Performing Ethos
Volume 1 Number 1
 Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/peet.1.1.69_1

**DEVORA NEUMARK**
Goddard College (Vermont) and Concordia University (Montreal)

# Close proximity

**ABSTRACT**

*The possibility for artistic practice to effectively catalyse and support wellness is a question of some urgency as more than 42 million people are currently living as refugees or internally displaced persons. This article explores resilience, the power of symbolic meaning-making and the scale of influence at the nexus of beauty and home relative to community performance.*

**KEYWORDS**

art
community performance
displacement
beauty
wellness
home

> My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
> so much has been destroyed
>
> I have to cast my lot with those
> who age after age, perversely,
>
> with no extraordinary power,
> reconstitute the world.
>
> (Rich 1984: 264)

In attempting to make sense of my early childhood experiences of abuse within a historical trajectory,[1] I have come to identify three separate yet interconnected loci where home is imagined and experienced: within the body, amidst sentient relationships and in association with place. At the centre of this inquiry into the ontology of home is a series of questions about home's properties, associations and manifestations (or lack thereof) in the emotional, political, cultural and embodied realms. Once the fracture of home becomes part of individual and communal history, how can a new sense of centre be cultivated and a connection to dwelling be affirmed in wellness? These questions are both pressing

1. See my 'Performing Beauty, Practicing home: Collaborative Live Art and the Transformation of Displacement' which begins: 'Born in the shadow of the *Shoah*, the stories about home that were repeatedly told within the culture of my youth emphasized the 6 million Jews who were systematically murdered under the Nazi regime; the stories also included references to the familial losses incurred during the Polish pogroms and forced

exiles of the Soviet Gulag era. These narratives were not just passed down orally or taught in the texts; the history was haptically felt and daily remembered over the first years of my life as internalized oppression passed on through the generations resulted in severe physical and psychological abuse.' (Neumark 2010: 419).

for me personally and I believe central to the ethos of the twenty-first century. My history is not very different from many people's histories around the world whose internal sense of home has been fragmented or fractured and whose houses have been destroyed through 'domicide' – the politically motivated wilful destruction of habitation that has been and continues to function as a major weapon in the arsenal of cultural oppression. In the Preface to *Domicide: The Global Destruction of Home*, J. Douglas Porteous and Sandra E. Smith write:

> Currently, no word exists for the action of destroying peoples' homes and/or expelling them from their homeland. We suggest the neologism 'domicide', the deliberate destruction of home that causes suffering to its inhabitants. A second term, 'memoricide', concerns deliberate attempts to expunge human memory, chiefly though the destruction of memory's physical prop, the cultural landscape (e.g., in Muslim Bosnia, 1990s).
>
> (Porteous and Smith 2001: ix)

According to the UN Refugee Agency, more than 42 million people are living as refugees or internally displaced persons, and the number is rising yearly. The impact of domicide is sentient and environmental in scope – with environmental referring here to both built and 'natural' habitats. Dislocated individuals, the communities they leave behind and those into which they subsequently attempt to integrate are part of an increasingly fragile ecological balance, as Dr. Vandana Shiva has pointed out in her introduction to *Close to Home: Women Reconnect Ecology, Health and Development Worldwide* (1994) and elsewhere over the years since her first actions with the non-violent Chipko movement to prevent deforestation in the 1970s. The impact is considerably greater if we take into account all the animals, reptiles and insects that are displaced and killed in the fallout of shifting human populations and land use changes.

In *The Globalization of Poverty and the New World Order* (2003) University of Ottawa Professor of Economics Michel Chossudovsky argues that the deteriorating state of the environment, the appalling increase in the number of people living in abject poverty and escalating territorial degradation are not only interrelated, they are the outcome of deliberate economic interventions conceived of and sanctioned by a handful of influential academics and corporate executives, the US government and the International Monetary Fund: 'The New World Order feeds on human poverty and the destruction of the natural environment. It generates social apartheid, encourages racism and ethnic strife, undermines the rights of women and often precipitates countries into destructive confrontations between nationalities' (Chossudovsky 2003: 1).

It has been only slightly more than nine years since the concept of domicide was proposed: by shaping a cultural framework to account for the global phenomenon of 'why powerful people destroy the homes of the less powerful, which happen to be in the way of corporate, political, or bureaucratic projects' Porteous and Smith (2001: ix) have begun to name the conditions that directly impact on a substantial number of individuals in their quotidian lives, and by extension that implicate so many – if not all – who are alive today. Less than thirty-five years ago there was no such thing as a women's shelter in Canada: conjugal violence was referred to, if at all, as a problem within individual families, certainly not as a pervasive socio-political issue. Forces contributing to domestic abuse were largely ignored with personal stories fragmented from the collective fabric and consequently resources were not made available intersectorally to deal with this complex issue. In order to respond to the worldwide phenomenon that has been named as domicide, I propose that we urgently need a similar epistemological shift such as that which gave rise to the domestic shelter movement – while not presuming that the same responses relative to the domestic violence phenomenon would be appropriate and transferable to the phenomenon that is domicide.

Conditions for this new consciousness are gradually starting to emerge as phenomenological and human behavioural science approaches in the West have slowly awakened to the complexity of factors related to the place-based experience of home both individually and collectively (e.g. Altman and Werner 1985; Bachelard 1994; Israel 2003; Jacobs 1992 and 2004; Menin 2003; Rapoport 1969; Seamon and Mugerauer 1989). Now in addition to the cultural framework linking seemingly disparate acts of forced displacement with economic oppression and ecological devastation, grassroots activists around the globe are making their voices heard about substantive issues such as indigenous rights, modern-day slavery, the collapse of wild fish stocks and other vanishing flora and fauna, mining, energy, ecology, the arms trade, etc.[2] Social scientists have been developing new wellness models and healing methodologies sometimes referred to as resilience or productive trauma approaches, or alternatively, as positive psychology (e.g. Cvetkovich 2003; Levine and Frederick 1997; Orange 2001; Peterson 2006).

The green energy and healthy house movements have also been gaining momentum. Although just a small minority of wealthy enough individuals can afford new construction or refitting with new eco-friendly material and technologies – and while so many of the old ways of vernacular building inherently part of healthy ecosystems are lost and forgotten – some vocal advocates are calling for equity and social justice in the design of 'ecological democracy' (Hester 2006) and a 'sustainable world' (Girardet 2004). One factor that will influence the likelihood of this shift will be the reconfiguration of the relationship between ecology and economy such as is being proposed by a growing number of academics, alter-globalization adherents and policy advocates (e.g. Brown 2001; Hawken 2007; Shiva 1994).

With individuals from so many fields increasingly interested in actively working towards healing our selves and repairing the places we dwell in, it is not surprising to find artists interrogating neo-conservatism (and associated autocratic tactics) while imagining what could be – a process more often than not implicating at least an attempt to integrate ethics and aesthetics. Some cultural theorists like Norman K. Denzin in *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture*, suggest that rather than continue to practise art for art's sake 'the current historical moment requires morally informed performance and art-based disciplines that will help people recover meaning in the face of senseless, brutal violence' (Denzin 2003: 7). While I have no doubt that the commercialized art market will continue to proliferate the exchange of art as a commodity, I personally feel compelled to emphasize what is possible at the nexus of artistic practice, democratic civic engagement and environmental advocacy.

## DRAWN TO BEAUTY

At the centre of my research and community-involvement has been the question of home. For many years, I was involved with 'Auberge Shalom … pour femmes', a Montreal women's shelter and support centre for female victims of domestic violence and their dependent children. In addition to being

2. Paul Hawken in the opening pages of *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Social Movement in History is Restoring Grace, Justice, and Beauty to the World* states: 'By any conventional definition, this vast collection of committed individuals does not constitute a movement. [...] Rather than a movement in the conventional sense, could it be an instinctive, collective response to threat?' (Hawken 2007: 2–3).

vice-president of the board, I was an in-house volunteer facilitating weekly art workshops with the women residents and their children. I have successfully challenged the Quebec policy related to incorporating artwork into the architecture and environment of publicly funded buildings by insisting that community performance should be considered valid within this programme.[3] Whether inviting others to participate in street events and community performance processes or writing about art and codes of benevolence that situate the self in relation to the world (such as the Judaic notion of *mitzvah*, Buddhist *tonglen* meditation, and African *ubuntu*)[4] I have come to appreciate how, despite the often overwhelming desire most people feel for a sense of loving connection, the challenge – to be open to the vulnerability that is a condition of love – is great.

For a long time I too resisted vulnerability and the call to beauty that for me is so connected to love. I can therefore understand artists such as members of the Zurich-based Dada movement who refused 'to gratify the aesthetic sensibilities of those responsible for the First World War' (Danto 2006: 57). In *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*, Arthur Danto points to a line from Rimbaud's poem of 1873, 'A Season in Hell': 'One day I sat Beauty on my knees, and I found her bitter, and I abused her' (Danto 2006: 39). Danto concludes: 'And the "abuse of beauty" became a device for dissociating the artists from the society they held in contempt' (Danto 2006: 48).

Wellness, beauty and home are complex interrelated issues. As Noël Carroll states in *Ethnicity, Race, and Monstrosity*: 'The couplet beauty/non-beauty (or, more specifically, beauty/ugliness) frequently figures importantly in the representation of groups, including most notably […] ethnic and racial minorities' (in Brand 2000: 38). Contentious a terrain as it is on its own in western discourse since Aristotle, aesthetics coupled with ethics has been the subject of intense debate in the wake of the Holocaust and in the aftermath of other human-directed atrocities that occurred at the same time and since. This has been especially true since the 1990s (e.g. Boullata 2008; Bourriaud 2002; Brand 2000; Danto 2006; De Bolla 2001; Foster 1997; Frueh 2001; Glowacka and Boos 2002; Hooks 1995; Kemal and Gaskell 2000; Meltzer and Williams 1988; Nehamas 2007; Nuttall 2006; Roth and Roth 1998; Scarry 1999; Tymieniecka 2008; Wolf 1991). Recently, the House of World Cultures in Berlin held an exhibition entitled 'Über Schönheit/About Beauty'. In addition to a full-colour printed catalogue edited by Shaheen Merali, organizers created an extensive web-based resource databank including bibliographies and artist indexes in a number of categories including 'Beauty and Trauma' and 'Beauty and Public Space' (see Merali 2005).

I do not assume an unchanging definition of beauty, nor do I assume a homogenous application of beauty's potential in the healing process. My interest in beauty is not nostalgic: I do not intend on simply reaffirming the *perception* or *objectness* of beauty, but rather – as Suzi Gablik articulates in countering the critic Hilton Kramer's affirmation that 'art is incapable of solving any problems except aesthetic ones' – place emphasis on the *performative agency of beauty in/as action*.

> Kramer is in the forefront of those who believe that when art is actively engaged with the world, its aesthetic quality is necessarily compromised. I, on the other hand, consider that such art is often intensely aesthetic, because in responding compassionately to whatever it

3. The Quebec Minister of Culture and Communications is responsible for the law stipulating that 1 per cent of all new government construction and building renovation budgets is to be applied towards the commission and integration of new artwork. In 2001 I was commissioned to facilitate a process with elderly inhabitants of a residential long-term care centre in Ville St Laurent, Quebec, leading to the development of the permanent artwork entitled *Entre Nous* now installed in the building's public gathering space. The awarding of the commission was challenged resulting in a ministerial review and ultimately a confirmation of the eligibility of the project within the law.

4. As part of the Canada Council for the Arts' *Off The Radar: Initiatives in Critical Thinking* programme I was invited to chronicle the *Heart-to-Heart* project organized by the Modern Fuel Artist Run Centre (Kingston, ON). 'I Am Because We Are' was the title of the 2005 essay that resulted from my critical involvement with this event.

> touches, it is helping to create a more beautiful world. Artists whose work helps to heal our soulless attitudes towards the physical world have my full respect and attention because, for me, beauty is an activity rather than an entity, a consciousness of, and reverence for, the beauty of the world.
>
> (Gablik 1998)

Instead of reacting to all that is not good in the world and using beauty as an antidote, so to speak, my intention is to shift my relation to crisis. By relating beautifully with the world – and thus engaging with beauty ethically – I choose to link aesthetics with values in an unambiguous way. 'Any agenda of questions concerning ethics […] takes for granted that there are systems of values, if not a single one, which flourish though processes of learning and socialization in a historically-determined human society.' Hasan Ünal Nalbantoğlu (2002: 8) continues in *Aesthetics and Ethics: A Tenuous Relation Revisited*, 'So the question for us, the moderns, who dwell on societal-cultural fault lines is can one still talk about relatively stable shared systems of human values, and where is today's art in all this?' While I do not think it is possible to talk about a universal set of values that guides artistic practice today (if indeed there ever was such a thing), nor do I advocate for universality, preferring as I do healthy diversity in all aspects of life, I do still think it is relevant to struggle with the question of how art and beauty are relevant today in the struggles for justice and well-being.

Along with a preference for nurturing the question of what conditions make it possible for art to examine and invite individual and social responsibility as an ethical stance rather than a moral one, the approach I have taken through my community performance practice tends to diverge from the contemporary cultural affinity with the nostalgic, wounded or absent home (and thus the victim's perspective) by invoking the generative potential of all experiences, however traumatic they may be, the creative productivity of collaborative process, and the intersubjectivity of dialogue that results in the unfolding of meaning. This participatory process challenges dominant notions of aesthetics and beauty insisting on an 'ethics of accommodation' that includes 'letting go of preconceived notions of perfectibility, and negotiating complex sets of needs' (Galloway, Nudd and Sandahl 2007: 229).

The need I have for beauty as/in action is not separate from my yearning for community or at least a sense of being part of a caring group of people dedicated to non-violence. I am drawn to Petra Kuppers's invitation to practise community performance as 'work that facilitates creative expression of a diverse group of people, for aims of self-expression and political change'. Kuppers points out that the (relatively) open outcome 'maybe within a thematic field opened up by the facilitator, but full of space and times for people to create their own expressive material' (Kuppers 2007: 4). Furthermore, my approach aligns with what Haedicke and Nellhaus (2001: 3) propose as one of 'the most common traits' of community performance, that is, 'participatory performance techniques that blur the boundaries between actor and spectator in order to maximize the participants' agency'. Amongst the processes that I have found that can lead to such agency is the sharing of story and gesture as these implicate multiple layers of witnessing. Being witnessed by strangers has a particularly significant effect as the shared vulnerability does not have to be sustained beyond the incidental encounter.

My live art interventions and community performance projects have explored both the power of the narrative and the repetition of symbolic daily dwelling practices taken out of the ordinary domestic context as I have continued to investigate how art can address and help shift perceptions about personal and social disintegration through a deliberate dialogic engagement with imagination and particularly with the symbolic enactment of self-authored 'what if' scenarios. I can point for example to the 1996 street intervention entitled *s(us)taining* during which I sat barefoot in a white dress peeling beetroots for six hours on the street in front of the ruins of my house in the St Henri district of Montreal that had been recently destroyed by an act of arson. Performing story and embodied gesture have provided me with the means to make sense of my life experience and connect with others concerning the individual and collective impact of violence while examining the association between trauma and memory.

If my creative praxis over the years has led me to trust the process of extending my intimately lived experience into artistic exploration, it has also demanded attention to the ethical implications of shifting between the personal, the communal and the public sphere. I can never take for granted that the need to share my own story will not eclipse the stories of others. At the very least, I have come always to acknowledge that my own story will shape, at least to some extent, how available I am to the experience of bearing witness to the narratives that others have to tell – similarly to the ways in which others' life experiences will influence how and where they meet me and the invitations I extend to make meaning through the sharing of story and gesture.

The use of symbolic language is never politically neutral as Haedicke and Nellhaus (2001: 14) affirm: 'Intervention, location, and agency, all revolving around asymmetrical relations of power, authority, and involvement, circumscribe the politics that determine the nature of the work.' Furthermore, the question of what will follow from the sharing of story and gesture is integral to the shift in scale, or move along the continuum between personal, communal and public spheres. Haedicke and Nellhaus (2001: 15) caution: 'Just recovering repressed stories, which certainly may feel good to those finally given the opportunity to speak, does little to change the established power dynamic, especially if the theatre/cultural worker is there to plunder, no matter how subtly.' Assuming that I strive to be present with compassion and in solidarity with each person who chooses to get involved towards our mutual liberation, even with the best of intentions, I must also always be aware that what I offer (extending from my understanding of what is beautiful) may be challenging, if not downright difficult, for others whose wounds may be triggered in relation to the stories and gestures being shared.

## *HOLDING GROUND*: A CASE STUDY

By reflecting on the community performance entitled *Holding Ground* I wish to interrogate how symbolic and deliberately reparative play-like encounters in the face of what scares us can have a tangible effect in the corporeal world (e.g. Blatner and Blatner 1997; Knafo 1996; Russ 1999; Winnicott 2005). This interrogation necessarily leads to a consideration of scale, especially the scale of influence any one intimate performance event can have.

*Holding Ground* was one of a series of performances commissioned for the Prescriptions event curated by Denis Simard under the auspices of the artist-run centre Folie Culture located in Quebec City. The other artists involved in the Prescriptions event were Pierre Beaudoin, Sylvie Cotton, Patrice Duchesne, Steeve Lebrasseur, Hélène Matte, David Michaud, Karen Spencer, Christine

St-Maur and Benoît Woo. While I did not authorize photographic documentation of *Holding Ground* there are a number of images from some of the other artists' gestures to be found on the Folie Culture website.

Over the course of the event (which was held on the evening of 7 November 2003), I literally embraced others, reinforcing in me the capacity to be present with another's fear and my own. Those who accepted to be held also held me. The sheer number of people who answered my invitation, and the quality of the encounters within which participants allowed themselves to feel consoled, clearly indicated to me just how prevalent is the culture of fear and how we are being habituated to respond to it by shutting down or shutting up, or by becoming more prolific consumers.

The idea for *Holding Ground* emerged during yet another of my housing crises: this time the mass eviction of tenants (including my family) from a downtown Montreal building in a neighbourhood undergoing gentrification. Dealing with this displacement triggered a resurgence of emotional residue from previous displacements and multiple flashbacks from the abuse I suffered as a child – abuse that I had thought I had already dealt with and resolved. It was during this time, in moments of acute, even desperate recognition of my own need for being held, I had an odd reverie while lying on the table in my acupuncturist's office: I imagined offering to hold people in a position that would feel comforting when anxiety threatened to overtake them. In the dark of the dimmed clinical setting and, with the needles still in me, I played with this fantasy, and quickly concluded how unlikely it would be for me to find an appropriate context to perform such an act of love, and thus intentionally engaging with individual healing culturally and politically as part of a critical contemporary art practice.

Prior to placing the needles, Suzanne Harvey and I talked about the conditions for working through unresolved trauma and how powerful a role art that resonates on a deep emotional level can play. Yet what I had envisioned seemed unfeasible. Under what circumstances could I invite holding with strangers *as art*?

I returned home still wondering about how to create a context for this work only to find a voice message from Céline Marcotte, managing director of Folie Culture, telling me about a performance event that at the time was just in the early stages of being planned. She mentioned that the event was to be called 'Prescriptions' and that it would aim at destabilizing medical, social and artistic regulations and prescriptions for health. Laughing out loud, I returned Céline's call and explained to her how synchronistic the timing of the invitation felt.

The choice to invite photographic documentation is a complex one. The ethics of documentation is something that I have been concerned about for quite some time (see for example my 2000 essay 'Im/possible Representations'). As any anthropologist will attest, the relational dynamic – and even the event itself – is changed as soon as there is a witness present. I have chosen to document this work in words only, as I felt strongly the need to avoid photographic intervention despite the public nature of the event in order to honour the intimacy of the process. This choice has not been obvious as much of what I experienced lives in the place where words do not form easily: the following have taken me many years to articulate.

Having known fear, having felt it deep into my bones, I know how long it lingers and how easily it can be triggered in situations that do not seemingly present any immediate or even obvious threat. On the evening of the performance event, while bringing awareness to my breath, I sat in stillness preparing myself to be open to whatever experience would arise. I had set up as cosy a space as I could in the warehouse-like interior of Méduse[5] while keeping in mind the intrusion that would be experienced from the prescriptive gestures of other performance artists such as the crashing of china dishes from Sylvie Cotton's corner and the ubiquitous odour of onion soup cooked up by Karen Spencer.

Many people asked to be held that evening: one woman, older than me by some years, requested that I hold her on my lap while rocking back and forth. A man lay prone on the floor and asked to be guided verbally into a state of relaxation. Another said – after I had held him in silence for some time – that because he had been held, he no longer felt the need to break plates.

Then there was the woman who stopped by as most everyone had already begun gathering to leave. She told me how she thought of approaching me all evening but had not found the courage to do so. I asked her what position she wanted to be held in. Together we arranged the pillows and blankets, then I took her head in my hands as she requested. After staying like this silently for some time she began to weep: with tears streaming down her face she told me how her child was dying and how in her sadness and dread she had closed her heart. She explained that she had not been able to cry since hearing the hopeless prognosis nor was she able to connect emotionally with her son, however much she longed to. She said that the parameters of *Holding Ground* – the symbolic framework provided by this performance gesture within the context of the Prescription art event – offered her a chance to connect with her emotions in a way that nothing else had.

She continued to weep. I continued to hold her.

It was late: the technicians were beginning to undo the plastic sheeting that had served as walls around us. She left not long after, though not before suggesting to herself as much as to me that things might be different now for her in relation (to what was happening) with her son. From all that she said and that she did not say I suspect that this woman is inhabited by the history and painful legacy of slavery in Canada. I do not know her name and I have never seen her since. I cried for three days straight afterwards and know that in the liminal space between my need and hers we created a powerful bond that resonates still whenever I think of her.

## 'ARE YOU SURE SWEETHEART YOU WANT TO BE WELL?'[6]

What the art frame provides – when, in our daily life, we lack the means to move beyond the alarm and alienation that has accumulated and passed on from one generation to the next and that is being culturally produced and calculatingly manufactured by governments and corporations – is a state of capacity. Working with his students to explore Mamet's model for action-based aesthetics and Mienczakowiski's ethnodrama framework Norman Denzin (2003: 41) suggests that: 'Meaning is lodged in performativity […]. Each performance event becomes an occasion for the imagination of a world where things can be different, a radical utopian space where a politics of hope can be experienced.' Much in the same way as Winnicott's 'potential space' – the creative possibility located between external and internal realities and 'between the individual and the environment (originally the object)' (Winnicott 2005: 135) – Denzin points to the activation of the symbolic experience by drawing on the close proximity that often exists

5. Méduse is a community cooperative run by ten non-profit cultural groups in Quebec City dedicated to artistic production and diffusion (see Paradis, online).

6. This is the question that opens Toni Cade Bambara's (1992) novel The *Salt Eaters*. I first came across Bambara's book and this question when I was installing *Iris*, a collaborative artwork involving 6000 pounds of salt, photographic projections and a soundscape created from the stories told by women about a moment in their lives when they realized they had a painful choice between holding onto and letting go of the past (see UC Regents 1998). *Iris* was also installed at the Koffler Gallery in Toronto (1998) and The Littman Gallery at the University of Portland, Oregon (1999).

between make-believe and reality (despite how unrealistic it may seem to bridge the gap). I think also of psychoanalyst Danielle Knafo's exploration of Cindy Sherman's work in 'Dressing Up and Other Games of Make-Believe: The Function of Play in the Art of Cindy Sherman'. Sherman, according to Knafo, 'dresses up and masquerades as others; she plays peek-a-boo and hide-and-seek games, games of loss and retrieval, and she plays with dolls' (Knafo 1996: 140). Inviting others to articulate playfully their own fears and desire to be held, I brought my concerns about the experience of wellness and the capacity to feel at home to the *Holding Ground* performance.

According to Winnicott (2005: 135), writing about early childhood development in the early 1970s: 'Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifest in play'.[7] It is precisely this 'abolition of objective time', manifested through symbolic role-playing, that allows for 'a healing through the reactivation of former pain which can now be tolerated by the mature person' (Runco 1998: 172). Integrating play into my artistic practice is deliberate as I turn away from an emphasis on neurosis and what is wrong in favour of nurturing the potential for learning new skills and developing 'compassionate intelligence' as a cultural goal such as Edith Cobb (1998: 107) proposes in her publication *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood*.

However insignificant *Holding Ground* may be, relative to the scale of current worldwide suffering, destitution and destruction, I am interested in the process of just how performative imagination has the potential to shape new affective and cognitive strategies (see Neumark 2001), something that Van der Kolk and Van der Hart point out in their work on traumatic memory and the processes of integration and catharsis.

> [Dr Pierre] Janet suggested to his patient Justine, who was traumatized at the age of 17 by the sight of horrendous nude corpses of victims of a cholera epidemic, to visualize these corpses with clothes on. […] One contemporary therapist of a Holocaust survivor had the patient imagine a flower growing in the assignment place in Auschwitz – an image that gave him tremendous comfort. […] Memory is everything. Once flexibility is introduced, the traumatic memory starts losing its power over current experiences.
>
> (1995: 178)

If this is possible with individuals, is it also doable with whole communities? And once people begin to alter the narratives that explain and shape the sense that is made of the world in which we live, how will our relationship to and with home change?

Healing methodologies tend to change depending on how a toxin enters the body: ingested poisons are often countered with charcoal or milk neutralizing the harmful effects as a substantial amount of the offensive substance is flushed from the digestive tract, while injected poisonous exposures (from bee stings, for example) are treated by the use of a constriction band which limits the flow of vital fluids to the area, thus slowing circulation of the venom around the body. The substance that can counteract poisoning is often the very same toxin in small doses resulting in an effective antibody being produced.

When the bane is political the healing method of choice is not so much a consideration of medicinal application as it is a question of relationship. Can creativity not tempered by ethics contribute anything useful in the vital task that is the making of home? By bringing flexibility into old narratives in the present moment as with performance practice, especially performance art that

7. My personal experience confirms this possibility for art's influence. (For a theoretical exploration of how this manifests see Russ 1999: 57–75.)

invites participants into the sensate experience, personal agency is strengthened as the resilient body is nurtured.

John Ralston Saul in *On Equilibrium* points to a set of qualities that, if practised as one would work out to strengthen and bring flexibility to different muscle groups in the body, could contribute to making humans more humane. The qualities leading to a greater sense of equilibrium, according to Saul, are not fixed or unchangeable; the list he provides (that includes common sense tempered by ethics and inspired by intuition) is simply a starting point to a conversation he feels compelled to be part of. How practising this set of qualities can alter the socio-economic and political dynamics that have set in motion so much destruction is not entirely clear to me, especially as so much of this destruction has been carried out in the name of progress. I do think that these qualities are nevertheless important in the practice of democracy, and that democracy itself is still, after all, a worthwhile project.

Some of this work, in relation to the culture of fear, can and must be done alone by connecting fully with oneself. Some of this work, however, can and must be done in collaboration with others. Close proximity is vital for healing, perhaps especially when it has been interpersonal contact that ruptured the capacity to feel and trust in the first place. And as art invites and supports the potential for 'as if' scenarios it has the potential to alter both cognitive patterns and cultural constructions. However, unlike the almost certain reactive clarity of employing the appropriate antidote, constriction or neutralization process in substance-based poisonings, the means of addressing ideological toxins through art is a challenging and nuanced process – one that has no prescriptive or predictive certainty.

Following on from the work of *Holding Ground* I continued to explore the benefits of play-like activity as part of my artistic practice and began to collaborate with Jorge Goia, an experienced Soma practitioner currently living in London, England. Soma proposes that people who play together build experiences of mutual responsibility.

> Soma is a series of workshops using body games to build a group dynamic. Created in Brazil by Roberto Freire as an anarchist therapy for activists fighting the military dictatorship, Soma focuses in challenging hierarchical relationships, observing the body as material to talk about collaboration, trust, self-esteem, emotions and feelings useful for a life despite capitalism.
>
> […]
>
> Soma is an opportunity to study the micro-political and the everyday through our bodies' response to certain physical exercises. The sessions work out of a framework which incorporates the theories of Wilhelm Reich, anti-psychiatry, Gestalt, the Afro-Brazilian art form of Capoeira Angola and the practice of self-organization and solidarity. Soma seeks to inspire skills that can transform the way we perceive the world, rebuilding the body, its dwelling and livelihood.
>
> (Goia 2008)

When all is functioning well within the body, between self and other, and in relation to place, we barely, if at all, take notice of the movements through, around and between the passages and demarcations. It is only when there is some kind of assault on any one of these three loci that we begin as individuals and social bodies to become aware of what is not going smoothly. In his publication *The Common Place: the Ordinary Experience of Housing* Peter King (2005: 67) suggests: 'Dwelling is both a physical and an ontological condition whereby we feel secure, stable and complacent.' Furthermore, he states: 'So when we are living our lives and pursuing our interests we, as it were, take our housing with us. It forms the basis upon which we can act, and this is the very reason why we are able to ignore it and take it for granted' (King 2005: 65).

While I understand King's assertion to be describing a quality of wellness in feeling at home, I also know that for the majority of my life this capacity to ignore home and take it for granted has not been possible. From my own experience and from conversations that I have had with other people who have been forcibly displaced, I have learned that feeling secure, stable and complacent is not easy to come by. I have also learned how powerful is the cycle of violence and how it is all too easy to succumb to the victim-to-perpetrator cycle.

The indigenous populations of what is now known as Canada, where I currently live, are living with the impact of this cycle begun more than 400 years ago with European migration initiated in part to escape religious domination. The First Nations, *Métis* and Inuit peoples know intimately the breach in connection with self, other and place whether they live in any one of the hundreds of allocated land reserves carved out as part of the Indian Act, or are implicated in one of the more than 800 currently unresolved land claims. (BBC News 2007; Government of Canada 2007).

As a Canadian citizen, I must be concerned with and actively contribute to healing this breach lest I be complicit with the continuing genocide. As a Jew alarmed by the ongoing oppression of the Palestinian people, I feel equally compelled to point to the annexing of land to build Jewish-only settlements, the siege on Gaza and the illegal construction of what the Israeli government often refers to as the security fence – but in reality is more than nine metres high and made of concrete in certain areas, often located quite a distance from the green line as it wends its way across the landscape integrating all water sources within Israeli control – as blatant examples of discordance in the loci of home.

Heeding the call to beauty for me cannot be separated from working towards an affirmative cultural framework for home in the aftermath of domicide despite (and because of) the wounds of history. This interdisciplinary framework will necessarily emerge at the intersection of a host of subject fields as diverse as community performance, permaculture and human rights advocacy as we continue to replace 'the Cartesian mind' with 'the alternative conception of an experiential world' (Orange, 2001: 287). According to Orange (2001, online),

> The Cartesian mind is isolated and self-sufficient, subject opposed to object, inner devoted to clear-and-distinct ideas, reliant on true-false logic, atemporal, representational, and substantial. The experiential world is relational, social, dialogic, and contextual, perspectival, doubly inhabited and inhabiting, complex and fallibilistic, more or less aware, temporal and emergent, understanding-oriented, and organizing process.

I am only just beginning to imagine what home can look and feel like with beauty and wellness at the centre of a dynamic life-long personal, social and political equilibrium-seeking project grounded in love and intent on nurturing the conditions for individual and collective responsibility for our environment and all that dwells within it.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is my pleasure to acknowledge the many conversations I have had with Julie Boivin, co-curator of Montreal's municipal public art collection and make reference to her text 'Emerging Urban Aesthetics in Public Art: The Thresholds of Proximity'. Writing about the value of 'immediate social and informal contacts with passers-by' she locates the contact 'at the thresholds of proximity which can be thought of in terms of an experiential intimacy' (2009: 250).

## REFERENCES

Altman, I. and Werner, C. M. (eds) (1985), *Home Environments: Human Behavior and Environment: Advances in Theory and Research*, New York and London: Plenum Press.

Bachelard, G. (1994), *The Poetics of Space*, Boston: Beacon Press. First published 1958.

Bambara, T. C. (1980), *The Salt Eaters*, New York: Random House.

Bateson, G. (2000), *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. First published 1972.

BBC News, (2007),'Canada natives in day of protests' *BBC News*, 29 June, 22:18 GMT. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/6252218.stm. Accessed 17 February 2008.

Blatner, A. and Blatner, A. (1997), *The Art of Play: Helping Adults Reclaim Imagination and Spontaneity*, New York: Brunner/Mazel, Inc.

Brand, P. Z. (2000), *Beauty Matters*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Boivin, J. (2009), 'Emerging Urban Aesthetics in Public Art: The Thresholds of Proximity' in Annie Gérin and James S. McLean (eds), *Public Art in Canada: Critical Perspectives*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 249–64.

Boullata, K. (2008), *Belonging and Globalisation: Critical Essays in Contemporary Art and Culture*. London, San Francisco and Beirut: Saqi Books.

Bourriaud, N. (2002), *Relational Aesthetics* (trans. S. Pleasance and F. Woods), Dijon: Les presses du réel.

Brown, L. (2001), *Eco-Economy: Building an Economy for the Earth*. New York and London: Earth Policy Institute and W.W. Norton & Company.

Chossudovsky, M. (2003), *The Globalization of Poverty and the New World Order*, Pincourt: Global Research, Center for Research on Globalization.

Cobb, E. (1998), *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood*, Putnam, CT: Spring Publications, Inc.

Cvetkovich, A. (2003), *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.

Danto, A. C. (2006), *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*, Chicago: Carus Publishing Co. First published 2003.

De Bolla, P. (2001), *Art Matters*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.

Denzin, N. K. (2003), *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Folie Culture (2009), *Folie Culture*, http://folieculture.org/iiix/event/details/?id=71 (text in French only). Accessed 8 July 2010.

Foster, H. (1997), *Compulsive Beauty*. Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press. First published 1993.

Frueh, J. (2001), *Monster Beauty: Building the Body of Love*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Gablik, S. (1998), 'The Nature of Beauty in Contemporary Art', *New Renaissance*, 8: 1, http://www.ru.org/81gablik.html. Accessed 8 January 2007.

Galloway, T., Nudd, D. M. and Sandahl, C. (2007), 'Actual Lives and the Ethic of Accommodation', in P. Kuppers and G. Robertson (eds), *The Community Performance Reader*, New York: Routledge, pp. 227–34.

Girardet, H. (2004), *Cities People Planet: Liveable Cities for a Sustainable World*, Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Glowacka, D. and Boos, S. (eds) (2002), *Between Ethics and Aesthetics: Crossing the Boundaries*, Albany: State University of New York Press.

Goia, J. (2008), *Soma: An Anarchist Experiment*, http://lambethbandofsolidarity.wordpress.com/soma-an-anarchist-experiment/. Accessed 4 October 2008.

Government of Canada, Office of the Prime Minister (2007), 'Prime Minister Harper outlines the government's achievements for Aboriginal Canadians', *Prime Minister of Canada*: *Stephen Harper*, 2 November. http://www.pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?id=1887. Accessed 17 February 2008.

Haedicke, S. C. and Nellhaus, T. (2001), *Performing Democracy: International Perspectives on Urban Community-based Performance,* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Hawken, P. (2007), *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Social Movement in History is Restoring Grace, Justice, and Beauty to the World*, New York: The Penguin Group.

Hester, R. T. (2006), *Design for Ecological Democracy*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Hooks, B. (1995), *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, New York: New Press.

Israel, T. (2003), *Some Places Like Home: Using Design Psychology to Create Ideal Places*, Chichester: Wiley-Academy.

Jacobs, J. (1992), *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York: Vintage Books. First published 1961.

—— (2004), *Dark Age Ahead*, Toronto: Random House Canada.

Kemal, S. and Gaskell, I. (eds) (2000), *Politics and Aesthetics in the Arts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

King, P. (2005), *The Common Place: Ordinary Experience of Housing*, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing.

Knafo, D. (1996), 'Dressing Up and Other Games of Make-Believe: The Function of Play in the Art of Cindy Sherman', *American Imago,* 53: 2, pp. 139–64.

Kuppers, P. (2007), *Community Performance: An Introduction*, New York: Routledge.

Kuppers, P. and Robertson, G. (eds) (2007), *The Community Performance Reader*, New York: Routledge.

Levine, P. A. and Frederick, A. (1997), *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma*, Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.

Meltzer, D. and Williams, M. G. (1988), *The Apprehension of Beauty: The Role in Aesthetic Conflict in Development, Art and Violence*, Strath Tay, Scotland: The Roland Harris Educational Trust.

Menin, S. (2003), *Constructing Place: Mind and Matter*, New York: Routledge.

Merali, S. (ed.) (2005), *Über Schönheit/About Beauty*, Berlin: The House of World Cultures. See also http://www.ueber-beauty.com/index_fixed.html. Accessed 8 January 2008.

Nalbantoğlu, H. Ü. (2002), 'Aesthetics and Ethics: a tenuous relation revisited', http://www.sanart.org.tr/publications/aesthetics/nalbantoglu_aesthetics_and_ethics.pdf. Accessed 14 December 2007.

Ndejuru, L., Neumark, D., Ngirumpatse, P. and Wesley, S. (2008), 'The Scent of Home Beautiful', in *Faire comme si tout allait bien/As If All Were Well*, Montreal and Strasbourg: Centre des arts actuels Skol and Rhinoceros Art Contemporain, pp. 62–79.
Nehamas, A. (2007), *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
Neumark, D. (2000), 'Im/possible Representations', *Liberté*, 42: 3, pp. 26–28.
—— (2001), 'Between Terror and Belief', in *Promise,* Toronto and Leeds: The Koffler Gallery and the University of Leeds Gallery, pp. 18–25.
—— (2005), 'I Am Because We Are', http://www.canadacouncil.ca/NR/rdonlyres/6E26A96E-41A7-4396-9A67-2983398A8F3A/0/10ModernFuelENGRevised.pdf. Accessed 4 October 2008.
—— (2008), 'How At Home Are We Really? Art, Diversity, and Dwelling in Canada's Multicultural Landscape' in T. Willard (ed.), *Live In Public: The Art of Engagement*, Vancouver: The Visible Arts Society, pp. 31–48.
—— (2010), 'Performing Beauty, Practicing Home: Collaborative Live Art and the Transformation of Displacement' in C. McLean (ed.), *Creative Arts in Interdisciplinary Practice: Inquiries for Hope & Change*, Calgary: Detselig Enterprises Ltd., pp. 419–436.
Nuttall, S. (ed.) (2006), *Beautiful Ugly: African and Diaspora Aesthetics*, Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
Orange, D. M. (2001), 'From Cartesian Minds to Experiential Worlds in Psychoanalysis', *Psychoanalytical Psychology*, 18: 2, pp. 287–302, available online at http://www.pep-web.org/document.php?id=ppsy.018.0287a. Accessed 8 July 2010.
Paradis, V. et les membres de la coopérative, (n.d.), *Méduse*, http://www.meduse.org/. (In French only). Accessed 4 October 2008.
Peterson, C. (2006), *A Primer in Positive Psychology*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
Porteous, D. J. and Smith, S. E. (2001), *Domicide: The Global Destruction of Home*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
Rapoport, A. (1969), *House Form and Culture*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
Rich, A. (1984), 'Natural Resources', in *The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New 1950–1984*, New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, pp. 256–264.
Roth R. and Roth, S. K. (eds) (1998), *Beauty is Nowhere: Ethical Issues in Art and Design*, Amsterdam: G & B Arts International.
Runco, M. A. (1999), 'Tension, Adaptability, and Creativity', in S.W. Russ (ed.), *Affect, Creative Experience, and Psychological Adjustment*, Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis, pp. 165–85.
Russ, S. W. (ed.) (1999), 'Play, Affect, and Creativity: Theory and Research', in *Affect, Creative Experience, and Psychological Adjustment*, Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis, pp. 57–75.
Saul, J. R. (2001), *On Equilibrium*, London and Toronto: The Penguin Group.
Seamon, D. and Mugerauer, R. (eds.) (1989), *Dwelling, Place and Environment: Towards a Phenomenology of Person and World*, New York: Columbia University Press.
Scarry, E. (1999), *On Beauty and Being Just*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Shiva, V. (ed.) (1994), *Close to Home: Women Reconnect Ecology, Health and Development Worldwide*, Philadelphia, PA and Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers.

Tymieniecka, A. T. (ed.) (2008), *Beauty's Appeal: Measure and Excess*, Dordrecht: Springer.

UC Regents (1998), *Sweeney Art Gallery: 'Iris*', http://sweeney.ucr.edu/exhibitions/iris/irispress.html. Accessed 4 October 2008.

Van der Kolk, B. A. and Van der Hart, O. (1995), 'The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma', in C. Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 158–82.

Winnicott, D. W. (2005), *Playing and Reality*, New York: Routledge. First published 1971.

Wolf, N. (1991), *The Beauty Myth*, Toronto: Vintage Canada.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

Neumark, D. (2010), 'Close proximity', *Performing Ethos* 1: 1, pp. 69–83, doi: 10.1386/peet.1.1.69_1

## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Interdisciplinary artist Devora Neumark is a faculty member in the MFA-Interdisciplinary Art program at Goddard College (Vermont) and co-director of Engrenage Noir/LEVIER, a Montreal-based non-profit community & activist arts advocacy and funding organization whose most recent initiatives are intended to stimulate dialogue about healthy interdependence and ethical responsiveness while encouraging artistic creation addressing the systemic causes of poverty. Neumark is also currently a Humanities PhD Candidate at Concordia University's Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Society and Culture. Her research project 'Radical Beauty for Troubled Times: The (un)making of Home' examines the role that beauty plays in the process of home-making in the aftermath of forced displacement.

E-mail: fireside@progression.net