

Honorary Fellowship University College Falmouth  
Acceptance Speech September 16<sup>th</sup> 2011  
Karen Christopher

My thanks to the Honorary Awards Committee and to those who nominated me for this honorary fellowship it is an unexpected delight to receive it and to be here speaking to you today.

Congratulations to those of you who graduate today. Graduations usually make me weep—there is so much hope represented here. It is wonderful to acknowledge this moment in the progress of your lives and I hope you are able to feel the strength of this moment and let the impact of this graduation ritual carry you away.

All we have is each other. There is much that we have that we can do without but we have nothing without each other. Other people make us who we are. We are nothing without finding ourselves reflected in the eyes of others.

I have no work without other people. But what is true for a person who works collaboratively must be true for everyone—the whole of life is tangled in collaboration.

I make collaboratively devised performance works. It is like trying to open a cabinet door with a handle made of spider web. The skein of silk spun by a spider is one of the strongest materials but it exists on a very delicate scale. Special tactics must be employed. Among the materials of live performance are time and sensation, and the work calls for thinking about thought and becoming attentive to invisible processes. And the moment we make it, it is gone.

Regardless of what field we work in collaboration between individuals, groups, and with our environment is a potent and transformative activity.

I was a member of the collaborative performance group Goat Island for about 20 years until we disbanded in 2009. In the course of leading workshops on collaboration we suggested tools for working together in non-hierarchical structures, methods of negotiating in groups working together to make performance. We said: Communication is an art. Though we all communicate every day it takes practice and attention to be really good at it. We described four points of distortion in the course of communication—this describes any time we talk to another person and because our ideas, nestled in our brains next to collections of feelings and associations along with the residue of breakfast have to be expressed in a series of words strung together in a linear order. An idea transforms the moment we have to say it out loud and sometimes we hear ourselves talking and think: how is that the same as what I was thinking? and also: I wish I had a better vocabulary or some other way to describe this. And the distortion continues as the receiver of those words attempts not only to understand what the speaker means by those particular words but lodges those ideas in a mind that is also filled with feelings, sensations, and associations all settling around to influence the newly arrived thought.

Far from confining us to rigid inflexibility, other people's needs can provide a filter through which the multiplicity of options the world offers is narrowed down to a digestible level—other people become organizing principles.

Susan sat and listened to Goat Island hold a post-show discussion after our performance at Chelsea Theatre in London. And then she began to speak and during the questions she asked and the answers we gave, I noticed a distinct deficit of openness on both our parts—we didn't like her questions and she didn't like our answers.

Later, I wrote her a letter, I attempted not to convince her of our correctness, but to communicate with her fully. I said:

*[extract of letter to Susan]*

*Some of the tactics we employ in our work are designed to avoid the simple knee-jerk response, the too-quick understanding. If something is inexplicable, slightly off-centre, or seemingly inappropriate, it perks up the attention and the part of the mind that wants to know what is going on. Work has to take place, attention has to be closer, and smaller signs are watched for. If one can't immediately read a situation, one must look closer.*

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*That which causes a person to stop and question or stop and think again is useful to us as artists. In this way the audience is adding a thought process of their own to the work we have made as well as being woken up to listen closely.*

*My observation is that you were listening very closely and I think you rely on your own quick thought processes—which are sharp and reliable—that is one of your strengths no doubt. I thank you for sharing your inquisitive nature and your passion for correctness with us. It caused me to think about how to answer your question long after the session was over.*

*You may not appreciate or like the work of Goat Island and I certainly don't want to suggest that you should. (On the other hand, sometimes when people tell us they didn't like a show we suggest they see it again! When they have, they've reported feeling differently about it after a second viewing.) In this letter I am merely hoping to give an answer that makes sense to you regarding your question about our use of specific words. I didn't think the answers we gave you in the post-show discussion satisfied you. Maybe this one does.*

*Respectfully,*

*Karen Christopher, Goat Island*

You here today aren't so much finishing or beginning as you are continuing—you can see yourself on a life-long journey and you've already lived through the years behind you and you know what you have learned and it's as flexible as anything is and can be applied to the experiences ahead of you. And the everything you know will always be less than you want it to be even when it's so much more some day.

Regularly ask yourself what you are hoping for.

You haven't finished learning, you've only just begun. You've learned to learn is what you've done and now you'll learn some more.

From the world of performance I have a directive—a performance directive is not written or composed in anticipation of a right or wrong answer. Rather than telling how something should be done, it is an invitation, an invitation to be translated according to and depending on the person responding.

Language, idea, and action inform, shape, and incorporate each other. A performance directive is a creative act.

Design a garden for a place on your body.

or

I propose that one day you extract three actions from your hardest day of work and use them to compose a dance: that you remember your hardest day of work, remember what someone said on that day, remember the name of the street on which it occurred, that you say the name of the street, that you perform the dance, and that you repeat what you heard someone say.

In this way your hardest day of work becomes a dance.

What is it you know now and think you will never forget? Find a way to make it true by living in this moment with full engagement, with eyes open and wonder activated.

I wish you a fruitful continuation.