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Leigh Bowery's game of embarrassment and release

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Using your emotional experiences in order to create an art object is perhaps a way to represent the world. It adds to the odyssey of the exploration on what we like and what we don't like, by trying to answer the question: why? In the case of Leigh Bowery, an artist known mainly for his aesthetic modifications of the body there exists in his work an intensive personal enquiry and art-making on embarrassment. This text refers to the manner in which he experimented and addressed this emotional concept that the artist seems to approach like a game of embarrassment and release or a playful, personal and rather cruel enquiry; a game that rests on the thrill of an elegant and esoteric violence.

Embarrassment, as all of us know, is that feeling of awkwardness that is accompanied by physical reactions of the body – blushing, for example – and is ultimately related to the existence of a spectator, whether of flesh and bones, metaphysical or even imaginary. It also retains a kind of “orgasmic quality” in the way it manifests itself:

a sudden introduction of the disturbing event is followed by an immediate peak in the experience of embarrassment and then a slow return to the preceding ease, all phases being encompassed in the same encounter. A bad moment thus marks an otherwise euphoric situation.¹

In other words, it gives us a psychological *rush*. It might simply be related to the release of adrenaline, but it is certainly a stimulating experience. Bowery sees *embarrassment* as a driving force related to *memory* and the production of *ideas* because people remember an embarrassing moment more clearly than a pleasant one. What's more, the nervousness associated with a state of *embarrassment* is a jolt, an unstable state conducive to the production of *ideas*². But do the artworks that ensue from these ideas seek our attention and stimulate our perception simply by offending commonly accepted notions of good taste? Rather, these *ideas* might be an exploration of how to get more out of that unsettling feeling, not for a moment's pleasure, as he states quite clearly that he is not a masochist³, but perhaps for an art project that has to reach a successful point before a foreseeable death?⁴

Bowery was raised in the morally conservative and socially restrictive environment of a small town in Australia. Being a creative individual he must have felt an incompatibility with his surroundings from a very early stage in his life, and perhaps his social environment made him feel gauche, like an alien figure in a community to which he didn't quite belong. Instead of playing football, as most kids did, Bowery invented his own version of a kind of *jeu de société*: there existed only one player, but there was always an audience. This was the first expression of his creativity and poise in the face of shyness and alienation; it was a fair game. In trying to explain how he conceived this procedure as 'painful' yet 'rewarding', Leigh Bowery says:

‘I suppose I figured that out when living with my parents. Things from that time really stayed with me – the difficult things, the embarrassing things, those were the things I liked’⁵

From an early age he was seeking the discomfort brought on by that state of *embarrassment* and, according to friend and collaborator Mathew Glamorre, it became a principle and a driving force⁶ of his artistic temperament. By coming to terms so early in his life with the fact that *humor* and compulsive *embarrassment* were both acting as the homeopathic remedy to his psychological disadvantage of shyness, he embraced them both. This was necessary, especially for someone who loved the performing arts. *Embarrassment*, he says in an interview, 'is excruciating and certainly worthwhile'.⁷

Let me explain a bit more. Bowery's early interest in 'too many' things drove him to turn his investigative drive on himself and in doing so he realized that, in order to avoid any irreversible mutations of a self that he was particularly fond of, he had to learn to play with *embarrassment*, master it and, maybe the most difficult task of all, cope with its relation to bad *memories*. As Nietzsche suggested:

"Perhaps there is nothing more terrible and strange in man's pre-history than his technique of mnemonics. 'A thing must be burnt in so that it stays in the memory: only something which continues to hurt stays in the memory' – that is a proposition from the oldest (and unfortunately the longest – lived) psychology on earth"⁸

One doesn't have to be a great thinker like Nietzsche to understand the truth in this remark, at least on a personal level. It is the most simple thing and it only demands a critical stand upon a proposition such as 'why was I mocked?' or 'why I was told off?' If one replies "because I did something wrong", then one will reach a point where one will have to decide if one is in agreement with a collective notion of accepted behavior in the social context or not. And if one wants to retain his own perspective in judging one's behavior, it is like resisting the 'burn' of the bad memory by licking the wound in pride: avoiding shame.

We could also view this in terms of a shrinking or widening of the conceptual limits of the issue of personality and behavior. In the case of expansion, the emotion perhaps works as a traumatizing experience, which by adding to the database of experience-knowledge the memory somehow makes one not essentially stronger, but beyond doubt more flexible. This conceptual 'wound' generates a mechanism that incorporates an embarrassing moment in the process of self-awareness and, in the case of Leigh Bowery, a process of expansion of his personality; an exhalation, a release. On the other hand, to contract these limits by adopting an uncritical position of submission could be considered as an act of *castration*: a trauma that has inflicted an irreversible wound, a missing limb, a violent mutation.

Let us now consider Adam and Eve's blushing and *embarrassment* before God's eye for having eaten the forbidden fruit; an image that has initiated the notion of human guilt and mankind's abjection, and the failure of the ideal. Bowery makes a telling point on the subject of this primordial scene of

embarrassment. He explains from his own point of view that the only good reason for having an organized religion is the pleasure one has tasting the forbidden fruit- tastier by virtue of being forbidden⁹. If religion ceased to exist, this pleasure would vanish as religious guilt and blasphemy would not define the borders of our social and moral standards. Perhaps adopting an epicurean stance, Bowery defines his existence and his art-making through the necessary principles of pleasure and pain. Each is there to make the other significant and both make the experience of life what it should be. The limit is used to serve the pleasure principle by being broken. And it is through pain that we can reach a next level in anything that is important to our being. Indeed, transgression is always related to pain, be it physical or psychical. As Foucault writes on the subject of sexual transgression and Christianity:

never did sexuality enjoy a more immediately natural understanding and never did it know a greater 'felicity of expression' than in the Christian world of fallen bodies of sin.¹⁰

Yet the essence of Bowery's enquiry seems to be on transgression itself. Not pleasure and not pain but their mixture in search of a lost *sensation*.

Maybe all of these are not only related to the norm and its subversion, in terms of morality, social behavior and public appearance of an individual or a group but in fact they are dependant on them¹¹. It is possible then that, when Bowery says something like: 'I like to embarrass people'¹², he was referring to what might be called empathic embarrassment¹³; a sort of embarrassment that occurs when someone is made uncomfortable by the actions or state of another person. Laboratory experiments have shown that this is possible.¹⁴ In order for such an art to exist there must be a perceptible limit to transgress. Though what we need to bring forth here is the function of an art work in relation to an emotion about which we still have only a vague idea as far as its dynamic is concerned. Anyhow, the art work has an autonomous force that keeps it in the domain of the artistic. By perceiving a work as such, the metaphor of the creative principle of the universe is not at all irrelevant and exaggerated here:

Is every artist not pedaling away in the nucleus of an atomic bicycle, crashing into other atoms producing the clinamen – the chain reaction which gives off radiation, aura, and shock? Saturate each atom: Convert your medium into energy and irradiate the world with art.¹⁵

In that sense we could say that Leigh Bowery's work seeks to emit a kind of 'energy' of *embarrassment* to its audience. That could be one way to regard an art object: through its function.

So let us consider the performance called *Laugh of Nr.13*. It is a ridiculous scene. A big piece of white fabric is set as a curtain and we hear birds singing. A woman in a baroque ballet costume appears and sprays the open space with air freshener and the curtain is lifted up. What is revealed is man behind a large plate of glass, suspended with a harness from his feet, wearing long black



stockings and bulky platform shoes (kothornous). His head is all painted black and he wears a neck corset. There are quite a few pegs stuck on his nipples and on his penis and, holding a microphone, he is about to sing. Next to him, a naked man (Richard Torry) is playing the electric guitar, covered in bright blue balloons. On the other side – and here the brilliant work of the camera man makes the difference – is the audience reflected occasionally on the glass surface. As far as we can see, the audience is not very underground, but mainly consists of families with children, who seem particularly enthralled by the spectacle.

Bowery's voice is squeaky and he is obviously not singing pleasantly. He is shouting rhythmically while dancing with his head. The music is minimal electric guitar only; but has an excessive character that creates an atmosphere of 'breathlessness'. It could be described as abstract with a dirty sound that has no melody but yet gives us a hint of something epic, unstoppable. The song is was composed by MINTY,¹⁶ the group Leigh Bowery, Richard Torry, Mathew Glammore and Nicola Bateman had put together in the fall of 1993. This shouting though seems to be more than singing; it is highly penetrating and it does not allow you to be uninterested. It is like a nightmare scene; anomalous and yet very realistic. It is perhaps a figure of the uncanny that has escaped from a bad dream and entered the lives of the spectators. Freud writes on the notion of *uncanny*:

This is the fact that an uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary, when a symbol takes the full function and significance of what it symbolizes.¹⁷

At the end of the 'song' Torry pulls Bowery at an angle while he counts to twelve. On thirteen he lets him go and break the plate of glass with his body. The curtain comes down.

Reading the caption, we can see what kind of symbol we are dealing with here. This performance was made for an art event at Fort Asperen in the Netherlands. The curator's concept was to turn the three levels of the ex-military fort into 'the inner life of the 12th card of the Tarot deck, known as the Hanged Man'.¹⁸ She assigned three artists with that task: Tony Oursler, Irene Grundel and Charles Atlas. The former, who was given the third level of the fort, corresponding to the legs and genitals, decided to install Bowery as the art who in his own way gave an interpretation of the concept with *The laugh of Nr. 13*. Generally in Tarot signification The Hanged Man card symbolizes suspension:

at which truth and realization are revealed. The cloak of secrecy removed. The inner self is exposed¹⁹

In fact the Hanged Man is not at all helpless but *chooses* this position that has an inverted and reversed relation to its environment,²⁰ an entirely new

perspective is gained in transition to a new way of being. Yet the Nr. 13 card is the one that signifies death. The ultimate mode of change.

The song suggests Bowery's amazement at this novel angle by telling his audience that his experience at that very moment seems too beautiful to be true as he realizes that he can actually do whatever he wants, that taboo is not something that actually exists as a barrier for his actions, but that it can be mentally transgressed. Embarrassment, fear and shame are states of mind as powerful as pleasure, joy and self-confidence. 'We can do so much. We can do anything'. This was not only the message of the piece but also Bowery's philosophical thesis in life which he discovered by playing emotional games. Bearing in mind not the consequence but the tedious effect of self-containment, he is released from his previous position that kept him thinking of himself as separated from his environment. Breaking the plate of glass with his body is like jumping between tall buildings: it involves risk and freedom. It's a wager with the self.

There is a little piece in the ICA compilation video that shows what was happening backstage before the performance. Bowery was drinking scotch from a bottle as he was 'pegging' his nipples and his penis. The pain must have been unbearable, yet it was part of what would make the work have a deep impact on its audience. It was a gimmick. Behind the aesthetics though there was his game of *embarrassment* and *release* and quite a lot of emission. And this, as the core of the artwork, seems to be even more violent than physical pain. I must confess that when I first saw this performance I found it stupid. The second time I found it interesting. When I saw it for a third time I realized that it must have been a unique experience if seen live.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Erving Goffman, 'Embarrassment and Social Organization', *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol 62, No 3 (1956), pg.265
- ² Leigh Bowery in an interview with Richard Torry, 'What About your sex life?', Leigh Bowery, (London: Violette Editions, 1998), 198
- ³ *ibid*, pg. 200
- ⁴ Bowery was aware that he was infected with HIV since 1988, and therefore we can assume that he was aware of the short lifespan he was facing. Yet, this cannot not drive us at this point to jump into the conclusion that having AIDS was something that informed his work or something that he wanted to explore and exhibit.
- ⁵ Leigh Bowery in an interview with Richard Torry, 'What About your sex life?', Leigh Bowery, (London: Violette Editions, 1998),pg. 200
- ⁶ Ian Parker, 'A Bizarre Body of Work', *The Independent: Sunday Review*,(London, 26/02/1995), pg.4

- ⁷ Leigh Bowery in an interview with Richard Torry, 'What About your sex life?', Leigh Bowery, (London: Violette Editions, 1998), pg. 198
- ⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pg. 41
- ⁹ Leigh Bowery in an interview with Richard Torry, 'What About your Sex Life?', *Leigh Bowery*, (London: Violette Editions, 1998), p. 203
- ¹⁰ Michel Foucault, 'A Preface to Transgression', in Fred Botting & Scott Wilson (eds), *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, (London: Blackwell, 1998), pg. 24
- ¹¹ Rowland S. Miller, *Embarrassment: poise and peril in everyday life*, (London: Routledge, 1996), pg 1
- ¹² Leigh Bowery in an interview with Richard Torry, 'What About your sex life?', Leigh Bowery, (London: Violette Editions, 1998), pg. 199
- ¹³ Rowland S. Miller, *Embarrassment: poise and peril in everyday life*, (London: Routledge, 1996), pg.34
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*, pg. 36
- ¹⁵ Neke Carson, 'Atomic Bicycle', in http://supervert.com/essays/art/atomic_bicycle, originally published in Francesco Bonami, (ed.), *Echoes: Art at the End of the Millenium*, (New York: Monacelli Press, 1996)
- ¹⁶ MINTY, *Open Wide*, Candy Records, 1997
- ¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock, (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 150
- ¹⁸ Ann Tilroe, 'The Laugh of No. 13', in *Take a Bowery: The Art and (larger than) Life of Leigh Bowery*, Museum of Contemporary Art, (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004), pg. 120
- ¹⁹ Stuart R. Kaplan, *The Classical Tarot: Its Origins Meanings and Divinatory Use*, (New York: Aquarian, 1980), pg. 108
- ²⁰ Liz Dean, *The Art of Tarot: A complete guide to using Tarot cards and their meanings*, (London: Cico Books, 2001), pg. 26