

The Appearance of Emotion:

A glimpse of the unbound.

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Romance

I was wearing a magenta body suit with extravagant ruffles of cream lace flouncing around the décolletage and over the shoulders. I had been thinking about a character who exhibited some of the awkward qualities of Pierrot, and the frilly, feminine appearance of Columbine. At the time I performed this song, my voice was not used to the soft and hushed style of delivery, which requires a lot of control. This, and the ensuing nerves of exhibiting a song which now seemed far too personal, created a tremulous vibrato in my voice. After the first couple of lines, I overcame this...I felt confident. I appreciated the silence and stillness of the audience, and could somehow feel their attentiveness. I remembered the moves that I had devised to go with the song, and these relaxed me some more, as I repeated in public what I had practiced alone.

I was curious now about the audience. Could I see the reaction on their faces? Unexpectedly my eyes fell on my boyfriend. He was as still as the rest of the audience, eyes fixed upon me. The nature of this gaze is peculiar to the performer and the spectator. Off stage it would be unusual for anyone to prolong a stare in one person's direction. Even in conversation, the gaze is constantly flitting, averting and then re-affirming. This is the comfort of the darkened auditorium. From the stage, the entertainer will occasionally seek the eyes of the audience, but will dart from one person to another. The wish is to be inclusive, and also affirm that all eyes are on us – that the audience is engaged enough to maintain a gaze, therefore to maintain interest. The audience knows that although the performer may catch an individual's eye, it will be only momentary. The audience can look without the self consciousness, or the expectation that they will have to respond directly to the performer.¹As I caught his gaze, so it was at once intimate and general. In this acknowledgement of intimacy, I felt he was here to support me. I had written this song with him in my mind. I was singing about something private in public. I was betraying his privacy! I felt like everyone knew about me and him! I was embarrassed. What was I doing? What on earth had I been thinking when I wrote the song? I felt the nerves return. I felt the tremor in my voice. I was shaking all over. I turned quickly away. I concentrated on the moves once again. I breathed deeply, focused on relaxing my larynx. I got through the song. I was relieved. I wanted to stay for longer. My earlier embarrassment and discomfort was forgotten. I wanted to do it all over again!

My public and private personas seemed suddenly to collide. My biggest fear was (and still is) what I might have revealed through the physical reactions of my body: the heart racing, the quickening, shallow breath. I felt in danger of appearing to have revealed something very private about myself, but also something sentimental, something a little self indulgent or vain. Something also, that I suspect may be exaggerated. I was aware that the lyrics I wrote in the song were not a description of a constant state. I could only honestly claim that they represent the truth on a few occasions. Was I being sincere when I sang the song? The nerves I felt were perhaps

caused by the idea that I could be revealing something very personal about myself, something that I felt to be sincere, yet also something that I didn't want to be judged by. Something that was transient, fleeting...*not always true*. Does this dubious, faltering assertion of 'truth' mean that the content of the song was in some way superficial, perhaps even fake?

Truth

To become a character through costume and make up can signify two opposing interpretations. Firstly, it can be supposed that the one who dresses up is pretending to be someone or something else. What they appear to be is an artifice or façade which masks the 'real' or 'natural' thing beneath. It could be that this is liberating for the person in costume. It could enable them to cipher the self who they dream of being, distancing themselves from the earthly realities of their own flesh. Or it could be oppressive. It could be that the costume hems the wearer into an identity that they believe is more acceptable than what lies beneath. Secondly, it could be supposed that the costume emphasises certain things about the wearer, things that are indeed authentic within that character, and in this respect it communicates something intrinsic about that individual. This is not dressing up, or pretending, this is a form of communication about, and formed by, a sense of identity.

If the first supposition is true, and the wearer feels liberated by their costume, it will reveal something of their desires and fantasies. It may also reveal something about what they are not. 'Desire is both what promises us something, what gives us energy, and also what is lacking, even in the moment of its apparent realization.' (Ahmed, p.31) Desire and fantasies themselves can be duplicitous. Desire may be centred round cultural expectation, around certain achievements and ways of being that are held above others. In her writing about the desire for happiness, Sarah Ahmed states that 'to deviate from the path of happiness is to challenge convention.' (Ahmed, p.64) Desire might not always be liberating in the true sense of the word: it may liberate the individual momentarily from focusing upon the things that they are not (in terms of a 'conventional' fantasy); but this is still to be trapped within a particular set of ideals about what may constitute happiness. If this is the case, the joy to be drawn from dressing up can only be transitory. It might even ultimately cause pain. The wearer will always be acutely aware of the pretence, of what it is that the costume signifies that they are not. They may or may not be aware of the authenticity of their own desires. The desires played out are not theirs alone, but are the product of convention. To fulfil a desire by dressing up, whether that desire be the product of convention or not, can in some ways be interpreted as a way of hiding, even repressing, something else.

If the second supposition is true, it could be said that truth has many faces. It is mutable, dependent upon perspective and time. *There is a different side to every story.* In this way, truth can be subjective. Different aspects of the truth loom out and recede at different times, in different places. It cannot be trusted as a permanent fixture. The truth is temporal, it always pertains to a particular moment in time, and it always fulfils itself in the present. This can be considered in relation to the brain as it picks up and processes information – from unconscious sensory and neural signals to conscious acknowledgement.

‘Looking back, with the licence of metaphor, one might say that the swift, second-order nonverbal account relates to a story: *that of the organism representing its own changing state as it goes about representing something else.*’ (Damasio, p.170)

What follows this is the organising of non-verbal feeling into something that is quantified by ‘the autobiographical self’² based upon other memories of events that have happened. This is the third layer of the ‘story,’ to which a temporal narrative is applied. The moment the brain picks up sensory matter is the moment it perceives what may be understood as a truth. The processing of this signal devolves the initial ‘truth’, reinterpreting it in language. As it reaches the conscious mind in a form that can be conveyed in language, there is already another feeling, or sensory signal that has hit the base level, ready to rise to the top. There is always a delay in time between the moment the signal triggers a reaction in the brain, and the point when it can be expressed in language.

‘The fabric of our minds and of our behaviour is woven around continuous cycles of emotions followed by feelings that become known and beget new emotions, a running polyphony that underscores and punctuates specific thoughts in our minds and actions in our behaviour.’ (Damasio, p.43)

Writing, painting, dressing up, as a means of expressing emotion, can never hope to catch up with this constant pulsation of events. When writing a love song, the point at which it has been written and composed will always be retrospective to the original signal and reaction. In its rendition, the performer may wish to recreate these sensations, within themselves, possibly within the audience.

‘Activities as remote from sexuality as writing love poetry are not substitutes for sexuality per se. Nor should they have been called instances of sublimation. Strictly speaking, what is involved is substitution of a symbolic object of love for a flesh and blood object of love [...] It is the same affect which is felt towards the beloved that is expressed in the writing of love poetry.’ (Kosofsky Sedgwick & Frank p.60)

If feelings that are engendered by the writing or reading of love poetry, or the performing of a love song, are (re)enacted whilst experiencing the piece, they will always be accompanied by a desire for ‘the real.’ There will always be the knowledge in the conscious mind that the feelings these words evoke are triggered by a *recreation* of original sensation. As the mind triggers a physical re-enactment of that sensation, it will also destabilize it, in the knowledge that what is being experienced is actually not ‘truth.’

Apparition

I found myself laughing. Awkward. Staccato. Also a release, relaxing my facial muscles, shaking the tension out of my shoulders and my diaphragm, but somehow making me aware of a sense of despair. I had to tell my sister the news. It was difficult to say. The sentence had not really formulated in my mind.

Only just before on the bus I had mistaken several people for my friend, affirming for just a second that he was still alive. Each time, as the face I thought was his came into focus, it became a little bit more apparent that what I thought I had seen was a figment of my imagination. Each time, I felt a surge of hope, which quickly dissipated as the reality became evident. Nonetheless I felt some kind of solace in these near hallucinations; that my mind could conjure up his image so convincingly, lucidly and vividly. I was comforted by the notion that my memory of him had not faded. It was there, wherever I turned, in full, glorious, 3D Technicolor. As the days passed, I even experienced it in scent. As I was about to fall asleep, I could smell the heady, sweet perfume he used to wear, so redolent of our nights out together.

I had been so close to him, to the thin and delicate skin of the eyelids, as I applied mascara to his lashes. I can see now the fluttering and quivering of the lids, just like a butterfly's wings, that occurs when make-up is applied. A sensation so familiar when applying make up to my own face became something of a wonder as I watched it in another. The eye beneath the lid is always moving, acting unconsciously, registering changes in light and darkness. Another time as we sat facing one another cross legged, I mirrored the traditional dance he used to do every day at school. He showed me how the teacher would make them bend their fingers back into an elegant arc. I still do this, and it reminds me of him.

I wasn't looking at my sister as I told her. I looked up after I had said it.

"Oh no. That's sad," she said. Her eyes were open wide, taking in what I had told her as she replied. I couldn't confirm it was sad. I just laughed. I could see little lines of concern forming creases around her eyes. "Why are you laughing?" Then I was crying. I couldn't really answer any of her questions for some time, it was hard to breathe, my nose was filled with mucus and my throat was tense, only relaxing when I allowed it to cry.

It was a moment when I was unwilling to speak the truth. My body was complicit in trying to stop it from coming out. My usual fluency was replaced by an awkward, stuttering cadence. My voice was faltering and uncertain. It seemed that to say what had happened, to speak the truth, would be an acceptance of the event. It would make external, open and public this information that I had been carrying inside, that had been in my mind almost continuously, yet which had not been transformed into speech. It was the strangeness that struck me more than the sadness; the alien laughter that surprised me by breaking out after my utterance.

I wanted to regain composure; the ability to communicate in language. I wanted to become *myself* again. I was afraid to look at my sister directly as I spoke, in case I might cry. I was afraid that her sympathy would affirm my loss. I was embarrassed that I had laughed, and after a second of feeling a little stunned, I looked away.

Retraction

There is a sense of embarrassment and vulnerability that comes after making a show of your emotions. Usually in relation to the negative ones: crying, anger, fear. Sometimes more positive ones: lust, admiration, laughter. In some way our behaviour has gone beyond the constraints of polite mannerisms. It is a sign we have lost control. The embarrassment perhaps also stems from the idea something has been revealed about our inner selves. Silvan Tomkins explains shame as operating 'only after interest or enjoyment has been activated, and inhibits one or other or both.' (Kosofsky Sedgewick & Frank, p.5) He defines the physical attitude of shame as 'the lowering of the eyelids, the lowering of the eyes, the hanging of the head.' (Kosofsky Sedgewick & Frank, p.20) In this way, the affect of shame could be read as a kind of self-repression, the attempt to physically retract something which has been externalised. Kosofsky Sedgewick and Frank have written in relation to this that 'the pulsations of cathexis around shame, of all things, are what either enable or disable so basic a function as to be interested in the world.' (Kosofsky Sedgewick p.5) It is this idea of 'pulsation' that leads me to think of the inevitable surging of affect, e.g. tears or laughter, which shame will acknowledge as something to repress. It is a word which suggests something that, like a heartbeat, occurs without conscious control. It is a pressure which repeatedly swells against its confines and then retracts. What is this boundary where the pulsing can be felt most pressingly?

Display

This was the set up: two large projection screens, a high volume sound system, two camera men, a spotlight and a dance floor in a crowded dark, clammy club. One performance artist dressed in black and holographic silver, shiny headphones covering her ears. It is way past midnight. The artist's journey to the dance floor is filmed and projected live onto the screens. She makes her way through the narrow corridors backstage to the bar below, jostling with the crowd as she passes, and goes into the main room. She begins to dance under the central spotlight, and a circle forms around her. She looks as though she is spiralling out of control, a magnetic force pulling her this way and that. The audience are both amused and bemused by this odd spectacle.

As she spins, she becomes aware of a pair of hands gripping her waist. The spotlight that was hers alone is now shared. The face of the other is flashed up on the screen. A bristly faced man, skin deeply lined, covered in gaping pores from which the sweat could ooze out, and a look about his eyes that suggested he was under the influence of alcohol or drugs. As he starts to pull her around more forcefully, she moves away...to the sides. He could have the limelight. It was all his now. He revelled in the magnified projection of his own face on the screens before him. Triumphantly he cast off his shirt and bared his hairy, pot bellied torso to the crowd, arms raised up high. This, however, was not enough for him; he wanted to give them more. His hands plunged into the top of his trousers and he started hauling, pulling up from his crotch another trophy. But this was unsuccessful. No matter. The next moment he was on the ground, writhing around like a bloated worm, thrusting his groin in all directions as its merely human scale became vastly increased on the double projection screen.

Footage of this incident revealed a strange coincidence. The movements of the imposter were almost *exactly* the same as those that the performance artist had choreographed, privately and alone in her studio. Playing the two sets of footage together, both private and public, they seemed to mirror one another. The artist had been thinking about the kind of moves that would be inappropriate, embarrassing even, for a young woman to make on the dance floor. Little had she considered the thought that a middle aged, inebriated man might spontaneously improvise those exact moves without even the slightest encouragement.

“Come with me! Don’t go home yet! Just stay for one dance”

I always did. In the venues that we attended, I felt liberated and seduced by the atmosphere. This was so different from other clubs, where I would suddenly find my steps hindered by the presence of another: sweaty hands around my waist and warm breath on my neck. Suddenly I was not the author of my own movement. That spotlight was mine, and in that spotlight I had intended to lose *myself*. I had intended to dance alone, but to feel radiant amongst friends, and those that shared this love of dancing, all in a constellation around me.

My visions were stellar, but these hands were dragging me back down to earth. Where I had taken joy in the multitude of the crowd, I became restricted to interacting with only one other. No matter how lithely I tried to slip away, to wriggle out of their pull and evade them, they made me doubt myself. Perhaps my skirt is too short or my top too low. Perhaps the dress is too clingy. Perhaps I was dancing too suggestively, or I had caught their gaze and smiled. Perhaps it was my fault. Perhaps I am naive; perhaps I was acting out desire that I could not admit to myself. And so to avoid these confrontations: should I always stoop in the posture of shame? Should I lower my eyes so as not to catch the gaze of another, lest it be mistaken for a sexual invitation? Should I cover my body so that none of its contours can be discerned? Should I round off my shoulders so that my breasts are hidden, concaved into my back? Should I stay away from the dance floor? Should I avoid all this, in order to avoid being seen as *up for grabs*?³

Inhibition

‘The vocabulary of slang [...] is of course a radical instrument of separation, of rejection, and, at the limit, of hatred.’ (Kristeva, p.191) *Slut, slag, slapper*. These words are always behind me. As I halt at a red light, a white van pulls up just after me. It is too close; the driver has gone right over the boundary designated for cyclists. I can hear it revving up, threatening me physically. As soon as the light turns to amber the van screeches round in front of me, making a left turn and cutting me up. One of them leans out of the window and yells ‘*SLUT*’ in my direction. Had I not been fast enough, quick enough of mind to pre-empt what would happen, I could have been knocked down.

This is where adrenaline explodes. My mind was filled with the scenario of killing them, locked into a vortex of repetition, over and over and over again: of smashing their skulls with rocks, ripping their skin open and crushing them to a bloody pulp; of setting fire to the van and obliterating their rabid, hideous, valueless existence in the violent cracks and sparks of an explosion to mirror the anger burning just beneath my heart. And in fire at least their filthy rotting entrails would be purified. These thoughts, boiling like blood, spitting and bubbling, seeping into the soft tissue of my brain like a fatal haemorrhage.

This scenario for me is mere fantasy. I have not crossed the line that would enable me to enact my hatred. What I fear is that the two men in this van are several steps closer. What I fear is to cross this line.

Expression

‘Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time... Write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth.’ Hélène Cixous (Greer p.107)

That which is censored is likely to cause shame if it is exposed. David Dibosa has made the distinction between shame ‘as social embarrassment’ and shame as ‘an instance of moral reproach.’ (Dibosa p.13) I would suggest that the two can occur reflexively as a result of the same event. Dibosa draws us to Judith Butler’s comment that ‘the shamer has to actively legitimize and delegitimize the figure they intend to shame through the issue of discursive imperatives, injunctions, incitements or prohibitions.’ (Dibosa p.19) In relation to this is the paroxysm of shame an individual may feel if they have been treated physically inappropriately. The acts of groping, leering and verbal abuse are on the edge of this spectrum. They may not cause actual harm, but will no doubt leave the subject with an uneasy sense of in some way having been violated.

These acts are often not quite definable: their having happened is hard to prove. In some ways their position on a boundary could function *as a border*. They could be interpreted as a controlling element, whereby the gaze, handling or abuse that is elicited (all be it unknowingly) marks out what is seen as legitimate or illegitimate in the eyes of the beholder. Those that perpetrate the gaze or the grope are acknowledging what they understand to be on the border of legitimate behaviour. It is the way that this implicates the subject of the action that is troubling. In the example of a woman being leered at for showing cleavage, the implication is that she has shown too much. A woman may simply be leered at because she is attractive. The gaze of the perpetrator will traverse across her body; the woman will follow this gaze and guess where it falls. *He undressed her with his eyes*. In following the gaze, and this quest to understand its route, there will always be the question: why did the eyes follow that trajectory?

‘Since shame relates specifically to the making and the unmaking of the subject, one might conceive of it as a condition of quandary. In simple terms, one might speak of a subject’s shame in terms of someone being *undone*.’ (Dibosa p.164)

The moment of doubt is the moment where power is exerted. It is the moment where there is an awareness of the physical self and how it is presented. There is the question as to whether the subject invited this inappropriate behaviour, and therefore are themselves complicit. In self doubt there is a space for shame. To truly ‘write yourself’ would mean to overcome the controlling nature of shame. To let ‘the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth’ would mean to cast off the tropes of desire - as mediated by convention - and to access what is below.

Spectacle

Showgirl: The Homecoming Tour 2007. I had gladly paid up and secured my ticket to this stadium event months in advance, and my anticipation had gone beyond excitement into panic as I boarded the tube on the way to Wembley Arena. What if *something happens*? I was shaken when I heard the news that Kylie had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Throughout my childhood and into adulthood, I have been consistently enchanted and delighted by the entertainment she offers. To hear any one of her songs is bound to cheer me up, as is leafing through the pages of the coffee table book, or curling up on the sofa with a cup of tea and a blanket, watching her on video. I am in awe of her beautifully proportioned body, and the way that she moves it. I am seduced by her coquettish and playful gestures. I am thoroughly absorbed by her performance, always a welcome diversion. When I think of my love of Kylie, I am reminded of this well known quote from Matisse,

‘What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which could be for every mental worker, for the businessman as well as the man of letters, for example, a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue.’⁴

After a hard day’s work, there is the need to be placated, rested and diverted. A spectacle can transport us. It can gently massage the imagination, but will not encourage it to enter dark or troubling places. The visual and aural stimulation will be diverting. At every turn, the spectacle will provide a new delight. It will not allow us to dally long in places where our fears may become manifest, or where we could focus too closely and analytically on the problems of (for example) the workplace. In a spectacle such as this, the desires and fantasies played out are often conventional, especially in the sense that woman is an object of desire (and also a desiring subject), covered and adorned in opulent fabrics to enhance this desirability. I am aware of this, and yet I always find myself bound up in elation for what is before me. The vehicle that allows me to escape from my worries into a realm of fantasy (no matter how conventional) and beauty holds an important place in my life.

I was amongst a crowd of thousands. All around me I could hear excited chatter and laughter. When the lights dimmed, the focus of the audience turned to the stage, letting out a loud cheer. I felt thrilled as Kylie appeared on stage. She was all in peach. A huge flourish of ostrich feathers adorned her head like a fantastically effeminate Mohican. More feathers wafted around her shoulders and from her waist down to the ground in a train. She wore a corset dripping with rhinestones, glistening under the lights. Her legs were gracefully poised for dance. In the midst of what is, for me, visual ecstasy, I felt a little overwhelmed. I had to take in a breath. I felt a swelling in my chest. Perhaps a wish to be as fantastic and sparkling as she is, and then somewhere the thought that almost everyone in the audience probably feels a similar way; that they have pinned their hopes of a night of escapism and enjoyment

onto this one person. This figure is a vessel for our need to be entertained and diverted, to experience some hope of wish fulfilment. And this figure is mortal. In some way the hugeness of the spectacle is both dwarfed and affirmed by this idea. Perhaps it is in this revelation when the magnitude of the spectacle is turned on its head, and then spins back around again, that it becomes dizzying.⁵

...& The Sublime

‘Not at all short of but always with and through perception and words, the sublime is a *something added* that expands us, overstrains us, and causes us both to be *here*, as dejects, and *there*, as others and sparkling.’ (Kristeva, p.12) Inside the walls of the club, I experienced the stellar. I experienced myself as part of the constellation. Yes! *Overstrained*, over the top, flamboyant, *sparkling*, strutting, *other*. Other than I *would be*, more than I *would be*. Yet these walls are carefully guarded. Outside are the hands, always there, waiting for a chance to grab me by the face and turn it back towards dejection.

Fallout

I lock the door behind me, alone in the cramped space of the cubicle. My heart was beating so fast before, it was impossible to tell whether I was hot or cold. I knew what got me here was the intense fluttering inside my stomach, the pre-emptor of diarrhoea. *My bowels had turned to water.* Transformation, no matter how intolerable, is the motif of this somewhat euphemistic phrase: to become fluid, unstable, mutable. Diarrhoea quickly purges the body of shit: impurity, toxins, old unwanted matter that has been hanging around and fermenting in the gut for too long. To flush away physical matter is the most I can hope to manipulate this experience. The stench will permeate. Between the confines of the walls and the locked door I struggle to adjust my costume so that it does not become tainted with filth. Press studs and zips, lace and sequins, leotard, tights, gloves, feathers, ruffles and frills: all at this point are unnecessary; a cumbersome burden. I do not want them to fall to the floor, or to touch any part of the toilet as I crouch down onto it, and I do not want them to rip or tear as I hurriedly wrench my way free. This costume has become an entrapment; for I do strap myself in. I am all trussed up. It becomes a container and a vessel for my body, a way to distil *myself* as *another*. Only the parts that I want to show will be revealed. Only the image that I wish to emulate will be on display. There can be no slippage, unless it is intended. There can be no falling out on stage. That would amount to mortification. I cannot control the urge, but I accept the expulsion of excrement from my body. The process is cathartic, a private ritual. It is as though the waste that I release somehow enables me to concentrate on the essence of what I want to communicate in the performance. It must happen here, from this position, just moments before I am to emerge: glittering, composed, and focused, into the limelight.⁶

Cycle

As the body swells during the latter half of the menstrual cycle, and the womb grows in anticipation of conception, so too many women report that they feel an emotional tension. It is this tension that signals the reaching of a limit. If there is no pregnancy, then the lining of the womb, which has otherwise grown to its full potential, must be pushed out. The pain that is experienced as the womb is cast out is almost violent, but with this sensation there will be catharsis. The tense mood prior to menstruation seems to transfer itself to the body in the cramping of the muscles. Already, just before the bleeding begins, the point where 'it' – *emotion, physical swelling* - is too much to bear has been reached. There must be a release. In the aftermath of the lethargy and pain of the period, there is a sense of renewal, of new life.

It could be surmised that P.M.S. represents a breakdown of the calm, composed, contented self. It is reported to be a time of irritability, anxiety, of tears, also of increased libido (a sign of desire, and in desire an admittance of dissatisfaction, of *wanting*). Traditionally this calm, composed, contented self has been seen as an ideal. The aggression, the anger and the libido, *the active, fiery nature* has been seen as masculine; the irritability and the tears have been understood as feminine and hysterical (this word originating from the Greek *husterikos* 'of the womb'). Paglia contends that 'the premenstrual woman incited to snappishness or rage is hearing signals from the reptilian brain. In her, man's latent perversity is manifest. All hell breaks loose, the hell of chthonian nature that modern humanism denies and represses.' (Paglia, p.17) P.M.S. can expose a deviant femininity. It does not conform to the positive ideal, and compounds the negative stereotype. Discontent does not feel good. It is difficult to accept an apparently negative way of being as 'being yourself'. As the discontented self can be tolerated no longer, menstruation occurs. This is not to say that these premenstrual symptoms should *not* be tolerated. In this analogy of emotion with the menstrual cycle, I am arguing that the swell of feelings, and their inevitable fallout, should be understood as an integral part of the process of regeneration, as portrayed in Rabelaisian imagery.

Documentary Study: The Head of the Medusa, Orlan, 1981

‘Using a huge magnifying glass to show my vagina (the pubic hairs on one half were painted blue) during my period, a video screen showed the head of the man or woman who was about to see, another showed the head of the men or women who were looking, and at the exit, Freud’s text on the head of the Medusa was distributed. It read: ‘At the sight of the vulva the devil himself flees.’ Orlan (Greer, p.38)

The text poses a challenge. Danielle Knafo has noted, ‘this is a misquotation attributed to Freud, who actually wrote, “We read in Rabelais of how the Devil took flight when the woman showed him her vulva.”’ (Knafo, 2)

It can only be speculated about what viewers actually felt as they passed through this threshold. Could they have felt embarrassed, a little squeamish, exposed? Perhaps this work, as it interrogated Freud’s theories, also questioned contemporary attitudes to the vagina and to menstruation. By confronting these potentially awkward feelings at a threshold created by the artist, the viewer can metaphorically surmount them as they come out the other side. To survive that which ‘would make the devil himself flee’ is to surpass expectation, and to acknowledge the terrifying as bearable.⁷

Regeneration

I am amazed at how much shit I can produce; but this is the body...devouring, using, producing, unquestionably alive.

‘To degrade here means coming back down to earth, the contact with the earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously in order to bring forth something more and something better. To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth.’ (Bakhtin, p.21)

In the visceral reactions of the body which generate feeling and subsequently the rising of an emotion, change can occur. Bakhtin puts forward the idea that medieval carnival allows for a rebirth of communal energies. The legitimate order is thrown over for a few days, and those that are at the bottom will rise to the top. The lower body, all of its functions, and desires that we associate with the carnal, are celebrated. ‘Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal.’ (Bakhtin, p.10) In this sense it also represents the extending of possibility: the suggestion of an infinite future; of the world in constant flux; *of the body in flux*. It is this point of flux in the body that relates to the expression of emotion. As the body releases matter: shit, urine, tears, mucus; it must renew itself. It must produce more of this stuff. It must be ready for the next occasion.

Granted, there can be a sense of shame and embarrassment when these things happen in public. It is perhaps related to the legitimization of emotion. Similar to times of carnival, there are certain times when it is more acceptable to show emotion than others (such rites of passage as funerals and weddings, and during specific forms of entertainment such as comedy or tragedy). It may feel better to be affected similarly amongst others, than to be the only one amongst others. However, there is also often a sense of relief: a sense that the tension and burden has been released. The physical matter that is excreted from the body is a perceptible sign of this. It is almost as though the external sense of self, of identity, is obliterated in the release of emotion. It could be said that to ‘break down in tears,’ or to ‘collapse in laughter’ is a point where ‘composure is lost’, and in this sense, the composed sense of self is deconstructed. This is to reach the limit of the finite, composed, contained sense of self. Emotion will push through, it will mark the boundary of tolerance, and it will go beyond it. It will manifest itself by its excretions from the body’s orifices (I include here sweat from physical exertion, from which pleasure is often gained, and the oral release of laughter, which bubbles up from the shaking diaphragm).

In this discussion of emotion in relation to Bakhtin’s writing, I am suggesting that the release of emotion could be understood as a revolution of being, one which is at once individually and universally understood. As the overflow of emotion washes away, a feeling of stability and calmness is experienced. At this time it could be said that that the known self is transcended. We have survived the point at which things were too

much to bear; we have gone beyond it. As this change occurs, there is also the possibility to become 'something more, something better.'

Threshold

I have always been intrigued by the specific moment when, as we sit in the audience, the door to the stage opens and a performer steps into the light; or, to take the other perspective, the moment when a performer who waits in the semi-darkness sees the same door open, revealing the lights, the stage, the audience.

I realised some years ago that the moving quality of this moment, whichever point of view one takes, comes from its embodiment of an instance of birth, of passage through a threshold that separates a protected but limiting shelter from the possibility and risk of a world beyond [...] I sense that stepping into the light is also a powerful metaphor for consciousness, for the birth of the knowing mind, for the simple and yet momentous coming of the sense of self into the world of the mental. (Damasio, p.3)

The stage itself is a precipice. I am afraid of what lies beyond, and yet I find myself desiring to be at the edge again. I can never predict the reaction of the audience, but I am always in pursuit of it. There are the times when it is truly a pleasure. I yearn for it. It feels like a triumph to address the unknown.

Tremoring, so much that even my jaw shook. I felt the terrible churning sensation of nausea. I could not be sick now. In amongst this unknown sensation of fear, something I knew: diarrhoea. I took comfort in this. Like the stage fright that I experience time and time again, I knew how it would play out. What annuls the fear in stage fright is the knowledge that the performance has been practiced. It has parameters, and as I physically set in motion what I have practiced, my mind can picture how it may appear to the audience.

I spent several hours subjected to this shaking of the body, and the cramping of the stomach. I could not envisage how to cope with what might happen. It is almost inevitable that one day I will pass through that threshold of anticipation, marked by fear, and onto a platform where the performance has not been practiced. I will pass the point where the control I usually have over my body (and as a result my speech) collapses. In the aftermath, it may take days, perhaps weeks and months to regain the sense of self I had before. It may take a great deal of time before that feeling of certainty in interaction with others returns - by this I mean the certainty of self, the certainty of enacting the person I believe I am. There are times when we are pushed *in life*, in the present, in public, to practice our part, to speak lines that we have not said before, to improvise scenes we had not imagined. During these times it is as though we are feeling our way into the character that we think we are, the one we feel familiar with: *the person that we know*.

Coda/D.C. al Coda

Emotion is generated unconsciously. It is constantly in metamorphosis. The inception of emotion is non-verbal. Only as we become conscious of it, is it put into language. Art is defined as practice, the result of conscious consideration. To intentionally create conditions that will trigger a particular feeling or emotion is to employ artifice. It could be that a romantic song induces the feeling of being in love, or that the image of an icon may inspire admiration and desire. Although the conditions created in a work of art may be considered and controlled, the response may not be. It may amount to something that appears to be superficial, based only on surface elements. These surface elements may combine in the mind of the spectator and elicit a feeling of emotion. In this dialogue there is a constant temporal interplay between what is 'genuine,' 'authentic' or 'truth' and what is 'created,' 'made up' or 'pretend.'⁸

Sometimes, emotion feels inappropriate. It can surprise the subject. It can be embarrassing, causing the subject to feel ashamed. The reasons why shame and embarrassment arise can point to something wider than just the discomfort of the individual. They can betray more general cultural inhibitions, which may in turn reveal aspects of society that are oppressive or conditioning. To overcome this sense of restraint could be considered a form of revolution within the individual, but one which may have ramifications in a public context. I include here behavioural restraints that can belie states of mind (including self confidence), such as those about dancing, posture and clothing (the pressure to be scantily clad, as well as the pressure to cover up).

Bakhtin believed that 'the sanction for carnival derives ultimately not from a calendar prescribed by a church or state, but from a force that pre-exists priests and kings and to whose superior power they are actually deferring when they appear to be licensing carnival.' (Bakhtin, p. xviii)

Emotional experience can be overwhelming. It can be awe inspiring and sublime, or it can be frightening and disorienting. It can feel as though we have '*let ourselves go.*' The person that we believe ourselves to be externally has been confounded by something that has arisen seemingly from within. What is usually projected outwards in physical gesture and speech as our 'character' is subsumed by the '*wave of emotion,*' which disables it. Like a tidal wave, emotion can feel unbounded, as though there were no way of restraining it. I am suggesting that emotion is a force such as that which drives the necessity to sanction carnival. It is filtered through ritual and art, but is also an immense pressure, which swells against the confines of convention; the rules of behaviour that we have learnt to obey. Art can provoke emotion through artificial means that will manifest itself in the spectator as real. The purpose for this is commonly acknowledged: the evocation of emotion through art acts as a cipher for feelings that have been '*pent up.*'⁹

These pulsations of affect give the promise of transcendence. From degradation there will be regeneration. It is cyclical, but perhaps something more than this: in each rebirth there can be an opening of new possibilities. With each experience there is a building of knowledge, of what Damasio would call 'extended consciousness.' Shame creates 'a precarious hyper-reflexivity of the surface of body, [that] can turn one inside out or outside in.' (Kosofsky-Sedgwick & Frank, p.22) In its most positive aspect, the destabilization of sense of self through bodily affect is what can turn perspective around. It can lead us *over the brink*, and prove that some things which are restricted or restrained may actually be acceptable. In art & culture, as we acknowledge the slip between reality and artifice in our response to what is before us, we are experiencing this undoing of self. At times it may feel insincere and superficial, and at times completely believable. It is this that can point not only to what is censored or inappropriate (and also to what is oppressed), but also to what lies beyond those confines: possibilities both utopian and dystopian.

End Notes

1. 'There are taboos on looking and being looked at only slightly less severe than the taboo on shared interocular intimacy....the taboo on mutual looking, because of the taboo on the expression of particular affects, arises in part because of the unique capacity of the look-look with respect to the expression, communication, escalation and control of affects....the taboo on mutual looking is reinforced by its specific linkage with sexuality.' (Kosofsky Sedgewick & Frank, p.144)
2. Damasio describes how the brain comes to consciousness and a sense of self as essentially three stages:
Proto Self – an interconnected and temporarily coherent collection of neural patterns which represent the state of the organism, moment by moment – we are not conscious of this.
Core Self – the second order non verbal account that occurs whenever an object modifies the proto-self. We are conscious of this.
Autobiographical Self – memory – changeable according to experience. We are conscious of this. (Damasio, p.174).
3. I would like to draw attention to the recent 'Slut Walk' marches which originated in Canada after a representative of the Toronto Police Force stated 'women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to get victimized' (<http://www.slutwalktoronto.com/about/why> accessed 23/05/2011). Many women have attended these marches in 'sluttish' or 'provocative' clothing – in defiance of those that would criticize. It can also be argued that women are pressurized to wear this type of clothing in order to feel desirable (and the need to be desirable could be yet another pressure). How much wearing high heels and short skirts is freedom of choice is subject to debate. However, this does not change the fact that rape is a serious and violating crime, and that the perpetrators, not the victims, are the ones who need to be held to blame for their actions. Refs:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/may/08/slutwalk-not-sexual-liberation> & http://www.thefword.org.uk/blog/2011/04/slutwalk_london accessed 23/05/2011.
4. <http://www.henri-matisse.net/quotes.html> accessed 04/05/2011
5. I would like to document how surprisingly emotive I found footage of the recent Royal Wedding (Prince William & Kate Middleton 2011). It was the apparent happiness of the bride and the abandoned cheering of the crowd that got me, and the knowledge that the dress had been made by the protégé of the late Alexander McQueen. I was again moved by the sight of a tiny human frame inside a huge dress. Several bridesmaids had to carry the train along the

aisle of Westminster Abbey, holding it high, and rendering it rather like a flying carpet behind the bride. In my mind the train had become a metaphor which referred at once to the idea of great wings of freedom, carrying the bride to a life of 'happy ever after', and also a symbol of duty and burden. Imagine, everyday, being unable to walk around normally because of the huge train behind you, to be constantly reliant upon the assistance of others just to travel the shortest of distances. Imagine, one day, to be transported in a magical white gown billowing out behind you, into the tender embraces of your lover, and happiness forever more.

6. As Kristeva writes: 'I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself.' (Benjamin & Fletcher, p.196)
7. Despite this work having been written about many times, I am questioning why I have never come across imagery of it. So much gruesome footage is available of the surgery that the artist underwent. We have seen Judy Chicago pull out the Red Flag, and Carolee Schneeman's Interior Scroll, even Annie Sprinkle, legs akimbo and vagina clamped open, with a member of the audience peering in to inspect her cervix. Could Orlan have done something that visually was a little too much?
8. 'Regardless of the mechanism by which emotions are induced, the body is the main stage for the emotions, either directly or via its representation in somatosensory structures of the brain.' (Damasio, p.287)
9. 'A person who has been unable to cry in distress, much of his life, may seek out opportunities to cry, e.g. in sad movies, in the crying released by alcohol, or at funerals. He may in short want to cry and welcome the opportunity to do so.' (Kosofsky Sedgwick & Frank, p.70)

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