



Cécile Belmont

Letter Performance

(Calgary) #1, #2, #3

The Language of Public Space

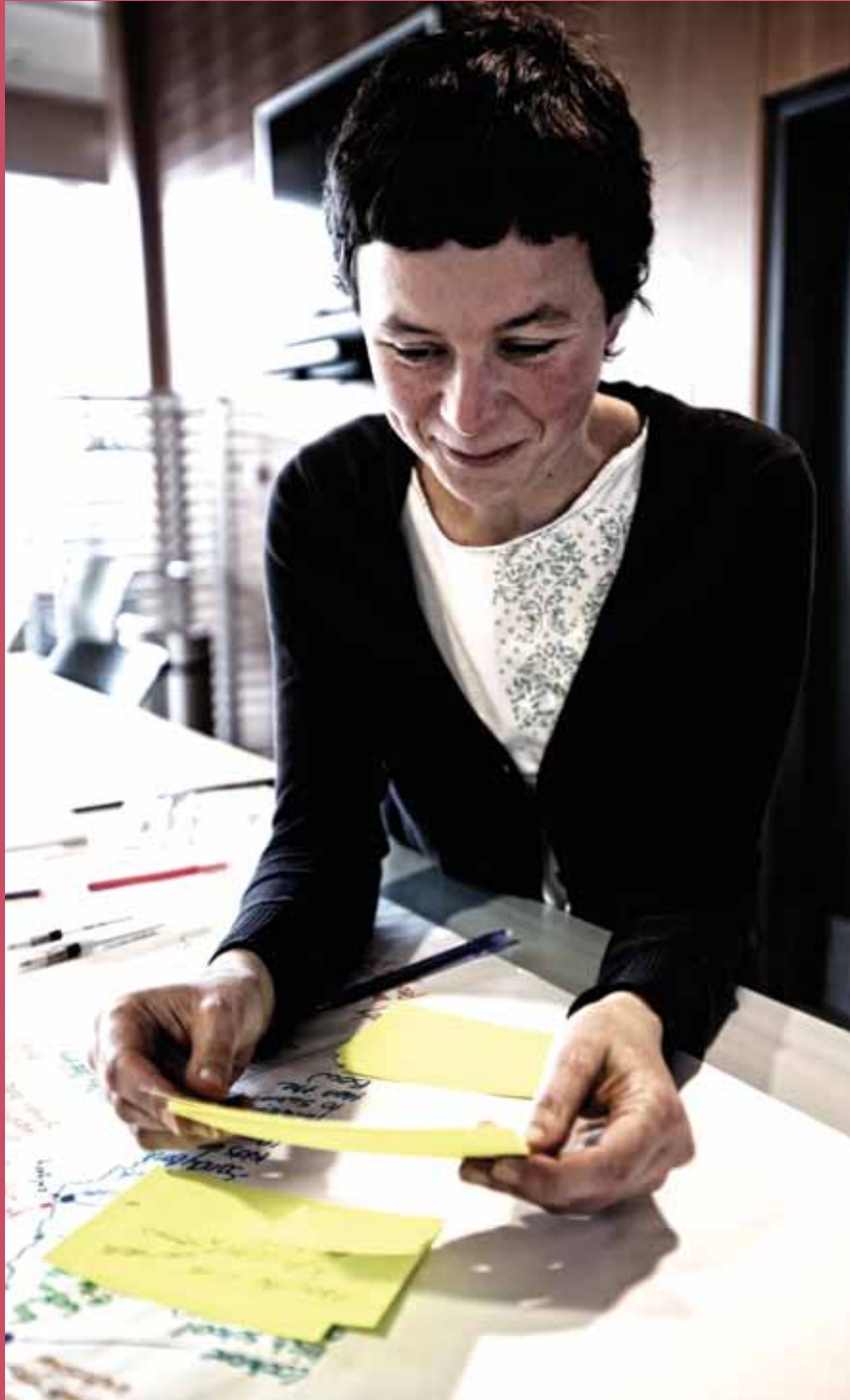
“Languages are a shared part of a collective. But the need to alter and change languages is individual. [We] start from codes which are also law. But, like clothes, there is no law that really suits everybody. I think that is why we reinvent...”

-Tulio de Sagastizábal

Cécile Belmont is inventing a language that builds understanding about places. Boldly written in block letters and silently declared by individuals, her words are physical entities that are performed artworks existing briefly in public spaces. They spell out ideas of separateness and community, temporality and collective history. Written in the language of performance art, her ephemeral interventions in the urban landscape are transcribed into permanence by still photography. Her Calgary *Letter Performances* build on an experimental body of work.

Although the term ‘performance art’ was not coined until the 1960s, its roots go back to the World War I era and the interdisciplinary exploits of Bauhaus, Dada, and Futurism¹ that defied the conventions of both theatre and visual art. Distinct from theatre, performance art is a fusion of concept, visual presentation, and live action with its own lineage and intentions. Its primary mediums are present time, space and performer. Performance artists who use public spaces raise questions about a work’s relationship with its audience — viewers are often unwitting and artists sometimes play with this ambiguity. While Belmont considers her viewers, she is more concerned with the construction of the moment and its documentation; her camera occupies the prime viewing spot; her events begin without introduction; and only Belmont’s soft spoken directions to performers announce its conclusion.

Belmont studied textile design in her native France before traveling to Argentina to explore the intersection of painting and public space.² She maintains parallel practices in



▲ Cécile Belmont reviews writings collected at her first workshop.



▲ A workshop participant records Bow River memories.



▲ Responses to the artist's prompts line TRUCK Gallery's camper.

embroidery, works on paper, limited edition clothing and public space performances. She has been living in Berlin since 2002 and has conducted residencies in Korea, Sweden, and Spain. Prior to this project, she had never been to Canada. "I was very aware that I did not know what to expect" in Calgary.³ For this reason Belmont's process remained organic although logistics such as the three performance dates, general locations and partnering groups were determined in advance with TRUCK Gallery. Belmont's firsthand impressions of Calgary infused the project's conceptual development. She acquired a feel for the city while riding a borrowed bicycle to scout locations. She noted structures, landscapes and perspectives that helped her understand this new territory and the Bow River's influence upon it. Three settings, one for each of her Calgary performances, were chosen.

The first *Letter Performance* took place in Olympic Plaza in the heart of downtown on a cold, rainy September day. In a preparatory workshop held two days prior at The City of Calgary Water Centre, Belmont guided a small group of staff in mapping their relationships to the river on hand-drawn schematics of the Bow. Participants focused variously on environmental concerns, recorded history and personal reflections. Then, Belmont suggested sentence fragments such as: *'I'd like to live where...; We usually say that...; If I could fly...'* and participants completed them with the river in mind. From more than two hours worth of writing by several individuals, Belmont gleaned the phrase the group would perform: *"We glide over land of water."* Her choice expresses how the river permeates one's consciousness even when it is out of sight. The words are intentionally metaphorical and evocative rather than didactic — they are meant to set the imagination soaring. "I use poetry because I trust poetry."⁴

For this first performance Belmont adapted an approach she had used previously. Each participant would wear a T-shirt bearing a letter that together, when properly arranged, would spell out the phrase. The 26 characters and spaces in this phrase equaled the number of expected participants. In addition to City staff, letter-wearers included a performance art class⁵ and some last minute on-site recruits including this writer. In a trial run we formed two equal rows against a backdrop of local cultural markers — the Calgary Tower, the Petro-Canada building and the Epcor Centre for the Performing Arts. Participants' heights echoed the varied stature of the surrounding architecture and evoked the fluid lines of an imagined river. Once our placement was finalized and we were each assigned a letter, we cleared the performance area. When we entered it again it would be as performers.

When participants are 'in performance,' Belmont asks that they not talk to those outside the camera's frame. The artist wants nothing to distract from the activities involved in communal creation. Shirts were distributed and letters were collaboratively pinned in place. In previous performances Belmont screen printed letters onto shirts in advance. This new method was more chaotic but also created opportunities for interaction and contributed to a sense of belonging.

As we formed the phrase, the artist called for minor adjustments. Without making it obvious, the final photos were taken. They are portraits of a group engaged in the moment, unconcerned with the camera, behaving as naturally as can be expected in this unnatural situation. Then, on Belmont's cue, we broke the pose and left the frame. The signature image chosen by the artist is often one taken after participants think they are done.⁶



▲ The artist directs Letter Performance # 1 at Olympic Plaza.



▲ Letters are attached to T-shirts worn by each performer.



▲ T-shirts spell a phrase gleaned from workshop writings.



▲ Participants end the performance by leaving the frame.

Belmont, occupied with directing the performance itself, works with a photographer as an integral part of her process. She believes a series of static images is stronger than video because the moment, not movement or passage of time, is the essence of the piece. "Video would just be a simple documentation of the performance but photography is much more, it's a work in itself."⁷ So, her photography is both the record of a moment and a work of art. Belmont likes the conciseness of photographs — viewers can linger and find closure for themselves within the fixed, abstracted moment. The artist deftly selects about ten images from the dozens of photos taken during a single performance.⁸ She looks for an emotive quality that comes from the combination of place, people and poetry. "I have to be touched" by a sense of intimacy captured in the image.⁹

In some ways, the series of images *becomes* the artwork after the original performance is over. The compression of the live experience into two dimensions allows for the diffusion of a moment over time and across a broad audience. Each of the Calgary performance moments was translated into the durable language of photographic imagery and posters were distributed to participants and the public at a closing reception.

Belmont combined two forms of phrase presentation for *Letter Performance # 2*. Set on Prince's Island's north side, this was the only performance in which the river was visible. TRUCK Gallery's camper was parked nearby and served as the workshop space for the small group of gallery members who participated. Writings generated at the previous workshop papered the camper's interior. From them, Belmont had plucked the quintessential Canadian icon: the canoe. In the retro atmosphere of the camper, participants wrote myriad endings for a sentence beginning with "*I will take my canoe to go where...*" Then, at the site

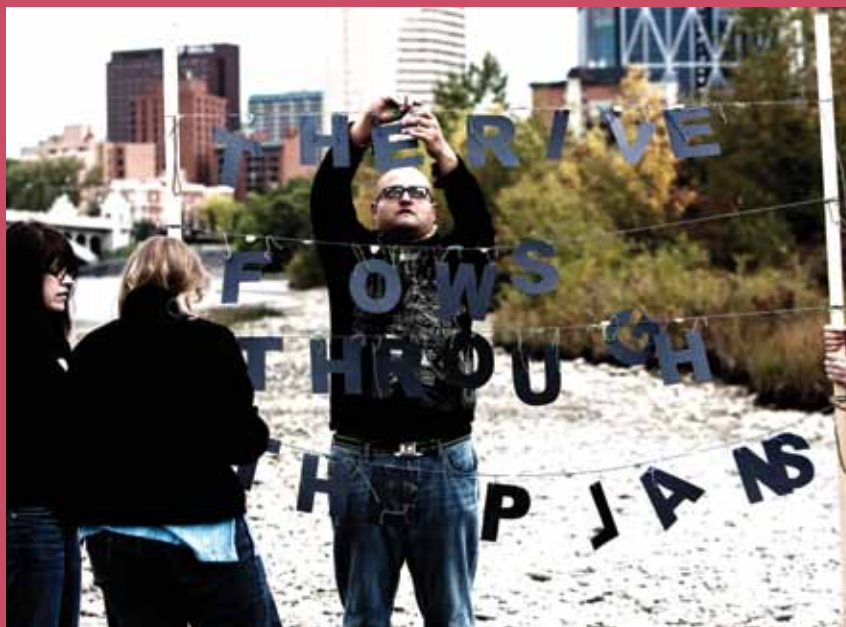
where the performance would take place the next day, Belmont described her plans. The group dispersed and the artist began the necessary materials preparation.

The following afternoon a brisk wind greeted participants at the river's edge. You could sense the poplar leaves turning from green to yellow in the fall air. In the near distance, downtown towers pushed into a grey sky and Centre Street bridge arched across the river. Belmont captured all of this within the camera's frame. The performance began as the six participants pressed two wooden poles into the rocky shore and strung four horizontal lines taught between them. They then tied letters to pre-marked spaces on the lines, fighting the elements with determination and focus. The phrase emerged in random chunks and when it was complete, one performer donned a sentence fragment crafted in fabric letters on a T-shirt. She stood to the left of the poles while the others took their places to the right. "*We will take our canoe to go where,*" her shirt announced, and the hanging phrase concluded "*the river flows through the plains.*" On this windy day the suspended letters stretched against the landscape seemed less proclamation than negotiation. At times they were tossed in unreadable directions in the relentless bluster. Artist and photographer waited while performers retied windblown letters in place. At last, a brief respite from the wind allowed the photographer to document the phrase. The performers laid down the poles and stepped outside the camera's static frame.

Belmont has likened her visual manipulation of text to a window that opens up a new dimension of meaning within the performance space.¹⁰ The two 'word treatments' in this piece offer different kinds of windows: one hard-edged and tangible like a hole pierced in rock; another through which the environment emerges and recedes, like curtains bellied by wind. Perhaps



▲ Performers prepare the support structure for the artist's phrase.



▲ LETTER PERFORMANCE #2 unfolds on Prince's Island's north bank.



▲ The artist combines two word treatments to create her sentence.

The sentence bridges urban and natural landscapes. ►



THE RIVER

FLOWS
THROUGH

THE PLAINS

WE WILL
TAKE OUR
CANOE
TO GO
WHERE

they represent contrasting notions inspired by the canoe: it is a practical vessel that delivers us to our destination; it is also a metaphor we ride into the fertile territory of the imagination. The river scribes a duality that is aptly performed in this work.

Movement was the focus of Belmont's third performance. The artist streamlined her process by choosing a phrase and preparing performance materials in advance of meeting the group. Local Library is an all-ages arts program where youth from a broad spectrum of the community engage in workshops, theatre and other creative endeavours at no cost. This is the first time they have worked with a performance artist.¹¹

Belmont explained how the performance would unfold but did not reveal her phrase. Since there were just seven people in the group, a shirt for each participant had been pre-printed with a full word.¹² Shirt size determined which word each would wear. The setting was the dry wading pool at Eau Claire's Barclay Parade with the windmill towering above.

To begin, the shirts were carried into the camera's frame. Random words appeared as participants put them on: ARE; A; LIKE; IDENTITIES; RIVER; and FLUID, — printed twice. As previously instructed, the two performers wearing the same word began to dance. The others easily found their order and formed a sentence Belmont had found in an Alberta magazine. *"Identities are fluid, like a river"* seemed a perfect summation of this residency. The first performer unfolded a paper image Belmont had given her earlier. It pictured a historical group portrait. She passed it on and struck a pose. As performers received the paper in turn, they too took physical clues from what they found there. Maintaining their positions in the phrase, the performers followed the same procedure with five paper images in succession while the dancing pair continued

its waltz. The action was slightly stilted but Belmont was after capturing 'life gestures' rather than the controlled movements of professional performers.¹³

Perhaps untrained performers better reflect "the fragile intensity"¹⁴ Belmont sees in humanity and explores in her work. The textiles she asks her participants to wear are thin protection, yet they enfold us in collaboration and strengthen our sense of community with a united voice. The language Belmont continually reinvents looks familiar but each iteration is intricately interwoven with the specifics of place, time and community, and each demands a new reading. Her language is a visceral, evolving vernacular that we build with our bodies and learn one sentence at a time.

Belmont explores a found sentence in LETTER PERFORMANCE #3. ►





IDENTITIES

ARE

FLUID,

LIKE

A

RIVER



▲ Performers gradually leave the frame at the Barclay Parade site.



▲ Dancers wearing the same word conclude Belmont's final piece.

◀ Wearing full words, performers move and dance within the frame.

Endnotes:

- 1 www.arthistory.about.com/cs/arthistory10one/a/performance.htm.
- 2 Belmont studied with Argentine painter and educator Tulio de Sagastizábal in Buenos-Aires, 1998-2000.
- 3 Cécile Belmont in conversation with the author, Calgary, September 27, 2010.
- 4 Belmont conversation, September 27, 2010.
- 5 Rita McKeough's performance art class, Alberta College of Art and Design.
- 6 Belmont conversation, September 27, 2010.
- 7 Cécile Belmont, email correspondence with the author, October 15, 2010.
- 8 A selection of Belmont's image series' can be found on her website: www.cecilebelmont.com.
- 9 Belmont conversation, September 27, 2010.
- 10 Belmont conversation, September 27, 2010.
- 11 Local Library program coordinators Eric and Dana in conversation with the author, September 22, 2010. The non-secular multi-disciplinary arts program began in March 2010 and meets at Central United Church.
- 12 Shirts were printed with the support of Alberta Printmakers Society in their Calgary studio.
- 13 Belmont conversation, September 27, 2010.
- 14 Cécile Belmont, Artist's Statement, December 2009.