Essay

READING FOUCAULT WITH DISLOCATED BONES: ETERNALLY EXCAVATING AN ONTOLOGY OF THE SELF, TOWARDS AN ONTOLOGY OF RESISTANCE

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It is from the materiality of life – as a historical production, within the very meshes of power – that resistance is possible.

Michel Foucault.[1]

This brief paper marks the beginning of my research into the subversive potential of independent arts practice when embedded within a methodology of "the self."[2] Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, I will briefly outline and exemplify contemporary technologies of power and, using my own work of the past decade, look at why approaching the self as a field of observation and analysis is vital if we are to look toward modes of resistance. As a sound and video installation artist who also uses performance, a writer and a curator, the strategies within my practice are multifaceted.

Foucault interpreted power as the management and exploitation of freedom, and believed that power could be seen in terms of control – *as action over the action of people*. Much of Foucault's work was based on a critique of institutional power, as made particularly clear in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*,[3] which provides insights into the mechanics of power in relation to the subject. Taking his cue from a graphic example of public torture and execution in eighteenth-century France, Foucault goes on to describe a prison system closely resembling the current penal system – where prisoners ultimately work to a timetable and under constant surveillance. Not requiring force or violence, Foucault highlights how this invisible and ultimately more efficient technology of power was rolled out over the following centuries across many institutional platforms. Initially used as a tool for shaping peasants into soldiers, these systems were also applied to schools, factories, asylums, working-class housing estates and hospitals. The implications of this foundational strategy of disciplinary power – based on behavioural homogenisation, hierarchy, and ceaseless observation and examination – are manifold and still hold relevance today.

It could be argued that the evolution of such technologies of power can be found reflected in our global culture of online public life. The seductive power of social media lies in its suggestion of agency, creativity, and individual freedom – and it is under these auspices of liberation and self-management that we 'share' highly detailed portraits of ourselves online. There are indisputable advantages to social media including connectedness to family and friends, and even facilitating radical movements such as the mobilisation and upheaval across the Arab world that occured in 2011. However, it must also be acknowledged that there is a justified sense of unease around the way we willingly reveal complex aspects of ourselves within online forums, and mindlessly navigate the highly traceable pathways of smartphones and media devices. The repercussions of such an exhaustive sharing of our physical and virtual movements, our politics and our intimacies are yet to be fully understood as we become inextricably involved with online social living.

I wouldn't be without the Internet or contemporary technology, but if like Foucault we are to consider disciplinary power as comprising three elements – hierarchical observation; normalising judgment; examination and the

gaze – then online culture perfectly fulfills the criteria of a key instrument of power. In thrall to a contemporary manifestation of Bentham's Panopticon,[4] we fastidiously curate our online lives according to a variety of generic templates under the relentless stare of actual and imagined spectators. In the wake of revelations regarding the widespread infiltration of the PRISM[5] surveillance program in and beyond the United States, we are unwittingly contributing to cyber data-gathering on a grand scale, for the benefit of both known and unknown corporate and government powers. The Panopticon is an effective metaphor for such contemporary technologies of power and surveillance, as read through the eyes of Foucault: "The Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen."[6]

Figure 1. Inside one of the prison buildings at Presidio Modelo, Isla de la Juventud, Cuba, 2005. Image courtesy of Friman, CC-BY-SA

If then, as in the Panopticon, our complex and highly visible contemporary lives are dictated by unseen, unnamed power-wielding forces, how can individuals reply to, let alone resist, such overwhelming technologies of power? And what do such strategies of resistance offer us as human beings alive in the present time?

By rethinking, critiquing and questioning our everyday relationships with technologies of power, we are establishing what Foucault has called "an ontology of the self" (which includes care for and work on oneself). The moment we stop doing what we are expected to do, and trespasses across and beyond the borders of hegemony, we start to actively participate in the interplay of power relations. As Anita Seppä points out: "Resistance comes first and remains superior to all other forces inherent in the struggle for power, for it is resistance that forces power relations to change."[7]

Art has been used as a mode of communication and potential resistance since its inception, and it is within this context that I endeavour to make work. My process begins with conscious deliberation around my subjective

position, and involves questioning and working to decipher the world around me. Similarly, Foucault has described the ways in which a historical ontology of ourselves must provide answers or facilitate dialogue with a series of open questions, always including in one way or another a consideration of the following:

How are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge?

How are we constituted as subjects who exercise and submit to power relations?

How are we constituted as moral subjects of our own actions?[8]

In other words: What is our relation to truth? To obligation? To ourselves and to others?

In 1983, having been given a year before succumbing to AIDS, Foucault gave a series of lectures at the University of California, Berkeley, on the study of the self. He spoke about writing, reading, and relearning a critical relationship to the self, of "taking up residence in oneself" and then staying there. He talked about "occupying you with yourself" as a strategy, and outlined the value of being concerned with oneself. "It is the function of a struggle, a permanent fight. When teaching someone about an ontology of the self, one must give an individual the arms and the knowledge to fight all their lives."[9]

When combined with aesthetic considerations, the materiality of the self presents an inherently political character, representing identity as a redefinable site for cultural, social and political resistance. It is from this position that I am compelled to make art.

Judith Revel concludes her book *Spheres of Action: Art and Politics* with a call to action:

Literally to make one's life the ground of one's own resistance. It thus supports subjectivication, desires, languages, and ways of life, quality and not forced objectivation, claims to universality, the order of discourse, quantity and economic moderation. Resistance is a creative development of life, art understood as a political paradigm as it puts its stake on the invention of existence against a reproduction of goods, the intransitive affirmation of freedom against the transitive management of subjection and exploitation. Resistance is an ontology.[10]

When embedded within an ontology of the self *and* in relation to our current global climate of complex political structures, art practice can provide insights into the cultural and political conditions of our time. I consider this process of indepth questioning, critique, and resistance to be the work of the artist in the twenty-first century.

Grounding my art practice in the circumstances of my life has remained an empowering and integral part of my process. An ontology of the self as defined by Foucault suggests that we cannot grasp the *whole* of our historical time, but we can construct a valid perspective on our era, decipher our relationships with other people and places, and continually re-establish an understanding of ourselves. Making work imbued with personally significant content, *without* a dependant commodity value, is a sign of dissent in our powerful global economy of collective anxiety and consumer narcissism.

While the common thread linking my work is the material of my life, there are other, interchangeable, connections between all the works I have made over the past decade. One reading of my work to date might go along these lines: I grew up in small-town New Zealand – I appropriated postmodern tropes to create a satirical pastiche of the terrifying underside of small-town New Zealand; I laboured at a factory to finance leaving New Zealand for further study – I made work that spoke about the grind of wage labour and the endless cycle of production and consumption – I moved to Melbourne to build a new life – I looked at suburban dystopia and strategies for coping under such circumstances – I came out as a queer woman – I curated shows and made work that hinted at the social rules around gender and sexuality.

Like Foucault, I believe that "Critique is the movement by which the subject gives [her]himself the right to question

truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth."[11]

A recent example of work embedded within an ontology of the self is a series I began in 2011 titled *Down by the River*, named after the small town of Balclutha where I grew up and which was then commonly known as 'The Big River Town.' For the initial work, I meticulously glued individual gold sequins onto my face over six hours, and videoed myself reading a story about my time spent living there. The final video shows a close crop of two eyes brimming with plastic-looking tears, the gaze locked in an eternal showdown with the lens. There is a soundtrack of low growling and sporadic roaring derived from the voice recording of me reading. As part of this series, I also made a short looped video montage using footage collected on the Clutha Bridge near the town, edited to appear simultaneously as a bridge and a body of water. Two feet clad in gold kicker boots are shown standing on the edge of the bridge.

Figure 2. Amy-Jo Jory, *Home*, 2008, digital video still, single channel video loop.

Figure 3. Amy-Jo Jory, *Down by the River* series, part I, 2011, single channel video loop.

Figure 4. Amy-Jo Jory, *Down by the River* series, part III, 2011, single channel video loop.

In 2013 I made a work titled *I don't want revenge*, performed as part of a larger show I curated called "OUTSIDE: Reasons for Leaving Your Backdoor Unlocked." Here I sharpened 40 steel axes and axeheads over 36 hours with a bastard file and wet sharpening stone. While performing this work, I focused on being methodical and calm – I was almost in a meditative state. Using my hands as a vice, the sound of the file on steel and steel on stone filled the room

Figure 5. Amy-Jo Jory, *I don't want revenge*, 2013, 40 axes sharpened over 36 hours with sharpening stone, water, bastard file and chopping block. Photos: Lauren Dunn.

Read from a Foucauldian perspective, I have made works that utilise an ontology of the self to highlight class divides and the experiences of wage labour, consider heteronormativity and the homogenisation of behaviour, and meditate upon modes of resistance and rebellion. Although the work I make is based on my lived experience, it is also deliberately ambiguous – and I expect viewers to bring *their* subjectivities to the work.

Ultimately, this short paper aims to highlight the value of an ontology of the self within the context of arts practice – as a means towards resistance. It does not aim to present this strategy as an answer or clear solution to the implications of contemporary technologies of power. The relationship between art and self requires continual questioning and reassessment – and there is no sure way into this process. Foucault himself was clear about his aversion to fundamental ideologies or totalising strategies:

> This means that the historical ontology of ourselves must turn away from all projects that claim to be global or radical. In fact we know from experience that the claim to escape from the system of contemporary reality so as to produce the overall programs of another society, of another way of thinking, another culture, another vision of the world, has led only to the return of the most dangerous traditions.[12]

Aiming to raise awareness of global social and political issues, but aware of the dangers embedded in such a utopian ambition, I set out to make work that is valuable not through the lens of the art market or through the validation of others, but through its relevance to my life. As an artist living in the West, I have the opportunity to reply to whatever dominant powers or forces are acting upon me at any one time. Art gestures towards a connection with the viewer, with other artists, and with physical and cyber spaces.

It is through communication with the self and others that we navigate our way toward potential sites of resistance. Perpetually rearranging my skeletons (both inside and outside the closet), I am empowered by this ongoing strategy of revealing my self to myself. Arts practice has provided me with a simple and effective kind of freedom. I say, first and foremost: this story is mine, I will tell it.

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1.   Judith Revel, "The Materiality of the Immaterial: Foucault, Against the Return of Idealisms and New Vitalisms," in *Spheres of Action: Art and Politics*, eds Éric Alliez and Peter Osborne (London: Tate Publishing, 2013), 99.

2.   Michel Foucault, "The Culture of the Self," lecture series given at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1983. It can be accessed, for example, at http://www.openculture.com/2014/08/michel-foucaults-lecture-the-culture-of-the-self.html.

3.   Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Allen Lane, 1977). First published in French as *Surveiller et punir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

4.   The Panopticon was an institutional building designed by Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century. It was designed to allow a single watchman to observe (-*opticon*) all (*pan-*) inmates of an institution without the inmates being able to tell whether or not they were being watched. Although it was physically impossible to observe all cells at once, the fact that the inmates could not know when they were being watched meant that they were compelled to act as though they were watched at all times, effectively controlling their behaviour constantly. Referencing Greek mythology, the Panopticon was named after Panoptes – a giant with a hundred eyes and therefore a very effective watchman.

5.   PRISM is a covert electronic mass surveillance data-mining program launched in 2007 by the National Security Agency (NSA) in the United States. Details about it were leaked to the *Washington Post* and the *Guardian* by Edward Snowden in June 2007. The program collects stored Internet communications based on demands made to Internet companies such as Google Inc. under Section 702 of the FISA Amendments Act of 2008 to turn over any data that match court-approved search terms; leaked documents identify Microsoft, Yahoo, AOL, Facebook, Google, Apple, PalTalk, YouTube and Skype as all having involvement. Alleged NSA internal slides included in the disclosures are purported to show that the NSA could unilaterally access data and perform "extensive, in-depth surveillance on live communications and stored information" with examples

including email, video and voice chat, videos, photos, voice-over-IP chats (such as Skype), file transfers, and social networking details.

6.   Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

7.   Anita Seppä, "Foucault, Enlightenment and the Aesthetics of the Self," *Contemporary Aesthetics, 2* (2004), http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7523862.0002.004.

8.   Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 48-9.

9.   Foucault, "Culture of the Self."

10. Revel, "Materiality of the Immaterial," 105.

11. Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?," in *The Politics of Truth*, eds. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth, trans. Lysa Hochroth (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997). This essay was originally a lecture given at the French Society of Philosophy on 27 May 1978, subsequently published in *Bulletin de la Société française de la philosophie*, 1990.

12. Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," 38.