

## ***Shield: a Performance/Prayer***

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On June 22, 2007, *Shield*, a collaborative performance work of my co-creation went to Prague as part of the Prague Quadrennial. I stayed home and prayed on the roof of my house until the police came. Apparently the neighbors had sent out an alert because they thought I was intending to make a suicidal leap.

Far from contemplating jumping off the roof of my house, I was attempting to do my job as artist and connect to my collaborator, Clover Morell, who was in Prague praying at precisely the same time as me. The two of us, thousands of miles apart, were joined by an act of faith that had nothing to do with religion; each of us having faith that the other was doing what she could to carry out the plan we had made long before Clover left Chicago, and boarded a plane with her friend and our co-conspirator, Elizabeth, for the Czech Republic by way of London's Heathrow International Airport.

We were making a work of art that Clover had astutely dubbed as: "a synchronized prayer".

I learned that it's hard to pray and perform at the same time. Prayer requires an immersion and lack of self-consciousness that can sometimes be achieved through performing. But performing a prayer and actually praying are entirely two different things. The challenge for me was to achieve the latter rather than the former.

Clover had previously worked with theme of prayer but *Shield* was my first artistic investigation into the concept of prayer. *Shield* was, also, my first foray into creating new performance work since 2004 after a life-altering event that involved poisoning myself with forty mothball-laced military blankets. I had purchased the blankets from an online army/navy surplus store for an anti-war piece I was making and while I was washing and drying the blankets in an effort to purge them of the strong odor of mothballs, the mothballs volatilized into the air of my studio. Attempting to mitigate the chemical vapors, I opened all the doors and windows, but by the time I realized what was happening it was too late. I had contaminated my entire studio and breathed in the poison for several hours while trying to "fix" the problem. The fumes were even noxious enough to awaken my husband two floors up. He instructed me to close all the windows since there must have been some kind of chemical spill in our neighborhood. I had to tell him I had created this hazard that now filled and engulfed our entire home with a thick, immobile cloud of poison.

Even after this massive exposure to the noxious substance, I (foolishly) continued to handle the blankets every day for several more weeks. I hung them outdoors trying to air them out and hopefully diffuse the odor. During this period I began having neurological problems: brain shocks and shivers and vertigo whenever I was near the blankets. There were other symptoms when I was away from them: enormous amount of phlegm and waking up in the night spitting up particles that looked like glitter. I supposed the vapors I breathed in had settled back into my lungs and reformed into crystalline particles that my body was now attempting to expel.

The long-term effects of my self-poisoning have been very strange and surreal. It's been

three years since the blanket- washing episode and the most distressing symptom of this experience is that I am now hypersensitive to *all* chemicals-a fact I discovered when the carpet cleaner at work and my husband's shaving cream sent me on two separate trips to the emergency room a couple weeks apart because I believed I was having a stroke.

Due to my hyper sensitization, each weekend Clover would come to my house and without question, protest or judgment, she's put on my clothes, usually jeans and t-shirts. Because fragrance residues from not only laundry but also personal care products made me ill, sometimes she would have to shower first. Next, she would don a little stretchy knit cap I made for her out of gray charcoal impregnated fabric since the minutest amount of shampoo residue would, also, set off my symptoms. In addition to driving 80 miles each way from Chicago in the dead of winter just to come work with me, these precautions were all hoops she had to jump through. At times, even with Clover's gracious precautionary measures, I would still have to wear a mask and sit right next to my air purifier just to be able to tolerate her physical presence. But she never seemed to mind and I never felt judged. She was so compassionate toward me that she went through all the paces I needed to put her through in order to make our visits possible.

The work we began doing took on an additional dimension because of the way in which our friendship was being developed and renewed. The process was invigorating. Together, we navigated through every aspect of the work. I loved her intelligence, originality and ways of conceptualizing the work. Because the original invitation to do a piece for Prague was mine and I was unable to go, many of our initial ideas were about the fact that Clover's actual physical body would be going to Prague to stand in for mine. We talked about setting up a live video feed that would connect us each in a different country at the same time. We considered the use of a gas mask or some kind of breathing protection to illustrate my illness. We played with the idea of handing out masks to the audience to bring the issue of environmental contamination and the need for human protection into focus.

At first, I was managing all the sewing labor for the dress to be worn during the piece, and it was progressing very slowly. My physical reactions to the materials presented an unsolvable problem and I was worried about not being able to meet the deadline. One day in my frustration, I desperately dismantled my salad spinner, taped charcoal fabric to it and wore it over my head in an attempt to shield myself from the odor of the dye and finishes in the materials. I'd been having adverse reactions even though I had already washed the materials numerous times. But without proper ventilation my ad hoc protection device would steam up and leave me without air and it became evident there was no way I could continue sewing without damaging my health. So I did something I had never done before: I relinquished the sewing to someone else.

Clover's acceptance of the daunting responsibility to resume construction of the dress was heroic. We emailed and phoned and sent photos and drawings back and forth to solve complex sewing problems so we could keep the project moving. I loved every stitch she put into that dress and interpreted each one as an act of devotion and utmost care that bound me closer to Clover.

The distinction between our collaborative efforts for the piece and our friendship collapsed and the two are now inseparable. The work could not exist without our friendship and the

course our friendship has taken could not exist without the work. To me, *Shield*, is more than anything else about a relationship between two people. It's about closing the distance between two discreet and separate selves in order to find something larger than each one of us: it represents a shared intellectual as well as heart and soul connection that I will always cherish. In retrospect, what we arrived at expressed the more unspoken, spiritual dimension of our shared conversations and the work became a kind of experiment in consciousness.

If Clover's body stood in for mine as we had originally discussed, then mine surely stood in for hers, as well. There was reciprocity at work. My vigil on the roof marked her absence there, as well as her activities in Prague marked mine.

The symmetry of our prayerful actions became emblematic of our unseen connection to each other, and, also, an acknowledgment of something more universal. Clover went to Prague and prayed publicly for five hours while I simultaneously prayed on the roof of my house back in Harvard, a concept so simple. In doing so, we each became integral parts of a duality that ultimately got played out in the streets of Prague: the duality of the visible and the not visible.