

title



Menu ▾

how to save your own life



By Nishat Hossain

taisha paggett's

counts orchestrate, a meadow (or weekly practice with breath)

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Benches scattered across a tall, vast room confront me. All the benches, save one, line the sides of this room. I sit on this single center bench. A concerned staff appears from behind one of the many pedestalled screens displaying experimental dance videos and nervously greets me, “Umm, I may have to ask you to move, but let me check with my boss first.” A few minutes later he returns, “Anthony says we’re all good!” I soon learn the reason for his hesitation.

Heavy breathing at the entrance. A knot of languid limbs begins to make its way through the door. It’s paggett and Murugesan. Their bodies are balled together in the tenderest and oddest embrace, moving at a pace slower than the beads of sweat dripping down their foreheads and my legs. Limbs folding and opening, swaying and turning, meandering through the makeshift meadow that is the floor of the gallery space, not moving in any particular direction or style, but instead trying to find their center of balance in the body of their partner. *actions choreograph themselves* the performance note sitting on my bench reads.



All photos courtesy of Stacey McDonald

The pair's slow crawl brings them to the center and my bench. paggett sits next to me and begins gently leaning her weight on me. I lean back. My body eases itself onto hers. I rest my head on her back. My breath steadies it rhythm to hers'. We hold each other's weights, each other's breaths. She moans-sings-cries-yawns-shouts into the air through the megaphone nestled between her hands. Her sounds catch in my flesh. Her breath beats in my chest. I want to move with her. *all action, meaning starts from the breath*

She hands me her megaphone, looks at me intently, then returns to her partner. I look at the megaphone, then look at her. I imagine all the sounds I could breathe into it, and all the sounds I probably couldn't breathe into it. A sharp impulse to let loose the obscenest moan I can ungrip from my tensing muscles overwhelms me. *where does pleasure go?*

What does it mean to move? In your own body? With other bodies? Through the world? *we'll move together for ourselves, knowing we'll be seen elsewhere*



Three months later on Sunday 1:48pm June 4th 2017 I would find myself at the ICA again, and paggett's lessons about breath and movement that day would guide me through one of the most traumatic experiences I would go on to have this year. Early that morning I would reach out to a friend after having spent a night by the river dissociating. He would tell me to meet him at the ICA. I would cry my way there only for him to walk to his bike, mount it, turn the corner, and leave. Only for all the colorful and glittering promises he once made me to settle into noxious clumps of dust and plastic that would chase all the air from my lungs and leave me dying. This wasn't the first time either of us had performed this script, and nor would it be the last. Each time I tell myself, maybe this will finally be the one where he greets my pain with love. But, each time I'm always stopped at Sunday 1:48pm,

halted at an angle I do not understand, sightless save the sound wrenching up my limbs. Each time he turns his head, then turns away. Each time I'm left with the empty cup tossing about the steps we stood at, the trampled sidewalk steadying my startled limbs. *certain repetitions fail us*

Each time his soft blue eyes touch my lusting skin to smoke, each time his sweet pale hands stare my longing bones to stone, I orchestrate my breaths into a meadow to rest on, and repeat paggett's and Murugesan's performance note: *how to save your own life*

There are many approaches I could have taken to paggett's performance. I could have talked about black performance theory, body performance art, poststructuralist feminism, reenactment, dance, and other vital veins of thought. I know many will find the contents of my piece unsavory. You may ask, why are you making public a private trauma? Or what does this tell me about paggett's work? My piece isn't about paggett's work. It's about myself. How paggett and her work connect me to parts of myself I would otherwise be too afraid to confront. Attending to her work is only an excuse for me to attend to myself. Probing her art is only an excuse for me to probe the darker corners of my mind from the safety of the space her philosophy of improvisation has helped me build. *every space is a classroom*

Nishat Hossain is an Independent Visual Studies B.A. candidate at Haverford College. Her works are indelibly stamped by scarcity the same way her body and psychological welfare have been since childhood. She uses her body, the most cheaply and easily available material, to explore how its corporeal and psychic specificities clash with the habitus she continues to acquire as an artist and scholar, how her race, class, gender, sexuality, and mental illness misfire with the relationships and institutions she inhabits. Her works have exhibited nationally and internationally at venues including Anthology Film Archives, San Francisco Cinematheque, and Woodmere Art Museum.

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