

Outward from Nothingness

Interview: Marcus Civin

May 1, 2013

Marcus Civin and Saehee Cho

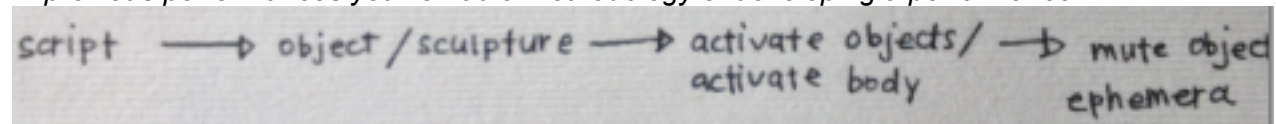
Saehee Cho: A very early project of yours was to transcribe Tolstoy's epic "War & Peace" in painstaking hand written script, which could be perceived as a way of living the story, of embodying the text. Is the process of transcribing word-by-word a way of inserting yourself into the text?

Marcus Civin: Absolutely. I wanted to play that text... I was outside of it and inside of it... I'm still doing projects with paper and text. For example, I collect the notes I make during the day. I type into the computer what I need from those notes at the end of the day, and then at the beginning of the next day, I combine the paper scraps into compositions. I've lined the compositions along a wall in my apartment. They're starting to resemble bandages.

Could you say that this is an act of translation between literary work into a visual art object, or is that distinction blurred?

I think that you could say that. I lost myself in that text. I also transcribed English translations of *Fathers and Sons*, *Notes from the Underground*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *The Prince*. Those were beautiful delirious years, about 2001-2006.

In previous performances you've had a methodology of developing a performance.



I like this flow chart, Saehee. My methodology, if you can call it that, is probably more of a continuum. I might start with an object. I might start by trying to approximate a certain choreography, the actions from a film clip. I might transcribe part of a text I admire and then start exploring a bit of the argument in that text and let that exploration meander towards objects or actions I think are somehow appropriate, vaguely related to the text—related perhaps somehow like nightmares are related to reality. I might re-use an object I used in an earlier performance

Throughout your process the text and objects and even your body shuttle between active and inactive. Objects/sculptures are found/manipulated and then activated by your performance and then go mute after the performance and remain as ephemera. Your pieces seem to have lifespan, go through several rounds of meaning. The textual elements begin as scripts and then are often orated as part of the performances. The elements of your work never seem to want to stay stable. What is being communicated through the shifting states?

I want to make sense by crashing together ideas that are seemingly opposed. I want to share the opening text from a performance, *Vaudeville*, that I am making as a tribute to my former teacher, the dancer, filmmaker, writer, Yvonne Rainer. This opening text is a call-and-response. I say the first line and then I encourage the audience to repeat after me. This is the second call-and-response I have performed recently. (The first is part of

my play, *A Play Called Scenes From A Love Story including An Optimist's Tale*.) Some of the following language draws from Yvonne's work, or my response to it; some of the language refers to what else will happen in the 15-minute performance, a performance loosely about ping-pong diplomacy. Also, I'm thinking about the abstract painter, Agnes Martin, who wrote in 1972: "We seem to be winning and losing,/ but in reality there is no losing/ the wiggle of a worm as important as the assassination of a/president" ...

CALL AND RESPONSE

I am running.

I am running.

I make a circle.

I make a circle.

I am a circle.

I am a circle.

I am a hard edge.

I am a hard edge.

I am a worm.

I am a worm.

I am bouncing.

I am bouncing.

I am bouncing a ball.

I am bouncing a ball.

I am a bouncing ball.

I am a bouncing ball.

I am hardly a saint.

I am hardly a saint.

I am no diplomat.

I am no diplomat.

I am not your blueberry muffin.

I am not your blueberry muffin.

I cannot open the gate.

I cannot open the gate.

I can open an oyster.

I can open an oyster.

I can re-write the constitution.

I can re-write the constitution.

I could be wrong.

I could be wrong.

I crack jokes.

I crack jokes.

I hate it in that old musty castle.

I hate it in that old musty castle.

I have my two feet marching.

I have my two feet marching.

I have no business in here.

I have no business in here.

I pass you the ball.

I pass you the ball.

I put down my weapon.

I put down my weapon.

I raise my arms.

I raise my arms.

I remember.

I remember.

I see you across the table.

I see you across the table.
I stand on my own two feet.
I stand on my own two feet.
Nothing but net.
Nothing but net.
It's only the news.
It's only the news.
It's what's on TV.
It's what's on TV.
This just a filibuster.
This just a filibuster.
The key is by the boiler.
The key is by the boiler.
The key is by the potting soil.
The key is by the potting soil.
This is anything but a game.
This is anything but a game.
This is our little game.
This is our little game.
This is supposed to be funny.
This is supposed to be funny.
You could laugh.
You could laugh.
Or you could eat celery.
Or you could eat celery.
We shall switch groups.
We shall switch groups.

Instability/imbalance feel to me so important in your work. There's a kind of pulsing anxiety when I watch you perform, like the whole thing could fall apart, and it really could—and I think that potential is so much of what I love about your work. You could choke on Orgone matter, you could fall out of the bath tub, you could drop all the bricks. Can you speak a little about the role of imbalance in your work?

Thank you... but I never do.... I never get hurt. I rehearse. It's all staged. Smoke and mirrors. Smoke and mirrors. I do feel energized by that tension you locate, though. To me it's like the feeling of being financially stable, but looking around and knowing that at any point, the floor could fall out from under.

Another element I love about your work is the absurdity with which you treat your sculptures. I'm thinking of the plastered clown shoes, the dirty white tuxedos, the slightly rounded tools, the spinning rusted bathtub. The proportions are always just a little off. What is the work of these manipulated proportions? What do they do to the "reality" of the work?

I do prefer rough objects, torn paper. It's true, I start looking at an object, hold it in my hands, and I end up rounding that object down. In my hands, objects end up looking poor, stepped-on, sewn together in a hurry; they're missing teeth; I draw on their backs... I've debated a related point with some of my friends who also make objects. I feel like I lose this particular debate every time, but I'll restate my hypothesis here in case someone can help me for future debates: *I think an awkward, humble object is an accessible object.*

In general though, I'm not a realist. I'm interested in what could be. We could be worms and we could be presidents.

One text I am thinking about recently is “I Am We,” Black Panther Huey Newton’s Epilogue to his book *Revolutionary Suicide* (1973). Huey Newton is a difficult figure for me—I am obviously no Black Panther—but I like what I read in “I Am We” as Newton’s idea that a certain earnest simplicity or meaningful symbolic demonstration can move great and powerful forces to act in concert with small groups who possess great imagination and extraordinary resolve. For me, the text is about a giving, losing self, having a specific faith, addressing injustice.

Here’s Huey Newton: “The reactionary fool is “wise,” and the revolutionary suicide is a “fool,” a fool for the revolution in the way that Paul meant when he spoke of being “a fool for Christ.” That foolishness can move the mountain of oppression; it is our great leap and our commitment to the dead and the unborn. We will touch God’s heart; we will touch the people’s heart, and together we will move the mountain.”