

Embodied Historiography:
Rupture as the Performance of History

An article for submission to the *Performance Research* edition "On Rupture."

Contact:

Boyd Branch

boyd.branch@asu.edu

+1 602-499-5266

Erika Hughes

erika.hughes@asu.edu

+1 602-377-5481

--David Lucier (US Army, Ret.) in The Veterans Project, November 2013.

Introduction

The Veterans Project is an ongoing work of embodied historiography in which American military veterans appear onstage in an unscripted forum where they are invited to share their stories of military service and civilian life. We employ the term 'embodied historiography' to describe the practice of regarding performers as historical documents, using the act of performance to expose the subjective processing of memory and historical events through the live layering of multiple perspectives. The individual narratives that emerge during the performance are consistently interrupted and thereby disrupted through the use of an evolving media system that interjects various video, audio, and graphic media into the conversation. Those onstage do not select the media projected on a large screen behind them, but do have the ability to pause, replay, or reject each individual item as it appears. By disrupting the monolithic and uniform discourse surrounding the veteran experience in the post-9/11 United States, The Veterans Project calls attention to the contradictions inherent in a society that claims to value life and liberty but has to maintain a military to "defend" those values.

This essay offers an examination of the framing, rehearsal, performance and aftermath of The Veterans Project as it was recently staged in three locations in Arizona, a focal point for some of the most contentious ongoing political debates in the United States. We outline a methodology for embodied historiography that, we hope,

can be leveraged within other fields of inquiry for the purpose of utilizing creativity as a powerful force for community engagement.

The viewing of art occurs through a lens of personal bias, which limits the potential effect a work of art can have. Yet technological gestures enacted in the performance space can effectively rupture this process of passive political meaning-making within the spectacle, preventing the event from leading the audience to one fixed or 'logical' conclusion. Our aim is to rupture ~~the~~ teleological notions inherent to narratives as they form when an individual encounters a work of art. Embodied historiography employs technical gestures to reposition the constituted political spectacle of meaning within a constituting meaning-making apparatus. This effectively inverts the conversation from a question of *what* the meaning of a given work of art is into an examination of *how* that artwork means. Following Peter Bürger's Theory of the Avant-Garde and Vilém Flusser's Into the Universe of Technical Images, this inversion takes Bürger's art-yielding-historicization causal relationship and replaces it with an alternative Flusserian technical apparatus centered on play, restoring the avant-garde notion of art not as object but as praxis. By staging The Veterans Project as a work of embodied historiography, we seek to distinguish our activity from associations of art and performance that reinforce traditionally political, teleological, and narrative-based historical frameworks. In consciously interrupting and thereby rupturing the narratives that each individual soldier has crafted with respect to his or her own historical framing of memory, we posit that this project consciously resists teleology in both historiography and performance.

The Project

The Veterans Project has thus far been presented in three distinct Arizona locations and settings from November 2013 to May 2014: a 160-seat proscenium on the campus of Arizona State University in Tempe, an art gallery in downtown Phoenix configured to seat 20 people, and at the Arizona State Museum in Tucson, for an audience of approximately 40. A total of eight different American military veteran men and women shared stories that collectively represented every major U.S. war from Vietnam until the present. The veterans (7 from the Army and 1 former Marine) ranged in age from 22 to 70 years of age and served in varying capacities including: paratrooper, military police, nuclear biological chemical specialist, army intelligence, and infantry. Each performance was unique and yielded discussions ranging in topic from the intricacies of a bartering system for MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) that emerged during combat, to stories about the loss of friends, accounts of competitive drinking between engagements, and the infuriatingly unapologetic accounts of an unambiguous and persistent sexualization of female soldiers.

Contemporary American veteran narratives are still largely shaped by the competing tropes of valorization and victimization following American engagement in World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. Whereas soldiers returning to the United States in 1945 were met with a heroes' welcome and have been subsequently lauded as America's "Greatest Generation" throughout the following seventy years, those engaged in subsequent conflicts, most notably the Vietnam War, were regarded upon return as outliers of society, the archetype of the homeless vet serving as a by-product and painful reminder of American failure and weakness on both international

and domestic stages. Largely a conscripted population of soldiers who were forced to engage in an unpopular and ultimately unsuccessful proxy war that revealed cracks in the myth of post-WWII American utopia, Vietnam veterans returned not to a grateful public, but one that feared and despised them. These contradictory notions of heroism and suffering have informed the complicated evolution of veteran narratives in American society ever since; following the attacks of September 11, 2001 and subsequent American military engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States is again reeling from an influx of the veteran population that it struggles to cope with. Today's yellow-ribbon valorization of the veteran does not allow veterans themselves to speak, almost as if they have become heroes that should remain silent, lest their own stories complicate the hegemonic narrative of patriotism. The individual particularities of human experience in war, and the nuances of a military culture that exists to engage in conflicts fought on both the battlefield and around the diplomacy table, are reduced to a neoliberal framework of "with us, or against us." By focusing on moments of rupture in the face of would-be constructs of narrative, we seek to destabilize this binary and subsequently empower audience and performer, civilian and soldier, to participate in the formation of new, post-historical conceptualizations of these roles in society. This is of particular importance in the face of recent conflicts fought against not nation-states but rather groups and organizations. The United States is currently engaged in the longest armed conflict in its history. As our understanding of military engagement shifts from formal declarations of war to targeted strikes and ongoing foreign occupations, so too must we adapt our understanding of the complex nature of those who served.

Dramaturgy and Rupture

A dramaturgical notion of fragmentation is central to understanding how embodied historiography generates an environment wherein revelation and contradiction emerge as acts of rupture to challenge the hegemony of dominant ideological processes. We understand fragmented (and fragmenting) aesthetics in performance to be those inorganic elements that are uniquely positioned to attack the fallacy of institutional and conventional inherency. In response to 'organic' works of art that not only refuse to challenge the status quo but actually reinforces the false notion of inherent ways of being, Peter Bürger posits that the practice of the historical avant-garde distinguished itself by both its attack on the general function of autonomous art as an institution removed from life praxis, and the specific practice of art purporting to represent (natural) reality:

The opposite holds true for the avant-gardiste work: It proclaims itself as an artificial construct, an artifact. To this extent, montage may be considered the fundamental principle of avant-gardiste art. The 'fitted' (Montierte) work calls attention to the fact that it is made up of reality fragments; it breaks through the appearance (Schein) of totality. (Bürger 1984:72)

By fragmenting or rupturing any notion of a 'totality,' room is made to question politics and social order at the immediate level of the individual rather than the teleological timeline of history. Aesthetics alone, however, would be insufficient for meaningful social impact as long as art remained contained in the sanctioned gallery, theatre, and museum, separated from the praxis of life. On this front, Bürger notes, the historical

avant-garde failed in its aim when individual 'works' of the avant-garde (i.e. Duchamp's Fountain) were eventually 'accepted' back into the very institutions, galleries and halls they opposed. For this reason, he warns those who would pick up the avant-garde's mantle, "without surrendering its claim to truth, art cannot simply deny the autonomy status and pretend that it has a direct effect" (Bürger 1984: 57). Yet whereas the historical avant-garde aimed its sights at art as an institution, embodied historiography ruptures the processes through which the historical subject is narrativized - in this example, as soldier and veteran in the context of the post-9/11 United States.

The rehearsal process with veterans disrupts narrativization through an engagement with what Vilem Flusser terms the 'technical image.' Flusser suggests that society has abandoned narratology for the technical image, which he defines as "not surfaces but mosaics assembled from particles. They are therefore not prehistoric, two-dimensional structures but rather posthistorical, without dimension." (Flusser 2011: Loc 250-251). Our dramaturgy focuses on aesthetic contradictions as a means to decenter signification, with the aim of allowing questions of 'how' something means replace the 'what' of teleological imperatives. Flusser positions the 'technical image' as the contemporary usurper of history; this notion guides our treatment of recorded and repeating images and media as collective memory borne from the creative acts of individuals.

In rehearsal, this process begins with unscripted conversation. After the initial meeting together with the dramaturgical team, the veterans are introduced to our media apparatus through which they are shown a wide range of visual and auditory content about the military. A particularly large number of items are videos uploaded to sites like

YouTube and Vimeo by soldiers during recent deployments, the content of which includes parody music videos, footage of exercises and operations, instances of pranks and discipline, love letters, interactions with local populations, target practice, and diary-like musings on life in and out of the military. The selection also includes amateur videos by civilians close to those who were deployed: parents, girlfriends, children, community leaders, teachers, siblings, etc., as well as homemade videos dealing with the minutiae of daily military life. Also included are clips of classic American military films, such as Apocalypse Now, The Hurt Locker, Forest Gump, and Black Hawk Down. Most videos are between 30 seconds and one minute in duration.

Technical images operate discursively; that is, they are disseminated monolaterally through film, television and social media sites. By taking the technical images produced and distributed through these apparatuses (Youtube, Vimeo, CNN, etc.) and instead employing them discursively, as dialogical fragments, we are attempting to realize Flusser's vision of a "telematic" apparatus that can "extract it (the technical image) from the possession of the sender to make it the possession of all participants" (Flusser 2011: Loc 1843). While one may be tempted to argue that social media is already the realization of a kind of telematic production in possession of the masses, apparatuses like Google, Apple, Microsoft and Facebook actually control the organizing and distribution of content. Much in the same way that institutions engaged in the business of collecting and controlling art remove the impact of individual works, so too do these apparatuses of distribution merge images into flattening, hegemonic models that perpetuate an existing order. Flusser notes that technical images "function by means of feedback between themselves and their receivers. People pattern their

behavior according to the images, and the images pick up on their behavior according to the images, and the images pick up on their behavior to function better and better as models. The feedback is a short circuit that threatens to tip us into entropic decline and exhaust all history.” (Flusser 2011: Loc 1971) Yet dialogue through telematic operations is the means whereby we are able to break out of the feedback loop.

Our initial media-driven rehearsal sessions begat two central but distinct observations: first, the process of selecting media for this system made us each uniquely vested in the process of watching/querying the veterans. We both - independently of one another - felt as though we were posing direct questions through the particular act of media selection and curation. In the first sessions, we took copious notes during the ensuing veterans' conversations in an attempt to locate additional keywords for further video curation, assuming that through the act of selecting videos we could steer the conversation in a particular direction. However, this attempt to steer the conversation meant that our personal narratives and private political agendas had a potentially disproportionate impact on the collective conversation. This led to our second observation: our rehearsal space demands, from us, a practice that utilizes randomness to rupture dominant narratives as they form (both on the dramaturgical side as well as on the side of the veterans) without inhibiting the free flow of ideas. The revelation of the fragmentary, incomplete, subjective nature of reality rather than an (imagined) whole and complete 'natural' reality is critical to the social and political aims of this project, as it challenges insulated and preconceived notions about both the military as an institution and how the veterans no longer in its system remember themselves as soldiers.

Our observations led us to construct dialogic environments at each level of engagement with the veteran performers, and eventually the audience, in both technical as well as performative modalities. In the next stage of our rehearsal process, veterans were asked to comment on and interact with the evolving library of media both verbally, by way of conversation, and physically, by way of a device that enabled them to pause, rewind, advance, and skip each individual video. However, the selection of the videos was now made completely at random – that is, while the larger collection of media was curated throughout the rehearsal process by the dramaturgical team, each individual meeting with veterans progressed randomly, guided by the apparatus. This insertion of a level of randomness, we hoped, would disrupt any notion of an agenda within the rehearsal phase and let the technical images that emerged appear dislocated from the original sending apparatus.

Over time, the monolithic tropes of the veteran experience presented through our media apparatus effectively became broken and fragmented into the perception of structured mosaics, and eventually dissolved into decontextualized particles that were reconfigured into the more authentic expression of the individual veteran's experience. For example, the question of “did you kill someone?” is a recurring trope that presents itself both directly and indirectly in contemporary technical images. The archetype of the soldier as a righteous defender forced to kill in the name (and ideology) of one's country flattens dialogue about the veteran experience into binaries of contradiction useful for both the recruitment of soldiers (heroism) and the subsequent denial of care to veterans (unemployment, homelessness, insufficient health care). This trope can manifest as the assumptive cause of PTSD in a video such as “‘Now, After’ (PTSD From A Soldier's

POV)”, which presents a panicked young man who awakens to flashbacks of dead Iraqis, as well as in the video “Shit Civilians Say to Veterans” which presents a montage of civilians repeatedly asking veterans they just met, “have you ever killed anybody?” When clips of veterans being asked that question played randomly during a rehearsal for our first production, the veterans initially responded collectively with statements affirming the experience and expressing disgust with the question that mirrored the intention of the video. One veteran described his pat response to the question from people he doesn’t know well: ‘Yeah, and some of them were even adults!’ Similarly, a female veteran likened it to asking a woman whether she had had an abortion.

This exchange is indicative of the feedback loops that take place as a technical image hails the veteran who answers the call. However, the dialogic environment ultimately encouraged the veterans to go beyond affirmation and engage each other and themselves with questions and anecdotes related to civilian curiosity and fantasies about killing. Subsequent rehearsals randomly presented the same video during discussions that resulted in further nuance, disagreement, and challenges to the subject, effectually inflating the flattened trope into a multidimensional and ultimately unresolvable question demanding creative interaction:

I guess it’s not that surprising that it was asked, but it’s more, um, more friends I have who are civilians, they don’t really know what to ask. And how do you - they say something like thank you for your service - um, that’s a [cliché](#) but it’s also like, they don’t know what else to say. And I think that’s awkward for me too but as far as the killing someone - um, you know, I don’t really know what to say

about it. I - I just can't remember what I was like - well, I can a little bit but I can't remember what I was like when I was 17 and before that, before I joined the military. So I feel like - I might have been asking the same stupid, I guess insulting, ignorant questions. But um, it's hard for me to remember like my mindset before I actually went into the military. (Hugh Martin, The Veterans Project 2013)

These multiple viewings allowed contradictory positions to emerge. Instead of reinforcing given tropes, the act of repeated viewings encouraged a kind of productive disagreement that revealed dissent amidst the monolith's former ranks.

As the above example illustrates, embodied historiography resituates the historical participant-turned-performer (in this case, the military veteran) as a post-historical document whose personal narrative is not so much mined for information as it is treated like an opening gambit for investigation. [For an extended discussion of post-history in relation to technical images, see Flusser.]² Flusser identifies two divergent veins with respect to images: the first moves "toward a centrally programmed, totalitarian society of image receivers and image administrators, the other toward a dialogic, telematic society of image producers and image collectors" (Flusser 2011: Loc 229-230). The performative act of embodied historiography initially appears like any other artistic endeavor: a constituted spectacle of art conceived by a finite group of artists. However, through practice it becomes a constituting, dialogic, technical apparatus capable of competing with those very political and commercial totalitarian apparatuses identified by Flusser, which produce the technical imagery that defines and shapes the flattened, neoliberal society in which we currently find ourselves. The

rehearsal process is therefore not one of mastering a particular narrative arrangement, style or aesthetic as with the rehearsal of a play, but is instead rehearsal of the dialogic engagement with technical images and for the creation of new technical images that become part of the performance.

The term performance is used loosely here, and simply marks the period where an audience is invited to contribute to our emerging telematic enterprise. The audience is kept strategically outside of the embodied dialogue, and is instead asked to engage at the level of the technical image and apparatus. Following our observation about our own level of engagement regarding the selection of media, during the second performance we invited the audience to participate directly through further curation of technical images. Prior to the introduction of the veterans onstage, that audience was collectively shown videos from our evolving bank of media, and asked to vote on whether certain content would be presented throughout the evening. This process is aimed at taking the zero-sum equation of political interpretation and forming it into a plus-sum game, as the audience is caught up in the strategy of dialoguing with the veterans through videos. The selection process takes place collectively, subtly undermining the tendency for individuals to reduce a topic that is typically very political (war, soldiers, veterans) within the binaries presented by the projections of the dominant technical apparatuses in our culture.

By presenting an unrehearsed dialogue between veterans, the project relieves the audience of the burden to interpret the political agenda of the work. In being tasked with the twin jobs of identifying information and rejecting redundancies that reinforce flattened perception, audience members are in effect playing the role of historiographer

and, in so doing, are freed to engage in a kind of creative play that can potentially undermine hegemonic projections and lead to new, collective interpellations. Our ultimate purpose is to allow for the creation of a community of senders through the realization of creative improbability in both audience and performer. Pursuing the improbable establishes a framework through which all are producers and programmers ('makers'), instead of passively programmed receivers ('users'). By curating technical images for performance alongside both performers and audience members, we are implicating those gathered together with us in the performance space as distributors and producers, and repurposing the technical image as dialogue instead of mere projection.

Towards Utopia

These experiments into embodied historiography represent the first stage in a larger [performative](#) endeavor toward resisting manufactured teleological [narratives](#) that society experiences hegemonically. These initial performances sought to elevate the living, embodied subject of political and military history (the soldier turned veteran) to the level of authority that could rupture and fragment the propaganda of technical images, and then offer rupture as the means of creative engagement with the audience. The next stage of the project currently underway is the development of a telematic device capable of [disembodying](#) historiographies and turning them into pure technical images. This apparatus, an app accessible on smartphones and tablets, will allow the audience to tag, replay and remix the initial embodied conversations as they unfold and are being recorded. Each new conversation that is recorded and tagged into the

database will be constantly remixed, repurposed, and crowdsourced for information. The community will thereby be charged with creating improbable interpretations and locating discoveries about the veteran experience that can, we hope, ultimately subvert the narratives facilitating those political agendas now at play to recruit, use, and subsequently discard citizens who become soldiers.

For Flusser, Utopia means “groundlessness, the absence of a point of reference. We face the immediate future directly, unequivocally, except inasmuch as we cling to those structures generated by utopia itself” (Flusser 2011: 224-225). Such movement toward a dialogic and ultimately telematic engagement with an audience will be the activity that allows us to actively realize Flusser’s utopia. As he suggests, our hope is to cultivate a collective community invested in creative play as a counterbalance to the monolateral hegemonic processes made manifest through government and industry, which have deemed it permissible to kill its own citizens both through direct military action or afterwards, through the denial of healthcare, exposure to toxins, or allowing them to become homeless, harassed, feared or marginalized. A telematic, utopic and groundless engagement with the veteran experience is, perhaps, the only one ethically permissible for the civilian who has never experienced firsthand the intricacies of military life but is nonetheless engaged in decisions as part of a larger populace about what those individuals should do, and why, and how.

Works Cited

Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso, 2012. Print.

Bürger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-garde*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1984. Print.

Flores, Ray. *Shit Civilians Say to Veterans*. YouTube. 4 Mar. 2012. Web. 10 June 2014.

Flusser, Vilém. *Into the Universe of Technical Images*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2011. Kindle.

"Now, After" (PTSD From A Soldier's POV) [contains Graphic Imagery]. Dir. Kyle Hausmann-Stokes. Perf. SSG Kyle Hausmann-Stokes. YouTube. Blue Three Productions. Web. 10 June 2014.

Ranger Up Presents: *Shit Veterans Don't Say*. YouTube. 11 June 2012. Web. 10 June 2014.

The Veterans Project. Lyceum Theatre, Tempe AZ. 14 November 2013.