

The Aura of Bad Maps

by
Deke Weaver
Assistant Professor
New Media Department
School of Art + Design
University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign)

131 Art + Design Building
408 East Peabody Drive
Champaign, Illinois 61820

Fax 217-244-7688
Cell 718-427-6230

Email dekew@uiuc.edu
Website www.dekeweaver.com

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The Aura of Bad Maps

100 Word Abstract

While wondering about the importance of live performance and how it is different from virtual/online-performances, I try to define Benjamin's aura and chew on ideas of authenticity, presence, community and audience. The essay alternates between theoretical/practical examples (Ralph Ellison's notions of the cosmopolitan to Mahalia Jackson's love of performing in church to Reverend Billy to recent science on body maps and bio-magnetic fields to the do-it-yourself technology provocateurs The Institute for Applied Autonomy) and an anecdotal journal chronicling my solo performance tour of intimate spaces (cafés, backyard sheds, Brooklyn lofts, and the Edinburgh Fringe).

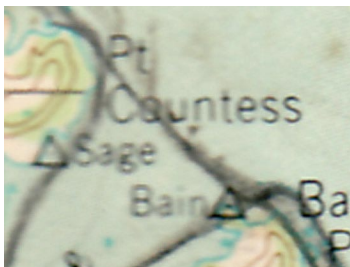
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aura, live performance, technology, mapping, do-it-yourself

If I don't understand something and it blows my little mind I use a suspicious word: magic. I like magic. If it's done right and done flawlessly technology makes magic. But my fear is that technology has come to be seen as the only magic while the slower, less flashy, less commodifiable magic is left for dead.

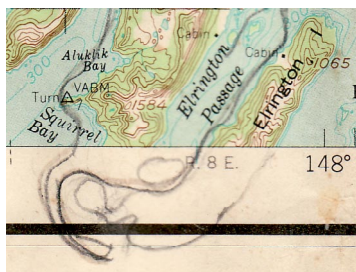
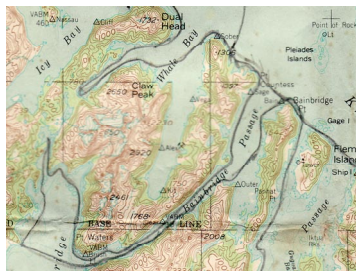
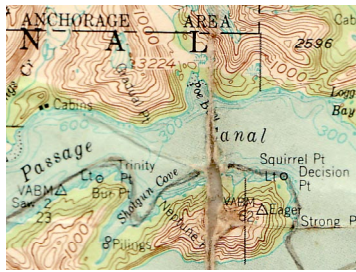
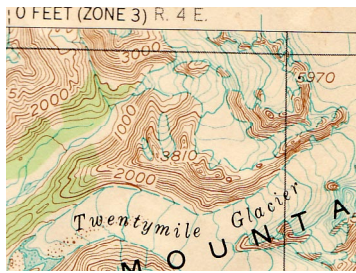
For years I worked as a broadcast animator-designer, but I knew I would eventually teach. I figured the technology chops that I had developed in the commercial world would help me get a job in an academic art department. But then, once inside the Ivory Tower, I would hatch my Secret Plan: I would teach performance art and experimental theater. I write and perform what I write in solo performances. The performances usually include projected video that I shoot, animate and edit. Like many of us, I have a love/hate relationship with technology. New technologies are dazzling. They make money – in the market and in the land of writing grants (no matter how crappy the final product). Sometimes, the new technologies make our lives better. But... I guess I'm interested in what technology can't do. I'm interested in living, breathing, physical, embodied, non-web-based performance.

ENCHANTMENT IN VIVO



My solo performance with video, *The Land of Enchantment*, was about a place in the world and a place in my life. Dixon Place (New York City's "laboratory for performance ... dedicated to supporting the creative process by presenting original works of theater, dance and literature at various stages of development") awarded me a Mondo Cane! Commission to present a workshop version of the piece in April 2005. Jill Samuels directed the performance. The work charts the rise and fall of a marriage, tells the tales of an ill-conceived spoken-word tour of the Southwest and searches for The Authentic (in love, in sex, in performance) in California and the West. Running throughout the performance is the fundamental idea of mapping. Maps have not always been my friend.

On a kayaking trip in Prince William Sound, Alaska (pre- *Exxon Valdez*) we saw whales, sea otters, bears, glaciers, seals, trees, sea lions, mountains, rain, the ocean and lots of salmon. To navigate the straits and channels we used maps and tide charts. When you sleep on the beach it's important to pay attention to the high tide mark. You don't want to set up your tent in a spot that will be two feet under water at four o'clock in the morning.



The tide also determines how quickly you can paddle through the passage between two islands. For some of the channels the ingoing or outgoing tide could create a current of 3 to 5 knots. The channel would become a river. If you can help it, you don't want to paddle upstream. One day we were paddling towards a passage of water that, according to the map, would be quite narrow. The narrower the passage, the faster the tide's current. We planned our arrival at this passage so we'd be able to ride the tide. We'd get to our night's campsite in no time. But when we got to this spot, there wasn't any passage of water at all. We checked the map. We broke out the compasses. We triangulated. We got out and walked on shore. We were in the right spot. But the map was totally wrong. Finally, we looked at the date of the map: 1953. In 1964 the third most powerful earthquake ever recorded struck Prince William Sound. Sections of the region's geography were completely changed. We improvised a campsite at the base of a glacier. It was cold. We were cranky.

THE SQUISHY SCIENCE

Paddling through Prince William Sound I wanted to be like my dad - a field biologist. Scientific method encourages the elimination of variables. The results of an experiment can be more easily defined and reproduced with a nice, clear $A + B = C$. This would go under "predicted results" in your lab book.

Unfortunately, “actual results” often read like this: {A (Piles + Gobs)} + {B (Messy Sacks + Invisible Creatures) } = C (A Slippery Monster). This works o.k. for chemistry and physics. Sometimes. But the idea gets sticky in what the pocket-protector-set calls “The Soft Sciences.” “Soft” seems to mean behavioral - animal and human. Unpredictable. Too many variables. Kinda magical.

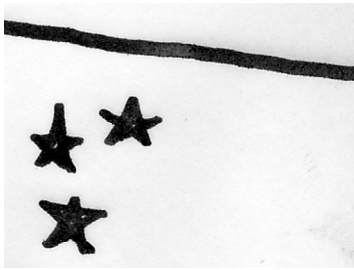
How about the reeeeeeally soft sciences? The squishy sciences... o.k., the non-sciences. Like performance art and experimental theater. Somewhere along the line I stopped wanting to be a scientist. I wanted to be a performance artist. How can a play or a solo performance be so different from night to night? Well, it’s certainly not an A+B=C situation. Too many variables. You’ve got an audience of 500 people. That’s 500 histories, 500 varying views of the world. And every night that equation shifts. I love that. I love sitting in an audience. I love performing.

Recently I reread some Walter Benjamin. My friend Kevin said, “What about that aura thing? What the hell is that?” I opened my mouth. I closed it. Once again: too many variables. Where is aura located? Is it a noun? Is it in the object? In the performance? In the air around the object? In the theater? I asked around. People shrugged their shoulders, shuffled their feet. Defining “aura” felt like the judge defining pornography: “I know it when I see it.”

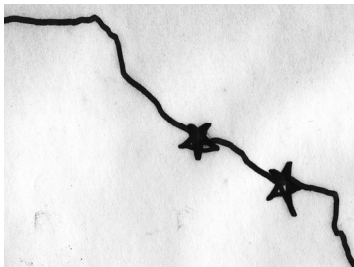
For the purposes of this essay, let’s say that it’s not the performance that has aura. Let’s say aura (if it shows up at all) exists in the intersection of the performance with an audience, in a

physical space. Aura is how art affects a group of people or a person. Aura is how these people react to the object/event and the environment – the collective experience, the collective perception of the art. The Place is important. The Audience is important. The Performance is important. You can record this intersection of performance, audience and physical space, but no matter how many cameras are in that room – that particular aura generated by that intersection cannot be reproduced. You're not going to get the moment. You're only going to get a map of the moment.

ENCHANTMENT IN TRANSIT



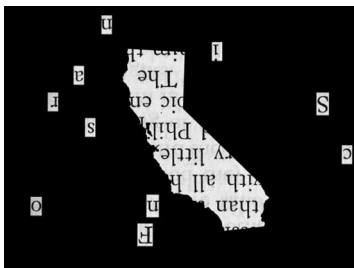
Lucy Lippard cites the introduction to *Goode's World Atlas*, "... a well-drawn map creates an aura of truth and exactness, the cartographer should caution the reader against interpreting the generalized data too literally." (*The Lure of the Local* 78)



Words of wisdom. I've had a lot of experiences working with faulty information – navigating parts of my life with bad maps. This idea became the spine for *The Land of Enchantment*.



"I've never been swept off my feet. I've never believed in love at first sight. I'm always suspicious. I'm ridiculously aware of the horrible gray continuum of human behavior. Well, maybe not the whole continuum. I know I've got blindspots. The very nature of blindspots is that they are spots where you are blind



- you don't know what goes on there and you might not even know that you have blindspots. That's why I like maps. Let's say you're going to a place you've never been. It might be scary. But if you've got a good map, you'll have more information. If you can trust your map, you'll know what you can expect. You'll feel better. But what would happen if there was an earthquake or a flood? The land might be altered. The map would become unreliable. There's nothing worse than an unreliable map."

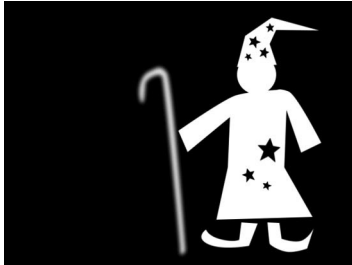
(Weaver)

2006. I mapped out a tour of *The Land of Enchantment*.

1. Savannah, Georgia
2. Richmond, Virginia
3. Hyattsville, Maryland
4. Brooklyn, New York
5. Montpelier, Vermont
6. Edinburgh, Scotland

It would be a do-it-yourself tour of the East Coast with my show about the West Coast and finish with a run at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. The tour would be a sort of meta-performance - a search for the Authentic in its own right. I'd perform its tight, intimate (sometimes uncomfortable) story in tight intimate

spaces: bedrooms, living rooms, garages, cafés, bars and lofts. Finally I would write about the tour. Not as a way to describe or translate the performance itself (Elyse Pineau gnashes her performer/academic teeth on this dilemma wonderfully in “*Nursing Mother* and *Articulating Absence*”) but as a way to think about why live performance is important to me. What is unique about a live, in-the-room performance?



STINKING PRESENCE

Wait a minute. Why bother with the tour? At all? Why not just post my performance on the wonderful World Wide Web? Performance artist Erin O’Brien often has new friends and acquaintances ask her, “Can I see your work online?” And Erin says with an exasperated shrug, “Um. No.” Sitting in a room with 1 to 5,000 friends/strangers all focused on an event happening 3 to 100 feet away is a very different experience from looking at a 240x180 pixel, 8-frame per second Quicktime video hiccuping and freezing on a virtual desktop while the user checks their email and I.M.’s their mom.

Now, I know that there are all sorts of amazing things happening online (the blossoming of collective intelligence, participatory cultures, and transmedia storytelling chronicled in Henry Jenkins’ *Convergence Culture*). I’m not trying to set up a this-is-better-than-that dichotomy. However, in the rush to press our noses against the window at the pretty technology store, a lot of us seem to forget that there’s a whole world of experience that is not included in the current web-tech paradigm. Stroking a sick lover’s hair. Rubbing their feet. Drinking a glass of beer. Blowing

on a cup of tea to cool it down. Depth of field? Hot? Cold? Vibration? Body language? The standard GUI/keyboard/mouse/online scenario creates flat conflationary experiences privileging sight and sound while ignoring the other special senses smell and taste, and the somatic senses or “flesh-bound” senses - touch, thermoception, nociception (pain), proprioception and balance. Recent neuroscientific and sensory anthropological findings are showing us that these other-sensory-perceptions have everything to do with proximity.

Technologists (and their corporate sponsors) seem to think that bandwidth will eliminate distance. With more bandwidth you get a smoother flow of information - one step closer to flawless technology. One step closer to magic. In a discussion about bandwidth somebody usually brings up an example that starts like this: “Let’s say you can’t make it to the thing because you’re busy...” (when I see that commercial where the dad is in the airport calling his child halfway around the world to “tuck her in” I have to leave the room). Jenkins talks about being able to go to a club or concert just by turning on your phone (although I doubt the speaker on his mobile is going to have enough bass to physically shake his pants and I bet he’s not going to have that weirdly pleasant feeling where your ears are ringing and your body is vibrating because the music is so loud). I’ve listened to people talk about performances where the string section is in Sydney, the percussionists are all in London, the woodwinds are at Lincoln Center and the trombonist is stuck on the Santa Monica Freeway (he couldn’t make it, he was busy), but luckily he’s got his Blackberry so he can phone in his part to the network. Mr. McLuhan? Kit Galloway, Sherrie Rabinowitz? Your global village is here. But, the idea is pretty much the same that you guys had back in the ‘70’s. Some of it even LOOKS the same as your 1974 Electronic Café International.

You stay waaaaaay over there. And I'll be waaaaaay over here - on the other side of the planet. And by looking at each other on this big TV screen we can DANCE together.

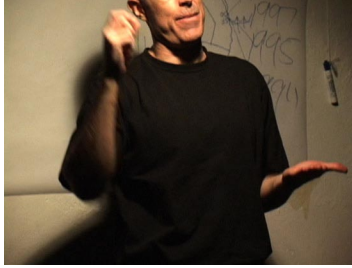
Maybe this is the victory of uptight-sparkly-white society? It's clean! It's eeelectronic! No dirt! No smell! No nasty fluids, uncomfortable engorged organs or awkward gassy moments! I know plenty of folks that love to make this stuff – but if you're not personally performing – well ... the work isn't so great. It might just need more bandwidth.

I like dancing with people that I can touch and smell and taste. Live performance gives my life purpose and meaning. I like seeing it. I like making it. I feel like I can do anything when I'm performing – fly, travel through time, control the weather, read minds, predict the future, tell the truth - all of that – and it's the down-at-the-roots presence that brings it home: ritual, jazz, prayer, meditation, rock n' roll, rants on the street, dance, theater, live, unmediated sitting-in-the-room-all-sweaty-and-teary - there can be something holy in live performance and a huge part of this holiness is being there. “The tick tock of our watches is so mechanically jerky that we no longer have ears subtle enough to hear the passage of time.” (Bachelard 167)

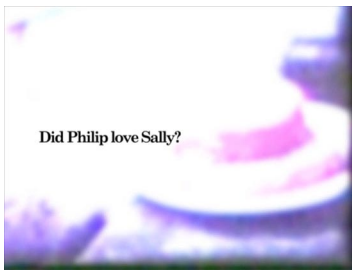
THREADS IN CALIFORNIA



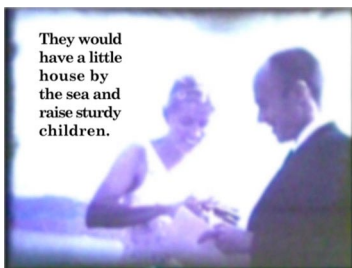
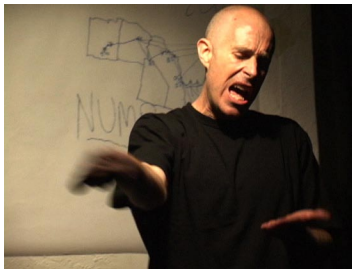
The tick-tock of my watch was very loud - I'd lost the ability to hear anything, let alone the subtle passage of time. I was numb. One of the reasons I made *The Land of Enchantment* was to try to make sense of the numbness. I kept trying to find ways to reconnect with the feeling that my existence was not completely



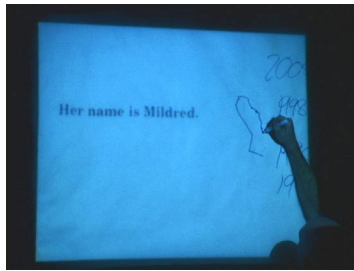
predictable and mediated. It sounds heavy and self-important, but I wanted to feel like my life was authentic. Usually I could rely on a few activities to feel fully alive: performing, driving across the country, and sex. But, during the Days of Numbness, nothing seemed to work.



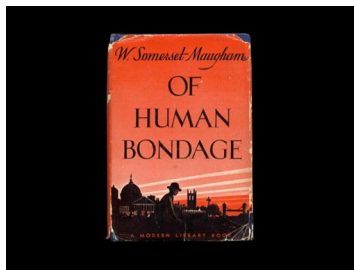
I decided to weave three narrative threads through the performance. Each thread would wind through a faulty map. One thread – the stories about a spoken-word tour I took through California, Nevada, Arizona and New Mexico – combined performing and driving long distances. Another thread, my spiraling marriage, traced, among other things, what seemed to be the end of my sexual existence. The tour and the relationship had stories that happened in the same towns and places – the stories of these two threads winding through each other geographically and emotionally. For the performance, we treated the spoken-word tour sections with poetry-slam energy: (amped and loud with microphone, rhythmic, funny). We approached the relationship sections as a fourth-wall-less conversation.



For the third thread I made a series of short animated videos that were projected over a large sheet of paper. While each video was



projected, I drew (physically) California, Nevada, and the other states, gradually forming an upside down map of the U.S. (an upside down flag is an official signal of distress) on the sheet of paper. The animations were about a novel.



“*Of Human Bondage* is a book by Somerset Maugham. I love this book. For fifteen years I used the book like a map to navigate my life. This is how I remembered the book ending: Philip marries a woman he was fond of but who he didn’t love. They would move to a little house by the sea. He would have a small medical practice and watch all the ships sail off to the lands he would never visit. They would raise sturdy children. I thought the book was about compromise for the sake of survival. I read the book again. It was even better this time around. And you know what? Somehow I got it wrong the first time I read it. It’s not about compromise. Not even close. For fifteen years I’ve been living my life using a map that’s all wrong.” (Weaver)



MAHALIA, THE REAL DEAL AND ESSENTIALISM

Here’s another “map” I misread: Benjamin’s “Art In The Age Of Mechanical Reproduction.” For years I had understood that “aura” was a bad thing, connected to cult values and animism. Reading the essay now, I realize he wasn’t down on aura. Benjamin was down *with* aura. He

liked it. For Benjamin, to have authenticity was to have aura. And for our densely replicated, commodified, big-box-store, video-on-demand, online, celebrity culture any hint of the authentic is rare, rare, oh-so-very-rare.

The Authentic? There's that word again. So. What is *that*? I was at a talk by Professor Kenneth Warren. Warren spoke about Ralph Ellison's idea that cosmopolitanism depended on pockets of semi-unadulterated cultures, neighborhoods and places where the "old country" still exists: Chinatown, Little Italy, The Mission, Koreatown, Harlem, Greenpoint, Jewish delis, Jamaican radio, churches, synagogues, mosques. The bohemian cosmopolite skims these pockets of "intact culture" like she's pushing a tray down a postmodern, trans-cultural buffet. Maybe she has brunch at the Cuban joint, hangs out for the jazz/jam service at the Church of John Coltrane, and watches Fassbinder films at the Goethe Institute. She forms a patchwork-life. She doesn't necessarily participate directly in the cultures, but, through an American-hipster-quilting-bee process, forms a new kind of authentic life. A patchwork-life not born from a melting-pot, but stitched together like a charmingly beautiful young Frankenstein – all the sutures visible, all the parts intact.

Ellison loved the radio. He loved that people who had never been in the room with Mahalia Jackson could hear her sing – people like the little man behind the stove in his "The Little Man at Chehaw Station" essay. Mahalia's been dead for 36 years and we can still hear her sing. Or can we? Is it live or is it Memorex?

I asked a question about Mahalia singing in her favorite place to sing: church. It seemed

to me that if cosmopolitanism depended on pockets of “intact” non-hyphenated older culture, that somewhere in that long chain of cultural-skimming one would have to finally bump into The Real-Deal: the headwaters, the source - The Singer From Which Every R&B/Soul/Gospel-Singer Flows. Isn't this what cosmopolitanism depends on? Points of origin? Moments of authentic experience? Moments where the performer, the audience and the place cook up some aura and everybody can feel it rippling through the hairs on the collective backs of our collective necks?

Well, my head got bitten off by an exasperated English professor, “Look, don't bore me with Essentialism.” I didn't have anything to say at the time – I wish I was better with the quick lethal banter - but his exasperation stuck with me and has bugged me ever since. Clearly this guy wasn't a performer. Clearly this guy hadn't seen a live performance in ... well, maybe he's never seen a live performance? At least a good one... yes, there are few things worse than a bad live performance. I know Essence is a dirty word. I understand that at its most basic, visceral level, Essentialism is dangerous because it can turn cultural assumptions and stereotypes into government/corporate policy which, at it's most horrific, has found expression in genocide. I wasn't intending to equate Essentialism with “Aura” or “The Authentic.” But I know that if I was sitting in the front pew and Ms. Mahalia Jackson was singing, tapping her feet fifteen feet away, it would have been an outrageously different experience than hearing a recording of the performance. For me, the folks in the church who experienced her live performances WIN over the folks who are left with her recordings.

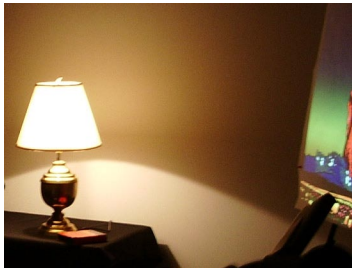
The feeling that I got performing for an audience is what I connected with in my first

performance-art forays. Lippard writes about the body artists of the '60's and '70's in *Overlay*. Carolee Schneeman in an orgy of flesh. Vito Acconci masturbating under a floor. Chris Burden getting shot at with a gun. Gina Paine cutting herself. The artists explored rituals, which, on the surface, seemed to be similar to those of ancient hunter-gatherer societies. In a particular light, these artists seemed to be asking if there was a basic essence to being human.

In *Mixed Blessings* Lippard steps away from her ideas in *Overlay*. Why, she asked, were early 20th century European male artists (Modigliani's sculptures and Picasso's paintings are great examples) suddenly painting and sculpting images that looked like they'd been hijacked from Africa? The Noble Savage myth (the innocent, Edenic human - honest, pure, closer to God) had been swirling through Europe for 150 years. The European intelligentsia seemed to say, "We want to be pure. We want to be closer to God. So we will make our work look like the work of Primitive Man." There are hints of this impulse in the body artists from the '60's and '70's. But Lippard said, "Hang on. What about context? Where is that mask from? How was it used? What about that statue? What's its story?" She said, "It's not my story. It's not your story." She said, "Tell your own story." She said, "Look at your own past. Your own ancestors."

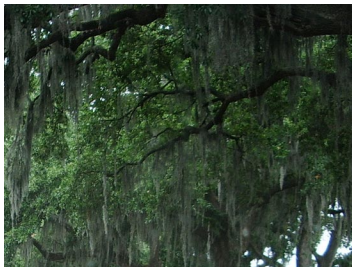
But, as Judith Halberstam points out, not everyone inherits their family or their past: "... queer genders profoundly disturb the order of relations between the authentic and the inauthentic, the original and the mimic, the real and the constructed ... there are no true accounts of 'passing lives' but only fictions, and the whole story turns on the production of counterfeit realities that are so convincing that they replace and subsume the real." (45)

When I read *Mixed Blessings*, I thought to myself, “Shit. My past? Middle American suburban hetero white culture? What’s new about that story?” But I slowed down. O.k. My middle name is Kerr. Where’s that from? How did I get here? Who do I want to be? Who am I anyway? Maybe the path through the minefield that is Essentialism is the path of specificity: tell your own story.



CATS IN SAVANNAH

O.k., my story. The way I started making *The Land of Enchantment* was writing down everything I could remember about living in California. All the stories. Ocean, mountains, deserts, forests – all of these traditional spirit-seeking spaces are nearby San Francisco. San Francisco attracts a lot of seekers. Lots of seekers, lots of different ways to seek, lots of subcultures, lots of fakers and a very few shining prophets. Lots of stories. Maybe it’s these subcultures and their shared overlapping stories that make up a global community of self-styled “outsiders”? Bohemians. Musicians. Hipsters. Hippies. Artists. Gadflies. Nerds. Aesthetes. Activists. Polyamorists. Assholes. Innocents. Horny fuckers. Intellectuals. Sentimentalists. Dreamers. Maybe this was the sort of audience I would find on my tour?



I head down to Savannah, Georgia to do my little performance in a little coffee house called The Sentient Bean. The Sentient Bean is co-owned and co-operated by Kelli Pearson, a friend of my friend Michael Farkas and his band The Wiyos. They schedule live music, a regular film series, poetry slams, and performing anomalies (such as myself). The Bean let me have all the coffee I could drink. They fed me. They passed the hat and gave me the collected money. I take a picture of the audience. I decide that I will take pictures of all the audiences in all the odd little places that I perform this piece. Who's in this audience? Art students and their professors, the café faithful, recent West Coast transplants, fellow monologists, the curious, the noncommittal. Most of the audience and I went to a luau after the show. I slept on Kelli's couch with her cats.

SITTING IN PLACE

Who is your audience? Hmm. Tricky. Who are your people? I'm not talking about the faceless mass audiences of popular culture (millions), I'm talking about the audience of unpopular culture. In "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin proclaims the death of storytelling. According to Benjamin, storytelling's fatal disease was mechanical warfare and entertainment – the end of boredom – and its most telling symptom the end of the shared local experience, the end of community. Seventy years after Benjamin wrote his essay, it seems that, yes, we've kicked boredom's ass. I'm so un-bored I'm frozen with indecision – so much to do! Multi-tasking and attention-deficit-disorders are the norm. Daily life is hyper-linked. The point of the net is to surf,

to skim over the surface of the virtual ocean, moved by whatever wave happens to be coming in at that moment. It's about horizontality and speed. The point of prayer, meditation and, perhaps, live performance is to be present - to calm the mind (or leave it) – to sit still and drop vertically into yourself. It can be very slow. It might even be boring.

In his novel *The Road Home*, one of Jim Harrison's characters wonders if meditation was born from hunters needing to remain still for long periods of time. The subtle rewards for this sort of patience don't have the immediate pop-culture gratification Jenkins writes about. "In a hunting culture, kids played with bows and arrows. In an information society, they play with information." (Jenkins 130). We're dismissing entire worlds of experience because it can't be digitized. Isn't playing with bows and arrows filled with information? Can't you find information through sitting completely still? This information needs to be embodied, not broken into 1's, 0's and \$'s.

In *Arctic Dreams* Barry Lopez writes about how - for some nomadic-hunting cultures (Kurna, Arunda, Walbiri and other Australian aborigines; Kalahari Bushmen; Paluwatan natives of the Caroline Islands in the South Pacific; Eskimo; Lakota Sioux to name a few) - language, maps, myth, stories, history, ancestry, the land – all become inseparable: stories are maps, language is spirit, history is place. "The people, many of them, have not abandoned the land, and the land has not abandoned them. It is difficult, coming from cities far to the south, to perceive let alone fathom the richness of this association, or assess its worth. But this archaic affinity for the land, I believe, is an antidote to the loneliness that in our own culture we associate with individual estrangement and despair." (Lopez 266).

It seems that this “affinity for the land” which Lopez sees in nomadic cultures is related to our Western notion of “place.” We’re not tuned into the subtleties of shifts in the wind, the widening cracks in the ice, or changes in the tide anymore – “place” is constructed through our ideas of Self, what solitude means and what it means to be part of a community. Clearly, the notion of “community” has shifted since Benjamin’s time. Lippard reasons “In the absence of shared past experience in a multi-centered society, storytelling and old photographs take on a heightened intensity... Where once the stories detailed shared experiences, today it may be mostly the stories themselves that offer common ground. Once you start hearing the stories, you are becoming a member of the community.” (*The Lure of the Local*, 50) This seems to describe virtual communities very well – a blog’s shared stories, conversations and photographs. But what is missing from a blog and a website is a literal grounding of the neighborhood. A place with air and physicality. Perhaps the sense of cultural despair that Lopez speaks of comes from our utter ignorance and dismissal of embodied information, the information we find being in Place. The Local doesn’t matter.

BEER IN RICHMOND



You can get to Richmond, Virginia from Savannah, Georgia faster than MapQuest says you can. Even without driving fast. You can drive, oh, let’s say 5 mph over the speed limit and you’ll still get there faster than the MapQuest estimate. In designing the show for traveling solo (no tech support) to small, non-techy venues, I wanted to fit the show in a couple of bags. I put all



my video and sound cues on a DVD, and – with a remote for my laptop – choreographed all of the “button-pushes” into the piece. All the lighting is done with little footlight clip-ons and a table lamp. Every part of the show is do-it-yourself-absolutely-solo. My friends Elizabeth and Bob have hooked me up to present the performance at Flat International, a gallery in Richmond. Bob teaches in the Kinetic Imaging Department at VCU, so the audience is mostly students and faculty members. Everyone’s drinking beer, eating pretzels and sitting in folding chairs. They listen. They laugh. They suck in their breath. We talk afterwards. They’re excited. I’m glad I came.

PHYSICAL COMMUNITY

So let’s talk about community – 21st century community in a specific physical geographic space. Not your 2nd Life community. Not the World of Warcraft community. Not the greater blogging community. I’m talking about corporal, stinking, sweating bodily community – the kind of community that gets cancer, the kind of community that can keep you up late at night because of their shitty music, the kind of community that will stand in line for hours and hours to donate blood even though they still haven’t found any survivors. Bill Talen’s Reverend Billy character is at home with the idea of Home. Billy’s ideas grow from “Give us your poor, your tired, your huddled masses” open-armed egalitarianism. He’s about relationships, love, families, taking care of each

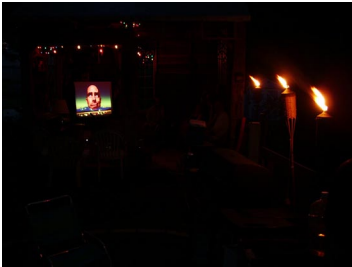
other, living a life of dignity, having respect for your home, taking care of your place. How could you argue with that? What his brilliant-ridiculous-dead-on oratories point out is the double-speak that's become the accepted norm in advertising, politics and our increasingly corporate world.

The '90's saw Disney and other corporations literally buy New York's raw and raunchy Times Square neighborhood and squeeze it into a sanitized, family-friendly mall. For Reverend Billy, it was a perfect metaphor: Corporate-Amusement-Park as Neighborhood. The Disney Store (right next to the Broadway theater showing Disney's *The Lion King*) seemed to be the jewel on this metaphoric crown. The store became Billy's guerrilla theater. Through street-performances (the crazy street-preacher as his model, a megaphone at his lips), solo theater events (followed by trips to the Disney Store with the audience after the show), and direct in-store interventions, the Good Reverend valiantly battled for the stories of Times Square - stories that might as well have come from a different planet than Benjamin's craftsmen. Billy armed his audience with fake cellphones and sent them into the Disney Store to argue loudly and intimately with an imaginary loved one about why they wouldn't buy the Pluto doll. He found that store personnel wouldn't interrupt a personal call. After arrests and a court order to remain 400 yards from the Disney Store, Billy moved on to other battles with monoculture and consumerism. Recently he's fought to preserve Manhattan's 9th and 2nd Avenues' lack of big corporate chain stores. He and his Church of Stop Shopping choir have preached and sang against Starbucks, Walmart, and Victoria's Secret in New York City, California and other parts of the country. In a short documentary about Billy and his church, the Reverend says, "You can't tell a certain length of story in a big-box store... You'll get arrested!"

Only a particular type of performance is allowed in corporate public space. Don't talk too loudly, don't talk too softly, don't move your head too abruptly, don't flail your arms, don't sweat too profusely, don't swear, don't run, and please don't linger - keep moving. If you are a bump in the consumer road, get the hell out. That's what it's come down to - like Benjamin's vanished storyteller, Reverend Billy knows the direct link between the anti-story of congeal-and-conquer corporate monoculture and the loss of local stories, their neighborhoods, communities. The loss of their place.

There are plenty of folks making work that uses technology to actually celebrate being in a room (or on the street) with others and explores new ways of storytelling. Kevin Hamilton, and other critical spatial practitioners are using global positioning system (GPS) technology to explore ideas about place and the body. Ryan Griffis uses cellphones to create audio tours of places like parking lots and hazardous waste sites. The Institute for Applied Autonomy repurposes Defense Department technology for activism. One of their projects is "TXTMOB, a cellphone text message broadcasting system, which allows activists who are distributed throughout a city to remain organized during chaotic street protests. TXTMOB users are able to use their cellphones to send up-to-the minute text messages to hundreds and thousands of other TXTMOB users, containing vital information regarding needed medical assistance, protest meeting points, and police blockade locations. Used effectively during the 2004 Republican Convention, demonstrators used text messaging to converge on protest targets with little or no advanced warning catching law enforcement off guard. Tipped off by TXTMOB messages, protestors were able to disperse before police reinforcements arrived, only to reconvene around a new target moments later." (*Institute for Applied Autonomy*)

FRANKENSHED IN MARYLAND



Suburbezerk in Hyattsville, Maryland. We didn't need TXTMOB to gather ten people to Johnna Schmidt and Chris Brophy's backyard shed. Johnna and Chris live and work in Hyattsville. I met them in San Francisco. Johnna and I were resident artists at Bindlestiff – a wee theater set amongst the Tenderloin's methadone clinics. Johnna – writer, dancer, performer – teaches at the University of Maryland's Writer's House. Chris, one of the founders of Dude Theater, had long been tapped into Climate Theater, Life On The Water, Magic Theatre and all-things-theatrically-glorious in San Francisco. He staged a boxing match between himself and Contraband-er Keith Hennessy. Chris and Johnna's careers have seen Rockefeller grants, roles in top-end regional theaters, running their own junk/coffee shop in Williamsburg and performing their piece *Sexy, Bloody, Dirty, Scary* from the east coast to the west coast of Canada's Fringe Festivals. They ran all their tech on-stage with foot pedals and hand switches. Despite good Village Voice and New York Times reviews for their *Sexy...* production in Manhattan's HERE theater, they couldn't compete with Cameron Manheim's solo about being a fat girl. The lines were out the door for the TV



star. Johnna and Chris know big audiences and small audiences. And they definitely know DIY. They made a couple of kids. Chris built a shed in their backyard. He calls it The Frankenshed. They invite a few friends over, we light some mosquito coils and some tiki torches, and I perform in the Frankenshed. During the show, the bright-white projection screen for the videos and my drawing of the upside down U.S. map became a magnet for bugs – I was drawing on a screen of bugs.

BODY MAPS, AURA AND THE WHITE LAB COAT

When I stop worrying about the lack of cultural capital accrued by performing in tiny places like the Frankenshed, I find a deep pleasure in living room salons and do-it-yourself house performances. You don't need anybody's permission to make something or be something. There aren't any commercials or gatekeepers. Henry Jenkins and others theorists write about cultural production and economies, producers and consumers. He talks about "consuming media." He's writing about capitalism. I guess when I'm making the work and performing the work I'm connecting with what I end up describing as spiritualism, not capitalism (well...it doesn't take much to bump into capitalism – I'm an educated white male able to go on non-profitable, barely breaking-even "tours" funded by a big university ... but if I wasn't doing this tour, I'd find some other way to perform. I do it myself. If I couldn't perform I would be a deeply depressed human being). When I'm performing, there aren't any consumers in the audience. There are people. Sitting. Right over there. And, although, I'm not touching them...

I can practically feel them.

In his book *Impro*, Keith Johnstone cites Stanislavsky's description of a performance where the actor Salvini "...took the entire audience of the great theatre into his hands. It seemed that he did this with a single gesture – that he stretched out his hand without looking into the public; grasped us all in his palm and held us there as if we were ants or flies." Johnstone goes on to quote acting teacher Jean-Louis Barrault: "Just as the earth is surrounded by an atmosphere, the living human being is surrounded by a magnetic aura which makes contact with the external objects without any concrete contact with the human body. This aura, or atmosphere, varies in depth according to the vitality of human beings... Any man who moves about causes ripples in the ambient world in the same way a fish does when it moves in the water." (58)

Well, skeptically speaking, this is very... "creative," but, come on, Stanislavsky and Barrault are THEATER artists! Spare me the mystical hocus-pocus. I realize that pure science is under attack just as much as the arts and humanities, but the scientist in me would like reproducible measurements and the reassurance of a lab coat. Can "aura" be quantified? $A+B=C$? Is it related to physical presence? Mahalia's in the church and we're there with her in the pews - an exchange of energy between audience and performer? Pheromones! There have to be some pheromones involved, right? Smell. Taste. Touch. A blurring synesthesia? In Richard Powers' *The Goldbug Variations* a project director, presented with an elegant solution that sinks under the waves of laboratory evidence proclaims, "So goes poetry. Shipwrecked on shoals of fact." But sometimes science hasn't quite caught up with poetry.

Sandra Blakeslee and Matthew Blakeslee's *The Body Has A Mind Of Its Own* is all about "body maps." It seems that aura is getting pretty damned close to quantification. Your self doesn't start or stop with your physical body – it extends into the space around you. Space-mapping neurons known as "place cells" allow us to mentally map rooms or spaces. Place cells kick in when you're walking through your bedroom in the dark, not bumping into lamps and bureaus. "Grid cells" are context-independent and allow us to navigate without landmarks. "Mirror neurons" are a special set of cells found in particular body maps that are critical to empathy, imitation, and the ability to read the intentions of one another. Together, place cells, grid cells and mirror neurons help form our brain-body peripersonal space maps. An expert rider and her horse merge their body maps to become a single entity. So do passionate lovers. Perhaps, when it comes to performance, Benjamin's aura is the merging of performer and audience body maps? A lot of the findings in the Blakeslees' book sound just like Johnstone's descriptions of performer, audience and theatrical space.

This work has incredible implications. "Meaning is rooted in agency (the ability to act and choose), and agency depends on embodiment. In fact, this all is a hard-won lesson that the artificial intelligence community has finally begun to grasp after decades of frustration: nothing truly intelligent is going to develop in a bodiless mainframe. In real life there is no such thing as a disembodied consciousness." (Blakeslee, 12)

O.k., what else is out there in science-land? How about this: the heart has a magnetic field. You can measure it. The heart has memory. Really? Yes, the heart remembers things. They've found that

the heart contains brain cells. Literally. I saw this on TV (so it's true) - *Mindshock*, a documentary on Channel 4 in Edinburgh. The heart has a magnetic field that is 5000 times as powerful as the brain's magnetic field. And sometimes, with heart transplants, the people who receive the heart also receive the desires, talents, tastes and memories of the donors. So what happens when you have an audience? All of those hearts beating together? All of those magnetic fields merging, coalescing and remembering. It sounds corny, but The Scientists are legitimizing everything The Artists have always said about The Heart: The Heart is sentient. It feels. It remembers. It pines and yearns and leaps with joy. It senses its brothers and sisters. The Poets have said it for centuries, but now, The Scientists are beginning to be able to measure the depth of The Heart.

Maybe paying attention to our body maps is a human need, like food, water, air and sex? Maybe if we stopped trying to tuck loved-ones in with cellphones, our bodies thousands of miles away from each other, there would be fewer school-killings like Columbine and Virginia Tech, fewer people "going postal"? Yes, I'm being reductive (as if these tragedies could be averted with more hugs and "live performances") but I think we're finding out that a hug is more complicated than it seems. Because as we become further and further "connected" through the disconnection that is the web/email/cellphone/network+cable TV ... if you're in cyberspace nobody can feel any of those corny magnetic hearts beating as one. Yes. Super corny. But true.

FIRE IN BROOKLYN



Studio 111 in Brooklyn, New York. My heart will beat with more San Francisco ex-pats. Kenn Watt, Tanya Calmoneri, Alan Willner and Gillian Chadsey. Who is my audience? My friends. Many of them already saw a version of the show at Dixon Place. I feel vaguely guilty – a sense that I should be giving them something they’ve never seen – a sense that they are there to “show their support.” That’s fine if you’re in your 20’s, but, gee Deke, you long-in-the-tooth-geezer, shouldn’t you be over ‘needing support’ by now? The fatigue of the New York audience member can be palpable. The reason it feels like they’ve seen it all is because, in many cases, yes, they HAVE seen it all and they are exhausted from seeing it all. They mostly want to sit in front of a fire and read a book – or, better yet, watch TV.

AUTHENTICALLY SUCKING

O.k., if “aura” and “the authentic” are such big deals how come it’s so hard to get a live audience to watch your live performance?

Well, duh.

For one thing, it's not convenient and it's not cheap. You have to turn off the TV, heave your fat ass off the couch, put on some shoes and leave the house. The performance starts at 8pm, you can't Tivo it, and – for the love of Christ – there is NO LATE SEATING. TV is free (well, o.k., it's not free – but you can buy one for \$5 at the Goodwill). Movies are \$10 or so. Depending on how many “off's” you have in front of “Broadway” your theater ticket could cost anywhere between nothing (if you're ushering, know somebody, or come to one of my shows) and a zillion dollars (hellooooooh opera buffs). Maybe it's marketing? How can you convince people that this fabulous event is going to be worth this getting-out-of-the-house effort? Another reason it could be hard to get a live audience to watch your live performance is that you... yes, you... the performer... your live performance might just suck.

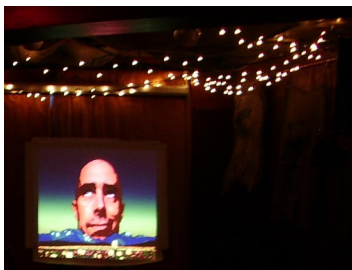
There's nothing worse than watching somebody pretend to ooze aura. There's a lot of shit out there. On the bad days, one of the first things on the block for me is that, well, maybe I suck? A cheeky paper in Edinburgh reviews Festival Fringe performances not with a scale of one to five stars but with a scale represented by shot glasses – how many drams of whiskey you have to drink to get through the show. Five shot glasses: bad. One shot glass: good. On the other hand, where can the intrepid performer test something? Theaters dedicated to new work are exceptionally rare. Those dedicated to experimentation – trying the untried? Very rare indeed. Theater and performance isn't created in a vacuum. These days experimentation in public can be dangerous – people might mistake it for the final product or a terrorist attack. Even seasoned producers can fall prey to mistaking works-in-progress as final.

But when a live performance is good? There's nothing like it: Karen Finley in a small

club, Philip Seymour Hoffman and John C. Reilly in *True West*, Dustin Hoffman and John Malkovich in *Death of a Salesman*, Colin Wood wearing Snoopy boxers pops out of a trunk on a tiny San Francisco stage and asks for a raise, Jim Cave and Debbie Gwinn perform all the characters of *Romeo & Juliet* to the *West Side Story* soundtrack in a Vermont barn, Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters, John Coltrane, Charlie Mingus, Laurie Anderson in *Happiness*, Kevin Kline in *Henry IV*, James Scruggs in *Disposable Men*, Mary Louise Parker in *Proof*, Kiki and Herb singing their hearts out.

“But wait,” you say, “Who’s to say a performance is good? What does ‘good’ mean anyway?” O.k., I see the point. I guess that’s where we trot in that “community” word again. Certain stories told by certain performers resonate with particular people. And that’s when you can sit in a packed house and “hear a pin drop” or watch an “audience rise as one” in a “thunderous standing ovation.” I’ve been in an audience where we “leapt to our feet.” It really happens.

SPECIAL IN VERMONT



The baby dykes running the coffee bar at the Langdon Street Café in Montpelier, Vermont said, “We’ve never seen anything like that before.” And I said, “That’s right sister. Uh... there’s nobody like me. At least here in Montpelier. Nobody in the history of PLANET EARTH has ever done what I’m doing... today... at 8:30... here in this coffee shop in Montpelier. I am TOTALLY and UTTERLY UNIQUE.” Theater? Not really.



Spoken word? Too long. Performance art? Nah, too much narrative, too theatrical. Not enough blood. Gallery-based-visual-practice? Could you repeat that please? Storytelling? Well, I'm not reading *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, I don't have a long grey beard and live in the Ozarks and I'm not one of Benjamin's wandering seafarers or village craftsman cataloging the local gossip and myth.



In a recent late night scramble to finish a grant application I ended up checking the "OTHER" box to describe my discipline. Under "IF OTHER, SPECIFY" I typed Interdisciplinary Storyteller From The Plains.



The next morning, long after I had hit SEND, I thought to myself, "Oh my god, did I really do that? Who the hell am I?"

NOT SO SPECIAL

Look, I'm not trying to be a Luddite. I'm just waving a pom-pom for the losing team. History repeats itself because we don't pay attention. We have to keep teaching ourselves the things that are right in front of our nose. There's wisdom in live performance that's going to disappear with the passenger pigeon, the polar bear, the Arctic and winter. While the virtual world explodes with the seductive flash of instant broadband gratification the non-virtual suffers. With every acre of rain forest that is lost, with every ice-shelf that melts into the sea, with every

language that disappears, with every plant and animal and DNA combination that becomes extinct, the ancient bards of Ireland, oral traditions, the dreamings of Australia, Manhattan's Lower East Side – all of this stuff ... if it's not gone now, it's on its last legs – and when this poetic/scientific/spiritual information is gone? Well, that's all folks! It's gone. We'll have to build the wheel all over again.

But maybe rebuilding a wheel or two wouldn't be so bad. I realize many of the things I've mentioned that “can't be done with technology” ARE being done with technology – units with haptic capabilities that use computer-generated data to give someone using remote controls “feel” and “touch,” visualizations that enable us to “see” in three dimensions – and with enough time, money and brain power we will probably make the technological equivalent for all of our senses and extra-senses. It really is amazing stuff. But, here's the deal – we already have these senses and extra senses. However, if you don't use them, you lose them. We could all be highly sensitive GPS systems like the South Pacific Islanders and the Kalihari Bushmen of old. We could all relearn how to do some incredible things.

BILLBOARDS IN SCOTLAND



Maybe comic timing is one of those incredible things. It's all about reading the audience. There are a lot of stand-up comedians working the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Some have played Wembley Stadium ... right, the stadium with the giant soccer matches and The Who. There are comics that have had all of their shows sold out for a year in advance. There are



hundred thousand pound TV spots advertising particular venues and particular shows - usually comics. There are giant pictures of comedians wrapped around buses and taxis and buildings in Edinburgh. There are former Saturday Night Live performers, voices of The Simpsons, Grammy winners, and football stars playing the Fringe in Edinburgh.



I did 16 shows in Edinburgh. I learned about marketing, audience and money. I spent a lot of time on The Royal Mile handing



out fliers for my show. 3000 fliers in 16 days. I wasn't alone. It often felt like performers handing out fliers out-numbered potential audience members accepting the fliers. I ran into Sxip of the Luminescent Orchestrïi – a fantastic band from Brooklyn.



They hadn't spent very much cash on handbills. But he was spending hours on Myspace making connections and promoting their shows. Luminescent has some recordings on the web, but the main reason those recordings are online is to get people to come out to the live shows. And the shows are great.



Not very many people came to see my work. I wondered about the whole thing – philosophically. If a performer falls in the forest and nobody hears him fall – does he make a sound? Before one



particular show I sat backstage and thought, “This might be the show where absolutely nobody comes. I don’t think anybody’s out there.” I poked my head out from behind the curtain and found a single person. I went out to talk to him. He was a little embarrassed. Like he was responsible for the lack of a gracious Scottish reception. He said, “Are you sure you want to do the show? I mean, if it’s only me...” I told him I liked doing the show. I said, “If it doesn’t make you uncomfortable, I’d be happy to do the show for you. That’s why I’m here.” We chatted a little bit more and then it came out that he was a critic from The Scotsman. He’d come to write about my show. Ha. Very very funny. No, seriously. He’d come to write about my show.



Kill me. Kill me now.



But I didn’t die. And what doesn’t kill me makes me stronger. I even got a pretty good review.

SONGS FOR THE DEAD

The death of painting. The death of the novel. The death of theater. The death of God. The death of live performance. Any passionate practitioner of a medium will defend its worth. Unfortunately, convincing the unconvinced of the subtle, the intangible... it’s not easy going.

Especially when the paintings are bad, the novels are dull and the theater is unconvincing, and none of it makes a dime. The Public Theater's director Oskar Eustis writes,

“Even the act of putting on a performance is an exercise in community building; the theatre gathers together a large group of people, requires their physical presence, and places them in the same space, sharing the time and air of the artists who create the show. No one can telecommute to the theater: as soon as you aren't there, it's TV. The live presence of the artists and audiences creates, at its best, the closest thing we have to a secular church – where values and ideas and emotions are debated, experienced and processed by a group, all at the same time. When it works, audiences may walk in as consumers, individual and isolated, but they leave as part of the audience; they leave as better citizens.”

A secular church. An antidote for loneliness. An act of faith.

In my tour of small spaces I spent a lot of time with small groups ... small groups verging on non-groups. I would wonder, “If there isn't an audience, who am I performing for? Why am I doing this? Why bother?” But what if there's one person in the audience? An audience of one. That's still an audience, right? It wasn't an $A+B=C$ sort of situation. I'm not a religious person, but I thought about offering the work up - like a prayer. Like a gift. I thought about Mahalia. I'll bet she liked to perform in the church even when the congregation was still tucked in their beds.

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