

“Torrence 6-36-86”: Connecting the guest/spectator through site and self

Interview Essay by Edward Kahn and Rashana Perks Smith

Contributors Note: The two of us experienced “Torrence 6-36-86” from two different perspectives: as a guest/spectator and as the artistic director/resident. The difference of our roles and the similarity of interests as colleagues led us to this discussion on the various layers of connection fostered in this site responsive work.

“Torrence 6-36-86” (May 2016) was a collaboratively created, fifty-minute, site-specific dance theatre performance situated in and around the private home of the artistic director, Rashana Perks Smith. After gathering in the driveway amid a four dancer movement prelude, small audiences of fifteen were beckoned by an elderly “home owner” character, through the garage and into six distinct playing spaces. The first room encountered, an office on the ground floor, contained interactive video installations of portions of the house and served as a staging area for dividing the personally invited spectators into two halves.

Spectators, who were first sent upstairs, discovered performances in each of three bedrooms. In the first, a lone dancer struggled beneath a blue cloth, draped in a corner where one might expect a bed. In the room at the opposite end of the hall, two youthfully dressed women moved to a textured soundscape. In the middle master bedroom, a genderqueer/non-binary performer engaged individual audience members in questions and actions of intimacy and agency.

Downstairs spectators explored the interactive video installations in the office as well as letters of lost love retrieved from a chest by the “homeowner,” before being invited to the kitchen. There, a polka-dot dressed “housewife” danced to the Sisyphean task of endlessly popping corn while a radio offered cooking tips. Also, from an expanse of windows in the den, the four dancers of the prelude could be observed animating the landscape of the backyard, which included a bathtub whimsically nestled within the trees. After the groups of audience swapped floors, they were briefly united in the backyard, before being waved to the exit path around the side of the house.

As with other site-specific dance and environmental theatre performances, “Torrence 6-36-86” invited spectators to engage with performers, each other, and the space. Moreover, since the piece was performed only six times with audience groups limited to fifteen persons, this particular performance space was layered with additional meaning for most of the 88 spectators. These included dance artists from the Columbus, Ohio area, colleagues from the college where Smith teaches, and neighbors who also lived on Torrence Road, all persons who had some level of personal relationship with either the artistic director Smith or one her collaborators. As per Karen Barbour and Alexandra Hitchmough’s description of site-specific dance, the form “implies a relationship between site, performers, and audiences in which the embodied, emotional and sensory experiences of those present are engaged with the design, organic and

structural features, *as well as the social and cultural histories of the site* (Barbour and Hitchmough 2014, italics added).

Here, the unusual site of a private home made public invited audience members to bring their own individual histories with artistic director Smith into the mix, even though her decision not to double as a performer left her physically absent from view. When John Giffin, as the “homeowner,” played a tiny music box, it resonated differently for anyone who recognized it from a dance Smith choreographed the previous November. When the image of a bicycle prominently appeared in a video of a room which no longer held a bicycle, the intrigue was greater for those who knew about the cycling habits of the Smith household. Most directly, when I visited Michael J. Morris, the “mischievous visitor” in the master bedroom, our encounter ended with the striking question, “What would Rashana think about you sitting on her bed?”

In the “Director’s Note” contained in the program handed to spectators at the end of the performance, Smith asks,

[H]ow much honest effort do we allow ourselves in order to be connected? I ask these questions of my collaborators and together we are creating a collaborative, interdisciplinary, immersive dance theatre event that consists of new choreography, improvisational scores, and video dealing with the ideas of proximity, accessibility, and domesticity.

Here the audience was given proximate accessibility to Smith’s personal domestic site, creating a powerful connection with both the place and the “absent” artistic director behind the event.

KAHN: What initially inspired you to create a work in your own home?

SMITH: It’s been almost two years since I started making plans for the project, so this question has spawned a lot of retrospection regarding its actual origin. If I were to explicitly point to one thing that inspired me, I would refer to discussions with a friend and colleague, Kevin Kerby, in 2014 regarding the viability of presenting music in certain venues. The topic of conversation centered on middle-aged singer/songwriters making a viable living without being forced to book tours in night clubs. If singers/songwriters age, so do their audiences and neither are necessarily still interested in staying up late and going to smoky bars. House shows have been an interesting solution to venue selection. The shows can be booked earlier in the evening, the crowd while smaller, is more appreciative. It’s more personal and meaningful. To me, it’s thoughtful stewardship for the art itself and for all involved, taking thoughtful care to give the art a chance to be seen and fully acknowledged. I could see this idea being beneficial when considering making dance accessible to audiences in a different way than holding a concert at the theater. It’s not a new idea to have dance performances in a house; Isadora Duncan is famous for presenting commissioned salon dances for benefactors. However, it’s quite different to have dance take place in every room of the house (barring the bathrooms) and having it in one’s own home. Still, I think it was worth it.

KAHN: What did you see as the advantages to working in this particular space, in terms of what you could create for audiences?

SMITH: One of the biggest advantages is having time and not having to pay extra rental fees for rehearsals. I was able to spend more time devising the work with collaborators and to craft more thoughtfully from the ground up. I didn't have to worry about how long the gestation period was because I didn't have to worry about being able to afford the rental.

KAHN: So in what ways did you put that extra development time to good use?

SMITH: I wanted to go further than site-specific and be more site-responsive. And I wanted an immersive performance to be a part of that responsiveness. Having a performance in one's home, forces one to acknowledge the loaded construct that is "home." Though I didn't want this project to be about how I live in my house - I certainly had to examine my biases, thoughts, and concerns about domesticity and the trappings that it holds - that discourse shows up in different ways through the contributions of the other collaborators. And vice versa. For example, Megan Yankee and Megan Davis's work brought a lightness that I didn't originally feel in the upstairs bedrooms. Other collaborators were influenced by rehearsal discussions that led them to make decisions they didn't see coming. Examination and re-examination happened constantly throughout the rehearsal process and the performances. The proximity between performers and guests required responsiveness. Guests had to respond to performers and to the architecture in order to experience the work. I saw many of those interactions, sometimes being visible to guests, mostly not. There was a sense of triangular reciprocity happening between director, performers and guests that fed the work constantly throughout the performances that wouldn't occur with proscenium work.

KAHN: Did you anticipate that audience members would respond in any particular fashion, given that engagement was such an important part of the performance?

SMITH: I was curious. If there was a dance/theatre event next door on your very street *for free*, would you go? If all you had to do was to walk next door, would you go? Or would you be intimidated or annoyed? Are we so cut off from neighbors that we can't connect, or can art be common ground? We didn't make the work to address different demographics. We presented work regarding the house and in that way, I think we presented thought provoking work for our friends who are also artists, those who do not consider themselves to be artists and those neighbors (some whom I had never met) who were simply curious. Another side benefit to this project was being able to extend my circle of colleagues and learn more about the artist community in the area. There were a couple of instances where guests who attended the event asked to invite their friends who were coincidentally my neighbors further up the street. The next evening, those neighbors walked down the street to see the performance. I see my neighborhood a little differently now and I'm sure my neighbors drive by house and think different things as well.

KAHN: You're drawn to the word "guests" in describing the personally invited spectators. Did inviting these guests into your own home strongly color performance choices?

SMITH: I asked each collaborator to give me seven names of people they wanted to add to the invitation list and I created individual invitations for each guest. Some guests I knew personally and others I had never (and still may have not) met. Regardless, I wanted people to feel that they were invited into the house because whether there is a performance or not, one does not usually just show up to someone's house and demand entrance, at least not in Clintonville as far as I know. I didn't want the guests to feel like door to door solicitors, either. Also, given that my family also resides in the house and that, by the time of the performances, the collaborators also had a certain sense of ownership to the site, I needed to ensure a bit of safety. I don't think inviting specific guests affected the *performance choices* per se; but I think we were all aware, (whether we knew every guest or not) that along with the construct of home, we also constructed community with which to interact and that community provided support.

KAHN: How do you think the experience of those in attendance with whom you had no previous contact differed from those with whom you had a previous relationship?

SMITH: From what I gathered from conversations with collaborators and guests at the receptions - those who did not know whose house they were in seemed to look for story and point of reference in the work. I'm not saying that those who did know me didn't make narrative connections (whether we intended them to or not), but it seemed like those who had never entered my house prior or had any personal connection with me, did not have to contend with actual, known stories behind objects in my house. They may have wondered why I elected to place certain objects where I did, but they didn't have any kind of other association to the objects other than the present work they were seeing. For those who knew me and/or have been to my house before, their association with me and the objects in my home became a silent performer in the work.

KAHN: Can you elaborate more on your conception of the performance as site-responsive? How is this a more complete term for this work than site-specific?

SMITH: Yes, *site-specific* can be used as a generally accepted label as the kind of dance performance I produced, yet *site-responsive* seems to address the overall goal of the project - to examine not only the architecture but also the cultural aspects of what the house held in the past and may hold presently and to allow for considerable time with the space to devise the work with the other collaborators. I really wanted to interrogate the space and feel the implications of having multiple collaborators from multiple art disciplines reveal different aspects of the space. Right now, in my own relationship with dance and art making, the term *site-specific* has a somewhat diluted meaning. Being "specific" to site does not necessarily mean "responsive". Certainly, an artist can be responsive to a specific site and in that way, it is up to the artist to decide which term holds the most meaning.

KAHN: What conclusions can you draw from how “Torrence 6-36-86” fulfilled those desires to interrogate the nature of the space with your multidisciplinary collaborators?

SMITH: I considered interdisciplinarity and collaborative responsiveness as a means to examine community and connectedness. I believe the work resonated much more by having collaborators come together to consider the site as a living space of art and personally invite a *somewhat* public gathering into the private spaces of the home. I cannot imagine a more private site than a private residence. The blurring of boundaries between public and private space leads me to further question the *ease* of occupying spaces and how we navigate through collective space when social expectations shift. I wonder how we acknowledge artistic curiosity without invading spaces. How do we acquire the courage as performers, artists, and audience members to step into a new space that we might not normally enter? How do we see it differently from the inside versus how we judge it from the outside?

KAHN: So, what kinds of projects do you have in mind to continue your exploration of these questions?

SMITH: I'm in the planning and research phases of a new work that will take place at four different skate parks in the central Ohio area. I am particularly invested in finding connections with seasoned skaters and BMXers to understand the boundaries of the site and unspoken rule sets. I want to test the limits of physicality that are different from park to park while simultaneously acknowledging and appreciating personal boundaries. I would like to develop movement choices atypical for the site while also working inside of and challenging the social expectations of the site. And finally, I am interested in who will attend and witness the material. Who shows up at skate parks? Will they join in or will they watch? I hope both.

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