

ROUTLEDGE ADVANCES IN THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE STUDIES

Experiencing Liveness in Contemporary Performance

Interdisciplinary Perspectives

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2 Attention as a Tension

Affective Experience between Performer and Audience in the Live Encounter

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To be had is to be had in a flash.

(Manning and Massumi 2014, 29)

To my right side, kneeling on the ground beside my bare feet, is a young man. The man holds a large camera with an intimidating lens to his left eye. He pauses, re-positions his crouched body, and reframes a potential shot. Standing monumenally still, I stare down into the lens until the tension of our mutual stillness is almost painful. Through the silence of my gaze, I defy him to take the shot.

Though the camera has me in its sight and the lens registers a body within its frame, it seems he, on the other hand, does not see me at all. I exist by proxy in the room of the lens and only in the room of the lens; not, as I had wished, in the room of the performance. Any direct encounter with my eyes is fettered by the mediation of the camera. The immediacy with which we are present to each other, more or less, depends on his courage, or lack of, to experience the mutuality of our presence without this shield. Our encounter has become tethered within the limitations of lens and shutter: a fixed object for re-experiencing later, rather than a temporal process to be lived through in the now. Presence, albeit, at a safe distance.

The incipience of the moment, just before the moment that the camera captures 'the' moment, causes a hiatus. As he presses the shutter, the moment is already gone; it has already been and been had in a flash. Slowly, apologetically, he lowers the camera from his face. I maintain eye contact throughout and see that behind the metal and glass of the machine, soft eyes had been shaded by the shield. The camera, now nestled on his lap, seems redundant; hollow, despite my body somehow 'living' inside of it. Certainly, the camera has failed to capture this post-photographic experience of co-presence between myself and the photographer. He was both too early and too late in anticipating this moment, and indeed the newer moments to be experienced thereafter.

Evidently, what was taken by the camera is a negative shadow of what was bodied forth in the inter-corporeal experience of the event. The photograph would have nothing to show for the braiding of our live(d) somatic experiences; nervous dry mouth(s), anxious beating heart(s), nauseous performance stomach(s). Inside the camera, our bodies are no longer temporal processes; breath is taken, muscles are numbed, pulses are stopped.

In November 2013, I was invited to exhibit at the *8th Biennial of Photography* in Poznań, Poland. An international group of performance artists were selected for an exhibition titled, *This One*, in which each artist exhibited one photograph representative of their live practice.¹ In addition, I was commissioned to make a solo performance in response to the paradox that performance, an art form supposedly 'freed from the burden of the object [still] requires continuous documentation' (Szablakowska and Trusewicz 2013). My intention was not to critique the photograph itself as an effective document of live performance, thereby addressing the status of the photograph after the event had taken place. Rather, through my performance, I was keen to highlight ways in which the activity of taking photographs during the event changes the affective experience of performance itself, for both performer and audience. With deliberate perversity given the focus of the *Biennial of Photography*, I devised a performance titled *Shutter* (2013), which I expressly forbade to be photographed. Not only would I prohibit photographs from the audience, I would also veto the attendant press and official biennial photographers. Through this provocation I intended to privilege the *process* of performance as live(d) experience and not the economy of photographic objects.

On the evening of the performance, the audience entered the performance space to find that I was already in situ. Choosing to perform outside of the 'frame' of the gallery, my performance was installed in an abandoned building opposite, presumed to be an old cold storage warehouse. Standing naked in the far right corner of a large, damp, unlit room, I waited beside a closed door situated to my left side. The door, once opened, would reveal a lit stairwell with steps leading to a basement beneath the performance space. Slowly, as eyes adjusted to the darkness of the room, bodies started to migrate towards me, forming a semi-circular fringe around my still body. Once assembled, I addressed the room directly, asking that nobody take photographs. In addition, along with numerous Polish and English language signs positioned at the entrance to the space, the curators communicated my request to each audience

rubbing skin of arms belly back legs in dark to keep warm with hands making fast windmills with arms circulation stopped white fingers i'm so numb touching the ground its uneven roof leaks damp cold water forms stale pools of water wet stone walls reflect orange street light standing naked not neutrally feet resisting the ground in parallel toes lined up exactly parallel to grey floor tiles like rulers thin brown hair in lines brushes shoulder blades base of back blister forming on right little toe feet are bone naked in far left corner they find me curt corporeally compact they're squinting there's nakedness sense a crowd meet each eye lifted from solar plexus makes skin stretch across hips gut's taut like a stone fight lungs pubic hair swollen belly menstruating inside having heavier thighs a period is no small thing rounder thighs sting from cold rash have six stinging lumps collar bones pushed down to

member in Polish as they entered. However, as the live event played out, my request was much harder to enforce in actuality. As a result, the power dynamics between an audience keen to record the live moment for posterity and a performer keen to experience the event in the now, were starkly underlined.²

Over the course of 45 minutes, my performance constituted the singular minimal action of slowly opening the door to the lit stairwell, entering, and then closing the door behind me. Like the mechanics of a camera or the human eye, the door behaved like an aperture or iris. Thus, I had absolute control over the size of the opening through which light could enter the room and the length of exposure time. Since the door was situated in front of the audience, it fanned light across their bodies as it opened. Strategically, I positioned my own body slightly behind and to the side of the door. Consequently, the further the door opened the more I disappeared into shadow. By having control over the distribution of light, I had control over what and who was made visible and for how long. This shifted the power dynamic in the room, granting me agency to project light onto the audience, exposing their bodies rather than my own. Defying the veto on photography, at least a quarter of the sixty strong audience photographed the performance on mobile phones and digital cameras. Each time a person took a photograph, I made strong eye contact, silently imploring them to take heed of my request. As if a camera abstracted them from the ethical dynamics of the scene, people continued to ignore my appeals. Paradoxically, it was as though I became invisible, despite being the subject of their photographic impulse.

Shaken by the affective impact of these almost confrontational encounters, I was compelled to record the physicality of this experience in writing, just

salvage control of a nervous high chest red blotches plus back ache esp. right shoulder left nerve sciatic pain like tooth ache bladder sensitive off cold door handle in left hand slight frozen metal object something to hold audience handle awkwardness using both eyes left wrist twisted makes elbow drop tuck to left waist i'm trying to be immense slightly slacker stomach from airplane breakfast makes self-conscious pelvis softer bread rolls coffee juice porridge menstruating hold in bread blood food and breath in rooms that are also all dark so the room it's also like an intestine intense womb lung open door begin people's pupils dilate duration there's lots of this light slow yellow breath breathing emerges as only strategy breathe in fully hold until desperate breathe out discontinuous lungs ache off the camera's stomach all the pelvic cramps equal this rooms tensions triangulate gazes between door ground and a tall man on a step in far left on a window ledge gives nothing away a woman in cream wool beside a woman with glasses has no eyes because of harsh light woman on left shoots beside a gentle woman to her right who's 'on my side' has encouraging eyes skinny man on right is a sad woman passive aggressive on right takes me too many times from my

moments after the performance ended. In the basement, and still unclothed, I took out a pen and paper. Limited for time, struggling with the cold and coming down from the adrenaline, I wrote quickly for several minutes. As the audience trickled away chattering and, in my imagination, comparing photographs, I attempted to notate the physical sensations of this affective encounter. In my experience of live performance, both as performer and spectator, affect impresses on the body. As such, I believe that affect is congruent with *kinesthetically* felt, sensory impressions. Kinesthesia is thus a self-reflexive awareness of the internal dynamics and 'qualitative contours' (Sheets-Johnstone 2009, 332) of movement and sensation that constitute affective experience. Thus, I noted my internal states of feeling: qualitative information regarding physical and psychological experience that a photographic object arguably fails to convey.

However, articulating the spatial, temporal and energetic dynamics that constitute affective impressions puts equally firm pressure on words and 'only if the word resonates in some bodily felt ways [...] does it rise to the challenge of languaging experience' (Sheets-Johnstone 2009, 367). Post-performance, the dark, damp and cold basement had important corporeal bearing on my ability to re-language my sensate experiences, thus the environment served to 'thicken the memory' (Sklar 2008, 86). In a stream of 'kinesthetic consciousness,' (Noland 2009, 36) words fell out in partial sentences but were full with bodily resonance, rich with somatic (non)sense. Fragmentary and poetic, the words put flesh on the bones of a memory of a live(d) performance, borne of my live(d) experience of writing in affective tatters.

right side 'because she can' take young man kneeling at feet regrets taking someone tuts it hurts feel more bloated than a year ago performance period makes my body putty itchy dry blood on left knee from shaving embarrassed uneven toe nails what's actually been seen photographs for deflecting the cold is invisible material like time light elongating time light reveals sores they're embarrassed by time and light embarrass the man by using both my eyes legs ribs belly button hips skins hands shoulders breaks into chatters the tremors tongues lips teeth break it feels less powerful closing the door as back turns inwards back side in a recoil goosebumps are more intense on thighs than on arms belly breasts hands or feet i'll remember this inflexible audience disappear like an eclipse my muscles of my right calf spasm taking all my weight my right bicep the shape of a cashew nut embarrassed by the curve of a soft light but swollen hip vein vain inelegant bruises cellulite stretch marks my body it changed in the course of this performance period does a period make this more impossible to photograph what's internal to performance is not benign woman who leaves early falls is hurt somebody arrived late everybody saw but not everybody listened.

Notes

- 1 Curated by Agnieszka Szablikowska and Lukasz Trusewicz, Raczej Gallery, November 16–30 2013.
- 2 I am mindful of additional tensions given my naked female body, particularly if read through the lens of 1970s and 1980s feminist visual theory regarding objectification of the female body in visual representation and the fetishising 'male gaze.' Rather than allow these (albeit important) histories to foreclose the use of my body in performance, I situate my performances within 'new model[s] of thinking about visuality' in contemporary feminist visual theories (Jones 2012, 173). According to Amelia Jones, by foregrounding duration, process and corporeal materiality, ethical relation rather than spatial objectification is cultivated between performer and spectator. Jones coins the term, 'Queer Feminist Durationality' (Jones 2012) to define these new modes of visuality. Consistent with contemporary feminist discourse, I deploy duration, close proximity and heightened somatic awareness as strategies to counter objectification in my performance work.

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