



Deviations from The Script: on Michael Portnoy's "Relational Stalinism - The Musical"

"If, as William Burroughs has written, language is a virus from outer space, then Portnoy might come from a planet where dyspraxia is the common, acceptable mode of being." Noam Toran attended Michael Portnoy's performance at the Witte de With, and spoke with WdW's director, Defne Ayas. He shares his insights on Tohu Magazine.

Critique / Noam Toran April 24, 2016

The first thing I hear upon pushing through the black curtains on the third floor of the Witte de With is the cry of a distressed baby, along with what sounds like the incoherent stammerings of a deranged person. Promising beginnings, and perfectly in line with Portnoy's reputation as an agitator of the behavioral status quo, though it turned out that the baby was merely an all-too-innocent visitor promptly taken away by his slightly embarrassed parents. It takes me a while to find the performance, as the space is large and dark, fragmented into bare rooms, illuminated here and there by a few naked bulbs. A calm, methodical voice draws me in, where I join a small line-up of visitors. A performer, seated by the wall in one of the rooms, clad in a black suit streaked with white stripes, calls into the microphone:

Enter like a virgin with a mixture of jittery hope, body dysmorphia, misdirected longing, and mild substance abuse.

6_Michael Portnoy_77 Blinks_A Hoogendoorn.jpg



[1]Michael Portnoy. 77 Blinks, part of "Relational Stalinism - The Musical" at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 2016. photo: Aad Hoogendoorn

Another performer emerges from behind a white curtain at the back wall, dressed in the same way, and begins to pantomime the 'order' given to him: first approaching the center of the room with a coy smile, then clutching at his body with revulsion, followed by uncontrollable shaking and scratching, before returning backstage. Another order is placed:

Enter like the man whose name has just been entered into a Google search followed by the word "infection".

Again the performer returns, this time his face is solemn, before opening up with fear, and retreating into a cringe. This continues on for ten or so more orders, and then the group moves to another room, where another performer is waiting.

[michael_1.jpg](#) [2]



[3]Michael Portnoy. The Agglutinators (Rigoberto), part of "Relational Stalinism - The Musical" at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art 2016. photo: Aad Hoogendoorn

"Hi, I'm Anal Leek. I'm an underage Japanese girl. I have a motor disease. I also have a leek inside of my anus. I was discarded in an industrial dumpster outside the Stedelijk museum because I deviated from my programmed role in a piece by Toni Seagull stolen from Phillippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe. Would you like to know how I deviated from my role?"

The actress proceeds to deliver an entangled monologue full of popular referencing, non-sequiturs, and dirty jokes. She moves in sharp, aggressive gestures, circling and cutting up the space. The combination of wordplay and choreography is highly watchable, and enacted with the intention of eliciting nervous giggles, the actress at one point sitting cross-legged like a samurai, with her back turned to the audience, chanting gutturally in Japanese while making masturbatory gestures. The show ends, and we are guided to another part of the gallery.

[20_Michael Portnoy_Mental Footnotes_S Knijff.jpg](#) [4]



[5]Michael Portnoy. Mental Footnotes, part of "Relational Stalinism - The Musical" at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art 2016. photo: Sofie Knijff

This formal procession –an ‘act’ beginning and ending in one space, followed by another in a different space– is how *Relational Stalinism - The Musical* is structured, so that the audience encounters eleven pieces of physical theatre running a total of two hours. Although not explicitly connected, all the performances share an experimental approach to language seemingly untethered to reason, moving us into an at-times exhilarating space of absurd poetics. In this linguistic ‘terrain-vague’, the performers dip in and out of coherence and in and out of political and cultural allusions, using a variety of methods, both tried and novel, from the cut-ups and assemblages of the Dadaists to more contemporary improvisational, generative, and non-linguistic techniques.

The “Anal Leek” skit turns out to be one of the highlights, and the most transparently critical piece of the eleven (the title’s satirical take on Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics* coming into literal play), as the skit directly references Tino Sehgal’s infamous employment of an adolescent girl to embody the personality of ‘Annlee’, the otherwise-pedestrian manga character famously purchased and liberated by Pierre Huyghe and Phillipe Parreno in the work [No Ghost Just A Shell](#) [6] (2002). Portnoy’s unsolicited use of the character (and his critique) goes a necessary step too far, apparently taking Annlee back into the anarchic fold and perverse logic of Japanese manga, and re-animating her in a way that feels like a more genuine attempt at personification. With this type of work Portnoy articulates his outsider status, a position that Defne Ayas, the Witte’s director, is quick to bring to the foreground when we meet the following week to discuss the project.



[10_Michael Portnoy_The Citybank Sessions_A Hoogendoorn.jpg](#) [7]



[8]Michael Portnoy. The Citybank Sessions (A Dance of Logic), part of "Relational Stalinism - The Musical" at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art 2016. photo: Aad Hoogendoorn

Enthusiastic and giving and requiring no prompts, Ayas immediately opens up about working with Portnoy (consistently since [Performa 2007](#) [9]), and it's clear that she sees her responsibility as providing a soft landing for his first large-scale experiment in white cube performativity. We begin by discussing the intentional conversation with Charlemagne Palestine's exhibition [GesamttkkunsttMeshuggahhLaandttt](#) [10] on the floor below, and what she sees as a kind of shared diasporic attitude, both never having been properly acknowledged in the United States, and in turn fostering their identity as self-proclaimed "monsters in disguise": necessary antagonists questioning contemporary notions of value and taste in art. She even describes theirs as a "Meshuge" energy, where craziness might be a positive liberating force. She also clarifies Portnoy's "[conceptual horticulturalism](#) [11]" describing it as a methodology for improving "breeds" of art. In this way the techniques in *Relational Stalinism* can be read as a cross-pollination of various movements and trajectories in art practice, with the aim being to challenge the current forms and make new and improved ones. After an enjoyably circuitous conversation, we return to what we agree is the backbone of the work: Portnoy's experimental approach to language.



[11_Michael Portnoy_Anal Leek_A Hoogendoorn.jpg](#) [12]



[13]Michael Portnoy, An(al) Lee(k), part of "Relational Stalinism - The Musical" at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art 2016. photo: Aad Hoogendoorn

If, as William Burroughs has written, language is a virus from outer space, then Portnoy might come from a planet very similar to our own but where dyspraxia is the common, acceptable mode of being. His scripts are overflowing with materials high and low, philosophical *dérives* and nonsensical meanderings, delivered without a clear sense of structure or valuation. The effect could be akin to visiting a low-risk psychiatric ward where the patients are unable to express their thoughts coherently, and instead regurgitate what they know in unfiltered streams of consciousness. The resulting prose feels, for better or worse, allied to the post-Internet trend in poetry, with its fractured, a-historical broken-mirroring of the world. It's also filled with a lyrical humor, and in its best moments evokes a kind of dysfunctional landscape as dark and smart and funny as a Tom Waits or a [Kool Keith](#) [14] song. Take, for example, another section from the "Anal Leek" script:

Samantha, your warehouse woman, has just given you a box of woven hair in a bin, as a gift. You



fear it's infected and enact fecal protocol sprawl. Ergo-Ergo, you tell Samantha that your obsession with your "friends" is a metaphorical form of death. Now you are meant to discuss whether it is better to die due to the inattention of a costermonger, a costermonger, or from an infectious disease alone?

[23_Michael Portnoy_100 Big Entrances_S Knijff.jpg](#) [15]



[16]Michael Portnoy, 100 Big Entrances (WdW), part of "Relational Stalinism - The Musical" at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art 2016. photo: Sofie Knijff

If there is any disappointment in the performance, it comes from what feels like the single tonality of the piece as a whole, insofar as the rules of performativity remain roughly the same across all the acts. There are very few troughs and peaks of experience for the visitors -the 'register' of the work remains very much the same throughout- and even when the fourth wall is breached, it's done sparingly, in a prescribed and scripted manner.

Put another way, the work feels safe, and not as challenging as I was steeling myself for. Both Portnoy's reputation and the purposefully cryptic but tempting [press release](#) [11] penned by the WdW, have led me to believe I would be a 'spect-actor', to borrow from Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, immersed and pro-actively engaging in a kind of assault on rational behavior. But one senses the work is too rigid and exact in its construction, too motivated towards producing a



specific tone or atmosphere to provide the audience with a transcendental experience. There's no question that it's a thoughtful piece of work, one which is cultivating a new performative voice, but as much as it proclaims an absurdist spirit, the piece is timed and coordinated too resolutely. Somewhat dictatorial, as the title implies.

[14_Michael Portnoy_DARSTELLERZWANGSLAGE_A Hoogendoorn.jpg](#)

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[18]Michael Portnoy, 100 Big Entrances (WdW), part of "Relational Stalinism - The Musical" at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art 2016. photo: Sofie Knijff

[21_Michael Portnoy_Blues on Blues_S Knijff.jpg](#) **[19]**



[20]Michael Portnoy, Blues on Blues, part of "Relational Stalinism - The Musical" at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art 2016. photo: Sofie Knijff

But I wish to end on a generous note, as it feels like Portnoy is still prototyping for something greater to come. A hint of what might be in store is apparent in the fourth act: the excellent, hilarious "Citibank Sessions", where one of the performers, equipped with mike and headset, cold-calls the Citibank business helpline and embarks on a live, improvised rant. Exploiting the customer service provider's limited frame of reference, the actor asks rambling, disjointed questions about their 'performance'. The service provider, thinking the caller is referring to the performance of an account, tries desperately to contextualize the conversation and make it coherent, but to no avail. Any attempt at moving it towards intelligibility further emboldens the actor, and the provider, exasperated, finally hangs up. What the Citibank Sessions reveals is the pure power of the absurd, and the opportunity, perhaps necessity, to defy the collective social commitment to order and reason, and go occasionally, gleefully, off-script and off-piste.

[9_Michael Portnoy_The Citybank Sessions_A Hoogendoorn.jpg](#) [21]



[22]Michael Portnoy. The Citybank Sessions (A Dance of Logic), part of "Relational Stalinism - The Musical" at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art 2016. photo: Aad Hoogendoorn

[Michael Portnoy. Relational Stalinism - The Musical.](#) [11] Witte de With, Rotterdam, January 29 - March 6, 2016

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