

## Interview with Mo Diener by Dimitrina Sevova, 30 January 2016 at Corner College, for the launch of Internet platform [www.panch.li](http://www.panch.li) and LUPE Zürich

*Additional language editing and proofreading: Alan Roth*

D: Can you tell me a bit more about your practices and how you contextualize your art work? Do you think of yourself as a performance artist?

M: I would say it's difficult to limit myself as an artist to a genre like performance. I would say that I start with an idea, and work with the media I feel I can best handle for that idea. It's rather conceptual work. Either alone or with the collective, the Roma Jam Session art Kollektiv, depending on the project, on the place or space that invited us to do something, we will decide in what form to express our interests or our message, how to shape our art piece. It can be a text. It can be spoken words, a kind of a reading. Or it can be a performance. I have a lot of experience with performative pieces, and also with working in electronic media, like video, or even some interactive pieces with computer programming. And I think all of them are just contemporary forms. I combine them, for the purpose of being precise.

D: From what you said it looks like with your practices an idea is searching for a form to be expressed or per-formed. An idea that has to be shaped and articulated in the public, with the commitment of the public, but as your choices, too. At the same time it seems to me that you are trying to avoid using the word performance. It looks like you are more interested in the performative aspects of the relation between your practices, daily life, aesthetics of existence, resistance and politics. As you have put it, performance art for you is rather a genre. Can you tell me more about why?

M: Yes, I was even kind of pushing this label away. At the same time I can relate to it. I know its history. I appreciate, I love Carolee Schneemann. I love a lot of in various ways political artists, women. I know about it, and I love it, and at the same time I see there is a genre. I'm not interested in the genre, as a genre. What I am interested in is doing performative work. I also think it's a very open form, I mean I respect the history, but think the quality of the performative is more about something so ephemeral, fading away permanently, that you cannot grasp. Something immaterial. In a certain respect it's completely uncatchable, and the moment is the thing, the moment of the event. It's like chemistry. I found that most interesting. I like how it's always surprising and risky.

We're not professional actors, and even if we work with actors we are a mixed group. Personally, I have a transdisciplinary way of working. I always learn new things, new techniques, new skills. What is interesting for me in a performance, whether I do it alone or with a group, is this kind of chemistry in which the performative situation is a catalyst. It's always different when you have a public. If you do it for a camera then it's just a video performance, for example. This is something else.

D: The video performance will be shown to the public at some point, too. What makes it different?

M: Yes, it will be, but that is not the same. Let's say, what I like in a live performative work is the attitude. You have a relation to what you do, and this relation is for me very much based on concentration, it's something that is difficult to talk about. One cannot talk about everything. Words are sometimes very limited. Live performative work is very much about concentration, and losing yourself at the same time.

D: Should the genre of performance art be defended?

M: Those who do are right to do it. I'm just at a different point. There are some groups in Basel who have a lot of discussions around performance, and they are good performers. They are very much into the genre. But still, there are a lot of other possibilities. I like the chemistry of the moment. You have a concept. And then, the moment shapes it somehow, nourishes it also. It's always different, and it can be that once it works, once it doesn't. It depends on you, it depends on the moment, the space, on so many things. As I said already, it's a risky work. The more you have experience, probably, the more you are able to deal with that. Anyway, you first have a concept, a strong concept, and usually it works.

D: So for you performativity lies in the event itself as a shifter of the situation, rather than in the repetitive elements of the performance? Because an event is a relational constellation, a sequence that changes the direction, a leap and always different? There is no moment that can happen again, be identical to another?

M: Not only. I mean, there is a concept that should be, let's say, possible to be acted out, without or with public, and it should be repeatable, also, in a way. Most of the time the concept is not purely relational in the sense that I would leave everything open, no. But for sure there is this openness. Especially when I work with the collective I know there is a lot of uncertainty or ambiguity, when it's about communication and there are relational parts in it. Still, there is a concept as well. It's many-layered. The performance itself shows a moment of that relational-conceptual situation. So we develop it and show it in order to give an insight, an artistic insight into our reflections, which we make accessible to the audience in their interaction with it.

In the collective we talk about minorities, we talk about empowerment, we talk about taking space in a cultural field as a minority. We are not especially talking about stereotypes any more, being critical in that way, but we are interested in being part of a larger community of artistic production. And actually, that's our goal, and our steps go in this direction. We like to do it playfully, making people aware of our existence. I think that's it. When I do my own solo pieces, and this was not so often the case in the last two years, it's usually rather physical interventions in the space. It can be, for example, writings on a wall, driving a car and saying some words, or letting my guests step out of the car and walk away.<sup>1</sup> That's not so much performative, but an intervention in the space, like changing the space by coming and leaving traces.

D: I find very interesting how you relate to the idea of intervention, and performativity, rather distinguishing them and shifting the idea of the performance in a new direction or trying to give it another trajectory.

M: Maybe I can make a link here and say that our performances with the group are **rather** interventions as well, because we are not only working in an art context. We are working in a political context, so we have also something to do on the level of politics. Not all of our members have the same qualities. For example, one member is absolutely great with contacts and communication. He is very much the person who does more activist work and who is mostly involved in political contexts. As a collective we were invited to work in a working group at the national level, at the Bundesamt für Kultur [Federal Office of Culture]. This means we take part in political meetings, and yet we are still artists. We are involved, somehow, in changes, or in processes that are real, and at the same time, when we are artists, we try to work on the level of the collective

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<sup>1</sup> Mo Diener, *Intervention with an Opel Astra and Friends*, 18 March 2015, PROGR courtyard, Bern.

imaginary, which we want to access in another way. Because we think that's a good way to work, for getting something moving.

D: How about the relation between performativity and technology in the context of performance art? It seems that the term performance is connected to labor, labor performance, that the word was critically appropriated during the 1960s or 1970s to affirm the deskilling of workers due to automation, and was used as an antithesis to theater, by artists who called themselves performance artists, no longer actionists, or situationists, no longer doing happenings as Kaprow called it. This sounds closely related to this idea of technologization, systematization and bureaucratization of daily life and of human working processes that were being replaced by machines. Yvonne Rainer made some performances where a dancer was reading from Keynes's economy texts alongside the moving bodies.<sup>2</sup> I want to ask you about this relation between performativity, labor and technological apparatuses. You mentioned that it's different when you are filming the performance, and the filming you said becomes something else. Some artists work mostly with film performances, employing the performative aspects inherent to the media and the moving images themselves. They do not perform so much in live situations. You very often perform live. The intervention seems to me is one of the most important aspects.

M: I think there are two lines that can be answered. One is really this live aspect that makes the difference. I think the live aspect is something that has been very important, and is now becoming even more important. Because it is something three-dimensional. It's a situation which intervenes in another situation. The artist and the public influence each other, and that's important because people who are assisting, I mean the public, have a relation to space and time and reality. There is nothing cut, there is no montage. It may be imperfect, but there is something very real in the interventional time, being in another situation, changing the situation by being present there and doing something. And I think that's a kind of contemporary, powerful strategy to do that. It gives back some of our physical time. During the 1990s it was not the same. Artists performed predominantly for the video camera, and I was myself involved very much in video work, and I was editing a lot of my own performance work. I made physical performances, filmed them and edited them in order to produce videos, with some artificial choreographies. I enjoyed that, but it's no longer my interest. I wondered why I stopped doing it. I can still do work for a camera, but I would do it very differently today. I think there is something interesting about non-edited video, working with the real rhythm of your physical existence in space. I think that's a movement, and it's more interesting nowadays.

And then, technology is a tool. When I use it in a performance, I use it maybe to change a view, to give other ideas about observation, to open another space. To merge the spaces. This is a tool for it. But it's not really the interest of my work to reflect on labor, like it was in the 1960s or 1970s. The roots of performance is not so much my subject, I would say. The subject I am working with is more important than my own subject is. I think it's about opening other perspectives, using it as a tool for producing different temporalities, or the same temporalities with different perspectives. It's kind of a very visual tool.

D: What about the body? Both the forceful and the weak body has been very important in the art performance context.

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<sup>2</sup> Yvonne Rainer, *Assisted Living: Do You Have Any Money?*, premiere in 2013, as part of *Judson Now* at Danspace Project.

M: It's still important. The body is very important, it is our tool. We don't have anything other than the body to express what we have to express. Our brain may be controlling everything, but without a body we're nothing. We have chances to explore our body and with technology can reflect, we can make dreams out of it, we can artificialize, can get heroic with it. I mean we can empower and give superforces to our body, but maybe that's good, just to show both, to see the trained, or not trained, existence of our human forms and articulations, and the capacity a machine has of transforming it into some kind of monsters, or even the supernatural. I think it's interesting to reverse views, so I'm rather working on that field when I use camera eyes, lenses, projections, and so on.

D: Do you think there is a performance art scene in Zurich? Are you interested in contextualizing your group as a collective position in that scene, too, or the work you do on your own?

M: It's always important to contextualize. I cannot imagine to work on my own, disconnected from everything. At the same time, I don't want to be limited by contextualization. I want to be contextualized as an artist, in art spaces, in the political contexts I'm interested in, which means feminist work, minorities context, art context, conceptual context. It's very important. I need that. I cannot work without.

D: You said that in Basel **they** are extremely interested in performance art? What is the specificity of Zurich context?

M: I have contact to some people, like San Keller, and I've known Dorothea Rust for a long time. We know each other quite well. But I cannot say that there is a Zurich performance art scene, there is no performance work rooted here. Anyway, I'm somewhat of a hybrid. I cannot say that I feel at home in only one scene. I feel at home with interesting art work, whatever that means. I feel absolutely fascinated by things created which speak to me. That can be all kinds of art forms. For me, it's very difficult to say if there is a performance scene in the town. I would very much like to feel something about the performance scene in Zurich. I don't. I know singular persons involved in this. I know some young people from my studies, also, whom I appreciate very much. But I don't feel it as a scene. I feel it as a loose network, rather. Maybe it's because I don't have this life where I go each Thursday, or whatever, always to that place to look at something, because I don't have the time to do that. But I haven't heard of a scene here, either. I mean a performance scene. For sure, there is an underground, or off-space scene. There is no doubt that it exists, but a performance scene, no. I know that there are some artists who want to do LEGS. And I also said, yeah, cool, I'll take part. And I'm very curious. I know some artists who will be there, and I'm looking forward to it. I know about ACT,<sup>3</sup> a school context performance scene. And there was also *Der letzte Tag* [The Last Day] of Dorothea,<sup>4</sup> where there were so many performance artists coming, each hour, to do something. I'm involved in such things. But that still doesn't make me feel part of a performance scene, it's very funny.

D: Are there any art spaces in Zurich that from your point of view are more engaged in presenting this kind of practices, or a space that is explicitly taking care in a sense of giving consistency in their program to supporting practices in the direction of art performance, or performative art practices that are more ephemeral – spaces that not only offer an exhibition format in a sense of showing

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<sup>3</sup> ACT: Performance Festival der Schweizer Kunsthochschulen <<http://www.act-perform.net/>> (accessed 2016-02-25).

<sup>4</sup> Der längste Tag / The Longest Day: 16 hours non stop outdoor performances <<https://derlaengstetag.wordpress.com/>> (accessed 2016-02-24).

objects, but go beyond that? Are there spaces in Zurich whose efforts you'd like to emphasize, specifically when it comes to performative practices?

M: Your space, Corner College, is open to many forms. Then there is Walcheturm. They have shown a lot of performance and performative work in their program. There are some other places, too. Generally speaking they are not so consistent in the sense that one can go there and see an art performance. There is no stable art place with a clear politics or interest in this direction, where you would find an archive, for example, with curators who are available all the time. Or rather, there are spaces with a stable interest in performative practices, but there is no stable staff, no one you could regularly approach to discuss a proposal. Perhaps I have this view, because in the last two-three years I have been really working a lot on some subjects, and wasn't looking for spaces so much. We started with one thing, and then suddenly people just said, ah, we would like to invite you to come here. We had to travel to different institutions or spaces, and didn't even look for places ourselves. We were completely happy to be invited, when we were, but we didn't have time any more to think about whether we need a specific space to work with. I think it would be very helpful for many reasons to have a place where performance would be rooted somehow. There is no performance rooted in the art school, either. There is no department. I mean, Fine Arts, yes. But there is not really a teacher there who could teach performance, for example. Sometimes they have guests who teach that as well.

I think performance does not have a lot of roots here. I might even say that Zurich is not a real performance city. Even if there is a lot of performative work created here. I think it has a lot to do with the market here. It's just an idea, I have not researched that. But it's not really the city for performance. Until now. Maybe it changes.

D: Speaking about Zurich, you already made this connection between the spaces, performance, the archive and the missing expert staff. Is there a systematically done archive about these kinds of practices, a publicly accessible archive where one could find traces, if not about the history of a performance art scene, at least about certain tendencies and movements in the "genre"?

M: Shedhalle has an archive. Not specifically focused on performance, I think it's a post-colonial and feminist, queer archive. When we talk about performance, we always end up talking about a genre. And I'm not really a person who relates to genre as such, be it painting, or performance, or whatever. I'm rather connected to discourse, let's say. For a while I've been reading books about New Materialism, and I'm very interested in that. I'm rather going in the direction of exploring discursive fields that I'm interested in. And there, I find inspiration for finding my form, and for the strongest experiences that I made in performance art, and video work, and technology use, and so I kind of use my tools. It is very simple. I have my ideas, and I have my tools. And sometimes I have encountered people who are interested in working with me. Or I meet people I really like, and relate to. So I propose, or they propose. That's the way I work. Maybe it sounds simple, but it's just the way it is. The network I'm in is created by these interests and movements, and sometimes it's so surprising. Like, suddenly I get to know, for example, Rosi Braidotti's work, and start reading her. And then I meet this person, and that person, and another person in Geneva who reflect on the same thoughts, and then I find a lot of things in the Internet, but then I meet people here and there, and suddenly a network is created. I cannot say it's because I was studying in the Master program. It's also not because I'm performing permanently. It's also not because I'm doing video. It's just because it's a conceptual situation, and maybe this is this kind of chemistry stream.

D: Do you think performance should be taught at art universities?

M: It would be very helpful. For example, I would have been very happy to have a teacher, or somebody, a coach, who would give me some advice in my work I have done with the collective, like how to guide people. Because I never did it before. What kind of courses there are, and what kind of skills I could teach them. Maybe yoga courses. Really basic actor stage courses. Contact improvisation. Speech training. It seems to me that many things that seem straightforward at first, can be learned properly. Take filming. Everybody can film. Of course, you know how to press the button. But how to edit a video is another issue, some do it well, some not so well. I think it's the same with performance. Some laypersons, but that's very rare, may have an unusual talent and always do it right. But otherwise you have to try and try again. Sometimes you don't know how to solve a problem. You want to go in a certain direction but you cannot reach it. So I think yes, the school should be open to modules where you can learn some technologies on stage, or for the voice, for the rhythm, things like that. For me, a performance should have a certain interesting rhythm. There is a sort of dramaturgy. Some artists may think there is no need for it. For my perception, the times when you could make self-experiences on stage, and a public would assist a bit by looking, are over. That was the 1970s, and I think it's gone. When I see that, despite the consciousness of having a public, somebody does something on stage for him or herself, I must say it's not ready for a public. Sorry, you should reflect it. Because there is a public, and the public has a certain right to try to understand what you are doing. Give them a chance, or not, give a kind of key. Or if you want to be mysterious, at least have a certain approach to that. Being conscious of the public is important.

D: Going back to education, are there techniques, or even tricks, that can be transmitted from teacher to student, from one artist to another artist? Of course, there are tacit forms of knowledge that have a highly subjective specificity and can only be passed from one artist to another in a very material and personal relation. Let's say if a student has a teacher, one of the conceptual artists like Marina Abramovic, Carolee Schneemann or Rebecca Horn, who have been also very involved in performance art. They have Master classes, and I know artists who have been to their classes to study specifically with one of them, not just to enroll in some Master class at art university and go through all these modules and the credit point system, but to study specifically with one of them, to rigorously study with their master, who would teach them like in martial arts.

M: I cannot answer generally. If I was teaching, I would teach about intervention. I'm interested in that. Physical intervention in a situation. Performative intervention in a situation, this kind of practices and how to do that. Probably I could teach, I could kind of find a way to develop a course. And if you very, very basically would like to know whether I think it's possible to teach performance, I would say, yeah. As a time-based art, it requires a consciousness about your physical state in the room. It's work with one's body, so one has to know one's body. One does not have to be a dancer, but one has to be able to control one's body, somehow. One has to move in space, to feel the space. This can be learned through trainings which offer this sensibilization, like Tai Chi, meditation. Recently I was in a course called Laban technique, on how to move, with which dynamics, a whole system, very cool. I'm interested in all that stuff, too, because one has to somehow deal with one's capacities, possibilities, weaknesses. And then, I think, like in all arts, there is a specificity that one has to care about one's body and know a lot about one's body when one performs. It's like a lifestyle, in a way, because you one cannot just not care, and then do a good performance, I think it's not possible, or it's rarely possible. Marina Abramovic I think has a whole lifestyle about not eating, eating, drinking this, not drinking that. Dancers have the same. I think performers more or less do as well. They're conscious about how they feed themselves, with spiritual and physical material things.

Education is not indispensable in art. I mean, one can work without being taught. In art, one can be one's own teacher. Maybe the reflection about it should be articulated, and publicly discussed.

There has to be a discursive field where one can look to discuss one's work, where one's work can be discovered. But I think going through a school is not a prerequisite to finding one's own forms. However, one needs a context. I'm sure that is important. I'm grateful to all my teachers with whom I could exchange my thoughts. I'm very grateful to any person I can do that with. And I think this exchange teaches me so much for my work. If there is no conversation about what one is working on, there is a stagnation. It's very important to have a sort of open field of exchange, ideas, discussions, critiques. For sure, there is a lot of theory about how to approach performative work, because many artists have given it a lot of thought, and researchers have studied their practices. There is a lot to be learned, but I don't know if that makes good artists. What I observe is that it needs groups, it needs communities, it needs exchange. That is what makes artists go forward.

D: How does collective subjectivity, or even the mood of the space, influence performance practices? Some conceptual and performance artists, like Robert Morris, who is from the generation that coined the term *performance art*, have done performances where the objects and the space itself are equally or more important than the performer's presence. Morris even gives them more material appearance, and he tends to disappear. His movements become mechanical in a machinic kind of immaterialization of the body, in an assemblage or collective subjectivity with the whole environment, losing himself in the mood of the space where the props or objects become acting characters in their own right. Another example would be John Cage, who works with silence in the space.

M: It's so vague when we talk about performance, because it's so many things, it can be everything, somehow. I can only talk about myself, and I very much like when I'm kind of losing myself in a situation I create in a space. And the space is for sure a character somehow, too. It's playing with you, and you with the space. I think the space is most important. For example, I don't like stages. Sometimes we had occasions with the collective to perform on a stage. I don't like it so much because it's such a theatrical situation. We don't want to be in the floodlight, and do some kind of extraordinary singing or dancing. We do something else. And the context is wrong then. It's rather about doing an intervention, which is absolutely not a merging thing, but it's kind of a cutting across the space and time with bodies (this is a different kind of cut, not like in video or film montage), and then suddenly changing it so that suddenly we end up in a new situation. It's like hacking, a bit. A space, or an order, something. This is something I'm getting more and more interested in. Going into a system, and marking the system with a new color, or just making a new move in it, or introducing a different logic into it. This, for me, and for us, I guess, is the strongest strategy. Just to go into a system and then kind of tweak its structure a bit.

D: In your work, the relation between the public and the performance is key. It strives to give visibility to social and political issues and engages with the participation of the public. Does a performance have to be public, or can it be rather invisible, as part of a longer process within an artistic practice? Some artists ritualize certain aspects of their art practices with performative procedures or language, and even use elements of performance, without necessarily making this public or even visible in their works. They tend to be disconnecting and displacing techniques in a hermeneutic way, a kind algorithmic surface of an art work.

M: I have no claims to say, one should work like this, or work like that. But if there is a sort of invitation saying performance work will be shown, and there will be a public and very often there is even an entrance fee, and then the performance is just about the artist's own little thing they want to try to figure out in front of the public, I think that's difficult for me. I don't think that art is such a private thing. It's an instrument. I really don't want to moralize anything, or say what's possible and what's not. It doesn't have to be a show. And I can understand that one might want to do some

auto-shamanistic experiment. Why not? But then it's always a question whether art should serve as some sort of self-therapy. I ask myself if this is not a misunderstanding of art. It's very difficult. For sure, we develop ourselves by doing what we are doing. And hopefully we always develop when we do something.