

South Dakota State University
**Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional
Repository and Information Exchange**

Faculty Publications

School of Design

12-2013

Charles R. Garoian: Exploring the In-Between

Leda Cempellin
South Dakota State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/design_pubs



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cempellin, Leda. "Charles R. Garoian: Exploring the in-Between." *Juliet Art Magazine*, no. 165, December 2013-January 2014: 83. Print.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Design at Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. For more information, please contact michael.biondo@sdstate.edu.

On October 10th, 2013, I conducted a Skype interview with Dr. Charles R. Garoian, Professor of Art Education at The Pennsylvania State University. Dr. Garoian has authored three books on performance and pedagogy: the most recent, *The Prosthetic Pedagogy of Art: Embodied Research and Practice*, was published this year by The State University of New York (SUNY) Press

You have been a performance artist and teacher for more than forty years. How was your earliest work different from that of other major contemporary performance artists of that time?

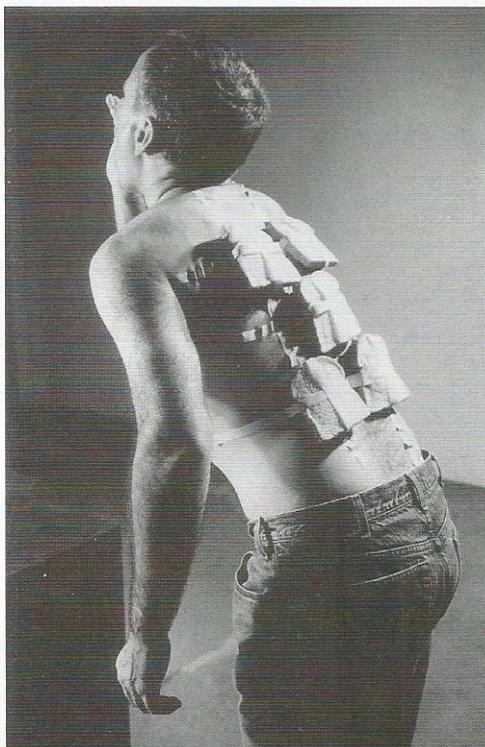
I have been involved in performance since 1970-71. I started off as a mixed-media painter then moved into performance. The influences in my early career were Allan Kaprow, Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, Tom Marioni, Bruce Nauman, Joseph Beuys, Judy Chicago's *Womanhouse*, Valie Export, just to name a few.

But your performance looks different, being also an extension into pedagogy. How did you move there?

Actually, Beuys, the artist closest to my work, spoke about performance art as social pedagogy. In 1969 I graduated with a Master's degree in studio art and began experimental work. In the beginning I was attaching mechanical and industrial materials and objects to my paintings. Eventually, as they came off the canvas, off the wall, and onto the floor, I became aware of my body as a correspondent culturally constructed material and object performing in space. I was a practicing artist when I started to teach at the high school. It was from the perspective of my exploratory, experimental and improvisational work in the studio that I started reflecting and questioning how to teach as compared with how I was taught in college. I fell in love with teaching: there was something incredibly engaging and alive about the space of the art classroom; about teaching and learning from my students. I discovered multiple associations between what was going on in my studio practice and what was going on in my classroom. Performing in that in-between space with my students became extremely significant and meaningful.

With the exception of Beuys, to my knowledge performance art was unheard of as pedagogical strategy in the Seventies. You were breaking ground in the US at that time. What did you find when you matriculated at Stanford for your PhD? What was already known, and what was new?

I felt like a fish out of water at Stanford because much of my studies there were based exclusively in academic models of pedagogy and curriculum. While at the University, I was also devaluing theoretical writings about contemporary art in *Artforum*. It was the heyday of process art, as in the works of Richard Serra, Bruce Nauman, and Eva Hesse. Their art was performative. It was about doing, not about representation. In my estimation the best teaching occurs when you are engaged with your students in exploratory, experimental, and improvisational processes; in the liveness of what art does, its conceptual operations,



Charles R. Garoian performing in "Raisin Debt" 2005, courtesy Stephanie Avonian

rather than illustration and representation. Academic representations will always constitute schooling, but what emerges from creative activity in the classroom is the source from which transformation and agency are made possible.

Wow! You were exploring these ideas back in the Seventies, were you? And in these most recent years a debate has been spreading all over the US about active and engaged learning, flipping the classroom, using social media for instruction, etc.!

No one that I was aware of was writing about this back then.

In the introduction of your book *The Prosthetic Pedagogy of Art*, you mention your parents' forced immigration to the US to survive the Armenian genocide. How did such biographical experience and your bicultural heritage affect your own performance work? Did performance help you to heal your wounds, or to overcome cultural barriers like a form of "prosthesis"?

I would say both. I view perpetrating genocide as diabolical performance. The Armenian Genocide in the early XX century became a model for the Holocaust. In justifying the extermination of six million Jews, Hitler asked: "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?" He assumed that his decision about the Jews would be buried in history like the 'forgotten genocide' of the Armenians. So, I see the Genocide as a slaughtering and dispersion of the Armenian cultural body. My parents were part of a vast migration that resulted from the Genocide; that constitutes the diaspora

of Armenians dispersed throughout the world and continues to this day. And I happen to be just one person, a particle in all of that: my body and my personal history within the larger context of that body and that history. In his graphic novel *Maus*, Art Spiegelman writes and illustrates his experience of the Holocaust as a "received history" from his father who actually survived the concentration camps. Mine was received history as well: I was born in the U.S., but experienced the Genocide vicariously through my parents' testimonies; their pain filled memories of the horrors they witnessed, their narrow escape, and the fragmentation of their lives. They had to reconstruct their lives. My parents' vineyard in Fresno, California was small, but for them it was Armenia reclaimed, remembered. As an immigrant family we made do with what we had. My first "art teachers" were my parents. They taught me to explore, experiment, and improvise. Life on the vineyard and in the Garoian household was like an assemblage: fragments of this, fragments of that, putting them next to each other, to make sense, to make meaning in-between, and to heal the wounds of the Genocide.

What is your ultimate goal as a performance artist, as a theorist, and as an educator?

My aim as teacher and artist has been to contribute, even if in a minuscule way, to changing the world by engaging with others that are different biologically, culturally, racially, religiously in compassionate, caring, and respectful ways. I believe that the power of art practice enables seeing, thinking, and performing differently than what we assume about ourselves and others. Given its characteristic ambiguity and incompleteness, art enables the creation of open spaces and systems of possibility as it resists intellectual and ideological closure. As such, I continue to find the immersive spaces of art-making and teaching-making transformative insofar as they constitute the making of the Self as a process of becoming-other rather than becoming the same.

CHARLES R. GAROIAN

EXPLORING THE IN-BETWEEN

Interview by LEDA CEMPELLIN
Associate Professor of Art History at
South Dakota State University.

