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[The Blindfolded Body in Wen Yau's "Wish You Were Here," Alice Vogler's "Liability of body. Language of liability" and Marilyn Arsem's "Marking Time."](#)

Text by Sandrine Schaefer



© photo by: Monika Sobczak | Wen Yau, *Wish You Were Here*. Venice International Performance Art Week 2014

When an artist undertakes an action blindfolded, it undoubtedly makes them vulnerable to their audience. Although the removal of a sense allows the audience to experience a heightened empathic response towards an artist, the blindfold offers a far more complex experience. While blindfolded, an artist's personal history with an action is exposed. If there is an immediate confidence while engaging in an action, we can assume that the action is one that they are familiar with. If there is hesitation, witnesses can assume that the action has been previously unexplored by the artist. When an artist is without sight, what is made visible, is the artist's understanding of time, mediated through the chosen action.

Installed in a room on the 3rd floor of Palazzo Mora the phrase "I want real universal suffrage" has been repeatedly and methodically written in Chinese on half of the walls. In this piece titled, *Wish You Were*

Here, Hong Kong artist **Wen Yau** is crouched on the floor, blindfolded with the national flag of the People's Republic of China and wearing a t-shirt that reads "I Heart HK." Wen Yau continues to repeatedly write the phrase in charcoal on the other half of the space without the sense of sight. Over the duration of approximately 4 hours, the writing not only fills the walls, but also spills onto the floor.

"I want real universal suffrage" is a phrase often used in protests of the pro-democracy Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong in which Wen Yau is an active member. Upon Wen Yau's arrival in Venice to create *Wish You Were Here* for the VENICE INTERNATIONAL PERFORMANCE ART WEEK, police cleared the site that the movement had occupied in Hong Kong for the past 3 months. Being disconnected from her community during such an important time resulted in Wen Yau being moved to tears while performing this blindfolded action. As she wrote, Wen Yau allowed her witnesses insight into her relationship to the phrase and the power it holds for her.

The duality between the phrase written in an orderly manner next to the chaotic scrawling produced during Wen Yau's blindfolded action furthers the complexity of the performance as it foreshadowed the piece's ending. Several days later, *Wish You Were Here* was continued when Wen Yau returned to Hong Kong. In the final action of the performance, Wen Yau walks blindfolded, around the government buildings once occupied by protesters. As she traverses this location, she secretly writes "I want real universal suffrage" in places along her path. This action that was [live streamed](#) at the ART WEEK contextualizes *Wish You Were Here* in a way that otherwise could get lost in the magnitude of the exhibition. Through this action, the audience is reminded that although exhibitions like VENICE INTERNATIONAL PERFORMANCE ART WEEK and performance art festivals prioritize the gathering of artists from around the world to share work, these artists must return to the places from which they come to continue their practice. Wen Yau endures the action of blindfolded writing in one space, yet never abandons the space that has inspired this action. The action cannot exist in Palazzo Mora or the former occupy site alone. These contexts must be linked through Wen Yau's own body for the piece to be fully realized.

It is through this choice that *Wish You Were Here* serves as a refreshing example of the lineage that performance art shares with activism. The piece is made for an art-educated audience, protesters, and the public, and therefore, erases the boundaries between what is demarcated as "art action" and actions of the everyday. Furthermore, the blindfold illuminates the challenges of operating within the safety of an art-designated space vs. operating amongst an unknowing audience.



© photo by: Monika Sobczak | Alice Vogler, *Liability of body. Language of liability*. Venice International Performance Art Week 2014

The blindfold also ignited dialogue around everyday actions in the final action of Boston-based artist **Alice Vogler**'s *Liability of body. Language of liability*. With ease and confidence, Vogler sits blindfolded on top of a plinth and fluctuates between repeatedly injecting her arms with needles and dropping small cards that depict life size images of the needles that she is using for injection. Even to the witnesses who do not know that Vogler is a Type 1 Diabetic, diagnosed in childhood, they can recognize that this action is so familiar to the artist that she can even do it with her eyes closed.

On the first day of the 2-day piece, Vogler sits at a table that holds a mountain of white sugar. She methodically fills empty pill capsules to make placebos for pre-made pill bottles that are also placed on the table. The bottles contain labels like "optimism," "luck," "fascination," and "more time". As she fills each bottle her demeanor changes and it becomes apparent that she is infusing each pill with an essence of the word written on the bottle. In this action, Vogler wears a mask and gloves. Not only does this create a physical barrier between Vogler and the audience, she also refrains from making eye contact or engaging with those who enter her space.

This changes dramatically in the second day of the performance upon the audience's entrance into the space. Each audience member is greeted by an assistant and required to sign a waiver and release of liability. This form states that the undersigned knowingly assumes the responsibility of all risks and that they will not hold anyone affiliated with the VENICE INTERNATIONAL PERFORMANCE ART WEEK responsible for any injury, disability or even death that could occur in the witnessing of the work. Those who refuse to sign the waiver are asked to leave.

Once the form has been signed, the audience must navigate thousands of clear marbles that are pooling on the floor. As Vogler stands in front of another plinth that holds a large glass bowl containing the marbles, she dips her face into the bowl, takes a mouthful, and spits them onto the ground. This repeated action is unpredictable. Sometimes she spits the marbles one by one, sometimes she simply opens her mouth and allows the weight of the marbles to send them tumbling to the floor. Sometimes the spitting is gentle. Other

times, she spits aggressively and the marbles bounce across the floor, hitting the legs of audience members.

Like much of Vogler's work, *Liability of body. Language of liability* is rooted in chance and choice and passively invites interaction. As Vogler spits marbles, another plinth presents the pill bottles that Vogler filled during the previous day alongside a bottle of water, a glass, and a cloth. As Vogler moves into her blindfolded action of injection, she lays out a paper explaining the side effects of sugar. The audience is never told to ingest the pills, simply offered a choice by positioning and suggestion. The majority of the audience ignore this subtle invitation until the moment that Vogler blindfolds herself. Once the artist's eyes are covered people pool, like the marbles, around the pills and ingest. As this situation unfolds, witnesses also move close to Vogler's body. Some photograph her, some observe her form, the needles and the cards at an intimate proximity. Regardless of the differences in how the interactions take shape, what is consistent, is that Vogler has created an experience that allows space for the audience to witness in ways that encourage collaborative viewing in which we all assume responsibility for our individual and collective safety.



© photo by: Monika Sobczak | Marilyn Arsem, *Marking Time*. Venice International Performance Art Week 2014

Collective and nuanced witnessing is also called upon in Boston-based artist **Marilyn Arsem's** *Marking Time*. Over 7 days, *Marking Time* spans 24 hours in which Arsem explores the seen and the unseen, the living and dead. Installed in a room are two black chairs, one that holds a bundle of black fabric that emits a faint aroma of rose to those who get close enough. The room contains a constant and soft ticking of a clock. This causes many to become mindful of their own pace upon entering the room. In the beginning hours of the piece, Arsem stands with her back to the chairs and stares out of a window, she also dressed in black. As she watches what is happening outside of the building, her breath is captured on the surface of the glass and illuminates smudges previously placed on the pane. This is a subtle acknowledgement of the space's history. The curious thing about encountering a body in front of, or behind glass, is that the observer is required to navigate their own reflection. Arsem's choice to engage with this aspect of the architecture sets

the tone for the next 7 days. *Marking Time* is about reflection and invites the audience to explore their own relationships to time and ways in which it is marked in its passing.

As Arsem peers out the window, an insect flies by and catches her eye. Her curiosity ignites the curiosity of the others in the room. This is the first of many invitations for the audience to engage in a way that is unique within a traditional performance context. Some viewers stand and peer out other windows while others peak through a closet in the space that is slightly ajar. Many also occupy a close proximity to Arsem's body. Her actions are modest and she often sits and stands in places in the room where the audience is gathered. In these moments, Arsem is not recognizable to all as "the performer." This invisibility is shattered in the moments when Arsem looks around the room, engaging each person in eye contact. This tension between looking and being looked at continues to gain intensity throughout the weeklong duration of the piece. On the second day of *Marking Time*, Arsem introduces another black cloth and engages in various actions that include her covering and uncovering her body. In these variations of seeing and inviting herself to be seen, the cloth provides a similar function as the blindfold. Arsem's actions with the cloth make her vulnerable, invite the audience to engage, and position time as the primary concept of the work, rather than something that is consequence or bi-product.

Throughout the week, Arsem creates an evolving relationship with the cloth, the chairs, and the black bundle that sits on one chair. In the final days of *Marking Time*, Arsem reveals that the bundle contains stones. This is not revealed, however, until Arsem has engaged in an action of holding the bundle in her arms for an hour. In this provocative image of an enduring body, Arsem's body visibly breaks down. Her limbs tremble softly as it becomes apparent that this mysterious bundle contains substantial weight. This image adds an immense gravity to the actions that follow.

In the final hour of the piece, Arsem lies on the ground, covered by her cloth. The stones have been hidden once again, under the other cloth that has been removed from the chair and gathered on the ground in a way that resembles another covered human body. Because Arsem made several artistic choices that positioned the audience alongside her, many chose to endure the full 7 days of *Marking Time*. These witnesses wear their personal investment in the piece in their body language and facial expressions. Some lay on the cold ground with the two forms. Many cry silently. While Arsem offers her own covered body next to the visual suggestion of another, she is present, yet simultaneously she embodies the past and inevitable future of death that unifies us all.

In all three of these works, the blindfolded body is used as a strategy that breaks traditional witnessing and viewing behaviors that are often a consequence of "performance art's" close semantic proximity to "performing arts." In *Wish You Were Here*, *Liability of body*, *Language of liability*, and *Marking Time*, the audiences are not only considered, but positioned as active collaborators that are invited to engage in the creative processes necessary for these three works to be realized.

[2:38pm](#) | URL: <http://tumblr.co/Z2Cr0u1afieIG>

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