

DIRECT ACTION * 2014

REVIEW BY PAULA CHESLEY

On Sunday, May 25, I attended the last of the three-day Direct Action 2014 symposium. Unfortunately my timing did not allow me to see any performances: I rocked up to the Institut für Alles Mögliche in Mitte a bit after noon – just in time for the lovely brunch, I might add – and had to leave at three, just when Navigate (a London-based collective) was going to give a performance. However, I got to meet with the main organizer, Maria del Consuelo Guijarro, and two artists, Paula Bourke-Girgis (from London) and Penny Rafferty aka PUNK IS DADA (Berlin), while we were eating. Then symposium participants informally showed their videos to the group as more participants slowly trickled in. Still, these discussions and videos were interesting.

The website lists the goal of symposium as bringing together artists to develop works in progress with the theme of “non-expressive-, non-dramatic-actions, minimal moves, conceptual gestures and media interventions”. Although I can’t speak to this theme directly, Paula and Penny both had participated earlier on in the symposium with contributions that were “sort of” performances, as they put it during our informal chat (read: non-dramatic actions and minimal moves). That is, Paula set up a small kiddie pool full of hundreds of small, brightly colored pieces of paper in which people could sit and enjoy themselves, given the space to “be silly”. Penny wore make-up and a hairstyle that prevented her face from being detected by automatic face recognition algorithms (yes, camouflaging from face detection algorithms is a thing; check out

be-used-to-thwart-facial-recognition-te-1495648863 and <http://cvdazzle.com/>, for example). We then watched videos from Paula Bourke-Girgis and Penny Rafferty, exactly the artists I had been talking to.

Paula Bourke-Girgis makes videos, does performances, and more; she even wants to get into stand-up comedy. We watched three of Paula's videos, "Sublimated peas", "One night with his virgin mistress", and a self-titled live performance piece in which Paula plays two women. I found them all quite impressive. In "Sublimated peas", she sits in a white room, dressed in black, and spells the word "Sublimated" from peas in her mouth, in time lapse footage. In "One night", a male voiceover reads part of a text from the eponymous novel. It's your standard heteronormative female-objectification-during-foreplay text. The accompanying images are two separate films of Paula trying to open a jar repeatedly and not succeeding in either attempt. It's a wonderful commentary on female frustration, objectification, and dependence. In the last piece, she plays two women who meet, talk about art, make out and have a fling and eventually a sad break-up. It would seem femaleness is an issue that Paula is interested in exploring in her art.

From PUNK IS DADA we watched "Just fuck it", "The commercial", and "A short fetishised [sic] history of the modern world aka Coke and Mentos forever". These were more slightly challenging videos for me, most likely because I find punk cultures and ideologies challenging to me personally, and therefore, I know relatively little about them outside of the one book I've read on anarchism. But from as far as I could tell, the videos accurately and articulately portray the concerns of the subculture to which Penny Rafferty clearly belongs. And crucially, in speaking with Penny and re-examining some of her work as well as the material that influences her, I would be interested in learning more. This I believe speaks to her skills and her ability to engage her public.

“Just fuck it” is a video of a white man and a woman just, well, fucking, wearing balaclavas with the words “JUST FUCK IT” on them. The video has stroboscopic effects and beats throughout, which combine for a simple and powerful aesthetic, if not exactly the most innovative. Messages flash at the end: “JUST FUCK IT/YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU/PUNK IS DADA”. Other than the jab at the consumerist Nike, one message is obvious enough: it’s all about left-wing procreation, Penny said. People who are politically liberal don’t have as many kids as their conservative counterparts. I couldn’t help but notice that the short film contains many more images of the nude woman than the nude man, in a way consistent with the male gaze. Because there was no mention of the Young Girl in this film (see below), I’m not sure if this was a decision commenting on a social practice or not.

In the first scenes of “The commercial”, two people with make-up embody the punk subculture, showing what it is about: tattoos, cigarettes, sex (read: leisure time for all these things), and Molotov cocktails. Then comes the quasi-American Apparel ad, whereby we see how only the “look” of this subculture is being reappropriated for a broad base of consumers, not at all interested in the political issues concerning the subcultures (which, by the way, is not unique to punk; witness the reappropriation of all things African-American). That is, these styles are made acceptable by the complete ignorance of the sometimes inconvenient messages associated with them.

My favorite of the PUNK IS DADA films was “A short fetishised [sic] history of the modern world aka Coke and Mentos forever”. About that, I will just say, who doesn’t like watching a Coke and Mentos combination, especially when it’s sexualized, politicized, and on a rooftop? At the end there was text adapted from Tiqqun’s Preliminary Materials for the Theory of the Young Girl. Not having read the original work (but now wanting to), the

text initially confused me and I had a totally different interpretation than what was originally intended. I was not the only one: another participant asked to see the text again, and a discussion on the Young Girl ensued.

I had to leave somewhat abruptly at this point. Since I only witnessed a sliver of the three-day, 24-hour-plus-long event, it also seems appropriate to abruptly end my account here, without synthesis; as with my participation in Direct Action 2014, there was none.