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The Ambivalent Politics of One-to-One Performance

One-to-one performance is a form of live art wherein a solo performer stages a situation, action or event for a solo spectator. In most cases, the artist is spatiotemporally co-present with the audience member. Indeed, they are often uncomfortably close, as in Kira O'Reilly's *Inthewrongplaceness* (2005), where she performs a "slow crushing dance with a pig for one person at a time" (ABC). In other cases, the performer and spectator are temporally co-present but spatially distant, as in Susana Mendes-Silva's *Artphone* (2002) which invites audience members to call the artist and ask her about contemporary art. In still other cases, the artist and auditor are both spatially and temporally distant, as in Berni Louise's *Only a Phone Call Away* (2007) where participants dial a telephone number and listen to one of five audio recordings. In some rare instances, the artist does not participate at all and delegates their presence to a performer. For example, choreographer Danielle Agami employs four dancers to perform her 10-minute solo in 40-minute shifts for her work *Laotang* (2010). Alternatively, the performance might be delegated entirely to the audience, as in Rotozaza's *Etiquette* (2007) where two participants sit in a public space, wearing headphones and following audio instructions that tell them what to say to each other and which objects to move. On other occasions, the artist, delegated performer, and audience member are all spatiotemporally distant, as in *A Soldier's Song* (2010), which was devised by Quarantine, performed by seven serving soldiers (who were filmed singing their favourite karaoke songs), and viewed by a single spectator (who decides which recording to watch and whether or not to sing along). Regardless of the exact configuration of co-presence, one-to-one performance often blurs the distinction between performer and spectator, producing a hybrid figure that Deirdre Heddon, Helen Iball and Rachel Zerihan call the "performing spectator" (2012, 121).

The precise mode of participation ranges from the convivial to the confrontational, reflecting the form's twin origins in relational aesthetics and body art. In the Live Art Development Agency's *Study Room Guide on One to One Performance*, the first major mapping of the practice, Rachel Zerihan argues that the form can be traced back to Chris Burden, specifically his *Five-Day Locker Piece* (1971) where he was shut into small steel locker for 120 hours. To his surprise, Burden found that people came "to sit in front of the locker, to tell him their problems and the stories of their lives" (Carr 1994, 18; quoted by Zerihan 2009, 5). Whether by accident or by design, Burden had created a space and through this a social relation resembling that of priest and confessor, where physical invisibility facilitates spiritual intimacy. The few other scholars who have attempted to trace

the genealogy of one-to-one agree with this timeframe but suggest different names and events. For instance, Lynn Lu argues that Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964) and Marina Abramovic's *Rhythm 0* (1974) could also be regarded as proto-one-to-ones, since both pieces rely on the physical, psychological and mental engagement of the audience to work (Lu 17), while Dror Harari names Yoko Ono alongside John Cage, Fluxus, Environments, and Happenings (2011, 142). While they focus on the highbrow lineage of the form, David Jubb—artistic director of the Battersea Arts Centre and curator of their one-to-one festivals—adds some lowbrow levity to the mix by reminding us that the genre can also be traced back to the crystal-gazers and fortune-tellers found at the fairground. These twin inheritances, from pop culture and the avant-garde, mean that one-to-one performance is a “paradoxical and risky mix of the trivial and the challenging” (Alston 2012a, 344).

Over the past fifteen years, both the volume and variety of one-to-one performances have increased. There are now numerous subgenres, including the seductive, which positions the spectator as a potential or actual lover. Examples include Ontroerend Goed's *Internal* (2007) and Fractured Cloud's *The 15 Minute Relationship* (2010), both of which seduce and then betray the audience in less than half an hour. In other subgenres, however, the participant is positioned less as a lover and more as a customer. There is an entire subgenre that references the private dance, including the previously mentioned *Laotang*, Janice Parker's *Private Dancer* (2009), Abigail Conway's *Dancefloors* (2010), and Claudia Alessi's *Your Private Hooper* (2012). While Conway and Alessi gently tweaked the form by inviting the audience to choose the music and/or costume and/or degree of participation, Parker pushed it much further by designing a set that resembles a house with five separate rooms. In each of these rooms, a dancer with disability performed for a single audience member.

In contrast, other performances seek to separate sex from intimacy, staging chaste encounters in beds and/or bedrooms. For example, Charlie Sofo's *B.E.D.* (2010) took place in the audience member's own bed, effectively starting when they invite him to sleep over and continuing as a series of awkward negotiations, for example over which side of the bed to sleep on (see Spiers 2010). There is no conversation in SJ Norman's *Rest Area* (2007), which takes place in silence in the back of a stationary truck. Norman receives the spectator, leads them to the bed, and then spoons them. Both Sofo and Norman acknowledge their debt to the late Adrian Howells, particularly his performance *Held* (2006), in which he led his audience through three progressively intimate scenes—sharing a cup of tea at a table, holding hands on the couch while watching television, and then spooning in silence on the bed. If Howells pioneered a genre of one-to-ones that were almost therapeutic, then Franko B and Kira O'Reilly have pioneered a more traumatic genre. In *Aktion 398* (1998), Franko B sat in the corner, wearing nothing more than a layer of white paint, a ruffled collar, and a cut on the side of his stomach. In *Aktion 398/Why Are You Here?* (2005), it was the audience who had to strip naked before entering the performance space and viewing the fully clothed artist. O'Reilly is often naked and/or wounded and in *View (nearer to the time)* (2005) she was both, as audience members made a small cut on her skin.

No doubt there are many more categories that could apply such as “mobile one-to-ones,” which would designate those works that involve walking, cycling or riding in a car—Nikki Jones’s *Ush and Them* (2012), Sarah Nelson’s *Mobile Moments: Series #2* (2012), and Michael Pinchbeck’s *The Long and Winding Road* (2004) respectively. Or “mediatised one-to-ones,” which would designate those works that involve phone calls, projections or video goggles—Helen Paris’s *Vena Amoris (love vein/vain)* (1999), Lundahl & Seidl’s *Rotating in a Room of Images* (2011), and Me & the Machine, *When We Meet Again (Introduced as Friends)* (2011) respectively. Inevitably, though, the best one-to-ones elude such taxonomies, deliberately playing with the distinctions we like to draw between different types of intimacies, as Samantha Sweeting does in *La Nourrice (come drink from me my darling)* (2009), where she wears a supplementary nursing system and invites the audience to suckle almond milk in an act that is dually—and discomfortingly—sexual as well as maternal. In addition, even when a performance is apparently straightforward, different spectators have diverse and contradictory responses. Take *Half Cut* (2010), for instance, which invites the audience to pluck, wax or shave a single hair from the male performer’s chest. While Adam Alston reads this within the context of budget cuts and as a rehearsal for the assumption of risk, agency and accountability (2012a), my own response was embarrassingly base as I thought—and I have not seen the piece live—“How I would love to pluck a hair from a man as slowly, painfully and ineptly as possible, so as to wreak one tiny revenge for all the time, money and energy I have spent—not to mention the pain I have endured—in the name of depilation.” This intense, solitary and subjective response often drives a desperate desire to compare notes with fellow “survivors” of any given show. It also accounts for the academic reluctance to engage with the genre, as scholars not only feel self-conscious but also an “added layer of responsibility and slight tinge of betrayal ... in writing about a one-to-one performance” (Solovyeva and McKenzie 2012).¹

The credit for shifting this reluctance goes in large part to Zerihan, whose work forms the basis of the discourse on the genre, including debates about its nomenclature (see for example Zerihan 2009, 2010; Chatzichristodoulou and Zerihan 2012; Kartsaki and Zerihan 2012). Until 2010, the term “one-to-one” tended to dominate the discussion but when the BAC programmed the world’s first festival devoted to the form and titled it “one-on-one” the latter term gained more traction. For her part, Zerihan favours the former, arguing that it suggests a “dialectic exchange” whereas the latter implies “a more sexualized encounter ... a scenario that meshes, presses or collapses bodies one on to the other” (Chatzichristodoulou and Zerihan 2012, 226). She reiterates this argument in an article co-authored with Deirdre Heddon and Helen Iball, where they write that one-to-one conjures the image of “a dialogic and collaborative encounter” (Heddon, Iball, and Zerihan 2012, 122). In contrast, Alston prefers the term one-on-one precisely for its sexual connotations as well as its implications of “risk and confrontation” (2012a, 345). Like Zerihan, I prefer the term “one-to-one” but also think that as the form and the discourse associated with it expand, perhaps each preposition will designate a different type of performance. For example, “one-for-one” might refer to performances that emphasise economics or exchange while “one-with-one” might indicate performances that prefer to remain in the convivial as opposed to confrontational mode, i.e. those that stage an encounter that takes place side-by-side rather than face-to-face. Even so, an argument over prepositions is

probably something of a distraction from more important ones about the intimacy, ethics, and economics of the form.

The subject of intimacy is perhaps the most prevalent in the literature on one-to-one. Some scholars and practitioners argue that one-to-one performance has emerged in response to the lack of intimacy in our everyday lives. For instance, Howells told Harari: “there’s a direct correlation between the proliferation of this genre of work and the pace at which our culture becomes more saturated with visual information” (Howells, quoted by Harari 2011, 148). More than the visual, it is in fact the virtual that was of particular concern to Howells and he argued that as people spend more and more time “staying in touch,” via email, online chats, and virtual worlds, they spend less and less time actually touching (148). Hence the rise of one-to-one performance can be seen as “a reaction to this cultural shift” as people “increasingly ... see[k] out experiences that are more ‘up close and personal’”(148). Others, however, do not see one-to-one performance as a reaction to online practices but rather as a continuation of them, noting that the two have made parallel progress. Like Facebook and Twitter, one-to-one performance is yet another platform “for claiming and proclaiming individuality” (Heddon, Iball, and Zerihan 2012, 121). Whether framed as a reaction to, or continuation of, contemporary social practices, it is worth remembering that intimacy is not synonymous with intensity and it exists on what Dominic Johnson calls a continuum: too much intimacy can result in abuse while too little can produce abandonment (2012, 90). Hence it remains hard to generalise about the intimacy of one-to-one since each performance enacts and enables a slightly different mode. Whatever the mode though, the genre contests the very category of the “intimate” and its implied distinctions between public and private.

The issue of privacy is part of a larger debate about the ethics of such performance and the rights and responsibilities of its participants. Firstly and most obviously, the one-to-one performer owes the spectator both a legal and moral duty of care. That is, they are obligated not to harm the participant physically, mentally or emotionally. In many ways, Howells was a model of best practice, providing participants with detailed descriptions prior to the performance and giving them options during the performance, for example he offered to place a pillow between himself and the participant when spooning in *Held* and let the spectator wear a swimsuit while being bathed in *The Pleasure of Being: Washing, Feeding, Holding* (2011). Yet even in these careful, indeed caring, scenarios there remains a subtle but insistent pressure to, in Iball’s memorable phrase, “give good audience” (Heddon, Iball and Zerihan 2012, 124). Social and theatrical conventions mean that audience members are often anxious to please and want to assist the artist in realising their vision. Thus, Zerihan finds herself eating a strawberry in *The Garden of Adrian* (2009) despite a lifelong aversion to the them (123–24).²

Far more serious problems arise when the consent is not fully informed and cannot ever become so because the performance depends on a revelation or surprise. This has been an issue throughout Ontroerend Goed’s immersive trilogy. In the first instalment, *The Smile Off Your Face* (2004), the spectator is blindfolded, bound in a wheelchair and wheeled into a darkened room, where a series of physical encounters take place (Ontroerend Goed

2014, 11–61). For one participant, the wheelchair triggered memories of having been cancer patient and caused her to cry (Smet, quoted in *Scotsman* 2009). For another, the sound of click of a camera caused him to remove the blindfold and leave because he associated it with “Abu Ghraib-like acts” (Nibbelink 2012, 413–14). In the second instalment, *Internal* (2007), the performers thought they had clearly signalled the theatricality of the encounter; as Alexander Devriendt told the *Guardian* “when you entered the space, you saw the other [previous] five audience members leaving, you saw the make-up room, and the actors. So, everything was there to let you know it’s theatre” (Dickson, Poulton, and Tate 2010). Yet they found that spectators misread, misinterpreted or simply forgot about the contrived nature of the situation. Or, as Devriendt puts it: “people wanted to believe they were the special one” (Dickson, Poulton, and Tate 2010). Having bought into the fiction, audiences then allowed themselves to be seduced into disclosing very personal information in the one-to-one encounters only to find their interlocutor repeating this confession to the entire group—the four other spectators and four other performers—in the show’s final scene. Unsurprisingly, many felt manipulated and humiliated and as result of these experiences, the warnings became more and more elaborate as the show toured around the world (LaFrance). Yet, unlike Howells, the company still could not fully reveal what would happen, since the performance could not function properly without the element of surprise.³

While the performer owes the spectator a duty of care, the reverse also applies, especially when the artist is vulnerable through being naked, wounded, or exposed in some way. Of course, many performances are designed precisely to test this duty of care and place it in direct tension with the desire for the continuation of the show. For example, at one point in *The 14 Stations of the Life and History of Adrian Howells* (2007), Howells silently beseeched his audience to douse him in ice-cold water. Jon Cairns describes how his initial “relish at throwing the bucket of water ... is met with my almost immediate regret – not simply that I had given him such a bodily shock, but that I had unthinkingly done his bidding” (2012, 366). On reflection, he argues that “resisting the urge to throw water over him might have been more spiteful and had a worse effect, possibly denying him the redemptive humiliation that the piece scripts” (366). In this way, Howells held the desire to “give good audience” and “be a good person” in tension, forcing people to prioritise one over the other. More often than not, they choose to give good audience even though they almost always felt “complicit” doing so (365–67).

On other occasions, however, audiences feel no such compunction, as in Tania El Khoury’s experience of performing *Maybe If You Choreograph Me, You Will Feel Better* (2011). Performed for male audience members only, this piece offered the spectator the chance to create “the perfect passing by of a woman underneath his window ... my name, my walk, my look, even my feelings—I would perform his choices for him” (El Khoury 2012, 210). Incredibly, El Khoury was asked:

to jump in front of a moving car, run into the wall, punch the pavement, hurt myself, touch myself and scream abuses on passers-by—all of which I did. I listened to racist and sexual stereotyping and discovered the most

obscure Orientalist fantasies. The police stopped me three times during these performances. I now feel terrified every time I am asked to perform it again at festivals. ... We had to make up a rule that every man can experience the show only once ... to avoid stalkers and harassers. I also stipulated that I would need somebody watching me at all times while I was in the streets to avoid dangerous situations my audience members would like to put me in. (211)

Having read this scaring account, one can only agree with her article's blunt title, that "Sexist and Racist People Go to the Theatre Too" (2012). One-to-one performance renders them particularly visible to the performer, though not necessarily to other audience members.

If the ethics of one-to-one performance are complex, then so too are its politics. In many ways, one-to-one is an inherently radical form, not only because of its frequently explicit content but also because of its implicit challenge to conventional economics. If, as Peggy Phelan famously argued, "performance honors the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value, which leaves no visible trace afterward," then one-to-one would seem to take that liveness and tracelessness to its logical conclusion (1993, 149). Furthermore, if this is how "performance clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital," then one-to-one would seem to be particularly "clogsome" or troublesome, since it is extremely inefficient for both performer and spectator (148). For the performer, staging one-to-one can be expensive in terms of both time and money. The costs include hiring a space and employing a performer or performers. Some artists reduce hiring costs by working non-theatrical locations, as Howells did when he staged *Salon Adrienne* in a hairdresser's, though this can create another set of problems. Similarly, artists reduce labour costs by relying on volunteers or by outsourcing the performance to the audience themselves; as Brian Logan observes "casting the public ... doesn't cost a penny" (2010). More often than not, though, labour costs are borne by the artists and producers and in the absence of the—already modest—economy of scale offered by conventional theatre, this means that the performer has to do the show hundreds, even thousands of times. For example, Howells once performed *Foot Washing for the Sole* 190 times in 12 days (Crawley 2010, 9), while director James Yarker states that Stan's Café has performed *It's Your Film* more than 4,500 times around the world (quoted by Logan 2010, 29–31).⁴ This, in turn, means that even when funded, performers can find themselves earning well below the minimum wage (Manninen 2012, 95) and/or costing their producers serious money; by one estimate almost \$80 CAD per person (Pearson 2015, 64).⁵

For the spectator, the situation is slightly more complicated. In financial terms, one-to-one is often cheaper, as Nancy Durant notes: "It costs up to Pounds 49 to see *Mary Poppins* in the West End. *The Dresser* [a one-to-one by Christopher Green] set me back a fiver" (Durant 2006, 19). In terms of time, however, one-to-one can be very costly. When attending a standalone one-to-one, participants often spend more time in transit than at the performance itself, as Saini Manninen did when she attended Brian Lobel's *Carpe Minuta*

Prima (Manninen 2012, 93). This is alleviated somewhat when attending an event such as Stoke Newington International Airport's *Live Art Speed Date* and the Battersea Art Centre's *One-on-One Festival* in the United Kingdom, *The Blind Trip* and *The Pod Project* in the United States, the "One-to-One Series" embedded within the *Rhubarb Festival* in Canada, and the *Proximity Festival* in Australia, where several one-to-one performances are located in the same place. However, performances are not always available back-to-back and even if they are, they are often only about five minutes long, so the spectator can easily spend several hours at the venue attending one performance, waiting for the next, attending another performance, and waiting again (96). Indeed, as Manninen wryly observes, the audience often spends more time with chit-chatting with the ushers than with the performers (2012, 96). (This is an issue that Australian artist Nikki Jones takes up in her one-to-one *Ush and Them* [2012], where she shows audience members around the building while on the way to their next performance.) Even at a festival then, or perhaps especially at a festival, spectators can still fritter away hours of their time.

The "festivalisation" of one-to-one, which began in 2010 and shows no signs of abating, raises several other issues. Some of these criticisms are general and familiar ones about the institutionalisation of the avant-garde and the move from the margin to the mainstream, however others are more specific. For example, Alston argues that such events frame performance as "fit for consumption ... as some sort of theatrical nouvelle cuisine: both bite-size and intense" (2012a, 345). Certainly, the creation of "menus," complete with ratings of one to three chillies, for the inaugural festival at the Battersea Arts Centre did not help. For Zerihan, they "commodified, commercialized and categorized the [otherwise] diverse performances" and as a result the entire festival was "shot-through with consumerist, capitalist and potentially illicit lures and promises" (Chatzichristodoulou and Zerihan 2012, 226). In the same conversation, Maria Chatzichristodoulou also laments the "superficial sensationalism" and "sexualisation" of these marketing ploys, which often work against the artists' intentions (226, 230). In short, such festivals—according to their critics—reduce one-to-one performance to yet "another personalised consumer artefact" (Logan 2010).

Yet perhaps what is most troubling about the festivalisation of one-to-one is not that it recuperates a previously radical form for the mainstream, but rather that it reveals that a degree of conservatism has been inherent within the genre from its very beginnings. For a start, one could argue that one-to-one models a kind of "compulsory monogamy" (Zerihan 2009, 4), even if that monogamy is temporary and transient. Monogamy begets exclusivity, which means that one-to-one is imbued with greater cultural capital than many other forms of performance. The mention of cultural capital brings to mind other forms of capital and raises the prospect that one-to-one performance does not so much exit the economy, as Phelan would have it, as "relocat[e] [its] operations from a market in goods to a market in services," as Nicholas Ridout has argued in reply (2008, 130). Indeed, Ridout argues that the emergence of one-to-one performance is part of a longer-term "shift from the industrial/theatrical model of artistic production to one in which the performance of services predominate[s]" (129).

Here it becomes clear that the radical inefficiencies of one-to-one performance and its concurrent festivalisation are not coincidental, but rather cause and effect or even symptoms of the same economic structure. Indeed, it is precisely these inefficiencies that prompt curators to create such festivals in the first place: they are, as director James Yanker explains, “the only way to render this type of performance cost-effective” (Logan 2010). They also have the added bonus of monetising all the “dead,” “spare” or “wasted” time that surrounds the performance itself. Spectators spend far more time in the foyer or at the bar, than at the shows themselves, meaning that they are spending up large. To be fair, directors and curators argue that the festival format restores a social experience to an art form that is criticised for “foster[ing] a cult of individualism” (Powell 2010, 34) and “encouraging selfishness over sharing” (Logan 2010). Howells himself commented on this, telling journalist Peter Crawley: “I feel a bit of a responsibility to return to a more collectivist experience ... a performance experienced as a community has huge benefits, potentially, and I’m wondering to what extent the work I do encourages an individualism” (Howells, quoted in Crawley 2010, 9). Nevertheless, he agreed with Crawley that:

even in addressing his audience individually, he is creating a burgeoning community of people who have experienced his work, much as Ontroerend Goed’s visitors linger around after performances, not singly but in battalions. They seek each other, trade reports and swap recollections, while meaning is made and interpretation advanced as an ultimately shared experience. The final irony of one-on-one performance is that it is not something you want to keep to yourself. (9)

In short, one-to-one performance is intimate and alienating, ethical and violating, political and conventional, even occasionally banal. Likewise, its festivals are sociable and sensationalising, efficient and expensive, restorative and exploitative. In this way, one-to-one emerges as an ambivalent symptom and occasional subversion of late capitalism.

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Notes

1. On this point, see also Rachel Gomme, who writes: “If a particular iteration of a performance can only be witnessed by one person, how is a critical approach possible? In a collective audience, notwithstanding the inevitable subjectivity of each individual’s experience, there is a

sense that some common ground can be found in discussion of a performance witnessed by all ... In one-to-one performance, however, we can never be quite sure we are all talking about the same thing" (Gomme 2015, 282).

2. Several audience members experience this obedient mode as "infantilising." For example, Tim Etchells tells Brian Logan that he finds much of the work "infantilising" (quoted in Logan 2010). Similarly, the anonymous reviewer for *Scotland on Sunday* says of *Pleasures of Being*: "Finally, Adrian feeds me. He posts a piece of white chocolate in my mouth. (I don't actually like white chocolate but for some reason I don't say this, which seems absurd given what we've just been through.) Next, an orange segment. I don't like the feeding part. It feels too infantilising, almost like a joke. I can't get into it at all" (*Scotland on Sunday* 2011, 7). Meanwhile Lynn Gardner wonders "what would have happened at my encounter with Sian Stevenson if, instead of allowing her to force-feed me half a jar of organic summer fruits baby food, I had rebelled and smeared it all over her?" (2005).

3. Indeed, they state that "whenever this aspect of the show had leaked, we noticed some visitors felt compelled to raise their guard, which made the experience less rewarding" (Ontroerend Goed 2014, 133). For a detailed analysis of the entire trilogy, see Alston (2012b).

4. Similarly, Felix Barrett, the founder of the immersive theatre company Punchdrunk, tells journalist Lucy Powell that: "In terms of real immersion and not being influenced by other people, one-on-ones are the purest Punchdrunk theatre,' and are embedded within every show it stages ... 'If I could, every Punchdrunk show would just be one-on-one.' And why can't he? 'Economics,' he says. 'It'd have to run for two years straight before breaking even'" (Powell 2010, 34). In the same article, Yarker of Stan's Café tells her: "Financially, it's only going to get more difficult to do this kind of work" (34). Ontroerend Goed also ruefully note the "un-economic setup" of *The Smile Off Your Face*, which had "a crew of nine, maximum capacity of sixty visitors a day" but also comment that it turned out to be the company's "biggest door opener and we've kept it on the playlist for almost ten years" (2014, 20).

5. Canadian artist Deborah Pearson is one of the few to give actual figures. She states that her one-to-one performance *The Queen West Project* (2012) had "a budget of \$30,000 CAD [and] cost approximately \$104 CAD per potential audience member. Tickets were \$25 CAD each, meaning that the show operated at a loss of nearly \$80 CAD per person" (Pearson 2015, 64).

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