Performing Disruptions

A Bodily Encounter with Misogyny in Lifestyle Television

Rose Beermann

1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will trace my experience as author and performer of "Strip naked, talk naked," a performance I created in 2014 together with my collaborator Iva Sveshtarova. The performance is itself an intertwining of aesthetics and politics in response to the television show *Blachman*, which was broadcasted in 2013 by a Danish public TV channel. Due to its inflammatory nature, it ignited an international media response. Invented by the Danish jazz musician and X-Factor judge Thomas Blachman, the TV show is structured as follows: In a dark studio without spectators, two men are sitting on a sofa. They are fully clothed. In front of the two men steps a woman who removes her bathrobe and stands naked and fully illuminated in front of them. The men then discuss female beauty, male sexuality and cognate subjects. The camera moves back and forth; the exposed woman stays silent. The TV show's stated goal is to teach men to verbally express their sexuality. The premise is that women and men are no longer allowed to express themselves equally in polite society. In analysis of *Blachman*, I realized that the TV show is not only about representing a particular idea of gender but, in fact, about producing it with enormous intensity. At the same time, a specific heterosexual male subjectivity and a certain form of perception of women and their bodies are produced through this performance. Something in the performative structure of the TV show, however, seemed to effectively obscure the underlying power structures and deprive them of analysis. This very fact brought us reenact the TV show in the first place, aiming at a bodily response (1). With our bodies as a central means of expression, we wanted the audience to *feel* our critique. To do so, we chose *reenactment* as a method, but its main limitation proved to reproduce this gendered argument couched within a sensory order—which I will identify as belonging to *affective economies*—instead of disrupting it, as hoped; so, we turned to two further disruptive means with *micropolitical ruptures* and the concept of *underperformance* to get the audience squirming as much as we did ourselves.

The circumstance that *Blachman* was produced and broadcasted by a public TV channel points to the acceptability of such a misogynist idea of gender by a broad public. How do those images of men (and women) attract an audience? In the rehearsal process for "Strip naked, talk naked," we were looking for a resistant performance of femininity that might allow us to counter the male flow of speech. By understanding *Blachman* as a specific aesthetic practice of sexuality, the critique became about proposing subversive ways of sensory perception. We were searching for forms of sensuous address to re-negotiate the way how we are perceived as women standing naked and silent in front of two men. However, we came up against the limits of the idea of reenactment itself for establishing another bodily reality. Starting by a reenactment that could be read as such, we moved to the boundaries of the form itself as the performance progressed. The question of what I, as a performing artist, can do to counter prevailing forms of perception still occupies me today: How can a rather small-scale and clearly framed intervention like a performance make us experience the *sensing of collectives*?

Following the analysis of the sociologist Andreas Reckwitz that social orders are always sensual orders, I assume here that "sense regimes" operate on the level of bodies, affects and artifacts (2015; 2017; 2017a). This puts the body and the senses at the center of theory making. From my perspective as a performing artist, I wonder if this shift in perspective on the functioning of social orders requires a different form of writing, an embodied form of writing. Building on the work of ethnographer Dwight Conquergood as well as sociologists Norman K. Denzin and Laurel Richardson, I propose autoethnographic writing to reflect on my experience as author and performer of "Strip naked, talk naked." Autoethnography focuses on personal experiences to explore one's own practice, which makes it a promising way to present my case. As an embodied writing about an embodied practice, autoethnography allows me to approach academic writing from the perspective of my artistic practice, and to produce within the reader some of the sensations I hope to produce in my audiences.

To understand, how the sensory perception of a woman's body is done in *Blachman*, I will first analyze its performative structure with reference to the media scholar Gareth Palmer and his critical analysis of *lifestyle television*. Following on from this, I will report from the rehearsal process and the experience of performing the finished piece. I will outline the way we have related ourselves to the original material to identify forms of bodily critique we employed in the performance. Based on the artistic choices we made, I will discuss the potential of performance practice for (un-)doing sense regimes. Building on the work of performance theoreticians Bojana Kunst and Stefan Hölscher, I will explore the idea of micropolitical ruptures and the critical potential of a reenactment. Considering the limitations we have experienced in working with the form of reenactment, I will end by proposing the

idea of *underperformance* by queer feminist philosopher Laurent Berlant as a way to perceive each other differently.

2. AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS AN EMBODIED FORM OF WRITING

Recognizing how much personal experience influences a research process, autoethnography takes into account subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on the research itself. This makes the body the first and foremost instrument of research, verbalizing physical perception, emotions, and the capacity for empathy are the base for writing an autoethnography. This approach was articulated by ethnographer Dwight Conquergood (2006/1991) and sociologist Norman K. Denzin, who developed the concept of "performance ethnography." This concept refers to the combination of academic writing and performance practice, often with the goal of communicating research findings through performance (1997, 2003, 2006). However, from my perspective as a performing artist, I am not interested in translating theoretical research findings on stage but bringing my experience creating performances into dialogue with academic writing.

Based on lived experience, autoethnography aims at resonance with the reader's experience, as sociologist Laurel Richardson vividly illustrated in "Fields of play: constructing an academic life" (1997). By including the process of writing in the writing itself, she involves the reader in the creation of her book. To do so, Richardson advocates for the aesthetic value of autoethnography, but not for a specific form (2000, p. 15). Thus, the method is about the search for another language, a way of storytelling that not only names and classifies the underlying experiences, but makes them tangible. This does not mean, however, that it is primarily a matter of autobiographical writing. Richardson suggests the following:

> [T]he central imaginary is the crystal which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. … Crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic. (1994, p. 522)

Like the infinite number of shapes, dimensions, and angles of a crystal, different forms of knowledge can be related in autoethnographic writing. But even though a crystal can always look different and even change its shape, it always has a structure. Thinking through sensuous, embodied experience makes it possible to relate different forms of analysis and different genres of writing.

3. AFFECTIVE ECONOMIES IN LIFESTYLE TELEVISION

In the TV show's title sequence, Blachman claims his ambition to "positively recharge the women's view of men's view of women" to meet the circumstance that "the female body is craving words, a man's words" (transcript of the first episode, translation: Matilda Mester). Introducing himself as a "modern man, and therefore more of a woman than any woman ever had the ambition to be, unfortunately" that is not able to face this challenge on his own, Blachman continues by introducing his guest, a different male figure from public live in Denmark for each episode.

Following the media scholar Gareth Palmer (2008), I would identify the TV show as "lifestyle television," a genre which is centered around the neoliberal idea of the flexible self: Mediating the optimization of daily practices, lifestyle television is based on the phantasm that the self is a question of choice, strategically obscuring social, economic, and political dimensions. Furthermore, Palmer draws attention to lifestyle television's tendency to reproduce normative femininity. Questioning the social recognition of such reactionary positions, he identifies the co-existence of a distancing irony, an as-if in a supposedly playful setup, with the simultaneous re-affirmation of normative femininity as the very characteristic of lifestyle television.

Interestingly, all of Blachman's guests are either intellectuals or artists, and, in the conversations, they are asked to use their specific expertise to find a language for his proclaimed project. So, besides its misogynistic character, *Blachman* is deeply problematic in terms of class: A writer, a fashion designer, a visual artist, a songwriter, a rapper and a sexologist are introduced as experts to ensure "striving, discretion and good taste" (Palmer, 2008, p. 6) in expressing heterosexual male sexuality. Palmer points out the role of the expert in this very format as early as 2003, describing a development he will later call life-style television. Aiming at the transformation of selves, the role of these experts is to make this process as entertaining as possible. As with Blachman, their background is in the service industry, committed to consumer culture in their profession to shape the self. At the center of these operations is the body as the venue for the struggle for self-optimization (p. 175 ff.). Palmer conceptualizes the moment of broadcasting as "a shift from the panoptic to the synoptic" (p. 148), opening the possibility for the many to look at the few in how they are made subjects of normalization. As a hook for the TV show, Blachman states the impending loss of heterosexual male identity in a supposedly incomprehensible new living environment. To counter this state of emergency, he presents himself as an expert to establish a "re-naturalization" of gender relations. Instead of dealing with male bodies, perversely, women's bodies are subjected to discipline. Female subjects are silenced and objectified to restore a powerful, oppressive male subject in the synopticum of public television.

Regardless of views affirming or criticizing *Blachman*, discussions that took place with colleagues while developing our performative response to the TV show were characterized by a strange inaccessibility or inability to formulate a clear argument. Discussing the concept of "Strip naked, talk naked" with us, one male dramaturg insisted on his "right to arousal." Obviously, he felt backed into a corner by the mere fact that two women were planning to develop a performance about the TV show (he hadn't even seen a rehearsal yet). According to his impression, there was no space for heterosexual male sexuality in his social environment. Discussing *Blachman* with female friends, every one of them was outraged by the fact that a public TV channel produced and broadcasted a show which reaffirms such a narrow, problematic idea of gender. But in the discussion itself, the arguments seemed to be missing: The conversations were dominated by expressions of anger and frustration, and it was difficult to grasp why the TV show was enjoying such success at the present time.

Using the idea of mediality and the principle of premediation, formulated by the media scholar Richard Grusin, I assume here that media function by producing affective states and, in this way, influence future events (2010, p. 6 f.). In the conversations described, I became aware that representation and production of a certain gender image are deeply intertwined in *Blachman*. Packaged in an entertaining TV format, the underlying misogynistic attitude becomes even more threatening. The gesture of a supposed re-naturalization of the relationship between genders seems to effectively obscure the underlying power structures and deprive them of analysis. The way this TV format defies analysis forces me to acknowledge the power of such affective economies (Ahmed, 2004), shuddering with disgust. The concept of the queer-feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed describes the way, how particular feelings and values become "stuck" to specific notions. The emerging affective economies shape the affective response to particular statements, objects, and actions. In *Blachman*, the woman is constructed as the other by marking her behavior as the cause of feelings of inadequacy, frustration, and unfulfilled desire in heterosexual males and thereby mobilizing feelings of hatred towards women. A fantasy of a collective subjectivity of disadvantaged male heterosexuals is created, who are now collectively reclaiming their right to penetration. The intensity with which *Blachman* succeeds in generating such a fantasy can only be explained by the affective economies in which the TV show is embedded.

4. FEELING NAKED, OR: ARGUMENTS BEYOND WORDS

For the reenactment we wanted to create, the first step was to explore the affective economies of and around *Blachman* practically. Therefore, we started rehearsals with a precise reconstruction of the TV show on stage: Iva Sveshtarova and I analyzed

Blachman building upon our knowledge as choreographers, meticulously tracking every movement, every camera pan, every cut. The intimate atmosphere of the TV show seemed to be produced by close-ups, a handheld camera and slow camera pans of the women's bodies as well as the supposedly casual set-up of Blachman's studio. As in the TV show, the stage remained empty for the reconstruction, except for two side-by-side leather chairs on which our "Blachman" and his guest were placed. To recreate these approaches of the camera to the bodies, we experimented with different theatrical means to direct the gaze of the audience. Therefore, we set points in space for specific camera perspectives. To translate camera pans, we worked with small choreographies. We had performers intensify or weaken their actions to direct the attention of the audience to specific images. Later in the process, our lightening designer also worked to direct the spectator's gaze, recreating the extensive square studio light present in *Blachman* and subtly highlighting places on stage with additional spotlights. To perform cuts, we choreographed freezes to clearly end one camera view, pausing in new positions for a moment before resuming the action. We invited Sebastian König and Daniel Hinocho to perform Blachman and his guest. These performers joined the rehearsal process a little later. Together with our dramaturg Marcel Bugiel, we edited a script out of the six episodes, compiling the most striking dialogues between Blachman and his guests. The reconstruction of the TV show on stage went well and I developed a kind of perverse pleasure in the clever precision with which *Blachman* is constructed.

The central question in the rehearsal process, however, was how to make our audience *feel* our critique of *Blachman*. This became an almost insurmountable task because—and I can only speak for myself here—I literally felt naked, deprived of my expressive possibilities in view of the affect mobilizing machine, I perceived *Blachman* to be.

> Blachman (B): The woman isn't a threat, she is a wonderful counterpart. The woman becomes a threat if she can't take in the man, if she can't deliver her half of the deal. Without crossing the border. You are yourself, and I am myself. You take care of your business, I'll take care of mine. Give me a fucking moment of silence and just be a woman.

Staging this monologue in front of a live audience seemed to create a certain alienation. The reconstruction of *Blachman* on stage would disclose the TV show's mode of production but this was far from the statement we wanted to make. How to disrupt the situation without making the subject of our critique unrecognizable? How to open up spaces for subverting ways to be perceived? We experimented with dance styles, costumes, and props which we associated with a resistant performance of femininity: burlesque dances, living paintings, Duncan technique, dances with particular female body parts, bikinis, nipple pasties, nudes, fake plants, fruits, and many more practices and artifacts we found during our research in the depths of

the internet. For a few days, we were even fantasizing about a spectacular showdown between men and women inspired by Western movies. Based on this scenic research, we developed several strategies to disrupt the performative structure of the TV show. I will elaborate these strategies in the following along a description of the finished performance.

We decided to start the performance with a reconstruction of the TV show but slowly moving out of the performative structure. From the beginning, we were breaking with the regime of precision and integrity that usually characterizes a reconstruction. We did not change our appearance to make the men's comments (quoted from the actual show) suit our bodies; so it happened that the two men were commenting on my supposedly short hair whereas I was wearing it long at that time, they did also comment on my tattoos even if there were none visible on my naked body. Whereas the two male performers were asked to stick to the filmic original, Iva Sveshtarova and I did not. These small disturbances point to the fact that the performance was not an affirmative reconstruction of a media event; instead, it was a reenactment created by two female artists.

After the two men entered the stage and sat down on two adjacent chairs, just like the actual show, I entered the stage in a black satin bathrobe. I stopped in the middle of the stage and—unlike the show—looked briefly towards the audience before opening my bathrobe and letting it slide over my shoulders onto the floor. I remember always hearing my heart beating with excitement at that moment, anxiously awaiting how the atmosphere would change with my act of undressing. Most evenings, my act was followed by a tense, fragile silence. I held this tension for a moment and then turned around to the two men who were positioned diagonally behind me and they began to speak.

> B: Such a fine, silent entrance. You could hear that wasn't a man. Like an insect.
> Guest (G): But also… They shouldn't do that… it's a sneaky walk, a tricky walk, where you think: Am I going to be taken by surprise now? Women should stop thinking they have to surprise… to do a good job.

I listened as this dialogue continued and observed the reactions of the audience. I also allowed myself to comment on the dialogue of the two men with a glance at the audience, as well as shooting them a look for their reactions to a certain extent, or by stepping out of my position in front of the chairs or letting go of a pose and performing a relaxing exercise. Reconstructing a close-up of the two men, they were positioned facing the audience, I left the stage for a short break in the meantime and came back when they had changed to the next camera setting. After a few changes of position, my collaborator entered to replace me. We smiled at each other—unlike the show—and I exited backstage while the two men continued talking.

B: But just look at that ass… […] what do you prefer?
G: Ass-wise?
B: The shape of a drop, baggy or what do you want?
G: That is a nice ass.
B: Just simply a nice ass? To the woman: Could you please turn around again?
G: Legs and breasts are important, I think. They communicate really fast. And the way they move. To the woman: Could you move a little bit? Just walk back and forth.
B: To the woman: May I see you from the side?
G: I love asses. To the woman: Turn around, please!
B: To the woman: May we see the pussy there, just for a moment?

Iva Sveshtarova responded to this request with an ironic smile and a suggested presentation gesture with her arms while turning to the two men. Shortly afterwards, she simply put on her bathrobe and left. Then, we entered stage together to perform a short dance. Obviously, we had departed from the show's format by now. Creating short dances to be performed in between was another strategy to disrupt the performative structure of the TV show. We took on the (passive) TV images of women that appeared in the conversation between the two men, with the idea of countering them with a (lively, dancing) bodily reality. For the transitions between the reconstruction and the short dances, we entered the stage again each time in the paradigmatic black bathrobe, took it off, performed our dance and put it on again to leave the stage. The two men remained sitting in their chairs, seemingly unaffected by what was going on. These short dances left traces on the stage and on our bodies, which remained visible in the further course of the performance.

For one of the dances, we had explored images of a "natural femininity." The dance began by rolling balls made of plastic leaves (the kind used as potted hedge miniatures for hotel décor or other representative architectures). These dark-green, slightly absurd artifacts remained on the stage like a plastic moonscape. Inspired by burlesque dances, we performed another dance where we shook our boobs in every way imaginable. We wore oversized, self-made nipple pasties and moved a little bit too resolutely (in my case) or too pleasingly (in my collaborator's case). The rest of the performance was spent with long colorful threads attached to my breasts that seemed to pop out of my nipples.

B: That's also the complex and abstract nature of women nowadays, that they have both this feminine ambition… of being overly dressed up and at the same time have a traditional male career. If they could only be completely crazy! All the time. Then they could do whatever they want…
G: Because then you feel more normal?
B: No, then I'm entertained, then I'm not bored.
G: So you just need to be entertained?

> B: I need a show from when I get up till I go to bed, I need to ease the pain, call it what you like.

After approximately forty minutes, the two men dropped out of their performance as Blachman and his guest. They undressed silently and started commenting on the audience. Shortly afterwards, we entered to interrupt and ask them to leave the stage. After asking the audience for comments, we announced ourselves as the creators of the performance and outlined the concept of *Blachman*. The performance could have ended here, but we had the feeling that we had not escaped this entertainment machine yet. Interestingly, the majority of our test audience, whom we invited towards the end of the rehearsal process, hardly seemed to question the relationship of our short dances to the original material. Most of them expressed the desire for more intensity and stimulation: more feelings, more dances, more flesh, more sex. However, I did not want to comply with this request, because I had come to the conclusion during the rehearsal process: I could not escape the situation by exaggerating the TV images of women more and more. Where would this end up? In putting dildos rhythmically in my body to some fancy beat?

Because the time until the premiere was short, Iva Sveshtarova proposed to share loosely connected artifacts and related scenic ideas that we had gathered during the rehearsal process. I agreed since this did not seem to me at least to correspond to *Blachman*'s idea of gender. We named the artifacts and brought them in relation to our bodies, for example, we recreated scenes from renaissance paintings with the plastic plants, or my collaborator decorated my folded arms with fruits so that I turned into a living fruit basket. The performance ended after we had dressed in street clothes, cleaned the stage to leave it to our sound and light designer for a little duet of their skills. Avoiding a melodramatic logic that would demand a climax and a resulting resolution of what had gone before, we did what from today's perspective I would identify as underperformance, according to Lauren Berlant:

> Underperformativity, a mode of flat or flattened affect that shows up to perform its recession from melodramatic norms, foregrounds the obstacles to immediate reading, without negating the affective encounter with immediacy. (Berlant, 2015, p. 193)

By performing the unfinished scenic fragments pragmatically, one after the other without further contextualization, and then leaving the audience alone with the technical apparatus of the theater, the last part of the performance eluded a clear interpretation of the situation. Although this artistic decision caused much incomprehension, I still find it interesting today because it allowed us to escape the attributions as "women" called on stage by *Blachman*.

5. A BODILY CRITIQUE?

Discussing the particular temporality of performance, the philosopher and performance theoretician Bojana Kunst (2015) conceptualizes its political potential emerging from its very materiality through which a situative re-ordering, "a micropolitical rearrangement" can take place. Thus, performance practice never addresses specific politics but itself can become a political act: "there is no concept of politics that would suit the practice of performance, and no performance which would give us a satisfactory answer with respect to its politics" (p. 1). Insisting on the singularity of performance practices, which she assumes to be the precondition for their political potential, she ascribes them the power to create micropolitical ruptures. As singular event, a performance forms a temporally and spatially bounded community of shared experience. And yet the perception of the experienced can vary greatly from audience member to audience member. A micropolitical rupture might emerge when something supposedly familiar is perceived in an unfamiliar way and this experience is disruptive. The question of how a disruption of prevailing forms of perception affects a larger context depends primarily on its potential to attract more people to the same cause.

As described above, we explored the idea of reenactment creating disruptions. In response to the performance, the Austrian dance critique Helmuth Ploebst stressed the political importance of reenacting a TV show like this, which he considered to be "essential in a hyper-oblivious time like ours" (2015, my translation). But at the same time, he asked "if the pure reenactment as a documentary performance within the frame of a contemporary theater festival would still be self-explanatory enough—or if explicitly articulated critique would be needed again" (Ploebst 2015). I am still asking myself what "explicitly articulated critique" could be within the frame of such a performance. Indeed, what would be the point of performing if the critique is explicitly articulated?

The performance theoretician Stefan Hölscher (2018) identifies the meaning and purpose of a reenactment not in the faithful reconstruction of the original but in "the breaking up of events" (p. 523, my translation). Following Michel Foucault, Hölscher proposes an idea of event that goes beyond its discursive reading, as something that exists within and through networks of power and knowledge but at the same time has the potential to escape them.

> Unlike reconstruction, which attempts to reconstruct events trapped in facts, reenactment, as presented here, aims at the boundary itself between the order of facts and the disorder of events, at the storm between the sensuous and the intelligible. (p. 531, my translation)

Reenactment, then, can bring to light that which cannot be captured through the practices of writing down and classifying: the unordered, the unclear, the sensual,

the dirty, the unhinged. Hölscher develops the idea of an "aesthetic theatricality" (p. 523, my translation) and conceptualizes a surplus of the sensual as critical potential. From my perspective as a performing artist, I would like to pursue the question here of how such a form of non-discursive, bodily critique can be practiced. In light of my experience as a performer standing naked in front of an audience, I would like to ask: How can I renegotiate the way I want to be perceived? In my experience, the idea of reenactment has limits for establishing another bodily reality. If the affective economies in which the source material is embedded are very powerful and efficient, it is not easy to find gaps for subverting ways of sensory perception. Building upon the work of queer-feminist philosopher Lauren Berlant, in what follows I would like to suggest another way to counter prevailing forms of perception.

6. DANCING IN A SPACE OF BROKEN FORMS

Berlant uses the term "flat" or "flattened affect" for exploring the possibility of resisting dominant genres of sense and feeling. She conceptualizes affective structures "as beneath the surface of explicit life that is collective, saturating atmospheres of held but inexplicit knowledge" (2015, p. 194). This understanding refers, on the one hand, to the question of how these structures emerged historically and, on the other hand, to the emergence of growing social structures. Questioning the supposed connection between high intensity and importance, she disagrees with any "self-evidence of excess" (Berlant 2015, p. 195). Adapting the concept of interpassivity by the philosopher Slavoj Žižek (1998), she claims:

> In this remodeling of the concept, interpassivity is the condition of relationality as such; and affective activity communicates first as inexpressive form, presuming that we no longer know it when we feel it, and vice versa, whether or not it seems to provide a neutral or holding space for assessing situations of being-with. (Berlant 2015, p. 196)

Berlant advocates for underperformance as a mode of encounter that does not anticipate its perception and therefore invites an aesthetics of apprehension. These forms of (non-)expression, she finds in "performance modes that do not provide emotional clarity but, whatever else they do, dramatize the process of sociality by wedging open what shapes the encounter as such" (Berlant 2015). How to invite more of those minor forms of being together? Which practices do not presume the event in the space of an encounter? After writing this narrative inquiry in spring 2021, I feel the desire to explore practically how to create that very style of underperformance: How to escape "that modality of performance that attaches feeling stated to their gestural inflation in bodily performance" (Berlant 2015, p. 191)? Inspired by Berlant's demand for "living in a space of broken forms" (2016a), I would like to explore dancing in a space of

broken forms, creating bodily realities that might allow us to sense each other differently. How could one inhabit a space of broken forms? Being there, I understand as the refusal to express certain feelings and values excessively and comprehensively, so that their dominant forms collapse like empty shells. Therefore, in my bodily research I would look not for physical forms of expression but for the underlying physical states and atmospheres and affects related to such states. As a temporary microcosm, performance is a valuable research space to explore the preconditions for being together as a sensing collective. Thus, the basis for exploring underperformance would be considering performance primarily as a social situation. For this is where I see the political potential of performance: Speculating about resistant forms of being together and hereby creating micropolitical ruptures, through which we might catch a glimpse of possible futures.

Endnote

(1) I would like to note here that this text only reflects my perspective, since I wrote it without Iva Sveshtarova. The "we" I use here is in no way meant to render invisible the differences that are always part of a collective authorship, rather they are not the focus of this contribution. Therefore, I have chosen to use "we" to refer either to shared decisions within our collective authorship or to the temporally and situationally limited community as female performers on stage.

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