

Real Beauty Doesn't Have To Try Like That: How I Got to Transform Cost into Value

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Abstract

At the centre of my research is an investigation of beauty and ugliness and their operation within live art practice. As the basis of my PhD, I embarked on a piece of practical research to transform my body through going to the gym every day for a year. During this time I also kept a diary wherein I attempted to situate my changing physicality in relation to world events, in order to retain perspective and some degree of self-reflection. At the end of the project I had written 80,000 words and gained two stones of muscle. One year to the day after finishing, I presented an eleven hour long performance installation which placed a one penny value on every word I had written. This paper investigates the nature of cost and value in the gym project and its outcome in the performance. Referring to Amelia Jones' scholarship on performing subjectivities, I use the gym-practice as a way of investigating responsibility and the incongruity of a gym-fit body in an arts gallery setting.

Introduction

This paper investigates the role of practice in framing a philosophical enquiry into beauty, in particular reflecting upon the nature of my own responsibility in the moment of performance. Speaking about his own work, performance artist Andre Stitt writes that 'Ultimately [...] responsibility is conferred upon us all; and if one is not being responsible one is not paying attention' (85). My mode of 'paying attention' within two projects is under discussion in this essay. Under the provisional title 'the trouble with male beauty' I went to the gym every day for a year (January

2006 to January 2007). One year into the project, I presented an eleven-hour performance entitled *Coinage* (Jan 2008), which was based on the gym-project, at The Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol. Thomas Aquinas' medieval (and sacred) definition of beauty, following on from the Greeks, is a three-point system: 'First, a certain wholeness or perfection, for whatever is incomplete is, so far, ugly; second a due proportion or harmony; and third, clarity, so that brightly coloured things are beautiful' (qtd. in Carritt, 51). The pursuit of a body that one finds daily on the front of fitness magazines might easily accord to this description: the body is balanced, not underdeveloped on one side, and, being stripped of hair, it possesses an even tonality. It promotes itself as beautiful and those that cannot attain the ideal are by implication ugly; these grinning models are the new sanctified icons. In 2006 I was far from the ideal promoted in fitness magazines. Starting at this distance from the ideal, my project aimed to engage with the visual politics of the ideal or aesthetic body. The gym project owed something of its enquiry to sports geography with its interest in spatial and temporal measures (gaining muscle mass over a one year period was my principal objective). In framing this paper, I acknowledge the work that goes before it regarding identity politics; in particular I draw on Peggy Phelan and Amelia Jones. Performances of long duration and of transformation often fall into the category of body art and in this respect practices by Marina Abramovic, Gina Pane, Vito Acconci and early work by Stelarc also inform my work.

Project Development

In its physical practice, the gym-project consisted of going to the gym every day for a year and engaging with muscle-building and fat-reducing exercise. Rather than a sports orientated goal I was engaged in an aesthetic proposal to develop my physique towards the popular shape of fitness magazines men. I wanted to engage with the drives and social phenomenon of going to the gym and a masculine preoccupation with beautifying the body as an art practice; I took inspiration (in the form of the project) from the performance artist Tehching (Sam) Hsieh, in particular his 1980-1981 *Time Clock* piece. In this one year performance Hsieh installed a time-clock in his studio and for one year, every hour, on the hour, he punched a card and shot one frame on a 16mm camera (he began with a shaved head to mark the passing of time). While I admired the commitment to the project I was most taken with his changing appearance over time, which became apparent from the

frames he had taken at measured intervals. The gym project felt more like a private matter, a kind of invisible performance. By adopting a dour and business-like attitude and wearing carefully selected clothes (tight fitting, technical material), as well as maintaining a regularity of attendance that helped register my seriousness amongst other frequent gym users, I was more easily able to inflict upon my body the casual brutality necessary for it to gain mass and fitness. I use the term 'invisibility' in the sense that Erving Goffman employs it in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, regarding the execution of socially performed roles (29), rather than Peggy Phelan's gendered reading of racially other, female or queer identities in *Unmarked*, these latter identities rendered invisible – and thus unrepresentable – by dint of their not being heterosexual male identities (5). It was important to me to record a starting and a finishing position, not so much as Hsieh's proof of authenticity but as a record of spatial and temporal development. This ended up being a multilayered account of 'before,' 'during' and 'after' the gym-project, comprising most significantly of a daily diary, but also featuring measurements, a photo-montage of my body, as well as the ephemera of completed exercise cards for the fitness plans which were programmed for me, together with photographs of the dozens of empty pill bottles and empty tubs of protein powder (see Fig. 1) that I consumed over the course of the project.



Fig. 1. Pill Bottles. Photo courtesy of Stephen Robins

The diary, which runs to 80,000 words, is written under two headings: 'Here and Now' and 'Elsewhere.' The first of these is an investigation into the transformations happening to me as a result of the gym practice. It is concerned primarily with domestic issues, but with a focus on reporting my gym activity (whether it be progress with a particular exercise, changes to my eating regime or the latest glucose 'power' drink). The 'Elsewhere' part looked at world news events (reported mainly through the BBC News website, Al Jazeera or Fox News). When I originally conceived of the diary, I had in my mind a mechanism for

recording the meaninglessness of the gym-project in the face of overwhelming world events. There is a tension between the rules of the project and taking an ethical stance regarding my own body. There were a few days when I was exhausted and needed to rest for fear of causing myself an injury. This anxiety about the value of the project is implied in the conjunction with world news. Could the fact that I could now bench-press 5kg more than three weeks previously be important when read in relation to reports of Shia reprisals against Sunni militia in Iraq? These two records (kept as one) speak to a passage of time as lived through repetitive activity. By framing the entries in this way I hoped to juxtapose them, allowing myself space to question the nature of responsibility and artistic practice. The selection of news stories is of course inextricably linked to my own blindspots and enthusiasms: there is an emphasis on the war in Iraq, which I had opposed; the Israeli bombing of Lebanon, which I was appalled by; stories of the empowerment of women's politics because of my long-standing support of gender equality; anything to do with Catholicism and queer politics, because I am a self-identifying gay ex-Catholic man. Whilst I imagined ironic juxtaposition between my gym work and world events at the beginning (my feeble bench pressing as an example), the dialogue between these things emerged in the moment of writing. The diary also records my increasingly complex relation, over time, to the project's original aims: I found it less easy to see myself as separate from the social environment of the gym – I became a 'regular' and came to be on nodding terms with several people who were also attending frequently. Whilst I might have started the performance of my part in the social scene of the gym a little cynically, not thinking myself a sincere gym-goer so much as a figure occupying a position simultaneously inside and outside the role, this gradually changed over time. To use Goffman's terms, it was through a process of immersion (fitness programmes, exercises, dietary advice and so on) that I became more convinced in the sincerity of my performance (29-31). The diary aspect was then critical to retain a degree of reflectivity throughout the process, even if the monthly measuring and photographing of my body became occasions for concern and shame at slow progress. Unlike a sportsman who would be concerned with increased strength, stamina or power, my tests aimed to visually measure an increase in muscle bulk.

As a student of theatre I was fascinated by the performance of the gym user, in valorous action (gasping, sweating and red in the face from exertion), performed in front of similarly intentioned

people. I saw grim faced concentration amongst users in front of the banks of television sets showing MTV or Soaps; there were young men working out together, each encouraging (bullying?) another repetition out of the other's exhausted muscles; young women plugged into iPods™ making up the large part of the cardio-vascular machines' demographic; and the erotically charged sight of the lycra-clad rowing teams pulling in unison. Even if I write about 'groups' I recall individuals clearly: the grandfather and grandson who worked out quietly, the woman in long Buddhist robes whose horizontal style of rowing made me smile, the extremely thin woman who would spend an hour and a half on the stepper and whose neck vertebrae I could count. Having purposefully not interviewed any other gym-goers, I can only speculate on the reasons for their attendance. Some certainly go to train (rugby players and rowers for example), but others (maybe most) go for reasons other than complementary sports training. However, it was the groups, specifically those who had organised their efforts, that caused me to wonder about the need to be *seen* working out, like performers need an audience. The audience in theatre has the role of witnessing, giving meaning to the performance of character and action, while gym users on the other hand witness each other coextensively. By this I mean that they are engaged in mutually affirming and validating not only the efforts taken but their relation to one another in both time and space. Put crudely: the space you take up is reflective of your commitment to gym-practice. Perhaps they are required to complete the action: it isn't enough for me to go there and do my exercise; I require them to witness my progress and value my attendance, as indeed I value theirs, and their performance of it.¹ This 'completion' happened in several ways, from my gym instructor asking if I had new kit ('no I just fit it better') to my awareness of other gym-users really *noticing* me for the first time. As Musetta Durkee writes (with reference to identity in dance):

The task of causing appearance to appear is [...] a political imperative as well as an aesthetic one: taking hold of, possessing and arresting the representations of bodies, of persons, is an authoritarian act of domination and oppression. (39)

¹ I am grateful to my colleague Ruth Holdsworth for her thoughts on this matter

These sanctioned looks did indeed subtly shift the way I behaved as an object to be looked at, and in particular to be noticed as a man by other men. It was in fact profoundly unsettling (and surprising, since I have always prided myself on my capacity to disappear when I need to), making me feel like an actor on stage as the lights come on. By developing pectoral, abdominal and bicep muscles, I became aware that I was awakening a new role within the body that I inhabit, identifying no longer as invisible, but as masculine. 'The process of self-identity,' writes Phelan, 'is a leap into a narrative that employs seeing as a way of knowing' (5). In the gym environment, I became most visible to the serious users when I engaged most fully with the narrative of the gym. I understood, perhaps for the first time, the performance of masculinity by adopting (however disingenuously) some of its codes. Jones reads (male) body artist Vito Acconci's narcissism as inherently destabilizing to masculinity, although framed in a very different way:

Acconci's body art works [...] suggest that the very need for the continual performance of masculinity – the repetitious restaging of its boundaries to keep out that which is not *it* – testifies not to its durability and coherence but, rather, to its radical instability. (111)

Becoming visible in the social context of the gym is then taken as a tacit acceptance of game playing with the 'radical instability' of masculinity. Completion of the action, in the sense in which I used it earlier, does not mean that the process is over when this happens, but that its transactional quality is affirmed, which is repeated on the next visit. An important element of my reflection on the gym-project in the diaries is a building sense of dissatisfaction – mentioned a little earlier – with my progress. I might have become visible to some other serious gym users but I had yet to become visible to myself, or at least not consistently so. It is this lack of consistency in my own visibility which attests to the pernicious problem of male beauty: the masculine male in his febrile attempt to attain/maintain the aesthetic body makes manifest the anxieties of failure. I was not the only man to go to the gym every day.



Fig. 2. *Coinage*. Photo courtesy of Steve Robins

Making the Invisible Visible

Ending the year's project left a dilemma as to how to proceed with distilling the ephemera collected over one year's practice into a performance. My solution was to literally convert terms of engagements into matter: I took a one-penny coin for every word I wrote in the gym diaries, so the rule-based nature of the project informed the structure for the performance. *Coinage* was the result of my desire to make the invisible performance of the gym project manifest within a performance art context. What follows is from the 'copy' I wrote for The Arnolfini's brochure of programmed works to frame the performance, which was displayed in the centre's main installation space:

The smallest denomination coin is one penny, the smallest part of language is the word. I wrote 80,000 words – that's £800. Here each word has an undifferentiated value. So for me it's a question now of taking some responsibility – to stand and say I weigh these things and maybe I can carry the mass of these words. To revalue them, perhaps.

There was here the hollow joke about words being cheap. In this performance installation, 'taking responsibility' for the words I had written involved literally carrying them for eleven hours: I actually felt the weight of them. *Coinage* roved over several sites in The Arnolfini. In the foyer space of The Arnolfini 80,000 pennies were installed in a grid of 365 piles. The action of the performance / installation was to clear the coins from the foyer to the light studio over eleven hours. Each pile had the same number of coins as the diary entry for that particular day. So, for example, on 12th September 2006 I wrote 514 words. In the white studio, two

floors above the foyer, there were three films showing on a continuous loop. Two showed films of my back as I held a large £20 bank-bag of pennies. In the first film, my back was naked, while in the second I was wearing a floral print dress (see Fig.2). Each of these films saw me holding the bag of pennies until my arm gave way and the bag began to drop, at which point the film would loop back to the beginning. The third film, projected from above onto the white floor, showed a life-size image of me lying facedown naked on the massed pile of pennies. In the film, the natural lighting causes a shifting in the coins' reflectivity. These were all silent films. I recorded myself speaking the 80,000 words from my diary and by placing a DVD player and speakers into a rucksack I carried in performance, I was able to listen to the diary in real time. The duration of the event was set by the length of time it took me to speak the words of the diary. As each day's text ended on the audio, I picked up the coins and put them into the rucksack. As the bag slowly filled (and became very heavy), I walked the two flights of stairs to the white studio and emptied the coins from the rucksack onto the lying-down projection, so that over time the real coins covered the site of projection, which became largely obliterated through refraction. The holding of the coins and their removal functioned as a symbolic holding of the weight of the words I had used to describe one year's worth of 'news,' both global and personal.

For me, the entire performance installation was a reflection upon the nature of responsibility, the war in Iraq and the trouble associated with striving for physical beauty, which I had been exploring in the gym-project. As Andre Stitt asserted in relation to the issue of responsibility in his own work: 'My works are about paying attention, about asking questions and trying in some small measure to address imbalances in this struggle [...] If you take care of this moment, you take care of all time' (85). I do not think Stitt is suggesting that performance is the answer to a question, but rather that performance is alertness, attentiveness, the raising of problems in tangible forms. Through *Coinage* I was paying attention to the work of the previous year, the diary and the huge effort recorded in my body. Moreover, I think it is also worth reflecting here on Stitt's idea of 'taking care of this moment' and its significance in my own work. In the main performance space there is a tension between the careful formal arrangements set up in the installation and the slow action of erasing the structure (that is, the sculptural form of the coins' grid-arrangement in the foyer). In the spoken text, the body's 'improvement' is read in relation to the real but



Fig. 3. *Coinage*. Courtesy of Steve Robins

remote events of invasion and military conflict contained within the text of the diary, the low-key nature of which is almost lost in the cathedral-like space of The Arnolfini's foyer in which it is presented.

Project Evaluation

The classical statues of the Greeks and Romans often celebrate the aesthetic body by placing it prominently on a pedestal in a gallery space – such as the one in which I performed. I aimed to speak to the unsuitability of the aesthetic body in the (performance) art environment, which so often speaks for the marginalized, the imperfect. In November 2007 I had been invited to join La Pocha Nostra in creating a performance for the Arnolfini called *The Barbarian Collection: Runaway Runway*, which staged hybrid identities on a giant catwalk against the backdrop of a life-sized cross for staged crucifixions of the artists involved. La Pocha Nostra are renowned for delivering complex, ambiguous and unsettling personas which vex matters of aesthetic beauty and demand that marginal identities are given attention. During the *Barbarian Collection* project I created a sexually titillating and ambiguous 'character' which I dubbed muscle Mary; this oiled and muscled persona in pigtails, high heels and a mini skirt was born out of my engagement with the gym project. Two months later, in gym vest and joggers, my body's implied idealism, or its apparent engagement with a decisive attempt towards a popular ideal of masculine beauty, felt incongruous in the art gallery context –

incongruous because presenting the attempt is tantamount to applauding the ossified, alienating mono-dimensional character that beauty in popular culture presents (if you are young, white, straight, able bodied, upper-middle class, Western, and so on). The text of my diaries speaks about the instabilities within the body visible and contradicts this monotonal symbolism, introducing plurality and ambivalence to the time-consuming, physically tiring action and spectacle in the foyer. I hoped that the text would gently attest to the unseen, or, in Phelan's terms the 'unmarked.'

I am not unmindful of the criticism levelled at male performance artists regarding heroic practices. According to Jones the inclination to pay for attention with discomfort amounts to a masochistic practice; she wonders whether 'masochism [...] threaten[s] or reinforce[s] the male body,' writing:

The prevalence of [...] masochistic strategies in male body art suggests that [...] attempts at transcendence continue [...] to be fundamental motivating factors for male artists. The ambivalence of much of this work can be located in part as an effect of its obsession with the hegemonic [Jackson] Pollock myth [...] that is both countered and in some ways reinforced by the riven, punctured, suffering body of the masochistic male body artist. (129)

Inevitably when one is presented with a sculpted body (in gym parlance 'ripped'), one knows, if only on a superficial level, that suffering has been endured to get there. However, in this case it was covered up, obscuring (I hope) the idealism that the male gym-fit body implies. However, this is only a part of what is read: it is principally desire, either repressed or activated, which responds. I chose the foyer space because I wanted this private, almost invisible performance of one year to become visible for a time: not the body it created but the person who carries the 'gym-body' (if such a mind body split could possibly stand: the ambivalence which Jones refers to is clear). In the incongruous body that I mentioned earlier, the pure presentation of it carries codes of action already performed, of choices already undertaken in the gym and in diet. Whereas the actions of other body artists often work to make the body present, I wanted this, my new, valorised body, to disappear, a desire that was reflected in the arduous action of removing all the coins from the gallery space over the course of the

day (as well as some of the night: hardly a mark was left by 11pm). There was nothing re-markable. Maybe that was beautiful.

Works Cited

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