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Action Art Now Event 3

Review by Mark Greenwood

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The act of writing, in a context of aesthetic and performative experimentation presents a series of conundrums and problems which the writer approaches with caution; objective and subjective dichotomies become confused and speculative while attempts at notation become ponderous and predictable. Writing from scribbled notes, scraps of mediated imagery and fragile memory seems inefficient in light of formal/informal strategies implemented by the artists who approach the Action Art Now events as a challenge to their own practices of 'making' and 'presenting' work.

The first artist, Dominic Thorpe rubs a spoon and stone together in a likely alchemy that generates a pile of silver, green dust on the wooden floor below. Thorpe occasionally pauses to listen to traffic outside and his head tilts towards the ceiling to monitor sounds of domestic disturbance. Opening his jaw to its full extent, Thorpe sustains a silent howl as he searches his pockets for charcoal. Using both left and right hands he inscribes 'easy to forget, hard not to remember' awkwardly on a white wall. On completion of this task he lies down and wedges his body between the crease of the floor and wall.

Thorpe provokes questions around the 'individual' and the 'environment'. His actions amplify a sense of relentless yet unseen energies that inhabit the space between things. These forces may not originate in the body and intentions of Thorpe; they appear to manifest gradually as responses to sights and sounds recovered in the immediacy of the space and spectators. The actions of writing and pressing, rubbing and immersing, test the body and its surrounding architecture as an economy of inscription and legibility. Thorpe evokes a formless force unleashed and regulated in a slow ontological process. While speculating on the representation of a spasmodic trauma that vibrates in Thorpe's sonorous body, I anticipate the emergence of a second ambidextrous inscription that reads 'no speaking here, no listening in this place'. Emphasising the body as inscriptive site/citation, Thorpe punctuates his actions by dipping his head into a bowl of black paint, becoming plastic and monstrous as a strange and disembodied stop.

Anne Seagrave wears white socks.

Bodies emerge in shadows as Seagrave physically shifts through a series of positions in tense yet controlled transitions. A number of collages are worked through as colours and shapes are temporarily

tattooed on skin and muscle, revealing predictive and resistant topologies of sinew and bone which render her body as androgynous and alien. Gestures overlap in physical and digitised knots to produce layers of movement, where impressions of 'real' and digitised bodies become confused in curious permutations influenced by the obdurate materiality of a table and chair.

A taut outstretched arm reveals a series of photographic stills depicting mythological beings and creatures carved in stone, while parallel wooden slats frame areas of naked skin. A litany of statues, times and locations refer to a desire to inhabit other forms, where manipulations of movement repeat and re-represent hidden dimensions of autobiography and corporeality. Flesh and bone re-enact and configure the body beyond diaristic gesture as Seagrave snakes in and out of tri-dimensional representation. The possibility of reading her body as visual or grammatical material is complicated as Seagrave defies the performance space as a platform for her actions and treads upon a political terrain which proposes identity and the body as fabricated, interchangeable and fluid. Precise and visceral, Seagrave's work reveals an obsession with morphology and a disturbance of ideological structures through a striking aesthetic.

Samuel Hasler arranges stacked chairs around a space, constantly relocating observers from their settled positions. Curtains are knotted around hollow black cylinders while five squares lie in a serial and symmetric sequence on the floor, each coated with fine, blue powder. Hasler talks to the audience, dismissing any kind of mystification that exists in the roles of the artist and viewer. He relates the story of a church in Venice, a church that may or may not be a museum or an art gallery, while he might not be a tourist or a pilgrim. Hasler walks in circles, surveying as he goes, pondering and pausing before making adjustments to the structure and alignment of objects in the room. Turning over chairs and scattering text, Hasler's hands conjure an aleatory assemblage of words, objects and images.

Cut up 'prayers' inhabit powder blue corners, while knots are untied and black tubes liberated to stand as solemn monuments. Turning off the lights, Hasler induces a dark materiality, where senses search to distinguish chairs assembled in a circle, their legs jutting outwards to circumscribe invisible loops. The lights are turned on again and audience wince as Hasler announces the end of the piece. I stand in an absurd and uncomfortable silence, smiling and appropriately perplexed; Hasler's live installation provides insight into processes of making and editing but also explores an existential plane where the psychological qualities of object-hood evoke a dialogue of casual disinterest and primordial veneration.

Performance art practice often describes what the artist and writer Justin McKeown refers to as 'a prevailing aesthetic mistaken for the form of the medium'**(1)**. Goals and objects are often lost in confused contexts where rituals of repetition lead to self-indulgence; where pain and endurance become acceptable practices to justify a sense of meaning and 'pure' expression. *O U I Performance* as curators,

appear to reject this misappropriation of performance art and re-negotiate what might constitute artistic practice in the context of a city such as York where 'a new economy of militarism heritage tourism'(2) dominates a landscape of industry, commerce and leisure. Interestingly, the protected facade of York's ancient city walls act as an easy metaphor for what Victoria Gray describes as an art community's self defence and buffering of 'prejudicial and hierarchical attitudes' towards a 'precarious' art form that is pigeon-holed as performance(3). However, rather than forfeiting political and aesthetic risk, Gray and Walker appear more content to program more conceptually challenging work that positively antagonises the limits of an art form, rather than protecting it. Innovative and trenchant, *O U I Performance* continues to survive and thrive in what I hope could become a permanent zone of autonomy.

www.ouiperformance.org.uk/vn-04

Notes

1. McKeown, Justin. 'I Am', Review for Circa 127 (Spring 2009), p.62
2. Hunter, Roddy. 'I think I now know' in Artist Research in Action – Proceeding of CARPA 2, Colloquium on Artistic Research in Performing Arts, edited by Annette Arlander. Helsinki. Theatre Company, 2011, p. 41
3. Gray, Victoria. 'Beyond Necessity: Can we save performance, or, can performance save itself?' in O U I Book 1, York. O U I Performance. 2011.

Writer Information

[Mark Greenwood](#) is a performance artist / writer originally from Newcastle but now based in Liverpool. He has presented work across the U.K, Europe and the United States as well as curating the RED APE; a performance platform dedicated to the preservation and legacy of provincial performance art practice in the U.K. Utilising indefinite durational practice and minimal actions as art forms, Greenwood's interests lie in anthropomorphic puzzles and inter-textual folds. Mark is currently researching a PhD in Fine Art at Kingston University, London.