

How can 'I' become 'Je' and should I even try? Gina Pane's 'minor' action.

Abstract

How can I hope to embody and live a past performance whilst maintaining its minority? This presentation focuses on 'Je', an action by Gina Pane which sits outside her best-known work and which has preoccupied me in my own writing and practice for some time. I usually turn to the writings of Jean-François Lyotard for an uncomfortable kind of support: his declaration that the work must force the body 'beyond what it is and what it is able to do, beyond what we believe it is and is able to do' challenges the risk of complacency as I ask how 'I' can become 'Je'.

Darkened room, single spotlight top left; me reading from clipboard with mini-torch and hand held microphone: [as per mexico texts]

There is a photograph of a performance. It is black and white and not well known: I have never seen an original print. But it shows a three story building at night with a spotlight trained on a top floor window. Here we have the spotlight but we are inside and there is no window; there is also another essential difference – in the photograph I am describing there is a figure at that window – a woman dressed in black trousers and a loose-fitting, long-sleeved, white top; she is standing outside, on the window ledge, turned away from us looking into the room inside. The woman is Gina Pane, the French performance artist. The photograph is of an action performed by Pane forty years ago, in 1972, in the Place aux Oeufs, Bruges, Belgium. It is titled 'Je', the French first person singular: 'I'.

[F.B.]¹

Je: it is 1972 in Bruges, Place aux Oeufs. She is standing outside on the edge of a third floor window. Behind the window, in the lit room, a family seems to carry out their everyday life, as though not knowing that Gina Pane is outside in the night watching them. Below, people are watching Gina Pane watching. The ledge is narrow, perhaps slippery, one hand grips the frame, the risk is real. She takes polaroids, throwing them down to her assistants three floors below that which the photographs show: nothing more than the normal life of a family with two children, on the third floor of the Place aux Oeufs in Bruges. Microphones and loudspeakers have been installed. Below in the square, with the small white silhouette, black trousers fixed eight meters above, we listen live to the discussions and the noises of the house: after all, nothing significant, nothing but the sound of voices and the remarks you might overhear on a train, or on a summers evening through an open window. The noises of life, but that which is usually called private life. At the same time, she reads extracts of anthropological texts: about the ritual practices of the Kwakiutl Indians of Vancouver. This takes place over two days and two nights, and if she falls asleep she will fall. Remains of the action 'Je': 32 black and white photographs, chosen and annotated by Gina Pane. What do the ritual practices of the Kwakiutl Indians teach us, connected like this to what we observe of an ordinary family evening in Bruges? It is what we have lost or can no longer reach.

[J.B.]²

On August 11, 1972, Gina Pane performed *Je* (I) in Bruges, Belgium. For this *Action*, the artist stood on a windowsill outside a third-floor apartment and observed the activities of a family of four inside. She was spot-lit from the plaza below, where she could be seen by the crowd that gathered; loudspeakers installed on the street transmitted the sounds in the apartment; and photographs of the family's comportment were distributed.

[M.H.]³

In 1972 Gina Pane made a work, *Je*. The performance – or is it the resulting photographic reconstruction, or both maybe – notably emphasised the multitude of perspectives from which the performance account can originate: Pane stood outside the first floor window looking in; the watched looked back from inside the room, returning Pane's gaze: the audience gathered in the street below looking up, watching the watcher being watched. Perhaps this is not so different from the 'performance' of painting a photograph of a painting. For Pane's work, a single memory did not suffice, the total work could only be completed through its documentation – where all these perspectives came together [...] by consolidating (photographic) memory into an event.

[A. M-R]⁴ *I have been particularly fascinated by the photographs you took of the 1972 action Je [I]. This was the piece where Pane placed herself high up on the facade of a block of flats. We see her from outside perched up on the window sill, standing quite perilously, and lit from spotlights placed at street level. [...]*

[F.M.] I took the photographs both inside the building with Gina seen looking in and from street level looking up at the facade of the building. Lights were set up from street level and lit Gina at the window. The thing I remember most was the antagonistic response of people on the street which was really horrible. People were shouting up at her, "Jump, jump!"

[J.B.]⁵

Documentation of this performance was subsequently exhibited in the form of photographs and texts mounted on four panels. Three of the panels consist of black-and-white photographs of Pane on the ledge, as viewed from the street, and of the family in the room, including images of the family in which the artist can be seen through the window. The fourth panel is composed primarily of handwritten texts accompanied by four photos. Pane described the purpose of the *Action* in the introductory statement on this panel: "In placing my body on the window's parapet between two zones: one private, one public, I had the power of transposition that shattered the limits of individuality so that 'I' could participate in the 'Other'". The other five texts are labelled "Lectures (Readings)"; their themes are the relationship of the self to others, to objects, and to space. In an interview years later, Pane summarized the *Action* as thus: "*Je* brings a double and simultaneous vision of public and private space".

[A.T.]⁶

One action which perfectly illustrates this fragmentation of narrative, although very structured, this partial occultation (intermittence) of things impossible to recompose, except by guessing the most secret points. This action is titled 'Je' and was realised in August 1972, in Bruges, place aux Oeufs. Standing on the ledge of a window situated on the third floor, Gina Pane observed the life of a family, whilst in the square below the public were invited to observe the action in the position of mediator and receiver of certain information.

Retransmission of the ambient sounds of the life of this family, distribution of polaroid photographs taken by the artist, reading of five texts of anthropological interest. These constituted at the same time the limits of a symbolic fence resulting in the representation of a singular space within which the artist stands: a space of mental concentration.

[J.H.]⁷ 'Je' / I or THE ARTIST AS TRAVELLER BETWEEN TWO TERRITORIES

The action entitled 'I' took place on the 11th of August 1972, at 23:45 at Place aux Oeufs, Bruges, in Belgium .

'I' distinguishes itself among other corporeal actions by Gina Pane insofar as it happened in a place not specifically dedicated to art: the windowsill of her apartment overlooking the public piazza of Bruges. As demonstrated by her 'intermediary' position, the artist points to a connection between people that the concept of interior and exterior, private and collective cannot disjoin. The desire and the need to express herself in such an environment that opposes the limited space of a gallery or an apartment, reflects the openness and the will to reach as many people as possible. Here, differently from other actions, the artist doesn't employ *blissure*, rupture or wound.

[C.M.]⁸

Still, appearances seemed to be against the artists. Seeing them absorbed in their enigmatic activities, and faced with the aggressiveness of some of their gestures, the public was sometimes tempted to dismiss their practice as a form of pathological behavior. This was the case, for example, when artists used their own bodies as an expressive medium, whether inflicting benign suffering on themselves in the form of bites (Vito Acconci, *Trademarks*, 1970) or exposing it to more serious danger by, say, spending two and a half hours on a third-floor window ledge (Gina Pane, *Je*, [I/Me], Bruges, 1972).

The loss of all sense of a frontier between the self and the outside world is one characteristic of schizophrenia. A schizophrenic is liable to bang into walls or wound himself on the objects around him because he cannot distinguish his body from his environment. Of course, this was not the case for any of the proponents of Body Art, and the performances they gave always kept within the more or less conventional limits of spectacle. During the performance of *Je*, Gina Pane was lit by a theatre spotlight, and she ended the action when, as the tension came to a head, people in the crowd that had gathered below began to call for her to jump.

...

Normal lights

This selection of texts recording and relaying the action includes accounts by people who were there at the action and some who were not, but who have seen the photographs which constitute its visual record. Some of those writing include ruminations and contextualisations, analyses and investigations: one taking the researchers approach and talking to the photographer Francoise Masson, who was involved in the event. My question is: What more can I bring with my claim that this is a minor performance – or minor ‘action’, as Pane preferred to refer to her live works? As has been stated in the premise for this 2-day event (and discussed this morning) minor resists incorporation into an easily identifiable history and in the case of Pane, ‘Je’ stands apart from the more visceral bodily actions for which she is best-known, and which are more easily subsumed into the historical categorization of body art. Yet, as my introduction has already shown, it is not a wholly overlooked piece – not to the extent of the exhibition *Celebration of the Body*, for example – and the five-panel visual document has been exhibited in the Guggenheim gallery in New York, of all places. I confess I haven’t seen these panels and am not wholly sure of their present whereabouts. Mine is an academically incomplete investigation – I am presently too chicken to write to Anne Marchand (who controls Pane’s estate) or to Julia Hountou who has shown the ‘constats’, these visual documents, in Italy – I use my poor written French as an excuse.

But this is not really the reason: I came upon this piece through already published material, initially a popular introduction to Contemporary French art and then a bit more searching led me to art magazines from the time: *Artitudes International* and *Studio International*. Each time the visuals presented were different and the account added something else to the story, not a piecing together of a jigsaw (as academic research is sometimes portrayed) but a sense of strangely growing intimacy with the work. During this time, about five years, I have spoken several times about the encounter with the piece through these different published accounts and incorporated some of this into my writing; but more recently I have been trying to come to terms with the piece through my own studio practice, specifically through drawing and performance.

Currently I am drawing the sources where I found visual reference to Pane’s ‘Je’; small drawings (about 60 x 40 cm) in 4B pencil on watercolour paper with a conscious decision to show the physical support where the images were found – whether books or photocopies from archived journals. The area round the drawing of the book or photocopy is shaded black and consequently these drawings involve a particular time-based engagement with these published documents and also a certain repetitive strain. Visually they are similar to the work of Vija Celmins and frequently I have in my head a quote from her describing her own process of drawing the night sky (which involves drawing a lot of black). She describes the drawings as: coming from ‘loving the blackness of the pencil’. In the process of my drawing I am very aware of the physical transfer of graphite onto paper as the pencils are quickly worn down, and then there is something nice about the difficulty of viewing the drawings as the surface becomes reflective. However, despite this physical materiality I have chosen to show these images

not as drawings but as projections from OHP acetates, in order that another layer of distance be added and it becomes perhaps less immediately obvious that these are drawings of books showing photographs of a performance but that they become something else: warm projected images.

Plug-in OHP in different sockets round the room – a different acetate for each one, then leave as return to powerpoint. Talk as the image warms...

In the abstract for this presentation I warned that I often turn to the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard to aid me in my ruminations on the inter-relationship between art and writing, or art and thinking, or art and its history, or performance and its documentation. There was a caveat I put in and took out several times, which was the attempt at a self-effacing declaration that this recourse to Lyotard is becoming perhaps predictable, not for you – as you don't know me and my predilections – but as a warning to myself not to churn out the same arguments for the need to consider what he says in relation to affect, or singularity or the return. Rather, I must remind myself what it is that is minor in Lyotard's writings and that is his refusal to settle and be satisfied with his own position or approach and to turn over his own, and our own, presuppositions at every turn: it is a 'supine' minority which provokes my own desire to look again with Lyotard, to help me question what I can do with my own preoccupation with Pane's 'Je'.

In his writings on the Dutch artist Karel Appel Lyotard includes a section on the physical twisting and turning of 'supination'. The notion of a deliberate turning over captures some of what we are concerned with and to try and get a physical sense of it I'd like you to take part in a small exercise – if you can bear one forearm, stretch it out in front of you with hand palm down and move hand up and down at the wrist, now feel the muscle that moves with the fingers of your other hand: this is the supinator muscle. Keeping your fingers on the muscle turn your hand over palm up in a gesture of 'supination' – there is a definite twist here. This is the twist and turn that Lyotard calls supination. [ok relax].

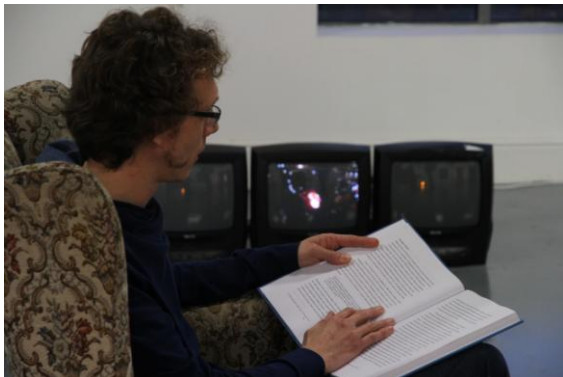
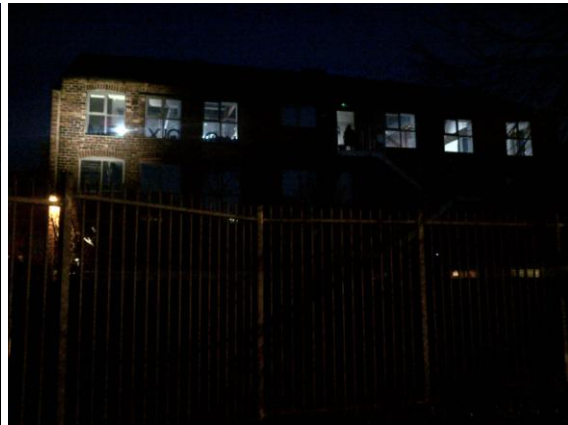
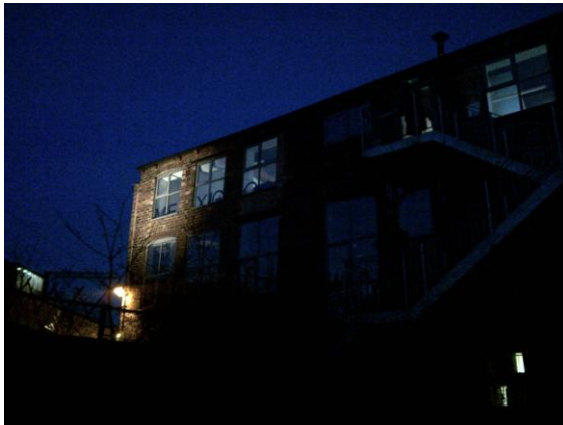
Lyotard goes on to the quotation I used in the abstract in relation to the body: the work must force the body 'beyond what it is and what it is able to do, beyond what we believe it is and is able to do' [Karel Appel, 215]; in the previous section Lyotard talks of the body as a body of colour, of movement, of words, a *sensorium* of space-time-matter whose torsion is signaled in the work. It is this twist that Lyotard describes as analogous to the impact on space-time-matter presented by the challenge of the art work, one that gestures to another space-time, not one of 'ordinary sensibility' but one that relates to a prior shock felt in the body.

I have mentioned the process of drawing I have been undertaking as a means to investigate why Pane's 'Je' lures me in, but I also attempted a more physical version, not an attempt to re-perform or recreate the piece – how could I?: I am a different gender, different nationality, from a different time with different concerns and working in a very different context – *Place aux Oeufs* is now *Eiermarkt* after all. However, I proposed to create a live version of one of the photographs taken by Francoise Masson of the action; it was the first image I saw, the one I described at the beginning of this presentation – of

Pane standing on the third floor window ledge lit by a spotlight as dusk fell on the evening of the 12 August, 1972. I proposed staging the photograph for an exhibition at an M-e-x-i-c-o, an artist-run space in Leeds, as the conclusion to a performance. The performance was simply me sitting in an armchair reading the 80,000 words of my PhD thesis – which concerned performance art and documentation – aloud into a cassette recorder: so the c60 tapes stacked up as the pages were read and then the final chapter, which deals with Pane's 'Je', would conclude with me opening the window and taking up a position on the window ledge outside, reading the accounts of the action into a microphone whilst the dusk fell and the effect of the spotlight grew stronger, overlooked by the trains passing by on the adjacent viaduct.

As you can see from the photographs, the reading worked, the recording worked, the spotlight worked and the amplified reading took place outside, though not from the window ledge. I won't bore you with the details, suffice to say that I am still looking for a building with 6 foot windows and a decent window ledge and next time I won't seek permission.

Lyotard makes it clear that the body is one of a sensorious matter likening the struggle to that of Artaud and which we could easily relate to Gina Pane's tortured body – if we are to see it as tortured – but it is not the clichéd tortured artistic figure I see on the window ledge. What I see in the figure on the window ledge, lit-up by a spot-light, is the interlocutor that can force us to twist with the torsion of self-critique and confront the contained cultural experience that history presumes will suffice.





¹ Francois Bon 'Gina Pane, pour mémoire', *Le Tiers Livre* <http://www.tierslivre.net/spip/spip.php?article625> [accessed January 2012]. Loose translation to English by Kiff Bamford.

² Jennifer Blessing 'Gina Pane: Je', *Premises: Invested Spaces in Visual Arts, Architecture, and Design from France 1958-1998*, exh. Cat., New York: Guggenheim Museum, p. 264.

³ Matthew Hearn 'Forgetting to remember or remembering to forget. Lest we forget – Lest we remember', *NOTES on a return*, ed. Sophia Yadong Hao & Matthew Hearn, Sunderland: Arts Edition North, 2010. P.176

⁴ Alice Maude-Roxby & Françoise Masson *On Record: Advertising, Architecture and the Actions of Gina Pane*, London: Artwords Press, 2004. P.44.

⁵ Jennifer Blessing 'Gina Pane: Je', *Premises: Invested Spaces in Visual Arts, Architecture, and Design from France 1958-1998*, exh. Cat., New York: Guggenheim Museum, p. 264.

⁶ Anne Tronche *Gina Pane: Actions*, Paris: Fall, 1997. P.115. Loose translation to English by Kiff Bamford.

⁷ Julia Hountou 'Gina Pane. Je ou l'artiste comme passeur entre deux territoires', *LUXFLUX*, <http://www.luxflux.org/n38/drills-fr.htm> [accessed January 2012]. Loose translation to English by Kiff Bamford

⁸ Catherine Millet *Contemporary Art in France*, trans. Charles Penwarden, Paris: Flammarion, 2006, p.177.