

Interview with **Gregory Hari** by Dimitrina Sevova, 15 February 2016 at Corner College, for the launch of Internet platform www.panch.li and LUPE Zürich

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D: Can you tell me about your own artistic practices? How do you contextualize them?

G: My artistic practice is based on the idea to install myself as a body, as a performer, in a space. It's always related to a specific space where the performance is to take place, doing something specific to that space. I started to work on how I can install myself in a space not as a performer alone, but in relation to objects or props that may be included in a performance, even if it's only a microphone, or boxes, while I'm singing as a performance. It's always a question of space, moving, body, and presence as well. I think about what atmosphere I want to perform in. Then I try to think about what I know, what's in my memories. This leads me to building a fictional stage, trying to imagine which character I will play. In the performance I did with an elevator,¹ where I built a fake elevator based on 1960s aesthetics, I played a character that is perhaps related to Matthew Weiner's television series *Mad Men*, which is set in New York in the 1960s. The character of myself as a performer changes from one performance to another.

D: Can you tell how, as an individual performance artist, you relate to the art performance scene and position yourself and your practices there? In regards to this question, is there such a scene in Zurich from your point of view? How are individual performance art positions in Zurich, and the Zurich context, connected to other towns like Basel, or Bern, other places?

G: I'm hopping from one scene to the other. There is a performance scene, or more than one, in each city. I'd say that Zurich has one scene around performers who are into gender, trans-gender, gay studies. Those are the subjects they work and play with. Then there may be performers who are more into ritual performances. There are always different scenes in a city, a variety of different performances and different interests. I wouldn't say that I really relate to the scene, even if I do exchange a lot. I ask other performers what they think about my performances, and in turn I criticize other performances, or ask myself in what way they may be related to my work. It's hardly ever really related, because of the importance for me of working with biographical themes and personal interests. But I have started working in collaborations with local artists. For instance, for the elevator, I worked with Luigi Archetti.² He's in a totally different scene, or scenes. He's a painter, a performer, a musician. I guess the frontiers are not that clear, as contexts overlap, and the cities are quite close to each other. There are many gatherings, for instance the Swiss Performance Art Award, where performers come together. And yet, the Swiss Performance Art Award is a good example of an event gathering a public, and performing artists, predominantly from one scene. There weren't that many young emerging artists there. Even though the first prize was shared by two artists who were placed equal first. One of these first prizes went to Philippe Wicht,³ a young gay artist from Geneva, which came as a surprise to me.

¹ Gregory Hari, *stuck*, performed on 3 June 2015 at F+F School of Art and Design Zurich as part of the *Degree Show*. Performative installation, 3h 10min, 2015.

² Luigi Archetti <<http://www.luigiarchetti.com/>> (accessed 2016-02-23).

³ Philippe Wicht <<http://www.philippewicht.com/>> (accessed 2016-02-25).

D: Are there influences on your methods of work from other performers, or historical art performances, or the current Zurich scene?

G: My method is based on collecting. I go to many gatherings, openings, performance evenings, to the theater. I permanently collect everything, from going to a museum, going to the theater, watching trash TV, going to theme parks even, to Disneyland Paris, all the way to watching movies. It's a huge pot where I collect stuff. Then I make something out of that collection in my brain or in my memory. I go to other performances and see how they work. My performances are really about building or installing, performing a room of imagination. They give the public a chance to calm down and meet me in the performance, be part of the performance, and associate personal things with my performance. I never give a clear key to how someone should read my performances, or understand my performances. It's only a kind of chance given to the public. Disney is a great example for giving the public a chance to create a room for imagination. It's all about fantasy. It's all about imagination and also entertaining, of course. For me I would say Disney is one big influence, even if it's not always conscious or permanently active or present.

One influence on my future work may be Philippe Wicht's performance I mentioned. I am also thinking of doing a performance that is inspired by Nils Amadeus Lange, who is also into transgender, gender, gay studies methods of performance art. Their idea is to get away from mainly ritualistic, ceremonial performances, from the idea of repetition, of movements that turn around in the same row and it doesn't change anything even as it goes on for several hours. I was quite amused by this idea of these two performers, who work quite intuitively it seems to me. I think they parody other performances, working with quotes from pop culture. It's a totally different field they work in. I'd like to do something for LEGS that breaks away from this idea of the ritual, towards something ... fun. Because my performances are never really fun. They're always quite clear, and always quite sacred, I would say. People never talk during my performances. It's clear that it's a kind of sacred situation, and atmosphere, and there is a distance between me and the public. They also respect that. I would like to try something totally different, where I also confront or even communicate with the public, break down that distance.

D: Are you not afraid of the unification force of mainstream culture like Disney against the independent and alternative culture? One could see Disney as appropriating the energy of underground and independent small producers and pop culture that they clean and polish. Of course we can find some very positive elements in *Alice in Wonderland*,⁴ and some other of their movies or cultural products, we can say, yeah, that's really great, but in a sense it's perhaps sometimes too politically correct or too optimized, losing the irony and critical transgressive elements of pop culture and underground movements and their differences.

G: It's never a question of getting a political statement across, in the sense of Disney. For me it's totally clear that I am part of pop culture, influenced by it and also by mainstream cultures. I digest them in my personal intuitive way. And as I digest them, those things that come together turn into a personal aesthetics. I'm never scared of being criticized that I'm mainstream, that my aesthetics are mainstream. It's a question of self-consciousness. That critique has never scared me. If someone asks me what my performance is about, I'll be quite open. But it's never clear that it's about Disney, for example. Or it's not clear enough in which way it is related to something. Because I digest the source material in a personal aesthetics.

⁴ Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Disney animated feature film in 1951. Acted feature film produced by Disney, directed by Tim Burton with Johnny Depp 2010.

D: Are there some spaces and places that you would like to highlight as important for the performance scene in Zurich?

G: I asked myself recently if Zurich needs a performance festival. Zurich, compared to other Swiss cities, doesn't have a big performance festival at which performers come together. Bern has Bone.⁵ Basel has many different gatherings. In Zurich there is no space that focuses particularly on performance art. I wasn't there, but friends of mine told me anecdotes on the so-called *Eternal One-Night Stand*⁶ performance program at Réunion.⁷ Various small rooms, more like cabins, were installed in the space, and each room had a performance in it. This put the public really close to the performer. Another space that comes to mind, more in the direction of contemporary dance, is Tanzhaus Zürich.⁸ And of course there is Friction.⁹ I really like the interdisciplinary practice of Friction. The members of the team come from different backgrounds, theater, and visual art.

D: Do you think that performance art is something that can be taught, that can be learned at the art university?

G: I never asked myself that. It's interesting. I'm not quite sure. I mean, people used to go and learn how to paint, and there's a long tradition of learning how to paint. But I mean it's a practice. For performance art I'm not really sure. I don't think you can learn it. It doesn't make sense for me, somehow, to learn it. Even though there is a department in Bern that is offering a Master in Contemporary Art Practice. It's called that. Even that department is not only focused on performance art. It's a mixture.

D: Do you think that performance art is rather a genre in the field of contemporary art? Sometimes when it comes to performative and ephemeral practices we can talk more precisely about interventions, actions, situations or performative aspects of conceptual art. Rather than performance artists, some artist prefer to see themselves as conceptual artists who work with performative elements or even performance art. And what about performance that comes rather from the experimental theater or dance scene. Do you think there is a specific transdisciplinary field as a crossover of all these different disciplines? Or is it a sub-genre of contemporary art that we can call performance art?

G: Someone asked me last week what I'm working on. I told them I'm working mainly in performance, including music at the moment, working with a musician. Then they said, in that case it's not really performance. Maybe it would be a band, a contemporary band. But for me it's quite clear that there is a genre of performance art, with a broad spectrum of backgrounds and relations. Regarding performers coming from theater, I'm under the impression that many of these theater people want to do things that are more experimental, and not only work on traditional themes, work on Shakespeare, and then play Shakespeare. There seems to be an ambition or interest of theater to get more experimental. But that doesn't mean that it's automatically performance instead of theater.

⁵ Bone: Festival für Aktionskunst Bern <<http://www.bone-performance.com/>> (accessed 2016-02-23).

⁶ *Eternal One-Night-Stand*, part of zurich moves! – a festival for contemporary dance and performance, at Réunion, 19 March 2015 <<http://randominstitute.org/event/zurich-moves>> (accessed 2016-02-24).

⁷ Réunion, Müllerstrasse 57, 8004 Zürich <<http://www.reunion.la/>> (accessed 2016-02-24).

⁸ Tanzhaus Zürich <<http://www.tanzhaus-zuerich.ch/>> (accessed 2016-02-24).

⁹ Friction <<https://www.friction.ch/>> (accessed 2016-02-24).

D: What distinguishes experimental theater performance from performance art? When does theater become performance or performative? When does contemporary art become more performance than performative practices or even kind of a new experimental theater?

G: I guess at the moment it is not clear at all. I guess it needs time somehow, and then maybe it will crystallize more clearly what performance art could be. Performance art is a quite open word, it can be music, it can be theater, it can be lecture-performance, reading something, even a curator could be a performer for one evening when he is doing a lecture-performance. I recently saw a Mercedes-Benz advertising titled *Performance Art*. There is also a clothing company that call themselves *Peak Performance*. I guess performance is always related to the body. Always about movements, always about the moving body. That's mainly performance for me.



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