Room for Repairments:
A Review of Cally Spooner at Graham Foundation
By Jennifer Smart | March 5, 2024
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Performance, once an avant-garde gesture, a means of rejecting the market's colonization of art by refusing to create work that could be bought and sold, has, like so many things, been emptied of its critical edge. There are many reasons for this. Performance has proven rather less difficult than its early proponents imagined to be commodified, its documentation an easy "object" to market. And performance itself is no longer a surprising event but instead an increasingly ubiquitous presence in the museum. In the body of work she has been assembling over the last decade, Cally Spooner considers a third reason for our present difficulty with the concept.

In the exhibition text for "Deadtime, an anatomy study," her solo show currently on view at the Graham Foundation, Spooner writes that we live in a culture in which "the doctrine of 'performance'" has made us all "ripe for consumption." In a society in which performance is demanded, tracked and exploited, she asks, how can performance possibly be rewritten as a tool of resistance and repair? In "Deadtime" Spooner deploys the familiar gestures of post-conceptual art—sparsely filled rooms, architectural interventions, sound, and yes, performance—to construct a tentative answer.

Spooner has transformed the Graham's exhibition space itself into a performance, or, to take up one of her frequent strategies, a script (albeit one without explicit directions) for the audience to inhabit and activate. In the Graham's first-floor gallery visitors are presented with several small objects—an oil painting of a pear, several actual pears perched on a window seat, and a speaker that projects intermittent sound (a cello, the sound of breathing) into the space. The walls of the space have been painted a rusty shade of red, on top of which white paint has been applied with large circular brushstrokes. These are all small gestures that activate the space without filling it.

As one ascends the first staircase, more speakers installed in the stairwell intermittently project the sound of children counting and more sounds of breath, this time heavier. In the second-floor gallery the titular video, a single-channel digital projection scaled to the size of the room, features dancer and frequent Spooner collaborator Maggie Segale. In the video

Segale performs alone in front of a white wall, shifting between athletic, sharp movements and periods of stillness. At the bottom of the screen a digital clock runs, keeping track of Segale's performance and, as it turns out, the entire exhibition.

Sound plays a crucial role in "Deadtime." Both the speakers on the first floor and first staircase, as well as additional speakers dispersed throughout the Graham's three floors, are synchronized to the exhibition's clock: forty-three minutes and fifty-nine seconds. But it's a synchronicity in name only: Sounds from the video itself, for example, are experienced asynchronously, Segale's heavy breathing projected intermittently from the gallery's speakers, overlapping and colliding with other sonic fragments.

As audiences climb, they are offered different media and different scales. While the first floor is almost entirely bare, on the second, the visitor encounters the video work and the giant receiving box through which the speakers on all three floors are routed (and more pears). Upon reaching the third floor one encounters a gutted drinking fountain and its endlessly recirculating water and several other small pieces including a sterling silver cast of soap that the wall text tells us was "held by a mother for a month, while she held her mother."

The works themselves, many of which Spooner has included in the various versions of this work she has exhibited over the last few years (including in Chicago in 2019 as part of "Iterations," a series of performance commissions the Art Institute of Chicago hosted between 2018 and 2022), seem far less important than the affective and physical space they assist in creating. Their sparseness and spareness seem like the barest concession to any expectation that art involves looking at objects. Their repetition across the Graham's three floors creates a sense of familiarity but ultimately encourages visitors to look elsewhere for fulfillment or meaning. Minimalism's emphasis on presence, the mere co-existence of object and visitor, is an old gesture, but it makes sense here. "Deadtime" is a show that privileges the (mere) experience of being, especially that of being in a space with others (both human and non).

The psoas muscle, a muscle buried deep inside the human body, serves as an extended metaphor for Spooner here. Although little can be done to stretch or improve the muscle, when it is weak or unwell it exerts a powerful, negative effect on the body and the emotions. When the psoas muscle is "vibrant," Spooner writes, it "disappears." "Deadtime"'s obvious emphasis on creating space—empty rooms, painted walls, sound—seems to be Spooner's response to the paradox of resisting performance. Yes, we may all be performers, a term that has also become an increasingly common way of referring to museum visitors themselves, but performance doesn't have to have an end, it can just be.