On feminist activist aesthetics

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In a world where women are supposed to be “fragile as a blossom” it’s damned important to stand up there and be the loser who dares to talk about how they couldn’t stop eating until they got ileus, shit themselves and were wiped and washed by a nurse. What I want is for young girls who have seen me on stage to leave without feeling sad or ugly or insufficient. I want them to feel, “If Lo can, so can I.” Because I know I’m not alone about things like this. Not very many people actually live in a pink soap opera, and if we told more stories of this kind—true stories—people would feel much better.

Lo Kauppi

Abstract
This article discusses some trends in critical theory and activist aesthetics in contemporary feminist performing arts in Sweden. The 2000s have witnessed at least two “turns” in feminist theory, namely the affective turn and the social, or as it is called here, the solidarity turn. The status of poststructuralist theory has been widely debated and Marxist, class-based analyses have returned to the political and aesthetic agenda in Sweden. The focus has shifted—once again—from individual art making to collectives who have chosen to work and fight together. The backdrop of this discussion is the shift from a social democratic welfare state to a neoliberal one. In civil society the distinction between neoliberal and social democratic lies in the extent of personal freedom(s), including sexual and reproductive rights, and whether interpersonal engagements are marked by commercialization and inequality or by mutuality and equality.

Keywords: feminism; activism; aesthetics; solidarity; performance; gender; queer; class

“Can artistic practices still play a critical role in a society where the difference between art and advertising have become blurred and where artists and cultural workers have become a necessary part of capitalist production,” political theorist Chantal Mouffe asks. Has art lost its critical power because any form of critique is automatically recuperated and neutralized by capitalism? There is no doubt that we live in most trying of times with a planet whose physical and biological health grows more imperilled by the day. Current issues such as militarization, poverty, trafficking, global warming, the AIDS crisis, violence, homelessness, homophobia, sexism, racism, and disrespect for human rights demand proactive measures if philosophers not only wish to interpret the world in various ways, but also to change it, as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels once so famously put it.

Certain theories and terms are more marketable than others in specific historical situations. What is hip today is inevitably going to be outmoded tomorrow, but not forever. Ideas come and go, and there are unexpected forms of both theoretical and artistic continuities and coalitions. This does not only concern theories, but also the interest in theorizing itself. After the late 1960s and the early 1970s intense concern with Marxism and structuralism, the interest in theories diminished in the

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late 1970s. The poststructuralist theory boom of the 1980s and 1990s was likewise followed by a certain fatigue in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Books and articles entitled *The Death of Theory* and *After Theory* were published, and the *Theory*—as poststructuralism was called in academic circles—seemed in the changed political climate of the 2000s “so September the 10th!”

In order to understand this shift in theory and artistic practices it is important at a certain time distance to contextualize postmodernism, post-structuralism, and postmodernity, or rather the debates around these issues and terms from the 1960s and onwards. As cultural theorist Fredric Jameson emphasizes, it is always necessary to historicize. He points to a defining understanding of the postmodern as the disappearance of the sense of history in the culture, a pervasive depthlessness, a “perpetual present” in which the memory tradition is gone.

In the 1980s, postmodernism seemed to be the most exciting thing ever, but the enthusiasm faded and in visual arts, performance, literature, and architecture postmodernism had lost its aura by the mid-1990s. Aesthetic strategies of the counterculture such as documentary genres, closeness to everyday-life, and the revival of political art re-emerged in the late 1990s and stayed on in the 2000s. Scholars who have summarized the era of poststructuralism have pointed out September 11 attacks in 2001 as the symbolic reason for the main change in both theory and politics. Aggressively neoliberal, right-wing economical politics, “the war against terrorism,” climate change, increasing global inequality and poverty, and lack of social justice are the reasons for the comeback of Marxist theory and class issues in both critical theory, in feminist politics and performance. The postpolitical “third way thinking” beyond the political left and right is dismissed by Chantal Mouffe in *On the Political* (2005), where she argues for passionate politics and stresses the importance of creating forms of anti-essentialist collective identification around democratic objectives.

In this article I wish to address some trends in critical theory and activist aesthetics in contemporary feminist performance in Sweden. The 2000s have witnessed at least two “turns” in feminist theory, namely the affective turn and the social, or as I call it, the solidarity turns. The status of poststructuralist theory has been widely debated and Marxist, class-based analyses have returned to the political and aesthetic agenda in Sweden. The focus has shifted—once again—from individual art making to collectives who have chosen to work and fight together. The backdrop of this discussion is the shift from a social democratic welfare state to a neoliberal one. In civil society the distinction between neoliberal and social democratic lies in the extent of personal freedom(s), including sexual and reproductive rights, and whether interpersonal engagements are marked by commercializations and inequality or by mutuality and equality.

**FEMINIST HEGEMONY STRUGGLES OF 1990s**

The feminist debates of the poststructuralist 1990s were strongly dominated by Judith Butler’s gender and queer theories that explicitly developed Michel Foucault’s work in relation to feminist theories of gender in order to expose and explore naturalized and normative models of gender and heterosexuality. The 1990s were also about hegemony struggles in feminist theory and politics. Queer and postcolonial theories challenged the hegemony of white and straight middle-class feminism. This conflict grew out of the 1970s and 1980s terrain of race and sexuality struggles, but in the 1990s both queer and postcolonial feminists were at least to some extent successful in their demand for visibility and participation both in theory and in the feminist movement.

Butler’s work restored gender to a central position in the analysis of sexual desires and relations, but not in order to preserve it as basis for political solidarity. Instead, she adopted Foucault’s argument that “sexuality” is discursively produced, and extended it to include gender. Butler presented gender as a performative effect experienced by the individual as a natural identity, arguing against the assumption that the gendered identity category “woman” can be the basis for feminist politics on the grounds that attempts to deploy any identity as a foundation will inevitably, if inadvertently, sustain the normative binary structures of current sex, gender, and libidinal relations.
There is no doubt about the brilliance in the Foucauldian and Butlerian thought. They remain influential also for affect theorists like Sara Ahmed who combines feminist, postcolonial, and queer theories with phenomenology, and for postcolonial scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty with an attempt to decolonize theory and practice solidarity.¹³

Chantal Mouffe notes that artistic practices could contribute to the struggle against capitalist domination but this requires a proper understanding of the dynamics of democratic politics.⁹ Cultural democracy is a right just like economic and political democracy. One way to achieve this is to practice solidarity. Chandra Talpade Mohanty defines solidarity in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities.¹⁰ She also thinks that communities do matter and writes: “Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together. Diversity and difference are central values here—to be acknowledged as respected, not erased in the building of alliances.”¹¹

Mohanty uses the political scientist Jodi Dean’s notion of reflexive solidarity that she finds particularly useful. Dean argues that reflective solidarity is crafted by an interaction involving three persons. The thematizing of the third voice is to reconstruct solidarity as an inclusive ideal rather that an “us versus them” notion.¹² Mohanty argues that Dean’s idea of a communicative, in-process understanding of the “we” is useful, given that solidarity is always an achievement, the result of active struggle to construct the universal on the basis of particulars and differences.¹³

“It is the praxis-oriented, active political struggle embodied in this notion of solidarity that is important to my thinking—and the reason I prefer to focus attention on solidarity rather than on the concept of ‘sisterhood’,” Mohanty writes.¹⁴ She finds that feminist solidarity constitutes the most principled way to cross borders—to decolonize knowledge and practice anti-capitalist critique. Mohanty does not mean those women’s lives and struggles are the same everywhere, but they are comparable. She, therefore, argues for a notion of political solidarity and common interests, defined as a community or collectivity among women workers across class, race, and national boundaries that is based on shared material interests and common ways of reading the world.

Mohanty focuses on continuities, because “it makes possible a way of reading the operation of capital from a location (that of Third World women workers) that, while forming the bedrock of a certain kind of global exploitation of labour, remains somewhat invisible and under-theorised”.¹⁵ Her choice is a strategic one, and it does not mean that discontinuities and differences in experiences do not exist or that they are insignificant. This is the reason why Mohanty posits solidarity rather than sisterhood as the basis for mutually accountable and equitable relationships among different communities of women, instead of promoting the contested notion of “universal sisterhood.”¹⁶

A RETRO CLASSIC: JÖSSES FLICKOR!

Feminist continuity and the sisterhood theme were interestingly featured in the juxtaposition of Jösses flickor: Befrielsen är nära (Gosh, Girls: Liberation is Nigh) from 1974 and Jösses Flickor: Återkomsten (Gosh, Girls: The Return) in 2006. The dramatist Malin Axelsson and the stage director Maria Löfgren were infants when Gosh, Girls: Liberation is Nigh premiered. “It’s fun and an honor to take over the baton and make our own mark,” said Löfgren.¹⁷ She saw the project as a means of reclaiming feminist history and demonstrating that women are still an exception from the male norm in society. It is important that young(er) feminists carve out a place in feminist history—a room of their own—but the cross-generational moment in feminism is also important: a passage of legacy, memory, and yet unanswered questions and unresolved conflicts belonging to political and intellectual struggles that are too important to leave behind without dialogue across the generations.

“Be happy, don’t cry, resist, attack!” the feminist group Grupp 8 chanted in the 1970s in Sweden, interrupting wordy orations with their song. Many people knew the songs from Suzanne Osten’s and Margareta Garpe’s production Gosh, Girls: Liberation is Nigh. Swedish theater has an unusually rich heritage of songs from the golden age of political theater in the 1970s. These songs have been especially significant for the women’s
movement. Many songs feel like diary entries, with just the kind of touching and embarrassing directness one would find in a diary. The strongest impression is that of optimism, the feeling of being on the brink of a bright future, while trying to relate to the past. The passionate approach is similar to that of contemporary artists such as Le Tigre, Peaches, and Chicks on Speed, even if the musical style is vastly different. And the problems then and now are largely the same: the practical and theoretical issues. The question “Can we, shall we, dare we?” in one of the songs is still relevant today.

In the productions Tjejsnack (Girl Talk, 1971), Kärlekssföreställningen (The Love Performance, 1973), and Jösses flickor: Befrielsen är nära (Gosh, Girls, Liberation is Nigh, 1974), Osten presented feminist issues at Stockholm City Theater. Girl Talk was about the image of how young women and men ought to be. Osten observed how quiet young women were, how they hardly dared open their mouths. Girl Talk encouraged them to talking and fight for their rights. Women should dare demand attention in schools, on the labor market, and in social life. Girl Talk also toured youth clubs for free. When Osten set up her own group, Unga Klara (Young Klara), at Stockholm City Theater in the 1970s, she remained faithful to this tradition of always conducting some of the activities outside the theater building and going to the audience, especially in places frequented by children and young adults.18

Gosh, Girls, Liberation is Nigh is a play in two acts and 32 scenes and tells the inside story of the liberation of modern woman in Sweden. In it Garpe and Osten not only encouraged rebellion but also gave a historic perspective on forgotten women. The story goes back 50 years, and then chronicles the members of Gosh Girls up until 1974.19 These three plays were firmly founded in the feminist context of the era. The contemporary feminist theater emphasized the importance of featuring women’s experiences on stage, and to encourage women to write about women. Subjects such as women’s situation on the labor market and at home, and the exploitation of women in the porn industry were key subjects of debate among feminists at the time and were discussed energetically in feminist literature and press, both in Sweden and internationally. The wish to make women’s history visible through features on pioneers of the women’s movement such as Rosa Luxemburg, Alexandra Kollontai, and others, was in line with Gosh, Girls, Liberation is Nigh’s powerful essay at presenting women’s experiences.20

When Gosh, Girls: The Return opened at Stockholm City Theater in 2006, this was a dear reunion for many. The première was choc-a-bloc with young and old women’s libbers, which all got their share of history. The first act stuck to the original from 1974, while the second act presented an unruly, mottled women’s movement in which an increasing number of women’s groups were demanding attention. Both the director and the dramatist were loyal to the feminist tradition, but their heroines looked dissimilar. The younger feminists employed somewhat different strategies and also find it easier to accept the lack of consensus in the movement. This historic encounter made it obvious that even if there is continuity the new era required new approaches and aesthetic means of expression. The feminist sisterhood had also been enriched by more immigrant women and queer feminists. This was a sign of a new diversity that was not so typical of the Swedish women’s movement in the 1970s.

**ACTIVIST AESTHETICS AND THE STREET**

Practiced feminist, queer, anti-racist, and class-based theories take us out to the streets. Social movements for gender, sexual, class, racial, and ethnic liberation have all had their specific aesthetics in forms of demonstrations, protests, guerrilla theater, music, poetry, visual culture, and media events that have taken place in the “street,” meaning public space.21

Political scientist Jane Mansbridge calls this practice-oriented, activist knowledge street theory in contrast to theories produced within the academy. Street theory is created in and by communities. Sometimes these ideas are picked up by academic scholarship, rearticulated, redefined, and often ending up meaning something else they once meant in their street period. It is problematic that historians who chronicle political movements rarely address parallel developments in academic writing, and academic theorists are none-too-consistent about acknowledging the influence of direct-action politics on their scholarship.22
Art historian Nina Felshin points out that the hybrid cultural practice called art activism is shaped as much by the “real world” as by the art world. Felshin wrote in 1995 that “activist art represents a confluence of the aesthetic, socio-political, and technological impulses of the past twenty-five years or more that have attempted to challenge, explore, or blur the boundaries and hierarchies traditionally defining the culture as represented by those in power. This cultural form is the culmination of a democratic urge to give voice and visibility to the disenfranchised, and connect art to a wider audience. It springs from a union of political activism with democratizing aesthetic tendencies originating in Conceptual art of the late 1960s and early 1970s.”

Activist art means community or public participation as means of effecting social change and promoting social justice. This can mean work in tenant's organizations, feminist, radical, or solidarity groups, labor unions, or in cultural task forces of small leftist parties, or with environmental, pacifist, LGBT, anti-racist organizations, all groups offering ways to connect with those who are interested. Activist art, in both its forms and methods, is process- rather than object- or product-oriented. Activist art takes place in public sites rather than within the context in art-world venues. As practice it often takes the form of temporal interventions, such as performance or performance-based activities, media events, exhibitions, and installations.

Feminists in Sweden and abroad have used spectacular and dramatic means to demonstrate how women are objectified in a variety of ways in different dominating cultural and social representation systems. For example, feminist action groups organized a counter-performance in connection with the Miss World and other beauty pageants by decorating their own bodies with flashing lights fastened to their breasts and crotches, or by decorating shop dummies with various attributes denigrating women. The “No More Miss America” demonstration in August 1968 was the start of the popular image of feminists as bra-burners. This kind of demonstration is once again being used, for instance by the Swedish feminist activist group, Unfucked Pussy, consisting of Joanna Rytel and Fia-Stina Sandlund, in their Gubbslem (Slimy Old Men) action against the Miss Sweden pageant in 2001. The early street demonstrations and direct actions triggered the body-centered critique of gender and sexual representations that dominated feminist theater, theory, and practice in the 1980s.

Performance is a hard-to-define live act that is a form of performing art but not necessarily linked to the skills or traditions of the stage. As a genre, performance is effective for fast, improvised and spectacular appearances, and it is rooted in the early futurist, surrealist, and Dadaist events, 1960s happenings and other multi-disciplinary art forms. Performance is about presenting and enacting, but it is not necessarily tied to traditional theatrical acting. Performance is a hybrid, where no rules limit what can be mixed, or how. Thus, it is a tumbling place for encounters between political activism, autobiography, popular culture, ritual body art, and the “ordinary” commonplace. One significant trait is the multiple voices, the lack of hierarchic components in the performance. Instead, performance strives to attain simultaneousness, a concurrent effect that the audience is free to structure and evaluate for itself.

When Swedish feminist artists adopted performance art as a form of stage art, this gave them greater freedom. The focus shifted from text and craftsmanship to thoughts and ideas. In performance art one is free to use the form of expression that most effectively conveys the contents. The focus is on direct action, mixing styles, and genres such as spoken word poetry, music, dance, circus, and elements of popular culture with various impromptu pranks and tricks thrown in), but it also utilizes more text-based traditions of theater when required.

THE EXPLICIT BODY

In women’s avant-garde theater and performance art, the female body, the adored and deeply mythological body, became a denuded and increasingly deconstructed principal character. Rebecca Schneider calls this the explicit body. So, what is an explicit body? According to Schneider, it is the body presented by feminist artists with the purpose of challenging categories such as gender, social class, sexuality and ethnicity, using performative means. Historically, Schneider’s analysis spans from happenings and performance art in the late 1960s up to the mid-1990s. She describes how feminist artists have used the explicit,
distinctly expressed, and presented female body for more than 30 years to put forth their opinion on how our culture exposes and perceives women’s bodies. This theater is a form of guerilla warfare, with the female body as its battlefield, to use the American artist Barbara Kruger’s imagery.

When the Swedish artist Marie-Louise Ekman appeared nude in the art magazine Paletten in 1969 (1969, 1) in a theme issue on the artist role, she presented herself as a pinup girl. This was a provocation aimed equally at the conventional public and the male-dominated art scene. Her strategy was to place her own body as a real woman on the picture, rocking the entire classical position of woman as the object, something that undeniably challenged the perspective of the traditional and only (male) subject. The female body as the agent went against the patriarchal text and challenged the entire representational structure by refusing to participate in it, and by introducing new, multiple texts based on the experiences and sexuality of real women.

The heteronormative boundaries for women’s bodies and the narrow definitions of femininity are the central theme for the artist group High Heel Sisters, who physically explore concrete social situations. With their critique of power they seek to renegotiate the rules that determine social games. The group’s methods are based on cooperation in terms of sisterhood to encourage women to support each other and once and for all lay down the myth of the male artist genius. On the underlying assumption that gender is performative, the High Heel Sisters exaggerate behaviors in various situations in their works to underline that it is all a matter of social codes. In this way, they seek to undermine these codes.

The High Heel Sisters met at an art exhibition opening: “We were standing next to each other at an opening and discovered we had the same physical traits: we are taller than 1.78, older than 30, we take more than a 41 size shoe, and we had beautiful, hairy legs. We felt that this was power.”28 The artistic method of the High Heel Sisters consisted in the group members setting themselves entirely concrete tasks or choosing a situation to be explored. For their first exhibition, for instance, they assigned themselves a task to be solved in the course of one day: to see how long they could hang in a tree together, stand still together, specific situations that they wanted to study, their own physical limitations, but also the confining normalization mechanisms of society. What is it that determines whether something is art or not?

To walk together across a square (2003) was a performance in which the High Heel Sisters invited women to walk together with determined steps across Sergels Torg plaza in Stockholm for an hour. The invitation said:

The High Heel Sisters invite you and all other women to walk back and forth with determined steps across Sergels Torg for an hour. Devote one hour to walking together across a plaza. Welcome to take part on Wednesday, 27 August at 12 to 1 pm. Instructions: walk with determined steps, slowly and proudly, towards a fixed point on the other side of the plaza. When you reach it, turn around and fix your gaze on a new point, etc. Do not speak while doing this. Feel that we own the place.29

The purpose was to create an ownership relationship vis-à-vis Sweden’s most public space, to gain a physical experience of redefining, and to give other women an opportunity to share this experience. Another work, Never Too Much (2004), reverses the strip-tease. The High Heel Sisters started the performance nude reading aloud from books by Gertrude Stein, Judith Butler, and Julia Kristeva, and eventually got up on stage and put their clothes on. The artist group’s actions and activities are used as a way of both creating and entering into social situations to reveal power relationship at different levels.30

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL BODY

Performance art and theatrical performance by young Swedish feminist performing artists in the 2000s display two distinct traits that link them to the preceding feminist tradition. The first is the strong autobiographical element, and the second is the way in which this autobiographical element nearly always relates to the body. One of the most successful performances in 2004–2005 was Lo Kauppi’s Bergspränggdottern som exploderade (The Rock-Blaster’s Daughter who Exploded), in which she delivers a naked, powerful, and candid account of her life and class origins, giving her audience both a social reportage and the energy to keep going. “It felt like I had gone through drama
school just to be able to tell this story,” said Kauppi. And there were many who wanted to hear it.

Kauppi’s life story was not just a private anecdote but also a fierce political critique against cutbacks and bad health services. She was fueled by her own fury and her perpetual questions. Kauppi pointed out that nobody at drama school understood what she meant by political theater. “I felt so lost—what if I had chosen the wrong profession. And now it has all fallen into place. I was able to do political theatre after all,” she says. In the program, Kauppi summed up how much she has cost society: two million Swedish kronor. And how much less she would have if she had been given the right treatment when she started having problems around the age of 14. Kauppi tried to resolve her inner chaos in her teens by dieting. Her eating disorder took place in a working-class environment in a family of addicts, where, she says, they used to fight about who was the sickest. This was followed by years of drug abuse and other social problems. “I’m incredibly grateful that I grew up in Olof Palme’s Sweden. It doesn’t matter what the Conservatives say, I would never have survived in a more competitive society,” says Kauppi, thanking Sweden’s social democratic society for her life.

With her performance Bergsprängadottern som exploderade, Kauppi felt that she was able to obtain forgiveness and acceptance at last. Theater was her means of expressing her feelings. She took the risk, well aware that theater requires one to put one’s body on stage, the body that she had been trying to alter since she was 14.

I have done so many stupid things in my life; robbed, fought and injured myself in lots of different ways, and always thought everything was my own fault, that I only had myself to blame. But now that I’m older, I realize that everything might be connected and that we perhaps do things simply because we have to when we are small, and that everything was really just a cry for help that was about making dad stop drinking. / . . . / I’m not trying to evade responsibility, just to explain. To explain why I did all those things. To show that there might be a reason why some people behave like idiots and you shouldn’t get mad at those who fail. To show what it’s like to be a teenager and realize that you’re not actually a human being, but a woman condemned to be an object to make old men horny that everybody has the right to criticize and put down, and how hard it is to defend yourself against the constant advertisement with anorectic models, when everything is chaos at home and there’s nobody who can tell you you’re fine just the way you are. How that sort of thing affects your life and gets too heavy for some of us.

The need for autobiographical narrative seems to be insatiable. It occurs not only in feminist theater, but also in gay and anti-racist theater. An autobiographical narrative is intended to be moving and feel familiar to others in a similar situation. In fact, this fundamental desire for identification is contradictory to performance as a genre, and to our contemporary theoretical framework, which is so critical of identification. There appears to be a need, however, for these autobiographical narratives, since they are so prevalent and popular. Thus, the identity political dimension has remained strong in feminist performing arts. Autobiography has been a means of politicizing and portraying the anger and frustration felt by many feminists.

Sara Ahmed writes in The Cultural Politics of Emotion and Ann Cvetkovich in An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures that feminist and queer insights are based on the feeling that something is wrong in the world. Ahmed demonstrates how the emotional road to feminism goes via a number of feelings such as pain and anger, where anger is a reaction to the fact that pain is wrong. Ahmed analyses the anger that feeds the feminist and queer activist, while the angry person needs to move on and present this anger to the world. Thus, these feelings do not stop at being anger and pain but are transformed into new feminist and queer power.

Cvetkovich links the concept of trauma with everyday life and identifies it in lesbian and queer cultures. She speaks of the everyday life where the trauma does not necessarily relate to “major,” decisive events such as war or death. Trauma is just as common in everyday life. The fuzzy boundaries between “positive” and “negative” feelings in Cvetkovich’s analyses lead to new cultural formations, including feminist and queer perspectives, without the participants in these cultures perceiving themselves to be victims. On
the contrary, anger and pain are politicized and transformed into decisive action.

Another example of autobiographical body theater is the actress Lotti Törnros’s work Mitt liv som tjock (My Life as a Fatty, 2005). Her performance is about obesity and is a tribute to the full body. In the small basement premises of Teater Scenario in Stockholm the audience were brought into close contact with the small, overweight child, with bullying and loneliness, while Törnros also managed to convey what it was like to have a round body that many find attractive, despite the prevailing social norms. In enacting scenes from the life she eventually decided to portray, she dared appear nude in front of the audience, with protruding belly and wobbly thighs.

In an interview Törnros said that she no longer dreams of being someone she isn’t, namely, another, slimmer woman, or that her 100 kilos are a temporary mistake. “Every puffed-up fat cell of my body is a protest movement!” she proclaimed.37 By the entrance to the little basement theater, Törnros had placed a large set of scales where the audience were requested to weigh in and note down their weight in a book before the performance. Many people refused, at least when it came to writing down what they weighed. Others, whose body weight was “normal,” explained in a note that at least two kilos were attributable to clothing.

Törnros’s performance was one link in the feminist performance tradition that portrays shame using autobiography and the body. For many years she had been toying with the idea of writing her own story. One night, she dreamed that the play was finished, that she performed it, and that it was a success. The cold shower, she says, came the day after; when one of her male friends told her it was the most embarrassing thing he had ever seen. In the dream she took his opinion as the truth and decided to phone all the men she knew and apologies.38 Shame has always been a tangible part of Törnros’s life, as for other groups who are excluded from the social community. She says her shame is gone now and defends the right to have a voluminous body:

I’m not denying that there are dangers associated with eating. But the stigmatizing of fat people also leads to bad health. Many people will confirm that their lives have been restricted, that they feel excluded and don’t dare demand attention. I believe all this is a much greater health hazard than being fat. When I was a smoker and people told me it was dangerous, I started smoking even more.39

“If women had devoted as much energy to women’s lib as we do to dieting or dressing, we would have been in power by now,” says Suzanne Osten.40 The classical empowerment genre is still vibrant in contemporary feminist performing arts. It goes hand-in-hand with the autobiographical theme, giving the audience both enlightenment and comfort. Since the early 1990s, there has been a strong “feel-bad trend” in young Swedish feminist art, literature, drama and performance, focusing largely on eating disorders, self-mutilation and mental illness. The feeling of being insufficient is familiar to many women, and My Life as a Fatty was specifically about this painful feeling of insufficiency and exclusion. The physical exposure to the audience is a feminist strategy to challenge the onlooker’s gaze at the female body and make the audience aware of how their own gaze at her is part of the whole story.

HUMOR

The idea of combating repression with pranks and wry humor has ancient roots. In contemporary art feminist activism the Guerrilla Girls, who are veterans of feminist cultural resistance by now, still describe themselves as “fighting discrimination with facts, humor and fake fur.” Political agitation often makes use of humor because humor is disarming. Even if frustration can certainly help fuel the feminist activist, humor is communicative and makes the audience feel included without the sense of accusation. Common to most of these acts, and a feature that perhaps sets them apart from 1970s feminist theater, is that they take another format. They include a great deal of monologue, performance, and elements of popular culture. The performance artist Maya Hald’s alter ego D Muttant rapped her message, to name just one example.

I want women who see my show to feel encouraged by the fact that D Muttant does what she does. But they don’t have to agree with everything. But I want to convey an allowing message, that “I can do anything at
D Muttant sometimes appeared together with Y Puss (Åse Fougner) as a feminist hip-hop double act in the mid-2000s. This duo preferred not to be pigeon-holed. Their music was based on simple beats produced with a toy drum machine. The sound was monotonous, with rough cuts and sudden changes. Their concept was that feminism comes first and that hip-hop was a tool for shouting out their message. And the message in this case was loud and clear: women are oppressed, and Y Puss/D Muttant wanted to change the balance of power. D Muttant was dressed in net stockings under a red latex dress with a triangular hole over her crotch. On her head she wore a green hat emblazoned with the word “subba” (bitch). Y Puss wore pink trousers with pockets and studs, a pink glittery vest and a woolly hat.

The younger feminist generation have, in the footsteps of the older feminists, given the cunt a face, as the name of the activist group Unfucked Pussy and the comedy group PomoDori’s show Lilla Fittan på prärién (Little Cunt on the Prairie, 2005) clearly indicate. Now, as before, feminists present the female genitalia and demonstrate that genitalia are still a sensitive subject. Little Cunt on the Prairie refers to Little House on the Prairie, where everyone is always good and kind, but here the similarities end. The material was culled from the group members’ everyday life and concrete situations they have experienced. A great deal was about the demand to be a happy person and about social norms for women. The group tried to formulate thoughts on how many people go around feeling that they are some kind of fake. PomoDori wanted to get at the “loser” we all have inside. Even if their humor was sophisticated, PomoDori also gave them license to be rude, physical, ugly, and coarse in the way men are allowed to be. They also wanted to challenge the fact that much of what is performed by women in mainstream theaters is written by men. In that way, women become the obedient lackeys of men instead of rebels. For their own part, they solved this issue by working in an all-women ensemble.

QUEER FEMINIST DANCE

In 2004, Dansens hus, the main dance theater in Stockholm, engaged in promoting young women choreographers, including Malin Hellkvist Sellén and Anna Vnuk. Several dance artists had started using performance art as a means of dissolving the strict rules that govern that art form. Many young dancers no longer felt comfortable in the authoritarian role of choreographer. Dance, with its rigorous training, has an inbuilt perfectionism that is so much about control. The Western female ballerina image has often been associated with severe dieting, extreme exercise, painful pointe shoes and “natural” selection processes that exclude the chubby or girls six feet tall. Dancing women are supposed to complement their male partners and be easy to lift. At the same time, modern dance, especially outside the major public institutions, has helped put forth new representations of gender and body norms. Athletic women dancers and choreographers, some of whom started as athletes, have grown increasingly common in Sweden. The boundaries between dance and theater, music and other art forms have also disintegrated and made the performance genre greatly popular in dance.

With their extrovert, athletic movement patterns, contemporary dance varieties such as street dance and hip-hop have come to represent a more active, dynamic style. However, very few transgress the habitual gender roles in dance. One choreographer who is not keen on perfection, on what is nice and correct, is Malin Hellkvist Sellén. For her, activism comes first and she wants to create a dialogue around their art. She also seeks to politicize the non-political dance world. Hellkvist Sellén has devoted herself to creating an entire series on dance and gender, under the heading Never-Ending Fight including performances like Projekt: Genusneutral armé på uppdrag (Project: Gender-Neutral Army on a Mission, 2003), Dom ger tanken kropp (They Give Body to the Thought, 2004), Kung Kristina (King Kristina, 2005)—a performance for children about gender roles, and which was performed in a terse and exact choreography for five women dancers, in an attempt to create movements that are neither feminine nor masculine. Hellkvist Sellén has developed her concept further in En kristen kväll (A Christian Night, 2008) and Rosa loftan (Pink

all”. / . . . / There are more and more of us. There are masses of feminist performing artists who are beginning to be established, but also a multitude of up-and-coming ones who will carry on the work. This is not something that will disappear in the next few years.41
T. Rosenberg

Promises, 2008). She is at present working on a new piece with people who hate dance. She also choreographed Cosh Girls—The Return (2006).

Hellkvist Sellén is part of the queer feminist community that has emerged in Stockholm in the 2000s, mixing feminism and queer theory, and focusing on gender variations and feminist sexual radicalism. As a dancer and choreographer, Hellkvist Sellén strives to apply these ideas in her works. “We want to be out there in some kind of reality, and that opens the door to a new audience,” she says.42 Since a choreographer is not restricted to the psychological-realistic style that dominates dramatic art in Sweden, she can relate more freely to her material. Hellkvist Sellén is convinced that body, gender, sexuality are no more static than movement and dance. Instead, they are continuous processes.

Another interesting example of a young feminist choreographer is Anna Vnuk. In Solofestival med mig själv (Solo Festival with Myself, 2003) she describes a few of the roles she has danced so far in her career: “tree, whore, color and abstract figure.”43 Thus, Solofestival med mig själv was a relaunch for Vnuk. It was at this point that she decided to ignore all expectations and simply use herself as her starting point. The result was a narrative about her childhood on Hertso near Luleå in northern Sweden, mixing dance, talk, and guest artists.

Solofestival med mig själv was a mental turning-point for me. Something changed in my approach. I’ve always felt that I had something inside that needed to come out. It was my own attitude and my own visions of how things ought to be that I needed to rebel against.44

After Solofestival med mig själv, Vnuk went on to create another work, Anna Vnuk sätter upp Cats (Anna Vnuk Produces Cats), a musical without singing. It was neither about the musical Cats (which, incidentally, she had never seen), nor T.S. Eliot’s poems (which she had never read). “Cats is my own story, in some ways,” Anna Vnuk explains.45 According to her, cats are a good starting-point for portraying feelings. They appear irrational, but what they do is to act out their reactions immediately. “For me cats represent glorious, magnificent feelings and dazzling displays,” she says.46 The performance is about being abandoned. Anna Vnuk draws all the sympathy to the abandoned, and none to the abandoner. The performance opens with big band funk music and three large men in hairy cat hats writhing on stage. But after this introduction the music stops. In comes Anna Vnuk, who turns to the audience and says: “We didn’t get further. Because Anders, whom I was together with for six years, left me. The rest of this performance will be about that.”47

On stage, she then proceeded to read aloud facts about cats, along with a text about being abandoned. In this way Vnuk mixes dance and movement with speech and recitation.

Anna Vnuk describes herself as a collector of other people’s narratives and her own. She often takes cuttings from the letters columns in newspapers. Her idiosyncratic body language is about small snippets from real life. She collects life stories, “written” by people whose gestures and movements transmit all sorts of cries for help. Vnuk’s works, as her latest performance Härdaresnabbar Anna Vnuk! (Harder, Faster, Anna Vnuk! 2009) are often autobiographical, and she remembers exactly when she became a feminist. She was 19, and sat waiting while her boyfriend was rehearsing with his band:

From home I had learned that I was just as good as the boys. When I encountered feminists I used to react by thinking, “But I haven’t been humiliated at all.” I used to think it was humiliating to assume I was humiliated as a woman, to stand waving in front of the guys and saying we were just as good as they were. I hadn’t analyzed my own position at all.48

Vnuk wants her productions to be accessible, but without over-simplifying things. She makes demands on her audience to understand and contribute. This desire for communication makes the audience feel that they are participants and that the role of onlooker is critical. Although this may not be new in itself, the world, people, and the times are different now and need to be reformulated with other parameters. The almost disintegrated boundary between the private and public domains has made it hard for us to know if we are at home or away or just happen to be somewhere. Vnuk juggles sensitively and precisely with the shifts in these spheres in her performances. She takes on the contemporary aesthetic, turns it on its head and creates something new. The private domain is present, but the presentation inter-
weaves it with the personal. Vnuk steers away from a voyeuristic audience role. She wants her performances to feel urgent, and wants the audience to perceive them as such.

THE ACTIVIST ARTIST AS ORGANIC INTELLECTUAL

In the 2000s, Sweden experienced a veritable explosion of feminist performance. Although feminist actions, theater, shows, and performance existed previously, feminist events with a distinct performance approach have emerged strongly in the current decade. Feminist culture festivals are held in rapid succession, and feminist performance, dance and theater occasionally attract broader audiences. This popularization of feminist performing arts is related to the lively feminist activism in Sweden. Just as political activism in the 2000s is being reshaped by the political conditions of this decade, activist art is also being shaped by the art, dance, and theater world of the 2000s. With the increasing acceptance of feminist activist art, the activist artists must pay close attention to avoiding being automatically recuperated and neutralized by capitalism, as Chantal Mouffe warns for.

Taking feminist activist artists, Mohanty’s notion of practiced and decolonized solidarity and combining it with the Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci’s notion of the organic intellectual, we might find one possible way to create contact with the social movements, the academy, and the arts. Gramsci saw the role of the intellectual as a crucial one in the context of creating a counter hegemony. He identified two types of intellectuals—traditional and organic. This also goes for artists. Traditional intellectuals and artists are those who do regard themselves as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group and are regarded as such by the population at large. They seem autonomous and independent, and give themselves an aura of historical continuity despite all the social upheavals that they might go through. They are essentially conservative allied to and assisting the ruling group in society.

The second type is the organic intellectual, here including the organic activist artist. This is the group that grows organically with the dominant social group, the ruling class, and is their thinking and organizing element. For Gramsci it was important to see them for what they were. They were produced by the educational system to perform a function for the dominant social group in society. It is through this group that the ruling class maintains its hegemony over the rest of society. Gramsci, in his Prison Notebooks, wrote that not only should a significant number of “traditional” intellectuals come over to the revolutionary cause, but also the working class movement should produce its own organic intellectuals. Gramsci saw one of his roles as assisting in the creation of organic intellectuals from the working class and the winning over of as many traditional intellectuals to the revolutionary cause as possible. The intellectual realm was not to be seen as something confined to elite but to be seen something grounded in everyday life. Gramsci wrote that “the mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence […] but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organiser, ‘permanent persuader and not just a simple orator’”.

NOTES

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