

How can socially engaged art practice contribute to peace through the embodied memory of one person?

INTRODUCTION

Over the past year I have made three new friends. Well in actuality I met a number of new people, a lot of whom I now consider friends, but the three I refer to here developed through a social art project I have been conducting called 'mindful encounters', and resultantly these friendships are also sculptures, or living art. This research approaches human relationships as sculptural form, and mindfulness as creative practice. When mindfulness is a state of awareness, building a relationship specifically through it might be seen as consciously creating or sculpting, and the connection we form is the outcome. Such a connection is as ever changing as any lived or felt experience, and thus any representation of it is only temporarily true or relevant. Representation is problematic beyond the changing nature of friendship, it extends to the fact that I can not authentically show the relationships, as they are only felt and lived by those who experience them. If I was to try to provoke the feelings experienced through writing, I might be best to weave a fictitious narrative that would better suit a novel than the project report I am writing here. Therefore, I do not try and represent the project through these words, but to share some of the ideas that have arisen around it. These ideas are discussed in relation to an engaged art practice that strives for universal ways towards peace through one on one exchanges.

THE PREMISE AND PROJECT OUTLINES

A place to begin.

'mindful encounters' is a time-exchange project wherein I offer people 8 hours of my time to do whatever they want, need or would like to see more of in the world, and in return I ask for 8 hours of their time to engage with me in mindful activities. My 8 hours begin with the same starting point for each collaborator, and have referenced 'mindful practice' in the building of a series of performance outlines that alter behaviour within everyday situations such as eating, walking and talking. See plate 1 below for details. My collaborators' 8 hours do not have to reference mindfulness in this way, but I found myself favouring suggestions that put positive personal or environmental action into the world, and are somehow outside of feasibility within a commercial market. Once activated, these 16 performative hours combine to create the 'social sculpture' of the relationships built through the process. At the outset I intended to form 4 of these relationships, and at the time of writing there are three in a state of 'realisation'. I am now open to pursuing more than 4 before finalising this research, but now with a more acute awareness of the investment each entails, emotionally and logistically. This project can and has at times become all encompassing, effecting not only a creative or intellectual part of me, but also become intertwined with my being, shaping my moods, my happiness, and my movement through life.

Many discussions have occurred around what people would 'like to see more of in the world' apart from the three realised. Logistics, time, space, resources and even personal preference have not allowed for all of them to be activated, however I see the discussions as a living part of the work. The moment when people articulate their wildest dreams in a way that approaches them as possible might be the same moment of transformation that allows them to become a reality. This work is a platform for that articulation, and a provocation of the thought process that leads us there. A democratic manifestation that entrusts our future to the ideas of the individual and suggests that saying those ideas out loud is the starting point for their actualisation. Academic Peggy Phelan suggests that such words can change societies when saying that "Queers who survive the death accorded them by the Law of the Social and go onto create another life, dream continually of another social space, one we help bring into being by reciting those ideas out loud." Somehow we are all queer, regardless of our preferences or our willingness to go against the grain. And our shared banality might be the queerest thing of all in it's ability to make us unaware of it's causal affect. Often routine makes us move mechanically through shared space, supporting outdated constructs with mundane monotony. It is within this shared banality that art might occupy a rehearsal space for new futures, as something that can shape our everyday lives and consequently effect socio-political structures simply by adding awareness. Existing outside of the requirements of defined outcomes, art can be an arena that allows for open ended experimentation where ideas are made real through actions that give us embodied memories to contribute to collective memory, allowing us to experiment with ways of living.

A way to exchange

In this creative arena we can not only experiment with the new, we can also activate those existing parts of society or ideas that we would like to see prosper. If every action is a vote for that thing to exist, what do you support with your presence and participation? That's why this project uses as its premise the alternative economic model of time-exchange. In a world recovering from a crisis of economics, where and how we spend our money can be revolutionary in itself. Here the individual as consumer can be empowered by refusing to participate. As inherently social beings however, we will continue to negotiate with the other in an increasingly global market and our involvement in a capitalist system is more complex than simply disengaging. Perhaps though, we can have a marketplace that is fair, and it can be when we truly connect with ourselves that we naturally do what is right for the other, dismantling greed and acknowledging an interconnectedness of human organisms. To do this we may come back to mindful practice which helps us connect to ourselves, and therefore support the other as equal. Time-Exchange breaks down hierarchical roles by acknowledging an hour of one person's life to be equal to an hour of another's. The 8 hour structure of 'mindful encounters' references the working day, the same amount of time we fought for as a workers right, the amount of time that is often simply not enough to get it all done in, and indeed the amount of time many wish away daily in jobs they do not like. What can we do in 8 hours? 'mindful encounters' playfully throws that idea into action in the world placing the mindful techniques directly in the social, in the space between people to see what these chance based methodologies might bring up.

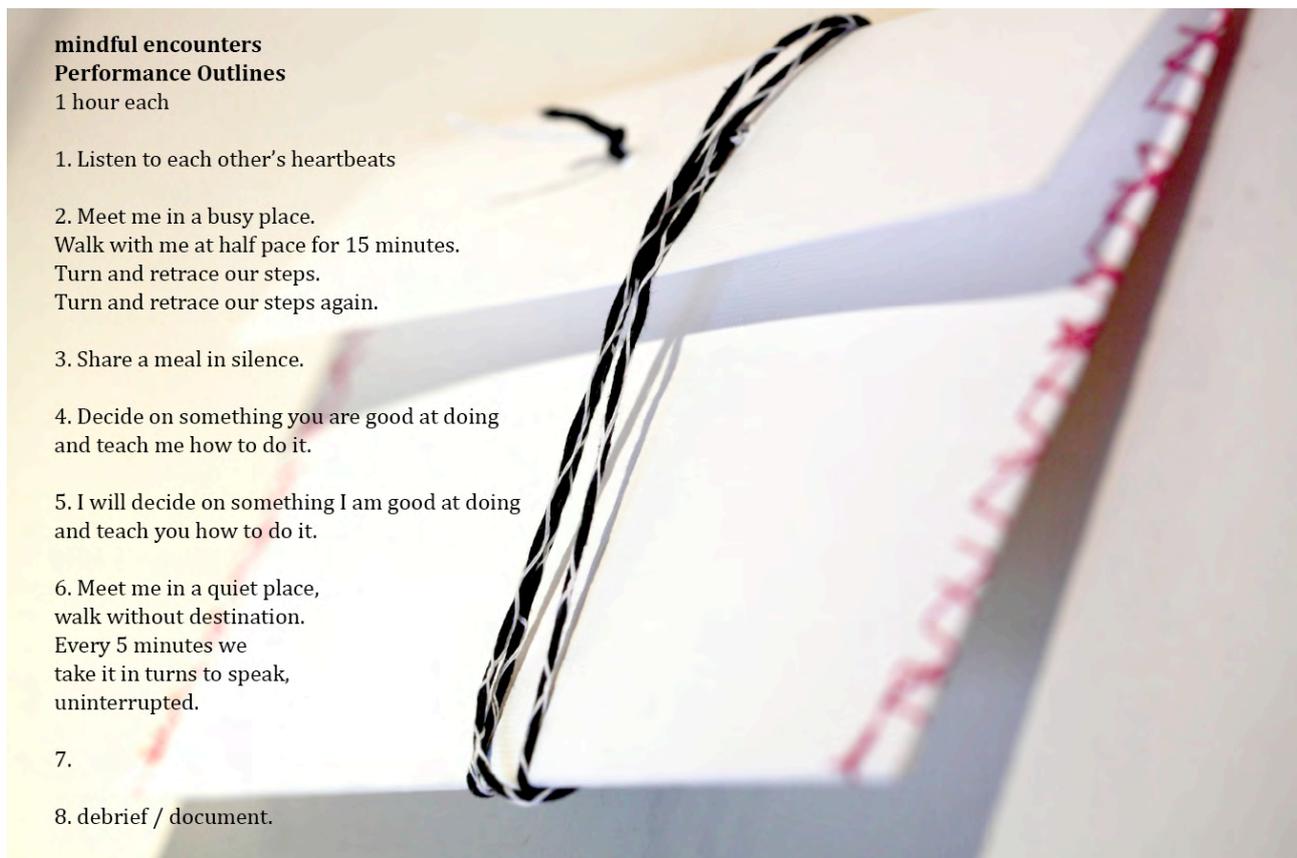


Plate 1. mindful encounters performance outlines.

THE BUILD UP, NEGOTIATIONS AND CONTRACTS.

Agreeing to engage.

Approaching friendships as art can both become confusing, and raise notions of purity. Is it an authentic friendship if it is entered into under certain terms? Relationships invariably involve compromise, and experiencing them through art challenges me to be the person I want to be and leave my fears behind. I take more risks, I am brutally honest, and once committed am so unconditionally. These are things that I notice then begin to influence my relationships outside of art. I also find that the performative nature of 'social sculpture' brings out wonderful parts of my collaborators, they themselves often surprised at how brave or thoughtful they have been in or after one of our encounters. In this way, approaching life as art, or as a part of a creative process, allows us to build an existence that makes sense in a world where what's on offer can often seem foreign or prescribed.

To introduce the three people I have enacted this project with (none of whom have chosen to remain entirely anonymous) there is Oliver Vicars-Harris, a Londoner; Liberty, a 6 year old girl in Australia; and Caara Fritz-Hunter, an American woman in the Eastern Sierra Mountains of California. This is also the order I met them in. For all three there was a documented moment of mutual agreement to trust and engage. For Oliver it came when he accepted an invitation from me, a hand stitched envelope given to him while we shared a dinner in pitch darkness one evening. For Liberty it was on the agreement of terms as they were suggested by her mother, and with Caara it was decided when we agreed on the performance outline for our 'environmental theatre' piece, that we later carried out as an ecological pilgrimage. These documents can be seen here below, plates 2, 3 and 4. Interestingly enough, the tune of the original negotiation carried through the manifest encounters as any seed holds the entire potential of it's mature plant.

So what was it people wanted to do? For Oliver, he wanted to spend more time in the creative process to further empathise with what it was he, as a consultant to some of the major museums in London, made spaces for. In this way, being in my 8 hours satisfied his needs. He cared for these hours with an attentive hand, and it was a huge learning process for both of us. Being my first collaborator, Oliver helped me shape the project with his light hearted approach and knowledge of alternative ways of engaging audiences, resetting their threshold of expectation when entering a situation. Oliver was an informed, provocative and engaged collaborator. Since we have completed the first 8 hours Oliver has suggested that we spend the 8 hours I owe him engaging in 'more explicitly creative pursuits in combining art and life'. I am developing these as workshops which will eventually be made accessible to a wider public.

With Liberty the list changed weekly. Although she never ran out of ideas, the original list consisted of 10 activities, of those the ones we have executed are: go to a glass art exhibition with jars and permanent markers and make our own glass sculptures; go to the park and remake it; go to a cafe and take photos of the food; go swimming. If being in the moment is 'mindful practice', then children live in a more constantly mindful state than adults. Therefore, the activities I suggested to Liberty as per plate 1 took on an entirely different meaning, often becoming more of a distraction from the process than adding the heightened awareness it offers to adults.

Caara's original suggestion came as "an informal vibration packed with inquisitiveness as to where a collaborative project like this could take us and to the people that it could reach with its 'butterfly effect'."ⁱⁱ Caara is an environmental activist whose "heart's interests are within social and environmental conservation, centring on the things that scare me most... fracking, tar sands, gentrification, loss of habitat"ⁱⁱⁱ. We entered into a warm electronic dialogue, through which Caara suggested we undertake some kind of 'environmental theatre' action. She felt that her ecological campaigns were not reaching the emotive place they needed to in order to make a difference in peoples behaviour and for our planet. Perhaps we could come up with a way to reach that place through performance art? Through the conversations, we eventually settled on the theme of water conservation, focusing on domestic use of water during drought. This became the premise for *The Passage Of Water, an ecological pilgrimage*, which we carried out in California about 6 months after meeting online. See plate 4.

As a result of my experience with Caara I developed an action I call 'Transferral' where I sit opposite my collaborator and we pour water from one vessel to the other for 5 minutes. It becomes a rhythmic non verbal exchange felt in the weight of the water and it's changing attributes from one pour to the other. The two beings are connected by the movement of our most prominent natural resource. I will do this action with Liberty and Oliver in the near future. See plate 5.

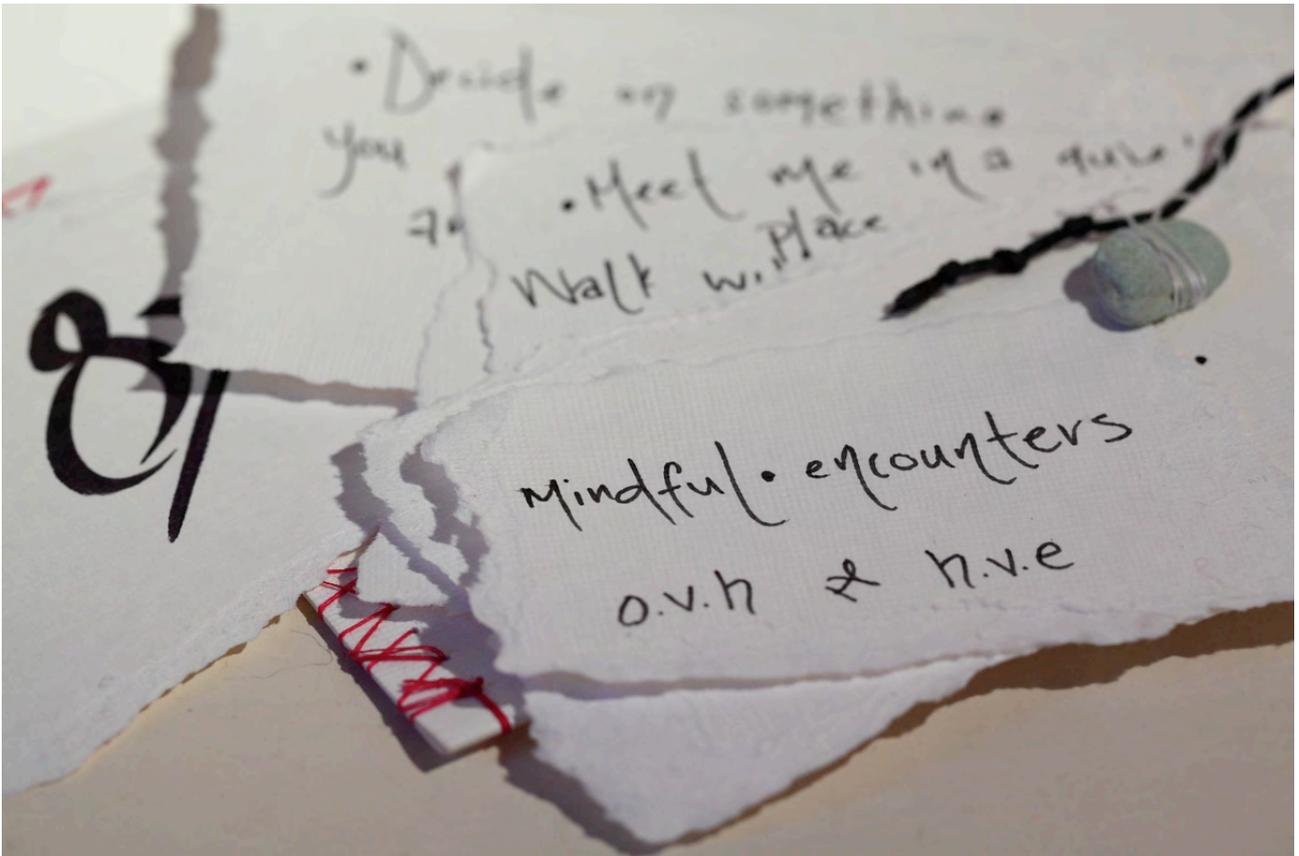


Plate 2. An Invitation. mindful encounters with Oliver, documentation. 2013

Regarding working with children, I'm happy to do this, the only requirements I would have would be

- Her face not to be shown. So perhaps views of the back of her head etc.
- Discretionary subject matter, ie. Adult subjects that are inappropriate (usually anything that veers on sexual content).
- We ease her into spending unsupervised time with you. This is more about teaching her not to go off with 'strangers' rather than me thinking you are a freak. It will also build better conversations as the trust will build. She will also do this very quickly so if you wanted to go for a walk to discuss things this will be ok. She will also very quickly assume that you are friends so you should be able to cultivate good conversations.
- Also, in no way is this to have editing priorities but if I could have a look/listen to what may possibly be exhibited? This is more a discretionary thing...I would hate for conversations to wander into areas of her father when I guess, myself, I haven't resolved all these issues internally and out of respect for everybody... I'm more than happy to discuss all this if you have reservations about anything please let me know. In no way do I want to be dictatorial about anything but the inclusion of her face. Very happy about voice, hands, rear views etc.

Written by Liberty's mother, in email correspondence September 2013

Plate 3. Terms of engagement. mindful encounters with Liberty, documentation, 2013.

The Passage of Water.

An ecological pilgrimage by Caara Fritz-Hunter and Honi Ryan.

Two women converse online, creating a text written over email responding to the domestic use of water, and how we can conserve water in our everyday lives. Parts of the dialogue are taken from existing environmental action content and parts of it are personal responses to these ideas, facts, provocations and statistics.

Months later, we meet at a lake. We fill a glass vessel with water. We take the glass vessel with us on a journey to Los Angeles, following the path the water is directed to reach much of the life it nourishes. Along the way we converse and develop the ideas begun in the email conversation to distill it to a 5 minute dialogue.

We arrive in Los Angeles to a space where a large scale projection of an Indian woman whose tears fall in reverse, drying up like the lakes along the lines in her face. Caara and Honi stand before the projection on either side of it and take it in turns to read the 5 minute text they have developed on the journey, voice for voice, statistic for statistic, idea for idea, feeling for feeling. Between each exchange we cross the stage and pour the water from one vessel to the other in each other's hands, crossing the screen as we go, taking it in turns to speak aloud.

We do not spill a drop.

We sit on the floor together, half of that water in each of our vessels.

We have 8 smaller clear glass jars laid out in front of us in a line connecting our bodies in the middle of the room. We divvy the water up into small portions across the 8 jars.

In one I clean my teeth.

In another she washes her face.

In one she washes a dish

In another I wash a shirt

In one I make a cup of tea

In another she mixes bread

Jar for jar we move from opposite sides of the stage until we are both in the centre where we take the final two jars and stand up, side by side, we drink the water.

Plate 4. Environmental Theatre Action. mindful encounters with Caara documentation, 2014.



Plate 5. Transferral. mindful encounters with Caara documentation, 2014.

MINDFULNESS AND METHOD

Why mindful engagement?

Although the term 'mindful' is defined simply to mean aware or conscious, describing a deliberate state of mind and presence in the moment, mindfulness is used here because of its relationship with propagating peace. Some techniques that are embedded in the performances such as stillness, silence, slow paced, repetition and openness can lead to mindfulness. Peace activist, teacher and Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh teaches mindfulness as a path to peace through incorporation into our daily lives. The mindfulness he speaks of activating in everyday life can be likened to the history of 'art and the everyday' that was defined by Alan Kaprow, both ask that you add a layer of awareness to your daily activities. Artist Linda M Montano feels that the application of art to the everyday can be an awareness, an elevated state that she chose to apply to her entire existence, essentially claiming herself and all her doings art when "In 1984 I appropriated all time as performance time or art, meaning every minute of my life was an opportunity for that kind of higher - not higher, but that kind of consciousness, a kind of awareness".^{iv}

This history of performance art can be seen as the roots for what is now considered 'socially engaged art practice', wherein artists work with communities and social issues to give voice and create dialogues. By the late 1990s, Thich Nhat Hanh had coined a socially active buddhism as 'engaged buddhism' which holds many similar attributes to the discourse of socially engaged art practice. Writer and artist Suzanne Lacy compares them in saying that "Both engaged Buddhism and engaged art are inherently antimaterialist and antihierarchical forms of advocacy for meaning-making within society. Both respond to the increasing visibility of suffering in the world, now and everywhere through mass media."^v This anti hierarchical nature to human exchange is something I seek and encourage in my encounters. It is my resistance to a capitalist dialogue that subordinates even in the guise of liberation, and trains us to blindly follow or defiantly distrust authority within a patriarchal system.

Leadership and the anti-anti

The aspect of non-hierarchical exchange during 'mindful encounters' has been, on the most part, received as empowerment by my collaborators and cared for accordingly. Although I seek a shared authorship of experience in 'mindful encounters' inevitably at some point it comes back to me being the creator and keeper of the project. When in a position of authority or responsibility I have found surrender and vulnerability to be some of the most valuable tools to invite serendipity and equality.

This I learned in another area of my life. I volunteer periodically at a meditation centre in my area, registering people for long term silent retreats. It is a part of my job to make them aware of the guidelines of the centre and ask that they hand certain things in before beginning. Often a nervous new meditator will want to hold onto the things they use in their daily lives, although they are not needed during the retreat. I find a great beauty and trust than in the moment where I tell them that they are master of their own life, and can do as they please, our guidelines are merely suggestions. This surrender nearly always results in them happily handing over the thing they were holding onto, such as their mobile phone or some pharmaceuticals in their bags, having decided for themselves.

Working with Liberty the 6 year old girl was the case when this equality became questionable, as indeed she seemed to get more out of things when I took a stronger hand in leading them and often pushed me if she saw a weakness. Perhaps this comes down to our biological roles, or perhaps it comes down to our very early conditioning that learning is not meant to be fun. Liberty had an expectation of me, that I would teach her something. She often mentioned how my suggested activities "didn't work", although I always enjoyed them. And at times she would walk down the street saying something like "But Honi I don't even feel like I'm learning anything now" to which I would ask her if she was having fun, and she would reply that she was having a wonderful time and didn't want to go home, at all! Fun and empowerment might be two of the most valuable teaching tools we have, and could guide us away from leadership as an oppressor.

Artist and social choreographer Ernesto Pujol described his position on leadership to me recently:

“Leadership is tricky, and can only be engaged by individuals who know themselves to be broken vessels. Leadership is best exercised with wisdom and humility. Information and ethics are important, but not enough.

Most of the leadership we know is patriarchal or matriarchal. But there is "leadership" in Nature, outside of the human parameters, when we look at pack behavior. There is always a dominant or senior wolf, stag, dog, elephant bull, etc. It has to do with the survival of the species in the desert, jungle or mountaintop. So, humans did not invent "leadership." It goes back to the animal we are. Of course, it gets informed and complicated by secret and public agendas and goals, and that is when it goes wrong.

So, I do not distrust leadership, because I have experienced a holy, enlightened, evolved leadership within a monastic context where I surrendered to the wisdom of a very old master teacher monk. But I distrust patriarchy and matriarchy, and concentrated power. I simply try to discern the nature of the leader that confronts me.

As for my own leadership, I claim it when necessary and exercise it transparently, in addition to sharing (delegating) as much as I can and training others to be evolved leaders in the process. So, my leadership is a school for leadership.”^{vi}

If leadership can be activated more widely in these terms, then it is a useful and necessary part of conscious surrender. It can also redefine notions of celebrity to be seen in terms of responsibility. If a dominant or popular sensibility truly behaves for the group, and not for individual or capital gain then it supports the one-ness of all living beings and might lead to abundant equality.

The roles we play with time in art and life.

Although I entertain these natural roles and daily activities as performance art, I do not feel to simply to put art at the servitude of everyday life. Rather, I think art can appeal precisely to that which we do not have in our daily lives and therefore raise awareness of it. To do this I maintain some experimental magic as playful performances that allow subtly absurd actions to tease the philosophical edge of society. Indeed, ‘mindful encounters’ continues to separate art and life by using time as a frame for beginning and ending what are not entirely normal behaviours in otherwise entirely normal situations. Many of my art actions are timed, and although they invariably take longer than the allocated time, there is the understanding that they will end. With this knowledge in place, and knowing that an alarm will sound to let me know when, I can lose myself in the process. To be able to release my self from time, first I must take care of time. Once time is taken care of, I surrender to it, and can activate an openness, an emptiness that makes room for unexpected things to happen. Even though finishing a performance on the bell is an arbitrary act that may or may not change anything except the decision to do so, it is mentally and physically influential. After the bell, it’s no longer art. Art can be defined purely by it’s intention to be art.



Plate 6. Dancing with Fire. mindful encounters with Oliver, documentation, 2013.

THE RELATIONSHIPS

Performing sleep.

I am endlessly fascinated at how formative the intention behind any action can be. The mere intent of approaching something otherwise ordinary as 'art', as discussed above, completely changes the embodied effect, and in all honesty I find art actions exhausting. The otherwise unexplained physiological evidence of this, even in very subtle performances, has led me to develop a new work where I will do a series of sleep actions as art to see if I wake up tired. But as an example of intent's power I return to a fable, often told, of two knife wounds. One occurred to a man as a stabbing on the street, and the other came from a scalpel on the surgeons table. Both knife incisions proved fatal and people died, but the effect and meaning of each is entirely different. It is here that we can see how the intention of a persons actions changes the meaning not only in their own lives but in the experiences of so many people around them.

Performing life.

Sometimes there is a rhythm to things that beats with my heart. A synchronicity that seems supernatural and for a split second, I'm a character in a film. I grab for my camera, then wait, look, I missed it. Or did I? Is it enough that I lived it? What will I do with the knowledge, with the feeling? Life offers these moments all the time, and I find them to come in thick and fast when I activate awareness, openness, and ask nicely. Acknowledging these performative moments in life is an important training ground to be able to invite them along again when I am ready to share them, creating them by setting the right environment and the right mindset for them to occur. Tempting synchronicity into life could be described by quantum physics as the law of attraction, and once you are aware of something you are much more likely to find it. Like harnessing intuition to prevent things rather than react to them in the aftermath, how can we recreate moments with an authenticity that allows the remnants to be not only telling, but also poetic? This is a state of readiness, a prepared state (not an altered state) that has invited the camera, asked for the unexpected, set the timer and begun. Of course only to end. And there in that end is a simple beauty that lies in what we leave behind. Every single lived moment has the potential to be art, to be great, to be remembered, to be transformative, to be captured. But it is often the things we let go of, the parts we do not include, that are the most important. This could be as much about remaining present in life as in art, as the decision to make something art also might involve a decision to make that thing publicly accessible through documentation or critical distance. Both documenting and maintaining critical distance can, paradoxically increase and decrease the mindfulness of the moment. It will increase it by making us acutely aware of it, and decrease it by removing us from the moment and into it's documented immortality.



Plate 7. mindful encounters with Caara, slow walking documentation, April 2014.

REMNANTS AND THE AFTERMATH or DOCUMENTATION

Written

Performance and documentation have a complicated relationship that I feel was quite adequately expressed in a text message conversation I had with artist and author Sean Lowry. Sean and I have been writing what we call an ‘asynchronous conversation’ for the last few months^{vii}. We have been playing with the idea of swapping voices, speaking for each other, and here we do so for the first time. It’s his turn to reply over email, and he texts:

Sean: Will get thread going again later this week

Honi: No worries, we've got years to weave a dialogue. We could get experimental with it, assume characters - historical, fictitious.. Are you now Kosuth since you share a body of work?^{viii}

Sean: Kosuth hates poetry in art. I like it.
I would rather swap characters with you!

Honi: Done! In that case would you please submit a 3000 word project report on mindful encounters by Friday morning, and I will reply to my email for you. Thanks.

Sean: Will you accept an intention to do so? I'm not sure if I'm feeling myself today.

Honi: Intention accepted and acknowledged as immaterial documentation.

Sean: Is that all I have to do?

Honi: That depends on how justified you feel with it.

Are you

1. Exhausted as a result of thinking about it.

2. Prepared to sit in a cubicle for 64 days straight to ‘show’ it.

and/or

3. Actually entirely able to articulate it but refuse to as the problematic of representation becomes a conundrum you are willing to talk about but not submit in any written form due to it's in-ephemeral nature?

Sean: ~~SE~~ ~~SE~~ ... \..... \.. \..

\.. \.. \.. 

Honi: Pass

Sean:

Honi: Put a box around it, call it art, and write me a paper, please.

Spatial

I exhibited mindful encounters in a gallery show this year, and I found myself not wanting to include any documentation of the friendships lest it gratify the viewer. That may seem a little mean, but my intention behind it is to keep the viewer in a state of answering for themselves, and in direct contact with themselves, both conceptually and physically. To these ends I wrote the mindful encounters project premise on the wall, in the hope that they would think of what they would do in that situation. How would they like to spend 8 hours and what, indeed, do they think the world needs more of? For me the provocation of an idea is a full and completed artwork. The cerebral space the participant fills in thinking about something is the crucial individual space where true transformation can occur. It is a respect for the individual authorship of their own life and a trust that when one acts for themselves they will automatically act for the other. Next to the wall text I offered a double stethoscope with which everyone can have ‘heartbeat conversations’, which is how I have begun all of the mindful encounters collaborations. By listening to our hearts. See plate 8 below.

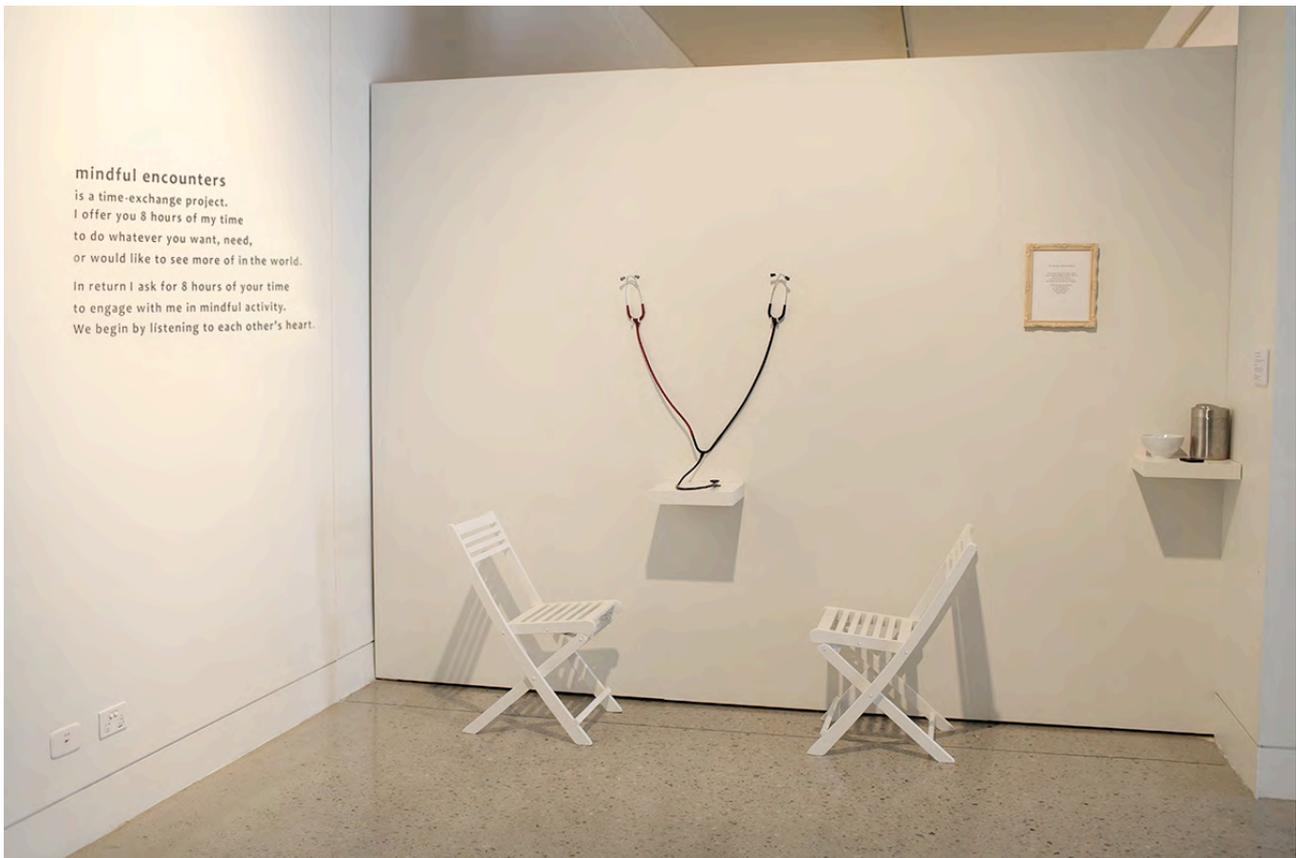


Plate 8. mindful encounters in Honi Ryan INSTANCE exhibition at Blue Mountains Cultural Centre 2014, installation view.

FAILURE AS POSSIBILITIES

The goodbye is always bittersweet.

When a performative piece of art begins and ends in human interaction, the method might become the site and the documentation of the work. Perhaps they sculpt society, perhaps they remain always as pieces of performance art and simply disappear in time. I wonder, does a friendship that began as a sculpture ever stop being art? And if we keep the friendship going am I indefinitely trapped in my art? Do I want to be? Is it possible to represent it authentically at any stage in any form? Is the poetic authentic? Whether I choose to show photos, speak poems, lead workshops or drink cups of tea from this research, it does not change the fact that although it may have inflated through experience, 'mindful encounters' has effectively not moved since I began it. Here I am with an outline for a performance art piece that may or may not be enacted again by any two given people in a number of circumstances, and enacted or not, from it comes a plethora of possibilities that may or may not become relevant to myself and others. I am however certainly more aware. Aware of the project, of myself and of the other.

“Under the influence of awareness, you become more attentive, understanding and loving, and your presence not only nourishes you and makes you lovelier, it enhances them as well. Our entire society can be changed by one person’s peaceful presence.”

Thich Nhat Hanh^{ix}

- i Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex, Performing Public Memories*. Routledge, UK, US, Canada 1997. Print p16
- ii Caara Fritzheimer, submitted at www.mindfulencounters.net Received by the author as an email. September 26, 2013.
Web
- iii *ibid*
- iv Linda Mary Montano. *Letters from Linda M Montano*. Routledge, UK US and Canada 2005 Print p48
- v Suzanne Lacy *Having it Good* in Jacob and Baas (eds) *The Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art* University of California Press, 2004 print p105
- vi Ernesto Pujol, From email correspondence with the artist, Feb 11. 2014, web.
- vii The first published excerpt of this ongoing dialogue was in: Sean Lowry and Honi Ryan *Extended Instance, an asynchronous conversation* in *Honi Ryan Instance, recent works and performances*, hedonics creative, Aus 2014 ISBN 978-0-9924376-0-2 print
available online at http://www.hedonics.com.au/HoniRyan_Instance_Catalogue.pdf [last accessed April 10, 2014]
- viii Referencing Lowry's exhibition *One and Three Tasmainias* (after Kosuth's One and Three Chairs), Plimsoll Gallery, Tasmania, Australia, 2014.
- ix Thich Nhat Hanh *The Sun My Heart*. Parralax USA 1988. Print. p41