

Performance Enhancements and Permissions:

Licensed Pleasure?

Who decides whether we can touch the merchandise, feel the cloth, prod the bread or taste the assembled produce? Who gives us license to bargain, to run our hands over the garments displayed on the long wheeled rails, or take off our shirt and exchange it for another one more colourful, try on these boots for size and comfort, before we walk away? And what permissions do we require to say exactly what we need to, or what we feel, to rob the street of its orderly hubbub for a moment, calling out across the street, crying out, even screaming? Across public spaces with their interminable rules and regulations, with their semi-private and proscribed communities of operations, the wandering body enters, searching for its place, any place, some place, to play a part. A virus in the body politic, an impermissible cancer, a stinking gorge of bile, come to disturb the consensual peace. Or to perform an entertainment, a service toward the common good, in dissensus...

So here we gathered, a ragbag of individuals with all their competing practices, for a few hours collected together with a common goal, in a common space, overturning the commonplace with our affects. No one gave us permission to take over the covered streets of the market, to enter other stalls and jostle, to spill out onto the street and enter/taint. We invited ourselves, enticed by the possibility of reaching a public, any public, an improvised audience, who carried in them no particular prejudice, not yet having cultivated that sense of distance required of the *real* consumer of art. We came together tentatively, to nourish and cultivate a common space, in an exchange with others, who were not completely jaded, or inoculated to the potential in art to create change. In this way then, announced to all in its founding principle – ridiculous in its grandness – the Commonist Gallery/Art Agora, there is an echo of a promise, of another way of doing, thinking and being, lurking behind the pretense; to gain a purchase on the real and turn words into actions, actions into words, which have the potential and effect of altering the actual material and meaning of life. This is no longer commentary, no longer simply representing, but altering, metamorphosing, struggling and:

“Its legitimacy lies in its formal approaches to public discourse in the creation of an agora that exists as a market for the trading of ideas, practices and initiatives; providing proofs for the efficacy and relevance of certain artistic and universal truths.” (Art Agora/Commonist Gallery 2009)

These artistic and universal truths, whatever we claim, infect each other, intermingle, calling forth dissent and argument. In this contamination between art and the everyday there is a questioning of the very foundations, the authenticity and relevance of contemporary art practices, that make a claim on the social space without acknowledging the structures of power and privilege that have permitted such practices to take place.

Performance enhanced - a theatre of engagement:

“...art ‘out of the gallery’ and apparently or even intentionally radical ‘edgy’ art becomes marketable – a humiliation of the labour of the artist. Recuperation happens so quickly... Freedom for anyone to make art is tied to other freedoms and restrictions imposed through the systems of wealth/property ownership/land enclosure. So, physical freedoms, of the body as well as time to dream.... who has a right to occupy spaces for living, working, studio, study, learning and so on.”
(Anne Robinson: ArtAgora 2010)

How much allowance should be gainsaid to the cyclist racing up a mountain after days of continuous cycling, belaboured by aches, exhausted by the hundreds of kilometers already covered, and thinking ahead of the thousand kilometres still to be endured. And all without injury, or without appearing to be at the end of your tether, while racing at speeds that mortal cyclists can only dream of. Like automata they grind on, and all their toilet stops, their feeding, the emergency repairs, vomit and diarrhoea hidden from prying eyes, expunged from the media. All we hear and allowed to see, is their heroic exploits. Yet do we not already know - stretched out in the original history of the great European Cycling Races, the murky tales, those concoctions of cocaine, painkiller and caffeine, or the cocktails of amphetimine and steroid - the deceptions in all the performance enhancing substances that go into an efficient training regime? And even if we still pretend not to know, we are not to be taken in, for we understand what is permissible within the limits of the sport, and can still enjoy the spectacle, feel the pain, the misery of those who fall by the wayside, the small triumphs of that day's winner, all completed with the appropriate amount of performance enhancing drugs and performance enhancing regimen that no ordinary athlete can dream of emulating.

But it seems eventually, inevitably that these performance enhancements place the athletes in an impossible situation, whether to carry on taking it (all that punishment), and taking us, the public in, or by saying no, destroying the illusion of a sport built on courage, commitment, endurance and selfless heroism. Who would allow themselves to tell the truth, the unvarnished truth, and at what cost? No, on the contrary it is all about calculation and a certain cunning, who has been given the right to win, who placed highly by dint of influence, by seniority, and therefore who must keep going, playing their part, whatever the part, but some part, in the great machinery of the Tour de France or the Tour de Italie or some such extraordinary human spectacle. You must never appear to be destabilizing the order of the game. For the game is to make it seem all extraordinarily authentic, to engage all the tropes of a theatre that not only reproduces the real, but is *more* real, more extreme than the run of the mill, the mere everyday. And so we give our consent to these gods, these masters of the universe, to go on and on, enhancing their performances and our expectations with these imaginary inhumane feats. For how much freedom do any of us have, and if and when we do, how should we exercise that freedom?

The effect of affect.

“This particular reading of political theory as aesthetic discourse is flawed because it only takes into account the end of times, it demands a state of immediate immanence without any precursor. There need be no struggle only the enjoyment of all things now that everything is permitted and nothing true. But this is not the case, everything is not permitted, the revolution did not succeed, it was co-opted, repackaged, and sold back to us. We have been tricked. The disinterested blankness of the ironic pose permits everything except time and commitment, enthusiasm is not allowed as the god is dead and will ride no more.” (Jon Traynor: ArtAgora 2010)

This artwork made without permission, taken outside the bounds of what has been ordinarily or exceptionally allowed, shudders unannounced into the public realm. It is a clandestine art, that knows its place is to be unplaceable, unlicensed, unpermitted, to go uninvited to meet its public, whoever they maybe, and surprise, delight, confuse, engage (Thomas Schlessner 2011). It must be given some light frame, some improvisation will do or even some enthusiasm, but it requires no formal announcements, no pre-marketing, no overt signposting. That would only give the game away, before it had properly commenced. For it is not enough for it to exist, it must be infiltrated into the rhythm and intensities of the street, into the virtual, the semi public/private arenas of our interconnected disembodied lives. The uninvited guest will perform for you now, and curiously it is more intense, more consuming, more irritating – like illicit pleasures, stumbling upon something impermissible, and yet entirely un/missable. The effect of these affects is hard to quantify, but its quality is woven into the fabric of the body, every body and it reverberates after and into the future, reminds us of our frailty, joins us together, momentarily in micro-encounters of curious affectivity.

We do not go to the theatre to see a copy of the real, to experience the authentic but to see the illusory make an address to the real. It is here, where the borders separating our common spheres of activity are made most apparent, that a laying bare of the operations between dream, fiction and actuality coalesce – where the lines both blur and fragment. We can see anew... when theatre shatters the pretexts of our lives or when the real bursts upon the stage in spasms of unstaged affect. The theatre's lights exploding in a thousand tiny shards, that pierce our eyes, skin and lips with their stench of Otherness. Here then, in an unfamiliar redistribution of the sensible, the illusion of social cohesion is confronted by the raw of affect.