

Sex, Work, and Negative Affects in Participatory Performance

One of the impulses behind this current issue of Interventions was a consideration of intimate performance, occasioned by the publication of It's All Allowed: The Performances of Adrian Howells, on one of the foremost artists working in the one-to-one genre. In this piece, artist Owen G. Parry reflects on his own practice, and particularly a series of one-to-one performances. In this reflection, he tests the limits of what's allowed in performance, asks when performance stops being performance, and accounts for some of the complicated effects and affects that kind arise in this kind of work. Parry also considers how we are permitted to write about highly inter-subjective work, particularly as an artist writing about one's own work.

Sex, Work, and Negative Affects in Participatory Performance

Owen G. Parry

In this writing I will close my eyes and touch you. If I go somewhere you don't want me to go, you can stop the writing by slapping me as hard as you want across the face. I can also stop whenever I want...

Between 2005 and 2015 I staged a series of performances which all began with a similar proposition to participants: *Untitled* (2005-9), *Touching Feeling* (2011-13) and *Salome, Baby! (Dance of the Infinite Veil)* (2014-15). Each piece took the form of a one-to-one encounter, first between an audience-participant and myself the performer, and eventually, just between participants. While I did not set out to make a consecutive series, each work called for a new version, eventually becoming a work that documented and critiqued itself through multiple iterations – a work in public and in process. These performances can be usefully contextualized within the genre known as one-to-one performance or one-on-one performance.¹ This phenomenon has become popular in the UK since the turn of the millennium, with many works featuring in live art programmes and a growing field of study. The one-to-one exchange has been staged and adapted by a variety of practitioners too, including established artists like Marina Abramović, whose piece *The Artist is Present* (2010) at the New York MOMA is perhaps the most well known. However, it has also been willingly taken up by emerging practitioners, perhaps due to its affordability in terms of production costs, adaptability for programming, and immediate impact. I staged my performance series across a number of different public programmes, but most notably through a sustained and supportive collaboration with Brian Lobel's *Cruising For Art*, 'a curated series of one-on-one performances playfully exploring the practice of cottaging and similar encounters in public spaces'.² Intimacy, labour, and ethics of the face-to-face encounter are reoccurring themes in these works, including some participant insights to my own practice.³ Writing becomes useful for thinking about what it is exactly that these works

do: their function, their efficacy, and their affect – relating them to the broader fields of participation in art.

One-to-one performance is notoriously difficult to document for the intrinsic reason that ‘three is a crowd’ in these inter-subjective works. Those who have written about the format have discussed the challenges it poses to documentation and the difficulty of writing about the form. Dee Heddon, Helen Iball and Rachel Zerihan, for instance, refer to, ‘the unappealing yet inescapable subjectivity inherent in such authored works’.⁴ Each performance is tailored in response to each participant, and so each inter-subjective experience always escapes any singular theoretical apparatus that might attempt to capture it. That is not to say that this type of performance cannot be theorized or documented, but that perhaps this kind of subjective work lends itself best to a particular kind of theorizing evidenced through stories and anecdotes or confessions. Beyond the actual performance, I’ve always found the stories it produces to be moving and entertaining. I think this is particularly because such intimacies or ‘staged intimacies’ open up experiences of the sexual and romantic persuasion. These experiences can and do often lead to embodied collective remembrances in the form of anecdote, gossip and hearsay. People talk about their ‘first time’ or ‘virgin encounter’ in one-to-one performance, whilst revelling in the telling of their experience to others.⁵ There is an interesting tension between wanting to disclose and withhold information about these subjective experiences, between what can and cannot be said, that makes them ripe for rumour.

This writing thus purposefully employs the subjective and anecdotal as a sympathetic mode through which to think and write about my own experience of creating participatory performance. Cutting distinctions between anecdote and theory, Jane Gallop argues that theory is ‘bound up with stories’. We might say the same about participatory performance. Personal anecdote is thus staged here as ‘a theorizing which honours the uncanny detail of lived experience’, paying heed to those minor, subjective, and embodied affirmations.⁶ The stories I’m about to tell move between anecdote and theory, and account for and extend my own experience of creating and staging three inter-related performances.

Untitled

I started making one-to-one performance straight out of my undergraduate studies with little more than a curiosity for the blurring of art and everyday life (especially sex) that such encounters might offer. I was 22 and interested in the moment when performance stopped feeling like performance. *Untitled* was in fact never fully realised as a performance, nor officially programmed, although I was invited to stage it as part of Stacy Makishi’s performance installation *You are Here... But where am I?* at the National Review of Live Art, Glasgow, in 2008.

In *Untitled*, I covered my face with a t-shirt, my eyes peeping through the neck hole, and cruised you – my participant – in festival foyers and lobbies. I gave you one match and a box to strike and led you to a secluded, usually dark area; a cupboard behind the box office, a disabled toilet, a changing room, a janitor’s storeroom. I stood opposite you in complete darkness and that was it. What happened from then on emerged out of a curiosity between us, and through the situation I had instigated. In terms of Grant

Kester's thinking around dialogical art practice I was a 'context' provider not a 'content' provider.⁷ In terms of the efficacy of participatory art my work was potentially redundant. Luckily, no one was paying me.

What started out as a preparatory or leisurely activity, through repetition eventually started to feel a lot like work. I soon became aware that the performance was not so much operating, as I had assumed, on a binary between art and everyday life, but more between work and not-work, or sex work and not-sex work, and where these blur in public performance programmes. Through repeating the work with different participants I also became aware of the service I was undertaking as 'affective labour', a form of 'labour that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication'.⁸ I was not only a 'context provider' but also a 'service provider', providing context as a service, but a service for what? Therapeutics? A cheap thrill? As critic Lyn Gardner writes about her experience of one-to-one performance, 'it is the idea that anything – or indeed, nothing – might happen during these encounters that makes them so charged and interesting'.⁹ Adrian Howells, an artist well-known for his development of the one-to-one performance format, puts it this way: 'It's all allowed'.¹⁰

So, as hooking-up started to feel like work, the idea of getting paid to do this performance was actually quite appealing. And so was the desire to create a situation that might exceed work, that was deliberately flawed, and that made the unappealing and transformational prospects of participation explicit.

Touching Feeling

I'm touching you wherever I want to touch you. I've got my eyes closed and I'm waiting for you to slap me as my finger approaches your anus, and finally, before I get there, you do – you smack me right on the cheek, and it ends, and we laugh, because it's funny, and ridiculous, and then I go and find someone else to do it with.

In *Touching Feeling* I had accidentally become a character – a theatre critic who also happened to be a total sleazebag. The format was no different to *Untitled* but there was now some dramaturgy in place: I literally touched my participant's body, leading to a felt response probably ranging somewhere between boredom and excitement, arousal and repulsion, or at best a confusing feeling of all these things. If this performance was affective labour then I wanted to do my job properly. My aim was to create a situation that rinsed the participant of affect – a total 'straight to work' manipulation that called for a slap. This work had shifted from merely providing context to offering up content. *Touching Feeling* was a very literal title for my performance, but it is also the title of a book on affect, pedagogy and performativity written by the late queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.¹¹ Reading Sedgwick's discussions on the politics of affect – particularly negative affects like shame – I questioned what might be at stake in creating a performance that elicits or embraces negative (as well as positive) affects, and whether negative affects could be a potentially viable experience in participatory performance. Silvan Tomkins' psychoanalytic framework on shame is key to Sedgwick's work. Lauren Berlant notes that in this framework, shame emerges from a 'broken circuit' when, for instance, the child is rejected by his/her mother, and which, for Tomkins, leads to something like self-loathing.¹² In my performance the circuit of

exchange was broken each time my participant intervened to slap me – that was evident. However, instead of self-loathing, Sedgwick takes a more generative stance on shame in her own study by asking whether shame can become an engine for queer politics, performance and pleasure. For Sedgwick, shame is recuperated through queer practices, which might include the kind of experiences pursued through my own, and other participatory performances.

Jennifer Doyle's thinking around 'difficult art' is also useful for understanding the potential efficacy of negative affect here. She points out that 'this is what artists do... their work makes people feel good, smart, or important'.¹³ So what does it mean to provoke feelings of shame in the context of participatory performance? I hoped by eliciting negative affects that the work might not so easily be re-claimed into the productive realm of affective labour, and thus have something more to offer, perhaps something more pleasurable.

While I wanted to create a space for the possibility of negative affects like shame to emerge in my performance, I also refused any totalizing experience by remaining open to the possibility of it all just being a cheap thrill. This was intrinsic to the experience, but does not mean to diminish the possibility of more productive experiences in the realm of participatory art. *Touching Feeling* was no parody; there was a multiplicity of experiences possible depending on the circumstance and the participant. As Berlant claims, 'What's not productive is when people aspire to an explanation of a social relation through the fantasy that the emotional event tells a simple, clear, visceral truth about something.'¹⁴ My next performance in this series turned to the role of theatre and fiction as a key part of these staged encounters, and as a means of exploring the multiplicity of experiences and relations these encounters might offer.

Salome, Baby! (Dance of the Infinite Veil)

First created for Brian Lobel's *Cruising for Art* at Wellcome Collection's exhibition *The Institute of Sexology*, London, in 2014, *Salome, Baby!* is an audio and cos-play¹⁵ performance in which participants are cruised and invited to wear an 'infinite veil'. The veil carries an audio playlist of four tracks with documentary and game-like instructions for nosing out potential moments of contact between participants, artworks and strangers in the gallery. Two of these tracks from the playlist are featured below.

For this *Cruising for Art* programme we were invited to respond to the works in the Institute of Sexology exhibition. I was interested in how I would situate my practice in relation to a history of art and studies on sex and sexuality featured. I decided to focus my response around a single cabinet in the exhibition featuring an original publication of Oscar Wilde's play *Salome* (1891), and a series of well-known illustrations produced for the first edition of the book by Aubrey Beardsley (1894).

Wilde's play focuses on the character of Salome, a Biblical icon of dangerous seduction and perverted desire, who after dancing the *Dance of the Seven Veils* requests the head of John the Baptist on a silver platter. What seemed particularly interesting to me was the way Wilde's characterization of Salome bore resemblance to my own emerging 'character' in *Touching Feeling*. It was also in Wilde's *Salome*, that the invention

of striptease (in the West) had been traced to a single innocuous stage direction. And then there was of course Wilde himself, 'one of shame's most tortured and eloquent theoreticians.'¹⁶ *Salome, Baby!* was part response to Wilde's masterpiece, and part revival of my previous performances from this series. It drew relations across these works and to other works, too. For the first time, it was also structured in a way that participants encounter and choose each other, rather than relying on myself – the artist – to choose.

Someone in a long black mesh veil with Beardsley-esque illustrations is walking around. They spot you, approach you, lift up the veil and beckon you to join them under the veil. This person is wearing headphones and holding an ipod. They look at you and you look at them. They appear to be following some audio instruction that you can't quite make out. Eventually they pass you the ipod, remove the veil (with attached headphones) and place it on your head.

Track 1: Salome, Baby! 'Congratulations, you have passed the audition. You have been allocated the role of Salome'. There are some basic character prompts and you are invited to walk around the gallery exploring 'the powers of the veil'.

Track 2: Cigarette (Critique)

<https://soundcloud.com/fono1/track-2-cigarette-critique-1>

Here, participants are invited to relate their experiences to a broader history of sex in public porn theatres as documented by science fiction author and literary critic Samuel Delany. In his book *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, Delany laments the gentrification or 'Disneyfication' of New York's Time Square, and in particular the porn theatres which he claims to have frequented.¹⁷ For Delany the closure of the porn theatres signaled the end of 'contact', a mode of sociality which took place between people from diverse backgrounds and which was regrettably eradicated when porn theatre goers were replaced by tourists and middle-class theatre goers. Contact, Delany laments, was replaced by networking.

Track 3: The Cruise tells participants to 'Walk around the space until you find someone you don't know – a stranger'. It insists you choose someone that makes you curious, someone you'd like to invite to spend this time with you under the veil. The work lets you choose. So, you go straight for the hottest most attractive person in the room, or perhaps the curator of a festival you'd quite like to perform in next.

Track 4: Head (Touchy Feelz Remix)

<https://soundcloud.com/fono1/track-4-head-touchy-feelz-remix>

Opening up the possibilities of fiction and play across my practice, *Salome, Baby!* becomes a kind of record of my earlier works, while also drawing historical lines from Wilde's interpretation of the myth of Salome to the (possible) origins of striptease and, because of their relationship to sex and labour, to these kinds of participatory performances. While making relations across histories and practices, it was also important that the performance maintained its intrinsic function: the cruise and the quest for contact and/or networking depending on what you wanted.

By staging performance as an expansive archive, and using anecdote as an embodied mode of remembrance, this writing becomes the fourth and final part to the series: a series that, if anything, reclaims the idiosyncratic nature of participatory performance as its latent or potential efficacy.

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Performances

Untitled

- *Queen Mary, University of London, UK, 2005.*
- *National Review of Live Art, Glasgow, UK, 2008.*

Touching Feeling

- *PSi 17, Cruising for Art, Utrecht, Netherlands, May 2011.*
- *Vogue Fabrics Nightclub, Cruising for Art, London, UK, December 2011.*
- *Reactor Halls, Live Art Dogging, Nottingham, UK, January 2013.*
- *In Between Time, Cruising for Art, Bristol, UK, February 2013.*
- *ANTI Festival, Cruising for Art, Kuopio, Finland, September 2013.*
- *Les Brigittines, Cruising for Art, Brussels, Belgium, October 2013.*

Salome, Baby (Dance of the Infinite Veil)

- *Wellcome Collection: Institute of Sexology, Cruising for Art, London, UK, December 2014.*
- *Barbican, I'm With You and Gay Fringe Film Festival, London, UK, October 2015.*

Homepage image: Owen G. Parry, Touching Feeling, Brian Lobel's Cruising for Art, PSi17 Utrecht, Netherlands. Photo: Maarten Kipp, 2011.

Notes:

1. For a useful overview, see Rachel Zerihan, *One to One Performance: A Study Room Guide* (London: Live Art Development Agency, 2009), www.thisisliveart.co.uk/resources/Study_Room/guides/Rachel_Zerihan.html [accessed 15 September 2016]. ↵
2. Brian Lobel, 'Cruising for Art', <http://www.blobelwarming.com/cruising-for-art/> [accessed 15 September 2016]. ↵
3. Eirini Kartsaki and Rachel Zerihan, 'Slots, Slaps, Sluts and Other Cheap Thrills: Promiscuity, Desire and Labour in one-to-one Performance', *Performing Ethos: An International Journal of Ethics in Theatre & Performance*, 3.2 (2012), 155–171. http://doi.org/10.1386/peet.3.2.155_1 ↵
4. Dee Heddon, Helen Iball, and Rachel Zerihan, 'Come Closer: Confessions of Intimate Spectators in One to One Performance', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 22.1 (2012), 120–133 (p. 122). <http://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2011.645233> ↵
5. Brian Lobel, 'The Morning After: A Roundtable Discussion with Cruising for Art', *Performing Ethos: An International Journal of Ethics in Theatre & Performance*, 3.2 (2012), 191–204. http://doi.org/10.1386/peet.3.2.191_7 ↵
6. Jane Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 2. ↵
7. Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). ↵
8. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), p. 290. ↵

9. Lyn Gardner, 'I didn't know where to look', *Guardian*, 3 March 2005. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/mar/03/theatre2> [accessed 15 September 2016]. ↵
10. This slogan is so associated with Howells's work that it became the title of a book on his work, published posthumously. See Dee Heddon and Dominic Johnson, *It's All Allowed: The Performances of Adrian Howells* (London and Chicago: Intellect and Live Art Development Agency, 2016). ↵
11. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). ↵
12. Sina Najafi, David Serlin, and Lauren Berlant, 'The Broken Circuit: An Interview with Lauren Berlant', *Cabinet*, 31 ('Shame') (2008). http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/31/najafi_serlin.php [accessed 15 September 2016]. ↵
13. Jennifer Doyle, *Hold it Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013)/ ↵
14. Berlant, 'The Broken Circuit'. ↵
15. A term used in many fan cultures to describe the practice of dressing up as a favourite character or persona. ↵
16. Chad Bennett, 'Flaming the Fans: Shame and the Aesthetics of Queer Fandom in Todd Haynes's *Velvet Goldmine*', *Cinema Journal*, 49.2 (2010), 17–39 (p. 10). <http://doi.org/10.1353/cj.0.0189> ↵
17. Samuel R. Delaney, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: NYU Press, 1999). ↵

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Accessed 13 May 2022 <https://www.contemporarytheatrereview.org/2016/sex-work-and-negative-affects/>