PERFORMING AUTHENTICITY

Elvia Wilk / 2012

I

Inside-Outside

You can tell if someone's laugh is fake. Real laughter, called Duchenne laughter after French neurologist Duchenne de Boulogne, contracts the tiny orbicularis oculi muscles surrounding the eye. A non-Duchenne laugh doesn't. Duchenne laughter is defined as joyous, involuntary, spontaneous, and uncontrollable. Non-Duchenne laughter is defined as a social tool – used, for example, in peacemaking, appeasement, and dominance reinforcement, like mocking or teasing. This empirical distinction between Duchenne and non-Duchenne suggests a straightforward opposition between real and fake laughter, and with this implication it is possible to unpack a host of implicit dichotomies between real and fake behavior in general. For example: real behavior is ancient, innate, and unself-conscious, and fake behavior is new, learned, and performed. Or, behaving in a real way makes you a good person, and acting fake makes you a bad person. These oppositions hold heavy weight for social relationships, shaping a moral dimension of perceived fakeness.

The idea of real/fake, in terms of actions like laughter, is visualized as a physical separation between self and behavior enacted by self. We imagine a separate "inside" and "outside" to everyone, the former true and the latter false. This leads to the moral construction that being a good person is melding your inside with your outside, or perhaps allowing the inside to "shine" beyond its confines. Inside and outside are often construed as "the heart" and "the head," i.e. feeling versus thought, which promotes the notion that "truth" is illogical and uncalculated, un-intellectual, and unchangeable, and the thinking head decides how to portray the feeling heart to the outside world. This idea of personhood stems directly from modernism's design goals, which created a moral dimension based in physical, material attributes: "form follows function." Though the idea of self-design originates much further back, in Christianity's pursuit of the soul, its contemporary materialist conception in the western world depends directly on these ideals of modernist design. Such materialist self-design has constructed the rubric by which we moralize behavior in general.

We would have to believe in the existence of absolute, intrinsic human qualities to think there exists in each of us an entirely physical aspect of personality insulated from circumstance. Yet cause and effect cannot be so plainly extricated from one another. To disregard momentarily where laughter comes from (either impulse or agenda), let's think about what it does. Research suggests that Duchenne laughter evolved to be heard; that is to say that the sound of real laughter, whether it was at any point in human evolution an entirely involuntary utterance, is a musical sound that effectively pleases, calms, and disarms other social beings. The range of notes produced by laughter cannot be produced by the human voice in any other way, and the arrangement of notes produced is a particularly pleasing one. Its social dimension is built into the very structure of the sound. Just as fake laughter serves as a manipulative social tool, real laughter is a tool with undeniable social influence, and whether the effects of this tool are positive or negative, neither tool can be said to be effectless. The phenomenon of Duchenne laughter, however involuntary, has an inextricable evolutionary link to human relationships, and it cannot be divorced from "external" functionality no matter how "natural" it is.

If involuntary, physical actions, like voicing a sound, have evolved from interaction within a social context, there has never been an entirely natural action. In other words, there is no conceivable baseline back at the beginning of evolution when people were alone with their instincts—no magic moment when history began. Social life has a very real, built-in effect on our physical, genetic traits. Evolution is the confluence of nature and nurture, and there are endless basic examples of this reciprocal, simultaneous nature-nurture interaction in science; biology is never fixed but interacting constantly with its environment. Yet we continue to pursue and protect an idea of an ancient, true, immutable, inner self, who exists outside of time and space—thus our ongoing obsession with the Kaspar Hausers of the world.

"He's so shallow."

"Listen to your inner voice."

"Yes, but she's beautiful on the inside."

"You could really tell he meant it from the heart."

Where does the idea of a molten core of self surrounded by an outer shell of sociability come from? The root of the particular contemporary moral distinction between material inside/outside – which needs to be confirmed through physical examination of things like eye muscle movement – originates in modernism's moralization of design as self-design. Postmodernism would have us believe otherwise, insisting that the endless simulacra of our time have made material authenticity irrelevant. Yet the idea that such a loss of anything original is a contemporary condition simply reinforces the idea that there was at some point an authentic baseline for us to have strayed from.

Benjamin writes in a note near the end of The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, "at the time of its origin a medieval picture of the Madonna could not yet be said to be 'authentic.' It became 'authentic' only during the succeeding centuries."[1] Authenticity in this sense arises only in relief; there can be no concept of an original if there can be no copy. The authentic original is indeed a historical creation. As many have already written, modernism's obsession with origins, á la art brut, created in us a rabid desire to meld inside and outside, function and design, form and function.

Boris Groys writes, "the modernist production of sincerity functioned as a reduction of design, in which the goal was to create a blank, void space at the center of the designed world… the artistic avant-garde wanted to create design-free areas that would be perceived as areas of honesty, high morality, sincerity, and trust."[2] At the start of the 20th century, authenticity's definition in regards to the art object expanded from meaning the verifiable object (a real Matisse rather than a forgery) to meaning the reduction of ornamentation in order to arrive at the level of zero-design, as if such a place exists. This became the pursuit of self-design as well, to create maximum transparency of intention in order to achieve a perfect moment wherein "essence and appearance become one." The pursuit of the physical real became the pursuit of the true. Material reality became conflated with truth; thus truth became located in the material.

In the last decades, sincerity has pivoted around the logical loop. Sincere transparency became a style itself, a gimmick, thereby negating its own claim. We had to find other ways to prove our authenticity rather than being honest or straightforward. Groys cites Salvador Dalí, Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst as examples of "calculated" and "self-denunciatory self-design," figures who produce sincerity not via a reduction of design to its bare functional essentials, but by the opposite –totalizing (self-)design as function." Looking at the public image of these artists we tend to think, 'Oh how awful,' but at the same time 'Oh how true.' " Sincerity now does its job by confirming the suspicion that everything exists only on the surface.

As layers of copies are added at breakneck speed, we get increasingly greedy for proof of physical authenticity at the same time that we deny it exists. Somewhere, back there, in history, at the bottom of the heap, there must have been a ground zero of total unself-awareness, just pure, instinctual, Duchenne-type expression, which we have retained somewhere in our bodies. We have taken the Modernist search for authenticity and relocated it to a place inside ourselves, a secret underbelly of our self-awareness. In a post-internet era of remix and appropriation, we haven't really moved past our anxiety about how to define original/copy, we've simply created new barometers of authenticity built on the same solid materialist foundation.

> *"The secret of acting is sincerity. If you can fake that, you've got it made."*
>
> - George Burns

The pursuit of a "new" sincerity is a current cultural fascination that refers to the term posited in 1996 by David Foster Wallace in his infamous essay, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction."[3] In this essay, Wallace brilliantly describes the way that postmodern irony was co-opted by television advertising to sell our own ironic hyper self-awareness back to us, at once manipulating us and flattering us for getting in on the joke. Television, according to Wallace, has become impenetrably effective by ironically calling attention to its own agenda, as in a Pepsi commercial depicting Pepsi's own successful advertising. Wallace writes, "The ad does not so much extol Pepsi per se as recommend it by implying that a lot of people have been fooled into buying it. The point of this successful bit of advertising is that Pepsi has been advertised successfully."[4] Not so far from Dalí or Koons.

At the end of the essay, Wallace ultimately advocates for an unironic literary rebellion called new sincerity, a term that has since been appropriated in a variety of contexts towards various ends. Wallace proposes this new sincerity as a counter-move against the "ironic eye-rolling of the 90s," a return to "single-entendre" principles that will "risk accusations of

1 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936)

2 Boris Groys, "Self Design and Aesthetic Responsibility," *e-flux Journal 7* (2009)

3 The term has been around since at least the 1960s, but generally in current usage it refers to Wallace.

4 David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *A Supposedly Fun Think I'll Never Do Again* (1997)

sentimentality and melodrama" for the sake of expressing "untrendy human troubles and emotions." Wallace was not suggesting a return to the modernist pursuit, which would be a return to unself-aware/instinctive aka non-designed/un-artificial authenticity. He was not asking us to "use our hearts rather than our heads," or implying a ground zero of self at all. In fact, Wallace's entire literary oeuvre is nothing if not insanely, acutely, painfully self-aware, an intermingled web of being and behaving, creating a place in between honesty and dishonesty that can be called neither, and that does something radically different than Koons – not because it's not ironic, but because it's not cynical. For Wallace, self-consciousness, reflexivity, artifice, meta-meta-thought, were necessary and integral for his new sincerity. There would be no inside or shell. The head would be the heart.

"After all, authenticity can be thought of as style too."

- Harm Van Den Dorpel, "Strategies," 2011

Since at least the 1950s, anthropologists have been debating about whether authenticity should be considered as a materially intrinsic or an entirely constructed notion. Materialist anthropology links authenticity to truth value, arguing that true authentic ideas, customs, and things exist no matter where they are or who sees them. Constructivists argue that authenticity is, and always has been, situationally produced in the eye of its beholder. Anthropologist Sian Jones explains: "The materialist approach, still widely employed in heritage conservation…treats authenticity as a dimension of 'nature' with real and immutable characteristics that can be identified and measured…. the constructivist position [is] popular amongst academics and cultural critics, who see authenticity as a product of 'culture,' or, to be precise, the many different cultures through which it is constructed." [5]

In an ethnographic essay entitled "Abraham Lincoln as Authentic Reproduction: A Critique of Postmodernism," anthropologist Edward Bruner elucidates his constructivist position.[6] He begins with the oxymoronic notion of an "authentic reproduction," using as his example a reconstructed village and museum at the historical site of New Salem, Illinois, where Abraham Lincoln lived in the 1830s. The historical site has been entirely re-built to resemble as closely as possible the "real" 1830s New Salem, complete with actors in costume performing their daily duties for tourists and visitors. Like most historical sites, or reproduced historical objects, the site is advertised as an "authentic reproduction" of the original town it recreates.

Bruner carefully defines four meanings of the word authenticity in this context: verisimilitude, genuineness, originality, and authority. Verisimilitude is the pursuit of a passably authentic simulation of the past – for instance, whether or not contemporary tourists feel like Historic New Salem matches idea they have of what it should look like.[7] The second sense of the term, genuineness, refers to the actual proximity of the experience to real experience in the New Salem in the 1830s (if someone transported in time from New Salem in the 1830s would say that the reproduction closely resembles 1830s New Salem). Originality depends on whether or not the authentic object is actually the original; if the New Salem church is the same actual physical edifice that has been standing there for two hundred years, as opposed to an immaculate reconstruction made of different stones. And lastly, authenticity as authority refers to the way that things are officially or legally sanctioned as an authentic, which depends on the power structures that decide what is authentic and what is not.[8]

Authenticity in Bruner's sense of "the original," dependent on verifiable materiality, is only one of the term's four facets. Yet when using the word to describe someone's personality, we are speaking as materialists. Saying someone is being authentic or sincere doesn't mean that according to culture and customs, there is a code of behavior that we have all agreed should be considered sincere, and that this person is adhering to the code; it means that someone is acting in accordance with his or her inner self. In truth, social sincerity is like money: it can only work if everyone agrees what it looks like. Yet in assuming that sincerity

5 Sian Jones, "Negotiating Authentic Objects and Authentic Selves: Beyond the Deconstruction of Authenticity," *Journal of Material Culture* (2010)

6 Edward Bruner, "Abraham Lincoln as Authentic Reproduction: A Critique of Postmodernism," American Anthropologist, Vol. 96, No. 2 (1994)

7 Through an ethnography of Historic New Salem over time, Bruner illustrates how our idea about what is authentic is constantly changing. For example, there is little evidence to suggest what clothing people in New Salem actually wore in the 1830s, so tour guides have to improvise according to their idea of what outfits would look most authentic to visitors. In the 1970s, Historic New Salem's tour guides dressed in baggy jeans and worker clothes (which may not actually be too inaccurate). But by the 90s, tour guides were dressing in "little house on the prairie" style, since jeans didn't look historic anymore – somehow, to the 90s visitor, dirndl skirts "looked right" though they were inaccurate. The clothing is an obvious construction of what is imagined to be the authentic past. The collective imagination of an authentic 1830s outfit looked different in the 70s than it does now. Bruner writes, "These authors thus assume an original pure state, an authentic culture in the third sense, like the ethnographic present, before contact. It is as if history begins with tourism, which then pollutes the world."

8 In various works, Michel de Certeau also defines authenticity as an instrument of power, and suggests that re-appropriating the concept could be a method of resistance.

is materially verifiable, we create a type of moral judgment based in physicality, upon which our understanding of inner and outer layers of human personality are constructed. This division between inside and outside is the line between personality and behavior, when, in fact, personality is *one and the same as* the way it is enacted. No Venn diagram, only a loop.

It is crucial here to mark a point that Bruner touches on briefly, which is the fact that such physically connoted authenticity is both illogical and contagious. In terms of art and religion, this is an obvious and accepted fact: Jeff Koons can produce authentic works that he's never touched, as long as he's touched someone who's touched someone who's touched the brush (or not, but that's sort of the way we imagine it). Such contagion is an emotional, even visceral concern, if you think about the difference between wearing your grandmother's ring and wearing a flawless replica of your grandmother's ring. Material authenticity, like art, religion, and love, depends on magic.

Understanding how authenticity is constructed rather than materially intrinsic requires addressing the "fundamental problem with the essentialist vocabulary of originals and copies," which is the implication that, no matter how many copies have been made, there was at one point an original. Bruner agues that this idea of a distant original was actually cemented, rather than overturned, by the postmodern conception of the simulacrum. The concept of the simulacrum, so central to postmodernism's construction of reality, and to personhood, suggests to me that the postmodern authenticity of self remains an entirely materialist one. As Bruner writes, "The meaning of the text is not inherent in the text but emerges from how people read or experience the text," in other words, the original is just as much of a "construction of the present" as the copy is.

Either modern or postmodern, there is an implicit hierarchy set up between the original (the authentic) and the copy (the inauthentic); either the original is better or, for Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco, that the copy is better. The hierarchical positioning of copy and original is why authenticity is ultimately not a question of what is authentic, but rather *who* decides what is considered authentic, and is therefore an issue of authority and an instrument of power relationships. In daily life, these power relationships manifest as moralistic, social judgment, and account for a great deal of the way social groups organize themselves and judge one another.

> *"One effect of [the] search for meaningful—or authentic—experience is the highlighting of authenticity as nothing more nor less than the currency of the experience economy. We should not be surprised to find a business/motivational book entitled* Authenticity, *with the subtitle 'What Consumers Really Want.' "*
>
> - Martha Rosler

Authenticity is a commodity, bought and sold. In the same way that UNESCO employs a "test for authenticity" to determine the validity of world heritage sites (dependent on constructivism's third definition, "originality"), companies can refer to a recently-developed Australian ranking system called the Authentic Brand Index to determine how authentic they are. This index offers a particular insight into the loophole of how performing authenticity = authenticity; acting sincere = sincere. From the main page of the ABI website:

"In an age of abundant choice, consumers are drawn toward brands with an original story, an engaging identity and a sincere commitment to deliver what they promise. Think of fast-growing brands like Google, IGA, Apple and IKEA and they all have authenticity at their core....Authenticity helps fuel success in today's overtraded markets as consumers search for greater meaning and sincerity from the brands they choose - fuelled by a desire to connect with things that feel safe, certain and unambiguous."[9]

Here are some of the ABI's key "Drivers of Authenticity":

- *Originality*: The extent to which your brand has brought something new and different to market.
- *Declared Beliefs*: The extent to which your brand stands for more than just making money.
- *Sincerity*: The extent to which your brand tries hard not to let people down.
- *Heritage:* The extent to which your brand has a relevant and engaging story.

The Authentic Brand Index shows us that to seem authentic is to be authentic. The performance is the reality. If the brand can convincingly advertise that it has a personal story, that it's making something originary and singular, that it genuinely cares about us, that it's not solely interested in making money, and that it can prove it's telling the truth about all this, it will make more money. But this is ludicrous. We all know that companies exist to make money. And we know that the company must tell us these things in order to profit. How can we know this and still respond to the totally "sincere" declaration of authenticity that the company makes? How do we arrive at this willing suspension of disbelief?

If to be authentic is to seem authentic, pretending and being are not mutually exclusive. As Wallace wrote in the 1990s, irony was at one point a tool that separated pretending from being, that enabled you to say one thing and mean another, to juxtapose word with action. It was a way of getting around the either/or opposition inherent in all consumer decisions. The ability to apprehend the question without ultimately taking a stake in either response was irony's power; neither actively refusing the burger nor actively enjoying it. Of course, as Wallace explains, this potency was sapped from it when irony was

9 http://www.authenticbrandindex.com

fed back to consumers as a tool of totalizing advertising. Without irony, what tools are we left with to deviate from the dialectic that demands performance as a counterpoint to authenticity?

By altering the way we think about our inner and outer physical selves, we could become more opaque to the systems that turn us into conduits for endless flows of capital. To finally shift modernism's morals based on singularity and transparency, we would need to become more opaque, not more sincere.

Most of us have a friend who says really sharp things in the name of honesty and sincerity. Someone who likes to Tell It Like It is, whom you can't criticize for being mean since he or she is just being honest—as if transparency itself isn't a decision with an agenda. Sociologist Erving Goffman writes, "When the individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience, we may call him cynical, reserving the term 'sincere' for individuals who believe in the impression fostered by their own performance."[10] According to this conception, being sincere is irrelevant to performance; sincerity is simply the concerted effort to engage with other people. Social life requires both authentic intent and the ability to deceive, and it is not necessarily in our interest to know which is which. While we spend half our time trying to obfuscate our own performances, we are struggling to decode others as real or fake during the other half.[11] But the word "performance" has no antonym. Only by altering the conception of an authentic versus a performed self could the tendons of social relationships begin to stretch or contract, allowing social geometries to alter themselves according to a different philosophy of morals.

10 Erving Goffman, "Performances: Belief in the Part One is Playing," The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959)

11 Richard Wilk, anthropologist, in an e-mail (2012)

II

On Wojciech Kosma

"An operative hypothesis, an aesthetic problem is being processed in a fable-like manner, setting up a scene of relays of monads of perception with a definite starting and ending point but without certain moral. To communicate a certain problem in the performance (as the performance) will be using a hammer as a saw or a sound-box….To perform in the theater of means without ends."

- Petar Milat

Wojciech Kosma's work wrestles with the problems of authenticity in social relationships; the logical loop of "authentic performance," or the oxymoron of "acting natural" is at its heart. In summer 2011, Kosma presented a performance piece for the exhibition Based in Berlin, which involved two performers and lasted nearly three hours. The difficulty of describing the piece begins in the basic attempt to find a name for the role that the artist himself plays. Kosma is part of the audience during the performance itself, and to viewers unfamiliar with his work, his role in the piece is not clear. Because the work is presented in an art setting, we don't assume he's a "director" in the theatrical sense – and while the performance is in some sense rehearsed, it's not, strictly speaking, scripted. The next difficulty in explaining the work is to describe what happens between the two performers on stage, which is extremely powerful live, but which loses a lot of its clout in description and even video documentation.

To begin by describing what viewers encounter as they enter: a brightly-lit, slightly raised stage is placed in the middle of the auditorium space at Based in Berlin's Monbijou park location. The audience is seated in folding chairs on opposite sides of the platform. The performers are Sjoerd Dijk and Dwayne Browne, barefoot, wearing t-shirts and jeans. Dijk is a 23-year-old white American man with shoulder-length blond hair, slim build, and delicate face. Browne is a 26-year-old black British man with a muscular body and gauged ears. The performance begins with Dijk circling Browne in the center of the stage, the two of them holding hands. They begin to alternate between the different modes of interaction that will sustain them for the duration of the performance, beginning with joking banter, making up bits of songs and dances, and eventually progressing to rather extreme gymnastics. During the first half of the performance, there are long periods of protracted and awkward improvisational movement, which then incites conversations—joking, goading, questioning, and provoking, all the while they are embracing, roughhousing, and dancing. Dijk and Browne are fearless in terms of physical boundaries, and are aggressive yet sweet with each other. Less than ten

minutes into the performance, they take off their white shirts, and before a half hour elapses, they take off their jeans. Here is a slice of dialogue from the end of the first hour:

Browne: Everybody wants different things in life. Some people want to give people hugs. Some people just want a brand new Mercedes Benz.

Dijk: Everyone wants a brand new Mercedes Benz. Not everyone wants a hug.

B: Some people want a brand new Mercedes Benz, and a hug.

D: Well, what do you want?

B: What do I want?

D: Like, what's something I could give you right now, in exchange for that hug.

B: I was kind of hoping you would say what you want in life in general, not what you want right now.

D: I want to read Eckhardt Toll, and understand it!

B: What do I want from you? Give me something…tell me something private. Something you've never told anyone before, not your girlfriend, not your best friend, not anyone!

D: You have to really want it. Dwayne 90210 can't just want it.

B: 90210?

D: Beverly Hills 90210. It's an American thing.

B: Yeah, I know. You know, you can take away the first 0 and you get my birthday. Apart from the 2010 part…

D: I knew there was a connection!

B: Yeah. Enough! Give me something. For just me and you, and... the amount of people around us right now.

D: I have to think about it... Jesus …hmmm… if you had gotten to me like six months ago before I met you, I would have told you everything.

B: It's funny, that.

D: I have to think about it. ...Well it's nothing edgy. I don't tell people tons of things.

B: Why not?

D: Because they're boring.

B: Why do you think they're boring?

D: Because I don't tell them to people, and then I forget about them.

B: You mean like the sort of thing where you're thinking, wow I really need to tell that to somebody, and by the time you actually get to tell them you don't, because you think you'd have to be there to appreciate it?

D: No no no, well, let's see, something I haven't told anybody…I didn't buy a subway ticket today.

B: …Man, you suck.

D: You want a specific answer, you gotta ask a specific question. A question is half the answer.

B: FYI, neither did I.

D: What?

B: Neither did I, because I rode. I rode my bicycle all the way here.

D: Yeah, so did I.
(pause, laughter)

D: Why would I tell you I didn't buy a ticket today?

B: Because… you make things up on the spot.

D: No, I didn't [make it up]. I rode my bike. (pause) Now that that's solved….

The physical and dialogic aspects of the work are so integral to each other that it is bizarre (and somewhat inaccurate) to present the dialogue estranged from the action. The rhythm of the speech either conforms to the rhythm of the movements, or the vocal and the physical run contrary to each other, expressing basic forms of verbal, situational, and dramatic irony. This occurs when one of the performers self-referentially describes what is happening, reflects upon an earlier moment in the performance, keeps a secret or punchline from the other or from the audience, or when a physical movement either acts out or contradicts what is being said. The relationship between physical and mental activity is presented in all its complexity and with as little censorship as possible, providing a portrait of human self-awareness and, more to the point, of the human relationship between the two people. Several audience members assume that the nakedness and the ironic humor are gimmicks, but I would argue strongly that they are integral and functional aspects of the work that arrive out of necessity rather than a desire to distract.

Action accelerates during the second half of the performance. It is unclear to the audience what has been agreed upon by the actors in advance, but it seems that the two have some kind of joking agreement or dare dependent upon taking off the last of their clothes. The sexually-suggestive physical improvisation escalates into full-blown naked action, and the men finally take their briefs off. Dijk is self-conscious at first, covering his crotch with his hands, but through goading by Browne it's only matter of minutes until he's sitting on Browne's shoulders pouring a bottle of water over him. Browne rips a fluorescent bulb out from the ceiling fixture. They teabag each other, make jokes about pre-cumming, and seem to lose all sense of privacy or humiliation.

There is a ritualistic aspect to what occurs. At times the dialogue is reminiscent of a drug trip, when

conversation circles around the mutually-understood profundity and hyper-reality of the situation. And there is the element of near-religious discipline to the performers' interaction: the sheer duration of the performance makes it demanding, and the action is clearly physically exhausting. But it's the fact that Browne and Dijk are working so hard that makes it acceptable for them to demand the audience's attention for so long too, and in this way they successfully make an argument for engagement and awareness on both sides. The performers in Kosma's piece trust in the audience's intelligence, and ask us to chalk it up. This approach argues for rigor on both sides, and epitomizes sociologist Erving Goffman's notion of "sincere" performance.[1] Though most artists would probably agree in principle that artists should "sincerely believe in the effect fostered" by their work, I think that very few make the leap of faith required by belief in one's audience. This leap requires intimacy, vulnerability, and possibly humiliation. Kosma's faith in his audience is personified by his two performers, who literally prostrate themselves before us naked, their desire to connect with us strong enough to force them through the barriers of self-doubt and embarrassment.

Plenty of performance artists push through humiliation and pain--picture Marina Abramovic carving stars on her stomach. But we never get to witness her transformation from a human to a superhuman performance artist; we don't observe meta-awareness, instead she remains a unified, mostly humorless front. The violence of her action slices through any of the human ambivalence that would keep *you* from doing such a thing. In contrast, by allowing the audience in on the joke, Dijk and Browne allow us to become part of their dynamic, included and therefore complicit. Ultimately, they reward us for our patience with their own nakedness. The nakedness acknowledges our need for a reward, anticipating the subjugated position we may unconsciously desire to see them in. Furthermore, this acknowledgement avoids being an aggressive challenge for the audience to objectify them, since the performers actively objectify themselves.

The relationship between Dijk and Browne does not simply drive the performance but sets up its entire condition, inducing its own rhythm, internal logic, and parameters. Without props or distractions, they create something fascinating from nothing but the context into which they are placed and the history of their relationship with each other – as Petar Milat writes, "To communicate a certain problem in the performance…will be using a hammer as a saw or a sound-box." The men take a set of conditions (which Kosma has set out for them) and then use every part of themselves (bodies - memories - jokes) as their tools. The word improvisation, which I would generally like to avoid, could be applied accurately here in the sense of improvising survival when lost in the forest with no knife or matches or food. Here, humiliation, boredom, and irony themselves become particularly productive. It would be relevant to consider David Foster Wallace's description of irony as the ultimate "fear of ridicule"— since it is through their use of irony that Dijk and Browne flaunt (at once exposing, denying, and enacting) our collective desire to avoid ridicule. It might seem that their running straight towards the risk of ridicule would border on self-flagellation or masochism, if it wasn't obvious that they were having so much fun transgressing it.

The reduction of a relationship to such a bare place, a place that could be called honesty and attentiveness, is perhaps the reason they, and many of Kosma's performers, so often end up naked during the performances—not because nakedness attracts attention and not necessarily because it intends to suggest a sexual tension underlying most relationships. That is to say, when a connection between people is reduced to such bare bones, intensifying in the process, there arrives a point at which any further reduction necessitates literal nakedness.[2] This kind of skeletal honesty allows the audience to witness the backbone of someone else's close physical relationship, which is a scenario that rarely presents itself in regular life. It is this nakedness, the manifestation of a complete lack of pretense, that is to me the performance's strongest point--though before seeing the show I might have assumed it to be the weakest. I heard the work described by an audience member simply in terms of extenuated sexual tension: "You want to see how far the two of them will go without actually fucking." But again, this withheld climax does not seem to me to be the scaffolding of the work, but an outcome of it. When talking about this aspect of the work, Kosma himself says that the men's familiarity with each other's bodies, which they've acquired from months of "practice time" physically messing around with each other, is what makes viewers assume a sexual relationship.[3] The point is that, like the signifiers for race or gayness (which is not the content of the piece anymore than nakedness is), the very relationship between Dijk and Brown cannot be reduced to one term: friendship, brotherly love, sexual love—what does the terminology matter? The performance points to identity as a moving target itself, and the performers dance their way out of becoming signifiers for a singular identity.

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1 (as quoted earlier) "When the individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience, we may call him cynical, reserving the term 'sincere' for individuals who believe in the impression fostered by their own performance."

2 From conversation with the artist.

3 From conversation with the artist.

Kosma's profound absence from the piece relieves the pressure for the work to be a means to any particular end. His role has been displaced to that of the creator of conditions in which the action can occur; to negate himself, to allow everything and demand nothing, thus extricating the work as much as possible from spheres of value production (knowledge/capital/cultural capital). Through the reduction of the performers' relationship to a vacuous space, we are able to witness and consider the performative nature of all our relationships. What if you could really have a relationship in a vacuum? A relationship outside of any economy?[4]

A more productive question to ask might be, how could we acknowledge the fact that a materially authentic self does not exist, and yet still be "true" friends with each other? By situating the dilemma within the sphere of interaction that is labeled explicitly as performance, which does indeed carry a preassumed set of parameters, it is possible to see that authentic behavior has nothing to do with transparency of intent, but the belief that the effort to communicate will be received. Trust begets trust; work begets work. In the performance, Dijk and Browne often break the fourth wall, addressing the audience or even sitting in an audience member's lap, arranging entertaining vignettes for us, trying to impress us, and remaining explicitly aware that they want us to like them – emotionally and physically naked. By openly referencing the fact that they are indeed performing, both for each other and for the audience, the performers flaunt our desire for authenticity in both relationships and in performances, all the while presenting us with the intimacy, affection, and rigorous engagement of "authentic" friendship and art.

David Foster Wallace presents us with this scenario in Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: what if you walked around a party asking everyone, "Do you like me?" and saying, "I want you to like me! Please like me!"[5] Wallace goes so far as to implore the reader directly, for the very reason that it is never acceptable for friends, much less writers or artists, to say these things outright, since it would be seen as evidence of contemptible desperation for approval. And yet, Kosma's work shows how it is possible to reference one's need to be liked, and yet push beyond this need (rather than become trapped in the meta-loop of "telling you I want you to like me as a way of making you like me more, and you know this, so you like me more, and you know that you know this...). This is how the contradiction inherent to the existential "authenticity of self" becomes a valid working term for discussing Kosma's projects. The audience is able to witness as self and performed self converge, indistinguishable. To cite Robert Ezra Park: "…everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role… It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves…. In the end, our conception of our role becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality. We come into the world as individuals, achieve character, and become persons."[6] In regards to identity politics, then, Browne and Dijk's pursuit could be said to be the attempt to return to individuality from personhood.

We are familiar with ephemerality and time-based work. We understand the inherent problems of documentation and marketing time-based, product-less art. We saw how relational aesthetics responded by pushing relationships themselves into a commodifiable space, leaching agency from artists and imbuing them instead with the limpid power to brand themselves and their friendships, turning life-as-art into nothing more than furniture. The life-art blend has been drained of its potency, replacing work-through-relationship with relationship-as-commodity. For me, seeing Kosma's performance reactivated the possibility that artful relationships are still occurring somewhere, and not just so that they can be called art. This performance manages to be relevant to art practice at the very moment it produces an outlet from art practice. If the art scene can produce outlets from itself, I rest assured that it is still functioning. And that there is sincere, authentic work to be made.

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4 Kosma writes in an email: "Observe how they interact outside of the "theatrical" space. it's totally different, if only because they spend different amounts of time together inside and outside of the performance. The whole point of the performance was to create a relationship inside of the theater space…I do consider an intimate relationship the highest form of performance and the only way to…show it without compromising the trust, is to make it from scratch in the theater. So in other words they might have two different friendships going on now, the performance one and the other one, developed in [the Berlin bar] 'Times.' "

5 David Foster Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999)

6 As cited in Goffman, 19: Robert Ezra Park, *Race and Culture* Glencoe, IL: The Free Press (1950), 249.