

Asher Warren

Can't or Won't:

Sneaky Feelings in the Theatre

“Sneaky feelings, sneaky feelings / You can't let those kind of feelings show”
—Elvis Costello, “Sneaky Feelings”



Fig. 1. Michele Lee and Tanya Dickson, *The Naked Self* (2016). Photo © Jody Haines.

In 2016, at the Festival of Live Art, I found myself inside a private padded booth in the North Melbourne Town Hall, wearing headphones and holding the touchscreen tablet which had led me to this point as part of Michele Lee and Tanya Dickson’s interactive participatory work, *The Naked Self*. Facing a full-length mirror, the app on the device instructed me to ‘undress and confess’, that is, to take off my clothes and leave a ‘self-portrait’ by way of audio recording. I refused. Something was *off*, and while I couldn’t quite

put my finger on it in that moment, I was irritated. The openness with which I had approached this work had evaporated, so I stood silent, brooding in the private cubicle. As I remained fully clothed, the app, oblivious, recorded three minutes of *almost* nothing, capturing only my forced exhalations of sullen displeasure. I left the cubicle, handed back the device, and tried to leave it all behind me. I only succeeded in shifting from irritated to irritable. The bad feelings lingered for the rest of the weekend and beyond, as my participatory petulance transformed to shame, regret and self-loathing, which have lingered with remarkable persistence.

My focus in this essay, to which this brief account alludes, is the particular experience of negative affective or emotional states in performances, specifically the minor irritations, that are all the worse because one knows they should be ignored or 'let go', but simply cannot be shaken. We might call them, after Elvis Costello's song of the same name, 'sneaky feelings'. This epigraph makes its appearance not because of any feelings in particular it evokes (which might be read as love or hate depending on your orientation toward Costello's early career bluster) but rather the need to keep them discreet, and the incapacity to properly 'get through' these feelings. I'm interested here in how these feelings develop, how they linger, and the blockages, negations and inactions that become attached to them. As such, this paper is positioned within the burgeoning field of inquiry regarding the experience of participatory performance, which might be surmised by the title of Sophie Nield's short article, "The Rise of the Character Named Spectator" (2008). With this paper, Nield responds to the rise of immersive performance practices, generally dated to the mid 2000s. While Gareth White has pointed out that immersion "has no strong claim to creating either fictional or imaginative interiors in a way that is different in kind than in more conventionally structured audience arrangements" (2012, 233), it is worth noting that the structure, or arrangement of audiences *in* these works have important implications, around which a broad series of debates and implications, both pragmatic and ideological, have emerged. As Adam Alston suggests, some immersive practices elicit entrepreneurial behaviour, (2013; 2016), and more generally, the rise of immersive practice has brought a renewed focus on the experiential aspects of performance, notably in the work of Josephine Machon (2011; 2016), and in Heddon, Iball and Zerihan's engaging account of intimate spectatorship (2012). The focus of this essay on 'sneaky feelings' adds another tangent to these debates, picking up some of the threads, and lingering a little longer on the taste of the unwanted strawberry, eaten to "give good audience" (Heddon, Iball, and Zerihan 2012, 124).

These feelings are sneaky not just because one feels they *shouldn't* happen, but also because they hover on the edge of both perception and description. Feeling can be emotional, rational and physical, and as Martin Welton observes in *Feeling Theatre*, this "is not only an accident of the lassitude of the English language, but reflective of the extent to which thought, affect and sensation are bound together" (2014, 5). In looking to explore the connection between thought, affect and sensation, Welton is contributing to what has become known as the 'affective turn' within the humanities, preoccupied, in general terms, with interrogating "bodily capacities to affect and be affected or the augmentation or diminution of a body's capacity to act, to engage, and to connect" (Clough 2007, 2). As is

perhaps already clear, sneaky feelings fall within this affective banner, as do the blockages, negations and inactions that become bound up with them.

Following Herman Melville's recalcitrant scrivener, Bartleby, and his steadfast preference *not to*, I seek to trace moments in performance where audience or actors did not do as they were 'supposed to': instances of non-participation that needle, bother and vex. In this respect, I am less interested in Bartleby's refusal, and more in his employer, the narrator of the story. In the wake of another of Bartleby's refusals, he "sat awhile in perfect silence, rallying my stunned faculties" (Melville 1853, 550). Plagued with indecision, the narrator is unsure of how to act, acknowledge or respond. He is overwhelmed with a suite of bad feelings, which while troubling him, are never quite enough to bring him to any decisive act. With such a focus on bad, or negative feelings, this essay also draws on a branch of affect theorisation, which might be understood as the "affective genealogies" (Stephens 2015, 273) conceptualised by queer, feminist and critical race theorists who "give more thought to the modes of subjectivity that are disorganized, or noncoherent, or negative" (Berlant 2004, 449; see also Stephens 2015). This essay takes up Sianne Ngai's productive exploration of *Ugly Feelings* (2005), particularly her observation that "the morally degraded and seemingly unjustifiable status of these feelings tends to produce an unpleasurable feeling *about* the feeling" (Ngai 2005, 10). I also draw on the concept of 'cruel optimism' theorised by Lauren Berlant (2011), and Sara Ahmed's scholarship on happiness (2010). In moving from the literary and filmic sources these scholars primarily focus on toward performance, I consider how negative affects circulate (or rather, don't) amongst spectators and participants, and how the performances can also serve to function as what Ahmed (after Foucault) terms a disciplinary technology.

My point of entry to these sneaky feelings are drawn, primarily, from a stockpile of experiences accumulated between 2014 and 2018, from what might broadly be described as hybrid contemporary performances. My goal, although it may at points appear otherwise, is not a self-diagnosis of irritable participant syndrome, but rather, an attempt to employ these experiences as footholds for working through what Seigworth and Gregg describe as the "methodological and conceptual free fall" (2010, 4) of engaging with affect. While these experiences (and their descriptions) are undoubtedly idiosyncratic, I draw on this resource of feeling, mindful of Ngai's observation that "[f]or all its pettiness, the feeling calls attention to a real social experience and a certain kind of historical truth" (2005, 5). As Ngai acknowledges, the consideration of feeling and its relation to social and historical contexts brings us back to the cultural hypothesis of 'structures of feeling' proposed by Raymond Williams to define "a particular quality of social experience and relationship" attentive to the tones, impulses and affects that "do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action" (2015, 23). In this essay, I want to explore how the particular contours and qualities of these sneaky feelings move beyond my own experiences and partake within a larger shared economy of 'public feelings' (Berlant 2004; Cvetkovich 2003; 2012), which might offer insight, into the "specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension" (Williams 2015, 23) that structure feeling, and the body of the audience, in contemporary performance.

One prominent branch of affect theory, which traces a line from Spinoza to Bergson, Deleuze, Guattari, and Massumi to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, places an importance on the independence of affect as an intensity separate from meaning, signification and intention. However, as Ruth Leys observes in her incisive critique, this approach suggests possibility of an affective *determinism*; where “affect has the potential to transform individuals for good or ill without regard to the content of argument or debate” (2011, 451). While my use of the term ‘affect’ in this essay does not conform to a strict Massumian definition (see Shouse 2005), it should also be noted that in many cases I have adopted Welton’s preference for the productive ambiguity of ‘feeling’ rather than ‘affect’, to better capture the ways those sneaky feelings I wish to explore slip and oscillate between the sensed intensities of performance and the cognitive processes of making sense and participating.

The works under consideration elicit sneaky feelings—the low level affects that provoke in us inaction, indecision, paralysis—and redirect feeling away from the body as primary site, towards objects and technologies. I begin by interrogating a ‘killjoy moment’ in Chunky Move’s *Complexity of Belonging* (2014), drawing on Ahmed’s theorisation of happiness, and its capacity to circulate, then move on to Nicola Gunn’s *Piece for Person and Ghetto Blaster* (2015), a work which relies on a ‘cruel optimism’ theorised by Berlant. While I begin with a focus on the unwritten rules of the theatre, I then turn, using these works and others, to the impositions of the theatre as a disciplinary technology of the body. This leads to the second half of the paper, centred on Tanya Dixon and Michelle Lee’s *The Naked Self*, and the way this work utilises contemporary networked media technology and culture to structure feeling. Following Patricia Clough’s observation that technologies “are allowing us both to ‘see’ affect and to produce affective bodily capacities beyond the body’s organic-physiological constraints” (Clough 2007, 2), I wish to argue that while *The Naked Self* attempts to reimagine the affective potential of mediated networks and technologies, it performs an affective displacement that becomes complicit in the techno-cultural phenomenon it seeks to critique. In examining my own sneaky feelings with respect to Ngai’s theorisation of irritation, I trace how technical and normative limitations shape participation, displacing the qualities of the desirable *body* toward a desirable *mood*, structuring the ‘right’ way to feel within this work, and by inference, the ‘wrong’ way, and the sneaky feelings attached to it.

“Thanks for Coming!”

The first ‘sneaky feeling’ I wish to describe emerged during the 2014 Melbourne Festival premiere of Chunky Move’s *Complexity of Belonging*, a hybrid dance/theatre work co-directed by Anouk van Dijk and Falk Richter. A standout scene in this fragmented work was a solo, by dancer/actor Lauren Langlois. Structured around a spoken description of her ‘ideal man’, Langlois contorts herself through a remarkable sequence of increasingly frenzied movements. On the night I attended, it was partway through this solo that an elderly woman rose from her seat, and attempted to quietly leave the theatre. Langlois, mid solo, noticed her, and momentarily abandoned her script to wave, and call out “Bye! Thanks for coming!” This outburst was, to clarify any doubt, laden with sarcasm. The woman continued on her way out, and Langlois carried on with the performance, but this

little moment had snagged on me. It sat uneasily, and I was jarred out of what had been an artful depiction of neurotic desire, a performance for which Langlois went on to deservedly receive a Green Room Award. Instead, I was drawn into another set of questions. Why was I entirely unsympathetic to the performer? Why did this nettle me? Did this outburst come from the performer; or their character; and does such a distinction matter?

At an even more basic level, this scene was supposed to be comedic, yet because of this outburst, I found myself unable to laugh. A sneaky feeling had got in the way of my happiness, and hindered my enjoyment. I begin with this sneaky feeling in particular, because of its relationship to happiness, the pursuit of which, Aristotle proposes in the *Nicomachean ethics*, “is the best, the noblest and the pleasantest thing” (Aristotle 2000, 14). The pursuit of happiness, and the historical connection between happiness and a ‘good life’ has been productively explored by Ahmed, who traces it from Aristotle, through Rousseau’s *Emile* and to contemporary self-help advice. Notably, Ahmed draws attention to the complex *conditionality* of happiness in these philosophies, and the current practice of ‘positive psychology’, which, as Ahmed writes, “involves the instrumentalization of happiness as a technique. Happiness becomes a means to an end, as well as the end of the means” (2010b, 10). As such, Ahmed argues, happiness not only circulates, but can be distributed. Ahmed is drawn particularly to the circulation of happiness within, and by families, and the moments where the expression of feelings, such as anger, disrupt the collective happiness. Her particular example comes from the feminist objector; who is characterised not simply as an “angry feminist”, but as a feminist *killjoy*. Ahmed writes:

Does the feminist kill other people’s joy by pointing out moments of sexism? Or does she expose the bad feelings that get hidden, displaced, or negated under public signs of joy? Does bad feeling enter the room when someone expresses anger about things, or could anger be the moment when the bad feelings that circulate through objects get brought to the surface in a certain way? (2010, 65–66)

While few would be surprised that the pointing out of transgressions might produce bad feelings, this passage is notable because it shows Ahmed’s attention to the circulation of feeling through both subjects and *objects*. Happiness is not solely distributed through subjects, but attaches itself, and moves through *things*. In this example, Ahmed’s object is the *family*, but I am interested in extending this to the audience, and the theatre.

Returning to Langlois, we might ask, what is brought to the surface in this moment? While not an instance of sexism, it is a ‘calling-out’, directed to both the woman leaving and the rest of the audience. The calling-out goes beyond the script in order to draw attention to the transgression, a spoken reminder to re-establish the unspoken rules of the theatre. Perhaps then, the outburst brings to the surface the inequality between actor and audience; Langlois’s sarcastic ‘thanks’ undermining the role of the ‘good’ performer, who keeps the audience happy by being happy herself. I am not, however, entirely convinced by this reading. The walkout was not a statement, an act of ‘no-platforming’, but a quiet attempt to leave the theatre. While breaking one convention (one should not walk out during a

performance) the woman in question did also seem to be attempting to uphold other conventions of the theatre, most notably to avoid disrupting the experience of others.

Given my own experiences as an uncomfortable, but dutiful participant, it should come as no surprise that my sympathies lay with the walker. Had Langlois not drawn my attention to her, I would not have noticed. Indeed, a key aspect of what Welton identifies as the “social and intellectual tendency to place objects of study at a remove” (Welton 2014, 11) in the theatre is also to remove distractions with a unique kind of wilful ignorance. Which leads my sneaky feeling to double down on itself, as taking issue only made it *more* of an issue. I wouldn’t have given the walkout any further thought, but here I am, still processing this moment, wondering whether it is Langlois, or I, who is the theatrical snowflake, liable to melt if conditions are not just right.

If there is pejorative more emblematic of ugly (and sneaky) feeling in our early 21st century than the killjoy, it would be the snowflake. To label one a snowflake is to gesture toward a decidedly un-rugged individualism of easy outrage and emotional vulnerability; a slur thrown with abandon from the right, and increasingly the left. This use of the term is attributed to Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*, where it was used to puncture an inflated sense of importance and entitlement, “each of us a sacred, unique snowflake of special unique specialness” (1996, 207). I, however, am more interested in the question of *resilience* raised by this metaphor. Snowflakes need quite specific atmospheric conditions to form, and can easily break or melt. Creating specific atmospheres is also the domain of the theatre. Consider the conditions suggested by Bruce Wilshire:

The key to all great theatre is the silence of the audience. It discloses that each person has cut the continuity of everyday talk and everyday concern, those activities in which one can always find more to occupy oneself if one wishes to lose oneself in them. (Wilshire 1982, 80)

Rather than actor or audience, we might think of this ‘great theatre’ as our snowflake; requiring absolute silence and stillness to avoid turning into something as pedestrian as rain, or, once in a while, hail. Which brings me to a more general observation, of a branch of contemporary performance practice that has sought to ensure sure the conditions are *just right*, by placing strict conditions on reception, so as to safeguard the affective machinery of the theatre. The use of the theatre in this way, as a technology to discipline reception, returns us to the question of affect; more specifically, the production and distribution of feeling. Drawing on Foucault, Ahmed suggests that we might consider the relationship between affect and disciplinary technologies; indeed, central to her argument regarding affects and happiness is the way she theorises affects and feelings as capable of moving beyond personal, subjective experiences, and questions the role of objects in their circulation. Rather than attribute bad feeling to a person who expresses anger, we might return to her question: “could anger be the moment when the bad feelings that circulate through objects get brought to the surface in a certain way?” (2010, 66) Could the sneaky feeling that gets in the way of enjoying Langlois’s performance point toward the bad feelings that circulate within the ‘theatre machine’ and the conditions of its operation?



Fig 2. Nicola Gunn, *Piece for Person and Ghetto Blaster*. Photo © Gregory Lorenzutti

A ready to hand example of these conditions is the prevalence and enforcement of strict lockout policies. Which brings me to note that I have nothing at all to say about Tamara Saulwick's *Endings* (2015), but I do have a lot of bad feelings about it. A work with a similar lockout policy, however, which I did arrive in time to attend was Nicola Gunn's *Piece for Person and Ghetto Blaster*.

PLEASE NOTE / Please note there is a strict lock-out for this show. **Latecomers will not be admitted.** We recommend arriving at least half an hour early to secure parking and admittance to the theatre. Toiletgoers may be readmitted to a different seat. (Malthouse Theatre 2017)

Piece for Person and Ghetto Blaster is another hybrid dance/theatre monologue, which saw Gunn exploit the conventions of the theatre to discomfort or challenge her audience, a strategy employed in a number of her works. Notably, a particular preoccupation of this work was the implications and effects of intervention. In the *Daily Review*, Owen Richardson writes:

So agitated does Gunn become that at one point she climbs into the audience, getting right into our faces: there is a staged neediness here, a demand that we share her discomfort, as if by simply sitting and watching we too are failing to take her seriously enough, and we're not going to get away with that. *Do not think you can avoid getting involved.* (Richardson 2015)

But what exactly does ‘getting involved’ mean in this instance? As I watched Gunn get into the face of a man in the audience on the other side of the theatre, I wondered if I would have the courage to say, “excuse me, Ms. Gunn, but the stage is behind you.” Or to demand equality in the work by leaving my seat and sitting upon the stage. I did neither. I quite decidedly *did not* get involved. But why? Am I afraid of upsetting the artist? I am confident that Ms. Gunn would have something to say should I attempt a reciprocal spatial annexation; and nearly as sure it would not be kind. Would I become the butt of a joke, and the subject of the audience’s mirth? Or would I be asked to leave? Do I risk breaking the work itself; hindering the aesthetic experience that my fellow audience members have come to see? Stuck within these conventions, we became the sitting ducks that Gunn speaks of in her monologue; suffering the stones thrown by a stranger, unable or perhaps unwilling to protect ourselves. In Gunn’s narrative, the duck stays still to protect its eggs. But what do we, the audience protect?



Fig 3 and 4. Nicola Gunn, *Piece for Person* and *Ghetto Blaster*. Photo © Gregory Lorenzutti

We protect, I suggest, our optimistic attachments to the theatre. Optimism, as Berlant suggests, is “the force that moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring closer the satisfying *something* that you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene” (2011, 1–2). We are attached to the hope of enjoyment or pleasure, escapism, humour, of being affirmed, improved, changed or even enlightened. As Berlant suggests there is a connection between optimism and affect, in that, “the *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way” (2011, 2). While optimistic attachments might help you to look on the bright side, remain positive, and keep moving forward, Berlant also notes that certain optimistic attachments can be *cruel*. “A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project” (Berlant 2011, 1). In formulating this notion of cruel optimism, Berlant is responding to our contemporary lives; full of promises of the ‘good life’ that is just around the corner, but never attainable. We are surrounded by visions of the good life on every screen, in each picture, all vying for attention so that they might point us toward another gap in our lives that needs to be filled. As Berlant points out, “[t]hese kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel” (1), but become cruel “and

not merely inconvenient or tragic” because the attachment still “provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world” (24). Despite the various disappointments, I remain attached to my optimism that the next time will be different.

The experience of ‘being in the world’ as Berlant phrases it here is another useful reminder of the slippage of feeling between the corporeal and the cognitive. This is, somewhat strangely, captured in the derivation of ‘theatregoer’ used by the Malthouse Theatre to refer to those who demand a break from the theatre to attend to other bodily matters: *toiletgoers*. The toiletgoer, in Gunn’s piece, may be admitted to a different seat, but is still allowed to return to the theatre. The third experience I draw upon begins in the foyer of the Melbourne Arts Centre, where I found myself with mounting anxiety about becoming a *toiletgoer*. I was waiting to enter the 2017 Melbourne Festival staging of Mette Ingvartsen’s dance work for naked bodies, *7 Pleasures*. As I stood, an usher made the rounds, confirming that everyone understood the show had a strict lock-out policy. If we left, even for the toilet, we could not come back in. I hurried to get my toiletgoing out of the way, as a multitude of memories flashed before me of sitting uncomfortably in my seat, praying for the curtain to drop so I might rush from the theatre to empty my bladder.

Some minutes later as I sat in the theatre, waiting for the lights to dim, I thought it rather generous that the house held back an extra few minutes for latecomers. However, it soon became clear this was not the case. This was the start of the show. With the house lights up, the dancers, planted throughout the audience, stood up and slowly undressed, standing naked amongst us, before finally making their way to the stage. It felt tremendously awkward. It was not, however, because of the nudity, but rather because the performers did not make eye contact, or interact in any way with those around them. We, the audience, followed suit. We sat very still, remained very quiet, and looked toward the stage. It was surprising that such a work, focused on corporeal sensuality and the body, could place such a penalty on toiletgoing, sidelining the bodies of audience.

As Gabriella Giannachi and Nigel Stewart argue, “theatre, like traditional science, produces the spectator as a separate *cogito* surveying and dominating what is now ‘nature’ as object (including the object of ‘human nature’)” (2005, 35). The strictures of *7 Pleasures* not only attempted to separate my body and its *cogito*, but appeared to extend to the bodies on stage as well. Their bodies seemed divorced from emotion, the choreography driven by rules and structures, and despite the inherent comedy that naked bodies can evoke, a deadly seriousness hung about the work. It felt like a vivisection, rather than a celebration of sensuality. Another kind of sneaky feeling began to gnaw, starting in my lower back, and legs; which began to stiffen. I felt the need to move; to stretch my legs, in the way that comes most strongly when one cannot. I felt like I was eight hours into a long haul flight. My attention was drawn from the glacial pace of *7 Pleasures*, and toward the bodies amongst the audience who decided to opt out. They may have lost interest in the performance, they may have been toiletgoers, or simply wanted to stretch their legs – but after the first 20 minutes of the show, and until its duration, a number of people quietly and calmly rose from their seats, and made their way out of the theatre.

Which bring us back to the act of walking out of a performance, and its particular manifestation of the preference *not to*. In *7 Pleasures*, those walking out sparked another sneaky feeling in me, a mild twinge of envy. It was not enough to overcome my commitment to seeing out the work, but once the idea was lodged in my mind, and niggled at me. I *could* walk out. While I did not, this feeling also lingers, tied up and inseparable from my experience of the performance – the house lights staying up for the start of this show emblematic of the blurry edges of theatrical experience; the way the theatre itself, with its doors, toilets, ushers and patrons, serves as an apparatus “by which performance is constituted and within which feelings arise and are shaped or contained” (Welton 2014, 108). As a technology for making sense; for transmitting feeling, of which these examples each point to certain structures and strictures. My argument ignores, I acknowledge, a host of reasons for the ways these audiences are restricted in their movements, access and agency. It would, however, surprise me if this came as news to anybody; the theatre has, throughout history, imposed varied types of physical, economic and social strictures on its audience. It is no coincidence, though, that the naked bodies of this last example mirror the naked bodies in the *The Naked Self*. For all their differences; as I will explain, they both draw on a *disembodying* of feeling; distributing it through various technologies and objects. Following my engagement with sneaky feelings within the theatre, to a work that operates outside of it, I aim to suggest, if not structures, at least contours and modalities of feeling, by attending to the gaps and slips that threaten to undo these affective regimes.

The Naked Self

The Festival of Live Art (FOLA), running biennially since 2014, has been a fertile site for contemporary participatory works, particularly those exploring media technologies. In its inaugural year, the festival included the distributed participant networking of Sam Routledge and Martyn Coutts’s *I Think I Can*, and the live cinema extravaganza of Tristram Meecham and Aphids’ *Game Show*. The 2016 festival included a suite of works under development as part of *In Your Hands*, a commission through Arts House and the Australia Council’s New Digital Theatre Initiative. These works were all designed for hand-held technologies, and included the audio visual installation *Alter*, by Tamara Saulwick, Martyn Coutts and Peter Knight; the procedural thriller *Vanitas*, by Robert Walton and Jason Mailing; the geolocative introduction service *Are We The One?* by Keith Armstrong and David Finnigan; and the work I am focused upon, Tanya Dickson and Michelle Lee’s *The Naked Self*.

As the brief description of the work on the FOLA website and program explains, “There could be thousands of photos of you online; photographic ‘selfies’ contrived to capture your best angles and features. How many really show how you feel about yourself and your body?” (FOLA 2016) Indeed, as the theme and form of the work suggests, *The Naked Self* draws heavily on the cultural phenomenon of the ‘selfie’. In the context of this essay, however, I’m particularly interested in the last line of this description, the need it identifies to *really show* how you *feel*, an imperative that includes mediated forms of self-expression and self-perception, as it seems the very antithesis of the sneaky feelings I want to explore, which one *can’t show*.



Fig. 5. Michele Lee and Tanya Dickson, *The Naked Self* (2016). Photo © Jody Haines.
For a one-minute video about the performance, see Arts House vimeo.com/162482945

The Naked Self was conceptualised by Lee and Dickson (playwright and director, respectively) and developed in collaboration with production designer Matthew Adey, sound designer Russell Goldsmith and system designer Steve Berrick. The final work was an application for a handheld tablet, connected to headphones and equipped with a microphone, with which participants interact in a gallery space. The space was sparsely filled with an assortment of pastel coloured mats, cushions and padding to sit or lie down, and two particle board booths lined with pink soundproofing. Participants were greeted by an attendant in a foyer, who gave instructions for the device, and admitted them to the gallery space. The headphones relayed a woman's voice, which calmly instructed participants to find somewhere comfortable, and listen to "audio portraits of strangers revealing the stories and the secrets of their bodies" (FOLA 2016). These portraits were organised within the application in a database of sorts, categorised under: time, beauty, unique, regrets, confessions and inheritance.



Fig. 6. Michele Lee and Tanya Dickson, *The Naked Self* (2016). Photo © Jody Haines

Following the prompts of the app, participants listened to these recordings, and after a certain number of these audio portraits had been audited, the app gave the option to continue listening, or to enter one of the soundproof, padded booths and record their own. Once inside, the voice instructed participants to lock the door, to undress, and to spend some time looking them themselves in the full-length mirror which served as one wall of the booth. The app then prompted the user toward one of the six categories, and under a button promising 'more help', it suggested the following:

In making a portrait, you could start by describing what you're looking at. From that you might want to fill us in with a fact about that body part, a story, a metaphor, a memory. Think about what you've listened to today. What did you enjoy?

Using the microphone attached to the headphones, participants could then record, listen back, and save, or re-record their story. After giving it a title, participants were instructed to get dressed, and leave the booth, after which they could stay and continue to listen to other portraits, or leave the gallery.



Fig. 7. Michele Lee and Tanya Dickson, *The Naked Self* (2016). Photo © Jody Haines.

The work was well attended, in part due to its availability within the festival programming, allowing participation in-between scheduled performances and events. Critical responses to the work were varied, from strongly positive to indifferent. In a striking review for *The Guardian*, Jana Perkovic writes that “[t]apping deep into potentially traumatic subject matter, *The Naked Self* is an extremely confronting experience, but after sobbing in the privacy of the booth I left feeling lighter and clearer” (2016). Taking the invitation to confess beyond the particle board booth, Perkovic’s journey from tears to clarity suggests a therapeutic dimension to the experience. In *Theatre People*, Laura Elizabeth writes positively of the work, but in more placid terms: “It was a lovely, gentle, respectful piece that carves out the opportunity to listen to and commune with the one thing that never leaves us: our bodies” (2016). Other reviews were less engaged. While it must be taken in the context of dwindling space given for reviewing in *The Age*, Anne-Marie Peard provides a description of the work, and rather than elaborating any response to it, instead offers the truism that “No experience of *The Naked Self*...can be the same” (2016).

In a contrasting review to Perkovic’s, Andrew Fuhrmann suggests that “while some participants will no doubt find it a bit discomforting, it would be wrong to call the work transgressive or deliberately confrontational” (2016). This is because, as he argues, *The Naked Self* “is in fact only a canny re-staging of the way in which social media is already used” (2016). To be more precise, the work emulates social media insofar as it “build[s] on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 ... that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, 61). The point is most neatly made by a description of the work on Michele Lee’s website: “it’s a participatory

work where the audience generate the content" (Michele Lee n.d.). In adopting this logic of user-generated content, the work also draws on a larger cultural or social culture of sharing, and as Fuhrmann concludes:

How you feel about *The Naked Self* will probably depend on how you feel about the current culture of over-sharing more generally, and about the way in which new technologies variously encourage or contour narcissistic and voyeuristic impulses. (Fuhrmann 2016)

While I am interested in the question implicit here, as to whether *The Naked Self* is engaging with or simply adopting a contemporary culture of sharing, and the technologies involved in shaping this culture, more pressing is the *contingency* of feeling that this statement rests upon. To this end, it is through the specifics of the contingency that I want to connect the feelings that circulate within this experience and a larger cultural context, the first point of which is to consider how this work structures an individual experience of sharing.

As Heddon, Iball and Zerihan note, it is perhaps not surprising that the rise of individual hand-held technologies has been accompanied by a proliferation of 'one-to-one' forms of participatory performance, where "the spectator books a performance slot during which they alone encounter the work" (Heddon, Iball, and Zerihan 2012, 120). Nor, it is surprising that the proximity of both have suggested an increased focus on intimate encounters, which, "in their very staging, seem to demand performances of trust, mutual responsibility, mutual openness and mutual receptiveness" (Heddon, Iball, and Zerihan 2012, 126). *The Naked Self* capitalises on this mutuality, with its catalogue of intimate confessions, regrets and admissions, whispered into the ear, seeking to induce participants to reciprocate to these exposures with their own.

At the same time, however, the act of listening also provides participants with a template for future portraits. This is illustrated by the remarkably similar *tone* and *form* of the portraits that I listened to. Most took on a quiet, soft tone, thoughtful and *weighted*: as if to signify the importance of these confessions. Beginning with a pause, a breath, perhaps a repetition of the theme (confession, time, beauty etcetera) participants very slowly and deliberately searched for the right words and phrases to build their portrait. Many addressed their problems or issues with their own body (a large nose, an abundance or lack of weight), making peace or finding some resolution to it, before entering into a 'winding down' stage, where, often lost for words, truisms and clichés began to surface. There was a subset of portraits where participants expressed their satisfaction or comfort with their bodies; notable for the way almost all made these comments "in all honesty", heading off the sceptical listener. As media scholar José van Dijck argues, "[s]ociality coded by technology renders people's activities formal, manageable, and manipulable, enabling platforms to engineer the sociality in people's everyday routines" (2013, 12). The stories never exceeded a few minutes – a constraint of the application, and as such, could never build or develop into a more coherent whole; and as such, I found they began to fatigue me; always starting and stopping; fragmentary. This fatigue was also inherently linked to the use of durational

audio for these ‘selfies’ rather than the still image, which demands a more sustained focus of attention.

In her study of Blast Theory’s *Karen* (2015) and Kris Verhoeven’s *Wanna Play? (Love in the time of Grindr)* (2014), Eirini Nedelkopoulou interrogates “the nature of the attention structures that the artists create to allocate and capture their audiences’ engagement” in one-to-one interactive works, mediated by digital technologies (2017, 354). As Nedelkopoulou observes, the increasing economisation of attention in an information rich society means that working on such platforms requires engaging with “an attention economy geared around promise, anticipation, and a reward” (2017, 353–54). At first appraisal, the audio recording, which participants can listen to in real-time would appear to operate against the readily consumable visual flow selfie-sharing platforms like Instagram, which might be seen, as Fredric Jameson writes of a post-modern aesthetic, as “a glossy skin, a stereoscopic illusion, a rush of filmic images without density” (1990, 34). The speeding churn of social networking elicits a shortened span of attention, epitomised by the acronym TL;DR (Too Long; Didn’t Read), which could be categorised by Jameson’s much cited (and critiqued) “waning of affect” (10). In shifting from the still image or the video to audio only, the artists suggest a more honest, and therefore intimate expression of embodied self-hood; which might recapture some unguarded self. And this may be correct; insofar as the largest companies in the tech industry are also seeking to listen to as much as possible; with Amazon’s Alexa, Google’s Home devices and assistant, Apple’s Siri and Microsoft’s Cortana: what people say has become the next trove of data these companies are mining. However, there is nothing intrinsic to durational media that lends it any more *depth*: many of the audio portraits are notable for their *ordinariness* – and quotidian banality, which leads me back to my own feelings about these portraits. Rather than being required to pay attention to my own attention, as Nedelkopoulou suggests of *Karen* (2017, 360), my attention shifted in a different direction. The more I listened, the more these audio portraits irritated me, which only led to further bad feeling *about* such irritation.

There are many ways I might describe this feeling. Metaphorically it might be surmised as a splinter received by going against the grain of the work, and in physiological terms, I could report the prickling tingle across my scalp, the adrenal response that accompanies embarrassment, shame or indignation. Yet, it was not a ‘full-blown’ emotion, like rage or anger, rather a lesser feeling – to borrow from Ngai’s memorable allegory of an affective bestiary, this feeling was “weaker and nastier”, a rat rather than a lion (2005, 7). I have quite deliberately described it thus far in terms of *irritation* – one of the titular ‘ugly feelings’ explored by Ngai. Ugly feelings, she writes, are “explicitly amoral and *noncathartic*, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release. In fact, most of these feelings tend to interfere with the outpouring of other emotions” (2005, 6–7). Irritation in particular, Ngai argues, suggests an inadequacy or inappropriateness, which she traces back to the definition Aristotle offers in *Nicomachean Ethics* that “[t]hose people we call irritable are those who are irritated by the wrong things, more severely and for longer than is right” (1985, 106). This *wrong* feeling suggests a dysfunction, in the case

of *The Naked Self*, of not sharing in the proper, or *healthy* celebration of bodily uniqueness, acceptance and openness.

Of relevance to the question of ‘healthy celebration’, were two memorable portraits in *The Naked Self*. The first was recorded by a woman who questioned why we needed to be ‘happy’ with our bodies, and if we needed to feel any emotion toward them at all. Another was a man, who recollected a party he attended, which turned out to be a ‘naked’ party. He described his preference not to be undressed by another person at this party, and not to be naked in the presence of others; but like *Bartleby*, refused to elaborate on exactly *why* this was his preference, even suggesting there was something irrational about it. It is tempting to consider this refusal as a sign of repression, but this view is, I believe, unhelpful. In her study of Nella Larsen’s *Quicksilver* (1928), Ngai brings our attention to the way that the incessant irritations of the protagonist, Helga Crane, tend to be read under a popularised psychological idiom of *repression*. This idiom, “in which ‘repression’ more simply refers to an absence or deficit of expression, and ‘expression’ is implicitly identified with liberation” (178), suggests that those unwilling to express themselves are in fact self-oppressing. Yet, Ngai argues this simply operates within “a critical framework in which an ideal of ‘total intelligibility’ is posited as the antidote to repression”, and suggests that such a critical framework requires further interrogation.

As I stood in the booth, there was a turning point when my own irritation finally shifted me from willing to unwilling participant. It was, of all things, a subtle shift in the way I was addressed by the app. At the beginning of the work, it was emphasised that undressing and leaving a portrait was optional, but inside the booth, I was not reminded of my options, rather, simply directed to take off my clothes, and leave a message. This small linguistic tactic, no doubt intended to gently coax participants through the work, was the turning point, an irritation that I felt both as epidermal prickling and as a more cognitive chagrin. This crossing of feeling of mind and body, as Ngai observes, is not limited simply to irritation, as “synonyms for it tend to apply equally to psychic life and life at the level of the body—and particularly to its surfaces or skin” (Ngai 184). In fact, the conflation between the psychic and physical suggests something paradoxical about the affirmative impulse in *The Naked Self*.

This impulse, I argue, becomes clearer if we return to Perkovic’s description of her own feeling after the work: of being *lighter* and *clearer*. The implicit values in this response are that lightness and clearness are both positive and desirable psychic states, but values that, in bodily terms (of weight, or skin), *The Naked Self* seeks to strip of their high esteem. Thus, while *The Naked Self* celebrates the uniqueness of bodily diversity, this work (which at this point must be both understood as a collaboration between the participants and artists) seems to displace the terms and strictures which had been used to identify the desirable *body* toward a desirable *mood*. Within such an affirmative structure, it is not so much feeling irritable or prudish that is unhealthy, but the reticence to *share* these feelings.

There is something else notable about Perkovic’s shift into an affective register, and the decision to share her feeling about this work. One might, standing on the side-lines, read

her response as complicit within the affective attention economy of *The Naked Self*. However, Perkovic is a seasoned reviewer, who is very familiar with affective, participatory performance, and the register she deliberately adopts here demands at least one further note – particularly in light of the contrast with Fuhrmann’s more distanced critique. Side by side, it would be remiss not to consider the way that these reviews raise the question of gender, firstly regarding the portraits themselves, and secondly, in the way gender might inform listening and responding to these portraits. In particular, I have been struck in the process of thinking and talking about this work, how the topic and structure raise quite gendered expectations and assumptions of participants, stories and reception, that the work has an inherent femininity. The audio portraits, however, were remarkable in that many acknowledged sex and gender, but moved fluidly around and through it, slipping between registers of corporeal and cognitive feeling. And this points back to the limits of Fuhrmann’s critique. While insightful, it remains twice removed from the contingencies of feeling, and the suggestion that “[h]ow you feel... will probably depend on how you feel...” (2016, emphasis added) neatly circumvents not just sneaky feelings, but feeling in general.

Following Perkovic, I want to return to, and question my own feeling, of irritation. Much like the participant who did not wish to be naked (but nevertheless did share his experience), this feeling has less to do with repression, but rather with the pressure to share, and the specific conditions under which one is asked to share. The mediation of intimacy offered in *The Naked Self*, like other social networking platforms, removes a layer of complication, negotiation, and of *awkwardness* of an intimate encounter. While the portraits are undeniably revealing of personal, intimate detail, it is experienced *asynchronously*, without an ‘other’ co-present in time or space. The device and the database structure expressions of intimacy; which reduces the scope of complicated, messy and ugly feelings; allowing them to remain hidden; uncaptured by microphone. It is, perhaps, unsurprising that eye contact with other participants experiencing *The Naked Self* was avoided, and not at all dissimilar to an experience in any contemporary public space; of individuals connected to others through their devices and ignoring those physically proximate to them.

In attempting to engage with the complexity and uniqueness of bodies, it is the body that actually disappears from this work. *The Naked Self* structures feeling through a digital database of portraits which seek to *show* how people really *feel*; but develops a particular model of categorised expression, which itself emphasises certain tropes and patterns. At once voyeuristic, while also exhibitionist, intimacy and feeling in this work are, in fact, contingent on participants being *alone*. This work is, I would argue, one of collective feeling, but not felt at the same time, in the same place, rather collected by an informational architecture, distributed in a ‘manageable’, asynchronous method. This is to suggest that feeling is structured heavily by the mediating technologies, but also by the cultures of use which participants bring to this work from their everyday lives. In thinking about my own feelings about this work, while I was not able to put them into words, it was actually my body that served as a conduit. My impatient exhalation, pursed lips, and head slightly tilted to the right found no purchase; my sneaky feelings were hidden by the booth, they escaped collection and distribution: my body removed from really feeling itself.

Conclusions, Postponements

What good might we take from the assortment of dead ends, rocks, hard places, refusals and withdrawals I have catalogued in this paper? Even to ask such a question hints at an optimistic attachment, or as Ahmed suggests, evidence that “happiness is used as a technology or instrument, which allows the reorientation of individual desire towards a common good” (Ahmed 2010, 59). What is, then, the correct tone to strike in concluding a paper so laden with bad vibes? Would that I could simply follow Elvis Costello’s path, and rather than deal my sneaky feelings, just fade myself out, repeating again and again that “I’ve still got a long way to go”. Yet still, in doing so, the mediating technologies of feeling come to the fore; cutting up this transmission into supportable doses.

The written medium, sadly, does not permit such an outro. It does, however, allow another kind of looping, which mirrors something about these sneaky feelings, and their continual evasions and deferrals. Once more, I return to Bartleby’s employer, and his feelings about Bartleby’s refusal. “I pondered a moment in sore perplexity. But once more business hurried me. I determined again to postpone the consideration of this dilemma to my future leisure” (Melville 1853, 551). What stands out about this, is how the physical, technical and socio-cultural structures of affect discussed in this essay all function in ways that allow all kinds of deferral, or disappearance; to shield audiences and participants from minor irritations, distractions and sneaky feelings, by isolating bodies, compartmentalising them; and distributing feelings throughout networks and across time. In each of these cases, disciplinary technologies are at work in the way sneaky feelings can’t, or won’t be registered in these works; lest they become a *sabot* in the affective machinations of the theatrical experience.

In June 2018, *The Naked Self* was restaged at Arts House; and while the pastel gallery space was replaced by a hallway for listening, the database remained the same. I went along, to revisit the work and to see if my portrait of irritated exhalation had been included. I could not find it. It may be due to the algorithmic processes which randomised the lists, or perhaps it had been screened out in a process of censorship or quality control. I remember trying to catch the eye of my partner, who was seated down the other end of the hallway. Instead, a man seated beside her looked up, and we held eye contact for a moment. He looked back down at his screen, as did I. It was an awkward moment. But it was a *shared* awkward moment. In fact, for all the segmentation of feeling in these works; it is the sneaky feelings that move most readily between bodies, atmospheres of irritation, angst, resentment which become collective feelings; a feeling that something is amiss, that the disciplinary technology of the theatre (or the participatory application) may be dis-oriented; or unable to properly control all feelings. This kind of shared “drama [of] contingency” (Ahmed 2006, 124) operates outside of the affective economy of social media, that “relates to users distributing personal information to each other, but also implies the spreading of that personal information to third parties” (Dijck 2013, 45–46), as well as the viral cultures of snark, lulz, and trolling; it is a bad feeling that we can’t let show, for which we don’t have the right container.

As a conclusion of sorts, then, I want to return to Langlois's outburst, and suggest another reading, that it points toward an older definition of happiness, one we are unaccustomed to. In tracing the etymological root of happiness, Ahmed points toward the Middle English 'hap', meaning chance or fortune: "The word *happy* originally meant having 'good "hap" or fortune,' to be lucky or fortunate" (Ahmed 2010, 22). Our contemporary understanding of happiness is one stripped of luck and contingency: happiness doesn't just simply *happen*. One works at it, one is rewarded with it. For the actor (and the audience) the strictures of the theatre are a disciplinary technology which takes the 'hap' out of the equation. Perhaps (a word which is also built upon the 'hap') this means a different act of getting 'lost' in the performance; of wandering away from the inscribed affective machinery that structures feeling, and being lost in contingency and circumstance. I don't remember much else from *Complexity of Belonging*, but the affective resonances of that brief outburst, that *hap*, have been remarkably durable.

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ASHER WARREN is a Lecturer in Theatre at the University of Tasmania. His research interests include intermedial and networked performance, participatory and collaborative practices, and the sites of contemporary artistic practice. He is a member of Performance Studies international, the IFTR intermediality working group, and currently sits on the PSi Future Advisory Board. His writing has been published in *Performance Research*, *Australasian Drama Studies*, *Refractory: Journal of Entertainment Media*, and in the edited collection *Performance in a Militarized Culture* (2017).

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