

## ○ EZEKIEL OFF-BROADWAY

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'Ezekiel Off-Broadway' explores intersections of modern performance art, in theory and in action, and the rhetoric and speech/acts of the prophet Ezekiel.

I can easily imagine watching Ezekiel perform in an off, off-Broadway experimental lab theatre project. I would watch this lone performance artist, similar to those I have seen before (Karen Finley, Annie Sprinkle, Bill T. Jones) turning his body into a symbol. He writes words of mourning on the front and back of a scroll and then eats it (2.10-3.3). The stage is dark and quiet as Ezekiel binds himself in strong rope and sits mute (3.24-6). He then places a steel plate between him and 'the city', lies on his left side for an extraordinarily long time and then on his right side for an extraordinarily long time (4.1-4). Then he bakes bread, on stage, and uses some sort of excrement. He eats the bread while he is lying on his side. He eats the same amount of bread everyday at the same time – it is a very long performance (4.9-13). Finally, Ezekiel takes a sharp sword and shaves his head and face. He weighs all the hair and divides it into three equal parts. He strikes one part with the sword, one part scatters with the wind, and he keeps part of the hair in his robe and burns the rest (5.1-4).

What reviews the *Village Voice* would give him! The performance would not get rave reviews for originality – the repetition, the excrement, the excessiveness, the presence of ordinary, private acts publicly performed are common fodder in the world of performance art. That Ezekiel's prophetic performances and performance art are so similar is not coincidence. Both seek to express concerns that emerge from the fringe and both offer direct resistance and, perhaps, attempt to subvert power centers. This essay seeks to explain why Ezekiel does these crazy things. Performance seems to hold a privileged place in the arsenal of those who battle power from below, especially in poststructuralist discourses that seek to circumvent the linguistic.

In a poststructuralist understanding, the prophetic text becomes a site where meanings come together and are organized by the readers' interaction with it; it is a constructed organizing entity that participates in a creation of meaning. The text and the reader create meaning through 'interpreting events and making sense of experience' (Prosser MacDonald 1995, p. 2). Whether the text is visual, tactile, aural, auditory, hallucinatory, etc., Mieke Bal claims the common ground is narrative. She writes, 'Narrative as a mode of implicit argumentation is the line which runs through my work on all these different bodies of writing. Narrative as a mode of representation is a tool of manipulation, a figure of rhetoric...' (Bal 1994, p. 263). Likewise, Julia Kristeva understands texts to be written, dramatic, musical, visual, or auditory as well (Grosz 1990, p. 252). The aggregation of acts coalesces into a single act, a performative symbol that is open to interpretation. In Ezekiel, where we see the "body as text," we find excellent examples of a 'performance artist' at work.

There is a strong move in postmodern theory toward expressing 'queer' concerns through the genre of performance.<sup>1</sup> Simply put, a 'queer' concern is one that understands gender as

something socially constructed; queer criticism seeks to expose and perhaps subvert gender normatives. One of the basic claims that performance theorists are making is that performance can be more disruptive of gender norms than written text. There seems to be an underlying assumption that performance is a more 'transgressive' or subversive form of signification. There are several reasons given to support this claim. First, some argue that performance exists in a non-categorizable space.<sup>2</sup> (This claim would presuppose, of course, the existence of categorizable objects).

For example, Catherine Elwes claims that when a person, particularly anyone whose sexuality has been labeled 'obscene' in a particular culture, becomes the speaking subject of a performance, she or he refuses

easy categorisation and begins to put together what patriarchy has pulled apart. A performer may be sexual, but she is not a stripper, she may act but she is not an actress ... [S]he escapes categorisation into existing disciplines with their attendant pigeon-holing for women (Elwes 1990, p. 174).

Here, Elwes is claiming that performance in itself defies categorization as a genre. It may involve speaking, but not necessarily. Performance not only defies genre categorization, some claim, but also may be understood as occupying the same interstitial location, as Elwes describes above, in its relationship between the sign and its referent. There is a relentless claim in many of the new queer theory works on performance, particularly performance art, that performance retains a direct relationship with the signifier because of the presence of a flesh-and-blood body.<sup>3</sup> There is an assumption that the presence of a body somehow trumps or negates those texts that are merely representative of the spoken or written word.

In contrast to the claim that there is a non-referential, extra-symbolic body in a performance, I would agree with those who claim (e.g., Lynda Hart and Judith Butler) that performance *creates the illusion* that the Real is being actualized through the presence of flesh-and-blood bodies. Often, the value of the performance is connected to its authenticity, its parody of the 'real'. According to Hart, watching a performance piece should elicit the question from the spectator, 'is this real? Is this really happening?' But Hart astutely observes that when the distinction is blurred between what is 'real life' and what is art, that is, when the performance is 'too real', those who watch and interpret become mighty uncomfortable.

In order to explore the disruption that a performance brings when it so completely erases any distinction between the Real and acting, Hart analyzes Arlene Croce's<sup>4</sup> 'non' review in *The New Yorker* of Bill T. Jones's dance performance, 'Still/Here'.<sup>5</sup> Hart cites the following reasons that Croce gave for not seeing the performance: '(1) "Still/Here" incorporated videos of people with AIDS who talk about their illness; (2) in doing so, the performance 'crossed the line between theater and reality...'; and (3) the combination of points one and two has made critics like herself 'expendable'. It is almost as if Croce believed that by attending the performance she herself would be annihilated (Hart 1998, p. 131).

In the analysis of Croce's article, Hart is intrigued at Croce's refusal to see the performance. From Croce's review, it is clear that she does not think the piece is art because it is too 'real.' Hart suggests that Croce senses threat or danger in admitting not 'representations' of disease and sex into the performance, but 'real' disease and sex. Hart understands that what has happened

in the interpretation of 'Still/Here', is that when Croce refuses to allow the performance piece to be called art, she is in fact refusing it entrance into the Symbolic. Hart writes, 'What Croce's actions and language signify is her participation in the dominant order's refusal to allow AIDS and its representations to enter into discourse' (Hart 1998, p. 132). Further, Hart describes what is occurring in Croce's 'non-review' as an example of what Tim Dean calls 'social psychosis': AIDS is encountered not only as the discourse of the Other in a return of the repressed that constitutes the repressed as such (the structure by which we understand a neurotic subject); it is encountered also in the real as a consequence of its wholesale repudiation by a society that refuses to admit a signifier for AIDS and is therefore analyzable according to the structure by which we understand a psychotic subject'. What Hart is saying, simply, is that Croce (as an interpreter) is threatened by Jones's performance piece because she recognizes the 'realness' of it:

Croce keeps her distance from Bill T. Jones and his representations of people who are terminally ill – "I have not seen Bill T. Jones's 'Still/Here' and have no plans to review it." But she does review it. She re-views it, without first viewing it, as an unspeakable, extra discursive act, a dance that cannot be symbolized, a dance that falls out of her repertory of the symbolic...When Croce says that Jones's performance was too realistic, she doesn't mean dramatic realism – the illusion of reality – she means life (Hart 1998, p. 133).

By refusing to call it art, Croce is refusing AIDS signification in the dominant discourse (because AIDS is a discourse of an Other). Thus, the process is self-reproducing: because AIDS (as a conflation of sex and death) poses a threat to the dominant discourse because it is a discourse of an Other, it is refused signification. Then, death and sex become real, and in their 'realness' they become threatening to the symbolic order. By this construction, the Real, then, is something that threatens the production of the symbolic order, is something that is refused signification by that order, but remains necessary in the determination of the primary discourse.

There seems to be some credence, then, in the claim that there is a 'realness' present in some types of performances: it is a realness defined as that which opposes the Symbolic. As Hart argues, the performances that register discourses of an Other seem to have direct bearing on the production of social norms. What is threatening about performance, then, is not anything ontologically specific to performance, nor is it due to the presence of a flesh-and-blood body, but the perceived threat comes from the flesh and blood body in performance combined with the presence of an Other. Karen Finley notes that it is not when she performs 'bold and painfully graphic' speeches about 'the horrors of sexual abuse, governmental indifference to AIDS, incest, rape, and a host of other issues that address race, class, gender, and sexual minorities,' that has generated the greatest controversy (Hart 1998, p. 130). Rather, the elements that have been labeled the most 'obscene' in her performances are when in one, she smears chocolate all over her body, and in a piece called 'Yams Up My Granny's Ass', Finley smears yams on her buttocks. Hart notes that in the interpretations of Finley's performances, 'the image – conveyed through the physical action – subsumed the speech' (Hart 1998, p. 130).

Yet, any political, or aesthetic, or theological point becomes entirely ignored in a rush to judgment by hostile interpreters because of the presence of physical excesses. For example, there are scenes in which urine is supposedly thrown on the audience (it is not really urine; the container

was switched offstage); there is a piece in which HIV infected blood (not really) is put on a rag, attached to a clothes line and passed over the audience; there are performances of body cuttings (therefore, real bleeding) and self inflicted (real) mutilations. All of these have been harshly criticized precisely for their use of the body's refuse.

In addition to the participation of the flesh-and-blood body in a performance communicative of an Other's discourse, there is at least one other aspect of or a type of performance that tends to draw negative criticism and is often labeled 'not art'. The performances of Janine Antoni and Alison Knowles, for example, often draw such criticisms.

In one performance called 'Identical Lunch' Knowles invites the viewer to prepare and eat a tuna sandwich on wheat toast with lettuce and butter, no mayo, a large glass of buttermilk, or a cup of soup. Antoni, in a piece call 'Loving Care' mops the floor with her hair, which has been dipped in Loving Care hair dye.<sup>6</sup> Like Ezekiel shaving, she is doing a mundane activity (mopping the floor/shaving) but doing it in an unusual, almost bizarre fashion. Other performances, such as 'The House' performed by the Gob Squad, 'Scrubbing' by Chris Rush<sup>7</sup> and 'Object Lesson Part III', by Ailie Cohen, merely present ordinary household chores or items and invite the audience to ponder the strangeness of everyday objects and events.

These performances may mimic everyday events. The piece may be nothing more than 'the appearance of the insignificant, meaningless natural behavior of daily life presented apparently with no other message than the acts themselves parading nakedly' (Pywell 1994, p. 26). Geoff Pywell notes that the staging of everyday, mundane events works to show that common things are never exhausted of their meaning; the presumed simplicity of ordinary acts is itself a fiction. Thus, performance again muddies any distinction, if there is one, between reality and acting.

However, the blurred distinction between what is 'real' and what is 'acting' in Jones's performance does not appear to be the same 'realness' that is portrayed in the performance pieces I am describing here. Here, in Antoni's pieces, for example, is not the stark realness that death and disease represent, but the desolate and unsettling realness of banality.<sup>8</sup> But I would argue it is the same 'real' in that its font of subversion is in its potential for disruption, which in turn elicits rejection by the Symbolic (as is evident in the work of the interpretations). In other words, both types of performances are perceived to be subversive; they are labeled 'too real' and are rejected as being 'not art' by critics. Regardless of the severity of the event, whether it is the actual presence of disease or a woman ironing clothes, any assumed division between theater and reality dissolves. The dissolution of this boundary removes all that one imagines to protect himself or herself from whatever malfeasance is causing the weeping, bleeding, or any excessive behavior. Thus, the security of the spectator and by implication, the order of the spectator's world, is perceived to be threatened by both types of performances. What is it, then, that both hold in common apart from their identical (negative) reception in the critical interpretations?

I have already pointed out the similarities of the presence of a flesh-and-blood body participating in a performance that dissolves perceived distinctions between what is real and what is art. Perhaps, additionally, it is the out-of-placeness of behavior that further compels severe criticism. The ordinary events of urinating or bathing oneself, or the simple gestures of ironing or cooking or reading take on a sense of surrealism, i.e., a subverting of reality, when removed from the private sphere into a public display. When ordinary objects merely become noticed, they become exceptional. Pywell writes:

A tent, like [an] apple or [a] sink, is, after all, such an ordinary thing, so very unexceptional... Only when, through happenstance, a mundane thing is attached to some otherwise unconnected human significance does it become precious. By definition, it then leaves the ranks of the ordinary and becomes something else (Pywell 1994, p. 79).

Thus, the simple act of noticing an object or a gesture makes that thing or action extraordinary. Calling attention to the ordinary can take on many forms. If an ordinary event, such as shaving, braiding one's hair, or washing one's hands is performed to excess, i.e., beyond what is considered to be necessary, merely adequate or functional, the gesture becomes exceptional and in some cases, disturbing (Pywell 1994, p. 83).

Thinking about performance art gives one insight to Ezekiel's prophetic performances. It is easy to see in his actions the distinguishing features that were present in the performance pieces that have been labeled deviant and/or obscene, or just annoying: he is a strange/familiar person doing strange/familiar things with his body.

Yet, what we have is a linguistic text describing the embodied symbolism of Ezekiel. In the translation of performative into linguistic, the function of language is to displace or conceal the body because performance threatens to disrupt the symbolic order (particularly the production of gender norms). The queer performer or a performance inclusive of excess or parodic repetition, such as Ezekiel's, can signal an intrusion or transgression into the defined and bordered social mores of any culture. Such performances disrupt or threaten to destabilize the orderliness of societal norms (maintained by language) much in the same way Ezekiel's prophetic performances do. The problem is, we do not really have Ezekiel's abject body, but the linguistic arrangement of those acts it performs. Judith Butler explains the distinction.

As I demonstrate above, poststructuralism posits there is no such thing as a "real body" – even the performance is a linguistic text. And, as a text, the body is placed squarely within the dominant culture. Another debate arises then around this question: are some texts, some bodies more subversive than others? Is Ezekiel's prophetic performances of eating dung and shaving his head more destabilizing than, say, the lamentations and speeches of Jeremiah?

On the one hand, Kristeva would argue that when Ezekiel bakes bread made with excrement and eats exactly the same amount at exactly the same time every day (4.9-13), his acts become abject, i.e., bodies marked by contact with human refuse and relegated to the fringes, displaced, and called unclean. Ezekiel's body exists in a semiotic place - a place perhaps not outside the dominant order, but closer to its boundaries. The word 'closer' here is pivotal because the idea of a gradation or of degree in naming the relationship between the symbolic body and the 'real' body, or a pre- or post-linguistic body marks the primary distinction between Kristeva's work on the abject and Butler's.

Briefly, Kristeva's work on the abject was initially understood just as Butler describes it: it places the abject body *outside* language. New Kristevan scholars, such as Kelly Oliver, Ewa Ziarek, and Martha Reineke, argue that Kristeva does not place the abject outside the symbolic. Kristeva understands such bodies to be situated very near the borders, or the margins. Here, one must wonder 'the borders between what?' For Kristeva, who is following Lacan here, there is clearly a 'pre-linguistic,' non-constructed body as well as a post-linguistic body (which, for Kristeva and Lacan, usually means psychotic). Thus, the borders are what separates the symbolic,

linguistic order from that which exists outside that order. Kristeva, according to her most recent interpreters, places the abject body at the edge of language, right up against the borders. Even in this re-reading of Kristeva, she and Butler would still not agree.

Kristeva understands different bodies to be at different stages of constructedness. She implies that those bodies bearing the marks of abjection are not fully involved in the dominant order (and particularly, its gendering processes) but may resist, to a point, participation in that order and may even disrupt its production. In other words, Kristeva understands that bodies are constructed in degrees and, thus, some bodies more fully participate in the perpetuation of the paternal ordering of gender. Reineke describes Kristeva's abject bodies as follows: 'For Kristeva, the abject is ambiguous and wholly incoherent in its very form, or non-form. An inassimilable nonunity, the abject is a primary mark of the not-yetness of a subject who is in process and on trial' (Reineke 1997, p. 43).

Butler, as I read her, does not posit an 'outside' at all. Butler calls for us to 'cure ourselves of the illusion of a true body beyond the law' (Butler 1990, p. 93). For Butler, even the flesh-and-blood body that bleeds or lactates is no less a socially constructed product than any other thing that exists; the abject body participates equally in the maintenance and perpetuation of gender norms. Butler does, however, posit a possibility of subversion, though it is a subversion that remains firmly 'inside' the gendering process. She writes, 'If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself (p. 93). The possibility of gender norm subversion within the patristic order may be brought about, according to Butler, through parodic repetition of those actions considered to be gender normatives.

Gender is sustained through repetition in that it

both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects. In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; "agency," then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition. If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, i.e., new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarism, then it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible (Butler 1990, p. 145).

Thus, according to Butler, gender norms can indeed be subverted by doing the very thing that creates them: performing them again and again. The parodic or excessive repetition of norms exposes, claims Butler, 'the illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance' (Butler 1990, p. 146). Butler's statements here about parodic or excess repetition could confirm the third argument offered by those proponents of performance as subversive (the first being an assumption of incatagorization and the second being the presumed presence of a 'real' body): the portrayal of everyday events in excess works to disrupt and displace ordinary space.

Reading Ezekiel with Butler's perception of performance would place particular emphasis on the fact that Ezekiel embraces a form of the ridiculous. His mimicry of ordinary events even unto the absurd transposes those acts into subversions. The excess of Ezekiel is precisely the thing that makes the performance an effective disruption of societal norms. This disruption, as

Ezekiel must understand it, is a matter of life and death – to permit ‘business as usual’ is to sanction death, captivity, and the exile of his own people. Ezekiel’s withdrawal from the linguistic, i.e., his muteness and his performances, is an effort to withdraw from the dominant culture. However, protecting and maintaining gender norms becomes first and foremost the priority of language. So, of course, any subversion that Ezekiel may claim is subsumed again by the literary text and becomes, again, a part of the dominant order.

The value of using a performance model in an analysis of Ezekiel is that it allows one to acknowledge that the performances of prophetic acts can be disruptive without placing the subversive or queer body outside the dominant culture; indeed, it is impossible to do so. One of Butler’s critiques of Kristeva is that those experiences which Kristeva labels abject, such as lesbian or maternal, make those women ‘intrinsically unintelligible’ (Butler 1990, p. 87). Butler makes a space for the subversive within the workings of culture. Reading the prophetic acts through Butler’s lens, Ezekiel, in his performances, disrupts the social normative by parodying familiar events. Ezekiel is a performance artist. However, though his performance draws attention to and works to breakdown the norms he is mimicking (to be secluded, to be bound, to be defiled), he ultimately suffers those fates. The interpretations of the events, indeed, the historical sexist, homophobic, racist readings of Ezekiel, become the vehicle through which language toils to organize and appropriate. Performance mimics, it points to the absurdity of the ordinary, and eventually, it alters that ordinary. Yet, as shocking as a performance may be, for whatever reasons, social change is gradual and the status quo is never absolutely subverted.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For example, see Pellegrini (1996), Hart (1998), Sedgewick (1990), Phelan (1993).
- <sup>2</sup> cf. Phelan (1993), Elwes (1990), Bell (1994).
- <sup>3</sup> Lynda Hart does not make this claim; in fact, in *Between the Body and the Flesh*, she specifically argues against the essentialist placement of the body in performance. See pp. 84–123.
- <sup>4</sup> Arlene Croce is the primary dance reviewer for *The New Yorker*.
- <sup>5</sup> In the analysis to come, I am not assuming an existence of a Real beyond a Symbolic (linguistically ordered) structure. However, the authors I will be discussing are following the Lacanian terms of Real and Symbolic. They are assuming there are subjects in the state of ‘not yet-ness’ or have rejected the linguistic order. Thus, when I use Real, in capital letters, it represents that which Lacan describes as existing without the Symbolic order.
- <sup>6</sup> See <http://www.varoregistry.com/antoni/3.html>.
- <sup>7</sup> Formerly available from [http://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/Art\\_History/AHIS372/module14/05.html](http://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/Art_History/AHIS372/module14/05.html).
- <sup>8</sup> Antoni has other pieces in which she gnaws on a giant chunk of chocolate, or she may wash her hands repeatedly.

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