

## A Conversation: Margaret Dragu and Jacob Wren

Margaret Dragu 0:05

Let's start.

Do you have a thought?

Jacob Wren 0:12

One of my thoughts is... I was working in performance, and then, I was very frustrated with a lot of aspects of it. And writing gave me a place to be less frustrated, even though everything can be frustrating. But the kind of ephemerality of performance - the way it disappears, the way you must be there, the way most of my friends miss the performances, and therefore, it often seemed to me like the performances hadn't even happened - was one of the things that maybe, I mean ... I'd say my life is equally divided between the two. But there was something in writing that I couldn't get it in performance. Some sort of a feeling that something is solid, even though it's might only be an illusion.

Margaret Dragu 1:13

That something was solid as in kind of more permanent or left a trace?

Jacob Wren 1:18

Yes, exactly. Yes.

Margaret Dragu 1:19

I kind of get that. I'm kind of shocked how many traces I've left. I mean, there's this mysterious thing called archives, and you think... But the archives don't necessarily seem very true, the ephemera that I've left -- certainly the writing that I've left -- all these books, even the little books, although they're fake, and yet they are somehow very true. I was surprised. Certainly, some of the writing that was more political, like the manifestos, I thought, oh my god, I could have written that last week. Which is both demoralizing and encouraging. (Margaret laughs) So yes, the kind of illusion of permanence about writing is interesting. But writing implies speaking, I think. I get very confused, particularly with the little books, since many of them were used for performance as well. What is this thing, and what are these words? Just because I put them down on paper, and I can touch them, they were completely transformed through performance, so they have a different sound, even as I read them now, because I

also remember the performance. You can't escape that memory. So that's a weird kind of permanence, surely, is this memory thing? Do you think?

Jacob Wren 3:06

Yes, but also, I mean, writing a book about the first 20 years of PME Art ... I was astonished how often I remembered what happened -- sorry -- how often I misremembered what happened. Or I remembered it differently than other people who were there or who I worked with. So, it really gave me a sense that the ephemerality of performance is also the misremembering of performance. Maybe a lot of the performances that were most important to me when I was young, if I saw them now, I wouldn't like them, and they have the kind of aura of my own youth in my misremembering of them. Which is also true of books -- certainly I miss misremember most of the books I have read as I often learn when I go back and try and find a passage that I want to quote -- and when I do find it, it says something completely different than I remember it saying.

Margaret Dragu 4:15

This is only going to increase over time, I assure you. (Margaret and Jacob laugh)

Jacob Wren 4:19

Yes, I know...

Margaret Dragu 4:21

I love the quotes you put on Twitter. I particularly like when you're quoting yourself. I always misname your blog -- as Eve's song. I keep reading it as Eve's song -- as in Adam and Eve, and you're Eve, I guess. But it's really every song I ever wrote, right? That is the name of your blog. I don't know why it's been truncated in my brain.

Jacob Wren 4:52

Well, it was truncated by Twitter because uh...

Margaret Dragu 4:56

So, it's not just me?

Jacob Wren 4:57

Twitter stopped it at "eve" because I didn't know what I was doing when I was setting up my Twitter account, so it stopped me in the middle of the "eve".

Margaret Dragu 5:06

This makes me feel much better. (Margaret laughs) Anyways, I like these quotes, the quotes from other writers, which I'm sure you have your little memory thing about finding them... But also, when you're quoting yourself. Most of your quotes are about the failure of writing, or looking for failure, or welcoming failure, which is something that is essential for performance as well. So that's another thing that makes writing and performance blur to me. It is this rush to failure and languishing in the joy of failure.

Jacob Wren 5:55

This is also something about misremembering, because often I misremember the failures as successes in some strange way. Or, if at the time, it seemed like some of the performances I've done that people talk about most, I mean, there was no one there to see them. So, I wonder how this rumor, I mean, the very few people who were actually there, maybe they started the rumor? I don't know how that word of mouth spread of these performances that hardly anyone saw. But suddenly they become something that they weren't at the time.

Margaret Dragu 6:34

Yeah, I think of Gertrude Stein and her reveling in how small her audiences were, is a kind of the thermometer for all of this. So that becomes gossip in a kind of form. I'm not at all shocked how obsessed we all are with social media, because we always -- as society members - look to any form to distribute gossip, in the most salacious and quick ways, with as much dishonesty as possible, and employing it to our own ends, and by any means of spreading gossip and slander and lies.

I've seen two of your performances, and I've read most of your books. Not all but I'd say most. I saw you and Shannon Cochrane perform at the Gladstone Hotel. Which was one of the most romantic... Here's some memory. Do you remember it this way? This might be interesting. I remember this performance as very existential and romantic. She was lying on the bed. Each audience member had to go up a ladder and look through a window trestle to look down on the room, which was this really, seedy room -- this is before the Gladstone was renovated. It was a trash heap at that point, and a big memory bank. Shannon was lying on the bed, just chain smoking, kind of languorously watching you. You were on the other side of the room with a guitar and a huge stack of songs, all of which sounded kind of exactly like the one before. They were at least kind of almost teenage... She was older than you. It appeared like she was... maybe she wasn't, but it felt like she was much older than you. And you were like this teenage angst-ridden musician, pouring your heart out, for love lost that can never be re-gained without any hope. You just sang and sang and sang and sang. All these songs one after another. And the other performance I

saw -- it wasn't live. It was a video document. So therefore, in the performance art world that means it doesn't exist. Like there's this certainty for hardcore performance, it's like, if you weren't there, then you couldn't have felt it, so that's just the documentation, it doesn't mean anything. It's not what performance is. So, if that's true, then it wasn't a performance that I saw. I just saw documentation. You were working with Ame Henderson, and I think Evan and another guy, a kind of what I remember as a real theatre guy.

Jacob Wren 9:44

Yeah. Frank. Yes.

Margaret Dragu 9:47

You had set up a situation that was like a game, which is quite performance arty. You tried to be, as you often refer to in your writing about performance, to really be yourself. To not have this interference of all the theatrical acting and fakery that is why I hate theatre so much, although I don't hate you. And I also, oddly, don't hate Theatre Replacement. These two groups I like because you really confuse me. But generally, I just hate theatre. So, you'd set up this game whereby you were trying to be as real as possible in the moment and tell a story. But there was also a function about writing because it was also being written somehow on a word processor and printed. And that was being stacked up, but there was a square on the floor, or something, where you were going to perform and be real. And you did this as a circuit, all of you. I really liked that... I mean, I kind of held that thing --as I read your book about the 20 or 30 years - or how many years it is of PME -- as a kind of manifesto. About what you were all -- well, you, but maybe all of you -- were trying to do, is trying to be yourselves, truthfully. Does that resonate?

Jacob Wren 11:24

Yes, I'd almost completely forgotten about that performance with Shannon. It was only as you were describing it, that I had some memory of it. And I also realized I had my back turned to Shannon, so I had no idea what she was doing.

Margaret Dragu 11:40

Ah! I don't remember that. I don't remember that part.

Jacob Wren 11:43

Or maybe, maybe not my back, but maybe she was kind of in my blind spot, or in my side vision. So, in a way, I only remember what I was doing. I don't remember it all, I mean, I'm not able to play those songs without concentrating on them...my musical skills are quite limited. So...

Margaret Dragu 12:07

So, you were just doing your task. You didn't have the luxury of wallowing in the atmospheric river?

Jacob Wren 12:15

Yeah. And wow, I mean, that seems like I did do all these little performances in a way before I started making performance - a kind of pre-performance. Or I think of all the things also, I published before. I mean, at the beginning, I would write some things and try and get them published, but I wouldn't keep them. (Jacob laughs) It didn't occur to me to keep them. So, there was this kind of period where like, the writing was even more ephemeral, because once it was published, I would never, I mean, in a way, I still never look at it again. But I wouldn't even be able to look at it again because I didn't have a copy and didn't remember what I wrote. This paradox of being torn between the love of the ephemeral and the pain of the ephemeral. Like, I love it because it's gone, and it can't hurt me anymore. But I hate it because there's nothing to hold on to.

Margaret Dragu 13:21

And publishing isn't really it either. I mean, it's as curiously anticlimactic as documentation of performance art. And what is this rush to publish? I mean, you question this all the time. In your blog, you're always kind of thrilled when things fail, and that they're not being published. And you keep wondering why you're publishing. It's such an old-fashioned urge.

Jacob Wren 13:56

I've told this story before, but around 1999 or 2000, I got an email from someone who said they were traveling, they were backpacking, and they went into a used bookstore in Brazil, and found a copy of my first book, *Unrehearsed Beauty*, and read it. And then it was kind of a letter about how much they liked it. And when I was reading that email, I was thinking, like, how did my book get into a used bookstore in Brazil? Like, there's no way. It's like, I mean, it's not even in a used bookstore in Montreal, right?

Margaret Dragu 14:36

It's as likely as a message in a bottle that's shown into the ocean and, you know, you're on the shores of the Azores, and there it comes.

Jacob Wren 14:48

And there was something about that email that was really like, okay, there's something great about books, they really, they travel from hand to hand, people like them, and give them to their friends.

People leave them behind when they're traveling, there's something about like, there's some random aleatory way in which books travel, that really appeals to me.

Margaret Dragu 15:09

Yeah, I mean, that's how the little books started, in fact. I was waiting to get a big book published - not a big book, but like, like a real book with a real publisher, blah, blah, blah. I was waiting for Revelations to be published. It seemed to be taking forever -- I mean, it took us 11 years to write it. And it's typically even longer to get it published. And it was so formal, I just thought fuck this, I'm just going to make my own press, which of course, artists do all the time. And so, there's also something about publishing that is just perfect for the existential loner failure, the antisocial loner failure, because unlike what you did with PME, it doesn't take any more people to make the art. You don't have to worry about the audience, they're going to come when they feel like it, if ever, and you really don't have to think about them. I mean, people always say that you must figure out who your audience is, blah, blah, blah. But you don't, you can just write for yourself. And so, it's the ultimate loner thing. Especially if you publish it yourself, because you don't have to deal with anybody then -- you don't have to deal with an editor or publisher or, or, or anything, you just type it and print it and sew it with a needle and thread. It's the ultimate kind of God-like experience, I suppose.

Jacob Wren 16:47

Yes. And it's in a way, like one step away from writing in your diary. I was talking to some people the other day about, like, writers who published their diaries, or whose diaries were published after they died. And how, maybe a writer's diary is different than someone else's diary, because somewhere in the back of their mind, there's a strong feeling it might be published. And then a self-published chap book or 'zine, in a way, has a relation to that. But there is a will to get it out into the world, but how much you may not get it that far into the world, but still, you never know how the things travel. That's something that I always am very intrigued by,

Margaret Dragu 17:37

You don't really know what effect you have performing, either. I'm sure this happens to you, too, people will say, I saw you do blah, blah, and it made me feel blah, blah, and I'm still thinking about it. And you go, oh, I've kind of forgotten that you know. It's almost shockingly cavalier to not be able to immediately share a memory with a person in an audience who has a very strong memory, it's almost abusive, almost emotionally abusive. It's when I feel the most vain and despicable. It's like a big power imbalance.

Jacob Wren 18:38

But despite my obsession with failure, I want the work to connect with people. I mean, that is still my goal in some way. I still think that is the reason I'm doing it. With some hope that it will connect with

someone and mean something to them hooked in, in an ideal world, it'll mean something to them very different than what it means to me.

Margaret Dragu 19:02

Are you performing at all?

Jacob Wren 19:05

I performed once during the pandemic this past May.

Margaret Dragu 19:13

What did you do?

Jacob Wren 19:15

We did a show I've done before. A User's Guide to Authenticity is a Feeling. We did it here in Montreal at La Chapelle. It was like a reprise. It was sold out the first time, so it was scheduled for us to do it again.

Margaret Dragu 19:30

Is this the performance where you bring record albums and play music and tell stories?

Jacob Wren 19:34

No, it's connected to the book. Authenticity is a Feeling it's a lecture performance, where I take the audience through the book, chapter by chapter, and tell them some things that I was too embarrassed to put in the book.

Margaret Dragu 19:47

It is what I would call a performative lecture.

Jacob Wren 19:49

Yes, exactly.

Margaret Dragu 19:51

So, you're right in the middle between those two things -- performance and writing -- that uncomfortable spot? Did you feel you were yourself?

Jacob Wren 20:05

I felt very strange that everyone had masks on and there was social distancing. It was like 15 people in a 200-seat house, social distancing with masks on. I felt like we were in a surgical theater or something. And I'm sure a lot of people are having this problem now, but I'm having trouble recognizing people I know when they're wearing their masks. All 15 people came in, and I'm standing on stage when they come in, and they waved to me, and I waived back -- but I had no idea who anyone was. Suddenly, it was like some sort of game where like, your friends are hidden behind a curtain, and you have to guess who they are, but you don't know. The whole thing felt very deadening to me. It didn't feel like live performance, but in a way, it was what it was. I was happy to have the experience to perform at this time on the border between when you're allowed to perform and when you're not. Also, it's so fascinating that we've lived in a time where live performance wasn't allowed. I never thought I'd experience anything like that.

Margaret Dragu 21:14

it's the ultimate effective censorship. And it's the ultimate effective social community-based performance, like a social intervention, except it wasn't done by artists. It was shockingly effective, despite all the anti vaxxers and everything, it's still incredibly effective. (pause) I'm thinking, and partly hoping that I'll be able to go to Berlin and Copenhagen in May and June. Although it seems less likely every day because of ecological disaster, the carbon footprint. I mean, I would have to do a bunch of things. There's like six or seven things I can do there. So that it'd be worthwhile to go. I wouldn't go there for just one thing or for a day or something. It must feel like a worthwhile trip. So, there's all that to consider, the ecological impact, but also, what am I rushing towards? Am I rushing to towards a memory of how I remember Berlin and my life in Berlin? Where I've spent, and you have also spent, lots of time? Am I rushing to that memory? If it's not there, and I know it's not there. I'm not, you know, stupid. Something else is there. What am I rushing to? How can I be LIVE there? Can I only perform outside because it's safe? Or if I am inside, then why am I inside? And how can I connect to people? And can I? I mean, I've become a really, weird person over the last two years. I have been to one movie -- the James Bond movie (Jacob laughs) because I am a James Bond fan. And I've gone to the Vancouver Art Gallery twice. All these things, very masked. I've had a few coffees with Justine Chambers outside on a patio. That's kind of our new office. And that's it.

I was a very social person. Now I'm extremely isolated. So, I've become different. The verbs in all languages that are the most interesting to learn are I need, and I want. When you're learning a language, you're running around with this kind of childlike desperation to communicate that you must



find a toilet, you need a toilet, you want a toilet, you need food, you want food, you need people, you want people -- all in this kind of desperate toddler way. So that desperation seems less just because it hasn't been exercised. It could still be there. I'm not sure. But all the beautiful things that I remember about performance, say at grunthaler 9, can't possibly happen now. Like the people on the street. The woman who only speaks Turkish, who's got three children, who wants to come to my yoga class and we both speak a little French. We can speak a little French badly to each other because her German is worse than mine. She's not coming in [to the gallery], no, that's not happening. This kind of encounter that I loved so much, especially in spring with sunshine and people on the street .... that is not happening.

Jacob Wren 25:14

But some things are returning,

Margaret Dragu 25:17

They're returning, but even now when you see people, it's like this -- on ZOOM. I mean, we're in different cities, of course, ZOOM is the only way we can do this. But when you see people being interviewed [on TV news] about the big barge that blew upon on the beach by the Sylvia hotel. I mean, with or without masks, the interviewer and the interviewee are at least six feet apart. This is how we are now; we don't shake hands and hug. That's over. I mean, I see this as a change in our bodies. Right? I mean, I teach movement, dance, personal training and so-called corrective therapy and clinically based therapies, blah, blah. I touched people all the time, I always asked them first, you know, at the community centre, May I put my hands on your shoulders? Can I show you these are your pecs? Think of these, softening, and going a bit wider. And breathe, please breathe underneath my hands. I don't touch anybody. Not now. I hug my daughter. But...I'm not going back to the community centre to teach for complicated reasons. It doesn't really matter. But I'm left with these two ZOOM boxes. Or if there's two clients at the same time, I have three boxes. After you and I finish speaking this morning. I have a personal training session with two people. There'll be three boxes, me and the other two people. I mean ... We do have intimate moments on ZOOM. But why do I have this urge to go to Berlin and Copenhagen and perform and try and figure it out. Or do I want to figure it out there because I can't figure it out here in my apartment. In my COVID shuttlecraft? I don't know.

Do you long to perform live?

Jacob Wren 27:56

No, I really don't. But I'm curious about the future and what's gonna happen? I'm assuming everything you're talking about is temporary. But of course, I don't know.

Margaret Dragu 28:17

But knowing that when people read your words that are published in a book or magazine, or something -- is that the same kind of high as connecting in live performance? Is it the same thing? Is it different? Or have you just lost that? Have you just don't have that urge?

Jacob Wren 28:45

I mean, I never really liked performing so it wasn't something I did because I enjoyed it. It was something I did, because I was searching for some idea of art that seemed connected to liveness, that seemed connected to people being together in a room. It was like an idea, an ideal, that was never achieved. It was never something like this is great. It was always like No, we haven't found it. Let's keep searching.

Margaret Dragu 29:24

That feeling of liveness, that you were searching for with people in a room, was that like building community? Is that what appeals to you? Like a social architecture? Is it about social architecture?

Jacob Wren 29:39

I don't know because I've never really been very good at building a community.

Margaret Dragu 29:45

But why were you looking to bring people together in a live way? What was that?

Jacob Wren 29:50

It was like a feeling of art. A feeling of art being in the moment. A feeling of art being something happening, that something's happening right here and right now.

Margaret Dragu 30:12

For you? That you're feeling that?

Jacob Wren 30:16

No for the audience. I mean, maybe for me, but no. Somehow, it was clear that I wasn't going to feel that -- but somehow, I wanted to create it, whether I could feel it or not.

Margaret Dragu 30:37

Interesting that art is live for you.

Jacob Wren 30:41

It's not, Art is dead. But I want a different kind of art, that is more alive than the deadness I feel with a lot of art.

Margaret Dragu 30:49

Right, that the art you want to make is live.

Jacob Wren 30:53

It's a fantasy. It's a fantasy of an art that feels live. it's much more of a fantasy than a reality.

Margaret Dragu 31:02

It's an impossibility?

Jacob Wren 31:05

Yeah. But also then, you know, people come in, and they do experience it. So, it's an impossibility that people can experience at times.

Margaret Dragu 31:14

But you can't?

Jacob Wren 31:18

I don't want to say I can't -- because that's like that's like putting a line in the sand. But I'm not expecting it. If it happens, that would be great.

Margaret Dragu 31:31

Maybe it's more like sneezing or orgasm. (Margaret's cellphone alarm goes off) So I guess, authenticity is a feeling.

Jacob Wren 31:42

Yes.

Margaret Dragu 31:45

So that's 30 minutes. This was delightful. Thank you.

Jacob Wren 31:55

Thank you.

END OF RECORDING

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