

“What Remains” at DFBRL8R by Mána Taylor Published in *Chicago Artist Writers*, March 2020

I find a catalogue, a small booklet with text in a typewriter font, in my mother’s library. It is titled *Reliquarivm: a selection of performance art relics from Singapore*. From Daniela Beltrani’s 2012 exhibit in Singapore. I read about every object diligently, like it is my research assignment. “Fragment of a violin,” “Jar filled with fragments of a mirror,” “Porcelain cup and saucer, spoon, fragments of golden leaves.” There are more fragments, relics, with their descriptions and origins of their performance, and the reason they were kept by collectors as relics of a performance art piece. I linger on both words, “relic” and “fragment.” I appreciate them both for their visualization of something left behind, an object from the aftermath of an event. Relics of performance art outlive the event, no longer perfectly replicable, but the memory of the performance is now a part of the relic. The relic stands as a replacement, an object that can not become the performance again, but can become archived.

In February of this year, my mother and I were one of 40 performers in *What Remains: On The Sacred, The Lost, and The Forgotten Relics of Live Art* at Defibrillator (DFBRL8R). Joseph Ravens, the curator and founder of DFBRL8R, has been collecting objects left behind after performances since he opened the gallery in 2009. The gallery was also itself a relic, since the event was hosted in the former Dfbrl8r space, now Arc Gallery on Chicago Ave. There were still parts of the building that hadn’t changed. ieke asked the audience to notice the shoes that had been hanging outside for the last 5 years, since they were originally thrown by artist Miao Jiaxin. It was a way to “bring the relics back to their home,” Joseph exclaimed during one night’s closing statements. Artists were invited to perform a relic, or as co-curator ieke Trinks stated

“reactivate and reenact them.” From there, four chapters were installed for “What Remains” and happened in this order: Fixing, Merge, Referential, Consume. One theme for each week.

I think about the subtitle, “On the Sacred, The Lost, and The Forgotten.” Beltrani had also indicated in her own catalogue that this word *relic* “seems to convey the character of sacredness with which most collectors consider these objects.” The “sacredness” she writes about remind me of museum archives which seem untouchable, a sacred space. “What Remains” felt like a completely different approach to objects on a wall. It allowed artists to manipulate, use the archive in new ways. Not to destroy, but simply to use these sacred objects freely. I spoke with Joseph and ieke at the end of the four weeks of “What Remains.” ieke noted that “museums, who do have things in their collection, are very conservative with it because they don’t know how to work with it. Probably they will not have it used any more they will display it. So it will not get harmed by any one. In this case, Joseph was not that protective.” Joseph also said to me “It is a point of privilege, having storage space. It takes labor, dedication, and resources. Permanent spaces - there are so few spaces dedicated to performance art. It seems to me there’s sort of a collective artistic consciousness where more people are thinking of the ephemeral right now.”

If I could, I would write for each performance, honoring each act of re-activating an object.

An ode to the past, to the artist who first used the object in a performance. I could describe what each night felt, smelled like, what the new performance had created in the room. How each week, the remains of the previous week, lingered on the walls: red food coloring splashed on one wall, a puddle of ink, a tray of hair cuttings, polaroids on a wall. As both a performer and a part of the audience, I felt that I was able to experience many sides of “What Remains.” There was sacredness felt in each performance, such as Sungjae Lee whispering in my ears through

headphones, Doro Seror letting herself be untied by audience members silently, after slipping papers which said “free the woman without embarrassing her,” or Ashley Hollingshead reciting each object’s history and becoming the speaker for each relic. The simplicity of these small acts of sacredness is what created “What Remains.” The durational performances, the performative acts happening all around.

During the third chapter, *Referential*, artist Frans Van Lent monologued his performance.

Seated with a microphone to his long-bearded face, cross-legged, reading from his iPad, he observed “These performances start where they usually end”, referring to the archival remains that have previously been used in performances and are now re-used as new objects. The end of an object becomes a beginning in the eyes of a new artist. The iconic red chair he had chosen as his relic, was lost and now a part of the world. He left it somewhere in Chicago, for no one to see, and then asked for it to be removed from all the publicity. And so, the audience silently began cutting the iconic red chair out of the publicity posters, leaving hollowed papers with the outline of a chair. Joseph recalled this fondly during our conversation, “Frans yielded this wonderful moment of announcing the removal of the red chair and throughout the night, people were cutting it out of posters and stuff - it was this other micro-performance.”

Remains are normally the end, and they make new beginnings. The relics from these reusing of relics can ignite much more instead of being sacred relics, artists were able to use the archive and interact with objects from the past, referencing previous performances. There were more sacred and memorable acts happening in the audience as well, such as all the story telling and sharing. The lines blurred between performance and audience. We all became performers. I had been performing a durational piece in which my mother and I were writing letters to each

other, me on the typewriter and her with an ink pen. Sometimes, friends or strangers would come up and interrupt. “Can I ask a question?” Another time, I had left my typewriter for a break and returned to someone typing. I tensed up internally, at the thought of someone altering my performance, but tried to relax after I told myself it was all a part of what the night had invited us to do. To interact with the past, with artworks. To honor their sacredness but also to let them go.