

AHRC ICT Methods Network Event

INTIMACY: ACROSS DIGITAL AND VISCERAL PERFORMANCE

GOLDSMITHS COLLEGE, LABAN, THE ALBANY, HOME LONDON AND ONLINE, 7, 8, 9 DECEMBER 2007

Seminar on *Performance and Pornography* led by Dr Dominic Johnson

Rapporteur's report by Owen Glyndwr Parry

The seminar was formulated as a collage engaging critical theories and examples of texts and audio-visual material that source and interrogate notions of intimacy in Performance and Pornography. Performance Theory and Queer Theory were used as tools for theorizing and addressing the pornographic, its medium and its deeper attributes in relation to intimacy and the visceral.

The seminar was devised in 3 parts:

Part I Intimacy, Risk, and the Pornographic Life

Part II Slava Mogutin: *On a Highway I Drive Very Fast*

Part III Kira O'Reilly: Performance, Futurity, Intimacy

As a prelude pornography is introduced as intimacy in its most banal form, with a video clip from a *Summer Lust*, presenting us with an 'erotic' image of 2 men bathing. Johnson references William Haver's critique of Pornography being all that is excess, suggesting a radical openness of intimacy, 'life cannot permanently be lived in the pornographic'¹, hence the pornographic as an intolerable subject position. Beginning from this position Johnson demonstrates his intentions for challenging concepts of intimacy, and offers avenues for alternative perspectives on what amounts as intimacy and as pornography.

Part I Intimacy, Risk, and the Pornographic Life

Johnson considers the binaries of intimacy such as 'overly intimate' as euphemism for abuse, taking into account 'intimacy' as an everyday, banal subject matter that contains both apparently 'pleasurable and painful interpersonal relations' (Johnson: Seminar). Johnson draws a continuum, as we might understand intimacy as something tangible. It demonstrates the 'Pornographic' pursuit of the upper and lower limits of intimacy, Intimacy bounded at each end by danger, risk and other troubling eventualities. (Johnson: Seminar) From this perspective we can begin to understand *too little* or *too much* intimacy as problematic, exemplified in 'a continuum between abandonment and abuse' (Johnson: Seminar). Johnson references Winfried Menninghaus' standpoint; a parallel to the way in which beauty is also bounded by disgust, and where excess becomes problematic.

Johnson employs a Queer or 'camp' strategy:

¹ Johnson, Dominic, Seminar: Performance and Pornography, Intimacy: Across Visceral and Digital Performance, Saturday 8th December 2007, Goldsmiths University of London

'...denying the authenticity of intimacy, or denying the perceived purity of its emergence in the sites and situations where we might wish to seek it; and, conversely, privileging aberrant eventualities within the continuum of intimate possibilities.' (Johnson: Seminar)

From this perspective we may begin to consider where 'troubling', difficult and 'alien' encounters also pursue the 'intimate', to see where intimacy may begin to manifest itself in a monstrous manifestation. From here it is worth referencing Johnson's artistic collaboration with Ron Athey in *Incorruptible Flesh (Perpetual Wound)*². The performance bravely addresses monstrous intimacy, where too much and too little intimacy/beauty transforms itself.

From here, Johnson manages to tease out how 'intimacy' might mark a monstrously variable terrain of interpersonal encounters, 'from the banal → tender → alien → terrifying'. (Johnson: Seminar)

Johnson argues 'If we agree, with José Muñoz, that culture has taught us that relationality is not pretty, what happens if we allow the term 'intimacy' to admit all manner of touches into its range of visceralities?' (Johnson: Seminar) Johnson addresses his question by proposing a space where the intimacies of the theatre performance become the pornographic, using supporting theories and criticisms on the problem of intimacy in performance by Nicholas Ridout:

'What is painful in theatre's attempt at the face-to-face encounter, its movement towards an ethical encounter, is the way that it is either already trammled in repetition or completely exceeds the theatrical frame that would allow it to signify.'³ Moreover, for Ridout, stage fright is the direct product of the experience of 'intimacy in the midst of visibility' (77). (Johnson: Seminar)

Johnson, like Ridout, considers that intimacy in performance manifests itself problematically:

'Having paid to look at someone perform, and having them having been paid to return the look, this colouring of intimacy within an economic relation creates an intimacy that is always and already alienated, a difficult intimacy' (81). (Johnson: Seminar)

Johnson highlights Ridout's analysis as a scenario of prostitution and, elsewhere, the one-night stand, as analogues for the scene of an ultimately embarrassing intimacy experienced in the encounter with performance. Johnson uses Ridout's example such as when an actor playing Richard II looks at him flush in the face, 'at least part of the embarrassment may stem from a recognition that the intimacy into which I am being seduced has been paid for' (87) (Johnson: Seminar). Johnson's point here is useful in considering Kira O'Reilly's performance work which he discusses in part III of the seminar.

Johnson explores Haver's argument that porn exceeds representation, 'Porn is not merely a portrait of pleasure, but presents itself an *in itself* pleasurable; it provokes pleasure and enjoyment instead of teaching appreciation, and thereby free art's work from every possibility for a moralistic pedagogy.'⁴ (Johnson: Seminar)

Setting out such links about intimacy may ask 'what if we are able to jettison the 'moralistic' position that demands that the value of one's thinking be dependent on the possibility of redeploying it as a politics?' (Johnson: Seminar). Supporting Havar's theory, Johnson questions pornography as subject 'withdrawn from the very possibility of intelligibility and meaning.'⁵

2 Chelsea Theatre: Sacred Season, London, 2007. (Johnson presented the promotion video of this performance, at the feedback session to the Seminar during the Intimacy Symposium, Sunday, 9th December, 2007)

3 Ridout, Nicholas Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems, Cambridge University Press, 2006. p. 33.

4 Haver, William, 'Foreword: *The Logic of the Lure* and the New Pornography' in John Paul Ricco, *The Logic of the Lure*, p. xii.

5 Ibid.

Johnson read out excerpts from:

David Wojnarowicz (*Close to the Knives*, 49-52)⁶

Joe Orton (*Diaries*, 105-6)⁷

Yukio Mishima (*Confessions of a Mask*, 175-6)⁸

These readings offer a point to reflect on concepts of intimacy and the pornographic, considering the works using the queer strategy and theoretical approaches presented by Muñoz and Haver, and considering Ridout's perspective on the intimate confrontation of art subject and viewer/receiver. Where Wojnarowicz's work deals directly with the queer and the intimate and Mishima's writings can be thought of in terms of Menninghaus' beauty continuum.

Part II Slava Mogutin: *On a Highway I Drive Very Fast*

Johnson contextualises the photography of Slava Mogutin by giving a detailed biographical insight into his work. As photographic images of encounters between men are projected behind, Johnson orientates Mogutin's work as going *against* intimacy, as a works that 'never colonizes bodies or actions, nor poses assaults on love'. (Johnson: Seminar)

Johnson sees the work as a discourse *against* love, retaining the term's double meaning. 'To be *against* is to be both in opposition to; but it is also to be touching the other, to lay your body down beside it. To be against love, then, is to push against it while wanting it, to fight with caresses, taking care not to pursue desire so strongly that it attains the safety of closure, the threadbare event of secure perspective'. (Johnson: Seminar)

We are presented with bodies 'caught between voyeurism and narcissism, adjacent to love and troubled by death' (Johnson: Seminar). This makes us reconsider intimacy in terms of Lee Edelman's rethinking of queer politics and 'the death drive'.⁹ Taking the traditional political ideology as shaped by the image of the child, the reproductive future. We might question what happens when you go against that? We might also consider Lacan and/or Freud and a drive towards distinction and 'le petit mort'.

Part III Kira O'Reilly: Performance, Futurity, Intimacy

Johnson tackles further this discourse in terms of Kira O'Reilly's one on one performance *Untitled Action*. Addressing the cross-disciplinarity of the work, and the visceral act of making 'the cut' on O'Reilly's body. Employing Sarah Ahmad's theory 'the difference it makes *which way one turns*.'¹⁰ Johnson marks 'the choice to cut' over the choice not to cut as 'the queer choice'. (Johnson: Seminar) which may also lend it to Edelman's rethinking.

Johnson lengthens his argument by comparing it to Bersani and Dutoit's¹¹ perspective on 'inhospitable' works that 'renounce the authority of productive culture'. (Johnson: Seminar)

The seminar is brought to a close with a clip on cannibalism from Pasolini's *Pig Sty*, 1969, and an open reflection on the links set up between intimacy, ethics, performance and the rethinking of queer politics.

6 Wojnarowicz, David, 'Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration', Vintage Books, 1991.

7 Orton, Joe, Ed. John Lahr, 'The Orton Diaries', Methuen, 1986.

8 Mishima, Yukio, Trans. Meredith Weatherby, 'Confessions of a Mask', 1958.

9 Edelman, Lee 'In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*', Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

10 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006, P.15

11 Bersani, Leo and Dutoit, Ulysse, 'Arts of Impoverishment' Harvard University Press, 1993. p. 8