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What's In A Name?...¹

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My name is Deirdre Heddon. Or D. Heddon, or Deirdre Elizabeth Heddon, or Deirdre E Heddon, or D.E. Heddon, or just Deirdre, or even Dee. It depends on where I am, to whom I'm talking, and what I'm saying.

*My name's Bobby Baker.*²

*I was born Ellen Steinberg, but I didn't like Ellen
very much, so I invented Annie Sprinkle.*³

Bobby Baker and Annie Sprinkle call themselves performance artists.

Performance Art, Live Art, Visual Performance, Performance Theatre, Experimental Theatre, Non-Text Based Theatre, Physical Theatre. There's a problem here - a problem of naming. Who has the power to name and for what purpose? Naming requires categories, categories require boundaries, and boundaries are constructions which create and depend on both the inside and outside to have either. The boundary, though, is a point of bleeding, a potential seepage of one into the other. Boundaries are neither permanent nor immutable, but are subject to social, historical, political and economic forces.

Perhaps we should abandon the search for the name that fits and shift our focus to the potential fluidity of naming - the performativity of naming - a question of strategic choice rather than supposed essential features. Performers have the ability to move in and out of classifications, spaces, 'communities', wearing the various titles that each space or event requires of them. The spectator, unless aware of the other roles the performers have worn, accepts that what they see is all that there is. I saw Penny Arcade in a performance art venue a few years ago. I took it for granted that she was a performance artist. Last year I saw her perform in a comedy festival, in a space primarily associated with comedy. How did the spectators read her there? I assume, unless they too had witnessed her somewhere else, she appeared as a comic. And yet what she did in both spaces was similar in terms of its address and style. Only the space and the audience expectations had changed. Our horizon of expectations then, perhaps constructs our frame of reference, enabling us to name.

But what of the artist's agency in self-naming? Penny Arcade is not alone in her chameleonic adaptability. Multiple locationality enables performers to perform their work in multiple settings and to multiple audiences. Equally, in the shrinking world of arts funding such a strategy secures a wide range of financial support. By being fluid, the performer can capitalize on as many opportunities as possible. Categories are no longer sacred.

Of course, this is a far cry from the supposed 'purity' of performance art of the 1970s - an art form intended to be separate from the commodity culture of the art world, with the performance art piece being an unrepeatable event. But, like other art forms, performance art is not impervious to the changing social and cultural conditions. It used to be a one-way street - the artist's body was the art work. Now, however, the traffic is multi-directional and there's a borrowing going on across all the boundaries. Some effects on the performance art side are that performance art pieces tour around the country now, being repeated over and over again, performance artists make promotional videos in an attempt to 'sell' their work, and performance art is becoming more 'theatrical'. This latter shift, used intentionally, can become a productive borrowing.

Performance art was noted for being direct, for presenting the body of the artist as unmediated. This is the real body really being shot with a real gun. Intersecting with the Women's Liberation Movement of the early 1970s and its foregrounding of the personal as the political, performance art offered itself as a medium to which women could turn to explore those areas of their lives which had remained invisible in cultural production. It was assumed that the performer took on no roles, or characters, but presented *herself* and her world. As the generator and active participant in her own work, the performer was situated not as an object of art but as *both* subject and object, with no gap in-between. In their determination to posit woman as speaking subject and fill in the absences, silences or misrepresentations, women performance artists presumed that there was some subject to be 'known' - that is, that the subject 'woman' existed and all that was required was that she be represented by women, in order to correct the landscape. The aim of the majority of this work, therefore, was to present a more truthfully representative image of woman, this search for truth being grounded in the lived bodily experiences of the women who created and performed their work. To know something suggested the ability to represent something more accurately than the male-constructed woman they didn't know.

The personal performance bears similarities to autobiographical writing. At the centre of the autobiography is a subject who supposedly knows her/himself, and this individual self is conceived as a rational being with the body subordinated to consciousness and thought. As Sidonie Smith writes,

Reflecting on its essential nature, abstracting its teleological boundaries of experience, the self thereby presumes the possibility of self-knowledge. As subjectivity metamorphoses into objectivity and impartiality, the self assumes its privileged status as the origin of meaning, knowledge, truth. [This] teleological drift of selfhood concedes nothing to indeterminacy, to

ambiguity, or to heterogeneity. Such purposiveness leads to the silencing of that which is contingent, chaotic, tangential to a true self.

Smith 1993 p. 8

With its invocation to 'truth', autobiography is a powerful tool in the authorizing of 'correct' subject positions, and perpetuates the maintenance of 'proper' and 'improper' subjects. Criticisms levelled at the Women's Liberation Movement could equally be aimed at women's performance art - the 'woman' being more 'truthfully' represented was white, heterosexual, and middle-class, and she spoke for all women.

Recalling Freud and Lacan, however, while the autobiographical subject assumes that it is coherent and unified, such an assumption belies the fact that every subject is in fact a split subject, and cannot therefore ever know itself in its entirety. Moreover, underneath every consciousness is the unconscious, another level of the 'self' which is generally inaccessible to our 'rational' minds.

Furthermore, from a poststructuralist position, 'Truth', like subjectivity, is an effect of and dependent upon discourse, with the discursively established systems of rules governing what counts as 'Truth', as the 'Real' to be discovered, and what is 'false' or unreasonable. One cannot create meanings, as Terry Eagleton sparingly summarizes the argument, 'unless the rules which govern it [are] already there' (Eagleton 1983 p. 113). This is not to deny that every subject does not 'really' experience effects, but that experience is, as Joan Scott asserts, 'always already an interpretation *and* is in need of interpretation' (Scott 1992 p. 37). Experience, then, does not indicate some central core of identity, but seems to constitute subjectivity and rather than being the reflection of some reality should be the ground for an analysis of discursive systems.

Betty Bergland asks whether

we read at the center of the autobiography a self, an essential individual, imagined to be coherent and unified, the originator of her own meaning, or do we read a postmodern subject - a dynamic subject that changes over time, is situated historically in the world and positioned in multiple discourses?

Bergland 1994 p. 134

The challenge, then, when using one's own personal narratives, is to speak *from* the specificity of one's own circumstances and thus avoid a speaking *for* an entire category, while simultaneously contesting the notion of 'category' or 'identity' as a pre-given, immutable 'truth'. The performer who uses the personal should, according to this, show a subject who is multiply designated, non-unified and fluid.

Following Diane Elam's lead, a feminism based on identity politics is a dangerous politics in that it suppresses or erases differences between women, homogenizing such differences and enforcing uniformity or conformity. Instead, what Elam proposes is a politics of *groundless solidarity*. As Elam notes, 'a feminism that believes it knows what a woman is and what she can do both forecloses the limitless possibilities of women and misrepresents the various forms that social injustice can take' (Elam 1994 p. 32). We can never really know what 'woman' is because 'woman is a 'permanently contested site of meaning.' Similarly, as Judith Butler notes,

If feminism presupposes that 'woman' designates an undesignated field of difference, one that cannot be totalized or summarized by a descriptive identity category, then the very term becomes a site of permanent openness and resignifiability.

Butler 1992 p. 16

Returning, then, to Bobby Baker, I would suggest that she utilizes 'autobiography' in her piece *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* (1987), placing these experiences in a social and political context while simultaneously producing a troubling of the subject 'known' as Bobby Baker. First and foremost, Baker raises the problem of 'truth' within autobiography by theatricalizing the subject of the autobiography and thus prompting us to ask - is this 'real', do we need it to be so, and if so, why?

Bobby Baker: a performance artist, known only by the name Bobby Baker. The Bobby Baker in front of me is the only Bobby Baker I have access to.

Bobby Baker: just-below-knee length white lab-type coat, low wedged-heel shoes, neatly bobbed hair, damp jay cloth, tupperware containers, roast beef, chutney, Greek yoghurt.

The foregrounded image is that of the 'good housekeeper', a re-presentation of a familiarly circulated and recognizable symbol. The first words spoken are 'My name's Bobby Baker'. This 'subject' who speaks does not say 'I am Bobby Baker', but interpellates herself with the name Bobby Baker - the subject is perhaps named, therefore, but not strictly posited or given. To whom is this name referring? To the re-presented symbol - the stereotype of housewife/mother - and not therefore to someone that exists outside of that re-presentation, or to the performer Bobby Baker (not to mention the non-performing subject whose only known name - to me - is Bobby Baker)? I would suggest that this is deliberately undecidable, because Bobby Baker is *both* the 'character' *and* the performer, and yet the gap between these two positions is deliberately retained (even as it seems to be elided). First, there is the comedic appropriateness of the name - whether chosen or given - for a performer who repeatedly works with food. But Bobby Baker destabilises this notion of the fictional character by telling us that she is going to be drawing a picture from her experiences. And that this performance is 'slightly autobiographical. Totally autobiographical.' There is a troubling space interjected between 'slightly' and 'totally', but there is a deeper troubling already existent between the 'character' Bobby Baker and

the 'subject' that is relating her experience. Do the experiences belong to Bobby Baker, the character, or to the 'real' (performance persona *and* non-performing)⁴ Bobby Baker? The success of the performance lies in the fact that this question cannot be answered. We never know whether we are seeing the real 'subject' or the truth of her experiences, or whether the performance is fictional, because notions of both the 'truth' and the 'real' are problematized.

What is most obvious in the 'character' of Bobby Baker - and in fact what signals the fact that she is a character - is the use of parody within the performed text, as Baker explicitly mimics the 'good housewife/mother'. The inverted commas around that designation signal an ironic gesture, in which the audience and Bobby Baker can share. Prior to beginning the actual drawing Bobby Baker is hyper-clean and controlled, organized and calm. She talks to us in a soft, endearing, almost apologetic tone, asking us to 'pardon her' if she can't quite live up to the standards we (as knowledgeable performance spectators) expect. Throughout the piece, Baker solicits our sympathies as if to protect herself.

This parodic display of the good housewife/mother is most blatantly and humorously inscribed in the repetitive manner in which Baker cleans up after her every action, and references that fact as she does so, so that it becomes a sort of *leitmotif* of the entire performance. 'I'll just clean up as I go along.'

In a similar vein, there is the repetitive trope of the resourceful housewife, caring about the environment, avoiding unnecessary waste, and saving money. Again, due to the recognizability of this 'eco-housewife' symbol, this is foregrounded as being parodic, especially since such 'resourcefulness' is carried to the extreme. 'You needn't worry, this roast beef won't be wasted. I shall find a good home for it.'

A final strategy that suggests the constructed nature of 'Bobby Baker' is the performance of a recognizably British gesture - that of avoiding embarrassing subjects - such as giving birth, 'women's problems', and breast feeding, all of which are central to the piece but are displaced onto the action of making art from food.

Of course, within the performance there is an implicit danger that Baker, in representing a female subject as being passive, domestic, modest, nurturing and caring, merely reinscribes such an image. However, I would suggest that Baker attempts to avoid such reinscriptions of the female body by playing these marks to excess in the act of mimicking a recognisably cultural 'fiction'. Through such devices as excessive rendering and repetition they cannot be taken to be the 'real' of anything and in fact such tactics aim to de-naturalize the very concept of the natural 'mother' or 'housewife'. Baker is not simply parodic, however. She writes into her performance the various and competing discourses which form her subjectivity, with the question here being 'whose subjectivity?': Baker the performer, Baker the character, or Baker the non-performing subject - a question that again remains unanswerable.

There is not one Bobby Baker, a projection of a unified, coherent and stable subject, who 'knows' herself, but a subject who is dispersed across numerous and often competing discourses, each of

which contributes to the experiences that Baker reveals. Bobby Baker is simultaneously woman, wife, mother, daughter, artist, performer, and throughout the performance the clashing of these subject positions are made explicit. As a mother she cannot be an artist, as an artist she cannot be a good mother, as a good mother she must place her children first, as an individual subject she supposedly has the right to satisfy her own needs, as a wife and mother her needs are secondary, as a daughter she must be a child, as a mother she must be an adult, as an artist she must be an individual, as a woman she cannot be an individual, etc. etc.

Thus, lying beneath the Baker who almost obsessively cleans up as she goes along is the mother whose work is invisible (and never done); beside the woman who amusingly relates the story of taking empty bottles of beer back to the off-licence is the observing eye of the medical establishment and the discursive structures sustaining and maintaining the signifier 'family', and the pressure for all women to put their children first, and contained within the resourceful mother who makes chutney is the woman pushing at the boundaries of her constraint(s) by turning domestic acts into resistant acts of creativity.

Such acts of resistance are literalized within the performance, and in effect the culturally inscribed image of the 'housewife/mother' is undermined as the performer 'Bobby Baker' clashes with the prescribed fictional image 'Bobby Baker'. By using food in a way that is removed from domesticity - she draws with it, throws it around, creates a mess, literally rolls herself in it - she challenges that domesticity.

Likewise, the precisely neat image of the 'mother/housewife' begins to slip as Baker's material (performing) body begins to show signs of its materiality - the sweating, the stains on her previously 'Persil-white' overall, alongside textual references to memories of her body being pregnant, birthing, breastfeeding. The material body of Bobby Baker, the performer, seeps through the parodic body of the housewife/mother, and such seepage hints at the falsity of the seamless body, the unified body.

It is not that Bobby Baker reveals 'her' experiences to stabilize her self-identity, but that the representation of such experiences indicates the multiple ways in which subjectivity is constituted via various discourses. Bobby Baker is not revealed through her experiences. Instead, we are left to ask why those experiences should be experienced in this way? What forces produce such experiences, inscribing them (in Baker's case literally, through the traces of food left on her clothes) on the body of woman?

Performer Annie Sprinkle problematizes the performing subject in a similar way to Baker. Annie Sprinkle, like Bobby Baker, is Annie Sprinkle both on-stage and off-stage and Annie Sprinkle is also a 'character'. It is unclear where the performance persona begins or ends, resulting in the spectator questioning what is 'real' and what is 'fictional'. However, in distinction to Baker, Sprinkle

foregrounds the fact that *she* is an 'invention' - yet this invention continues to be inhabited beyond the performing space.

Her chosen name is ironically appropriate. She took the name 'Sprinkle' for herself because she was 'attracted to the sound of *wetness* - I like waterfalls, piss, vaginal fluid, sweat, cum - anything wet' (Sprinkle 1991 p. 27). And the wet, as we know, is seeping and uncontainable. It is impossible to pin Sprinkle down because she is forever on the move. Fluid. Annie Sprinkle is a performance artist, sex worker, pornographer, educationalist - a woman who straddles boundaries and troubles their constructions in the process. As is evidenced from the opening segment of *Post Post Porn Modernist* (1992), quoted in the opening page of this article, Sprinkle destabilizes any notion of the 'truth' of (her) identity, or 'reality'. Sprinkle is self-created, and that self-creation cracks any notion of a stable foundation, of an 'original' or 'natural' being that lies below the surface, awaiting excavation. While Ellen is perhaps posited as the abandoned 'original' self, the pre-Annie 'subject', and Annie is figured as the invention, it is possible to suggest that Ellen and Annie are *both*, equally, constructions. Neither is more 'truthful' than the other. Annie is 'invented', and in that invention, the 'real' status of Ellen is also questioned.

Annie Sprinkle was not 'born' Ellen Steinberg but was born, then named Ellen, and in that naming was gendered feminine. Ellen Steinberg becomes Ellen Steinberg through cultural inscription. In a sense, Ellen is culturally known as the 'good girl' while Annie is positioned as the 'bad girl', but as Ellen and Annie are located in the same subject, such neat dichotomization is troubled, revealing that both 'good' and 'bad' are imposed - and mutually reliant - constructions. It is not that Sprinkle is attempting to resist her 'bad girl' status, but that she is questioning the very existence of such nominations by undermining them

I would suggest that Sprinkle attempts to break down the boundaries between good/bad girl, through presenting 'herself' as an *effect* of performance. Not only does she make explicit the tools of her trade, she plays the role of the 'whore' to theatrical excess, in a parodic imitation of the signifier 'whore'. Before our very eyes the pre-whore body (which is still 'Annie Sprinkle') is transformed into the body of the whore - literally made up. As Linda Williams asserts,

Although Sprinkle 'is' a woman, and doesn't perform otherwise, her exaggeratedly fetishised femme appearance is offered as a performative achievement, not as natural.

Williams 1993 p. 187

After Annie comes another creation - Anya - a sex goddess (although notably, Sprinkle is not now known *as* Anya but continues to wear the name Sprinkle). As Sprinkle continues to invent herself we are denied the possibility of ever really knowing the 'real' Annie (the non-performing subject) because such a 'real' is explicitly destabilized. Sprinkle, with each transformation of her 'self', (and here I borrow from Elam) seems to be throwing representations into her own personal *mise en abyme* - each

of which affects previous representations. As Elam notes, in relation to the representation of women in general, “women may be represented, but the attempt to represent them exhaustively only makes us more aware of the failure of such attempts” (Elam, 1994 p. 28). Who knows what ‘self’ Sprinkle will yet become, or indeed what ‘self’ she will yet have been.

POST-SCRIPT

I presented an earlier version of this paper at the SCUDD 1998 conference. It was the first time in my life that I had attempted to undertake such an ordeal. It felt like this was the moment I finally put on the ‘academic’ mask to see how well it fitted, or how well I could wear it. The morning before I was due to present the above paper, I awoke with a slightly sore feeling in my right eye. By the night before, the sore feeling had become a painful throb. By the morning of my panel my right eye had almost closed. A huge, red, weeping sty looked out at me from the mirror.

It would seem that, in spite of my attempts to make the mask fit, my material (pre-academic) body was staging its own angry protest (assault, challenge) as if to mock my attempts. My confidant façade disappeared in the excruciatingly painful blink of an eye, as my own body seeped its own materiality.

Notes

¹. “What’s In A Name?...”, adapted from a paper I presented at the 1998 SCUDD conference at the University of Glasgow, is a condensation of material taken from my PhD entitled “Mapping the Shifting Politics of Women’s Performance Art” which traces the shift from representations of identity to representations of subjectivity.

². This is the opening line of Bobby Baker’s performance, *Drawing on a Mother’s Experience* (1988).

³. Taken from Annie Sprinkle’s performance *Post Post Porn Modernist* (1992).

⁴. Of course, this concept of the non-performing subject is itself open to contestation, in the sense that one is always, to some extent, performing. I do not wish to posit this non-performing subject as anymore ‘real’ or ‘stable’ than the performing subject. My use of this designation is merely intended to suggest the probable difference between the Baker before me and the Baker who exists beyond the performing space and the spectators gaze.

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