

PERFORMING WITH OBJECTS

Andrés Galeano in conversation with Joanna Matuszak

Andrés Galeano—a Spaniard by birth and Berliner by residence—is a visual artist and philosopher. Performance, photography, and video are his main media of expression. He works solo and collaboratively with other artists and also curates performance art shows. In his early performances he worked with everyday objects and predominantly in public settings, dealing with historical, social, and ethical issues. Several of his performances have investigated the audience’s role in performance art, and he has challenged spectators to take some responsibility for the outcome of his performances. Galeano has also been interested in birds and flying, and his live performances have grown more complex by the addition of found photography, photo projections, and various audio and video presentations. He based the structure of some of his performances on the rhythms of birdsong. In his newer projects he not only uses photographs and slide projections but has begun to investigate the indexical and documentary nature of photography. His most recent series, entitled *iPerf*, consists of performances that incorporate found photography alongside photos and video materials from his preceding performances. It is, to use Galeano’s words, a digital performance during which the artist uses audiovisual materials and the internet, focusing on the iconography and usage of a pointing index finger and web-based communication channels. This interview was taped in the Theatre Centre, in Toronto, Canada after Galeano’s performance *iPerf 1.0.1*, on February 24, 2013.

Your artist’s statement notes that the elements you work with are “space, audience, objects, actions, time, and your body.” Why, of all these elements, do you choose “objects” as the focus of your performance art workshops?

These are the main elements of almost every performance—the columns that sustain every performance. Dealing with performance, you move between the coordinates of time, space, and presence, which also means the co-presence of an artist or a performer with the audience, actions, and objects. Performance is, in a way, the finest immaterial practice. With a performance work you change the paradigm of art; you are no longer dealing with the “subject-object” relationship but more with a situation. You create a certain situation—a certain atmosphere—which is also immaterial. When I do a performance I aim to create an experience. I am interested in it.

But here is the paradox: on one hand, performance art is defined as an ephemeral art practice, but on the other hand, most performance art uses objects. Out of this paradox came an idea of a workshop on interacting with objects. My own practice is strongly influenced by the use of objects. I also studied in the sculpture department at the Kunsthochschule Berlin-Weissensee.

What is the relationship between the body of the performer and objects that are being used, and how do you teach it?

First, we explore presence. We start with the simplest thing—standing in front of the audience and being present, breathing your presence. We realize, for example, that a body can become subject or object depending on how the gaze is used. When you gaze at somebody you are a subject; when you are watched, you become an object—for example, when somebody takes a picture of you. So the starting point in the workshop is the presence of the performer and then we continue with a group reflection about what an object is. An object has a presence. Objects are bodies. At the moment when you are standing in the space and there is a chair nearby you have to deal with the fact that you and the chair are two bodies in this space. It doesn't matter that one is inanimate and the other is animate. There are a lot of different objects. There are objects that are performative, that is, machines that move. There are plants and animals, but are they objects? As a performer you have to be aware of very minimal, subtle elements. I insist a lot on letting the presence of the object breathe near the presence of the performer. This means, for example, dealing with the distance at which you positioned yourself in regard to an object.

How do you create balance, or for that matter imbalance, between inanimate objects such as machines, plants, soil, or wood, among others, and the body of the performer?

For me this is an open question. There are different traditions. There is, of course, a tradition which says that an object has a soul, a kind of animism. Then, there is Walter Benjamin's idea of objects which gaze back at you. I work often with found material. So one of my main habits is to go to flea markets, where I get fascinated by some objects. I don't know why, but it happens. They kind of gaze at me. I am not trying to be esoteric. It is a big issue how to deal with objects: Do I want to abuse, control, and manipulate the object, or do I want to exalt and listen to the language of the object? Generally we are not conscious of this relationship between a subject and an object because we are accustomed to only using objects. They have a function, so we use them, but we are arrogant. It is not a dialogue at all. It is not that we are at the same level of being, because we never hear them. Do you know what I mean?

Yes, we usually only listen to our own voices.

Yes. One of the exercises is to try to hear the language of this object. You try not to impose an action on this object but rather to collaborate with the object. It is a concept of collaboration. It is clear that if we do something together we collaborate, we as human beings. But with objects we usually have an anthropocentric point of view.

Andrés Galeano, *Action Poem #9*, May 2012, Interakcje
International Art Festival at Gallery OFF, Piotrków Trybunalski, Poland.
Photo: © Mariusz "Marchewa" Marchlewicz. Courtesy the artist.



In your approach to objects, do you group them in categories, for example, animate vs. inanimate, mass-produced vs. natural, and based on that you can suggest how to work with different types of objects?

I am interested in pointing out a wide range of possibilities. As a teacher I try to open possibilities rather than to say, "That's the way." I don't do this because I don't want anybody to deal with objects like I do. What I mean is that I don't want to create a miniature of myself. The idea is to try to hear the language of the participant—the person who is your student—and then to see how you can guide him or her. And this guiding is about questioning some things or opening some possibilities, but then it is up to him or her; it is their choice. Returning to the question of how we were dealing with objects. Notice that during a performance, just the fact of standing in front of an audience has a lot of meanings. Semantics are opened by the clothes, skin color, gender, and so on. It is very normal to use it in a performance. And the same happens with objects. They also open semantic fields. For example, if we take this cup of tea we could brainstorm for a half an hour based on its shape, color, and your personal memories related with this object. For me it is interesting to open up these different perspectives of approaching an object. An object can be a relic, a product, a symbol, a ready-made, a fetish. . . . There are different approaches. It is a huge topic.

Do you start with objects that are inspirational in themselves or do you start with a broader idea of what you want to say in your performance and then think about what objects you can use to talk about this idea?

I think I work both ways. In some projects I have been developing performances in which I deal with very personal objects and thus with my own biography and personal memories. They were objects that I took from my parents' house—for example, a little model ship they had had in their flat. There were also my grandfather's tape players. In this case these very personal objects deal with my personal memory. They are what drives me to say, "OK, I take this object, not another one." This is important for me. But on the other hand, when I do a performance using these objects, my goal is not that the audience sees these as my personal objects. For me it is important that these objects are working well formally—chromatically. What is important is their form and the action you develop with it. I don't want the audience to look for my autobiography because what is important for me is the abstraction. I mean, your biography is always there as a starting point. But it is not about me; it is about a topic that for me is important, that I want to deal with and share with you.

Do you strive to create balance between you and objects, i.e., to treat them as equal partners? Or do you create an imbalance where there is you—the "I" of the artist, the creator—and the objects being used? Or yet again, are you invisible and it is the objects that are performing?

It depends. Sometimes I search for poetical transformations of objects. Sometimes I just use them because of their functionality, like the performance that I am developing now, *iPerf*, in which I use electronic devices, like a laptop and a smartphone. In this case, for me it is interesting what is happening with my presence behind these

objects and how I become in a way absent and how I lose mobility and movement through these objects—as a consequence of using them—but at the same time they open a door to an immaterial and virtual world and make us telepresent. I am pretty much trying to deal with this hardware. In *iPerf* I am always behind these devices and my person is reduced. It is my aim that you are watching the screen all the time, which is what happens very often nowadays. If my telephone rings then I stop talking with you and respond to it. This behavior has become normal. I am dealing in this case with this digital revolution and how smartphones have changed our lives radically in a very short time. It is also one object which is a synthesis of many objects. It is one object which cancels a lot of objects: A smartphone is your photo camera, video camera, computer, sound recorder, sound player, and so forth.

You wrote your thesis for your diploma in visual arts at Weissensee Kunsthochschule-Berlin in 2011, and it was entitled Documentation of Performances as Artwork. Can you elaborate on it?

It is also related to objects because performance art was born in a way as anti-art and an anti-capitalist position. It says, “I don’t want to make any product. I don’t want to offer any product to the art market.” So, we work with action and ephemerality, on one hand, but then on the other hand there is a question of documentation. Performance is ephemeral but if you document it you have a picture, which is a kind of object. Many artists have this credo of pure performance that happens here and now and if you weren’t present you lost it, and documentation makes no sense.

Is this your standpoint, too?

No, I don’t agree with this because I think you can make the two positions compatible. You have to experience performance live, but you can also experience performance as documentation. Sometimes as documentation it has more sense than when you saw it live, because when you see it as documentation you get more background information so you can understand it better. Maybe if you see it live you don’t understand it, or you think it is bullshit, but in twenty years when looking at the documentation of this performance you will think, “Wow, it was really great because it was really breaking patterns.”

But still the question remains: Do we see documentation as documentation or as artwork?

It depends. I’m doing, for example, a performance entitled *Indexical* using my collection of found images of people pointing at someone or something. I usually tear out these images from photo albums of strangers. This means I take them from their original context and then they are a part of my collection and I show them in art—in my performance. Then I collect at the same time the documentation of my performance. This means I am collecting photographs showing me pointing at a member of the audience. But as photo documentation you do not see at whom I am pointing (like on the photos that I collect). Conceptually, this performance is meant to be performed and repeated in different contexts and its photo documentation to be collected and mixed with the documentation of strangers’ lives (found photos

that I show in the performance) in order to see what is lost and what is missing in all these images because you point at something that is not there anymore.

All these unknown people are pointing outside of the frame. I don't know these people, their lives, who they were, their names, the place. . . . All these anecdotes behind an image—they are not there. I am interested in what a picture doesn't say. I am interested in the invisible aspect of a picture. *Indexical* deals with photography and the indexicality of both media: photography and performance. Photography is always, as Roland Barthes said, an extension of an index finger. The picture is always saying, "Look at this. This is that." This is an indexical performance, which takes as a starting point found images—so it is photography and then it comes back to photography. I start with documentation of strangers' lives, do a performance, and return to photography, mixing the documentation of my own performance with photographs of strangers. It becomes a kind of photo album of the performance. I don't know—I am still developing it. But I could imagine creating several photo works in the future, maybe involving some videos of the documentation, and selling them. In my opinion it's compatible to doing ephemeral art, and why not sell these relics of the performance?

So some objects—like the photographs you incorporated in your performance—become art objects, and then the documentation of the whole performance is also an art object. Next they can be combined together in a bigger installation or a project.

Yes. And let me add how the collection of images of people pointing at somebody or something started. One day I just found such images, and when you find two images of somebody pointing at something then you just start the collection. Why photographs of people pointing at something and not, let's say, people sitting? I think these objects—these photographs with this topic—they remind me of other images. We are archives of so many images. A motif of somebody pointing at something else is an iconographical motif documented in art history. It has so many meanings—religious, and so on. And you can get obsessive with this topic.

Is there an object that you gave up, or you couldn't incorporate, or it had a bad aura and you just couldn't work with it?

It is funny. In a way I try to be free in the sense of not possessing too many objects. I regularly attend flea markets to sell what I don't need anymore. I am a very practical person. Often I collect objects that I like. I buy them cheap, usually. Then I have them in my studio. But then after two years if I didn't do anything with a certain object then maybe it is time for it to go. In this way I try not to identify myself with any object. I try to be free because if you have a lot of belongings you feel heavier. Now I like objects like a smartphone or a computer which are a reduction. They are many objects in one. I like this kind of very minimalist way of living.

Have you ever used animals as objects in your performance?

I did. I worked with birds. Well, a bird is not an object. It is an animal. It has a performativity which you can't control. So I am very interested in these things that you

Top: Andrés Galeano, *Indexical*, February 2013, Supermarket Independent Art Fair, Stockholm, Sweden. Photo: © Valentina Pini. Courtesy the artist. Bottom: Andrés Galeano, *A to B*, July 5, 2011, ¡POESÍACCIÓN! at Instituto Cervantes, Berlin, Germany. Photo: Isabel León. Creative Commons: Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-SA 4.0) Courtesy the artist.



can't control and that are organic. The internet is also something organic, in a way. It changes every day. With animals, however, it comes to ethical questions of how you do it. A cultural context also changes it all. If you use some animals in Germany where they are very ethically oriented and the movement for the rights of animals is strong, you can get in trouble there. In the performance with birds I put the life of this bird at risk. It was in Prague and people were OK with this.

What is your approach to using objects in performance art?

Generally speaking, if you research, you realize that lots of materials are a sort of cliché—common materials, for example, a tape or water. There are many materials that so many other artists have used and these materials became a cliché. If you decide to use them you have to be aware of the tradition of this object. If you are a painter you paint with colors. If you are a performance artist usually you work with everyday objects. And there are not so many. I try not to use this kind of object.

Do you avoid them because they are clichés, or because by bringing them in you would bring in too much of their background—that is, are they too heavy in meaning?

Yes, exactly. Well, I play a lot with humor and I like to work with a quote. I quote things. I use a known object as a quote, as a redoing of something, or as homage. I don't know—it is complicated. Because for me the approach to objects is like that: In a way they are not only objects; they are combined with actions, and then an interaction with these objects often tries to transform them poetically. That is what I am interested in. This transformation often has to do with something absurd and humorous because it is a silly way of seeing this object or using it.

One can see numerous performance art festivals where a workshop is offered and taught by an invited performance artist. At U.S. universities there are very few schools of fine arts that offer courses in performance art. What is your opinion about this situation?

I think it is normal because performance art is in the minority. It is, of course, growing. I think now performativity will become the most contemporary way of practicing art. When I think of artworks that remain in my memory they have usually had something to do with performativity. In my workshops we have a theoretical part but it is practical most of the time. It is about physicality. It is about working with action, with movement, and often about not thinking. One of the first exercises that we do is just to warm up. The only task is, “don't think, just move.” Do not even think about your body; just hear your body and move and then try to avoid prejudice. That, for me, is the starting point. Then the participants—we all—are touching each other, and it is very normal. We do not, for example, have to talk for three hours to know each other. We try to be a body and to avoid this pyramidal cultural structure of rationality in which the visual is more important than the sense of touch, the haptic. But touching is our main—the biggest—sense that we have. Then we are in another dimension of awareness. We are not thinking about what it is now correct to say to each other but rather what my finger wants to do now, my little finger in contact with you.

At a certain stage a thought, an idea, or a concept comes, doesn't it? First you work with your body, feel what you can do with it, and then a stage of thought comes in, or not yet?

My work is quite conceptual but the concept comes late. It is hard to say but usually I am interested in something because I do not understand it and that's why I start this process. And I put myself in this situation: "OK, I don't understand it. I am not afraid of not understanding. I will just start this process and go through it." And usually when I conceptualize what I am doing, in the sense of, "OK, now I have to write a text about my work for an application or for an exhibition," then it becomes kind of clear. It is not mysterious anymore. It is done. Then I change the project and start with another project.

So, does this conceptualizing—really verbalizing it—cap it all?

Yes, defines it. And yet it is kind of draining the blood from the work. Many of my works are very intuitional. I don't know what I am doing. I do it in order to know why I did it. That's what we do at workshops. It is not possible for us to talk about nothing. But if we do something we can talk about it. From the very beginning the participants are confronted with doing actions. We put a chair in the space—an object—and everybody does one action with this chair. There is no "I can't do it." Everybody can do an action with a chair and then we see ten different actions. Everybody does an action and learns and sees other ways of dealing with the same object. This is a starting point. We start very simple and then we talk. But we don't need to talk too much because everybody has seen what happened with this object and what is working and what's not. I always insist that there is no right or wrong, like Allan Kaprow was saying. When I teach I am not saying, "This is right or wrong." It is up to the concept—up to what you want to do.

After the action with the chair, do you let students verbalize what idea they had behind their action?

No, we don't start like this. We describe. I try to build up from the simplest things. The simplicity is the most complicated thing. When I say, "Now you only have to move without thinking," it is so complicated. It is such a struggle all the time. Then I say, "Do one action with one object." One participant took a shoe off and did one action with this shoe and the chair. And then I told him, "You involved two objects: your shoe and the chair," and so on. All the time we keep it simple: one object. We start talking formally in the sense of "What do you see?" not what is your idea or psychological interpretation or emotional reaction. A chair. What is it like? Because there are many different chairs. Is it metallic? Is it gray? And you are dressed in gray, wearing black shoes, etcetera. How are you and the chair in dialogue? Sometimes just by you being present a relation with a shape, with a form, is created. You are sitting there. There are rhythms. But you are not forcing anything. It is there and it is talking by itself. That, for me, is what good art is doing.

Seeing things that may not be visible to other people and bringing them out by pointing?

Yes. For me, good art is something very simple. But it is so simple and so beautiful that nobody has seen it before and you just say, "Look at this." Every day you sit on a chair but you never pay attention and think, "Look, you can do this with a chair." And this, for me, is to make art! Nothing complicated—I mean, it is complicated because you have to find something very simple.

If you were given more time, what other exercises or approaches would you teach?

We could go deeper, from the formal aspects of an action to the conceptual aspects. Most of the performances that I see are just crappy. I would say ninety-five percent of them are crappy. Why? Because you need a lot of knowledge, know-how. Because you can put everything in a performance. You are dealing with sculpture, with painting, with photography, composition, color, room, installation, audience, timing. It is time-based. A good performance is good because the presence of the performer is good. And it doesn't matter what the person is doing. I've seen great performances of almost doing nothing, because of how this person is doing it. And this is something that is hard to teach. How to teach you to be an artist? Is it possible to teach it? I don't know.

Is it possible to give advice to a young student of performance art, as to what to avoid when trying to create a performance piece?

It is a discipline that is interdisciplinary. It is a discipline that you can't discipline. There are no schools or styles. OK, maybe there are some people who teach and then they create a style. Marina Abramović was teaching in Braunschweig, Germany, for several years. I have met some of her students and you can see some elements that they all have in common. When I teach I try not to talk too much about my taste, how I would do it. In such a short period, it is more kind of, "Let's see and describe the things." We describe and we see what is working and what is not working formally. Does this action with this object set a contrast? Do they fit together? It is not about right or wrong because at the end of the day it depends on what you wanted to communicate. Your aim can be to do something very boring or very disturbing. Both are fine but you have to be aware of what you want first. In the workshop we start with formal analysis of actions and objects. If we had more time we would have moved more in the conceptual direction, deep and deeper. What is important nowadays? What do you have to say? This is your research. Then you have these concepts and these topics, and how do you translate them aesthetically?

JOANNA MATUSZAK is pursuing a Ph.D. in art history at Indiana University, Bloomington. She specializes in the history of post-WWII performance art. Her dissertation addresses Russian performance art in public spaces in the post-Soviet period. Her article on performances by Russian artist German Vinogradov has appeared in *Performance Research*.