

TOSH BASCO

CARLOS/ISHIKAWA



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MATTO

FAITH MUST FLOW
Tosh Basco, Christelle Ogninaka, Crystalliness, Anika Yi, Tarek Lakhri, Korakrit Arunonachai, Yunchu Kim, Winnie Ho, Riely, Marcelo Gomes, Aodhan Madden, Polar Madmax Ikea in June and Bangkok at night

CONTEMPORARY ART DESIGN PHOTOGRAPHY FASHION WORDS



Tosh Basco photographed at her studio in Zurich, Switzerland, 2022 by MATTO Studio

THE REAL IS A FEELING TOSH BASCO

For five hours, we drove over the most stereotypical Swiss landscape of snow-capped mountains in the distance, passing cows and family cars with bikes attached to them. We drove from Milan to Zürich to meet Tosh, a performance artist formerly known as boychild, at her studio. She prepared snacks and we brought chocolate from the gas station. After talking, she invited us to see the screening of *MOBY DICK; Or, The Whale* by Moved by the Motion, a group of interdisciplinary artists she is part of, that same night at the Pfauen theatre. Then on our drive back, in the midst of the night, we took the wrong turn and eventually managed to cross the longest Gotthard tunnel only by a hair's breadth, just before it closed.

What is the dynamic like between a performer and the audience? Where is the vulnerability? I feel it can be both ways, that the audience can be vulnerable to the actions of the performer, and the performer is vulnerable to the public, all these eyes watching. Is the vulnerability something that is welcome, that actually makes the performance better?

This vulnerability is a part of the power. And it is mutual for both myself and the audience. I can just speak to the way in which I perform through improvisation. Wu Tsang and I were just talking about this, in regard to artist Ron Athey. She was saying he and I have a very similar approach to performance, not in praxis necessarily, but in the way that we use a certain intensity in the performance that doesn't convey in the documentation of the work. I use it to both connect and grab the attention of the audience, it's very visceral, some people use the word cathartic. In order to sustain that intensity, I think it also requires my own vulnerability, and that I hold the space for people. I just taught a class with Wu yesterday, we talked a lot about performance. Performance is particular because it's neither theatre, nor a concert, nor film.

The performer gets to play with the rules of engagement, and that's where I think the vulnerability for the audience comes in. The rules that dictate reality become pliable. In a theatre, for example, or movie theatre, the audience generally knows to sit and face the performer, they know to not speak typically, they know, a certain politeness or etiquette. In the past people would yell, throw food. And now there are rules. I like performance because you can encourage the audience to move a certain way, you can bring things up about how things are seen, you can ask the audience how

to think about bodies and space in a different way. I think performance can fill a lot of the spaces that theatre might have filled when it was newer form. I don't know how I feel about the traditions of theatre or performance, I arrived to it through drag, which is its own kind of tradition. It's valuable for me to learn from the ways that people engage in different spaces. You become passive to the ways in which you're watching, also hearing, seeing. Bodies feel sound and feel the energy of other people around them. When I watch theatre, I find myself becoming passive, I just accept the fact that I'm sitting down watching something happen.

Do you care about the reaction of the audience?

I care about the audience. Ultimately I don't know if I care what they "think" in regard to their "reaction", that is something I have no control over. Improvisational work is about preparing, I do a lot of reading, sometimes I write, there are also the technical aspects like the lighting and much consideration of how an audience arrives into a space, how people will encounter the work, etc. I care about the accessibility of an audience to be able to connect with the work, whether that be physically, emotionally, sensorially, and I care that there is the opportunity for the audience to be roused into a place of feeling. It is very meaningful to me the act of showing up. I am very aware of how much energy it takes to go, to bear witness. It can be a ritual. I appreciate that aspect of performance – to be in a room or a space with other people.



Tosh Basco, *Still life, Zürich*, 2021, C-Print mounted on aluminum, Unique, 56.2 x 42.6 x 3.3 cm (22 1/8 x 16 3/4 x 1 1/4 in) Framed.
Image © Tosh Basco 2022, Courtesy of the artist & Carlos/Ishikawa, London. Photographer: Daman Griffiths



How important is sound to your work?

Yesterday we went to a talk with the filmmaker Steve McQueen and at some point he said that sound is sculptural for him, that it can actually become three-dimensional in the sense that when we hear we evaluate the distance. Sound has the capacity to become physical.

Sound is incredibly important! It functions differently in each work. Sometimes I use sound through "silence", yet silence doesn't ever really exist. There are these sound deprivation tanks, which are 1000 pounds of salt in water, and you sit and float – apparently it's supposed to be good for you. It's incredibly quiet in this space. And then your heartbeat becomes very loud. And the sound of your own breath swarms you. When I would walk out of the tank, I always had this feeling that when my heel would hit the ground, it sounded like the bass at Berghain. Sound is important to me in this sense.

Pauline Oliveros, the incredible sound artist, had a lifelong practice called *deep listening* that is a beautiful way of understanding and thinking through sound. People think they're going to go *watch* my performance, but then there's so much more that's happening – my breath, for example. Especially, after the pandemic we became aware of what it meant to share the air with people. Again, for me, what is important about performance is being in the same space with each other, about breathing the same air it is almost as important as what you're seeing – hearing breath, or footsteps, or body moving. Sound is a bodily experience that does not only belong to the ears. It is spacial and sculptural for sure.

Wu and I did a performance once by the ocean, and there was no amount of amplification of her voice that could compete with the sound of the waves. And that was a beautiful learning experience because I was reminded of how small I was. Sound was the teacher then, not just the sense of the horizon or the waves but the swallowing sound of the ocean and the wind, which the body felt too. We ended up deciding that instead of amplifying her voice, she would just walk in through the audience, so she had to get close enough for the people to hear her, which was more about her moving into close proximity to the audience rather than a coherent "hearing" of the text.

There are many different kinds of hearing, just like there are different kinds of seeing. The sense of what it means to be seen by someone – if I feel seen, I feel deeply understood. And if I feel heard, I also feel deeply understood.

You said you have been moving towards abstraction. Do you think it's because you start to understand better?

No. I have a lot of questions about how we conceptualize *understanding*. For me, abstraction allows me to move without language or the rigidity of representation. I started performing with pop songs, it's a powerful form to use because pop kind of belongs to myth, in the sense that it just reaches so many people. Because pop appropriates other musical traditions, there are things that are carried through and then there are things that are lost packed into a song. There's also loss in representation.

Do you as a performer have an idea of what the image of yourself looks like when performing in the eyes of the viewer? How do you want to be seen? I wonder how sight can fail us, what we are focusing on when looking at images of our own body, what we are actually seeing – it's all so fragmented. I think there is a strong presence of images in your work. I heard you talking at the Art Basel panel and you used a metaphor in regard to the limits and constraints of working in theatre, an institution – you said you imagine "the dandelion growing between two pieces of cement". With words you ended up creating an image that you shared with the audience.

When I think of seeing or images I think of photography. I have a fraught relationship with photography, especially as an extension of *seeing*. We live in a society where there's such an over-proliferation of images. My dad was a photographer, he gave me a camera when I was a teenager. My first creative outlet was taking photos, it was something that I did until I started performing. Then I got confused about what it meant to be the person who takes images. I started reading about the history of photography and the death impulse and implicit violence in the mechanisms of photography. I was and am still a bit freaked out by my desire to take photos.

When I perform, I stop thinking, that's why I love performing. Or when I draw, the drawings are so related to performance, they are truer transcriptions of the movement than a photograph is. They are remnants of a movement, or tracings.



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But even when I turn away from photography it is always there. I think of what it means to be seen, being imaged, of the proliferation of images, how we've accepted images as a language. I'm even thinking about emojis. Instead of writing a sentence, I'll just send an emoji. We see a picture and think we know what's happening. It's quite confusing with the internet, accelerating at such a speed that I do not understand, I definitely don't understand.

How do you successfully document your performances?

I don't believe that a document can ever replace performance. I have found collaboration to be a place where the work can be most successfully communicated.

Is it important for you to talk about your work?

Yes and no. I have this fear of language, so it's been important for me to deal with that, to interrogate that terror and what it means, why it's there. I think that the movement for me continues to be a way to express what I don't have language for. There's so many things that I can say with my body that are so outside of language, and I don't even know if I can be censored. Even I can only use my hands, or I could just use my face, there's always this ability to express. Even just with the eyes – Marina Abramović did that, right, she just looked at people.

But it was language that drove me to performance. Sometimes I have an intention of doing something and the people who are there experience something totally different, and I love that, that it's out of my control, that it lives in the memories of people who are there. But what used to happen was that people would put their own words on it, it's quite slippery... the same thing with abstraction, the information is disseminated, the way that it proliferates over time. There's a power in language. Same with images, you know, these forms, they can solidify in ways.

I feel images are somehow more flexible than language.

Language is also always eating itself. It's constantly being erased by itself. Words are always being forgotten and new words are kind of redacting old words. What I find interesting is that slippery space in-between, where things are not as fixed as we're told.

Your performances somehow escape those capitalist structures that define our everyday life. These works cannot be acquired in a collection unless documented, and you cannot reproduce identical performances hundreds of times. Where do you find the faith and determination to continue and pursue this?

When I started performing, I was terrified of being on stage. I think my first performance happened in 2011, sometime in November in San Francisco. And my second performance ever was in Melbourne one month later. I just happened to be travelling. And then after that I did many in San Francisco, and very quickly it became my career. When I started doing it, it felt that something had caught fire in me. I would have been untrue to myself to not continue. I have to find when I perform this thing that is *real*. I don't know how else to say it. There's no way of representing the feeling that is not words, or images, it is not any one thing but many. It is not a faith that I follow but the feeling.

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What happens when you perform something over and over?

Hopefully the thing that happens is that it's new every time, maybe not new but unique. I only started having that experience in the last four or five years. Repertoire – it's growing on me, this repetition, because you think that you know something, you know a work through and through. Every time I re-perform a piece there is always something new that I learn, there's always something else there or it changes or shifts or grows or becomes untrue. I love this.

Do you feel there is a thread between all these performances that you have done, that there is a continuation ?

There are many threads. First, the thread of my work. I would even argue that for anyone's work it runs through one's lifetime. And then there's threads of memory, everything feels very connected or touches everything else. Maybe to answer more specifically, I think of *Moved by the Motion*, the collective I'm part of – here there's always some edge touching the previous piece. It might be moving on from perspective to the virtual, or it might be something as specific as doing the adaptation of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and now we're doing *Pinocchio*, there's a whale that is present. There is also the theme of the myth as *Pinocchio* is kind of mythic – I think it's one of the most published texts after the Bible. Before we have done *Orpheus*, that is the prototype for a pop star.

What is your version of *Moby Dick* like?

I really love it. I hope you can see it. Which means I hope you can see it and hear it because it has a live orchestra. That's such an important part of it. When I first heard them play the score live, I cried. There's something so emotional about it because it's a fifteen string orchestra. You know, when you hear strings, you want to cry. The cello is so emotional.

Do you reckon you can better develop your thoughts as a solo artist or when working with the collective?

Both. It's something that I try to keep a balance with. In order to show up to a relationship, you also have to be your own person and have something to offer. And you get that through having space for yourself. I've been performing less as a solo artist, because I needed a break from it but I've been doing more drawing, photography, and last year I had three gallery shows which was a big surprise. That's where I've been cultivating, nourishing my own practice.

Collaboration has been incredibly meaningful to me. When it comes to my work, there's always a bibliography of people that came before me that did stuff that allows me to do what I do. I don't believe in individual genius, I think that we all have teachers,

and even in a refusal of ideas there's still that point of orientation of the people that came before us or the people that are around us.

Do you need a stage to perform?

It's the attention and intention that sets the stage. There are technical decisions that you can make that delineate a stage. I would say that people are important, I think people are the most important thing to my performance, that is how I make a stage, negotiating the space between myself and the audience, whoever they are. I think that the audience is as important as I am because I could just dance around in this room by myself and it won't be the same. I've performed in many different kinds of spaces. In the last Venice Biennale I chose a space that was a grassy knoll at the end of Arsenale. And I loved it, it was a charming grassy amphitheatre. A stage can be a physical space that is architectural, a wooden platform but I'm questioning that word even because performance makes things physical – I can make this table a stage with you two here. I think that the world becomes the stage in all these different ways, when we perform ourselves. We carry ourselves very differently at airports, with our parents, at a concert or at a restaurant even though we're the same person.

In my opinion, the performer has the ability to communicate within the emotional realm and bring awareness to experiences, or ideas, that cannot be communicated successfully to everyone through facts. I was reading Wolfgang Tillmans talking about this “backfire effect” – when a person doesn't believe in a falsehood of their opinion, you cannot actually prove them wrong with facts, this only strengthens their belief, unless the facts come from a source they “trust”, a fact dispensed by their “own” side – which I think is ultimately an emotional bond.

It's making me think about your first question about vulnerability, there's something intrinsic to performance that requires vulnerability. Gregg Bordowitz said that the real is a feeling. It's coming to my mind right now. This is where performance operates, in this realm of feelings. Maybe the audience's comfort is an access point of connecting to them.



Moved by the Motion: Orpheus, 2021. Image © Diana Pfammatter; courtesy Moved by the Motion & Schauspielhaus Zurich