

VISITOR REPORT

by Elia Steffen

on Grant Watson's *How We Behave / An Archive of Radical Practice*

Reading Performance

Friday 15 December 2023, 18-19hr

If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution

WG-Plein 881

1054 SM Amsterdam

Let me start with a brief acknowledgement of the new If I Can't Dance space. The abandoned surgical theatre turned office and presentation space is warm and weird and enchanting. The pea soup walls with raked seating that are too small for modern femurs, speaks to a history that suggests things will have happened here. It is a space of welcome (and) possibility.

Reading the programme for Grant Watson's *How We Behave*, I was struck by my strong, visceral reaction to 'Michael Foucault's call for "non-fascist" forms of life.' I found myself buffeted by my simultaneous sense of deep desire while also questioning to what extent it is possible.

During the night framed as an archival activation, four performers (Szymon Adamczak, Sher Doruff, Megan Hoetger and Joy Mariama Smith) read interviews conducted by Grant from four interviewees. These stories were cut and interwoven together forming the outlines of a conversation. The interviewees were not named before or during the performance to both 'highlight how the personal can be deindividuated and linked to collective sites of struggle' while also allowing Grant to share their stories more easily when the interviewees could not be assembled.

I must admit I got a bit of a burr in my bonnet about this choice. It served to highlight from *within* colonial logics (with their historic and theoretical ties to fascism) rather than resist them. It was clear from the performance that only certain stories could truly be deindividuated, one story going so far as to name its subject (if not the interviewee). In fact, I would have loved more naming, more specifics, more locality. I would have loved to know more of these individuals and have been trusted to find my own *link* and connection to their specific *sites of struggle*.

Having said that, I found the themes of this performance to be beautiful and compelling. I appreciated the ways meditations on death could be weaved into stories about choosing life. In the first reading Sher Doruff spoke of how trust might make space for a daily meditation to "choose life over death" and that when the time comes, which it will for us all, we were encouraged to die from our feet up. What an odd, simple koan. The second reading, brought to mind my own desires towards a universal queer experience as Megan Hoetger read a story told by the second interviewee of a hijra person who claimed unknown graves as a means of creating a right to live in the cemetery in which they resided. My own feelings and desire to find a collective link between this and my own queer experiences, reminded me of how often queerness and its sometimes universalising desires have been used for colonial wars of domination. However, I found something thought provoking in a later part with men meeting up to cross-dress. In my notes I have written "liminal sexuality" (from the reading?) while wondering about the possibilities of dressing to cross, to cross boundaries, to cross to each other, to cross the many selves we all contain, to cross out of the fascist forms of life.

Joy Mariama Smith's reading of a story about a Palestinian-Serbian returning to occupied Palestine from communist Yugoslavia created a potent site of comparison between these two places, which, in very different ways have been ravaged by occupation, fundamentalist ideologies and Western interventions. I also appreciated the extra touch of Joy dressing in a fabulous pink blazer and white and pink patterned pants, mirroring the colour of the interviewee's bedroom in Ramallah. In this story we also hear people holding land through a contested presence, demanding with their bodies recognition of ancestral connection. I wrote in my notes, "The landscape is political. Going to the land a form of claiming the land. Driving around the West Bank. Rivers running through the streets."

I am grateful for the chance to experience these stories and the undeniable work that went into collecting and sharing them. Although I do not agree with all of the framing choices, I was grateful for the call to consider how and what my form(s) of life serve, while receiving examples of others' struggles with this question.

ABOUT THE EVENT

In conjunction with the exhibition of Grant Watson's *How We Behave / An Archive of Radical Practice* at IHLIA LGBTBI Heritage OBA Amsterdam, a reading performance took place on Friday 15 December 2023. This was the inaugural event at If I Can't Dance's new home in the WG-terrein in Amsterdam. Interview fragments were read by Szymon Adamczak, Sher Doruff, Megan Hoetger and Joy Mariama Smith.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elioa Steffen is an artist working in the fields of performance, facilitation and curation. Her work focusses on the intersection of communal narratives, cultural norms and systemic violence. With over ten years of experience as a facilitator, Steffen crafts encounters that investigate the relationships between personal needs and communal truths. Heavily influenced by queer art lineages, Steffen's work melds critical theory, camp and drag in participatory performances that question an audience's relationships to each other, power and the state.

ABOUT THE VISITOR REPORT

At If I Can't Dance we see the visitor report as a method of documentation. The affectual, relational and embodied nature of performance work is not always easily captured in audio-visual formats. To supplement such formats, If I Can't Dance commissions written visitor reports, which are meant to offer subjective responses to a lived experience of a work and its context. The visitor report is, therefore, not to be confused with a critical review. It is first and foremost a form of witnessing. The people commissioned to write the report span a range of positions and practices within and outside the field of art.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The reading performance that was part of the archive activation of *How We Behave / An Archive of Radical Practice* was commissioned by If I Can't Dance as part of Edition IX – *Bodies and Technologies* (2022-2023) and was led by archive curator Anik Fournier and programme curator Megan Hoetger.

Concept and script: Grant Watson
Conversation partner:
Frédérique Bergholtz
Post-script remarks: Anik Fournier
Performers: Szymon Adamczak,
Sher Doruff, Megan Hoetger,
Joy Mariama Smith
Sound: Leroy Char
AV and documentation: Maarten Nauw
Front of house team: Naomi Collier
Broms and Sancha Meca Castro

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