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“The Chymical Wedding”

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An account of the performance of
“the chymical wedding” from the
perspective of a member of the
audience (as we imagined it)

On 1 January 2008 I joined a number of spectators on the steps of Tate Britain to witness “The Chymical Wedding” performed by *Plastique Fantastique*, a group styling themselves as a band of mummers “from the extreme past and future.”¹ The gang, who by sporting masks took up the roles of various avatars that they named as eternal forms and redundant commodity forms, had already paraded along the banks of the Thames before assembling on the steps to make a proclamation. One avatar, which the group referred to as Fox-Owl (presumably, an eternal form), announced that a wedding was to take place and that a contract was to be written in pain and in blood that would prove, once and for all, that there was “no such thing as the sexual relation.” This strange declaration, that begged reference to psychoanalytic concepts,² was met with joyous cries and applause that soon evolved into an incessant chanting, drumming and singing as the group entered the building. Serving as a wedding march, this riotous racket gradually petered out as the mummers arrived at the central atrium. Here the group called for silence from the assembled audience and we all fell mute as the performers began to strip one of their number. With some care, the group took away the mask and cloak, and therefore the identity, of one of the redundant commodity forms they all called Subkast Kofke.³ At this, some of my fellow audience members laughed and heckled and others muttered their displeasure at not being able to hear or see the performance clearly. I, however, amongst others, entered into the spirit

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**“THE CHYMICAL
WEDDING”**
*performance art as
masochistic practice
(an account, the
contracts and further
reflections)*

of the performance and began to feel myself strangely involved.

The ceremony continued with Fox-Owl demanding that the mummers hand over different articles of the contract. With much show, each member of the group handed forth an item to dress the “naked” Subkast Kofke who was thus transformed by a black hood and bindings of various kinds into a blind and straining body. This took several minutes during which many members of our sizeable “congregation” who were unable to see the ceremony grew restless. When the articles had been administered, the no-longer-Subkast Kofke twitched like a frightened animal, issuing piercing cries that reminded me of a stuck pig. What was intended

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by this transformation? Whether Subkast Kofke had become bride or groom, or beast or sacrifice, or defiled priest or slave, was difficult to ascertain at this point of the proceedings. Perhaps the significance of the symbolic erasure of Subkast Kofke was merely a preparation of some kind for the arrival of *something else*?

In fact, this was not a bad guess on my part as the players greeted the hooded and trussed new arrival with the words, “Welcome Third Thing!” At this point in the proceedings a wave of white noise erupted and rolled through the atrium, so loud that I raised my fingers to my ears to ease the discomfort produced by this torturous sonic assault. The sound track accompanied the appearance of a figure, projected high above the mummeters, who the group referred to as an angel. The apparition was projected onto the wall and spoke in mysterious terms that perhaps only Dr John Dee himself might have fully understood.⁴ Nevertheless, there was one phrase uttered that struck a chord with me. The angel called for the one who was made in the image of his father to be erased through the honouring of a contract to be made in pain and blood. I was not the only member of the audience to interpret this as a reference to masochism.

The mummeters then walked the bewildered and stumbling hooded and bound figure to the North Duveen Gallery to be whipped. The audience followed – but we stood at a distance from the group. The whipping was not gentle and the crack of rubber on the body of the hooded figure echoed in the great hall, as did the whoops and laughter and whistles of the mummeters. This onslaught of punishing blows and lashes lasted for a full eight minutes, growing steadily in force. I realised later that I reacted in a number of ways at this point of the performance, as did the “congregation” who expressed similar thoughts and feelings to my own after the event. I was in turn bemused, mildly shocked and embarrassed by the violence. The whipping and beating grew steadily worse until the hooded figure could bear no more and uttered the safe words, “Mercy, Mercy Third Thing!” All at once, I felt excited, amused and repelled by this spectacle, which was both comic and disturbing. On hearing this cry all players ceased their whipping. The audience

too relaxed. I could feel that they were relieved that the ordeal was over for the bound figure, even though many had enjoyed its comedy, as had I. There was something satisfying to eyes and ears in the image of bodies shaping to administer a stream of blows and the noise of their delivery.

Again there was a deafening sound and the angel appeared once more, projected above the head of the whipped figure, declaring that the contract had been honoured, that the thing that stood before us was not a man or woman, indeed that we should understand that there was no longer such a thing as a man or woman thing, “. . . only a Chymical Thing . . . a Third Thing that might be a fourth or four hundredth thing!” Whips were then placed at the feet of the hooded figure that stood still as a stone for several hours until Fox-Owl untied the bindings that had held arms and legs tight. It was at this point in the ceremony, when the punishment had ceased, that an image that had been unconsciously germinated by “The Chymical Wedding” became clear. Mixed up with the images of the defiled priest-bride-groom-slave that traversed the body of the Third Thing was the image of the hooded Iraqi prisoner from Abu Ghraib prison. This final hallucinogenic image was the most disturbing aspect of the whole event. The figure, blind and bound with arms and legs outstretched, resting after the beating, seemed beyond the concerns of the world, a veritable “vacuole of non-communication,” and yet haunted by this image of war and torture. All who attended attested to this strange and disturbing composite.

2 the contracts of the performance written through pain and abject humiliation (as we enacted them)

“The Chymical Wedding” was performed to enact a masochistic pact of sorts, *to make a play* of the relations between desiring bodies and the laws that govern their association. This might also be figured as a *retying* of “psychic relations” between the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real; a brand new knot of the RSI.⁵ In this “The Chymical Wedding” was as an alchemical transformation involving the production of something new from within the same.

A wedding is also always a contract, and “The Chymical Wedding” was no exception. Indeed, *this* wedding involved a number of contracts, for this was not just a personal affair but also an *artwork*: a staging of certain relations and stories, a self-conscious presentation made by individuals who performed for an audience. If it is to be reductively read (and how else might one write about an event that has already happened?) “The Chymical Wedding” consisted of two types of contracts: those concerned with relations between people, institutions and history (social contracts) and those detailing the roles of performers and the protocols of the performance itself (masochistic contracts).

i the social contracts

The institutional contract: first, there was the contract between the gallery/museum (in this case, Tate Britain) and the performers (in this case, the group *Plastique Fantastique*) who were allowed to enter the building and undertake certain actions after giving the guarantee that no harm would come to the exhibits or themselves or the audience. There was no direct contract made between performers and audience, however; they did as they pleased, as did we, within boundaries set by the institutional contract. (“The Chymical Wedding” was not a relational artwork; there was no conviviality here). Money was exchanged for services rendered. This, the first contract between parties, was the condition of possibility for the performance.

The historical contract: second, an agreement was made that bound the group of performers together, albeit temporarily, with an identity of sorts that gave each member the social status of performance artist, enforcing articles of the institutional contract above. This involved a further contract of a kind with the history of performance, for before performance art is anything else it is a performance about performance. This was, after all, an affair of representation.

ii the masochistic contracts

The contract of fiction: third, there was the contract, or the protocols, of the performance

itself: the writing of a fiction (by two of the group) and of an internal consistency agreed on and to be enacted by the performers. This involved the invention of fictional avatars from fictional situations – and the propagation of a “new” story involving redundant commodities and eternal forces (a marriage of things out of time). In this fiction one of the players was to be submitted to expurgation from the group so as to produce a suspension of agency (so as to become a “thing”). Intended in all of this was the production of a specifically *different* subjective formation. The performance, after all, was to involve a transformation.

The contract of pain and of its administration: fourth, there was the contract detailing the violence to be administered to the body of the individual playing the slave by the other performers. The latter would humiliate and abuse, and bind and hood, and whip and beat the former until the pain grew too much and the safe words were uttered. The whipping was to be as extreme and dramatic as the performers could make it but would not end in injury or death. (Note: this is not a contract between sadists and masochists, for as Gilles Deleuze has pointed out, countering Freud’s assertion that masochism may well be an inversion of sadism,⁶ the masochist draws up a contract with another or induces, seduces or employs others to humiliate and inflict violence upon him or herself.⁷ Masochism is precisely a technology of the self.

The contract of shame and humour: a further masochistic contract bound all the performers – an embracing of the shame of the performance itself (and of those who refuse to give up on their desires; for contra Lacan we assert masochism to be a viable strategy that pushes the subject beyond the “economy of goods,” *but only by first* becoming a “thing” to be played with).⁸ Embracing shame here is the paradoxical affirmation of all that is “not” in us, the stuff we cannot but deny (put bluntly, our bodies). In the case of performance art, it is also the shame of putting oneself forward for ridicule by engaging in “perverse” nonsense: a facing up to contempt (including self-contempt). With this contract the performers agree to go beyond judgement.

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We open our mouths as wide as we can and swallow judgement whole and then shit it out the other end, purging our subjectivities of paranoia. This is the transformative power of ritual humiliation, that is, performance art. This shame involves a gallows-humour of a kind: a comedy of the law and of a sticking-to-the-letter of the protocols, to see the performance out to its very end. Here we produce a bastard and base joy. The unnatural union of a Spinoza–Bataille (note: Deleuze, again, remarks that the sadist is an ironist in subverting the law through parody. The masochist, on the other hand, is a humorist who subverts the law through exaggeration and inviting his or her own “punishment”).⁹

The contract of non-interpretation and of asignification (when the nostrils twitch and the blood boils): there might be a sixth contract, one that is entered into only by crossing a threshold (passing through abjection and humiliation), in which it is agreed to explore and experiment with sensation and intensity in order to erase meaning. The work (the performance) in fact only works when its signifying components stop working. This entailed a refusal to interpret and an agreement to follow a programme until all signifying regimes evaporated, until they seemed like so much hot air leaving behind the cold stillness of a “Body without Organs.”¹⁰ Careful preparation is required to reap the potential treasure of this contract (after all, masochism is a practice rather than a lucky break). For the contract of non-interpretation to be enacted a certain *style* is needed; the body must tingle with pain, the whip arm must fly and the blood must course hotly through the body (of the spectators, tormentors and slave) for this threshold to be crossed.

The contract of sacred time: there is perhaps a seventh contract, one that is in and out of time. To put things plainly, through play and pain there is an untimely mixing of myth and sensation, producing a schizo-time for a schizo-subjectivity. All performers agree to enter into this collective project of schizoanalysis. All performers also partake of the strange temporality of the event as a rupture in a given situation, most importantly, to explore a break with the

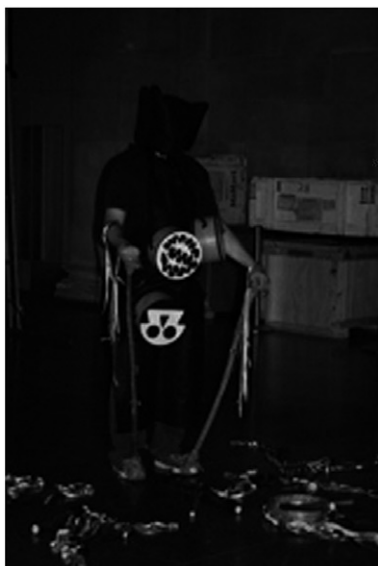
logic of everyday life and commodity obsession, and the usual art careerism and its commodity fetishism. Much time and money is invested in preparing for the performance, in making props and running through the protocols, all of which are “burnt” in the actual performance (as is the case with all weddings or sacred ceremonies). At the heart of the sacred, sacrifice is always present. Indeed, how else might the finite access the infinite? In fact this is more than an agreement, it is a moment that is irresistible, that overcomes all involved and is realised through an investment that all at once sees and seizes the event.

The contract of caution and of non-destruction: there is perhaps an eighth contract, which might in fact be only an article of the fourth, but one that follows from recognising the dangers of the latter, and of the sixth and seventh. This contract details the safe words that, once uttered, signal the end of any punishment. For to separate the body from signifying strata too quickly, or to burn all bridges back to the world of social signification, can be a dangerous if not fatal process (masochism is always an art of dosages). More than this, bodies can get carried away, and social strata can themselves produce a cancerous “Body without Organs” that is fascistic and deathly, that preys upon the life of the people. The image of the Iraqi prisoner that emerged like the bad conscience at the end of the performance is a reminder of the dangers of a fascist “bodies without organs” (one in which the Crusader who wants to enjoy occupation and total dominance becomes a death-machine).

Following the contracts of the performance is a complex affair but one that leads to an alchemical event. In the case of “The Chymical Wedding,” this event was the production of an apparition that was both in and out of time. After the safe words had been uttered, and as the beaten slave stands shaking and slowly recovering, the body of the slave, inscribed with the violence and fictions of the performance, becomes an image on the move, a new-avatar-in-process:

sacrificial figure of a folk play ↔ prisoner of Abu Ghraib ↔ a headless man – Acephale ↔ ghost-demon of the Black-arts of the CIA ↔

upside-down Masonic ritual ↔ comic-death-jester in fancy dress ↔ ducking-chair for a crab like witch . . .



3 some further reflections on the performance as event (as we look back on it)

The masochistic performance (“The Chymical Wedding”) is a merging of two things to activate a Third Thing: (i) the writing of a fiction (S) (a myth of renewal), (ii) is wedded to a technology of the body through performance (R) (an opening up of the body through masochistic play), (iii) producing hallucinations, wild images and intense sensations (I) (an outside to signification and the symbolic).

To be involved in this masochistic reversal of paternal law, through inviting punishment and humiliation, is to engage in a process of becoming-“thing,” of passing into a state of abjection, becoming an object of fun and ridicule. In embracing the role of this “plaything,” the world of judgement and prohibition is turned upside down. But if this is all there was to masochism then Lacan would be right, masochism would be a limiting practice, merely a symbolic play and nothing more than a perverse “economy of goods.” But the “thing” produced

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by masochism is never just “goods.” This fleshy thing is in fact a surface for fresh inscriptions and for new adventures. This manufactured thing can access *The Thing*: those forces and intensities that lie below habit, that secret and hidden place that both attracts and repulses. We repeat, only through becoming a plaything can *The Thing* be accessed.

We do not call or diagnose ourselves masochists, rather we produce a masochistic performance. But then we contend that there are no masochists as such (in private or in public), only acts of masochism or simply acts that express the desire to become a thing. In that we are a group punishing one of our own (as well as ourselves through submitting to humiliation), we are not so unlike other so-called masochists. However, instead of desiring the cold love and cruelty of the mother (as Freud said of all masochists), we hanker after the cruel laughter of our own society, to laugh ourselves into oblivion and back.

We have claimed that our performance art is not only a masochistic practice but also a form of schizoanalysis. How can that be? To reiterate, and to make things clear, embarrassment and humiliation were important to the transformative process of the performance; that is, without both performers and spectators embracing a shameful state of affairs, judgement and punishment remain a block or a brake in the production of the new. In this, we address the environment and society (the gallery and its constituency) that the performance takes place within, for the “museum is ill” and the subjectivities and relations it produces are too rigid and not healthy.

In forming this view we are drawing on Jean Oury’s statement, and idea, that the “hospital is ill.”¹¹ In fact, we find performance has many things in common with Oury’s practice of institutional psychotherapy, not least in its focus on the space (and time) of treatment. Oury remarked that the body and mind of the schizoid patient is never still and cannot connect to the space that it is apparently in; therefore, the problems of the patient cannot be addressed unless the question of how to connect a schizoid body and mind to an environment (in this case, the hospital) is also addressed. Group activity is

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used to “graft” an opening, a connection to an environment, onto this continually travelling body and mind. The masochistic performance (as schizoanalysis) is an institutional psychotherapy of a kind too, only one in reverse. Rather than grafting an opening onto the schizoid body that connects with the order of a specific environment (the hospital), we aim to graft an opening onto the order of an environment (the body of the museum or gallery) to connect with the schizoid within us all. Masochistic performance is one technology that grows just such an orifice.

It is through this grafted opening (produced by the performance of “The Chymical Wedding”) that hallucinations of a political, historical, religious and aesthetic nature are conjured. As with the ravings of the so-called mad, all the pasts, presents and futures that may or may never come to pass are paraded for all who wish to see them.



notes

“Plastique Fantastique” is a mythopoetic and performative fiction produced by David Burrows and Simon O’Sullivan. The collaboration involves an ongoing investigation of the relations between aesthetics, politics and the sacred conducted through objects, installations, comics, texts, and performances in which others also take part. Exhibitions and performances include: “Staubucks Fukkee is Your Enemy,” Aliceday Gallery, Brussels, 2007; “The Chymical Wedding,” Tate Britain, London, 2008; “Protocols for Deceleration,” Outpost, Norwich, 2008; “Black Mass for Partial Objects,” for “Event Horizon” at the Royal Academy, London, 2008–09; “Stranger Things are Happening,” Aspex, Portsmouth, 2009; “Multiverse,” Danielle Arnaud Gallery, London, 2009; and “A Visitation,” Tatton Park Biennale, 2010. For more information see <www.plastiquefantastique.org>.

1 The word “mummers” refers to a group of masked players who visited households, often unbidden, to perform a play in expectation of food and drink. The practice, first recorded in the thirteenth century and common throughout parts of England from the fourteenth to the nineteenth, was repeatedly banned for giving cover to

anonymous criminal behaviour. See Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996) 11–96.

2 Jacques Lacan theorised that there was no such thing as the sexual relationship, any relationship being mediated by representation – and that it is love that “makes up” for the (non-existent) sexual relationship. See Jacques Lacan, *Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1999) 38–50.

3 Subkast Kofke is an avatar from previous *Plastique Fantastique* performances derived from the twisting of the phrase Staubucks Fukkee that was in turn a twisting of the phrase Starbucks Coffee. See <www.plastiquefantastique.org> for further details of performances, writings and other matters.

4 Dr John Dee, during the reign of Elizabeth I, and with the help of scribes such as Edward Kelley, spoke to angels and eternal beings, interpreting and writing down all his communication and dialogue.

5 “A brand new knot for the RSI” refers to Jacques Lacan’s concept of subjectivity envisaged as a Borromean Knot in which the Real (R), Symbolic (S) and the Imaginary (I) are tied together in such a way that if one loop were to be cut the knot would fall apart, and the subject become “untied.” In such cases, only a new form of knot can tie the subject back into the order of things. See Jacques Lacan 118–36. “The Chymical Wedding” might be figured as the writing of a brand new knot in this sense (albeit a temporary and somewhat fragile one).

6 Freud argued that masochism is a perversion that has three aspects: the infantile (a desire for childhood punishment), the feminine (the desire of a man to occupy the subservient position of the female), and the moral (the desire to be punished for some wrongdoing of the past). At one point, recognising the problem of an activity that is not focused on pleasure but displeasure, he suggests that masochism is the inversion of sadism, which in liberal times is suppressed as an activity. See Sigmund Freud, *The Economic Problem of Masochism* [1924] in *On Metapsychology*, trans. Angela Richards (London: Penguin, 1984) 409–26.

7 See *Coldness and Cruelty: Masochism* (New York: Zone, 1989). A psychoanalytical understanding of masochism, as presented in Sacher-Masoch’s

fiction, views the man, Severin, submitting himself to torture delivered by the woman, Venus/Wanda, which is further read as a desiring of punishment to be delivered by the mother (103–10). This, in turn, is viewed as a negation of the law of the father who punishes to prevent incest between mother and son. In Sacher-Masoch's fiction, the law of the father is then subverted as the punishment Severin receives affirms an erotic relationship with the woman/mother figure. What is important about this story is that through fiction, and an enactment that involves different roles and the taking up of invented names, the law is subverted. In the performance of "The Chymical Wedding," the fiction is played out between individual and group, but a fictionalising of erotic, social and symbolic relationships is still produced.

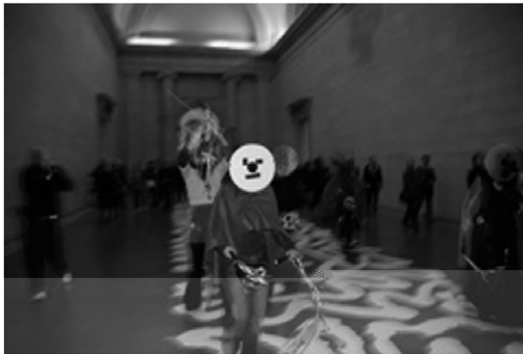
8 See Lacan's remarks in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Dennis Porter; ed. Jacques Alain-Miller (London: Routledge, 1992) on Sacher-Masoch and on the perverse masochist who desires to "reduce himself to this nothing that is the good, to this thing that is treated like an object, to this slave whom one trades back and forth and whom one shares" (239). A question might be posed as to whether masochism consists solely of this play of goods, as depicted in Sacher-Masoch's fiction, or whether masochism, as a technology of the body, allows for an intensive experience that goes "beyond" the symbolic.

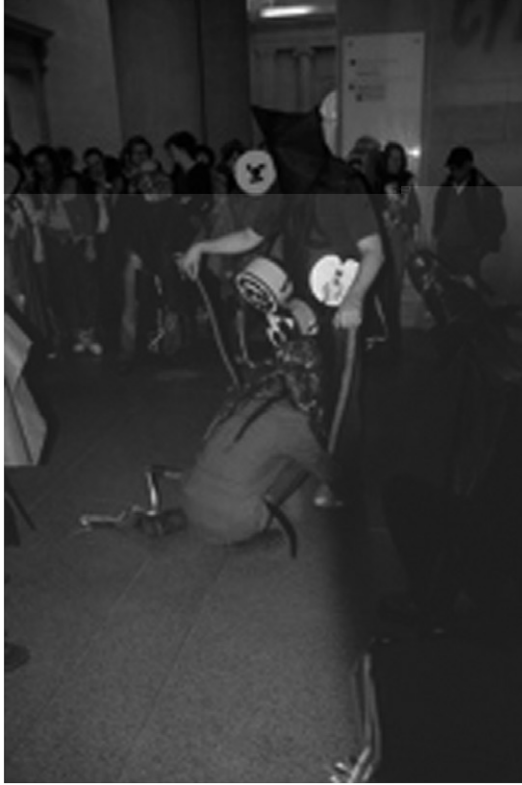
9 See chapter 7, "Humour, Irony and the Law" in Deleuze, *Coldness and Cruelty* 81–90.

10 On the "Body without Organs," see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 1988) 149–66. The practice of masochism is one example given of how to build a Body without Organs.

11 See David Reggio, "The Hospital is Ill: An Interview with Dr. Jean Oury," available <<http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/history/news-events/interviewl.pdf>> (accessed 29 July 2008).

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