

On Performance, Family, and Queerness: A Conversation with Vanessa Godden¹

Camila Salcedo and Vanessa Godden

Vanessa Godden and I met in 2021 during a residency at Trinity Square Video. At the time we connected over our shared Trinidadian ancestry, and our common interests as interdisciplinary artists, in performance and sound. Over the past few years we have grown our friendship through sharing cultural kinship, joining each other in life celebrations, and grievances alike. I really admire Vanessa – not just their art, but the way they show up in the world and in their relationships, always with a smile and fiercely authentic.

This year, Vanessa asked me to participate in a new series of work for their exhibition, *Transgressive Passages* (October 12, 2024 – December 8, 2024) at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa, as a photography subject, for a series focused on queer Caribbean folks, and to submit audio for their most recent performance work *Transference*, performed during 7a11d* festival in October in Toronto.

The performance is a twenty minute durational work in which they move through a number of vessels filled with salt water, as they decline in size. It is underscored by sound work created by their collaborator, James Knott, which includes sounds of steel drums, field recordings from Trinidad and Tobago, and recordings from their queer and trans chosen and blood family members.

I met with Vanessa on a cloudy day via Zoom. Before we started, they asked if they could eat their yogurt while we talked, to which I answered, “Of course! Honour your body.” What follows is a conversation between two friends, speaking to the body, family ties, queerness, and the sea.

Camila Salcedo: How did you find performance art, or how did it find you?

Vanessa Godden: I think that I’ve always been theatrical. I’ve always put on performances for people since I was a kid, and my mom enrolled me in dance lessons when I was two. I didn’t follow dance lessons very well. I wasn’t very good at, you know, sticking to choreography. I always wanted to do my own weird thing. And so performing has always been a part of who I am. A typical Gemini – I like the attention, but there’s also something about a body in space. When language fails, that’s the tool that I use to speak.

My first introduction to performance art must have been when I went to the Tate Museum when I was 13. I think I saw some documentation of a performance art piece and I was like, this is so weird. When I was doing my Bachelor’s of Fine Arts, I took a feminist course on feminist art from the 1970s to more contemporary work in 2011. Seeing some of the things that I was already

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utilizing in my photography process and my video process through the use of my body but removing the camera lens, was that 'aha' moment. A lot of the things that I was speaking about, the tools I was using, and that basis of activism that a lot of performance art had, it made me change my 13 year old mind about what performance art is and what it could be.

CS: I wonder too if performance is like a way to almost cope or kind of "work through" the body? As we know, trauma stored in the body, and I know you've created work that responds to various like forms of trauma. With seeing your most recent performance, something that I was wondering is what you were feeling as you were performing? Sometimes when I perform I experience dissociation from my body, within that moment of being perceived. As I was observing you, I was really wondering what was going on in your body, like somatically? What were you feeling, in that moment, in that space?

VG: For most of the performances there are marks that I hit. In that particular performance, because it was so specifically timed to the composition that James created, I was really thinking about timing. After doing it live for the first time, the work is about temporality. My brain being so focused on time and timing, during that performance, my body almost didn't even register actions. It just was thinking about time, how can I move through this space efficiently according to the timing that's been provided to me?

The performance itself hurts a lot in a lot of sections. It's very uncomfortable. I am feeling the things in my body, but having something else to focus on so intently helps me lean into the pain of those actions because those are the moments where the gesture really speaks about an experience that I have about how I move through the world. While the piece is about joy and care and love and finding resilience, it is also about the pain of being a queer person in this world. Leaning into the pain is like speaking about how all of this can exist alongside one another.

I probably do dissociate a little bit from these performances because I have to take my glasses off. And, you know me, I'm a smiley person. I'm goofy. And so I become a vessel for something else, and how can you not leave your body a little bit here and there as it's happening?

CS: There's something beautiful in not only your intent behind the work, but also what it may cause for you in that experience of like, even though you are in pain, what's carrying you through are the voices of your friends and your friend James' recordings. In your past work you've often included your family members, and with this piece you're including your chosen family as well. Could you speak to the people that you chose to include in this work, and what that means to you?

VG: My family and friends' voices are in the recordings. I was thinking about how there is a relationship there. I am talking about the tension between needing a chosen family when your family that you grew up with, that helped to raise you, sometimes aren't the most accepting.

When I was younger, my auntie Zin and my mom and my dad and my uncle may not have been the most generous towards queer folks. As I've grown into adulthood and been more open about my gender and my sexuality. They have been trying. My auntie Zin, one of the most heavily featured voices, has been one of the most staunch advocates for me. I really appreciate her, and I love her for being 74 years old and trying at this age, you know? I have worked with my chosen family before, but it's been a really long time since I've worked with them. What we've collaborated on together has mostly been about experiences of trauma, with a heavy focus on the suffering of our bodies moving through this world. A shift really came from coming out of my PhD and

realizing the hypocrisy of it all – this expectation that marginalized bodies need to showcase, produce, and have their pain be consumed by a wider audience in order for them to be taken seriously. My whole career was built on this because that was what I was taught. I'm acknowledging the flaws and the ways that education, arts education specifically, has done me and my peers a disservice.

The residency that I did at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery was an opportunity for me to think about how I can refocus. And through that, it meant asking people to think about their resilience, and asking myself to think about my own resilience. That starts with the people that are meaningful in my life. I wouldn't be where I am today without them. I reached out to almost everyone that I know, even people that I hadn't stayed in touch with over the years, because I was remembering my formative years.

I've been out as bisexual since I was 16, and then I started dating predominantly cis men. I was in a relationship for many years in my 20s, where I was read as straight and just went with it, because it was Texas in the early 2000s. But I do remember all the people around me at that time, when I was in art school, that were really inspiring to me, and how grateful I was to have them around as folks to look up to. Being queer in Houston was hard, and there were quite a few folks that were out, and not hiding like I was.

They were also queer in ways that we think are new in this day – expressions or discussions of gender and sexuality that don't revolve around this heteronormative perception of how you're supposed to be in a queer relationship. This idea that even if you are gay or a lesbian, you still have to fulfill these roles and replicate heteronormative systems of relationship building – but these folks weren't doing that. I was always in awe of them.

They were the ones that gave me resilience and modeled the ability to move forward in my queerness, to be open and find joy in it. It also gave me the push, following my PhD, to explore my gender, and feel more comfortable with the reality that I am not a woman. I also reached out, of course, to the people that I love dearly and I'm growing to love, because I'm in a new relationship. And I reached out to people that just inspired me as I was learning about the world.

CS: I think your piece speaks to queerness in so many different ways. Oftentimes I feel like as queer folks like we are teachers for a lot of our family members – it's almost our inherent role to represent freedom in the ways that your friends did for you also.

I was wondering too about the elements that you chose to use for this piece. In a lot of your work, there's a lot of chewing, digestion, or mastication of natural elements like flour and curry powder. In *Transference* that element also comes in where you're biting around a bowl and trying to fit in these vessels and containers. I was really moved by the element of water. I'm wondering how you arrived at this material.

VG: I've been reading a lot more and engaging a lot more with a lot of Caribbean diasporic art and thinking about salt water as a metaphor. Not for this idea of longing for belonging, but as this vessel for movement, because it is the thing that has transported us across so many continents. Salt water just felt like a natural material to work with.

There was talk at the beginning of putting some of the materials that I have used in other

performances, like curry powder and chili powder, but I just really enjoyed working with salt water. In Toronto, you have access to lakes, and they're fine, but it's not the same as the sea, you know?

CS: No, it's not.

VG: I just miss the salty water of the sea. There's a specific kind of feeling of home that I get when I'm in that water.

CS: It's interesting to think of seawater as this comforting, home, almost healing element – at least it is to me, but it's also dangerous. It was cool to see you work with that element. I think it was very natural and it made sense to me. What was the result for you at the end of the piece? How did you feel after?

VG: Well, I had been rehearsing before and that was the first time that I got the timing perfect. When I first finished, I think I was kind of in shock. The reflection on what happened during the performance is always hard to put into words. What I am noticing about my own feelings about the work is that it turned out to be much more melancholy and somber than I was intending it to be.

I think that's just part of my own working through how to focus and prioritize joy. It's hard to not have those same trappings that I was trained in come through. As I continue to develop my practice and grow out of these tropes, I'm hoping that I'll be able to use strategies that can still impact the audience and generate an effective response in them that doesn't rely on struggle. This heaviness is there, of course, but the entire intent behind all of it is joy. I know that this might sound a little bit cheesy but, love. I've got so much love here for all these folks and also for myself.

CS: I love you.

VG: I love you too.

CS: I do want to ask about sound. You worked closely with James on the sound piece, and as you were describing, it was the marker of time and this work. I'm curious about what role sound has in your everyday life.

VG: I'm neurodivergent, so sound plays an immense role in how I am able to move through this world comfortably. I get triggered easily by sound and I have specific sounds that help soothe, but generally I like quiet. So this work, which is so loud and chaotic, is interesting to me – the sounds that would cause chaos in my everyday life are the sounds of banging that myself, Manolo (friend and colleague), and James were making on the steel pans. They were a source of anxiety when I was hearing the composition, but the sounds of people's voices are often soothing to me.

I really appreciate that James took the initiative to highlight and focus on the sounds of voices in different ways and through different textures too. I gave people the prompts of laughing and breathing and reciting texts, but the way that she was able to think about pacing in the composition made it feel like a reflection of my experience in this life. These ups and downs of not just sound, but anxieties, and then comfort and sadness and joy. I am contradictory in that I love, love, love Soca music so much – it's so loud, but it's in this format that feels so familiar. Sound really is something that helps me ground myself, and it is something that can spark memories so quickly, good or bad. It's just a really interesting material.

CS: As your friend, it's an honor to witness you work through those pulls of opposites, like comfort and discomfort, and also finding the pockets where you do feel that freedom. I think the work was very successful and I'm glad I got to talk to you more about it, thank you.

VG: Thanks for being a part of the project. It really meant a lot.

CS: I'm so grateful.