
A THOUSAND WAYS

by Simon Dove

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.
Arundhati Roy, *Financial Times*, April 2, 2020

This new work by Abigail Browde and Michael Silverstone has its origins in a very different time, a very different world. Over three years ago, before any of us valued epidemiologists as much as we do now, I invited Abby and Michael to lead the creative thinking process for a project I was curating for Temple Contemporary in Philadelphia to encourage a diverse range of residents there to empathetically listen to fellow citizens whom they had not previously met.

The project was a response to the specific context of that city, one of the oldest cities in the US, and one that continues to suffer from immense social, racial and economic divisions. However those civic fractures have been compounded by the current US political context that has so polarized citizens across the country, and with social media algorithms increasingly insulating us all from perspectives we do not 'like', there are diminishing opportunities for all of us to engage with one another, particularly outside of our existing social circle, and now exacerbated by pandemic isolation.

The profound irony, of course, is that we have never before in human history had better systems and technologies with the potential to connect us to such a diverse range of people and information sources. Yet we seem to have lost patience, or maybe even interest, with different or opposing perspectives. Are we even aware of them anymore? Have we really stopped engaging with others in the echo chamber of (anti)social media?

A Thousand Ways is Abby and Michael's quietly radical response to the challenge and the opportunity of this new world we are now entering, through the pandemic portal. The apparent contradictions of the desire to resume human contact and the protocols of social distancing offer both a strong impulse and an aesthetic framework for this new work. Central to Abby and Michael's work has been the principle, and virtuosic skill, of nurturing individual people's voices, and framing them theatrically in a way that is totally supportive yet retains the fascinating fragility and vulnerability that we see as their humanity. *The Record* (2013) presented '45 strangers for 61 minutes' in a compelling study of human diversity and connection, an ensemble piece for unique individuals. More recently, *The Fever* (2017) created a new community of performers each time it was performed, coaxing and supporting the public who had gathered for the show to come together as the performative ensemble for the piece. Abby and Michael's strengths as theater makers lie in their highly skillful and deeply felt capacity to ensure everyone involved in their projects – from professional colleagues to community collaborators – feel safe, completely supported and clearly heard.

A Thousand Ways is a generous invitation to engage with a stranger by sharing gestures, thoughts, actions and perspectives. The context is a theater, a site of performance and audience, in the center of town. It requires a journey to get there, and one that in that old world meant you would enter a presentational space together with (hopefully) many others, and share an experience as a group, or as a community. For this work however you are sharing the space just with one other person, someone you have not met before. The work is a guided encounter, where an envelope of cards with instructions and prompts supports and structures your meeting. You are both the subject and the witness of the performance, performer and audience, but where the detail of the exchange can be totally determined by you. The cards offer practical steps and a reassuring framework, ensuring equity in the encounter, and a mutually shared experience. The setting of the table at which you sit the required two meters apart, the plexiglass screen between you, and the gloved interactions all tangibly ensure your safety, yet perfectly manifest the deep sense of care that Abby and Michael always bring to the work. The performance offers the perfect opportunity to break out of the enforced isolation of quarantine and engage with a new person, a stranger, yet with all the protocols of the new world securely in place. The work directly challenges the notion of individual isolation and social distancing, acknowledging the physical distance whilst enabling the participants to create a totally new social connection.

When asked about their previous work Abby and Michael have written "We construct performances that illuminate the inherent poignancy and theatricality of assemblies of people. We explore a radical approach to making art that creates intimacy amongst strangers. Our work is an investigation of presence and humanity, not only in performance, but also in process and its aftermath. When describing our work to people who've never seen it, we say that our performances frame the individuals who are performing them, not asking the performers to transform themselves, but rather to be present and vulnerable and thereby transform all of us."

This powerful vision of a way of working from the old world seems to predict the essential requirements of this new world we have now entered. Abby and Michael's new work has the potential to transform each individual in a thousand different ways, and as epidemiologists know, we all have the potential to incubate those transformations and become superspreaders.

Simon Dove, born in the UK and currently based in New York, is Executive Director of CEC ArtsLink and an independent curator and educator. He was co-curator of the *Crossing the Line Festival*, the annual transdisciplinary fall festival in New York City from 2008 to 2018, and Artistic Director and Curator of *Springdance*, the international festival of new developments in dance and performance in the Netherlands from 2000 to 2007. He was also Professor of Practice and Director of the School of Dance at Arizona State University from 2007 to 2012.
