

RISA HOROWITZ

TRIO



EXPERIMENTAL ART FOUNDATION
ADELAIDE SOUTH AUSTRALIA



Practice makes Imperfect (I'm perfect)

For Trio, I taught myself to play a Franz Schubert trio for piano, cello, and violin—*Opus 100, d929, andante con moto*—a piece of music that I have wanted to play since I was a teenager. Since my musical background is limited, I learned how to play the cello and violin for this project, beginning with scales, in February 2005. In April 2005, I arrived in Banff to commence learning the Schubert piece, documenting to video my Practice Sessions, followed by my Best Performances in June 2005. I was interested in endurance, the idea that repetitive practice is meditative, and as Jim Drobnick pointed out in his book *Aural Cultures* (Toronto: YYZBooks and Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery Editions, 2004), an activity aimed towards perfecting something. While perfection was not my goal, I am fascinated by the relationship between hope, or aspiration, and failure. Like many of my works, an element of failure is built-in, whether through risk, incompetence, or [the logic of] faulty logic. Risa Horowitz

Practice is at the heart of learned skills and often expressed in the phrase ‘practice makes perfect’, yet it is the bane of generations of music students and novices. For many, this rite-of-passage ends in never wanting to play music again, and for those who aspire to a career, practicing to perfection is a ‘mere’ beginning. Nothing can prepare even the most skilled students for the terror of a real-world audition and if they make the cut, to be continuously judged by peers and the public. Any honest musician will confess that they experience stage fright, each and every time. There can be no strategy of courting failure.

Another reality hangs over musicians. No matter how good you are, are you good enough to be a soloist—more than a journeyman—and regardless of the music genre,

are followed. I’ve described this before as ‘enactment’ and not a reenactment: although *Trio* has a beginning and an end, there is no story line or narrative. A comparable work is Shaun Gladwell’s *Multiple Descent (Taranaki)* (2004): Gladwell followed and videotaped three skateboarders, one at a time, as they descended a multi-level parking garage at ocean-side in New Plymouth NZ. Although the skateboarders were ‘skilled’, there were no instructions to do more than descend, and the three descents appear in the video, one after another.

Horowitz videotaped her final performances over a four-day period: all were continuous takes with no editing. The selections for the projected portion of *Trio* were performed in the Rolston Recital Hall at the Banff Centre. The completed projection component of *Trio* are two performances each approx fifteen minutes long. Each segment has the same framing with Horowitz playing and the un-played instruments appearing ‘at rest’. The violin and cello sections are the same, but different piano performances were used. The music is performed in-time, but the video-making time is discontinuous. The triptych format provides a simple means for her to be in three places at once, and what you see is what you get. The triptych also creates a dramatic aspect ratio, a form of ‘expanded vision’ that is more common in video than cinema (the technology is readily available and adaptable to gallery installation settings).[†]

A key to *Trio*—its exposed nerve, uncomfortable truth and reality—is the rehearsal footage. Thirty-four hours of practice sessions were shot in a rehearsal cabin at the Banff Centre: a selection is shown on a monitor. It’s all-too-real and all-too uncomfortable, although Horowitz ‘plays’ her frustration to the camera on occasion—a ‘video diary’ aside that is familiar through the plentitude of reality television shows. Horowitz wrote: ‘*Trio* evokes the

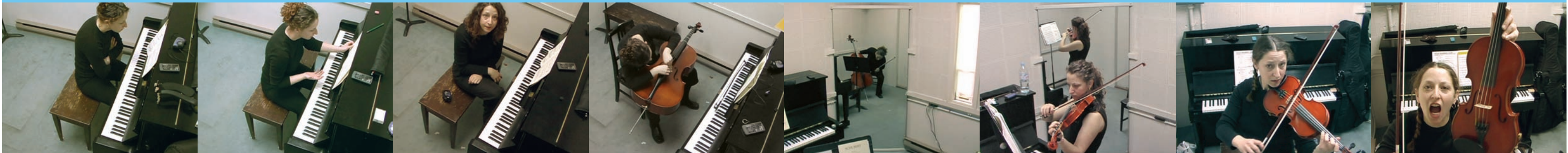
faker. Who isn’t entertained by experts being fooled—as some are—but the revealing episodes have a transformational impact on the ‘fakers’: they learn something about themselves. In one, a privileged-class 2nd year art history student ‘trains’ to be a graffiti artist. Initially dismissive of street culture, he subsequently switches his field of study to graffiti. This epiphany is echoed in a comment made by Horowitz:

That I’ll never be able to play the piece as it should be, or as well as I’d like it to be is okay, it’s the wish and the effort that’s important. Other elements of research included adult-learning, body and muscle memory, training, discipline, and the introduction of leisure [what others consider hobbies] into a professional art practice. With this work I question ideals of competence, virtuosity, and specialization. I’m interested in the interdisciplinary and the questions that arise from crossing media without the usual permissions that come with training and accreditation.

[†] One of the exceptions in cinema is the triptych finale of Abel Gance’s 1927 epic biographical film *Napoléon*, a process that Gance called Polyvision. The point of devising it beyond experimentation for its own sake, as it was also technically cumbersome, could be the subject matter: Napoleon was larger than life, so why not the visual spectacle?

Ihor Holubizky

Risa Horowitz is based in her hometown, Toronto, and she has lived and worked as a visual artist, writer, and art gallery programmer in seven Canadian provinces. She has exhibited her works in Canadian galleries including Plug Inc ICA, The Saidye Bronfman Centre, The Mendel Art Gallery, and several artist-run-centres, and in the UK and in Brazil. Reviews of her work have appeared in the *Globe & Mail*, while her critical writing has been published in *Canadian Art*, *Border Crossings*, *C-Magazine* and *BlackFlash*. Risa has been awarded grants from the Ontario Arts Council and the



to take what has been heard and played before to places not-yet-heard or imagined? It requires more without knowing if inspiration will ever appear. Unlike practice for sport, to gain a competitive edge, the objective of playing music is to communicate, yet there is no guarantee of the same level of appreciation because of subjectivity—who and how to judge what is good or exemplary? (There are, in fact, standards of measures, and therein a form of implicit competition.) The performance of music—live or for recordings—is analogous to presenting art in galleries, with an important distinction. Art no longer foregrounds skill, the training that art schools once offered, and skill is often regarded as ‘mere facility’ (or playing scales in music terms). Artists who choose this path must find a ‘discourse’ to justify their work. Meaning, representation is not enough, it must ‘interrogate representation’. To complicate matters, we also live in an age of the *autodidact*, admiring the work of the untrained and the ‘idea’ of obsession. Can this—should this—be ‘paradigm-ed’?

Horowitz’s undertaking to acquire skills—knowing in advance that it could only be so-good—was more than a strategy or a variation on the ‘pathetic’, a term that floated into the art world in the late 1980s (American Cary Leibowitz—aka CandyAss—is considered by some to be the ‘godfather’ of the pathetic). In brief, the pathetic declared and vocalised underachievement—appearing to be contrary, but claiming that there is no contradiction. (The show-biz equivalent examples are intentionally lame stand-up comedy or the juvenilia of singer-songwriter Jonathan Richman.) Horowitz’s self-directed challenge, in contrast, has a conceptual rigour, and whether the outcome is judged good or bad, it cannot be indifferent to the process and *raison d’être*. Self-instruction is an important element in many of Horowitz’s projects. She has, for example, taught herself how to paint, not as an end unto itself, but to be good enough to communicate visual ideas.

With *Trio*, much of what Horowitz achieves is a consequence of how she uses video, to record a sustained activity and event in real time. It is a language that is particular to video, rather than film, and resonates with the formative language of video’s beginning in the mid-1960s, and with what would come to pass if these rules of engagement

will to grow, to nurture the self, and to share vulnerability without falling into cliché. The work is funny, it should make people laugh, but also taps into a sort of heartbreak that accompanies aspiration, hope, and failure’. She is not ‘prescribing humour’, but (I believe) we can also look at it with objectivity. There are no clichés unless we are so cynical as to think of our lives as acting out or fulfilling a threadbare drama. More than documentation, this is life itself.

If not already evident from my commentary, duration is an important aspect of *Trio*—the sustained endeavour in its realisation and making, but also for the viewer, who can (can chose to) be put to a test. Not to watch it once, but over and over, as we all listen to music over and over until it enters our consciousness and becomes part of us. But when is enough, enough (and likewise for multiple viewings of Gladwell’s *Multiple Descents*)? *Trio* is not only ‘about’ music, or a one-trick-pony performance, it is music, irrespective of value judgments.

By happenstance I was in Banff a few weeks after seeing *Trio* in exhibition (on the other side of the country). As I toured the Centre facilities and entered Rolston Recital Hall, I immediately recognized it as the site and had to conduct an ‘investigation’, comparing impressions of the here-and-now reality against what had been enacted in the ‘reality of art’. One observation; the view beyond the screens set up in the background of Trio is jaw-dropping, windows that look out to the panoramic vista of snow-capped mountains. Underplaying the (potential) enchantment of the eye confirmed for me that Horowitz was being truthful to the idea. The screens were used because they were there, part of the Hall equipment, as were the potted plants. (The camera in Gladwell’s *Multiple Descent (Taranaki)* captures passing glimpses of mountain and ocean on the descents ... because they were there.)

Trio also brings to (my) mind the British Channel 4 reality series *Faking It*: the participants accept the challenge of mastering new and vastly different professional skills. After four weeks of immersion with mentors they are put to the test with ‘ringers’ who have skills and prior experience in the field, in front of a panel of experts to decide whom is the

Canada Council for the Arts and was the 2006 recipient of the K.M. Hunter award for excellence in Visual Arts. Risa is a Board Director at InterAccess Electronic & Media Art Centre Toronto, where she is also a member of the Programming Advisory Council. Her work *Corners* was shown in fall 2007 at Forest City Gallery in London, Ontario; upcoming exhibitions include *Trees of Canada* at MKG127 Gallery in Toronto. In the summer of 2008 Risa will be artist in residenc at *La Cité*, the Paris Studio.

Production credits. Creator/Producer Risa Horowitz thanks Jukka Nurmela [audio engineering]; Heather Tuach [string lessons]; Linling Hsu [violin savior]; InterAccess; Wendy Tokaryk; Ed Bamling; Aubrey Fernandez; Brian Richards; Tom Montvillia; Jeremy Rotzstain [tech research]; David Rokeby [all the answers]; Dana Samuel; Esther Brown.

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Ihor Holubizky is a self-taught musician. He writes about art, culture and society.

Image credits. Front centre: *Trio*, Owens Art Gallery, Sackville, New Brunswick 2007, video screenshots; all other images are from *Trio. Documentation (learning sessions)*, 2005, video screenshots.

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