

# Performance Art and Embodied Data Analysis in Arts-based Sociological Research on Whiteness

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‘I don’t think I expected this . . . but . . . but thank you’ were the words whispered by one of the audience members of ‘The Chamber of White’, which was performed as part of a major installation called ‘The Performance Sense Laboratory’ in Denmark during four days of the week long Roskilde Festival in 2014. In this work, I sit in the corner of a small white painted room, one of eleven which constitute the performance installation for the duration of the festival, built of lightweight wood. My body leans against the white wall, in front of me different coloured beans are poured to form a big heap on the dark earth, flowing from the wall on my left-hand side where a video is projected. Opposite me are two doors, one where visitors enter and the other where they leave to continue their journey through the Laboratory. I am dressed in black and am mute. I don’t talk or respond to visitors with words, but all sensory faculties of my body are open to give and receive. I am Cinderella, who has been given a body that is vulnerable and leaking (Figure 17.1).

This performance piece is part of a series that I designed to explore the affective performances of white femininities. I was interested in simultaneously tying to and loosening the white female body from white heteronormative patriarchal ideologies and norms (Halász 2019). Through insisting on the body’s malleability, fragility and on ‘the possibility of things being otherwise’ (Bell 2007: 5), the performances imagine ‘anti-essentialist relations outside of colonial restrictions of cisgendered and heterosexualised white supremacist femininities’ (Halász 2021: 64). As a visual sociology project, the research took an artful and performative ‘live sociology’ approach (Back and Puwar 2012). I undertook interviews with self-identified white women active in anti-racist movements in Europe and created performance art works as a sociological research method to study the affective performances of the visually and viscerally present white female body. In this chapter I focus on a method of embodied analysis that I developed to make my performance ‘The Chamber of White’ answerable to the research question of how white femininities are produced in anti-racist contexts<sup>1</sup> – in this case in the staged space of the performance art curation of the music festival.

I begin by briefly discussing the theoretical and methodological context in which the performance was produced to feed into the description of the design and manifestation of the



*Figure 17.1 'The Chamber of White'. Photo by Diana Lindhardt.*

piece. I then move on to consider the method of data analysis I developed that fuses embodied analysis with arts-based elements, and consider the challenges, strengths and weaknesses and the ethical considerations of the method. I conclude by arguing for social researchers to use performance art as a research method to pay closer attention to bodies, and by outlining the creativity of research using arts-based methods and embodied data analysis that enables an understanding of the affective dimensions of racializing and gendering discourses.

### **Performances of affective white femininities**

'The Chamber of White' originated in a doctoral study that, from within critical studies in whiteness, aimed to analyse white femininities as a product of intercorporeal and intersubjective affective performances of race and gender, expounding our understanding of the fleshy materiality of embodied experiences. The research employed semi-structured interviews with feminist and anti-racist activist white women alongside the creation of four performative situations, to examine more closely the role that affect has in producing or undoing the figure of 'white woman'. By developing different performative spaces or situations, my goal was to enable participants to feel and access meanings, which are typically left unspoken, through an affective register. The approach that I developed understands affect as being one of the 'socially produced, heterogeneous and dynamic processes of being and becoming' (Gunaratnam 2003: 3). In social constructionism, these processes are argued to produce race against essentialist models (see also Omi and Winant 1986; Brah 1996; Gilroy 1998). My project was concerned with how social discourses and power

relations affect individuals and, in turn, how individuals give meaning to, shape and reject discursive categories through their affective investments in them. However, the argument that I developed does not close off social discourses from embodied experience (see Brah et al. 1999; Wuthnow 2002).

In a move against reifying whiteness as an autonomous thing in itself, the analytical task for the research was to investigate how certain human relationships are interpreted and determined by ideas of race and gender, and how these, in turn, create the figure of ‘white woman’. A key focus of this research was to explore which specific discursive and corporeal processes take part in the formation of social relationships around this figure, and ‘the specific conditions which make this form of distinction socially pertinent, historically active’ (Hall 1980: 338). My approach to understanding the production of anti-racist white femininities involved an exploration of the dynamic interrelationship of social discourses and the lived, embodied experience of race and gender in moments of affective intercorporeal encounters.

I understand affect not as a thing, but as an event, a happening, a process of life and vitality that circulates and passes between bodies (O’Sullivan 2001; Blackman 2012). Throughout the research I used affect to mean the capacity to affect and be affected, as a movement and circulation between one experiential state of the body to another. And, by extension, I used emotion to refer to those affective registers that can be interpreted, have a name and are socially displayed by this name (e.g. shame). I understand feeling as embodied sensations, as a reference to the senses (e.g. hearing, touching). This differentiation between feeling, emotion and affect corresponds with theorizations on affect (Massumi 2004; Shouse 2005).

I was interested in the affective capacities of bodies to be in affective circulation, and in what affect does, how it mediates the relationship between ‘the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective’ (Ahmed 2004b: 119). It has been argued that the power of affect lies in the fact that it is transmittable, that it circulates (Ahmed 2004; Brennan 2004; Shouse 2005; Wetherell 2012). Through my focus on affective movements as processes that connect and produce relations between those present in the social action, I analysed whiteness inherently as a relational construct (Parish 1997; Frankenberg 1997; Gunaratnam 2003). Furthermore, understanding whiteness in more affective terms, as a denial of fundamental human connection and relatedness between people racialized as different (Ware and Back 2002), allowed the research to seek out those affective registers through which a ‘fundamental human connection’ could be established as a prime anti-racist foundation, on the basis of which the work of dissolving white supremacy and privilege could begin.

By producing an artful and performative live sociology (Back and Puwar 2012), I used the creation of performative situations as a means of exploring the possibilities of performing anti-racist whiteness through and upon white female bodies. The methods I used allowed me to analyse the specific intersubjective and intercorporeal interactions and affective movements of often unremarkable encounters. Together with the four performances that formed part of the final PhD thesis, I produced seven artworks and two exhibitions in the course of the research. All projects have been informative in my thinking, both on the research question and the methodological design. Moreover, these projects informed the themes and questions I asked in the interviews, and in turn, I employed the affects produced during the first three interviews as integral elements of ‘The Chamber of White’, which was the last art piece of the research. This ‘messiness’ of the process was imperative in experimenting with ideas, concepts and methods in

producing the research. Out of the seven artworks, I selected four performances to be part of the final thesis, because these four pieces put the figure of ‘white woman’ at their centre. The other artworks also explore the affects of whiteness, but without a clear gender dimension. Although the four performances that I developed and staged were perceived by various audiences as artworks, the methodological concerns behind their creation were not to produce artworks as such, but rather, to use art as a research method, and thereby render these performances as a means through which to uncover information (Lambert 2018; Leavy 2015). Of particular concern are those registers of body experience that cannot easily be seen, and ‘which might be variously described as non-cognitive, trans-subjective, non-conscious, non-representational’ (Blackman 2012: 4). It has been argued that affect is difficult to study and capture via conventional methodological approaches (Blackman 2012).

The installations, videos, performances and exhibitions – the different social encounters that I initiated before the interviews took place – addressed the themes of the visual and affective registers of whiteness, the roles of white and non-white bodies and their affective capacities in subjectivity formation and in constructing the identity category of ‘white woman’. Through the creation of performative situations that were staged as performances in various settings, it became possible to study not only how the visual works in race-making, but also to engage the body as a whole entity along with the full array of the senses. I analyze bodies and their affects to understand their role in the production of anti-racist white femininities and in the formation of subjectivity as ‘lived and felt in the flesh’ (Young 2005: 7).

Using performance art as data generation and the embodied analytic method I outline in this chapter enabled me to use four different art projects (manifested in the UK, Bolivia, Germany, Denmark)<sup>2</sup> systematically and in a dialogue with not only the thematic analysis of the interviews, but also their affective intensities. With this research I aimed to contribute to critical whiteness studies that have long been dominated by a social constructionist approach that has privileged epistemology over ontology and shifted away from the body. The argument that I elaborated in my doctoral project, using arts-based methods and interviews, is an intervention into onto-epistemologies (see Hunter and van der Westhuizen 2021) by insisting that whiteness is lived in and through bodies.

### **Performance art as a sociological research method on whiteness**

The curator, Gry Wolle Hallberg, defined the curatorial concept for The Performance Sense Laboratory as ‘to activate the sensuous through different, yet related, performance-artistic approaches which all subscribe to an interactive and immersive performance art tradition’.<sup>3</sup> I received an invitation to be part of the curation alongside the performance artists Cuenca Rasmussen (DK), Savage Amusement (AU/DE) and Sisters Hope (DK). We were each given a room to design according to our projects, all with a distinctive fiction and character, and were aided by performers who took the role of ‘Evokers’: they greeted audience members in their own front room of the Laboratory to prepare them for the immersive experience that awaited them through various exercises, such as binding their eyes and giving them a piece of chocolate to taste while whispering poetry in their ears and so on – Evokers were tasked to ‘evoke’ the senses of the visitors. Visitors were let into the Laboratory one by one, and as they wandered through the rooms each performance artist engaged with an audience member on their own. When entering

and exiting the Laboratory, visitors were asked to fill out a form charting changes in their affective states. The curator called visitors 'Human Research Objects' and the form included simple questions such as: 'What mood are you in?'

I designed 'The Chamber of White' as an installation, where each part was constitutive of the others. In addition to having painted the room white, I had burning white fluorescent light installed on each wall of the room. Unless the light was switched on, which I used only on two occasions, the room was cosy and intimate in the dark, only lit by the projection. A soundscape connected all rooms, the same music that was put on in each room was played in the corners of 'The Chamber of White'. A continuum was created between the projected images, the performing body and the visitor body and their physical proximity sitting in a triangle facing each other and the projected video, and through the material properties of the earth and the beans (Figure 17.2). A direct, intimate and confrontational interaction was thus created, to facilitate and account for the 'sensuous interrelationship of body-mind-environment' (Pink 2009: 25).

'The Chamber of White' reconfigures the historical figure of 'white woman' in contemporary relations. The work is structured around its engagement with three primary sources that it pulls out of time and puts into conversation with each other. Blending elements of cultural tropes, fiction, archetypal characters and personal experience, abstraction and real-life events, the performance works across three artistic strategies that are its material sources in creating an affective experience of white femininities. The first source is the video with images of 'white woman' and icons of white femininity including cultural figures like Cinderella, the personification of the purity of the white female; the cartoon Betty Boob, with its own history of racism; and Marilyn Monroe, the epitome of the white blonde bombshell. These archetypes of white woman are cross-referenced with art projects that I initiated to interrogate white femininities and masculinities: my re-enactment of Howardeena Pindell's *Free, White and 21* and Adrian Piper's *The Mythic Being (Cruising White Women)*; performing as a white man in the streets of Berlin after attending Diane Torr's 'Man-For-A-Day' workshops, and footages from *The Blush Machine* and *Freeing Up Shame*, two performance works I developed in the framework of the research, along with other cuts to women dancing and resting. White man also appears in the video, in violent scenes of riots from the 1960s and 2011, and as the oppressor of white woman; but also as the intellectual superior who seeks to understand and redress its own actions through words and scholarship, through his own inaccessible white male activity.

The second source is the live performance of Cinderella, who steps out of the video and works on understanding its meaning. Building on the Cinderella figure as told by folk tales (Roalfe Cox 2020) and manifested as a mute white woman working in the service of reproducing and maintaining white supremacy, the performer selects and mixes white, black and brown beans. She is doomed to work until she can make sense of the world structured around race and gender, femininity and masculinity, whiteness and its power. She is a passive labourer of whiteness, the heaps of beans she selected gets stirred together again by her constantly working hands. She invites the visitor to help her, to take part in creating and destroying classification and categorization. The live performance brings close the images projected on the wall. The normative white female body is simultaneously experienced as visual and haptic, the performance is the site to negotiate the shifting between body image and 'body-without-an-image', the viscerally felt body that is not reducible to its image (Featherstone 2006). Cinderella has been given a body that is malleable, in progress, opened up to be affected and to affect in the encounter with the visitor.



The third material source for this performance-installation consists of the interviews I conducted with three of the eleven women who had been part of the research and whom I interviewed before I staged ‘The Chamber of White’. Instead of using quotes from the interviews or actual situations that the women described, I tried to build into the piece the affective episodes of some of their life histories and the interviews themselves: the sadness, disappointments and anger they expressed when they talked about the whiteness of their skin and their inability to include an analysis of their own racial positions in their work. The fourth source is the narration, quotes from Audre Lorde, Aimé Césaire and my own words, that holds the video and the performance together and offers a connection beyond histories of racism and sexism that we are all entangled in.

The installation creates an affective zone of engagement with these primary sources. The elements put together are marked by a particular affective circuit I theorized as white affects: the



*Figure 17.2* ‘The Chamber of White’. Photo by Diana Lindhardt.

understanding of whiteness as an intersubjective and intercorporeal affective performance. A self-reflexively subjective archive of moments of encounter with white femininities are assembled and transformed through the aesthetic strategies of creating connections between past and present; inviting new connections to be made between different historical figures and events; reframing these histories and their legacies and thereby highlighting how they are made relevant today; calling into question knowledges produced about bodies through reading their surfaces; and finally enacting complex fields of viscosity and affectivity in order to generate feelings of belonging and co-extensivity.

### **Embodied data analysis with arts-based elements**

The bodies of performer/researcher and of the audience members are at the core of the method of data analysis I developed to use 'The Chamber of White' in theorizing about affective performances of whiteness. Despite the ongoing debate that all data analysis is embodied (see Kara 2020), it remains the case that 'the body is still largely absent from data analysis' (Leigh and Brown 2021: 57). The combination of the methods of participant observation, observation of the self with a particular attention to bodily experiences and affective states, and observation of the interactions between the performer and audience members, all revolve around the bodies present in the interaction and their visceral relation, which was not only an integral part but the desired aim of the performance. 'The Chamber of White' 'draws the audience into an active relation to a scene that had previously been staged for them' (Doyle 2013: 56.): a safe space for exploration of the self was created not through subversive artistic means but through an affective engagement of performer and visitor in their intimate proximity.

Although it has been stated that performance is distinctive in the unmediated 'realness' of living bodies (Phelan 1993), it was the feeling of intimacy (Kavka 2008), rather than the unmediated physicality of the performer's body, which was the locus of the affective intensities experienced within this performance setting. Because of this, the complex and ambivalent entanglements between truth and fiction, fantasy and history had to be carefully presented, always in response to the actual affective state of the individual audience member. The narrative of the piece had to be relatable and accessible to the audience, allowing for an intersubjective and importantly inter-corporeal connection to be made between performer and visitor on a distinctively affective register. The context of the music festival and the audience made up of overwhelmingly white youth in their late teens, early twenties and thirties posed further questions on the intelligibility of the work to this demographic, and on its perceived relevance to their lives and their current affective state of being at a festival.

When I arrived at site and sat down to face my audience, I felt immediately insecure about how the work would fit into this world that did not seem to exist beyond the gates and was made up of music, dance, alcohol, drugs and of letting loose of anything serious or unsettling. My assistant Louise Jensen and I performed Cinderella interchangeably over a week and saw approximately 150 visitors. After each shift of approximately four hours, we would make as detailed ethnographic notes of our encounters as possible, and include the reactions of the visitors, their bodily reactions and comments. These notes of participant observations and observations of the self then formed an integral part in the analysis of the affective encounters we experienced

during the performances. I received many ‘thank you’s from older women who seemed particularly appreciative of the subject matter. A young girl also commented ‘very inspiring’ before leaving the room. Many visitors directly engaged with the beans and the earth on the floor, touching the beans, playing with them, laying down on the floor, striking the earth beneath them. I received many smiles, nods, light tapping on the shoulders with grateful expressions. Some visitors expressed their awkwardness not knowing what to do, in which case I silently pointed at the pillow next to me, or let beans fall on their hands. Without exception, the visitors who seemed untouched by the work and left the room without watching the video until the end or engaging with the performer were white males. This is not to say that there weren’t any white men (even if considerably fewer than women) who sat down with the performer, oftentimes with curiosity and openness. The few occasions when visitors left without any engagement became opportunities for me to consider questions on the boundaries of intersubjectivity and the limits of affective relation and circulation. In most cases however, ‘The Chamber of White’ created new models of relationality. The video performance invited audience members to engage in different affective states. It offered visitors to map themselves onto a white and heterosexually normative narrative of the world and imagine different embodiments even if only within the confines of the performance and for the time of the encounter.

Ethical concerns regarding the use of art as a research method and embodied data analysis was one of the key challenges I experienced. It has been argued that arts-based research is ‘radical, ethical and revolutionary’ (Finley 2008: 71, quoted in Leavy 2015: 29). In this sense the very practice of art as a social research method has been argued to be moral and ethical (Denzin 2003; Finley 2008). In contrast to conventional research that tends to be accessed by the research community, arts-based research is accessible by a wider audience, and ‘draws on the emotional, evocative, and resistive to jar people into seeing, thinking, and/or feeling differently’ and thus has the potential ‘to evoke change’ (Leavy 2015: 29). However, the impact of performance on the audience in social research remains an underdeveloped field. ‘Given that the paradigm is in a time of rapid development, ethical issues are particularly thorny and as a result the literature in this area needs to catch up to the field’, argues Patricia Leavy (2015: 281). Some guidelines are offered in the literature as regards performed ethnodramas in health-related areas, but none of them were applicable for my research. Neither a preview performance nor ‘postperformance forum sessions’ (Mieniczakowski et al. 2002: 49, quoted in Leavy 2015: 191) were possible to assess the impacts of the performance, since it was performed at a music festival, for regular visitors to this cultural space. Similarly, given the settings of the performances, informed consent could not be obtained from the visitors.

Being aware that the subject matter of the performances addressed difficult issues, and indeed I aimed to create a space where these difficult issues could evoke difficult affects, I tried to build an element of release into the design of the pieces. In ‘The Chamber of White’, the video – an integral part of the piece – ended on a gentle notion of human connection which I attempted to amplify by the tender moves and smiles of the character I performed. The design of the performances was in line with Denzin’s argument for ‘a collaborative social science research model that makes the researcher responsible not to a removed discipline (or institution), but to those he or she studies’ (2003: 258). The model he advocates stresses ‘personal accountability, caring, the value of individual expressiveness, the capacity for empathy, and the sharing of emotionality’ (Collins 1990: 216 in Denzin 2003: 258). I could not provide a thorough assessment of the visitors’ well-



being after they had experienced the performances. The forms that our ‘Human Research Objects’ had to complete on arriving and leaving the Laboratory unfortunately got lost in the taking down of the installation, which was partly remedied by the detailed fieldnotes. The ethical dilemma on the art-social science continuum is one I was not able to resolve (Leavy 2015).

In terms of theory, some of the strengths of the creative data analysis I developed include a closer understanding of the participants’ (visitors and performers/researcher) lived experiences, their sensory, bodily and affective responses to whiteness and their bodies in interaction. This has allowed the research to contribute to recent developments in race theorizing that have brought in new understandings of the body and affect into critical whiteness studies mainstay social constructionism. In relation to methodology, the embodied data analysis including some artistic elements expands on arts-based methods of researching the embodiment of race and gender. There are also weaknesses of the methods I employed. These include the considerably more difficult replicability of them since the performance was staged in particular locations and settings. The highly subjective nature of data generation and analysis can evoke criticisms of bias, rigour and validity, which therefore need to be carefully addressed through a particular attention to reflexivity (Kara 2018; Leigh and Brown 2021). Due to the less developed ethical guidelines compared to more conventional sociological methods, ethical concerns also need to be sensitively considered. The doctoral research has received formal ethical approval from the Goldsmiths Research Ethics Committee after a detailed and careful investigation of the possible impact of participation in the performances. Furthermore, a reflexive approach in relation not only to data creation but data analysis, defined by Helen Kara as ‘effectively analysing our analytical work’ is the approach that I have taken to ensure that my approach and work meets ethical concerns (2020: 137).

## **Conclusions**

The creativity of the research that ‘The Chamber of White’ was a vital part of lies in developing performance art as a sociological research method and a method of data analysis that puts the body of researcher and participants at the centre. The research remains experimental, confronting the limitations and possibilities of artistic experimentation in sociological research as a way of creating a material and emotional account of the embodied and affective experience of whiteness. It involves ‘practice as a response to lived experience, the temporal, the personal and the collaborative – revealing how subject matter requires new forms of expression and presentation’ (Barrett and Bolt 2009: 10). The knowledge-producing potential of a sociological practice through art practice and embodied inquiry is articulated in the creation and theorization of performative situations. Performance as research is not only an art form but can be used as a means of revealing aspects of the affective dimensions of whiteness and modelling affective processes in ways not available to other modes of qualitative research. As I have argued elsewhere (Halász forthcoming), through employing performance art as a research method researchers can learn to be more attentive to the manifold movements and meanings bodies produce. Through the method of embodied analysis described in this chapter, ‘The Chamber of White’ enabled an embodiment of what has remained unanalyzed and unspoken in discourses on the white female body – the processes of affects. This performance work and its analysis contributes to the

widening of our conception of how research can be conducted by pursuing live sociology, that in Back's interpretation is 'able to attend to the fleeting, distributed, multiple and sensory aspects of sociality through research techniques that are mobile, sensuous and operate from multiple vantage points' (2012: 18).

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## Notes

- 1 The way in which I refer to anti-racism throughout this chapter relates to a broad, inclusive term that encompasses both small, everyday practices and large, formal anti-racist campaigns and organizations that challenge racist attitudes and acts at various levels of the social world.
- 2 For more of these art projects please see <https://www.katalinhalasz.com/>
- 3 For more on the Performance Sense Laboratory and participating artists please see <http://sensuous.dk/roskilde-festival-2014-performance/>

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