

Museum of the Sublime: Relic # 5: Notes Towards a Fragmented Performance

Nikki Heywood

***Abstract:** Developing and presenting performance within the frame of Practice as Research leads to the creation of two media – the art work and its written account, including details of background research. Research on and through the intersubjective relations between animal and (gendered) human body(ies), from the Paleolithic on, incorporates visceral response, the nature of touch, and questions of empathy and representation.*

***Keywords:** Animal mask, Bataille, Body Mind Centering, embodiment, empathy, fur, Grotowski, Hay, Lascaux, performance, shamanism.*

'Relic #5' is the title of a performance presented at the *Global Animal* conference, University of Wollongong in July 2011. This performance, whilst created specifically for the conference, was one of an ongoing series of live showings within a practice-based doctoral research project situated within the field of feminine identity and poetics. The project's practical and written research engages with themes of gender, interiority, and the wound (Peggy Phelan, Helene Cixous), through the lens of an historical and archetypal feminine and related *animal entities* as portrayed in fable (Marina Warner), mythology, and art (Georges Bataille, Elizabeth Grosz). This project attempts to bring these themes into dialogue within the frame of a contemporary performance practice in Australia from 1993 to the present.

Underpinning the conceptual concerns of the artistic research project is the proposition that an embodied (movement-based) performance practice (Schechner) that engages with imagistic, visceral, emotional affect can provoke sensory resonance in an audience through the medium of the performer's body: its presence, its movement, and its vocality.

As the research is engaged with the subjectivity of the artist, I, as the performer, explain the process behind the performance(s) in the first person. "I" is sometimes truer than "one" or than "it". Truer because it admits its source' (Irigaray 2).

A state and attitude of open curiosity is integral to my creative process and is informed by performance and studio-based research that engages a range of perceptual practices, including the near-impossible challenge of American choreographer Deborah Hay's directive to move with an awareness of the 'whole body at once'¹:

The whole body at once is the teacher ... I imagine the whole body at once has the potential to dialogue with all there is ... What if my whole body at once has the potential to perceive Here spatially, including everything I see and everything I can't see, now, now and now? What if Now is my past, present, and future here, here, and here? (104)

Also influential, as a residue of my early theatre training, is Polish director Jerzy Grotowski's assertion that 'one mustn't forget, our body is an animal' (qtd. in Richards 66). Thomas Richards, who worked closely with Grotowski in his later years, articulates his own experience of this: '[i]f I observe a cat, I notice that all of its movements are in their place, its body thinks for itself. In the cat there is no discursive mind to block immediate organic reaction, to get in the way' (66).

I have also been inspired and enabled to enter an enlivened state of curiosity by close observation of my young cat and various neighbourhood dogs at play. Cultivating an awareness of Bonnie Cohen's concept of 'Body-Mind'², where, like the cat, the body thinks for itself, helps to

remove cerebral pre-judgment and to bring a trust in my own body's instincts and impulses whilst both making and performing my work.

This body-mind thinking provides the pivotal motivator that propels me through a somatically driven continuum, not one where I enact animal, but rather where visceral intelligence and curiosity (the animal nose, eyes, and senses) become the choreographic drivers. Body-Mind thinking enables a still core of presence amidst activity, an engagement with objects that becomes an open-ended investigation of materials and space.

The nine performance works that thus far comprise *Museum of the Sublime: Relics* have each involved a loose choreography of and with a collection of objects that extend or articulate my body in some (largely unpredictable) way and relate associatively to time, the wound, and the animal. A rope, balloons, a fur coat, an animal mask, a wooden toy, an empty box, white gloves, a mirror, a red and white stick: these particular objects have all found a place inside the work. Unfortunately, there are no photographs of 'Relic #5', but the accompanying images of other presentations in the series will, I hope, suffice as visual references for the overall consistent aesthetic of the work.

With this writing I offer both an abbreviated account of an audience's possible experience of 'Relic #5' and a record of my thinking around the making of the work. I ask you, the reader, to be a remote witness to some imagined moments of live performance: the relics, or remnants, of a relic. I have tried not to pre-empt too much 'meaning' so that you are free to observe and glean, just as an audience does.

Relic #5: the introduction

The audience enters a room where they must pass a pale naked man who stands with a clothed older woman in the narrow passageway. The audience pass beside the woman who wears the white gloves of a curator and has a rope tied around her ankle. Her face is obscured by the mirror held in her left hand, whilst her right hand hovers in front of the young man's genitals.

The audience enters a theatre space to see an empty mirror and a woman with no head. The shivering man wears dark sunglasses.

There is naked skin, and a rope, but as yet the only visible animal is human. There is a smell of sweat and musk.

The spectators enter a darkened space, from the bright outside to the dim inside, and light flashes from the woman's mirror/face into their eyes.

They catch the gleam of polished wood from the back of a reclining double bass, further into the room.

Later, as the young man plays the double bass, the instrument's prone shape will be revisited, momentarily doubled/mirrored by the woman's naked reclining back. The bare pale form could be a crude painterly attempt at a semi-nude Odalisque by Velasquez or Ingres, but perhaps refers more to the abject state of a skinned animal.

In this performance I invite the audience to look with me, or through me, rather than *at* me, as I attempt to broach the tasks and the objects with a type of 'truthfulness' spoken of by Sylvia Plath, with few preconceptions and without sentimentality. But what are we looking at? Or rather, what is touching (us) and being touched? Perhaps something more blood-filled than is indicated by Plath, who writes with an icy candour from the perspective of her *Mirror*:

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
Whatever I see, I swallow immediately.

Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike
I am not cruel, only truthful. (34)



Figure 1: Sam Pettigrew & Nikki Heywood, *Relic #7*, SEAM Conference Launch, Critical Path, Sydney, 2011. Photo: Heidrun Lohr.

Referring back to journal notes whilst creating ‘Relic #5’, my instruction to myself was ‘[t]o look: at the *eye* itself and how it sees, the interior and the animal’ (Heywood 2011).

The Interior Animal

The presence of animals in *Museum of the Sublime: Relics* has evolved in a gradual accumulation. In 2005 whilst walking in forests in the Czech Republic I came across an abject tree stump, boastfully marked as the place where the last bear of the region had been captured and killed in the 1930s. Later on that same trip, fossicking around a Zurich market stall I found a small carved wooden bear, originally made to stand atop a cigar box. I was struck by the contradiction of its finely chiseled animal form, and thoughts of its maker of some 100 years ago in a Swiss mountain village, with a block of wood, some sharp rhythmic tools and the vision of a live brown (dancing?) bear.



Figure 2: The Swiss bear, Relic #3, Critical Path Residency, Io Myers Studio, UNSW, 2010. Photo: Heidrun Lohr.

In 2010, in need of company, I invited the bear to join me in the rehearsal studio. I unearthed a decrepit fur coat from my old costume trunk and started to wear it in a curious kinship with the bear. To be more like the bear? To be furry, and possibly wild, alongside the bear? Or conversely, perversely, to deepen the gulf of inconsistency, the space between me and the animal? Unsurprisingly the fur, the unknown animal’s skin, and the troubling ease with which I could put on and take off this still luxuriant, yet disintegrating pelt, was asking its own paradoxical questions.

Of course, the phenomenon of the fur coat was vividly opposed in the late twentieth century,³ with the fur's historically perceived sophistication and glamour now exposed as emblematic of an ugly sense of entitlement. An entitlement, wielded with bloody savagery across our species' history, that allows us humans to continue to take the glistening skins from their animal owners, even when it is no longer a necessity for our survival. What do we become when we wear them?

The sense of ancient carnality I experience in wearing the fur coat has been folded into my thinking alongside the discussion on the origins of human consciousness articulated in Georges Bataille's writings on prehistoric art and culture (2005). Tracing the thick thread of human/animal connection back in time to the early Paleolithic, Bataille speculates along the walls of animal forms in the French caves of Lascaux:

The apparition of the animal was not, to the man who astonished himself by making it appear, the apparition of a definable object. That which appeared had at first a significance that was scarcely accessible, *beyond* what could have been defined. (135)

The inherent theatricality of the palimpsest of animals – their creation and display, their (disputed) sympathetic magic and the powerful and enduring presence of the bison, horses, boars, stags – continues to evoke an experience of awe, a movement of attraction for the contemporary body-mind toward these prehistoric depictions, even if for many of us (myself included) they are only seen in photographs or virtual tours (French Ministry of Culture).

Descending into the caves, in the virtual tour of Lascaux, along the curving walls is to enter into a body, a giant undulating organ. The sense of being touched, across thousands of years, by the meeting of human hand and animal form, opens a vast space for the imagination as well as a space of empathy and visceral intersubjectivity. Having entered into these arcane imaginings I am inevitably led, as was Bataille, to the Shaft where the Panel of the Wounded Man holds the only human depiction in Lascaux, a figure who lies dead or dying alongside a bison whose organs spill from its abdomen. Bataille suggests that this is the figure of an early shaman, wearing the head of a bird:

The bird face reminds us of the bird costumes typical of sorcerers, the shamans of Siberia. This kind of bird signifies the shaman's voyage into the beyond, into the kingdom of death. (172)

The shaman, arguably the contemporary performer's predecessor (Schechner 40-1), is often depicted wearing an animal head and/or covered in skins, reshaping him/herself in animal form, and dancing:

One can only speculate, and many have, about the origins, structure, and functions of totemism and animism. What is very clear is that people identify themselves with animals, dress in animal skins and heads, and develop specific ceremonies and observations to keep intact links connecting animal species to humans. (Schechner 96)

In assembling the *Museum of the Sublime*, I had been drawn to a mask-like head, an animal head of slight indeterminacy: is it a bear? Is it a deer? Is it a donkey? When I wear this head, I find a deferral of my human self and another type of looking from inside the mask. A mask demands something essential from its wearer, a stillness, a receptivity. No explanation to the viewer should be needed. Strangely, the quality of this particular animal head seems to invite empathy and connection with the onlooker. The viewer also suspends or defers the human inside the mask, as something (what?) in them is touched.



Figure 3: Nikki Heywood, *Relic #6*, FraserStudio, Sydney, 2011. Photo: Heidrun Lohr.

In the *Museum* series, it is the infinite reordering of the objects, their textures and densities, that allows for personal associations to arise. As Elizabeth Grosz (80) suggests, it is the *sensation*

elicited by the objects (and here the words of Proverbs are also objects), the *vibratory rhythms*, literally present with the deep rumblings of the double bass, and my own interrupted rhythmic response and punctuated interaction with objects such as rope or stick or words or balloons, that are the work. Each object, in its relation to multiple frames of reference – including my body, its subjective and cultural history and related spheres of interest – produces sensations, or introduces a charge into the gap between me and it and the witness/audience.

The objects are what they are, themselves, concrete and material. Performing together, they also become an extension of my self/my organs/and body parts.

Below is a possible table of signs – the objects not as symbols but as parts:

gloves = hands as tools = self as curator/objectivity and distance/self in a ‘lady-like’ pretence of gentility/ clown

balloons = organs removed from the body = bladder = creativity, playfulness; also lungs and stomach = breath, viscera, mortality, childhood, play in the face of death

rope = guts/sinew = thread/riddle/noose/lasso/restraining device/snake/attachment

shoes/stick = teeth and nails = purchase, grip, authority

stick = measuring device/marker of time, depth, history = controlling prod

fur coat = skin/costume = emptiness/dead animal/luxury attained through sacrifice/ageing movie star/decay/restitching

animal head = eyes and heart = fable creature/donkey/Bottom transformed/the invisible head of Rembrandt’s Slaughtered Ox/empathy

With the putting on of white curator’s gloves, my hands become not entirely my own. They are impersonal and practical hands that put things in place. Clothed hands rather than naked, telling pictorially, giving signs and signals as they become graphic outlines. They keep things at a distance, neither infecting nor infected by what they touch.

With the fur coat, I am able to enfold myself in another kind of embrace: the embrace both of the abject animal and the illusory embrace of glamour and luxury. In ‘Relic #6’ I create a headless body that stumbles blindly around, directionless, until it finds and re-unites with the deer/bear/donkey head. In some versions, this seems to be a donkey (the fool of Proverbs, or Bottom in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*) who dances a little jig, rejoicing in finding a body, and the body a head. Rejoicing in becoming animate. On the other hand, the woman inside the coat rejoices in becoming/being animal, welcoming her donkey/beastly nature.

However, the embrace, this letting go into animal, comes with a price. In the culminating sequence in ‘Relic #5’ the woman as animal moves slowly – sitting, standing, sitting – along a row of empty seats that mirror the seats of the audience opposite. Although her row is not really empty. Each seat

holds a clear glistening balloon.⁴ She holds each balloon's captive breath, the interior of interiors, before moving along the line, awaiting her turn on a slippery trajectory where lightness, spirit, soul, face the inevitable weight of mortality. As observed by one audience member '[her] "turn" in this case was imminent death – like animals moving in a (human controlled and determined) line to slaughter'.

In the performance of 'Relic #5', this reading back and forth, between the agency of the female body and the plight of the vulnerable animal, is highlighted in the spoken/intoned use of multiple translations, variations on a theme, of the misogynistic Proverbs 7:22:

He goeth after her straightway, as an ox goeth to the slaughter or as a fool to the correction of the stocks:

All at once he followed her, like an ox going to the slaughter, like a deer stepping into a noose;

Immediately he follows her like a steer on its way to be slaughtered, like a ram hobbling into captivity;

He follows her at once like an ox going to the slaughter. He was like a stag caught in a trap.



Figure 4: Nikki Heywood, Relic #6, FraserStudio, Sydney, 2011. Photo: Heidrun Lohr.

I am as interested in the putting on and taking off of the fur coat and the animal head as in the transition, the slippage between the human and the animal 'other', as in any steady state or fixed reading that these items suggest.

After the head and coat are taken off, the woman is released, again bare. In 'Relic #5' the head and skin are loosely reassembled (precariously on the frame of chairs) as relics and returned to objects in the museum, the connection between human and animal remaindered as an unending question of perception:

... art is not simply the expression of an animal past, a prehistorical allegiance with the evolutionary forces that make one ... but above all the transformation of the materials from the past into resources for the future ... to be unleashed on a people ready to perceive and be affected by them. (Grosz 103)

Yet for the *Museum*, I foresee going further with the parallel visceral, visual, tactile worlds. I hear more animals, past and present, calling out to be heard, to be seen and touched, enticing in all their historical and personal references, poignant in their contemporary subjection to cold economic imperatives.

The near impossible enquiry in this work was, and still is, to ask:

How do we (audience and performer) look at a (female) body and at an animal?

When does this looking between the two, from one to the other, meet?

When does looking become touch?

How are we touched by looking?

How are we touched by a body representing an animal?

Perhaps for touch, read empathy. Or something that moves inside the body.

Notes

¹ Hay's 'choreographic work developed in the midst of the most radical cultural revolution in the United States. Hay was one of the early members of the Judson Dance Theatre, a community of artists whose work challenged the foundational principles of modern dance ... to the very notion of what constitutes a dance'. (Hay 105)

² Body-Mind Centering (BMC) is a somatic approach developed by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen over the last 40 years. In the foreword to Cohen's 2008 publication *Sensing, Feeling, and Action*, Susan Aposhyan emphasises: 'BMC is a study. Its subject is movement. By watching the movement of the body, we can see the movement of the mind. The "mind" of a physical form is the moving quality of that form, its inherent intelligence down to a cellular level' (Cohen vii). BMC is taught in Australia by practitioner and dancer Alice Cummins, with whom I have studied since 1998, and more intensively since beginning doctoral research.

³ As historian Carol Dyhouse (2011) has detailed in her article 'Skin Deep: The History of Fur', fur lost its popularity partly due to the efforts of the 'Animal Liberation Front, formed in 1976, PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) in 1980 and Lynx, the animal welfare trust, in 1984. Lynx mounted a high-profile advertising and poster campaign in the 1980s, most memorably distributing an image by David Bailey which showed a model trailing a fur coat oozing blood on the catwalk with the slogan: "It takes up to 40 dumb animals to make this but only one to wear it." However, as Dyhouse and others have noted, fur has recently seen a renewed presence in the designer fashion industry and on European catwalks.

⁴ This image, and the use of balloons throughout the *Relic* series, was created after Rembrandt's *Slaughtered Ox* led me to observe the prevalence of slaughtered animals seen hanging in the domestic interiors of many Flemish paintings from the sixteenth century. In some of these rooms we see balloons, made from the animal's inflated bladders, placed there as a counterweight to the heavy presence of death, lightly connoting the spirit, the immortal. For me the balloon is the held breath, the personal exhalation captured and creating form, filling the membrane, a space within a space, a small cell within the larger cell of the room – where the air is divided, or one becomes two. For somatic practitioner Bonnie Cohen, in BMC the bladder is the organ that stores both that which is being eliminated and the instinctive essence of our creativity, the creativity that Elizabeth Grosz refers to as the *excess* of our being.

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