

BODILY: CONJUNCTION AND FERMENTATION

TESSA NEEDHAM

UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN SYDNEY

Introduction

BODILY IS A SOLO PERFORMANCE I produced in April 2006. The performance, and data resulting from it, forms part of the research work for my Ph.D. *Bodily* explores the multiplicity of attitudes towards female beauty and body image in contemporary society. It focuses on the culture of thinness in our society, and in particular how this contributes to the damaging beauty ideal. *Bodily* functions in the Ph.D both as a culmination of research into female beauty and body image, and as a springboard into researching audience transformation through performance. This paper discusses ‘Before’ the performance: the development, ‘During’ the performance: the show itself, and ‘After’ the performance: the responses to the piece and what this means for my research.

My doctoral research is a combination of practical and theoretical research, and investigates the transformational potential of provocative performance. I am exploring how performers’ and audience members’ behaviours and attitudes can be changed through performance, and how the concept of ‘projection’ and the alchemical metaphor could be a key to understanding this. The title of this paper is “Conjunction and Fermentation” because my thesis draws on the terms and concepts of alchemy. ‘Conjunction’ is a stage in alchemy when elements are recombined into a new substance. In the thesis, this is the story of the creative development of the performance. ‘Fermentation’ is about breaking down a complex substance into simpler pieces, and this is the analysis of the responses to my performance. Alchemy is used in the thesis as an overarching metaphor for transformation. Many artists and philosophers have touched on elements of alchemy in their work, and my appropriation follows this tradition.

I am mainly aligning myself with the performance as research paradigm in this work. However, I am also interested in methodologies that allow for reporting lived experiences, such as autoethnography and phenomenology. Self-portraiture, performance and focus groups have emerged from these methodologies as useful research instruments.

Creative Development

I have been passionate about the issue of female body image for about as long as I can remember, so in this performance, I wanted to talk from a personal perspective about the myth of the ideal body. Increasingly, alternative discussions and portrayals of female body image have been appearing in mainstream cultural forms. Songs from pop stars Pink and No Doubt have addressed the issue, Dove have created an advertising campaign featuring ‘normal’ women, even Harry Potter author J. K. Rowling wrote about the celebrity culture of thinness in her online blog. So, in a way, we are now

more aware of different sides to the discussion, rather than merely being bombarded with the same image and message all the time. As well as placing myself within this contextual field, I also wanted to portray a new side to the issue.

While developing the performance, I noticed a paradox between being educated and aware of all the dangers and debates surrounding body image, and still having moments of regression, where I worry about how to achieve the ideal body. I started to think that that other women must surely struggle with the same issues, and there is not much said about it. Through my own experience, I have also felt a very strong and communal power in seeing a performance and being able to say: "I feel that too!" To encourage this sense of community in my own performance, I wanted the audience to integrate their experience of the performance with their own culturally formed experiences. I have always found it very powerful to recognise something in a performance as a problem or feeling I am encountering in my own life.

In *Bodily*, I looked to highlight and embody the dysfunctions of body image, the places where it has overstepped. I tried to highlight this dysfunctionality in a physical and visual way, as well as through the structure and spoken text of the performance. There are many of these, and most of them are paradoxical. First, we worry so much about making our bodies thin and healthy, this worry has a physical toll on us, and we end up making ourselves unhealthy. Second, there is the image of the anorexic as disempowered through the loss of her body shape, hair, menstruation, among other things. She is actually becoming less of a woman. Women in general therefore become disempowered, because we spend so much time, effort and money worrying about the way our bodies look. But the main paradox, the main dysfunction I see with this issue, is the paradox between intellect and emotion. I experienced cognitive dissonance between my personal experience of this issue, and how it is framed in society. Intellectually, many people can see through the ideal, we can analyse and condemn these images, but emotionally, there's something so ingrained in us that we still feeling guilty when reaching for 'unhealthy' food. In the performance, this paradox is evident in all the different characters, but is especially seen in the recurring 'neutral' character. This character, to some extent, embodies Mercurius, a figure with much mythological, alchemical and philosophical significance. This seemed appropriate because, as Jung notes, Mercurius is "God, daemon, person, thing, and the innermost secret in man; psychic as well as somatic. He is himself the source of all opposites, since he is duplex and utriusque capax [capable of both]" (Jung 1970, 481). *Bodily* is therefore, on various levels, about the contradictions inherent in body image discourses. One actor is playing all characters, although each character in turn has internal contradictions in their own views on the topic.

Through my research in preparation for performance, mainly in the form of case studies of two televised performative protests, the presence of certain elements of performance seemed to encourage transformation.¹ One of the most important of these elements is the resolution or conclusion of the performance. Augusto Boal is an important espouser of this idea, as he theorised that the denial of audience catharsis could have more efficacy. When writing about her struggle with bulimia, Lisa Tillman-Healy says: "[i]t may frustrate some that I close without revealing 'what it all means.' But, as Robert Coles . . . tells us, 'the beauty of a good story is its openness—the way you or I or anyone reading it can take it in, and use it for ourselves'" (Tillman-Healy 1996, 104). In a 2004 episode of the American cartoon series *The Simpsons*, titled "Sleeping with the Enemy", eight-year-old Lisa struggles with her own body image, also refuses to resolve the issue. Her father, Homer, asks her at the end if everything is okay, typically seeking to solve all the problems of the episode at the end of 22 minutes. Lisa disturbs the formula by acknowledging that she, like many women still obsessed by weight, still has a long way to go. To test this denial of resolution, I chose to leave my own performance

unresolved, hoping that this would frustrate the viewer and force them to interrogate the issues presented. I wanted to see how a denial of resolution would affect the potential transformations brought about by the performance.

Performance Season and Audience Response

Bodily's performance season consisted of five one-hour shows at Sidetrack Theatre in Marrickville in April of 2006. As well as being an outcome of research into provocative performance and the beauty ideal, *Bodily* was also positioned as a research tool in itself. Immediately after each performance, a focus group was held with volunteer audience members. These sessions covered many questions, from direct responses to the performance itself, the body image issue, and whether performance can be transformational at all. One thing I am interested in is the effect of a discussion between audience members after a performance, as this is something I have experienced before. The focus groups were intended as a simulation of a natural post-performance discussion, however with the addition of a facilitator to direct the conversation.

There were some focus group participants who commented on their identification with the paradox between intelligence and emotion. For instance, one participant said "you can see the humour in the elastic band, but you can sit there also and go: I'm kidding myself if I don't think that's me." There were also many people who commented on certain projections as being effective for them. The image that was most commented on was a slideshow of celebrities juxtaposed with anorexic women. This projection in particular seemed to be effective for many people. In every focus group, people remarked that they had related one or more sections of the performance to their own lives. Some even went further, to discuss the potential impact of this: "[i]t was just, something very simple, it was a "me too" thing that can be quite big even though it sounds quite small."

Another significant line of discussion that emerged in most of the focus groups was about the resolution and conclusion of the performance. People were left without experiencing a dramatically conventional catharsis, and this appeared to cause some frustration. This was echoed in a review from *Sydney Stage Online*, which said that there was "no respite," and that: "As women we know there are pressures in society imposed on us by glossy magazines and the media, but this show offers no new insight into how to come to terms with these issues" (Horkan 2006). When speaking with an audience member after the performance, she told me that in the focus group she had stated that she wanted me to cry at the end. However, after thinking about it, she had realised that she had said this because she felt a lack of release, and she wanted me to cry for her. This apparent confusion and frustration around the ending of the performance is interesting as a possible condition for transformation.

Two weeks after the performance season, I sent out follow-up surveys to the focus group participants. These questioned the effect of the focus groups on their reception of the performance as well as the images, ideas, themes and moments the participant retained from the performance. The two-week gap meant that people had some space to reflect on their response to the performance. Every respondent remembered many elements of the performance, and in particular the projected images and videos seemed to have had the most profound impact. The discourse was similar to that of the focus groups, for instance people talked about the paradox of intelligence and emotion and their identification with the piece. Some people even said that the show had changed their attitudes or behaviours about the issues presented, for instance one said: "The performance has made me question many of my beliefs about body image and my own eating habits. It has also made me more reluctant to buy women's magazines." Another said "I have resisted looking at those horrible magazines since the performance!!"

In the questionnaires, I also asked about the focus group process. I wanted to know people's reactions to the focus groups, as this is not often talked about in performance studies. People were generally very positive about the process. Interestingly, one said:

[h]aving a focus group immediately afterwards was an interesting way of concretising certain experiences that are usually much vaguer. The 'disappearance' part of the performance—its ephemerality—was somehow altered through being asked immediately to formulate an opinion. On the whole it means my recollection of the performance is much higher than it is for other performances that I have seen.

Others agreed, saying that having the focus group directly after the performance materialised certain experiences, and forced them to think about the issues presented in a new way. Therefore, they felt the performance had more of an impact on them than it might otherwise have had.

After I received the original questionnaires back, I sent out similar surveys to people I knew were in the audience but who didn't participate in the focus groups. I asked them the same questions about what they retained from the performance, and also whether they discussed the performance with anyone afterwards. Again, people largely recalled the images from the performance as having the most impact for them. Some also mentioned that the structure of having the piece written from different perspectives enhanced their identification with it, one person saying "I know that I have been each of the personalities Tess portrayed when I struggle with body image, depending on how sensitive, emotional, political, or strong I am feeling at the time." Every person who responded to the survey said that they had discussed the performance with others afterwards. One commented on the effect of sharing ideas with other audience members, saying:

. . . hearing the themes related through someone else showed that the performance did what any good art piece should do; it encouraged the viewer to think in a different way, and it related to the audience in ways that each individual could understand.

This is also an important outcome, as normal post-performance discussion is what the focus groups were attempting to simulate.

Conclusion

The performance *Bodily* is an integral part of my doctoral research, and both audience and performer responses are integral to the assimilation of the performance into the thesis. The piece was developed in conjunction with my theoretical research, as the practice and theory components intertwine and inform each other. The focus groups and follow-up questionnaires revealed many interesting insights into the performance itself, as well as the discourse of transformation. Certain elements of performance seem to be conducive to transformation, and some focus groups participants even said that they had experienced change through experiencing *Bodily*. However, the longevity of this change is more difficult to assess. The outcomes of reported personal and audience response to the performance therefore form a multi-layered strand of data, which supports a theory of transformation through performance. The performance of *Bodily* is therefore located as a strand of research, and is here discussed through its before, during and after.

Note

1. Specifically, these case studies are the mute protest staged by contestant Merlin Luck upon his eviction from the *Big Brother* (Australia) reality television series in 2004, and the 2003 Academy Awards acceptance speech of filmmaker Michael Moore.

References

- Horkan, Melanie 2006 “*Bodily*: An Exploration of Body Image through Performance and Projection (review) in *Sydney Stage Online* <http://www.sydneystage.com.au/content/view/72/>. (accessed 27 June, 2006).
- Jung, Carl G. 1970 in Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, and Gerhard Adler (eds.) *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung Vol. 13: Alchemical Studies*, Bollingen Series. New York: Princeton University Press.
- Tillman-Healy, Lisa 1996 “A Secret Life in a Culture of Thinness: Reflections on Body, Food, and Bulimia” in Carolyn Ellis and Arther P. Bochner (eds.) *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing* California: Altamira Press, pp76-108.

Tessa Needham completed Bachelor of Arts (Theatre Theory and Practice) and Bachelor of Performance, Theory and Practice (Honours) degrees at the University of Western Sydney, Australia. While undertaking these courses she participated in various student productions, including *Awaiting Gravity*, a solo show she wrote, directed and performed in 2003. Tessa has recently completed a Ph.D. at the University of Western Sydney, exploring provocative and transformative performance. A major part of her thesis was the performance project *Bodily*, a solo work she produced in 2006. She is now an independent scholar.