

The Poetics of Technology
Performing technology in poetic spaces of surveillance, encounter, and intimacy

Lynn Fels and Kathryn Ricketts

“So you won’t do it? You won’t get into costume and video from inside the performance?”

“No. I’m the researcher, the videographer. Performing? That’s your job.”

In any collaborative engagement, there are moments of conflict, resistance, negotiation, reconsidering. As a performer who engages in a practice of impulse and response, Kathryn revels in the unexpected. I, as an arts educator, claim a similar commitment to unscripted explorations. However at this instance, we are stopped. My fault. I am refusing to play.

This chapter introduces readers to spaces of surveillance and intimacy realized through the poetics of technology. In our embodied encounter, we explore the collapsing borders between observer and the observed, researcher and the researched, performer and the performed. Our inquiry becomes a place of dynamic possibility where the invisible and visible are exposed through performative tensions of resistance and reciprocity, intimacy and surveillance. What is tacit in our understanding of the body becomes disrupted with new meanings as performer and videographer are performed through the lens of technology within an improvisational space of encounter.

“We’ve done everything but both be inside a performance at the same time. You’re always positioning yourself behind the camera. Let’s expand the parameters of our research. What are you afraid of?”

We are currently researching the emergent relationships between performer and technology, videographer and performance. What limitations, what possibilities emerge through negotiations between observer and the observed in the difficult dance between technology and performance? Who performs whom? What moves the presence and action of a camera lens (and videographer) from that of surveillance to one of intimacy? We are curious about the poetics of engagement: what embodied texts are evoked by these encounters?

“Look,” she persists, “you called me on it when you had me wired up to a computer, physically trapped within the axis of techno-mediated trickery. It’s your turn to take a risk.”

A stop (Appelbaum, 1995) reveals our vulnerability; a stop comes to us as a possible moment of revelation, precariously suspended between one breath and the next. A stop dares us to move beyond our own perceived limitations of engagement; we cannot remain in suspension, commitment is required, a choice of action that embodies its own ethics of engagement, responsibility, integrity. A stop requires that we take action, and in doing so reveal ourselves.

I am reluctant to step beyond the known, the comfortable, the familiar. To be engaged simultaneously as performer and researcher? To encounter and respond to the performer within an improvisational practice of listening and responding, attending to an unfolding sequence of impulses, each impulse opening to the next. Dare I risk it? How should I respond?

“Okay, I’ll do it.”

Our research together has required a willingness to engage in new venues, to anticipate each encounter—whether in our studio, classroom, or at conferences—as potential moments of research. Watching Kathryn engage with her work has been revelatory, she opens each moment with a gesture, listens with her body, engages with the sounds, smells, touch, sights, tastes that she encounters, like a poet, she creates lines of poetic inquiry with her body, and I, in her presence, read her poetry with a hunger that astonishes me.

On the day of our presentation, I arrive on stage, decked out in rubber boots, a southwester, and yellow rain overalls—a pseudo-fisherman with a video camera in hand, wired to a computer and overhead projector which will project images that I film onto a screen at the back of the stage. Kathryn warms up, flexing her body in back-arching postures that make me wince. She is wearing a long green cloth coat. A felt hat is pulled low over her eyes. She approaches me with final advice.

“Look,” she says, “whatever happens stay inside the performance.”

I triple-check to confirm that the technology is working: the camera battery is at full power, the recording button triggers the camera into action, video images are projected onto the screen. As random images blur in and out of focus, I feel strangely seasick. Kathryn takes her position, fingers clasped around the worn handle of her 1930’s suitcase. My finger is poised on the record button; I wait for the music to begin...

I feel the space charged with our readiness—I am standing, my head hanging down, suitcase in hand, knowing that the audience is conjuring their own preliminary narratives provoked by my character; long

overcoat, oversized felt hat and worn leather suitcase. I feel Lynn near me and am glad she has accepted the challenge to be part of the performance space –“You can’t bring a so’wester and fishing waders and not contemplate being in the performing space!”

We are poised and then we are not. The poised-ness dissipates to impatience as the moment transforms into a technical error laden with restlessness from those who anticipate our performance.

The music is not playing. I have to decide whether to crash our decision to ‘stay in’ or just to prolong the uninvited silence....AAAh—technology! I move towards the frustrated sound technician and coax the music to play...

I trigger the record button.
Our encounter begins.

Poetic Inquiry through performative moments unfolding

Within the performance of poetic engagement are moments that catch our breath, moments that give rise to unexpected images, images that evoke new meanings, recall lost memories, touch the skin of our emotions, tender and raw. To imagine performative inquiry (Fels, 2010, 2009, 1999, 1998) within the realm of poetic inquiry is to understand that both ways of inquiry require attention to the moment, to being deeply sensual and open to recognitions that momentarily reveal us, naked and vulnerable. “Creating poetic inquiry is a performative act, revealing researcher/participants as both masked and unmasked, costumed and bared, liars and truth-tellers, actors and audience, offstage and onstage in the creation of research.”(Prenderghast, 2009, xxiii).

To inquire through performance is to attend with a poet’s commitment to the unexpected, to the as-yet unwritten phrase, or word, or timbre of sound that resonates deep in the heart’s soul. Each gesture, each intersection of movement, relational and communal, occurs within poetic spaces of performance, illuminating or calling into being that which is not-yet known nor recognized.

Video camera in hand, I dwell within the poetic spaces of our engagement, my gaze lingering on the images that come into presence through my lens. *This too is possible*, I think, as I lean into the impulse of each embodied moment, capturing images as she bends to her suitcase, opens it, lifts her hands skyward, releases red sand that spills through her fingers. The confines of the stage disappear, and I am on the seashore, a fisherman watching from a distance. A lone recluse has entered my world, suitcase in hand, seeking welcome in a foreign land. How shall I receive her? How will she welcome my presence?

I zoom into the brass clasps of her suitcase, pan along its stitching, a hand comes into view, and I follow the line of her gesture, as handfuls of sand are released, again and again. She comes in and out of focus, so close is the zoom, there are only moments of clarity. I move as she moves, slowly, in tandem, receiving, offering, advancing, recoiling, seeking an encounter that metaphorically evokes new rememberings, new recognitions, new possibilities. There is poetry in the shifting images of our encounter; it is as if I am a poet writing lines of intimacy in the reciprocity of our interplay together.

A performer seeks resonance through the work, in partnership, with those she is working with, and those in attendance—a relational suspension that creates a poetic space of engagement, allowing performance and performer space and time to mark presence. Images caught in a gesture or as seen through the lens, vibrate with metaphorical possibilities, with metonymic fecundity. Working from impulse to impulse, there is no planned action, no script; the performance unfolds, as each moment requires acceptance, then letting go as the next moment is received. These emergent moments call into presence fragments of images, narratives, metaphors, memories informing what has come before, what is present. Like a line drawn in a sand before an oncoming tide, the markings are temporal, ephemeral, performance does not permit capture (Phelan, 1993), but we remember, we embody the moment and through action/reflection create meaning. And, if we are lucky, a moment will tug at our sleeve (Fels, 1999, 2010), calling us to attention. Such moments are gifts that offer illumination, renewal, a new turning.

I am excited by what is evolving through the viewfinder. Does the audience see what I see? I glance up and recoil from the shock of a blank screen, the video feed has somehow failed—under my breath, I curse the technology—our anticipated multi-media performance is now simply one of two individuals oddly costumed encountering each other.

Should I stop? Find the loose connection? Rewind?

Whatever happens, stay inside the performance.

I hear my breath as I curl into myself, squatting, quickened heart rate amplified against my thighs. Within my limited area of vision I see my worn leather shoes, the rust granular dirt we collected the night before from an empty lot and, in the corner of my vision, I see a small silver object. Without turning my head I reach slowly towards it, curling my finger around it as I simultaneously pull it towards me. It is a cable from Lynn's camera, which gives me more information than I expected: the camera is not working! and with this realization, I become aware that a critical factor in the performance is absent. I quickly tuck the cable under my hat and feel a rush of images; a street person wearily pushing bulging carts filled with useless paraphernalia because of the need to own, to acquire and

accumulate—for some, the latest models of BMWs, for others, objects that are no longer useful or even understood—the images invite a flood of complexity and pull me back into the performance...

forgive
fall into each moment
trust that she will hold you

I stay inside the performance, and, faulty video camera in hand, I continue to film, to engage through the lens, allowing each impulse of engagement to guide me to the next. I remain committed to our shared space of performance—letting go of what was expected, I come to understand that it is a relief to not try to fix it, it cannot be fixed, not now, not ever, this is what is. I am strangely reassured—to abandon my expectations of both performance and technology, to simply embrace, *Here and Now, something happens*, moving through each emergent moment, I release responsibility for what arrives, and breathe.

Poetic inquiry through performance requires that we pay attention to the absences, the silences, the awkward moments that throw us off-balance. The learning is revealed in moments that disrupt, interrupt, corrupt. And just like a poet, whose poetic ambitions dissipate when the task becomes pragmatic—phrases pushed into position so as to appease the poet not the poem—so too, does the integrity of a performative inquiry fail us, when we seek to impose our will, in the guise of a good ending, rather than allow the emergence of what is not-yet known or recognized to call us to attention.

But practicalities impose. The music nears its final minutes; how do we end this encounter? A linear, insistent voice whispers, *okay, this is what you should do, create an ending that frees you from this burden of technology that prevents you from going to her* and, abandoning impulse for pre-determined action, I decide that I will put the video camera on the ground, and go to this odd creature who has been washed ashore. I will embrace her, fill my hands with the rich red sands of the island that her suitcase contains, and together we will stroll offstage, *yes, a perfect ending, picture it*—the video camera and its faulty connections abandoned onstage, illuminated by a spotlight. A perfect post-modern anti-technology response!

But, against my will, I cannot relinquish the camera, it refuses to cooperate, counters my intentions. The video camera has become an extension of me, it remains clenched in my hand, finger on the record button. My body rejects the narrative, and, despite repeated attempts, my intention to abandon the video camera is thwarted. I

cannot but listen to the integrity of the impulse, and, I watch,
dismayed, through the lens, as in turn, the stranger in the coat,
without a glance at me, shuts the suitcase. She rises with the
burden of the moment, and walks beyond the attention of the lens.
I attempt to follow her, but reverse the zoom; distance lengthens
between us, performer and videographer, fisherman and
immigrant, observer and observed, technology and human.

Through the viewfinder
I realize the intimacy of
my surveillance intrudes
Her back turns against me,
She scrapes the soles of her shoes
on the sand-gritted stage floor
Once, twice, three times...

I move away from Lynn and the camera as if being pulled by a tide, I move with
reticence, not wanting to leave Lynn but longing for space.
As I turn away I feel the grains of sand under my feet, creating a difference in my
stride, and I hear their voice pushing their way into my moving image.

I feel two conflicting images: one of a bull pushing his hooves into the ground as
if accelerating his courage and heart rate to pierce the heart of the matador; and
at the same time, I feel like a small animal pawing the ground as if to mark
territory.

The two images, one of charging forward and one of claiming arrival gives a
fantastic tension to my emotional state and my relationship with Lynn. Trapped
but curious, surrender with agency.

I receive this gesture
as a curse
against this place
I am dismissed.

There will be no reconciliation between us
In the gap of our encounter
the sound of soul against sand
grates like a fingernail
across a borderless country

We stop. I turn off the camera.
“What happened with the video display?” she asks, handing me the
cable.

In sounding our presence, we yearn to be received, to be acknowledged, to feel
the presence of awe. We desire that we, and those in our presence, experience a
quickness of pulse, or sharp gasp that leaves us breathless in response to a

revelatory image or gesture or word. What we cannot do is orchestrate another's response, we can only invite them into poetic spaces of engagement, offer possibilities that in turn are witnessed and received, not as we may have intended or might have expected, but as moments that speak to them, individually, communally. Such moments of illumination, revelation, may be a surprise.

“Well, that was a disaster,” I begin, turning to the audience, but their response surprises us. The majority had not known that the camera was supposed to relay images onto the blank screen; they saw our presentation not as a failure, but as an evocative interplay between the two characters on stage. The technology, they tell us, served as a metaphorical and metonymic presence, mediating our encounter. We learned that at certain moments my shadow on the blank screen loomed over hers, and in reverse, her shadow towered over mine, depending on our proximity to the light from the projector. There was a point, reports an audience member, when the shadows of our hands, unbeknownst to us, touched on the screen, portraying a moment of angst, tenderness, longing, reconciliation.

Our conversation with those who witnessed the performance revealed that we had created images that evoked multiple readings and emotions. The blank screen, intended to project a live capture of the fragmented images recorded by Lynn, became a canvas of living shadows inviting metaphorical openings into the performance. That the input had failed was not a disaster but rather an invitation and opportunity to engage anew.

Two poems, shared below, written by two participants after our performance, illustrate the diversity of individual responses.

proxi.mates

the lens is on you
dirt hat coat.

it is mine this dirt.
I have not touched

you. scoop into the suitcase
this life. it is not

mine. I have it in my lens
your life. it is mine.

have we touched

the blue light that claims us

—Daniela Elza

The land and the sea

The sea watches, records the
self-conscious, self-preserving,
vital, obsessive movements
of the land.

The land needs to feel itself
to sustain itself, contain itself.
The land has a plan—
makes itself ready for adversity.

The sea leans in, out,
follows, retreats—without a plan,
the sea observes.
The sea watches the land.
The land is busy;
absorbed.

—Kimberly Dark

We had left the performance space, curious and somewhat troubled, we were unsure what had happened and what had been perceived. We soon realized that this ambiguity is precisely what we seek to create when teaching or performing so that learning may occur. The poems and our conversation with our audience highlight the multiple perceptions that may arise from a singular event, and bring into play the value of shared and individual meaning-making. The immediate space following a performance is necessarily performative and integral with the performance itself. This embodied encounter is where the learning begins and continues in conversation with others. When working with material that is non-narrative and fragmented, we recognize the value of crossing the threshold into a performative space of reciprocity that becomes possible in communal witnessing and engagement.

Milloy (2007) and Leggo (2004) invite us across this threshold into a world of mystery where deep listening occurs. By accepting such invitations, we encounter fragmentation of what is presumed to be a solid mass of knowledge and, with this splitting into pieces, we allow the possibility of an entirely new configuration of self in relation to other. We propose that this process of exploring the borderlands of collective storytelling through fragmentation invites participants to dismantle and

re-create their 'mass' of knowing amongst themselves and their worlds of engagement.

In reflection poetic moments sustain the tension

We are buoyed by our experience in this work; we recognize that we are, willingly or not, in play with technology in ways we had not anticipated. Our experience as encountered from being inside the performance breathes what matters into presence. We now recognize the possibilities and impossibilities that hold the tensions between performer and technology; videographer and performance. As performer and videographer, we seek a new language, and find ourselves performing and being performed within a poetics of resistance and reciprocity.

Resolution is impossible. Like shadows slipping in and out of Plato's cave, our bodies are in play with and through technology; our techno-mediated encounters and physical interplay offer metaphorical and metonymic readings of suspended moments. Our struggles, witnessed by others, are read from multiple positions; what unfolds during each encounter becomes a place of wonder and questioning anew.

Despite the interrupted beginning, the missing cable, the blank screen, our experience as seen, seeing and being seen through the lens evoked images, memories, feelings, metaphors, symbols beyond the immediate physicality of the moment. Through and beyond technical constraints and parameters, what evolved were possibilities, openings, opportunities to new inquiry and meaning-making. The poetics of technology is one of resistance and reciprocity, engaging what is not-yet imagined, creating new horizons of inquiry. Berger writes, "An instant photograph can only acquire meaning in so far as the viewer can read into it a duration extending beyond itself" (1980, p. 89).

Poetic inquiry informs our work as we explore performance and technology through our encounters together—Kathryn with her suitcase in hand, and Lynn, bearing the weight of the video camera. We come to moments of resistance, reconciliation, reciprocity and recognition that inform our learning, our way of being in the world, our understanding of what matters. Through the meeting of our shadow hands—an image that haunts us still—we have come to understand that the poetics of technology reveal ourselves in new ways. Within the tensions of each improvised engagement between our knowing and doing, creating and being are unexpected gifts that stop us. It is the gap between that continues to be a generative and evocative place of poetic encounter, possibility, and impossibility.

Equally critical to our process is the sharing of experience, between ourselves and with those who witness, and through our writing—a poetics of witnessing and

remembering that allow us to come to new understandings, to come to recognize what is present and what is absent in our continuing inquiry.

The contribution of this work is to provoke a new questioning of the interplay between body and technology. We seek to provoke conversations around poetic inquiry through performative exploration and call attention to metaphors and possibilities of new understandings that are found in the interplay between embodied play and technology within poetic spaces of performance. This chapter is a witnessing that is itself a new poetic inquiry, eliciting new interpretations through embodied engagement, evoking the “heat” within poetic spaces of encounter, surveillance, intimacy, resistance and reciprocity.

Resources

Appelbaum, D. (1995). *The stop*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Fels, L. (2010). Coming into Presence: The Unfolding of a Moment. *Journal of Educational Controversy*, 5(1).

<http://www.wce.wvu.edu/Resources/CEP/eJournal/v005n001/a020.shtml>

Fels, L. (2009). Performative Inquiry: Arresting the Villains in Jack and the Beanstalk. *Journal for Learning through the Arts*. Irvine, Cal.: University of California. <http://repositories.cdlib.org/clta/lta/vol4/iss1/art2> (no page numbers).

Fels, L. (1999). *in the wind clothes dance on a line—performative inquiry as a research methodology*. Unpublished Doctoral dissertation. University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C.

Fels, L. (1998). In the wind, clothes dance on a line. *jct: Journal of Curriculum Theory*. 14 (1), 27-36.

Leggo, Carl. (2004). Living poetry: Five ruminations. *Language Literacy*, 6(2).

Milloy, J. (2007). *persuasions of the wild: writing the moment, a phenomenology*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Burnaby, B.C.: Simon Fraser University.

Phelan, P. (1993). *Unmarked: the politics of performance*. London: Routledge.

Prendergast, M. (2009). *Poetic inquiry: Vibrant voices in the social sciences*. Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense.

Note: Authorship is shared equally. We wish to acknowledge the support of SSHRC for funding this research, and the organizers of the 2nd International

Poetry Conference, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island in 2009 whose invitation to participate led to this writing.

Lynn Fels is a writer, researcher and scholar in Arts Education, Simon Fraser University, British Columbia. Her current areas of curiosity are performative inquiry, teacher education, leadership, creativity, and writing. She co-authored *Exploring Curriculum: Performative Inquiry, Role Drama and Learning* (Pacific Educational Press, 2008).

Kathryn Ricketts, dancer, choreographer, teacher and researcher is currently in Arts Education S.F.U. Her doctoral research integrates her practice with notions of identity and place towards literacy and self-agency.