

Michael Portnoy

**"Progressive Touch – Total Body Language Reprogramming"**

Part of the KW performance series "The Weekends"

Secret location

5.5. – 6.5.2017

"You are a naked, white male, alone in a room with a Larval Bouffon and a Relational Stalinist", runs the blurb on the KW site. Not quite. I'm a clothed white male who's been granted the exclusive right to peek out at Michael Portnoy – along with actress Lily McMenemy and another man, who actually is naked – from behind a makeshift screen as they enact *Progressive Touch – Total Body Language Reprogramming*, as part of KW's spring performance series "The Weekends".

Portnoy and McMenemy are bending close to the naked man's pubic area, intoning phrases in an invented language that strays, occasionally, into bathetic coherence: "*Gub, brooj brooj, kleem! Joon, ac-crue, sugub pridge pridge, growth table tort, bub bub bid joon klead*", they intone. The vocalisations remind me of the healing rituals of Brazilian composer Hermeto Pascoal: Portnoy sings a constantly permutating riff in what I estimate to be 11/4 time at 130 bpm, while McMenemy syncopates in measures of 5/4 and 7/4 at a much slower pace: "*Joon klead bub torb, gub lien, gub call risk lien, par-passu void to K-ra-tio flush...*"

The process has been disorienting from the start. We're in an industrial building in Buch, a suburb on Berlin's northern fringes. The subject – a banker who collects art, apparently – has been interviewed about his life while being driven here. In a separate car, I've been briefed by KW staff. They've given me explanatory texts by Portnoy, as well as a non-disclosure agreement covering aspects of the performance that might compromise the subject's privacy. The banker has signed a different agreement, which includes permission for me to be present.

Once I'm safely tucked away behind my drape screen, the naked man is led out and placed in a piece of strangely-shaped furniture which dictates an awkward, splayed pose. There are eleven chairs in all, coloured in shades of grey and beige, corresponding – it turns out – to eleven distinct movements in the performance. They look like Gyrotonic exercise machines or the installations of Franz Erhard Walther. A faint odour of sweat and cosmetics hangs in the room, like the smell in a dance studio.

If all the secrecy and legal brouhaha smacks of hype, it's

working: twenty 45-minute sessions were snapped up within hours of the performance being announced. That may be down to McMenemy, whose "pulpy mouth and diaphanous skin have made her the mannequin of the moment", according to one French newspaper. But it's also because Portnoy's performances have proved so resonant, and – beyond their value as estranged entertainment – broached some serious themes.

The stated intention for *Progressive Touch* is hugely ambitious: this is behavioural therapy designed to "reprogram the corrupted source code of the white male, responsible now for the decay of progressive values around the world". This mix of identity politics, therapy speak and the erotic radicalism of the 1960s (think of Norman O. Brown and the orgone-accumulating disciples of Wilhelm Reich) might be the form

Portnoy's personal politics genuinely take, or may be a pseudo-progressive justification for yet another situation in which a white male (Portnoy himself) assumes power over others. If that's the case, it's also a canny meta-critique of the vertiginous hierarchies of power, price and possibility that pertain in the art world, from its unpaid interns to its superstar curators.

When I think about Portnoy's work and how he has described himself as a "Director of Behaviour", I often think of Stanley Milgram's famous electric shock experiment, which is where we discover how easily our propensity to obedience and contextual conformism can lead to actual harm. Enacted in Germany by a Jewish artist, these rituals can have particularly chilling or vengeful resonances. But it's a mark of the power of Portnoy's Gesamtkunstwerk that so many contradictory ideas and references rush through my mind as I lurk behind my screen. The banker also seems stimulated as McMenemy gyrates around him like Pina Bausch restaging Isabella Adjani's freakout dance from the film *Possession*, or Kate Bush and Klaus Kinski remaking the former's "Wuthering Heights" video as disjointed jujutsu.

The performance ends and the banker is led away, looking somewhat dazed and abashed. I'm returned to normality without debriefing. On the ride back into town I glimpse a man dancing awkwardly in a kebab shop, a row of pedestrians facing a red signal on an empty street corner, a veiled woman dragging a cigarette. It's to Portnoy's credit that I come away from this remarkable "reprogramming" experience convinced not of his strangeness but the world's.

Nick Currie



Michael Portnoy, Rehearsals for *Progressive Touch – Total Body Language Reprogramming*, 2017