

Creating in the Face of Struggle: An Interview with Helene Vosters
By Joy Cosculluela, RSMT, RSME

Below is an interview I conducted as an assignment for my Tamalpa Level 3 training. The purpose was to interview someone involved in some work I resonated with, to further the scope of work I was already involved in. I interviewed Helene Vosters.

Helene Vosters M.A., M.F.A. is a performer, activist and scholar. Helene's performance philosophy is deeply informed by her long association with post-modern dance pioneer, Anna Halprin. A student of Halprin's since 1986, Helene has performed in numerous public and environmental performance rituals produced by Halprin. She served for three years on the core faculty of Tamalpa Institute. Helene earned her M.F.A. in Activist and Queer Performance from New College of California's Experimental Performance Institute.

Helene has taught on the faculties of New College of California and the California Institute of Integral Studies where she incorporated a breadth of modalities (academic, performance, activist, somatic and healing arts) into her academic teaching practice. In addition, Helene has written, directed and performed in several original works—including *Rosaceae*, *Eve's Trespass* and *Green*—activist allegories in the form of absurdist physical comedies that explore questions of collectivity, passion, pleasure, sin, alienation, death and war. Helene is currently a PhD candidate in Theatre Studies at York University where her performance and research explorations are focused on awakening the transformative power of collective grief through public performance intervention.

I performed in Helene's piece "Mourning Papers" in 2007 in Union Square, San Francisco, together with 15 other participants. "Mourning Papers" was a response to Helene's experience of the Afghanistan War. Participants, dressed in black working clothes, gathered and formed sculptures while reading newspapers and then sang a song written by Helene.

"Impact Afghanistan War" is her latest project that attempts to register, through her body, the impact of our (Canada/ US and other NATO allies) engagement in the Afghanistan war. It is a project where she falls 100 times everyday in a public space for one year.

Interview w/ Helene

What was your motivation behind “Mourning Papers”?

HV: My motivation was a response to what I experience as an “impossible juxtaposition” of reading the papers everyday, reading all about the suffering ----and just going about life.

Personally, it started when my partner Cassie’s grandmother and mother died. Then, 9/11 happened and the U.S invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq became motivations. I was reading about the wars, reading about deaths in general in our local neighborhoods. I was seeing how these events were sensationalized and began asking how we were not feeling this empathically ... so it was the desire to juxtapose our lack of resonance towards these deaths and ask: where’s our mourning in all of these?

I also experienced my own level of depression and asked how much of this was mine alone. I asked what happens to our expression of collective grief? Why are so many people on Prozac, why are there episodes of prescription drug use in managing our despair, to be constantly happy? What does it mean to be a citizen of a country at war and go about your day?

As these questions came up, I asked: where is our collective grief? I felt my own numbness and wanted to explore it. Like “Impact” I face up against my own inability to feel my grief.

How is grieving manifested in the West today?

In “Rosaceae”, I explored the story of we’re given this amazing bounty of living here in this country, but we’ve managed to invest our energy into destruction. The response of the ensemble I worked with was interesting in that nobody could access their grief... they were feeling more alienation, numbness... and depression, which was different than grief. Grief is more visceral, emotional. Depression is

more internalizing and isolating. Grief, as I learned in my research, was in ancient times, a public and collective practice mediated by women. Later on, laws were set in place that restricted the public practice of grief. Mourning became privatized, taken on by church and state or more contained in homes and individuals. We've become experts at dulling grief.

“Mourning Papers” and “Impact” challenged my own sense of isolation, to try to get past my own alienation. In “Rosaceae” I tried to awaken the public. I refused to think of it just as my own suffering... I felt it needed to be done in the realm of the collective.

3. What were your primary methods in the creative process?

The RSVP cycle was a primary method. (RSVP cycle is a map and a structure for designing themes, intentions and activities to generate creativity. The “S stands for scoring.) Scoring generated resources, the main one was working with materials ---- newspapers. I used activities such as reading the newspapers, and reading about death while having breakfast... I explored many ways of physically working with newspapers. I continue to explore that in costuming today.

So for me, it's not over... the element of recycling continues in my work. It keeps coming up again and again and I work with it in new ways.

Another model was working with task-based movement. I came in as a non-dancer and the work was not about choreography. So having task-based movement invites everybody into movement including my cast for “Rosaceae” who were non-dancers.

Tamalpa-based work with postures and sculpture also was important in giving the ensemble accessible tools to work with, such as

exploring emotions through postures. Other methods derived from Tamalpa are learning to work with space, time, force and embodying and images. I also worked with improvisation.

Within the scoring process, I look at embodied performance as an inquiry, the process of investigating the art of grieving.

4. What challenges did you encounter when working with people and how did you work with those challenges?

One challenge was forgetting how powerful the work is. My first experience of this power was when I was first working with Anna Halprin. We worked intensively on deep explorations and improvisations and I had meltdowns. With Daria Halprin, I learned how to hold the emotional space, to be aware of when that happens when you work with people, and how to enter and exit that space. I learned to create a container to hold the work and I had to step back and create scores to hold a therapeutic intention so I gave them creative tools to work with, in a therapeutic model. For example, if feelings got stirred up, I would ask them to embody these feelings in a posture. The performers were not dancers and I created a clear space for work and communicated transparently my intentions. So the biggest challenge is forgetting that not every person is familiar with the Life /Art process and therefore, how do I create space and scores for the work to happen?

I also gave them the opportunity to work with their personal material. As facilitator and director, I listened to what was generated and was influenced by what emerged, but I was also aware of not giving over completely to everything. It was also very effective to have a warm-up circle, which built group cohesiveness, trust, and camaraderie. They would do warm-up movement exercises together, which is very important for people who don't have Tamalpa vocabulary, people who wouldn't be able to self-guide themselves when instructed to do their warm-up.

5. In your opinion, what makes art valuable?

For me it's about art as a meaning-making process, art as an inquiry... Art as in the Life/Art Process.

In the Life/Art Process, everything in life became a palette for me. Art is a way to relate to the struggle in life. Instead of seeing constraints, my life experience becomes another color in the palette... how do I create in the face of my struggle?

In "Impact", I'm not just responding to me. The response of other people becomes part of the creative process. I have been accessing how alienated we all are, how we have forgotten how to connect with each other. My own experience of being ignored while I was falling strikes me as tragic... it makes me see that we don't even express our curiosity.

So my response to being ignored feeds back into the next fall... It makes me remember about the Afghani people who are impacted by the deaths around them and still have to go on living, juxtaposed by the other half of the world where we go about our own lives in alienation.

6. Do you have any last words about performance?

Performance as ritual... ritual as a container for my inquiry... ritual makes my inquiry meaningful, a much-needed element. In scoring, the container holds me. I would have skipped commitments because I didn't feel like doing the score on some days. Other reasons such as "I feel awkward, or I don't know where I'm doing this, or my body doesn't feel like falling 100 times." The ritual as the score helps me stay committed. Another example is when winter comes; I don't know what this will look like. I don't now if I will be outdoors, but having a ritual contains my intention, and I will

continue to find a way.

What I learned from Helene:

One of the things that came up for me very strongly was the question: What is the role of an artist in today's world? I ask that question every day. The more I come in contact with suffering, mine, other people's, the environment, the world, the more I believe that the artist has a much bigger response-ability today.

I see Helene as an embodied being, actively relating to the world and generating work that is provocative, accessible, and meaningful. She inspires me to wake up, to listen, to respond, to relate to my experience, to ask questions, to take a stand, to act and respond artfully. In my interview with Helene, I am reminded once again about the power of the Life/Art Process in weaving together the threads that make meaningful art. I am reminded about art and its social and cultural impact in our lives.

When Helene talks about confronting her own inability to grieve, I hear her speak to the "Confront/Encounter" process that we practice in the Life/Art process. ("Confront/Encounter" is part of the Five Part Process that serves as a map to develop awareness, explore our life themes therapeutically, and generate resources for insight and change) When Helene confronts her inability to grieve, I see her exploring this theme in a creative and embodied way. I imagine that working with concrete materials such as newspapers, as well as exploring the impact of her body falling on the ground, facilitates full-body expression of numbness and grieving, giving her work depth and authenticity. In short, art-making is healing in and of itself and offers us the space to reflect on our lives and the opportunity to rewrite our life stories.

As a performing artist, I feel validated in hearing again, the power of performance as ritual, as a frame for the performer. I asked Helene

how she would be able to sustain herself for a long period of time in “Impact”. Her response was that it was a ritual for her. I imagine that offering her action to something much bigger than herself gets her through challenging moments.

Another realization that came up for me in this interview is my responsibility to be mindful about how I go about generating creative resources. As a facilitator, I see the RSVP Cycle as a powerful tool in providing structure for working with people, especially those who aren't versed in the Life/Art approach. I'm reminded of the respect we show for who we work with. I have the responsibility to ask who I'm working with, what I'm working with, why I'm working this way. That information directs me on how I need to work with them, especially when bringing up emotional issues or deep wounds. It is vital in the practice to be able to provide a clear, safe space with the right creative tools to hold the experience mindfully.

Weaving Life and Art in my practice is a life-long learning and commitment to find ways to respond artfully in the face of struggle. I am inspired by Helene to continue to inquire, to respond to life in the most embodied way and to make meaning through art.

Joy Cosculluela, RSMT, RSME, teaches at Tamalpa Institute. She dances and collaborates with various artists in the Bay Area and performs with Anna Halprin's Sea Ranch Collective.