

Ground Rules: Live Performance and Eco-art

by Denise Kenney

in consultation with Neil Cadger and Daniel Keyes

Performance created and performed by

Denise Kenney and Neil Cadger

Our project, *Ground Rules*, began as an exploration of our relationship with the environment. Kelowna, BC—the place where we live and “the best place on earth” according to the license plates—is an aggressive commodity culture embedded in an expanse of rugged lake country. In advertising campaigns for the area, the geography itself becomes the commodity via the fetishization and marketing of wine production (Aguiar, Tomic, Trumper 133). Looking under the polished surface of this environment, we were struck by the remnants of an agricultural community; we heard stories of riding horses through what is now Orchard Park Mall; we saw old photographs of the valley in the early years of settlement. Meanwhile, the city is widening roads, and we are surrounded by frenzied demolition and construction. We observed that local culture had lost its connection to its agricultural heritage, and we looked for an embodied way to critique this. At this time we weren’t consciously doing “eco-art.” We certainly had no illusions about educating our audience; we were simply embarking on a creation process in accordance with what was preoccupying us at that time. We presented our work-in-progress at the 2008 National Independent Media Arts Festival and Conference (“On Common Ground”) hosted by the Alternator Gallery for Contemporary Art, IMAA/AAMI (Independent Media Arts Alliance/Alliance des Arts Médiatiques Indépendants) in partnership with the Ullus Collective and the National Indigenous Media Arts Coalition. We used this conference deadline to force ourselves to work productively to create material that could be shared with an informed and supportive community.

We began by working with seeds. We discovered that by moving the seeds around the floor, we were able to create graphic patterns (reminiscent of crop circles) and visceral images of fertility and regeneration. We were able to tell stories by using these shifting images. The difficulty, though, was that these images were on the floor and would not be seen by most of our audience. Video artist Stephen Foster suggested a ceiling-mounted live video feed that would project these images on the upstage wall during performance.

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DOI: 10.3138/CTR.144.48

This simultaneous overhead perspective created a powerful tension between the live action and the projected imagery. An intriguing disorientation was created: a friction between the actual and the virtual. The seed with its literal and figurative meanings remained our central metaphor: a story of origins, roots and the power of myth (dis)embodied in a highly mediated narrative. The virtual displacement of the organic seeds into this screen image acted as a haunting metaphor for the Okanagan's displacement of the natural into the commercial. An "Orchard Park" shopping mall, for example, uses names of various fruits to describe different wings of the complex, signaling the orchard lands they now cover.

Flash forward to 2009 when we received a UBC Okanagan Interdisciplinary/Collaborative Research Grant to further develop *Ground Rules* (which eventually evolved into *Inner Fish*). We knew we wanted to continue to tell stories



"We began by working with seeds": Denise Kenney in the 2009 production of *Inner Fish* at Theatre Kelowna Warehouse, created and directed by Denise Kenney and Neil Cadger. Photo by José Gates

with the seeds, but every other aspect of the original work-in-progress was in question. We began by questioning the relationship we had with our audience. We asked two simple but seminal questions: "What can live performance offer that other art forms can't?" and "How is this inherently related to our environmental concerns?"

John Burnside, in a chapter entitled "A Science of Belonging: Poetry as Ecology," describes a human body exposed, moving or standing in the open, as essentially an ecological act (98). By simply walking, he suggests, "we become ecologists because, walking, we have the potential to see the world as it is, not in virtual glimpses through a VCR or a car windscreen, but as the here and now, the immediate, the intimate ground of our being" (97). I believe that live performance offers the same experience. The vehicle for live performance is flesh and blood. It is, by its very nature, a rejection of "the commodity status of art in favour of a symbolic activity which takes place between

real people, in the real world, over time, necessitating a move away from the isolated art object" (Kenning 13). It involves a symbiotic relationship between performer and audience in real space and real time. As performers, we try to "be present" or "body-mindful" in order to have an authentic experience and to share this with an audience. This kind of work is particularly difficult in a world where we often have a dichotomized tamer vs. tamed relationship with our bodies (Foucault 131) or where we become hamstrung by tradition and codified experience. By asking a performer and an audience to simply be present and partake in a symbolic activity of the "here and now," live performance provides a deeply significant and deeply needed experience of belonging. For how do we participate meaningfully in a natural world if we experience ourselves as separate from its rhythms and its miraculous interdependency? To some extent then, all good live performance is an ecological act, especially in an age of isolated experience and electronically mediated communication. There is a certain relief in this realization, but the importance of "real space and real time" in live performance brought into question for us many aspects of our original performance of *Ground Rules*. These questions then influenced the next incarnation of the work.

Our initial investigations were in response to our use of projected imagery. Beyond the already described thematic resonance, how did the virtual imagery shape the audience-performance relationship? It was clear to us that it distanced the audience from the real intimacy of the immediate space and time, but it also heightened the impact of the unmediated live relationship through juxtaposition. It made the live relationship a focus rather than an assumed theatrical tradition. In order to bring even more attention to these differences between the real and the mediated, we changed the projection surface so that it became an object within the space rather than a familiar "movie" screen. Movie audiences expect to be transported elsewhere by a film and expect to be passive recipients of the work. We believed our audience was simply



Neil Cadger in *Inner Fish*. Photo by José Gates



(l-r) Neil Cadger and Denise Kenney performing in their production of *Ground Rules*, at the Laurel Centre in Winnipeg, 2008.
Photo by Steve Heimbecker

too familiar with the traditional projection screen and, if presented with one, would be too quick to forget that what they were watching was a mediated reality. In our performance, therefore, a projection surface was created

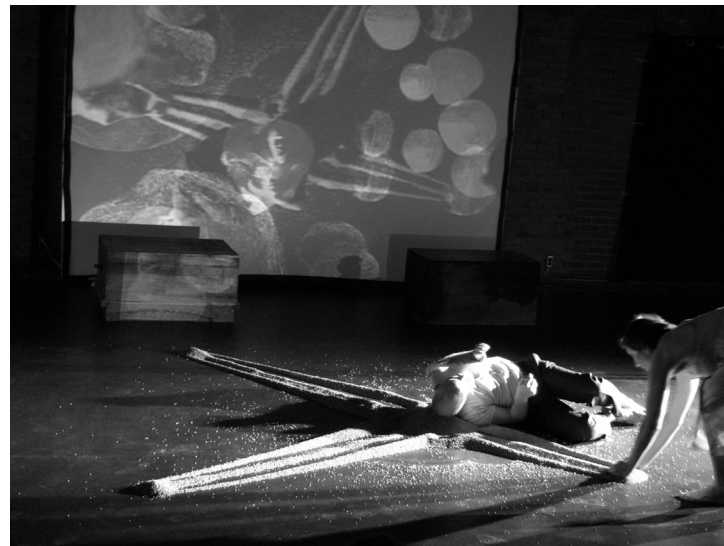
The vehicle for live performance is flesh and blood.

to look like a stretched animal skin (thematically relevant), and the resulting image was one of an object suspended in space, the surface of which changed depending on the projection. In addition to our live-feed projections from the overhead camera, we also used images created or reconfigured by media artists Stephen Foster, Steve Heimbecker, and José Gates. We discovered that the more abstract the projected images were, the less likely they were to relocate the audience from the real space into virtual space. We also discussed surrounding ourselves with a mobile audience and using moveable projection surfaces that actors could reconfigure throughout the performance. Because of space and technology limitations, we were not able to explore this idea, but we believed this would have furthered our goal of audience involvement, giving audience members agency within the narrative, and making them visible to each other within the space as a kind of “entreveillance”: a dynamic where there might be “observation from between or within the audience during the performance” (O’Donnell 61).

Creating new work using contemporary technology, though, presents inherent challenges. We noticed that we were

beginning to create material in response to technological tools rather than in response to our actual environment. While I don’t believe the solution lies in necessarily rejecting all technology, we continue to struggle with the use of technology in our creative process and in the resulting work.

The next questions we had regarding our original performance were in response to our fictional characters’ relationship to the audience. During our 2008 exploration we were characters based on the *bouffon* tradition that grew out of an exploration of “people who believe in nothing and make fun of everything” (Lecoq 117). Our characters represented the white “invader-settlers” “Dick” and “Jane” who spoke to the audience as they navigated their way through evolution and around their habitat. Yet while these *bouffon* characters embodied the playful quality we were interested in, they also seemed



(l-r) Neil Cadger and Denise Kenney in *Ground Rules*. Video design by José Gates, Stephen Foster, and Steve Heimbecker.
Photo by Steve Heimbecker

somewhat condescending and didactic—creating distance rather than shared understanding.

We returned to our original purpose as creators. While we had started out wanting to explore our connection to Kelowna’s agricultural beginnings, we realized we also wanted to explore our biological beginnings and the notion of ourselves as living organisms within the environment. We needed to move beyond the boundaries of the human experience and represent ourselves as members of earth’s broader community. While the designs of the seeds helped to tell our ever-evolving story, we liked the idea of examining

the metamorphosis of our very bodies throughout history—our “inner fish” in the phrase coined by Neil Shubin in his book *Your Inner Fish: A Journey into the 3.5-Billion-Year History of the Human Body*. The hand, for example, became a specific



Neil Cadger in *Inner Fish*. Projection screen in the form of a stretched animal skin.
Photo by José Gates

focus with reference to its evolution, its beauty, its role in agriculture and its immediate presence in our bodies. If, on leaving our show, the audience (and we as performers) became aware of our own breath, our bones under our skin, our skin touching the Kelowna air, and the millions of years of history and evolution contributing to that moment, then perhaps we would become sensitive to our surroundings in a new and more connected way.

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To this end, we tried making our relationship to the audience more interactive. We, as performers, would lead our audience through specific mental imaging exercises and physiological triggers to help them become aware of their bodies and presence in the space. We soon discovered, however, that we couldn’t do this without clumsy and contrived transitions. The action of leading the audience through physical and mental exercises, albeit interesting, simply didn’t belong in the kind of show we were making, a show that presented generic settler characters speaking to the audience as they journeyed their way through history.

Throughout this journey we retained a performance energy that signaled our working with symbols and metaphors rather than attempting to convey a semblance of “real life.”

Our actors/characters spoke directly to the audience and to each other as we reconfigured the abstract space around us. We were engaging the imagination of our audience and presenting fiction (unlike performance works that make no reference to anything beyond the real space and real event), but the fiction remained so firmly rooted in the manipulation of space, bodies, materials, and objects that it never removed the audience from the actual space and time of the performance. Unlike film, which can often lure viewers into forgetting that the image they are seeing is completely constructed, theatre is inherently “fake.” A theatre audience is always conscious that the activity they are participating in is designed and that they are always, in some way, complicit via their acceptance of the proposed rules of engagement (whatever they may be). Because of this, I don’t believe that audiences who suspend disbelief are less “present.” I look at my three-year-old daughter as an example of complete (and embodied) engagement with the world around her, while flexibly moving in and out of the imaginative realm.



One of the bone animals, created with the assistance of David and Jordan Doodey (from *Inner Fish*).
Photo by José Gates

Having abandoned the idea of directly interacting with the audience, we turned our attentions to myths from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* involving the bones and flesh of the human body springing from seeds planted in the earth. These myths supported the seed imagery and the idea of “bodies becoming other bodies” (Ovid 3). Along with the transformation of the environment in the performance, we transformed ourselves through the addition of bone appendages that signified both decoration and physiological evolution. Two visual artists, David and Jordan Doodey, assisted us with the creation of these bone appendages and with the design for the space as a whole. Once we found ourselves with an abundant supply of bones (collected and cleaned from roadkill remains) we began to respond to this material in the same way we had to the seeds



Neil Cadger in a death scene from *Inner Fish*. Video design by José Gates, Stephen Foster, and Steve Heimbecker.

Photo by José Gates

(and the projections). The bones, in other words, began to dictate our process, both because of their potential as intriguing and versatile objects within the space and also because of their metaphorical implications. They represented—all at once—our own physiology, the presence of nonhuman animals, and the remains of life.

Bone thrones were constructed upon which our two characters could reside. They were made to look like carcasses, with vertebrae, anuses, and splayed ribs. In contrast to the seeds, the thrones represented the tyrannical development we were witnessing in our community. To position ourselves on them was to position ourselves as the conquerors, to occupy conquered territory, conquered flesh. Miniature bone animals were also created to occupy the agricultural fields we created with the seeds. These small skeletal beasts represented both domesticated animals and extinct creatures. As we manipulated them (and the seeds) to tell our story, we became the all-powerful “colonizers” of the space. The very act of placing them in our squared-off territory, like whimsical hostages of our perilous game, further reinforced the story arc we were creating of our gradual movement away from harmony with nature. By placing silverware on either side of each animal, we made our fields into a dinner table and the sequence culminated in a dinner scene—a glimpse of the top of the food chain.

With the introduction of the bones, the world of our show began to take shape. We were able to create in response to concrete objects, rather than abstract concepts. Our process with the bones, as with our initial creative process in response to the seeds, embodied our belief in the importance of “being present” in our world. It is interesting how projects, in a sense, create themselves. They have their own trajectory.

Rather than forcing a narrative, we essentially had to relinquish control over the material and let the material (the bones) guide us. In my experience, this is when the best work emerges. An audience can always detect the authenticity of a staged moment—whether it is born out of a living moment (or object) or a preconceived and lifeless concept.

The notion of having to relinquish control in order to discover our story is, of course, our challenge in terms of broader ecological issues as well. Whatever our goals are as performance artists, our process is inextricably linked to our success. And our process in the creation of *Inner Fish* continues. In December

2009, we had the opportunity to workshop our “discovered story” with Blake Brooker (One Yellow Rabbit) for one week. While much of our work to date had been devoted to the creation of imagery, this provided us with the opportunity to work specifically on a written script. We needed to define ourselves more clearly as specific people or characters within our expansive narrative. It was clear during the workshop that we couldn’t return to the contrived characters of “Dick and

Our intention with this work is not to provide ecological information, but rather to heighten perception.

Jane.” Blake challenged us instead to look to ourselves and to our real preoccupations as people “in the here and now” in order to create characters that might resonate with honesty. In the same way as we had to “listen to our objects and to our environment,” we had to “listen to ourselves.”

The resulting work is now entitled *The House at the End of the Road*. We have preserved the connection to the natural world through the continued use of the bone animals and the seeds, but our texts focus on two storylines: the resolute and audacious settlement of the North American west, and the restlessness of a languishing middle aged couple holed up in their urban Kelowna home. The story of the westward trek continues to give shape to our preoccupation with the evolution of agriculture—not only locally, but also globally and as evidenced by records of the colonization of North America—while the sardonic tone of the original invader-settlers (from *Ground Rules*) has been retained by the

relationship this history has to the dissatisfied urban couple's need to continue expanding. The story of the urban couple is a kind of "endgame": for the first time in history this couple (the progeny of their restless colonizing ancestors) are physically capable of travelling or expanding anywhere, but they (we) have nowhere to go. Their (our) new challenge is to stand still, to renew (or renovate, in the case of their house) and to dig deeper where they (we) stand.

Perhaps the next direction in the journey of this particular project will be to take it out into nature itself—another step away from the black box and a step toward the rhythms of the natural world. Perhaps this approach belongs to an entirely new project. Our intention with this work is not to provide ecological information, but rather to heighten perception or to "stop the audience in its tracks and engender what James Joyce labeled 'aesthetic arrest'" (Bogart 63). In this way we hope to deepen ecological understanding through a connection to being alive, being together, and being "present" at the zenith of a very long (and continuing) journey.

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