

(For *Writing Bodies* book published 2017, based on the *Writing Bodies* experimental exhibition curated by Litia Perta for EFA Project Space, September – October 2015)

Beyond jobs and institutions.

It was after dark. The room was blacked-out, which may explain my somnambulism when trying to recreate the evening. We were guests and captives. Our host, keyon gaskin, had been inhabiting the room all week. As director of the venue, when it is lit, it is as familiar to me as my living room. Now the atmosphere was something alien, magic, menacing. Those in the room with me sat silent, poised, watching, listening, mesmerized, as our host/performer/shaman, a dark figure in black—a voice and silhouette-- moved, spoke, and gestured through the shadows between our bodies, placed in an array like objects across the floor. At one point, there was loud music, and when it stopped, keyon's voice addressed us again, but from farther away now. We could no longer locate our host's figure in the space. The room had been divided with a taut black screen of garbage bags. keyon had slipped through. One at a time, we followed. The guests crowded together on the other side, still looking for the figure from which the voice was emanating. And then, the realization. A gasp. A startled expression (perhaps). The window was open, and keyon was out there on the windowsill, delivering a speech to us 3 ½ stories above the concrete Manhattan sidewalk.

I am not sure if my heart was pounding, or if it had stopped. I had understood keyon's "*not a thing*" explores the multivalence of blackness, activating unused space, illuminating that which is not seen. But I hadn't anticipated the potential danger. But why hadn't I? When I think of *Writing Bodies*, I always zoom back to this final moment. Much of *Writing Bodies* consisted of confrontations that forced us to question our own understandings of identity, subjectivity, and power, and invoke greater empathy. This was the culminating moment.

I had gotten to know and observe keyon in the days leading up to this event. It had been an honor to provide space and time to an artist of such rare and powerful presence, to let them do their thing for real. I have made it my job here to ensure that boundaries can be pushed and risks taken that are uncommon in New York institutions. This has been possible because of a chain of trust granted. The organization places trust in me, and I place trust in the curators and artists. This creates a delicate tension that is always there, waiting to be broken. I now had to trust that keyon wouldn't fall, and keyon had to trust that I wouldn't intervene.

As director and guardian of this space, I am responsible for the bodies within it. Beyond the anxiety that I, along with every witness that night experienced, I admit I also felt a sting of betrayal to be put in a situation where I felt ultimately responsible for a life -- one that I had come to care for. This suddenly much higher, involuntary stake made me acutely aware that while I was an artist in all other parts of my life, in this event, I was the institution. I was the entity that needed to be deceived in order to carry out the desired plan. Of course I could see this was how it needed to be, but it still broke my heart. The artist on the ledge was free, and I was bound.

Through the great discomfort of this moment, came clarity: our lives are not our own, but completely tangled and contingent. Just by existing, we continually risk and are responsible for each other: with any small action, the impact could be devastating, or not. As much as we try to deny this or pry ourselves away, we are bound to each other. In this moment, with keyon outside looking in, rules and regulations no longer mattered. Perhaps this was the lesson keyon intended, one that is beyond jobs and institutions. So in that moment, with keyon perched 3 ½ stories up from a concrete Manhattan sidewalk, there was not a thing I could do but surrender to whatever came next and, in what felt like an eternity (but was probably a few minutes), keyon was back inside.

– Michelle Levy