

Performing Sociology at a Music Festival

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Abstract

The white woman has been a central figure in second wave feminism. Conceptualised variously as an embracing character allured by racial difference by Mica Nava (2007) or as a racist oppressor by Hazel Carby (1992) among others, she has emerged in various disguises which all point to her centrality in feminist and anti-racist movements. This article considers *The Chamber of White*, a video performance that reconfigures this historical figure in contemporary relations. It explores how the performance enables an affective experience of white femininities by inviting audience members to engage in different affective states. The question is discussed how to do sociology – a sociological research on whiteness and gender– through the intensive, the performative and affective dimensions of art. It is argued that the performance expands on the concept of “live sociology” (Back and Puwar 2012), whereby through doing an artful sociology the affective and sensory aspects of sociality are not simply reflected but enacted in order to critically examine the affective power of whiteness in a feminist context.

Keywords whiteness, femininity, affect, performance, live sociology

The making of white woman through artful sociology

This article considers the doing of sociology through art by way of discussing *The Chamber of White*, a video performance I performed at Roskilde Music Festival in Denmark in 2014. The artwork was developed as part of a visual sociology research on the making of the white woman – on the affective dimensions and performative codes that reinforce, construct and disrupt meanings of white femininities. The artwork is part of a series of performance events I staged as part of the research, and explores the key themes the research is concerned with, namely embodied subjectivity and the performance of affect. Here I want to focus on one aspect of the piece, on the affective connections triggered between performer and individual audience members through the deployment of several artistic strategies that I argue enable a profoundly intercorporeal and affective experience of white femininities.

Through attending to the intensive, the performative and affective dimensions of art, to the movements and ruptures occurred in the performance event I argue that the artwork enables new modes of doing sociology and expands on the concept of “live sociology” as developed by Les Back and Nirmal Puwar (2012). In their approach “live methods” present an opportunity for a more “artful” and “crafty” sociology, the development of “forms of attentiveness that can admit the fleeting, distributed, multiple, sensory, emotional and kinaesthetic aspects of sociality” (Back 2012, 28). Artfulness in this understanding is not just about form but about “being mindful of the kinds of realities that are enacted and produced” and “*bringing a bit of craftiness into the craft*” (Ibid, 33, 34, emphasis original). They suggest that by embracing multi-media (sound, image and text) the sociological form can be extended and new innovative ways can be thought on the ways in which to attend to the social world: “The component elements of live sociology proposed here seek to expand the sensory dimensions of sociological attentiveness, to design methods that move with the social world and to develop multiple vantage points from which empirical accounts are generated” (Ibid, 28). Although in an artful live sociology “explicit research questions can be critically transformed into aesthetic practices” (Puwar and Sharma 2012, 10) and the fostering of inter- and trans-disciplinary collaborations between social researchers and

creative practitioners are encouraged, there is also a warning about the too hasty blurring of boundaries between social research and art.

Although a growing number of social researchers are using new media technologies, including film, photography, audio (Pink 2001, Blunt et al. 2003, Knowles and Sweetman 2004, Rose 2005 and 2010, Blunt and Dowling 2006, Kuhn and McAllister 2006, Back 2007) and also increasingly art formats like theatre, performance, installation and curatorial practice (Denzin 2003, Latour 2007, Puwar and Sharma 2012, Jungnickel 2013), it remains the case that “the inclusion of audio or visual material in the context of ethnographic social research has been little more than ‘eye candy’ or ‘background listening’ to the main event on the page” (Back 2012, 27). While I concur with the caution that needs to be exercised when working with different traditions of knowledge production I would argue for expanding the scale of experimentation in sociological methods through art in order to further the sociological imagination and attentiveness. I would argue that there is scope for using artistic practices beyond only as tools for dissemination of research findings – which is mostly the case with social science research – to affect audiences to enacting and creating the social world as they make sense of it. This is where I expand on the concept of “live sociology” by arguing that working with art in sociology, excavating art’s performativity and the affects that are produced by art the research process itself can be transformed. The dialogic encounter augmented between art and sociology as different formations of knowledge production can be further exploited by attending to the intensity of art, which I locate in its performative and affective dimensions.

The uncritical and often over-used application of the notion of performativity is not without its critics. The art theorist Barbara Bolt questions whether any production across creative arts – theatre, paintings, sculptures, films or a performance event – can called be performative only because the practice brings into being what it names (Bolt 2008). Far from being exhausted however I contend the concept as a “possibility of things being otherwise”, in Vikki Bell’s words (2007, 5), and the expansion of the creative use of a wide range of artistic methods in generating and communicating social research as a compelling invitation to opening up landscapes of enquiry about difficult questions. In my own research practice the concept of performativity allows me to think about its capacity of

inaugurating movement and transformation, and the affective dimensions of creative production within the framework of a sociological inquiry – in a similar vein that Bolt approaches the performative nature of artistic research. She argues that similarly to science, procedures in the creative arts are based around repetition, and that performativity is not first and foremost about meaning, but force and effect. The force and effect of the creative production is then where the truth claims of artistic research can be located: “Here the work of art is not just the artwork/performance or event, but *is also* the effect of the work in the material, affective and discursive domains” (Bolt 2008, emphasis original). In Bolt’s interpretation creative arts research is thus directed at mapping the movements and ruptures that are created by its productions and at recognizing the transformations occurred.

It has been argued that academic research itself is performative, that method in social sciences is not a set of procedures intended to report on a given reality, “rather it is performative. It helps to produce realities (Law 2004, 143). John Law makes the point that these realities produced are not free and random, they operate through a ‘hinterland of realities’, already enacted patterns, resonances and absences that cannot be ignored (Ibid). But method can also be creative: through re-working the hinterland of realities they can be re-crafted and thus ‘new versions of the world’ created (Ibid). Bolt’s and Law’s accounts are useful in thinking through the transformative potential of an “artful live sociology” that creatively and carefully infuses sociological research with artistic methods and techniques, and creates social realities and situations where the felt and lived experience can be brought within an affective register. It is this space of the affective and aesthetic encounter where I take this debate up through the discussion of the video performance *The Chamber of White*, an artwork that examines the making of the white woman – the formation of white femininities – through creating an affective experience of whiteness. By discussing the artwork I explore the potential of the creative use of artistic methods to create affective engagements that draw people in experiencing and expressing complex facets of affects. I contend that beyond text and talk, a range of objects, interventions and events can be employed not just to disseminate research results but also to activate affective and aesthetic engagement of the audience who is confronted with them and is

completing the artwork. They bring about a kind of engagement and produce a social reality as they make sense of it, where I would argue the force and effect of the performance could be located and the analysis of which made relevant to sociological research.

My focus is on the affective and performative dimensions of the artwork, the movements, ruptures and transformations occurred, and their implications for social research. I approach this by way of discussing first how the different elements of the piece highlighted particular encounters with white femininities. I then trace the affective exchanges between performer and audience members that I argue evoked the affective figure of the white woman before concluding on the expansion of live sociology through artistic methods.

The White Room at Performance Sense Laboratory

The Chamber of White was installed in one of the rooms of the Performance Sense Laboratory at Art Zone, Roskilde Festival in 2014. The curatorial concept for the performance programme focused on how “to activate the sensuous through different, yet related, performance-artistic approaches which all subscribe to an interactive and immersive performance art tradition”¹. The work was shown during four days of the music festival, which featured a significant art programme.

Each performance group was asked by the curator Gry Wolle Hallberg to explore different ways to “evoke the sensuous and poetic mode of being and being together in the otherworldly space” (Sensuous 2014)². Visitors entered the Performance Sense Laboratory, a giant installation consisting of a big reception area and ten rooms through a gate in the shape of a circle, and were greeted and escorted by “Evokers”. Performers prepared the visitors for their journey through the Laboratory and evoked their senses (hence the name “Evoker”) through different exercises, like binding the visitors’ eyes and letting them touch and taste different objects, a feather, a piece of chocolate, laying them down and whispering poetry in their ears and so on. Before letting visitors move into the rooms, Evokers entered their names in a book and asked them to fill out a form as “Human Research Objects” in order to chart changes in their affective states as they went through the Laboratory. At the exit visitors were asked again to fill out the form, which included simple questions, e.g. What mood are you in? and some possible

answers. Despite its playfulness and fairy-tale like design, where wandering around in different mystic and dreamy worlds the visitor could feel like Alice in Wonderland, the Performance Sense Laboratory had a profound purpose which all artists shared. Surrounded by the buzz of a prestigious music festival with a long tradition³, Evokers and other performers had to achieve no less than to create the atmosphere of “the otherworldly space” where in each room another immersive experience was waiting for each visitor, who were let in one by one, or in groups of no more than 2 or 3. The ten “intimate parallel-universal” (Sensuous 2014)⁴ rooms were designed individually, according to the instructions of the artists performing in the rooms, all with a distinctive fiction and character.



(Photo by Diana Lindhardt)



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I designed the video performance as an installation, where each part was constitutive of the others. My room was painted white and I had burning white fluorescent light installed at each wall of the room. Unless the light was switched on, which I used only on two occasions, the room was cosy and intimate in the dark, only lit by the projection. A soundscape connected all rooms, silent music was played from one of the walls. The video was projected in the opposite corner of the entrance. Beans and earth were flowing from the wall where the film was projected down to the floor, where performer and visitor sat facing each other and the projection, thus a continuum was created between the projected images and the performance. I devised *The Chamber of White* for one single individual at a time, in order to create a direct and inescapable interaction, intimate and confrontational. The material properties of the installation space, of the earth and beans, and the physical proximity of performer and audience member were put in use to facilitate and account for the “sensuous interrelationship of body-mind-environment” (Pink 2009, 25).

At the centre of the artwork is white woman, who has been a key figure in second wave feminism. Conceptualised variously as an embracing character allured by racial difference by Mica Nava

(2007) or as a racist oppressor by Hazel Carby (1992) among others, she has emerged in various disguises which all point to her centrality in feminist and anti-racist movements. *The Chamber of White* reconfigures this historical figure in contemporary relations. I structured the work around its engagement with three primary sources that it pulls out of time and puts into conversation with each other. Blending elements of personal experience with fiction, cultural tropes and archetypal characters, abstraction and real life events, *The Chamber of White* works across three artistic strategies that are its material sources in creating an affective experience of white femininities. The first source is the video with images of white woman and icons of white femininity including cultural figures like Cinderella, the personification of the purity of the white female; the cartoon Betty Boob, with its own history of racism; and Marilyn Monroe, the epitome of the white blonde bombshell⁵. These archetypes of white woman are cross-referenced with my own artworks that interrogate white femininity: the reenactment of Howardeena Pindell's *Free, White and 21*⁶; the binding of breasts from Diane Torr's *Man-For-A-Day* workshops and my subsequent reenactment of Adrian Piper's *The Mythic Being (Cruising White Women)*; and footages from *The Blush Machine* and *Freeing Up Shame*, two performance works I developed in the framework of this research, along with other cuts to women dancing and resting. White man also appears in the video, in violent scenes of riots from the 1960s and 2011, and as the oppressor of white woman; but also as the intellectual superior who seeks to understand and redress its own actions through words and scholarship, through his own inaccessible white male activity.

The second source is the live performance of Cinderella, who steps out of the video and works on understanding its meaning. She continues selecting and mixing black, white and brown beans, she is deemed to work until she can make sense of the world structured around race and gender, femininity and masculinity, whiteness and its power. She is a labourer of whiteness, the heaps of beans she selected gets stirred together again by her constantly working hands. She invites the visitor to help her, to take part in creating and destroying classification and categorization. The live performance brings close the images projected on the wall. The normative white female body is simultaneously experienced as visual

and haptic, the performance is the site to negotiate the shifting between body image and “body-without-an-image”, the viscerally felt body that is not reducible to its image (Featherstone 2006). Cinderella has been given a body that is in progress, opened up to be affected and to affect in the encounter with the visitor.



(Photo by Diana Lindhardt)



(Photo by Diana Lindhardt)

The third source is the narration, quotes from Aimé Césaire, Audre Lorde, and my own words that hold the video and the performance together and offers a connection beyond histories of racism and sexism that we are all entangled in.

The installation responds to these materials and creates an affective zone of engagement with these primary sources. The elements put together are marked by a particular affective circuit I call *white affect*: the understanding of whiteness as an intersubjective and intercorporeal affective performance. A self-reflexively subjective archive of moments of encounter with white femininities are assembled and transformed through the aesthetic strategies of creating connections between past and present; inviting new connections to be made between different historical figures and events; reframing these histories and their legacies and thereby highlighting how they are made relevant today; calling into question knowledges produced about bodies through reading their surfaces; and finally en-

acting complex fields of visibility and affectivity in order to generate feelings of belonging and co-extensivity.

Affecting White Femininities

Creating a visceral relation was an integral part, indeed the desired aim of the performance. A safe space for exploration of the self was created not through subversive artistic means but through an affective engagement of performer and visitor in their intimate proximity. Although it has been stated that performance is distinctive in the unmediated “realness” of living bodies (Phelan 1993), I would agree with Misha Kavka’s (2008) contention that it is the *feeling* of intimacy, rather than the unmediated physicality of the performer’s body which is the locus of the affective intensities experienced within this performance setting. Because of this, the complex and ambivalent entanglements between truth and fiction, fantasy and history had to be carefully presented, always in response to the actual affective state of the individual audience member. The narrative of the piece had to be relatable and accessible to the audience, allowing for an intersubjective and importantly intercorporeal connection to be made between performer and visitor on a distinctively affective register. The context of the music festival and the audience made up of overwhelmingly white youth in their late teens, early twenties and thirties posed further questions on the intelligibility of the work to this demography, and on its perceived relevance to their lives and their current affective state of being at a festival. When I arrived at site and sat down to face my audience I felt immediately insecure about how the work would fit into this world that did not seem to exist beyond the gates and were made up of music, dance, alcohol, drugs and of letting loose of anything serious or unsettling. The predominantly positive reception of the piece however soon swept away my worries and the few occasions where the visitors left the room without watching the video to the end or engaging with the performer instead opened questions on the boundaries of inter-subjectivity and the limits of affective relation and circulation.

Affect produced in the social encounter is always unpredictable, we can never know its impact upon us in advance. The closed space of the Chamber and the intimate and confrontational design of the one-on-one performance heightened the density of affects in the

room, which at times got thick and heavy. The affective fields of whiteness were created together by the visitor and Cinderella, in continuous reacting to each others bodily, affective and intellectual states. Complex processes of negotiations took place that at many times developed to a joint narration of the situation with both adding their ongoing thoughts about what might count as appropriate response to the other and to the compositions of themselves. These evaluations were bound up with bodily reactions that preceded or followed movements of hands, legs and body signalling the ongoing thoughts and affective states of the visitor and Cinderella in a continuous interaction. The potentiality of the unexpected encounters where affects meshed with evaluative reflection and made the bodies present permeable, open and porous, enabled the renegotiation of power: the power of me as the performer in framing and leading the situation and the power of Cinderella and her white femininity were at once strengthened or dissolved and handed over in a constant movement between the two present in the Chamber. The concepts and ideas of the purity and respectability of white femininities (Dyer 1997; Skeggs 1998) that Cinderella was carrying in her body were made available through the openings of her white female body for the visitor to shape, form, add to or leave it untouched. *White affect* was performed, and white woman created as an affective figure through the joint affective movements of Cinderella and the visitor.

In most cases *The Chamber of White*, I contend, created new models of relationality. The video performance put the bodies of the performer and visitor at the forefront, and invited audience members to engage in different affective states. It offered visitors to map themselves onto a white and heterosexually normative narrative of the world and imagine different embodiments even if only within the confines of the performance and for the time of the encounter. The affective dominance of white normativity was simultaneously asserted and weakened. According to José Esteban Muñoz, the affect of whiteness is underdeveloped and flat (2000). In his view “the affective performance of normative whiteness is minimalist to the point of emotional impoverishment” (2000, 70). *The Chamber of White* proves otherwise. Performer and participant together entered an alternative affective register of whiteness, which was full. Shame, guilt, desire and longing superseded strict confines of iden-

tity politics. The grouping did not form by identity, but instead by the circulation of the powerful affects of whiteness.

Performing Live Sociology: towards an affective and aesthetic experience of social research

By tracing the specific modes of affective and aesthetic engagement presented by the artwork I argued for the creative use of artistic methods to think through sociological questions on the making of racialised and gendered subjectivities through affect, and delivered a way of working that is consistently productive and generative in working with the affective and performative dimensions of art in social research. Through doing artful sociology a central aim was to develop a way of thinking and a line of argument that might flow from the aesthetic and affective experience of art through to social analysis. I showed how affect opened up a space for those that cannot be quantified and measured through conventional methods. The artwork brings to presence the unrepresentable, accessed through an experience that can be aesthetic, and affective. The affective and performative dimension of art, alongside its materials and methods, I contend, can be part of the artistic means of producing and disseminating social research.

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Notes

- 1 Me and my assistant Louise Jensen performed interchangeably along with performance artists Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen and her staff, Melanie-Jame Wolf and Ana Berkenhoff from Savage Amusement, and Gry Wolle Hallberg, Anna Lawaetz and the performance crew from Sisters Hope. <http://sensuous.dk/?p=939>
- 2 See: <http://sensuous.dk/?p=939>
- 3 The first Roskilde Festival was organised in 1971. On the night of the opening of The Performance Sense Laboratory The Rolling Stones opened the Festival. See: <http://www.roskilde-festival.dk/>
- 4 See: <http://sensuous.dk/?p=939>
- 5 See Dyer, R. (1986). *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*. Basingstoke: Macmillan; Handyside, F. (2010). Let's make love: Whiteness, cleanliness and sexuality in the French reception of Marilyn Monroe. In *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 13 (3) 291-306.
- 6 http://www.ubu.com/film/pindell_free.html