

Stages: A Conversation Between Andrea Thal, Pauline Boudry, and Renate Lorenz, Berlin, September 2010

### Performing Performance

ANDREA THAL: I would like to start by talking about the importance of performance in your films—an integral part of your artistic practice. Some of your films are even comprised of parts of already existing performances that have been developed by performers and artists (mostly long-time friends and collaborators). How would you describe your specific intertwining of film and performance?

RENATE LORENZ: All of our films incorporate performance. We usually shoot a long sequence of a performance without an interruption or cut—like the dance in *Contagious!* (2010), the speech in *Charming for the Revolution* (2009), or Werner Hirsch's laughing in *N.O. Body* (2008). Therefore, I would say, the performance is given a certain kind of autonomy. But still, these films are neither meant to be a unique performance nor a documentation of one. This is true also as our films are always shown in a loop, which means that, unlike a performance, the performers address the camera (as well as the audience of the film) again and again.

PAULINE BOUDRY: Yes, the performance doesn't exist outside the film—it's not staged for the audience that was there the day it was shot, but for the audience that watches the film when it is projected.

RL: Also, we edit the performances after they're filmed. We sometimes change the chronology of a performance, we make decisions about its rhythm, we add music, which becomes another quite autonomous element of the final product, and so on. All these belated decisions become part of the performance and are present as much as the decisions the performer or the director makes before or during the performance. But there is still always a tension in this film/performance relationship ... On the one hand, the editing and looping highlight the performance as performative—a constructed and social process that is based on repetition and therefore not unique or individual. But on the other hand, the performance paradoxically underlines that this film is nevertheless a “live” event—something that happens between the projection, its context, and the audience.

### Revolutionary Becoming

AT: The camera and the performers move very freely in your films. You work with scripts but within these scripts, there are moments where you leave space for the performers and the camera to act autonomously.

PB: The performance happens for the camera, and I think when we conceive our films, we are very attentive to the role of the camera and its position, as well as to the relationship between the camera and the performer, who both have an autonomy and a gaze. The performer acknowledges the presence of the camera and the camera doesn't pretend to be invisible or neutral. In the film *Normal Work* (2007), we also wanted to have the position of the “director” marked. There is a dialogue between the “director” and the “performer”—the director gives instructions and the performer follows them. Sometimes, the performer also gives instructions

to the director and to the camera. This is similar to *N.O. Body* or *Charming*, where the performer gives “campy” or “narcissistic” looks to the camera, acknowledging the moment of being filmed.

RL: By acknowledging the camera (and therefore the audience), the performer also communicates something about the nature of her\_his performance: s\_he seems to indicate that s\_he is not trying to “be” the historical figure, but instead that s\_he is trying to connect to photographs, to objects, pieces of clothes, gestures, and poses. You see her\_him doing the work of *becoming* the photograph.

PB: We often work with materials from the past that show bodies that have been marked as “other,” freaky, perverse, racialized, or socially outcast. But when we do this, we ask us a lot of questions about how we can work with these documents without repeating processes or acts of devaluation of these bodies.

RL: For instance, if you watch *N.O. Body* or *Normal Work*, you are not invited to pity the body you see, since what you see is an obviously staged performance. Instead, the performer seems to say: “See, this is me Werner Hirsch, not Annie Jones (the historical reference in *N.O. Body*) or Hannah Cullwick (the reference in *Normal Work*). What you see is not ‘my’ embodiment. It is not my nature, it is not a personal feature. It is a document. But I desire it, it gives me pleasure to connect to it and I would strongly recommend that you do the same.” This visible connection plus the lines of desire that are created between the embodiment of the performer and embodiments or objects from another time or context is what you could call a performance practice of “drag.”

PB: When I think about it now, I realize that in all our films, the beginnings have a similar moment where the performers, in a very demonstrative way, stage the start of their performance. In *Charming*, Werner Hirsch creeps out from behind the electric mast in a very funny way to position his body in front of the camera; in *Contagious!*, you see Arantxa Martinez climbing on the stage; in *Salomania* (2009), you follow Wu Ingrid Tsang walking to a microphone. All these moments underline the start of a performance and obviously refer to drag performance. It’s a signal that says: the drag show is starting.

RL: Yes, and I think these moments are also a way for the performer to present her\_his agency in dealing with the historical material and to allow the audience to also engage in it—to also connect to this desire. The audience does not have to completely merge or identify with what is shown but rather, as Kathrin Sieg describes it in her book *Ethnic Drag*, the audience is invited to connect with the “act of showing,” which is moreover informed by contemporary drag practices. This produces some links to Bertolt Brecht’s acting theory. But while Brecht asks his actors to explain history to audiences by demonstrating the actions of their characters, our films don’t tend to explain or to give instructions.

I like how Gilles Deleuze, in relation to the past, describes an urgency to differentiate between “becoming” on the one hand and history on the other. He strongly suggests not to confuse, “the way revolutions turn out historically and people’s revolutionary becoming.” Deleuze turns to philosopher Charles Péguy to explain what he means in a passage that I really like. He says, “Péguy explained that there are two ways of considering events, one being to follow the course of the event, gathering how it comes about historically, how it’s prepared and then decomposes in history, while the other way is to go back into the event, to take one’s place in

it as in a becoming, to grow both young and old in it at once, going through all its components or singularities.”

So the question is, How is it possible to “go back into the event, to take one’s place in it as in a becoming”? What is enabled through the visualizing practice of “embodying” different times, a practice that Elizabeth Freeman calls “temporal drag”?

### Temporal Drag, Chronopolitics, Queer Archeology

AT: The way performers build a connection to various temporalities via objects, poses, or photographs demonstrates how connecting to a past (or any) event is something that has to be actively and continuously produced, an ongoing process of chronopolitics, that form temporal connections of specific moments and positions in time and political action. I like very much how, in your work, the concepts of “becoming,” “temporal drag,” and “queer archaeology” (another term that you sometimes use in relation to your films) find a practice that reaches beyond an individual or solitary act, in the sense that the way you make films is always collaborative and that your films count on the viewers to be active participants.

PB: We try to produce a collaborative space and to engage in a dialogue with friends from the present and, one could say, with friends from the past. So for example, our different performers bring their own perspectives and artistic backgrounds to our projects. But we are also in a relationship with friends from the past—the different characters and queer histories that we excavate and research, and which we present in our installations.

RL: Yes, and as I mentioned, you see drag performers from our time period engaging with archives from the past. But the films aren’t just about dealing with the past. They do not produce “history” as such. Instead, they show a *current* desire to experiment in a way that may instigate some future practices and relations.

PB: I think the perspective of the present is underlined when we make our position as “directors” visible. For instance, the music is often edited very abruptly, which underlines our intervention in the montage. You also sometimes see a clapperboard, which reminds you that the performers were just given instructions before the beginning of their performance, underlying our staging of the event and our decision making. Also, we purposely blur conventions of beginning and ends. For example, in *Contagious!*, we show an audience who is at the same time staged and participating. At the end of Vaginal Davis’s performance, they applaud (which actually was a spontaneous, not a rehearsed, applause). Then, they presume that the performance is over, and the audience and performers start to relax and talk to each other. But the camera kept recording that moment, instead of ending the film right after the applause. So it is as if you have two different ends unfolding.

In the film *Salomania*, we have two or even three different beginnings. First you see Wu Ingrid Tsang announcing his performance and the characters he is going to perform with a microphone in front of the camera. Then the clapperboard “claps,” announcing some kind of start, but what you then see is Wu Ingrid Tsang and Yvonne Rainer putting on their makeup and getting ready for the film in front of the mirror, as if the camera had started to film too soon. Then Yvonne Rainer warns the audience about the perverse contagiousness of the dance we are going to see, and then finally the actual dance performance starts.

RL: Paradoxically, the montage in *Salomania* seems to break open rather than to connect, as the term suggests.

AT: Your editing process underlines the fact that what we see in your films is a constructed view. Through this fragmentation, the performance disrupts traditional modes of narration and linearity and insists on a more complicated, temporal process of creating a relation.

RL: Breaks and unanticipated connections in temporality help us frustrate the idea of a legible body on screen for you to see. And of course, they also produce a resistance to the idea of progress and to the idea that there is an increasing amount of enlightenment when it comes to dealing with the variety of bodies and body practices. The photograph of Annie Jones in *N.O. Body* moved from the context of the sideshow into the context of a medical institution. The way in which difference is produced and performed changed, but it remains a brutal operation and a process of othering.

PB: Showing archives and research documents in our installations may also be a proposition for the audience to construct their own temporality and their own approach to the materials. They can decide if they want to watch the film first and then look at the photographs and documentation or do the reverse. It is also a proposition for the audience to become a performer themselves, to make their own “performance” by engaging with the different materials. In this way, we try to underline not only the autonomy of the performance, music, costumes, and archive, but also that of the spectator.

### Multiple Audiences

AT: The audience is a recurring theme of your films in as far as they often include a sense of an (absent) audience. Only in *Contagious!* do we see an actual audience present in the film. Furthermore, you have set some of your films in places where very distinct relations of viewing or speaking positions are at work, like the studio set up in *Normal Work*, the auditorium in *N.O. Body*, or the stage in *Contagious!*. These settings are also reflected in the performances, the camera positions, and the editing of the films. In this sense, an audience is always already there before we as a “second audience” see the films and this renders your work highly self-referential and reflective about their very means and conditions of production. And it brings us as viewers into a position of watching ourselves, observing our own implications in the act of watching a film.

PB: Yes, and different audiences are fantasized. In *N.O. Body*, the relationship with the audience shifts; Werner Hirsch/Annie Jones addresses them in different ways and different positions are taken into account. They are sometimes outsiders and their violent act of staring or maybe laughing is thematized. But in other moments, the audience is addressed as queer insiders, such as when Werner Hirsch flirts with the camera at the beginning of the film.

### Female Voices

AT: Your practices are very broad. Next to your collaboration as artists, both of you are involved in a whole range of other activities. Renate publishes in the field of queer visual culture and works as a curator of exhibitions and (together with Karin Michalski) of film programs. Both of you hold teaching positions at art academies and Pauline has an ongoing connection

to underground performance scenes through her activity as a musician and singer with Rhythm King And Her Friends and now with her new band Normal Love.

Songs from the post-punk period or bands influenced by it are important elements in your films. The experimental, often political, nature of the songs and the great number of female and lesbian musicians already challenging traditional gender concepts in a wide range of post-punk bands puts the songs you use in your films in close relation to recurring themes in your work. Beyond that, you use the music in a very specific way—usually only ever once in each film, almost like an insert.

RL: The music in our films is clearly part of post-production. It is used in an artificial way. It starts loudly and stops suddenly with a clear cut. It does not produce the illusion that it was recorded in the scene.

PB: I think it is very important to hear the female voices. It is post-punk. Some songs are more experimental, there is humor. In our films, it's not about virtuosity, but about experimentation. In Jack Smith's films, the presence of the exotic music from the forties is very important. It refers to a moment from the past that is reworked in his films. Through female post-punk, we also call up a particular presence.

RL: It is another past and, in a way, another performance that is included.

AT: It seems in your films everything is given a moment of "entering onto the stage": the music just as much as the performance, dances, objects, or props—like the ball in *Salomania*, which substitutes for the head of John the Baptist. This moment of entering onto the stage gives a sense of independence to these elements and grants them equal status in the production of a "queer archaeology." In your recent exhibition in Geneva (*CONTAGIEUX! rapports contre la normalité* at the Centre d'art contemporain Genève), four film installations were exhibited next to each other. Given that the music is usually the loudest part in your films, the songs could be heard in every single space of the exhibition, thus all the films were somehow simultaneously present when watching one.

RL: In the exhibition in Geneva, I also got the impression that the music connects the different installations. Suddenly, music starts in one part of the exhibition space, and then it wanders from one installation to the other. You might follow the sound as a kind of tour guide.

### Putting Captions Under Scrutiny

AT: Your films are always accompanied by photographic reproductions of archival or documentary material, which you sometimes modify by reframing or layering images over each other.

RL: And we usually use frames to present the photographs and material we show, so the documents don't look like they're in a historical display. But what does it mean to frame the documents and photographs and hang them on the walls?

AT: You mean, the rather classic idea of framing an artwork with *passe-partouts* and frames?

RL: We do not use display cabinets to present the work, for instance. We do not display the material as "authentic" material from the past ...

PB: In the historical documents themselves, we highlight the staging of discourse on pathologized bodies (such as in *N.O. Body* or *Contagious!*) but also the staging of class positions, sexual positions, and ethnicized positions (like in *Normal Work* or *Salomania*). These historical

documents are interesting to us because of this staging and copying, which of course is already there. So we do not present the historical material as something “original” or “authentic” that the contemporary film copies—that would construct a linear, chronological temporality and also a dualistic idea of original and copy. Moreover, the way that the performers engage with the archive is not a mere reenactment; it very often involves anachronistic elements. This is part of the reason why we are reluctant to use the notion of “reenactment” as a linear concept that means performing a role in an event that occurred at an earlier time.

AT: Your form of presentation clearly brings the documents into another context, one that reflects the way the material has been contextualized previously.

RL: The film *N.O. Body* is accompanied by forty-seven small photographs. To produce them, we photographed images and captions from one of Hirschfeld’s books, called *Geschlechtskunde, Bilderteil (Sexology, Images)*. The book is filled with images that Hirschfeld assembled in order to legitimize his gender theory. By taking photographs of Hirschfeld’s book, we separated the images and the captions, so some of our pictures only show the captions. We present them in a way where it might not be clear how the images and captions belong together. We hope the forceful and fixing process that the captions enact on the images—making it unequivocal—is highlighted this way.

PB: Or it could raise questions such as: What happens if the captions themselves are put under scrutiny in the same way that the deviant bodies are? What happens to these bodies if you don’t have a caption that helps you to read them? Do they become more or less threatening to normality?

RL: One could say that the separation we perform in our images produces a belated, perhaps incomplete attempt to undo a process of othering. Thus, our intervention into the historical material is quite visible in the photographs. Similarly, while the film presents the photographs as if they were in a historical slide show by Hirschfeld (he invented the slide show as means to lecture about his work in sexology), the subject and object of the presentation becomes insecure throughout the show, as does the position of the viewer. The film focuses less on the photographs themselves than on the *gesture* of demonstrating and exhibiting the photographs.

AT: The series of forty-seven photographs demonstrates another gesture of exhibiting.

PB: It is not a classical “ethnographic” presentation ...

RL: ... or a scientific presentation. Rather, the images and captions are presented as “art”—as something fabricated. A contemporary attention toward them is highlighted, a very specific kind of attention.

PB: Yes, and exhibiting these photographs or documents in the art context for the first time may give us an opportunity to look at them in a new way.

RL: It may take up or produce a double bind of repression and glamour: there is a history of constraints and cruelty connected to these photographs, but still something new and unexpected could be generated ...

AT: At the same time as your reframing of historical material questions the way captions seemingly ascribe meaning to images, attaching them to a single possible reading, it puts an emphasis on the traces of the archival-like page and illustration numbers, titles, and footnotes. Your series of photographs make the archival system visible while “freeing” the images from their ascribed meaning. Whereas in Hirschfeld’s book, the captions produce a knowledge that

is often *exterior* to the picture, your images render the very mechanism that produces and structures this knowledge visible.

PB: It could be interesting to fantasize that this group of pictures were part of Annie Jones's collection. What would it mean if she had taken and collected the pictures and showed them to her friends as perverse, sexy, and glamorous?

RL: Yes, I think the possibility to see the photographs anew is stressed by the way we hang the photographs. We neither use Hirschfeld's categories, such as "sexual fetishists" or "transvestites" to structure their hanging, nor do we produce new categories. Instead, we stress similarities and proximities between the photographs, we hang some images closer to others and some farther away. So it becomes a question of relations—of relative closeness or farness. This process changes with every installation of the photographs.

PB: This might be the reason why we still haven't managed to find a definitive way to hang them. Which is a problem when we are not in the exhibition space to hang the piece. Then the people putting up the show have to deal with their placement.

RL: It could be interesting to not dragoon ourselves to define the hanging but to rather describe the *process* one has to undertake to install the photos and to be curious about the results.

#### Friends from the Past

AT: Speaking of relative proximity, what does it mean for you both that in *Contagious!*, for the first time in one of your films, you not only address but actually *show* an audience?

PB: In the *Contagious!* audience, you can recognize artists and performers, people from our "scene" in Berlin, people who would go to a performance by Arantxa Martinez or Vaginal Davis. So in one way, they are participating "fans"—that's how it came about that they started to applaud Vaginal "for real" at the end of her performance. But at the same time, the audience is also staged. For example, we gave them some instructions about how to behave.

RL: Everybody acted very well. They seem bored, unconcerned, like zombies ...

AT: Even though they are there in the film, they also seem to be something like placeholders—an imaginary public. They seem to possess some kind of "passive" agency.

RL: *Contagious!* is about the possibility of contagion. The performers infect the audience and those in the audience infect one another—they might even infect the performers too. But at many points during the performance, the audience is specifically *resistant* to infection; they look bored or blasé. And this boredom in the film seems in a way even more visible or striking than infection.

PB: We were interested in *Contagious!* in the relationship between movements and repetition, or contagion. In the film, you see Vaginal Davis and Arantxa Martinez engaging with the dance called the cakewalk and also with epileptic dance. The cakewalk itself is a dance style that was invented by slaves at the beginning of the nineteenth century. They copied the dances of their masters in order to mock them. Then these dance movements were "copied" again in white bourgeois society, which saw them as "authentic" Afro-American dances, so that they became very fashionable at the end of the nineteenth century. There was like a big cakewalk "contagion"!

The epileptic dance scene developed similarly. Doctors at La Salpêtrière, the famous old Parisian hospital, were very closely observing the movements of the interned "hysterical" women,

but it's not clear if these women were actually "hysterical" or if they were simply copying or imitating the "hysterical" movements expected of them. It isn't clear if the original was not already a copy, like with the cakewalk. In the Parisian café-concert scene, these movements of the "hysterical" women were again copied by performers, who staged a dangerous loss of control of the feminine body. Again, this phenomenon was feared as something that could become contagious and spread throughout society.

In our film, at some "contagious" point, you see Vaginal Davis and the audience start to make the same movements. But then suddenly, Vaginal interrupts this togetherness, shouting at the audience to "Stop it!" When we recently screened *Contagious!*, Carolyn Dinshaw, a queer scholar working on temporality, was in the audience and she made a very interesting comment about this very moment in the film. She suggested seeing in this scene a "friend from the past" who is interrupting the repetition we were staging. What if our "friends from the past" decided *not* to be copied or imitated? What if they decided against communication? What if the "friends from the past" just said, "Stop it!"?

AT: I like this idea, it seems to allow for a space for the "friends from the past" to articulate themselves. Personally, I felt that the exclamation "Stop it!" is not only directed to the audience we see in the film but that, beyond that, it's something like a collective "Stop it!" aimed against any sort of staring or "othering" as one experiences it in everyday life. A "Stop it!" directed against normativity.

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