

Voices in my Head

Chapter 2



Photo by Sandra Chanis

DMV Performance

Biography of Interviewer

Maoe Switt is a graphic designer/illustrator with over ten years of industry experience. She holds a BFA in Communication Design from Kutztown University, PA. After graduation, she relocated to San Francisco where she worked for Gensler, a large architecture/interior design firm. In 2006, she moved back to Philadelphia, where she worked as a graphic designer for various firms, including Philadelphia City Paper. In 1999, Switt traveled to Israel where she worked as an avocado picker on a

kibbutz south of Haifa. She moved to San Diego in 2000, and in 2003 she started her own business called Urban Legend Design.

I selected Macoe Switt to review The DMV Performance because of her teaching experience. I appreciated that she had taught to diverse populations from different cultures and classes in a variety of settings. I chose Switt because I want feedback from an educator's perspective.



Photo by Sandra Chanis

Q&A For DMV Performance

Macoe Switt: What made you choose the DMV for location?

Larry Caveney: Every time, I visited the DMV, I experienced alienation; a sense of not belonging. The structure is very intimidating and the people who are in line hate spending their time that way. I felt that the people waiting at the DMV needed some kind of interaction that would lighten, or make humorous, the experience of being there.

MS: What does the red paint symbolize?

LC: Red is a color of passion and activity. I wanted to incorporate both into the coded message of the performance.

MS: Why did you choose James Brown for the music?

LC: James Brown plays up-lifting rhythmic music that many generations can relate to.

MS: How do you think this piece would be received in NYC? Philly? San Francisco?

LC: As big as San Diego is, it still cannot compete with cities such as NYC. The folks in NYC see a lot of day-to-day acting out. Eye contact in NYC is avoided mostly because people there do not want to commit to interaction. Actions such as mine would be ignored (not necessarily dismissed). NYC, San Francisco, and Philly have big art communities; therefore, actions such as mine would be readily digested as *art*. San Diego, on the other hand, is in a constant state of flux. Because of its constant need to distinguish itself from Mexico, San Diego is also in a state of cultural confusion. This creates a huge vacuum in its cultural landscape. When there isn't anything to historically associate with, the next best thing is commodification. San Diego is a tourist-oriented city and outsiders define that characteristic by visiting, spending money, and then leaving.

MS: How did most people react upon seeing you perform?

LC: Some people interacted with me by giving me dance lessons, sharing jokes, and accepting Blow Pops. Some folks forgot why they were there and lost their place in line while hanging out watching me. Some people just walked by unaffected.

MS: Did any employees of the DMV comment?

LC: The manager and security guard were very receptive to me performing this piece. I think they saw how it could affect citizens in a positive way.

MS: What was in the blue cocktail (did you say Tanqueray)?

LC: Gatorade, in a martini glass for effect.

MS: Why did you choose to wear a suit with sneakers?

LC: The sneakers were the only shoes I had that I could destroy. Also, because I didn't want to look exactly like an entertainer, the contrast of the shoes and suit emphasized this pretending. Dressing like I was a quasi-expert made the contradiction obvious and helped create an opening for passersby to give *me* advice.

MS: What did you do with the red paintings afterward?

LC: I had a show that month following the performance and displayed the paintings within the installation of the video.

MS: What was your favorite part of the day?

LC: Some points of the performance had no interaction. You don't see that in the video because it's just an overview. My favorite part was when people were giving me advice on dance steps and jokes. I wanted to create a place of exchange by not being an expert on the elements of the performance.

Research Readings to Support the DMV Performance

The final two sections of Lewis Hyde's *The Gift*, sets the stage for how gift giving can enrich an artist's outlook. These readings were an important resource for me. The information and given examples gave me clarity on how I could and can present my intervention devices without the impression of trickery. Gift giving within my work makes the interventions more accessible for the audience involved because of my friendly and caring manner.

One example of the gift that Hyde uses is Walt Whitman. Whitman spent his later life as a nurse in a military hospital. This experience for Whitman created the "begging bowl" concept where he opened himself up by being the gift. This action parallels the postmodern model of looking outward onto the world. The second example used by Hyde is Ezra Pound. Pound extended himself to younger artists' development. In a section of a letter by T.S. Eliot regarding Pound, Eliot writes, "No one could have been kinder to younger men or to writers who...seemed to him worthy and unrecognized."⁴

The Gift is a tool for understanding the history of commerce, gift giving, and property rights. Whitman and Pound are wonderful examples of the artist as the receptor, as the

⁴ Lewis Hyde. *The Gift* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983) 231.

sublime presence of creative spirit and gift giver. The narratives on the authors (Whitman and Pound) illustrate the principles laid out by Hyde in the previous chapters. All the chapters provide a way to understand postmodern methods of execution, where the audience is more interactive with the artist. This interaction might give the audience a stronger connection with the artist and a sense of empowerment. By playing an active role in the artwork, the audience becomes a receiver and giver as well. This book also directs the artist so he can operate in and out of the capitalistic landscape by understanding the nature of gift-giving versus commodity.

My next reading was Lewis Hyde's *Trickster Makes this World*. This book informed the DMV piece by defining how humor can redirect a suppressed or socially isolated situation. The Trickster is very much the joker who gives culture a surreal event that makes it stop and take notice. Humor trips the trap of culture as well. The Trickster, walking the middle ground in life, uses humor to keep him from taking issues too seriously. The Trickster uses humor to objectify the reverent symbols of culture. He creates a kinship by poking fun at the subject and also by being the recipient of the joke. An example of this would be the joke, "Your momma is so fat that when she is cut, she bleeds Karo syrup."

The Trickster also extends himself by telling his secrets. The release of a secret to the community liberates the Trickster because it puts the trickster in a social place of having nothing to hide. Telling the secret also becomes a means of sharing and gift giving to the

community. This act symbolizes an act of trust when the Trickster allows himself to be vulnerable in public.

In the DMV performance, I read from a book of jokes. I didn't want to appear to be an expert in joke-telling so that people would share their jokes and it would become more of an exchange. The "your momma" jokes were the most effective. Another example is, "Your momma is so fat that Bigfoot takes pictures of her." This created an exchange between me and the public, an exchange that many of the younger audience members took part in. The "your momma" jokes represent the common denominator that most humans share and that common denominator is family. The subject of family lends itself as a sacrifice by poking fun; the verbal exchange helps to create a balance of not taking ourselves or our families too seriously.

Critique

Sharon Hayes's critique stressed the importance of documentation. She advised me to think about how I was documenting my performances and if video was always the best means of presentation. She told me to let the performance exist and not to think in terms of how it will be documented. She suggested shooting stills, audio, and video and then seeing which medium would be the most parallel to what had happened during the actual performance.

Free Advice Performance

Biography on Interviewer

Louis Hock began making films while he was studying psychology and poetry at the University of Arizona, from where he graduated with a BA in Psychology in 1970. In 1973 he received an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Before joining the Visual Arts Department in 1977, he established the film program at the University of Texas at Arlington. Since 1976, Hock's films, videotapes, and media installations have been exhibited in one-person shows at numerous art institutions, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Cinematheque in San Francisco, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh, the American Museum of the Moving Image in New York, and various international institutions.

I selected Louis Hock to review *Free Advice* because of his background in intervention performance art. I was, and still am, impressed with Hock's work and his sense of community.

Q&A For "Free Advice" Performance

Louis Hock: Who is your audience?

Larry Caveney: The audience, for me, is the person that offers the exchange of talking at the free advice booth. Another aspect of the audience is the panel that will

determine whether I deserve a grant to further this piece. The other audience is Vermont College, which will determine if I deserve a MFA degree.

LH: Is the tape the artwork or is it merely a document of the performances?

LC: The tape of the artwork was a means of presenting the performance to Vermont College. They only allow a maximum of 7 minutes to review a video. I had to format the video in a very specific way that would showcase different facets of my interactions. The performance itself is a collection of conversations based on real time and actual space.

LH: Is the viewer's knowledge of the different contexts of each table placement important? Say the difference between a business lunch crowd and Sunday park crowd.

LC: Either way would represent leisure, except that the time restraints of a lunch-hour present more limitations. People are more receptive to interacting if they have the time or nothing better to do. The site is very important in regards to participation. People with a rigid agenda most likely would not get involved.

LH: How relevant is the very modest, almost whisper "free advice" signage relative to the way a more commercial enterprise might advertise their presence? Its effect?

LC: The image of the table and chairs with signage offer a recognized social code (even if it is make-shift) that helps the passerby relate on some level. The note seduces them into the comedy of the project.

LH: Why did you choose a static two-person shot to record the events rather than a more intimate close-up of the advice seeker?

LC: I wanted to maintain the frame of the two of us discussing the question. I also wanted to showcase both reactions of the participants. And because the frame was constant, this allowed me to show the traffic going back and forth in front. I like the visual texture of the passersby and their reactions to the booth/sign.

LH: Would a slightly enclosed table, with a tented top to provide better wind protection for the audio and harsh sun protection for the camera, yield a more accurate media documentation of the verbal exchange?

LC: I liked the open table because of the above reasons. The wind and harsh elements are an issue for the video. Since then, I have been more focused on what and how things are documented on the front end of production, instead of trying to work out issues through editing. Especially the audio, which was most important in this piece.

LH: How intent were you on giving good advice? Do you give bad advice?

LC: For the most part (after the first 5 minutes) the guest recognizes that there really isn't any hierarchy of knowledge and that what we are doing at the table is having a conversation. It really depends on who I am talking to. For instance, one young man had some very serious questions so I had to play the role of an older brother or father figure in advising him. The questions really dictate how I respond. Another time, I had someone who was actually plotting to kill someone and needed advice. I have had to treat each situation accordingly. I'm sure I have given uninformed advice that is probably bad advice. There were times that I would go on break and ask the guest to give advice until I got back. That's when I really liked the exchange, when it removed me from the lead role and put the participant in the driver's seat.

LH: What similarities and differences does your *Free Advice* have to the free advice of relatives, friends, call in radio programs, or *Dear Abby*, and the paid advice of doctors, shrinks, or consultants?

LC: The difference is I'm a pseudo-expert and not family. I need to talk to someone as much or more than they do.

LH: What art context does your *Free Advice* rest within, e.g., which artists bear some kinship to your work?

LC: Suzanne Lacy's *Crystal Quilt* was a good device for social exchange. I really like the idea of relational aesthetics and how it can redefine form and audience. I like what Nicolas Bourriand has written about this topic.

LH: Do you ever ask the advisee why they stopped to talk?

LC: No. But that is really something worth asking.

Research Readings Supporting *Free Advice*

The readings that helped inform the *Free Advice* performance were very beneficial in regards to recognizing authorship. During this period, through research, I became aware of the role of the audience within my pieces and how the site-specific audience can play an important role as author or co-author. Miwon Kwon's *One Place After Another* is an important text that helped me understand the social responsibility that an artist has when going into a community and projecting his will onto an audience. After reading her comments on community interaction, I was determined to make this performance a sharing experience that would be dictated by the interactions of the passersby. In the video I danced and was given lessons by the passersby. Kwon states:

Furthermore, as some artists have noticed, community based art can function as a kind of “soft” social engineering to defuse, rather than address, community tensions and to divert, rather than attend to, the legitimate dissatisfaction that many community groups feel in regard to the uneven distribution of existing cultural and economic resources.²

Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* is a difficult text and one that I am currently re-reading. From the reading, I came to an understanding how the practice of the everyday dictates our societal structure. Humans have become codified and exploited through ideologies of a socialized system; basically it's how we interact with each other that shape communities and governments.

⁶Miwon Kwon. *One Place After Another* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004) 153.

Ken Knabb's *Situationist International Anthology* was useful in terms of just reading selected sections. I was invested in reading about *detournement* and the notion of drifting. According to Knabb *detournement* is:

...short for: detournement of pre-existing aesthetic elements. The integration of past or present artistic production into a superior construction of a milieu. In this sense there can be no Situationist painting or music, but only a Situationist use of these means.⁷

Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* was significant in that it informed me about commodification. Commodification produces spectacles: if we observe and consider how people choose to spend more time shopping versus making something on their own. This text gave me fresh insight on how spaces such as malls are constructed. Most malls are designed for through traffic and not intended as a place for people to congregate. This sends a subliminal message to shoppers to buy and keep moving. After reading this book I started questioning my own outings and wondering if they were about purchasing or just an outing to experience life. When I go out into the world am I on the path to attain interaction with people through buying? Is socialization a means of luring a person into buying? In the text, DeBord writes that:

The spectacle is not a collection of images but a social relation among people mediated by images... The spectacle in general, as the concrete inversion of life, is the autonomous movement of the non-living... The liar has lied to himself.

Suzanne Lacy's *Mapping the Terrain* helped me define what different levels of audience could present in terms of my intentions and the effects on a given audience. Level of intent equals measure of effectiveness.

⁷ *Internationale Situationiste* 1 (June 1958). 45

Critiques on the *Free Advice* Performance

Steve Kurtz (in a workshop) offered his reflections on my performance. He stated, “Larry, you might just be the next one arrested.” David Joselit felt that the video was “great” but that it needed more of an open perspective or interpretation of the setting. He said that I needed to give the audience more of a feeling for the place where the performance happened. He thought that communication of site specificity was just as important as the interaction of passersby within this piece.



Photo by Guy Lombardo

Superman/Safety Crossing

Biography of Interviewer

Paul Bouzan teaches at the Art Institute of CA. His specialties are Law and the Graphic Arts (Intellectual Property), Media Law, Sociology, and Contemporary Social Problems.

Presently, Bouzan is President of The AeroVest Group, a private venture capital firm investing in manufacturing aerospace components and flight control instrumentations. Bouzan was one of the founding Managing Directors of The Henley Group, which was an outgrowth of the diverse industries that spun-off from the Allied/Signal merger. Paul Bouzan and his wife live in Fallbrook, CA.

I selected Paul Bouzan to review this performance because of his background as a law professor. I thought Paul could address some of the technical issues dealing with copyright or intellectual property. His reflections on copyrights were very limited in this interview. His responses were mostly based on the pedestrian's perspective.

Q&A on Superman/Safety Crossing

Paul Bouzan: Why didn't you focus more on the reaction of people whom you helped?

Larry Caveney: Well, in the extended version there are more interactions of people thanking me and interacting with laughter. The film clip that you reviewed is a vignette of what happened. It also (because of the lack of visual evidence of interactions) allows the viewer to place him or herself into the scenario of being a possible bystander.

PB: Why did you seem only to help women cross the street and ignore the men?

LC: In the extended version I help men as well as women. When I formatted the small version of the film, I wanted to create the biggest impact, which meant the best reactions. The reactions from the female pedestrians just happened to be the most interesting. Since I have been doing these interactive performances, I have observed that males are less inclined to act out in public, whereas women, even if they don't participate, are more receptive to the humor.

PB: Did anyone reject your assistance as you tried to help them?

- LC: Only one man actively rejected my assistance, but some were indifferent to my presence. I think because I am a small guy and perhaps an unthreatening figure, people are more apt to interact.
- PB: Any catcalls from autos that you stopped to help pedestrians?
- LC: I had a lot of people waving and speaking to me as if they had known me all their life. Superman represents a lot of childhood memories for people and that in itself is a fondness that creates an entry point for me to narrate an action that could redirect a given situation. If you remember the court jester and his antics, he used humor to get the king or queen's favor.
- PB: What did you do with your clothes after you changed in Starbucks?
- LC: I actually wore the costume over my street clothes. I wanted to look dumpy. Wearing the costume over my street clothes brought into focus a regular person wearing a costume as oppose to a person creating the illusion of Superman.
- PB: Were you really able to get into your role as Superman or were you feeling slightly strange?
- LC: It was a weird role to get my head into if you think about the context of the space. I grew up with comic books all my life and I know the character of Superman very well. I set limits on how I would interact with the citizens and tried to stay within those guidelines. I did, at one point, mention to one person that I was a performance artist. That was a big breach of the practice for the piece, and when I do it again I will make an all out effort to stay within the role.
- PB: What did people say to you after you helped them?
- LC: Because of the time limitations, we only had a brief time to interact as the traffic light at the intersection was turning green. People reacted to me as if they had known me for years. It was the familiar image of Superman that they related to.
- PB: Did you ask anyone that you helped to stay and assist you in helping others?
- LC: No. Most people aren't out walking to be walking anymore. It seems that most travelers on foot are in pursuit of something, either buying something or for exercise. The other day I noticed a guy just walking and shooting pictures and asked him why he was shooting pictures and he stated for "no other reason than looking." It's great that a person can find empowerment or be entertained without the pursuit of buying something or having a need for a certain outcome.

PB: Had you any plans if the police stopped you for strange behavior?

LC: At first I wanted to wear some kind of uniform that would read as authority. But that didn't come across quite as funny and would have been even more suspect than Superman. I always worry about getting arrested, because an arrest today could be very (considering the present administration) discretionary. If an officer is uncomfortable with you or your use of public space you could be carted away for an over night stay in jail.

PB: What other character would you have chosen if you found that the use of the Superman character was an infringement?

LC: I could have used Zorro, but that would bring in the issue of ethnicity. I could have used Batman, but he is a dark figure that would not provide the same humorous contrast to my personal image and that of the super hero. I could have used the Hulk, but then I would come off as a jolly green midget. Infringement? As on copyrights? The use of Superman could, as intellectual property matters, if you are using it for commercial use. I see myself in the costume more as a fool in the traditional sense, rather than that of a Superman figure.

Critique on *Superman/Safety Crossing*

The critiques on *Superman/Safety Crossing* were constructive and flattering. The one critique that stands out the most was Mary Ting's. She felt that there was too much time spent on the Starbucks scene and that I needed to pay more attention to showing the interactions with the pedestrians. She felt that the *Free Advice* piece was stronger in that respect. This was supported by comments made by Todd Bartell. Bartell pushed the idea of me doing it all over San Diego during scheduled hours. That way, over a period of time, people would expect Superman to be at a certain place; therefore, people could

gather for the event. Todd argued that repetition of the piece would make for a bigger impact.

Research Readings Supporting *Superman/Safety Crossing*

My reflections on the readings that supported the *Superman/Safety Crossing* performance begin with Beatrice Otto's book *Fools are Everywhere*. Initially, the role of the jester was to entertain royalty. The fool, or jester, found favor with the king or queen through humor. Accounting logs show which jesters were awarded the most gifts. Both the terms jester and fool are interchangeable for the royal subject that holds this social position of court entertainer. For the most part, the jester was a nomad who was always struggling to maintain a place and a role in his community. Otto states that:

Apart from providing a balance to the royal hubris, the primary function of the court jester is to provide comic relief from the everyday stresses inherent to the throne. Max Gluckman reminds us that the jester for Queen Elizabeth 'did her more good than the medicines of all her physicians, and the sermons of her chaplains'⁸

Humor allowed the fool to be the messenger of bad news to the king. The jester was always seeking favor from the king in order to maintain a position in the court. William Somers was a favorite jester of King Henry VIII. He is believed to have had the most stable position in the history of the court. William was a natural; he humored his way into the heart of the king. Reading this book helped me project the figure of Superman into that peculiar space. "The grotesque jester," according to William Willeford in his

⁸ Beatrice K. Otto *Fools Are Everywhere* History Today (June 2001): 33. Questia. 10 Oct. 2004

book, *The Fool and His Scepter*, “is like other kinds of fools, is a mascot who maintains a relationship between the ordered world and the chaos excluded by it.”

The modern-day jester finds his own court in the open terrain of the public using their presence to speak out on issues of injustice, to define or to redirect socially isolated environments, and to sustain humor in the idealized culture of America. The figure of Superman within this given context helped make fun of the situation and people were able to project their notions of the famed character onto me.