

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

GUGGENHEIM

Collaborative Duo Gerard & Kelly on Adapting Timelining for the Guggenheim

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BY BRENNAN GERARD AND RYAN KELLY



Gerard & Kelly, *Timelining*, 2014. Performance, edition 1/5. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Purchased with funds contributed by the Young Collectors Council, with additional funds contributed by Josh Elkes, Sarah Stengel, and Younghee Kim-Wait 2014.75. Performance view, July 2015. Pictured: Ryan Kelly and Brennan Gerard. Photo: Zac Spears

Walking onto the Guggenheim's rotunda floor for our first site visit with curators Carmen Hermo and Nat Trotman, we anticipated a challenge. It was still early in the planning for the exhibition *Storylines: Contemporary Art at the Guggenheim*, and for a manifestation of our performance artwork *Timelining* that would be part of it. On this afternoon in March, a day when the museum was open to the public in the normal way, the first impression was of sound and movement swirling around us. We could hear voices in multiple languages, but struggled to have a conversation with one another standing three feet apart. In the background was the hum of the HVAC system that preserves and protects the artworks on view; all around us was the circulation of bodies from information and ticket counters to ramps, bathrooms, and elevators. Neat rows of stanchions guided

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visitors to the ticket desk, but as squarely institutional as they were, they were no match for the choreography of the building and the constant flow of bodies in space, above and below. The only stillness: a person looking up and photographing the famous oculus.

Conceived as a moving and speaking score for two people in an existing relationship, *Timelining* was created for a gallery exhibition (at The Kitchen, in 2014). How would this performance in which two people walk in spiraling patterns and speak intimate details of their lives happen within the visual and aural cacophony of the rotunda? Only by surrendering to Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture and the space's strange acoustics did we come to realize how the site could surface elements of *Timelining* we had only partially seen or known before.

Timelining is structured as a series of if/then rules that govern the speaking and moving patterns of two performers through space. At times, the two performers walk in a circle, side-by-side, one halting and the other continuing, in rhythms determined by the persistence and failure of memory. The performers activate a lexicon of choreographic terms—"triggering," "linking," "looping," "overlapping," "timekeeping," "ending," "starting," "restarting"—in split-second decisions. These modalities work to create a durational spiral that lasts for up to three hours per performance session.



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Every time a spectator enters the exhibition space, the score restarts at “now.” Any given performance session includes an unfixed number of cycles of the score.

The Guggenheim is a wandering architecture with no fixed points, a repeated geometry of arcs and circles—from the rotating glass doors that spill the visitor onto a shining metal disk under a curved overhang to the motif of circles inlaid in the terrazzo floors. The spiral of the ramp either energetically pushes the descending body down into an accelerated arc across the rotunda floor or pulls it up into a sideways climb. Even the window that frames the intersection of 88th Street and Fifth Avenue (with Central Park just beyond) is curved. These patterns of the architecture provide a key for navigating the cul-de-sacs and spiraling memories of *Timelining*.

In *Timelining*, there is no outcome, no end, no victory, only a kind of precarious truce. It is like taking a long walk with a stranger. Along the way you might notice the changing quality of light, or remember your mother’s long braid, or realize how a Supreme Court decision or Madonna’s first album changed your life.

But how to hear these two performers speak intimate details in a space built to be seen and felt but not necessarily heard? To attempt this, we turned to the score itself, the genetic material of the work, to find latent characteristics—rules—which had not yet been fully explored in past manifestations. We rediscovered that initial indication to performers: “When a viewer enters the space, make a circle around them or near to them, if possible.” This led us to think about a circle constantly re-centering, shifting its



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point in space from the middle of the rotunda floor to the periphery, carving out space among groups who had clustered together near the information desk, or arcing alongside people who had gathered on the bench by the fountain; then after some time, weaving toward the windows and making the tiniest orbit to fit within that part of the architecture.

These efforts fit the work more specifically within the space of the rotunda without betraying the nature of the piece. In fact, there may be something in the materiality of performance itself that opens the medium to just such shifting enactments and allows it to always be present-tense, reflective of the specific strategies of display in use, and able to contextualize the framing devices at hand.

Beyond the formal correspondences and acoustical challenges was something else about the rotunda—a mystery about time that revealed itself to us only through our occupation of the space during several months of performances this summer. We found a metaphor for subjectivity at play in the building's architecture. Wright's spiraling rotunda hexes the upright subject, secure on two sturdy legs, no longer animal, head over feet, striding across a flat surface and world. Such a subject is more accustomed to the vertical column of a skyscraper, or the enfilade typical in art museums. Those are spaces for that familiar humanist human who is born, learns to walk and speak, ages, and finally dies, in what seems a logical progression. The rotunda, from our perspective, suggests a different subject than our old Cartesian ruse. This subject is relational, choreographic, and contingent. At its best, the Guggenheim rotunda provokes continuous movement without destination—for the eye as much as the body—and a temporality of spirals, cycles, returns, recursions. The architecture presents a narrative that unfolds in time, but in which the notion of a beginning, middle, and end no longer makes much sense. There's nothing linear about the Guggenheim rotunda, and nothing linear about how time works in *Timelining*. Nor is there anything linear in how a subject, queer and otherwise, comes to be.

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