



REFLECTIONS ON WIN:

A letter to Poppy (Miracle) Jackson from Benjamin Sebastian

Art is never an end in itself. It is only an instrument for tracing lines of lives...

Deleuze and Guattari

If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive.

Audre Lorde

Poppy,

As I write this I am overcome by a nervousness (fear) I am all too familiar with. It is that nervousness that Audre Lorde describes often and so eloquently with regard to speaking out, being heard/visible. This to me is important, specifically in relation to your work; being heard/visible, but a self-owned visibility. Not a visibility imposed from the outside.

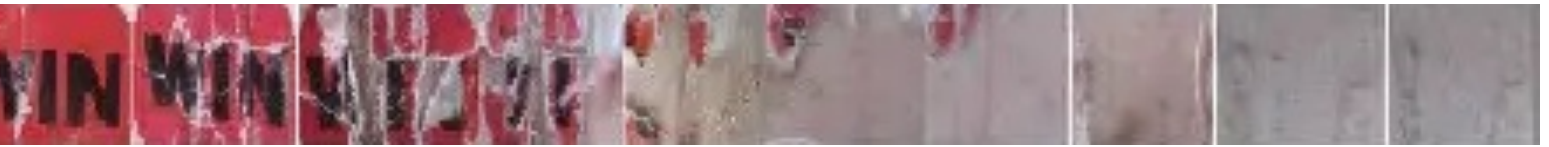
It is now six months since we were in Brooklyn (NYC) together. Six months since we paced two blocks in Bushwick convincing each other that the only failure possible would be self-censorship. We were both scared of opening ourselves up (literally), becoming vulnerable and showing that which so many (still) do not want to see or have exist; the penetrated male and the self-owning woman. Although I would normally consider myself a non-binary identifying body, I find it productive at times to identify on the basis of sex and gender strategically, but we can talk more about that in person.

I want to share with you some of my memories of our time in New York and my experience of your installation, *WIN*, which took place at Grace Exhibition Space.

Grin and Bare It.

I have been thinking about how much unwanted attention Bean received, apparently due to 'looking different' and when she was researching the legality of states of undress and found that (as in England) it was legal in the state of New York for women to be topless in public. I can't remember why you were not with us but I want to recount when Bean and I went for that walk... Two bodies, both bare-chested, walking across the Williamsburg Bridge. Yes it was a provocative act, but does not research dictate a rigorous approach? Talk about a reality check. Reactions varied from humour to aggression and disgust. One man, on jogging past (topless) commented jovially "Now there's something you don't see everyday"

and asked to take a picture. With a reply of no, the man proceeded to take the picture anyway. After being informed he was operating within the same power dynamics as rape, this enlightened creature replied: 'If you want to dress like that, I am within my rights to respond how I like'. This was the first of many people (men) who felt it was their right to objectify and capture (digitally) Bean's body for their own desires. I remember Bean and I recounting this experience to you and the myriad of discussions that ensued. What I remember the most is the absolute feeling of frustration and anger surrounding the inequality of it all.



Targeted.

On return from a trip to Coney Island, you and Bean had won a fish (which you later gifted to me, where was I that day?) from the Win Fish & Critterz fun stall. From the stall operator you had negotiated a sticker in the style of a target with the word 'WIN' printed on it. You placed this on your solar plexus and left it there, documenting its disintegration across time (10 days?). I remember feeling this was just as provocative as Bean walking topless through Brooklyn and Manhattan. The sticker drew attention to your cleavage, labelling your body/chest (your heart?) as a target. The word 'WIN' insinuating domination already achieved. Was this an act of defiance, eroding the misogynistic ownership of your body? Or was this an act of resignation, accepting and becoming that target full, enabling self-ownership? I perceived it to be both and something more still.

WIN.



Our time in New York was almost over, 6 weeks had past. It was the evening that you and I were programmed to make our install-actions. I had finished my install-action (after having almost suffocated in a full head bind of gaffer tape) and you helped me to calm down. It was time for you to begin. Prior, you had instructed me move the entire audience out of the exhibition space for the beginning of your work. The audience obliged and were instructed that in a moment they would re-enter the space, one by one. We began to re-enter the space.

As I entered, I was forced to move through a narrow passage, between wall and counter. I instantly felt controlled and manipulated. The layout of the room channelled me towards you – naked, cornered, inverted. Supporting your bodyweight through your neck and shoulders, your arms flowing out across the floor. You looked to have been thrown there. Your thighs where I expected to view your shoulders, feet in place of head. Legs splayed wide apart, a tatty homemade sign was inserted into your vagina (it read 'WIN' – a digital copy taken from documentation of the target you had worn on your chest). In one hand you held a small blade and in the other, a handful of gold leaf, spilling, floating out with air

currents in the room.

Silence.

Your position and my height facilitated an awkward, topical view of your vulva, penetrated lips separated by the cardboard shaft of the sign. Your body suggested the fallen, pornographic choreography and somehow, a misuse of the female body, particularly the vagina. Yet there was no misuse: you had orchestrated this scene, claiming the space, body, time and vagina as self-owned. I remember feeling as though I was in a temple and reverence was required, perhaps demanded. Even before I had made eye contact with you, I was uncomfortably aware that your eyes were upon me.

You were gazing at me.

As I traveled past your body into the open area of the space, you traced my movements, only your eyes moving. You controlled that interaction totally. Over and over again your defiant gaze silently ushered each audience member past your contorted body and into the space. Some shocked by your install-action, others laughed nervously. All were unsure of how to act and where to look.

You knew exactly where to look.

With everyone beyond your gaze, you slowly rolled your head to face us, momentarily, you lifted the blade to your left shoulder and began to cut a long, curving line. Shoulder – solar plexus – shoulder. Like the line of a bird's wings in flight, a red mark followed your finger tips and blade. The blood began to trickle down over the tops of your shoulders, in sporadic little streams. You then began to gold leaf the curved, now bloodied lines.

This echoed in me of the Japanese pottery practice known as Kintsugi, whereby broken objects are repaired, not in an attempt to hide the damage but to highlight cracks, fault lines and breakages with gold. The belief is that the objects become more beautiful because of their history, because of such damage and re-assembly.

Gilded, you paused. You withdrew the shaft of the sign from between your labia. Carefully, you lent the sign against the wall, upright, folded yourself down from the wall and stood before us. Staunchly, you searched our faces momentarily with your gaze before slowly starting to shake your hands. Your Head followed, hair flowing across your face and chest. Eventually your arms began to flail and your whole body violently convulsed until the action was no longer possible.

You regained your balance, gold leaf fluttered and glistened around you in the air. As you shook, your body was freed of all rational, socially-required calmness and the gold leaf radiated



from you. Sparkling, almost suspended in space and time. That moment felt like a new world where we could be and do anything. You slowly swept the hair from your face, paused, regarded us and walked through our mass, parting us as you left.

I often think of New York and *WIN*. In turn Poppy, I think about the opening quotes in this letter. I think about the 'lines of lives' you traced with *WIN*, the bodies (women, men and everyone in between) damaged by misogyny, sexism, heterosexism and cis-sexism. It seems the world becomes more multiple and complex with every passing moment. I wonder, if we can define ourselves and not be 'eaten alive', where might we end up and what lives might we live?

Remembering the final moments of your install-action, one particular element blazes in my mind. In the golden, quite calm that followed your convulsions, I noticed the blood lines (the stream like tears that had trickled away from the lines that you had cut), that had aptly run with gravity over your shoulders towards the floor, were now inverted. Uncannily, they now ran up your chest, seemingly weightless, as though droplets of blood were about to lift from your shoulder tops and float up and away from your body. In this moment I felt light. Everything felt light. There was hope and the potential of something... New?

I wanted to reflect here Poppy, share some memories, write a personal letter to you rather than write an essay referencing theoretical approaches. There seems to be more than enough academic activity surrounding our field and sometimes I think this is to the detriment of the actual work.

My final thought for you is this: Do you remember when we met Tehching (Sam) Hsieh? Do you remember how terrified we were to know he was in the audience, viewing our work? Why? Why were we so scared? Both you and I are exploring the world and everything that has come before us through our bodies in our time, in our space. No one can tell us how to do this or that we are doing it wrong. There are no benchmarks, no one has ever lived in our bodies, here and now. Watching you reclaim your body from the violent histories of misogyny and patriarchy was so inspiring and gave me courage to dream of other ways of being. I will hold onto this lightness Poppy, thank you.

With love and autonomy,

Benjamin. Xx



WIN was curated by Bean and Benjamin Sebastian as part of the residency programme/performance festival; Alien(s) in New York, Funded by Arts Council England and the British Council through the Artists' International Development Fund awarded to the curators. Grace Exhibition Space, Brooklyn. NY. August & September 2012

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