



VK Preston

Performance and Theater Documentation 2000-2007

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Narratives and Photographs

2006

Mascot for Soft Soul – Narrative November 2006, Berlin. Original concept and performer.

Mascot for Soft Soul – Project statement for upcoming performances.

Naked West – Production in October and reading in May 2006, Berlin. F-40. Director.

Sonnenstein – Zelle 1 – February 2006 at 100 Grad Festival Berlin, Sophiensaele. Director.
German translation of *Piedra de sol* by Octavio Paz

Sonnenstein – Zelle 2 – March 2006 at Unser Laden e.V. Berlin. Director.

Kanadiana – May 2006. Staged readings at F-40 Berlin. Curator.

2005

Low Tech / High Traffic – November 2005 in Berlin at palast.berlin at Tacheles. Curator.

The Hope Machine – February 2005 in Montreal at *Musée des maîtres et des artisans du Québec*. Director.

2004

The Hope Machine photo performance – November 2005. Process. Director.

MFG – Mobile Filter Group / More Friendly Garbage – October 2004 in Montreal at *6e Mois du Performance, Galerie La Centrale*. Performance.

R.S.V.P. – May 2004 in Montreal at Galerie La Centrale. Group exhibition. Performance.

Unbalanced – Edgy Women 2004 in Montreal and in Toronto at Red Festival. Solo work.

Projects 2000-2004

Research—*Hope Chest* – June 2003, Montreal. MAI (Montréal, arts interculturels)

Theatre Projects and Director Training

- *Bowlin' Ghosts* by Josh Cowan – June 2004, Montreal. Director.
- *Wedding Day at the Cro Magnons* by Wajdi Mouawad – December 2003, Montreal.
- *Sea Peach* by Catherine Kidd and Jack Beetz – November 2002, Montreal. Director.

Dance Projects

- *Luftbalons*. September 2002, Montreal. Choreographer.
- *O!sweetmediatrix*. May 2002, Montreal. Choreographer.
- *Collaborations with Jean Haluska*. October 2000 and May 2001. Choreograph

Soft Soul Protokoli
Riding the Ring.
Berlin, Saturday night 2am- 4am
19 November 2006

Bunny Narrative 1 (Virginia / Concept)

We walk to the train station with the pink costume in a plastic carry-all bag. I am excited because it is my first opportunity to see the costume from the outside. I have a digital camera, a notebook and a novel—for cover. We examine the train schedule and give ourselves five minutes to get Vladimir in costume and board the next train. The moment the bunny appears out of the bag voices scream '*Rosaroter Hase, rosernes Kaninchen*' (*pink bunny pink bunny*). This is the refrain of the evening. Vladimir is immediately mobbed by girls with digital cameras on their mobile phones. He boards the train and sits.



Who would miss a two-meter tall pink bunny rabbit? Not the guys on the train dressed as top-hatted characters from *A Clockwork Orange*. The rabbit causes a minor stampede to the middle of the car. I am nervous for Vladimir—my research on corporate mascots shows that people are violent with them. This is our first public outing—and we meet the 'Droogs' within twenty minutes. I wonder whether the train conductor will ask us to leave the train, but after a long wait the doors close and the train pulls out of the station.

The bunny creates hilarity on the train, but since Vladimir doesn't *do* anything the passengers are flummoxed. A new game begins: when we pull into a station everyone on board waits for the new passengers to discover the bunny—and laughs hysterically. Now they are the experts. The bunny creates a community on the train. Cameras come out. I have no need for cover. Almost no-one notices my equipment—I am among many revellers. Meanwhile, Vladimir sits like an ordinary but very pink and furry passenger.

Bunny Narrative 2 (Vladimir / Co-Performer)

I get changed into the Mascot at Ostkreuz, at 2:10 am. We board the ringbahn, a city train that runs counter-clockwise around the downtown core, and which is to carry us in the next hour and a half once around Berlin on the border between the city and its outer districts. I sit down on the last bank of chairs, slightly leaning against the glass to my right. I can't see much, reconstructing the situation mainly by hearing now.

The crowd is drunk, either post or pre-party. Immediately people respond to my appearance in the train. Loud disbelief.

Constant photography with mobile phones. Generally friendly but slightly aggressive testosterone and alcohol induced atmosphere. Young guys engage in games of daring with me, to which I only slightly respond. I'm trying not to move too much, only small lifesigns, little communication. This seems to provoke them. They photograph themselves with me, I gently lean on one of the guy's shoulders. The next one dares to sit on my pink lap, and gets this photographed also.



The question arises whether I'm a boy or a girl, I don't respond. Someone suggests pulling the mascot's head off, somebody pulls the mascot's ears. At that point I feel "in character" so that everything happens to me as a hybrid: they are pulling MY ears. I get the feeling that I'm becoming more dehumanized, a toy. It is suddenly appropriate to touch me, to speak of me in the third person, to violate my private space.

Virginia cont'd: The droog taps the mascot on the head several times with his cane, but he is mostly interested and curious. He invites the bunny to a party.



Vladimir stands at Westhafen station, and I blow my cover following him off the train. We change roles but are mobbed as we change on dark stairs. We are not 'friendly' so the group leaves.



I take Vladimir's place and sit like a decoy on a bench. Groups come to explore the strange apparition of a rabbit on a suburban train platform at 3 AM: *Rosaroter Hase!* The first group to find me decides I'm a doll. But they notice I am wearing shoes so they come up behind me and feel my shoulders through the costume. I am human. They decide I am asleep in a bunny costume—so they arrange my ears.

Vladimir cont'd: This is where I get a sense of danger for the first time, it seems that by performing an object in this way I lose the instinctive untouchability of a person surrounded by its usual private sphere. The more the bunny gets humiliated physically or by jokes, the more I feel strangely superior inside it. (It is the position of a jester and of the ethnologist on a field trip.)



After about 25 minutes in the first train we get off at Westhafen. Virginia changes into the costume, I document now. Soft Soul sits down in a chair on the platform and waits for the next Ring-Train to continue our trip. People start gathering around the sitting bunny right away. As Virginia continues to sit, only slightly moving her body, more and more people gather around her to discuss this strange appearance. Somebody tells the group a friend of his was supposed to be participating in a film shoot tonight, also wearing a bunny costume. The situation is very communicative, strangers discuss the bunny together, make guesses and jokes. Again people pose with the bunny for photographs.



The crowd responds to the bunny in at least two ways: some see it as a cute toy, and try to play with it, others try to get it to respond or check if its "alive". The sexual connotations of bunnies are clearly present—the public's remarks turn quickly obscene, although or maybe because the bunny's sex is left unclear.

Virginia cont'd: When more people arrive the girls explain my situation: I am drunk and have fallen asleep on the subway platform in a pink rabbit outfit. The newcomers commiserate: bad luck. I try not to move, although I am uncomfortable being manipulated by strangers. Then—I can't help it—I laugh. A spectator notices my shoulders shaking under the costume. My game is up, but a new game begins. The stranger becomes our interlocutor. He explains to the crowd the meaning of irony. I cannot see him (I am fairly sure he is on my right below).



Most of the people we meet seem not to realise I can hear them—and almost no-one notices Vladimir. The groups decide I am alone. Although we are cooperating in making a kind of story, I feel like a plaything. It is a strange feeling—particularly when I am groped and manipulated from behind. The laughter and group feeling is positive, but my position feels vulnerable. The costume breaks down barriers between groups and individuals. As the group gets larger I feel more and more like an object. The group keeps growing. It is fun, and also quite disturbing

When our train arrives and we stand to leave the group breaks into applause and thank-yous. I take a small bow. We leave the social center of the city and head through the suburbs and the old west. The train is almost empty. I lie down.



Vladimir cont'd: The bunny becomes a catalyst for the situation. If there is a possibility for a group in a certain setting the group will form itself around the bunny. The mascot functions in his displacement like a chemical indicator, the response to it is an immediate fallout of whatever the current social mixture is made of. Around the bunny people start to react to each other, forming a group of witnesses.

The bunny has the pink/rosé colour of litmus paper. Tendencies in behavior of loose groups tend to clarify and enhance when confronted with the presence of the strange mascot. The loose crowd becomes tighter as communication and curiosity grow and a common mood/disposition evolves among the people/spectators surrounding the bunny.

After staying at Westhafen for about 20 min. Virginia gets on the next train. The coach is pretty empty and the bunny gets no reaction besides little sniffs of disbelief.



On one of the next stops we change cabins. I leave Virginia sitting on a sideways chair between two doors and go to sit a couple of seats further down.



Virginia cont'd: My head hurts from the costume. A very drunk man sits opposite me. He hardly takes me in. Now I am the witness—and I take a more active role watching and taking in peoples' intentions. To my left a man cruises a woman and she ignores him.



Vladimir cont'd: As I turn around I see a guy kicking the sitting bunny violently in the stomach. Before I realize what is going on, he also punches the bunny in the face, deforming the wirecage with his fist and leaving a dent. Several people rise from their seats and shout, I run towards Virginia, the guy stops kicking the bunny and runs out of the still waiting train onto the platform and away.

After that three young guys enter the train.



When we arrive at Sudkreuz I change cars. I sit and almost immediately feel a heavy weight on my stomach—and then my head. I realise I am being attacked when a man starts pulling my head off. Passengers on the train begin to yell, the head comes off and I see—simultaneously, a man ready to hit me and Vladimir and a stranger running to help. The man stops punching me and runs off. I think he realises I am a woman. The wire frame protected me and I am unhurt. No photos. I am incredibly relieved the mask held—and that the stuffing on the stomach protected me. While we were making the costume security was part of the planning. We reshape the rabbit's face and continue. Our anonymous helper returns with a camera for photographs. He thanks us. I wave goodbye.



Three drunk men get on a train. I am more nervous. One is aggressive and full of sexual innuendo. The tables have turned. I wait him out. He wants to know whether I am a man or a woman and he feels my musculature under my costume. I flinch. I make a funny gesture with claws to make him laugh and back off. He does. I am more cautious, I have learned that not moving seems more aggressive than gently engaging. I am more attentive, but he cannot read my expressions under the costume. We complete the circuit and disembark.



All photographs by Virginia Preston and Vladimir Miller

Soft Soul Proposal

Field Study (Trojan Horse)

Brief summary of work:

The Soft Soul Field Study is an action in public space in which Virginia Preston and Vladimir Miller appear as a two-meter-tall bunny rabbit. The project becomes a litmus test of place, public response, and the formation of groups. As the project develops in different cities, we create a fictional narrative with document, observations and reflections on cities.

Aims/Investigations/Problems/Mysteries:

Our work explores embodied risk and humour in public space. To date, in Berlin, Warsaw and Amsterdam we have not announced the bunny's appearances to the public.

Objectification:

The uncanny, even frightening, experience of *Soft Soul* is that spectators respond to the character as an object—despite the obvious presence of a human inside it. Viewers trespass beyond ordinary codes of conduct and like subjects of David Milgram's experiments, act with violence.

Inert Action as Intervention:

Soft Soul is a living sculpture that throws public space into relief. We seek to 'place' the rabbit in banal but uncanny international spaces (trains, airports, parks and shopping centers). The presence of a playful proposition in public space—one that *does* nothing and which refuses to react or play with spectators—creates a surprising range of audience response that we seek to document and (re) frame.

Fiction and Mystery:

The mascot—as a corporate identity and sports symbol—engages play for the purpose of marketing a product. Its function is to disguise the market as a friendly fantasy. Our

anthropomorphic bunny appropriates a recognizable public role for a fictional use and easily assimilates into public space. We enter into the public domain through disguise. In so doing, we experience the flow of public space within unique constellations of politics, sexuality and human interaction.

Research context:

We think that place is created when space becomes specific.

Our tactical invasions of public space function as a Trojan horse whose purpose is to transform and test public places. *Soft Soul* is an adorable, uncanny and deceptive visual joke.

We believe that every place has rules that are revealed when you break them. Every street can become a place once you start deconstructing and exploring its strategies. The mascot allows us to explore difference by employing humour as a catalyst to reveal the social constituents of place.

Michel de Certeau usefully differentiates between consumer and user, on one hand, and between strategies and tactics on the other. *Soft Soul* invites the public to recombine and reinterpret public space by replacing identifiable corporate strategies with subversive and individual tactics. Place and art, as similar self-defining phenomena, here collide through playful, joking and physical encounters with strangers. By insinuating the foreign body of the bunny into public space, we load the space with meaning and memory—this creates multiple possibilities for transforming 'space' into 'place,' transgressing boundaries between self and other, and triggering places to reveal their essential characteristics or functions.

Place is created through performance:

Our working proposition is to explore how performance, through fiction, realigns individual subjectivities in public space. This view of performance originates from De Certeau's idea of *using* space by employing

what he calls the tactics of everyday life. We are looking at place as a time-based medium that we can influence and change through performance.

Project History (Virginia):

The work started in June 2006 as a chance encounter. I met a bear mascot handing out flyers in Berlin's Alexanderplatz (the rather strange, awkwardly capitalist center of the former East Berlin). I photographed the bear and began thinking about how and why mascots come to impersonate the market in public space. Since it

was quite a tatty and badly-made bear, I also began thinking about the ubiquitous use of cartoon animals as friendly representatives of the market. Not only do the animal characters become dehumanizing fetish objects, they are performed by trained players who operate according to prescribed goals and codes. I looked up the performance rules for Disney's, McDonald's and other corporate performers—and I began thinking about how to work within their rules but against their purpose.

In October 2006 I began work on *Mascot for Soft Soul* with a directing and performance colleague Vladimir Miller. We first met in Warsaw over the summer and we are both involved in a loose association of artists called Best Use of Limited Liability (BULL). With the help of Julia Schweizer, an assistant costume designer at the Volksbühne—who cut the fabric and showed me how to attach the fur to the wire frame for the head—and with Doreen McBride who sewed the body and showed me generations of fantastic family Halloween costumes, *Soft Soul* 'premiered' on October 31 at the group exhibition *Grand Narratives* in Berlin.

Vladimir and I now work as a performance team. We take turns 'playing' the bunny and witnessing or documenting the way it affects public space. We are also test-driving the bunny in different cities. Ultimately, we would like to use the mascot to make playful use of "market" tactics—postcards, websites and posters—and insinuate visual counter-jokes in the public sphere.

We describe the bunny as a queer object that prompts, questions and conceals the player's gender, age and motivation. The bunny accrues symbolic meaning in reference to the libido, and it irritates the viewer by withholding information regarding its sexuality. In turn, the performer inside the costume can assume the position of an observer. This position enables the performers to explore places and tasks while the bunny, as a character, becomes the center of a public event.

Soft Soul throws everyday place into relief. It is a catalyst which reveals underlying affects and organizations of public space and group behaviour.

The bunny is an object of very low social status in public space. Spectators pull its ears, talk about it loud in the third person, and invade its 'private' space. The fluffy pink mascot provokes both affectionate and aggressive response because it is seen as an object that has no private being as such.

This lack of privacy sometimes spills into outright violence.

The Canadian documentary film *Behind the Mascot* shows violence as an occupational hazard of mascot performers. We have also found this to be true. We are seeking to document reactions, including violence, in public space—and within bounds of safety and a self-defined ethics of performance.

Dissemination:

Mascot for Soft Soul is a long-term project developed through unannounced appearances in different cities as well as through relationships with artist groups, festivals and conferences. Ultimately our purpose is to create an archive of documents and narratives that can be framed in exhibitions, publications or on-line.

Our physical experiences as the rabbit are sometimes alarming and we strongly believe they constitute the basis of a strong, ironic social study. As we shape and create this material, we will disseminate this in written and visual form.

We imagine *Soft Soul* as an event in the form of a magazine. Each appearance constitutes a short 'article' that we can disseminate as either a unique event or as part of a series. The group BULL—an ad hoc association of queer artists in Berlin, Warsaw and Belgrade—may also deploy *Soft Soul* to mount playful and ironic counter-advertising campaigns.

Documentation. At each stage of the project we experiment with how to document our appearances in public. We feel like the Loch Ness Monster—and our best and wittiest attempts at documenting ourselves are undoubtedly outnumbered by legions of passersby with mobile telephones. The question of documentation is central to our process. Our interest is to find compassion, complicity and play in public space—and to record these in performance documents. At the same time, with the development of wide-spread consumer digital products, we know we are working in the public domain where our appearances are as much part of our own experience as the public's.

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| Thanks to Julia Schweizer and Doreen McBride for their help and advice for the costume. |
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Naked West

Performances 3-7 October 2006

Reading 17 May 2006

English Theater Berlin, F40



Director: Virginia Preston

Music: Louis Scafouras

Roles and Performers:

Randy – Melissa Holroyd (Australia)

Jim – Kristi Hughes (U.S.A) / Lucy Cran (U.K.)

Virgil – Kelly Ann Sharmann

Emmett – Anna Finn (Canada)

Naked West is a satirical text by Calgary writer Michael Green. The piece is written for four male characters—and according to the script the gender of the players is optional. Ours is the first staging by an all-female cast.

Jim, Randy, Virgil and Emmett are hunters in the woods. Over the course of an alcohol-fueled night, they discover their desire for animals, violence and one another.

The piece structurally resembles *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the language is an elevated fusion of cowboy poetry and heroic monologues. In place of Puck, the piece is haunted by the Native American Trickster god Coyote.

Under Coyote's influence, the characters shapeshift, fight, and play out violent unconscious motives. The group kills Emmett after he strangles a mountain lion (Virgil) with his bare hands. Like all fables, the characters never die. Both Virgil and Emmett return as ghosts.

Working with a creative team including set designer Moss Fitzpatrick and sound designer DJ Scarlett Johansen, we developed a spare, styrofoam environment that distilled our wastelands concept to three core elements: moveable cacti in forced perspective, a skull, and absurd props such as cardboard guns and fright wigs. Sounds, gestures and vocal qualities reference clichés from Hollywood, 'Spaghetti-Westerns' and TV-series.

The piece presents several challenges. Not only are the players women playing men, the characters also change gender and become animals.

The actors and I developed 'breaks' from the narrative: line-dances, silent scenes and movement sequences featuring galloping-sounds made on half-coconuts and pop music. Using signs to identify themselves as narrators, the performers also announce the action and stage direction.

Ultimately, *Naked West*, is a political piece in masquerade – a philosophical critique in drag. Loneliness and beauty stalk these urban cowboys as they seek to escape themselves and the violent history of the West.

Video stills by Alina Rojas.

Sonnenstein / Zelle 1 & Zelle 2
100 Grad Festival, Berlin February 5, 2006
Unser Laden e.V., Berlin March 19-25, 2006



Text by Octavio Paz
(*Piedra de sol*, 1957)
Language: German
Directed by Virginia Preston

Music by Mark Barden
Performed by Christiana Mudra

Sonnenstein 'Cell 1' and 'Cell 2' are variations on a long-poem by Mexican Nobel Laureate Octavio Paz. Reflecting the Aztec 'calendar' upon which the poem is structured, we performed the piece at different times of day and night. The performances took place inside apartments and were co-created by performer Christiane Mudra, composer Mark Barden and director Virginia Preston.

Paz' poem is a powerful critique of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed. The self and the meld—becoming lover and beloved, torturer and tortured, and master and slave. The piece takes the form of a circle—the last line repeats the first and repeats a cycle of history and thinking.

In addition to creating a staged reading of the poem, we worked with the apartment as an installation. We developed use of sound which incorporates architectural features of the rooms. Walls and windows shook, cupboards became resonators, and a richness of dynamics and textures throughout the apartment encouraged audience members to explore this "space as instrument".

Our question was how to engage the audience's role in a performance and exploring alternative modes of perception. In this spirit, we conducted an experiment involving artificial sense enhancement at our last performance. We provided each audience member with (1) a microphone and headphones, (2) a still camera, or (3) video equipment. We invited them to "document" the piece during the performance.

'Spectators' using what we are calling prosthetic recording technology were much more courageous and active: they came much closer to the actress, physically interacted with the set, and explored zones in the apartment that audiences at previous shows had not. Feedback was enthusiastic and varied: everyone seemed to get something different and meaningful out of the work. It was one of our most successful performances and we are eager to continue working with audience documentation and alternative perceptual modes.

In June 2006 Mark and I began work on *Zelle 3*—an audio project for multiple voices, electronic and traditional instruments.

(Photographers clockwise from top left: Eric Green, Drew Kaiser and Natascha Engelmann)

Curating 2005-2006

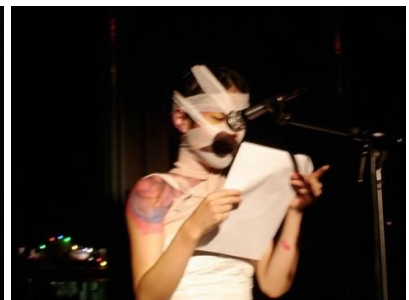
Kanadiana – Berlin, 17-19 May 2006



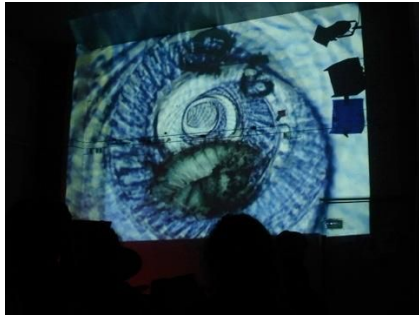
In May 2006 I was invited to organise a staged reading series of Canadian and Québec playwrights at the request of the English Theater Berlin. I chose works by Michael Green (*Naked West*), Deborah Pearson (*Table Talk*) and François Letourneau (*Cheech*). All of the works present performances of masculine misbehaviour. Deborah directed *Table Talk*, Robert Chevara directed *Cheech*, and I directed *Naked West*. Seventeen actors participated over three nights. I looked for works from both English and French Canada, and I showcased the first international reading of new writer Deborah Pearson as well as the hit text *Cheech*. She workshoped the piece in Berlin and while she was in Germany she was short-listed for the Rod Hall Memorial Award at Plaines Plough.

Actors in *Table Talk* and *Cheech* F-40 Berlin

Low Tech / High Traffic – Berlin, 23 November 2005 palast.berlin Tacheles



Low Tech / High Traffic took place at Tacheles in a street-level performance space in a busy, central part of Berlin with heavy pedestrian traffic. I chose eleven interdisciplinary artists and groups ranging from internationally established visual artists to relative newcomers. I was looking for flexibility and for people with the ability to create a group dynamic in a short work session. The artists ranged from new music composers and vocalists to film directors, musicians and performance artists. The artists, primarily new Berliners from a diverse range of countries, proposed music improvisations, experimental films and an excellent interpretation of a vocal score by George Aperghis. The groups met for one hour to coordinate an improvised structure for the performance. I coordinated lighting and sound transitions and 'directed' the evening live. The piece ran from 8 PM until 4 AM—and was packed to the rafters.



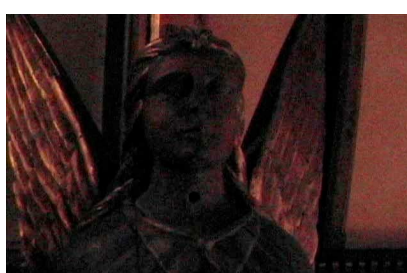
The Hope Machine
Performances in Montreal Feb. 17-26 2005
Musée des maîtres et artisans de Québec (MMAQ)

Directed and written by Virginia Preston
 Music by François Girouard
 Performed by Sebastien Morand, Miko Sobreira and Sara Wiskar
 Set design by Ana Cappelluto with Kerri Strobl and Isabella Geddes
 Video and documentation by Raylene Campbell and Mathieu Chartrand
 Technical direction by Mathieu Chartrand and Isabelle Beaudry
 Languages: English, French and Spanish



Photos by Sandra-Lynn Belanger

Hope Machine was first conceived as a documentary-theater project on the theme of hope. Through an interview-based research process, I came to see hope and fear as a continuum. The impulse for the project came from questioning how groups collectively experience hope in a secular context.



Montreal's Museum of Masters and Artisans, the venue pictured above, is a Neo-Gothic church that once lay at the center of downtown Montreal. In the Depression-era 1930's the building was relocated to an outlying, working-class borough of the city to make room for Montreal's central

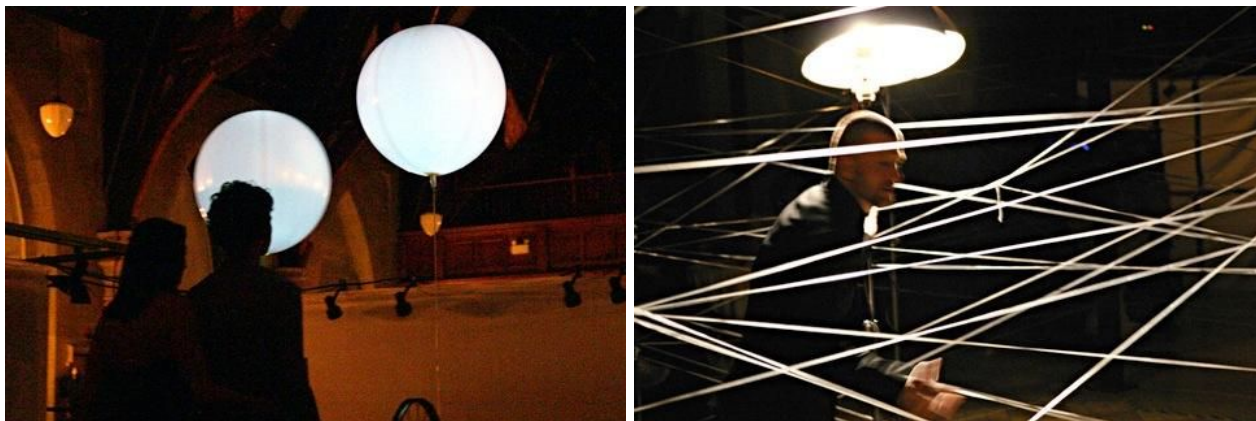
train station and the Queen Elisabeth Hotel. The latter is most famously the location of John Lennon and Yoko Ono's *Bed-in* and the recording *Give Peace a Chance* (1969). The church was built in 1864 as a Protestant space of worship and became Catholic in the forties. During the so-called 'Quiet Revolution' (*Révolution tranquille*) of the sixties, the Catholic church lost power in the region and attendance dropped precipitously. The building then became a secular museum housing a collection of heritage and artisanal works. Compelling connections between the building's history, its architectural features, and the themes of *Hope Machine* were furthered by research into local history and site-specific treatment. To get to the performance, many audience members had to travel to a relatively unfamiliar part of Montreal—and so their adventures discovering the venue became part of the experience of the performance. Even in February we had very good houses.



Working with a strong group of lighting, set, costume and sound designers, the creative team turned the museum's display areas into a labyrinth. Spectators entered the venue through a maze and were seated on the sanctuary by one of the performers. The main performance area made use of a metal structure that we wrapped in translucent elastics like a spider's web. Because we could not install dimmers, we worked with practical lights and collaborated with an environmental engineer to re-use industrial robotic equipment from the pulp and paper industry. We lit the performance with portable photography lights from the 1950's and programmed them with Morse code for 'Hope,' 'Faith' and 'Fear.' Using a video projector as a secondary light-source, we fractured an image that resembles neurons—representing the Tree of Life—onto the elastic structure. By subtly moving the images, we could 'speed up' and 'slow-down' the atmosphere of the room. *Hope Machine's* scenography and spatiality were exceptionally effective—and both made inexpensive and innovative use of non-traditional materials.

The piece was sound and image-based. Light, movement and darkness were primary aspects of the work. I cast two dancers with theater backgrounds and a mime artist in the roles of Adam, Eve, and the perverse Gnostic god Samael. François Girouard, a Montreal-based electroacoustic

composer, created an original score for the piece using a combination of live and recorded sounds. He also used large metal oil drums as percussion objects.



While I started the piece with an utopian idea, the performance ultimately had very dark content. The piece addresses religious themes but is not religious as such. The first version of the script was formally experimental and had no story, and I incorporated narrative elements based on Gnostic stories of Eden after meeting with a dramaturg.

The most effective part of the work was a conversation. At the climax of the piece, Miko Sobreira (above right) asks the audience what they fear. This section came from an improvisation I had done at a reading series in October the previous year. Surprisingly the audience always answers. When the audience finishes speaking, we do the first blackout in the church (which is an uncanny place to be in the dark). The darkness reveals two dimly-lit balloons high above the audience. The performers lead the balloons through the enormous space, manipulating them like air-borne puppets while François plays a digitally-slowed and randomly-sampled choir by Gyorgy Ligetti. The proposal for the scene is to manifest and release fears as a collective. The performers lead the balloons all the way out of the Church.

Ultimately, although the section does not involve visible actors, it is the most 'theatrical' moment of the piece. I give this example to address the fourth-dimensional quality of my work and also to address a problem of documentation. There is no effective way to videotape this kind of event. An image of two distant balloons does nothing to convey the spatial quality of the intervention or the intimacy of a group sitting together in the dark after talking about fear.

Thank-you to the Canada Council for the Arts, the Montreal Mayor's Foundation and the Montreal Museum of Masters and Artisans for supporting this project.

The Hope Machine (2004)

Time-based photo performance – V. Preston, Mathieu Chartrand, Sarah Wiskar



Photos: Mathieu Chartrand

While I combined visual and performing arts practices in past processes, this 2004 photo session for *Hope Machine* marked my emerging interest in creating work for camera.

Feeling pressure to create publicity images for a piece that had only just entered rehearsals, I decided to approach the process as a parallel, 'recycling' project. I took a concept/character, the Golem, that was to be cut from the live production, and I worked with a performer and a photographer to stage the 'discarded' rehearsal material for camera.

During the session I realised that I was interested in generating images other than documents from the live material.

Over the past two years, my interest in photography and performance has branched away from 'documentation.' I am now thinking about how to generate a parallel world of images in addition to creating and documenting live works. During the research process, I walk and photograph objects as part of my directing research. Looking at my own photographs has helped me to understand how I see the world and what I find remarkable in it.

I bring a camera to rehearsal and sometimes use my images instead of publicity images on my flyers. This changes my relationship to the publicity object. Instead of handing out 'flyers' I try to circulate private images in public space and attempt to re-appropriate the labour and budget of marketing for creative ends.

What I have found is that my visual approach to process frees my theater work, and consequently rehearsal time, from being tied up with a picture-based aesthetic. This allows me to fulfill the urge to create images as a separate but parallel process without imposing a static sense of picture on the actors.

After meeting Olaf Breuning and Catherine Sullivan this summer—both are exciting artists who combine visual and performative approaches in their work—I have reflected further on connections between rehearsal/performance practice and photographic image.

While I do not think of myself as a photographer, I am excited about bringing these media and processes together. I sense that this change in my work has been coming over several years and will become a central part of my approach. *Soft Soul* and *Sonnenstein* begin this process.



MFG – Mobile Filter Group / More Friendly Garbage

Re-performances of works by Canadian women artists
6e Mois du Performance, Galerie La Centrale. October 2004.

MFG : Véronique Emond, Claudia Bernal and Virginia Preston

In October 2004 at Galerie La Centrale's annual performance festival *Le mois du performance*, I was part of a trio who re-performed twelve works by Canadian performance artists. The works were compiled and published by the gallery as a set recipe cards distributed nationally and internationally by La Centrale.

Anthologie de déplacement – performance recipe by Julie Andrée T.

Performers do task-based displacements through space using a variety of prosthetics and limitations.



Photographer: Sandra-Lynn Belanger Pictured clock-wise from upper left: Virginia Preston, Véronique Emond and Claudia Bernal.

Three Huggers – Recipe by Nathalie de Rome & Anna Beaudin

Instructions for this performance are on the website <http://www.ikatun.com/100-11/php/gallery.php>

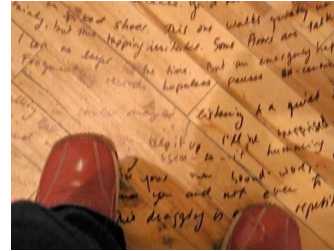
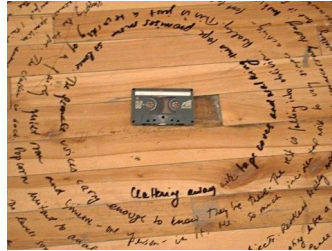


In fulfilling the instructions of the piece we hugged a variety of people and objects and tried to convince strangers to join us. The objects of our affection included police officers on horseback, people having bad days, trees, pedestrians, and people submitting their federal income tax returns. An interesting hug that was not documented for security reasons was the line-up in a bank and the bank manager.

There were 12 recipes in the series and we re-performed eleven pieces during the festival. Our adventures included camping overnight on the roof of a building in the city, faking a UFO landing for web-cams, becoming representative human targets for Iraq bombers (*Diversionary Tactics*) and trying to start chain reactions of Public Yawning. Here we are yawning at the Employment Office:



RSVP - Répondez s'il vous plaît (2004)



Photos: Virginia Preston

Members' Group Exhibition *Conducting Relations*: April 2 – May 1, 2004 La Centrale, Galerie Powerhouse, Montreal

Répondez s'il vous plaît is a month-long exploration of automatic and improvisational writing. Visiting the gallery daily throughout the month of April, I created a palimpsest of observations, tracings, and word-play on the floor. Spectators entering the room walked over, on, or through the work.

As one of five artists in the group exhibition *Éléments conducteurs / Conducting relations* on the theme *Visions*, I proposed an intervention linking the artistic practices of twenty-seven women artists. I visited the exhibition for extended periods, browsed the artists' files, listened to sound recordings of the space, and allowed words and images to flow through sustained observation. Using *La Centrale* members' slides, documentation and artist statements, I developed meditations on each participant's dossier.



Photos: Sandra Lynn Bélanger and Mathieu Chartrand

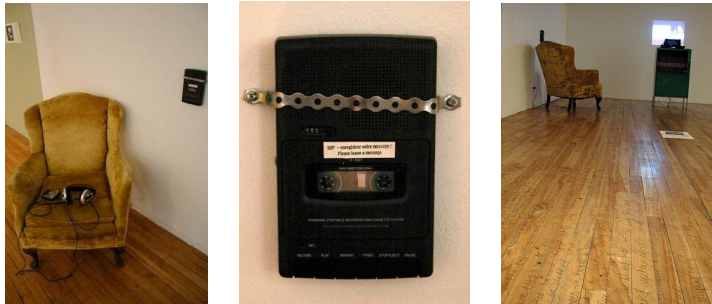
Placing a tape recorder on the wall, I invited spectators to record their observations. Additionally, I recorded sounds in the gallery—'capturing' intentional and accidental traces of those who passed through the space. Footsteps, sirens, dropped objects, and greetings became recurring elements within the piece—and these were repeated throughout my writings, drawings and interventions.

I allowed my attention to deterritorialize and recompose things in the gallery. Sustained by prolonged periods of listening, writing and observing—I met with ghosts or traces of myself, and of anonymous others, through overlapping traces of writing, documentation and sound.

My work on ***RSVP*** allowed me to concentrate on a public, daily practice of art-work and on task-based performance over quite long durations. I focused my attention on a playful transposition of words, sounds and images while observing an indirect and casual relationship with spectators.

The politics of 'wasting' one's labour in disorganized, unpublished language, particularly in a paper-based and electronic communications culture, pressed me towards a project illustrating the literal and metaphorical trampling of words, discourses and thoughts. Whereas fragmentary language is taken up within marketing and advertising strategies—in service to abbreviated and politically self-serving forms of discourse and attention—I wanted to take up early twentieth century experiments with 'words in freedom' through prolonged observations of artistic and group practices.

Encouraging spectators to walk on my thoughts—or conversely to be supported and surrounded by them—allowed me to examine mechanisms of internal censorship. I resisted correcting or modifying my words, organizing them into ‘readable’ areas, or placing them in top down hierarchies. I also wrote in the pace and language in which I was thinking or reading (in English or French regardless of continuity). The writing emerged without a singular location or logic to read from. Repeat and overlapping visits left traces of a composite subjectivity or an abstracted point of view. In direct contrast to my experience as a performing artist, I worked without a scheduled timetable of performances and taking as long as I needed.



Photos: Mathieu Chartrand and Sandra Lynn Bélanger

RSVP: Winding Collaboration with Raylene Campbell

I invited Raylene Campbell, a sound artist and composer who works with Pauline Oliveros, to participate in a walking intervention and meditation in the gallery. Campbell's work as a composer emerges from her research into new music, deep listening, dreams and technology. We found connections between her dream-body project and my attention research while we developed an upcoming interdisciplinary performance of Octavio Paz' poem *Sunstone*.

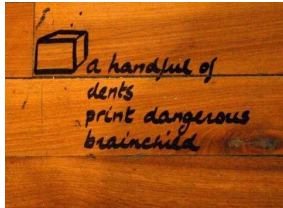
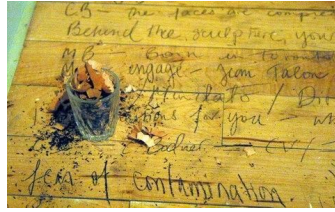
Responding to the work of Maria de los Milagros Masino, and transposing May-pole dance traditions associated with May Day celebrations and fertility rites, on May 1 we wound spools of string around a central column in the gallery. Our task was to maintain a sustained level of attention and tension in the string while we walked in opposing spirals.



Photos: Sandra Lynn Bélanger

Over the period in which we sustained our task—almost two hours until the string ran out—we noted the effect of individuals and groups entering and leaving the space, special lexicons within the gallery, and the effect of our movement on vibrations in the string. As our threads crossed and re-crossed one another's trajectories, we observed our attention which fluctuated between awareness-of-self and interconnectivity with another.

RSVP: Responding to Artists (proposals, doodles and relationships)



Over the course of the month I brought objects and materials into the gallery that referenced in the members' work: rocks, stones, landscapes, soap and water. I sprinkled laundry soap in the corners of the space and brought small objects into the room. These were connected with notes, words, and improvisational links.

In **RSVP** I was interested in drawing relationships between my own work and that of my colleagues. My cross-disciplinary engagement, both performative and as traces of thought, represents an exchange of ideas, discourses and bodies outside the mainstream.

Unbalanced (2003-2004)



V. Preston in rehearsal at Edgy Women 2004. Photos by Mathieu Chartrand

Virginia Preston in *Unbalanced*:

Red Festival, Toronto (October 2004)
Studio 303, *Edgy Women*, Montreal (March 29, 2004)
Head and Hands Cabaret, Montreal (October 10, 2003)
and as 'Bird Circling' at the One Yellow Rabbit Summer Lab (July 2004)

Unbalanced is a solo physical-theatre performance on rollerskates that I performed in different versions in Montreal, Toronto and Calgary. It was the first piece I wrote and one of the few dramatic or rehearsed pieces I have performed since I began directing and choreographing.

Set in Florida in the early 1980s, *Unbalanced* is a non-linear story of a young woman on the lam. Jeannie Otis has murdered her babysitter in cold blood, and she's on her way to Hollywood to "shoot a star." She imagines herself as a modern-day Bonnie Parker "shot down in a red dress ... with perfume on."

Performed on roller-skates to a plunderphonic soundtrack of Ronald Reagan, Queen, Bob Dylan, Chopin and ACDC, new versions of the piece benefit from collaborations with sound artist Raylene Campbell and make-up artist Susie Wolf.

As satire of pop-nihilism and creative pathology, *Unbalanced* draws on stories of generations of violent women whose stories, for better or for worse, are largely forgotten. Jeannie's defiance of the law, the courts, and her minimum wage destiny at Walmart are destructive, heroic and iconic. Her demeanor, a cross between Billy-Idol and Mae West, is a 50-50 mix of hellchild and angel. Her voice, however, is distilled to images and fragments.



Hope Chest (June 2003)

These images document a private workshop showing of new material at the MAI (Montréal, arts interculturels) in June 2003

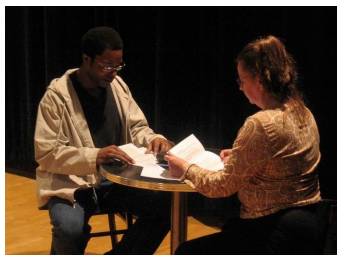


Photo by Tristan Brand

Hope Chest is an interdisciplinary performance about the secular role of hope in contemporary societies and everyday life. The piece encourages spectators to address a “naive” theme in various public settings. The research process for this piece received production and development funding that became *Hope Machine*.

As an expression of utopia, or faith—or as a lifeline at critical moments in individuals’ lives—hope binds individuals to one another and creates affective investments in institutions and public structures. Hope is an unspoken element of social cohesion and control, but it also reveals individuals’ complex and contingent relationships to cultures and communities. This project is a dance-theatre performance and a public intervention in which audience members have a role in examining their assumptions about hope.

If the audience is the location of a performance, and if hope and fear are ubiquitous elements of human experience, then perhaps exploring the public’s ‘private’ hopes and fears will shed light on our simultaneous experience as individuals and members of a collective. Whether through private contemplation—of success or failure for example—or through manifold forms of doubt or faith, individuals’ experience of being in the world is mitigated by hope and fear.



Photos by Tristan Brand

Different religious, philosophical and theological traditions categorize hope as both a positive and a negative force. Hope all too easily allies itself to social movements, and it has an ideological ‘use’ function—whether for positive social change or for violent and oppressive ends. This project aims at a subtle, participatory deconstruction of hope as a tool of subjugation and as a social force.

This project attempts to show two ‘characters’ struggling with one another through their aspirations and fears. After a short presentation of material, we invited audience members to have a conversation with a stranger about hope. Café tables with tape recorders and envelopes of questions provoked, in an immediate and practical sense, a medium for insight into the variation of hope within a group.

Theatre Projects (2002-2004)

Sea Peach (2002)



Photo by Mathieu Chartrand

Sea Peach is an hour-long production of performance poetry by Catherine Kidd and Jack Beetz. Performed in an empty swimming pool, the production earned accolades by Montreal Gazette theatre critic Matt Radz. Sold-out performances were extended for three dates.

Kidd is an accomplished poet and recognized performer. She has toured internationally with these pieces, under the direction of Mike Patterson, and with other works of poetry and fiction. Beginning as a movement coach on the project, I took on directing for the first time working with this company. The performances and rehearsals took place on location in the swimming pool. A unique opportunity to work with site-specific performance, I concentrated on working with the existing architecture of the pool, on movement, and on work with the video artists.

Wedding Day at the Cro-Magnons—excerpt (2003)

Imago Theatre's Montreal Theatre Gym
Mentoring Director: Stacey Christoudoulou
Mentoring Designer: Ana Cappelluto

Written by Wajdi Mouawad
Directed by Virginia Preston
Music by François Girouard
Performed by Dave Lapommeray (Walter), Cristina Toma (Souhayla), David Karevicius (Neel), Deborah Kirshenbaum (Nazha), Millie Tresierra (Nelly), and Doug Price (Neyif)

The Montreal Theatre Gym is an annual professional development project for emerging directors in the city's theatre community. In 2003, Stacey Christoudoulou chose three women artists who also work in artistic disciplines other than theatre—dance, film and sculpture—to work with her on an evening of works on the theme of war. I worked on two excerpts of *Wedding Day at the Cro-Magnons*, a text by internationally recognized playwright and director Wajdi Mouawad. In this piece, a family attempts to celebrate a wedding in an apartment in the middle of a war-zone. I developed the piece from my confusing childhood memories of a coup d'état in Ghana in 1980.

Bowlin' Ghosts (2004)

Written, Performed and Produced by Josh Cowan
Music by Jens Christian
Directed by Virginia Preston
Stage Manager: Vincent Absi

Bowlin' Ghosts is an hour-long theatre performance by Josh Cowan. He invited me to direct his piece at the 2004 Montreal Fringe Festival. The work involves four characters struggling with loss. By turns witty and disturbing, the piece depicts isolated male characters overcome by urban environments and family commitments. The evocative score, created by Jens Christian on electric violin, is a powerful motor for the work. In addition to work on text and movement, this was a unique opportunity to design lighting for the piece using only three practical light sources.

Luftballons (2002)



Written and Performed by Catherine Kidd
Music by Jack Beetz
Directed by Virginia Preston
Video by Todd Van Dyck and Chris Flowers

Downward Facing Dog
Twelve performances at the Bain St-Michel
November 2002

Director-Choreographer: Virginia Preston
Performers : Isabel Mohn, Juliana Pivato, Nadine Sures and Rachel Worth

Created and performed at a summer residency for emerging artists at Studio 303

Performed in an installation of 99 helium-filled red balloons tied to toy cars and trucks, *Luftballons* conjures puppy love and pop nostalgia in explorations of social anxiety and discomfort.

Four child-like characters seek out one other within a sonic 'chaos' created by playing back rehearsals of the piece during the performance.

The 'archaeology' of the work, including our tape-recorded conversations recorded during the residency in the performance space, create a sonic layering effect that fills the performance space with melodies, voices and anxious laughter.

Plundering from musical luminaries Nena and Burt Bacharach, *Luftballons'* low-tech soundscape plays tricks with time. The characters manipulate recordings of themselves by fast-forwarding, rewinding, and repeating their gestures and sounds.

Consumer-culture, anxiety, war and love—communicated here through the performers' covers of pop songs—interrupt half-hearted attempts to come to terms with memory and social existence.

Collaborations with Jean Haluska (2000-2001)

Let Me Rock You, Jacques Lacan (October 2000)

Choreography and Music by Virginia Preston • Video Images and Documentation by Jean Haluska • Performed by Marlon Torres



Marlon Torres in stills from a video of *Let Me Rock You, Jacques Lacan* by Jean Haluska

Let Me Rock You, Jacques Lacan took place in a festival of performance works, lectures and artist talks that I curated at Binghamton University. The event took place during a week-long "inter-campus dialogue on race" which followed an attack on a student on campus.

Let Me Rock You, Jacques Lacan is a 15-minute choreographic exposition of violent, masculine identity. Undressing an eroticized body within a 'space-age mirror stage,' the piece shows constructions of violent behaviour through repeated, aggressive gestures. In the images shown above, Marlon Torres performs stereotypical imitations of masculine behaviour. He stands in front of a screen that dominates and de-contextualizes the visual field. Meanwhile, to the left of the performer, a chorus of disembodied, televised female torsos plays with children's toys—cars, helicopters and purses.

Jean Haluska, an American visual artist and collaborator, created video images for the work using reflected light on plastic surfaces.



Virginia Preston in stills from a video by Jean Haluska

Hallway Improvisation (May 2000)



Virginia Preston in stills from a video by Jean Haluska

Performance by Virginia Preston • Images and video documentation by Jean Haluska

Hallway Improvisation is a fifteen-minute performance intervention at an opening of visual art works and paintings by Jean Haluska. I interact with a sequence of wall-to-ceiling light sculptures and paintings by the artist. The improvisation consists of interactions with the paintings which hung in a hallway blocked by a crowd of people. I wore a dress made of paper and contact microphones and did an improvisation with an electronic musician and DJ.