

Double Negative

Performance, Performativity and the Queer Impostor

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Gender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts* [...] This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted *social temporality*.¹

Fouché is dressed in a black suit and sitting in a black chair, a deadly serious expression on his face. He is in a bare white room, with only a small (black) wireless radio in the corner. In the foreground of the image is a rope, hanging suggestively from the ceiling, its purpose unfathomable. A second image shows the artist, still serious, still shadowed, evidently engaged in some kind of delicate operation, the nature of which remains unclear. Here instead of the thick rope is a thin white thread, tensed in anticipation on one of many black shiny bobbins. We have caught him, it seems, unaware, in-between, in the shadow that falls (to paraphrase T.S. Elliot) between the motion and the (repetitive and continuous) act.²

A man busy working (as is Man's prerogative).

But, Fouché tells us, he is, in fact, performing. And not only that, but he is an *impostor*³, a fraud, someone and something *other* to that which he performs. Locating his actions thus implies a copy, a simulation and an intervention into the expected, but also negates any finite assumption as to the performer's supposed natural identity. To be an impersonator is, before it is about taking on the role of an Other, to be 'not-oneself', with the performer's identity obscured by that which is performed, the 'I' residing only through a series of negations.

If, as Butler proclaims above, we are to accept gender as performative; a set of actions from which the 'I' emerges, as opposed to the natural visible position from which the individual performs, then Fouché's act, his intrusion into a specifically gendered realm, becomes complicitous in the negation, or at least concealment, of his own gendered subjectivity. For by engaging in a notably "*stylized repetition of acts*" as he makes lace in the gallery (and this, we finally see, is what he is doing), a ritual the artist himself tells us is one belonging to a "tradition which generally excluded men in the manufacturing

¹ Judith Butler. 1990. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge: New York. (191).

² From T. S. Elliot's 1925 poem *The Hollow Men*, which reads:

Between the motion

And the act

Falls the Shadow. Available [<http://aduni.org/~heather/occs/honors/Poem.htm>]

³ website

process”⁴, the impostor not only suggests a fissure in his own visible masculinity, but also threatens the very stability of that subjectivity into which he inserts himself.

Fouché appears, as we have said, as a man, surely, but one who performs the ‘women’s work’ of lace making. However, the performance is not that simple. Instead of assuming a ‘man’ who acts like a woman, what is apparent here is a (apparently male) subject being shaped by his own “repetitive” acts – a performance in a gallery, but one which consciously mimics the everyday performativity that shapes notions of gender, sex and sexuality. A fraud (not a woman) within a women’s realm, so then not-a-woman, but not necessarily a Man (do real men sew, thread, craft?) and if not-a-man, then what?

Queer perhaps, a word which by its definition implies the unexpected, the other from the norm, and for many (including both those who vilify and those who define themselves through ‘Queerness’) has come to mean any gender definition or sexual preference that is complex, multifaceted, non-binary, other to Others, a term that, like the impostor, is defined through negation.

Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing particular to which is necessarily refers.* It is an identity without an essence. ‘Queer’ then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality *vis-à-vis* the normative”⁵

Thus, in *As time went on the grown men were now able to make lace, so that when the sea was too rough they were able to support themselves* (but wait! Another inversion, in which we are told that in fact Fouché *is* performing masculinity, albeit in the guise of femininity being performed by a man), Fouché purposefully plays with notions of gendered identity and histories, presenting an unsettling ambiguity within his own subjectivity as he quietly attends to his craft.

This kind of transgressive passivity is central to *Love and Misery*, where Fouché performs as the ultimate queer impostor, the drag queen, here managing to subvert both the queerness and the charade (or the Drag and the Queen) of the drag tradition. Dressed in Jeans and a white T – Shirt and standing on a simple white stage Fouché sings a series of fourteen contemporary songs by a range of artists with “as much emotion as he can muster”⁶, his only costume changes switching T-shirts before the beginning of each track, with each bearing a different name (some men, some women) across the chest.

Love and Misery then leeches drag of its campness, its parody, and disallows the potentially sexist essentialising of femininity indicative of the traditional Queen; a performance that references drag acts in its refusal to adhere to any of the characteristics that drag requires. Un-drag drag. Fouché does, however, reference drag for good reason.

⁴ Fouche, P. 2009. *As Time Went On*. Available [<http://www.pierrefouche.net/projects-as-time-went-on.php>]

⁵ David Halperin. 1995. *St Foucault*. (62)

⁶ Fouche, P. 2007. *Love and Misery*. Available [<http://www.pierrefouche.net/projects-love-misery.php>]

If, as Butler suggests, “*in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*”⁷ then drag might be considered as gender simulacrum, a parody of the very notion of an original, “the truth which conceals that there is none.”⁸ The not-drag then (and perhaps then, even, not-queer) that Fouché performs presents the artist as a floating signifier, literally donning different names in a constant shift of identity and sexual preference (is he taking on a role, or singing *to* the name on his chest) even while he himself appears as the very definition of normative jeans-and-T-shirt masculinity.

In *The Ecstasy of St. Daniel Engelbrecht*, a collaboration between Fouché and his partner, Werner Ungerer, the artists created an homage to a South African small-town not-hero – a teenage boy who, after becoming increasingly withdrawn disappeared from his foster parents home in Barendsdorp, leaving only an empty adolescent bedroom behind. As shocked and concerned visitors started to visit the missing boy’s room, the space became a site for pilgrimage after “the miraculous disappearance of [the boy’s mother’s] psoriasis after touching the boy’s bed linen”⁹, linen that, if expert analysis of Daniel’s diaries is to be believed, would have been the site of much torment as the boy grappled with his latent homosexuality¹⁰

In *The Ecstasy of St. Daniel Engelbrecht*, Fouché and Ungerer are not actors, but rather set builders, though impostors nonetheless – creating a bedroom that is not their own, nor that of the small town boy they reference, but rather a signifier of *the* teenage bedroom in a clusterfuck of calligraphy, drawings, video, text and found objects, which all hint to a dissolution of the real within an imagined teenage boy’s unnamed desires. This empty room, then, straddles the lines of reality and fiction, memorial and pure fantasy, in yet another subversion of the truth and normalcy associated with finite ideas of gender, sex and desire.

And in *Take it Like a Man* Fouché steps entirely outside of his own identity, facilitating a photography project with seven Capetonian rentboys. These sex workers are given Polaroid cameras and basic photography training to allow them to present their environment, shifting the artist’s gaze to a very specific group of Others, who are, Fouché tells us “forging an existence in this *doubly negated* realm of identity”¹¹.

Quietly and pervasively resisting fixed meanings and any kind of easily untangled subjectivity, Fouché’s projects are rather interrogations into the plausibility of *any* kind of fixed, gendered identity, as negations beget more questions, and questions more ambiguities. Fouché refuses to allow us to feel, or *be* in one place or another, caught (like the tense thread in *As time went on*) always somewhere in-between.

⁷ Judith Butler. 1990. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge: New York. (137).

⁸ Baudrillard, J. (1988). *Selected writings*. Cambridge: UK (74)

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Fouche, P. 2009. *Take it Like a Man*. Available [<http://www.pierrefouche.net/projects-polaroids.php>]. Emphasis my own.

