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To the memory of queer theatre pioneer Reza Abdoh (1963–95), whose work stands as a testament to the lasting power of queer dramaturgy.
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On 9 June 2001, Doran George spent a workday in a large emptied store within a shopping centre located at the heart of London’s Elephant and Castle district in the UK. This area south of London city proper usually has the connotation of being an undesirable area; it has been largely a run-down working-class and immigrant neighbourhood, although also an historical site of theatres. On a global scale, this moment is shortly pre-9/11, less than a decade before the world recession, and, more locally, 50 years post-renewal following the district’s destruction during the Second World War. In the intervening years the locale had changed its notoriety from a consumerist space of prostitution to a massive shopping centre, the first of its kind in the UK. The commercial space George took over for the day was converted into a performance space, shifting the register from buying and selling to enacting. My approach to this performance is to ask in what ways do its various components make concrete, or localise, the time and place of its actions, affects and political gestures within the ever-expanding space of neoliberal economic orders? Against the backdrop of globalising tendencies that leverage the masses into the precariat, what can this performance teach us about shifting registers and political allegiances?

During the eight-hour performance, titled Remnants of the Original, George’s body became encased into three standing brick sculptures, with gaps just large enough for a hand to fit in-between the sections of the enclosed head and torso, and the torso and legs. In effect, George spent a workday lying down while others laboured to keep hir both confined, and safe in these risky confines. This high-risk performance meant that George could only be released by demolition. Eight ‘keystone’ bricks were arranged so that they could be let loose, allowing sand to spill out and the upper structure to be removed at the close of the performance. Precautions were taken so that the mortar would not fatally dehydrate George’s body. The bricklayer, care-persons, as well as audience members, who signed contracts obliging them to stay the duration of the performance, were all on hand to participate and bear witness (figure 17.1).

This performance is affectively charged with the seeming passivity of the performer and audience contrasted with the activity of other labouring bodies marked as skilled. Yet through the staging in the time of work and place of consumerism Remnants of the Original asks its audience, who must sign a ‘labour’ contract and mark the encased body with their fingerprint, to meditate actively on the tasks required to comply with the gender economy’s norms. As a gender-variant person, George’s work can be characterised, in hir words, as seeking to ‘sustain a place where my gender is not under scrutiny’ (George 2012). In assembling various operators such as the bricklayer, care workers and witnesses, George points to how (intimate) others must be called upon to perform what Jane Ward calls constitutive ‘gender labor’ (2010). Whereas Ward is interested in the ‘affective and bodily efforts invested in giving gender to others’ (2010: 237), Remnants seems to shatter the value of any bolstered ‘authentic’ gender, preferring instead to withhold or suspend capitulation to structures of gender recognition. This form of non-compliance to the successful recognition and affirming of gender also involves skilled labouring and co-production.

In doing so, it strikes me that the performance of Remnants refuses the terms of much trans activism and theory produced to further
the aims of gender self-determination, in so far as it rests on the individual production of self. For instance, Dean Spade uses the term ‘gender self-determination’ as a strategic tool ‘to express opposition to the coercive mechanisms of the binary gender system’ and then lists the ways that public authorities impinge on an individual right to self-determination: from their assigned birth gender, to toilet access and policing (2006: 235 n9). The performance defaces the individual; literally, by covering the face with swaddling, then plaster casing and sand, and finally by brick ing in all the identifying (gendered) individual characteristics. This durational live art performance turns on a series of de-individualising gestures, while nevertheless clearly creating one body as a singularity through how other singular figures labour on it. In this sense, it comes close to enacting aesthetically Jean-Luc Nancy’s notion of ‘being singular plural’ (2000) that proposes a co-terminous ontology of being-with-one-another, in which an entity is particular in its difference but always relational to other singularities. José Muñoz explains his attraction to this concept is because it ‘renders the ontological signature of queerness’ as both anti-relational and relational (2009: 10–11).

In this chapter, I argue that the choreography of gender labour contests the predominant trans* focus on self-determination of sex/gender by bringing into sharp relief the impossibility of individual self-sufficiency. Through each person present performing difficult acts of risk and sustainment, Remnants creates a social (albeit artistic) context that does not revolve around the gender identity of the performers but their tasks. The motifs of building and destroying personal property, and the gendered person as property, defy normative articulations of trans* subjectivity. Dan Irving’s incisive reading of how the transsexual body is legitimated through becoming (seen as) productive in the contemporary neoliberal context shows the gross shortcomings of this normative economic approach (2008). He argues that militant trans* activism must address the ‘integral links between regimes of sex/gender and exploitative economic relations of production’ (2008: 39), because they form intertwined systems of oppression, insidiously through demanding capable, productive, compliant, individual workers. Irving’s analysis worries the reactive championing of the good transsexual as a legitimate ‘upstanding citizen’ who contributes to society in order to counter how they are usually cast as ‘enemies, threats, and drains on the system’ (2008: 52). I see that Remnants demonstrates how one might rather perform the ‘down lying citizen’ instead of appealing to ‘up standing citizenship’. To be upstanding plays to respectability politics, and implies an honest, rule-abiding relationship to authority. In contrast, George’s horizontal body absorbs the rebuke of being a rule-breaker, by ‘taking it’ lying down. This apparently passive acceptance without protest – while lying down – refuses to capitulate to the legitimating discourse of the productive, upstanding citizen. In addition, those attending to the passive resistance of George, lying in an extreme state of vulnerability, emphasise the collective production of anti-relational and relational queerness. Taken together, I understand this performance to install a trans* body as ‘mobile architecture’ (Stryker 2009: 45) – a localised becoming-sculpture through thickening in particular meeting points. Hence, my analysis of Remnants will proceed by moving through the three sections of body parts entombed into brick pillars in order to draw links between the sex/gender system and the (exploitative) economic relations of production.

A face of brick: Class and visibility

When I asked about how s/he came to the idea for employing bricks, George responded, ‘I wanted to be bricked in, literally’ (2015b). From a dance and feminist performance art background, George’s desired mode of display and choice in material came together to create a face of brick. This hardened face is laboured upon but, unlike a death mask, it forms no relation to the contours of a human-animal form. Rather than showing off his own technical skill as a dancer, however stripped of individual subjectivity, this bricked-in display format highlights the working-class skill of a ‘labourer’. George explains that s/he was interested in the story of his friend, Aiden Grey, who was an out gay bricklayer (ibid.). The dance sequence becomes composed from Grey’s movements, choreography and especially the rhythmic sound of cement mortar being placed and scraped. The sound technician placed sensors on the key equipment, like the cement trough, to amplify these movements. While many dancers already have the ‘build-up’ in place before the performance formally begins, the predominant inclusion of Grey’s skilled labour in the building industry brings class into stark visibility.

Drawing upon his own paternal working-class background, Remnants expresses a desire for the arts to be accessible to working-class people, using familiar materials and movements, and casts skilled labour as a form of art practice. For people who did not sign the contract and were only passing by, gazing familiarly into a shop window, George conceived of this as another, parallel performance called A Room for Improvement.
From outside the space, George’s artist biography, cheekily written by his mother, was displayed, offering another level of critique to the stuffy professionalism of dance that might appeal to passers-by. To draw in the working-class people of the neighbourhood, George also asked Jean Cameron from Glasgow to stand at the door from: to talk to ordinary people about the work. Though Cameron worked in the high-art forum ‘The National Review of Live Art’, she grew up in working-class Paisley and could draw on her interclass skills to discuss what A Room was about without sounding superior. While Cameron was the first ‘public’ face of the performances and Grey the main performer, Grey’s partner, boat builder Winand Cnops also lent his skilled labour: to design the brick structure and perform as Grey’s ‘brickie’s mate’ during the performance. Together they mixed cement on site, for example. These various figures lent the performance their normally invisible ‘faces of brick’: hidden faces of the nameless labourers behind cultural institutions and built structures alike.

The massive structure of the Elephant and Castle shopping mall is above many bus stops that serve throngs of people travelling to and from South East London. George went through the area daily when travelling to work as a caregiver for the elderly and disabled (2015b). Even when s/he was unemployed, George bussed every day to dance classes and meetings to organise the London Transgender Film and Video Festival and other events. This performance’s chosen site in a ‘contact zone’ (Pratt 1992: 7) with mainly working-class and impoverished denizens stresses the practices of sustainment by those living on the outskirts of capital, or the capital, proper. The largely migrant small business owners that rented space in the shopping centre created a dynamic meeting point and overlap with the adjacent longstanding outdoor market used by the (working) poor (George 2015a).

Jack Halberstam’s study of subcultural lives and art, In a Queer Time and Place, defines such ‘risk identities’ populating this contact zone broadly: all people who live outside the naturalised time/space of sexuality, and on the edge of productive labour logics (2005: 10). Halberstam cross-identifies this class of people as potentially including ravers, club kids, the unemployed, HIV-positive barebackers, sex workers, homeless youth as well as trans* people (ibid.). These risk identities are ‘queer subjects’ in terms of how they live (deliberately, accidentally, or of necessity) during the hours when others sleep, and in the spaces (physical, metaphysical and economic) that others have abandoned, and in terms of the ways they might work in the domains that other people assign to privacy and family. (Halberstam 2005: 10)

Gender non-conforming lives are perforated by the risks they are willing to take with regard to, for instance, expressing or being read as a ‘contrary’ gender, their livelihood by non-lucrative practices such as art, or living without financial safety nets, or steady jobs.

From this point of view, Remnants occupies the outskirts and empty excesses of the straight, cisgendered life aligned with reproduction and production. Reassembling the remnants, or remains of a brick and mortar economy might be read as a throwback to the time of idealised ‘mom and pop’ (stores). However, by risking the uninterpretable brick face of both gender-non-conforming and labouring classes, George refuses to copy or imitate some ‘original’ labouring man or woman. Instead, an out of joint, yet adjoining, genderqueer time/space emerges in the broken original.

Swaddled torso: Gendered care beyond the surgical economy

Remnants does not mobilise the practice of visibility familiar to western gay and lesbian rights politics of being ‘out’ and proud. In creating a swaddled and ‘bricked-in’ body to the outside world, George becomes intentionally invisible and inscrutable. While not desirable at all times and places, hir durational and sculptural practices of dodging scrutiny challenge dominant political narratives of (gendered) visibility in public, normative spaces. In this sense it adheres to the politics of performing the ‘unmarked’ that Peggy Phelan (1993) and other feminist and queer makers (see João Florêncio’s chapter on Derek Jarman in this volume, for example) have turned to as a theatrical strategy of resistance. The sculptural forms that emerge challenge the scopic regime of the sex/gender system that seeks out privileged markers of gender in the secondary sex regions of the chest and groin (cf. Bettcher 2007). The decision to become swaddled is, in the first place, practical to protect the body from pressure sores, but with it come connotations of both protecting (from) a wound and wrappings for a baby. These transformational resonances direct the audience to tropes of trans* practices for physical transitions. Yet, George turns away from the surgical and civil rights discourses regularly connected to discussions of transition, suggesting instead a transformational economy of care that sustains and renders
viable hir life. In being partially hidden by the swaddling, this body enters a micro-political practice of becoming-imperceptible. By this I do not mean ‘disappearing’ as such; for gender scholar Paul Beatriz Preciado (n.d.), becoming invisible or inscrutable is a condition for political work in the society of control that depends on surveillance and transparency.

By frustrating our gaze, the brick towers and glimpses of sweaty skin solicit our attention to the micro level of sensations. The transformations of this performing body are happening in small increments, not visible to the eye. Water levels are dropping, meditative breathing calms, sensory deprivation sends shivers of sensation across the neurological system. George writes that entering the bricks reminded hir at the time of processes of gender transition: ‘I've swung back and forth between gender presentations of male and female for as long as I can remember, and each swing takes time and labour. They aren't conscious choices, but I feel them happening’ (2015a). Using releasing techniques commonly practised by dancers, like Alexander Technique and Qi gong, George cultivates the conscious awareness needed to drop into these highly localised, subtle and extreme swings of bodily transitions.

Dropping from the molar to the molecular level, to speak in Deleuze and Guattari's terms, I find affinity between the encasement and transgender practices of transitioning. In both molecular states of becoming, making a place for oneself is a collective, brick and mortar process. The body becomes situated into place during Remnants, localised in an environment, performed in a specified time and place. Susan Stryker's autoethnographic writing frames the somatechnical becoming of her transsexual body through the techniques, intimacies and, most of all, through the place of a sadomasochist's dungeon – the Golden Bull in San Francisco – that holds the space for these belongings (2009). She draws on the work of geographer Doreen Massey, who analyses place as process, to understand ways that transsexual sadomasochism installs the body that practises it. In other words, place becomes a distinctive mixture, ‘a gathering, and manifestation of local and global social, economic, and communications relations’ that knot themselves up together for a length of time (Massey 1993, in Stryker 2009: 38). They become concretised in their assemblage together, claims Stryker; similarly, George's body becomes installed through becoming realised – literally – in concrete. S/he explains that 'in those physical changes I find a sense of self that is not ordered by gender and sexuality identity, even though I certainly define it as a relief from those terms' (2015b). The choreographies of space and time – created through the mason's brickwork, clinking of concrete, clinking of tools, George breathing, water being sipped, friends chatting, curious strangers entering – together form the rhythms and topography of this workday installation of identity relief.

The team that was assembled allowed this moment of live art to express a body protected, yet vulnerable; confined, but also embraced. Like at the Golden Bull, where Dungeon Masters and Tops/Dominants 'hold the space' for bottoms/submissives to perform, a care-taking team held the space for George's transitioning process. The care-taking team included Guy Undrill as medical consultant and Tony Burch, who was the general practitioner on hand at the performance and consultant prior to it. They helped George work out the calculations of the risk, deciding that the greatest hazard was George choking on hir own vomit from a panic attack, leading George to fast for three days beforehand (2015b). This decision also increased the ritualistic character of the performance's staging of a transformation. Also on hand were live artist Kira O'Reilly and dancer/choreographer Sophia Lycurous, who were George's direct body carers. They took shifts watching over hir, and also did the swaddling. O'Reilly brought her experience in live art that relies on assistants to interact with her body, as well as knowledge of how to hold space reverently in the face of a calculated risk. The dance practice of Lycurous was at the time on the edge of performance art; hence, she understood the importance of choreography and involvement of the audience in creating this 'dance piece'. To this team George actively 'rescinded my decision-making capacity' (2015a), very much in the spirit of transformative power play practised consensually within the kink community and especially the trans* and queer players who incorporate BDSM into their gender labour (cf. Bauer 2014; Hale 1997).

As noted, the audience had to sign a contract to attend, and this was a concept developed by George to prevent others from becoming upset by the imposition of her calculated risk. They entered on their own choice, but in a restricted manner. The contract required the audience to attend the beginning of the bricking-in alone or in pairs, return when the work was complete and mark George's exposed body with a fingerprint one at a time, then return again as a group for the demolition. George explains how '[t]he contract detailed the process of the bricking-in, and the risks that it might entail for my body, stressing that if anything goes wrong the contract would be null and void and the audience would be asked to leave the space' (2015b). During the most dangerous parts of the performance, George also had hir team whitewash the windows to prevent regular shoppers from seeing without giving an informed consent. At maximum, 3S people could see Remnants, though many
more could also view *A Room*. This division was intentional: for the different audiences, each performance provided different levels of access without coercion, but also different levels of responsibility. Doing so respected the training for witnessing contemporary performance that the audience of *Remnants* may have needed in order to deal with its intensity.

Key to the eight-hour commitment, though, is the time the audience could *not* be inside the shop. Instead they had to hang around Elephant and Castle, potentially lingering in the downtrodden market area and interacting with the rest of the topographical assemblage. The audience's three timed entrances into the live art shop enact a weaving of their personal strands of experiencing local place as process into the situated place of the performance. They become a witness of George's gender non-compliant labour and dually an enactor of the processual character of the space of the performance. Like George's imperceptible shifts, the audience must become attuned to the atmosphere and the effects of perhaps feeling out of place. This slowing down, a hanging around if not a lying down, performs the affective labour of the marginalised.

**Stilled feet: Making a home in the quagmire**

Finally, I want to discuss the brick pillar of legs and feet by way of considering how these stilled anatomical motors signal the most direct form of 'lying down citizenship'. Being walled in, a torture called 'immurement' in medieval and current times, is considered a punishment of the highest order. Whereas during immurement a body is left to die slowly, George expressed how delighted s/he was to get into the bricks precisely for the relief they offered in blocking out the outside world (2015a). The brick-in process provided George with a queer space of desire in the sense that Muñoz describes: 'Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present' (2009: 1). George's supine repose in *Remnants* allows hir to sink into what appears to be a contained quagmire, if by that we mean a sandy, soft bog. But this crafted quagmire becomes a home rather than a trap. If for Muñoz '[t]he here and now is a prison house' (ibid.), then George's retreat to behind a wall is to make for hirself a room for improvement within the prison-world.

The making of this room took six months to prepare: along with learning new practices of physical stillness, George and hir team conducted numerous experiments to get the structures right. Thus, constructing the portal of the queer aesthetic to another time/space on the horizon was highly anticipatory, mixing the affective structures of hope and fear (Muñoz 2009: 3). George made *Remnants* after a period of being homeless in London, which s/he dealt with first by couch surfing and then staying at a homeless hostel. Without a private place to call hir own, George was also very conspicuous in public, explaining, 'I always wore make-up and gender-punked clothing' (2015b). Moreover, the Elephant and Castle public bus intersection 'was a place where I often encountered harassment, or adulation, for my gendered appearance' (ibid.).

At the time of its making, then, George was effectively living in the public, shared domain, both vulnerable to and open to how others co-operated (or not) with the labour of gendering.

The local trans* community at the time did not always offer respite. This was largely due to a normative drive towards a medicalised physical transition that would eliminate the ability to perform gender fluidity, like George's 'gender swings'. Faced with messages of 'make up your mind' (2015a), George's indecision to move one way or another becomes a form of political refusal. Though seemingly passive, lying down keeps open all the options: s/he might engage medical technologies of gender in the future, or not. Either way, George can keep deciding or not deciding. This labour of contemplating the options feels to George 'more like the existential labour of contending with [a] gender system that doesn't seem to work for me' (2015b). In this sense, gender labour is fully captured in our post-Fordist era that no longer differentiates between work and leisure, or public and private selves.

Paolo Virno typifies this production era's 'emotional situation' as hopelessness, requiring a 24/7 exploitation of the multitude's labour, totalising for capital all our intellectual and physical labours (2004). Trans* people do double time, then: labouring for demanding capital and for punishing gender regimes. Even worse, largely shut out from normative productive time, many trans people lose jobs when they transition, or are deemed unsuitable for work environments, placing them at greater risk for homelessness, assault, addiction and suicide (FRA 2010; Irving 2014; Schilt 2011). Lying down might thus be understood as the expression of 'bad sentiment' that Virno sees as routes of escape from late capitalism's mandate to be emotionally 'on' while on the 24-hour clock. For Muñoz these bad sentiments, like bitchiness, cynicism and depression, should not be taken as individualistic moments of dysfunction, but signal the capacity to transcend hopelessness (2009: 176). Hence a lying-down citizenship that *Remnants* models is paradoxically motored.
by the paralysis of hopelessness. It stages a series of moments of civil disobedience, then, by shifting a collective eight hours of work into a mediation on what or who is working, and what or who is not. Not only for himself, but for all of us, George takes it lying down, expressing non-compliance to a fully realised humanity through gender and economic activity.

On George’s way back out of the brick pillars, the bricklayer first deconstructs the sculptural formation by pulling out the eight keystones that then release the kiln-dried sand. It falls softly to the floor, evocative of sands of time in an hourglass but also of a body falling helplessly. George experienced the release of the sand internally as a dramatic change in atmosphere, like a weight being lifted off and sloughed away (2015a). The falling sand, then, is not only suggestive of negative affects like failure or helplessness, but also of freedom and sweet relief. When s/he comes back out of the hard cocoon during the final stage of the performance, the process draws links to other fallen people: those who fall out of favour, the fallen improper woman. Without romancing the figure of the fallen, Remnants softly suggests solidarity with those down and out.

In conclusion, George’s performance highlights the neoliberal logics of time’s normative organisation into what some might take for granted as the workday. This chrononormativity is framed by the time before and after the shop is closed, but runs co-extensively with self-care time. It suggests a queer temporality and spatial aesthetic bound locally but also always in relation to the global scale of labour economics and epistemic regimes of gender. Sustaining a gender non-compliant time and place, then, is about the practices that sustain this actively passive force in a localised, knotted, thickening time and place. The wrapping, the sand, the bricks, the contracts, the occupation of the abandoned on the outskirts, the risk taken and care given: all these efforts at thickening the body and its social bonds generate a queer assemblage that crosses and emerges with the torsions of trans* sex, global capital and hopelessness of 9 June 2001.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Antke Engel, Wiebke Straube and the 2013 Berlin ‘Queer Time’ workshop as well as Marianna Szycgel ska, Esther Peeren and other commentators of the 2013 Emotional Geographies conference where these thoughts were first presented. My gratitude is also extended to Lazlo Pearlman, Stephen Farrier, Alyson Campbell and especially Doran George for helping bring this essay into being. All images were generously provided by the artist.

Notes

1. As an independent artist, George proposed this project to the London Arts Board, who funded it along with in-kind support from the London Borough of Southwark. On George’s request, Lisa Haskell from Media Arts Projects produced the project and was on the original funding application.

2. Doran George uses the non-binary pronouns s/he and hir (2015a).

3. I use trans* with the asterisk to indicate the broadest, most inclusive understanding of gender variance. Trans* activists borrow this sign from computer language in which the asterisk will search for any term with this prefix.

4. Though Spade continues to popularise the term, he fully recognises the limitations of gender self-determination as a concept. Namely, it remains bound up in capitalist conceptualisations of individuality, including the individual freedom to sell labour. Spade expresses a wish to move towards a community-centred politics of change (2006: 235 n9).

5. They took over spaces that were abandoned by chain stores that could not work with the dated accommodations of the centre, such as small loading docks.

6. ‘Mom and pop’ stores are small businesses, often run by (immigrant) families, such as clothing and tailor shops, delicatessens, bakeries or convenience stores. The prevalence of husband and wife teams led to the colloquial term of a ‘mom and pop’ shop.

7. George mentioned O’Reilly’s performance of ‘wet cupping’ earlier that year, in which an assistant cut into her skin and placed Chinese medicine cups over it to draw out blood, as an important influence on hir decision to include assistant carers.

8. Though the swaddling resembles the BDSM practice of mummification, George came to the work through dance/art rather than the fetish community. S/he did get advice from a bondage expert and developed the taping of the swaddling from exercises that he suggested (2015a).

9. Due to space limitations, I only mention the resonances of George’s challenging of hetero- and trans-normativity with a re-visioning of the contract with Preciado’s Manifesto Contra-Sexual (2002), which deeply engages the idea of the contract as central to queer community formation and sexual practice.

References


18

Queer Performance and the Drama of Disorientation

Fintan Walsh

Searching: For home?

When Irish theatre and events company THISISPOPBABY took its electro-pop musical Alice in Funderland to the main stage of the Abbey Theatre in 2012, it seemed like Ireland’s vagrant queer performance culture had finally found a home in the national theatre.1 Since its founding by Jennifer Jennings and Phillip McMahon in Dublin in 2007, the company has gained a reputation for creating diverse projects dedicated to both recuperating and evolving queer performance in Ireland, but always brightening the fringes rather than the main stage of the national theatre. Written by McMahon, with music by Raymond Scannell, and directed by Wayne Jordan, this production was loosely structured around Lewis Carroll’s novel Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865). It followed Cork girl Alice’s (Sarah Greene) journey through Dublin’s technicolour underbelly, where she mysteriously finds herself after eating hors d’oeuvres during stressful preparations for her sister’s imminent wedding – an event overshadowed by the recent death of Alice’s own boyfriend. But even though THISISPOPBABY appeared to have found a home for queer performance in the national theatre, here was a musical whose heartbeat pulsed to the pains and pleasures of being lost; of one girl’s search for home, rather than her arrival. Alice’s venture is routed around the reiterated questions: ‘Who am I? Where am I? Which way is home?’ – appeals she connects throughout to feeling ‘very queer indeed’.

Who am I? Where am I? Which way is home?: In many ways these are among the same questions to have preoccupied a (post)colonially fixated Irish theatre throughout the 20th century, implicitly voiced by characters asserting their claims to ownership, or driven by a desire to

George, D. (2015a) Interview by the Author. Long Distance. 3 February.
George, D. (2015b) Email Correspondence with the Author. 7 February.