouth Strikes Again

During the 1990's an explosion of interdisciplinary performance activity occurred – particularly in Britain and North America - which drew on clear social agendas and demanded change. It became known as Live Art.

Although clearly building on that which had gone before here was a new wave of performance practices grappling with the fall out of the post-Thatcher / Reagan era. Artists from a broad range of formally disparate backgrounds opened up a series of radical new spaces within and around the territories of live performance, society and the body, in order to address head-on a range of urgent cultural concerns.

Post-punk and drawing in part on the activist histories of the North American civil rights movements, issues of race, class, sexuality and gender were embedded in a breathtaking re-evaluation of what experimental performance activity could achieve. Some of the voices raised during this period had not been heard so clearly within the art world before - from the dispossessed to the downright pissed off - and many of the performance strategies engaged by both emerging and experienced makers alike were, by necessity, brave (or "high risk") in their show of honesty, their harnessing of rage, and / or their use of flesh.

Nowhere was this truer across the early to mid 1990's than at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts under the Live Art Directorship of Lois Keidan and Catherine Ugwu. During their tenure they programmed, commissioned and nurtured what would come to be acknowledged as some of the most influential performance work in the world. Audiences for radical practice had arguably never had it so good.

Their use of themed seasons provided audiences with diverse and often challenging ideas: *Ask the Angels*, *Jezebel*, *Textuality*, *It's not Unusual*, *Rapture*, *Acts of Faith*, *Mirage* - these and other seasons defined Live Art at that time, and must surely remain pivotal to any serious exploration or understanding of 20th Century performance praxis.

Extensive video documentation, promotional materials and programme notes from this period can be found within the LADA study room (which serves to further underline the important archival assets of this resource).

Many artists who showed at the ICA in the seasons mentioned above at that time used autobiography as narrative - or allegory - cherishing both that "the personal is political" and "politics start in your own backyard".

Whilst this seemed particularly true for many UK and USA based practitioners mainland European trends throughout the 90's were perhaps slightly different, reflecting more of an inclination to formally review the body in physically altered states, rather than reporting on the politics of cultural difference or reconfiguring identities. This is reflected in my selection.

**Artists Name:** Elia Arce  
**Title of work:** 'I Have So Many Stitches'  
**Reference Number:** V0027  
**Season:** Ask the Angels  
**Date:** 19/07/94

In 1994 Costa Rican artist Elia Arce showed *I Have So Many Stitches* as part of the *Ask the Angels* at the ICA, a season showcasing artists working out of Los Angeles. The programme copy for Elia's work included:

*"Costa Rican artist Elia Arce slips a punch past defences and straight into the gut in an uncompromising rollercoaster ride through the dreams and nightmares of a life spent kicking against religious beliefs, sexual taboos, and cultural legacies."*

This work is a good example of content driven political performance, utilising autobiography as narrative. There is a clear manifesto in evidence here, and yet this is a work that does not patronise or talk down to its audience. This is complicated work executed in a space of Arce's construction, which deliberately takes from - whilst simultaneously rejecting - theatre procedures, as much as it does from those of the gallery and those of the street. This is very clearly someone working out their demons. Yet amidst such highly personal territory we - the audience - begin to experience a very difficult sense of the performer checking in with each of us. As forensic looking slides of a brutalised (deceased?) female body are projected on stage Elia stands in the audience cutting off chunks of her hair and passing bits around:

*"I just want to make sure, that every body here tonight, leaves this performance with a little souvenir."*

Arce's route through *I Have So Many Stitches* is an interrogation of issues around the politics of place and belonging. The work is a journey: from an exploration of the space occupied by the performers body - Elia in a bath, seen by the audience reflected in a large angled mirror - through domestic function and the performers 'real voice' - discussing Trade Policy whilst destroying an avocado - into ritual space and heightened narrative - a subverted Mass.

Far from comfortable, this is a good demonstration of the rage present in much of the Live Art work generated across the 1990's. Nonetheless, Elia is similar to many makers of the time in seeking strategies to ensure the work remains open and inclusive. This invitation to engage, to participate in a dialogue, is what made the work 'activism', rather than simply received or consumed entertainment. It's work with a purpose; a function.

**Artists Name:** The Hittite Empire  
**Title of work:** 'The Punic Wars'  
**Reference Number:** V0030  
**Season:** Ask the Angels  
**Date:** 22/07/94

Again working out of Los Angeles, The Hittite Empire presented work at the ICA that fused live performance with forum debate and audience participation. The programme copy for *The Punic Wars* read:

*"The Hittite Empire is an all male African American ensemble articulating a new Black aesthetic. Based on interviews with over 100 black men who had been arrested, The Punic Wars compares the story of Hannibal's failed attempt to make peace with the Roman Empire to the failure of black middle-class men to make peace with the U.S. government."*

Again, as with Arce, this work includes performers talking to the audience in a 'real voice', but here the men onstage are pushing for consensus, asking the audience to agree *en masse* that they are ready for whatever happens next.

Extremely confrontational *The Punic Wars* includes a section where white men in the audience are brought onstage and forcefully encouraged to insult each other using racist language. This is a deeply uncomfortable piece of performance work - albeit an often humorous one too - and my memory of the event is that it caused much debate amongst those people present (and subsequently many people who weren't) in it's retelling and reportage.

We may well deduce that it worked then.

**Artists Name:** Nao Bustamante  
**Title of work:** 'America the Beautiful'  
**Reference Number:** V0101  
**Season:** Jezebel  
**Date:** 23/09/95

Another key aspect to much of the work made during the period discussed here - and one which is all too often overlooked by art historians of socially engaged praxis - is the element of humour utilised by many practitioners. Many highly politicised works deliberately engaged the side-splittingly funny (perhaps as a strategic mechanism for encouraging audience support?) only to subvert it moments later into the bittersweet, the self-deprecating, the wrong: laughter as a way in to contemplation and debate.

Memorable for just such tactics is Nao Bustamante's wonderful work *America the Beautiful*, a venomous attack on social mores around gender, sexuality and nationalism. Seeing Bustamante use packing tape to maliciously bind her own torso into a human bonsai before donning a long blonde wig, truly dreadful kiddie-style make-up, and an unfeasibly high pair of stilettos was extraordinary: to then witness her trying to scale a 20 foot high A frame step ladder, free-standing precariously in the middle of the ICA stage, to the strains of 'Nelly the Elephant' was properly shocking.

Hilarious and heart breaking by turns this level of personal risk pays dividends in that ten years later I am again hot wired right back into the pathos of this moment as if I'd seen it yesterday.

As a quote reads on Bustamante's website:

*"We get to watch how the magician does her tricks, whether she's strapping-on burrito-dildos upon which white males perch in an absolution feast for 500 years of Colonial guilt, or binding her voluptuous torso with transparent packing tape that rips and chafes at the vulnerability, sensuality and power it takes to ascend the big-top while evacuating notions of "America the Beautiful" in platform shoes. She empties out her body like drag so we can try it on. Her edgy improvisation deploys the old Hitchcockian strategy of making the spectator sorry they just laughed."*

**Artists Name:** Annie Sprinkle  
**Title of work:** 'My Body Is A Temple'  
**Reference Number:** V0045  
**Season:** Rapture  
**Date:** 21/11/95

Arguably, Live Art continues to assist in moving many political discourses forward within broader cultural landscapes. The space created by performance tactics can afford the artist a range of options - not necessarily available elsewhere in society - with which to challenge what may be seen as the prevailing *view* or *conversation* (albeit that these debates are often already occurring outside of dominant culture).

A prime example of this has to be Annie Sprinkle's self-inclusion in the ardent debates of Feminism and Censorship. Throughout the late 1980's and 1990's this ex-porno actress and sex worker gave forth on her Post-Porn-Modernist philosophies. Hers was a deeply unfashionable voice at that time within the discourses surrounding female objectification and the constructed gaze.

Many people found her sex-positive stance objectionable - one of the simplest and yet most complicated of ideas it would seem. But interestingly / worryingly these were often objections coming from within the so-called left as well as from the usual self-appointed *moral majority*.

One of the sex industries truly great transgressors Sprinkle's charm is her seemingly absolute lack of embarrassment at anything that might be considered sexual or self-exposing.

*My Body Is My Temple* is described in the programme as being:

*"An intimate, informal show and tell evening; Sex is Sprinkle's politics."*

Pivotal to the way in which Annie performs in this piece is a gentle calmness, which seems a world away from the frenetic head bobbing of her more youthful performances. She tells the audience:

*"What I'm gonna do is really very simple. All I'm gonna do is share with you a little bit about my life, and I'm not planning on doing anything more than that, or anything less than that."*

She talks about being born Ellen Steinberg - *"fat, shy, ugly"* - and becoming Annie Sprinkle - *"voluptuous, exhibitionist, wanted"*.

As an audience we witness other people witnessing her cervix on video: mediated presence as a moment of truly intelligent transgression.

*"And then AIDS hit... And being the Queen of bodily fluids my whole entire erotic existence seemed threatened."*

## Section 2 – How Soon Is Now?

During this 'boom period' for live praxis space was claimed and flourishing across a wide range of sites: from squats, alternative nightclubs or independent artist-run spaces, to high-end galleries and black box theatres.

Another crucial location was obviously the street, and a range of strategic coalitions and highly organised practices flourished as direct action. The campaigning work of groups such as Act-Up, Reclaim the Streets, Outrage, and Gran Fury actively utilised performance, and their activities still continue to bedrock the rights and living conditions of many of us.

Some of these groups were formed through groundswells of people coming together to address specific issues head on. Others were alliances formed between likeminded people who wanted to unravel multi-faceted or ongoing agendas.

One of the first campaigns I was involved with was to challenge the decision by high street stationers W.H.Smiths not to stock Gay Times magazine, which was then the leading publication for lesbians and gay men in the UK. Pre-internet this magazine was a vital mechanism by which people could share information, and as such was the mouthpiece for a broad range of queer communities nationwide.

The method of the campaign was very simple: every Saturday morning thousands of people would go in to branches of W.H.Smiths across the country and fill as many baskets as they could with shopping. Then, at exactly midday, they would take their baskets to the checkout desks, being sure to form long queues at every available till. After the shop assistants had rung each basket of wares into the till item by item the 'customer' would ask for a copy of Gay Times. When they were told the store did not stock it the customer would leave, the sales assistant would have to go through each item one at a time and take it back off the till roll, and the next person in the queue would step forward with another full basket...

This till jam campaign caused total chaos to the store week after week after week, and eventually forced W.H.Smiths to stock Gay Times. I offer it here as an example of live tactics applied as a 'domestic' strategy in order to effect real change.

Whilst the 1990's certainly remained a period of struggle for many folk of marginalised identity, still the activism of a range of key presenters, artists and funders ensured that the status of live work was nonetheless forcibly on the up, and many hard one gains continue to have significant repercussions today.

**Artists Name:** Ron Athey  
**Title of work:** 'Four Scenes In A Harsh Life'  
**Reference Number:** V0024  
**Season:** Ask The Angels  
**Date:** 15/07/94

Ron Athey is arguably one of the most pre-eminent queer artists of our age, and yet – (or so?) – still remains extremely marginalised in many territories. His work has always moved (un)comfortably between queer culture, fetish sites, underground counter-cultural spaces, the art house in both live and visual art spaces, the academy, and real lived experience.

Ron makes work that is uncompromisingly brave beyond measure.

One of the most impacting live performances I have ever seen *Four Scenes In A Harsh Life* is important for many reasons. Very open about his HIV positive status Ron confronted AIDS hysteria head on in this show. The piece manifested itself across territories, with variants of the work presented both in nightclubs and high-art spaces.

This border crossing between different audiences for the performances challenged the very function of what theatre and live art could be at that time. The notes accompanying the ICA show read:

*"A former Pentecostal preacher and an ex-junkie Ron Athey creates controversial, ritualistic performances that revolve around images of suffering, torture and transformation. With a body adorned with piercings and tattoos, Athey, a member of the Modern Primitives Movement, draws on his own experiences to explore eroticism, transcendence and modern-day martyrdom in relation to addiction, body manipulation and the AIDS epidemic."*

Note: this is not work to be viewed by the squeamish.

**Artists Name:** Various  
**Title of work:** PSi Manifestations  
**Reference Number:** D0538  
**Season:** Performance Studies international #12  
**Date:** 06/06

Performing Rights was held in London in 2006 hosted by Queen Mary, University of London. It was a festival of creative dialogues between artists, academics, activists, and audiences investigating relationships between human rights and performance. It was composed of two distinct but related programmes: a Conference and a series of Manifestations. Extensive documentation of the Performing Rights Manifestations programme is available to view in the Study Room.

Performing Rights Manifestations was conceived as an event that would live on beyond June 2006 and contribute to the continuing development of performance-based practice as a means by which human rights can be understood as part of evolving cultural and political processes. Housing materials submitted by artists, writers, academics and activists from around the world the Library of Performing Rights website has been created as a living archive of performance activism in support of human rights ([www.performingrightslibrary.org](http://www.performingrightslibrary.org)).

This video contains works from across the entire event.

## Section 3 – What Difference Does It Make?

I believe a primary aspect of my job as an artist is to serve audiences and over the past decade I have been experimenting with a variety of methods that challenge traditional economies of how work is toured and shown.

Originally made for theatre spaces *Finale* is now a site-specific project that also focuses on professional development and peer review. It operates by Pacitti Company inviting up to 30 practitioners (local to wherever the work is in the world) to participate in a two-week workshop exploring issues of Manifestos (where are you working from, and why?) and the Explicit Body (how we take responsibility for our own representations?). These sessions are carefully sewn into a process of sharing *Finale* as an existing work with participants, enabling them to generate their own performative responses. This material then forms part of a new collective, reconfigured *Finale* performed at the end of each residency, unique to that time, site and group. This begins to challenge issues around ownership of work, the artist's hand, and hierarchies of who does what in a process of production.

*Finale* has been performed in many different languages around the world. A primary politic of the project is that it's always remade within the culture and language of the site where it shows. This means that a wide range of translation strategies are now on hand to serve local artists and audiences as the piece continues to travel and grow.

When I imagined and then produced the first SPILL Festival many of the artists I invited to show work had previously been through the *Finale* process before, in Australia, Brazil, Belgium and the UK. SPILL provided a high profile UK platform for these practitioners to show their own work, before working together across the last week of the festival to prepare a big hybrid *Grand Finale*, with which to end SPILL 2007.

On one hand both the *Finale* model and the SPILL curatorial policy represent a fairly straightforward tactic – they enable temporary coalitions between cross art form practitioners to share information and maximise output. Yet on the other hand there is a complex series of political dialogues built around the renegotiation of form and content in each new location. This in turn challenges what a presenter of the work might buy or sell as 'the product', thereby promoting that it isn't just the work which is socially engaged but also the conditions around the work.

Nowadays *Finale* has become a staple of Pacitti Company's ongoing touring and educational activity, and in many ways remains my favourite project. It enables artists to stand shoulder to shoulder for as long as feels useful and embeds cultural specificity to make each new showing of the work relevant to site, and thereby also audiences. For these reasons I offer it here as a model of radical practice.

**Artists Name:** Pacitti Company & Guests  
**Title of work:** 'Grand Finale'  
**Reference Number:** D0802  
**Season:** The SPILL Festival of Performance  
**Date:** 22/04/2007

For Finale Pacitti Company join forces with sensational Swiss cult electronica band Velma to bring you one from the heart: a series of unique performances shown in intense locations worldwide.

Abstracting the 1867 Emile Zola text 'Therese Raquin' Finale dispenses with narrative structure and character, in order to prioritise the themes of the book - deception, lust, spite and domination. This is theatre full of sexual obsessions and jealous distractions played out against the hypnotic repetitions of Velma's minimalist soundwork. Elements of installation, video and photographic work serve to further blur the boundaries between gallery and stage, activity and page.

Finale was originally made and toured in 2001, and is now re-made as a site specific work to reside in spaces that have their own resonance and sense of history. For this process Pacitti Company work with guest practitioners, local to wherever Finale shows in the world, in the capacity of being workshop participants and guest performers. Jointly exploring issues of manifestos, and the explicit body, each person present remakes Finale afresh in advance of public performances.

For Grand Finale Pacitti Company remade the existing work with artists from elsewhere – many also within the SPILL programme – who had previously performed in the piece before in sites local to where they live. This new composite international cast spent the last week of SPILL again undertaking the workshop process before ending SPILL 2007 with two large performances of GRAND FINALE shown throughout the Shunt Vaults.

Grand Finale - Pacitti Company & Guests:

Including members of Unreasonable Adults (Australia), Andre Masseno (Brazil), Tuca Moraes (Brazil), Francoise Berlinger (Belgium), Eve Bonneau (Belgium), Sylvain Reymond (France), Valerie Renay (France / Germany), Carla Esperanza Tommasini (Italy / Venezuela), Hancock & Kelly (UK), Priya Mistry (UK), Heather Uprichard (UK) and Hannah Williams (UK).

## Summary

Here is a recap of the video references from this study guide. I have also listed several other selected works which I feel are relevant viewing when considering issues of socially engaged practice.

Artist:	Title:	Ref:
Annie Sprinkle	My Body Is A Temple	V0045
David Maayan	Presence Of The Present	V0072
Dorothea Smart	Medusa	V0127
Elia Arce	I Have So Many Stitches	V0027
Elia Arce	Stretching My Skin Until It Rips	V0102
Fiona Templeton	You The City	V0581
Fiona Wright	Salt Drawing	D0257
FrenchMottershead	Club Class	D0593
Juliet Robson	Norman & Shopping	V0725
Hittite Empire	The Punic Wars	V0030
George Chakravarthi	Shakti and all other work	V0524
Guillermo Gomez Pena	PSi Collection: Mapa-Corpo	D0555
Marisa Carnesky	Jewess Tattooes	V0373
Mehmet Saunder	Force Solos	V0026
<b>motiroti</b>	Wigs Of Wonderment	V0231
Nao Bustamante	America the Beautiful	V0101
Oreet Ashery	Magnum Opus 1-111 (compilation)	V0309
Pacitti Company	Civil	V0678
Pacitti Company	Grand Finale (SPILL DVD)	D0802
Various artists	PSi Manifestations	D0538
Reza Abdoh	The Blind Owl	V0202
Robin Deacon	Harry And Me	V0602
Ron Athey	Four Scenes In A Harsh Life	V0024
Rosa Sanchez	Sanctus	V0137
Sarbjit Samra	Hysterical Asians	V0129
Susan Lewis	Walking Tall	V0133

## Robert Pacitti – short biography

Having initially trained as a fine art painter Robert Pacitti began making live performance in 1988. He has since made and shown over 20 award winning interdisciplinary works throughout the world to great acclaim.

A highly experienced facilitator and teacher Robert continues to lead workshops and residencies worldwide. A co-founder of the New Work Network Pacitti also regularly contributes internationally to a broad span of publications, conferences and other performance related cultural activities.

In 2007 he established the SPILL Festival of Performance, an international programme of experimental theatre, live art and performance for London.

His memberships include the Medical Foundation Against Torture and the Chelsea Physic Garden. He and his partner currently live in London.

[www.pacitticompany.com](http://www.pacitticompany.com)

[www.spillfestival.com](http://www.spillfestival.com)