

A Culture of Waiting

Ernesto Pujol in conversation with Monty Paret

(Note: This is the original interview. An edited & illustrated version will appear in the April edition of the online magazine 15 Bytes.)

From sundown on April 8th to sunrise on April 9th, internationally known conceptual artist Ernesto Pujol will create a site-specific durational performance with a group of approximately forty collaborators along the South Steps of the Utah State Capitol building in Salt Lake City. Pujol, an instructor at Parsons The New School for Design in New York City, is the first recipient of the John and Marva Warnock Visiting Artist Residency in the Department of Art and Art History of the College of Fine Arts at the University of Utah. One of his video pieces, as well as two video documentations of past performances, are currently on view at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts. I sat down with Pujol recently to discuss his residency, his work, and the ambitious performance planned for Salt Lake this spring. The following are excerpts from that conversation.

On your role as the first Warnock Artist-in-Residence at the University of Utah

The Warnocks had the wisdom of bringing in something that the Art and Art history Department didn't already have, at least to begin with; something that would contribute a missing element to the college. It is a visionary endowment. In my case, I specialize in site-specific durational performance because I am very interested in reclaiming urban space from clutter, noise, and speed. I am drawn to revisiting historical monumental architecture that has become invisible. I try to establish a new space within the older space for silence and solitude, conducive to meditation. I believe that reflection is a human right, particularly in a culture of entertainment; of distractions..

Site-specific art is created for a place, tailored to a very specific context. It embraces a landscape, a people, their history and oral memories as a fabric. You don't import the materials, those are the materials, the building blocks of the piece; so that it could only have been created there and may be meaningless beyond this context. I like that belonging. Durational means that it transcends the standard duration of cultural events (approximately two hours), so that it actually manifests the unhurried flow of natural time. I try to create a rift in the experience of urban time. Human time consist of in-betweenness, of gaps between work and home, work and play. I try to recapture the original purity of time beyond the human construct. Let's say that my bookends are sunrise and sunset, or a full 24-hour cycle. That length extends well beyond what is thought to be bearable as entertainment, consumable. Those hours manifest time beyond the anthropocentric. The first feature of durational performance art is an experience of time on the body of the performer, time on the body of the audience, and time as the first layer of meaning of the piece. The durational puts us back into nature from the point of view of nature.

On the regional culture of waiting

I first visited Utah several years ago and became very intrigued by the culture of the region. So it is a gift to return and pursue that interest. In my ongoing academic and visual research of the region, what has struck me is the culture of waiting. Dating back to the pioneers, there is a culture of waiting that perceives the land as a wilderness and labors to transform it into a garden. But that is not purely the result of human agency. There is a connection between the virtue of the laborer and an unpredictable gift of grace from the universe. You toil, but then you wait for that work to somehow be blessed by a mysterious greater force. Then, there is the specificity of Mormon theology that awaits for the return of a spiritual figure that will transform everyone and everything. And there are the military families waiting for peace and the return of their sons and daughters from the Middle East, alive, not missing any limbs, not suffering from post-traumatic stress disorders. It is definitely not a passive waiting. It is about a very laborious, missionary, active people and space, but with waiting as its existential backdrop.

What does waiting look like in Utah? I would like to embody the metaphor of a neutral space where I recruit elements that may be familiar here, maybe even quite proprietary locally, but that I respectfully engage in such a way that they trigger a conversation about ending cultural isolation, about, opening public space to contemporary conceptual art as a vehicle for exploring our commonalities with the rest of the globe. Somebody else would have picked up another trait, of course. I am not saying that Utah is only about waiting. But from the perspective of my performance practice, this culture of waiting is what struck me.

Salt Lake City reminds me of Tel Aviv, Israel, a secular city in a religious state. There is something about the embeddedness of religion in spite of the efforts at secularism, along with a feeling of being under siege, and the notion of being a unique people. Mormonism is more than a religion, it is a social structure, whether you are of the faith or not. This place is about the collective, the beehive, the sacrifice of the individual and individuality, particularly among women. It is a very complicated waiting that deserves very serious objective cultural study as a unique American narrative. Globalism is not about a landscape of sameness. True globalism consists in a balanced presentation of the multiplicity of such mythical narratives created by the human desire to transcend. I would love to curate an exhibition about this narrative.

Can you describe the performance piece you are planning for April 8th on the South Steps of the Utah State Capitol Hill?

Our performance starts with a group of individuals scattered throughout the city. The performers will be dressed in white because that is one of my signatures, and the uniform of enlightenment in many world cultures: the Caribbean, the American South, Brazil, India, West Africa. They will begin to walk alone starting in all sorts of neighborhoods and historic places that are either meaningful to them or perhaps have a public meaning. Someone may trace a route of Native American or European

settlement; someone will trace the hydrology of a part of the city that is now underground, day-lighting it through their walk. It won't be obvious, it won't be revealed immediately. All of these different walkers will converge as a collective at the base of the South Steps on Capitol Hill at 6:00 PM. After a long silent group pause, they will begin to ascend and descend the hill, pausing and flowing, night into morning.

I chose an urban place that was high, that would be a kind of Jacob's Ladder, a secular vision of human desire for transcendence; of dreams flowing between earth and sky. And then, at sunrise, they will walk back into the city unspectacularly, unheroically, as quietly and anonymously as they came. Although it is a silent piece, I am collaborating with Utah artist Rosi Hayes who is creating a very subtle soundtrack in the form of a sound marker every half hour, a murmur or whisper combining human voices with natural sounds. It will be heard but for a few seconds within the hill, with no leakage into the residential community, barely audible to the public, echoing the passage of time for those who are in this timeless place and nevertheless need help to journey through it. I am also collaborating with Utah artist Ed Bateman in the graphics of the piece, which will soon have a website.

On Architecture as Site

Aside from the verticality of the site, I chose the grounds of the Utah State Capitol because when you look at the footage of its rededication ceremony it is supposed to be the house of the people; all constituencies are meant to gather there, to be represented there. Architecture is the ephemeral embodiment of human dreams. It is surreal to find this massive building in a salt valley surrounded by mountains; a gesture inspired by classical architecture from Greece, almost a Roman basilica, foreign. It was a conceptual act about the kind of people we wanted to become. It is about a solitary notion of civilization in the desert. I walk through the lower avenues neighborhood, where I am currently living, and I imagine what this place looked like before they created a grid (the metaphor for order against chaos), and planted trees to create shade. If the people migrated on, how quickly all these lawns would dry, the architecture would fall apart and the desert would reclaim the human dream. This place is young enough that capitol hill feels like a tent of visions in the desert, a still fragile gesture.

What I also like about Capitol Hill is that at night it gives you a stage under a dome. The sky closes in. The mountains fade out. The hill is delineated by a boundary of avenue-like corridors, railings, steps, and squares. Its flooring is a subtle grid. All I am engaging of the hill is the space between the lower wall (engraved with the State of Utah letters) and the colonnade. I am not using the sides or back of the hill. And it is flanked by lamps, so that I do not have to add extra lighting. The building is lit as a kind of monumental backdrop. I am not entering the building. The site gives me the walk. I always seek architecture that orders me in a prescriptive way how to move through it. I decode architecture through the body.

On Walking

I walk and train others to walk as a form of drawing study, as a different level of knowledge acquisition through the body. I believe that we live in our heads and are disconnected from our bodies. As Rebecca Solnit writes, the postmodern body does not move, but it seeks to be moved. I am trying to awake the postmodern body, disconnect it from virtuality, and walk it outside, into the natural world, to revisit the topography of the city with an empty mind. I want to give the walkers, first and foremost, an experience of being present, a revisiting of the familiar that they have taken for granted and has become invisible. I use the local performers' bodies as role models, so that the audience finds itself in those noteworthy but incredibly familiar bodies that are just like theirs. And this triggers a mirroring, so that the public slows down, stops, and joins us, expanding the performance.

Who are the performers?

I am leading a master workshop at the U every Friday morning for graduate and undergraduate students of the visual arts and modern dance programs. That is my core group of performers. But I have also issued a general invitation to all cultural groups and specialized communities, inviting them to participate. So I have been offering two weeknight and weekend workshops for these diverse constituencies. It is an exciting challenge to train people who come from the world of ballet, modern dance, the visual arts, the LDS faithful, the Zen Buddhist community, to name just a few, into this sensitivity for site-specific durational gesture; to train this fragmented group into a cohesive ephemeral performance company that will only meet for one evening. It is terrifying and beautiful.

On Spirituality

I am a student of religion as global culture. To me religion is part of the human experience. Humans are religion-making machines. I treat it as a material. So I sample from it as an interdisciplinary visual scholar, unapologetically. I am not interested in creating or recreating religious art, directly or indirectly. But I am very interested in conceptual art informed by 21st century humanistic spiritual values. Art has to be informed by more than mid-20th century art theory. Otherwise, it is going to be sterile and insensitive to audiences; irrelevant to audiences and the issues that still inform human experience. And within this intellectual effort, I am driven to focus on the persistent human desire for immortality. So it is not even about spirituality per se, but about survival and the theologies of survival. I use various languages in doing these performance pieces. I claim elements of contemporary dance – Pina Bausch and Mark Morris. I claim elements of religion, Zen Buddhism's walking meditation and the bodhisattva, Mormonism's encodedness, and the Roman Catholic cloister.

On Silence

Silence is not the absence of sound. Silence is the absence of distractions. When I generate silence in a performance, it is not that I believe that everyone should shut up abruptly. It is a very slow difficult process. There is no silence on the Hill. You can hear the sound of the city like a constant revolving static. But I believe in creating a silent space, backing off, and seeing what floods it from deep within. What do we encounter in such silence? What surfaces from our unconscious depths? Do we face our true identity, our concerns, our turmoil, our peace?

On Audiences

It would be great if there was a considerable turnout for the performance on the evening of April 8th, but I am the first one to say that it is not entertaining. There is no narrative arc with a climax; no drama. The performance is about manifesting time. That is the experience that meets you beyond the first impact of the visuals. You can stay with the piece for a few minutes or twelve hours. You can bring a blanket and a thermos and camp out all night. Maybe you go home but know that it is not over, so you return at midnight, or at sunrise, to watch it end. The first thing that you may see is people watching people, expanding the ring of silence and stillness. The public will complete the piece, generating a permeable cloister wall.

Can you speak about shifting art from objects to the body of the artist?

I harbor very radical notions of what art should be in America in the 21st century, in terms of what is ecologically sustainable, refusing to be part of the old economy of collectibles, and what our democratic process needs in terms of creative critical thinking as the true contribution of the artist as citizen. I am a student of Carol Becker. Nevertheless, I have always avoided only siting the work on my body. I am always trying to get out of the way, operating as a sign rather than a destination. You need to see the sign but you also need to keep going because ultimately my body is a gesture that points at something else.

The itinerant artist and the role of the outsider

I believe in the role of the outsider. Some feel that bringing an outsider is a betrayal of the local. The local must be supported, but not merely because it is local. It needs to have more merits than that; there needs to be more qualities to it. So it must transcend the local even as it is totally embedded. That kind of un-self-critical philosophy can create an isolated, incestuous, repetitive, complacent culture. There is the great American tradition of the 19th century itinerant photographer or painter. The pioneer homesteaders would come out and pose in their Sunday dress with some of their precious belongings. And the outsider would capture their portrait in a remarkable way. They were suddenly and unexpectedly able to see themselves in an extraordinary way. Sometimes that became the best if not the only record of their lives. In addition, I believe that a crucial role for artists working at the national level is to be a conduit through which culturally isolated regions connect with the rest of

the country and the globe. We need cultural exchanges between “the many countries” that make up this country.

But the true answer is that I am not different. In the end, we are the same. It turns out that I am not an outsider. We share the human condition, we may even be striving for similar things. I watch my otherness disappear as the weeks go by and I am accepted, trusted. Projects like these are completely based on trust. Trust is the one and only building block, from beginning to end. But I also try to retain some of my otherness because it is the only way to contribute a certain objectivity. This is a very humbling selfless practice.