

Curatorial Statement, Michelle Daly Director Berkshire Cultural Resource Center

TRUST is an invitation for three performance artists – T L Ford, Benjamin Lundberg Sanchez Torres, and Ana Mendez - to create site-specific works in downtown North Adams, MA in September 2017. Collectively these artists explore ideas of ritual, alleyship, otherness, queerness, sexuality and repetition. By presenting these works, TRUST explores vulnerability and intimacy in public spaces acknowledging that the works will have both a small dedicated or intentional audience and a casual or unintentional audience of passersby. These performances will take place over the weekend of September 9-10 and there will be additional opportunities to connect with artists including workshops, and informal discussions. TRUST seeks to disrupt the everyday experience, draw attention to the diversity of bodies making contemporary performance work today and provide opportunities for non-traditional theater audiences to experience intimate and immediate work in locations throughout downtown North Adams, MA.

Locating site-specific works in public space involves an element of risk. Especially in a community that has an uneasy relationship with contemporary artwork in general and performance in particular. How will the work be received? Will the artists be safe? How will an unsuspecting audience react? How do you create conditions for both audience and performer to safely sit in discomfort and remain open to the experience?

The process for TRUST began with questions of institutional and artistic risk in relation to relevancy. Nina Simone in her book *The Art of Relevance* articulates this tension of relevance as “at its heart, building relevance is about living in the creative tension between evangelizing for the things you care about and listening with interest to what others care about.” (257) TRUST articulates this desire for relevance by presenting works that challenge the dominant narratives for an audience unfamiliar with their work and mostly with contemporary performance art.

As a curatorial proposition TRUST considers how performance work by queer artists and artists of color can be relevant in a small, mostly white (94.4% according to the most recent survey data) city like North Adams, MA. The performers invited to participate in this project are also interested in this question. What does it mean to be a queer artist and/or an artist of color and present your work to an audience that doesn't look like you? How do they, as artists, engage with the potential for fetishization of their bodies and experiences. I don't have answers for these questions, but have curated TRUST as a way to investigate these ideas alongside a few of the many artists also grappling with these ideas.

It's an invitation to the performers to create their work in a new and unfamiliar place for an audience unfamiliar with their work. It's an invitation for both performer and audience to be together in a space and be open to a new and potentially uncomfortable experience. It's an invitation to be vulnerable together and to set that as the intended outcome. It's intentionally low-tech and small in scale to remind all of us of the humanness of these actions. It's about institutional and artistic risk. It's about the struggle to articulate what that risk is and what it means and why it's important. It comes from a belief in the power of sitting together and

sharing a common experience. It comes from a curatorial desire to challenge the established and expected. It comes from a place of deep care for the small city of North Adams and its post-industrial, quasi-rural, hardscrabble existence in the mountains of Western, MA. It comes from a belief that people who live outside of large urban centers also deserve access to these experiences. It comes from hope that it matters, and a deep uncertainty if it does.

As a curator working within an institution of higher education – how institutions respond to these questions is also quite timely. The call to eliminate funding to the NEA points to a larger cultural issue where arts funding is once again on the precipice. Increasingly the conversations both in and out of institutions turns to capitalism and entrepreneurship. This institutional necessity to pay the bills often correlates to a more conservative or safe programmatic output in ways that may feel comforting and familiar but situate the institution outside of a larger contemporary discourse which often leads to a real or perceived reputation for being out of touch with the everyday lived experience. Instead of shrinking into the familiar, TRUST proposes embracing the uncertainty, the unknown and the difficult. “Perhaps now is the time to embrace the paradox of being Public Arts Institutions: a part of society—but a part which must remain apart in order to fulfill its multifaceted role as “chastiser, rebel, lightning rod, redeemer, irritant, codifier, and horse-laughter.” (Ragsdale)

I too am considering this paradox of how my work at an institution can challenge, chastise, subvert, and delight. This practice sits alongside the responsibility to practice a pedagogy of inclusiveness that elevates and shines a lens on a multiplicity of experiences, drawing attention to the underrepresented, and emergent voices in this space and creating conditions to witness, engage and participate with these ideas. TRUST exemplifies this approach to curating.

Risk and its relationship to vulnerability and intimacy are further explored in the selection of artists for this project all of whom engage in exploration of risk in their works. Vulnerability researcher Brene Brown describes the power of vulnerability as the “birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path.” TRUST asks for vulnerability from both performer and audience in the belief that it is through vulnerability moments of empathy, joy and authenticity will be experienced.

Through the initial invitation and subsequent conversations, each performer has been asked to create or adapt a work for TRUST. For Benjamin Lundberg vulnerability and risk takes the form of collaborative collisions between public and performer, inviting immersion and participation by creating spaces that script the way audiences engage. In his recent performance Safety Pin Removal for example, he observes the public’s reactions. Naming and rejecting their empathetic response. Finally asking the public to remove the safety pin. The removal requires “collaboration, risk, trust, intimacy, and bodily contact.” (Lundberg, statement)

Lundberg will expand this action for TRUST issuing a call for local artists of color to participate in the performance, offering a space for a mostly (or exclusively) white audience to move beyond symbolic alley-ship and through the removal of safety pins demonstrate the physical care for a body of color. Lundberg's use of certain bodies aims to make visible how difference and internalized assumptions and biases work to shape a public's engagement with bodies that may or may not be like their own.

Ana Mendez creates hybrid dance performances based on rituals, traditions and stories of native cultures and mythology. The works can be regarded as secular ritual because they are presented in ceremony through structured improvised games and "situations" that exhibit the evolution of our relationship to spirituality. In her work *Liminal Being*, for example, Mendez situation took the form of her falling down and falling up a staircase 37 times. Saying of the performance "The piece was an anti-show embodying ambiguous, often chaotic states that exist in the moments before crossing thresholds." (Mendez, Artist Statement)

For TRUST, Mendez will create a new site-specific work designed to highlight and collapse the dichotomy of the two worlds that exist within the history the buildings currently home to MASS MoCA. Previously home to Sprague Electric, which at its height employed 4,000 workers and now home to the largest contemporary art museum in the country. For TRUST Mendez will perform as a mannequin in work coveralls. Beginning her performance at a bus stop designed by Victoria Palermo and installed on Main Street in downtown North Adams in 2012. Her piece will perform in and around the bus stop, while the space is actively being used by the public. Her movements will include an exploration of the architecture of relationships, primarily between the audience, the structure and Mendez as performer. A soundscape of machinery, cars, engines and gears plays on a loop from a nearby cassette tape player will accompany the movement. Mendez will then board the bus and continue the performance before returning back to the bus stop.

T L Ford blends elements of contemporary dance and burlesque to create work that explores otherness, and non-heteronormative displays of sexuality. Their intensely emotive performance draws the viewer in and asks for an equally emotive response from the audience. In this exchange of energy an intensely vulnerable space is created. An intimacy is created and both audience and performer ask the other to TRUST - in the experience, and in each other. This vulnerability is risky, and the request to do this in a public space further intensifies the act. It asks the audience to confront a sexualized queer body in a public space.

For TRUST, Ford has devised a performance piece, *Shifts*, that demonstrates the fluidity of gender. As Ford describes, "gender itself is a daily performance that each person participates in whether they are intentionally, or unintentionally, acting out. Shifts works to demonstrate the ways in which geography, personal interaction, self-proclaimed identity, and the ways in which we are socially constructed to categorize gender affect a person's perceived gender."

For their performance Ford will shift between 6 to 9 examples of genders including, but not limited to, high femme, butch, boi, diesel femme, genderqueer, masculine of center non-binary, drag king, diesel dyke, and androgynous. Along with their performance, definitions

of each gender will be distributed, along with a list of questions requiring each person interacting with the piece to question their own gender in that moment.

TRUST proposes that there is tremendous value in the presentation of contemporary performance work in a non-institutional setting, and that this is especially relevant in rural and semi-rural communities where access to art of all kinds is limited and opportunities to experience performance works often takes one of two forms - community based works, or touring productions deemed to have broad appeal.

TRUST presents a third alternative for the presentation of performance outside of urban centers by creating a space to engage with performance that is less obvious, more challenging, rooted in ambiguity and open to multiple interpretations. By thoughtfully presenting the artists of TRUST, we create an empathic performative exchange between audience and artist. Offering 'risky' work in public space, democratizing the audience experience and providing opportunity to be transported from the everyday. By locating these works in public space TRUST presents a disruption to everyday activity. Spatially and temporarily dislocating the viewer from their experience. These moments of dislocation or disruption offer opportunity for experiential shift and it is in this place of disruption where we can find surprise, wonder and splendor.

Lindsay Cummings describes this form of relational audience engagement in terms of an empathetic exchange that she terms dialogic empathy. "Dialogic empathy does not "arrive" at understanding, but rather consists of a constant and open-ended engagement." (18) The artists of TRUST likewise create conditions with their performances to create reciprocal and open-ended engagement with their works.

In many ways North Adams is an ideal community for this project. It is a small, post-industrial city that has struggled with generational poverty and its attendant lack of opportunity. Lack of opportunity can lead to a feeling of being trapped or helplessness. It can be incredibly difficult to see beyond the day-to-day reality and TRUST provides the opportunity to be transported, however fleetingly, from this reality. In this place of transportation hope and an expansion of understanding can occur. The benefit of rural, idyllic locations of these institutions also serves as real barriers to access, especially for local populations. This is true despite the fact that North Adams is also home to a large contemporary art museum, MASS MoCA, which has included contemporary performance in its programming since the beginning. There is distrust of MASS MoCA among many locals. Both in terms of the work it has presented and what are seen by many long-term residents as failed promises to the community in terms of economic prosperity and recovery.

TRUST is presented as part of the DownStreet Art 2017 season. DownStreet Art is a program of the Berkshire Cultural Resource Center at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. Designed initially as a marketing and economic development project for downtown North Adams, DownStreet Art has evolved over the past few years to focus on bringing artist-centered experiences to local residents. This is achieved through a multi-tiered presenting and engagement strategy featuring visual and performance art experiences

including some combination of pop-up galleries, temporary and permanent public artworks, music and roving spectacle-type performances, and a local makers market. DownStreet Art brings a wide variety of artists to the North Adams and Berkshire region and also prominently features the work of local and regional artists. Where DownStreet Art has been successful over the last nine years is working in the space between large institution and community-based programming.

TRUST capitalizes on this history of presenting contemporary artworks (both visual and performative) outside of traditional institutional spaces and expands that idea to the commissioning of site-specific interventions conceived to challenge assumptions of audience engagement, occasionally blurring the line between ordinary movement and performance, with a strategy to present multiple points of engagement with the work and provide contextual information to the audience. By creating a deeply collaborative engagement strategy between both audience and performer we nurture an appetite for risk, for participation and conversation creating conditions to expand understanding, exist in vulnerability and be open to new experiences and differing viewpoints.

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