

**On Intimacy and Writing Histories of Performance:
An Interview with Amelia Jones**
Performance Studies, NYU
March 28th, 2013

AMELIA JONES: I particularly like that you want to talk to me about intimacy and the way that I engage with artists.

ALIZA SHVARTS: That to me is one of the most striking things immediately reading your work. It really jumps out. And it just seems a rare thing for academics consider and deal with in their own work.

AJ: Yeah, particularly with the visual arts. I've been chastised in the past for choosing *not* to interview artists for certain projects. If they're alive you're supposed to interview them, but then you're only supposed to write about it in a very "*disinterested*" way. And obviously neither of those interest me. I interview artists when it is useful to what I'm trying to do with a project. But I always tell my students: Be careful before you make that connection because once you make it you can't go back. You know them. And there's a certain intimacy and responsibility you feel towards them. It's much harder to be really critical for example. So you have to make those choices.

AS: Intimacy seems part of your methodology but it also seems part of the critical work. Which, thinking about the subjunctive position of disinterest—it's always "*as if*" disinterested—seems significant to how we might understand the work criticism in general. How did you come to that?

AJ: I came to it definitely through feminism—through the classic 70s and 80s call to position yourself openly as a way to denaturalize the idea of objective criticism [through models of distanciation, etc.]. That was an important ... politics. But then it also really depends on the project [how I express or deal with my relationship to the material]. I'm not always positioning myself at the beginning of every article. If I'm writing a historiography for example, like when I write about the historiography of identity politics in [my 2012 book] *Seeing Differently*, that type of positioning isn't really necessary for understanding why I'm sketching that trajectory. But if we think specifically about Ron Athey and the article in *TDR* about *Judas Cradle* [2006; entitled "Holy Body: Erotic Ethics in Ron Athey and Juliana Snapper's *Judas Cradle*"]—I mean, I know him. I had known him for quite a long time living in Los Angeles. But because of the particularities of my life at that point [when I was living in LA, up through 2003], I wasn't queer enough to really engage with what he did. So I would go to performances and would think, I really respect this but it's kind of too much for me. It was only when my life fell apart [after moving to the UK in 2003] that his work suddenly made perfect sense to me. And methodologically that's actually really interesting. I always felt empathy for Ron as a person, but the work kind of frightened me and I wasn't able to take it in really. Until my own life was so

destabilized that his destabilization of literally the whole body—the holes—made sense to me, and then all of a sudden I could write about it, and I wanted to write about it in a way that evoked that.

AS: That really comes through in the way you talk about holes in that article, as well as the way you talk about “cunt art” in the chapter of *Seeing Differently* we read in this morning’s PhD seminar. Thinking of Derrida’s idea of invagination—“the internal pocket larger than the whole”—which might be an interesting take on the subject/object positions in relation to art—I wonder, is there a specific magic of holes? Is there something critically useful about an invaginating hole?

AJ: Well I definitely think that Derrida was brave enough to mobilize that in a context where he was being interviewed and written about by a lot of feminists—so, he obviously knew exactly what he was going—and to risk something by talking about that. In that sense, it is very much what I was thinking [in the *Seeing Differently* chapter on “queer feminist durationality”]. [In relation to Ron’s work], here is where I have to be strategically essentialist. There’s no question that when I saw Ron impaled on the Judas Cradle with his asshole, I feel that somewhat in that part of my body, but I feel that really more in my female anatomy. Because, at least for me, the way I experience my body, there’s a vulnerability there at the center that is quite different from the asshole for a queer man.

AS: This is maybe abstract, but I’ve been thinking a lot about the relationship between the hole and the fold. If you think about invagination as the way proteins fold to become a form, the way the inside/outside relationship maps on to the tectonics of folding—and also folding as a gathering place.

AJ: Yes the thing about invagination that is so brilliant, and it is what I’m trying to do with folds, is that it’s literally a place where the inside becomes the outside. It really—actively, formally, and structurally—enacts the impossibility of [firm or final] boundaries.

AS: Yes exactly, and I was wondering how this relates to an idea of feminist duration you explore in *Seeing Differently*. Is a hole—when put in duration—a folding? How does the idea of the hole relate to durationality? Is there something durational about holes?

AJ: How does time relate to space, right? Invagination is the place where there is a continuum, where there is no clear division. How do you apprehend or experience that kind of continuous invaginated flesh? If you look at Henri Bergson’s durationality, it’s about this relentless continuity of perception and experience, but also the way they continuously loop back. So there is no division between present experience and the past because everything that occurs in the present is interpreted and understood in relation to the past. And I am trying to say that certain modes of representation but also certain actual elements of content can provoke that durational process of interpretation and experience where you are made aware that

you can't climb out of that hole, that you are immersed in something. There's a lot of examples now of work by younger generation artists who do projects where it's not really clear what the work is, what the work of art is, which is another way of activating that. Like Heather Cassils, who will do a performance, but it's not really clear where it begins and ends; it's not clear what the performance is once the temporal action is over. Or Alicia Frankovich's work in my show *Material Traces* [subtitled *Time and the Gesture in Contemporary Art*, and displayed at the Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery, Concordia, February 16 to April 13, 2013] is a perfect example of that. So, you're sitting at the opening—it's the only actual performance in the show. Everybody's at the vernissage, and they don't really know that anything's going to happen—although they might have been aware that in the vernissage flyer it says please come at or before 3:30pm. Everybody is kind of milling around and all of a sudden the gallery director tells everyone to sit down and be quiet. A few minutes later these runners come in the gallery and there's a camera filming them and everyone's just like, what's going on? And the runners basically go from a state of high exertion where they're panting to where their breath slows down, and then someone hands them a bottle of water. Then for a while everyone is just looking around. Eventually the gallery director walks through and people start to get up. And then the film from that non-event is put on a monitor in the show. So, where does that performance begin? Where does it end? Because the athletes obviously come in having done something, so it's the aftermath of some action, but in itself it is a non-action. So that kind of thing you could look at as an invagination of time.

AS: What is the relationship between dehabituating, as you talk about it in the *TDR* article, and duration, which you talk about in the book? Does duration dehabituate the way we approach a hole by mobilizing it in time?

AJ: There's a relationship that's possibly implicit in the way I talk about the works in that chapter in *Seeing Differently*, in that something expected in being delayed in the world, or thwarted in some way, and that is part of the opening to durationality. The way the art world and art discourse functions is through an assumption of instantaneous value and presence, and that is where the crossing over of performance, but also performance theory, and the visual arts can be really interesting. What performance theory is arguing, and what Bergson is arguing, is that you cannot articulate a definitive or set meaning or value for a work. Some works make it easy to attempt to do that, and other works do not, and whether they do or don't depends on where we are in space or time. So it's not inherent. Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, when they first came out, I think were quite durational. They freaked people out, because they had to sit there and move their bodies around in front of this large thing that wasn't cohering into anything recognizable. But now they've become a cliché, so that potential isn't there for us [informed viewers today such as art historians or critics]—though it might be there for someone else. So I think it is all contingent on the specificity of how a work is made and what its material forms are, but also on its interpretive context, and where it's displayed and how. Things might open into durationality in one moment and not

later—I mean Marina Abramović’s retrospective at MoMA showed us how easily even durational performance can be eradicated of durationality.

AS: Thinking about duration as a type of relation let’s get back to the idea of relation we were talking about earlier.

AJ: Yes, and again I think it’s a really important thing to make a conscious choice about [how to approach the works of art one is studying]. I have different relationships to each work I write about, and I don’t always want to meet the artist—it really depends on how I’m accessing the work and what I want to say. For example, in *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, I have a chapter on Vito Acconci, and I remember giving a paper at the Getty and having all these traditional art historians saying “Well, of course you’ve interviewed Acconci...”. And my response was, “No I haven’t” [I had made a conscious choice not to because the project was] not about what Acconci says now about his work in 1970. [The project was] about what the work is doing for me, and what I believe it has done in its historical life as a discursive thing. So that was what was important to me. However, writing about Ron Athey’s work, I almost knew him before I knew the work—not quite, but it basically came at the same time. I mean, I’m in love with him. He’s the most generous and extraordinary person. I find him fascinating as a person in the world and I admire him. That’s kind of corny but I feel it has to be put front and center, otherwise I’m just another art critic talking about how “genius” [an artist] is without really saying that I have a bodily investment in this person as a person in the world. His performance for me functions across the literal moment of [experiencing] performance art and the moments of engaging people in the community. And that’s one of the things I think is amazing about his lived work; [his lived queer experience and his performances are] not really separate.

AS: That definitely needs to be emphasized about Ron. People really love him—the love comes first in a lot of ways.

AJ: And there’s a reason. He’s the most generous and un-judgmental person I’ve ever met.

AS: And the work is that too.

AJ: If you allow it to be. And I think if you’re frightened of it, like I was in the beginning, you’re not quite open to—your holes aren’t permeable to—the generosity. I thought it was great intellectually but I couldn’t let it in emotionally until later. And I don’t know anyone who writes about Ron’s work who doesn’t have that kind of intimacy with him.

AS: Thinking about critical practices and intimacy together makes me wonder about a critical practice of intimacy, if we can talk about such a thing. The assumed disinterest scholars are supposed to maintain really erases the whole life you might

have with people, a life that's full of people, how you come to people—things like that.

AJ: You know what's interesting is that when I give talks on this chapter about queer feminist durationality, and then when I talk about Paul [Donald]'s work—[he is my partner, and I reference this in the book]—people are just horrified. No one's ever said a single word about it. It's weird because they are really interested until I get to the point where I say, "By the way, he's my lover." And I thought long and hard obviously about whether to include his work, and eventually I thought, I need to take this risk, because the whole way in which I was thinking about materiality and relationality—which shows up in the *Material Traces* show [where his work is also included]—was from living with him and watching him work. It's dishonest to exclude him under the pretense of being objective, when I'm not objective at all.

AS: Which is such an important political move.

AJ: I hope so. I really don't get how my work is understood in my own discipline, and it creates a lot of pain for me personally because I am really ostracized in some ways. I deal with the history of aesthetics, and yet I feel like it's falling on deaf ears somewhat. But then people think that they know enough about it to exclude me on all these different levels of how the discipline functions. I wish I felt like people were disagreeing with it in writing, but there's [very little art history] dialog around it. And that's how a lot of art history functions.

AS: This reminds me of an amazing encounter I heard about recently: A friend of mine had a studio visit with a very well-established artist who called my friend's work "inconsequential." My friend just replied yes, in relation to the art historical legacy of this more established artist, the work was of course inconsequential. But this seemed to upset the artist, who then pushed further and asked, "What if I said you were inconsequential?" My friend asked, "As an artist or as a person?" And the artist replied, "Both." I mean, it sounds terrible, but then at the same time I think what happened in that exchange is kind of profound, because *consequence* is precisely the art historical question, the canonical question, and the disciplinary question, which makes me wonder: What does it mean to *not* be of consequence?

AJ: And to whom are you of consequence? There's a politics there.

AS: Exactly, because we think about consequence so differently in performance theory. Austin has these two modes of performativity: illocution, which is immediate, and perlocution, which is this endless chain of consequences—which is duration. And duration is, if you think about it, nothing but consequence. But this un-ending, un-anticipatable, and in some senses never completely knowable type of consequence seems really different than the disciplinary sense of consequentiality, which is supposed to be both knowable and static.

AJ: And if you go back to Bergson, consequences are based on our modes [of] interpretation, [which themselves have] to do with previous experience. The way that we treat other people, the way that we feel effected by other people is preconditioned by the past.

AS: Exactly, and that is part of what is so interesting about this terrible anecdote: The question of consequence is maybe not even our own. We might be keepers of it within a certain discipline, but that type of gate keeping is also always so futile, because consequence exists in such extensity.

AJ: Yes, I've had opportunity to think a lot about this in my career. On one hand why are we doing this if we can't engage each other critically? But then, why are we doing this if all we are doing is trying to substantiate our own sense of consequentiality? And quite frankly, no one gives a shit. Nobody cares—we constantly have to remind ourselves of that.

AS: And that's a powerful position to be in actually—we are in this realm of remove.

AJ: On the other hand, we do have to bear responsibility because our ideas do find their way into the world one way or another—through our teachings, through James Franco [laughs]. There is a fair amount of porousness now, particularly with the internet, and we do need to take responsibility.

AS: We recently had Kathleen Stewart here as another visiting lecturer for the Performance Studies PhD Seminar Series, and it is interesting to think about the overlap between her methodology and yours. She is in an anthropology department and refers to her writing as auto-ethnographic—which on one hand seems very different than what you do. But insofar as you both position yourself in the work—and insofar as both of you have received a lot of push-back from your respective disciplines for doing so—it also seems like you might have something methodologically in common.

AJ: There is definitely a relationship. Anthropology still has some investment in an authentic reading of an “other” about whom you cannot fully know. Which is not that dissimilar from the art world and art history's idea that there's a way to make a reading of an artwork that is somehow authentic.

AS: Right, an object that you cannot fully know. Is intimacy a way of bringing time back into an encounter with an object?

AJ: It can be. I don't think that as a writer about performance or visual culture you necessarily want intimacy to be constantly mobilized at the center of what you are trying to do. But you may have to acknowledge that it's there, whether or nor you are comfortable with it, or that it's not there. And when you are writing about historical work that's really evident. You can't have the same kind of intimacy—or can you?—as someone who experienced it a long time ago. I wrote a book on New

York Dada [*Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada*; MIT Press, 2004] that speaks exactly to this. I was tired of seeing the canonical histories of New York Dada about Man Ray and Duchamp, because there were all these women who were facilitating and intervening in their little club—and to their credit they were open to that up to a point. And so I clung to the Baroness von Freytag-Loringhoven, who is otherwise this peripheral figure, but who kept getting mentioned here and there by the [New York-based] queer feminist avant-garde—[figures] like Margaret Anderson and Djuna Barnes—and by the male Dadaists who were terrified of her. These men were ‘so radical’ and [were claimed by many to be] tearing apart bourgeois culture except, actually, when there’s a woman who is publically following them and desiring them, [whose sexuality is voracious and non-normative], they go to pieces—their radicality doesn’t go that far. And I became overly intimate with her through what were at the time archives of her writing, which have now been published: [her diary, as well as her] extraordinary cross-linguistic poems, mostly German/English but some French, and diaries. So you can have the *feeling* of being intimate with someone from another time.

AS: This cross-temporal sense of intimacy seems related to what you were saying earlier about making a choice regarding intimacy—about whether you will interview a living artists or not. Which I can’t help but think about since right now at this moment I am engaged in the project of interviewing you. It’s provocative to think that you can be sometimes more intimate with the work of someone whose dead.

AJ: That’s easy to say through because you have no one to disagree with you. They’re dead. There’s a difference between someone who is no longer alive and someone who can actually talk back.

AS: How do you experience that talk back? How do you negotiate it?

AJ: It just depends I think. My big thing right now is, look: if we’re not going to be able to have debates publically about the things that matter, why are we doing this? I’m more and more angry about this because, as we were saying before, the politics of the art world is to ignore and shut down and marginalize people who are making trouble. And I’m just going to make more and more trouble—I have nothing to lose. Because why would we be doing this otherwise? It’s not like we’re being paid a lot of money. Why can’t we debate these things publically? Why is it that when you try to do this it just gets shut down?

AS: And why are we called to the type of normative good citizenship that is the subject of our critiques? Why do we respond to that call?

AS: So, there is one question that we have been asking at the end of these interviews. What is performance studies to you?

AJ: I think performance studies, from my slightly outsider perspective, wants to say it's completely cross-disciplinary, but at the same time wants to guard certain boundaries more and more that kind of look like disciplinary boundaries. But again I have a strange position vis-à-vis performance studies. So, I'm not quite sure what it is. [My view on this] probably depends on which performance studies person I'm talking to.

AS: Oh that's nice—maybe it's a relation?

AJ: It's relational, sure. I hope that it remains open minded, and I hope that it doesn't get hijacked by the glamour of the art world. I see that happening quite a bit in parts of it, but to me that is laughable. To me performance studies is glamorous precisely because it is distinctly different, and it's this difference that allows it to complicate all the reifications of my discipline.