



HENRY CHAN

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Rearranging the bones in my head

CLAUDE WITTMANN'S UNRESOLVED DEPRESSIVE
ANARCHIST FEMINISM OF VULNERABILITY

Writing about claudes work is a two-folded intertwining—an Ouroborosian movement. Difficult to text-ify without solidifying, his work is in constant death and re-generation. This text archives via the filter of my mind-memory in order to, I hope, give wider access to his works that he tends to share with minimal photo and written documentation. (((Since much of his past work is no longer circulated online, we have to whisper the stories of his pieces to each other in the twilight. This is one of those whispers.))) This text is what I see in my proximity to him--huddled close to his practice, warmed by the embers that we share with each other through our processes. It's true, you can trace clear veins through his body of work in the past five years. You can find one pulse if that is what you're looking for. But for me, he is always multiple and I always hear (at least) two pulses: drum-pounding echoes. This text steps to that double-beat, overlapping and uneven. Each footfall marking a trace of mind-movement as I try to double-touch his practice: from near & far. This stepping is not the forward movement towards a goal, but the wave-like flow of a foot through the air as thought takes flight.

claudes wittmann *Legs, Too*, Artscape
Sandbox/FADO, Toronto, 2015

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Ouroboros: the snake eating its tail (Epilogue).

He was a molecular biologist before he was a Butoh dancer before he is a bike mechanic. He was Swiss before he is a Torontonion. He was Claudia before he is claude. He was a woman before he is a man /before/ he is a man he is a man.

“Somebody asks me whether I am surrendering... Somebody asks me if I am safe. ...somebody asks me for explanations.”
—claude wittmann¹

Constant re-creation. Phoenix cycling.

Before the work derived from looking inside to see what needed to be moved, and then setting the intention to move it via the performance. Now the same unfolding happens through looking outside, at the world around him. There is sense in this movement starting with that quotidian link between inside and out: food.

In 2011, claude wittmann performs *All I can eat* in his apartment with a select, invited audience. He has told us the small list of foods he is able to eat. He is blindfolded, wearing a dress at the beginning, a suit at the end, and invites us to feed him. Deep **vulnerability**—unwordable, opening wide wide wide inside him.

The following year, in a one-to-one performance called *beet/bettrave rouge* performed at the Buddies in Bad Times’ Rhubarb Festival in Toronto, again there is gender and again there is food. The inside and the outside. Dialogue with the participant begins to centre itself: We sit together, feed each other red beets, (our fingers staining into pigmented performance traces), each cross-dress choosing things from what he has laid out, and sit down again. His mode of conversation is so direct it shocks, yet it’s sensitive and careful. An attempt to name what tends to rest in the unsaid between two bodies and, through wording, make moveable. He asks questions as if the other has wisdom. He treats me with unwavering and assumed **equality**.

Both of these performances, and many that came before, focus on gender identity. One of the most self-evident themes in his work; questioning **gender**: a key pivot in the imbrication of his art/life practice.

1 claude wittmann, notes after burning photocopies of academic writings and performing “when there is no (Schroedinger’s) cat anymore,” Subtle Technologies Festival, Toronto, June 3rd, 2011



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Will-fully Asynchronous.

Flags. His work enters into **publicspace**. Not only in the sense of those spaces that are city-owned, but also in that a certain container falls away. Instead of the work generating the sacred through delimiting—fore-fronting the movement between the inside and the outside of his performing body—it begins to generate the performative through inclusion. Everything that enters the space of performance is equal, and holds valuable information that might illuminate what he investigates: shame.

But of course, it is claude, so the shame flag—a tall and regal wooden stick topped by a flag of natural canvas that bears a drawing he has done in beet juice while connecting to his “internal shame”—is birthed from an invitation to speak at the Toronto Trans March as part of Pride 2012. Here, Sara Ahmed’s recent thinking on the willful subject¹ seeds my understanding of claude’s resistance. For Ahmed, willfulness is evidenced through the uneven distribution of will. To be willful is to will otherwise: the river’s current is made visible by the still rock’s disruption of flow, through its persistence of being. When one is meant to take “pride,” Claude gives place to shame. He enters an uncomfortable, dark note that reminds us: we are not all feeling the same way; reminding us: everything is not all

claude wittmann *beet/bettrave rouge* Kitchen of 519/Rhubarb Festival, Toronto, 2012

right, alerting us: to flow alike is to collude.

Ahmed articulates the “social time of the will as non-synchronicity.”²

Watching the video recording of *Shame Flag*, I observe that non-synchronous moment I’ve felt before in his performances: he is introduced amongst celebratory and smiling sounds, sparkling plastic beads and banners—he wears all black and says that, for him, there is no community without vulnerability. He shares vulnerability by offering a list: some of his shame. It starts, “I am ashamed of not feeling like I really belong to the trans community.” Often his performances displace an expected celebration or mode of reception, often he is out-of-sync with the expected, and that, for me, is the integrity, strength, and beauty of his work.

Claude is stubborn. Willfully asynchronous = a denaturalization of the flow-status-quo. Resistance causes ripples. After the shame list, he asks if someone witnessing would be willing to take the flag, a letter from him, and repeat the action in another context. (((Someone does.))) Luckily for those of us whose state of existing is always already a rock rippling the flowing stream, those of us who refuse to actively collude with asymmetrical and oppressivesystemsofpower:heisstone-stubbornandhisworkcausesripples.

Unresolved vulnerable anarchist feminism.

“(to resolve difficulty would be to loose proximity to what is difficult).”

—SARA AHMED, *Willful Subjects*³

I see feminism in his work. Though he is tired of identity politics in general—of their tendency to restrict and narrow existence to certain aspects of a person—he sees that it may be politically productive to mobilize them. He uses those labels (“trans” and, independently, “disabled”) handed to him by a society he doesn’t align with. Takes them on so that he can access support systems reserved for those labels; takes them on as statements of co-experience with other trans and/or disabled people and tries to participate in movements that want to reclaim power under those labels; he takes them on like a strange coat—as an affirmation that inside and outside he is a product of an identity-obsessed, trans-patient-porn-hungry, disingenious-charity-driven individualistic society.

How, though, can I speak of the very specific feminism I see in his work—in him—that overflows those labels? It is not akin to any trans feminisms or disability feminisms I’ve come into contact with—it can’t be named anything that resembles or recalls generalized grouping—it’s far too individual and autonomous for the general, far too dark and depressive for the celebratory.

His is an anarchist feminism of interiorized oppression, a feminism of the body’s vulnerability.

His is a feminism of necessity. Feminist because he survives. His work marks a resistance in his very persisting; the act of continuing to be. (((Every performance is a declaration of continued existence.))) An unresolved, and ultimately depressive feminism through attempts



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at survival, through slamming up against the status quo (an act that necessitates a utopic sense of some better horizon beyond here), and thus is always met with the forceful push back of subjugation processes. His work always lands the witness with an unromantic thud into what is. In trying to survive queerly, queer survival’s inability to flourish becomes all the more evident. Yet, his feminism seems to me to be paradoxically fuelled by an optimistic engagement with art (as potential change). I know no one else who more often asks whether art is worthwhile than Claude. I think his ideal is making art that is no longer art: not insular but part of the active unfolding of politics as he experiences them in the world. This continuous ambiguity of belief in art—of the difference between art and life—becomes a core of **integrity** in his work.

Whereas a resolute feminism might attempt to find answers, might determine itself towards successful solution, Claude’s unresolved, depressive feminism is based in a belief of **autonomy** so deep that it does not hold a gathering of individuals into mutuality (community) with ease. A feminism of difficulty and dis-ease. Though the Ouroboros’s reptilian self-cannibalism might give the sensation of going in circles, of uselessness and insularity, its endurance (the continued occupation that is the act of

Claude Wittmann *Chicken on political land*, Behind Sketch Studio, curated by Coman Poon, Toronto, 2011

² Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 2014), 19.

³ Ibid., 20.



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being) especially as a mythical creature that is not supposed to exist, is only a symbol, is not meant to have, let alone be able to, communicate first person singular experience, in other words, “I”-ability—is its feminism.

Communities of dissent

It makes sense, then, that so much of his recent works have been one-to-one performances. In *Radio Equals*, he invites participants to have a conversation with him on live radio broadcast about equality while attempting to inhabit an egalitarian relationality. The form itself manifests the content: for claude, it is important that the witness in radio can walk away without ramifications; radio can be turned off without anyone knowing. The audio recorder somehow intrudes less than the lens. The witness and even the speaker may be relatively anonymous. **Freedom.** He searches for agreement—striving to find harmony between inside and out before moving forward—and that takes time, precision, and nuance. In 2014, during *7a*11d* International Festival of Performance Art in Toronto, and then during LINK & PIN Performance Art Series in Montréal, he holds these conversations in a small separate room. The discussion is broadcast live into the adjoining space and online. We listen and hear the unfolding, tucked up against speakers in the shared space, staring at the wall, accidentally gaze colliding at sweet or strong moments. There are others at home or on the bus or walking down the street with headphones on. We listen, an audience of ears brought together in a momentary, ephemeral community. (((Radio plus ears equals...)))

His work holds uneasy, localised communities. They are never communities based on agreement, but rather communities of dissent: in Landsgemeinde, he invites the public to engage in a process of direct, democratic action. We decide first whether we want to participate. After those who do not want to participate have left the voting body, claude proposes we proliferate his *Radio Equals* action—returning to our lives, and having a conversation on equality in an egalitarian manner— using a portion of his artist’s fees to pay those who will proliferate the action. Other propositions arise: we should use the money for something else; no, we should pay the artists who enact the action; etc. It is beautifully complicated in its simplicity and one of my only experiences, as an adult, of conscious, direct, democratic action.

Always focused on the systemic, his work accesses larger politics through the individual body, in all its specificity. **Transparency** is always a key value in his works, and ties into his struggle for the **simple**. His performance descriptions often boil down to one sentence that he has exhaustively sculpted until it feels true for him. This commitment to transparency is a core ethical pillar in claude’s work.

(Like a snake spine running throughout this text, I have bolded word-vertebrae that I see running throughout his work.)

4 For a deeper understanding of the term “worlding” see A. Disman, “Performance Art, Pornography, and the Mis-Spectator: The Ethics of Documenting Participatory Performance,” in *Performing Producers*, T. Nikki Cesare Schotzko, Didier Morelli, and Isabel Stowell-Kaplan, eds. Special issue of *Canadian Theatre Review*, (Spring 2015), 162.

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ARTIST’S NOTE
shame flag and *radio equals* can be viewed at claudewittmann.ca



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Almost here, but not quite.

If performance art is a “worlding”,⁴ claude’s world is unspectacular and immanent. It is a place where everything that lives outside the body, lives inside it as well. A dark world of suffering that is profoundly lonely but that, in admitting its pain, is fundamentally optimistic since it continues to exist, and in that existence, reaches towards others. claude’s world is very close to the here and now because it strives to confront and move the wild beast of what is instead of turning away in escape.

He is brave.

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claude wittmann *the chicken will arrive at around 2:30pm* Dufferin Grove Farmers’ Market/Food is Need, curated by Leena Raudvee and Pam Patterson, Toronto, 2012

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