

So, Let's Begin With the Toe

Tommy Olsson

So, let's begin with the toe. The big big toe. And we'll see how far up the legs I'll manage to get while I'm here. The big toe is, arguably, the most important toe, located at the inside corner of the foot, it is crucial for our balance. And this is about performance, and performance is nothing if it's not about balance. I usually stress the point that performance art is mainly built on two different schools of thought. One will find the artist rolling naked on broken glass while masturbating and screaming at the top of his or her lungs, covered in red paint. The other will find the audience in deep regret as the artist moves very slowly from one side of the room to the other within two or three hours in absolute silence. Now, this is a cool thing to say in situations like these, but unfortunately, it is, of course, bullshit. Or at least, it's far from being the whole story. Because it is all really about balance, and in a broad perspective – because these two mentioned extremes are just there to counterbalance one another – even if that's a weak point to consider if you find yourself stuck before a performance artist who either shits in his pants for the greater good, or acts like a mime but without the skills, for what seems to be an eternity of numbing deathlike boredom and utter despair.

Except for the issue of balance, none of this really applies here. The works of Agnes do however tap into one of the cornerstones of early performance art, and what is a keyword in general when briefly going through the history of this odd practice: endurance. If performance was ever about anything apart from balance, it is endurance, either on the artist's behalf, or the spectators'. The artist as a martyr taking a lot of pain, or as a bully intimidating the audience – and this is something you can do in so many ways. I'm probably doing it right now.

Usually confronting her own body and its limitations, rather than the patience of the observers, this work tends to fall on the martyr side of the fence – though no harm is usually done to the artist's body, it is clear that its position in time and space is addressed, and twisted around to check where the potential limits may lie. And it could easily be read and understood as a matter of balance – because as I said, that's really what it's all about. So let's get back to the toe briefly, as I find the feet to be of a certain importance here, as anywhere else really. We'd be pretty fucked if we didn't have feet. Things would be very different. And much harder. There would be no balance to keep. I think we should consider this every now and then – and we shouldn't take our feet for granted. We may lose them. Actually, our species probably will, as we get more permanently stuck with our laptops in bed ordering pizza and prostitutes and over generations mutate into jelly because there is really no need to go anywhere. The future of mankind is a blob.

It may be beside the point, but I used to produce and sell weird fetish and BDSM pornography before I became an art critic. A context where feet really matter, or at least the female ones, and where very odd things take place. And I can't help to speculate when – since this was some years ago – a VHS tape with a woman in high-heel shoes stepping on a guy's mobile phone till it breaks, before moving on to the TV set's remote control and stomping on it, while he's getting turned on by it – the grey fuzzy area between this shit and the art world merely is a question of high-pitched eroticized focus and what the viewer is expected to project on the events taking place. In other words, it means whatever you want it to, and you're being manipulated no matter what. A gay friend of mine had a very nasty stroke a couple of years ago. So bad it left him in a coma for a while. Eventually he woke up a changed man; and he was, all of a sudden and out of the blue, straight. He is now a father. So, those militant christians were right all the time; homosexuality can be cured. You may cure it with a stroke. Praise the Lord.

I mention all this because my first encounter with this work was on some level steaming with restless sexual frustration and urge for transformation. It was a video piece called *Look, My Dress is Blue Like the Ocean*, and I've written about it in this book – I don't want to repeat anything I've already pointed out there, but it stands out as a not particularly performative work – it is very much a video, and it is very much about this blue dress, actually verging on becoming a fetishistic focal point, or a vehicle for immediate and sudden change. Because everything we see in this video – except for the girl in the dress – is very outdated. Everything is either old, left behind, or ageless and more importantly, it is deserted – there is none else around. There is no one to target with all this nervous and restless energy, that makes the video cut in and out of distance rapidly. And no one to submit to the inherent logic within the seductive folds of the dress. It is very much a picture of a teenager waking up to the facts, that eventually finds the girl in the dress climbing a mountain, like a blue spot in the distance. I think it is very appropriately titled, with its demanding "Look", even if there's only the camera to actually look.

In a body of work – and I mean body quite literally here – it stands out as something a little less arranged, and more organic. Almost as if it was a force of nature that's being captured.

And, I really think – compared to the actions taking place within the institutions' white cube walls – it is decidedly *unbalanced*. Revolutionary, even, or at least very much breaking free from the status quo and setting things in motion. Not to say that the more ritualistic approach in the live performance situation is not just as much, but it is a very different creature altogether – more organised, definitely more planned and figured out beforehand.

Thus, it makes sense to consider the various props and objects being used within this context. There are a few seemingly odd choices there. They may seem random, but we

could spend the night and the next day considering how random is random. The artist may turn up in her pyjamas, or a glamorous dress, or her everyday clothes – I dare suggest none of this is coincidental.

Then again, what is in a world built on the terrible logic of cause and effect? The feet that walk the ground are a different set of feet the next time the individual comes by. The feet wavering about in the air as someone insists on walking on their hands or stand on their head will helplessly signal their own conclusions on the state of things. Why would anyone be interested in performance art? I could say, because performance art is very interesting, that's why. But it isn't really. Not in itself. It makes sense only in the moment when it is performed, and being a kind of confrontational art creature myself, I always liked the fact that it is so hard to sell, that it isn't something that you can have or keep, and that the documentation of these events will remain as its own iconography and establish its own visual impact, because it can never match up to the original event – which is just as out of reach as the 17th century. And there of course lies the greater lesson – that life may be short, but for certain it is long enough.

Half a life ago, I read a very good one-liner somewhere. I've often quoted it, and it goes like this; "The best performance is to stand still" – I've been considering this for the past 28 years, but in 2016, where any simple act can and will be described as performative – caught as we are between the grim reality of the islamic state and the science fiction dystopia should Donald Trump be elected president of the united states – I'd say the best performance is probably to duck and cover, or run as fast as you can. And keep running. And for that, you know, we do need our feet. So how far did I move from the tip of the big toe while sitting here? I'd say just above the ankle, but not even close to the knees. It takes more than a lifetime to conquer the whole body, and it takes generations to fulfil missions that for better or worse will be forgotten halfway through. This is who we are.