

Chicago Art Magazine

[Review: In>Time 2010 Performance Series](#)

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Ira S. Murfin

Among the most basic assumptions of live performance is that an emphatic through line will move us intentionally ever forward, directing our attention to what needs to be noted before delivering us to an end point from which the accumulated experience will be made retroactively unified. But, taken together, the four performances that made up IN>TIME at the Chicago Cultural Center, raised the possibility of de-emphasis as a strength which, by accumulating temporal events that do not fit seamlessly together, allows the act of assembly to occur collectively. Now in its second year, the IN>TIME performance series features work that deals explicitly or implicitly with time and the body, using the passage of the first and the movement of the second to understand their specific qualities. It comes out of curators Mark Jeffery and Sara Schnadt's Chicago Performance Network, which seeks to center a national and international performance conversation in Chicago and to include local and emerging artists in that conversation. This year Schnadt and Jeffery teamed up with the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago to present work from here in Chicago and from Arizona (the international contingent, Croatian collective OOUR, cancelled). It is perhaps fitting that an evening of discrete performances, two set and two durational, meant to bring together disparate practices, occurring in separate, but proximate, space and time to each other, would bring up a conversational tension between the disjointed and the unified and introduce the various possible uses of the discontinuous.



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The implementation of multiple aesthetic and disciplinary strategies within a given work may be the final frontier in artistic experimentation. It can be fairly assumed that anything goes creatively so long as work stays internally coherent, which is to say contains within it the key to its own logic. Or the key to the key, perhaps. In non-narrative performance, we usually imagine spatial and temporal

relationships to be almost exclusively the door to meaning. Flow, as in directional indication for legibility, is what makes a work readable. But each of the works in IN>TIME chose to make a dis-unified sense of presence, aesthetic, time, and/or space central to, even the subject of, their structures.

They're Mending the Great Forest Highway, one of two works being developed by [Every house has a door](#), a new collaborative effort from Goat Island Performance Group co-founders Lin Hixson and Matthew Goulish, is a dance work still in progress. Its incomplete, in-progress showing opened IN>TIME. Although neither of [Every house has a door's](#) works has premiered yet, early evidence suggests that one of the principle ways the new company's strategies are diverging from Goat Island's is in a tendency to include explanatory interpretative and source material within the performances themselves. While Goat Island's work was research-based in a similar way, the sources of their material were only occasionally discernible during the performance, though they were often documented in separate, published works. The richness and challenge of Goat Island's performances came in part from the necessity for the audience to deal with creative material resulting from their developmental process without knowing its sources or to what it might refer.

The interior life of those performances' logic is opened up and in many ways reversed in *Every house has a door's* approach. Instead of oblique approaches to text and movement, source and process is laid exhaustively bare in an academic (or performed academic) introduction that operates as internal to the performance, yet introduces a critical intelligence, which appears to be outside of it. This performed text offers not only insight into the origins of the performance, but also a preemptive interpretative response to it. The challenge for the audience then being not to piece together or resist piecing together what the sources of the performance might have been, but instead to either resist or integrate the interpretative explanation of the performance offered by the performance itself. In the case of *They're Mending the Great Forest Highway*, this explanatory text took the form of "director's notes," credited to both Hixson and Goulish. These notes were delivered by Hannah Geil-Neufeld, a noticeably young woman, especially considering the frequent allusions to aging and life's scope in the text. Geil-Neufeld's presentation was memorized, though when ostensibly reading from Hixson's rehearsal notebook, she referenced a small book. Her delivery was clear, flat, and impersonal. Without being cold, it distinguished her responsibility for delivering the text as distinct from any responsibility for its content. She was only the messenger.



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The notes included a story about a mysterious meeting on the author's way to rehearsal with an old schoolmate who was carrying a lifelike doll, an inanimate practice baby, in preparation for the birth of her sister's child. The story provided a contextualizing metaphor for the rehearsal process and the developmental steps in a creative project that lead ultimately to a composed and functional

experience. The connection of children and birth with the act of creation carried through to another anecdote, this one about the young child of the author's friends in Portland who performed a dance on video as part of a birthday gift to the author in Chicago. The notes suggested not a hint of irony in describing the toddler as a creator of dances, rather than a little kid dancing. This clarified the relationship between dancing and dance, or between art and action, in this performance's terms. It is not one of intention, but one of reception. The author of this particular passage, Hixson or Goulish or both, described the child's dancing as a dance piece because that is how they chose to receive it. The audience's role in defining the limits and logic of the performance using the material provided had been defined.

In fact, these questions of intention and action were precisely the ones addressed throughout the director's notes. Hixson wondered what the difference was between a diagram and a dance, as well as between an idea and an actuality, or a proposal and an experience. The relationship between Geil-Neufeld's proxy delivery and Hixson and Goulish's text proposed some simple answers. But at the same time, the text complicated our understanding of the provenance of the dance to follow. The question of the difference between a diagram and a dance became quite real as Geil-Neufeld introduced the exact sources and structure of the dance. Based on a structure Goulish transcribed from Bela Bartok's *Contrasts for violin, clarinet, and piano*, the dance took its title from another Bartok composition, one of his 8 Hungarian folksongs. The title's suggestion of hard and romantically noble labor inspired the artists to investigate the relationship between labor and dance movements. The source for both turned out to be that ubiquitous repository of collective memory, YouTube. The original *Contrasts* album cover provided the costuming inspiration, each of the three performers were equated with one of the musical instruments and so were costumed as the musician who played that instrument on the album. Geil-Neufeld also explained precisely what we would see, which was two parts of a three part dance, followed by a brief musical interlude and then 35 seconds of part three, for a total of eleven minutes of a seventeen minute dance (though the director's notes were clearly part of the performance, part one in fact, they were not treated as part of the total duration of the performance which they described.) Rather than using the source music, which Hixson had never even heard, or any Bartok composition, the dance was scored by Charissa Tolentino, a musician and DJ, creating live electronic accompaniment using her laptop. The notes positioned her conceptually, as the dance did in the performance space, as a fourth performing collaborator.



Justin Cabrillos © John W. Sisson Jr.

To my mind the director's notes invited the audience to trace the structural and textual sources of the various performance units back to their sources, or at least to make a go of it. What I could not stop remembering was the YouTube videos from which the movements came. Each dancer moved in a discrete space of his own creation, independent of the architecture of the room or the position of the other performers, referencing only his own body. It was as if their dances were running separately, but in tandem, collectively accessible only to the audience, but leaving the performers themselves unaffected by each other's presence.

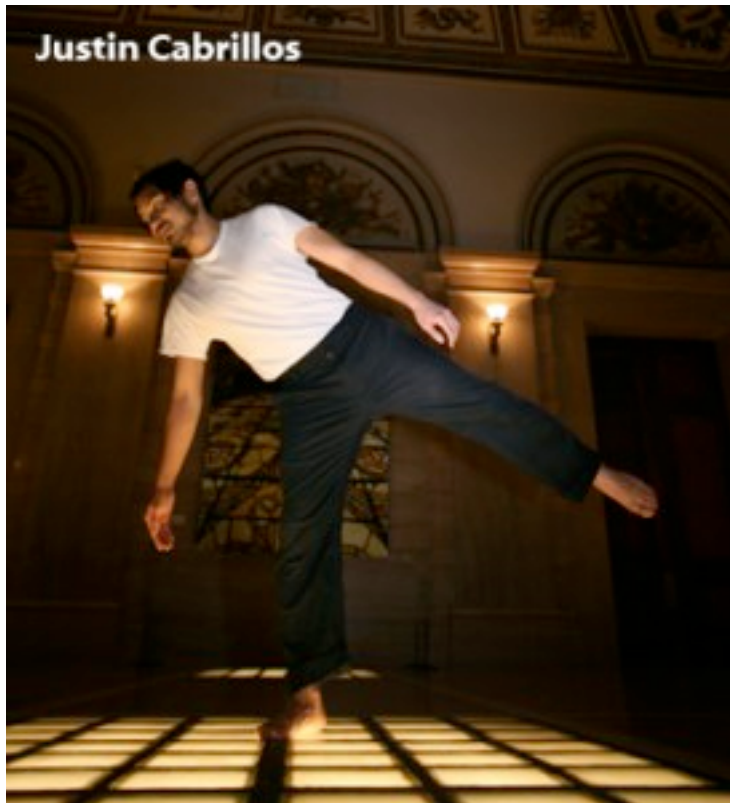
This simultaneity embodied some of the more experiential human qualities of the internet, our commonplace understanding of images from hugely varied sources co-existing by accident or through the selectivity of the viewer. Notably, and thankfully, absent was the sort of mediated commentary on consumer culture or technological isolation that often accompanies observations about the impact of information technology on viewership. The individual dances drew on a new and familiar vernacular of watching – they were not about isolation or separation or distance or loneliness, they simply were not about each other. Or rather they were *about* not being about each other. They ran parallel to each other, in discrete windows, as it were, and when spatial or sequential convergences occurred they seemed accidental, though fortuitous. The movements themselves maintained the fullness and suddenness that one associates with internet-based video – short and decisive action, immediate and without explanatory context, prologue, or conclusion. Indeed, the dance functioned most strongly on exactly the planes IN>TIME was focused on, temporality and the bodily, while the larger unity of the dance floor as a whole remained contingent upon particular intersections of bodies coming into proximity or synchronous movement.

Tolentino's score reflected this disjuncture. A patchwork of electronic clicks and apparent nature sounds, it toggled back and forth in a way which seemed both regular and arrhythmic, indeed as if the various sounds were issuing from different sources. Not the incongruous elements of a single

composition, but two entire sonic landscapes which we could experience only one at a time. Even going back and forth very rapidly, they would not blend. In even the most sophisticated sensory hybrids this resistance to blending is present. Any combinatory work – visual, spatial, sonic, textual – is made up of individual parts, autonomous universes that can be willfully constructed into wholes or willfully deconstructed into constituent elements, which operate in parallel, side by side. That this is a particularly apt and accurate depiction of the experience of digital video or electronic music does not necessarily speak to the peculiarly disjointed qualities of those forms, the disjointedness of the forms is in fact their most organic quality. A synthetic fusion that seamlessly conceals the components of which it is made is truly artificial, while this work began to lay bare the separate particles necessary to all composition.

We understood this relationship to exist across the elements of the performance as well, since the audience's knowledge of the work's background pre-existed the dance, as it usually does only for the artists. The units of movement had been separated from the music that gave birth to them. The movements themselves had been sourced from independent online archives. Each element entered from elsewhere to compose the whole without losing its status as a unique document of its own origin.

Yet, in the brief glimpse we got of the third movement of the dance, there was a hint that something else might be up. First, Tolentino's interlude, freed from the presence of the dance, became unexpectedly complex and more seamlessly blended. The sound took on a recognizably musical quality as Tolentino used the analog tape deck that was part of her DJ set-up, a reminder of an era when the very act of self-conscious pastiche was a physical one –the mix tape, the analog sample. Playing along with the dual cassette player on her laptop, the clicks and twitters of the dance score took on a more lush and complete quality. The third part of the dance, too, or the brief snippet of it we got to see, demonstrated a more consciously dynamic use of the dance floor, as if the elements of the performance had suddenly become aware of one another and started to come deliberately together. After problematizing the very idea, the dance introduced a possible combinatory synthesis. And then it stopped. A work in progress, we can expect those final 6 minutes sometime next year. [Justin Cabrillo's](#) *Faces, Varieties, Postures* took an approach to disjointment and separation more anchored in the particularities of the room, while at the same time locating multiple performance strategies in a single body rather than across several, treating the body itself as a multi-dimensional instrument for recording and playback. The GAR Rotunda of the Chicago Cultural Center is a uniquely tempting and difficult site for a performance, with its grand domed ceiling and floor checkered with glowing, internally lit glass block rectangles. Of a number of site-specific works I have seen performed there, Cabrillos made perhaps the clearest use of the glowing floor by taking advantage of its most simple and obvious quality, that the glowing rectangles delineate distinct areas, separated from each other by darker expanses of floor.



Justin Cabrillos © John W. Sisson Jr.

Each rectangle encompassed a unique inventory – stilts made from logs, a light bulb, a Kentucky Fried Chicken bucket with a speaker secreted inside, a plunger, Cabrillos himself, and one left empty. Cabrillos spent the performance traveling between these distinct sites, often contorting his body to crab-walk or slither to his destination, executing a surprising choreography of precise transit operations.

Cabrillos's performance work investigates body, breath, and language through physical ordeal and "inefficient use of breath," drawing attention to the body itself as a site of production for breath and voice, and to voice itself as a physical and embodied action. By displacing the external elements of his performance onto each of the 6 illuminated squares, he isolated and foregrounded their individual physical and functional characteristics, the fact of their existence, and the imminence of their use, while centralizing his body as the mutable site of action drawing our attention. His voice became the issuing force bridging gaps between the various objects and locations that defined the parameters of his performance, knitting together what was essentially separate.

This is more or less what he accomplished conceptually, as well. Following his multiple research strands, inspired by the history of the building as both library and Civil War memorial, he included a Walt Whitman poem, an etiquette book, and songs of the minstrel show, all from the civil war era, and brought them together in and on his body. His body and its limits became a more temporally accessible and audibly assertive, though also more fleeting, site of remembrance of the history the building attempts to memorialize. The tension between the ways the building and Cabrillos's body were being put to like purposes made me conscious of the limitations of any memorial, whether flesh or stone, in continually generating awareness of that which it seeks to memorialize. Consciousness of the intentions of the building falls away and is obscured by its everyday uses. While in Cabrillos's performance we witnessed him pushing the limits of his body's capabilities through his particular immediate and physical ordeal and, at the same time, understood that we were receiving only

momentary access to the unique strands that coexist in Cabrillos's body as dormant research and muscle memory. What I found most moving was the thought that these recordings which could only be unlocked through his mortal remembering, his breath, and his body.

Cabrillos used these stored texts and performance fragments much as he did the objects arrayed on the six glowing rectangles, calling them to action just as he was able to call up the stilt quality of logs by using them as stilts, or the part of Kentucky Fried Chicken's corporate identity which memorializes Kentucky, by playing a grainy and distant recording of "My Old Kentucky Home" from inside the bucket. Each article, text, object, body, contained dormant information and implicit potential uses.

Interestingly, the two durational pieces, which continued throughout the evening, insisted on a kind of hermetically sealed wholeness in order to operate on their own terms. Yet they generated the most disorienting sort of disjunction, though by way of opposite approaches to intrusive presence. [Jessica Hannah's](#) "life-size domestic diorama" *The Living Room* presented a stage set version of a post-WWII suburban home on a pedestal, where two performers playing the young couple who might live in such an environment went about a quiet evening, sometimes stony, sometimes cozy, while a live pianist played popular tunes of the day. Meanwhile, a soundtrack available through old-fashioned telephone receivers and a video looping near the entrance repeated familiar commercial claims about the advantages of suburban housing developments, as lab coat-clad assistants vapidly grilled everyone who entered about their preferences in interior décor.

As the program text had it, the piece was "inspired by nostalgia" for a period when postwar consumption and suburban sprawl were seen as positive and promising, though the piece's commentary seemed not to do much more than acknowledge that such an era existed and vaguely mock it. The striking element of the piece was its verisimilitude and the extended nature of the naturalistic performances. Rather than the repetition of a difficult or mundane task, as in much durational performance, the piece required the performers to sustain what in acting is called "stage business" and remain in character for a number of hours, doing nothing much of anything. This left the impression of a larger narrative, of something having just happened or being about to happen, which we had voyeuristically discovered. And indeed, we were the disjointing presence, the interruptive force. The set and its reality stayed intact, but by witnessing it, we witnessed first and foremost our own intrusion.

Conversely, Angela Ellsworth's *Another Women's Movement* operated largely by way of intrusion into rooms in which a performance was not expected. A line of paired Mormon "sister wives" in prairie dresses and prosthetic hair-do's – bouffants with fake braided ponytails attached to the back of their dresses but disconnected from their hairlines – wound through the rooms of the Cultural Center without acknowledging their surroundings. Ellsworth wrote in her program notes that they were "proposing a new community of women with their revelatory potential and a history not yet recorded." While I'm not sure that they were clearly proposing anything with their disconnected wandering, they were certainly ominous and eerily separated from the rest of us. Their private and exclusionary focus kept those of us they encountered at a tremendous distance even when in physical proximity and their impact came by way of interruption. Unlike *The Living Room*, though, the audience was not intruding upon them, they were intruding upon the audience, claiming unoccupied territory, and moving through it as if it were their own.

When they finally did coalesce into a formal line dance at the evening's conclusion, though, Ellsworth had them go directly to the area used earlier as a dance floor by *Every house has a door*, reactivating it for an already familiar use. Suddenly all the creepy wandering around seemed largely extended prelude to their line dance in which the pairs chewed down long lengths of string between them until they were kissing, standing stock still, as resistant to acknowledging their mouths pressed together as they had been to their earlier surroundings. Finally, in a unified act of completion and rejection, they spit out the strings, as if some spell had been broken, but they left still in some otherworldly haze.

The deliberately disjointed quality of the evening remained its most distinct impression. Perhaps this is the way with all performance series, by definition they resist cohesion. But an internal awareness in the performances themselves of their constituent parts, how one body, one composition can be formed and informed by multiple distinct elements coexisting in a single movement, a single moment, had awakened me to the particulate units making up all the pieces, and creative work in general. Perhaps the works themselves constituted "a new community" with a "revelatory potential and a history not yet recorded." What endowed IN>TIME with its complex and collective logic was that it was eclectic as a city neighborhood is eclectic, disparate occurrences reinforcing shared continued presence.