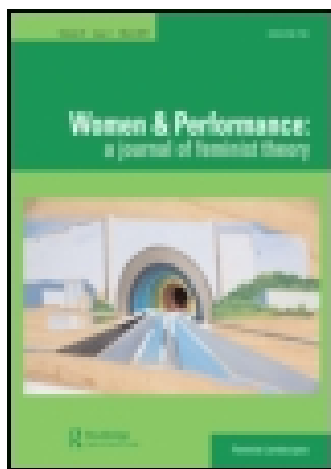


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Symptom

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PERFORMANCE REVIEW

Symptom, performed by BodyCartography and directed by Olivia Bieringa and Otto Ramstad; February 14, 2013, San Francisco, CounterPULSE

Across a stage lined with strips of white paper, two dancers run backward and propel themselves into a series of mirrored movements, a sort of synchronized improvisation – leading and following interchangeably, each one initiating steps that the other takes up. They move in jerky, symbiotic syncopation, like birds or unknown schools of animals, but the intricacy of their movements also begins to resemble mitochondria or some other form of cellular life, prodded by tiny biological impulses. These electrically charged, doubled movements evoke the mysterious bonds of twinship – unspoken communion and transmissibility through physical intuition. Even in these first five minutes, their bodies, pressing together and then unwinding into empty space, reformulate the boundaries of the self as they touch everything: skin, air, papered stage, bluish light. As their moving patterns shift three-dimensionally, the two dancers also reconstitute the surface and scale of the gridded stage.

From textured set to tangled limbs, fictional biographies to queer ambient sound, *Symptom* privileges what is felt over what is seen or known.¹ As a conceptual intermedia piece performed by self-proclaimed “twin” dancers Otto and Emmett Ramstad, *Symptom* “queers concepts of naturalness by asking viewers to question their understanding of the human body and kinship,” as the program notes. Attempts at agency or autonomy in *Symptom* produce a self-identity that is always *touched* by others. Through a series of performative experiments in identity, the two dancers stage the ways in which the kinetic precipitates the permeable and the haptic disrupts biological and cultural boundaries. Playing on the intertwinings in both movement and genetics, the dancers ask us to see identity as a tactile negotiation between sameness and difference. Once identity is reformulated through identity, it refuses stability, coherence, or pre-determination. Instead, identity names a mode of becoming that can be invoked by a declarative utterance or a bodily proximity. In *Symptom*, bodies that come too close to each other operate in defiance of chronological time or biological classification. In *feeling* sameness, the dancers activate identity in order to claim agency against the codifying, reiterative forces of identity that organize, repudiate, arrest.

How can bodies signal their singularity or mutuality; or, where do bodies begin and end? *Symptom* inhabits the space off the map of “body cartography” in order to consider how bodies and their relations disrupt fixed taxonomies. Instead of a discursive formation of the self – bounded by legal, scientific, and linguistic systems of categorizing bodily states – this piece presents a counter-strategy for agency. The dancers follow proprioceptive traces into encounters with the politicized, the awkward, the vulnerable, and the intimate. In a culture that scrutinizes and manages bodily difference, what are the side-effects of queering identity through identity (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Otto and Emmett Ramstad. Photo courtesy of Sean Smuda.

One possibility rests in the return to the molecular – the bodies within the body that, of course, cannot be touched. Another is the potential of language to operate outside of the verbal but within the realm of haptic intelligibility. In the second duet, Otto and Emmett begin a rapid series of collaborative hand signals: as if they shared a private language, the two dancers seem to be simultaneously communicating and discovering themselves through intricate touching. As the frenetic signaling comes to an end, Emmett and Otto stack their hands into an open diamond shape, pushing this mosaic of skin down to the floor. This alignment of descending hands moves the dancers into a daisy-chain sequence that recalls genetic intertwinings, molecular dockings, and twisting spirals of DNA. As they lock elbows, rotating and lowering and rising again, their twinned forms mutate and multiply without replicating exactly. Here dance re-appropriates the dominant discourse of biology and disarms it by taking it outside the verbal and into the realm of touch and movement. If knowing is performed not by naming or mastery but by dissolving into dance, then the movements of a *felt* identity help to recode the “other” as always already a part of the self.

“He looked away from me,” the first line to be spoken aloud in the piece, seems at first to indicate a rupture of the connection between the two dancers. But as other pronouncements are made intermittently by each of them – for example, “he came disconcertingly close to me,” “he will lie down,” and “he’s going to crawl” – the uncanny narrative they are sharing veers from the descriptive into the predictive. It is difficult to know if the words are governing their actions or merely accompanying them, whether this is a speech-act with performative power or simply a set of possible movements that could be undertaken by “him” (as it is never “I” who is the speaking agent in this section). Both temporality and agency are configured backwards in this twinship: “he’s going to touch me,” Otto intones, just before he touches Emmett once again.

Symptom resides in the camp of what Eve Sedgwick called the queer “periperformative,” particularly in its blurring of “first person” and “active” (2003, 67–68). The reflexive, twinned actions that “he” has undertaken voluntarily, or will perhaps be compelled to do, are coupled with the uncertainty of who this “he” is and what his relation is to “me.” Once the speech turns more hostile – “he will be identical,” “he wanted to be like me,” “he’s going to compete with me” – the intensely staged homo-sameness moves from light-

hearted sibling rivalry toward queerer sadistic pleasures. The multiple stories being told here, through speech and through touch, illuminate cultural suspicions around male intimacy and the few available forms it can take.

As “twins” who negotiate identity anew with each gesture, Otto and Emmett likewise signal back through a history of queer art-making concerned with themes of homo-sameness and the potentiality of touch. *Symptom* inherits a queer aesthetic of identity from avant-garde artists Genesis and Lady Jaye Breyer P-Orridge, who began to alter their bodies to achieve a state of mutual pandrogeny in the 1990s. Queer choreography has also historically emphasized the haptic: in 1989, Michael Clark’s *Hetrospective* featured two nude gay male dancers, who moved in such carefully coincident phrases that the giant fur muffs they held against their genitals never revealed anything except – as dance scholar Ramsay Burt notes in the title of his essay – that “the threat of the queer male dancing body” is that the body will “dissolv[e] in [the] pleasure” of touch (2001, 209).

But reinventing oneself through an other that is the same can backfire when the stakes of identity become complicated by the insistent political realities of difference. While Genesis and Lady Jaye can claim that they still share a bodily art practice even after Lady Jaye’s death in 2007, identity is problematized by race. In Bill T. Jones’ dance *Untitled* (1989), which invokes both erotic and eerie aspects of queer bodily melding, Jones echoes movement phrases created by his partner Arnie Zane in *Hand Dance* (1977). When Zane died of AIDS in 1988, Jones re-embodied the gestures from the body that he could no longer touch, marking the difference of race as he memorialized bodily closeness. Uncanny elements of sameness are also pushed to their foregone technological conclusions with the appropriation and reproduction of queer styles of doubling in the work of Ryan Trecartin. For instance, in *K-CorealNC.K (section a)*, a faux identity proliferates within a chattering chaos of impossible sameness, where blonde wigs and white facepaint splice bodies in a process fixated on racial and gender difference. Trecartin employs identity as a trope of futuristic horror: twins represent the robotic and the meaningless, and sameness multiplies exponentially through the filter of globalization. Whereas Trecartin’s videos focus on worlds where the optic has conquered the haptic, *Symptom* feels sameness, adopting twinship as a critical potentiality rooted in the body.

The pre-circulated program for *Symptom* offers an elaborate and authoritative fiction for the dancers’ “freakish” bond, presenting it as a generic mash-up of bio-narrative and origin myth. We learn that Otto and Emmett are a “scientific anomaly” known as “rhizogyotic” twins, like a certain species of armadillo; but the program also romanticizes their separation and reunification: when “the twins reconnected in the twin cities, [t]hey realized it was their dream to make art together.” But the performance itself undoes the authority of all master narratives through touch, constantly reframing the meaning of their relationality. Thus, the periperformative “he reinvented himself” is also a larger motif that argues for forms of haptic knowing through the repetition of queer touch.

Midway through the piece, the fourth wall is broken by a performative intermission: a self-conscious, ironic reflection on spectatorship and what it means to make “twin art.” Holding their microphones with the laconic ease of practiced art stars, Otto and Emmett take questions from the audience about the intimate details of their special status. “There’s this idea that twins are always together, and they groom each other, and they do lots of activities at the same time. But I think we feel if we did everything together that



Figure 2. Otto and Emmett Ramstad. Photo courtesy of Sean Smuda.

we wouldn't have our sense of self," Emmett confides, parodying the cultural fascinations with celebrity narrative and the fetish of twinning. Instead of relying on conceptual speech-acts, they now satirize more facile forms of relating: the sentimentality of the pre-rehearsed interview, the real talk with the artist in a post-show Q & A, the self-conscious capital of public confession (Figure 2).

When this clever, flat, parodic banter – so satisfying for the hip viewer – ends, it devolves into a deconstruction of sound, as the electro-acoustic score kicks back in at loud volume and the two dancers flick their microphone cords, generating wavelengths across the floor. Like a heartbeat monitor, the cords and their shadows link the dancers to the audience in a wavering triangle. We feel the sound encompass us; its thrumming static reverberates in our bodies. The next time a dancer speaks, it is Otto, who begins a long, uncertain litany describing various symptoms. As we are granted this uncomfortable access to the textures and states of the “crackly, variegated, fluid, swelling, solidifying, deeper inside, popping, snapping” body, we see a glimpse of the subcutaneous self, one felt through the periperformative.

Retreating from the stage, Emmett seems to withdraw from this intimate, suffocating pathology. Then, clawing through the back wall of the set, he scrapes open a window and crawls through it, letting the torn paper curl at his feet. He begins folding the paper floor of the set into geometrical sculptural objects whose peaks and dangling shreds become the architecture of another handmade landscape. In fact, Emmett is primarily a multi-media visual artist who works in sculpture, printmaking, and fiber. As Jeanne Vaccaro writes in her article on Emmett's 2007 exhibition *Scars as Metaphor for the Body in Process*, his installations contain an “embodied aesthetic” that “challenges the performative force of diagnosis in transgender discourse” (2013, 96). In *Symptom*, the handmade likewise introduces, if not a challenge, a transitional mode of becoming.

Vaccaro sees Emmett's visual art as a site of “felt matters,” emphasizing the role of the haptic in navigating “conflicting genealogies of the self” (93). In *Symptom*, these “affective, textured and fibrous imprints of bodily difference” help to stage an ending befitting a piece that has wrestled with the constraints of language and biology (91). In its call for counter-agency and what can only be called the transformative power of touch, *Symptom* implodes

productively in Emmett's hands, where possibilities materialize from the destruction of former enclosures and previous diagnoses. In these closing moments, Emmett wraps the set around himself like an animal making a nest, reconfiguring the paper landscape around the contours of his own body. The two dancers lie in the undone gridding of the stage, swaddled in the new textures and depths Emmett has torn from the walls and floor. The stage is bathed in a dim blue half-light. The outlines of their bodies under the wrinkled paper sheets are still. Cocooned and quiet, they rest together, awaiting future becomings. Once again, their doubled bodies touch: we imagine that they feel skin, paper, air, ambivalence, exhaustion, embryonic potential. As dimensions unfold through a synthesis of self and landscape, what can it mean to touch in a field of performance, where relationality is always an act?

Note

1. The electro-acoustic score for *Symptom* was composed by Andrea Parkins, the lighting was designed by Michael Wangen, and the program text was curated by Aren Aizura. See <http://bodycartography.org/portfolio/symptom>.

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