



Performance Research

On Generosity

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A Rhapsody For You

HELEN PARIS

Then it was all true. I saw the skins of tigers flaming in his palace on the Grand Canal; I saw him opening a chest of rubies to ease, with their crimson-lighted depths, the gnawings of his broken heart.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

GENEROUS

I have always relished the word, stored in a pantry of similarly succulent words: gigantic, gorgeous, ginormous – full-bellied words, with excellent mouth feel. Intimately connected to the human, generosity rolls off the tongue, passes voluptuously through the lips (try it) and takes the body with it. To be generous is to be open handed, big hearted; to be ungenerous is to be tight fisted, a skinflint.

I've experienced much generosity through performance, from the audiences who take up the invitation, from collaborators from distinctly different disciplines who give of their expertise, from non-performers who turn up at the crack of dawn with open minds and hearts, and from

the hosts who have let me perform in their back gardens, bedrooms, buses and boats. So when I was invited be part of an audience of twelve to a performance called *For You*¹ I was a ready disciple. I thought: that sounds just the kind of thing, well, for me.

Saying yes to *For You* means a commitment from the start, because it all begins with you. *For You* artist Erika Chong Shuch writes,

Often times we think of performance as an opportunity to 'see'. What happens if we think about performance as an opportunity for audiences to 'be seen'? How do we build a work that does not assume audiences enter into our worlds, but rather we, the creators, enter into theirs?

And enter into your world they do.

First, the *For You* company – Chong Shuch, Rowena Richie and Ryan Tacata – come to your house. Their only request is your curiosity and time. Now, I have always had abundance of the former but the latter was in rather limited supply. My invitation to participate in *For You* came at

¹ As *For You* is made new each time it is performed, bespoke to each audience, I am not going to describe in detail the performance I experienced. For more about the project, and to apply to experience it for yourself please see www.foryouproductions



Photo Robbie Sweeney

the very moment when my partner Leslie and I decided to leave San Francisco, our home for the past seven years, and move back to London; a precarious shift in an ungenerous time, from one ruptured national politics to another.

HOME

It was an awkward moment to have people coming to my house, not only because of the clutter of half-filled moving boxes strewn about but also because in San Francisco when you sell your house you have it 'staged'. All your personal belongings are taken out and replaced with generic furniture and fixtures so the next buyer can imagine themselves living in a pristine catalogue fantasy. To save money and because we reckoned as theatre makers we should be able to stage things as well as anyone, we had already started 'staging'. As the *For You* team looked around my house to get to know *me* they were, in fact, looking at pictures, lamps and decor chosen not 'for me', but for an anonymous buyer.

And then there was the fact that I double booked my first *For You* home visit date. Glancing at my phone moments before the *For You* artists were due to arrive I read with horror,

Thursday 28th Sept, 1pm: BIOMETRICS

This was a vital stage in the progression of my US citizenship, an appointment that if

■ 'Departure Day'. Helen & Leslie photographed by their realtor, Jamie Lawrence.



I did not keep would nullify my 100-page and \$1,000 application.

The door knocker rapped. I swallowed and dashed downstairs. 'You have to take me to the USCIS Application Support Centre NOW!' I yelled at the three bemused artists on my doorstep. A moment's pause and then, 'Sure thing,' Erika said.

They bundled me into the car, zipped across town and waited at the USCIS office as I had my eye colour, weight, age and height filed, was fingerprinted, photographed and got my retinas scanned. Well, at least I was fulfilling the company's desire for creating opportunities for audiences to 'be seen'.

UPROOT

Ethnographer Nicky Gregson writes about 'the gap in accommodation' (2007) to describe the space objects enter into when they are handled in a process of decluttering or moving house. In that moment, the worth of the object is weighed. Shall I save it, or not? What memories does it hold? Are they important enough to grant its place in the 'keep' pile?

In the end, what Leslie and I most wanted to take with us but had to leave behind were our plants. After many years spent living in London, it was San Francisco that finally gave us enough cherished outdoor space to plant our first garden – Black Eyed Susans, rosemary, lavender, agave and artichokes.

'Write them all down!' Jamie our relator instructed when she came to value our house. 'Write a letter to the prospective buyer about the things you planted, what they mean to you. Buyers love that.'

Where to start? What value to place on place? On bright pink tresses of bougainvillea, flagrant against the wall, on the paper-thin rock roses or the family of camellias we nursed back to health when a freak 100-degree heat wave fried their green leaves black, or on the rows of lemon and cherry trees, the magnolia and the primrose tree, the chubby drought-tolerant succulents. To other eyes our garden is wild, perhaps a mess. To us it's a beloved wilderness. I watched Leslie rehousing cherished pot plants to give to our neighbours and I felt the tear of uprooting rip through me.

GIVE

The first piece Leslie and I made as Curious – the performance company we have co-directed since 1997 – was a live art road trip across Route 66 from Chicago to LA. We were curious about the artist's presence in cyberspace, our place in the realm of placelessness. We based the piece on the gestures of give and take, leaving a breadcrumb trail of items from home (then the UK) out on the old highway and taking what we could in the form of stories and images from the people we met in the roadside cafés and gas stations along the 2,451 mile stretch. The gestures of give and take are, for me, the essential duet of performance. However, decades later, exhausted by the stress of an international move and reeling from daily government atrocities (US and UK) I walked into Yerba Buena Arts Centre, where *For You* commenced, with very little left to give.

I have audienced numerous intimate bespoke performances. I have also made my own fair share of them. I have even been to other performances called *For You*². I tried not to curate the facts I told the artists about myself, subliminally pre-scripting my own performance, feeding them stories that might cast me in a particularly adventurous or dashing light. I tried not to have expectations about the final cut, a semi-rehearsed version of my own.

Some things we are given, like Christmas presents, are not always the things we want. They are inescapably *for us* even though we might heartily wish they were for someone else. And when a performance is called *For You*, there is, hidden in the folds, an underlying hope that you will like it ... or, if you don't, you should make a very good job of pretending that you did and definitely send a Thank You note.

In the end, *For You* was for me in ways I could never have predicted, ways that are perhaps more myself than I. *For You* reminded me of how performance can still astound.

But I need to take you back, out of the performance, back to the house and neighbourhood I am about to leave. I need you to meet my neighbours, Mark and Carolyn, so that you can understand what *For You* meant to me.



Photo Robbie Sweeney

NEIGHBOURS

I remember the first time I saw him. It was a clear navy night and I was sitting on my balcony, washed in moonlight. The old wooden lounge still held some warmth from the day in its faded green and white mattress. The Giants had just won the World Series. A man from the house across the street flung open his front door, came right outside, stood on his steps and said:

'I love you, San Francisco!'

Then he went back in, leaving his words behind him like a kiss.

A few months later he crossed the road to where I was watering the plants. 'My wife likes your flowers', he said pointing to the bright yellow mantle of Black Eyed Susans that swathed my fence. I was thrilled, I have to admit, with the sudden surprise of him coming over like that.

On warm Autumn nights, jazz music would spill from the open windows in their house.

And over the years that our back garden faced their front door, we knew little more about them than that. Privately, we christened them 'The Jazzies'. We would smile or wave when we saw them out and about. They were part of the increasingly familiar fabric of our life in Glen Park, the friendly neighbourhood, nestled alongside the eucalyptus-scented Glen Park Canyon, the most distinguished concave feature in the famously convex city.

² Including the poetic *FOR YOU* by Julie Tolentino, 2005. www.julietolentino.com

And then, after *that* election, Leslie and I hosted a comfort café in our garage. We posted notes through doors of mostly unknown neighbours that read:

Dear Neighbours, if you are heart sick over the election and its aftermath and would like to participate in giving and receiving some comfort, please drop by tomorrow from 3–5pm. We will be running a very impromptu Comfort Food Café.

Don't feel like you need to bring anything – you are welcome just to drop by. If you feel like bringing some Comfort Food pot luck that's great too. A few years ago we did an art project where we created a portrait of the city of London through the sense of smell by interviewing over 2,000 Londoners, asking 'what smell reminds you of home?' We will always remember the man, a Kurdish refugee, who got choked up with emotion and said, 'Chicken casserole. The smell of chicken casserole always brings tears to my eyes because when we arrived in this country our nextdoor neighbours brought us a chicken casserole to welcome us and we knew we were home.'

Yours in blue state esprit de corps, Helen and Leslie.

As our heartfelt notes slipped through letterboxes I wanted to wrench them back. We don't know most of these people! Too late now. The invitation had been given, who would take it up?

At 3 p.m. the next day we fussed with napkins, checked again that there were enough glasses, and waited. Ran to get more ice. Another bottle opener. Fussed with the napkins some more. And then, 'This is just the best damn idea ever.' A man in a fedora and a woman with a sleek grey bob stood at the door. 'We brought Spanakopita', Mark said. 'Home made', said Carolyn.

GIFT

The twelve of us were led into a small gallery in the Mission. In the lobby we were invited to take a fur coat from a rail before entering the space. I didn't hesitate. Shrugged mine on like a second skin. Embraced in our pelts we scattered, each seemingly led by some imperceptible thread. Installations filled the gallery in all directions. The path I took drew me to the middle of the room, to a sleek baby grand piano. A woman stood next to it pouring earth into china teacups. A man started to play the piano – trad jazz. I turned to look at him. Mark! Had he been brought in as

musical accompaniment for the event? What a coincidence! I looked again at the woman, now potting rosemary in the teacup. 'Carolyn? What brings you here?' She carefully patted the delicate roots into the soil and looked up. 'We're here for you.'

And there it was.

A small white card in the corner of Carolyn's potting table read:

The Jazzies

2017

Two performers, Kimball grand piano, live plant, teapot, teaspoon, potting soil, pots

Performed by:

Mark Plakias (Piano)

Carolyn Schultz (Gardner).

Mark Plakias plays an entr'acte of "Like Someone in Love" every ten minutes. Carolyn Schultz plants and distributes a plant in twelve pots.

My neighbours in an installation in a San Francisco art gallery. For me.

This extraordinary thing that performance can do. Can give. This was a gift I didn't know I wanted and it was the best gift I could possibly have been given.

Can impact be measured by the depth and quality of the conversation we have with our audiences before, during, and after the culminating performance events? We're moving away from the idea of trying to affect the masses, to the idea of more consciously and deeply affecting the lives of very few. (Erika Chong Shuch)

Is it a good performance or a generous one? Perhaps intention is the key. For me generosity lies in commitment. The commitment of the *For You* artists was there full force in the quality of the attention that was paid, in the deepness of the listening. This listening was tuned not to details that might make the performance funny or clever or conceptually brilliant – though it was all of that.

They listened to **who we were**.

And the thing is, **looking back**, I don't even remember telling them about **The Jazzies** that day they came round or on the subsequent meeting over **spicy cocktails** in the Mission. That's what I mean, **you see, about how** very deeply they listened.

GIFTS:

a slim black YSL lipstick mirror in a patent leather case;
four expertly rolled joints (these are tales of the city after all);
a handful of yew berries (poisonous);
a feathered felt fascinator, mustard yellow;
nine hours of performance;
two dates – one featuring a drive to the biometrics centre downtown on Broadway;
a three-course dinner and bespoke cocktails – a feast concocted from the stories, memories and experiences of twelve women who had never met;
Merrill's faux fur coat (still to be returned);
and Mark and Carolyn, my neighbours, The Jazzies

For You is generous to a fault, shimmering on a faultline, for it is also a performance about this city, about the people who make art in this city, a city that is increasingly impossible for artists to live in as growing ranks of Google buses plough up the streets, and new skyscrapers gleam like old amalgam fillings. And yet. Behind the scenes of *For You* were twenty-seven people who drove cars, organized, cooked meals, cleaned and performed feats of extraordinary timing so that we twelve were borne through the city. Carried to the secrets the city still holds tight – to the diner on the edge of town where, through the sticky analogue technology of juke boxes in cracked leather booths, we time travelled back to the other San Francisco.

I LOVE YOU SAN FRANCISCO.

I pause from writing and look across the street. I notice how some of the Black Eyed Susans have migrated into The Jazzies' garden. In that primary splash of orange yellow I feel the imprint of my *For You* performance. Usually in thrall to the ephemerality of liveness, now I crave permanence. *For You* is riven through me, its inky tattoo syringed into my cells. I know its shape. I know its biometrics.



For the most part, it will lie dormant as I work on my next project, teach my classes, swap SFMOMA membership for the Tate Modern, go out to dinner with old friends. Then, suddenly, it will flood me, knock me sideways as I re-experience the overwhelming fullness of the moment when every one and every thing disappeared and I experienced a headrush of my own wonder.

Then it was all true. As vulnerable, as romantic, and – yes – as *willing* as Nick Carraway, I believe again. I grasp for the words to lay out before you – rubies of words to reflect this experience and how it radiates still.

This generosity of *knowing* and being known. In a world of fake news, hashtag everything, mindless tweets and Facebook bragging, the extraordinary generosity of someone listening and hearing. At a time of mass communication when messages, tweets and posts are for everyone, anyone – this was just for you.

In a home I am about to leave, in a city built on shifting plates, midst a world crumbling in greed and corruption, I find something to hold onto.

Roots.

REFERENCES

Erika Chong Shuch, email interview, November 2016.
Nicky Gregson (2011), *Living With Things: Ridding, Accommodation, Dwelling, Hereford, UK*: Sean Kingston.

■ The For You diner.
Photo Robbie Sweeney