

The Practice of John Court - Durational Performance as Vision and Spectacle

Visual Culture

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The Practice of John Court - Durational Performance as Vision and Spectacle

Elayne Harrington

To consider performance art in the context of vision is to presume the work will at some point be witnessed. This medium of art may be executed live and observed in the moment of its creation by a given group of individuals. It may unfold in a less public manner, where it is delivered and experienced by an artist as something different. Still, in both instances, we may have the opportunity to be acquainted with performance art. Often this practice will be recorded, possibly edited or reduced selectively and experienced in a digital visual format after the initial live demonstration, published and retained for posterity. Either way, whichever route is navigated - the work will at some point be a vision. I want to reflect on why performance art is a worthwhile vision and the importance of observation of this strand in the fine art field - visual performance art.

The matter of how it relates to contemporary art practice and visual culture as spectacle will be deliberated via the praxis of British born, Finland based artist John Court. To narrow the focus and interrogate the principles of vision and spectacle within this artist's practice I will explore his work in a general way with specific focus resting on two of his artworks. The first is an untitled piece, the work consisting of five hours live performance which was presented in *Beijing Live* in Beijing, China in 2016. The second, again is untitled - a three hour performance presented in *Uprooted Fake Nations Festival*, Helsinki in 2013.

To assist the alignment of John Court's work with theories of vision and spectacle I will reference artists, theorists and educators who have commented on Court's aims and points of focus evident from his writing, documentation and of course his practice. Also, I will refer back to written records obtained during a week of masterclasses led by the artist himself in Poznań at the University of Fine Arts in Poznań, which was a group project where object making was guided by Court with the employment of his own design strategies. This

collective process served as a precursor to the international sculpture and performance conference *Sculpture In Process* which was held at Brama Poznan in March 2019.

Throughout the research, I will regard performance in conjunction with thoughts from the artist plus points of interest regarding expectations and conventions within the field. “In the context of the contemporary art world it allows us to suggest a practice full of paradoxes, wilfully refusing to be fenced in.” (Coogan, A. 2015). I set out to cover strategies, experiences as well as materiality, site specificity and scale which emphasise that paradoxical ambiguity exhibited by the particular branch of art. This will allow the arguing of crucial points around what can be derived from Court’s durational and endurance work in terms of vision and spectacle.



Fig 1: John Court, *Untitled*, Photograph by Helena Wikströ
7 hours performance(11am to 6pm)in *Room for Performance* at Bildmuseet Umeå, Sweden on Saturday the 17th of September, 2016.

Venø Gård KUNST stated in the promotional details of their 2017 International Performance Art Festival: 'John Court deals with issues of physical endurance by pushing his body to its absolute limits.' This brings to mind the fundamental element of bodily function and how it reacts to pain and fatigue. Without venturing completely back into the history and origins of performance art I want to draw upon *Fluxus* to relate to the philosophy of Court's endurance pieces. "Fluxus was characterised as a shared attitude rather than a movement." (Tate, 2019). To first exemplify this attitude and later to parallel with that of John Court, let us consider Fluxus artist Joseph Beuys and his three days spent with a coyote in the 1974 work: *I Like America and America Likes Me*.

The performance employs duration in a way similar to how John Court works. John Court's wild animal is the unpredictable and feral self - the human body that can be controlled or forced to operate in a given system within its biological limits. In a way, Court's objects act as a goad or purpose, an activating factor of the process that is a vital determining element. There is a risk and an unforeseeable element in Beuys's work as there are similar aspects which occur in Court's durational work. Although John's objects can spontaneously fail(they can weaken and break, thus ending the performance), the design and preparation, his creation of the objects have a certain amount of authority and support, perhaps even command or restrain possibilities. This is not necessarily reductive in that it is the very imposition of those physical demands unto John that create the prospect of spectacle for the onlooker.

Like the coyote offers Beuys's work a undeterminable force, so do the impromptu factors although these cannot stand as the crux of the work. The engagement and interpretation of the combined presence of both Beuys and the coyote become the meaning spreading, shifting and of curiosity, tolerance and exchange. Indeed the vision of man at close range with a wild animal could certainly be considered spectacle, but it is the subtle moments of harmony and of circumspection that hold to the spectacular nature of normality in the everyday and the more rare, artificially constructed instances. "Beuys regularly performed the same series of actions with his eyes continuously fixed on the coyote." (Yeung, 2019).

Drawing upon this, it is easy to see how repetition was a functional feature in this work from Beuys and it can be considered when interpreting the repetitive or recurring components as carried out in that of John's. His recreation of sorts of hyper-normalities

framed within an everyday context include systematic and sequenced structures, actions and evidence from mark making. His artistic output is exploratory. When caught up in the vision of Court's inward exploration, as expressed outwardly, we are allured by the sheer spectacle of this 'hyper-normality', this action-on loop that is nuanced by the biological limits of Court's humanity. The allure occurs in a clandestine way. The artful play of the artist's actions, his focus, the whole privacy come publicity of the act intoxicates the perception and blurs the sense of time, our sense of awareness of absorption and of our watching. We become active viewers. Subjects to the vision and this is where the work of John Court extends its reach beyond the realms of durational and endurance work to the throes of participatory practice. "Only through an effort and desire to heal, Beuys would argue, can we eradicate fear and stereotype: but it's as simple as spending time together."(Yeung, 2019).

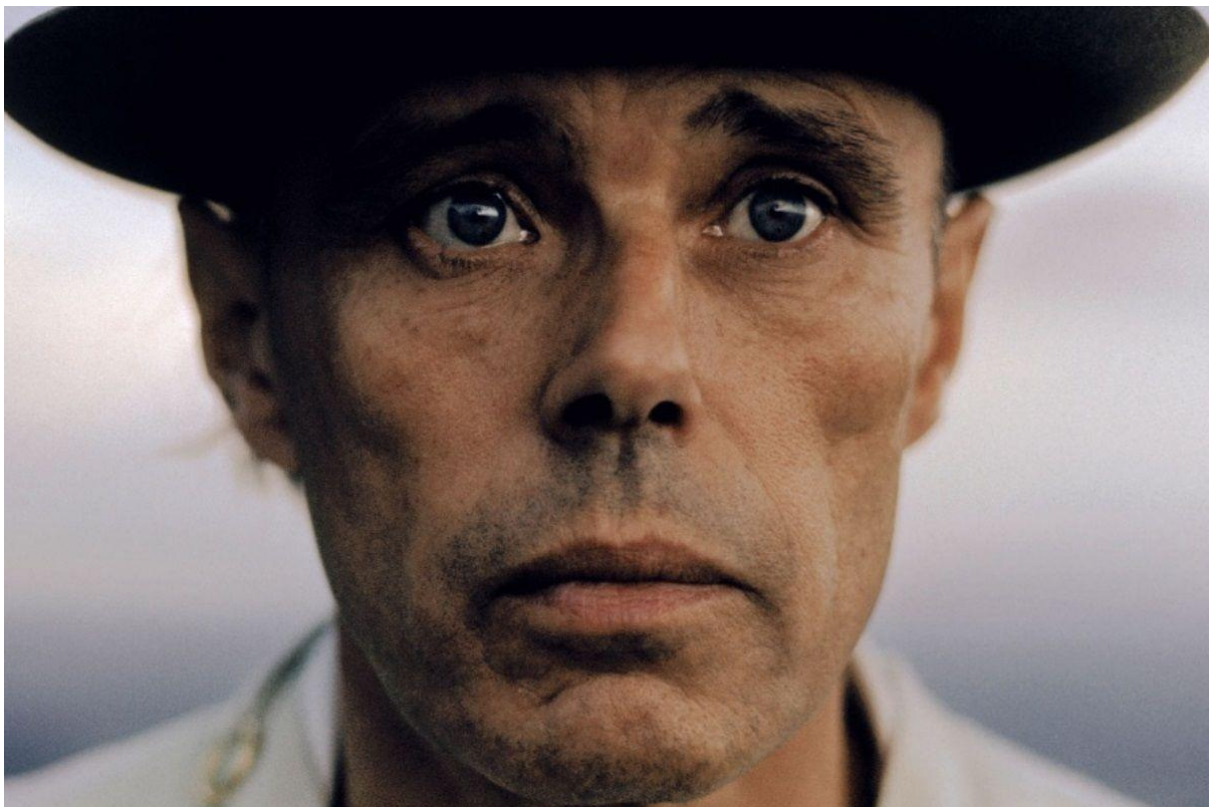


Fig 2: Joseph Beuys - Participatory Art and Social Sculpture, Lorenzo Pereira, Widewalls, 16th of March, 2016.

In theory Court's work may not be thought of as socially engaged or participatory in nature but the fact of his benefit from(albeit not dependency upon)the exchange of energy to influence and enhance his live output is in contrast to some performance artists. Within a performance where Dominic Thorpe was blindfolded, the artist reported afterwards that he never knew whether anyone was observing the work and asserted that the value of the work does not reside in it being witnessed. Thorpe states that he feels the work needs to be done and that is what matters. (Begley, 2019). John Court exhibits the normal functioning body in extraordinary moments of simple and plain fatigue during navigation of and negotiation with impressive, albeit not overtly extraordinary structural elements and accompanying objects. So, the spectacle of the banal asserts itself through John's work via the sheer exertion, the pure play of energy and the brilliance of the human staying power.



Fig 3: John Court, *Untitled*, Photograph by Steven Bridges, 7 hours 30 minutes performance(1pm to 8.30pm)in Rapid Pulse Festival, Chicago, USA on Saturday 13th of June, 2015.

In her essay response included in Court's 2017 publication *An idea of performance a idea of art*, Northern Irish visual artist Sandra Johnston refers to the work in its rawness, as reflected in the style of the book itself.

“...a relationship is implied of how one element might purposefully connect to the other, a series of conceptual interactions testing how the corporality of one component might articulate its inanimate other. (Johnston, Chap. 3, p 19).

It is the insistent presence of Court and the engaging of these durational endurance pieces that that jolt and absorb viewers and gallery-goers alike. It is this purposefulness that Johnston refers to which, as it emanates from the encounters with various objects and repeated activities that stirs these seemingly solemn and at first glance quiet works to spectacle. A push and shove of the emotions, as the observing body leans in or contracts away according to the physiological sympathy incited by Court's one-man procedures. Johnston notices the work's tendency to induce a response of a duplicitous nature - as she describes Court's ferocious holding of a space as offering the possibility to witness inclusion and exclusion simultaneously. Johnston refers to “an incessant quality in the work as it unfolds that is sensed as irreversible.” (2017, Chap 3, p 19). Even the language she uses to describe the realisation and delivery of his work and how it is received reflects the poetic flow that is moving and living in the portrayals of endurance as delineated by John Court in his durational processes.



Fig 4: Sandra Johnston and Alastair Maclellan, Venice International Performance Art Week, 2014.
Photographer: Monika Sobczak.

Of five hour duration, the intensity of an untitled work expounds the themes of labour, continuous movement and interaction with sculptural object. Court's recurring themes are at play in a new way. Again, some structural elements determine the nature and reach of his movements yet "Court's precision and discipline are not used to invoke sympathy." (Johnston, 2017). In this it could be said that this is addressing the audience in a way that asserts their autonomy in not establishing rigid narrative to be easily navigated. This is perhaps where the spectacle of John's work resides - within the expansiveness in which the work can be experienced. And as the artist asserted during the masterclasses held in Poland: "It is simply moving an object, but something *else* happens." There is something turbulent yet quiet, sporadic yet steadfast all about the work - the work which "need not be a spectacle, for that's not necessary." (Court, 2019).

The impressive structure captivates the viewer and the monumental platform is a continuum which incline and decline alike offer no recess for the eye or senses when partaking in the observation of the unrelenting silent spectacle. The artist can be prompted to constantly move by the object or the object can be continually set in motion by the artist.

He walks on to a hand build wooden structure built by the artist which is based on the shape of infinity. He writes on his forehead 3 letters which represent three words god-gob-dog which stay on his forehead for the whole duration of the performance. He starts by running in anti-clockwise direction up to one side of the ramp and then running down the other side. Each time he passes one side of the structure he tries to write one number from 1 to 9 trying to keep them in the same order. He does this for the whole 5 hours performance. (Court, 2016)

He continuously moves, although at varying paces. The design with its aggressive arching peaks and steeply descending slopes forces a reduction in the continuous flow whilst intermittently propelling The anticlockwise direction seems to create greater pressure, making the job a tougher one, slowing the body down. (Court, 2019). It is not feasible to enter into the laws of biology or psychology to attempt to cover this entire topic and connect John Court's mind with the facts behind "directional preferences in a wide range of visuospatial behaviors." However, there is reasoning behind preferential rotational behaviour and it is understood that there are habitual patterns and physical functions that occur and which make choices according to scientific laws or the law of nature, if you like. (Karim, Proulx, Likova, 2016).

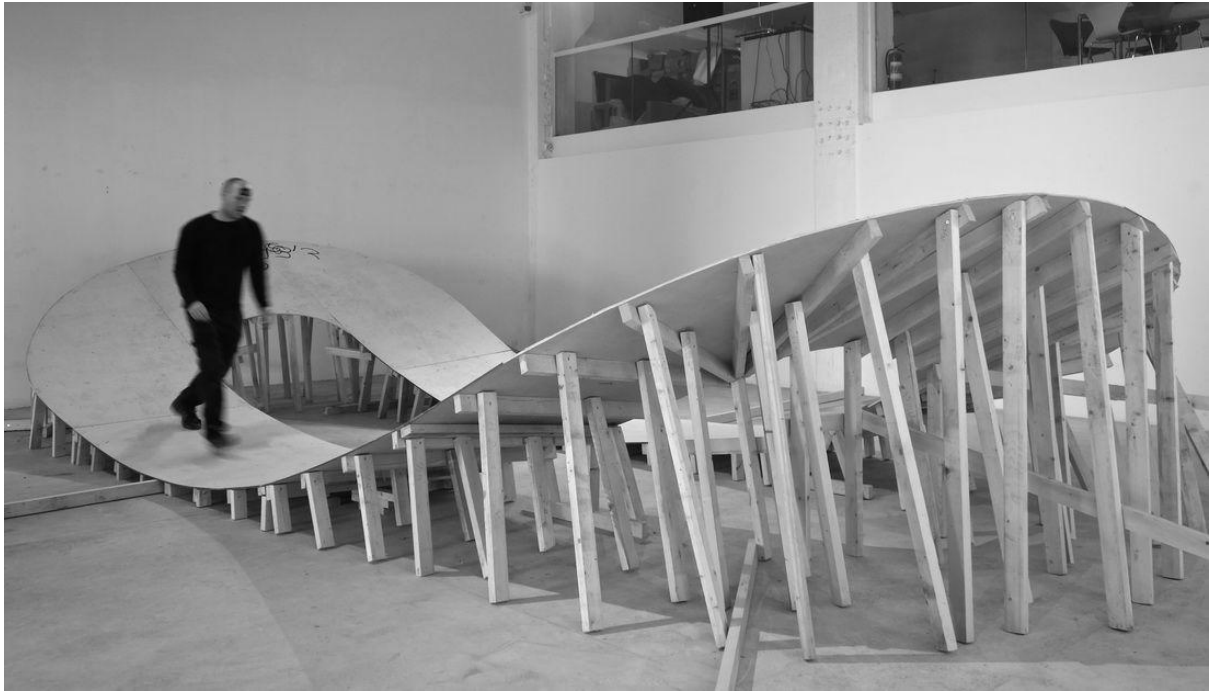


Fig 5: John Court, *Untitled* in Beijing, Live Beijing China, Sunday 23rd October 2016 (10am to 3pm).
Photograph by Joakim Stampe.

A brick held, a bucket of water balanced - the next of Court's works which I will exemplify is the 2013 untitled work. There is further poetry to be interpreted from this routine administration of effort, it is a sort of organically tempered metronome elapsing within a three hour frame as an abstract performance of endurance. The work which unfolded at *Uprooted Fake Nations Festival* in Helsinki quietly captivates. There is a matter-of-factness about his air, a solemn perseverance and a reverent sort of focus. We are entering into a private moment within a public situation. We are in the gallery, in school yard, in the council estate, on the building site in the gallery. The white cube in this instance is space to hold things that will elevate the artist and in turn he elevates a selection of items to propel something not as tangible as bricks and water. A temporary exalted status, a working man's stage - a labourer's soap box made of bricks and toil. The vision of the work is captured only as a portion of the reality, keeping in mind the live work is a three hour action. Our proposed three minute attention span fails to meet such lofty standards when consuming the re-processed footage of such a work on Vimeo, but this is a whole other topic. When consumed live, the vision is preferable, more so than the evidence as a digital remnant.

The vision is barely tolerable yet the seduction of the kinetic process as viewed in the flesh is a strange blend of high and low and at times of indifference and then of excessive concern with the minute accents as they fluctuate in a spontaneous yet perfectly timely fashion. We are this involved because of our own predisposition to empathy, because of memory and knowledge of the body, also sympathy with the limits of the fragile human condition. That is not to say this is the artist's intent or the purpose of the work. In fact, I am not convinced of this, especially when considering Johnston's pertinent response: "What we observe is a quiet internalisation, where the artist withholds from the viewer overt signs of emotional conditioning or attachment." (2017, Chap 3, p 20). Although the official composer Court is not orchestrating. Rather something profound and involuntary is being allowed to happen to his audience. And the fact that something of a similar calibre is happening to the artist says something of the power of that attention, the visual exchange and energy as key elements leading to an overall experience of spectacle.



Fig 5: John Court, *Untitled*, 3 hour performance in Uprooted Fake Nations Festival, Helsinki 2013.
Photograph: <http://interakcje.org/en/artysci/john-co/>

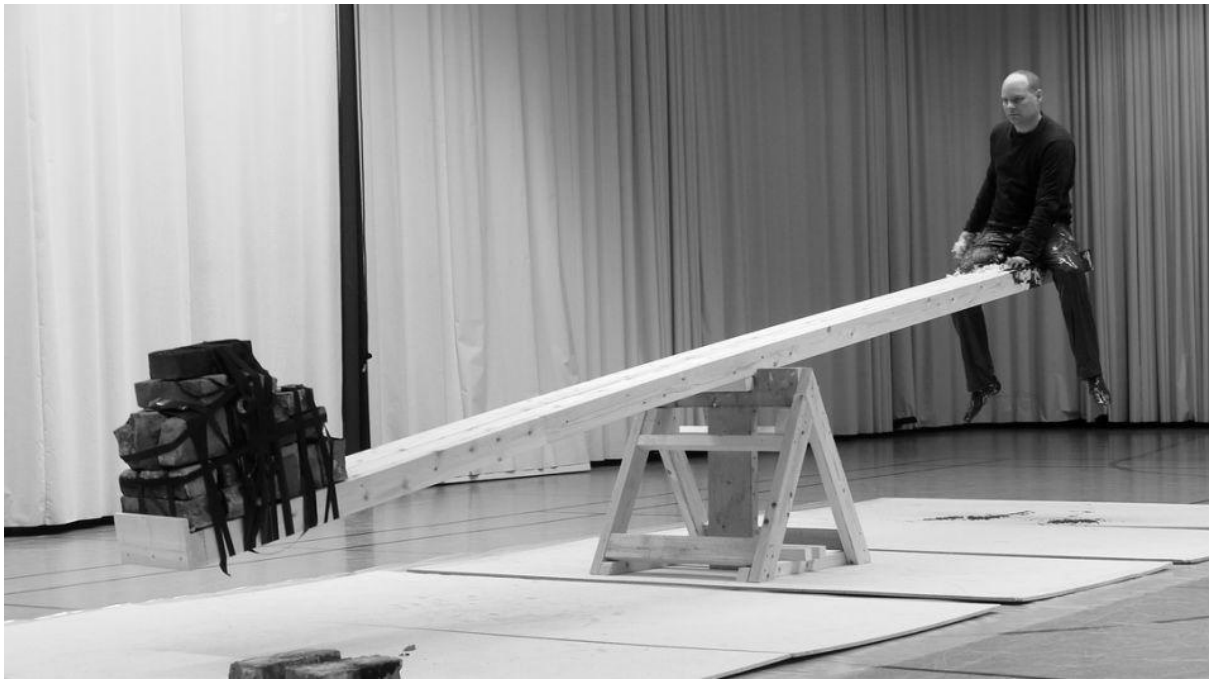


Fig 6: John Court, *Untitled*, 8 hours performance(10am–6pm)at Fake Finns and Wannabe Swedes, organised by PAiN - Performance Art in Norrbotten at IKRA Dance and Performance Art Festival, Haparanda, Sweden on 12th of June, 2013.
Photograph by Stina Engman and Denis Romanowski.

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