



Invisible Journey

Peter S Petralia

Contemporary art makers obsess over the question, ‘where is performance?’ Is it in the documentation of an act or in the act itself? Artists like Sophie Calle perform in the borders of daily life and fiction by creating interventions into public space that are invisible, unseen. Participants often have no idea they are involved in an art project – they participate by default, as the artist manipulates the flow of daily life. What ends up being called ‘art’ in Ms. Calle’s case is the documentation of these interventions, but for me the art is in the enacting of her strange fictions. She might see her acts as a means to an end (i.e., photos, writing) but it’s possible that her constructed realities are more artistically interesting than the resulting documentations. Without the story, the photos are just pictures.

Taking a cue from Sophie Calle and the theater group Blast Theory, I conducted my own ‘performance as life’ experiments recently on the Trans-Siberian railway while participating in the Capturing the Moving Mind Conference. My goal was to send out strands of ideas like a virus through a series of pre-arranged encounters with artists at train stations and hotels. The project was meant to work like this: I’d document the happenings of the conference, fictionalize these documentations and then deliver them in packages to artists who I’d arranged to meet me at train stations and hotels. Back at home after the conference was over, I’d wait for those artists to send me a response via DHL.

Some of the meetings were grander than others. When I stepped off the train at 5 a.m. in Irkutsk I was surprised to find a long banner stretching across the platform emblazoned with a giant ‘Welcome Peter Petralia.’ My visit coincided with an arts festival and since my stop was only for 15 minutes, the curator brought the festival to the train station. Two musicians played accordion, a local television crew interviewed me, and as I boarded the train to leave, a series of beautiful fire performances lit up the dark Siberian night.

Some visits were brief. In Yekaterinburg, the artist was too busy to meet me, so he sent an assistant. I handed her the envelope and she took it, slightly baffled but extremely polite. Other meetings, allowed for deeper interaction. In Novosibirsk, I managed to finagle a young arts collective called CAT onto the program of ‘official’ conference sessions. They added an interesting element of tension to the day, by showing video of

their performance actions against the establishment – much to the visible dismay of the ‘officials’ on the bill.

The packages I delivered in my meetings were not what I expected they’d be. Instead of simply recording day-to-day occurrences and fictionalizing them, my packages ended up capturing emotions, experiences and ideas that have no direct physical manifestation, i.e., *the invisible journey*. I became obsessed with this pursuit, wondering how the narrative of absence, time-zone tag and distance we were engaged in as travellers could be represented physically. It seemed to me that as the train progressed across the continent, those of us in the conference began to contain and compress individual, invisible narratives. We drank. We furiously recorded the moment in photos. We told each other stories that may or may not have been true. All of this, in the interest of keeping the turmoil of our emotions wrapped tightly under our skin.



Package Three, Photo by Peter S Petralia

We were passengers, strangers and tourists but we were also conference participants. We negotiated the borders between what we came expecting and what we actually encountered. I attempted to turn these border disputes into documentations that could recreate a feeling of the moment in the viewer. The package I gave to Tatyana in Irkutsk contained a series of ‘identical’ Polaroid’s showing my face in close-up. On the bottom frame of each picture was a word describing my emotional state: happy, lonely, drunk, depressed, anxious. Although I kept the same face, I was cycling through states of distress internally. *The invisible made visible*.

In Moscow, I sought to capture the strangeness of the false socialization of the conference and the dislocation of crossing ten time zones. Here we were, strangers assuming the comfort of long-time friends. We let our guard down, shared intimate details and assumed the fact that we were all ‘selected’ somehow ensured the safety of the group as a whole. This intense, immediate intimacy was captured in a narrated photo tour of Moscow I created for Sergey in Perm. Mixed into this tour are recordings about being lost in the many hallways and foyers of the hotel. I adopt an intimacy in the way I address him. I assume he feels safe with me. The recording suggests a *system for moving through the invisible landscape of foreignness* and it does so using the language of long-time friends. I end the narration by inviting Sergey to tell me something intimate about his home town. How do you navigate a city that until recently was completely inaccessible to foreigners? What are the invisible journey’s he takes every day?



Package Four, Photo by Peter S Petralia

This is my first experiment with this form and it verifies my evolving belief that performance is ephemeral. It happens everywhere and often, and it disappears just as quickly as it appears. Performance happens while sitting in a café in Beijing engaging in an extremely complicated conversation about art, politics and economics with a man whose language you don’t understand. It happens in the false safety of organized meetings and events. It happens in the lies we tell every day. It happens in every moment but most of the time we ignore it. We only need change our gaze or alter our interaction with the moment as it passes us to experience the performance around us. Maybe the performance can’t really be captured. Maybe it happens in encounters: a

performance for two, by two. The photos, videos and audio recordings are something else. They are documentations of a performance that has since evaporated.

I set out to connect myself to the places we temporarily inhabited and ended up creating a map charting the invisible landscape of time and the invisible spaces and experiences that made up my journey. This map was constructed from interactions that provided a way for the discussions and ideas happening on the train to spread out into the geography we moved through, to be altered and to return changed. Now, one month later, I am constantly checking my doorstep for a yellow box with my name on it from Galina, Sergey, Vladimir, CAT, Jeurgney, Tatyana, Mugi, Tian or Shu. And while I wait for these packages, a new performance begins.



Package Eight, Photo by Peter S Petralia

'Since leaving, time has not made sense. It has looped, tripped and reversed itself repeatedly. Before, I thought the ground I walked on gave me stability; now I realize it was time that ordered my life. On the train, time is fickle, inconsistent, unkind. It teases with the promise of sleep. But it only delivers disorientation. At first, I missed the old version of time – the one that gave me consistency – but now I have fallen in love with this new time. Soon, I will return to time as an iron vest, constraining and controlling my movement. I will miss being lost in time zones vast and foreign to me. But being lost is a fiction that can't be maintained. So, I return home, to alarm clocks and schedules. And learn to love my past.' Beijing, Package Nine

the author

Peter S Petralia is a producer, director, writer, curator and designer who works in live arts. Peter is Artistic Director and founder of Proto-type Theater for which he has written and directed nine new works for theaters in NY, NC and Europe. He is a member of the Avant-Garde-Arama committee at PS122 and recently created a project called TEN MESSAGES while traveling on the Trans-Siberian Railway from Moscow-Beijing with the support of TCG/ITI. He has been awarded many grants, residencies and awards including Person of the Year 2004, nytheater.com. www.proto-type.org
E-mail: info@proto-type.org