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I AM A GENIUS DOES ANYONE HERE KNOW ME?

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Context

Lois Brown attended VIBE International Symposium at Concordia University, November 30 - December 2, 2018, where she performed a twenty-minute solo version of I AM A GENIUS DOES ANYONE HERE KNOW ME? This performance was based on a 70 minute piece also titled I AM A GENIUS DOES ANYONE HERE KNOW ME? created by Lois Brown and composed by James O'Callaghan.

Trailer: <https://vimeo.com/289326915>

Contexte

Lois Brown a assisté au symposium international VIBE à l'Université Concordia, du 30 novembre au 2 décembre 2018, où elle a interprété une version solo de vingt minutes de *I AM A GENIUS DOES ANYONE HERE KNOW ME?* Cette performance était basée sur une pièce de 70 minutes également intitulée *I AM A GENIUS DOES ANYONE HERE KNOW ME?* créée par Lois Brown et composée par James O'Callaghan.

Bande-annonce : <https://vimeo.com/289326915>

Key Words: objects, things, props, theatre, dance, performance art chronic pain, disability aesthetics, performance, curiosity

My twenty-minute solo version of I AM A GENIUS DOES ANYONE HERE KNOW ME? for VIBE's Art Night was introduced in this way:

This improvised performance proposes that when we slow down - when we risk boredom, deflate narrative adhesions, freeing ourselves from our expectations and suppositions, that when we extricate ourselves from the weight of past and future time, from the preposterous irrelevance of repeating idealized forms, then we become present, curious and open.

During the earliest part of the research period for I AM A GENIUS DOES ANYONE HERE KNOW ME? - I referred to my practice as “following the prop”. At that early stage the props were a plastic bag, paper and a microphone. (The term “prop” came from my education in theatre.) Prop – short for property – implied ownership; and as my interest in equitable interactions with the props developed, I started to refer to my practice as “following the thing”. I borrowed the term “thing” from Jane Bennett’s notion of “thing power”. Following the thing proposed that when I improvised with things like a plastic bag, paper, a microphone, foil and an old, out-dated dictionary, allowing the things to lead me, that a relationality would develop. To follow the thing was to patiently deflate a habitual response of attaching narratives to things. It was to hold back an impulse to do to the paper, plastic bag, the foil and so forth, and instead to inflate a curiosity about them.

Eventually I replaced “the thing” with “the object”. When thing and “power” were uncoupled, “the thing” felt cold in tone – besides it reminded me of the 1982 science fiction thriller of the same name. The term “object” felt cold too, but it made sense to relate my work to the vast amount of artist inquiry into and philosophical writing about objects and objecthood, especially the work of my collaborator James O’Callaghan.

I situate I AM A GENIUS DOES ANYONE HERE KNOW ME? in the transdisciplinary. Although I used disciplinary approaches associated with dance and theatre in GENIUS, my dramaturgical aim was to go beyond disciplinary perspectives, to create something else; if not something new, something open. I consciously reached into the aesthetics of disability arts, especially open access, democratization and repurposing. These principles supported a transdisciplinary dramaturgy, and included my search for relationality and patience: all of which necessarily incorporated aspects of crip time as I elasticized my expectations of

what can and should happen in time, challenging as Alison Kafer puts it “normative expectations of pace and scheduling.” (2013, p. 27).

“Open access” is a conceptual framework developed by artist Carmen Papalia consisting of five tenets (<https://canadianart.ca/essays/access-revived/>). The first tenet describes a “perpetual negotiation of trust.” Embodying open access by aiming at an unbounded investigation while negotiating equity ultimately translated as not only following the objects, but also living with them. At work and at home, the emergency tent foil (nine dollar-store tents taped together to make a single piece of mylar or foil) was always impulsive and chatty – annoying, easily damaged - easily repaired but not easily replaceable. The old dictionary was overwhelming and heavy, always wordy, but able to simulate flight, with pages flapping like wings. The bag - sometimes full of air, sometimes flat - was transparent. It was easily transportable, but also able to carry the other objects: it was ordinary, elastic, and relatable. Though made of environmentally-unfriendly plastic, the bag was the friendliest of all.

Open access, especially the second tenet, which “acknowledges that everyone carries a body of local knowledge and is an expert in their own right” (Papalia) is in my mind another way to say: “I am a genius, does anyone here know me?”. Open access informed the way I injected myself into the scholarly work of Brian Massumi, asking the audience to conclude through a series of interrelated embodied discoveries, arranged as deductions, that what I understood or misunderstood about Massumi’s discussion of animals play-fighting was an allowable embodied interaction between Massumi’s ideas and my own.

Democratization stood for an equity requiring patience. It reminded me that the structure of the work had to break open to allow the unified experience, the experience I was leading the audience through, to be individually equitable. To be honest, I didn’t so much accomplish this as

allow it. (For example, I didn't work with an ASL or other sign language speaker or audio describer, though at VIBE my performance was interpreted by an ASL speaker and an audio describer.) In one part of the performance, I invited the audience to stand, move; or not stand or not move; or otherwise engage or not engage with the work – to be enthusiastic or bored, or understand or not understand the work.

Repurposing supposes that the obvious affordance is the first of many. The bag is a thing that contains and carries other things, but it can be repurposed, and often is, as a raincoat, for example. Repurposing is an indication of the ability of the bag to do something other than (or as well as) to contain. In *GENIUS*, I put a microphone in the bag in order to manipulate sound. I repurposed the bag as a fan. I used it to obscure my face. It became a mask. There was magic in repurposing – the magic of transformation. Following, however, meant more than considering the bag beyond its ability to contain – beyond its ability to become a fan and so forth: beyond my many repurposings. Following drew my attention to the bag as apart from me, apart from what I might do to it, and apart from what it might do. The bag could be flat, full, small, big, empty, still. Following offered the possibility that I could be with the bag, and the bag be with me; and our “be-ing” in the same space and time could be a form of togetherness. I experienced not only a curiosity about the possibility of the bag, but also a sense of it as somehow like me.

Crip time calls out normative time, and names time as something that includes my disorganized chronic pain mind. Crip time offers fluidity on a continuum of embodiments, realities and identities. In *GENIUS*, crip time stretched towards patience, through a process of resistance, accommodation, acceptance, and interdependence. Crip time urged me to become empty of expectation and to make room and time for curiosity and togetherness.

I have chronic pain. Reorganizing my time is essential to managing my pain and my pain-brain. Crip time calls out the success attributed to accomplishing tasks on time and offers to bend time to my pace. During my research, I used the timer on my phone when I improvised. After the time that I set (between five and twenty minutes) elapsed an alarm would sound. I would stop, often before I was ready. Accommodating the disruption of the alarm as part of the fabric of working with my pain-body and mind became a reminder that the aesthetic compulsion to complete wasn't necessary to the dramaturgy, or an ongoing relationality with the objects or the audience.

Instead of creating a central narrative about disability, in *GENIUS* my body and mind, disorganized by chronic pain, are at the centre of my journey through each performance. The structure is my playful investigation of relationality and the enthusiasm engendered by curiosity about the being and behaviour of the plastic bag, foil and so forth.

I crunch a plastic bag and hold it tightly in my hand. I open my hand and as the plastic bag unfolds slowly, I struggle to stay attentive. I'm frustrated. I notice a habitualised impulse to find distraction. But I wait. Eventually, I decide to carefully push a small flat solar-powered light under the still crumpled plastic. Now, the plastic is an orb and I hold it in both hands. Maybe it contains the future. My future. A future. The plastic continues to unfold. I see a corner of the bag. I pinch the corner between my index finger and thumb. I set the solar-powered light on the floor. The bag, its corner still held between my index finger and thumb, continues to unfold; it begins to rotate in the light as it unfolds. This partnering – this togetherness – makes me happy.

Suddenly, my connection with the bag flickers. I sit in my damp and uncomfortable boredom. Finally the bag's continuing rotation tugs at my attention. I experience my boredom as

chaotic and the slow turn of the bag as meditative. Next, the bag discloses its ability to further let go of its previous crumpledness. James has composed from the object's sound, its sonic metaphor: this plays as the bag turns. I have returned in some way; I am dissolving in another. I let the bag drift to the stage floor. Maybe my experience of flickering togetherness is a misunderstanding or maybe it's a becoming.

Who is a genius? Who or what possesses an exceptional natural creative power? The flickering togetherness I describe as part of my performance with the plastic bag, was in a creative context, in this case: VIBE. Like any performance, it was entirely unique and exceptional even though it was similar to other performances of GENIUS. These performances are sometimes boring and sometimes have a spark of genius – and it's not always clear for who they are boring and for who they are genius. For twenty minutes the audience was with me and the plastic bag and some of the other objects. We were together in space and time: we were crippling time, opening access, democratizing perspectives. We were imagining an on-going (a future) patient and curious relationality with objects and people, exceptional objects and people that we are like, but cannot completely know.

Acknowledgements

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Bio:

Lois Brown was born in Corner Brook, Newfoundland. Educated in Drama at the University of Alberta, she returned to St. John's, where she established a cross-disciplinary artistic practice. She is an original member and past Curator of Neighbourhood Dance Works, and past AD of RCA Theatre Company at the LSPU Hall. In 2005, The Canada Council for the Arts awarded her The Victor Martyn Lynch-Staunton Award for *outstanding achievement in theatre by a mid-career Canadian artist*. In 2010 to 2013, Lois was Artist and Dramaturg in Residence at Playwrights' Workshop Montréal. In 2014, she received the YWCA's Women of Distinction Goodwill award for her contribution to the arts locally and nationally. In 2019, she was also inducted into Dance Collection Danse Encore! Dance Hall of Fame. Her current artistic interests are dramaturgy, improvisation and democratization, island studies and disability arts aesthetics and processes.