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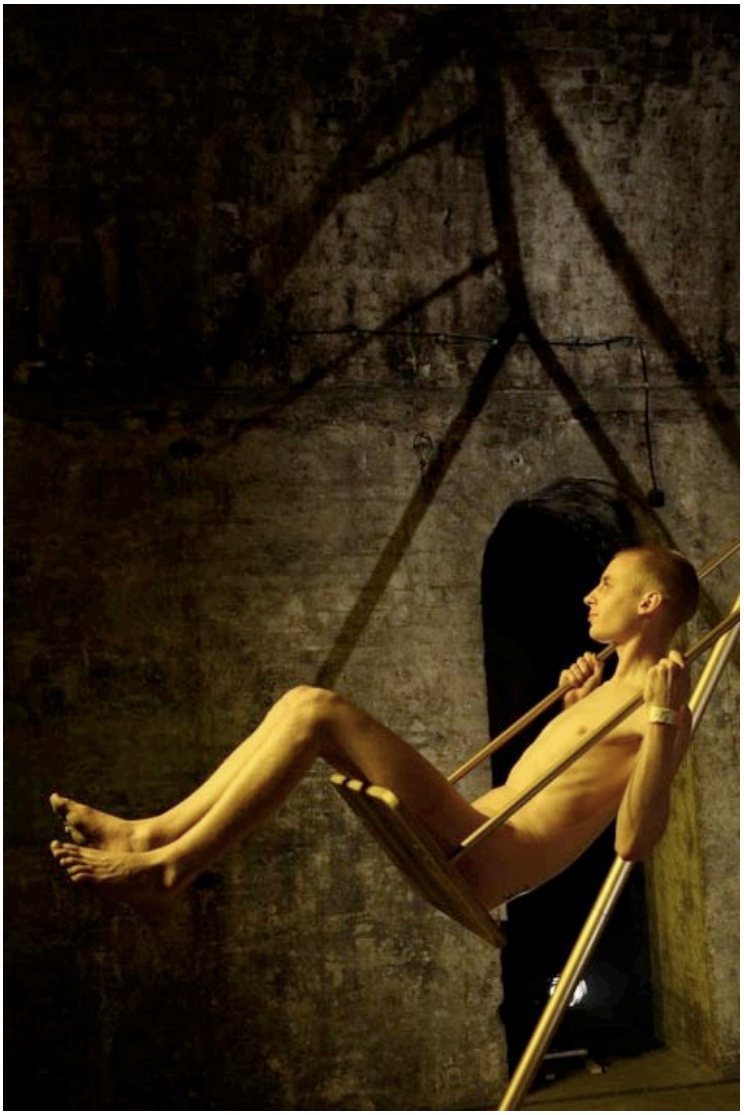
‘I’m Thinking of You’
Franko B
Visions of Excess at SHUNT Vaults, London
as part of Spill Festival of Performance

12. 04. 2009

I found Franko B illuminated (awash in gold spotlight, naked and smiling) on a converted gilt playground swing in one of the archways opening onto the dank corridors of Shunt. Accompanied only by the tinklings of a simple piano tune, the seemingly endless loop of swinging and sound carried with it the nostalgia of music boxes and lullabies. Occasionally making eye contact, Franko glanced as if in invitation to those watching him while enjoying a chat and a drink. Perhaps an attempt to welcome us into the fantasy, the invitation was an extension of one that Franko had made earlier in his open call for participants to inhabit the installation at hourly intervals. And as time unfolded, another ‘performer’ assumed his place on the swing, extending the image in cycles over a period of twelve hours.

The multiple levels of repetition in ‘I’m Thinking of You’ seemed to echo like the persistent refrains in Franko’s past work. These have revolved around love (and the beloved) and around ideas of home (the place where love lives). ‘Oh Lover Boy’... ‘I Miss you’ ... ‘Blinded by Love’ .....blinded by love, I wonder what he can see in front of him? Can he see beyond a persistent image from the past? And if his performances are a type of re-enactment, what compels him to go back for more? Doing. Re-doing. Doing again. Magical undoing. A child hostage appealing from a state of abjection? When asked about this piece, Franko responded that it was not about him. (Indeed, he also reminded a few performers who may have been drawing attention to themselves, that it was not about them either.) Perhaps now, working with light instead of blood, performances which might previously be read as melancholic (re)enactment, circling around a central loss, act more as revelation coming in a blinding flash of love, or a blinding flash of love coming in revelation…

In his most recent performance work, ‘Don’t Leave Me This Way’, the audience, temporarily blinded by light, was left with a perceptual afterglow. An image, similar to that created after looking at the sun for too long, temporarily persists. By contrast, in ‘I’m Thinking of You’, Franko, seemingly bathed in the light of romance, was the lived afterglow. The re-occurrence of this flickering image over an extended period of time invited us (some, literally) to enter into it while, at the same time, the twelve hour duration seemed to collapse into an extended residual image. Indeed, the participants and audience members that I spoke to remarked that the performance stayed with them, manifesting in feelings of “happiness”. An activating, affective takeaway?



Franko B, ‘I’m Thinking of You’, 2009 Photo: Richard J. Andersen



Franko B, 'I'm Thinking of You', 2009 Photo: Richard J. Andersen

Looking back at Franko B's past, and following from Deleuze and Guattari's work on 'refrain', one might say that the refrains in his body of work act together to create a territory or a terrain. But maybe this 'home' does not function merely as domestic refuge, but has the potential to become a more enduring act of production. By continually invoking an 'image' of home, home is brought into being. By externalising and actualising a need (to have a home and the love and security that, ideally, it contains), he has potential to integrate his creation and to carry it with him. A mobile home? In a similar way, by playing with a clichéd image, as he does in 'I'm Thinking of You', Franko B does not return to the nostalgia of personal memory only to repeat it in the future. By using a fictionalised image of 'the past', he opens up new possibilities for the future of that image. A processional self? By returning to a fictive time that has been 'lost', actualising a time which never, and possibly could never, exist (an ideal), something new is created in the slippage of that image's boundaries.

'I'm Thinking of You', was brought to life in the context of *Visions of Excess*, a live art event co-curated by Ron Athey and Lee Adams as part of the Spill Festival in London. Billed in the supporting publicity as a "12 hour communion with the ragged spirit of Georges Bataille", from 9pm until 9am Visions of Excess occupied its time with work from a number of international artists including Bruce LaBruce, Ron Athey and Kiera O'Reilly. In the main stage areas, David Hoyle acted as compère/health & safety, rep/sideshow host(ess) and tour guide for the performances. Tragicomic experiments in personal transformation were explored in works such as in 'Til Death Do You Part - Marry Yourself!' a one to one performance with an "encouraging priestess" where the participant had an opportunity to devise and enact a ceremonial commitment to themselves. In Zackary Drucker's 'work in progress', the audience, encouraged by an acousamatic voice (reminiscent to that of a guide from a self-help audio tape), was invited to collectively build-up and channel negative energy (derived from personal failure) into the hair follicles of the artist dressed only in a blond wig, stilettos and panties. As a finale, in a futile collective act of gender re-assignment, the participants, now armed with tweezers, were encouraged to pluck hair from the artist's body to the accompaniment of the disembodied voice's chants of "you will never be a woman".

Albeit it in different ways, the work in *Visions*, responds to alienation from societal ideals ingested and then enforced by our 'selves'. Captured by 'images' of perfection we are forced into repetitive patterns of behaviour. Our vision thus guided and media-driven, we get caught in the productivity of sterile cycles of consumption. And try as we might, steered by a hunger for completion never satisfied, we never quite manage to shoehorn into the confines of the ideal. In this way, happily ever after, we are destined to fail in the pursuit of an ideal romance modelled after an ideal childhood. And in these closed and enclosed economies, the excess produced by, while at the same time, excluded from the system, is neatly kept out of sight.

Working with his own blood in previous live performances, Franko B's wound was open to be interpreted in a variety of ways. The skin acted as a landscape to the visible surfacing of an individual psychological conflict (as in historical readings of persistent skin disorders such as eczema), marked him out as the bearer of stigma, and represented a collective vulnerability, and disgrace. A scarlet letter radiating a burning heat.

As Erving Goffman examines in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, stigma is something that marks the bearer out as different from existing, desirable, social norms. It is a mark, however small, of some defect in presentation of or deviation from the identity categories that form us and which we reiterate our self in relation to. Stigma, therefore, has to be 'managed' to a greater or lesser extent. Informa-

tion needs to be controlled, so that the individual is not labelled as different and then marginalized, or excluded. Since identities are relational, stigmatization may precipitate a crisis in self-perception that would require a readjustment of personal schema. For these reasons, the visibility of stigma is controlled wherever possible and concealed. When it does surface, so does a feeling of shame. And this shame may lead to anxiety and avoidance of social contact.

Goffman goes on to explain that the stigmatized and the 'normal' are not so different from each other, in fact, he says that they run in parallel to each other and that "every individual participates in both roles".[1] As both a part and a product of a shared framework and system of rules, they are reciprocal and dependant upon one another. Even the so-called normal shares some, however small, stigma, as they desire but can never fully achieve an unattainable social ideal. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari, in a concern with how to proceed in a war fought against what they recognise as a sick (neurotic) society, explore how a feeling of lack is created, maintained, and exploited by society and it's mechanisms of power through repression (for example, in capitalism's exploitation of the free floating desire created by repression). Similarly, this constant striving for, but never achieving a state of completion in an idealised and stable identity (itself an unattainable social ideal), creates a feeling of lack in the subject.

As I see it, it is this lack, maintained in the self-perpetuating closed system of the 'I', which can be made manifest through stigma as excess. In this way, stigma performs as a symptom (as a positive symptom, perhaps), as a defect in the cultural machine, surfacing repressed desire and alterity. Surfacing what is kept out of conscious awareness has the potential to remind us of our ultimate alienation from the ideal, and by extension, society (and ourselves created in relation to it) - the alterity internal to ourselves. It also has a role to play in escaping the system.

While some of the work at *Visions of Excess* was literally playing with systemic waste (think auto-fisting, blow-jobs, blood-letting), Franko B played with an ideal by bringing it to life.....and invited others to join in. In 'I'm Thinking of You', I see Franko B bringing a fantasy to light. This is not just a personal/reparative phantasy, or an idealised and fetishised image, but extends to include that of social ideal. There did seem to be some catharsis to be had in having the opportunity to temporarily embody (and in the process reconfigure the shape of) an ideal childhood/romance. In this piece, it is not the scars left by his past performances, nor the tattoos that capture my attention. Is it the face of an image with no fixed identity, collectively owned? Strangely, I noticed that once performers took to the driving seat, that they, although altogether physically different, shared a similar look. As one participant explained to me, his experience on the swing oscillated between self-awareness, "it's cold", "people are looking at me", and loss in what he described as 'non-personal' reverie...Blinded by love is he having a romance with himself? Has he, escaping capture, 'returned' home? And as an audience participant, over time, I can't help but feel the image's eidetic affect.

1 Goffman, Erving. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity,* Penguin Books, 1968, (163).