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SOCIAL ACUPUNCTURE

A GUIDE TO SUICIDE,
PERFORMANCE AND UTOPIA

COACH HOUSE BOOKS
TORONTO

(2006)

PART ONE
LIFE IN THE SHIT FACTORY

FLUORESCENT LIGHT, WALKING IN CIRCLES
AND TALKING TO CAB DRIVERS

The world is a collapsing shit factory. War is total and people are being murdered and tortured in our name every day. Real political engagement is boring and labour intensive, and it involves too much fluorescent light. Activism is hard work, but, honestly, its impenetrably Byzantine internecine weirdness is particularly preposterous in a sector that's trying to build a movement.

I would laugh if I weren't so busy contemplating suicide. I enjoy my privilege; I think everyone should have some. I even enjoy a good demonstration now and again, but not because I have much hope that any good will come of it – if the millions gathered on February 15, 2003, to protest the impending invasion of Iraq can't make a difference, what can? I enjoy demos because they're nice social opportunities. I prefer chatting to chanting, and I hate being cold. I'm a wimp. And I don't like walking in circles. On the other hand, I like fighting with cops, occupying abandoned buildings and throwing cobblestones at Queen's Park. But we're at the wrong moment in history for all that; too many of us are too busy fighting each other and nothing much is going to happen until we get that sorted out. Besides, while the symbolism of a night in jail does offer a bit of a thrill, it doesn't represent anything resembling resistance.

So what's an angry, stupid, white idiot pervert asshole jerkoff supposed to do? I keep trying this voting thing but that seems to be going nowhere. I could write some articles, but I can't shake the feeling that everybody already knows, that critical mass has been achieved – we're all just hung up, distracted by petty details, while all around the shit is hitting the fan. I can squabble about the minutiae of peak-oil theory or pronounce righteously that Empire is here, there, everywhere;

I can hope for some kind of spiralling escalation of insurrections that will spill out of the Parisian suburbs or explode in response to the indignation and horror of New Orleans. I can agree that police forces on every continent are preparing for urban warfare against their own populations. I can talk about all the weird tales circulating about 9/11 or watch with a sick certainty what's unfolding with respect to Iran; I can agree that white supremacy still explains so much of it all. I can leave town and try to find a place where more progressive things are happening, but they're not my struggles, I don't speak the language and, besides, I'm lazy. I know I'm complicit; I try to recycle, shop correctly, hire equitably and strike up friendly conversations with cab drivers, but it all seems like a stupid, offensive joke I'm either perpetrating or the butt of, and I'm too confused or too stupid to tell the difference. I'm well-read, I have my finger on the pulse of this and that; I know big words and I sort of know how to use them, if not how to spell them. I want to be engaged in world events. But, essentially, I'm a twerp, a powerless pipsqueak, strong enough to push around a few of my dazed and less-informed comrades, and while that does provide a bit of a thrill, it's hardly a long-term strategy. Shit, it's not even a short-term strategy; it's just enough of a narcissism of small differences to prevent me from capitulating to my real desire to kick back, put up my feet and go for dinner at McDonald's – say whatever you like, the fries are good.

CREATIVITY, ALZHEIMER'S AND MY NEXT P-R-O-J-E-C-T

There's been a lot of buzz about creativity and how it's going to make everything okay, so why does all this chit-chat makes me so fucking nervous? When unabashed and unfettered creativity seemed like an idea emanating from our end of things, something we did in the interstices of the city, I had

this crazy belief that, like weeds cracking through the concrete, these efforts would begin to erode those circuits of capital that were keeping us subjugated, isolated, atomized, bored and sad. But just like Big Bucks figured out how to recoup the liberatory individualism of the sixties, all of this culture-jamming seems to have been scooped and recouped, brought back into the profit-driven fold, like an Alzheimer's patient gently guided by the elbow back into the safety of the locked ward. Now we surf from cultural event to cultural event, this modest purring economic engine providing plenty of beer sales, the line of cabs outside our favourite boutique hotel testimony to the power of culture to grease the wheels of commerce.

I feel tricked. Of course, it's easy for stupid people to feel tricked – that's how we avoid feeling stupid. How did I end up spending so much time believing that culture had some revolutionary potential? What was I thinking?

Was that me who dressed like a businessman and went down to the financial district to dance in the streets, convinced that it had the power to affect the withered souls there? Was I so arrogant? Did I join a Situationist International reading group and walk aimlessly through the city scanning my body for how capitalist planning guides my desires? Did I hang fake money on trees on Bay Street to make some point about something or other, organize 7 a.m. parties on the subway to jar the squares out of their stupor and provide them with a glimpse of a truly liberated soul? Did I really believe the People would prefer my self-conscious manic glee to the quiet, meditative clickity-clack of the subway? Did I spray random chunks of concrete with colour, claiming to heal the soul of the beleaguered city? Did I really construct plastic structures atop exhaust grates to critique the homelessness generated by neo-liberal reforms? Did I really organize talking parties for strangers and play Spin the Bottle with a room full of adults?

Did I call it activism? That was me, I swear, or someone who looked an awful lot like me. What was I thinking? How did my head get so fat?

My next project is seven forty-five-foot-high white letters spelling the word P-R-O-J-E-C-T that I'm going to weigh with gold and sink to the bottom of Lake Ontario. For the project after that, I'm going to swallow a string of golden anal beads embossed with the letters P-R-O-J-E-C-T and then ride the Zipper until I puke them up. After that I'll hire seven children, adorn each with a gold pendant of a single letter - P-R-O-J-E-C-T - and get them to walk with me everywhere as they chant the word over and over. And then I'm getting colon cancer and dying. At least, that's what I've said on my grant applications. But you know the creative process: a streetcar could hit me even as I write this.

THEATRE, EMBARRASSMENT AND COMMODIFICATION

I do most of my work in theatre not for any good reason but because of a few bad choices, some success, an obsessive need for attention and because I hadn't noticed that the possibility of an activist theatre capable of direct civic engagement has more or less evaporated.

After I graduated from theatre school and moved to Toronto, it quickly became obvious that acting wasn't the locus of creativity I had been led to believe. Interesting work in theatre was rare, in television it was non-existent and most film work involved small, dull roles in American movies of the week. I played a paramedic, an alien, a bystander and someone who loves pasta but doesn't have the time to make it himself. I had spent most of my time in theatre school hiding in the library and reading Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre*, so when I was introduced to Buddies in Bad Times' Rhubarb! Festival, I recognized it as a place where I might find

like-minded people to push some personal and creative boundaries. It was exciting. Sky Gilbert and Tim Jones had managed to nurture a vibrant, socially engaged community of perverts and weirdos who were creating good work. I formed my first company, Pow Pow Unbound, with Wendy Agnew, Sigrid Johnson and Stephen Seabrook. We did a few interesting shows, including *A Horrible Night of a Man of War*, *Field* and *Stage/Groove*, and then went our separate ways. I formed my current company, Mammalian Diving Reflex, in 1993 and have been writing and producing work since then.

I'm embarrassed that I've stuck with it for so long and will probably continue until I can find something else to do. It feels a little too late for a career in a more socially relevant field - besides, like I said, I'm kind of dumb, I love attention and I would survive in an ordinary workplace about as long as it takes to say 'my anus is the new black' before getting knocked out by some harassment or incompetence charge. And I would deserve it: I'm an idiot. I guess I could change, though I've only ever managed small, temporary changes. I once stopped eating for a few weeks to drop some pounds before a performance but quickly returned to old habits, eating a doughnut during the curtain call. I'm addicted to all my bad habits, including theatre, even as they remain only remotely connected to sensations that I vaguely remember providing me with pleasure.

While all art is suspect, theatre is looking particularly sketchy. With the proliferation of biennials, music and film festivals and design events, at least you can accuse other forms of selling out; all you can accuse theatre of doing is nothing. Examining the fading of theatre as a form that once held the promise of a democratic forum, like the examination of any organ that's falling apart, can yield valuable insights about the wider - in this case socio-cultural - system. I never understood how the practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine managed to acquire such subtle, nuanced and subjective

understandings of the body until my own started to fall apart. Ohhhh, so *that's* Damp Heat in the Lower Burner. Watching theatre – a form that has always had an intimate association with public discourse and democracy – struggle to maintain cultural relevance can help us understand the dysfunction of the wider social body. The particular aspects of theatre that have prevented it from making a graceful transition into the twenty-first century are challenged in much of the public arena.

Over the course of the twentieth century, theatre has been eclipsed by the other time-based representational forms: film, television and now gaming and other online activities. Theatre practitioners tried to hold on, often resorting to snobbery and a wistful attachment to the classical canon. But in terms of contemporary cultural relevance, the European tradition of representational theatre as an active part of a civic discourse is more or less finished. That's not to say that hanging out together and experiencing constructed time-based events is history, but it does mean that a definitive break with certain traditions needs to occur if we want to salvage the aspects of theatre that contribute to a healthy and vibrant exchange of ideas.

Theatre suffers from the economic realities of the day, which are unable to sustain a forum where actual bodies encounter one another. Capitalism is not here to stay, but until it goes, theatre will be sidelined simply because it can't be commodified, capitalism's most basic requirement. It's impossible to duplicate and mass-produce theatre. Recording the event is next to impossible, and the published playscripts, while a commodity within the industry, hold little interest outside the field. You can point to some products like the big international musicals, but these exist in a different economy of scale and in no way shed any light on the opportunities for mid-range producers. Theatre production, at that magnitude, has little to do with the work itself; it's part of a larger package

that offers tourists a big-city/Broadway/West End experience. Mid-sized companies cannot duplicate this without the heavy capital necessary to generate a huge buzz.

Theatre's most disabling trait, from the point of view of commodification, is that it requires the very expensive prospect of the creators and the consumers being in the same room at the same time – and not just any room, but a theatre. This makes it unique among the arts; I can think of no other form with these kinds of restrictions. Even performance art and dance can be documented without sacrificing too much of the original impulse.

The uncommodifiability of theatre means it has remained largely a local phenomenon, with theatre artists isolated from artists working in other places and other media. A recent art school graduate can make a modest film or video and have it shown around the world. In theatre, the young artist has to invest years before touring becomes an option, except at the level of the Fringe circuit, where work is often lost in the melee and financial risk looms large. Even then, the economics of touring preclude all but the very successful from accessing more than a few locales. Theatre is caught in an eddy, in a redundant conversation with itself, out of the loop of the cultural, philosophical, political and aesthetic developments in other forms. Information-age capitalism, with its demand that cultural products be digitized and circulated via electronic networks, has left theatre gasping for intelligence, relevance and currency.

SNOBBERY, REPRESENTATION AND DAMP HEAT IN THE LOWER BURNER

But while technological advancements and the currents of history are largely to blame, we can't overlook the individual responsibility of the theatre artist, who should be chastized for

her reluctance to admit the reality of changing economics and aesthetics. There's been snobbery among theatre practitioners, some bizarre headspace that keeps us focused on the classical canon, with Shakespeare as the gold standard. Imagine if things were similar in the visual arts: artists continually re-presenting their classical canon, these interpretations often relying on contemporary costuming to help audiences make thematic connections between then and now. Imagine seeing the *Mona Lisa* over and over – this time dressed as a flapper, next time as a Nazi, then as a hippie, then as an emo girl. It's an absurd idea, yet *Romeo and Juliet* keep on killing themselves again and again and again, sometimes dressed like b-boys. Actors covet these roles; they long to speak those lines, believing, for some reason, that mastering the classics signifies some artistic pinnacle. Innovative young practitioners capable of moving the form in new directions simply don't have the resources to dislodge this obsession with the classics. Unlike popular music, which cut itself loose from parental apron strings decades ago, there is very little in the way of popular or alternative theatre that is not imaginatively and fiscally beholden to the past. Mostly this is a problem of economics – it doesn't cost much to buy a guitar, practice in your parents' basement and do a show at Sneaky Dee's. But theatre costs real money: rehearsal and performance space is expensive, and nobody spends money getting shit-faced on beer while we're performing. So, like any capital-intensive project, theatre has had to remain within a system of companies with buildings, which are inevitably institutions just on the brink of survival, too frightened to invest in any real risk, hoping always to capitalize on past successes. And who is more successful than Shakespeare? The Fringe Festival offered an antidote to all this, with lots of innovative work appearing in the early years. But with no real way to be economically viable, the Fringe – both in Edinburgh and

North America – rapidly devolved into little more than a trade show, with teams of artists constantly losing money in the hopes that their show would become the next *Da Kink in My Hair* or *The Drowsy Chaperone* – these exceptions doing little more than proving the rule.

The classical canon and traditional approaches to representation still hold the theatrical imagination captive. Most theatre still hasn't managed to dispense with coherent, pithy and supposedly interesting characters whose lives occur incident by incident. Presenting false possibilities of self-knowing – even among nominally postmodern dramatists – still dominates: characters' lives are summed up, they understand their various shortcomings and blind spots, and they're offered some sort of redemption, whether or not they choose to take it. And if they don't, then, at the very least, the audience is offered that possibility. Representational work – work that derives its meaning from the portrayal of other people in other places doing other things – still dominates, imposing its inherent limitations around the construction of transparent subjectivities and the illusory possibility of an objective position from which observation can occur. It also brings along its tyrannical emphasis on narrative; it's a dramaturgical cliché that the fundamental component of theatre is story and storytelling. While stories may be one way to get the job done, they're not the only way; stories are simply one tool among many. What theatre is *really* about – like any other form – is generating affect, and that's it. Feelings. And, if things go well, quickly following feelings will be thoughts. Stories certainly can do this, but they're not the only thing to do it, and they're no longer always the best way to do it. Yet representational narrative continues to dominate, keeping the experience sheltered from the possibility of a direct encounter between audience and artist, between bodies in the same room at the same time. But this is a Damp Heat in the Lower Burner moment;

by understanding what's gone wrong, we might find an answer. Perhaps we can turn theatre's liability – the proximity of creator and consumer – into an asset.

REALITY, SPONTANEITY AND ANIMALS ONSTAGE

The reality movement in television and the explosion of interest in documentary film have shifted the terrain, with representational drama ceding a significant portion of its audience. Part of this shift is economic – it's cheaper to make reality-based work – but it also stems from the genuine interest we have in the real tribulations of real people. Postmodern consciousness recognizes the performativity of real life and the sociological currents evident in almost every gesture; the ubiquitous corporeal dynamics of race/class/gender/etc. This has yielded an appreciation of the real as a potentially more sophisticated, revealing and rewarding realm than that of carefully constructed, contrived and wrought fictional representations. Theatre has always known a live animal onstage will inevitably be more interesting than even the most brilliant performance, even as it has ignored the ramifications of this insight. So, while film and television capitalize on this interest in the real, it's theatre, paradoxically, that can generate the real *for real*. Real reality is much more likely to be found in the theatre, where the audience is within coughing distance. Yet most theatre is still ensconced behind the fourth wall: those few postmodern works that do take into account the presence of the audience still keep things under strict control with carefully memorized text, tight light cues and no meaningful audience interface. But the innocent gestures of the spontaneous will always tell us complex and politically charged things about this very moment, giving theatre artists the opportunity to find rigorous ways to generate and frame it. That's the challenge, with theatre's addiction to a very particular

understanding of a rigidly rehearsed virtuosity standing in its way. It's easy with film and tv – you just edit out the dull shit, focusing on the telling spontaneous moments. This is not so easy when the interactions are live, and particularly so if they involve audience interaction. There will always be annoying fumbles and distractions, and a final product that doesn't have the same concision that editing allows.

The path to a rigorous participatory theatre is fraught with dorkiness, earnestness, amateurism, social work and therapy. It's a minefield. And no one can be blamed for feeling squeamish or repulsed by the notion. We like our work rehearsed and we like it well rehearsed, like a nice charbroiled steak from Denny's. The question for the theatre artist anxious to break with debilitating habits of the past is how to create thoughtful, rigorous work while allowing for the unknown, the unexpected and the awkward – how to find meaning in qualities other than virtuosity and razzle-dazzle. In a beautiful and revolutionary irony, the real magic of theatre may ultimately be in its banality.

REAL REALITY, DEMOCRACY AND DISCOMFORT

The struggle of theatre for social relevance without the benefit of easy commodification is instructive for all forms; it points to avenues for establishing, sustaining and maintaining the relevance of art in general. If participation is the key for theatre, it can be applied with success to many other forms. Our burgeoning penchant for interactivity and forums for healthy discussion is sustained or fortified largely by the hype around the Internet and other participatory interfaces. Though there will always be the suspicion that it's still about sales, the media is certainly democratizing: the forums soliciting comment are many, and the discussions that follow a given article on, say, the *Globe and Mail's* website are often of

more interest than the article itself. The article may be the catalyst, but more and more, the discussion that follows – as loose, stupid and obnoxious as it can sometimes be – provides a much better sense of where things are at. The deluge of racist diatribes that followed the recent coverage of the Supreme Court's ruling allowing Sikh students to carry kirpans was a creepy reminder that stupid, salivating bigotry lies mere microns – if that – beneath the artifice of Canadian tolerance. A revealing interactiveness, even if it reveals ugliness – maybe *especially* if it reveals ugliness – is the order of the day, and that's a good thing.

So if theatre's relevance as a democratic forum lies in its potential as a participatory form, then how will this look? How can it play out? The answers are legion and can be glimpsed in the visual-art world, with its turn toward the social and its plethora of projects that bring people together and induce interactivity. But before we get too excited, we have to return to the question of my P-R-O-J-E-C-T projects and the role of art and art-making. If our work – interactive or not – is to have any real effect, we must resist being pulled into the gravity of a horny capital's need for content for its information networks and the city's need for superficial cultural activity that does nothing to question socio-economic dynamics. It's been fun to experience the last few years as art production has begun to incorporate increasingly sophisticated approaches to fostering dialogue and we've seen the proliferation of events designed to create networks, friendships and communities. But this, too, now seems about to unravel with its co-optation by a manic and hollow civic boosterism. The hype that surrounds Richard Florida's book *The Rise of the Creative Class* and his assertion that urban economic development is dependent on the activity of creative types can be seen in initiatives like Toronto's Live with Culture campaign. This nominal support for culture and the plethora of activities it encourages,

while perhaps fun for the kids on a lazy Sunday, does nothing to attend to any of the real indicators of civic health: housing, public transit, employment, immigrant services, etc. As artists being recruited to contribute to this Creative City concept, we must be careful not to simply create projects that glorify the sweet, whimsical and easy – projects that reinforce enclaves of race, culture, age and gender. We need to start engaging with unease and discomfort. Art shows and articles abound that invite critical and utopian considerations of the possibilities of the city's future, but rarely do the suggestions or the work take themselves seriously or rigorously engage with policy.

I was being rude in my earlier litany of suspect projects, referencing friends and associates like Free Dance Lessons, the Toronto Public Space Committee's *Better Way* exhibit, the Urban Beautification Brigade, the City Beautification Ensemble, the October Group and my own project, *The Talking Creature*. It's clear from this list that the impulse to engage with the social is strong: artists are keen to generate works that activate the public sphere by either questioning old ways of being or proposing new ones. My concern is that the primary purpose of these projects is to provide a release valve for the pent-up frustration the artist is feeling toward social realities; I worry that we prefer fun and whimsy to rigorous social engagement. All of those projects are good and important – but only as a start. The stakes must be raised, an engagement fostered that takes the work far from these comfortable circuits of galleries, clubs and events, far from the familiar dichotomous thinking in simplistic and dualistic challenges to the squares on Bay Street or to Office Drone culture.

As we were doing our culture-jamming, engaging with the rhetoric of social activism, righteously demonstrating that another world is possible, we inadvertently began to develop an Art Drone culture, a new kind of rat race, fuelled

by the promise of better days, party times and the delusion that the creative networks we were fostering were something more than simply fun. We recoiled from the ennui of political irrelevance, wanting to believe we could engage meaningfully, but rarely did we have the courage to accept that discomfort, confusion and powerlessness is our reality. We preferred, instead, to pretend. Fun is fun, after all, and you can't blame us for trying. But there is the need for an understanding of art that goes not only beyond pleasant aesthetics, but beyond even typical ideas of creativity and imagination, direct engaging with the civic sphere. An aesthetic that can work directly with the institutions of civil society – an aesthetic of civic engagement. An aesthetic that says: Okay, so you want to make culture and creativity a central part of civic life? Fine. Then I want in on the institutions that form – at ground level – the fabric of the city. I want to use these as material in my art practice.