

A Paper

Shamanoid 2.0

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Who do we think we are? Who do I think I am? Who do you think I am? And who do you think I think you think we think we are? etc. I'm reminded here of R.D. Laing, experimental British psychoanalyst who came to eminence in the 1960s. I am reminded not only of Laing's work on the interpersonal (to which I'll later return), but specifically of his collection of poetry, *Knots*, first published in 1970. A linguistic and theoretical entangling of subjects, some of the text concerns the relationship between a couple, Jack and Jill, and their intersubjective relations with each other: For instance:

it hurts Jack
to think
that Jill thinks he is hurting her
by (him) being hurt
to think
that she thinks he is hurting her
by making her feel guilty
at hurting him
by (her) thinking
that he is hurting her (13)

But a section of the sprawling, confusing, web of *Knots* that are particularly brought to mind are the following:

One is inside
then outside what one has been inside
One feels empty
because there is nothing inside oneself
One tries to get inside oneself
that inside of the outside
that one was once inside
once one tries to get oneself inside what
one is outside:
to eat and to be eaten

to have the outside inside and to be
inside the outside
But this is not enough. One is trying to get
the inside of what one is outside inside, and to
get inside the outside. But one does not get
inside the outside by getting the outside inside
for;
although one is full inside of the inside of the outside
one is on the outside of one's own inside
and by getting inside the outside
one remains empty because
while one is on the inside
even the inside of the outside is outside
and inside oneself there is still nothing
There has never been anything else
and there never will be (83)

And this, oddly, brings me in to the subject of this paper, *shamanoid* performance art. The shamanoid is my own term, and a queering of anthropologist Victor Turner's concept, the *liminoid*. In *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, Turner suggests that 'One works at the liminal, one plays with the liminoid' (55). As a theatre anthropologist, Turner is part of a tradition and a history with which I am sure most of us are familiar. What I am interested in in performance is the interstice between the liminal / liminoid potential of performance (and its associated theorisation in Performance Studies) and the individualised performance of the visual art tradition. As such, I am interested in the seriousness of play about which Turner writes and its specific relation to the tradition of ritualistic and shamanistic performance art. Most of us are probably familiar with artists such as Joseph Beuys and Andy Warhol (both notable for what Thomas McEvelley refers to in a text 'The Poseurs Mantel' as their 'somewhat outlandish faked appearances and personas which mimicked the outrageous behavior of shamans – the profession which the historian Mircea Eliade has called an essentially psychotic role' (270)).

Outlandish faked appearances and personas, outrageous behaviour and the performance of an essentially psychotic role are figurations by no means alien to me. I could talk about my own performance of Art Voodoo (Fig. 1), I could talk about becoming-scapegoat (Fig. 2), becoming-locust (Fig. 3), or about any of the other fifteen becoming-animal performances I have made since 2002. What I want to talk about though is a series of arduous, sometimes durational, solo action performances begun in early 2009. One of these in particular, *Untitled Actuation*, lasted four hours and was performed at InBetween Time Festival, Arnolfini, Bristol, on December 2010. It consisted of a very slow

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series of actions (each action lasting between 5-10 minutes), some of which were repeated over the course of the performance, others not. The actions were

performed in a silent, meditative, almost trance-like state, which was punctuated by moments of very gentle, quiet interaction with spectators when I would offer them doughnuts. I would also, for periods of the performance, turn on the radio in the space, which played Radio 3 (and happened to be a Chopin piano afternoon). For various reasons, I have only one photograph (Fig. 4) of the performance (and no video), but I do have a partial score of the action (Fig. 5)



Fig. 1 *ArtVoodoo*, 2010
(video still, Emily Bull)



Fig. 2 *Becoming-goat*, 2007 (photo Kim Fielding)



Fig. 3 *Becoming-locust*, 2008, (photo Gary Varro)



Fig. 4 *Untitled Actuation* (photo Oliver Rudkin)

ACTION SCORE:

- bucket head stilettos
- egg head, glitter head
- sprinkle glitter
- knee bells
- broolly conduct
- shake bells dance (quiet)
- give out doughnuts
- put radio on
- wash head, take off bells
- put fan on
- put on wellies and Grandad’s jacket
- scatter feathers out of pocket
- take off jacket
- turn off radio
- leave fan on
- lay on earth with flowers
- roll with flowers
- stand up; pause
- take off wellies, turn off fan
- take Polaroids. Blu tack them above / behind people
- paint head / neck / shoulders red, rub in paint
- put on foil blanket and helmet
- bells on hands
- stand / walk with umbrella and flowers
- exorcise with flowers
- remove blanket and helmet
- wash hands; vest back on
- give out doughnuts
- bucket head
- eggs and glitter head
- glitter sprinkle

Anthony Kubiak, in an article entitled ‘Theatre and the Technologies of Appearances: The spirit of apprehensions’ writes of a

‘particular and critical mode of performative consciousness’, which is precisely unlocatable, and before we ascribe this ‘unlocability’ to some poststructural mode of thought, I would insist that this critical performative mode, this visionary impulse of mind embodies the best hope of curative, redemptive *political* life. I will, moreover, call this mode of consciousness variously visionary, shamanic, or *pharmakeic*. (83)

Kubiak demonstrates that critical shamanistic modalities may certainly be found in examples of twentieth century art performance (in ‘the anti-materialist revolutionary impulse of Joseph Beuys, in the trance encounters of Karen Finley, and the jazz flights of Bill Frisell, or the cruel, transcendent butoh of Jazuo Ono’), but also in examples from canonical literature, such as the visionary writings of William Blake. Suggesting that ‘both theatre and shamanic practice can be understood as elaborations of a more primal (though not primitive) visionary impulse to reformulate the world’ (Kubiak 85-6), Kubiak’s is a useful contextualisation of some of the theoretical debates around

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performance and the shamanistic. His use of the term *pharmakeic* is taken from Plato and Derrida, the former's use of the term *pharmakeus* meaning 'many things and all of the following: wizard, sorcerer, magician, physician, and finally scapegoat (more literally, the *pharmakos*)' (Kubiak 83).

We might relate it to Deleuze and Guattari's descriptions in *A Thousand Plateaus* of Sorcerers, who they claim

have always held the anomalous position, at the edge of the fields or woods. They haunt the fringes. They are at the borderline of the village, or *between* villages. The important thing is their affinity with alliance, with the pact, which gives them a status opposed to that of filiation. (246)

My durational performances, such as the one outlined above, are conceived as experiential meditations on a spectrum, or multiplicity, of modes of being; modes of *being in relation to* other objects, people and forces (gravity, resistance, cold, exhaustion, boredom, etc.). In this sense, I would conceive of such performances, and the way in which they draw attention to these interrelations in terms of Deleuzo-Guattarian becomings. I would draw a line straight towards Robert Pepperell who, in 'The Posthuman Conception of Consciousness : A 10-point Guide' explains that:

The human body is not separate from its environment. Since the boundary between the world and ourselves consists of permeable membranes that allow energy and matter to flow in and out, there can be no definite point at which our bodies begin or end. *Humans are identifiable, but not definable [...]. Nothing can be external to a human because the extent of a human cannot be fixed.* (1-2)

Here, perhaps, we can begin to approach an understanding of a different human to that which we may previously have been. But, paradoxically, whilst the words of thinkers like Deleuze or Pepperell might help us *think* ourselves that human, our thinking (therefore our being...) propagates the conceptualisation of the self as an entity that is autonomous, permanent and fixed. Pepperell again:

Because of the entanglement of the subject and the object in observations of subjectivity, and certain conceptual circularities, it seems we might never be able to represent the self-conscious mind with anything other than itself. ('Towards a Theory of Conscious Art')

We return again to the idea of entanglement – here in philosophical knots, rather than in Laing's psychoanalytical ones. And we (or I) return to the question of how to disentangle oneself and one's consciousness from the web

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of subjectification, and to the question of what remains of ‘the human’ once this disentanglement has taken place. A Buddhist teacher I know gives the example of an elastic band, which when rolled up and then put down, will very slowly, and in fits and starts, pop and bounce and of its own accord return to its natural state of elasticbandedness. She uses this analogy to speak of the fits and starts of the unravelling of the self when we begin to practice meditation, and open ourselves up to the ‘gaps’ between thoughts and words, and experience reality in terms of what Buddhists call non-duality (an idea that also, of course, has resonance with aspects of poststructuralist and postmodern theory).

This meditative unravelling of the dualistic self, this overcoming of confusions of the inside and outside, of the knots of you thinking me thinking you, or indeed you seeing me seeing you, etc. is something with which I’ve been working for some time, before I ever sat down to meditate. My performance has often been concerned with the practice of stillness, and experiences of what Deleuze calls *sensation*. In *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, he writes: ‘This is a ‘logic of the senses,’ as Cézanne said, which is neither rational nor cerebral. What is ultimate is thus the relation between sensation and rhythm, which places in each sensation the levels and domains through which it passes’ (30).

As Rosi Braidotti writes, wonderfully: ‘The life in me is not only, not even human’. This life, a life that I know in the stripped-down experience of intensity and endurance (an experience that I can have not only in performance, but on a meditation cushion, at the gym, during sex, out dancing, at a funeral, etc.), is a life that is beyond the identity-based subject of ‘I’ (to you), of ‘Paul’ (the son, the partner, the brother, the friend) or of ‘Paul Hurley’ (the artist, the writer, the mobile phone customer, etc.). This life that is beyond *this* life exists in what Braidotti calls becoming-imperceptible. When we move beyond the realm of representation, of perception and signs, of thoughts, concept and form, we open up to – and realise ourselves part of - the realm of sensation.

Shamanoid performance is a transformative process which although temporary suggests an element of sustainability, which is effected through the intensity of performed actions that do not simply transgress boundaries and the frameworks (philosophical, discursive, autobiographical) to which they refer, but affect (to borrow a term from Braidotti) creative transpositions of them. In her book *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*, Braidotti defines the term as being ‘created as an in-between space of zigzagging and of crossing: non-linear but not chaotic; nomadic, yet accountable and committed; creative but also cognitively valid; discursive and also materially embedded’ (5).

This material embeddedness I see as a central element of shamanoid performance as a response to what can be a sometimes disempowering experience of living in an increasingly technological, individualised, informatic

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society. It is (admittedly) in part a neo-luddite rejection of some of the ways in which we find ourselves constituted as subjects, but it is also a rejection that parallels some of those of posthumanism (the fixity of identity, the body as signifier, the irrecoverability of boundaries) – what Pepperell calls a ‘radically extended and embodied being whose experience is potentially boundless’ (‘Posthumans and Extended Experience’ 31). It operates both on the level of a post-secular spiritual experience (for myself and for spectators), as well as the theoretical positing of a model of intersubjectivity that is perhaps both pre- and post-human – and as such touches on the potential for affective, empathic alterity. It is an affective and expansive conception of the subject that is both desirable and sustainable: a depersonalised subject that, as Braidotti argues ‘however much in process and in becoming, is still there’ (Braidotti, 2005: 268).

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