Charles R. Garoian: Exploring the In-Between

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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, and 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 devouring 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.

**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.

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**Charles R. Garoian performing in *Womanhouse* 2003, courtesy Stephanie Avanian**