

Ailish Hopper / Excerpt from *Not By Half*, work-in-progress, 2021.

Yet Stands Hopefully:
DML: The Lost Interview

Always our wars have been our confessions of weakness

---Muriel Rukeyser

When the artist DML (pronounced “dimmel”) disappeared, little was known about their life or contested work. Claimed by some as an activist, others as filmmaker, and still others as a performance artist, they produced work for a seemingly-impossible time and, some say, even changed the course of history.

DML is best known for a piece in which they assembled hundreds of thousands of people in Jerusalem, which many claim influenced the creation of the international Beings’ Rights Act. That performance, which embedded everyday actions (e.g., going to the post office) in large-scale spectacle, is among their best-known work. Their canny use of television and media has made them controversial, however, as they gained followers by the millions, and now appear as often in history books as art books.

Because DML was also well-known for keeping a very tight hold on their public presentation, generally avoiding interviews, it’s been impossible to know what was real, and what’s just more of the performance, including their disappearance. Many assume that they are dead, but with no evidence, the rumors have been freely interpretive. Which makes the interview revealed this month by a former assistant all the more remarkable. What danger might they have come close to? And, important artist--- or activist? Their words may even cause us to finally abandon such categories altogether---which is exactly what it seems like they wanted.

Interviewer: DML, let’s start at the beginning; can you tell us more about your first work, *The Lamb*, a silent film that’s now lost, but supposedly an important precursor, because it references public disobedience.

DML: I was sorting through my family’s religiousness---is that the word? And with those early films, I wanted to show the simplest of revelations, the movement of emotion across a face---like clouds across a sky. I didn’t know it at the time, but I was.... I was being told to be meek. You know? Which I always assumed meant being weak....

So... I began to think about a category of action that’s created from heartbreak.

religion

Every last
All of it

Every tiny, hair-thin
Root

Back to
Before

To the first
Pre-cell

Rivulet

Of

Flowing
through

or and

"Born/Reborn" (Lyrics for choir performance, 2001)

Interviewer: You've received harsh criticism from the press for being too accommodating; too symbolic to be an activist, too popular to be an artist. Why do you think this is? Some see your work as moralizing, "fluffy," compared to the cold, hard work of politics----

DML: ---who's said this? Sorry---..... Somehow, my harsh critiques of America have been read as their opposite! But to me this is less about me, or any of the work we've done. It's people's misunderstanding of love.

There is work to do. Jobs don't pay well, people get sick and can't afford doctors, our old people.... Meanwhile, so many of us are asking for something more like tolerance from each other. Something safe. I'm not interested in that.



: *Shall desire*

*to settle on land
a license*

*So that each
shall have a plot, tillable ground
Not more than 800 feet, waterfront*

*The military authorities will afford them
Protection : To love*

and promise forever For ever [Sometimes the song]

I promise these For
ever promise Promise to you

“Promise Lands.” (Installation, choral performance at sites of former plantations, markets, jails, 1997).¹

¹ DML uses two documents in this piece: a map of South Carolina and Georgia where 400,000 acres was granted to 10,000 Freedpeople in January 1865. And text from William T Sherman’s *Special Field Order 15*, January 16, 1865.

Interviewer: But---and I can see why this gets you in some trouble--- love? In the face of so much violence---this past weekend's police killing of Josiah Kendrick, for instance, but also the coldhearted evictions---- how can that be what we need? Do you mean being "civil," "polite"? This is the critique others have made, of course. That you're just using a "soft" approach, because it will gain you more followers and participants.

DML: ---This always takes us down the wrong road. I have been trying to get people to think for themselves.... It's about pure method.

Interviewer: For example.....?

DML: For example, the way the CcorP piece ended, three hundred people arrested and beaten by police, including me... I'm used to the cane now. People misread my work if they don't see that I too, while not carrying a gun or anything, aimed for my work to be a weapon.

Interviewer: You see love as a weapon.

DML: A certain kind of love is, yes. Or... I think love is its own form of safety.

Interviewer: I can't decide if that's cynical, or idealistic.

DML: It's a question of what we are each willing to bear. I think we can bear more than most of us might think.

Legal safeguards, avoided conversations --- is *that* safety? People want to complain when my pieces ask us to consider our yearnings.

Description:

[Two images of a room filled with clocks: grandfather clocks, watches, and other timepieces,

One image, a close-up
on all the clocks the hands

have been removed.]

"The Appropriate Time to Complain" (Installation, 1987)

Interviewer: Can you say more about the improvisations you've done, on-the-spot collaborating with government officials? How do you shape the performance once it gets going?

DML: Managers and security forces are key, yes... In many ways their words, gestures become part of the artwork's vocabulary.

Interviewer: For instance....

DML: ---well, in Belfast for instance, our actions were purely symbolic---we acted out a story of what we wanted to come true. We were in costume, performing... handing out food, signing people up for fictional labor unions, not real ones, so the security forces just ignored us. We should have been better directors of them---they're actors, too.

Interviewer: That seems... less like art.

DML: Actually, *avoiding* the cops is more like reality—keeps it from rising to art. Like when the FBI surrounded us at CcorP, calling out their demands via bullhorn.... It becomes slapstick.

Interviewer: You think the police are funny?

DML: No. But we're the only ones offering pathos. We make our bodies as neutral as possible, our mouths mute, if not defiant.

I want to show the full effect of the law's absurdity--- which is considerable. We're playing roles that aren't in the script. Like that Bob Kaufman line, as "an old building nobody wants to live in, yet stands hopefully." We call the question. We pop the bubble of denial, fantasy. [Laughs] The call is coming from inside the house!

Interviewer: You are--- or you play – a fool.

DML: There are a lot of names for it, sure.

Interviewer: Let's talk about your most famous piece, "Belong," which gathered a few hundred thousand participants---or do you call them "performers"? And is it true that you and they were supported by Ben Aramekin, the controversial trillionaire?

DML: ...Why is it always---

Interviewer: ---which would make the political impact ---the International Beings Rights Act, which by all accounts has changed the game, lifting billions out of poverty and reversing some environmental poisons---seem.... I don't know--more contrived. Less of a victory. Not to mention the rumors that you've purchased several mansions on both coasts.

DML: All politics is contrived! And I think, given the history of my family, our struggle to make ends meet, generations in diaspora---- I mean, who are others to judge?

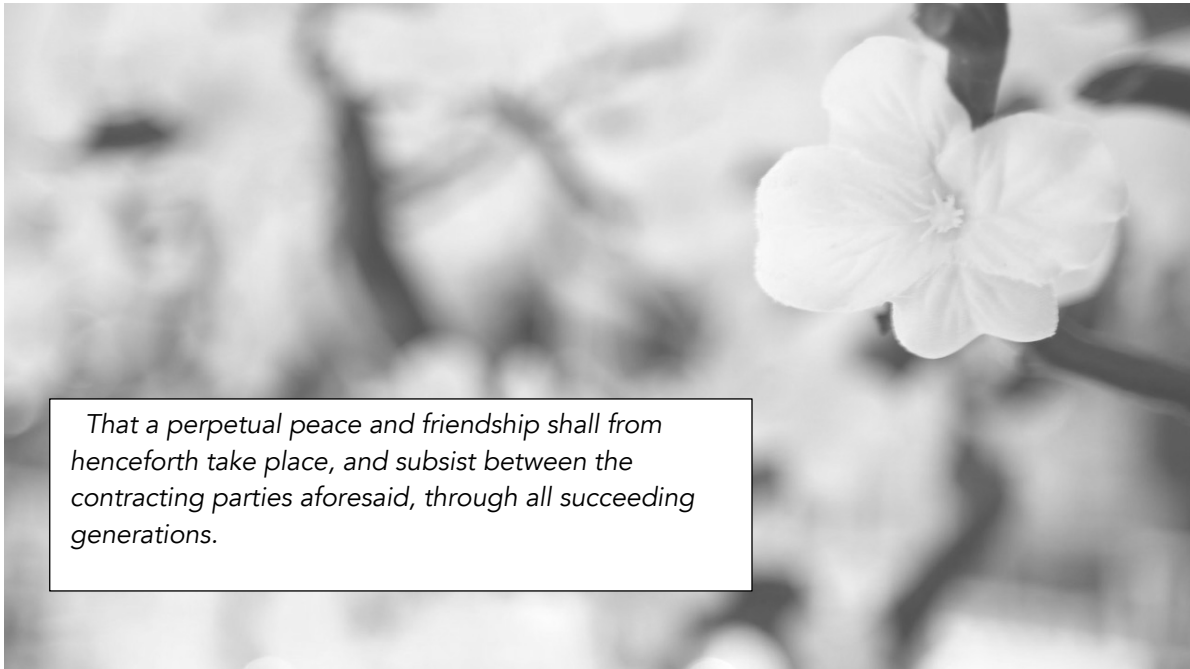
Interviewer: But it isn't just about you. I mean, you have seven million or so followers, that's just on FG, and your performance brought out more people than almost any actual political rally in recent memory---are you saying that paying them to show up is inconsequential?

DML: If I want to have nice things, if I want my followers or participants to---

Interviewer: ---Ok. but this connects with love...?---

DML: ---love is not turning someone into your hero, and following them blindly.

This goes back to fantasy. How can anyone use a map if we don't know where we actually are? Where we're beginning from. Trillionaire's support---maybe that's a more real beginning... than my critics' utopias.



That a perpetual peace and friendship shall from henceforth take place, and subsist between the contracting parties aforesaid, through all succeeding generations.

“Thinking of You” (Greeting cards with quotes from local treaties/agreements, 2018)

Interviewer: Are you against self-defense? That seems to get left out of this...

DML: [Long silence] This is very tricky.

Interviewer: How does your work answer to nihilism, for instance, or skepticism?

DML: My art is simply an invitation... It's not, in some ways a thing I should say...

To trust that there is even a ground that will catch you--- even if that ground will cover you in thorns.... Why would I explain that to you. Some part of me just hopes you never experience it.

Interviewer: But your own letters, speeches... speak already to society's ills. What is it you won't name?

DML: A kind of worst-case scenario. A world concerned with individual, human needs only.

*A woman's face, flicker
in her eyes*

: "No. I do not apologize"

Tree-tops, silver-up

*helicopter whine
& drilling spotlights*

: "'Police,' a most generic garment. Not even barely a noun."

"Fake Flow" (film short, 1986)

Interviewer: I'm still trying to understand your use of that word, "pure."

DML: I suppose I mean.... Now, I'm less afraid. I know: you can't build walls, really. Every wall can be climbed, in some way, can be knocked down.

Interviewer: The fine line between protection and sadism, between surrender and masochism---

DML: Sort of, yes. One half of it anyway. We are creating, me and others ... using these things we are each fearing. Like fabrics for a coat, a quilt. I'm saying, if someone wants to come and get me, if someone wants to hurt me, they will.