

PERFORMANCE REVIEW (JUNE 2017)

The following performance review regards the delivery of *Introduction-to-Performance*, a course elective devised by Gordon Douglas with members of HND Contemporary Art Practice, Edinburgh College. The course adopted a theatre shortlisting method in order to rigorously debate the values of 150 historically significant performances towards a mutually determined shortlist of 10 performances. Each week, members of the group were issued four works to independently research for the following week. Individuals would return to share their four works to the rest of the group through storytelling, presentation or re-performance with one condition that they must not use supporting images. The individual chose whether to discard or nominate the work for further discussion, at which point the work was, respectively, either dropped or designated to another member of the group for further research. The following week, the two discussed and argued the character of the work, and decided together whether or not to nominate it. As the list distilled itself, an increasing number of group members had knowledge of the remaining material and were able to participate in the decision- oriented debates. The course took place from October 2016 - February 2017 with the group meeting over 10 sessions.

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introduction-to-performance.xyz

PLEASE DESCRIBE YOUR WORKING CONTEXT.

From 2008-2010, I was a student at Edinburgh's Telford College (now Edinburgh College), a further education institution in the North-west of Edinburgh. I was studying the HND Contemporary Art Practice course, a course born out of HND Public Art and designed by course leader Alan Holligan in 2007. In 2016, I applied and was successful in assuming the position of Artist-in-Residence as part of the airETC... programme, an initiative inviting graduates of the course back for the reciprocal benefit of all parties involved. As well as successfully building rapport between succeeding year-groups of the course, the programme offers opportunities for professional development in the form of supported studio time and teaching experience. As part of the residency, I ran my own self-devised elective course, *Introduction-to-Performance*, in an attempt to: **(1)** provide a non-chronological approach to learning about performance art history; **(2)** expose students at an early point in their education to self-organised, morally diverse, and politically complicated practices; and **(3)** further understand transference and development of mutually-held virtues within group decision-making. Like many further education colleges, preparation and contact time have recently gone through major cuts due to mergers of previously existing local colleges (in the case of Edinburgh College, the institution has been the merger of Stevenson, Jewel and Esk, and the already mentioned Telford). The difficulties of the merger is also concurrent with the many national austerity measures placing teaching staff in precarious contracts. In response, staff uphold an active protest culture, and are, at the time of publishing, on strike.

PLEASE DESCRIBE YOUR ROLE.

The *alumnus* does not figure explicitly in the status hierarchy *freeborn/freed/slave*, nor in the *father/wife/child/slave* structure of Roman family patriarchy [*paterfamilias*]. [...] Leclercq, the first writer to deal extensively with the many inscriptions of *alumni*, assumed that the term applied to *expositi* reared as foster children, and concerned himself little with categories of slavery or freedom or possible legal ramifications. [...] both clearly denoted in the vast majority of cases, children abandoned by parents and brought up in the home of someone else. (Boswell, John, 'The Kindness of Strangers', 1988; pp. 116-117)

[A] slave might be treated as an *alumnus*, or an *alumnus* as a slave; an *alumnus* might be adopted as heir; or, what appears to have been most common, he or she might be regarded as somewhere between an heir and a slave, partaking in different ways of both categories. (ibid; pg 118)

John Boswell, an American historian of the interconnections between Christianity and male homosexuality, gives a concise account of the term *alumnus* in 'The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance'. He explains the distinction between the two terms *expositi*, ('the exposed'—abandoned children displayed in public, so that they might be reclaimed) and its subcategory *alumni*, a relatively more fluid position between the identities of *an heir and a slave*. As an alumni of the course I was about to be resident on, I was interested in the kinds of obligation, and inherited values I may have maintained since graduating. What kinds of performativity was I unknowingly exerting? As an artist who frequently practices with others, developing and involving myself in peer-groups, I am guilty of inventing self-organised modes of institution grounded on the habits present in any given collaboration. Would these kinds of collective working methods have the same effect as educational institutions on individuals after the 'moment of collaboration' had passed? Does the performance of collaboration leave a residual psychic document on the ongoing working practices of individuals, and how might these kinds of impressions provide insight into how sub-groups form around morals in the context of a freefall artistic multitude?

A contemporary of Boswell's, Stuart Marshall, provides an account of the fear of reproduction of ideology between lecturing staff and students in reaction to Section 28, the law that forbids the 'promotion' of homosexuality in educational institutions in the UK. The stereotypical gay character of the lecturer is played by performing artist Neil Bartlett, who after direct questioning assures the cameraman (played by Stuart Marshall) that he is not gay. Following the interview, a series of students declare their sudden realisations that they are no longer straight, but attracted to the same sex. They are grateful that through whatever tuition they received through 'straight' Neil Bartlett, they were able to understand themselves a little better.

Of course, this is a satirical version of what might constitute a fear of transmittal of the HIV virus, where law becomes a metaphor for that programmed fear. Habits can come from anywhere, not just through the authority figure in a given situation, and ideologies cannot be transferred in such a simplistic way, they require performance and re-calibration through discussion. My role is to locate these group virtues in behaviours, mannerisms and habits that are inherited through commitment, re-performance and submission to collaborative identities.

Stuart Marshall delivers a question to performing artist, Neil Bartlett, who acts as a lecturer to students of Newcastle Polytechnic: “**EXACTLY, WHAT IS YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR STUDENTS?**” (*Pedagogue*, Stuart Marshall, 1988)¹.

I really struggled with the concept of being distinct from the peer-group of students. Having spent so much time engaging within peer-organisations, it felt difficult and unnatural to assume a position of authority. In addition to being an *alumni*, I also had to come to terms with holding somewhat of a specialist knowledge in the history of performance art. My relationship with the students was therefore often quite confused: half-expert, half-peer. The relationship bore resemblance to an older sibling, someone who had gone through the same process as them and understood the stresses and concerns of being in their position. All of this was always in relation to the ‘real’ authority of the academic framework. I regard myself as a performance art enthusiast rather than an academic, so I tried to convey my obsessive qualities rather than my ‘expertise’ in the subject in order to separate myself from the academic framework. As stated before I wanted to use this relationship to share my research as well as learning how values were produced and reproduced in group contexts. In some instances, the list and the performance of that list became an educational construct for myself; and through the sympathies that we shared for each other’s labours, the promise of the end goal, and task we communally performed, we developed our peer-group.

In order to go about this research, I aimed to build a discursive scenario focused on the discussion of performance art ranging from 1952 to the present. In order to guarantee all things of more-or-less similar value, the field (or label) of Art was unintentionally and luckily a perfect equaliser, isolating these ‘cases’ from everyday occurrence. If all 150 items on the list were considered Art, and thus intentional, and thus acts of reason (no matter how complicated the sets of logic), then a somewhat arbitrary value system positioning works against one another could (quite quickly) start. Through debating and discussing works in sole relation to one another, a firmer understanding of how values transmitted between group members could begin to be pieced together. In most cases these kinds of rhetoric were grounded by feelings of ownership for individually researched works - many works were carried through to further rounds on this regard. Due to the unfamiliarity with the weight and narrative conventions of the performance art canon, the group were free to debate each work in a meritocracy, and found their own system of values that best represented ‘good’ performance. The group responded oddly to familiar works, and actually chose to discard them almost immediately, potentially in an attempt to maintain the values of this meritocracy.

My relationship to the students involved administering situations where the logic inherent to the group could be traced from peripheral uttering to mainstream virtue. Attributes such as ambitious, boring, comic, destructive, exploitative, fictional, gross, amongst so many others were raised from single works and echoed through discussion of others. The relationship I took on was of facilitated guidance, encouraging students to research not only the works but the social, political and economic contexts the works spawned from. The irony in teaching performance art non-historically, is that the method actually allowed for self-initiated history learning. All this research was done on their own, and my relationship with them was to guide them towards particular performances as reference points to help discussions come into being. The work following, of how the elective has effected the way in which we all might continue to practice, is still to come. What kinds of habit have we accumulated, and how does the collecting, amassing and welding of knowledge relate to our identities in group dynamics?

¹ [HTTP://LUX.ORG.UK/WORK/PEDAGOGUE](http://lux.org.uk/work/pedagogue)

in a video work of Alex Bag's, a semi-autobiographical art student describes a crit: **"YOU KNOW ALL THESE BOYS HAVE BEEN LIKE, WELDING TOGETHER THESE GIANT CREATIONS, AND WHEELING THEM INTO CLASS, AND LIKE, NO ONE ASKS THEM 'UM, EXCUSE ME, HOW BIG IS YOUR DICK?'"** (*Untitled Fall '95*, Alex Bag, 1995).²

In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick deconstructs *Our Mutual Friend*, by Charles Dickens. She talks about the accumulation of dust-piles from faeces that can be set alight for heat, controllable only through the anality and sphincters of men. The other metaphor for a gender-biased capital Sedgwick brings up is the river that only women can understand because it always flows away from them. Both the direction of the river and the pile of shit act as an inherited logic for the formation of relationships. Love triangles that dominate our understanding of sociality and sexuality, where the woman always completes the triad through her position as subject.

Maybe rather than accumulating habit like I've previously suggested, I'd much rather the knowledge and habit through *Introduction-to-Performance* be closer to the river in *Our Mutual Friend*, a force that we can understand and manipulate but that doesn't gather around us, a set of habits that are elastic, conscious and replaceable.

At the beginning of the process, I felt that people would submit to a collaborative identity, to the uniform group mentality that Alex Bag portrays of art school. There's another great quote from the same film: "*I am just so stoked to be like, around people who like, understand me, and like, um like me*". It satirises the homophily of logics and rhetoric within in the art school, self-replicated patterns of reason that produce a coherent student body. This was true to a certain extent and a lot of the values were shared, but once a grounding set of morals had been established (one that bears resemblance to a more typical social code outside of Art - the class do not take place in a vacuum, and history is so important in the development of morals), certain works in the list allowed for individuation from the group. Works which were particularly eccentric or extreme challenged the group, and in response, some individuals heightened their positions within the group in relation to those specific performances. As a way of edging the work closer to the shortlist, logic systems were developed around the reasoning of the performance in relation to others. This is not too dissimilar to the ways Actor Network Theory assesses the performance of a node within a given network relative to how many other nodes it is connected to, and how resourceful it can therefore be. By gaining traction through identification in relation to other works, some of these more extreme examples came out top as they both supported and capitalised from other works. Examples of this can be seen in the final shortlist.

² [HTTP://WWW.UBU.COM/FILM/BAG_FALL95.HTML](http://www.ubu.com/film/bag_fall95.html)

WHAT METHODS DID YOU USE TO COMPILE THE LIST?

In August 2016, I spent three weeks as an Assessor with Total Theatre Awards, an organisation that awards prizes to visual theatre, puppetry, dance and circus, during the annual Edinburgh Festival Fringe. The process of shortlisting in *Introduction-to-Performance* has been adapted from this awards organisation, with the Assessor peer-group being replaced by the student body. The list in Total Theatre Awards consisted of every piece submitted to the open call for assessment by contributors to the festival. In contrast, the list that formed the common resource for *Introduction-to-Performance* was highly considered in relation to the kinds of discussion it could raise.

Initially, the working list constituted 275 performances gathered by taking notes and uploading to a working excel spreadsheet. The original list was composed of every performance I could remember existing, and was influenced by:

- (1) experiences of live performance art (mostly limited to Scotland, and other parts of western Europe)
- (2) second-hand mediations through formalised performance art education (through classes and seminars that I attended such as 'Performing Life', 2011, devised by Michael Ned Holte at CalArts, and through close attention to blogs from classes I wasn't able to attend like 'Enacted Thought', 2016 at Princeton University) and informal self-education from books, websites and articles read for contextual interest.
- (3) programming conversations I had engaged in (both within independent curatorial practice, and within organisations and peer-groups)

Each artist or performance was researched again through: access to Edinburgh public and educational libraries; availability online via ubuweb, gallery, exhibition and artist-specific searches; and accessibility by generic search engines. This process of researching drew out problems when faced with the invisibility of a work in the published realm. Unfortunately, a lot of the works on the list fell in this category and were dropped due to the perceived frustration this would cause a student. The refusal of documentation and significance of the 'live' that Peggy Phelan coherently describes in 'The Ontology of Performance' is a feature of performance art history that I am very interested in. It was something that I didn't want to shy away from, but knew would be difficult to share. Alongside a couple of works which had little-to-no documentation accessible, I included performances with diverging approaches to documentation to encourage the group to increase their awareness of researching beyond the typical search for videos. Some works only exist online as reviews, others as stills, others as twitter feeds from protest movements, and I wanted this range to be reflected in the list to open up a broader idea of what performance could mean. I found it was also important to diversify the kinds of moral, philosophical, political and material value present in works, hoping that each of these might feed into debates over group-held values as mentioned above.

I found that due to my own experiences of education and viewership that vast parts of my knowledge regarding performance art in Eastern and Southern hemispheres were quite clearly lacking. I also noticed that there was a heavy political leaning on queer and feminist performance work, as well as work existing after 2008, a product that is no doubt due to my personal line of enquiry and the period of time I've been investing in it. In order to override the gaps and excesses from the original list, I made direct effort into further researching and including practices from varying geographies, time periods and backgrounds. It is worth mentioning that the geographical spread is still centered on western practices, and that the political/moral diversity is still weighted on queer-feminist discourse. In the context of a western educational system, it is difficult to truly remove yourself from this bias, and in future iterations of the course, I hope to pay significantly more attention to the demographics of the list.

WHAT ARE THE LIMITATIONS FROM THE LIST YOU GENERATED?

The list is the architecture through which the group developed its communal grammar. The finitude, and selection of content, always implied a finite and select number of discussions, of pairings, of arguments that could take place. Because of this, and the focus on navigating the list, all discourse will always certainly be limited by the list.

The list acted as a score for discussion and pedagogy. There is always the mediation of interpretation in reading the score, and there are always limitations to how a score is interpreted. Education in this format will always be limited by the score, but through self-reflexivity, and a questioning of the pool possibilities, the score can be criticised, and a wider conversation develop.

The list brought together a series of works that satellite my research practice, a body of protest movements, persona works, participatory practice, performance scores, photographs, narratives, organisations, websites, social experiments, provocations, archives, viral content, obsessions, re-enactments, mail art, embedded practice, and conversations. In the subjective arrangement gathered, it is no surprise that the works channeled my current anxiety about the uncertainty of our political landscape, and fostering urgent, moral values of revolution, resistance, blockage, anonymity, and action.

The list, although limited, offered many opportunities for expanded research. Following the shortlisting, it is my hope that the list will be used as an open resource for further independent investigations into specific and unknown areas of interest within performance. The shortlist that we compiled was, in essence, an arbitrary end goal. Something through which to channel discussion through communally awarding value. The shortlist was exercised through the limitations of the list and the drive to perform it.