

FLESH-EATERS: NOTES TOWARDS A ZOMBIE METHODOLOGY

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Abstract

This article reflects upon Martin O'Brien 2015 commission *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours* as part of *Trust me I'm an Artist*, a Creative Europe funded project. He discusses the ethics of witnessing the sick body in performance. The article considers the concept of dis-ease as a mode of spectatorship. It is a concept employed in order to think through the politics of witnessing difficult performance work by artists with illnesses. He particularly reflects upon the nature of participation within his performance, which involved explicit interaction with his boy as sick. O'Brien ends by considering the ways in which the nature of this interaction allows for the striving towards agency over one's own flesh.

It has taken an hour so far. I am tethered to a metal pole in the middle of a specially constructed room with plastic semi-transparent walls, by a long metal chain. Wearing a straight-jacket, jock strap and a green hood with only the mouth free. I have been plunging my head into a metal dish full of green paint and shuffling on my knees, using my head as a paint brush I have drawn a spiralling line from the centre to the outer limit and plastic walls. I began chained close to the pole and with each rotation I was able to reach further out into the space. As I reached the outer limits of the space, the spectators were forced to move in order to avoid physical contact with my body.

This relationship of contiguity between my own body and that of the spectators continued throughout the performance developing in unexpected ways, as I will explore in this writing. My 2015 performance *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours* emerged, as much of my work does, from my experience of living with cystic fibrosis. The genetic disease has traditionally been thought of as a death sentence from birth and, although the treatments for the disease mean that the life expectancy is ever increasing, it is still characterised by a shortened life span. *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours* took as its starting point the contemporary portrayal of the zombie as the ultimate abject body: a walking corpse that feeds on the flesh of the living and whose bite infects, turning the victim into the undead. I wanted to use the figure of the zombie as a metaphor for chronic illness in order to think through a politics of sickness in relation to contemporary fears of contagion. The term 'undead' itself is a productive one for considering the chronically ill body. Richard Greene and Kasey Silem Mohammad argue that

"its double-negative construction (the grammatical negative of *un-* and the metaphysical negative of *dead*), the idea of Undeath problematizes our everyday notions of what it means to be alive in the first place—in a literal sense, we are *all*, as living beings, "Undead". It is only a short step from this idea to the suggestion that the state of non-death (other-wise known as "life") we privilege as authentic might itself be subject to the same doubts that attend our apprehension of Undeath"[1]

The zombie is able to challenge the human understanding of mortality: a body bereft of subjectivity and individual identity, once dead but now living again, but simultaneously still dead. The zombie is rotting flesh, animated and stumbling. Curiously, most of the common representations of the zombie depict it

as motivated only by its need for survival as a species. The zombie bites in order to both feed and to create more zombies. The population of the zombie can only increase as the population of the human decreases. The zombie is both human and non-human animal, it is both dead and alive, it is something to both fear and to pity. It offers a useful metaphor for thinking about being in the world with a chronic illness in which the relationship with death is keenly felt as a way of life. This short writing is not a full essay, more a series of thoughts emerging from my work *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours* around performance, illness and the figure of the zombie. It discusses *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours* in relation to the context in which this work was shown: as part of *Trust me I'm an artist*, which is concerned with ethics in art and medicine. I am using this writing to pose some questions around ethics and the performance of illness. What are the ethics of asking an audience to witness performances in which the sick body is enduring? What are the implications of physical contact between spectators and the (sick) performer?

Dorita Hannah used the term dis-easing in talking about the recently deceased dance artist and co-founder of DV8, Nigel Charnock. She posits that during his performance *Fever* he was 'contaminating his surroundings' [2] by bursting through the proscenium arch and onto the audience members. This term seems particularly useful for talking about my own work. She suggests that 'Charnock's feverish body dis-eased the onlooker and unsettled the role played by theatre architecture' (ibid: 135 [3]). She thinks of the dis-easing of a body as 'a feverish body unleashing itself in space; a contaminated body, and body as contaminant, threatening to erupt through the borders of its own skin and refusing to be contained within established forms for housing performance' [4]. Hannah conceptualises the dis-easing of bodies in relation to theatre architecture. Her project *Heart of PQ* (2003) erected a performance landscape in the Prague Industrial Palace. Over a two week period her performance interacted with spectators who moved freely through the enormous space 'where notions of spatial containment and contamination were explored as a means of manipulating theatrical space' [5]. I am borrowing this term from Hannah in order to think about how the bodies of the spectators might be dis-eased, through both the breaking of barriers between audience and performers and a form of contiguity with the sick enduring body.

This form of relationship between performer and spectator poses ethical questions about consent and what is at stake in being an audience to the sick body. One of the ways in which I disrupted the boundaries of the spectator-performer relationship was through a section in the performance in which I spat mucus into a small metal bowl filled with water and washing up liquid then proceeded to blow bubbles from the mucus infested water. The bubbles floated over the entire room. Spectators dashed to avoid them or stood and allowed them to burst on contact with their bodies. My disease was manifested in these bubbles. I was literally infecting the space with my illness. The bubbles made visible the fears of contamination associated with the sick body and forced the spectators to share a space with this or leave. I ask my spectators to trust me.

The sick body in art has often asked pertinent ethical questions of spectators through difficult performances. Other examples have implications for how we might understand my representation of sickness in relation to issues of ethics. In writing about Ron Athey's work Dominic Johnson suggests that in witnessing Athey's 'ordeal in performance, we are asked to identify with the physical and psychic weight of his

experience, as a body under attack, not least as a survivor of AIDS' [6]. There are wider implications of Johnson's reading of the visual affect of bearing witness to Athey's work. Johnson suggests a form of identification is at stake when witnessing the enduring body. For Johnson performances which stage an enduring body, such as by Athey or Franko B, asks the spectator 'to read the body and its biological processes as something other than straightforward symbols or metonyms' instead 'to privilege her or his affective relationship with the artist's body, and to reassess assumptions about consent, vulnerability, dignity, and political agency [7]. Johnson points to a viewing experience that involves a return to the body of the spectator through the affective potential of the event that asks us to witness the difficult image of another body. It is reminiscent of Antonin Artaud's idea of theatre as vengeful and as able to act upon the body of its audience; attacking the senses. The body of the spectator is penetrated by the work of art. Jennifer Doyle describes experiencing certain works, often those interested in identity politics, as producing a 'critical limit' [8]. She points to the lack of interest, within mainstream art criticism, on issues of identity and body politics. These performances of endurance and sickness disrupt our ability to simply read a work critically and instead return us to our own bodies as also tending towards failure. In bearing witness to the sick enduring body in performance we are reminded of our own physical bodies as ones that are also capable of such suffering. This reality that we are forced into experiencing is uncomfortable. It asks spectators to be at dis-ease to understand that we are all human. My performance took this notion of penetrating the body of the spectator, abolishing the boundaries between human beings.

What is it to bite another human being? To taste the flesh of another? To become, for a brief moment, a cannibal? I think of the controversy surrounding the Uruguayan footballer Luis Suarez when he bit an opposition player during a world cup match against Italy. This was not the first time Suarez had been involved in a biting incident and his punishment was far greater than those handed to players for punching, head butting and dangerous tackles. Suarez gained a reputation, galvanised by the media storm surrounding him, as a monster. Unlike other assaults that regularly happen on the football field, the bite sparked outrage among fans and football authorities. Perhaps it is the animalistic quality that disturbs people in such a way. The bite reduces the other into a piece of meat. It establishes a relationship between two people predicated upon predator/prey dynamics. Or perhaps it is an inbuilt fear of contagion associated with the mouth of another.

Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours involved several sections in which a bite took place. The first followed directly on from a section in which I had pierced my lips together with a hypodermic needle. After removing the needle the blood ran from my lips down my chin and I continued my spiral around the space. As I reached a spectator I leant forward and bit her/him. I clamped my teeth onto their skin and remained there until they pulled away. The second biting section occurred when I was chained close to the pole. I was naked by this point and covered in green paint. I held onto the pole above my head echoing the position of St. Sebastian and spectators were invited one by one to walk to the centre of the space and bite me anywhere on my body and as hard as they wanted. After biting, they were asked to instruct another spectator of their choosing to carry out the task. I'm interested in how we might consider the formal quality of this action.



Fig. 1. Martin O'Brien, *Taste of Flesh. Bite me, I'm Yours*, London, April 2015 (© Martin O'Brien. Photo Arts Catalyst)

My sick body biting spectators presented myself as animalistic other. Yet, the biting was joyous. People enjoyed the ritual, me as predator, spectators as prey in a game whereby I leave my mark on them to carry away. It was the staging of a contamination of sorts. It became an act of aggression performed playfully. The space of performance became one in which a form of bodily contamination was possible. But this contamination through biting opened up an ethical relationship of flesh tasting. Spectators knew what was at stake in being in the space with me and what the nature of the consent this activated. I entered into a dialogue through biting which asked people to allow me to taste their flesh. The stigma of contiguity with sickness is annihilated in these moments. I ask others to be sick with me, infect me and I'll infect you. Trust me, I'm an artist. Performance is, for me, always a place in which I can stake a claim of agency over my own body and the consent of one body to become prey for another demands ownership of our bodies. In allowing spectators then to come and mark me with their teeth, the act of biting becomes a way of sharing an experience. In giving up my body to be prey for others I was also demanding that my body is mine to give in the first place. For those three hours, everyone present understood what it is to taste flesh. Share your taste with me and I'll share mine with you. For that brief moment when I can taste you, you are mine and when my flesh is in your mouth, for those few seconds I am yours. Trust me, I'm an artist.

References and Notes

"Trust Me, I'am An Artist" website: <<http://trustmeinanartist.eu/>>

1. Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammad, 'Introduction' in Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammad *The Undead and Philosophy: Chicken Soup for the Soulless*, (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 2006) pp. Xiii-Xiv.
2. Dorita Hannah, 'Containment + Contamination: A Performance Landscape for the Senses at PQ03' in Sally Banes and Andre Lepecki eds, *The Senses in Performance*, (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2007) pp. 135-145: p.135.
3. *ibid*: 135.
4. *ibid*: 135.
5. *ibid*: 136.
6. Dominic Johnson, *Theatre & the Visual*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012) p.68.
7. *ibid*: 41.
8. Jennifer Doyle, *Hold it Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013) p. 21.