

THE PHYSICS ROOM

CONTEMPORARY ART SPACE

holding many places, all at once.

Hamish Peterson

For the first month of its exhibition, Brian Fuata's projected video work, *PLACEHOLDER*, was a silent, impenetrable creature. It taunted viewers with decontextualised propositions and parts of sentences which popped up and disappeared like internet advertisements breaching the non-virtual frontier, breaking into Fuata's projection of a room; real but not here. In this projected room the floor had been taped off in two concentric squares marking an outside, in-between, and inner sanctum. The work seemed to revel in the privilege of being a placeholder or gate-keeper for the main act as it knowingly referenced its own relationship to this absence using on-screen text; 'with', 'at'. These disembodied words are meant to connect subjects to objects, viewers to works, participants to performers. However, in the context of The Physics Room's dark A.V. space, they referenced yet more absences: '*who at where?*' and '*who with who?*' Perhaps it can be thought of as a theatrical tool to build tension for the audience. If so, it was certainly successful as my feeling of suspense increased over the two or three times I visited the space in messianic anticipation of Fuata's performance. In this sense, Fuata's projection became part of the performance, functioning as an almost tangible talisman to absence but also as a timekeeper for the period of absence before Fuata's presence. It was a curtain I waited a month to 'fall up'.

The role of such dramaturgical ideas, tropes, and conventions became increasingly valuable the deeper I went into Fuata's August 11th performance. In particular, Victor Turner's writing on ritual and drama after Arnold van Gennep can be considered in relation to Fuata's performance work to read both the live and ongoing email performances as engagements with liminal time and space and the transformative potential that notions of liminality hold.

The very structure of Fuata's largely improvised performance closely resembles what van Gennep outlines as a typical 'Rite of Passage' ritual. This form of ritual, which Turner later theorised upon, involves a period of separation of the ritual subject from

larger society both symbolically and often physically. Then a liminal stage occurs where the subject is “betwixt and between” social roles, exploring and transgressing different identities and statuses before the final re-aggregation of the ritual subjects back into the larger social group, having acquired a new social identity, role, and status. In particular, Turner writes about how, in the sequestered liminal phase, the ritual subjects are permitted to disrupt, collapse, and even remould or invert social roles, rules, hierarchies, and structuresⁱ. Fuata’s performance similarly began with a period of separation as they and the other performer, Julia Harvie, met with participants in The Physics Room’s foyer. Fuata and Harvie discussed setting a timer for structure and Fuata introduced themselves and the nature of the performance to participants. They also gave instructions to the participants to begin the session by gathering tightly as a group and to follow Fuata around the perimeter of the main gallery space, moving and stopping in choreographic synchronisation with the performer. This functioned to encourage a group identity among us as liminal neophytes entering the ritual while abandoning our individual identities and statuses. Indeed, we all gathered together, touching bodies and coordinating our movements for the sake of the group. This also served to initiate the theatrical suspension of disbelief where, in the tradition of modern realist theatre, audience members all consent to ‘believe’ in the fictional premise from which the theatrical world unfolds. The performers are excused from their structural positions in society to play out contrasting roles in order to communicate this moral theme. In the case of Fuata’s performance, participants took on a collective identity with the faith that they would be somehow transported or transformed through the power of the ritual process. We were removed from the larger social body, traversed the contentious space of the main gallery *after hours* then were coaxed into the blackened A.V. space where Fuata began the second phase of the performance.

As Turner writes of public rituals, this process of separating the ritual subjects from the larger social body serves many functions. Turner writes that when society “cut[s] out a piece of itself for inspection” it separates out the ritually pure neophytes in order to safely frame subjects as removed and at a safe distance from the main social bodyⁱⁱ. This allows for the neophytes to safely transgress social norms, act out latent desires and generally challenge, collapse and even remould social forms. Once in the AV space, Fuata commenced a second performance utilising a static projection behind them, an area taped off on the floor dividing audience from performer, and a microphone connected to a PA. At times Fuata performed simple, precise movement and spoke in abstract poetic language from a white page into the microphone. They contrasted this formality with casual wandering around the space, talking to the audience in the first person, referencing the tape separating them from us, and crossing it to sit and speak from within the audience. At times, Fuata would be silent in focused movement but this sometimes collapsed into a thin, wiry falsetto rendition of *Unchained Melody* by The Righteous Brothersⁱⁱⁱ that often collapsed even further into laughter.

Here, the A.V. space became a sacral inner sanctum where Fuata adopted the archetypes of the clown, fool, or jester to embody multiple possible roles, hierarchised genre, and social statuses. Fuata is supposed to be a professional performer but here they are singing *Unchained Melody* in falsetto, unable to get past the first few lines of the chorus without breaking into a childish giggle. In sequences like this, the clown, heckler, lecturer, comic, and actor roles and their correlated statuses are collapsed into single moments. The hierarchies of genre (poetry, song, dance, comedy, banter) are all mashed together, collapsing distinctions between social roles and statuses so strictly policed and reinforced in the larger social body.

Fuata then intensified this collapse of boundaries as they brought us downstairs, into the residency space. They described it as a space of experimentation, incompleteness, and ‘failure’. Here Fuata lets us into their ‘backstage’, further complicating the identities and roles both Fuata and ourselves were playing out. Beers were handed out and young art school students, respected curators, and artists sat, stood, and leaned side by side in a gesture of egalitarianism. The distance between art school and public institutions temporarily contracted thanks to Fuata’s structuring of liminal time and space. In this third phase of the performance, the power of the ritual is evident in Fuata’s complete transformation from elder—as they taught us the ritual process—to ghost. Even the ghost is a liminal character as it fidgets restlessly between the living people and the resting ancestors. Fittingly, Fuata’s presentation of the ghost itself was not a clean and perfect illusory trick but rather a slow process of undressing and talking about how they used to wear all white but it just isn’t that important anymore; still confusing roles of critic, self, observer, and performer-embodying-a-character. Finally, Fuata called upon a nearby audience member to drape the ghost-making sheet over Fuata’s body thus completing their transformation. The climax of the performance and ultimate testament to the success of the ritual was in the ghost’s levitation of a chair, which involved Fuata sticking an arm out from under their sheet to lift a chair by its leg. Though executed in a way that was didactic, synthetic, self-reflexive, and self-aware, this interaction with a participant and this gesture of transformation both indicated the transformative power that the group of ritual participants held for the outcome of the performance.

The final phase of re-aggregation occurred as Fuata and Harvie, in the midst of their performance of ‘dance’ and ‘ghost’, slowly revealed themselves to be human bodies and voices. The sheet was allowed to fall off of Fuata’s moving body and the dancer’s movements turned to a violent shaking where the visceral physicality of the body was demonstrated in movement that looked painful and even made me tense with the imagination of that pain. This revealing of the transformed ritual subjects brought us back from the liminal space and time of the performance to the ‘real’ time and space where we each suddenly had to deal with our social reality. Now outside the world of

the performance, people finished beers, had conversations and reinforced those social roles and hierarchies Fuata had been permitted to collapse in their liminal space.

What Fuata did was criticise, challenge and at times remould social forms within the safety of liminal space and time. To do this in the contentious and highly structured public spaces of the city, in the middle of the workday would have immediately been read as aggressive disruption and insanity. However, by structuring the collapse of categories and structures within the safe liminal phase, they can be accepted and genuinely considered for what transformative potential they may hold for the social macrocosm of the city, or for the culture within which the heavily loaded gallery space sits.

failed".

cough

sweat

phlegm

blood

a dizzy spell

not again...

this [redacted] other preparatory show is simply a [redacted] confirmation of immunity.

Fig. 1

Also speaking to the position of the gallery space within larger social networks was the email performance Fuata carried out. The texts themselves offered poetic manipulations of ideas of the body, corporeality and contact (fig.1), communication and the email ‘page’ or space (fig.2). The emails were filled with poetic evocations of performativity and the tension between visibility and voyeurism as well as playing with the conventions of both the theatre and Internet as media through which we communicate (fig. 3). So often Fuata presented impossible anthropomorphisations of Gmail, Internet servers, and email addresses that expose, as Steve Dixon notes (echoing Marshall McLuhan’s idea of the medium as message), the central importance of the limitations, tropes and conventions of the Internet medium^{iv}. Indeed the medium itself—with such an influence on how we communicate—can be understood as somewhat liminal also. It occupies the threshold between our physical selves and physical data servers and computers elsewhere^v. It also facilitates a Cartesian split between our corporeal and psychic selves where we can project versions of ourselves into this liminal space for experimentation and play^{vi}. Therefore, when we engage in the Internet’s communicative forms—from webcam cybersex to the email performance—we engage in a liminal time and space where we project potential selves to interact with the projected selves of others. Fuata creates a liminal space for us, safely removed

(somewhat) from the larger social body where normativity may be challenged. Moreover, my anonymity within a set of addresses I did not know made the allure to interject into the performance all the more tantalising.

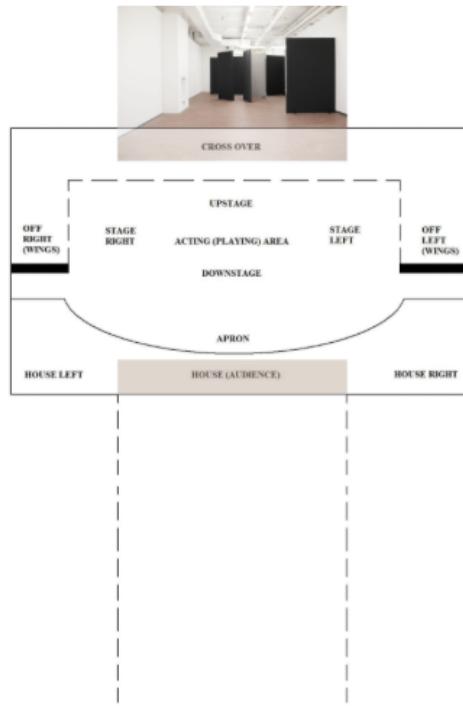


Fig. 2

CURTAINS
FALL
UP

THE BAND PREPARES

Fig. 3

Perhaps, when Fuata sets up this liminal discursive space, they engage in Claire Bishop's notion of relational antagonism^{vii}. As a critique of Nicolas Bourriaud's 'relational aesthetics', relational antagonism refers to artistic practice where voices from all across our necessarily polylogic and incongruous publics are placed together in communal or public space. What this has the potential to do is demonstrate where the antagonisms lie between differently oriented publics and demand we accept that contradiction and conflict exist in society. Rather than Bourriaud's celebration of the relational space so tightly constrained by the discursive and social spheres of 'art' that a utopia-producing consensus is manufactured, Bishop advocates for a practice that privileges disagreement, experiment, and unknown potential. The longer Fuata's BCC list of past participants grows, the more likely it is the liminal discursive e-space that Fuata sets up will foster the productive antagonistic space that Bishop describes. This is, as Turner suggests, the very function of the liminal phase; to have existing social formations challenged, collapsed, experimented, and played with to ultimately produce a transformation.

ⁱ Victor Turner, "Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality" *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*

ⁱⁱ ibid, p.468

ⁱⁱⁱ Likely a reference to the 1990 film *Ghost*.

^{iv} Steve Dixon, 'Virtual Bodies' in Steve Dixon ed., *Digital Performance. A history of New Media in Theatre, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007)

^vDennis D. Waskul 2005 'Ekstasis and the internet: liminality and computer-mediated communication' *New Media and Society* 7(1) (2005): 54

^{vi} Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance. A History of New Media in Theatre, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 214

^{vii} Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics" *October* Vol. 110 (2004): 51-79