Reckoning as Performance: Language, Computation, and Ritual in the Creative Process

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I look down at my hands, twirling my ring around in my fingers. My glance shifts nervously, seeking something, not finding it. I avoid looking into the camera. A few times I inhale, pout my lower lip open, only to bite my tongue and hold my breath. The fluorescent lights buzz. There is no other sound. Time drags.

"It's on a roof," I say suddenly. For the first time I move, finding a new nook in the chair. I take a deep breath, and continue:

> It's on a roof, and it's summer. By the ocean. I'm in a black dress. And I'm tan and sweaty and salty. And all my friends are there. All the friends I ever knew. Like a funeral. And it's sunset and everybody's dancing. We've all been swimming.

The improvisation begins like that. Simple. Mundane. The thoughts stay close to the ground, within a plausible real. But with time, the words begin to take flight. The ideas become wilder, more elaborate and complex. The speaking itself becomes automatic, not in the sense of brainless or repetitive but rather in its strict etymological origin, "acting of itself."
I no longer feel it is I who speaks. The words gush out instead, pushed through a crack from somewhere else. These ideas have no prior in my mind, no internal corresponding image or argument. Rather, the thoughts are coming from my mouth–from the tongue, the teeth, the lips and the throat. From the lungs. They are born in the present. They gain speed and momentum that seem entirely independent of any effort from *me*. As I continue to speak, the ideas, images, and expressed desires take on significance and specificity far beyond anything I could have planned or composed. I was not able even to remember or understand what had been said really until the next day when I watched the video.

Whenever I talk about this improvisational technique, in which an actor is left alone in a room with a video camera and asked to speak on a given theme or question, I'm reminded of a large ravine in the woods near my house that I loved to run down as a kid. It was steep and long, and

at about the 1⁄4 mark of the run, a change occurred in the relationship between my legs and the rest of my body. Control over my locomotion would shift, from my brain telling my legs to move, to my legs propelling and directing themselves. As I ran, I had to trust my legs, while they dodged between rocks, around bushes and trees, through puddles, and over logs. After that shift, I had no control over the shape of my path. My legs and the landscape that day, whatever rain we might have recently had, or whatever branches might have fallen in the wind: these decided where and how I went. By the time I reached the bottom, regardless of my way, I inevitably had cuts, bruises and scrapes on my arms and legs, mud splatters and thorns in my clothes. And when I looked behind me, I would see how I had come, carved by broken branches, smushed moss, displaced pebbles. It was different every time.

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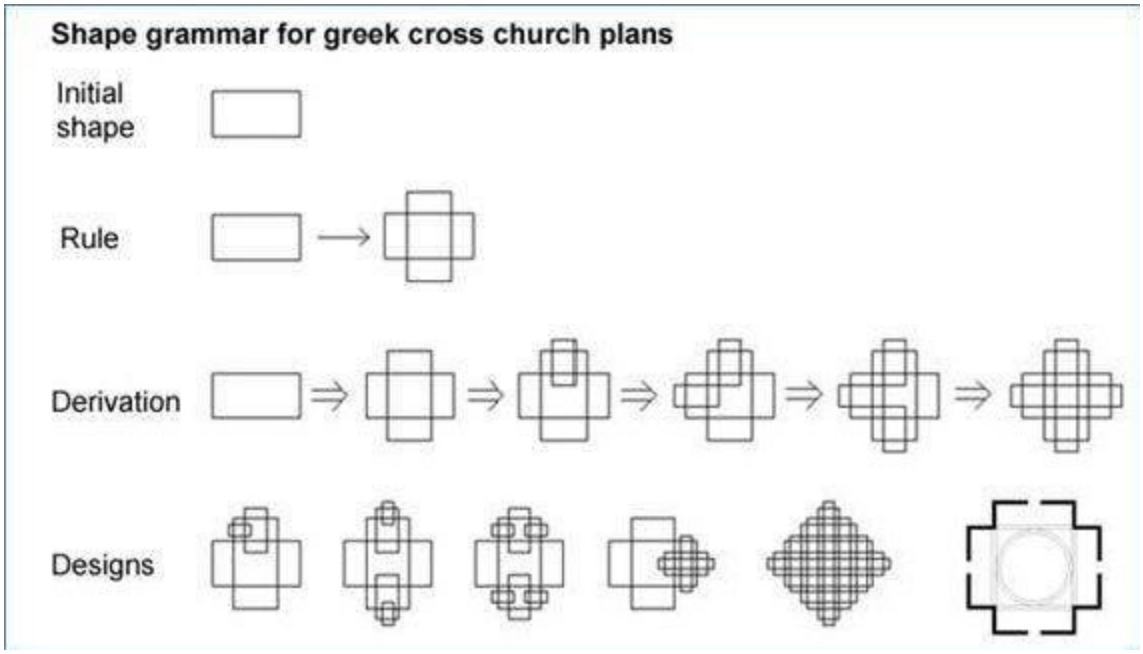
In the fall of 2014, I started a masters program at MIT in Art, Culture and Technology. I arrived with a background as a theater director and actor, with aspirations to enter into the visual arts. On the first day of the semester, I was enrolled in the course Visual Computing, which was offered in the Design and Computation Department. I had never coded before, and was interested in conquering my clumsiness around computers in the creative sphere. I thought Visual Computing I would be a good place to start.

As it turned out, I didn't use a computer the entire semester. This graduate level course in computation was taught entirely with tracing paper, pencils, stickers, double-sided tape, and Froebel blocks. These are the essential tools of Shape Grammars, a creative and analytical method used to devise visual systems, and an introduction to which was the entire subject matter of Visual Computing I.

To give a bit of background, shape grammars was created at MIT in 1971 by two undergraduates named George Stiny and James Gips. They had taken a linguistics course with Noam Chomsky, and together had begun to wonder if the visual world could similarly be described and generated algorithmically. Specifically, Stiny and Gips wanted to develop a computational system of design analysis and generation in which the inputs and outputs for the algorithm were entirely visual, and not substituted with 0s and 1s. Shape grammars then, are entirely expressed as a series of rules of geometric transformation, and are calculated like this:



My professor for Shape Grammars was Terry Knight, a scrupulously methodical and consummately passionate pedagogue. When explaining why computers were banned from Visual Computing, Terry liked to say, “What we’re doing is still computation; it’s just that *you* are the computer! Your hands, your eyes, your fingertips– they do the calculation, they run the program. They’re the processors.” Unsurprisingly, this meant there was a lot more room for error. Some assignments I had to redraw 50 times. What I remember from those failures, though, are all the ideas I would get for other possible geometries, as well as nuances I would notice every time I had to draw or assemble my calculation anew: an unusual curve or “s” embedded within step 3 of the calculation, an anomalous chip or aberration in the grain of wood on the block. If Shape Grammars, or Visual Computing, is training yourself to recognize patterns and create from rules, I think it’s a more fundamental lesson is in the ways in which at every step these rules can be challenged, compromised, customized, and undermined. The course made me fall in love not only with computation as a creative avenue, but made me fall in love even more with the glitch.

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Around the same time I was learning Shape Grammars, I also began singing American shape note music, or what is commonly called Sacred Harp. Started in the late 18th century as a

method for teaching poor rural New Englanders how to sing hymn music, Sacred Harp is America's oldest living non-indigenous vocal tradition.

At a Sacred Harp gathering, which is expressly non-denominational and open to anyone wishing to participate regardless of musical training, ability, or religious background, singers sit on four sides of a hollow, inward-facing square, with one vocal part to each side. All present have or are given a copy of *The Sacred Harp*, a hymnal of about 600 songs. One at a time, singers are called upon to lead a song of their choice. To do this, she or he stands in the center of the square, keeping time.

Sacred Harp is usually described as "traditional" music, though what exactly that means remains pretty hazy. The structure and rules of a Sacred Harp singing are rather strict: one never discusses politics or religion (though there is often a common prayer), one is expected to dress modestly and rather formally, and the day always goes the same: you start singing at 9 or 10, take breaks every hour until about noon, at which time there's a potluck lunch, called dinner on the grounds, and after which the singing continues for another two to three hours, with periodic breaks for snacks and chatting. At Sunday singings there is also a memorial lesson, during which the names of both the departed and the "sick-and-shut-in" (those who are part of the community but are unable to attend) are named and held in thought and prayer. And though the order in which the songs are called every time is different, we always sing from the same book. With all this, rather than thinking of Sacred Harp as being a singular tradition, or "traditional," I think of more as a ritual.

When most people hear or use the word ritual, I think they often imagine something solemn and serious, usually with robes of some kind, and candles. Sacred Harp, on the other hand, is known for being loud. More than loud, it's often described as "raw," as the singers are untrained and not always in key. Jokes and side snipes and laughs abound at a singing. It's sung in every kind of space you can imagine, from clapboard Baptist churches in rural Alabama to centuries old meeting houses in Western Massachusetts to anarcho-activist spaces in Philadelphia.

That being said, people who do not grow up singing Sacred Harp usually get hooked on it at a large all weekend convention, which usually are attended by 50-200 singers, who know the music well, sing it very well, and sing with love and enthusiasm. People often describe standing

in the middle as being met by a wall of sound on all sides. New singers often have a rather intense glow about them which borders on creepy, and are usually ravenous for the high of a good singing. And I can attest that it is a remarkable feeling, to stand in the center of the square, buoyed and embraced by the voices of strangers who also, one comes to intuit, are a kind of family.

When I was a new singer, I was obsessed with finding the very best signings, and when for whatever reason a convention didn't quite mount to that peak energetic level I was hoping for, if someone called a song I didn't like, if there was an overzealous, out-of-tune new singer who "compromised" the quality of the class–anything that made the singing feel a bit less than perfect, disappointed me.

But in the past year as much as I still love a good singing, I actually love Sacred Harp most for its regularity: its repetition and reliability. I go singing just about every Wednesday evening in Manhattan, and sometimes the singing is great, and sometimes the singing is awful, and sometimes the singing is fine but my mind is on my syllabus or my parents or the jerk who yelled at me on the subway. Regardless, at every Sacred Harp singing I notice a new phrase in the words that brings comfort or revelation to my day, or get to lean into a chord that's especially juicy. I know what to expect every time, and so get to relax and wait for the unexpected.

These three vignettes, though disparate, each describe a way of making, and I bring them up here because they are cornerstones for how I think about performance, both as a theater-maker and as a teacher. Today words like "performative" and "performativity" are used in a number of discourses and theories, and the word "performance" itself employed to describe all kinds of actions, behaviors, and epistemological legacies and lineages. Performance is a complicated word: its roots are in words for accomplish, complete, achieve, and furnish. In many contemporary discussions of performance, I think we are misled to conceive of it as a medium, a form, in which ideas or knowledge are constituted and later read. As if there's a thing to be given, a resultant performance that can be handed over, and then analyzed, and interpreted. Like a book or a painting. Often, the thing performed is an identity or a culture. We perform it and then have it: it is woven by and from our behaviors and actions, like a coat, or a hat that we then wear, though we may make alterations and adjustments. Many, though not all discussions of performance today, I feel, co-opt phenomena and doing to be read and dissected like artifacts

and archives: as repositories of knowledge and meaning.

But to me performance is instead a mode of attention and intention. And while verbal improvisations, shape grammars, and American hymn singing are not at all identical as media, they do share I believe certain modes of awareness, and an orientation towards the imagination. In this way they are for me exemplary of what I care about in performance. Of late, I've started to describe this mode as a kind of *reckoning*.

I first got excited about the word "reckon" in the final stages of writing my master's thesis. Normally, this is a terrible sign. But the longer I've sat with it, the more I have come back to it as a conceptual keystone in defining performance for myself.

To reckon, historically, has meant many things: to give an account of, to recite, to speak or tell of, to put in order, to count, or calculate, to go over or through in detail, to give an answer for something, to go over a contentious issue, to settle a score. I call it a keystone, but I think I actually just treat this list of definitions as a kind of koan on the principles of performance. I don't mean to say that to perform is to reckon, that performance is defined by counting, or issuing a final judgment. But I return to this word, sit with it, for its insistence on putting things in an order, for its connotations of an encounter with the divine, its ties to storytelling, and its evocations of math, calculation, and an attempt at or confrontation with something difficult or even impossible.

For lack of more sophisticated language, to reckon, for me, is to try to work out. And performance is a way of trying to take our experiences into account, take them apart, and then re-structure them, combine them. Performance is a kind of conscious, inconclusive reckoning that goes in order, creates an order, even as it explicitly includes or points to the things that do not compute.

While I currently teach writing, ,my methods and aims derive directly to the years I have spent as a performer. In writing, and really in anything I teach, I hope to help my students develop two habits: one is the habit of putting things in an order, and the other is the habit of engaging with the putting-in-order as a kind of play. When they are writing, when they are speaking, when they are drawing, when they revising, I want them to see all these instances as opportunities for improvisation and invention. In my estimation, our students are already engaged in processes of

an embodied cognition: they live in their bodies, and through their lived experiences in those bodies they have already built a store of knowledge. What performance as a mode offers, then, is an approach not to knowing, but to learning, and even unlearning. And teaching for me has become not so much about imparting a skill in any particular media, but rather facilitating a practice of how to pay attention as one makes. For me, as an artist, it is that mode of attention that has made making–from writing, to performing, to singing, to drawing–not only a source of vast discovery, learning, and invention, but of joy.