

Low Profile – Processing Preparedness Larry Lynch

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Between the Vanguard and the Peripheral

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The name itself may offer a way-in: the term ‘Low Profile’ implies a sense of reduced visibility and a move to resist public notice. Such positioning seems at odds with the idea of performance or performing – at least in the ways these things are traditionally understood. The production and presentation of live spectacle and the desire for the performer(s) to be the focus, watched, scrutinised even, are common enough tenets of much performance practice, particularly that which occurs within the theatrical mainstream. Why might a group who define themselves unreservedly as performers doing performance seek, through the force of their name, to frame their output with such explicit reference to contrary directives? And what might the practical implications of maintaining and invoking a low profile be for performance?

Hannah Jones and Rachel Dobbs started working together as Low Profile in 2003. At the time of their meeting they were both Fine Art students, drawn together by a mutual dissatisfaction with some of the strictures they perceived as being symptomatic of much painterly practice and pedagogy, and a desire to develop ways of making work that responded more readily to the ontological dynamics of lived experience and identity construction as they themselves felt them. Having first been exposed to the possibilities of performance as a field of practice that extends well beyond the boundaries of theatre (through hearing a lecture by Professor Peggy Phelan, reading *39 Microlectures: In Proximity of Performance* by Mathew Goulish and experiencing work by artists Franko B, La Ribot, William Pope.L, Marina Abramovic and Hayley Newman), the newly formed Low Profile began to identify in live practice the potential to confront the emphasis (deemed by themselves to be problematic) on ‘slick’, technically competent and ‘successful’ artworks that had persisted through much of their early art education and disciplinary experience. They also identified in performance the prospect of making work that might capture and reflect the social and subjective conditions of contemporary life.

In his introduction to Hayley Newman’s book *Performancemania*, Aaron Williamson makes a useful distinction between two identifiable performance traditions:

The roots of contemporary performance can be traced back through two identifiable traditions. One leads back to traditional theatre, whilst also seeking its validation within contemporary post-structuralism. The centrality of theatrical principles is maintained, alongside the often arbitrary or gratuitous deployment of sensory specific technology, such as video projectors, soundtracks and lighting. The other root of performance can be located in a fine art tradition which is anti-theatrical, discarding surface treatments and staging in order to place greater emphasis upon its three-dimensional (often public) setting. Such work sets out to vigorously interrogate its structure and materials for conceptual resonance.¹



It is with the second of these two trajectories that the work of Low Profile is best aligned, as many of the preoccupations of the visual artist have remained with them, rigorous engagements with structure, process and materiality (physical action, objects and reference to various cultural sources) remaining central to their practice. What they have sought to reject from this tradition is its tendency to prioritise the notion of a skilfully-wrought, singular and successful work. It is this aspect of Fine Art practice that jars most acutely with Jones and Dobbs and also, thereby, with their desire as Low Profile to enable the work to respond to the dynamics and demands of everyday lived experience.

A helpful example of their work’s endeavour to capture and interrogate the fallibility of contemporary living, and the dubious efficacy of the modes of cultural practice and social behaviour it promotes, can be found in their performance *A Lesson in Love*. The work sees Jones and Dobbs attempt to ‘learn’, in the context of the live event itself, a set of at least 100 love song titles. They have neither a ‘scripted’ way of learning, nor a practiced way of delivering the lines to the audience. Rather, the work focuses on their ‘trying’ to achieve the all but impossible, and in doing so compounds a perceived fissure between the experience of ‘love’ and the cultural rhetoric (in this case popular music) that stands to articulate its place in social discourse. The emphasis on linguistic redundancy, vulnerability and continued effort (hope) in the face of probable failure, is enhanced by Low Profile empowering the audience by providing them (and them only) with access to the list they are attempting to learn.

The focus of attention in much of Low Profile’s performance-making seems to reside in the interplay between the process and experience of making and presenting and the process and experience of viewing – that is, it is concerned explicitly with the role and status of ‘audience’. It is often the case that the process of viewing and responding to art (performance or otherwise) is, in part at least, determined by an assessment of the extent to which the work succeeds in its supposed objectives and the concurrent technical skills employed in the interest of any such achievement. For Low Profile, entertaining this economy of reception belies the opportunity to expose and explore socio-subjective dynamics that conflict with its currency, dynamics that they perceive as central to the experience of contemporary life. What, for instance, about failure – about trying hard, but not getting it right and not making it happen?

The theme of trying one’s best and possibly failing is an important one for Low Profile. It links directly to both their desire to respond to lived experience and the ways in which they have sought to construct and activate the means through which their work is encountered and engaged.

In the performance *Show For You*, for example, Jones and Dobbs attempt to

1. Aaron Williamson, ‘Writing Art’. *Art Monthly*, vol 13, issue 230, October 1999, pp 32–34.

remember the tea and coffee ‘orders’ of the entire audience, who watch as they try (and fail), racing against the clock, to serve refreshments to a full studio theatre. In works such as this, the performer/viewer dynamic and power bias is disrupted: the viewer bears witness to the futility and impossibility of a given task and in doing so is granted access to the fragility of social behaviour and the vulnerability of the subject’s desire. The locus of the ‘work’ is shifted from the successful enactment of a pre-determined conclusion to the process of endeavour itself – to the dynamics of flawed and flailing effort.

Just as they have identified a priority of successfulness in much art, they perceive in life (perhaps now more than ever) a similar desire to not fail and not be the loser. Such a desire can be seen to pervade both individual and collective existences. Indeed (and this is very important for Low Profile), a great many individual and group behaviours, dynamics and processes seem to serve the need to be prepared for and ward against the prospect of failure, be it calamitous (the alleged threat of terror) or merely embarrassing (the foolish dance move or spurned chat-up line). The theme of preparedness and its connection to that of failure is a central tenet of Low Profile’s practice and one that directly informs their approach to performance-making and audience experience that their name, in-part, captures. They may well ask: does not the individual and the society that seeks so arduously to protect itself from the supposed ignominy of personal and national/global failure defer much of the experience that is most fundamentally human? Is so much time and energy spent avoiding the prospect of the worst and preparing for a future charged with collapse serving only to redefine the present (all, in one sense, that we really ‘have’) as an experience dislocated from the truthfulness of being? Do we not sometimes run the risk of ‘missing life’, so preoccupied are we with preparing for it?

The theme of ‘preparedness’ is made explicit in the performance *Just In Case*. Jones and Dobbs describe the piece as

*... a guided tour through known and unknown spaces where Low Profile have tasked themselves ‘to be prepared for every eventuality’ – the task reveals itself to be repetitive, endless, obsessive, and nonsensical – switching between being moving, intimate, humorous and ridiculous, all the while retaining a sense of trying ones best and continuing against all odds.*²

This performance is consumed by a seemingly endless list of the things we (they) ‘have’ ‘just in case’.

The two main constituents of Low Profile’s work – the undertaking of physical activity and the delivery of spoken or written language in a designated environment (often a public rather than art specific context) – are both developed in response to the prevailing concerns discussed above. They are taken with the idea of



‘learning live’ (rather than privately preparing in advance of a slick and well-executed performance delivery) and engaging their fear and (in some cases) their incompetence as material. In this way, their work draws itself closer to performance in the everyday life sense: the tentative, mildly-inebriated and nerve-shot steps onto a largely vacant dance-floor; the karaoke performance shaped by fear and social pressure; and the rhetorical gymnastics and rituals of lovers negotiating the minefield of rejection and humiliation. Such procedures and occurrences (often drawn from within the fabric of their own lives) inform Low Profile’s work in terms of both form and content – although in their case, these two things are all but inseparable.

The performance *Show For You*, the result of a residency programme at Plymouth Arts Centre, plays on these themes and others core to Low Profile’s practice that have already been referred to. The work is set-up and framed by drawing on the idea of ‘hosting’. In making the work, Jones and Dobbs were thinking of game show hosts, dinner party hosts, comperes and bad comedians. It is easy to see why the role of ‘host’ and the notion of ‘hosting an event’, rather than ‘showing a performance’, would appeal to Low Profile: to try and ‘hold it all together’ and ‘make sure everything and everyone is OK’ are activities that would certainly reflect the aspects of everyday lived experience that interest them. In the work, they play-out a range of unskilled and largely unrehearsed party tricks, positively courting the tension (so common in a range of social interactions) between ‘getting it right’ and ‘getting it wrong’. This tension is one that Jones and Dobbs think is central to tackling the ‘performance’ of their own lives, and by placing it at the heart of a live event that they themselves attempt, however falteringly, to ‘host’, they again empower the audience, who capture the performer’s desire to be willed on and to please, to ‘get it right’, but perhaps to fail – but in a way that is always unfailingly human.



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GRAVITY
VIOLENCE OF A WORD
HAD ENOUGH
REPETITION
IMAGINED SUPPORT
MORE AND MORE
RELATIONSHIPS
WORDS LOSE MEANINGS
BASE COMMUNITY