

Seán Elder

A Map of Action

Not too long ago I was in conversation with a family member describing the Sternschanze area of Hamburg, attempting to evoke the architecture of the area, as well as the character of the neighbourhood and its inhabitants, which, thanks to its proximity to both a nearby University and the famous St Pauli red-light district, has become increasingly gentrified in recent years. The 3 or 4 story buildings that line the majority of Sternschanze's streets were described by me to this family member as Victorian.

This was obviously an attempt on my part to translate the familiarities of the pediments, rectangular windows and pilasters into something understandable or local to them. Something not so remote.

The flats and the houses of this area were obviously not Victorian, given that they were in a city once partially partitioned to Denmark, and in a city with its own independent history as part of a wider German nation, and Victorian referring to the United Kingdom's second-longest reigning monarch. But in my articulation to this family member, describing these multi-story stone buildings decorated with ceiling roses and cornicing and comparable to tenements so familiar in Scotland, there was a moment of erasure of their German-ness, their Hamburg-ness, their Sternschanze-ness.

There was a moment where a small particularity of these buildings was lost, obscured, or erased in favour of a more comfortable and local tradition, in translation.

If one can do this in the conveying of something as solid as stone and brick buildings, then I find myself wondering how easily the same might happen to concepts more abstract and residing wholly within language. If these

ascriptions can be lost in describing something that towers above my head, sits solid in strong foundations, deep into the ground, then how easy it must be for us to slip in our own agendas within the translation of a thought or a gesture, an ephemeral moment or slip; so easily re-structured as something other to what it was.

Anecdotes, gossip and trust are all slippery things, far less solid than rocks and pipes designed to house. But equally there is a desire for these things to foster and create a *[queerer]* home. The hallways and corridors that develop relations between identity are often predicated on wooden bridges, rickety and determined by the trust between those walking across them.

In the process of producing or contributing to a Queer cultural body, we are constantly attempting to know, re-know or even acquaint and re-acquaint with ourselves? In an essay written for Patrick Staff's *The Foundation*¹, Mason Leaver-Yap situates the anecdote as a Queer kind of knowledge sharing. The anecdote exists independent of any proposition, critique, analysis and conclusion. Instead the slippage that occurs with a personal account of an event relies on trust between the one recalling the anecdote, and those who are listening to it.

Between Queers, anecdote and sharing personal narratives become central to spreading the weight and difficulties of lived experiences. These multiplicities of experience are told and retold and become part of a tapestry of oral tradition within the Queer community(/ies).

If I told you I was called faggot 4 days ago on a central London road would you believe me?

¹ *The Foundation*, Mousse Publishing, 2015

If the way we understand the world is grounded in knowledge, it becomes particular to our many locations; those situated within geography, gender, sexuality, class. Understanding that our constructing knowledge is predicated on our situ is central to dissolving hierarchies of what knowledge is.

Knowledge may yet be memories made so concrete that our recollections are posited as fact. And yet knowledge may also be a belief in you, or you, or you, in how you shared your first experience in a dress, in a school changing room, or in a bar where that person caught your eye so briefly, intensely and determinedly.

Whether individual, collective, or removed from us directly and learned through history books or lessons, memory and how we communicate that in conversation is an inherently political thing. There is a trust in memory and its delivery which brings me to ponder these following things:

The powder on your face.

Refusal coursing through my trembling hand with that first stroke of eyeliner, dipped from a small pot held between thumb and finger.

And the next stroke, more confident and assured. And the next, more confident and assured. And the next, more confident and assured. And the next, more confident and assured.

Each of these strokes eventually becomes embedded within the movement of my body. It becomes a self-aware thing; a realisation that I can extend this with a brush and black drawn from the end of it.

The intelligence of the body; that tricky, foggy thing, is central to the memory of this action – and the subsequent re-creation of it.

*I wonder if my muscles have become party to this memorialisation of this movement.
Are my wrists limp for this reason?*

*Have they always been this limp so one day I could delicately brush this swathe of
bronze across my hooded eye-lids?*

*I watch girls on shaking trains, shifting sideways slightly on train-tracks, take a brush
and a sweep of powder under cheekbones and sat atop the bridge of their noses.*

*They have been taught this way since they were very little. "Making the most" is what
I have heard some Mothers describe to their daughters of what they do every morning
after brushing teeth and before locking the door behind them.*

*The figure of the Mother and the Son is one that has been with us, present in our
minds long before Jesus lay down his sweet head and Mary, Mother of God brought
him to this world, a Virgin.*

*Who taught you to do that first dip and draw of liquid liner? The first puff of powder,
the first sweep of blush and ebb of lipstick.*

I am imagining laying a list of our actions, one-offs, individuals, repetitions, continuous, fluid things, day after day, down on paper.

I am imagining these points as punctuations, strewn across a map of action.

I want to know if I dipped a paintbrush in red (maybe pink would be more appropriate) and dotted each time you flicked your wrist upwards in a last flourish of eyeliner, across pages of this map, how red would the page be?

Would we be seeing dots in proximity to one another, creating a larger beast of red?

Or orbits of scarlet, remote in their own space, a one-off, a punctuation, an island?

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