

# BOMB

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## Brennan Gerard & Ryan Kelly by Jenn Joy

*Exploring and choreographing intimacy in  
Timelining, currently on view at The Kitchen NYC.*



Gerard & Kelly, *Kiss Solo* (2012). Four channel video and audio installation, dimensions variable. Installation view, Kate Werble Gallery, New York. Courtesy of the artists and Kate Werble Gallery, New York.

Entering the theatre at The Kitchen during Gerard & Kelly's recent opening of *Timelining* is seductively disorienting. I hear the crush of chairs pulled down, risers falling apart, installers discussing how to proceed—loud, repetitive, destructive. Yet the remaining architecture appears precise, almost mute, against the chairs piled high on the darkened edge of the stage. I wait, listening. One dancer, Todd McQuade, climbs into the structure, reads a fragment from Richard Serra's *Verb List* (1967-68) inscribed onto various segments of the risers and begins to dance. "To roll, to crease, to fold [...] to force, of mapping, of context, of location, of time, of carbonization, to continue." Each transitive phrase invites an elliptical series of movements, reading becomes dancing, becomes something else, more fragile, elegant, subversive. Another dancer, devynn Emory, joins and the duets proliferate: McQuade with Emory, sound with architecture, sculpture with dance, Serra & Robert Morris with Gerard & Kelly. This opening performance infuses iconic minimalist works (Serra's and Morris's *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* [1961]) with a more precarious corporeal weight, homage and critique, spare yet deeply emotional.

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Gerard & Kelly, *Timelining* (2014). Performance view: The Kitchen, New York. Photo: Ian Douglas. Pictured: Anna Vomáčka and Lissy Vomáčka. Courtesy of the artists and Kate Werble Gallery, New York, and the Kitchen, New York.

I first met Gerard and Kelly on Skype in 2010, during a workshop with choreographer Trajal Harrell at Douglas Dunn's studio in New York City. Sitting in their then LA studio, Gerard and Kelly spoke of their collaborative practice since 2003 and the ways in which choreography affords a particular kind of critical efficacy as it trespasses into the spaces and institutions often affiliated with visual art. Generatively citational, their work, whether quoting minimalism or pieces by Tino Seghal as in *Reusable Parts/Endless Love* (2011) and *Kiss Solo* (2012), acts as a "suspension bridge" to borrow Lauren Berlant's term for a scene staging "the ordinary of the historical present in the gestural, the aleatory, the lateral move, the half thought, the compulsively hyper-vigilant observation, and above all fantasy, the ambitious fantasy of being able to continue to make sense in the places that test the senses and over-determine the object relations that make a world material for its inhabitants." Berlant is writing about writing, yet the tremulous encounter she evokes speaks to the proximity of intimacy and ideology, desire and the quotidian, underlined in Gerard & Kelly's work. And importantly, the urgency of not only imagining these queer practices but living them as well.

Jenn Joy I'm enthralled by the ways your work balances a theoretical score with a physical score; these are never mutually exclusive, but always set as an encounter. And encounter is such a key philosophical term through [Alain] Badiou and his new book *In Praise of Love*. There's something really compelling about how these terms manifest as performance strategies, particularly in *Timelining*, that amplifies and undoes some of the theoretical work.

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Gerard & Kelly, *Timelining* (2014). Performance view, The Kitchen, New York, NY. Photo: Ian Douglas. Pictured: Gwen Petry and Emily Petry. Courtesy of the artists and Kate Werble Gallery, New York, and the Kitchen, New York.

Brennan Gerard Those words are really loaded and Badiou's work especially. When we were first developing the piece with just the two of us, his recent work on love was really key. In *Treatise [Briefings of Existence: A Short Treatise on Transitory Ontology]*, I think he's trying to make an ethical argument that love has a relationship to the event in history and that this idea is catastrophic. There is a before and an after that instills in the subject a fidelity to that event or to that relationship. He's thinking of that relationship in a political way but it also, I wouldn't say exceeds, but implies more than what we normally think of as politics with an ethical consistency. One of the weird things that happens in our work is that there are theoretical and also very practical backgrounds to each project. With *Timelining* we were thinking specifically about our own partnership and relationship. I think that we were engaging a lot of theory in order to understand how we live our lives. (*laughter*) And so the theory actually became very urgent. Philosophically and politically the commitments that we have to one another, and the degree to which—and I think that this is what the piece is exploring in an experimental way—our activities are constructed in relationship to each other and are dependent on others. We are made by our relationships with others. Artist Mary Kelly has done significant work on the often under-theorized parent-child relationship as a structure of inter-subjectivity. This became urgent for her when she became a mother. What became urgent for us—this is complicated and I don't fully understand it yet—was to imagine relations outside of 'the couple.' This is a political and ethical project; every intimate relationship cannot be collapsed into a model of the romantic couple. JJ Isn't this one of the things that Badiou fights against? He wants to hold onto the fact that love is about 'two,' but that two holds a paradox, a rupture, that never dissolves. There's always risk. I love the moment when he equates the zero risk war with the zero risk relationship—a disruption that allows him to hold out for an ethics of love.

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Gerard & Kelly, *Verb Dance* (2014). Performance view, The Kitchen, New York. Photo: Ian Douglas. Courtesy of the artists and Kate Werble Gallery, New York, and the Kitchen, New York.

BG What binds the two without collapsing the two and why they are not one—they're interpenetrated. I think you can see this management of risk in relationships directly played out in the marriage movement, and also in the rise of social networking dating sites, like Grindr and OkCupid. Our whole world is constructed around knowing exactly what we're getting into before we get into it, scripting our encounters and therefore preventing an actual event from taking place. That's one of the things we're thinking about in this piece. Love is an experience that cannot be managed, you know?

JJ Yes, perhaps Badiou wants love to be out of bounds and out of control. So how does the queer theory that you're drawing on work with these ideas from Badiou? I returned to José Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* after he died last year and was thinking about his call for utopia as a radical possibility for the here and now against the exhausting pragmatism that the marriage agenda can collapse into.

Ryan Kelly I find myself coming to certain texts of queer theory with a feeling like it's a homing pigeon, is that what you say? Like the pigeon goes and then it comes back, right? I didn't live through an activist moment historically, so my event is in reading. My event is this transmission of knowledge at that moment of reading on the page. I find myself really moved encountering certain texts by people whose moment of political consciousness was informed by participation in ACT UP or the women's movement.

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Gerard & Kelly, *Kiss Solo* (2012). Four channel video and audio installation, dimensions variable. Installation view, Kate Werble Gallery, New York. Courtesy of the artists and Kate Werble Gallery, New York.

BG One of the things we discovered while working on the score, was that feeling, which I can sympathize with, of a kind of belatedness, which may be really queer in and of itself. That feeling is of arriving late--and I think specifically in relationship to foundational queer theory, artists who died of AIDS, teachers and activists who died of AIDS, or were traumatized by the AIDS crisis. Moving to New York when we did, you late '90s, me early 2000s, when it's already gone; everything that we wanted and what drew me here when I was a kid was gone. Feeling a real sense of a gap in that experience in and of itself. There may be something queer in that structure as a different relationship to history, if you feel like you missed out on something. A lot of people talk about it too; it can be confused for nostalgia.

RK That melancholic position of nostalgia is such a trope of queer theory. I think that our work is really trying to not do that and establishes a visceral, erotic, tactile relationship to history.



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Gerard & Kelly, *Verb Dance* (2014). Performance view, The Kitchen, New York, NY. Photo: Ian Douglas. Pictured: devynn emory and Todd McQuade. Courtesy of the artists and Kate Werble Gallery, New York, and the Kitchen, New York.

BG We just read about a show that Ad Reinhardt did in the '50s in a gallery—he developed a style of calligraphy and political cartoons before he was a fine artist. In the late 1950's he did a timeline, a CV, that included other events like the Spanish Civil War with “I was 11, we moved to...” For a fine artist to announce that his subjectivity was structured by history and to show that in a gallery was a big deal.



Gerard & Kelly, *Reusable Parts/Endless Love* (2011). Performance view, Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church, New York, NY. Pictured: Todd McQuade. Courtesy of the artists and Kate Werble Gallery, New York.

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RK When we were doing our own timelining we were impressed by this simple realization that the HIV virus was discovered in the nine month interval between our births. Somehow our three timelines correspond: the timeline of AIDS and the timelines of our lives interweave. I think there's a project, not involving timelines at all, that we want to do together in the future. What does it mean to address AIDS now? As something that ghosts and haunts my presence, an immediate thing that I have no particular contact to.



Gerard & Kelly, *Reusable Parts/Endless Love* (2011). Performance view, Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church, New York, NY. Pictured: Roger Prince and niv Acosta. Courtesy of the artists and Kate Werble Gallery, New York.

BG It's thinking about people like Larry Kramer or Sarah Schulman and other people, many of whom died, as having saved my life. To feel like my life is possible because of the actions of this generation directly preceding me, and just to realize that this historical crisis does haunt me and my subjectivity. . .

RK I would also say, there's a real need, once you get beyond yourself, to articulate a relationship that is not melancholic. In some ways the lost object is the resistance: the way that a community was generated around a common collective desire to fight the epidemic. There's a lot of tension between that generation and younger people who are contracting the virus. Why? Why are they contracting the virus? What structures exist to legitimize the shame that is associated with the virus? Many of those earlier structures were dismantled once anti-retrovirals were introduced. So right now, the major affect surrounding AIDS is one of grief, the loss of people, the loss of the struggle, the loss of ACT UP. But that doesn't account for the people who are—

BG—continuing to contract and live with the virus.

RK For whom it's not a question of loss, it's a question of the present, and shame, and very real

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needs. Material need as well. I have a desire to position myself within this situation and there's some work to be done there. Underneath the grief, there's a sense of the erotic that needs to be worked through in some way—the real desire for a homo-sociality that is eradicated in marriage or threatened by it. There are all sorts of really interesting lost objects...I do think that our project is born from this desire to understand the enigma of partnership. I want every possible kind of intimacy to exist! (*laughter*) And to be represented as a kind of cataloguing—'the couple' is absolutely here and the heterosexual couple is included, but equally so are ex-couples and siblings and someday I hope a slave-master relationship. I'm very interested in these different intimacies, those that exceed the family—the gay uncle, the faerie Godmother. What binds individuals together?

BG We were thinking about this project as existing in relation to past work by a logic of extension. I think that the performative aspect of *Timelining* allows for a contingency of time and time's passage that is already pregnant in Felix Gonzalez-Torres' work. He desired the timelines to constantly evolve but they rarely do because of the rules of the market. Here there's no choice; it's going to evolve because the timeline relies solely on the performance enactment.

JJ Dahn Vo imagined this historical spatial contingency in relation to Felix's work as well in a piece he wrote for *Artforum* when asked to describe the show that he helped curate at the WIELS Foundation in Brussels. Instead he writes of walking through the gravestones of Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris: Oscar Wilde, Isadora Duncan, Gertrude Stein. On the back of Stein's gravestone he finds Alice B. Toklas's name and is pissed off at Felix for giving him a decoy image in the photograph of flowers on the tombstone. Felix's work has a "secret detonator," he intimates that exists beyond it; these incite its subversive force. Writing in the same issue, Joe Scanlan asks how we maintain the subversion in Gonzalez-Torres' work, an artist who was so embraced for his sexy and beautiful and smart work, yet there was always something else... Perhaps this is another way of thinking the rupture—architecturally or spatially or conceptually—visceral wedges that mess with any easy relation in the ways your work deals with relationship and encounter. Are the two of you performing your timelines?

RK So far, no . . . I don't think it's a foreclosed possibility, but it's not the particular set of questions that we're asking now. We talked a lot about not wanting to model with our own timelines, not wanting to show the score or perform it in front of the people we're working with  
JJ The process is almost pedagogical in a way.

RK We think of it as a transmission, and that's a pedagogical term.

BG I like the way you described it in the past, Ryan, that we have to hold this space in order for the process of learning the score and developing the timelines to occur. That seems right to me, because the performers also hold the space for that moment when the encounter with the viewers takes place. Some kind of container needs to be there.



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JJ How do you teach that activity of holding? Is that part of your process for casting these relationships and how the scores developed? History touching intimacy moving toward something else . . .

RK We're not negating the history of dance and theater to produce visual art. I think that's a condition that's been so much a part of this new idiom of performance in an exhibition context; performance always appears as the negation of dance and theater. We're relying on our ability to direct someone to do this activity of holding space and to give them a task that will effect this. We're thinking about the non-score, the non-public score. How are we directing people to be in the space when no viewers are in the space? I'd say that's a little like Tere O'Connor, saying he likes to choreograph the consciousness of the performance.

We did a casting and we set up five partnerships. We'd love so many more; we're starting to understand is that this is really just the beginning. The first partnership we cast identified as a couple, two young men engaged to be married, so in some way we chose the object of our research to begin with, the thing that was instigating the whole project; the dis-identification.

*Timelining* requires a partnership, two people already involved in some form of intimacy. We think of this relationship as a "ready-made." The score is enacted when a viewer enters the exhibition space. The two walk side by side in the space, speaking the events of their lives beginning at "now" and moving backward toward the moment of birth. When one's memory falters and confusion sets in, this performer stops speaking and the other begins by associating within his own timeline in relation to where the other has left off. So it jumps around in time triggered by each person's statements (and there are rules that structure the movement and speech patterns). This weaving of events creates a history, or two histories, that are bound up in one another, that was the point. The timelines that are written in advance of the performance are then activated in the performances and these are always rewritten because time continues to advance. The score always begins at "now" every time that it resets, which happens every time someone new enters the space, so the performers have to improvise based on certain criteria to account for the events that have transpired in those moments since they last started.

JJ When teaching I sometimes draw a cone diagram from Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory* that was contemporaneous with early Sigmund Freud on screen memory and dreams. Bergson describes all of our memories as particles, dust, suspended in the cone moving along a plane of experience that activates specific memories when the point touches the present. He was imagining a way to think about duration, an idea that Gilles Deleuze borrows when he writes on cinema. There is something of this spatial and affective image that resonates with the scores you propose.

BG I like that it's a spatial structure for thinking about temporal experience of memory flooding the present. And the logic of it, that mixture of the everyday and the epic, the historical or political is not a logic of juxtaposition but much more one of interweaving. At least that's how we're thinking about it. The score is two people walking alongside—and that's another important idea—alongside-ness and not facing-ness. (*laughter*) Walking side by side, you each have a separate perceptual phenomenological relationship to the world. The score is basically an

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“if/then” structure that will dictate certain ways of moving: changing direction, moving simultaneously, changing location in the circle, on the outside or the inside. The performer has rules that they’re following when they’re doing the score, which is a way to visually interweave two people choreographically in space as their process of remembering also interweaves with each other and the everyday and with history. So less in terms of a kind of classic avant-garde strategy of juxtaposing; it’s more like braiding things together.

JJ That’s one of Tere’s [O’Connor] words, right? A temporal braiding. I’m curious about the work you were doing with Simone [Forti] and with Tere and if their divergent processes filter in at all? With Simone’s work, it feels less about juxtaposition and more about present-ness and instantaneousness.

BG Absolutely. Simone has had a huge impact on our work recently. One of the things that I really love about working with Simone is the direct connection between the physical experience and writing, because writing is a huge part of the preparation for this project. I hope the performers who may not have a writing practice will continue, because once you start remembering, it just keeps going. It really gets deeper and much more specific. One of the other things that happens with memory is that when someone remembers and it’s so specific that when you hear it or read it, it feels like you had it too. That’s the weird thing about it. It’s totally subjective, but somehow impersonal—like it doesn’t belong to that person. In fact, it’s communal. Definitely working with Simone that’s happening when you’re moving. Writing is a physical practice.

RK In the process of developing the piece, we ask a series of questions through writing practices, free writing exercises where you begin every sentence with “I remember” and working around the place where you were born. “I remember the yellow daffodils on the lawn. I remember the green garden hose. I remember the porch. I remember when lightning would strike.” We guide people toward this vault of memory: affective memories, somatic, visceral, and visual, cognitive. I think that gets us closer to a queer temporality that we’re interested in, so even as we think about the larger social forces and events that structure our lives, it’s about touching through memory the moment at which you encountered that historical force. There’s been a lot of queer work in timelines that has considered how subjectivity is historically formed and we are trying to understand how that happens. And we’re specifically relying on the mediation of memory to get to those events and encounters. Occasionally, we will allow for dated cognitive memories: “Ronald Reagan was elected” . . . I was one, so I don’t remember that. There is a syntax to the construction of the timeline. We borrow from Felix’s idea of creating a portrait. And this is where the project begins to depart, because we give the timeline to the subject, but then the subject is responsible for its enactment and maintenance so the inter-subjective happens even at the moment of the work’s making. There’s a transferring of responsibility to the performer. Now you could say that happens in any performance in which there’s a director or a choreographer or writer and then there’s the person whose job it is to interpret it, but in those cases I think it is staged and scripted. This process is entirely different—we’ve made this portrait, but now you have to rewrite it and you’ll continue to rewrite it through the act of performing it. I would love to see what resonance of my own portrait-ing remains in a year and what has been eroded by time and absorbed by the subject. The subject’s own process of reflecting on his or her life.

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BG This is the first time that we're adapting the score for an exhibition time-structure. We've always performed this as an event, so this is another way of thinking about event and encounter. An event is usually something that takes place at an appointed time and place. There's a lot of agreement among performers and spectators for that to happen. And then the encounter, which is where we are thinking of *Timelining* more intensively, happens whenever a viewer enters the gallery and the score begins. And it begins again when another viewer enters. For the duration of the five-week exhibition that's the status of the score. That time structure has a huge role in affecting the timelines and the fact that people will be performing for three hours at a time.

RK There's the timelines, the score, and then the schedule of performers' appearances that we're also trying to bring into the frame. We're thinking about the exhibition time-structure as one of development, but not necessarily related to narrative or plot. We're really thinking critically about this emerging idiom of performance in an exhibition context and what logics have come with it.

RK If you're going to occupy the whole time-structure of an exhibition, what can you do beyond repetition and reiteration as a logic? To address this a bit, we're also introducing an "interruption" to the score. Each performer—without h/er partner—can show up one time while the exhibition is open and replace someone in a partnership. It's like "cutting in." This new partnership then does the *Timelining* score. So it introduces a stranger relationality to these questions of intimacy.

BG Can there be intimacy among strangers?

RK So it's a little like a science experiment of queer psychoanalytic theory. (*laughter*)

JJ Nice. Is Leo Bersani going to be one of your partners? (*laughter*) When you speak of the intrusion of the stranger, it feels like you're opening the performance to the exterior of the exhibition space, too. This free agency creates an irruptive consciousness that's always working on the show or that challenges the always-there-ness of it. It seems to cultivate a different kind of attention on the part of the viewer. Do you anticipate how people will experience it?

RK I know what you mean because it does raise the question, how do you see that? There's also a whole realm of the project that exists in your head where you can imagine the possible reiterations because you're kind of given this metonymic structure. And maybe that's also queer, in some ways, like the impossibility of containing the whole thing, and knowing through what you do see, you can anticipate that there's so much you can't see. It will always be escaping your ability to hold it entirely.

JJ This reminds me of your 2011 performance installation Reusable Parts/Endless Love (Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church, New York). In this work, there's an obscuring of what's happening and a reiteration of language that allows for the viewer to see it unraveling again and again and again. You create these specific, right-angled architectural frames, yet they dissolve

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and shift. In a sense it's a solo done so many times that it undoes a level of solo. Jean-Luc Nancy writes about singular being plural, as another kind of subjectivity that's not about an autonomy of the rational subject but another way of engaging, which I think is perhaps how José is interested in talking about it, a specifically queer way of articulating oneself.

BG In *Reusable Parts* we thought a lot about queering the space. So this space at first seems stable, but it is fractured and changing. The spectator cannot contain the whole thing spatially, so it's a phenomenological step to awaken their sense of their own positionality, so hopefully that leads to: What is my position in relationship to this representation of this person? To desire? Why am I following this person? We are trying to raise awareness in the spectator and that began with the space.

JJ The night that I came was really emotional; Julie Tolentino was there with gorgeous glitter on. (*laughter*) And a crew from Project Runway and a high-end fashion scene circulating as well. So it casts other levels of visibility or dynamics of St. Mark's Church. I was also thinking about Julie's piece *For You*, where she dances blindfolded for twenty-four hours on a small patch of grass. In that work, I encounter her in a similar kind of corner. There's something really lovely about what these seeming formal frames incite, or maybe this is a Reinhardt question, how abstraction allows for this incredible kind of intimacy or playing out of erotic fantasy and other ways of being together. The structures: grid, frame, circle, corners are . . .

BG Almost like diagrams. Simple. I think we have this tendency, which we're becoming aware of, that we are structuring the work to produce unscripted experiences of intimacy that cannot be thought of in advance.

RK I think that's also a way that we, as two people, have negotiated a shared authorship or shared practice. If we were scripting, we would have to agree on everything. But there's something about the unscripted-ness that allows for disagreement and other kinds of communication to take place that is not about accord or consensus or agreement, which, I think, is also in some way an extension/possible critique of some queer positions.

JJ I sense an embedded critique of other works (contemporary and historical) surrounding your own—of how we think about collaboration, of how dance happens in a museum, of the agreement that is set up around expectations of dance or sculpture. Your work incites complicity through flashes of recognition in the timelines—synchronicity or syntactical disturbance. Particularly in the *Verb Dance* and *Black box with the sound of its un-making* you are drawing on the archive of iconic minimalist work and I loved how the sparseness of the score generated such eloquent intimate dances and how this language (gestural and textual) expands in the movements of the performers. *Timelining* proposes a different kind of experience that has to do with agreement and witnessing. There's a dilation moment, which is different from a flat-lining or constant vigilance to maintain performing.

BG I think that the flat-lining is a very dangerous, but very old...this is why I don't understand the way many performances are now being installed in an exhibition context, the timelessness of

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the art object has been critiqued since Minimalism. That timelessness is very dangerous when you think about it politically, because it's also about erasing history and the social relations that produce that art object. It's a flat-lining of time, which doesn't really exist, but also an evacuation of history. You're not supposed to think about the conditions, but I always do think about the conditions, especially when the work is presented in that way. I don't think this show at all begins to even solve anything, but it's trying to account for that contingency, and to account for time. When I was a kid, I thought maybe the painting would go away when I'm not in the museum, and they only come into shape or materialize when I'm there. What happens to the painting when you're not there? But I think that there's something to that, because I think, we make the world through our seeing. It doesn't exist other than in that moment.