

- ② Center, it forced a tense physical and psychological proximity that prevented us from forgetting our own presence. The dancers' queer movements and nonsensical gibberish, all dictated by a sense of jouissance, reflect the unintelligible, undisciplined body hovering dangerously at the edge of pre-linguistic consciousness. Clearly transacting emotions within themselves, to each other, and to us, *If I Sing to You* is about the body coming into language, and all the gender disciplining (bodily or otherwise) that goes along with it. And through our kinetic familiarity with the performers' everyday actions, the performer/spectator binary is recast, our subjectivities splayed out as raw as the bodies thrusting in front of us.

Language and the body are equally important to the always-playful Rainer. In her New York premiere of *Spiraling Down*, Rainer finds her bodily language in a mélange of historical and contemporary sources, such as old movies, the comedic movements of Steve Martin and Sarah Bernhardt, and ballroom dance, and in sports like fencing and soccer. Her repurposed texts come from newspapers and novels, including works by Haruki Murakami. *Spiraling Down* begins with Rainer speaking Murakami's words in a disembodied narrative that equates the seemingly dissimilar activities of writing and running. Murakami's text frames the dance (and perhaps all of what dance and performance could be) as an intellectual exercise, one that makes connections between the body and the brain, calling attention to the textual capacities of the body. The body, as performed by Rainer, is not simply something that can carry content (choreographed movement or otherwise), but is also dense with meaning (social or otherwise).

Like Hay's cast of performers, Rainer's unofficial, multi-generational dance troupe, which includes Pat Catterson, Emily Coates, Patricia Hoffbauer and Sally Silvers, consists of all women. And while they are all clearly women, they seem gendered otherwise somehow, rendered strange through their unfamiliar presence on stage set against their everyday appearance. The dancers' variously aged bodies, lacking the pretension of virtuosity, force us to recognize the mediated aspects of performance. The dance ruminates on different subjects, from war and technology to impotence and soccer. It's a pastiche of movement and language that jumps haphazardly between texts both physical and linguistic, producing a stage time that is neither linear nor narrative. This melancholic fragmentation calls attention to each dancer's bodily relationship to the time of the event itself and to temporality more broadly, creating a kind of embodied 'present' that is difficult to escape.

There are elements of chance and improvisation implicit to the structure of both Hay and Rainer's choreography that create a palpable tension and anticipation. Hay allows each dancer to choose her costume, which determines her gender, right before each performance, which then affects both the staging and the solo elements. Rainer choreographed set movements, which the dancers can choose to perform according to their own timing. Through the vocabulary of postmodern dance drawing on pedestrian movements, fragmentation and juxtaposition, Hay and Rainer remind us of the mutability of the body and the self. We witness the body's domestication and struggle against the memory of our own. And if we understand dance, as event, already in the process of becoming a memory, Hay and Rainer make us painfully aware of our fragile relationship to time. Unlike the slapped-together sloppiness of much that gets peddled under the name of performance, events such as Hay and Rainer's dances prompt us to recognize that performance has form, structure, history, and, well, an audience. In now recalling their dance performances, my memory of it exceeds the event, seeping into embodiment and my physical sense of being there.

The radicalism of Hay and Rainer's works from the 1960s and 1970s cannot be refuted. Their contemporary works show a clear lineage to these radical roots. A turn must be made to re-position their works in order to not simply historicize them nor elide their relevancy to contemporary performative art practices. The valorization of Hay and Rainer's historical legacies in some ways effaces our own anxiety over the lack of a coherent vocabulary to smoothly narrate contemporary performance. The current uncertainty around the indefinability of performative practices requires a closer look at the ways in which both Hay and Rainer reformulate contemporary problems around the body, the audience and the institution, and enact strategies to further elucidate these relationships. An inquiry along these lines may offer ways to productively recalibrate the contours of this tradition along the rough edges produced by this crisis in performance.



## Haunted Nowhere: An Interview with Kenneth Collins

*Caridad Svich*

Kenneth Collins is the founder and artistic director of Temporary Distortion ([www.temporarydistortion.com](http://www.temporarydistortion.com))

distortion.com). Although he is still an emerging artist on the interdisciplinary performance and media-theatre scene, his work has already been selected for archival distribution and public online purchase by the venerable performance venue On the Boards in Seattle for their digital performance collection. He makes static mediated text-and-image-based works that reference pop culture, US cinema, Japanese horror films, and the works of Samuel Beckett. A designer as well as playwright and director, Collins, who was born and raised in industrial New Jersey, is a rare artist on the downtown New York theatre scene. He makes austere works that nevertheless are hip and rock 'n' roll in their aesthetic. He mashes up genres and yet his pieces rarely feel derivative. As his work is commissioned and tours more and more in Europe, this interview is an invitation to experience an emerging artist on the rise. Kenneth Collins is a MacDowell Colony Fellow playwright, and his play *Welcome to Nowhere (bullet hole road)* was published in *Theatre Forum* magazine. His work with Temporary Distortion has been produced in the United States, Canada, France and Austria, and his new play *Americana Kamikaze* premiered at Performance Space 122 in New York City in October 2009. The European premiere of *Americana Kamikaze* was in March 2010 at Maison des Arts de Créteil (Paris) and Le Manège Maubeuge, along with additional touring of *Welcome to Nowhere* in France. This interview was conducted via email between December 2009 and January 2010.

**Caridad Svich:** Your work is suffused with a sense of loss and remembrance for ruined places and people, and that the work is filled with ghosts and ghostliness as well (as a result). As a writer, director and designer, how do you approach physical conditions and manifestations of ruin, as well as metaphysical and spiritual ones?

**Kenneth Collins:** When I was a kid there was this massive factory directly across the street from my great-grandmother's house in New Jersey. It was a rug mill that supported the town for over sixty years, but by this time was derelict for almost twenty. I was always quite taken by it. The rust. The broken windows. The empty mystery. When my family moved to Pennsylvania, I continued to be drawn to abandoned factories, decaying warehouses, rusted railroad tracks. Perhaps it was because they reminded me of home. These deserted places – their sense of seasoned use – are part of my vocabulary when I design the boxes that house Temporary Distortion's performances. Industrial light fixtures, iron pipe fittings, peeling paint, irregular grain wood, for me these materials evoke

a sense of history and heighten the overall feeling of desolation that permeates the work. They also bring a sense of necessity . . . as if these were the only parts available when making these unusual theatre machines. As a writer/director I am most attracted to themes of loss and memory. When I was little my father was a cop and I grew up on countless stories involving violence and loss. As a cop, my father was constantly sharing the worst days of people's lives. He would come home and talk to my mother about house fires and robberies, suicides and stabbings, all sorts of dark and drastic shit. I would sit and listen to all of these stories and imagine what my father was faced with every night at work. On top of that, my grandparents had this ritual of sitting in the dark smoking cigarettes and listening to a police scanner. My father's brother was also a cop, so they were always worried about what might happen. On the scanner, I got to hear a good deal of it first hand. So from a young age I had this tapestry of unseemly characters in my head and this general sense of uneasiness about what might be waiting around the corner. All of this comes to the table when I sit down to write a play.

**CS:** Do you see your visual and linguistic concerns as a maker of interdisciplinary live art changing from one piece to the other (i.e. from *Eva* to *Americana Kamikaze*)?

**KC:** I am incredibly interested in memory, or better yet, forgetfulness. The gaps and blank spaces we find when we look back on our lives. The way we make meaning out of the missing pieces. I like stories with holes in them and am equally drawn to structural and psychological contradiction. Moments when, even as we decide to do one thing, there is part of us secretly wishing to do the opposite. Basically: confusion, contradiction, disarray. These are the things that fuel my work from piece to piece. The visual (and spoken) language of these pieces has evolved, of course, over time. I think my collaboration with William Cusick (Temporary Distortion's video designer and co-creator on *Americana Kamikaze*) has allowed for even more contradiction to be layered into the work. With the expansion of video in our work, beginning with *Welcome to Nowhere*, we can now show things in the video that are in direct opposition to what is being spoken about simultaneously on stage. Using the same characters on film as on stage, we create a double world. This double world allows us to layer and complicate narrative structure in new ways, which conversely has led to a greater feeling of narrative arch in the work . . . that is, if you were to compare a show like *Eva* to *Americana Kamikaze*.

**CS:** What led to your conceptual work with stage boxes/physical containers for the live bodies of your performers?

**KC:** I've always been interested in stillness, but I wanted to find a way to heighten its dramatic effect. I began to imagine a type of theatre that was itself a sculptural object, but coincidentally had people in it. Performing in these boxes began as a form of sculpture – as a way to frame the body in space. I also wanted total control over the performance from the moment of conception. I wanted to work in the exact dimension of the stage on which we would perform. I wanted all of the lights, the sound, and props available to me from the beginning, but at the time I couldn't afford rehearsal space in New York City. In fact, we were rehearsing our work in an operating funeral home when we first got started – entering through the back door, walking between gurneys, and having to be finished when the last wake of the day was over. At a certain point I became fed up with it and decided to build what I saw as these miniature stages in the middle of my apartment. So, the boxes were also partially a practical solution to being broke and not having a rehearsal space to call my own. Obviously this is a rather simplistic reduction of what was going through my mind, because certainly there are more rational solutions to the problem of not having rehearsal space than locking your performers in Plexiglas-covered coffins . . . but I would be lying if I didn't admit that this was part of the thought process that led to the boxes. My first boxes were a direct response to the assemblages of Joseph Cornell, whose shadowboxes can be seen as tiny stages in and of themselves. The boxes were wood with glass fronts. The actors were totally encased, like specimens. After a couple of shows, the form became too limiting and repetitive. I began to experiment with building boxes out of steel pipe and Plexiglas. Now, there is more a sense of character and story in the work and the boxes have evolved in a similar fashion. The box for *Welcome to Nowhere*, for example, contained elements that echoed the theme of the American West that was present in the text and video. The box was decorated with skulls, rabbit fur, antlers, American Flags and mud-flap girls. I never felt the urge to introduce that level of specificity to the boxes until the content of the work suddenly seemed to call for it.

**CS:** As video collaboration with designer William Cusick has become more prominent in your work - in these live movies, in a way, for the stage - has the aesthetic freedom of the virtual, plasticized body of a performer in relationship to the tension of the

inescapably solid and contained live body of a performer been liberating for you as a writer and as a director?

**KC:** The video allows for choices that my directing style does not allow on stage. In live performance, I am not interested in watching performers pretend to interact or engage one another on a physical level. I feel that it creates a closed circle that cuts out the spectator. I prefer that the performer remains neutral, vulnerable, open, facing out toward the audience at all times, to allow the viewer deeper access to the play. While the characters might be engaged in dialogue with one another, they are always speaking to (or toward) the audience. Through a combination of acting style and amplification of the voice via microphone, there is an attempt to disembodify the character from the performer. The voice of the character becomes a whisper in the back of your mind and the action of the scene takes place in your imagination. In *Welcome to Nowhere*, we attempted this same style of delivery in some of the video portions of the show. We filmed monologues where the performer's gaze fell directly on the lens of the camera and they spoke much the same way that they do on stage, but on video it failed to operate in an identical fashion. Instead, it seemed to cause the opposite effect. Obviously different rules are at play when it comes to film vs. theatre and one of the best things Temporary Distortion has going for it when it comes to this realization is that William is a trained filmmaker. He understands the rules and knows when and how he wants to break them. Together we are able to suggest things to the audience in much simpler and poetic ways. So yes, as a writer, it is liberating to know that I can count on William to 'show' something in a moment of a video that I otherwise (because of my tendencies as a director) would have had to figure out a way for the performers to stare dead-out and say on stage. And of course, many of these moments and layers to the story wouldn't be in the show at all if weren't for William bringing them to the table. He is able to see the entire thing from such a totally different perspective that our collaboration is what is the most liberating of all.

**CS:** Does it make you think differently about the placement of the live body, for instance? The amount of freedom the virtual body has (even though it's fixed through pre-recording/filming)?

**KC:** No. None of this has made me think any differently about the live body. I treat it the same way I did before we had video. To me, the live body is an object . . . part of the sculpture on stage. The boxes are the main sculptural element, but they are

incomplete without the bodies inside them. On stage the performers need to stay vulnerable to the audience. This means that they must always be facing out, their gaze fixed directly straight ahead. They don't look at each other. They don't touch. They only get to do that in the movies. The tension between these two approaches is where the interest lies for me – the fracture that it causes. I also think it helps to create an odd balance. I always hear people talking about the competition video causes onstage, how we are trained by movies and TV to always be drawn to the mediated image. Many artists are afraid of how video overpowers what they put on stage. They try and ramp up the stage activity to equal the video in power. But stillness can be very captivating. I think that often people don't give it its due.

**CS:** How do you invite the audience into your work?

**KC:** The elliptical nature of much of my writing can render the work impenetrable at times, but I try to crack it open for the audience as much as possible. Recognizable tropes actually help. They act as a guidepost for the audience when the work suddenly folds back on itself, or a narrative thread unexpectedly emerges or is abandoned. They become surfaces on which the audience can project their own meaning. I would like to think that it oddly gives the viewer an opportunity to absorb the work in a much more personal way. I love nostalgia, false or otherwise. It is like a dream – a double reality of now and then. Longing. Lost time. Somehow in-between. It is a feeling that I try to put myself in touch with as often as possible in my daily life. I certainly don't want to marginalize Temporary Distortion's work by suggesting that it is pure escapism, but I don't try to steer away from these things as a director.

**CS:** What is your interest in representations of negative spaces (and I don't mean his pejoratively, but rather as opposed to spaces and actions which signify presence instead of absence)?

**KC:** I have this quasi-religious notion of what's sacred space and I try to manifest it in my work. I enjoy sitting in empty cathedrals. I'm very interested in Buddhist thought, but I've never had any luck with meditation. I find the idea of emptiness incredibly intriguing. I guess I try to create an environment in my work that is what I think meditation would be like if I could just sit still for long enough. Working on these shows is probably the closest that I will ever get, so I try to make theatre that approaches a meditative space/state.



## The Aura of Literature in the Age of its Virtual Dissemination

*Daniel Pearce*

*Daniel Pearce is a writer living in New York City. His writing has appeared in BookForum, The Rumpus and Idiom.*

The *London Review of Books* recently commemorated its thirtieth anniversary by holding a series of lectures and discussion panels in New York City. The final installment of the series was a panel entitled 'The Author in the Age of the Internet', which featured John Lanchester, a novelist and critic, and contributing editor to the magazine; Colm Tóibín, a novelist and critic; James Wood, a critic and member of the editorial board; Mary-Kay Wilmers, editor; and Nicholas Spice, publisher. (Andrew O'Hagan, a scheduled panelist, was absent due to volcanic ash.)

After a passing reference to Walter Benjamin, Spice framed the discussion by citing e-book revenue figures for 2009 – they came in at over \$100 million – and asking, open-ended, what such dramatic technological changes imply for authors and readers today. In a sort of panel-wide disclaimer, the panelists immediately confessed their relative non-participation in the Web 2.0 zeitgeist: none have Facebook accounts ('Oh, God no,' Tóibín replied), and although James Wood does use YouTube, he certainly does not engage in 'recreational texting'.

Wood spoke for the panel in saying that his most formative reading experiences occurred before the advent of the Internet. No writers, he claimed, anticipated this degree of 'technological ferment' when determining their career paths. These remarks laid the groundwork both for nostalgic descriptions of an older mode of writing and for wooden complaints about the noise of the blogosphere, so hostile to literary thought; yet neither of these two lines of thinking were pursued more than cursorily. Tóibín did address the loss of anonymity and solitariness induced by the Internet's totality, but he quickly turned to a positive consequence of this loss: 'the end of gay loneliness'.

When the e-book came up again, it was treated tentatively, as if the panelists were unwilling to let it become the focus of the evening. (With little fuss, a consensus emerged that the e-book format is clunky but will take over.) One of the most interesting exchanges touched upon the e-book only obliquely: Spice asserted that writers become writers because