Figs. 1-6: Nadège Grebmeier Forget, SUITE from the series One on one’s for so called fans, presented as part of the M:ST 7 Festival, 2014, courtesy of the artist.
Never Enough / Jamais Assez: on documentation, proximity, and Nadège Grebmeier Forget’s SUITE from the series One on one’s for so-called fans

Nicole Burisch

Part 1 * REGENCY SUITES * 610 4th Avenue S.W. — 9/10/14, 3:00 PM
Private performance for you: Jenna Swift, Sophia Bartholomew and Paul Zits. Knock at the door when you are all (three of you) there and ready. No pictures or videos allowed. No talking about performance to others after and no discussing performance amongst each other after. Merci!

Part 2 * TRUCK GALLERY * 2009 10 Avenue S.W. — 9/10/14, 7:30 PM
Public performance from you, for me: Please arrive 15 minutes or 20 minutes before.

Reminder: By accepting to live this experience, you also accept talking publicly, being filmed, documented and looked at. Filmed documentation and images will become my private property and work may be used for exhibition purposes in future times to come. Please accept these conditions by responding positively to this email and including postal address, phone number and email. Ok? Double merci!

There are no particular rules for this part. You have been specially chosen for different intuitive and personal reasons and my work will soon be in your hands...

The main idea is to recall publicly, in your special and particular voice, what you have lived or seen earlier that same day. I do not expect you to be particularly entertaining, comical or spectacular, just to be your real and sensitive self; nerves, awkwardness and reflective silences included :) I will be there with you, again...

Many warm and heart felt thanks in advance, N.
With this invitation, Montreal artist Nadège Grebmeier Forget initiated a set of encounters that constituted her recent performance *SUITE* from the series *One on one's for so-called fans*, presented as part of the Mountain Standard Time Performative Art Festival in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Building upon a recent series of private, or semi-private performances begun in 2013, this performance continues the artist’s investigations into the role of documentation and technology in mediating access to the performing (female) body. While Grebmeier Forget is not the only artist to experiment with the idea of controlling or limiting the audience for her performances, *SUITE* is notable for the way that she uses this form to address issues related to performance art and its documentation, as well as her use of oral accounts. This text is an experiment, and aims to take up these questions and to think through the methods, consequences, and contexts for experiencing a performance through its traces. It is also an attempt to echo the form of the performance in the writing about it: I was not present for the performance, its public retelling by the three audience members, nor have I seen any of Grebmeier Forget’s other work in person.

In describing the challenges of writing about performances “in absentia,” Amelia Jones has argued that, “the problems raised by my absence... are largely logistical rather than ethical or hermeneutic. That is, while the experience of viewing a photograph and reading a text is clearly different from that of sitting in a small room watching an artist perform, neither has a privileged relationship to the historical ‘truth’ of the performance.” Building upon this claim, I am interested in thinking through what it means to work with/within the logistical problems of absence. This text uses multiple and multiplying forms of documentation to negotiate my distance from the performance, less with the goal of providing a conclusive account of the event, but in a way that might hold a space for all the conflicting, affective, awkward, messy, unofficial, intimate, embodied, compromised, personal, and subjective versions of the performance.

If critical and historical writing about art “is haunted by an ideal of objectivity,” one logistical problem is supposedly that of social proximity. Jones expresses a wariness of “becoming entrapped in the artists’ usually fascinating but sometimes intellectually and emotionally diversionary ideas about what the work is (or was) about.” Because most of my research took the form of conversations and interactions with the people involved, the evolution of my relationships with the artist and the witnesses is necessarily a part of how this text took shape, and I am happily “entrapped.” I like Nadège. She is warm, friendly, generous, vulnerable. I can’t remember when we first met, but we both worked within the Montreal artist-run
community for several years. I knew that she worked a lot with her own body, and knew vaguely that she used things like glitter, cake, and costumes in her performances. At an opening one night, she described to me a performance she had done privately for one person while in residence at Est-Nord-Est in Saint-Jean-Port-Joli, Quebec. She seemed a little bit uncertain about how to talk about what she had done, as though she were risking something in sharing too much information about the performance. My favorite way to experience a performance I have not seen is through its retelling, a preference I shared with Nadège that night. We agreed that it would be good if I could see one of her performances at some point. The last time we saw each other, she served me dinner, we shared gossip about the Montreal arts community, and she showed me a picture of her mother. Both of the conversations I had with the witnesses of SUITE, while primarily about the performance, ended up extending into broader conversations about books, practices, cities, ourselves. It was impossible not to find some kind of personal connection even with people I had never met in person, raising questions about how social proximity might function in relation to historical or physical distance. In researching and preparing this text, I was also involved in proliferating further documentary traces by conducting interviews and through informal conversations about what I was writing. I am a part of the project now, this text is another trace, and the connections between those involved have made us all a part of the performance.

In the last ten years, a renewed interest in performance art and its histories has continued to expand the conversation on how live or ephemeral works are (re)presented; and exhibitions of performance ephemera and strategies of re-performance have provided new contexts for re-experiencing historical works. While performance art supposedly privileges the live presence of the performer and their embodied and temporal relationship to an audience, documentation remains an essential, even inseparable, consideration in how performances are produced and circulated. In discussing Marina Abramović’s 2005 work Seven Easy Pieces, in which the artist re-performed five historical works (a project that privileged the presence of a live performing body as the optimal way to experience performance works), Jessica Santone underlines how the re-performances relied on a reinterpretation of documentation, or “copying the signifier of the original.”5 The re-performances were themselves thoroughly documented, both by the artist and by the museum, and Santone goes on to note that the “technologies chosen by Abramović convey a great deal about the artist’s assessment of what aspects of experience were essential to the works in question.”6 Documentary traces such as photographs and video have now been staged, collected, circulated, commodified, and curated to such an
extent that even if they are still linked to an “original” performance, they clearly have a presence and value of their own. Indeed, as it has been argued by several performance theorists, the relationship between performance and its documentation is more appropriately understood as not one of before/after, original/trace, but rather one of “mutual supplementarity,” where the “performatve act of documenting” is what frames or produces the performance as such, even more so than the presence of an audience. It follows, then, that the way artists choose to manage the production of documentation is integral to how a given work takes form.

Engaging directly with these notions of performatve documentation, Grebmeier Forget embedded the production of documentation directly into the work, collapsing distinctions between the two. As described in the email correspondence above, the performance began when she invited an audience of three people to her hotel room to witness a private performance. Afterwards, the three witnesses publicly recounted their experiences for a packed room at TRUCK, an artist-run space nearby. Grebmeier Forget took several photographs in the hotel room (Figs. 1-6) and made video and audio recordings of the public retellings. The festival’s contracted photographer also produced a series of photographs of the retellings (Figs. 7 and 10). By restricting the initial audience and relying on them to disseminate information about the first half of the performance, Grebmeier Forget creates a situation in which the witnesses are not only responsible for transmitting information through oral accounts (a point to which I will return later), but effectively become a part of the performance. In researching this text, I met with Grebmeier Forget in Montreal, did Skype interviews with sophia bartholomew and Paul Zits, two of the three initial audience members, talked with the festival organizers, and assembled various documentary traces (Fig. 9). Drawing mainly upon my interviews with bartholomew and Zits, these traces provide enough information to reconstitute a basic account of the performance in the hotel:

Three people were invited to a hotel room in downtown Calgary. They were greeted by the artist. They were asked to sit on the end of the bed. There were strawberry candies.

Fig. 7: Jenna Swift at TRUCK, Nadège Grebmeier Forget, SUITE from the series One on one’s for so called fans, presented as part of the M:ST 7 Festival, 2014. Photo: Monika Sobczak, mmonikasobczak.com

Fig. 8: Screen grabs of Skype interview with sophia bartholomew, courtesy Nicole Burisch
Over the course of an hour, the artist performed a series of actions including:
- turning on and off the lights
- closing the windows
- closing the curtains
- taking pictures with Photobooth on her laptop
- bringing a pink balloon from the kitchen
- breathing in and out of the balloon, faster and faster, until increasingly out of breath
- spreading a tablecloth on the floor by the bed
- tying bows
- running water
- getting undressed, getting dressed: putting on a camisole and tying a pink veil tightly around her stomach
- putting on gold high heels
- putting her hair up
- painting her nails
- taking ribbons and fake grapes out of a suitcase in the closet, cutting the ribbons
- pulling hair out of a hairbrush, tying it up with the ribbon
- placing buds from a bouquet of baby's breath in between her toes
- striking poses, pausing, staring at the audience
- breathing on a mirror
- putting a half a lemon in her mouth and holding it there
- applying lipstick
- bringing out a jello desert, a bundt cake pan
- moving pieces of the dessert, by color from one container to another
- licking the container
- rinsing out the container
- applying glitter, applying nail polish
- pointing, gesturing
- taking off clothes
- taking more pictures with Photobooth (including some of the audience)

Of course, even the most detailed inventory of actions is bound to leave something out. Specifically: how were these actions performed? What was communicated by the body of the performer? How did that body performing those actions affect the initial audience? The secondary audience? What would I have felt or noticed if I had been there? When I spoke with bartholomew and Zits, they both elected to describe the actions they witnessed with a minimum of personal commentary. However, their retellings were inevitably colored by the words they used, their gestures, and
by the moments (conscious or unconscious) when they offered opinions or impressions of what it felt like to be there. While, overall, their narratives of the actions were similar and allowed me to develop the list above, it was in the glimpses of personal interpretations that contradictions and nuances emerged:

There was a sexual or sensual aspect
The artist looked bored or distanced, communicated a feeling of ennui
The actions seemed confrontational
The actions seemed seductive
The actions hinted at self-mutilation or self-harm as well as someone trying to be beautiful or sexy

**Fig. 9:** Untitled drawing, courtesy Paul Zits
Grebmeier Forget has worked previously with performances mediated through mirrors, Skype, projections, Photobooth images, or in the positioning of her body in relation to the audience. On screen and off, she often uses embellishments like makeup, glitter, children’s decorations, clothing, and packaged food products. She adorns, prepares, and presents her body as something to be consumed (visually, literally, metaphorically), but also as something that is never fully accessible or that performs an excess of adornment to a point where desirability begins to erode. The performance in Calgary extended these themes: using the site of the hotel room as a space that is at once intimate and impersonal; repeating gestures of grooming and adornment; building up layers of clothing, textures, objects; and performing quasi-domestic activities and actions related to the ways we work to inhabit a body or a space. While she is clearly drawing upon histories of feminist performance art and its emphasis on the presence of the active, embodied female subject who resists or troubles the fetishizing gaze, Grebmeier Forget’s performances also build upon this history to address the ways that gendered subjectivities have more recently been performed by/for/with new technologies. With her ongoing use of Photobooth screen grabs in this and other performances, Grebmeier Forget references the selfie, the YouTube celebrity, or the “camgirl,” and connects to broader conversations around how we perform our selves online.

By transferring the responsibility of performing documentation onto the three witnesses, Grebmeier Forget once again displaces and mediates access to her performing body. In its place, the bodies and voices of the witnesses stand in to describe the performance in the hotel, while the artist steps behind the camera to record their accounts. While there has been some attention paid to the significance of oral histories in circulating information about performance works, or art more broadly, they nevertheless remain a relatively under-recognized form of documenting, presenting, or preserving performance. More precisely: oral accounts, word-of-mouth stories, gossip, and retelling have long shaped how performance art’s histories have been circulated and constructed informally. They have, however, less frequently been taken up by artists as primary tools for presenting or documenting work. This is unfortunate, as retellings can often provide a more engaging experience than other forms of documentation (or sometimes even the performance itself); whether it is a quick synopsis or a step-by-step account, how we experience a performance through the voice and gestures of the teller is inevitably affected by our relationship to them. This experience is not just in the telling, but also, as Jenni Sorkin argues, the specificities of receiving and “the fact that the new receiver uses his or her own aural faculties, intuiting the action through hearing and perceiving rather than simply
seeing.” To be clear, I am not privileging the “presence” or “liveness” of oral accounts: my text has largely drawn upon conversations that took place over email and Skype, and what were essentially re-performances of the initial oral accounts given at TRUCK (Fig. 8). As a form of documentation, however, oral accounts do offer a particular kind of intersubjective exchange between “document” and viewer, one that remains under-recognized and under-theorized. Another excellent example of the use of (mediatized) oral accounts is curator Joseph del Pesco’s project Anecdote Archive, which exists as a series of YouTube videos. The project collects short one- to five-minute videos of people recounting their own experiences (or stories they have heard) of ephemeral art works, and makes a strong case for “word-of-mouth as a vital mode of distribution for art related projects and ideas.” The videos are quick, intimate, sometimes blurry, shot in the back of a car or in a noisy café, usually centered on the face of the speaker. They nevertheless manage to communicate not only something about the work being discussed, but also the speaker’s experience of that work. What oral accounts like these also implicitly emphasize is how they differ from one teller to the next, an aspect that Grebmeier Forget highlights in her use of three witnesses, who inspire immediate comparisons of their accounts. Here, the intentional multiplication of supposedly official accounts from the very beginning encourages a reading of the performance that is never fixed by one particular form of documentation or viewpoint.

While the question of experiencing performance through documentation is in part a historical one, I am also interested in extending this conversation to think briefly about other contemporary conditions that might create or even encourage the experience of performance “in absentia.” Most notably, the evolution and use of new technologies continues to provide opportunities for the production and dissemination of performances and documentation across distances and platforms. Along with these are shifting possibilities for how or where an audience is constituted: small, portable devices can now bring the screen (and with it, the performer) into spaces not previously considered part of the typical performance/audience space, like the bathroom, the bedroom, or the bus. Beyond the increased accessibility of performance through new technological platforms, we might also consider how current conditions in the art world, such as limited funding, over-programming, and an increasingly globalized circuit of biennials, residencies, and festivals might be creating ideal conditions for viewing or experiencing art from a distance. All in all, research and conversations in preparation of this text have taken place in at least five cities and two countries: Calgary, Montreal, Houston, Fredericton, and Toronto, with information largely being exchanged over Skype and email. If it is not possible for everyone to go to
everything, then what solutions might be possible for working around the problems of proximity in creating and viewing art?

Ultimately, *SUITE* maintains a productive ambiguity around when and where the performance ends and the documentation begins. Grebmeier Forget shares the responsibility of performing documentation with the witnesses and in turn with secondary audiences like the one at TRUCK, and again with tertiary audiences who hear retellings before telling their own version again. If this performance exists in the telling and the retelling, then what I have offered here is my own version, as both an extension of the project and as an argument for the ways that we might productively engage with performance through its documentation to negotiate questions of proximity and distance. This is different from an extended game of “telephone,” where the message mutates with each successive whisper until it no longer bears any resemblance to the original. Together, these accounts more closely resemble the recounting of a well-known story or fable, with a general agreement on the basic facts and the outlines of a series of actions, continuously embellished with a few choice details or impressions “to allow the voice of the narrator—the storyteller—to adjust accordingly: to add, blend, exaggerate, or reconfigure entirely.”17 With *SUITE*, Grebmeier Forget reminds us that performance is not bound to a fixed site where people interact face to face, but can instead exist and circulate in networks of sociability and in multiple documentary traces.

*Thanks to Mikhel Proulx, Mary Leclère, and Tom Jonsson for their help in preparing this text.*
4 Jones, 12.
6 Ibid, 148.
7 Jones, 16.
9 Renato Vitic, Executive Director of TRUCK, Facebook message to author, November 18, 2014.
10 Interestingly, the festival’s hired photographer, Monika Sobczak, uses a special contract that determines how “her” images can be used, revealing how questions of authorship are articulated through the relationship of performance and documentation: the photographs are jointly owned, confirming their reliance on both the work of the performer(s) and of the photographer. Complications around the ownership of documentation are not unique to this performance, but Sobczak’s contract is unusual in the way it precisely articulates how she is to be involved in controlling the use of the photographs.
12 For an excellent discussion of the “aesthetics of the grab” and its relationship to camgirls, see Theresa M. Senft, Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks (New York: Lang, 2008), 46-47.
15 Jones, 12.
17 Sorkin, 2010.

Fig. 10: Nadège Grebmeier Forget, SUITE from the series One on one’s for so called fans, presented as part of the M:ST 7 Festival, 2014. Photo: Monika Sobczak, mmonikasobczak.com.