

THE WORLD PERFORMS ITSELF

by Day Magee

I am a human body performing the role of a workshop facilitator.

The students of the Performing Identity Erasmus+ programme surround me. Their bodies are seated in various leisurely poses - not unlike dancers lounging between rehearsals. They hail from all over the world, and compose the raw material I will sculpt.

We occupy a large, empty studio space in the Burren College of Art, in the depths of County Clare on the Wild Atlantic Way. Outside, rolling hills of limestone and grass constitute the rural landscape, framing the life-image we situate.

I tilt my legs and feet rhythmically so as to walk in rambling circles, my right hand and its fingers posed so as to hold a microphone to my lips. My eyes point periodically from the text in my left hand to the faces of the participants. The vocal cords in my throat vibrate so as to read aloud the words my body has previously written, the past and present in dialogue. These vibrations bounce across the space, meeting the eardrums of each other body that is present, their eyes and ears on mine.

Together, we are mutually generating a reality.

The words I am reciting describe this reality in "real time" to the students, functioning as a live image description. I describe the situation in which we find ourselves. The point is to call their attention to what is happening - to the material. To themselves. To the moment. To their attention itself.

(Have you ever heard the Alan Watts say "Through our eyes, the universe is perceiving itself"?)

Attention is the creative material of witness-how it may be composed, regulated, sustained. What is seen, how it is seen, and when. This is how the world is made. Experience is a means of world-making. The signals induced by our sensory interface communicate reciprocally throughout the body, each body becoming its own corporal logic, its own auto-mythopoetic language. The resultant, ensuing life is a story being told to itself, and to others, in being lived. Each body is a cipher, a stream of phenomenological code the world is producing, encoding and decoding one another.

I invite the participants to walk through the space. I ask them to consider the floor, the walls, the ceiling, the windows, the paint, the manner in which chairs, bags and articles of clothing are strewn around the room, and indeed, each other's bodies, as a four-dimensional picture frame. This picture frame instantiates the moment we share, composing the image we are living together-indeed, through time, one image, one moment, after the other in the imperceptible frame rate of our chronoception.

If performance is the medium of the body in time and space, then is not the mind a constituent element of this process? Our thoughts. Experience itself-dramatised, characterised through the body-is the material made manifest, embodied. In this manner, human beings anthropomorphise the world.

The students' mind-bodies intone different frequencies, different gestural forms as move and are moved through the room. Some jaunt, some flow, some jut and strut and some go slow. They go high, and they go low, according to my instruction or against it, as I encourage. I do not give commands, but rather, statements for them to respond to. Their kinetic registers produce various lines of flight as they dance, as they crawl, as they remain still, embodying our own system of social orbit-social gravity.

Over the course of hours, I play the role of Pied Piper. I speak (and even sing) in varying tones, volumes, and registers, over music of many genres, tempos and moods. The point is to change, to augment the students' experiences continuously at numerous rates. Joy is material, I say. Sorrow is material. Boredom is material. It is all there, not so much for the taking as it is there for the being. I take this opportunity to play with being as much as they do—in performance spaces, the social contract is not abandoned but bent, curving like space-time according to the mass of performers and audience and the shapes their bodies throw. It is where bodies may *be* speculatively. It is a practical exercise in somatic philosophy. This is where I too, get to *be*.

We move from the indoors to the outdoors, into the blazing Summer sun, where we enact an absurd troupe, marching through a field. Curiosity is material, I say. Exploration is material. Silence, and its impossibility, is material. The world and all its physical laws have conspired to produce this moment in and with us. This is happening. This is really happening. I watch the students find and lose, create and destroy themselves all at once in dynamic rhythm. I watch them parse blades of grass, grab the air, cry out loud in an effort to meet the sky with their throats through the voice. It is a many-tiered, many spoked relationship, this merry band of bodies.

The conceit of many a performance is that it is “not real life”. The conceit of this workshop is that they may incorporate what they learn into their respective creative practices - that they will go off, back to the studio and then to whatever stage they set and “apply” this “knowledge”. But, I tell them, nothing that they have learned need apply merely to the professional, but the personal - to their everyday life. Life is the material, I say. Why shouldn't you sculpt your mind-body from moment to moment in the mundanity of a chore, of a commute, of going for a stroll and chancing upon flowers? Why wouldn't you?

This is what is important. A performance “work” is a window, however long or short, however wide open or merely ajar, through which audience and performer mutually gaze - not to mention the performer being witness to themselves. This acute period of collective temporal visibility is attached to many chains of temporal invisibilities, what is *not* seen. Just like our universe, we are made mostly of the unseen.

They tell me that they feel changed for the better

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A little under a year later, I am performing the role of an audience member, who will write this very article in response to what I see.

At the (*Pas si*) *Fragile!* festival in Brussels, I have journeyed overseas to see the fruits of the students' labour. Over the course of three days, my body is guided from site to site, its attention drawn from performance to performance. It is the logical progression of our time before, as well as the times their bodies have lived over the course of the Erasmus programme, and indeed their lives beyond these. These temporal rivers here converge.

On the first day, I enter the Halles de Schaerbeek. I step downstairs to see Joseph Gold Hendel's *Some Questionable Revelations From The A.I. Neural Net As Presented By An Indeterminate Man*. I see a stage occupied by the artist's body interacting with various props and makeshift sets that are changed intermittently. The performance is accompanied by a screen displaying images, words, and music generated through A.I. The songs cycle durationally, each never lasting more than a minute or so, before changing genre and aesthetic sensibility, with the performance changing shape to reflect this change in a kind of living TikTok feed. The work emulates the materiality of contemporary post-human attentionality, enacted through a body that is socially contextualised via masculinity.

Next, I enter a space at the back of the building. Mathilde Chaize performs *Act As If There Is No Tomorrow*. We see a number of performers donned in Rococo makeup, wigs and costume, lit by pale spotlights. A motorised box of Kleenex on wheels darts between them, as their faces shift rhythmically between exaggerated laughter and weeping. Chaize herself climbs a giant iteration of the Kleenex box, her garment itself made of tissues as she bawls in a mighty, operatic wail. The face itself is a choreography of emotions, a shifting landscape communicating our interiorities, here exaggerated beyond any ambiguity. "I will be understood!" It all seems to cry.

In another room, a projector points down from the ceiling at the floor, creating a pyramid of light, shining through the shadows. Beneath our feet is shone the image of the next performance, live-streamed from the Burren, back in Ireland. From there, where the sun still shines in the early evening air, Erin Besch performs *A Walk In The Burren*. She walks barefoot, participating in an ancient Irish tradition, across the stones of The Burren landscape,

We are then brought offsite to the Lovina Spa, to participate in Kimia Nasirian's *Hamhameh*. In alternating groups, we are brought into the changing rooms, where we change into swimwear. Venturing down into the hammam, we are met with a dense humidity, the sounds of water on tile. We add to the noise as Nasirian washes us one by one, telling us stories of queer emergence in Iranian childhood, which we are instructed to regale back to one another in a game of whispers. I am struck by the many flesh tones of the bodies all around us, and that of the tiles. The room seems to breathe, to heave with moisture and intimacy, proximity.

And that was the end of the first day.

On the second day, I am late. The bus never came. I make a mad dash through the city to La Balsamine, and arrive just in time for *Lemonidas* by Maria Strze and Marcjanna, where I learn we will be heading back out into the city I have just crossed. We are divided into groups of strangers, my own being tied together with string. We are provided with clues that pertain to our journey. We are asked to search for lemons hidden in the outward urban depths. We lead each other through the streets, baffled and curious.

Later, I enter a room framed by black curtains. Barbara Stanko-Jurozynska performs *Two Colors. Single-Selection*, sitting naked atop a table, around her delicately set nude paints and fine brushes like silverware. Stanko-Jurozynska's body is visibly marked with "Port Wine Stain," capillary malformations that cause various shades of purple and red across much of her skin. The stark intimacy of the performed bodily image literally meets the audience as they are invited to sit by the table and paint onto her skin. Through the creative tool the arts and audience may touch in mutual sensory witness and creation. We partake in her flesh without sacrifice. We cannot rewrite her past, but she seems to rewrite her future, we audience members the pens with which she scrawls.

Aimé.es Rossi performs in the foyer of La Balsamine. Here, between many sheets that hang from the ceiling, we hear gasps of pleasure, rhythms of skin impacting various surfaces. A trans body pleasures itself with a dildo for all the audience to see. Their ecstasy is expressed in the body through eyes closing, a smile benignly contorting the face as if remembering something fondly, and durational gyration. They are gently held by both the touch and gaze of their friends who surround them, collectively guiding them towards their own pleasure. Afterwards, they wash themselves, strangely childlike, in the moist folds of shiny plastic lining that is sculpted about the space in a makeshift amniotic sac. A post-autonatal recovery.

And that was the end of the second day.

On the third day, I travel to Studio Thor. Fadwa Bouziane descends the staircase of Studio Thor. She dons a deep red blindfold, and from atop her head stretches a braid of black hair dozens of feet long, trailing behind her. She slowly exits the building, reaching tentatively

out to a world she cannot see, and proceeds to exit the building, walking through the city streets. As she does, a scene begins to emerge, the audience as well as the general public otherwise going about their business moulding around a black body that has rendered itself hyper-visible and the world it navigates invisible. Some help to guide the braid as she turns corners; some rush to their balconies from above to watch the curious drama unfold; some stand silent, and others discuss what they see in hushed tones. It strikes me that everyone is performing. Eventually she circles back to Studio Thor. She kneels upon a white pillow, utterly isolated in the darkness of the space by a single spotlight. A scissors rests upon it, which she takes, and with it, cuts off the braid.

Upstairs, we are inducted into Hongsuk Ahn's *Intensive Becoming East Asian Course*. Ahn is joined by three other performers, utilising a projector. A slideshow begins, each slide presenting the audience with a question—for we are playing a game. A quiz to be exact. We are asked increasingly difficult multiple choice trivia questions regarding East Asia. We close our eyes and raise our hands respectively so as to answer, and if we answer wrong, we are asked to leave. There will only be one winner. After but the fourth question, regarding the differences in land mass between South Korea, Japan, and China, I answer incorrectly, and as I leave, Ahn shakes my hand, and whispers in my ear “go back to your own country”. Nervous laughter rings throughout the piece's duration, bouncing off the performers' deadpan faces.

Finally, the audience is lead towards the largest room, and one by one are given magnetic ear tags, as otherwise worn by Livestock, which is also the title of the last work. The doors are opened, and we are immediately met with the not-unpleasant stench of manure. Barely lit by the dimmest of lights, we see the glint and hear the tug of black polyethylene beneath us, straw and compost strewn throughout the space, around which the throng gathers. After a prolonged period, the performer, Dawid Dzwonkowski, seems to appear out of nowhere between us. In slow motion, they descend on all fours, periodically meeting the gaze of the audience, who stare dumbfounded like cattle. They crawl like a cow about the space, pushing sensually into the manure, invoking a rural childhood queerly navigated by the perfuming body. I think of Francis Bacon's origin story, discovering his sexuality in the violence of a childhood Irish stable.

And that was the end of the third day.

If performance is the medium of the body in time and space, then the medium is life itself. Lives are lead and intersect—lifebeams crossing time to meet at this intersection. It has been that I have borne witness to the fruits of our brief, mutual labour.

Each performing body has enacted the logic conclusion, if not continuation, of their living inquiry. Visiting upon the world, these ways of seeing, of being, are embodied. The world intervenes upon itself through consciousness, which further systematises itself into organisms, into people—then further still into the interior psychodrama of lives. Though, I have not seen all of the students' work - for it was impossible to see everything during the festival - I feel their resonance. The ghosts of their performances haunt the space, the mind and bodies of the witnesses and the conversations that follow.

These bodies have, for a time, performed the roles of students. But we are not ever one thing. We are many things in one moment, then a many other things in the next, then the next, then the next. Each frame of time exists in a body as a grade point average of innumerable perceptions ever changing. Further still, between these individual infinities are produced collective infinities. The “we” we perform beyond the “I”, a human gestalt composed of our union. We perform for one another, for history, for the world itself, which ever begs the question:

Who are you going to be?