Neil Goldberg on process and performance

January 18, 2017 – Neil Goldberg is an American artist who makes video, photo, mixed media, and performance work that focuses on embodiment, mortality, and the everyday. He currently teaches at Yale.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2760 words.

Tags: Art, Inspiration, Multi-tasking, Process.

How does teaching and working with other visual artists influence your own creative practice or the work you make?

I find the process of teaching profoundly absorbing. It's unlike any other activity except art in my life. I think of the art process as a dialogue with myself, but with teaching you're obviously connecting with someone else. There's something about trying to understand where students are coming from and meeting them there at that point that's fascinating and informative. At the end of the day I feel completely exhausted, but in the best way.

In terms of how it has an impact on my art process, I think it keeps me situated in whatever the space is that art comes from. I feel like if that's where you've planted your flag for the day, even if it's in service to someone else, it feels like it provides greater access to the same situation for one's own work.

This is partly a reflection of where I'm at in life. I remember when I was in my late 20s and a bunch of my friends were going into teaching and I really thought that I had figured out how to trick the system by doing other kinds of work that paid well. It wasn't gratifying in any kind of intellectual way, except in the way that maybe doing a crossword puzzle is gratifying, but I was paid well.

So many of my friends at that time talked about how exhausting teaching was, or how depleting the experience was. It seemed like their strategy was, "How do you put as little energy into it as possible?" I thought, "Wow I really gamed the system by going this other day-job route." Well, 20 years later, and I think that that was the right decision for me at the time because I don't think I could've made teaching work back then. I probably would have felt depleted. But now it feels right. Not depleting.

I think about what it would be like not to need a job sometimes. It's that classic winning the lottery question—people who say, "Even if I won the lottery, I'd still keep my job." I'd probably keep a teaching gig, even if I didn't need to. Some kind of studio visit teaching gig.



In contemporary art programs, the idea of what is powerfully, emotionally, intellectually motivating your work can get subsumed into more dispassionate theoretical questions. Not that one can't be passionate about theory. But I feel like I've created a little niche for myself by focusing more on things like—What is it in this one life that you urgently need to communicate via this particular form? What is it that you have to communicate? This is a very 19th century and slightly tacky approach, but I stand by it.

Do you find that as much as people want feedback on their work, that there are also people who just want practical guidance from you? Like, how do I get a gallery? What should I do when I get out of here? What can you tell me about how to have a career?

There's a little bit of that when you teach art. Surprisingly, not as much as one might think. I get very pragmatic questions about how to get a gig at a particular art space, or how

to get into a particular fellowship program. I don't get as many questions of "How do I plan my life for the next 30 years?" or "How should I be thinking about planning my life?" Although I wouldn't mind those questions at all. I think they're important, especially for people who are making this huge investment in their education.

If I were 22 and in an art school and making very challenging or esoteric video art, I'm not sure I would know what to do next.

I'm not sure I would either. The advice I feel comfortable providing is something that I think transcends questions of the access points into getting your work shown, but more about how to build a practice. I feel like I'm often trying to teach students the stuff that I'm still working through myself, which is about a type of endurance, a type of showing up, a type of sticking with it and doing the work for the sake of the work.

Something valuable I tell people is that you generally have to work a project until it's kind of dead to you. I think sometimes younger people are resistant to that idea. For me, I feel like I know when a project is done. A lot of my projects could spin out infinitely because they often involve iterative processes and stuff like that. Part of what I rely on to know when it's done is when it starts to feel a little dead or a little like an artifact.

I'm often trying to teach students the stuff that I'm still working through myself, which is about a type of endurance, a type of showing up, a type of sticking with it and doing the work for the sake of the work.

It always reminds me of growing up—we had these cicadas in the backyard and at a certain time of year you'd see these little empty cicada shells still clinging to the trees. To me the art "product"—whatever that is—feels a little bit like that cicada shell. It's the residue of a process that's left the building. That kind of thinking has generally worked for me with video art, but what I find now that I'm trying to do much more performance work, that same strategy doesn't quite apply because you have to be present in the actual work in a way that you don't have to for, obviously, a piece of video art.

Like a lot of people, I think I first knew about you because of your video pieces, particularly "She's a Talker." In the past most of your work was visually-based, but I know you are doing more multi-media performance-based things now. If you're up in front of people doing a performance piece, you have to be physically present and emotionally present, but you're also on the receiving end of whatever the audience's critical reaction is in the moment. That must be an interesting gratification for a visual artist if you haven't done that kind of work before.

It is. The experience cuts a bunch of different ways. This felt like a kind of homecoming for me because in high school I was that kid, that homosexual in drama club, but in the fiercest way. I was Jericho High School's class thespian. I was *deeply* into it and then I got to college and I was in only one show and I thought, "Wait, this is *so* not cool" or something. I don't know what was going on exactly, but I wasn't into it. Also, as a total side note, the one production I was involved with also included people like Rick Moody and Jeffrey Eugenides, which is just funny to think about. Anyway, I just hated it at the time. I felt like, "Okay, I have to get away from this."



I was also the photo nerd in high school, as well as an actor *and* a writer. So what I'm doing lately just feels like a return to that. In terms of the audience response, it…okay, first of all, I love attention. I love it. I'm also profoundly embarrassed of that need for attention. That embarrassment becomes a thing I struggle with in the work. It's funny, in thinking about this I started contemplating how I can identify in this really uncomfortable, ugly way with Donald Trump so much more than I can with Hillary Clinton in terms of his flaws and his narcissism and his fragility. That's a whole other story and I really think that that might be the unspoken thing that made people gravitate towards him—people's identification with his ego fragility… I think there's something complicated going on where we recognize that in ourselves, part of us, and it brings out either empathy or sadism.

For me I’m hungry for attention, but I’m embarrassed of that hunger so visual art is the best way to get that satisfied because it’s always bouncing off the wall at you. You might be standing next to someone watching your work or looking at it, but even that makes me uncomfortable. I’d much prefer to have it mediated. So yes, on the one hand it does feel great to get that immediate feedback, but it also puts me in touch with a part of myself that makes me really uneasy. It can really put me in my head because I’m aware of how much I want it and if I’m not getting it, I can get hyper-attuned to that.

I feel energized by the audience response, but it feels very obviously vulnerable and I can get hyper-fixated on it in a way that probably doesn’t serve the performance well. These performances also have a strong improvisational component to them. Nothing is written or scripted exactly, but it is bullet-pointed. Something I find very challenging is delivering an idea I’m familiar with in a way that feels as if I’m still discovering what’s fresh about it in that moment. It is a challenge that I still feel a little bit like I’m being dishonest somehow—to affect a type of discovery in what I’m saying when it already has been well-discovered.



You have always been very much a part of your work in the sense that you appear in it or it is about your actual life or your family. Doing performances alongside your visual work takes that to a different level. Why did that feel necessary? What is it that you can do in a live performance that the other work couldn’t do on its own?

Basically, when I make visual art I always feel like I’m steering a big ship, where the moves you make take place over time and you can’t have a subtlety to your navigation past a certain point. At least the way I make art. I don’t think that that’s intrinsic to all art making, I just think it’s intrinsic to my relationship to art making. Whereas when I’m writing or formulating ideas that become part of the performances, I always feel like I’m getting in there with a little dremel tool, with a very fine point, and I’m able to navigate much tighter spaces and get at greater nuance. I don’t disavow either one and I think that’s part of the reason that they hopefully compliment each other. They allow me to do different things.

Oftentimes with the work I feel like I’m creating this situation that offers a possibility, a broad possibility for identification. For example, I did a piece where people are emerging from the subway and orientating themselves. It’s the kind of thing where you can hopefully find yourself or lose yourself in what’s being represented in this very broad way. I set up certain formal parameters that hopefully allow, or facilitate that. A certain type of framing, a certain type of editing, et cetera. With performance I hope at least that I’m taking folks along a little bit into something more circuitous.

Have you heard about how coyotes and badgers sometimes hunt together? It’s a rare thing in nature where you have inter-species cooperation in hunting. Basically coyotes chase things that are out in the open field and they can run fast. Badgers can’t run fast, but they can tunnel and navigate through the earth really well underground. A lot of their prey, I think, are groundhogs and squirrels and stuff. The two different animals are known to hunt together because even though a lot of the times one of them is not going to get the prey, hunting together increases their overall likelihood, depending on where the prey runs. If it runs above ground, then the coyote’s going to get it. If the prey goes into its burrow, the badger is going to get it.

I feel like visual art for me is a little bit more like the coyote. It’s running across a big, open field really fast. Whereas live performances are more like the badger, it feels like, “Okay, let’s go into this tunnel together and let me take you on some turns and stuff.”



How does the idea of "practice" equate into your day to day life? Does it vary from project to project?

There are different pieces to it. A relative constant for me is this thing of waking up first thing in the morning and writing three pages longhand. That idea comes from a cheesy self-help book that I find very helpful, *The Artists Way*.

That book comes up all the time. It's useful for so many people.

I'm sure she's out of her mind, the person who wrote the book, but in a good way. But that's something that has definitely been a constant for the past 15-ish years, maybe longer, is getting up and writing three pages in the morning. I don't know how that directly impacts a specific project, but what it does is create a more open channel to whatever that energy is that's connected to art making.

The ideas for a project will sometimes emerge from that writing. Something I just jot down. Then I'll pursue it. Certainly that process has proved more directly useful now that I've started focusing on semi-improvisational performance.

Other than that, I've had the same studio in Chinatown since 1994, my landlord got it as a bar mitzvah present. For me an integral part of my process is putting the key into the door of my studio and walking inside. I can absolutely say that in the entire 23 years of having that studio, it is rare that I don't feel some little transformative thing associated with opening that door. Getting myself to the studio is hugely important. What I do there really super varies from project to project.

I'm a Virgo. A lot of my projects involve a kind of logistical work that I find deeply relieving. To me the "creative" part of art making has a lot of anxiety associated with it, as well as a lot of rapt attention. I love balancing that out with making a spreadsheet of people I need to get permission from or researching a media player. I try to always have a little blend of creative work and hardcore Virgo pragmatics in the mix.

Neil Goldberg recommends:

Tropical fish stores. I love the otherworldly lighting, the thick, fish-tanky air, the nerdy patrons, and, of course, the fish themselves.

Biking over bridges the Manhattan or Williamsburg Bridge. Going up is not fun, but at the midway point you can stop pedaling and just glide into another borough, feeling like you're floating high above water.

The cold. If you let it, a cold day can really put you in touch with your will to live. Plus there's nothing sexier than coming in from the cold, ideally into a warm space that smells of cooking.

Scrappy NYC performance spaces, especially Abrons Art Center, Invisible Dog, Danspace Project, Jack, the Kitchen, Joe's Pub, and the Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance. (OK, some of these are no longer quite scrappy, but still.) It blows my mind that for not too much money you can be in close proximity to live human beings singing, moving their bodies, playing music, making you laugh. I recommend picking something at random, but some performers I consistently love are Cole Escola, Jacqueline Novack, Erin Markey, Justin Vivian Bond, Taylor Mac, Miguel Gutierrez…

My cat Beverly's Instagram, Daily_Beverly. Few things beat the feeling of taking a good picture of my cat, and I'm grateful that Cat Instagram offers a community with whom to share them.

Name
Neil Goldberg

Vocation
Artist, Teacher

Fact

Neil Goldberg is an American artist who makes video, photo, mixed media, and performance work that focuses on embodiment, mortality, and the everyday. He currently teaches at Yale.

