

### Taking *Embers* to the Street

Motivated by my political frustration with US military action as a solution to the problem of terrorism, I decided to follow some recent advice to "do what you do best" in the service of what you believe in. So I packed up my costume and music and a flyer I made for the occasion, and performed my dance *Embers* in three public spaces in New York City.

*Embers* is a piece I made in the mid-nineties when civil war was intense in the Balkans and Rwanda-- a sparse, somber solo inspired by personal questions about how to go on in the face of devastation. I have performed it in the US, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Yugoslavia, and the Netherlands, often as a statement against violence and a memorial to its victims. Most recently I had performed it in Beograd right after the attacks of September 11th, which seemed ironic yet fitting given that I had performed it in this country to protest the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia two years before.

I performed *Embers* impromptu in Union Square, Penn Station, and at the Firemen's Memorial on the Upper West Side as an expression of grief and a statement asking people to question the effectiveness and appropriateness of militarism as a response to the tragedy in our city. These were challenging but inspiring experiences, and in all cases I found people to be much more sensitive, complex, and open than I had expected them to be. What follows is a kind of 'performance diary' of these experiences.

#### Union Square, Friday October 12, 2001

I performed "Embers" five times without pause facing downtown toward the World Trade Center (connecting the beginning and end of the piece to form a kind of movement loop). I had covered my body with white clay and dusted the nondescript dress with powder to set myself off from the welter of ordinary life and to give myself a more archetypal, less specific appearance. Three friends helped to define a performance space (also bookended by votive candles), and held flyers.

In short, it was an amazing experience and I learned many things. I may even have even given something to many people. In general, people were much calmer, more attentive, and even more emotionally responsive than I ever expected. Of course, there were a few who wanted to argue politics, a few who walked through the piece or sat "upstage" in the frame of the performance, and one crazy. But basically, there were a lot of people of all different races, ages, and backgrounds who stopped to watch and kept watching. They were mostly people who I suspect don't go to see dance or would not have related to this kind of piece at a different time in a different place. Suddenly, very ordinary seeming people didn't act like they were on the other side of the line. They acted like the piece was for and about them; they seemed to appreciate it. I think even I was surprised by that.

As I was performing I became acutely aware of a number of things: I suddenly had a visceral understanding of the meaning of "freedom of speech"-- something every American schoolchild learns about theoretically but something I don't think I've ever understood in such a concrete way. I realized that (within margins) I could just go out

there and do my thing and say what I wanted to say, and no one challenged that right. I don't think we usually realize how profound a power that really is.

I was also suddenly aware of the power and history of the public square as a place of communication. People have gone to open spaces to speak and others have gathered around to listen for centuries. This experience of saying something and seeing people naturally gather had a sense of timelessness, but was also a new side of NY. Public squares in NY are often not gathering places in the same way that they are in Europe or Latin America, and New Yorkers often don't take time to break the evening commute and stop and listen. It was a nice experience.

Lastly, I was reminded--like a kick in the head-- of the power of art and the potential real people have to appreciate it. We get so caught up in lamenting the lack of audience for dance, the sorry state of American arts education, the inaccessibility of funding and respect. It's easy to feel misunderstood. The people who gathered, who sat down on their way home, who smiled, who thanked me, seemed to understand what I was doing, and their actions seemed to suggest that they welcomed it. I had initially thought it wouldn't work to do a whole piece---better some kind of slogan or simple image--- because no one would have the patience to see it develop or think about meaning. But people did; I realized I had underestimated them and their current state of openness. Construction workers stopped to watch. An old man with a shocked, skeptical look sat down on the ground and said it was beautiful. Some people clapped in the middle because they had to leave and didn't want to just walk away.

#### Penn Station, Friday October 19, 2001

Penn Station was another proposition entirely-- one of those absurd "only in New York" kinds of experiences. Because all the good spots that I had scoped out were already occupied by musicians we decided to start outside instead. We set up in a cement pedestrian walkway west of Seventh Avenue with the big apple in the K-mart window as a backdrop. It was cold and windy, and people walked by quickly without much interest until we were discovered by a homeless man who wanted to join us. He first stole one of the votive candles, then asked for pizza, then decided to step into the performance space and keep blocking my way. When I finally asked him to please move because I couldn't dance if he was standing there, he said with eyes closed, "I'm hungry. You can't dance if I'm hungry!" The layers of social and political meaning of this event were accruing by the minute... Finally, I finished the piece, Veronique took him to get pizza, and we decided to try our luck again in the station.

We set up in one of the hallways that leads to the LIRR tracks. I danced, people passed. Some stopped briefly or watched as they talked on the phone. Some took flyers. Some ran around me, ties and briefcases flying, barely grazing me as I promenaded on one leg on the tile floor. One mother explained emphatically to a child, "That's *performing arts!*" Every so often a track number would be posted and I would be lost in a sudden sea of commuters, many of whom didn't notice the Hungarian folk song playing on the boom box or me crawling around underfoot.

On a Friday afternoon at rush hour in Penn Station it seemed that no one had time. It was so different from the leisure and mellowness at Union Square-- perhaps because people were already underground, already in the nitty gritty of the commute, or perhaps because the crowd there is a more well-to-do corporate slice of the population, or perhaps because they were not New Yorkers but in fact commuters and didn't have quite the same emotional relation to these events as the catharsis-seekers in Union Square.

But I take it back. It's not really true that *no one* had time. It depends who you count. The rampaging commuters didn't have time, or perhaps were embarrassed to stop for long, to become vulnerable, to lose the protection of motion. But the homeless had time-- and the drunks, and the down and out, and the National Guard. It always depends who you look at. The ones who sleep on the floor of the station don't ask what a woman is doing crawling around on the station floor. And the National Guard and the station police didn't seem to mind at all; they were happy to watch. They must get bored standing there all day.

But despite the general lack of audience I experienced a number of interesting things. Again, no one ever challenged my right to be there. They may not have noticed, they may have noticed and thought I was crazy, or they may simply not have cared. But in true New York fashion they all ran around me as if it were the most natural thing in the world that a woman painted white should be dancing in the fluorescent lights of the station hallway. There's a deep sense of acceptance that is surprising, even mind-boggling, that you feel acutely when you crouch on the floor and New Yorkers swarm around you. When I lived in Belgium there was no behavior that went unquestioned, unscrutinized... I understood why despite all our problems, all the false hype about freedom, so many foreigners talk about freedom when they move to New York.

I also realized that activism is like improvisation. You can't predict and you shouldn't try. If you want to affect people you shouldn't try to reproduce what worked before but rather respond to what the situation needs. There were a few young guys who stood around watching for a while, took flyers, and then wanted to talk. Initially, I hadn't wanted to talk but I thought that I would be failing my own goals if I didn't respond to their interest in some way.

They started a bit antagonistically, but in fact we had a long, interesting, and very respectful conversation. One guy was quite responsive to my points about the difference between the Taliban and Afghan civilians, to information about the refugee situation, and to worries that the military action would encourage further terrorist acts and help to martyr the terrorists. He left on a very different note in a way that made me think he might play devil's advocate in his next conversation on the subject or at least go away and think about it. Another guy was intrigued with the white stuff all over me and asked me a lot about why I had it and what it meant. He then stayed to watch a run of the piece. I'm sure it was like nothing he had ever called "dance" before. I was touched that he watched intently until the end. This one wasn't a victory for politics but for art. One person had at least seen something new and been open to its strangeness.

I realized that sometimes you give a lot of people a little to think about and sometimes you give a few people a lot to think about. But either way it makes a difference. I keep concluding that real dialogue and real change, not just sloganeering or rallying, are labor intensive and painstaking. You spend a lot of time and energy; the results slip through your fingers. Yet it also seems to matter somehow.

#### Firemen's Memorial, Wednesday October 24, 2001

I knew the Firemen's Memorial Fountain on 100th and Riverside would be yet another totally different environment, and I wanted to perform there despite its somewhat quiet and remote location. Doing *Embers* there gave it more the color of a memorial or vigil, a kind of living votive offering. I also thought it would be interesting to do it in a neighborhood, a place where people lived and walked their dogs and sat on benches, as opposed to a place they were passing through on their way somewhere.

The fountain had been full of flowers and cards and rimmed with candles since shortly after September 11th. Still, candles have gone out, flowers have shriveled, and it's been a bit inert lately. But when we arrived the candles were all lit and three people were sitting there. "We've been waiting for you," they said. "We lit the candles." I had put up signs at the fountain the night before but doubted any of the them would last the night. The middle-aged man said he saw the one remaining sign on his way from the bus stop. After three runs of the piece they left, hugging me and saying thank you. I had never seen them before.

Others watched, straying by with dogs or on their way home. Children imitated my movements, a cabby got out of his cab to see if I was ok, and a mover stopped and left his truck of furniture to watch! Some people thanked me or wanted to shake my hand. Some watched curiously; a few joggers acted as if nothing was happening. After about eight runs of the piece, a guy came over to talk about the politics of the statement and again we had a long discussion.

He started very negatively but after covering a lot of ground we both acknowledged the complexity and difficulty of the issues and the lack of solutions; we shook hands and wished each other well. I realized that you have to use whatever's needed, whatever you've got. If you can dance, dance. If you can talk, talk. You've got to do everything to reach people, to make them understand you. It became clear that he was expecting me to spout some sort of two-dimensional peace propaganda. When I acknowledged his concerns--- the need for response and protection, the feelings of anger and fear, the awareness of the complexity of the issues, we could start to speak. Interestingly, although he was very different economically and ethnically from the guy I spoke to at length in Penn Station, our discussion followed much the same dynamic. It was somehow moving to see two New Yorkers who might usually appear more different than similar following very similar patterns in their reactions and emotions, and it was heartening to see both of these conversations move in a positive direction.

After these three performances, I decided that the *Embers* action had reached its lifespan. The political and emotional climate were changing. But I was grateful for the chance to learn from it, and to see a surprising openness in New Yorkers that the media makes us forget, even about ourselves.

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