

# Interview

## THE CURTAIN RISES IN CYBERSPACE

By Haley Weiss & Photography Mark Davis | November 13, 2015



BRIAN FUATA AND SUSAN GIBB IN NEW YORK, NOVEMBER 2015.  
PHOTO: MARK DAVIS.

Last week, as the Performa 15 biennial geared up for a month of performances throughout New York City, one performance began in cyberspace, causing smartphones to buzz and inboxes to ping on the morning of November 3. The email recipients, largely strangers to one another, had all signed up to attend All Titles, No Centre Crux: the email performances in PERFORMA 2015, a project conceived by Sydney-based, New Zealand-born text and performance artist Brian Fuata and developed alongside Amsterdam-based, Australian curator Susan Gibb. Each email-goer is offered three options to join the audience: the "to" field, through which one becomes part of the content; the "cc" field, visible to all who receive the email but most of whom remain silent; and the "bcc" field, where one becomes witness to the action but is invisible to all, save Fuata.

The premise of the performance seems simple: reserve one of 503 available spaces anytime this month, and receive a new act of the performance via email twice a week, until November 30. The reality, however, is complex, both conceptually and in application. "Brian became spam," Gibb says, when asked why the second email act had not yet arrived in our inboxes. In Act One, Fuata asked those who chose the "to" field to call out their names, which was followed by a series of quick replies. The experience was frenetic, filled with varied fonts, colors, manners of introducing oneself, and the reformatting of the email with each "reply all." The thread changed languages, nesting deeper in

itself and ending an ironic reply from a hotmail account that shall not be named: "Shhhhhh. I'm trying to watch the show. Sent from an undisclosed location."

Not to be foiled by Gmail algorithms, Act Three arrived on November 11 (Act Two, to this day, has not arrived) and took a turn toward the personal. Within the email, Fuata's fragmented poetry was paired with photographs based on one of the "to" recipients, to whom Fuata personally reached out.

"The first institutional curating of this project was a few years ago at a gallery in Australia," Fuata says. "It was really tricky because of its attachment to the institution. A lot of people, regular audience members, got slightly freaked out because, due to the context, [the emails] turned into institutional copy," he continues. "So when Performa invited me, Susie was really careful to take it out of its typical realm of performative interaction and protect the project by making it consciously a theatrical experience, hence the booking system."

In tandem with the email performances, Fuata and Gibb have prepared "a preparatory/predictive performance for a circuit of email and the living," which will take its form through a series of live performances today and tomorrow at Printed Matter in New York. Informed by a dance residency where Fuata learned "authentic movement" (the act of closing one's eyes and moving improvisationally while being watched), the performances will evolve in real time, reflecting on the space of Printed Matter and the archives of 20th century correspondence artist Ray Johnson.

Earlier this week, we sat down with Fuata and Gibb in New York to discuss email as a medium and performance, both on and offline.

HALEY WEISS: When did you begin your email performances? Did recipients know they were being brought into a performance?

BRIAN FUATA: No, but the performances are always marked by a few reoccurring things, and one of them is stage directions. For example, “Curtains fall upward,” in the actual physical direction, you scroll. Another marker of the performances is the subject line, for example, “An email performance dedicated to all the men in my address book.” Those become clues to the receiver.

WEISS: Can you tell me how this project originally began?

FUATA: It started when I was living in a small coastal town a few hours north of Sydney, but was still working in Sydney and doing this daily commute, three hours one way. It’s pretty intense. One day, I was on the train, and these boys came on dressed up in mining gear, and they weren’t more than 12, 13. It was so bizarre and Dickensian, like Bugsy Malone, like, “This can’t be true at all.” So I sent a text to a friend describing the scene, and then sent it to a few more people, and on a whim sent it to everyone in my address book. It was just impulse, a genuine impulse of, “What does it mean to send a text out to every single person in my address book?” I started getting responses to this text, happened to have my computer with me, and started taking note of all of the responses, and then turned them into a poetic text. My background is in writing and autobiographical narratives in a traditional, theatrical monologue way. I essentially formed all of these responses into a score/text piece, and again on an impulse and whim, emailed it out to everyone in my email address book. And I’ve just kept it up.

Before I was conscious of it, I had always sent out video clips and funny jokes to friends saying, “Oh my god, this is so funny,” as a simple, typical use of email. Gradually, as I started doing it more, I became very interested in the idea of “bcc’ing” and what it means to witness a communication. Over time I likened that space of “bcc” to the theatrical setup of an audience in a darkened theater. I became interested in this idea of reading as a performative act, but also communication and correspondence as a performative act—the theatrical framework of two people talking to each other and what it is to be watched in that space.

WEISS: Susan, what was your first reaction when you received one of these emails or texts from Brian?

SUSAN GIBB: It was the text, and I can’t remember how exactly I replied, but I know I replied instantaneously. It was a sudden enjoyment and then this constant back and forth. Everyone was always sharing things, so it had a slight unexpectedness but there was also something quite natural about it. The ongoing email performances are very enjoyable; I think people look forward to it. I’ve kept all of them and they become these strange, treasured moments that you witnessed and existed in a different kind of time.

WEISS: I knew that there would be people I didn’t know emailing me through this performance, that’s how I assumed it would take form, but it was surprising to actually see email signatures, names, and all of this information about strangers that have chosen to take part in the same experience as me. I have all of this weird data.

FUATA: It’s amazing how that data [collects]. I’m also interested in this idea of the email address as a home and locating identity. The address as a form of words is also a really interesting place. I’m Brian Fuata but I’m also [says email address], and what is that psycho-location about?

Email is such an amorphous platform. A couple of years ago my account got hacked, and sent out a bunch of spam, and the reaction to that was so performative. People didn’t understand if it was real or not. This woman was talking to me yesterday; she got that spam and had also received previous performances, but the thing is, the spam was sent to her by a person who had died a year before, who was also an artist. I like this idea of the ghost in the machine and the connections or coincidences to this live mediation of the performances that I do.

WEISS: Because it’s somewhat improvisational and you’re allowing for audience input, what are the challenges of being a curator for this kind of project?

GIBB: As a curator, I’ve worked a lot in performance, and as much as I’m called a curator, I have always worked in production, so I’m not just interested in making a conceptual frame; I really like material. I like being there for the whole process and speaking in those terms.

In terms of the improvisational aspect, which Brian does very carefully, it's about making sure you set the space for the thing to occur and allowing for freedom within that space. With the emails, we spend a lot of time trying to think formally of what the email is and the pragmatics of making that space so it could work, rather than simply thinking you could move this one thing that's already happening into another context. It was asking, "What stage do we need to set for this to occur?"

One of the things Brian also does in the live improvisational performances is almost a ritualization of the space. He really sets the framework for the audience to enter. The moment of performance is almost announced before it occurs, and that shift to a different mode is established. So there's a contract that anything can occur and be understood within the framework of the performance.

WEISS: I know it takes a different form every time, but what is the process like for the live performance?

FUATA: The performance is called a preparatory/predictive performance. I'm really attracted to these adjacent ideas of something predictive, something that is formed that is going to happen in the future, and the idea of something preparatory, something in the process of being made. [Relating to] what Susie was talking about, in being grounded in the preparation of the space, these two ideas are another form of preparation, another way for people to understand the space of improvisation that they're going to witness. For the performances at Printed Matter, they'll be informed by the context of Printed Matter and the Ray Johnson estate works that will be behind me.

GIBB: How Brian approached the Ray Johnson archive is interesting, because he's been taking motifs and abstracting ideas out of the archive. Within the performance, and some of the emails, certain motifs have been used, like the number 13 was something taken from Ray Johnson.

FUATA: And the cat [photo in the first email] as the master of improvisation.

WEISS: The cat struck me because one of the jokes about the internet is that everyone just looks at pictures of cats and cat videos. Where did that image come from? It seemed like you were playing with the fact that this is a banal image, but it's also the beginning of a performance.

FUATA: The cat was a direct reference to Ray Johnson and to improvisation. Also, the place that I'm staying at has a cat! [laughs] The image that I used [in that photo] was a Ray Johnson postcard. What was really nice about dealing with the archive was having 10 days of just being in this Ray Johnson estate, and the most relevant, genuine thing that came out of that was actually meeting [William S.] Wilson, who is the gatekeeper of Ray Johnson's memory and history. As opposed to dealing with the preciousness of his estate and what the archive means, I got more from Bill just giving me these postcards that have no preciousness whatsoever. He said, "Oh, have these." What I liked about that was this genuine point of correspondence and point of exchange as a place to think from.

WEISS: Correspondence art has changed a lot, from postcards and letters to email. Do you see potential for it in other social media platforms, like Instagram or Snapchat? People are already performing in posting, but I wonder if there's some sort of intervention.

FUATA: Definitely, but I personally haven't thought about the potential of that. What's really interesting is that email is so old.

GIBB: It's utilitarian, it's so functional, whereas social media is already so geared toward self-presentation and a very particular kind of performance of the self. You can perform the opposite, but it sort of has the same discourse of performance. Whereas in the email, it ruptures a certain time and space that is in a very different register. Also, because Brian comes from such an interest in writing and text, the email is really a place for that. I guess you have Twitter, but even that format is more limited in terms of characters. Email allows it to not be so image-based, so that text and image can really correspond in a different way.

FUATA: And correspond with regards to ideas of the body and presence, and those conceptual relationships to language. These other social media forms I'm not all that... Actually, I'm quite good at Instagram. [all laugh] But it is about words, for me, and the space that the email allows for those words.