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Performing Queerness Virtually: An Interview with ATOM-R (Judd Morrissey & Mark Jeffery) and Abraham Avnisan

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1 ATOM-r (Anatomical Theatres of Mixed Reality) is a collective exploring twenty-first-century embodiment through performance, language, and emerging technologies. It was founded by Mark Jeffery and Judd Morrissey, former members of Goat Island Performance Group, and now includes poet and media artist Abraham Avnisan. Its work combines live bodies with ubiquitous computing in an evolving form of mixed reality poetics integrating augmented, virtual, and telepresent environments. ATOM-r was conceived in response to the historical architecture of early modern anatomical theaters, spaces designed for viewing human dissections and early surgical procedures. This physical and conceptual space of operations is used as a symbol throughout their work to engage queer histories and narratives of the body, sexuality, and prosthesis.

2 ATOM-r's large-scale multi-year projects include *The Operature* (2014), *Kjell Theøry* (2017), and *The Tenders* (2019). Prior to adapting their work for COVID-related lockdown, ATOM-r performed worldwide at venues including the Art Institute of Chicago and the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts in Chicago, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Chisenhale Dance Space in London, Zero1 Garage in San Jose, Eyebeam in New York, and Venuše ve Švehlovce in Prague.[1] This interview was conducted on Zoom by Laurence Gervais on October 2, 2020.

3 Abraham Avnisan is an interdisciplinary artist whose work is situated at the intersection of image, text, and code. Using a host of emerging technologies including 3D scanning, augmented reality, and virtual reality, he creates applications for mobile devices, interactive installations, and technologically mediated performances that seek to subvert dominant narratives through embodied encounters with language. Avnisan has presented his work both nationally and internationally. Selected exhibitions,

biennials, and performances include: *Inside Practice* at the Art Institute of Chicago in Chicago (2020); *Refiguring the Future* at 205 Hudson Gallery in New York (2019); and *Between Bodies* at The Henry Art Gallery in Seattle (2018-2019). Avnisan is an Assistant Professor of Emerging Media & Technology and Media & Journalism at Kent State University. He has been collaborating with ATOM-r since 2017.[2]

4 Mark Jeffery is a Chicago-based performance/installation artist, curator, and teacher. A graduate (Hons) in Visual Performance from Dartington College of Arts in the United Kingdom, he received a Junior Fellowship in Live Art of the University of the West of England and Arnolfini Live. He has been making collaborative and non-collaborative performance, installation, internet, and screen works and participation-based exhibits in numerous spaces in the United Kingdom (e.g., Cathedral Quarter Lincoln, Edinburgh College of Art, Inspace) and the United States (e.g., Arizona State University Art Museum, Hyde Park Art Center, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago), as well as Croatia and Norway, including festivals and conferences. He is currently an Assistant Professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where he teaches in the Performance Department.

5 Judd Morrissey is a writer and code artist who creates poetic systems across a range of platforms incorporating electronic writing, internet art, live performance, and augmented reality. He is the creator of digital literary works including *The Precession: An 80 Foot Long Internet Art Performance Poem* (2011), *The Last Performance [dot org]* (2011), *The Jew's Daughter* (2006), and *My Name is Captain, Captain* (2002). He is a recipient of a Creative Capital / Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant, a Fulbright Scholar's Award in Digital Culture, and a Mellon Foundation Collaborative Fellowship for Arts Practice and Scholarship. Judd Morrissey is an Associate Professor of Art and Technology Studies and Writing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Laurence Gervais: Your company's name is Anatomical Theatres of Mixed Reality, can you tell us why?

Judd Morrissey: When Mark [Jeffery] and I met, eighteen years ago, he was working with a world-famous performance company called Goat Island, based in Chicago. They had a very unique way of working with what they called "directives": their choreography and movements were driven by questions, instructions, and mathematical operations. They were also very deliberate about the markings of space, with each piece having a specific shape and delineation of territory. There was no technology involved at the time—it was very raw, very minimal, very "poor theatre." The shape of the work was traced with tape on the floor, but nonetheless this living calligram transported audiences to another sense of place and state of consciousness.

Mark and I then collaborated both together and with the company, and for many years did site-specific performances using projection mapping and live and recorded material. As our practice evolved, we incorporated a large number of dancers and participants. It was the era of database aesthetic, and we would channel live feeds and map spaces through both choreography and computing. For example, we created a work where the placement of dancers was based on the positions of stars above their location. Eventually, we invited some of our most dedicated collaborators to join us in forming "Anatomical Theatres of Mixed Reality." The term "anatomical" comes from a site-specific piece we did in Edinburgh's medical district, where Sir Arthur Conan Doyle went to medical school. We built an interactive surgery table so

that just like in the anatomical theatres at the university, the public looked down on medical procedures being performed. The form of the anatomical theatre became a metaphor of the observation of the body being subject to processes and operations connected to new technologies of surgery, being penetrated, being looked at from a distance overhead, from different scales of space. And the anatomical histories of our subjects are usually central to the work. But with COVID, we're in a sort of undefined, queer territory. Mark and I have been collaborating with Abe [Abraham Avnisan], but the number of people in the company is somewhat in flux at the moment, a sort of poly-configuration.

Laurence Gervais: According to you, what is the effect of using the body to break pre-established social codes via performances that seek to "queer" and transform space, especially city space?

Judd Morrissey: For our first work, *The Operature*, for example, we researched a Chicago-based queer figure who had several aliases, called Samuel Steward.[3] Steward was also a tattooist under the name Phil Sparrow and he pioneered gay pulp fiction as Phil Andros. He was a protégé of Gertrude Stein who had gone from being connected to "serious" literature to writing pulp fiction and using the body as a medium. He was fascinated with documenting his sex acts and tracking the data of his sexual encounters through photography, drawing, and even samples of hair. He made a card catalog, a massive, crude database called the *Stud File* where he coded and cross-referenced details of his tricks and encounters using a specific alphanumeric key. We reproduced his tattoos on the bodies of our performers and used the imagery as markers of augmented reality. We came to see his coded system and inscription of the rose onto the bodies of sailors as a transformation of language subsequent to Stein's modernist "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose."

For the next piece, I was in Norway and I discovered a narrative about Alan Turing travelling there towards the end of his life and falling in love with a Norwegian boy after whom he named his evolving theory of morphogenesis. Turing was legally punished for his homosexuality and given forced hormone treatment which caused him to develop male breasts against his will. In our work, *Kjell Theory,* we juxtapose Turing's narrative with *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, Apollinaire's surrealist play. The performance was structured as a queer fertility ritual of birth and metamorphosis, since both the theory of morphogenesis and the play are concerned with the generation of embryos. This describes what Anatomical Theatres is: a space where the body is performed and augmented, dissected, and penetrated, where our bodies become transhistorical zones.

Then Abraham came in a few years ago—he actually did his MFA in my program at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago—so we worked closely in that capacity for a couple of years and then began collaborating. While Mark is coming from visual performance and is really sculpting space and bodies visually through choreography, Abe and I had a similar background, coming from literature and computing. Mark and I had been working with transformations of place really from the beginning and often on a fairly large scale, and when Abe joined us we started experimenting with 3D captures using a powerful Lidar scanner. We started scanning and stitching together really massive and gorgeously impressionistic environments, using this laser scanner that just rotates on a tripod and swallows up large amounts of space.

In our new project, *The Tenders*, we are working with space in a more immersive way, blending augmented reality text-objects with volumetric virtual environments.[4] We have called our work "Anatomical Theatres of Mixed Reality" all along, but the conceptual use of architectural space has now become more visible and inhabitable.

Through an accidental discovery in our current work, we started working with the city. The city is really the subject of the work we are doing now, and this is relatively new. The queering of the city, the subversion and inversion of its structures and entrenched narratives, is central to what we're doing now.

Laurence Gervais: Since the body is also a locus and a performance in itself, would you say that space-based theatrical "performance" creates space?

Abraham Avnisan: In all of our projects and in the current work as well, the space of the work is a place where there are intersections of many different histories, narratives, discourses, and bodies. In the current work the city becomes a kind of body through the 3D scanning technologies. We are able to capture a large section of the city and then we can control it; we objectify it, we instrumentalize it in some way. The scan that we are working with for this project includes Trump Tower Chicago: this is a way of inverting the contemporary political discourse and queering it, playing with it, and having some agency over. It is interesting to think about locating an artwork within a physical urban space and using that to create a territory or a protest or a demonstration or a temporary autonomous zone—but today we can move beyond that as well, by taking the virtualized city and bringing it somewhere else. We can bring it into a theater, we can bring it into a zoom performance. And I think that is really interesting.

Mark Jeffery: We were part of a residency last fall, at the Bridge Museum by Trump Tower. This is also the site of Fort Dearborn, where the history of Chicago as a city built on land seized from the Indigenous population takes its root. The fort was built as a garrison to protect the "white" people from the Native tribes whose land they were occupying. Starting with last summer's protests, the mayor has repeatedly raised the bridges as a way to "protect the population." The Loop became a castle and the waterway was like a moat that stopped the demonstrators from getting into the downtown area. I never thought of the bridges as a site of war, and as a site of unrest to basically stop people from going into and disrupting this place of urban capitalism, to try and protect business.

This is the way we work with time. Our pieces take two to three years to take shape, the present one is going to be a four-year project. As we embody the material, the material talks back to us. There are always accidents, then suddenly we discover that we are mining the zeitgeist, which again is an accident or maybe a foreshadowing. This is what artists do: we ask questions and then suddenly the answers reveal themselves through the questions we keep on asking.

Judd Morrissey: In the current work we have been looking at the structure of the western fort and learning about that colonial history, and then associating that with Trump Tower in the same area. The xenophobia and the racism and the white supremacy of the current president in a time of pandemic draw attention to comparisons between forts and bodies, what you let into the body what you don't let into the body, who you let into the body who you don't let into the body.

Laurence Gervais: Queer and trans* activism has famously employed performance, street theater, or monumental activism: would you say that this is also what ATOM-r is doing?

Judd Morrissey: We were originally working with the Rhinestone Cowboy figure, Loy Bolin, who considered himself to be queer and who modeled himself after a Glenn Campbell song from 1975.[5]

Loy Bolin was considered to be sort of a vernacular artist in the sense that he was not a trained artist, and maybe not intending to be an artist. His house has been collected by a museum in Sheboygan called the John Michael Kohler Art Center, and we were able to capture it with the Lidar scanner. Bowlin modelled himself after a song, "Rhinestone Cowboy," from 1975, recorded by Glen Campbell but it's actually already a cover song. He became obsessed with rhinestoning all of his clothing, his teeth, glasses, car, and the entire interior of his house with cheap construction paper mosaics of sequin materials, to create this rhinestone style and environment. He was a street performer, dancing and playing harmonica in the city square, bedazzled and shimmering in his persona. In examining Bowlin, we are exploring the conflation of body and environment, a queering of boundaries via a deimatic behavior like camouflage or animal coloration. Through the thread of the work related to the city, we are intervening into the monumental through a queering of architecture.

Laurence Gervais: How is this work related to the city?

Judd Morrissey: Two embodied spatial contexts are juxtaposed: on the one hand, the cowboy in his home as a site of safety and protection, and a habitat; on the other hand, the fort, which is also a site of safety, but that keeps certain bodies out and allows other bodies to come in. I think of the queer urban body as a zone as well: is it radical to let many people into your body? With drugs that prevent or suppress HIV infection the body is biomedically fortified for interpenetration with others. With the conflation of city and anatomy, Trump Tower becomes the symbol of a person, and the city becomes a body that we can manipulate within our anatomical theater.

When our scanner spins and rotates in place, it swallows up all of the data of its surroundings, but the space under the tripod is a blind spot that always turns into a void. To scan a site, we might have to plant the scanner in ten different locations, and everywhere we plant the scanner we get a hole, a data void. Early on in our work we started working with those holes. Those holes are how we tunnel between virtual environments, and those holes are anatomical, they're very much orifices. When we turn the virtual city of Chicago over on itself, we literally *invert* the city—to use a term that is historically describing queerness as well. We penetrate the overturned towers and pass through their data voids. To make a bottom of the towers' top, we plumb the stymied ligatures of the height's depths. These operations of manipulating space through material inversions are how we are politicizing the city. When we inverted the city over, we also discovered that it looked like a prairie. This made us think about a lost origin. In this in-between temporality of the pandemic, we are looking at the covered over origin in relation to a potential future, a future of that precolonial origin story. But locating the narrative that comes before the colonial fort through which the city claims itself as origin has become our primary challenge, because we are not indigenous to the place.

Abraham Avnisan: In the current work there is a juxtaposition of at least two narratives: on the one hand, Loy Bolin's story; and on the other hand, the scan of his

home, the scan of the DuSable Bridge, and the research into the history of Chicago. The relationship between these two narratives is dynamic and unresolved, but one way we've been approaching it is by considering the figure of the cowboy and everything that figure represents as a symbol of the colonial project.

It raises the question of our own bodies, our own identities: what does it mean to try to critically engage in the history of the colonial project in North America as a cisgender white man? It is a challenge and we are trying to do our best to engage with that responsibly. We have this privilege as cisgender white men within the city, within the political landscape, to think back about territories and the demonstrations. It has become an important parameter in 2020: since the summer, there has been a violent imposition of a sense of territory from the state through police violence. We are really in a kind of war, an epic conflict to reclaim the territory of the streets.[6] Doing this performance is one way in which we can use our bodies, because our bodies are less vulnerable than the bodies of many others.

Laurence Gervais: What changes did the lockdown bring to your artistic practice? To your teaching performance in the School of Art Institute or in the School of Emerging Media & Technology at Kent State University?

Mark Jeffery: The last time we performed was at the Museum of the Art Institute on February 14 [2020] in Fullerton Hall, and then we presented online conferences in Florida and in the UK. This has also been happening in teaching as well. We have had to translate the live work, obviously, but also to translate it in a Zoom experience, figuring out different tools. Over the course of the late spring and early summer we kept on building on the project. After these three performances we are now involved in a residency with a cohort of people of color and Indigenous artists. Through this generative process we have been finding new DIY tools. Judd bought some green screen material and covered his windows at his house, Abe and I got a green screen, and we all began to basically navigate between our bodies and actually this projection of the bridge scans, and the Loy Bolin house scans. Abe was in a prairie scanning his body, we also investigated these green screen suits, not only creating landscapes within a green screen but also landscapes on ourselves. Naturally it took hours and hours of rehearsal, but I think we quite comfortably felt that we could do it. We had to keep on being creative, and as a teaching artist I should be making work, I think we all agree on that.

Abraham Avnisan: I was so depressed earlier this year, I think many of us were—we were supposed to go to Paris, I was supposed to spend four weeks in Palestine on another project and everything was cancelled. Work was on hold, we had to figure out something else, and Mark's optimism and his attitude, this kind of understanding that making work is one of the most important forms of taking care of ourselves and of each other, that really pushed us to get back into rehearsal.

What happened was incredible. It is not only translation but also innovation, and the constraints opened up all of these possibilities that were latent in the work, but which probably wouldn't have been explored or realized unless we were forced to move into the Zoom platform. And what we found was that our work was very well-suited to the Zoom platform. Though we had to let go, me especially, of our attachment to high resolution. We could start playing with this new element of the green screen that Mark talked about. What that allowed for, ironically, was a more immersive and layered kind of performance. We have been able to push this concept

of mixed reality, because now in the Zoom work there are so many layers of reality, which is very disorienting, but in a good way. I think of it as a kaleidoscopic kind of experience.

We had three performances over Zoom and at each performance we made a new discovery. For instance, we discovered the ways in which the city has a body, and how our bodies as human bodies can start interacting in a new way in a Zoom performance. Another example: I moved into the house I live in now quite recently, so I had all these moving blankets around, which I used to create a makeshift green screen. I taped four blankets together, and it meant that there was a seam down the middle, and so all of a sudden I could stick my hand through the green screen and I could have a disembodied arm that was penetrating the city when we were projecting the Lidar scan of the city onto the green screen.

We started experimenting with green screen suits so that our bodies literally became spaces, they became virtual 3D scans of physical spaces. Mark was doing amazing things with his green screen, just putting it around his shoulders and sort of draping himself in it, and we all found a way, through hours of rehearsal, to start moving around. Because we are in a room in our home, we are not in a space where we can really move around the way we are used to in a theater.

Mark took his laptop and he walked into different parts of his house, because that is what you can do with your body but it is not something we are used to, because what we are used to is sitting at our desks in front of our video cameras.

All these discoveries led up to the creation of the Buddy Research and Performance Residency, which we helped cofound, that was just launched a week ago or so. This residency is a combination of all of these things, making work as a form of caring for oneself and caring for others, the artist's residency as a kind of mutual aid network, innovating new tools and methods to make performance work in the context of a pandemic. It means also helping others, bringing out what we have learned, what we can teach and share with others, hopefully helping them to make their work in this way, and then have the opportunity to listen and learn from them, especially as artists who are coming from different positionalities.

Judd Morrissey: Performance is a way in which our bodies merge into a sort of assemblage body, this queer collective body-architecture. In the pre-pandemic performance Abe and I were physically leaning back to back against one another, like walls of a ruined fort that would collapse if we were not connected. Isolated from one another, we are performing a connectivity of bodies and spaces through networked technology. There is a moment in the remote performance when Mark is moving in front of and within these big virtual letters that I've placed in my apartment using augmented reality. Mark's virtual body is dancing inside a letter, inside my apartment, and I get confused as to where we are. That breakdown of individual body, and the queer hybridity and conflation of bodies and spaces, is coming through more strongly in this contactless realm of networked physical distance.

Laurence Gervais: Would you say that today's geography has become a mental one or is it still territory-based?

Mark Jeffery: When we work with these geographies and virtual architectures, they become inner spaces. For the last iteration Abe was able to create another sort of mapping of the bridge including the bas-relief, and that allowed us to go inside the

bridge itself, into the guts of its structure. Something also took place with the inverting of the Trump Tower, and also one of the Marina Towers, placing the body in relationship to that architecture. There is a moment in the performance when Abe is literally lying in a particular formation on top of the city that has been inverted, then he is falling into the tower so you get the sense of gravity and loss and escape. That act of falling becomes really quite a moment of horror as well as a bliss. Judd goes on, walks, and sings to himself a poem song in relation to Loy Bolin and a conversation that he had with his father. Then he is hammering in a green screen suit that is embodying an interior of Loy Bolin's house which slowly morphs into footage of the Minneapolis police station being burned down [on May 28, 2020, during the riots that followed the death of George Floyd while he was in police custody in Minneapolis].

Judd Morrissey: We have thought about the difference between inverting a tower within a simulation and pulling a statue off a pedestal. Those are clearly different things, one happens in perception while the other happens as a protest within physical space. Still, the world that we are building at least for the duration of the performance is the world. When we are using these technologies and we are using terms like mixed reality, what is happening is performative and ontological, and generative of the symbolic and the poetic. If geography has become mental, it might as well be a subconscious response to what is happening in the physical world.

Our simulated performative theatrical environment is in a telepresent and perhaps telepathic conversation with what's happening in the urban environment: the bridges and the walls of the fort are the same that are used today to segregate the city and to keep people out of downtown, to trap the protesters.

As we form this residency where we're working with a cohort of Indigenous artists and artists of color, queer and trans artists specifically thinking about site, we are thinking a lot more about hybridity of theatrical modes. Even though the world is not yet safe, we can have a performer with a socially distant audience at a physical site simultaneously streaming over the internet and placed in relation to someone performing in their home to a remote audience.

I am fascinated by the idea of a simulated act versus a real one. The transformation of consciousness that happens through the performative generation of a new sense of place is political. Even though it is not expressed in a conventional way as in a protest or a riot, information is transferred: another way of being, and a way of thinking and living are transmitted, a possibility of what we can be collectively. People who experience our performance or who are inspired by our pedagogy may form a collective of their own, teach workshops of their own, and people in these workshops form a collective of their own. A performance always has a secret recipient who receives its message and plays it forward.

Abraham Avnisan: In response to your question "Has geography become mental?" I would say that maybe geography has become virtual rather than mental through the new hybridity we are exploring in our work. In a sense you could think of the work as a site-specific performance that is accessible anywhere in the world through Zoom. Our work also presumes that place or geography is always symbolic and discursive because of the stories that we tell ourselves about places.

I think one of the most significant interventions that the new work is doing or trying to do is disrupting the story that white settler Chicago tells about itself through its architecture, and specifically through these four bas-relief sculptures that are on each of the four "tender houses" that anchor the DuSable Bridge. Because these sculptures tell a story that is totally inaccurate and that willfully erases and obscures and does violence to the actual struggle that happened with the Indigenous Potawatomi nation that was living in the area of present-day Chicago when Fort Dearborn was built.

So through research and creative work we are exposing that symbolic and discursive dimension of geography. We are trying to rewrite it or hack it or reclaim it, and again, interestingly reclaim it on behalf of another people, but also on behalf of part of ourselves, because we get interpolated into this history. My ancestors were not around in the nineteenth century when Chicago was founded, and yet as a white person I become interpolated into the position of the white settler colonizer.

I wrote a poem in New Orleans that we ended up using in the work. It employed anaphora, so every line of the poem started with "the fort does this," "the fort does that." "The fort knows how to mark a body," for example, is a line that appears towards the end of the work. Through the work of thinking and imagining that this poem accomplishes, the fort became a symbol for the colonial project and for white supremacy. The fort became an overdetermined metaphor for all of these things, and what we realized in the process was that we cannot and will never be able to speak from outside of the fort, because we are cisgender white men living in the United States. But at the same time, we can and must try to imagine and understand that which is outside the fort. There is a productive tension there. Acknowledging our own privilege, and the limitations of that privilege, is the only way that we can try to overcome those limitations.

NOTES

1. ATOM-r's activities may be followed on Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram.

2. Abraham Avnisan's activity may be followed on Instagram.

3. Samuel Morris Steward (July 23, 1909-December 31, 1993), also known as Phil Andros, Phil Sparrow, and many other pseudonyms, was a poet, novelist, and university professor who left the world of academia to become a tattoo artist and pornographer. Throughout his life he kept extensive secret diaries, journals, and statistics of his sex life. He lived most of his adult life in Chicago, where he tattooed sailor-trainees from the US Navy's Great Lakes Naval Training Station (as well as gang members and street people) in a tattoo parlor on South State Street. He later moved to the San Francisco Bay area, where he spent the late 1960s as the official tattoo artist of the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club.

4. "The Tenders: Embrasures in the Fort's collapse (zoom edition) is an [*sic*] simultaneous multi-channel mixed reality performance that engages with structures of the fort and the home, combining remote live performance and augmented reality poetics with 3d scans of the site of

Fort Dearborn, an early American garrison out of which the city of Chicago was incorporated. Juxtaposing excavations of urban monuments with scans of the bedazzled home of self-taught artist, Loy Bowlin, who embodied the persona of 'the original rhinestone cowboy', The Tenders seeks to invert and queer colonial narratives lodged deep within the American imaginary" (The Tenders: Embrasures in the Fort's Collapse).

5. *Beautiful Holy Jewel Home of the Original Rhinestone Cowboy* is a piece "that excavates the early history of panoramas, cycloramas and immersive 360-degree views, to create a queer visionary environment blending live performance and augmented reality. This first episode of the work explores habitats where the boundaries between bodies and spaces collapse in a dazzling anonymity. The performance invokes outdoor cruising, camouflage, the figure of the trickster, and the ornately designed home of American artist Loy Bolin, the original rhinestone cowboy. ATOM-rs [*sic*] use of mixed reality technologies and projection creates a transformed space where physical and virtual, interior and exterior, are blurred and reversed" (ATOM-r work in progress sharing, January 13, 2018). The project was supported, in part, by a Foundation for Contemporary Arts Emergency Grant.

6. A wave of civil unrest in the United States, initially triggered by the murder of George Floyd during his arrest by Minneapolis police officers on May 25, 2020, led to protests and riots against systemic racism in the United States, including police brutality and other forms of violence.

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