

mammalian diving reflex

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A Typology of the Three Primary Rigours

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Determining whether a contemporary performance is impressive or not can be a confusing task, particularly with respect to those practices that are in collaboration with non-artists and that aestheticize social relations. While it's not hard to sit back and register whether we've enjoyed ourselves or not, it can be a challenge to evaluate the degree to which we believe the efforts made have been great or miserly. Understanding when to gaze in amazement at the artist's labour has never been more complicated. Understanding when an artist has gone to great and effortful lengths to produce a work may not affect our enjoyment of the work, but it can affect our appreciation of it

This brief typology examines the three primary rigours; the three key areas within which artists can apply their labour to produce impressive results: the physical, the conceptual and the social. The first two – physical and conceptual – have been around for a while and are widely understood. Social rigour, in contrast, is relatively new to the scene, only popping up in the late 20th century and is still the subject of confusion, debate and controversy. As the idea of social relations as material becomes another tool available to all artists, determining whether or not what we're viewing is breathtaking or dull becomes a central task.

Physical Rigour

Physical rigour is the most immediately impressive and easiest to apprehend, understand and appreciate. It includes the obvious, like impressive displays of complex choreography, singing but also the skilled dramatic performance where the body is conceived of as an instrument and emotions are realistically and convincingly represented to great and moving effect. At its best, it's mind-blowing, and at its worst, it's cloying, predictable and unintelligent, even when executed with a high degree of precision.

Requirements

Physical rigour tends to require substantial and expensive training, multi-year dedication, a social and familial milieu where the skills are valued and encouraged by parents, teachers and peers. Preparation is very important and it demands substantial amounts of rehearsal.

Directorial style

Physical rigour tends to require hierarchy and an autocratic and dictatorial directing style.

Relationship with chance

Mistakes are not easily absorbed and chance is often the enemy.

Current artistic value (as of May 2013)

Physical rigour remains easily the most popular form with a decisive dominance on the internet, television and in film. When done well, nobody on earth can stifle a 'wow.'

Potential to make the world a better place

In and of itself, physical rigour is not very much help.

Conceptual/Formal Rigour

Conceptual rigour resides in the realm of ideas, often relying on surprise, irony and the juxtaposition of conflicting elements. The audience is taken to a point where they see the familiar in new ways. Advances in form always proceed along conceptual lines. At its best, it's mind blowing and at its worst it's pretentious, obscure, unwelcoming, smug, inaccessible and alienating.

Requirements

Conceptual rigour tends to require substantial and expensive training and a thorough understanding of art history and current trends in contemporary arts across many art forms in many different locations. It is very much a child of the times and can become stale very quickly. It is most often subjected to the "that's not original" critique, while physical rigour rarely is. For example, an experimental work of theatre will be critiqued for being derivative far more quickly than a dramatic play, even though dramatic plays have been around for over 2000 years.

Directorial Style

Conceptual rigour tends to require hierarchy and an autocratic and dictatorial directing style.

Relationship with chance

Mistakes are not easily absorbed and chance is often the enemy.

Current artistic value (as of May 2013)

Conceptual rigour is the single malt well-aged scotch of the art and performance world. For those who have the privileged to acquire the taste, the social value of being an aficionado can be high. For the very best practitioners, the compensation is generous, and competition is fierce. It's an elite sport. But there are also a lot of broke pretentious grad-school dorks trying to peddle their brew.

Potential to make the world a better place

While often credited with fomenting life-altering shifts in consciousness of the viewer, conceptual rigour is just as easily and very frequently co-opted by mobile companies for their internet adverts.

Social Rigour

Social rigour resides in the realm of social relations, where social differentials are utilized to bring people together in unusual ways. It is often deployed to make political comment, explore new social ontologies or 'ways of being together' and address inequity, marginalization and the gaps between people. The collaborators are often non-artists whose participation hinges on their identity, role and location within a social geography. At it's best it's mind-blowing and, at it's worst, it's earnest, pedantic, moralizing, awkward and tastes like cod liver oil being administered by your new age uncle from Findhorn in the purple shirt.

Requirements

Social rigour tends to require a deep and complex understanding of local political and social situations. This understanding is often acquired through on-the-ground labour that, for the most part, feels very little like art-making; the social artist is more likely to feel like a door-to-door Hoover sales person. Long periods of time are often required, though rarely provided. Preparation is everything. Faith is central to the process, with a deep belief in - if not incorporeal entities like God - then, at least, the presence of meaningful coincidence. Occurrence is best understood as sentient. It requires constant monitoring of the ethical implications of the work and its effects on both collaborators and audience.

Directorial Style

Social rigour tends to demand strong but flexible leadership, quick on its feet with a minimizing of hierarchy but the recognition that, sometimes, the burden of being the boss must be borne. Openness to the contribution and suggestion of others is crucial, no matter how horrifying their ideas may at first appear.

Relationship to chance

Chance is everything with ‘mistakes’ being a key locus of creativity. Social rigour demands the faith that the careening chaos that can completely consume a project is what the project – as a living and sentient entity – requires. The most powerful artistic tool is the ‘shrug’ combined with: ‘Ya, sure, why not, let’s try it.’

Current artistic value (as of May 2013)

Social rigour, on its own, is the ugly step-child of the art world, often assigned the moniker “community arts” and considered the practice that’s done until a real gig comes round. Given a bit of a defibrillation in the late 90s by Nicholas Bourriaud in his book *Relational Aesthetics*, it still remains – especially when it’s actually effective – more associated with social work than contemporary art.

Potential to make the world a better place

It has the highest potential of all the types of rigour. In its current form, however, it’s more likely to be a handmaiden of neoliberalism, allowing governments to shirk their social responsibility, with artists expected to step in and heal at-risk youth who would actually benefit more if those who hide money off-shore would actually pay their fucking taxes.

Some examples from UK, Canada, US and Europe

The examples are strong representatives of post-dramatic performance that is, as of May 2013, prominent on the international contemporary performance circuit. They are all strong shows, with plenty of rigour. There is no hierarchy of rigours; all are important and all can be used to good effect.

Gob Squad’s *Super Night Shot*

The audience is invited to congregate outside the theatre and mysteriously welcome the cast with hearty cheers as they arrive, exhausted to the theatre. Once we’re seated, we’re treated to a three-screen video installation in which we view what the performers have done over the course of the hour or so preceding their arrival. This three channel “film” ends with their arrival at the theatre, where we see our cheering selves as we were one hour ago. Over the course of the film the performers go on an adventure through the streets of the city, encounter people and coordinate synchronous moments, presumably by keeping an eye on the clock. So, for example, at 30 minutes into the three films, they might all starting spinning around, the three films syncing up in breathtaking rigour. During the actual screening, the performer are at the tech booth, signaling to the tech team which channel’s volume should be raised, as they recall which encounters with the public were significant.

Physical rigour is very high, though anchored by a very strong concept. Conceptual rigour is through the roof and social rigour is moderate, depending on what happens on a given night. Social encounters inevitably lack depth and meaning, as the shooting of the video must proceed apace.

Tim Etchells' *As Night Follows Day*

A cast of 16 performers between the ages of 8 and 14 stand before us chorus-style and take us through an hour and a half of declarative statements directed at parents or other authority figures. It starts with "You feed us" and "You bath us" and proceeds through the complicated terrain of life with more complex statements like "You tell us the earth revolves around the sun;" "You tell us that Martin Luther King was a great man." The show examines the relationship between adults and children from almost all angles imaginable. The entire cast often speaks in very rigorous unison, with small subgroups determined by age cohorts sometimes breaking out to speak particular sections. One lone boy repeatedly shouts: "You tell us no, you tell us no," before having a temper tantrum and tossing around some chairs.

The physical rigour is astonishing, particularly challenging assumptions about the ability of young people – very young people – to memorize lines and speak them in utter unison. It's high concept and very concentrated. Social rigour, however, is limited – the script feels very much the product of a single person, the cast is culturally homogenous and it's likely that a rigorous casting process occurred to ensure that all the performers were very talented.

Mammalian Diving Reflex's *All the Sex I've Ever Had*

A panel of between 5 – 10 pensioners sits before us and we are taken year-by-year through their entire lives, hearing details about their sex, romantic and family lives. Occasionally the audience is polled in relation to something that has come up in the performers' stories and the performers facilitate a discussion with the audience. Previous polls have included: "who likes to give blow-jobs," "who has had a promiscuous period in their life," "who has given up entirely on sexual relations," etc. Decades are marked by familiar songs and dancing.

The physical rigour is minimal, with performers reading from scripts, often stumbling over words, correcting each other, the vibe in the room very casual. Conceptual rigour is high, with a tightly focused concept, inspired, in part, by Etchell's *As Night Follows Day*. Social rigour is very high, with participants generally being whoever the team can secure, with only age and the time commitment being a requirement of participation – all are welcome. The process occurs over a very brief period of time and the only material available is the lives of the participants, which is explored after commitments

have been made. There is the trust that everybody who would participate in such a performance will have something interesting to say.

Nature Theatre of Oklahoma's *Life and Times*.

A cast of four sings a one and a half hour monologue that has been transcribed, verbatim style with all "ums" and "ahs." The monologue is simply a woman describing every detail of her life. Complex and constant choreography accompanies the singing.

The physical rigour is very high, with music, singing, and dancing filling every single moment. Harmonies are tight and the humour is relentless. The directorial team is quick to point out the amount of hard work they do to create this show¹. The conceptual rigour is also very high and very concentrated. The social rigour is low, with a homogenous cast of talented friends.

Ontroerend Goed's *A Show of You*

Lone audience members move from cubical to cubical in a 6 station installation, encountering themselves in a variety of ways. They are videoed in one moment, shown this video at a subsequent moment; they are assessed by other audience members through a one-way mirror, this assessment revealed long after the experience is complete via a digital audio recording; and they are imitated – mirror style – by the show's cast.

While not the kind of physical rigour normally on display, the logistical complexity is very, very high. The concept is through the roof. Social rigour is moderate, hampered by the fact that those likely to partake will be that narrow cross-section of the population attending contemporary performance. However the utilization of people as material is strong, while the exploration of social relations remains at a fairly surface, though conceptually impressive level. Ethics are delicate and feelings may well be hurt.

Constanza Macra's *Open for Everything*.

The cast is a combination of contemporary dancers and Hungarian Roma youth and a few adults. The dance is mostly focused on the contemporary lexicon, with some singing and dancing from a Roma repertoire. Short dramatic moments are created, primarily through stock and cliché depictions of the white European's racist attitudes - both hateful and fawning - toward the Roma.

The physical rigour is moderate with the contemporary dance lexicon deployed to moderate effect. The Roma dance tends to be more exciting, but introduces interesting questions surrounding the audiences desire to see "authentic" Roma culture. Conceptual rigour is very low, with clichéd

¹ Post show discussion, Rhurtriennele, Germany, 2012

depictions of racist Europeans. Social rigour is very high, with full engagement of young Roma woman and a tellingly more challenging and limited collaboration with young Roma men. Allowing the audience access to the inner lives and thoughts of these Roma people is a rare moment and at times astonishing. Managing to collaborate with Roma people, particularly Roma boys can be compared to the Fouttes Pirouette, one of the most challenges movements in ballet

Table 1, five contemporary performances viewed through a typology of the primary rigours

	Physical Rigour	Conceptual Rigour	Social Rigour
Gob Squad's <i>Super Night Shot</i>	Very high, but buoyed by a strong dose of conceptual.	The highest.	Moderate-low, depending on the night.
Tim Etchell's <i>As Night Follows Day</i>	Very high.	Very high.	Low-moderate, while managing to pass as moderate-high.
Mammalian's <i>All the Sex I've Ever Had</i>	Very Low	Very high	High
Nature Theatre of Oklahoma's <i>Life and Times</i>	Very high	Very high	Very low
Ontroerend <i>A Show of You</i>	Very high, but buoyed by a strong dose of conceptual rigour..	The highest	Moderate, while managing to pass as moderate high. Haunted by ethical concerns.
Constanza Macra's <i>Open for Everything</i>	Moderate	Very low	Very high. Managing to collaborate with Roma people, particularly Roma boys can be compared to the Fouttes Pirouette, one of the most challenges movements in ballet.

The necessity of understanding social rigour

Understanding whether or not an artist had gone to great labours to create the work may seem like a secondary concern. If the show is dull, then the show is dull. However, when considering artistic practice that is rooted in the artistic use of social relations, the quality of efforts made and the 'back-story' behind the work is very much a central component and must be understood for a full appreciation of the work. This fact, then, demands a specific kind of audience: an informed audience, aware of the complex social relations underpinning the performance and able to appreciate the real-world implications of the proceedings.