

15 Gisela Hochuli

In Strange Hands

*A conversation with Hanna B. Hölling,
Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin*

Following two colloquia in the “Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge” research project, the team (Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin) met with Swiss-based performance artist Gisela Hochuli. For each of these occasions, Hochuli crafted a unique performance. Hochuli’s practice centers around performance-based work, encompassing its activation, teaching, and collaboration with fellow artists. She embraces working with readily available elements such as her body, space, audience, and site-specific materials. Hochuli’s interests lie in investigating objects, focusing on specific elements, viewing objects as partners, embracing simplicity and its diversity, exploring everyday life, revealing the extraordinary within the ordinary, exploring transformations, and adopting a subversive perspective.

Hanna B. Hölling: Gisela, you presented your performance, *In Strange Hands I*, at our inaugural colloquium on May 30, 2021 (Figures 15.1 and 15.2).¹ The performance consisted of a live moment and a preparation phase in which you invited participants to send performance instructions to you. I’m curious about the thinking behind this performance and what inspired you to bring it to life. How did you come up with the idea of soliciting instructions from the participants?

Gisela Hochuli: Performance instructions are akin to cooking instructions or recipes. I have been working with performance instructions for several years because they offer the possibility of being executed differently each time by different individuals. The way an action is carried out or something is expressed, the timing, the bodily movements—everything varies from person to person. A performance instruction is essentially a written expression of an individual, and therefore possesses authorship. Intrigued by all of this, in 2017, I began collecting performance instructions from artists. I requested that

the artists not only provide written instructions but also record them in audio form, allowing the participants to hear the artist's voice as they speak the instructions. This adds a personal and artistic touch to the instructions. A selection of these spoken performance instructions has also been showcased in exhibitions. They are played as audio through headphones, and visitors have the opportunity to listen to these instructions. Some instructions can be enacted, while others may not be feasible due to certain material factors or surreal elements. They can be short poems, lyrical compositions, or simple neutral actions. They may also involve actions that go beyond the capabilities of our bodies or our human abilities. I find the diversity of these instructions fascinating.

In 2019, I was invited for the first time to create a performance based on these instructions and present it at the art venue Akku in Emmenbrücke, near Lucerne, during the exhibition opening. Within the exhibition, visitors could listen to the performance instructions through three sets of headphones. The performance lasted for forty minutes and was inspired by fifteen performance instructions from different artists. Although a set of instructions prescribes something, during the creation of the performance, I discovered that I still had to make decisions, as each set of instructions



Figure 15.1 Gisela Hochuli, *In Strange Hands I*, May 30, 2021. Leftover scores, “Conserve this performance.”



Figure 15.2 Gisela Hochuli, *In Strange Hands I*, May 30, 2021. Leftover scores, “Conserve this performance,” scattered on the steps of Kunstmuseum Bern.

allowed room for interpretation. I titled this work *In Strange Hands* because the instructions were not mine, but rather belonged to others and were now in my possession, so to speak. This is how the *In Strange Hands* series came about, in which each performance is interpreted by me using instructions that are foreign—originating from others. The title is indeed very fitting, as the authorship of the instructions lies not with me but with someone else. I take them into my hands, interpret them, and bring them to life, incorporating them into the space with my body—whatever is necessary to interpret them. In collaboration together, we came up with the idea of involving the colloquium participants in a participatory manner by having them contribute performance instructions. It then becomes my task to perform these instructions.

Hölling: You presented your work *In Strange Hands* at both of our colloquia, titling them *In Strange Hands I* (May 30, 2021) and *In Strange Hands II* (September 30, 2022, Figures 15.3, 15.4, and 15.5).² How did your thinking evolve in terms of conception and execution?

Hochuli: The first time, there were only a few instructions, specifically three: one from you, Hanna, one from Jules, and one from Valerian Maly and Klara Schilliger. With a twenty-minute performance, I had ample time to devote to each instruction. This was, of course, a completely different approach compared to the second version, where I worked with twenty performance instructions.

Initially, we were all a bit disappointed that only those three instructions were received. However, during our discussions—Hanna, Jules, Emilie, Valerian, and myself—we came up with the idea of making it a requirement for colloquium participants to submit an instruction. This introduced some pressure or compulsion for participants to come up with an instruction for the colloquium. As a result, we received around sixty entries, with approximately fifty instructions and the remainder consisting of comments like “Sorry, I am unable to provide this,” or “unclear to me.” So, in total, we had about fifty instructions, which was a huge number. Now you have a great pool of instructions to draw from. That’s fantastic. I then reviewed the fifty instructions and selected those that were feasible, that fit within the framework of the colloquium, and excluded those that were too complicated or didn’t appeal to me personally, or weren’t interesting in this context. Eventually, I settled on about twenty instructions, which is quite a lot for a twenty-minute performance—approximately one instruction per minute. Given the number of instructions and the time constraints, I decided to perform a table-based performance. This allowed me to set up all the materials on the table and perform behind or around it. There was this beautiful instruction, “Kiss your friend’s eyes,” which prompted me to step away from the table and kiss Jules’s eyelid. But apart from that, everything took place either on or behind the table. I made the decision to condense the entire performance. Table performances are almost a separate genre within performance art, often practiced by older performance artists who may not want to move around as much anymore.

The first performance with the three instructions, in May 2021, during your first colloquium, had a more immersive presence in the room. There was this wonderful phrase from Jules, “conserve this performance,” and your instruction, Hanna, to “rain.” I threw 30,000 pieces of paper printed with “conserve this performance” out of the window of the PROGR in Bern. There was a strong wind, and it became a spectacular sight as the slips of paper scattered through the air, creating a long rain of “conserve this performance” towards the Kunstmuseum Bern. It was truly impressive. At that moment, when I released the slips of paper, it was beyond my control. There were other forces at play. In the second performance, there was hardly any of that natural momentum, that interplay of other forces. Everything was essentially determined by me. Perhaps the egg I cooked had its own distinct momentum. But overall, you could say it was more of a typical action or sequential performance, one action following another.



Figure 15.3 Gisela Hochuli, *In Strange Hands II*, September 30, 2022. “Please perform an action that you could not do in front of a live audience.”



Figure 15.4 Gisela Hochuli, *In Strange Hands II*, September 30, 2022. “1. Project a shadow over the other side of this page 2. Observe the boundary between the shadow and the lighted part 3. Become the boundary line.”



Figure 15.5 Gisela Hochuli, *In Strange Hands II*, September 30, 2022. “Kiss your friend’s eyes (literally or metaphorically).”

Jules Pelta Feldman: You just mentioned something very intriguing: “other forces.” It seems that other forces are particularly significant in the *In Strange Hands* performances. It appears important for you to engage in a performance where you don’t have complete control and where you may not know exactly what will happen.

Hochuli: I believe it happens when I delve deeper or spend more time exploring something. It can occur because of external forces like nature, the wind, or even the audience. There can be a certain momentum in the interaction with the audience. In performance, repetition or even elements of ritual are sometimes employed to bring the artist into a different state of energy. That’s when uncontrolled things can happen. It depends on the artist’s intention. I can surrender myself completely to an intuitive, open flow, or I can maintain control by executing exactly what I had planned, but sometimes it just becomes uncontrolled [laughs], or it’s a mixture of both. It also spills over to the audience. This can also happen with religious rituals. The atmosphere changes, the energy shifts, and, as a spectator, I undergo a transformation, too. I experience something, and I am a different person after the performance. This is often the case with ritualistic or repetitive performances, even if they are not always identical.

Pelta Feldman:

On one hand, it could be said that these are instructions from others and that you relinquish control to others. However, you are still the one interpreting these instructions and ultimately deciding how things unfold and how they are to be understood. This was particularly evident with the poetic instructions you mentioned—some of them were more like poems. Even with something as simple as “ten” or “seven”—numbers that were probably included because someone didn’t want to write instructions—the decision is still yours on how to handle them.

Hochuli:

I found those numbers and letters interesting because they remind me of a type of performance direction that is also prevalent in Spain and France. It has different names: *poésie sonore*, *poesia acción*. This kind of performance goes beyond mere verbal performance and incorporates playing with numbers and letters. It’s fascinating to see that some people didn’t want to or couldn’t write complex instructions, so they simply typed a zero or the letter Y to fill in that field and continue with the registration. I incorporated these letters and numbers into my performance by cutting them out on cardboard and displaying them as visual elements around the room. Another noteworthy example is the instruction “Eat a whole lemon.” Many performance artists have attempted this, as there are performance directions that focus on exploring the limits of the body. A well-known example is Marina Abramović, who ate an onion. In my case, I chose to bite into the lemon instead of consuming it whole. If I had eaten the entire lemon, it would have taken around ten minutes and completely changed my facial expression because it’s so sour. It certainly would have been interesting, but considering the numerous other instructions, I decided to bite into the lemon every once in a while, and then place it on the table as a sculpture.

Emilie Magnin:

I must say, it was also very impressive for me last year when those “conserve this performance” papers descended and drifted towards the Kunstmuseum Bern, where I work as a conservator. This naturally raises questions about how you understand the preservation of your own performance. What should be conserved and what shouldn’t? How do you see your role in this process, as well as the role of others, such as the museum, institutions, or the audience?

Hochuli:

As a young performer, I was highly interested in the work of older performance artists. During my studies in fine art at ZHdK in Zurich from 2001 to 2005, I specialized in performance art. For my final thesis, I conducted interviews with three performance artists. I had role models like Marina Abramović, whose catalog I owned, and I had visited her exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Bern in the late 1990s. I had access to documents of well-known performance movements like Viennese Actionism. However, I found very little information about performance artists in my immediate environment. This prompted me to interview three individuals for my thesis: Barbara Sturm from Basel, who was active at that time and around my age; Muda Mathis from Basel; and Norbert Klassen from Bern. Through these interviews, I learned a lot about the nature of performance art. The project became a video work, which I titled *The Essence of Performance Art* (2005), and which included interviews and excerpts from performances by these three artists. I found it incredibly interesting to hear about their work, sources of inspiration, and preparations for performances.

At that time, there was a scarcity of documentation available. This is why I am delighted with the progress that has been made in archiving performances nowadays. Norbert Klassen was particularly influential to me as a performer and as a person. We often had tea together, and our discussions played a significant role in the development of my work during that time. Norbert passed away in 2011. I conducted another interview with him in 2010. I also conducted interviews with the members of Black Market International and collaborated with Christopher Hewitt on a DVD edition published in 2012. The DVD featured interviews and excerpts from their group performances from 2007. I had to generate my own material because there was a dearth of information about how artists work and why they work that way. Of course, I also witnessed live performances by Black Market International, Norbert Klassen, and my colleagues. However, documentation is crucial for reflection, further contemplation, and the analysis of performance art. Therefore, I strongly advocate for the archiving of performances.

Documented performances are essential for me as an artist to comprehend and appreciate the varied approaches within the field. Observing how others work differently from me, discovering similarities with certain artists, and realizing unexplored possibilities all contribute to my growth. It prompts me to question why someone does something in a particular manner. Therefore, performance art documentation helps me organize, reflect on, and further my own work. It also holds significance for young students, who can gain

insight into the accomplishments of artists like Norbert Klassen, Janet Hauf-ler, Ruedi Schill, and others. Since these artists are no longer alive, students cannot witness their performances firsthand. Scripts, videos, photographs, and other forms of documentation offer a window into the history of performance art and help in understanding the work of earlier artists. These artists have always been important role models for me as well.

Documenting my own performance work is also important to me. I strive to maintain order on my hard drives, particularly during the winter when I have more time to label and organize photos and videos. Although this task involves spending numerous hours at the computer, reviewing the images and footage stimulates the development of my work.

Hölling: An instruction inherently possesses the potential for repetition and reenactment. By executing the instruction, you give the performance a certain authority and create a realization that can be of interest to others in the future, or serve as material for reenactment.

Hochuli: Absolutely, it is indeed possible for someone else to reenact the performance exactly as I did it. The instructions can serve as a basis for someone else to develop their own interpretation and create a performance. Now that there is a pool of sixty instructions, it opens up the potential for action. It's an invitation that should be utilized.

Pelta Feldman: Gisela, what role does video play for you? You mentioned its importance in documenting your work. What do you learn from watching the recordings? Are there aspects that cannot be captured on video?

Hochuli: I believe it varies significantly depending on the individual who uses it. During a performance, I have an internal viewpoint. As I mentioned before, each performance affects me personally. Presenting my performance is a gift because it allows me to give shape to my artistic expression. There is an audience watching, and I can feel the energy that arises between the audience and myself. That's why it's often beneficial for me to know the number of people who will be present, whether it's three or 120, because it influences how I use my energy and presence. When I perform, it's both wonderful and fragile. I expose myself to the audience, and, while performing, I tap into both strength and vulnerability. That's why I can't watch the video immediately after the performance. I need time to transition back to my normal everyday life and establish a certain distance. Then I'm very glad to watch the video.

For me, video is a tool for work. I understand that the perspective offered by the video is not the same as that experienced by the live

audience. It provides a different viewpoint, and the energy captured is often more subdued. However, what the medium does offer is an external perspective on my work. I use it to identify aspects I like, aspects I like less, and moments of surprise in my performance. It allows me to see where I can continue and explore further, and it reveals new, interesting approaches. Additionally, it enables me to observe the spatial composition and aesthetics, both of which are important aspects of my work.

When I watch others' performances on video, I find it intriguing to observe how other artists work. If I couldn't attend a live performance, watching it on video gives me the opportunity to experience it. But I must admit that I don't do this often because the live moment is irreplaceable. The exception is performances by artists who have already passed away. Some people argue that photos are superior to videos. I'm somewhat conflicted about this because a photo is often a work of art in its own right, transcending mere documentation. With video, the camera accompanies the performance, while photography captures a moment in an image. I appreciate analyzing the composition of photos, including factors like the golden ratio, color schemes, and the interplay of materials. As a visually oriented person, I'm fascinated by well-composed images, but they can sometimes shift the focus away from the performance itself.

This conversation took place in October 2022.

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In Strange Hands II: Instructions submitted by the participants ahead of the colloquium Performance Conservation: Interdisciplinary Perspectives in September 2022.

To think a thought

I don't have specific preference

Interpret Mieko Shiomi's Fluxus score: *Shadow Piece II*, 1964

1. Project a shadow over the other side of this page
2. Observe the boundary between the shadow and the lighted part
3. Become the boundary line

Bring Your Own Light.

Bring Your Own Body.

Bring Your Own Animal.

Bring Your Own Liquid.

Bring Your Own Breath.

Bring Your Own CO₂.

Bring Your Own Illusion.

Think of a dream you had when you were a child.

den moment atmen

take a moment to care for the body; rest, drink water, breathe.

Crack egg

Y

Breathe deeply and yawn

I refuse to create situations instead of the artists

find urgency in your relationship with flowers and plants. what does it mean (bodily and imaginatively) to build human–non-human companionship around urgency?

0

I move to see, I move to pause

7

kiss your friend's eyes (literally or metaphorically)

Will email later

10

Scratch behind the left ear twice.

Sorry, I am unable to provide this.

Find the elegance in an awkward gesture.

Verstehe nicht, was damit gemeint ist

Meditate

Threshold. Damnation.

Stand on one foot and speak a sentence about silence.

Schneide deine Fussnägel und bilde daraus eine Skulptur.

Eat a whole lemon.

Count backwards from 51 to 43

trage bitte einen gleichbleibenden vokal durch den raum

Close first the left eye and then the right eye, think for an arbitrarily long moment you are in a forest and experience all seasons in this moment. Open first the right eye, then the left eye

Say: "Tenderness is everything"

Breathe in deeply, close your eyes, choose a pleasing sound around you

Count your heartbeats.

use a light source (or absence of a light source) to obscure your image in the zoom window

Look.

washing dishes

Discriminate to reach equity.

Draw a snowflake and smile.

Press mute. Then tell a secret.

in the morning there is meaning

Dream that your dead ancestors walk by your side once again

Performance instruction: Find a surface in your close environs. Breathe into it. Breathe with it.

Phone a friend.

Repeat what you remember doing from the same interval of time in your previous day

Allow silence to breathe.

Your thoughts about gesture and silent film?

a unique way of eye blinking

Show with your hands how happy you are with the colloquium so far!:))

Select an object of great personal significance to you. Show the object or a representation of the object to the audience. Describe it visually. Describe how you came to be the guardian of the object that you shepherd through time, and why it is significant to you. Reflect, in words or bodily action, how the object makes you feel. Meditate on its destruction. Reflect, in words or bodily action, how its destruction could make you feel (note: If that becomes too painful, remember that it will not be destroyed today).

Authenticity

unclear to me

Jump!

Follow a line.

Mieko Shiomi

< portrait piece >

1963

transpose lines of a poem or a sentence into a different (non-verbal) human or non-human language—means for example being expressed through gestures, or body language in general or whining or howling or anything else . . .

Please perform an action that you could not do in front of a live audience

Notes

- 1 “Performance Interlude: Gisela Hochuli, *In Strange Hands*,” first annual colloquium, Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Care, May 30, 2021, SNSF Performance Conservation (YouTube channel), accessed February 19, 2024, <https://youtu.be/LQAIJ0DM59E?t=6499>.
- 2 “Gisela Hochuli—*In Strange Hands II*, 2022,” live performance on the occasion of Performance Conservation: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, second annual colloquium, SNSF Performance Conservation (YouTube channel), accessed February 19, 2024, www.youtube.com/watch?v=0d7AU-mfGC8&ab_channel=SNSFPerformanceConservation.