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Dead Elements

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Abstract

This thesis, an interdisciplinary project entitled *DEAD ELEMENTS*, seeks to explore the complex relationship between performance and text. Seven common literary elements were selected and then interpreted both in a performative action and a written work. The work engages the traditions of both performance art and conceptual writing, blurring the distinction between physical body and textual body. Ultimately, *DEAD ELEMENTS* serves as a critique of academic literature, a reification of abstractions, a meditation on the body, and an engagement with my own idiosyncratic artistic practice.

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DEAD ELEMENTS

By

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DEAD ELEMENTS

My artistic heritage begins as far back as Antonin Artaud, who demanded that "we must first break theater's subjugation to the text and rediscover the idea of a kind of unique language somewhere between gesture and thought" (qtd in Badiou 100). Since my early days as a writer, my role as such has been complicated by my interest in performance art and thusly my interpretation of my textual work physically through gesture. In this way, my work is a continuous conflation of both the textual body and the physical body, the exploration of "the body…being used as an art language" (Vergine 7). Of particular interest to me are artists associated with early Happenings and Conceptual art in America during the 1950s and 60s: namely Vito Acconci, Allan Kaprow, and Bruce Nauman. Acconci, an avant-garde writer at first, soon turned to performance art as a form of 'body poetry:' "[using] his body to provide alternative 'ground' to the 'page ground' he had used as a poet; it was in a way, he said, of shifting the focus from words to himself as an 'image'" (Goldberg 156). Kaprow, the ostensible founder of Happenings and performance art as we understand it today, was fundamentally interested in creating " 'Lifelike art'…close to everyday life…[p]aying attention to simple activities performed in the present moment [and] developing a Zen consciousness in relation to the daily…an honoring of the ordinary" (Schechner 29). Nauman serves as a conceptual bridge between the two, utilizing both language as "utterance" and the quotidian to produce interdisciplinary work incorporating performance, film, photography, and installation (Kraynak 2). As a student of these writers and artists, I became disillusioned with the limitations of the literary sphere: a construct engaged by the art world consistently throughout postmodernism, but typically unwelcoming of experimentation within itself, particularly works extending outside of narrative, characterization, and grammatical perfection.

My initial concept for *DEAD ELEMENTS* came from viewing Max Ernst's Surrealist collage novel *Une semaine de bonté*, or *A Week of Kindness: the Seven Deadly Elements*. Ernst's novel inspired me to create a multi-faceted work that engages several concepts while still functioning as a unified whole. For me, Ernst's "Deadly Elements" became interchangeable with Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* – a text ubiquitous in literary pedagogy. I therefore concluded to deconstruct seven common literary elements/tropes with the tools of performance: both physically and textually. I was less interested in interpreting the elements of my choosing and more concerned with their redefinition: I became invested in violently upending them from their previous forms, mocking them and/or positioning them within a new conceptual framework as dictated by my distaste for their uniformity, staunchness, and permanent presence in the canon. The elements of my choosing were as follows: Invocation, Intonation, Structure, Interlude, Entropy, Juxtaposition, and Exorcism. To complete my mission in the creation of such a project, I would employ facets of my particular performative style – both in action (the use of everyday objects, after Kaprow; a precocious sadomasochism, after the Viennese Actionists) and in text (the pairing of both traditional and experimental forms, ranging influence from Beckett to Rimbaud).

I have no formal background in drama: my interest in performance stemmed from a distaste towards the malaise of formal literary 'readings.' Therefore, my performance tactics are less reflective of traditional theatre and moreso characteristic of Happenings: "simply a disruption of the everyday…perceived as routine, by the fact 'that something happened': theatricalization as a disruption and/or deconstruction" (Lehmann 105). Formal drama, so often victim to the same pitfalls as formal literature, is of little interest to me. Thusly, *DEAD*

ELEMENTS, like many of my other projects, takes a decidedly *postdramatic* angle to concepts of action, gesture, staging, etc.

Of course, my actions could have been performed in front of an established audience, in real time, for their viewing and their viewing alone. However, taking into account Derrida's concept of *différance* – that is to say, art in which "body/bodies of the artist are *traced* [original emphasis]…reflected and *relayed* [original emphasis] through live and recorded performance in new media" (Braddock 18) – I made the conscious decision to perform for the camera. In this way, new media tactics (such as dissemination of my videos online) not only allow for a greater audience to view the work, but also allow me as a performer to "become…[my] object. This is to say that [I posit myself] as object since [I am] conscious of the process in which [I am] involved" (Vergine 12). Oftentimes, the only witnesses to my actions were a cameraman and the occasional spectator, who more often than not became involved in the performance. This direct engagement with the audience as participants of the action is clear in both "Intonation" (the audience was instructed to pelt me with tennis balls) and "Structure" (the hands of audience members were used to hold the plates/clock). In these cases, without the audience performing alongside or in opposition to me, the actions could not be properly executed.

Furthermore, the mediated effect of viewing these actions through a camera lens allows me to challenge and manipulate aspects of the action that would be concretized if the action was presented in real-time: mainly time and environment. Most of the actions within this project were performed in an industrial warehouse and office space I transformed into a studio. Within these whitewashed, metallic enclosures and harsh fluorescent lights I applied my "back to the drawing board" sentiment towards the elements I selected to deconstruct (this is further illustrated by the chalkboard motif employed in the title sequences). Like a laborer, tinkerer, or even alchemist, the

work environment in which I toiled became reflective of my mission, yet seems spatially limitless, since the viewer is only able to conceive aspects of the environments I have chosen to perform within. The warehouse space becomes an environment absent of geographic grounding, temporal context, or any other associations. Through these subtleties of camera work, I am better able to formulate "a renunciation of teleological time, and the dominance of an 'atmosphere' above dramatic and narrative forms of progression. It is less the pastoral than the conception of theatre as *a scenic poem as a whole*" (Lehmann 63).

It was a very conscious decision to allow some possibilities of a narrative to leak into the presentation of the final piece. With the occurrence and reoccurrence of the masked figure, for instance, or the actions involving the bust of a woman, one could begin to tease out connections from work to work. That being said, the videos and texts can be digested in any order the viewer desires. Despite the anticlimax of "Exorcism," in which I scissor away the mask and reveal that this entity and I are one in the same, there are never any suggestions otherwise within the web of actions and texts. In fact, more often than not, both texts and actions take on a sort of autobiographical charge. This masked entity, who I will refer to as Dead, reflects my affinity for the Pop degradation of Paul McCarthy, who often donned plastic masks as a means of obscuring his identity in his performances. My choice of using a plastic mask to distort my persona, and in particular the choice of using the face of an old man, is indicative of the concept of the "*deviant body*, which through illness, disability or deformation deviates from the norm and causes an 'amoral' fascination, unease or fear" (Lehmann 95). Dead, as a withered, white-bearded, and hollow-eyed entity, may even contain subconscious associations with the Academy, with the tried-and-true forefathers of literary history. This being said, the choice of exploring the role of an alter ego in this work is not based solely in amorality. The use of masks has been used

throughout history in both ritual and performance to, as described by Richard Schechner, "constitute second beings who interact with the actors. These performing objects are suffused with a life force capable of transforming those who play with and through them" (203). I cannot deny that, while under the mask and performing actions as Dead, I entered a state of trance absent of myself and my own identity; it is apparent that, at the end of "Exorcism," I experience a cathartic reaction to the physical deconstruction of this alter ego.

Deconstruction often maintains a close association with violence, and this is an element of my work that consistently appears, both in conceptual and physical realms. While many of my influences, such as Kaprow and Nauman, are invested in producing work apparently absent of expressivity, it is the other camp of my forefathers – Artaud and the Viennese Actionists – that evoked images and actions of violence and physical turmoil in their work. The Actionists, with their preoccupations with sexual deviance, psychoanalysis, and repressed trauma, engaged in actions they referred to as *direct art*, or *total action*. Of this practice, Actionists Günter Brus and Otto Muehl wrote: "old art forms attempt to reconstruct reality, total action occurs within reality itself" (qtd in Green 41). Their scatological *direct art*, exceedingly censored in its day and still considered controversial, seems highly indicative of Artaud's augured "Theatre of Cruelty," which demanded unsimulated "shock and pain as constitutive for theatre" (Lehmann 38). Whereas my actions may not be as carnal as those of the Actionists, some still utilize rituals of violence or implied danger. For instance, the schoolyard punishment of being barraged by balls in "Intonation," the implied danger and mounting suspense of "Structure" (myself trapped within a field of saran wrap, holding a knife), or the basic horror of an obscured scream in "Entropy" (I suppose the cascade of blood slowly morphing my face into something unrecognizable adds to the tension). Even the meditative "Exorcism" demanded that I perform the action under some

sort of physical duress – upon reaching the filming location, I took to my hands and knees, refusing to walk, and spent hours crawling through the environment (much to the frustration of my cameraman). It is my belief that I, alongside the Actionists, engage "the power of a violence that is always to be interpreted as a means for breaking apart and decomposing the normality of the persona in which the individual is hypocritically forced to recognize himself" (Vergine 20). There is a direct desire to not only challenge the self into transforming, but to also transform the viewer. "[T]he victory of 'savage passion'" (Braddock 26) constitutes "the purifying and creative-constructive power of destruction" (Badura-Triska and Klocker, 11).

Transformation and deconstruction were two tactics I further employed in the creation of the texts for this work. I did not want there to be too close of a direct correlation between the pairing of a text with its action, and vice versa. I preferred a more fluid association between the two. Overall, it was my aim to engage seven diverse ways of formulating text. In the end, I observed that all of the texts were directly involved in performance in some way: the texts were either made to be performed ("Invocation," "Juxtaposition," "Exorcism"), made by a performance ("Structure, "Intonation") or were performing ("Interlude," "Entropy"). While the texts do not outrightly dictate the actions of their pairing, and neither do to the actions stipulate the texts, obviously such texts are as performative as any of the actions I constructed and performed alongside them. Therefore, I define them as *performance-texts*: inherently experimental, typically non-expressive, based in concept, and particularly postdramatic. In his theoretical work *Postdramatic Theatre*, Hans Thies-Lehmann writes of the *performance-text:*

> Postdramatic theatre is not simply a new kind of text of staging – and even less a new
>
> type of theatre text, but rather a type of sign usage in the theatre that turns both of these
>
> levels of theatre upside down through the structurally changed quality of the performance

text: it becomes more presence than representation, more shared than communicated

experience, more process than product, more manifestation than signification, more

energetic impulse than information. (85)

I employ three 'typical' textual forms: prose, poetry, and short play. For "Invocation," a

desperate prose piece preoccupied with dynamic linguistic play; "Exorcism" featuring a

meditative poem on the body; "Juxtaposition" a short play between two persons, set on exploring

semiotic contradictions and bodies in space, the latter of which is characteristic of Beckett's

work, and in particular his collaborations with Nauman, specifically "Slow Angle Walk (Beckett

Walk)" (Badiou 278). "Intonation" and "Structure" are *performance-texts* that are in an of

themselves constructed by a performative act. For "Intonation," I continue to engage rituals of

childhood punishment as I did in its corresponding action. This time, however, I am forced to

repetitively scribe regrettable actions from my past. "Structure" was formulated by my strict

documentation of labels, dosage instructions, and general "fine print" found on products in and

around my home, the only changes made being the replacement of the word "product" or name

of said product to "text." The final two *performance-texts* perform under a conceptual

framework: "Interlude" in the form of a (albeit satirical) self-reflexive survey, and "Entropy,"

imbued with violent, schizoid logic, designed after the poetic ramblings of Viennese Actionist

Rudolph Schwarzkogler. The diverse spectrum of texts engage concepts of "performative

utterance" ("Invocation"), recategorization of the familiar ("Structure"), and destructive self-

expressivity ("Entropy," "Exorcism") – all textual concepts more widespread in and familiar to

postmodern performing and visual arts writing than contemporary literature. It seems that I, like

Nauman, am interested in the "'functional edges of language,' where, he elaborates, it ceases to

be a 'useful tool for communication'" (Kraynak 35).

In its final form (as it stands now), *DEAD ELEMENTS* appears in its totality on

www.newhive.com, a social media site that streamlines the design of webpages. Each element's

page features a video of the action and a link to a .pdf document of its corresponding text. I also

assembled clip art/stock images featuring objects found within the pieces. The internet is a useful

tool for exhibiting a multimedia work such as this; however, if I had the opportunity to exhibit

DEAD ELEMENTS in a gallery or exhibition space, it would not appear much differently: each

of the videos would be uniformly projected around the room, with their text printed next to them.

Accordingly, an object or series of objects from each of the performances or texts (piñata for

"Invocation" or *VOSS* water bottle for "Intonation," for instance) would appear installed beneath

the corresponding wall display.

I wish to position *DEAD ELEMENTS* in the histories of radical performance, conceptual

artistry, and experimental poetics. In the project, I sought to bring together a culmination of my

diverse influences into an original work that tackled the depiction of ubiquitous yet almost

undefinable abstractions that dictate the objective 'greatness' of a work of textual art. It is my

hope that *DEAD ELEMENTS*, a work of dynamic action, challenges the numbness of the written

word with the complexities and liveliness of the performative body: a form of expression still

today being developed as an accepted art form.

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DEAD ELEMENTS

Instructions: click on the link below. Video of performance is embedded on the page. To access the text for each portion, click the corresponding term, which will redirect you to a pdf document.

(Note: Part 5 features strobing visual effects that may be harmful if you have a history of seizure)

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Part 0: Trailer/Prologue
http://newhive.com/barrettwhite/dead-elements

Part 1: Invocation
http://newhive.com/barrettwhite/invocation

Part 2: Intonation
http://newhive.com/barrettwhite/intonation

Part 3: Structure
http://newhive.com/barrettwhite/structure

Part 4: Interlude
http://newhive.com/barrettwhite/interlude

Part 5: Entropy
http://newhive.com/barrettwhite/entropy

Part 6: Juxtaposition
http://newhive.com/barrettwhite/juxtaposition

Part 7: Exorcism
http://newhive.com/barrettwhite/exorcism