

Not-so-close encounters: Searching for intimacy in one-to-one performance

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Abstract:

One-to-one performance has emerged as a significant form in recent years, but has not been accompanied by commensurate scholarly attention. One-to-one performances are often promoted on a promise of intimacy, a unique meeting offering the spectator a charged affective experience. However, economic and structural parameters governing the interaction, and physical and psychic boundaries put in place by spectator and performer, tend to militate against 'intimacy' as commonly understood. Nevertheless, spectator accounts often report a powerful engagement with something uniquely personal. While the subjectivity of such accounts can be perceived as problematic for scholarly analysis, this article suggests that it may be harnessed in a phenomenological approach that draws on a series of accounts from a single spectator to explore common features of multiple singular experiences. Moreover, this method offers a potentially fruitful pathway for building a picture of spectators' relationship with this form. Applying this approach to my own experiences, I argue that the intimacy that transpires is largely manifested as self-encounter, though the potential for intersubjective sharing remains.

Keywords: One-to-one performance; intimacy; intersubjectivity; phenomenology; theatre

As the lone spectator of a one-to-one performance, how do I take the measure of this experience? How do I relate it to my own understanding and experience of intimacy? To open with an encounter:

I reserve a slot for Michael Pinchbeck's performance *The Long and Winding Road* by phone, and arrive at my appointed time at a pedestrian precinct behind Euston Road in central London. In the middle of the precinct a graffiti-covered car is parked. A man with a clipboard stands nearby, takes my name

and asks me to wait as the previous performance has not yet finished. A few minutes later the car's passenger door opens, a woman gets out and, after a moment, I am invited to enter and sit in the front passenger seat. Pinchbeck sits in the driver's seat; the rest of the car is filled to the roof with parcels of various shapes and sizes wrapped in brown paper. Pinchbeck opens a tin of icing sugar-dusted travel sweets, offers me one, and then begins to tell me a story. It starts with a precise date, and throughout the brief narrative this date and others recur in a rhythmic cycling as Pinchbeck recounts the accidental death of his brother, the ensuing process of clearing his brother's flat and resolving, over some years, how to dispose of his effects, and his path up to now on the journey which will eventually take him to drive the car, full of his brother's possessions, into the river Mersey. Pinchbeck's tone is quiet, matter-of-fact, and this combined with the repetition of particular details – dates, his brother's address, the number of packages – generates a meditative rhythm to the narrative. He ends his story with the date on which the final event is to occur, and falls silent. The performance is clearly at an end, although a short time appears to be left for my response should I wish to make one. After a few words of exchange I leave the car, feeling quietly moved, with a sense that I have accompanied Pinchbeck on a very small part of his journey.

One-to-one performance¹ has burgeoned in popularity since the early 2000s, among both performers and audiences. These performances are often promoted with invitations to a unique, personal experience, an 'intimate' encounter: 'individual performances, tailor-made especially for you [...] curious, intimate, scary', as publicity for Battersea Arts Centre's inaugural One-on-One festival promised.² While various reasons have been advanced for it, the flourishing of one-to-one performances has not been accompanied by a similar development of critical analysis. The thoughtful consideration dedicated to the form by a few scholars (notably Rachel Zerihan) for a number of years has only recently begun to be met by wider examination, such as the recent issue of *Performing Ethos* devoted to the ethics of one-to-one performance, which itself notes the 'dearth of published writings' in this area (Kartsaki, Zerihan and Lobel, 2012: 102).

A central reason for this reluctance is precisely the 'intimacy' that one-to-one performance promises. If a particular iteration of a performance can only be witnessed by one person, how is a critical approach possible? In a collective audience, notwithstanding the inevitable subjectivity of each individual's experience, there is a sense that some common ground can be found in discussion of a performance witnessed by all – though as Freshwater (2009: 5-6) points out, critical assumptions of unity of response in a collective audience are at the very least problematic. In one-to-one performance, however, we can never be quite sure we are talking about the same thing. But despite this 'unappealing yet inescapable subjectivity' (Heddon et al., 2012: 122), if we are to engage in depth with the

particularity of one-to-one performance we must embrace the subjective account as our principal mode of access to spectator experience.

In this article I consider how this question might be addressed by harnessing the apparently critically ‘unappealing’ subjectivity that is brought to the fore by the one-to-one experience. To this end, I base my argument on a close examination of my own experiences of a series of performances witnessed over a number of different events.

Although necessarily individual and subjective, the potential of this approach is that it allows detailed, phenomenologically-based psychological analysis of the ‘intimate’ experience that is held as core to the one-to-one performance. I return to both the utility and limitations of this approach throughout this article. The method I draw on is based on a set of accounts from different individuals (an approach emulated in Heddon et al.’s ‘Spectator Participation as Research’ (2012: 122)), and later in the paper I also relate my own subjective responses to other scholars’ accounts of their experiences as spectator/participant. Drawing out the structural and psychological factors militating against ‘intimacy’ in one-to-one performance, I consider how the actual experience of these interactions compares with claims made for them – to what extent the promise of ‘intimacy’ is fulfilled, and if it is, how this intimacy manifests.

Approaching intimacy

Intimacy is by definition a personal, subjective phenomenon and hence a slippery concept. Popular understandings rest on a generalised assumption of ‘intimacy’ as a desirable access to, or sharing of, private aspects of oneself, usually with a singular other,³ while accounts of ‘intimate’ one-to-one performance rarely further define the term. Lauren Berlant points out that this superficial understanding belies the problematic, troubling nature of intimacy as it actually arises in the day-to-day: rooted in desire and/or fear, it destabilises the structures intended to contain it (Berlant, 2000, 2-3). More recently, performance studies has begun to approach the question of intimacy and how it might be defined and practised in a range of performance contexts.⁴ And as Maria Chatzichristodoulou and Rachel Zerihan point out (2012: 4), one-to-one *performance* has the potential to articulate intersubjective intimacy as a highly politicised, even policed, zone, and thus to re-situate it in the raw, troubling role that Berlant suggests it holds in the social realm.

Originally denoting ‘the inmost nature of a thing’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*), the term ‘intimate’ extended to describe that ‘pertaining to [...] inmost thoughts or feelings; [...] concerning [...] one’s inmost self; closely personal’. Over the twentieth century the Western concept of ‘intimacy’ shifted ‘from something inside to something outside, from most inner to most inbetween [...] from an essentially intrapsychic concept to an essentially interpersonal one’ (Levenson 1974). At the same time, the sense of the intimate arising through relationship became dominant in the psychological literature and elsewhere – an interaction ‘in which partners share personal, private material, feel positively about each other and themselves, and perceive a mutual understanding between them’ (Prager 1995,

22). In the context of performance, Chatzichristodoulou and Zerihan also emphasise the relational:

Intimacy enables *two* sentient beings, who feel comfortable enough with each other on an emotional and/or physical level, to reveal something about themselves and connect in some form of meaningful exchange. (2012a, 1; my emphasis)

It is noteworthy, and significant for the one-to-one performance, that intimacy is considered the province of two individuals rather than a plurality. This distinguishes the one-to-one performance from the one-to-many where, as Ridout (2006) points out, individual spectators may nevertheless experience moments of intimate encounter.

Noting the absence of specific definition of a phenomenon that nevertheless holds a 'special status' in psychotherapeutic process and psychological theory, psychologists Register and Henley (1992) propose that a phenomenological analysis of multiple personal accounts may be helpful in identifying some common features of the experience of intimacy. Here I propose that, by extension of their approach, one way of negotiating the slippery territory of subjective accounts of 'intimate' one-to-one performance might similarly be to analyse them for common themes, and that Register and Henley's categorisation might serve at least in part as a measure against which to evaluate some of the ways in which notions of intimacy are played out, and moments of intimacy experienced, in the context of these encounters.

Register and Henley's analysis is based on a series of solicited accounts of experiences self-defined by 'typical adults' as intimate (1992: 472). By comparing these accounts, they identify a set of features common to circumstantially quite disparate events, all experienced as 'intimate'. The advantage of this method is that it avoids the need to contain 'intimacy' within an (always contestable) definition, and that it allows the researchers to draw conclusions from a set of subjective accounts of affective experience. In an adaptation of this method, I propose to examine a number of my own subjective phenomenal descriptions of one-to-one performances, to determine whether they reveal aspects of affective experience that resonate with Register and Henley's categories, and consider to what extent these might be characteristic of the form in general.

This method obviously involves dealing with a considerable volume of first-hand accounts – 'thick descriptions' requiring a detail of narrative that is often precluded by considerations of space. (Register and Henley's article presents a brief digest of their conclusions with selected quotations from the accounts they draw on.) In this article I foreground this material, turning the method to focus my analysis on a series of accounts of my own experience of one-to-one performances, in an effort to tease out common threads in these encounters, later also making brief reference to the accounts of other scholars and practitioners who offer similar detailed reflection on individual experiences. This tactic works the ethnographic approach taken in Heddon et al.'s 'SPaR' into a phenomenological

analysis that draws on Register and Henley's more quantitative method, using my own multiple experiences as material for reflection on the nature of the one-to-one experience.

The method raises an important caveat that Register and Henley already note: pointing out the 'homogeneity of [their] subjects', they are careful to limit the generalisability of their results to 'other American adults with the same demographic characteristics' (1992: 472). Denzin, following Psathas (Denzin in Baker and Edwards, n.d.: 23), and Miller (in Baker and Edwards, n.d.: 30) suggest that one (or even 0) interview may be 'enough' for case studies in qualitative research. But notwithstanding the 'bracketing' of experience in the moment that is an essential part of the phenomenological method, the issue of partiality is acutely raised here. While the subjectivity and sociocultural contingency of the critical spectator's position is always a concern, it is perhaps particularly so in this case. I write not only from a set of unique life experiences of relationship, embedded in a specific sociocultural and educational background, but also as an interested and engaged party in both the making and the reading of one-to-one performance. The scholars to whose responses I make reference are similarly invested in engaging with, and reflecting on, performance in general and one-to-one performance in particular. Their accounts (especially Zerihan's) offer detailed empirical material on which a phenomenological analysis can draw. But while such engaged spectators may make up a substantial proportion of the one-to-one audience, they are by no means uniquely representative or insightful, and further research would be necessary to determine whether the themes I draw out here are common across a broader spectrum of spectators.

It is also important to note that the performances discussed here already point to the wide variety of encounters offered in one-to-one performances, from highly verbalised exchanges to completely silent interactions, from self-contained offering to the solicitation of animated contributions, from searching gaze to direct physical engagement. In drawing on these examples I do not suggest that all one-to-one performance achieves, or indeed aims at, the same affective register of experience for the spectator (and/or the performer); rather, I seek to investigate the nature of a relationship often assumed (though again, not always necessarily by the performer) to automatically open up the sphere of 'intimacy'.

Register and Henley draw out a number of key themes in their analysis of individual accounts of intimate experience. While several of these elements are clearly likely to be present in one-to-one performance ('non-verbal communication [...] presence [...] body,' for example), some of them, as I show below, may prove problematic, in particular 'boundary' ('the removal of boundaries between people'), 'destiny and surprise' (the sense that the intimacy felt was 'unexpected, but also destined'), and 'transformation' (1992: 472, 475-6).

A further difficulty in addressing 'intimacy' in performance is that, as generally understood, intimacy in relationship holds at least the potential for some equality of experience between those involved. While differences in status and communication capacity may well be present (as in the case of some of Register and Henley's informants), there is still a sense that something that can be termed 'intimacy' should be felt on both sides – a passage of affect shared between two beings. I consider below the circumstances militating

against such an equality of status in one-to-one performance, but I would also note that it is somewhat problematic that the majority of critical writing on one-to-one performance comes from the point of view of the *spectator* (Zerihan, 2006 and 2010, Heddon et al., 2012), and considers intimacy as experienced on only one side of the equation. Performers' reflections also tend to focus on the experience they seek to create for the spectator (Zerihan, 2009), and accounts of the performer's affective experience are few; even the late Adrian Howells' generous and thoughtful descriptions of his practice (Heddon and Howells, 2010, Johnson, 2012) say little of his own affective response to these encounters.⁵ Though for reasons of space I do not address the performer's experience here, if we are to account for spectators' reported experiences of intimate connection, an exploration of the performer's affective involvement might help to ground these accounts in a shared affective context, even if the experience is necessarily different for spectator and performer.

Economics

Underlying the predominant understanding of intimacy as the province of the intersubjective private, and clearly emerging in the accounts of Register and Henley's informants, is a sense of the intimate experience as something special and unrepeatable, unique to the individuals involved. Located in the wider economy of performance, the problems of claiming intimacy for one-to-one performance are immediately apparent. The repetition of one-to-one performance patently locates it in this wider economy, produced and reproduced by the labour of the artist, who must repeat it in order to render it financially viable. Thus already economic and structural conditions militate against the 'spontaneous' and 'unique' intimate experience. Often the spectator will be required to buy entry into the performance. In other cases it may be supported through public or private funding; or, in a doubling of labour, the artist herself will assume the financial cost of presenting it. In all of these cases, the overt or concealed economic exchange marks the performer's activity as labour, and the performance as a commodity or service bought by or for the spectator. None of these arrangements suggests the spontaneity and unexpectedness, let alone the uniqueness, described in other accounts of intimate encounters; rather they point to the capitalist 'alienation' of intimacy evoked by Ridout (2006: 80). In acute remarks on commercial programmers' attitudes to artists who challenge the art market, Zerihan has criticised institutional commoditisation of the 'intimate' one-to-one encounter (Kartsaki and Zerihan, 2012).

In my meeting with Pinchbeck on *The Long and Winding Road*, neither of us can pretend that this sharing of deeply personal material takes place on some plane abstracted from economic relations. To begin with, I have to book an appointment. I am clearly not alone in sharing an individual interaction with the performer: time slots are at a premium. I have to wait outside the car, and the next spectator is waiting when I leave, suggesting a steady stream of individuals presenting themselves for this 'unique' encounter. Moreover, the knowledge that had I not come, someone else could have been here in my place, precludes the sense of an experience 'destined to happen'. The tightly scripted nature of the

performance itself reinforces this awareness: this telling is clearly not spontaneous, nor am I privileged in being offered the sweet (I imagine a stash of similar tins hidden somewhere in the car). In his narrative Pinchbeck alludes directly to the repetition of the performance, highlighting the importance of re-iteration in his journey, but by the same token reinforcing my awareness that I am but one of many. Helen Paris suggests that the (imagined) spectator of her own one-to-ones might legitimately find herself asking: 'Is the intimacy [...] less intimate because it is repeated verbatim to each audience member [...]? Are [the performer's] words meaningless [...]?' (2006: 189) Less than assured of the specialness of my encounter, I find myself replaying it in an attempt to pinpoint moments of individual communication – a subtle nod of recognition, a quiet pause that might betoken Pinchbeck's acknowledgement of *my* listening.

Contract and power

The economic contingency of this encounter, accepted but unstated, thus differentiates it from intimacy as generally understood, placing it in parallel with the transaction between prostitute and client, in which an 'intimate' encounter is promised in exchange for money, and what transpires between the participants is restricted by the terms of the transaction. Jess Dobkin's *Fee for Service* directly articulates these terms, in an exchange that thereby subverts the professed 'intimacy' of the encounter and offers a paradigmatic example of how one-to-one performance works. As I encountered it, within the context of a symposium on 'Intimacy across Visceral and Digital Performance', it thus questioned the very frame in which it had been placed.

I arrive at the performance space, and find that there is a queue for the performance. Spectators are regularly moving forward, every so often passing one at a time through a curtained entrance. Reaching the front of the queue, I am asked by a 'receptionist' to pay £2, in return for which I receive a specially inscribed pencil to be sharpened in Dobkin's 'pencil sharpener'. After a short wait, I am ushered through the curtain to where Dobkin sits on a couch. She greets me in a friendly, welcoming manner: I feel that I am being put at my ease. She then invites me to inspect her 'vulva', which proves to be an elaborately embroidered fascia placed over her own genitalia. When I express my admiration, a brief, mildly flirtatious exchange ensues. Dobkin then asks if I would like my pencil sharpened, and offers the options that I can watch as she sharpens it, or insert it myself. I choose the latter, and push the pencil tentatively into her 'vagina'. I am immediately startled by a brief, buzzing vibration as a mechanical pencil sharpener is activated around my pencil. When the vibration stops, I withdraw the pencil, and after a moment more of bantering conversation, leave as directed through a side exit.

Dobkin's performance clearly references the interaction between sex worker and client: alongside the overt sexual reference of the central action, the financial transaction conducted through the 'receptionist', the bordello-like setting, with couch, curtained entrance and discreet side exit, the strictly limited range of options for engagement, and the brisk execution of the agreed service, accompanied by Dobkin's friendly but no-nonsense attitude, all allude directly to the transactions commonly made between prostitute and client. But it is precisely through this representation that Dobkin goes further, challenging the perceived intimacy of one-to-one performance. The real financial transaction incorporated into the performance (at an event where other performances were externally ticketed or 'free'), the challenging of gendered relations of power, the invocation of the 'vagina dentata' and the parodic deflation of intercourse also throw light on the nature of the transaction between performer and spectator in the one-to-one.

In her subversion of traditional gender roles, Dobkin draws attention to the power relations pertaining to this interaction. While ostensibly performing the role of 'tart with a heart' providing an 'essential' service, she in fact takes power within her performed role and points to the power the performer has over any spectator to direct her/his participation in the performance. From the start, the spectator's role is precisely determined, but inverted from traditional gender stereotypes. For my £2, I am given a phallus, a surrogate penis with which to penetrate Dobkin's 'vagina'. By the same token, I imagine that a male spectator might feel virtually emasculated, rendered impotent in the performance as he is given the same substitute for his own non-performing member. Despite this gender equalisation, each of us is ultimately castrated as Dobkin's 'body' (in the form of the automatic pencil sharpener) asserts its power over the spectator's phallus, controlling the physical interaction with mechanical timing and truncating the pencil. Whether I choose the voyeuristic route of watching Dobkin sharpen the pencil or the active role of penetration, I am cut down to size and reminded of my very limited agency within this encounter. Thus Dobkin troubles the dynamic of the sex worker-client transaction (in which, Julia O'Connell Davidson (1998: 208) suggests, the client buys the power to construct the prostitute as 'object to [his] subject'), but also reveals the actual power relations of the one-to-one performance. Dobkin's 'body' asserts her power over the spectator, highlighting that it is she who directs and controls the interaction. The spectator is not at liberty to do what she/he will with the performer, and with her/his gender identity reversed, it is rather she/he who is in some sense objectified by the performance. By using the model of the sex worker-client interaction, Dobkin also points directly both to the performer's labour in the performance and to the repetition of the encounter, the long line of those who come after. The 'intimate' encounter proves quite the reverse.

Managing risk

Even if we put economic considerations to one side, the one-to-one incorporates further, more subtle obstacles to spontaneous 'unique' intimate exchange, in the form of structural and psychic boundaries. Despite the 'risk' played up by publicity for, and accounts of, one-

to-one performance, and the genuine trepidation of anxious would-be audiences, both performer and spectator manage this risk through a variety of conscious and unconscious strategies, only the most obvious of which is to avoid it altogether. 'I steered clear of Adrian Howells' invitation to be bathed in the nuddy,' reports Dominic Cavendish. Theatre blogger webcowgirl, on the other hand, admits: 'letting strangers blindfold and touch me, putting myself in a situation where I can't see who is coming toward me and yet know that they are there *and* they are going to interact with me [...] makes me feel unsafe and a bit scared [...]' But then, I do like having my boundaries pushed, and I see the *One on One Festival* as really enabling that, in an environment that's safe enough' (2011).

The performance encounter is likely to be highly structured, and of precise, usually short, duration, maximising the intensity of the encounter and the number of performances that can be offered. Publicity for *The Long and Winding Road* stated that the performance would last five minutes. My expectations are influenced by programme information designed to entice my participation. My encounter is already being shaped by external structure and my own preconceptions, including, for myself as seasoned spectator, a degree of critical detachment that perhaps closes down the potential for intimate sharing.

Structural boundaries also serve the purpose of managing risk within the performance, for both participants. At the heart of any significant encounter with another lies the risk of emotional damage or even physical harm, a risk that we constantly negotiate in our search for closeness, and one that is also played on in programmers' efforts to entice audiences. As in any close relationship, the more deeply the individual engages, the more she is exposed to the possibility of being hurt. In *The Long and Winding Road* I enact an embracing of personal risk (as a lone woman getting into a car with a 'strange' man), but the context demarcates this otherwise risky behaviour *as* a performance, on my part as much as Pinchbeck's. My confidence in the established institution that programmed this piece, and my prior knowledge of its theme and brief duration, allay my fear of finding myself alone with another in the confined space of the car, by limiting the scope for our interaction.

The strongly defined internal structure of the performance – the tight script and ritualised, rhythmic format – reiterates these boundaries of safety. This clarity of structure affords both physical and psychic boundaries. Physical boundaries – furniture or props, set positions to be taken by performer and spectator, costume – offer safety to both participants, but also support and are reinforced by the psychic boundaries the two are likely to have erected in order to render the encounter safe enough. A precise script offers containment: the performer will not be tempted to go beyond what is psychically sustainable for him, and will know what he can offer in the form of self-disclosure or openness to the other. The spectator will bring her own subconscious limits – manifested in attitudes ranging from apprehension to detachment or cynicism – but her most fundamental boundary will be the knowledge that *this is a performance*, an experience she can to some extent abstract from 'real' life. And while many one-to-ones do propose an overstepping or breach of physical boundaries, the psychic boundaries of performance frame and emotional distancing on the part of both participants are by this very action redoubled: both performer

and spectator put physical safeguards and psychic caveats in place. The spectator for Kira O'Reilly's *Untitled Bomb Shelter*, discussed by Zerihan (2006), invited to cut or engage with wounds in O'Reilly's skin, wears surgical gloves; participants in Adrian Howells' one-to-ones are reassured that they may opt out of any element they do not feel comfortable with.

In *The Long and Winding Road*, psychic boundaries are manifested by the gaps in the script. The performance deals with highly personal material, yet at no point does Pinchbeck make reference to his feelings about the death of his brother. There is no outpouring of grief, and the spectator is left to derive the emotional significance of Pinchbeck's experience, and of the performance, from what is left out rather than what is included. His matter-of-fact, almost remote tone and the rhythmic repetition of dates and places establish a sense of calm rather than overwhelming emotion, creating a safe space for me to engage with my empathy with him and my own experiences of loss. This reticence is part of what makes the performance, for me, so affecting – an affect born in my empathy with what is not revealed to me. As Levinas (1987: 83) suggests, in the face-to-face encounter 'the other is known through sympathy, as another (my)self, as the alter ego.' Though I feel deeply touched by Pinchbeck's performance, I leave with the sense not of a close interpersonal encounter, but rather of having been offered a space for personal contemplation of loss. Pinchbeck's detachment, combined with the looming but veiled presence of his absent brother in the wrapped packages, hints at the profound unknowability of the other: 'the relationship with the other is a relationship with a Mystery: the other's entire being is constituted by its exteriority, or rather its alterity' (Levinas 1987: 75-76).

Fee for Service again directly articulates this distancing, expressing the psychic boundary through a physical barrier. O'Connell Davidson notes that while the client may project a fantasised intimacy onto the encounter, the prostitute's experience will be very different, and she will have her own strategies to maintain her integrity. In the promises of intimacy in one-to-one performance, this same 'fiction of mutuality' (O'Connell Davidson 1998: 158) is enacted, as the spectator transacts with the performer to perform 'just for her'. But Dobkin's prosthesis demonstrates that however close we imagine we are getting to the performer, there is still a boundary we are not invited to cross.

The safely managed risk of these and many other one-to-one performances thus opens a contained space where the spectator may engage with personal responses to powerful experience – bereavement, shameful secrets, desire, witnessing another's pain – and perhaps come face to face with aspects of herself that habitually go unremarked or even repressed. At the same time, however, it would appear to preclude the possibility of any genuine access to the other, reinforcing the absolute alterity indicated by Levinas. Beyond the external barriers to genuine 'intimacy' that may be put in place by performer, physical context, performance economy or sociocultural expectations, and beyond those I consciously and/or unconsciously set up myself, I come up against the utter unknowability of the other in front of me, the wall of the other's face. I find I am forced to fall back on

myself, to engage with the resonance of this encounter within me. In such encounters, it must ultimately be myself that I come to meet.

Acting intimate

Caroline Smith's piece *Eating Secrets: M.E.S.S.*, like *Fee for Service*, also plays subversively with the one-to-one format, not through economic transaction but through contrived affect and exposure. At the same time, it points more directly to the self-encounter that may underlie the sense of intimate experience reported by a number of spectators. Once again required to book an appointment and wait outside, I have an awareness of what to expect. Informed that I will be asked to share a secret relating to eating, and that secrets shared will be used in subsequent public performance, I have prepared for the encounter by choosing what I am going to tell, and thus am keenly aware of 'how far I am prepared to go'.

I am ushered into a tiny, cupboard-like room where Smith, tall and dressed in a 1950s-style housecoat and turban headscarf, welcomes me. I sit next to her on a small bench and she takes out a minidisk recorder and asks if she may record my secret. I am taken aback – I had not bargained on offering my voice as well. Not without misgivings, I agree when Smith assures me that this is purely for her own recollection, and that all secrets will remain anonymous. She promises, moreover, that while secrets shared will be used in public performance, she will not be drawing on my information for the one-to-many performance to be presented later on this evening. Nevertheless, a boundary has been, if not breached, at least rendered more porous, and I am aware of overcoming my resistance particularly to *voicing* personal information. My 'openness' has limits, it seems, exposed in this small access of heightened self-consciousness. Smith turns the recorder on and asks me to tell my secret. This is indeed a piece of intimate personal history that I have not previously revealed to anyone. In the event, having prepared myself to expose it, and reassured of anonymity. I am gratified by Smith's attentive listening, but am again drawn to offer more than I had envisaged when, with gentle curiosity, she asks me further, quite specific, questions about my experience. While my sense of the risk of overstepping my pre-set boundaries is assuaged by her apparently genuine interest, this is again unexpected: it seems that rather than simply gathering material for her performance, Smith is also engaging with me in that moment of sharing my story. I feel that my secret is valued: my private and, to my mind, rather shameful personal detail has been not only heard, but validated as interesting and potentially useful. I have been offered not so much a confessional that offloads the burden of my secret as an unexpected new light on its meaning for myself and others.

The recording complete, Smith closes the encounter by inviting me listen to something on headphones and eat a cupcake while she gazes at me with (as she puts it) ‘an inappropriate degree of love’. I choose not to eat the cupcake, and we sit together for a few minutes as I listen to Doris Day’s ‘Secret Love’, held in her ‘adoring’ gaze. Once again, my doubts about the genuinely personal nature of this performance are somewhat mitigated by the (small) degree of unscripted agency I am allowed in shaping it. I leave feeling touched and uplifted by the encounter, which has gone beyond my expectations. Smith’s ‘mirroring’ engagement, recognising and reflecting back to me the intimate detail that I shared, has offered me a new light on my own inner material, and enabled me to take the small but genuine risk of crossing my boundaries.

Smith’s performance simultaneously opens a space for intimate exposure and subverts it through parody. Despite my expectations, my experience is of a degree of both intra-subjective and inter-subjective intimacy: something of myself is revealed to me through Smith’s reflecting back of my experience, but I also go beyond my habitual boundaries in my interaction with her. The risk involved is contained, however, by the reassurance of anonymity, but also by Smith’s acknowledgement of the contrived nature of the ‘intimacy’ of the situation through her exaggerated performance of affect and the caricature of motherly domesticity evoked by costume, music and cupcake. Paradoxically, this acknowledgement goes some way to mitigating the artificiality, offsetting the real moments of personal sharing. Boundaries are played with, but remain safely in place.

These three cases all speak in various ways to the constraints on intimacy inherent in the one-to-one form. If Pinchbeck’s work represents the paradigmatic case of the one-to-one that suggests intimacy but proves to present boundary and containment of risk, both Dobkin’s and Smith’s ironically subvert the promise of intimacy with their reference to economic transaction and performed affect. Dobkin argues that ‘one-to-one performances are not intrinsically intimate, and the assumption that they are, is falsely derived from a privileging of heteronormative values and conventions for relationships’ (2012, 208). *Fee for Service* deftly and sharply deflates the claims to intimacy, drawing an ironic parallel with the sex worker/client transaction. Smith also plays subtly on the contradiction of promising an intimate encounter in a performative context. Her overtly performed ‘sympathy’ betrays the artificiality of the sentiment, and though she preserves her ‘informants’ confidentiality in the public exposition that forms the second part of the evening, the first-person recitation of previous interlocutors’ secrets, and the mess of foodstuffs splattered over the white sheet spread on the floor by the end of it, speak of dirty linen being exposed in public rather than the cosy privacy and ‘secrecy’ presented earlier.

Thus in each of these performances I come away with a sense of having largely been shut out of the *performer’s* inner world, rather than admitted to it. I am left to reflect on my own place in the interaction, and to note ruefully my desire for unique access – wondering

how well I 'performed' the role of empathetic listener, hoping that I was the 'special' punter or informant among the rest.

Moving beyond self

On the surface, then, it would appear that the economic contingency and concerns of psychic and physical safety variously evinced in these cases, but characteristic of the form in general, preclude genuine closeness, or indeed any spontaneous intersubjective encounter in the one-to-one. To take up one aspect of Register and Henley's categorisation, my experiences as spectator point to a heightened sense of boundary, rather than the reverse. The key themes Register and Henley identify – awareness of a numinous kind of 'presence' of the other, removal of boundaries, destiny and surprise, and transformation – seem nowhere to be found, in a programmed exchange that strictly limits access to the other. Yet spectators repeatedly report experiences of 'intimacy', profound affect and even transformation in one-to-one performance encounters, as Paris's reports of audience feedback and Zerihan's descriptions of her own experience testify.⁶ 'I experienced something so special, the focus on me was shuddering,' comments one of Paris's spectators; 'I felt so connected, so guided, so cherished and so much as if I belonged,' says another (2006: 183). Zerihan describes Random Scream's *Reflection* as 'the most intimate and liberating performance experience I have ever encountered' (2006: 13). If, as Zerihan and Paris argue, one-to-one performance can offer a highly charged encounter of unusual intensity, and indeed some experience of 'intimacy', and if this does not derive from a genuinely intimate *interaction*, where might it lie?

Adopting Register and Henley's method of drawing out common themes, deeper reflection on my own experiences suggests a subtle shift from intimacy of *interaction* to intimacy *with self*. Insights in the accounts of others (Zerihan, 2006; Heddon et al., 2012) also point to moments of *self-encounter*. Of Kira O'Reilly's piece *Untitled Bomb Shelter*, Zerihan notes: 'O'Reilly's use of the One to One format in this performance allows her to (metaphorically and literally) bring you face to face with *your own thoughts and contemplations* about the opportunity she affords you with' (2006, 10, my emphasis; see also Zerihan, 2010). Recounting her experience of Random Scream's *Reflection*, she states: '[performer] Freeman's gift of a form of corporeal catharsis provided the opportunity for *an intimate self-sharing and self-discovering* that [...] is unique to and lies at the core of the lure of inter-action in One to One performance' (2006: 14). Likewise, both Zerihan and Iball describe a clarity of *self-understanding*, or confirmation of *self-revelation*, in response to the performances they and Heddon witness in their collaborative research (Heddon et al., 2012). Other accounts of spectator experience reiterate this suggestion: '[sometimes] the best encounters are with yourself' (Gardner, 2011); 'it's all about you, what you bring to the performances, what the performances ask of you' (Hazel, 2010). Alston (2012) argues that spectators of one-to-one performance are involved in a 'narcissistic participation' that rests on an agreement, and indeed a desire, to expose the personal in performance. But these

accounts suggest that within this performed intimacy the play with boundaries may open up unsettling revelations or unexpected insights into the very material being exposed.

In the three cases discussed so far, my sense of self-encounter emerges variously through the structure of the performance. In Pinchbeck's, it is as I leave the car reflecting on my own experiences of grief, and my consciousness of seeking to offer a sensitive response to another's loss, in a manner that echoes Pinchbeck's reflective recollection. In Dobkin's work I am rather brought face-to-face with my desire for (and fantasy of) an intimacy that is undermined by the highly articulated economics of the encounter and the reference to commercial transactions of 'intimacy'. Smith's performative and formal mirroring of my engagement with my own private history gently teases my boundaries, taking me into new terrain with what felt like familiar material. Nevertheless, in each case the performer remains essentially a closed book to me: there is little sense of the intersubjective closeness suggested by popular understandings of 'intimacy'.

Can there be more – something that feels closer to sharing with the other? In my encounters with both Dobkin and Smith, I find brief moments of what feels like a personal meeting. In Dobkin's piece, our bantering interchange centres on an apparently spontaneous mutual recognition of shared sexual experience, and my expectations are overcome by a momentary sense of private joke, a warmth and kinship with her as person rather than as performer. As I recount my 'secret' to Smith, a subtle shift of tone in her gently probing questions, a spark of curiosity in her gaze, suggest to me a genuine interest in my material, prompting me to expose more than I had originally planned. But these appear to me to be spontaneous adjustments of the performance script that open gaps in the structural fabric and allow boundaries to be stretched, if not breached. That these moments, too, are safely contained by the performer contributes to my sense of uplift at the end of my encounter. Heddon et al., in their comparison of a series of one-to-ones, note that it is Howells' experience and professionalism that allows them to open up to him in particular, despite their awareness that he is performing his own 'unmasking' (2012: 130); similarly Smith's and Dobkin's experience as performers allows them to play with structure and open up these small spaces of meeting.

Such fleeting moments of connection seemed unlikely to be repeated at Battersea Arts Centre's inaugural 'One on One' festival in 2010, which ironically, but perhaps predictably, epitomised the barriers to intersubjective intimacy raised by the structural and psychic parameters of the one-to-one.⁷ Reserving my place for the evening, I was promised an individual menu created from a combination of pre-booked choices and experiences that were freely available through the evening. Over three hours, in a variety of rooms, corridors and foyers, I watched a drag artist miming for me atop a growing pile of dresses (Thom Shaw's *Drag Mountain*), received a personally cut, polished and stamped slice of an ancient oak beam (Barnaby Stone's *A Little Bit of a Beautiful Thing*), made a solemn promise for 'my country' (the Kings of England's *I Vow to Thee My Country*), sat in a room on my own (Franko B's *You Me Nothing*), and was gently soaped and rinsed in a bath, towelled off and held across the performer's lap (Adrian Howells' *The Pleasure of Being: Washing, Feeding,*

Holding). Notwithstanding the programme's promise of intimate experience, this kaleidoscopic series of encounters, together with the inevitable surrounding busy-ness and periodic anxiety about timetables, resulted in my predominant sense being one of detached observation of the relations being played out. The purchase of a ticket, the crowds, queues for appointments and the series of back-to-back experiences, many of short duration, worked to obviate the sense of private meeting; the overall effect was not so much of personal closeness but rather of a series of encounters that came to seem increasingly contrived and un-intimate. The performances I chose to engage with were in themselves quite distinct from one another, and well protected within their individual spaces. But the cumulative effect of the evening was of a set of encounters, each contained by time limits and the pressure of other spectators, which ultimately contributed to a degree of alienation at odds with the vulnerability and mutual exposure suggested by the promise of intimacy. This is not to say that I did not experience moments of connection or personal interaction; but in this experience of many one-to-ones one after the other (and many co-spectators having similar encounters at the same time) the elements of uniqueness, mutual removal of boundaries and the intimate encounter having its own time were absent; I came away with the feeling that much of any sense of 'intimacy' generated was through the effort of spectators themselves, fostered by the tone of the festival programme, and related, again, rather to an encounter with self than to a mutual opening.

Nevertheless, it was here that I was drawn into an unscheduled, unexpected encounter that upset my expectations and once again raised the possibility of an open personal contact with the stranger opposite me. I had not booked for Rotozaza's *Etiquette*, which took place in the foyer just off the main staircase, and it was only by chance that I passed when another spectator couple had failed to turn up and there was space free for myself and the middle-aged man who had appeared at the same time.

A black-clad 'usher' seats us opposite one another at a small table, informs us that we are to put on headphones and follow the instructions we hear, and leaves. The table holds a flat blackboard with lamp alongside, and each of us has a row of small figurines, a piece of chalk, and a notebook on one side. When the first instruction comes over the headphones, I immediately turn up the volume on the sound pack, unable to hear it over the general noise in the echoing foyer. My companion appears similarly discomfited, and it takes a few moments before we begin to respond to our instructions. It becomes apparent that we hear only our own: mine include moving the figure of a woman around the 'stage', adding other figurines from time to time, and repeating lines of dialogue that appear to respond to those spoken by my companion. Sound effects, and occasional lines of dialogue over the headphones, coincide with the gestures we are asked to make (my companion points to the table as I hear a man's voice say 'This is the stage'). Sometimes we are brought into physical engagement – holding hands, nodding or smiling

at the other. We seem to be enacting a scene from a play, an exchange of some kind between a man and a woman, though my (and apparently, my companion's) intermittent failure to hear the instruction leaves gaps in my understanding of what might be going on. (My sense is of some nineteenth-century realist drama – Ibsen, perhaps.) Our instructions sometimes alternate to create dialogue or exchanges of movement, sometimes seem to come together (though my timing is often influenced by the moment it takes me to understand what I have just heard). Occasionally we say the same thing at the same time. At the end of the encounter when, after removing the headphones as instructed, we thank each other and move away, I leave with a residual feeling of something raw and unresolved, slightly but not unpleasurably disquieted by this brief interlude of commitment to an unknown other.

This unsettling commitment to the unknown arises partly through lack of the very boundaries I have been aware of through the rest of the evening. While the structural parameters of this encounter are clear, the requirement to perform as actor for another (rather than simply act the 'good spectator'), and my confusion about the content of our exchange, find me as unprepared as I imagine my co-participant to be. If I leave little the wiser about the scripted encounter on the 'stage' between us, I am keenly aware of what has played out in the *space* between us. The combination of actual physical engagement and enacting the scene on the 'stage' opens an unnerving sense of raw exposure to a stranger, a closeness that has been mirrored by, rather than echoing, that enacted in our script and by the figurines. I also have a sense of having shared something unique with my companion – our struggle to grasp and follow our instructions, our mutual bewilderment as we occasionally gaze at one another, at a loss to make them out, speaks of a concerted effort to make something happen together, between us. Compared with the evening's other encounters, where my experience is guided and shaped by the performer, I have a greater sense of agency – and indeed a desire to 'make it happen'. And the sense of responsibility to the other I feel here differs from that I feel in many of the other pieces – to 'behave' as a spectator, to gratify the performer with, if not appreciation, at least a semblance of engagement. In our mutual uncertainty about the rules of this game, coupled with our commitment to playing it, the demand that each of us makes of the other here opens the possibility of an empathy that does not violate our separatenesses, 'that recognises our involvement and responsibility in relation to the other rather than an assumption of "understanding" which conflates the self with the other' (Parekh-Gaihede, 2012: 179).

Examined in the light of Register and Henley's analysis, this experience resonates much more closely with the key themes they identify. On the level where we meet each other, rather than the scripted protagonists, *non-verbal communication* is key, since our dialogue is not our own. It is through body language and gaze that we communicate our shared puzzlement, our efforts to make this work. A sense of the two of us being fully present in the moment emerges through my awareness that he cannot be going through the

motions, a rehearsed performer: he is there *with* me in this predicament. And this is one of the few encounters of the evening that I feel inhabits, and is contained in, its own *time*, notwithstanding its predetermined duration – a feeling that is reinforced by our parting without further exchange at the conclusion of the script, and contributes to my sense of this as a unique meeting, both *spontaneously* arrived at and ours alone. While I would not go so far as to say the encounter is *destined*, I am aware that it has arisen through the chance that we both, as it were, fell into the time and space where it was possible.

While the glimpses of intimate encounter I experience in my meetings with Dobkin and Smith arise in the interstices of the scripted performance, here that space of uncertainty is broadened to encompass the entirety of the exchange, albeit within the tight confines of the script. In my undefined encounter with a ‘stranger’, framed by the parameters of script, venue and event, but at some level ours to create, I find a glimpse of the open mutuality suggested in Luce Irigaray’s proposal for a relationship that truly acknowledges the other, based on the ‘infinite intuition’ of ‘a subject who, in each moment of the present, remains unfinished and open to a future of the other that is neither purely passive nor purely active’ (1984: 108-09). In a sense this exceptional case appears to reinforce the pattern I have identified in other one-to-one encounters: it is only when the two parties are involved on an equal basis, co-participants rather than performer and spectator, that something approaching shared intimacy begins to arise. The question remains, for one-to-ones where the performer also participates, how far it is possible for the structure to be open enough, for the performer to be vulnerable enough, to allow for such moments of sharing.

Conclusion

If, as I suggest here, the one-to-ones that touch us open access to our own intimate selves rather more often than creating a shared intimacy, perhaps the resistance to putting forward accounts of one-to-one performances derives from a reticence about exposing this intimate interiority for a second time. But if we are prepared to venture the raw personal material of such encounters, communicated through ‘thick description’⁸, into a shared context of exploration (as exemplified by Heddon et al.), we may be able to understand something of what is at play in the unassimilable experiences of the individual that are at the heart of one-to-one. Close phenomenological reading of such accounts (both my own and those of Zerihan, Heddon et al. and others) does indeed suggest that the intimacy that transpires is predominantly with self. Yet the moments of less constructed meeting I find with Dobkin and Smith, and the disorienting experience of attempting to build a relationship with a stranger using tools not our own in *Etiquette*, open a glimpse of what a less prescribed relationship might be. The intimacy that arises here derives precisely from its unscripted character – it is the unique, unplanned instant of meeting that cannot be programmed into the performance, and where performance itself begins to break its own boundary, overflowing and redoubling itself in the exchange. Beyond material conditions, internal barriers and imbalances of power, there occasionally arises the potential to renegotiate the boundaries, to confront what Zerihan (2006: 9) has called the ‘difficulty of

our (my) response-ability' – the sometimes joyful, often painful and always risky negotiation of the spectator's place in the performance, and in relationship.

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Notes:

¹ As spectator and particularly as performer, I concur with Zerihan in preferring the more relational connotations of the term 'one-to-one' over the suggestions of imposition in the equally frequently used 'one-on-one'. See Chatzichristodoulou and Zerihan (2012, 226); see also Heddon, Iball and Zerihan (2012, 121).

² Battersea Arts Centre, 'One-on-One festival', <<http://www.bac.org.uk/whats-on/one-on-one/>> [accessed 17 October 2010]. Other examples include descriptions of Adrian Howells' one-to-one performances on the British Council website, <http://www.britishcouncil.org/arts-performanceinprofile-2009-british_council-adrian_howells.htm> [accessed 4 July 2014], or Helena Goldwater's *Hot Soak* on the Tract Live Art website, <<http://www.artsurgery.org/Tract%20live%20art/Helena%20Goldwater/Helena%20Goldwater.html>> [accessed 4 July 2014].

³ Hence the titillating attraction of popular media stories purporting to reveal celebrities' 'intimate secrets', allowing the reader to adopt the fantasy role of lover/confidant/confessor with privileged access to the object of desire (or revulsion).

⁴ Most notably through the curatorial and critical work of Chatzichristodoulou and Zerihan; see in particular Chatzichristodoulou and Zerihan (2012); also of note is Deirdre Heddon's work with Adrian Howells.

⁵ The recent issue of *Performing Ethos*, again, begins to address this in a number of pieces.

⁶ The question remains of the performer's experience of 'intimacy', consideration of which is outside the scope of this article.

⁷ The successful format was repeated in 2011, and adapted for BAC's 'London Stories' event in 2013.

⁸ As Clifford Geertz notes, 'thick description' is always already interpretive, adopting what Bert States calls a 'binocular vision' that operates on both phenomenological and semiotic levels. See Geertz (1985); Bert States quoted in Garner (1994: 15).