PERSONAL TEXT, PUBLIC BODY: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO EMBODIED PERFORMANCES OF SEXUALITY AND GENDER

Interdisciplinarity

Passionate politics and a desire to create change regarding social existence has led me to acknowledge, interrogate and work with my embodiment of the mutually influencing and constantly shifting roles of therapist and artist. I do this in two specific ways: by developing a solo performance practice and by establishing the Personal Text Public Body Lab (see www.embodiedpractice.co.uk).

Personal Text Public Body is an ongoing interdisciplinary project blending dance movement psychotherapy (DMP), performance and feminist politics. As a therapist, performer, choreographer, film maker and scholar I regularly shift between these multiple identities allowing them to inform my practice. Moreover, I turn to the body as a knowing subject and as interlocutor of personal and public domains (Allegranti, 2004; 2007a; 2007b) and argue that embodied practice requires addressing the concepts of ‘public’ and ‘private’ within the individual and within the body.

Embodied Performances

As well as regarding the notion of performance as an art form, I have expanded my understanding of performance by considering the performance of identity and the social self as well, as the telling of a story as performance (Thornborow and Coates, 2005). Specifically, I use the medium of film to present an artefact.

As a DMP practitioner, I am influenced by feminist approaches to psychotherapy where I share the concern with understanding the impact of power and dominance, and of the social construction of sexuality and gender, on both identity development and therapeutic practice. This has evolved during twenty years of practice which has increased my sensitivity to the fact many women and men do not live from their bodies, they are not sure of them. As Susie Orbach (2003) points out, an unconscious solution is for women to treat their bodies as emergencies by food manipulation, intense exercise, dieting, purging, cutting. However, my DMP experiences tell me that men are not exempt from crises-laden bodies and, as bell hooks (2000: viii) points out, ‘female and male, have been socialized from birth to accept sexist thought and action’. What are the embodied consequences of this socialization?
An ongoing goal in my work is to address the embodied consequences of socialization by deconstructing (‘undoing’) and re-constituting (‘re-doing’) performances of sexuality and gender in everyday life and for performance (dance/film). I argue that embodied performances of sexuality and gender highlight ‘autobiographical’, ‘relational’ and ‘political’ unfolding through verbal and non-verbal expression (Allegranti, 2007a; b; forthcoming). By building on feminist notions of working in the spaces ‘in-between’ dominant discourses and embodiment through language I draw from the theoretical insights of feminist poststructuralism (Butler, 1990, 2005), feminist approaches to language (Coates, 1996, 2003), feminist psychoanalysis (Orbach, 2003, Benjamin, 1995) feminist film theory (De Lauretis, 2007, Mulvey, 1999) and feminist cultural theory (hooks, 2000).

**Solo Practice**

Solo practice acts as a springboard for the Lab. I am guided by an experiential approach, which means that prior to facilitating others I learn in my body first and take myself through a personal unfolding process in order to gain greater clarity. One phase of my solo practice involved an adaptation of Deborah Hay’s solo THE RIDGE (2005). As I entered into a visceral dialogue with Hay’s 25-minute choreographic structure I created my dance. Hay talks about ‘allowing yourself to be seen’ (2004); and for me, as both performer/choreographer and therapist this raises unique questions and has implications, particularly around the reciprocal themes of ‘seeing’ and ‘being seen’. Parallels may be drawn between ‘being seen’ and ‘being held’ within the therapeutic relationship (Musicant, 1998). A question that arises for me is how does the choreographer ‘hold’ the performer(s) unfolding personal text? Consequently, IN MY BODY (2005) explores a ‘performativity of loss’: an autobiographical reconstruction of identity in the wake of my mother’s death. Still in the nascent stages of updating myself I turned to the only thing that made sense - my moving body. This solo was developed from a reciprocal process of writing and moving.

**The Personal Text Public Body Lab**

In order to create a space where I could interrogate how sexuality and gender could be ‘undone’ (deconstructed) and ‘re-made’ (reconstituted) the Personal Text Public Body Lab was established for Arts Therapists/Performers. The Lab is a developmental space in the Winnicottean (Winnicott, 1960) sense as it provides a ‘holding environment’, in another discourse this would be called a performance space. The Lab is a construct which was designed in order to reveal process as well as produce an artifact. As such, the Lab is an ongoing interdisciplinary space which investigates and develops Embodied Performances.

In constructing the Lab I saw it as a microcosm of our performances of sexuality and gender in everyday life. Consequently, the Lab is an appropriate space for the expression and investigation of ‘everyday-life’
where it is possible to examine the relationship between personal and public performances of sexuality and gender.

Throughout the creative process of the Lab the performers reflect, in dance movement and in words, on aspects of ‘undoing’ and ‘re-doing’ their subjectivities. Consequently, a wealth of themes emerged including: sexual abuse, eating disorders, depression, sexual orientation and how to ‘do’ femininity and masculinity in the twenty-first century.

**Video Stills taken from:**
Direction Beatrice Allegranti
Camera: Matt Flagherty and Beatrice Allegranti
Edit: Ken Lyndon, Beatrice Allegranti, Gary Nikols
Soundscore: Steve Gibbs.

THE RIDGE (2005)
Choreography: Deborah Hay
Adaptation and Performance: Beatrice Allegranti

**Photography:**
IN MY BODY (2005)
Direction: Beatrice Allegranti
Soundscore: Steve Gibbs
Camera: Brixton Brady
Edit: Tim Young.
Photography: Yolanda Reeves

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