

Smoke in the Mask

Shamanism, Showmanship and the Promethean Ethic

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What exists in the space between the artist and the performer, (specifically the fire performer)?

How do performers perceive their relationship with their audience? What things do performers hold back and share, and what are they unable to share with the uninitiated? These questions form the basis of my conception of the Promethean Ethic. By this phrase I mean the artist's sense of a duty to impart knowledge which derives equally from the myth of Prometheus and the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas. My work with and amongst my fellow fire performers brings the metaphorical aspects of the Promethean myth to the fore, emphasizing its mechanics and heightening its visibility.

This paper examines the relationships and boundaries that exist between the artists (fire performers and other performers) and the audience, or rather, the two audiences; those who view the performers, and those who view my work as I portray the performers, in my overlapping triple role as audience and colleague to these fire performers, as a member of the fire spinning community, and as the artist presenting these images and stories to the reader and viewer. In this paper, the audience member or spectator of art is understood by the term “witness,” while the term “artist” refers to fire performers, actors, dancers, visual artists, or anyone else whose creative endeavor seeks and finds an audience. The artists who participated in this project and offered their collaboration I will most often refer to as “participants.”

In the process, this paper also draws attention to the languages of creative endeavor – to what these languages can and do communicate -- and considers those sources that can only be accessed by the creators themselves. This is the essence of the Promethean dynamic – the contract and vision shared between the one who brings fire and the ones who receive it, how one can cross the barrier, and what one gains – and loses – in doing so.

The focus of my work this year has been with fire performers because they understand these dichotomies of audience and performer, and more than most performers, they work in a medium that simultaneously draws and repels the audience – fire at once invites us to come close and warns us to keep a distance. So the art of fire performing seems to serve especially well in exploring my questions

around what is reachable and knowable, what can be shared and what cannot. In addition, the fire community is my community and the participants are close friends. Accordingly, I have tried to present their different personalities as clearly as possible by using substantial quotations from our interviews. For my thesis I decided to create work around my own community, the community of fire spinners and performers (also known as the Wildfire community) based mainly in and around the Boston area. I designed the project to be a more horizontal effort than a hierarchical one by making myself a participant in this project and not just the leader in a number of ways: by creating and giving a fire performance, by enlisting one of the participants to interview me, and enlisting another to portray me, as I am interviewing and portraying them and attending their fire performances. A brief introduction to the participants and their work is found in Appendix 1.

There is a reciprocal relationship between the audience and the performer. The artist communicates the creation with the audience. The audience receives and appreciates the creation, in exchange providing a reflection to the performer that his or her expression has received an audience.

This interdependence yet has impermeable boundaries. Within this dynamic certain things remain unshareable; certain things are lost. Paradoxically, these lacunae are critical to a successful link between artist and audience. They simultaneously draw the two together and create an uncrossable barrier to a place of creation.

The artist is at the behest of an inner voice or some tacit knowledge. This state of being is known and can be communicated in its essence but never fully explained in literal terms to someone not beholden to the same voice. Yet the audience is the recipient of that voice's directive, hears its expression and appreciates it. At the center of that appreciation is a mystery. Terrence Drake, a professional fire performer based in Toronto and a sometime member of the Wildfire community, says, "The whole point of sideshow is that it is uncommon and there is some sort of surprise, uncommonness, WOW factor to it . . . someone who had never seen a fire show before would enjoy the show far greater (than someone who knows how to spin fire)."¹

If the impact of the show is profound enough, the audience will wish to understand that mystery and pursue it as though it were a specimen to be collected, or a transformative charm to be ingested. As the renowned scientist and sociologist Michael Polanyi writes in his work *The Tacit Dimension*, the

recipient of tacit knowledge awakens: “the discoverer is filled with a compelling sense of responsibility for the pursuit of a hidden truth, which demands his services for revealing it” (25). The onlooker may be surprised to find that, to the extent that such a transmission is ever possible, his participation as a witness is the very catalyst that starts this reaction. As Polanyi explains, “In contemplating the discovery we are looking at it not only in itself but . . . as a clue to a reality of which it is a manifestation – all the time we are guided by sensing the presence of a hidden reality, toward which our clues are pointing” (20). Thus, when audience response and presence is willingly and spontaneously bestowed, they let themselves in for an experience that would otherwise be quiescent. Their displayed response feeds the performer, who, encouraged, infuses his work with even more energy, and this reciprocal feedback amplifies and continues.

One can be the originator of such a transformation only in pursuing a creative goal oneself, not in limiting oneself to the role of witness to the magic. The audience may try to parse the mystery of the creative drive and even attempt to capture or collect it by seeking to divine the artist's creative processes (which the artist him or herself often will decline to delineate, though beholden to that very force). Polanyi explains why this parsing of tacit knowledge will never achieve the real knowledge sought, a barrier the artist already intuits: “Unbridled lucidity can destroy our understanding of complex matters. Scrutinize closely the particulars of a comprehensive entity and their meaning is effaced, our conception of the entity is destroyed.” (Polanyi 18).

So the quantified acquisition of the performer's mystique is out of the question, but because of the urges of discovery that Polanyi mentions, the audience may still try to effect it. If the audience sometimes confuses the messenger with the message, the artist must maintain these divisions when relating to the audience. He must distinguish what he is obliged to deliver from what he cannot give. The adept artist understands and maintains these separations even in the midst of their work. Certain matters of identity are too private to be shared without risk of misunderstanding. Michael “Mooch” Mucciolo, fire performer, juggler, and co-founder of A Different Spin fire troupe and the Boston Circus Guild (hereafter known as Mooch) thoughtfully delineates where the private begins and what sets it apart. “For me, that delineation is those dangerous situations . . . in terms of dangerous misinterpretations. I feel like the misunderstanding [in public affairs] can be talked out whereas the misunderstanding on

some of the private things can be very offensive or polarizing.”² Performers each identify which of their own boundaries they need to guard and how far they are willing to allow a casual witness to proceed into their interior mental landscape or personal life. Terrence Drake says, “I set the boundaries . . . people will want me to continue performing for them . . . once my performance is finished. Which I am not interested or willing to do. . . . They *attempt* to cross my boundaries. I don't actually let them.”³ Mooch finds ways to be inclusive and yet maintain boundaries when the troupe's performance attracts people who want to take the relation further than the one prescribed by the audience/ performer dynamic. He reports,

We do have people who from time to time latch on . . . struggling to feel like they belong somewhere, 'hey, can I help you out, can I film for you guys?' and it's a little difficult to say no to that, so you try to find a way to make them included, even just watching the camera as opposed to being active with it.⁴

This tension between the private and public aspects of the artist's life is a magnified example of the question of the private self and the public self generally. Even as we strive to make ourselves understood, there is always something unsharable: those unique and magical components that depart from the generalities of human nature to define the individual. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas speaks to this question in developing his theory known as the “Ethic of the Other.” In his theory, Levinas' sense of how we relate to each other as alienated individuals supersedes the philosophy of his mentor, the great philosopher Martin Heidegger. Heidegger talked of the totality of being, that all experiences must be related through and toward the self. His theory posits that a consciousness interprets the universe entirely through itself, and therefore the mind contains all that can be known in the universe. Levinas proposed that it is more reasonable to understand that this idea underlies a sense that one cannot cleanly enter into a true knowing of another because of this barrier of the self and with all perception generated within the self. Knowing that, to at least try to accord the other some dignity, one must encounter the Other with the acceptance that there are ways in which the two will never understand each other and will always remain alienated, as strangers. Oddly, this strangeness and acknowledgment of alienness accords the most respectful existential agency to all parties.

As author Colin Davis explains, when explicating the philosophy of Levinas' Ethic of the Other in his book Levinas: An Introduction, “The Other is utterly resistant to the transcendental Ego and cannot be

assimilated to the world the Ego creates for itself . . . the strangeness of the world is its charm.” (43).

Michael Kevin Farrell, a professional fire performer in the Boston area and Wildfire alumnus, explains this when discussing where the revelation has to end. “All events and people are ultimately unknowable.”⁵ Polanyi puts his audience on notice that parsing facts and items will not conquer the mystery, because these details are not the reality itself. In fact, the reality itself may be totally lost in the attempt to grasp it: “The damage done by the specification of particulars may be irredeemable. Meticulous detailing may obscure [reality] beyond recall . . . the belief that [such] knowledge offers a true conception of things is fundamentally mistaken.” (Polanyi 19).

The relationship between the visual artist and his audience contains a similar tension. In the case of painting, especially with representational painting, the physical paint is the agent of the abstract communication. The image is the literal interpretation of it: the gatekeeper that will either admit the perceptive viewer or forever hold the unready or careless observer at a distance. To view a painting and only see the image dismisses the conduit of the basic energy that drives the work, which is to say the action of painting. In the case of performance, the tireless hours of perfected technique are not seen, only the easy portrayal of virtuosity. We do not so much value the brushstrokes themselves as enter the truth of the reality they convey – as Polanyi says, “the rules of rhyming and prosody do not tell me what a poem told me” (20). And yet, paradoxically, we cannot feel the message of the art without those outward signifiers. They are of course needed – they just are not the *point*. The author Robert Steiner, in his book Toward a Grammar of Abstraction, observes the gap and its uses and shortcomings: “[Grammar] . . . functions only at the register of how meaning might be made without recourse to leaps associated with the urge to interpret; it is not meaning itself” (76).

*I wish I could impart – that I could put it in a pill and give it to you and go - “THIS!”
And you'd go, “Fuck YEAH, that!!” --Terrence Drake⁶*

That. This something. Whatever it is. That place. That thing. Terms which have come up in many interviews the participants have given for this project when they discuss their work and the energy that underlies it. Everyone knows what it is if they perform to an audience, but in any other context it seems difficult to find the right word or name for what we mean. This is the very embodiment of what Polanyi calls “tacit knowledge.” It is telling that in a company made up only of performers, the “That” is not

really discussed – not so much because it is sacred or taboo, but because it seems so well understood that there is no need. As Steiner reports, Wittgenstein wrote, “What *can* be shown *cannot* be said” (42). Steiner wrote his treatise on how to translate visual language into institutional language, using the work of Jackson Pollock and the philosophy of Wittgenstein as his polestars for his project. Steiner is examining the problem of writing about art and this obtains equally with writing about performance.

What is “That”?

“That” is sacred knowledge, perhaps, in the sense that it is gained by participation in the mystery of performance: although it is not necessarily a cause for reverence, it always has the performer's primary respect. The witness who does not perform will not understand the “That” as a performer does, though they will receive its benefit as an audience member and will certainly feel it in their own privileged role as a recipient. In fact, the “That” is what the audience turned up to witness. So the audience is a component of the “That” and understands it from a different perspective. In reading conceptual artist and writer Suzanne Lacy's essay “Cancer Notes,” she does not try to define the What of “That,” but she delivers an interesting viewpoint on the Why of it. “Some of us who fear death go into medicine. Some of us go into art. We spin dreams of immortality as furiously as we can, making art out of our desire. Some of us only find peace in empathy” (Lacy 219).

Rogan Taylor, sociologist and author of [The Death and Resurrection Show](#), which explores the shamanic roots in the showman's profession, suggests that the mystery of show business is the very mystery of shamanism. He writes,

It may be a long way from the shamans of the ancient past to the pop idols of today, but between them stretches an unbroken line of descent. The 'magic' of show business is real magic. It draws its power from an immensely well-stocked religious bank which contains the deepest riches of a million years of human genius. (13)

The witness may actually not want to take on the mantle of creative knowledge. In fact, it may be essential to the witness that there remains something unknowable about the artist's performance. This is the essence of the show, as Taylor writes: “It is really only when the onlookers no longer know the mystery which lies behind the performance, and to which it constantly refers, that they become an audience” (40).

The alienness allows the witness to see that human beings are capable of audacious things without feeling called upon to do it themselves – in fact, they are called upon to act in the critical role of the naive audience, without which the performance would lose meaning. So the contract is forged around the “That.” The witness is there to receive it. The artist is there to impart it. Whether the energy has transferred in both directions seems to be the quality of magic and of successful entertainment. It is a partnership. Laura “Laa” Ceredona, fire spinner, fire breathing instructor, and principal dancer with ABRAXAS Dance Company in Boston, explains (while unconsciously mirroring Polanyi's idea of how tacit knowledge acts in an artistic setting): “When you're performing, you have an obligation to your audience. You can't be a performer without an audience, and you can't be an audience without a performer. It's a symbiotic relationship – they need you – you feed them and they feed you back.”⁷ Terrence Drake simply says, “There's no show without an audience. It's just practice otherwise.”⁸

The relationship is certainly one in which both parties rely on a distance between to catalyze the effect. As Davis quotes Levinas, “The encounter with the Other is an experience that is not an experience, establishing a relationship that is not a relationship”(35).

The artist's relationship to his work exists apart from the witness. An artist needs to share the *artifact*, but does not rehearse in the presence of witnesses. In fact the presence of the witness would not just be harmful to the creation of the art, it would likely stop it in its tracks. It is worth noting that a visual artist relies on the same seclusion to create. As Henry James wrote in The Madonna of the Future, “A great work needs silence, privacy, mystery even.”⁹ So too does the creation of a great performance. This ingredient of solitude suggests a meditative or cloistering process. In delving into the work and its creation, in listening carefully for the essence or the sense, the “that” that insists on being expressed, the artist has a relationship with creativity that is something akin to that of a priest or shaman privileged to enter the temple's inner sanctum where laity cannot go. The witness does not usually demand access to the temple – he asks only that once the wisdom, art, or fire is acquired, it be brought back to them in some form. This is a re-tailoring of the myth of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods and delivered it to the human race. The artist's job is to take a walk among the stars, venture into the vast ocean of being and grapple with monsters, take that material and convert it to a souvenir of experience which he

can share, much as the shaman deals with underworld spirits and underworld gods.

Taylor writes, “The shaman not only went down into the Underworld, but also experienced a prolonged encounter with one of the great disease spirits who inhabited that realm. He became familiar with the spirit or spirits and they with him” (32). None of this is the truth – it is only a metaphor that can point toward the “That,” still unnamed and likely to remain so.

Steven Johnson, principal actor with the “Ghosts and Gravestones” tour in Boston and a staff spinner with the Wildfire organization, has an interesting description of the “That” and why artists are needed.

Talking about the nature of art . . . my favorite art scratches at – I feel like there's some sort of – like a sphere, things that we don't understand about human nature – and my favorite art is the stuff that scratches at that surface . . . I think a lot of performers like to scratch at that egg in life but they like to scratch that sphere in themselves – human beings are *fascinating*, because we dedicate so much of our time to understanding things that we already do! . . . For every moment we've had where we do something awful, we've had moments where we act with complete and utter integrity and we have every reason not to. I think performers like to get at [that paradox].¹⁰

Perhaps “That” does not have a name because it drives the mission of the artist, and as such it is as individual as the artist himself. As much as a veil exists between the artist and the witness, another one hangs between one human and another, as Levinas observed in delineating the Ethic of the Other. For artists, the silence persists for a very practical reason: the sense of purpose *cannot* be imparted to the naive witness, and to the fellow artist, it *need* not be.

Reviewing the shamanistic origins of the showman's mission to cure the audience, which for our participants is to say, to reawaken their sense of wonder, Taylor writes, “The shaman's main healing effort appears to be directed at producing a similar ecstatic condition not only for himself but . . . in everyone gathered for the occasion. . . . Everybody is sick, and, in the healing séance, *everyone gets better*” (41).

It is the artist's prerogative to follow the voice of the “That” and develop a facility for hearing it clearly, retaining something of its substance to bring back to the daylight. The work of the artist's life is to find the medium that creates the clearest conduit for that voice, which is why the phenomenon is not limited to fire performance but is true for all creative and performing arts.

Terrence Drake recognizes the priority, saying, “(Fire) makes for a really good show apparently so I keep doing it. But I don't do it for the fire, I do it for the show.”¹¹

Mooch makes a similar observation; “To me it doesn't matter if it's fire or not fire . . . I want to bring the figurative fire to *everyone* in terms of finding a way to inspire the people to create to live and love fully in whatever capacity they need as individuals.”¹²

The development of this facility can lend power to a performance. Because the artist has found the search worthwhile, he imparts something worthwhile to the witness. As the contemporary art critic and writer Lucy Lippard writes, “Artists have a social mandate to take risks.” (Schneider, Between Art and Anthropology, p.25).

Steven Johnson describes his sense of mission to seek a way to be the conduit in this way:

Storytelling reminds me that I am a very small cog in a very large clock . . . It's very comforting to me and I don't feel that it's scary or sad or unimportant. It sort of puts me at a different level of service . . . I am telling this story because I believe that it's worth telling . . . I'm just taking up ten minutes of my day to tell this story and then those ten minutes never come back to me and they're gone – it makes you feel in service to something.¹³

Terrence Drake views himself as a lens to direct audience attention on something larger, rather than a conclusive point of audience focus: “It's not about me – I am no big deal. But I'm a vehicle for something that potentially *is* a big deal. It doesn't reflect on me, make me any more or less important – but putting on the show that takes people's attention and gives people emotions -- that's great.”¹⁴

Mooch tasks himself with temporarily suspending the audience's daily drudgery to experience a moment of childlike wonder:

I want them to feel inspired . . . I am very discouraged with monotony and status quo . . . it was important for me to feel like I was making a difference, even a small one – same as with the card magic that I was giving people even a moment of childlike wonder and if they know it's magic they're gonna get that somewhere in there.¹⁵

In their contact with an uncanny experience, the audience may be healed in a way.

Taylor writes, “[The audience] would know that they watched something peculiar, spectacular, and uncanny. At the end of the show, everyone would feel much better” (59).

The acknowledged rejuvenating quality of the performance is worthy of compensation, since the performer assumes a job that is in demand. The witness asks the artist to take the role of the Prometheus, and perhaps has neither the inclination, temperament, or time to embark on a similar search. But because creativity is an inherent human value, or maybe because of tacit knowledge surrounding a creative urge, we all somehow understand “That” when it arises and when we feel it. The hair-raising, heart-pounding or eye-widening moments when we see and feel when witnessing a performance is something we deem a worthwhile experience, enough to pay tribute of attention and presence – and money – to the artist, in exchange for an opportunity to connect with the “That” through the vision of the artist. The question of payment is neither mercenary nor accidental. Understanding the value of performance means that the artists understand that it deserves tribute. As Terrence Drake puts it, from the viewpoint of the professional performer,

There is never a reason to do a free show . . . if they are not willing to pay for that thing then they are not enjoying or appreciating it enough, and you are wasting their time . . . if they are not willing to pay you then they don't appreciate *you* enough – you are wasting *both* of your times. (*sic*) In this part of the world, people show their appreciation with their wallets. If they are not willing to do that, then move on and find some people who are. Otherwise, you are just making what you are doing look like it is not worth appreciating with dollars – which is how we show proper appreciation. That's how North America is. ¹⁶

The artists themselves understand that the tributes of attention and money are signals of appreciation and respect that tell them they did their jobs and brought the “That.” “If someone tells me that they want me to come and do a performance and they will pass the hat . . . no. I'm all good, I don't want to do that” says Farrell. ¹⁷

An unfortunate side effect sometimes happens as a result of capitalistic or consumerist thinking, which is that at times, holding a ticket can generate an inflated sense of entitlement in the witness. This clouds the real relation, for while the witness wishes to have some kind of access to the flame, they also distinctly wish to be kept apart from it. For the most delightful thing about the flame is its mystery in this push-pull attraction-repulsion. We endeavor to be in the presence of the “That,”

not so that we can analyze it but so we can feel it.

To seek creative fire oneself is perhaps the most appropriate way to respond to a Promethean call. If one is called to delve deeper into the mystery, one cannot rely on anyone else to do it for them. It is one thing to be grateful to witness the return of the Promethean's return from beyond the threshold, but to ask them to carry one there too is not a viable option. Terrence Drake discusses this in interview.

PB: In a way, it's wanting to have something you can only get by doing it without the trouble of having to do it. People who want to know what it is to perform on stage, who want to know what it is to spin fire – but they won't spin fire – even if you wanted to, could you impart that?

TD: The experience of being on stage?

PB: Or the experience of spinning fire around your body.

TD: Yeah – not without bringing them on stage and spinning fire around them.

PB: Which would give them a part of it - But even then, there is still an aspect missing – the ability to do it yourself -what it takes

TD: Yeah, you still didn't create the show – they're not there for you – it's my show still.
(laughs) ¹⁸

Steiner likewise maintains that the intellectual grasping for the thing is not the same as experiencing the thing – one cannot taste the juice by looking at the fruit, so to speak. He writes, “[Analysing art is] a trivial goal in comparison to the sensation itself (like deciding that the analysis of sexual passion is the genuine purpose of feeling it.)” (58)

All performers entertain witnesses who are not interested in pursuing a creative voice, yet want to possess it from the artist they witness. The attempt is doomed; the “That” is not something the artist can give away or share, because it is not a bridgeable gap of experience. What the Promethean can give is the spectacle of an artist creating, and offer a glimpse of the journey. That is what the witness must be content with until they seek it themselves. As Arnd Schneider, professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Oslo, says, “Knowledge is practiced through experience rather than simply replicated – and the aim is to 'emerge' knowledge rather than to simply find it, or its being embodied in a final product” (Between Art and Anthropology, 11.)

The problem comes from a misplaced sense of admiration, often expressed as a sense of entitlement. A witness to popular culture (magazines and tabloids, newspapers and television) has been conditioned

to believe that to witness something is to experience it, and that everyone is entitled to proxy “experience.” As well, a culture with a consumer mentality has a tendency to view the “That” as a commodity, so the “product” should be theirs for the right asking price. (And it is – but the price is the pursuit of experience and cannot be exchanged in coin.) Benjamin prehends this instinct to acquire experience by proxy: “Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction. . . . To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction” (Benjamin 4).

The witness who paid for a ticket may have thought he was purchasing a slice of the performer, or the performer's version of the “That,” as well. The ticket *can* buy the privilege of being present to the artifact and communicating something deeper to the attentive witness, but it does *not* entitle the witness to the lived experience as well. At any event, the artist could not share it even if they wanted to. As Terrence Drake says, “I can't give that experience to someone who doesn't already have it.”¹⁹ To repeat Wittgenstein's words, “We can know more than we can tell” (Steiner 4). This is the heart of the problem in writing about such things. We want to explore it in our common language, but to take that as a starting point creates a tight bind. Steiner, referencing the final page of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, frames the verbal inadequacy beautifully: “It would seem to leave us in that place where there is either silence or where we venture on high while pulling the ladder up behind us – the place of either mysticism or the senseless” (42). Davis also clearly explains this when he talks about Levinas' Ethics of the Other: “The Other is encountered as an essential mystery – it is unknown and unknowable . . . Levinas begins to develop a philosophy of the enigma, a philosophy of darkness in which the Other is never fully seen, known or possessed” (32.)

Because the performance serves as a conduit for this tacit knowledge but is not the “That” itself, we can say (and the performers do agree) that the vehicle is less important than what it contains. In that sense, visual artists dance with the same demon. They use the subject to attract the attention of an audience, but that is only a flag to catch the eye so that the real voice – the medium that makes up the image – can be heard when it sings. The distance at which the voice becomes audible depends mainly on the intended range of the piece in the first place.

Image actually has much less to say about the noumenal content of a piece as its medium and in the case of painting, the hand of the artist. A clear example of this might be Vincent van Gogh's painting of *Three Pairs of Shoes*, or Manet's *Olympia*.

In the case of *Olympia*, the subject is quite appealing, and so the receptive viewer is enticed by the signals of luxury and sensuality in the image.

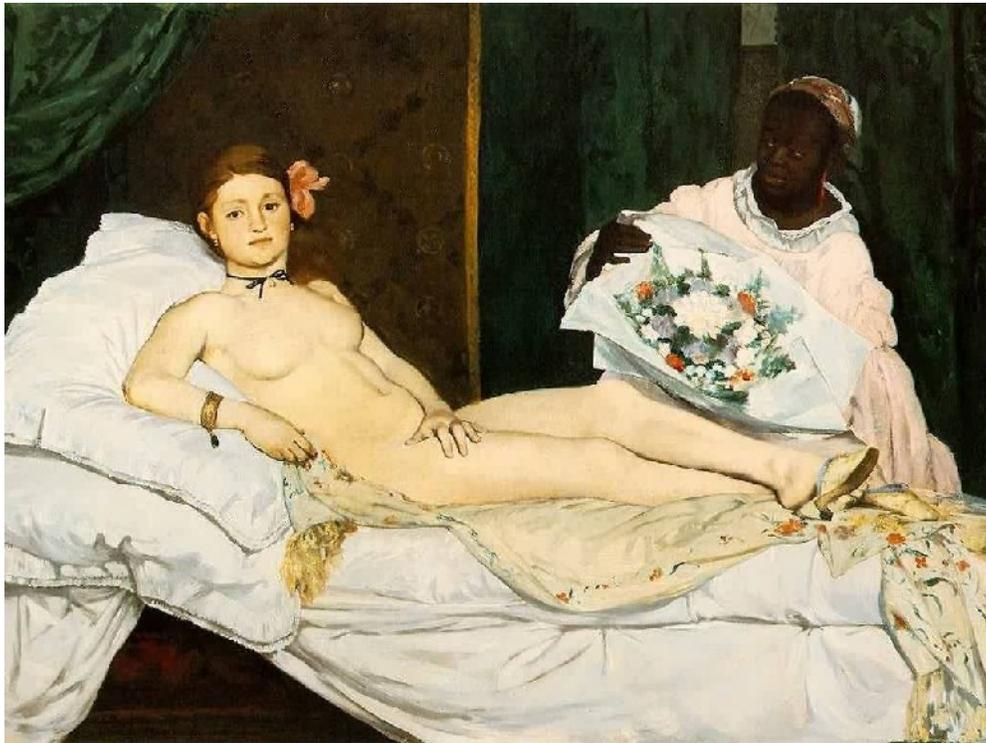


Illustration 1: Olympia by Edouard Manet, 1863

How one responds emotionally to the work is subject to the individual. It is not generally possible for the artist to deterministically impart a specific emotional experience to everyone – such a task is impossible and the artist has to live with that fact by simply doing their best to make the clearest statement possible by their own lights and then send the result into the world. As Lippard says, “Artists . . . have little control over what becomes of their cultural artifacts, little power to affect their social interpretations”(Schneider 25). The fact remains that a great many people *do* find a strong emotional experience when viewing this painting, which points to some common thing being

communicated or some action we all understand taking place, the tacit knowledge Polyani describes. Steiner ponders this mysterious commonality, saying, “Even if we cannot all paint, we all share an unconscious, as good a point of departure for modernist understanding as any . . . who is the painting for if not us?” (29).

It is tempting to conclude that the source of *Olympia's* mass appeal is the young and beautiful nude woman. But that's just subject. As a counterexample, I offer Vincent van Gogh's *Three Pairs of Shoes*. The signal here is the image of shoes.



Illustration 2: Three Pairs of Shoes by Vincent van Gogh

Both Manet's *Olympia* and van Gogh's *Three Pairs of Shoes* moved me to tears when I saw them in person. (It is worth noting that something critical is lost in the reproduction, as Walter Benjamin discussed.) The question that persists in my thoughts is, why should a row of beat-up shoes stir my sensibilities as easily as the graceful nude? As Steiner asks, “If the line expresses feeling, (why) don't we simply consider feeling the meaning or the function of the line?”(22)

The answer may be that the subject is the less important element of the piece. Subject is code, and both paintings are liberally laden with it, as explicated in the Appendix 3. The subject is just a doorway through which we can glimpse other ideas, bigger thoughts, deeper meanings. Particular to painting is

the feature of brushwork, and that adds another hundred facets or so to the diamond that is a finished painting. Because while image tells us one thing, and although codes tell us still more, the codes are an indicator, not the thing itself – not the “That.” Steiner draws the distinction thus, “If I must decode the painting to understand it, do I understand the painting or the code?” (20) So subject takes us only so far. What tells us more is the state of the artist when the picture was painted, if we can see the original.

This qualification is because the image was built one brushstroke at a time. Each brushstroke is the artifact of an anatomical presence and a living movement. Everything, from the artist's grip to the movement of his arm to his stance, affects the shape of the brushstroke. These are the nuts and bolts that hold up a painting, much as hardware holds up a house. (With respect to all media, it does not have to be brushstroke – it can be anything - the mark made by a hand-held stick of pigment or charcoal – the makeup on the actor's face – the whirl of the poi.)



Illustration 3: Terrence Drake.
Photo by Paula Billups.

Terrence Drake sees that the tool is incidental to the craft. “I am like a carpenter. Not a saw enthusiast. The fire breathing is whatever – what I *create* is the show. I don't care about the screwdriver I use.”²⁰ Whatever the tool, it transmits the artist's physical presence and condition, which can be said to be a reflection of one's mental or emotional state (we see people slump when they are tired, sit up straight when they are excited, trembling when afraid, and so on.) The more one looks, the more one might intuit the artist's state of being at the time the marks were placed. As Steiner writes, “We could trace as well in the instrumental interpretation on the nature of body movement during the act of painting” (75). That state of being, that movement of the brush, as much as the movement of the body in spinning fire, transmutes to become these artifacts that, piece by piece, create the work itself.

Steiner follows up his question about expression with this thought: “It is . . . accurate to say a feeling accompanies the line, or that the line, like a clothesline, is something on which to hang emotions . . . as a gesture we may consider the line a symptom, the way open flowers are symptom of sunlight” (22).

To witness the artist spinning fire, we intuit the presence of a deep internal drive that is speaking to the artist, and then speaking *through* the artist *to* the privileged witness. To see the artifact of human movement is to know something about the state of the artist's body and witness by proxy that state, indicative of the internal voice speaking, the artist listening carefully to the “That.” For the fire spinner, it results in physical responses that are a performance, intended to be seen and so to communicate.

Davis encapsulates this idea when he writes of one of Husserl's theories, saying, “The Other cannot be presented directly to my consciousness, *but his/her body and behavior can be*. Observing the changing but *concordant* actions of others can lead to what Husserl calls an analogical aperception . . . the Other behaves in ways I recognize as familiar from my own experience of myself” (27) (Emphasis mine.)

This might explain why those who gain pleasure from looking at a work can say that it is not the same in reproduction. Something is lost when the hand of the artist is muted. As the philosopher Walter Benjamin writes in his treatise *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*,

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. . . . The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity . . . The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. (39)

As it is with painting, so it is with all performance and communication. The direct mark is best experienced directly. This very extended analogy of image versus being can be applied to fire spinning. The manipulation of flame is the gesture through which the artist expresses a deeper meaning or state. Fire performance relies on a sense of daring and of magic – “magic” in the twofold sense that Taylor suggests, i.e. that the magic of shamanism is buried at the heart of the magic of show business. Taylor explains that “magic” in this case does not describe an objective reality but a *world view* that opens the door to an experience. “The shamanistic world view is . . . *everything is real magic*. We cannot answer the obvious question about the reality of this magic, but it does not matter.

The tricks are not especially important and there is no point in spending too much time contemplating them” (57). Indeed, Terrence Drake concurs when he points out, “I don't care about my toys.. They don't matter.”²¹

The magical aspect hinges on mastery of the discipline and so of the art. The audience is at a secure distance from the fire while the flames surround the artist in a dangerous swirl of heat and light, something the artist is deliberately calling up, causing to happen – controlling, up to a point. By concentrating on the physical aspects of the performance, the artist balances the illusion and reality of control with the illusion and reality of danger. Asked what it takes to pull off the advanced fire breathing trick called “Summoning the Elders,” which involves four breathers creating a vortex of flame between them, Ceredona bluntly names the requirements to do the trick: “Balls of steel. It takes a lot of experience. . . . You need to be able to hold a good sustain for about three seconds so you can hold it away from your head, and then you need to be really stupid. . . . It's a dumb trick. But it's a *cool* trick!” Ceredona, an accomplished breather, always seems to maintain control over the volatile medium.²²

Taylor writes that the audience's willingness to follow the leader depends on that leader's abilities. “The shaman must show mastery over the spirits and control of forces which, uncontrolled, create sickness” - or in our case, things or people catching on fire. (35) Small wonder that the fire performer is not one to do things off the cuff. Before an expressive performance with fire can take place, the artist prepares for a long time learning to use the toys adeptly before adding fire to the mix. As well, the artist conditions himself and acquaints himself with the laws of fire and how it lives and dies, how it behaves, so he can know what to expect of fire in a stable situation. The artist learns the methods and protocols of safety in performance and how to manage risks. He acquires technique in dance and choreographs a piece. All of this planning creates a platform from which the performance successfully captivates audiences.

Preparation is key and subject to assessment rather than emotional connection to the piece. Terrence Drake arranges his show based on what works and not what he likes. “There's *no* attachment. I don't feel sentimental about my choreography.”²³ Asked if he is ever spontaneous, his answer is an emphatic no. “I feel like they would clap less . . . If it's not a good enough part of a show then there's nothing to

be attached to. I really *like* the good parts. Until I find a better part.”²⁴ The artist may appear by persona to be wild, unpredictable and impulsive, but in fact is intently focused on logistics as long as the flame is alight, rather than on impressing oneself or one's audience. As Taylor writes, “At the very centre of this ecstatic whirlwind, [the performer] displays a supremely skillful control. It is the essential genius of such performers that they manage to combine, to an astonishing degree, ecstatic freedom with artistic discipline” (47).

The work to elicit admiration happened in rehearsal, and the preparation makes way for something ineffable. What Steiner writes of the virtuosity of painting also supports my thought regarding fire performance: “Putting together is the rehearsed activity that 'sees this as that' that familiarizes the order of signs and prefigures linguistic action . . . the intention, as the element that defies further interpretation, is the visual impression itself in that one does not think a visual impression any more than one thinks a dream” (58).

The artist's relationship with the audience often relies on witness naivete as much as artist's expertise. The witness is impressed in part because the artist is doing something that they have not the skill to do, or may never even have seen someone else do. The frequent comment is “I could never do that!” when complimenting an artist on their performance. However, most fire performers *did* become fire performers because they saw someone do it first and thought, “I *want* to do that,” instead of “I could never do that.” A barrier is about to be crossed, one that can never be uncrossed, with that new thought.

At that point of readiness to tackle the mystery, somehow the witness finds a fire performer willing to teach them and they enter the world of the fire spinner. After enough practice and focus, they spin fire for the first time, (a literal baptism of fire – spinners take “virgin burns” seriously as a cause for community celebration and support) and then at some point they have their first performance. At that time they pass the veil and shed the role of witness to assume the mantle of the artist. They will never again see a fire performance naively, once they have heard and responded to the “That.”

Mooch understands this and explains his experience of it:

I do a lot of card magic and people sometimes come up to me after the show and ask me to tell them how I did it. I make them the same deal my teacher made me. I let them know I will show them, but remind them that the reason the magic is awesome is because it revives a sense of childlike wonder that goes away as we get older and become jaded. And that once they know how the trick is done they will lose that sense of wonder about it – but in exchange they will be able to give that wonder to others because they know the trick themselves. To date, I've never had a single person take me up on it.²⁵

The power to reawaken that state of childlike wonder drives the dynamic between the art and its audience. We seem intent on keeping that garden of naivete available – why else would we insist on mystery or ignorance and then indulge in it? As Kimmelman observes, “Artists who push us to look more carefully . . . remind us of a childlike condition of wonderment that we abandoned once we became adults and that we need art to highlight occasionally, if only to recall for us what we have given up” (221). The art historian and writer Owen Jones observed that “if we would return to a more healthy condition, we must even be as little children or as savages” (Coles 48).²⁶

Taylor talks about the necessity of the showman being the interloper – the outsider. His stranger status and novelty allows the audience to encounter the performance unhindered by some prior knowledge and also allows the performer himself to preserve the illusion of magic of the uncanny. Taylor suggests that the rootlessness of the traveling performer may partly derive from not only nomadic origins of the shamanic tribes but also vocational requirement – passing through, they are not subject to local authority. As itinerant strangers, showmen have the latitude to act in outlandish ways to create an impressive show – which by the way, allows the audience to project freely onto the stranger, intensifying the effect of “magic” free of already-established associations with fellow citizens and familiar faces. Taylor writes,

The revamping of the healing séance into a show solved a lot of problems. It meant that the travelling people could remain on the move, manage to make a living, and hopefully avoid a too-rigorous sanction from the religious establishment, although . . . itinerant show people were never entirely accepted by civilized society. At the same stroke, the shamanistic nomads succeeded in encapsulating their religious mystery into a well-disguised form, which remained largely unrecognized [by the audience] (56).

As Farrell puts it, speaking in the year 2012, “I'm never there for very long and they don't know me. I'm a stranger. So that allows them to impose a lot of ideas onto me.”²⁷

Unusual costume or appearance is a visible signal that one is dealing with the shaman, the stranger possessed of unknown powers of transformation. This becomes important in allowing the audience to enter a receptive mindset. As Taylor explains, “At the center [of the mystery] there stand certain types of individuals who appear to have the capacity to abandon . . . their normal bodies” (13). Mooch allows that his unique multicolored trihawk is important to signaling a shift in mental space to the audience: “This is something about the visible aspect that signals to people that they are not in the everyday world anymore, they are in a different sphere . . . We've mentioned that as a group that I need to keep it now because it's part of the imagery now – it's an anchor for people.”²⁸

Ceredona describes how her persona's dramatic appearance is a camouflage that allows the private person to go unnoticed.



*Illustration 4: Laura "Laa" Ceredona.
Photo courtesy of Tim Ellis.*

At a venue I rarely leave a venue in costume and makeup – and at a venue that's a huge part of the persona – it takes two hours to put on. So I can walk into a venue as a belly dancer and I can leave as a completely different person, so it allows you to get around because you are not swamped, you're not a target.²⁹

The participants described the healthiest and most productive interactions post-show with witnesses who express gratitude and enthusiasm for the performance, rather than asking for more in some other way, for example by attaching themselves personally to the performer or trying to connect with them as private individuals, trying to bridge the distance signified by the space of the stage as it sets the front row at a distance.

Things can get out of hand when that presumption takes over. Terrence Drake recalls an incident when two women he had never met brawled over having their picture taken with him after a performance.

TD: There was a group of drunk girls who wanted to get their picture with me . . . and this one girl wanted a group picture and the other one wanted her to go hella way (*sic*) . . . [she] went up to me and put one arm around me and was kind of like, 'back off he's mine' - a little bit - and then [the first girl] wouldn't back off and she got punched in the face. . . .

PB So no pictures were taken? (laughing).

TD: No pictures ended up being taken at all.³⁰

Ceredona reports some of this transference in interview and how her persona protects her when she says, ““I get a lot of propositions when I come off stage. People are like, 'Oh my God, you're so hot, can I buy you a drink, can I -' With strangers I try to be gracious and if they get a little too fan-boyish I excuse myself.”³¹

Managing oneself is the primary skill needed to manage an audience, and, with the persona, remain in control whether on or off the stage. Mooch says, “There is a mental component of control and forcing my will onto the situation to either act in a certain manner or speak out in a certain manner.”³²

The witness who feels the “That” and attaches it to the performer begins to confuse the signifier with the noumenal. The performer is not the source of the “That” - or if he is, only can access it for himself. Prometheus is not fire: he is the carrier who brings it – likewise the artist is only the aperture through which a witness can glimpse the further journey if he cares to undertake it himself. To reach back to the analogy of painting, the performer is the subject. The fire is the brushstroke, and what it alludes to is hard to name but lies deeper still. The witness encounters a cipher: the persona is not the same thing as the human being who projects it. As Johnson reports, the audience separates the persona from the performer so completely that the rules of social engagement evaporate.

The persona can create a healthy divide between you and your audience – you're in but you're not too far in. . . . And one of the most fascinating place that I see that divide – you don't know how many times people talk – we're just a few feet from each other – *they'll talk about me like I can't hear them*. And that fascinates me! . . . There is a certain amount of unreality there.³³

Terrence Drake reports a difference between the life of a persona and the life of the personal, which he

uses to enhance the audience's experience, playing on their imagination. "When you're on stage you're not a real person anyway. You are a fantasy – you are basically a human-shaped slate that the people in the audience are projecting their fantasies onto - and my goal is to facilitate that rather than force my specific ideas of what they should be interpreting."³⁴

While maintaining the separation, the artist still has to hold the attention of the audience and uses typical methods of psychology to intrigue the audience. Terrence explains how to get an audience's buy-in.

TD: I drop some seeds and let them fill in the blanks, which they always do. You drop a little bit and they will easily extrapolate all this stuff and so rather than going out of my way to create a really specific character that I want them to get specific messages from, I embrace the fact that they have their own ideas and fantasies and just do my best to play to them, whatever they might be, and leave it open-ended with a little bit of texture for them to get a grip on.

PB: But that allows them to have a full emotional experience of their own at that point.

TD: Yeah, absolutely. I become a lot more real and relevant to them because they've filled in the gaps themselves with stuff that's relevant to them.³⁵

Even beyond the fact that fire is one of the oldest technologies, the attraction is deeper. Flame's hypnotic power lies in the image that has impressed itself on the human consciousness so that our response to flame seems more instinctive than acculturated, a subception (which Polanyi describes as the process of learning to respect or avoid a danger by modifying behavior without realizing that he is doing so) whose allure just barely outweighs its warning - and therefore it makes an excellent tool for a performer to arrest the attention of an audience (8-9).



*Illustration 5: Joanna Welch with A Different Spin
Photo by Paula Billups*

Joanna Welch, fire performer, acrobat, and member of the Boston Circus Guild, says, “Because it's fire, people automatically respect it . . . You don't even have to do anything with the fire and people will pay attention. It's almost as if the fire itself is more important than the persona in terms of giving permission or creating separation.”³⁶ By the process of subception, we all know from childhood that fire can hurt and destroy; yet we are drawn to its glow, and in spite of the danger we seem unable to look away.

Mooch points out fire's attraction above even other types of acts:

There is something that draws people to talk to us because they see us do something that is out of the ordinary. If we just do our circus show we don't have as many people come up and talk to us afterward . . . And I think it's because it's so out of the ordinary and visceral and you can feel the heat and sometimes hear it and everyone can relate to it . . . with fire everyone has an experience of some kind with fire."³⁷

As Terrence Drake says, "(Fire is) getting people's attention and giving them something to talk about . . . It is a good tool to accomplish those goals right now."³⁸ What fire awakens in us may be difficult to name, but it is instantly recognizable. Flame is a trigger to experience because of some collective primal memory that it evokes, as Mooch hints. Kimmelman says, "A vivid memory can play a mysterious role in the imagination out of proportion to its significance, like a smell or some note of music or a breeze that triggers the recollection of a pleasant trip or a childhood game or lost relative. It stays there, waiting" (215). He muses on these effects as "the consolations of art" (Kimmelman 227). So perhaps our subception of fire contains something besides danger – something at least entrancing enough to counterbalance the fear and draw us to a certain proximity.

Such a literal read of the situation only leads to a further mystification of the theory and practice of the art, rather than delineating the true quality of the encounter. It separates the witness further from the possibility of understanding the work in abstract or theoretical (or metaphysical) terms. Steiner writes that "We cannot say that meaning accompanies the sign any more than writing accompanies thinking" (54). The urge to grasp at the magic that made itself evident in the arena of the performance sometimes leads to the witness feeling bereft of something precious when that last part is (necessarily) held back – believing not that the performer is in thrall to something he cannot impart, but that the performer is commanding a privilege like a commodity or that something has been kept from their scope of education, a loss that the outsider might feel keenly, as Mooch pointed out with regard to people insisting at first on knowing his tricks. To receive the jolt and not know the source, one might then set off in search of it – if honestly, then through a personal journey – if vicariously, then by asking the performer for more. But the effect is resonant. "Though everyone experiences some sensation in the presence of a painting, many conclude that the meaning of a painting is being kept a secret, even a hostage to knowledge" (Steiner 57).

My experience as a painter has borne this out, as my audience sometimes wants me to tell them what it is like to create art work but who don't wish to learn how to do it themselves. I find this is a parallel to how audiences grasp for the mystery of the performance but will not pursue the performer's calling.

This exchange – the witness giving the artist an audience, and the artist giving the witness something mysterious – is what I refer to as the Promethean dynamic. For the artist's part, the participants offered that they derive satisfaction knowing they entertained the audience and gave something of value in the performance. I know that from my own experience this year in giving my first public fire performance to the assembly at Snowfire in Connecticut, my concern was less for my safety, my choreography or my appearance, except as they pertained to the entertainment and safety of my audience.

I half-expected that I would be preoccupied with the things that occupy my thoughts in practice – or what spinners call “flow,” a trancelike state, or otherwise, true to my cautious nature, a certain ultra-wariness of the wicks or the position of the safety. But instead what was uppermost in my mind was whether my audience was entertained and whether I was delivering the gift I had tacitly promised by taking the stage in the first place.³⁹

Most participants volunteered, independently, that if they felt they did not entertain the audience, their time and the audience's money was wasted. Terrence Drake says, My job is to be the most positive presence in these peoples' lives as I can be for the time that I am with them. I want them to get their money's worth and have something to talk about when they leave. If I haven't done that, then I've wasted both our times. (sic)⁴⁰ Performers take the responsibility seriously, almost as a kind of contract. Steven Johnson illuminates this thought when he says, “It doesn't matter how great and subtle I think I am. If the audience is not entertained, then I haven't done my job If they aren't having a good time you've wasted their money. You've cheated them.”⁴¹ Ceredona tries to engage her audiences as directly as possible, remarking that she knows some dancers whose affect is compromised when they refuse to make eye contact with their audience; “I like to look at my audience because I don't like watching dancers who are performing for themselves. You're there to entertain your audience. They have paid money to come watch you perform and if you ignore them I think that is kind of stupid.”⁴² The priority to entertain the audience and bridge the gap for many of the performers shares a similar ethic.

Performers tend to see themselves in the role of a caretaker, responsible for thoroughly entertaining the audience. They set that job requirement as a priority above satisfying a personal wish for self-expression. Michael Farrell says of one of the pieces he is most proud of personally, “[With creating that performance] I feel like I'd really accomplished something . . . [but] I've never done that piece for a party – they want to see more 'whiz bang boom,' you know?”⁴³ Terrence Drake has an ethic of detachment and remains unimpressed with even the best parts of any show; “I have absolutely no attachment to any part of the show. I am always looking to make it better. So if something doesn't work . . . then we have an opening in the show for something that does. I really would prefer to build a more awesome show.”⁴⁴

Johnson's concern for his audience reveals a generosity that informs his persona, which is evident even when he is playing the role of a demon and trickster. “I can hate everybody else and everything else. I *have* to love my audience. I tell them, 'you're my guys.’”⁴⁵

Welch gives a good example of how her mission to entertain supersedes her own sense of expression:



Illustration 6: Mooch warms up the crowd for A Different Spin. Photo by Paula Billups

“So let's say this person is having an old-time circus themed wedding. Well, at that moment in time my inner psyche may not *want* to be an old-time circus performer. I might be feeling very depressed and I might want to do this very slow sad something, but I'm totally gonna smile and make jazz hands because that's what the performance is and that's what they hired.”⁴⁶

Success in a happy audience that can walk away feeling they have been entertained. This is the metric of professional success rather than arcane knowledge or even self-challenge. Steven Johnson says, “I don't care if you are the most subtle and talented actor in the world . . . if you haven't entertained the audience, you've failed.”⁴⁷

Mooch talks about the work he and his troupe do to engage the audience with the experience in an active way. “I go through the setup to make sure they know we are there to

give them an awesome show. We let them know it's okay to clap and yell and have a good time.”⁴⁸

The performers extend themselves and empathize with the mood of a crowd in order to discern what is needed to keep the energy alive.

The performer's physical health is often tasked in the course the work. They care for and condition their bodies but take risks once the performance starts, sometimes incurring damage. “I have burned my lips and throat. My taste buds are basically scar tissue at this point. I have stripes on my arms from the fleshing. My teeth always hurt.” Terrence reports. And for him, injury is factored into the cost of doing business. “[Fire breathing] is more dangerous – it is more harmful and it is therefore more expensive for me to do and I pass that cost on to the client and generally they don't go for it.” (A breathing act starts at \$1000).⁴⁹

Ceredona talks about the injuries she has sustained performing with fire:

I have had first degree burns everywhere on my arms, legs, mouth – fire breathing sunburn where my face dries out – chemical burns from the paraffin – the worst one I got was I was doing some fancy showoff trick and I got a really bad second degree burn on my wrist. Kevlar weave burns, got a couple of those. I keep my arms shaved in the summer because I flesh [burn] all my hair off.”⁵⁰

Besides these injuries, performer who do fire breathing and fire eating are in the most dangerous situation, because factors that can lead to potentially deadly consequences are not in the performer's control. A shift in the wind can blow the atomized fuel into the performer's face and throat, bringing on chemical pneumonia and a trip to the hospital, or catching the face, throat or chest on fire - or the flame can blow back into the throat, mouth and sinuses – if the blowback is strong enough, or the breathing is ill-controlled, fire can enter and sear the lungs, collapsing them, resulting in coma or death.

Skill and experience can only ameliorate this so far; after that, the risks go up, not down, with every breath, as the performer makes the same bet with the elements time and again.

In the process of my work this year I decided to learn how to breathe fire, and I learned first-hand the secrets of how to do so and was fully briefed on every risk. The mechanics, knowledge and experience of breathing fire are mine, but having had both the practical lesson of learning how to breathe and the object lesson of watching the student next to me develop chemical pneumonia and go the emergency room, I am wary of taking up another breathing torch any time soon. (See Appendix 4.)⁵¹

From all we have discussed so far, we can begin to develop a clearer sense of the features of both sides of the Promethean ethic. Implicit in the bargain of the Promethean ethic is that the performer must give up wonder, and does so deliberately, in order to shape and deliver wonder. This is an extension of the Levinasian notion of duty to the Other. In becoming that messenger, the performer gives up the luxury of being a witness to their own work. They do not admire themselves as they do it, but attend solely to the mechanics of the art, putting in hours to construct something appealing for masses of strangers.

On becoming a performer, one surrenders wide-eyed admiration in exchange for delivering the wonder to others. Terrence's practical approach in this way is evident when he reports, "As I unlock what people want to see, I do more of that stuff and I leave out the stuff that they are just kind of like wading through for the good bits. . . . I pick four or five people that seem to be really into what I am doing and watch them . . . the parts they didn't react to that strong I try to eliminate." ⁵²

The audience is the other half of the Promethean ethic. They of course derive entertainment from the performance and all the emotions that attend it. As I watched performances by Terrence and Mooch and Dominique, I sometimes watched the faces of the audience instead of the performers, and always saw mixtures of delight, disbelief, entrancement and sometimes alarm when the fire trick was particularly impressive. In order to ride the wave of all those emotions, the witness has to forgo a kind of knowledge – to keep the "how" of the performance mysterious, as that is often a key element to the admiration, as Mooch explained with his card magic story. The space that exists between one universe and another, as Levinas illustrates, is embodied in the performance space and the distance between the minds of the witness and the performer. He writes, "Consciousness is not outside the world but part of it. Subject and object constitute and are constituted by one another in a process which denies the sovereignty and independence of either and ensures a perpetual interchange" (Davis 21).

Audiences surrender authority to the performer, put themselves in his hands and happily do as they are told. They can luxuriate in the fear of fire because on some level they understand that the performer is taking care of them and making sure they are safe and entertained.

The participants consistently experience the audience as a unified whole rather than a throng of individuals. Without prompting and without consulting, every participant reported this sense that the audience became a single force or being, "I don't even see the audience as a bunch of individuals,"

Terrence Drake says, “They all sort of merge together into a single entity.”⁵³ Johnson reports, “The audience is a funny thing because to me they kind of become one person.”⁵⁴ Ceredona's description of this phenomenon is very similar: “Sometimes you are on a big stage and you can't make face time with your audience individually but you can make face time with your audience as a whole. Your audience can become one entity that you are performing to.”⁵⁵ Farrell says,

After x amount of people the group just melds and becomes one and you're just performing for this beast – and I don't mean beast in a pejorative way – it's just -a creature, it's an animal – and you can – if you do it right and everything's going right you can really easily manipulate that beast. It certainly doesn't happen all the time.⁵⁶

Central to the artist's ability to entrance and entertain an audience is the canny construction of a persona uniquely suited to control and direct the situation and the audience as a kind of puppet master. The audience, once convinced of the authority of this persona, falls under its spell and does as it is told in order to receive the gift of entertainment. Farrell describes his experience of it: “When you've got an audience in the palm of your hand it's an amazing feeling because you can make them feel kind of whatever you want them to feel . . . they all kind of meld together as one in a lot of cases and that's a really cool feeling.”⁵⁷

Johnson also talks about the sense of the audience as an entity and his relationship with them in constructing a dynamic as a harmonious cooperation.

There are a number of performers that treat the crowd as both sort of a – something that they can sort of command – and I don't mean manipulate because it's never negative – I don't want them to do my bidding – but I want a perfect relationship with them, where I say “Yeah!” and they say “YEAH!” - a great duet.⁵⁸

The persona must be alluring enough to capture and hold the audience's willing participation for an extended period of time; it must be powerful and commanding, yet likable enough for the audience to submit to its authority and enjoy the process, and it also shields the aspects of the performer's private self from exposure, limits vulnerability and frees the persona to do its job without any inhibitions from the private persona. It is essential to the performer to controlling the show and the audience. Taylor writes, “The manipulative power . . . would certainly help the shaman keep the upper hand during performances”(57).

As Johnson says,

You have to play up on certain characteristics – confidence – extreme confidence – the lightness, a sense of humor about yourself, a certain level of command – they are [attractive qualities] . . . The fact that people try to get under that persona can honestly dictate what the persona is . . . It's not about talking. It's about command and control. I actually think to a certain degree that's what that persona is.”⁵⁹

This process contains the energy that helps the whole thing go, but hides the ontological reality of the human behind the respective masks of audience and artist . . . the “relationship that is not a relationship” (Davis 35).

Like many aspects of the interaction and dynamic between audience and performer, the participants find they share a common experience but it is not so easily communicated. Johnson remarks, “I don't totally know how to explain it. In some ways with an audience I can be more personal than I can be with my closest friends. It's a strange relationship. It's complicated.”⁶⁰ Terrence Drake feels an uncanny intimacy that is actually facilitated by the boundary. He understands the distinction between this “strange relationship” and those that take place outside a theatrical duality. “The relationship that I have with the people in my audience . . . is really no different than the relationships I have with my closest lovers where I just want to be the best most positive experience in their lives during the time that we are together.”⁶¹

This emotional connection that exists outside the normal definitions of human relationships is echoed in Terrence's reported experience of what happens when, just before eating fire, he explains to his audience that he is about to do something dangerous – in fact potentially deadly. He credits the power of the persona with enticing the audience's commitment to the character.

TD: When [they] feel like [they're] getting to know this person who is on stage . . . they become more invested in what happens to me. So by the end of the show, we've built this relationship over 25-45 minutes . . . And so now I am going to do some fire eating or some fire breathing or the stuff that could kill me - that I've *recognized* can kill me every performance and I *say* as much – they're like, 'whoah whoah, wait, you're gonna kill my *friend*?? No! No! Don't!!' And the music starts and they have like this little level of panic -

PB: *Can you feel it?*

TD: Yeah. It's pretty palpable. They actually worry about what will happen to me now . . . they worry that they want me to be okay. Which is a much higher level of involvement as an audience member and satisfies my goal of an experience [for them] to talk about afterwards. (*sic*)⁶²

The artist's skillful navigation of the divisions between the persona and the person, the audience and its need, activates the magical space [“magical” in the Tayloresque sense] between the performer and the audience. Even in these uncanny circumstances, an atmosphere of trust, connection and custodial concern obtains when the audience and performer fully engage the dynamic of this Promethean ethic. As Taylor writes, “the shaman must try to place himself between his people and any malicious spirits wandering around . . . and make sure they leave ordinary folk alone” (45).



Illustration 7: A Different Spin performs. Photo by Paula Billups.

It can be a strange and scary ride, and its elements can be totally foreign to the audience. As we have discussed, the performer is most often a complete stranger whose confidence and persona provide the foundation for that dynamic to take place. It is fascinating that an audience's trust in their guide to the underworld, as Rogan Taylor calls it, sometimes even hinges on the tender mercies of a demon.

This term is not too much of a stretch as Taylor reminds us, “Showbusiness is anchored in Hell. Not in the Christian abode of eternal torment, but in the Shaman's transforming of the Underworld” (96).

The trip through Hell makes the showman a suitable guide who by his trials has earned the audience's respect for his authority in these matters, as Taylor describes it. “All these feats have their final reference in the variety of other-world experiences. They tell the tale largely of how the shaman successfully negotiated his road through Hell” (Taylor 34).

Taylor explains that the course of history slowly transmuted the aims and goals of the show from religion to entertainment, but the mystery that lies at the heart of each is the same, and the thing the audience hopes to obtain from admission to the show is quite similar.

The showman's first concern was his audience just as the shaman's first concern was his patient. As Taylor writes, “the man of power is clearly prepared to leave no trick unturned for the sick person” (or for an audience ailing for a taste of magic) (43).

Johnson expresses this custodial aspect perfectly in describing the basis of his relationship with the audience in his thrall. “I really wanna love the crowd – I want to say, “You guys are like my *one pal*. I can hate *everybody* in the world – I'm a demon - I can want Hell to take over . . . but you guys will be *fine*. You'll get the VIP seats.”⁶³



Illustration 8: Steven Johnson as Anthraxicon. Photo courtesy of Ghost Tours of Boston

The essence of the live theatrical performance, in the end, is the role that was once the shaman's which became the showman's – to provide an insight to a kind of magic, or to offer a kind of transformation – to lift the audience out of their everyday concerns into an altered state using outlandish or uncanny events draw one in when, in an unprepared state, the strangeness would otherwise put them off. People are willing to be entertained if led to it by the caring stewardship of their able, if uncanny, host who shepherds them on a journey through Hell.

Through some mode of subception, we understand that these perambulations are evidence of the noumenal realm, the no-place that the Australian aborigines call the “Dream Time,” a place where strange linkages of ideas and stranger alliances of the disparate chorus of voices in each of us can take place and deepen our experience of life and what it means to be human. And while we do not all seek to do it for ourselves, we do seek out those who can give us a glimpse into those deeper waters. This is the birthright territory of all human beings, which is why the Promethean story resonates in myth and which is why we have entertained each other across time and geography. A few of us will always want to give a show. Most of us will want to see one and be taken out of ourselves by witnessing human accomplishments we did not predict were possible. Although it may be unexpected or even seem totally foreign to us when explained in literal terms, in the atmosphere of the show in our role as the witness, we revel in it. It is not so strange, and not foreign to us at all, but a privileged glimpse of the unforeseen part of our own dreaming, something in each of us that defies rationality to which we are being gently re-introduced and reconciled. We seek that “figurative fire,” as Mooch puts it, because it is a brand that lights a possible path of our own once we leave the darkened theatrical temple, renewed in our sense of the known and unseen powers of human creativity. This is why we say that the showman *gives* a performance rather than makes one – it is in fact a gift that we receive.

My research over the course of the year was a constant conversation with my studio efforts. When I began a series of portraits of my fire family. I wanted to delve into the challenges of persona and the personal that they face in their professional lives. The questions of the divide between our public and private selves has special meaning for me. In my own life as an artist, personal experiences have informed and shaped my work. I often play hide and seek – hinting at things but never fully revealing them, relying on mystery to make the work go. Mystery is a critical force in my own work, but the

public need seems to be for the artist to explain themselves more and more, rather than letting the work do the talking. I often found myself tasked with deflecting attention away from my personal narrative and redirecting it to the work itself. These tensions became a pressing question for me. So I began investigating that tension by talking to my performance friends about how they handle it themselves in the more pressing glare of the literal spotlight. A series of dual portraits emerged; simple head studies, which I used to apprise myself of anatomical structures and the set of character in the expression, images that showed my friends in the daylight. Then the second set of portraits emerged, large-scale images of the same people in the midst of their performance. I also conducted interviews with each of them about their experiences and views of the Promethean ethic and the roles their personae played in magnifying their public presence and protecting their private selves.

Because my subculture is laden with unusual and dramatic imagery, I was concerned that the portrayal not tip over into easy reads. I was not interested in creating a curiosity of my world, but wanted to share it honestly, as did all the participants. These concerns shaped how I approached the paintings and drove the direction of my research. Nicolas Estevez and Michael Bowdidge both encouraged me to acquaint myself with ethnographic work and autoethnography in art. This led to readings with Lacy, Coles, and Schneider, among others, to understand how others had negotiated the road of showing a culture to itself from a fresh perspective, caring for its read within and without the community at the same time.

I struggled through the middle of the year. The images were reluctant to emerge. I felt a growing concern that no matter what I did, I would not be able to communicate the clear and strong impression I wanted to make. I wished to create works which placed the viewer as the privileged witness allowed a place in the circle, to make it clear that he is there by invitation, rather than feeling that the participants had been brought out of our own sphere for his detached appraisal. Mooch was not worried about that, and his natural generosity as a showman was an example that helped me take more vulnerable and inviting attitude for my non-fire audience. It was a revelation when he asked a simple question that transformed my compositions and my approach; “How do we invite them in?”⁶⁵

Another major transformation of the work happened when I read contemporary art writer Lucy Lippard's essay “Farther Afield” in which I read what was perhaps the single most important sentence I would read all year: “Much art with anthropological affinities is not made for those about *about whom*

the art is made.” (Schneider, Between Art and Anthropology, 25) With that sentence, I realized I needed to shift my audience to the participants *themselves* and to my fire family. From that point on, I was not making the work for gallery goers or anyone else but Steven, Mooch, Laa, Joanna, Terrence and Michael. I needed to make work that I knew *they* would love and I needed to make the images especially for them. I thought about the many other members of my fire family too. What would Grisha or Nick or Matt think? What would Chad or Rachel or Sarah see? Would they feel illuminated as members of the fire family when they looked at my paintings?

Many of my fire family are also artists, and I began looking at our own fire photography and discovering which pictorial elements fire performers respond to most strongly. I noticed that we favor images containing three ingredients; the performer, the fire, (often a bigger character than the performer) and the dark. I illuminated my thesis question by adding a fourth element of audience, to explicate the relationship between the performer and the audience, the unbridgeable yet charged emptiness between them, and the mechanics of the Promethean ethic.

My research was not only reading. In fact it was a lot of action; attending fire performances and photographing or filming my friends as they worked, interviewing them, and pushing further into my own role in the fire family. To date I had been a spinner, someone who plays with fire but did not give performances up to that time, and I decided to step out of the audience and figuratively join my friends on stage. So I designed a performance, which I gave in March of 2012 to a small audience of about 40 fellow spinners. I also pushed myself to conquer a fear and learn to breathe fire.⁶⁴

The shift in audience spurred a shedding of ballast. I wanted, as the fire performer creates a direct gesture, to create the direct gesture in my own work, and that meant eliminating all intermediaries. I had been identifying, through my readings with Taylor, the ancient and shamanistic origins of entertainment and at about the same time saw a documentary on the recently discovered cave paintings at Chauvet. The simplicity of a fire performance, its elemental basis and its ancient origins, and the mastery of the Chauvet paintings, caused me to question the myth of “gear and tackle and trim” as being necessary to creating strong work.⁶⁶ In short, it moved me to work in primal and essential terms. I had already been using a limited “dead” palette favored in baroque painting. I limited it further to colors one could have found or achieved 20,000 years ago. I began to eliminate other things, among

them the literal palette itself. I found that if I worked in oil bars (oil paint in stick form) I could work with a direct handheld gesture, and so the palette, brushes, turpentine, and oil all went away. I also stopped working with canvas, stretchers, and easels, and started working on brown craft paper taped directly to the wall. All these reductions never hindered my vision or productivity. On the contrary, they enhanced it. Leaving the rigid canvas behind for flexible paper restored my ability to work at a proper size. Leaving the brushes and tubes gave me the gift of a fast-curing form of pigment that now meant I could roll up and transport the paintings safely in a shorter amount of time. (I think of it as a “portable wall” which I can take to exhibition spaces.) In giving up most of what I had, I received everything I needed.

The results of all these evolutions in my attention to audience, methods, and focus released the images at last. The drought was over, and the pictures started to come.

As the images slowly grew around me, I realized I was on my way to creating an environment, which fit my plan to bring non-fire audience into the fire performer's world as an audience member. As the walls became covered I began experimenting with the atmosphere, and I began inviting people into the space as a darkened room. We had flashlights at first, but to a person, every visitor (and the participants themselves) agreed that work about fire is best seen by firelight. So I found some handheld candle lanterns to do the job.

To assert and ensure the priority of my primary audience, I arranged that the first viewing of the work would be to the fire family at the Wildfire site in May.



Illustration 9: Wildfire attendees see the work at the Spring 2012 retreat, using the candles to light the work themselves so that the work would slowly unfold in a process of discovery generated by the visitor himself. Photo courtesy of Scott Chasteen.

The response of the fire family told me that I had accomplished the read I had striven to achieve.

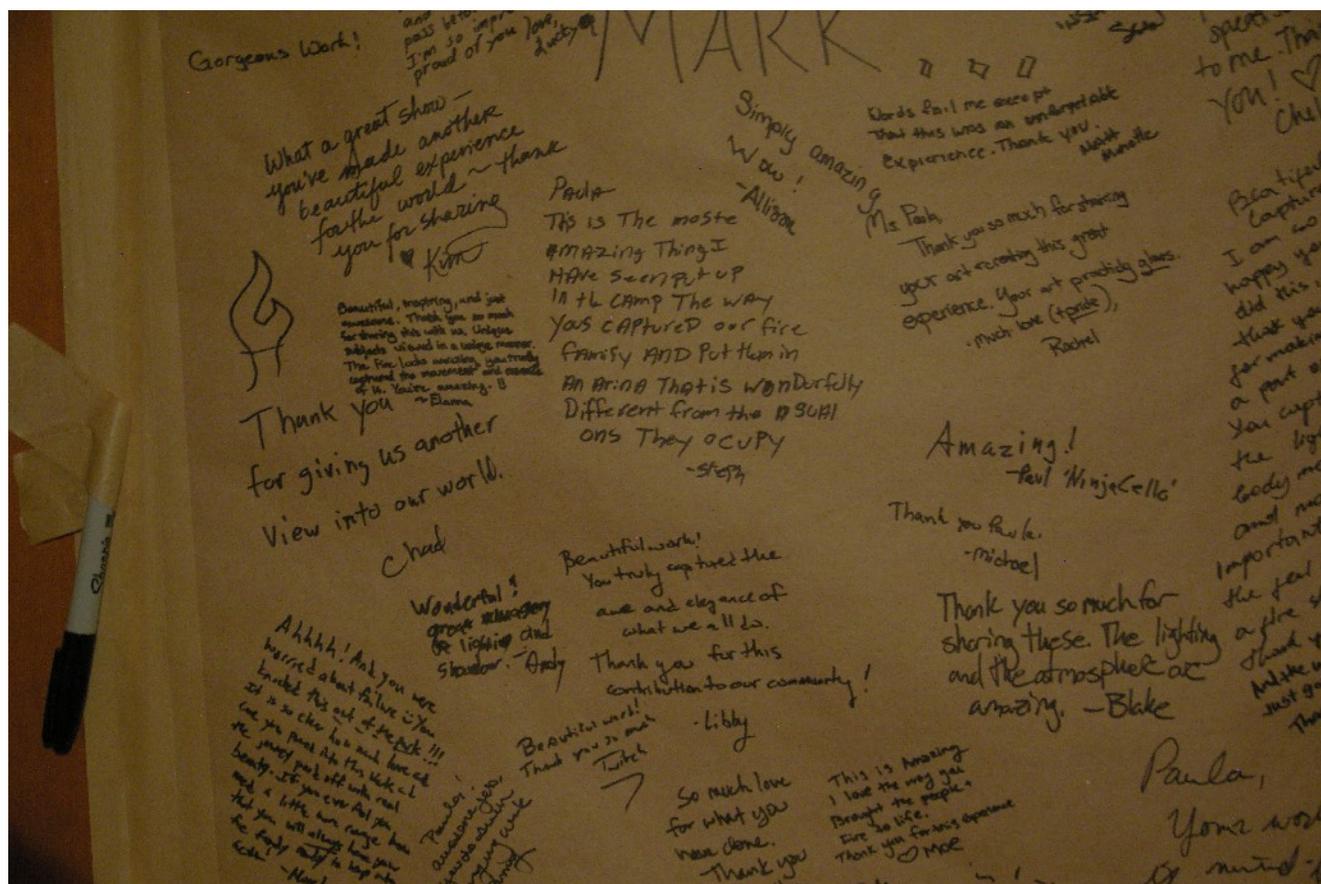


Illustration 10: Comments by Wildfire attendees as part of the installed work. Spring Wildfire 2012, Ashford, CT. Photo by Paula Billups.

I held an artist's talk with a discussion section at the site itself, where we sat on the floor in the circle, the space lit only by candle lanterns, and talked while the paintings surrounded us in the gloom. I documented the discussion, which is available to evaluators if needed. Thanks to the support of my research and of the participants, the images emerged as they needed to – not as a displacement or extraction of my subculture but as an invitation to the outsider to join the darkened space to be entertained once again and participate in that Promethean dynamic along with the Wildfire tribe.

-----Paula Billups
Cambridge, Massachusetts
June 1, 2012

Acknowledgments

This project was conceived as a collaboration of all the participants, who generously gave of their time and expertise in sharing the world of the performer with me and with the rest of the TI and Wildfire communities. My deepest thanks to them for staying on through a very long and demanding project and for allowing me to cover their performances, ask them questions and sometimes sleep on their couches. I quite literally could not have done it without them. Thank you so much, fire brothers and sisters, I love you – **Laa, Mooch, Steven, Terrence, Joanna, and Michael.**

There are other artists and fire family who stepped in to help and sometimes save the project, without whose support and kindness I could not have seen the work through. Primarily, thanks to my research advisor **Michael Bowdidge** and my studio advisor **Nicolas Estevez** for their robust support and enthusiasm for the project, for always generously sharing more material and sources with me, and for supporting me in seeing the project through in sometimes risky terms. (Who has a show in the dark?)

Thank You

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And **Scott Billups**, for everything.

Endnotes

- ¹ Personal communication: Terrence Drake, November 5, 2011, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
- ² Personal communication: Michael “Mooch” Mucciolo, September 21, 2011, Boston, MA
- ³ Personal communication: Terrence Drake, November 5, 2011, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
- ⁴ Personal communication: Michael “Mooch” Mucciolo, September 21, 2011, Boston, MA
- ⁵ Personal communication: Michael Kevin Farrell, April 21, 2012 Boston, MA
- ⁶ Personal communication: Terrence Drake, November 5, 2011, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
- ⁷ Personal communication: Laura “Laa” Ceredona March 10, 2012, Ashford, CT
- ⁸ Personal communication: Terrence Drake, November 5, 2011, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
- ⁹ Henry James text: *The Madonna of the Future* at http://www.online-literature.com/henry_james/2751/
- ¹⁰ Personal communication: Steven Johnson, April 20, 2012, Boston, MA
- ¹¹ Personal communication: Terrence Drake, November 5, 2011, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
- ¹² Personal communication: Michael “Mooch” Mucciolo, September 21, 2011, Boston, MA
- ¹³ Personal communication: Steven Johnson, April 20, 2012, Boston, MA
- ¹⁴ Personal communication: Terrence Drake, November 5, 2011, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
- ¹⁵ Personal communication: Michael “Mooch” Mucciolo, September 21, 2011, Boston, MA
- ¹⁶ Personal communication: Terrence Drake, November 5, 2011, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
- ¹⁷ Personal communication: Michael Kevin Farrell, April 21, 2012 Boston, MA
- ¹⁸ Personal communication: Terrence Drake, November 5, 2011, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Personal Communication. Laura “Laa” Ceredona December 2, 2011, Boston, MA

²³ Personal communication: Terrence Drake, November 5, 2011, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Personal communication: Michael “Mooch” Mucciolo, September 21, 2011, Boston, MA

²⁶ From Jones' essay *General Principles in the Arrangement of Form and Color* as quoted in Ernst Gombrich's *The Sense of Order* – this quotation is used in Matthew Rampley's essay [Anthropology at the Origins of Art History](#), an essay published in *Site Specificity, The Ethnographic Turn*, edited by Alex Coles, de-, dis-, ex-. Volume 4.)

²⁷ Personal communication: Michael Kevin Farrell, April 21, 2012 Boston, MA

²⁸ Personal communication: Michael “Mooch” Mucciolo, September 21, 2011, Boston, MA

²⁹ Personal communication: Laura “Laa” Ceredona March 10, 2012, Ashford, CT

³⁰ Personal communication: Terrence Drake, November 5, 2011, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

³¹ Personal communication: Laura “Laa” Ceredona March 10, 2012, Ashford, CT

³² Personal communication: Michael “Mooch” Mucciolo, September 21, 2011, Boston, MA

³³ Personal communication: Steven Johnson, April 20, 2012, Boston, MA

³⁴ Personal communication: Terrence Drake, November 5, 2011, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Personal communication: Joanna Welch, November 30, 2011, Boston, MA

³⁷ Personal communication: Michael “Mooch” Mucciolo, September 21, 2011, Boston, M

³⁸ Personal communication: Terrence Drake, November 5, 2011, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

³⁹ Personal Audio Recording: March 10, 2012, Ashford, CT

⁴⁰ Personal communication: Terrence Drake, November 5, 2011, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

⁴¹ Personal communication: Steven Johnson, April 20, 2012, Boston, MA

⁴² Personal communication: Laura “Laa” Ceredona March 10, 2012, Ashford, CT

⁴³ Personal communication: Michael Kevin Farrell, April 21, 2012 Boston, MA

⁴⁴ Personal communication: Terrence Drake, November 5, 2011, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

⁴⁵ Personal communication: Steven Johnson, April 20, 2012, Boston, MA

⁴⁶ Personal communication: Joanna Welch, November 30, 2011, Boston, MA

⁴⁷ Personal communication: Steven Johnson, April 20, 2012, Boston, MA

⁴⁸ Personal communication: Michael “Mooch” Mucciolo, September 21, 2011, Boston, MA

⁴⁹ Personal communication: Terrence Drake, November 5, 2011, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

⁵⁰ Personal Communication. Laura “Laa” Ceredona December 2, 2011, Boston, MA

⁵¹ I also reported this event in a Personal Audio Recording: March 10, 2012, Ashford, CT

⁵² Personal communication: Terrence Drake, November 5, 2011, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Personal communication: Steven Johnson, April 20, 2012, Boston, MA

⁵⁵ Personal communication: Laura “Laa” Ceredona March 10, 2012, Ashford, CT

⁵⁶ Personal communication: Michael Kevin Farrell, April 21, 2012 Boston, MA

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Personal communication: Steven Johnson, April 20, 2012, Boston, MA

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Personal communication: Terrence Drake, November 5, 2011, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Personal communication: Steven Johnson, April 20, 2012, Boston, MA

⁶⁴ Personal Audio Recording: March 10, 2012, Ashford, CT

⁶⁶ Personal communication: Mooch interviews Paula Billups, March 17, 2012, Bethel, ME

⁶⁷ From Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem *Pied Beauty*, 1918. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pied_Beauty

Appendix 1: The Participants

Artist: Paula Billups



Illustration 1: Self-Portrait

Toys and Skills: Poi, hoop and double hoops.

Paula Billups is an artist and a fire spinner. She holds bachelor's degrees in Painting from the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts and in English Literature from the University of Texas at Austin, and she trained intensively at the Grand Central Academy in New York in 2009. She was one of the first members of the American contingent of the Tunisian Collaborative Painters, and participated in their inaugural action in Old Lyme in 2010. She is a Master's candidate at the Transart Institute in Berlin, Germany. She has been painting for 13 years and teaching for seven. She has always been drawn to portraiture.

Billups has been spinning fire poi since 2000 and fire hoop since 2010. She joined the Wildfire Retreat organization in 2008 and gave her first fire performance this year at Snowfire in Ashford, Connecticut.

Billups' work can be found on her web pages at www.paulabillups.com, paulabillupsart.blogspot.com, and paulabillups.tumblr.com

Performer: Laura “Laa” Ceredona



Illustration 2: Photo courtesy of David W. Aquilina

Performance Name: Siha

Toys and Skills: Palm torches, breathing, eating, fleshing, levistick (flow wand), staff, fire fans, s-staves, dart, fire axe, and poi.

Ceredona is an animator, artist, dancer and fire performer. She received her BFA in Animation from the Savannah College of Art and Design in 2005. She recently worked on the Emmy Award-winning show *WordGirl*. Versed in both tribal belly dance and fire performance, Ceredona has performed under the name of Siha since 2011. She has danced at venues in Boston, including Wake Up the Earth, Oberon, Arisia and Temple. She is a principal dancer with the Boston-based ABRAXAS Dance Theater, having recently appeared in their inaugural show *Alchemy*. Her work can be found at <http://www.facebook.com/SihaDances>.

Ceredona has been a part of the Wildfire Retreat organization since 2008, where she teaches fire breathing, safety classes, and levistick (or flow wand), and serves as a field safety veteran.

Performer: Terrence Drake



Illustration 3: Photo by Paula Billups

Performance Name: Terrence Drake

Real Name: Matt Loppie

Toys and Skills: eating, fleshing (contact fire), poi spinning, staff spinning and breathing

Terrence Drake is a fire performer based out of Toronto, Ontario, Canada who has always possessed a passion for entertaining people. His unique brand of style and humor - fused with an intense desire to delight - is the kindling of his show. Terrence has done shows in coordination with the City of Toronto, City of Guelph, City of Brampton, City of Markham as well as Pfizer, Children's Aid Foundation, Ontario Science Centre, Ontario Place and alongside musical artists Mia Martina, IllScarlet, Kardinal Offishall and Three Star Seed. He appeared as himself entertaining the winning couple on the television show *Four Weddings Canada* in 2011. Terrence has been part of the Wildfire community since 2008 and has contributed as a teacher.

More of Terrence Drake in action can be seen at www.drakeshow.com

Performer: Michael Kevin Farrell



Illustration 4: photo not credited

Toys: poi, torch poi, hoop

Farrell performs as an independent artist at private events. In 2007, he completed a 10-month stint as a cast member and fire performer for *Four: Spirit of the Elements* at the Casino Estoril in Estoril, Portugal. He appeared on the television show *America's Got Talent* with Joanna Welch (as Dominique Immora) as part of the fire duo “Draconik.”

His work and resume are visible on his website at www.poispinner.com

Farrell has been a fire performer since 2003, and since childhood has been involved in performance in some capacity, whether acting, singing or dancing. He has been a member of the Wildfire Retreat organization since its inception in 2004, and has often served as a teacher at the retreat.

Performer: Steven Johnson



Illustration 5: Photo not credited

Performance Name: Anthraxicon the Destroyer

Toys and skills: Staff, sword, theatrical performance

Steven Johnson is a principal actor and manager at Ghosts and Gravestones tour in Boston, Massachusetts where he gives tours of the city as a demon, “Anthraxicon the Destroyer.”

His primary fire toy is staff. He is the Grounds Manager at Wildfire and is a longtime a member of the Wildfire Retreat organization.

Performer: Michael “Mooch” Mucciolo

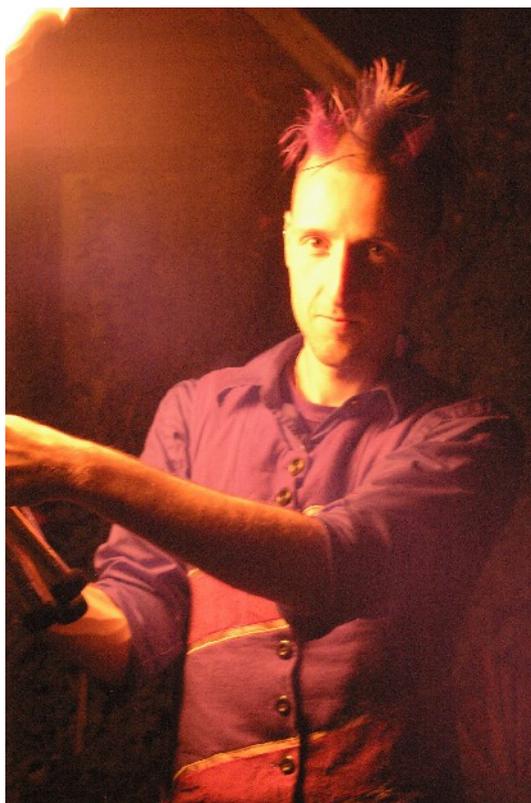


Illustration 6: Photo by Paula Billups

Performance Name: Mooch

Toys and Skills: Staff, torches, juggling, glasswalking, partner acrobatics, card magic, plate spinning
Mooch began his journey into a life of circus in 2002 with the Barefoot Monkeys, Vassar College's circus club. Upon receiving his degree in 2006, he began performing full-time and founded the professional circus and fire arts entertainment group A Different Spin. He registered an LLC that he continues to own and operate to this day. A Different Spin has performed for colleges and universities across the country as well as festivals in Canada and the US, including the 2010 and 2012 Tulsa State Fairs. In 2009 Mooch co-founded the Boston Circus Guild, where he serves as primary booking manager. He helped run WildFire Retreat from 2009-2011, assisting in restructuring the organization and serving as Pre-Event Manager. Websites include adifferentspin.net and bostoncircusguild.com

Performer: Joanna Welch



Illustration 7: Photo courtesy of Justin Moore

Performance Name (defunct): Dominique Immora

Toys: Poi, Hoop, Fire Eating, Fire Whip, Fire Fingers, and Aerial Acrobatics

Welch has been performing and working with fire for ten years, having performed all around the Northeast United States, and she performs extensively with the Boston Circus Guild and A Different Spin. She has also been featured three times on the worldwide fire spinning contest compilation DVD [Circles of Light](#), and appeared on the television show *America's Got Talent* (as Dominique Immora) together with Michael Kevin Farrell as the fire duo “Draconik.” Welch has been with the Wildfire Retreat organization since the beginning, in 2004. She became a Wildfire organizer and teacher and developed the roster from the original two or three class tracks to six, during which time the retreat began to be a destination for non-local teachers. Welch first learned to spin poi online, at the website [HomeofPoi.com](#), and at a distance from spinners in the UK, Australia, and New Zealand. Welch attended Brandeis University where she studied history, art history, and education. She currently works at MIT and teaches Aerial Yoga and Aerial Acrobatics. An injury has since turned her attention away from purely performance towards body mechanics and posture alignment. Her work is featured online at [adifferentspin.com](#), [bostoncircusguild.com](#), and [elevatingbodyarts.com](#). Her personal website for arts, movement, and bodywork is [elevatingbodyarts.com](#)

Appendix 2:

The Code of Manet's Olympia and of van Gogh's Three Pairs of Shoes

When enough time has passed it is difficult to remember or know the codes that created the cultural read of these paintings. This is a basic primer on some of the code contained in the subject of these images. Manet's *Olympia* was considered scandalous primarily because the model was partially dressed, not because she was nude. The shoes, neck ribbon, jewelry and flower in her hair suggest a sexual assignation. The tables of gaze are turned as she appraises the visitor, in whose shoes the painting's observer stands. We are not offered something for our evaluation; as the client, we ourselves are being evaluated. Her jewels, her sleek and well-maintained body, her luxurious room and bed and her maidservant are all signs of wealth. As a businesswoman she must be doing well. The cat on the bed at her feet is a well-understood symbol of sexual promiscuity, and replaces the usual art symbol of the dog on the bed, signaling marital fidelity. All of these signs subverted the cultural expectation that prostitution was something to be ashamed of and nothing to aspire to. With his code Manet expresses only admiration and approval.

Three Pairs of Shoes by Vincent van Gogh is a study of a peasant's world. The beat-up shoes are indicative of poverty and hard work. There are other works of shoes he painted, drawing the attention of Heidegger and thereafter Derrida. The Harper's article about this intense focus can be found here:

<http://www.harpers.org/archive/2009/10/hbc-90005828>

van Gogh's preoccupation with the plight of the poor he once felt called to serve as a minister and his meditation on their condition, is encapsulated in these shoes. With the somber palette and raucous composition, the uncomfortable contrasts of a straitened life are communicated. These shoes cannot be easily replaced and must last as long as they can. The low cost and availability of shoes now causes us to forget that in the 1860s it was not as easy to get hold of ready-made shoes, nor as cheap. Some knowledge of van Gogh's life among the poor surely informs this read, but it is clear that for Heidegger and Derrida among others, that tacit knowledge is amplified through these brushstrokes.

Appendix 3: Fire Toys and Terms

Breathing – Breathing fire by atomizing fuel out of the mouth while holding a lit torch before the face

Eating – extinguishing a small wick at the end of a torch with the mouth

Fleshing- Using a small torch to trace a line of fire on the body, using the other hand to wipe it away.

Hoop – A hula hoop fitted with wicks around its periphery so that the performer can swirl fire around their body.

Kevlar – fireproof material used for wicking

Paraffin – paraffin fuel in a liquid form, used for breathing

Poi – chains with a ball of wicking on either end, swung around the body in deliberate patterns and rhythms in a dance

Safety – Someone trained to safely put out burning toys, and on occasion burning performers. All participants at Wildfire must become trained safeties as a requirement of attendance at the event

Snowfire – The limited (to 60 participants) winter retreat that was begun in 2012 by Wildfire alums, but is not associated directly with Wildfire

Spinner – Someone who dances with fire toys for fun or profit. Also called a burner

Staff – a staff about five feet long with a wick on each end

Toys – refers to any of the tools fire performers use. These include poi, hoops, staff, whip, axe, sword, jump rope, dart, meteor, (both of these are one rope with a wick on one end) puppyhammer (an eight-foot rope with wicks on both ends) flow wand (a short stick with a wick on each end that has a thin string so that it appears to suspend in the air around the performer, also known as a levistick), palm torches, eating torches, fire fans, fire snakes (like poi but the whole length of the toy is wicking instead of just the end), fire scythes, a fire marionette, and a fire parasol, to name a few. Fire performers always seem to find ways to create a toy out of regular objects. Most toys are visible at the website homeofpoi.com

Wick – kevlar material (fireproof) which is used as the business end of a fire toy. It can absorb fuel and will burn for several minutes without incinerating. Also refers to the wound and sewn ends of a fire toy.

Wildfire or Wildfire Retreat – a thrice-yearly educational conference exclusively for fire spinners held in northern Connecticut. It is closed to all spectators and is built on an ethic of full participation, hence it has styled itself a “do-ocracy.” Impressively for such a large and complex event, it is entirely run and managed on a volunteer basis. Like the fire spinning community in America it is a young community, and the Wildfire organization is entering its eighth year. It has gone from its first meeting of spinners in 2004 of 26 participants to its current attendance level of 300 participants at each conference, with the wait list often exceeding 150. It now serves over 1000 fire spinners and performers each year with attendance capped at 300 for the last several years. It is the premier fire spinning training conference in the United States and attracts performers, spinners and teachers from around the country and the world. Its mission is to promote and teach the fire arts and build connections within the fire community and build awareness of the fire arts outside the fire community. It is one of the acknowledged leaders in fire conferences in the world and its business model and safety protocols have provided the blueprint for other conferences around the world. Its website offers more information: www.wildfireretreat.com

Appendix 4: Lessons Learned – My First Fire Breath

At the Snowfire Retreat in Connecticut in March of 2012, I faced one of my fears and learned to breathe fire in a class taught by Laura Ceredona. The events of the class happened in this order: we received the lecture from our instructors that can (and does) dissuade anyone not certain they are ready to take the associated risks. We practiced atomizing for an hour – not with the liquid paraffin that was the usual fuel, but with water. We then practiced atomizing with the liquid paraffin to become used to the extraordinary feeling of liquid fuel lining the membranes of the mouth, throat and sinuses, and learned the best way to clear away that coating. We also received training on not only how to present the fire to our face but also how to manage our breath rhythms correctly and assess whether the climate was safe enough to try breathing in (if the wind is unpredictable or high, breathing is out of the question.) Then we lined up and began taking their first breaths (afterwards dubbed “baby dragons” by the instructors). When my turn came, Ceredona, my teacher stood watch while I stood for a moment, mouth full of lamp oil and the orange flame dancing a few inches from my mouth, mind racing with the eight or nine things I had to remember to do and not do with my body to pull this off safely. I atomized and – *pow* -- my first fire plume soared into the air above my head. I tried a second time but had used up the fuel, and so stepped away and cleared out my mouth (though the velvety feel of paraffin coated my sinuses and throat for the rest of the day.) There was a lot of cheering as each new student breathed their first plume of fire.

The object lesson came a few minutes later, when one student either got crosswise with the wind or forgot a critical point of breathing skill and accidentally inhaled a lungful of atomized paraffin. Although it was not aflame (the worse case scenario, potentially fatal) the fuel itself is a respiratory hazard, and within seconds the paraffin had coated her lungs and she had chemical pneumonia, gasping for breath, her face growing blue. The long drive to the hospital harshly clarified the very real danger every fire breather courts, every time they breathe.

For obvious reasons, I do not specify the skills required to know how to breathe fire. Footage visible on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJzfnRIPAss&feature=player_embedded

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Audio Interviews

1. Michael “Mooch” Mucciolo on September 20, 2011, Boston, MA
2. Michael “Mooch” Mucciolo on September 21, 2011, Boston, MA
3. Terrence Drake, November 5, 2011, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
4. Terrence Drake, November 6, 2011 Toronto, Ontario, Canada
5. Steven Johnson, November 20, 2011, Boston, MA
6. Joanna Welch, November 30, 2011, Boston, MA
7. Laura “Laa” Ceredona December 2, 2011, Boston, MA
8. Michael Kevin Farrell, April 21, 2012 Boston, MA
9. Of Paula Billups by Michael “Mooch” Mucciolo, March 17 2012, Bethel, ME
10. Laura “Laa” Ceredona March 10, 2012, Ashford, CT
11. Personal audio recording post-performance and breathing lesson: March 10, 2012, Ashford, CT
12. Terrence Drake, March 31, 2012, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
13. Steven Johnson, April 20, 2012, Boston, MA
14. Joanna Welch and Michael “Mooch” Mucciolo, April 20 2012, Boston, MA
15. Michael Kevin Farrell, April 21, 2012, Boston, MA