

## Broken Edges – Darren Campion

We all perform, we inhabit certain roles. But performance is also a social category, and therefore it is a mistake to assume that the masks we speak out of – or *through* – are not in some fundamental degree the “selves” that are said to inhabit them. In many ways, the whole drift of European cultural thought has been to grapple with this very complexity – the volatility of self and the mechanisms of its projection are contemporary obsessions.

These themes occur forcefully in the sculpture and video work of Séamus McCormack, where the formal devices of theatrical space, with their uncanny suspensions of time and slippages of character are repurposed to questioning effect. He traces a line between the popular conception of an actor as protean self, disappearing into a role, and the equally uncertain convergence of postures and attitudes that define our individual selves. Here the theatrical is a ritualised zone of artifice and display intended to impose a (temporary) coherence on the shifting planes of identity.

However, the fact he utilises these tropes of actor and stage should not be understood to signal that the resultant work is *about* theatre, as such. Rather they serve a wholly metaphorical function, whereby the categories of dramatic performance are shifted into the social realm – identity is constructed *as* performance, fictive economies of self. This collapse of the performer into the role is seen as interchangeable with a similar movement of the individual into a persona fashioned either by will or by the demands of a social context. If identities are essentially performative we can slip fluidly between them and in this sense “the actor” is metaphorical as well, a pliable zero degree of theatre – the relative positions of spectator and performer are approached as a set of opposing territories. For McCormack these elements supply the means to probe whatever dissonance that might arise between the roles we take on and how they are performed, the imperfect becoming of identity. But he also directs the supposed interiority of performance outward and onto the means of its reception.

These open-ended strategies of estrangement are a further theatrical borrowing, in reference to Brecht and others, intended to undermine the stability of a given structure. The tensions between this “closed” frame of performance and the view afforded by McCormack’s determination to reveal their broken edges is a return of the performative to its social context. This is a paradoxical form of artifice calculated to disclose its own elaborate conditionality. These gestures of formal disturbance are exemplified by the work *Presence/Presents*, (2012) which is a double projection arranged in such a way that the viewer can potentially enter the space of the image, fracturing its supposed neutrality. From one side an actor on a bare stage reads a text, as if for an audition or rehearsal (the lack of scenery is a deliberately anti-naturalistic device) and on the other is the same stage, minus the actor this time, with a series of light changes. Crucially, both projections are over-laid to create a single complex frame, while the narration combines the text of the embedded performance with a reflection on the technical process of its visibility.

In this manner a dense circularity of reference is effected between the theatrical space of identity (the actor *as* role) and the way in which the performance itself is suspended within a vulnerable matrix of display. The negation of spectacle points to how identity might be understood as a process of concealment; we are seeing not only the scripted enactment of a character, but also seeing *through* its articulation – the notion of “performance” is taken apart. Even while inside the role McCormack has the actor describe (via the narration) the apparatus of projection, which is connected symbolically to both the “projection” of a character and also to the image of those empty spot-lights. These complete the piece with a significant metaphorical weight all of their own, suggesting identity is only what falls into our view, carried by the structures that make it visible and around that is an indivisible shadow, the darkened stage a teeming multiplicity of unconscious selves.

These activated spaces are a key value in McCormack’s practice and the themes established in *Presence/Presents* are developed elsewhere in his work. A comparable strategy is used for another recent video piece (*Tirve*, 2012), again reversing the view of an assumed spectator, where a plainly visible series of ropes raise and lower the seats of a theatre. This desire to conflate the space of performance with that of its reception has also been manifested as a more explicitly sculptural response intended to redirect that imagined point of transfer.

One of these works (*Prompt*, 2012) has at its centre a telephone, more like an improvised stage prop than a real appliance. Still, our inclination is to lift the receiver (a doubly significant word) and in doing so we will hear a series of reflections on the “enactment” of a given text, issued in the same hushed off-stage tones that the title implies. This voice is essentially a meditation on how the structure of a performed identity is

communicated at a remove and the way in which an unseen hand (that of the author, in this case) determines not just the words or actions of a “character” but also the very shape of their being.

An engagement with the notion of authorial voice makes an appearance elsewhere in McCormack’s work – specifically that of Charles Dickens, the arch Victorian sentimentalist, (who was also the catalyst for an earlier video piece, *A Vague Sensation of Being Wanted*, 2008). Taking Dickens’ classic *David Copperfield* as his point of departure the artist has, in a quite literal sense, deconstructed the book by creating a series of individually bound and titled volumes, each corresponding to a chapter. In this work (*A Retrospect*, 2012) chapters have been arranged in a column that runs from the first at the bottom to the last at the top. This is an astute sculptural tactic intended to make visible what actually *happens* in the novel, its internal movement – the journey of Dickens’ protagonist is one of advancement within a social hierarchy where he can fashion his identity as an act of will, the rhetoric of which is played out in the structure of the book itself. A synthesis of formal and thematic concerns, the piece is essentially self-supporting, as if to underscore the inherent fragility of its symbolic narrative.

The work contains an instability that is the whole point of Dickens’ eponymous hero. He aspires to another identity, but one that must implicitly enclose the recognition of how easily it can be undone, maintained by a performative structure in constant, uneasy negotiation with the social order. Ours is equally an age of theatrical self-impersonation; we can move with unprecedented ease between roles and personas. But the self is also subject to deep and inevitable conflict. It is perhaps in light of this that we seek the mediation of fictionalised experience as a way to direct the turmoil that might otherwise overwhelm us. The conclusion of McCormack’s work, then, seems to be that the individual as the measure of identity is a chaotic play of forces, their living agent, as well as being the often reluctant surface upon which they are inscribed – both performer *and* performed.

Darren Campion, 2012

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