

One Night Stand

Eastern Edge

By: Jennifer Dyer

In 2005, Judith Halberstam offered a dual notion of ‘queer time’ and ‘queer space’, both of which emerge in opposition to family institutions, heterosexuality, and reproduction. Queer time and queer space develop in terms of different logics of place, movement and identification, such as new temporalities, imaginative life schedules and overlooked economic practices (J. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, NYU Press 2005). Queer time disrupts normative accounts of past, present and future that have been organized by birth, marriage, child-rearing and death. Queer time marks time in terms of alternative modes of alliance and identification, of embodiment and representation. It works out new forms of life-narrative that intensify the present and reconfigure the historical past while also de-emphasizing the future in which hegemonic culture puts so much stock. Halberstam’s notion of queer time and, in some respects, queer space – where separate spheres of gendered and racialized spaces mark a normative form of lived experience – lie in the background of my experience of the Eastern Edge *One Night Stand* events which presented the work of Coral Short, Kailey Bryan, and Evelyn Donnelly.

Coral Short offered three presentations during her section of the series, beginning with the hugely successful *The Insiders*. Entering the gallery space, after grabbing a handful of jellybeans, I sat down on the floor with the rest of the crowd, chatting casually with others and watching short films on a loop, projected onto the wall. These were of shadowy figures in private spaces – someone’s own view watching others through leafy trees – everyday spaces, but spaces that didn’t belong to me. I watched films of emerging patterns of circles and spirals of colour that I slowly came to realize were doilies, knitted washcloths, afghan blankets and quilts, more everyday scenes abstracted out of the mundane into patterns of connection that hypnotically drew in my attention. Then, from around the corner of the projection wall, emerged with squeals and giggles and shushing and whispers four bright pink motile forms, each filled with people. I’m sure there was background music to accompany their slow flowing into the room because I was suddenly felt like dancing and hugging the people around me. These looked like what it would be like to be inside a bubble-gum pink bubble or a giant balloon, communally. Through the pink elasticized nylon (I presume) forms were about 4-5 people moving as one, pressing faces and body parts and backbones out of and around the insides of these moving unities to ooze each form into the crowd. You couldn’t tell who was inside the shapes, how they were each going to shift into and onto the space of the audience, but the pure joy and, of course, calamity of each oozing pink form was infectious and intoxicating. Short produced a form of community, of communality that brought people together, within and without each pink bubble. It brought people in touch with one another, it opened up our usually protected personal spaces to happy incidents of coming-together. This performance was everything Halberstam was articulating: fully felt,

meaningful, emotional, safe and yet projecting communalism that opened up momentarily a present that was fully lived. Bodies were bodies of happiness, of touch, of cheekiness without any sense of suspicion or foul play (even when one of them stole my purse). Short's bubbles formed temporary alliances within, and they radiated that sense outwards, into the audience. There was a lot of love in that room.

And love was what radiated during Short's performance the next day, Plush, when they dressed in a suit made entirely from head to foot of stuffed animals (it must have weighed more than 25 pounds and looked steaming hot to be in on an unnaturally hot Newfoundland afternoon). Walking up and down Water Street dressed as 'the stuffed toy of your dreams and your nightmares both', according to one passer-by, Short encountered people, talked to them, said hello and offered hugs. To my mind, what Short offered was comfort and by and large, most people took it... some wary at first, some scoffing the performance, but still coming in for the hug nonetheless. As with The Insiders, Plush changed the requirements of identity and identification, of the need for gendered presentation to offer and to receive the comfort, warmth, and connection that comes with a hug. You couldn't see what body was inside or behind the plush toys; the body was simply there to be held and to hold you. Ultimately, Short performed genderless acts of the alliance a hug brings, once again temporarily opening new zones of personal interaction, communal representation and unknowable, unplanned intimacies that made the day of a lot of people.

Finally, The Croning was, for me, a magical experience. Short walked down the hiking path of Signal Hill from the top, around the cliffs, to the bottom in the Outer Battery wearing nothing (it appeared) but a long grey hairpiece that flowed to their feet. Looking part sage, part hermit, part Captain Caveman, Short walked independently and slowly down the initial steps of the hill using a long wooden walking stick for support, not speaking, partly acting the part by looking about wildly, uncertainly, silently and cautiously. It didn't take long for an entourage to follow, of friends, intrigued hikers, and the Signal Hill fox, all keeping a safe distance from the somewhat meditative and fearful figure in front. Short's 'crone', what is usually allied with hag, witch, mentor, outsider, and elder, performed Halberstam's notion of queer time: from a cis and het point of view, a future that must be lived in its sheer presence, one that hasn't been accounted for and planned with insurance policies and health care provisions and trust funds. Yet from a different point of view, one that brings with it care, the concern of strangers, a new form of community that draws in the unexpected bystanders into, again, an unexpected form of alliance. Fear, care, immediacy, coalition: Short enacted the forms of spontaneous engagement, the continual regrouping of an unplanned tribe, that characterize queer time and move into the alternative bondings of queer space. As with the other performances, the outside becomes the inside of a group. One acts without shame; fear, yes, but with an openness to the other where no body relinquishes the truth of their own comportment. The Croning was breathtaking, and it brought for me the meaning of Short's performances together.

It is with reverberations of Short's performances in mind that I came to Kailey Bryan's performance, Ingrown. Yet, while my mind was filled with the intense physical altruism of Short's performance, Bryan's ongoing performative self-plucking shifted that sense into one of clinical questioning about the same themes. Depilation is generally a private practice, whether one does it oneself or hires someone else. It is careful, slightly

painful, and leaves one a little raw as it ever so strangely exposes your body and, often, changes its shape. With Ingrown, Bryan sat on a large circular platform that set their body off from the audience, even if Bryan was comfortably chatting with audience members about art, bodies, food, anything. Bryan was dressed in men's underwear and a t-shirt and, when not plucking an ankle, warm socks. Surrounding this, the walls of the gallery were lined with evenly distributed shelves, like a chemist's shop, on which were placed individually tiny bottles, each containing one hair and labeled according to where on the body it came from and what number it was in the series of plucked hairs. Bryan called into question, naturally, the physicality of gender: the social systems regulating it, the structures of organizing bodies, of measuring bodies, of measuring gender. The body Bryan offered was the clinically viewed body. But this body, too, was open – open to other forms of organization by the very revealing Bryan made explicit of the random selection of parts for plucking. Even the enacted experience of plucking, putting on display the tiny pulls to the skin that lifts it up to pull out the most marginal body part then snapping that minuscule piece of skin back, slowly making present an increasingly bald body, made viewers question what meaning could be found in pulling out (or adding!) hair to begin with. Bryan's methodical and painfully slow performance of body-shaping showed this particular private ritual to be absurd, to oddly disorder the body – any body –

leaving it marked randomly in order to become more of one gender than another, more of one kind than another, to fill a space in one way rather than another. The audience began to discuss why some bodies require plucking and others do not. To my mind, this focused questioning was due to Bryan's intensely clinical focus on the body, making us consider each part from which they removed apparently excess hair. Ultimately, Bryan made clear that the excess is the body remaining on the platform, because while each hair is carefully bottled, counted and catalogued, put on display in a new way, alone and labeled and individuated, the body on the pedestal is left behind. It is put to work in the service of clinical evaluation, but stands outside of that system. This, of course, leaves Bryan's depilated body liberated from the random systematization that was revealed in the first place. Another space of alterity, of independent and makeshift alliances is created, for we the audience may have peered curiously at the bottled remnants of 'gendering' Kailey Bryan, but we interacted with Kailey in and as the body, sitting on the platform gently talking with us about lunch.

Finally, what I saw of Evelyn Donnelly's Magic Show, the final performance in this series of 'One Night Stands', brought me back full-circle to the first. Here, anybody who entered the gallery was gently encouraged to engage in their own form of magic, a magic that didn't transform people out of themselves but rather one which emphasized flourishing self-definition. Donnelly's Magic Show involved three television screens, one atop the other in a tower, each showing a different series of 'magic show' performances by various people. To the right of the television tower was a large velvet curtain onto which was projected a large, round and bright theatrical spotlight. Participants could perform a trick either in front of the curtain (as with an old-style intermission-type performance), could emerge into performance from the curtain, or could have the curtain open onto their performance, basically setting up a staged space in which the magic would happen. Shadow puppets, dancing, body performance, peek-a-boo type theatrics were performed by people in the gallery and by Donnelly herself; these were filmed live

and fed into one of the televisions to join the screened tower of magic acts. Not only did Donnelly act as the Master of Ceremonies, introducing the audience to her show, but like any good MC she led with some of her own moves and joyously encouraged others to engage with her. What was put on display and made overt was the risk of jumping into immediacy and performing oneself for others, and the joy that leap brought with it in the space Donnelly made. Donnelly encouraged her audience to put our identities into the picture, to show ourselves in our mundane magicality, to put our immediacy on stage and make a show of what each of us can do individually, if not uniquely. There is always the potential to show off, here, and make up a presentation of self that is uniformly cool, but Donnelly's emphasis was on the spontaneous choreography of self-production: this is how I move, this is what I do, this is what you can see in me! Donnelly's Magic Show encourages the magic of all sorts of bodies to come out – with either a flourish or a quiet smile – to be transposed onto the screen as icons of what they are without disappearing into those icons. That is, the performance was about neither idealizing the self nor denying it in favour of a better one but rather exploring happily with others what we've already got in and of ourselves. Donnelly's televised documentation of all of our magic acts documents the everyday performance of life-narratives, and welcomes our performances of new ones. Donnelly made the revelation of new identities fun and communal, opening at least for me new ideas about the ongoing enactment of one's inner narratives and modes of social connection that make us who we are in the always present 'now'.