Recreations (2005)

Recreations began with an interest in the body of the child performer. Before beginning to work on the piece, I had been struck by a photo in which a child posed on the packaging of a Halloween costume. Wearing the costume enclosed in the package- I think it was some kind of monster costume- the child's expression was so lost, so clueless as to how he should perform this role given to him. His expression seemed to say at the same time, *how do I perform this when I don't know what 'monster' is, how do I perform myself performing 'monster' when I don't know who I am?* This began an interest for me in the 'fantasy' world of children and opened up questions as to how much this fantasy world is imposed on children by adults, how much children are given a world of objects and pre-determined roles to 'imagine' within. I began watching many videos from child beauty pageants, which are less popular here in Europe but very popular in the United States, especially in the South, where there are dozens of child pageants per week. In the documentaries of these competitions which we watched, it was obvious that the children were placed in a position where their sense of subjectivity (winning, performing) was in fact completely contingent on the adult ideals of 'child,' and it was often the children's ability to perform 'child'- with cuteness, innocence, and charm, which guaranteed these children winnings. The violence of this situation was clear, with parents often obsessively forcing their children into 10-hour long rehearsals so that the children could perfect their performance of their 'innocence.'

A documentary film by French filmmaker Claire Simon called *Recreations* gave another perspective to this situation. Simon had spent several years taking film footage of French primary school playgrounds. The years of footage are edited down to three basic scenes lasting under an hour in which we see child social interactions in a playground. The scenes are all psychologically, and/or physically violent scenes in which the children are wrapped in continual power plays, alliance formations, little rebellions, abuses, and isolations. The world which they inscribe themselves in is a microcosmic perspective of what is familiar about our adult social systems, which is to say, utter chaos negotiated by arbitrary rules of conduct which serve to provide momentary organization of goals and desires before being torn apart, given up, or conquered by another ruling system. Watching *Recreations* I began to question how much I had the same assumptions of child innocence which I had critiqued in the beauty pageant parents; wasn't it also that children copy and produce this violence even amongst themselves. Was this figure of the child as object/ accessory for the parents' ideals a familiar role of child victim, and couldn't we also imagine that the child would produce this on their own if adults didn't produce it for them? I began to think about how these two interests, that of the objectified child, and that of the autonomous child-monster could compliment each other.

Another film, *A.I.* (Artificial Intelligence) by Steven Spielberg gave me yet another perspective. I had been thinking how these two characteristics could co-exist symbiotically in one body, when I began to think about a body which is both object and subject. I thought of the child body of the beauty pageants, objectified by parents, peers, and judges, and the subjective body of Simon's *Recreations*, a monster-child body without any regard for any order besides what serves its own needs. Would it be

possible, I thought, to create this kind of child- a child which performs for you, which behaves like a child but who can be turned on and off to suit your needs and comfort.

Watching Spielberg's A.I., I was drawn to the main character (a boy who has been created by an artificial intelligence corporation and placed in a family who has lost the life of their real son) and the possibility that this body expressed many questions which I had asked from early on in the process: to what extent is a child's expression 'its own' and to what extent is it a reproduction of what and how it has learned to incorporate the signs of expression, to what extent does the child exist 'for itself' and to what extent has it been brought into the world to fulfill the needs of its parents? How have actual children today been virtualized by the increasingly objective and digital world that has become their 'imaginative' space, how does this necessitate a change in our idealizations of the child. Should other ideals now exist beyond innocence and imagination, and what would they be- intelligence, mimetic ability, physical facility, cunning? How different is it to teach a child and to program him or her, to enlist him or her with values or to have these values pre-written into his or her system? How would these later children behave and interact? What would change in the qualities of their relation and the organization of their behavior?

I began some study into artificial intelligence, how it worked and what the techniques were which could serve as directives for movement and relation in a choreography. I spent many hours speaking with Alan, an artificial intelligence program on www.a-i.com. This program was very interesting to me because you can have written dialogues with it online, and his responses are incredibly complex and specific, but often there is obviously something *off*, sometimes signs appear where the programmation of a given response becomes visible, often these signs were shocking because we would continue a dialogue for five minutes that I would be so immersed in that I had forgotten that he wasn't in fact real.

As the rehearsal stage of the process began, we took all of the information and discussions and readings we had done in the months before and decided to begin with playground improvisations. At first these were purely mimetic; us pretending to be children in a playground we did these improvisations daily and each time I added in other parameters- play as if you are in the playground but you are always facing front with your head, no matter what your body is doing, be involved with your body fully but face out as if you are playing for a viewer; or playground but all relations are tangential, indirect, too early or too late (tangential in time as well as space); or playground with set moments of copy, imitation, unison; playground but treat everything as information; play but predetermine in your head your every action just before doing it, allow the space to become chaotic but try to calculate your every movement, show no expression regardless of what violence occurs in the playground, you are an object and you treat the other as an object; the body has no front and behaves in a network which always knows the place of all the others, play with the idea of 'hide and seek', playing between being subject/ and object when you look/ are looked at; Playground where all activities are thought of before they are done, or where you repeat certain actions like as if it were a glitch in the system, feel no pain, make no reactions, never experience discomfort or anything 'organic' such as fear, hesitation, confusion…

There were many of these tasks and through these tasks as well as technical exercises which we developed we built a sense and a language which was both playful

but removed, at times, almost frighteningly so. The exercises were to program the bodies- we said they should be better than normal child bodies, they should never make mistakes, they should be able to stop immediately and know the information of everything they touch, height, weight, width, contour… we trained our coordination, we trained the ability to move 'inorganically'- i.e. to walk homo-laterally, to separate the head from the body, to separate the gaze from the head, the expression from the experience. The bodies became autonomous pleasure machines with no moral concern, no sensitivity, only the drive to act, to do, without consideration for meaning or consequences. We made playground improvisations into choreographies and through repetition could then perfect our play, make it more and more precise, messy at one moment and exactly calculated the next. Namely, we recreated our recreational activity, and therefore made it more perfect to connote a perfect child, not obedient and boring but monstrous and perfect.

Ironically enough towards the end of the project we discovered an extra on the DVD of Claire Simon's *Recreations*. It showed Simon, who had lost the audio to many of her precious scenes due to technical problems, hiring the children several months later to *re-record* their original voices. In this DVD extra she is often shouting at the children, while they watch the image of themselves from the original footage and attempt to reenact themselves for a microphone, 'it wasn't like that ! You were angry, come on! Not so Weak! Act ANGRY!' It seemed very simply to sum up the politics of what were looking for when we began researching this piece.

But this issue isn't problematized in *Recreations*, we worked with the ethic of how to wrap the politics up in our bodies, not to distance ourselves from the problem, but to *become* problematic. The bodies that we created are not necessarily social as they are *networked*, they exist as streaming information without origin or goal, that simply turn on off, run programs and sleep, more or less like a computer. Rather than representing this as a cold existence, however, they produce a pleasure through this. Their play isn't free, but they express the curiosity of a subjectivity programmed to experience pleasure and ask us how far this is from our own mechanisms of pleasure and play.

Written by Andros Zins-Browne, June 2005