

## Notes from backstage

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*A dialogue among Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz and Jon Davies*

This dialogue took place by email between January and May 2014.

Based in Berlin, Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz collaborate on creating performances for the camera originating from material from the past. They are interested in the myriad provisional and idiosyncratic ways that the past can take form in the present and what this means for the future. Often re-performing bodies from the fraught history of women's, queer, and trans visual representation, their work advances an aesthetic and ethos of the 'backstage' rather than merely shining a stark twenty-first-century spotlight on these resurrected figures. Drawing attention to how women's, queer, and trans bodies have been staged for a patriarchal Western gaze, they work with queer theories of time and temporality, glamour and camp, as well as feminist strategies of critical archival research (re-)performance and collaboration in order to construct their dazzling touches across time. Employing both artifacts and artifice, their practice arguably functions *as* queer feminist art and cultural history through its nuanced consideration of the representational framing of the figures from the past who call out urgently to us in the present. This queer feminist art historical methodology is foundational to their work – the air it breathes.

**Jon Davies [JD]:** Let's begin by talking about the breadth and depth of the collaboration that is at the heart of your practice. First, the two of you co-author all of your projects. Second, you work with performers from various North American and European queer and art scenes, including – most intimately – Werner Hirsch, as well as many others such as Yvonne Rainer, Wu Tsang, and Ginger Brooks Takahashi. How does the dynamic play out between them in front of the camera and you behind it? Third, there are what you have called your 'friends from the past'<sup>1</sup> – the historical figures who also perform – such as Annie Jones, Hannah Cullwick, Jack Smith, and Aida Walker. What is the balance of power you negotiate with these specters? Could you discuss how these different levels of collaboration manifest both in the content and the form of your work?

**Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz [PB/RL]:** Coming from activist backgrounds, we both have a lot of experience with all sorts of collaborative struc-



9.1 Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz, still from *Toxic*, 2012.  
Installation with Super 16mm film/HD, 13 minutes and archive.

tures, and we take advantage of the productive dialogue that happens during every stage of our artistic practice. When we work on a new film for one of our film installations, we don't arrange a casting session for the actors. We work with friends, people from our scene, people whom we have known for a long time who have their own artistic practices that we admire. This is important for us because we don't want our performers to act or 'to be' a character or a figure. When we restage an interview with Jean Genet – where he refused the filmic setting as a kind of police interrogation – starring Werner Hirsch as we did in our film *Toxic* (2012)<sup>2</sup> (Figure 9.1), we show Hirsch as himself, a drag performer from the 2010s, making a connection to Genet, who addressed sexuality, power, and political conflicts in his writings, and who gave this interview in 1985. We want to address the present and the 1980s at the same time. What we are aiming for is not only a drag performance, but a performance that also disrupts temporal norms – we like to use queer scholar Elizabeth Freeman's term 'temporal drag'.<sup>3</sup>

Since we have musical backgrounds as well, we are in contact with many fellow musicians; they have stage experience but not necessarily as film performers. We also worked with the artist Wu Tsang on two dances for the project *Salomania* (2009), though he is not a dancer; we are very interested in non-conventional ways of performing. Therefore we like to include unforeseen elements during a shoot: we always film very long scenes without breaks and we often don't rehearse a scene at all since we want to keep the precariousness and fragility of the performances intact so we can deal with any and all failures that might appear. We have developed long-term relationships not

only with performers but also with a number of institutions and curators such as the Zurich independent art space Les Complices<sup>4</sup> run by Andrea Thal or the contemporary art platform Electra<sup>5</sup> in London. This allows us to engage in ongoing discussions about our respective works and interests. And, as you mentioned, there is our long-standing collaboration with figures or 'friends' from the past too, like Jack Smith, whose performances and films have inspired us for a long time now – and who may or may not be happy with this friendship!

**JD:** Yes, of course! This reminds me of your conversation with Thal from September 2010, which ends by discussing how these 'friends from the past' all have wills of their own, and might not like how they are being imitated or 'used' by you in the twenty-first century.<sup>6</sup> You refer to that wonderful rupture in *Contagious!* (2010), where Vaginal Davis yells 'Stop it!' at the Berlin club spectators – one of the few audiences actually represented in your work. Can you talk about how this potential for refusal connects to the different kinds of queer kinship in your work, where performers past and present are often brought together in a way that respects their difference or disharmony, rather than in a purely affirmative and agreeable model of community?

**PB/RL:** Well, this is a really nice question. When we staged Vaginal Davis as Aida Walker yelling 'Stop it!' at the audience, we were interested in the question of contagion as a concept that might work against norms of bodies and behavior. We had researched two dances from the end of the nineteenth century – the Afro-American cakewalk, which was first developed by slaves in the US to mock their white masters, and the French epileptic dance – the latter very much inspired by the discourses and imagery around the hysterical female body. These two dances, which were very fashionable at the time, enabled different bodies to enter the stage in a very subversive way, bodies which were contesting whiteness and the ideal of a healthy body under one's control. Dance was considered quite dangerous by the bourgeoisie because it seemed that movements could be irrepressibly contagious, even holding the power to infect 'respectable' bodies.<sup>7</sup> Contagion, conflict, and disharmony are a range of methods for demanding a space to live differently.

This might also be the reason why in *Contagious!* there is a certain tension between the performers and the audience. As you mentioned, it is the only one of our films where you can actually see an audience, here reacting to the performances by Davis and Arantxa Martínez. We somehow thought of the scene in Antonioni's film *Blow-Up* (1966) where the musicians break their guitar, which is then stolen by a passive-aggressive audience. We were interested in staging a similar situation, some kind of love-hate relationship between the audience and the performers that has to do with desire, imitation, and a conflict about appropriation or contagion. Davis yells 'Stop it!' at the audience and storms off the stage in a very campy, melodramatic way, which leaves what should actually be stopped open for interpretation. We were not



consciously thinking about a friend from the past interrupting some kind of connection, but queer history scholar Carolyn Dinshaw suggested this when she saw the film, which interested us. One aspect of queer feminist politics involves looking at figures and materials from the past that were not able to fulfill their potential to initiate social and political change – for instance to enable different lifestyles and bodily practices – and make them available again in the present day for a possible future use. But the question is: What would happen if these figures and materials were to say ‘Stop it!’?

**JD:** Could you also reflect on the distinction you make between staging performances for the camera versus for a live audience?

**PB/RL:** We asked our friends to come by and we filmed them watching the performance. There is an ambiguity because they are staged and at the same time they are actually watching the performances as real admirers of Davis and Martínez. After you see Davis shouting ‘Stop it!’ and leaving the stage, we should have stopped filming, because this is where the staged moment ends. Instead, we kept filming and the performance shifts into ‘reality’ or a non-staged moment, Davis gets applauded for real by her fans (a bit reluctantly, however, since we didn’t give them those directions), and she and Martínez go out into the audience to relax and chat with their friends. The film ends with these two possible conclusions: the end of the staged part and what comes after, what is off-frame, what is backstage, which is something that interests us in many films.

**JD:** The figures we see throughout your work speak to us articulately with their voices and bodies, but the way that music operates and moves people is more intangible and arguably more open. Can you talk more about your project *To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe in Recognition of Their Desperation* (2013) (Figure 9.2) – what was it like to actually work with a historical score, written by Pauline Oliveros in 1970? How did following her ‘script’ with your collaborating musicians impact your approach to this work compared to your past projects? What were some of the lessons that Oliveros taught you in terms of using musical arrangement as a way of empowering but also organizing performers?

**PB/RL:** It was the first time we worked with an actual score, and this brought up a lot of questions. Usually we take some material from the past – a photograph for example – and use it as a starting point for a contemporary performance. Could we open the notion of the score a little bit, and consider it as a similar kind of material? A score is interesting because it already implies a specific temporality: you produce your own version, but there have been different ones before and there will be others in the future. What a nice way to think about performance!

*To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe...* is a score about power. What was most compelling for us is that Oliveros proposes a queer-feminist method-



Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz, still from *To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe in Recognition of Their Desperation*, 2013. Installation with Super 16mm film/HD, 18 minutes.

9.2

ology in music, which uses no slogans (except maybe the amazing title) and is not based on language at all: instead, the minimalist structure of the piece itself seeks to overthrow hierarchies. The score asks that six or more musicians choose five pitches and play them in long tones, either modulated or unmodulated. There are three sections structured by different lights (red, yellow, and blue), and in the middle section, the musicians should imitate each other’s pitches. Oliveros wanted to invent a non-hierarchic structure for a musical piece, which would leave the same space for each musician – trained or untrained, each one equal to the others, an individual and part of a group at the same time. The piece negotiates the idea of a continuous circulation of power, which was inspired by Solanas’s 1967 *SCUM Manifesto*: ‘It was really out of that understanding of both community and the individual – which was in her manifesto – that became the principle, or the philosophy, of the music that I began to write,’ Oliveros has stated.<sup>8</sup> We were inspired by the very question the piece implies: Can sounds, rhythms, and light *become revolutionary*?

The real challenge for us working on this score was to imagine how to visualize sound when there is always some kind of hierarchy between image and sound in a film. We decided to consider the camera as a seventh performer, an individual part of the community. The film was recorded in one take with the camera constantly moving and interacting with individuals or groups of performers positioned in a circle. The camera not only shows performers in action, playing, but also those waiting and listening. We wanted the camera to show the process of listening.

**JD:** Your work draws on historical legacies of discipline and the exercise of power, how bodies perform under the scrutiny of medical photography and mugshots, for example, and potentially subvert this control in different ways. With the omnipresent cameras in our lives today, total visibility is in reach of everyone but political power seems to be nowhere in sight. How do you see these disciplining mechanisms at work now as certain queer and gendered bodies achieve acceptance in the mass media, while others remain beyond the pale?

**PB/RL:** Our film installation *N.O. Body* (2008) deals with the history of visibility, developing around a photograph, which had already navigated diverse contexts before we began working with it. It is a highly staged photograph of the bearded lady Annie Jones that highlights the contrast between her beard and her very long hair and elegant lady's dress. It was taken for an advertisement when she toured as a freak show 'wonder' at the end of the nineteenth century. Later this photograph reappeared in a book by the German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld as evidence of gender variety,<sup>9</sup> but he made no reference to its staged origins, which means that the image had already traveled from freak discourse into medical discourse, from one devaluation of difference (and the practices associated with it) to another. In *N.O. Body* we have a scene where Hirsch as our performer appears in almost identical clothes, hair, and beard as Jones wears in the picture, and Hirsch stands in front of a projection of this photograph and even caresses it. While s/he touches the photo with affection, s/he obscures it at the same time, since these gestures block the projection. Queer art scholar Mathias Danbolt argued that this double bind of showing and hiding in *N.O. Body* refers to the fact that there are bodies that have been exposed too much throughout history, and therefore that visibility cannot always be the aim of queer politics but is instead a complex problem. He also noted that the touching 'points to the fact that *how we touch* forms and informs how the past takes shape in the present,' a remark we really like.<sup>10</sup>

Another aspect of our work that plays with the question of visibility and appearance is our use of curtains in our installations and, perhaps more importantly, a certain elaboration of the idea of 'backstage.' *Backstage* is a key space in many of our films, which often show events that happen out-of-frame or taking place at a time before or after the actual performance. We also take up the experience of walking backstage in our installations and exhibitions. Visitors enter a space and often find themselves behind the screen or behind the presentation. The visual manifestation of the piece is complete but not accessible on first sight. The idea of backstage allows us to address norms of staging bodies, of displaying knowledge and the apparatus of vision.

**JD:** Your work is consistently striving to make the camera's gaze into a more generous force, engaged with its subjects and their power rather than simply an authorization to stare. In Andy Warhol and Ronald Tavel's cinematic collaborations from the mid-1960s, their performers are subjected to absurd,

highly contrived situations within the film frame, and the camera's unwavering gaze tests how they perform under duress. This creates what you, Renate, have called 'a double bind of repression and glamour,' I think.<sup>11</sup> You borrowed their conceit of locating the entire cast and director on camera (feeding lines to the actors) in *No Future/No Past* (2011) (Figure 9.3), where every gesture and phrase seems to be in quotation marks – a citation of a guitar being smashed rather than a guitar being smashed. Can you talk about your interest or investment in Warhol and Tavel's cinema of cruelty (as it has been called), and how your queer feminist appropriation reworks its ethical ambiguities around power differently?

**PB/RL:** In *No Future/No Past* we collected quotes, attitudes, and slogans from different protagonists of the 1970s punk movement, and we were especially interested in the scene's female and queer performers. Our questions were: What counts as political? Which gestures, poses, and acts are excluded from the political, or challenge norms of the political?

We wanted to reconsider the punk idea of aggressively rejecting the present without ever proposing any action that advances toward future social justice. We used an arrangement of the camera and performers inspired by Warhol and Tavel's *The Life of Juanita Castro* (1965). This setting provided us with a precarious framework that allowed a certain distance toward those nihilistic punk expressions, phrases, and props. In Warhol and Tavel's film, the camera



Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz, still from *No Future/No Past*, 2011.  
Installation with two Super 16mm films/HD, 15 minutes each.



shoots the scene from the side, and the performers look at an invisible camera (or audience) that is out of the frame, rendering many of the actions invisible. This shift in perspective implies another kind of gaze, as the audience is not allowed to be in a position of visual mastery where they can see everything. On the other hand, the camera/spectator is virtually on stage, very close to the performers and almost one of them: it reminded us of the particular point-of-view of watching a friend's concert from the side of the stage, seeing the musicians and audience at the same time. This perspective, which we again could almost call the perspective of the backstage, is a constant preoccupation in our films: What happens outside of the frame? Where does a stage begin and end? What is the boundary between staged and unstaged moments?

In *The Life of Juanita Castro*, Tavel the screenwriter plays the on-screen director feeding lines to the performers (as well as occasional, sometimes rude, stage directions), who just repeat them. By contrast, the on-screen director in our film is scripted by us, and any cruelty is staged; what we like about this arrangement is that it allows us to invite and reject the gaze at the same time. As you nicely framed it, it also focuses on power relations and violence. The repetition allows for a line to be said twice, not only in different voices, with mistakes, but also with different accents and degrees of seriousness or irony. It allows for bad acting or for not acting. It emphasizes the unrehearsed or the process of rehearsing for a future performance. It is an ambivalent temporality akin to the punk attitude toward time: 'no future.'

**JD:** In *Toxic* you advance a 'perspective of toxicity' as a frame through which to look at the world and to interpret technologies of image-making in particular.<sup>12</sup> Hirsch/Genet implicates you as the makers controlling their representation, critiquing your position and turning the camera on you. They contaminate the film and 'expose' you to the camera's scrutiny where typically you remain hidden. Could you speak further about your theory of toxicity and how it relates to queer and trans embodiments and politics both today and potentially in the future?

**PB/RL:** We took up the notion of toxicity from various movements that are important to us: the AIDS activist movement, of course, and the public fear of a toxic body which is in many cases also a queer body; movements like the SPK (Socialist Patients' Collective) in 1970s Germany, which claimed that 'illness is the only form of life in capitalism';<sup>13</sup> the different movements around disability, and also the trans movement. We like the ambivalence of a toxin, which might heal in small doses – or allow for a break from the rhythm of normality – but does harm in higher doses. As Antke Engel said about the film, it also points to a certain notion of 'indigestibility': a toxin is something that can't be digested and therefore can't be integrated into the body – it lingers as an embodiment of difference, which touches and connects with the body without bridging or effacing its difference from the body.<sup>14</sup>

Starting from these discourses around toxicity, we also asked if it might be possible to see not only chemical and other substances as toxic but the filmic apparatus as well – its history since the nineteenth century and its social effects, but also the ways filmmakers continue to work with it. We were thinking of conventional formats, for example the situation of a formally staged, recorded interview: Genet's intervention during the 1985 BBC interview was very revealing as he dramatically draws attention to the toxicity of the apparatus that traps him. At some point, he interrupts the discussion and asks the technicians to take up his position in front of the camera and to speak. When they refuse, Genet asks the camera to turn around and film the interviewer and his crew; comparing the situation of being filmed with a police interrogation, he seeks to overturn this power relationship. He perfectly articulates how the position of the camera marginalizes him on the one hand by making him sit in front of his interviewer, like the thief he was, being questioned by the police, and simultaneously normalizing him by broadcasting him into the family homes of Britain. We re-enacted this scene with Hirsch, and there is of course some self-ironization here, as the situation behind the camera is clearly staged as well. We don't believe in the possibility of overturning the entire social order with one big revolutionary gesture. But we don't want to renounce this gesture either.

#### Notes

- 1 'Stages: A Conversation between Andrea Thal, Pauline Boudry, and Renate Lorenz,' in *Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz: Temporal Drag* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 2003.
- 2 For full descriptions, film stills and installation shots of work by Boudry/Lorenz, see [www.boudry-lorenz.de](http://www.boudry-lorenz.de) (accessed 12 May 2015).
- 3 Elizabeth Freeman, 'Normal Work: Temporal Drag and the Question of Class,' in *Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz: Temporal Drag, 1976–1980*. Also Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
- 4 See [www.lescomplices.ch](http://www.lescomplices.ch) (accessed 9 September 2014).
- 5 See [www.electra-productions.com](http://www.electra-productions.com) (accessed 9 September 2014).
- 6 'Stages: A Conversation between Andrea Thal, Pauline Boudry, and Renate Lorenz,' 1998–2003.
- 7 See Rae Beth Gordon, *Dances with Darwin: 1875–1910* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).
- 8 Martha Mockus, *Sounding Out: Pauline Oliveros and Lesbian Musicality* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), 155.
- 9 Magnus Hirschfeld, *Geschlechtskunde auf Grund dreißig-jähriger Forschung und Erfahrung bearbeitet*. Vol. 4, *Bilderteil* (Stuttgart: Julius Püttmann Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1930), image no. 728.
- 10 Mathias Danbolt, 'Disruptive Anachronism: Feeling Historical with *N.O. Body*,' in *Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz: Temporal Drag, 1988*.

- 11 'Stages: A Conversation between Andrea Thal, Pauline Boudry, and Renate Lorenz,' 2001.
- 12 Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz, 'Toxic,' [www.boudry-lorenz.de/toxic/](http://www.boudry-lorenz.de/toxic/) (accessed 24 August 2014).
- 13 Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Preface,' in SPK, ed., *Turn Illness into a Weapon* (1972), <http://vogania.com/MUSIC/JPS2.htm> (accessed 10 October 2011).
- 14 Antke Engel and Renate Lorenz, 'Toxic Assemblages, Queer Socialities: A Dialogue of Mutual Poisoning,' *e-flux* 44 (2013), [www.e-flux.com/journal/toxic-assemblages-queer-socialities-a-dialogue-of-mutual-poisoning/](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/toxic-assemblages-queer-socialities-a-dialogue-of-mutual-poisoning/) (accessed 24 August 2014).