

The kill joys

A female art collective and their performativity

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List of contents

| | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|
| 1. Introduction | 3 |
| 2. <i>The kill joys</i>..... | 3 |
| 3. <i>I am not a joke</i>..... | 4 |
| 4. Analyse..... | 5 |
| 4.1 Explicit bodies | 6 |
| 4.2 Disidentification..... | 8 |
| 4.3 Shame..... | 9 |
| 5. Conclusion..... | 10 |
| 6. Bibliography | 11 |

1. Introduction

Last year I saw a performance by the performance collective *the kill joys*. They performed their piece *I am not a joke* on 27 October 2017 in Bern in the *Reitschule*, an alternative, anarchistic, culture and youth centre.¹ I saw *the kill joys* perform in the house owns theatre venue *Tojo*. The following essay will first have a closer look on this art collective and their work, then second discuss the certain performance I saw and analyse it more closely by using several gender theoretical views, which are connected to performativity. My aim is to show on this specific artwork, how performativity theories can be applied, matched and understood. Rebecca Schneider's argument something being inappropriate will serve as arch for three views.² Here these are the ones by José Esteban Muñoz, who is talking about disidentification³, Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, who is talking about shame⁴ and Rebecca Schneider, who focuses on the explicit female body. These introducing texts are completed with statements from Judith Butler and some others focusing on performativity. Butler's performativity theory serves as connecting red line and basis for most theories.

I am going to have a wide definition of queer, inspired by J. Jack Halberstam. As some theories I use, are focusing on a definition of queer especially as not heterosexual and people of colour, I see feminists already as queers, no matter what gender identity, sexuality or desire they may have. Halberstam defines queer subjects by them not living in a capitalistic normative space and time, which is inside, domestic, private and reproductive/labour/day time.⁵ *The kill joys* are queer subjects because they don't serve a capitalistic norm. They are working in a creative field and bring their anger on current structures and systems out in the public space by making performances. This is why several theories, which talk about queer subjects, can be or have to be adjusted to this wider queer definition in the following essay.

2. *The kill joys*

As the name promises, are *the kill joys* an in Germany and Switzerland based art collective with the two women Olivia Hyunsin Kim and Magda Drozd with a clearly feminist agenda. In their work, they focus on destroying the patriarchy, sexual harassment and racism:

¹ „I am not a joke“, Concept & Performance: The Kill Joys, Premiere: no information, seen show: 27. October 2017, Tojo, Reitschule Bern.

² Schneider, Rebecca: *The Explicit Body in Performance*. London and New York 1997.

³ Muñoz, José Esteban: *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis 1999.

⁴ Sedgwick, Eve Kosovsky: *Queer Performativity: Henry James's The Art of the Novel*. In: *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1993, p. 1-16.

⁵ Cf. Halberstam, Judith Jack: *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York and London 2005, p. 6 and 10.

“Especially under the current political climate where women need to fight (again!) for their voice and visibility, THE KILL JOYS want to address current issues which move us, upset us and unite us. Being post-migrant and post-feminist themselves, they want [...] to go back to the DIY spirit and create a concert performance where both performers and spectators actively engage while incorporating elements of the 60s Feminist Body Art.”⁶

What makes their work so special and mentionable is the obvious use of dilettantism, by them called “DIY”. The performances they make have the impression of being unfinished. But actually it’s the opposite. I would say they are very clearly choreographed, dramaturgical structured and thought through. Also the fact, that they have been invited with their performance *I am not a joke* to several festivals and venues, shows that their way of performing is understood in a wide field of theatre business.

The performance *I am not a joke* operates with self-written songs, different costumes, singing, instruments, dance, manifests and light effects. These elements are found all over their work, which can be consumed online repeatedly through videos made by them.

They use the genre of music video clips to spread a feminist, political, angry and at the same time funny message. So for example in the video “Untilted 5”, where they censor their intimate parts with simple, black paper-pieces and sing very incorrectly. In the end they eat sausages, which could be read as act of destroying the patriarchy, as they eat their penises, symbolized by sausages.⁷

The kill joys operate with quite bold signs, as the sausage example showed. Also their props and costumes look like very low quality. The way they perform could be seen as very bad, unprofessional teeny girl band performance, but through it’s political feminist content, and the seriousness shown by the two performers at the same time, while they for example sing and play instruments very badly, makes it again a very powerful performance. The ambivalence of the quality is subverting very cleverly, as will be discussed further on.

3. *I am not a joke*

The following performance description is based on a video, made during the performance in Bern.⁸

⁶ The kill joys: about english. In: www.thekilljoys.net/about-english/, 21.5.2018).

⁷ Untilted 5. Concept & Performance: The Kill Joys, Video: Heta Multanen, 2017, 3.47 Min, (<https://vimeo.com/208921346>, 21.5.2018).

⁸ „I am not a joke“, Concept & Performance: The Kill Joys, Video: Simone Gfeller, 28.10.17 Reitschule Bern, 40 Min.

The performance *I am not a joke* at *Tojo* starts with the two performers sitting in the audience, wearing see-through tights, longhair wigs covering their faces and bare breasts. They start by making sound with the synthesizer and there is fog. The starting scene in total has a very monumental, big and loud appearance. Then the performers are putting on bikinis with painted nipples. Compared to other performances, they seem to be kind of unprepared, as they are dragging cables and moving stuff around. It is mostly Kim who will be singing, while Drozd is playing the guitar. The first song is about a date at the beach and slow sperms: “Your sperms are faster then your brain”. Then they ask each other “Nochmal?” meaning again and they start all over again as if they would rehearse. This happens several times and we get the impression they would be improvising. Some songs with feminist topics are sung and one goes explicitly to all the art-patriarchs: “it’s time for you to retire”. When songs are done, they mostly just cut short and the next thing happens immediately.

Drozd is having a speech in form of a manifesto about “patriarchal shit all over”. She states, that sexism is not history yet and a goal of an intersectional feminism must still be reached. The audience needs to bear the performers dilettantism. But the dilettantism develops for some songs also into punk music. Then Kim goes to a lectern and has a speech with an echoing sound effect. The text is about rape attacks against her. She wasn’t listened to, because of her Asian ethnicity, which isn’t counted as important and especially her voice not as true. The performance is almost done. The two performers dance and jump to some electronic drum music. Both sing: “oh, just another day, another fucking day”, Drozd screams, while jumping, “denn du bist Asiatin und ich bin fett”, Kim repeats: “denn ich bin Asiatin und du bist fett”. Both together: “I’m not fucking sorry, for not being sorry.” The last line, repeated, in the final song is: “I’m not a joke!”

4. Analyse

The final scene in the performance shall be used for further discussion. The basis therefore is a brief definition of performativity. By calling themselves *the kill joys*, they perform a Austinian *speech act*.⁹ The speech act has a meaning and people listening to it, have a certain interpretation. It is clear, that *the kill joys* are making art with feminist content. They are repeating something, what has been said and done before. As Jacques Derrida states, something is always a copy of something, but with a slight change to the original, if this then

⁹ Cf. Austin, John Langshaw: How to do Things with Words: The William James Lectures. Delivered at Harvard University in 1955. Ed. by J.O. Urmsen and Marina Sbisà, 2nd ed., Oxford 1975.
cf. also Austin, John Langshaw: How to do things with words. Lecture II. In: Bial, Henry a. Brady, Sara (ed.): The Performance Studies Reader. Ed. 3, Oxon 2016, p. 205–210.

exists.¹⁰ Judith Butler takes Derrida's idea and calls it *stylization*¹¹, "for styles have a history, and these histories condition and limit possibilities".¹² Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick comments on both:

"A term [performativity] whose specifically Austinian valences have been renewed in the work of Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, performativity has enabled a powerful appreciation of the ways that identities are constructed iteratively through complex citational process."¹³

Butler makes clear, that "the body is understood to be an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities".¹⁴ "One is not simply a body, but, in some key sense, one does one's body and, indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries [...]."¹⁵ This performative act could be used subversive by including changes in repetition. This happens automatically already through stylization. A repetition of something is never a pure copy, but always connected to a change and modification. There can be a transition in time. As *the kill joys* use elements of 60s and 70s feminism, they are reusing and repeating something, what already has been done.¹⁶ And Rebecca Schneider talks about ghosting, which means, that the past is always present.¹⁷

4.1 Explicit bodies

These possibilities of doing a body, described by Butler, are based on definitions of something being appropriate or not. Schneider talks about the appropriate female body. Is something called inappropriate, do we need to ask, who decides it being inappropriate? Who is the agency?¹⁸ And also do we need to consider the context in which something is defined as inappropriate.¹⁹ According to Schneider it is the patriarch, who defines female bodies as appropriate or inappropriate.²⁰ The patriarch's male gaze commands female bodies to be desirable and looked at only by men.²¹ The female subject belonging to this body is not meant

¹⁰ Derrida, Jacques: Signature Event Context. Margins of Philosophy. Tr. Alan Bass, Chicago 1982, p. 17.

¹¹ Cf. Butler, Judith: Performative Acts and Gender Constitution. An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory, [1988]. In: Bial, Henry a. Brady, Sara (ed.): The Performance Studies Reader. Ed. 3, Oxon 2016, p. 215.

¹² Butler, Judith: Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions, [1990]. In: ed. id. and Sara Salih: The Judith Butler Reader. Malden, 2004, p. 113.

¹³ Sedgwick, Eve Kosovsky and Parker, Andrew: Introduction to performativity and performance. In: Bial, Henry a. Brady, Sara (ed.): The Performance Studies Reader. Ed. 3, Oxon 2016, p. 226.

¹⁴ Butler [1988] 2016, p. 215.

¹⁵ Butler [1988] 2016, p. 216

¹⁶ Cf. Schneider 1997, p. 17 and 22.

¹⁷ Cf. Schneider 1997, p. 21–23.

¹⁸ Cf. Schneider 1997, p. 20.

¹⁹ Cf. Schneider 1997, p. 14.

²⁰ Cf. Schneider 1997, p. 11.

²¹ Cf. Schneider 1997, p. 5.

to be individually active and only being consumed by the male gaze.²² By obeying so, the subject woman is exhausted repeatedly by the patriarch. Women loose power, and this has been done throughout history. Cultural, social and historical repetition of definitions of being appropriate has formed the subject *woman*. *The kill joys* take what is (in)appropriate as a theme for their art work.

“At base, the explicit body in much feminist work interrogates socio-cultural understandings of the “appropriate” and/or the appropriately transgressive - particularly who gets to mark what (in)appropriate where, and, who has the right to appropriate what where - keeping in mind the double meaning of the word “appropriate.”²³

I mention this, because *the kill joys* performer’s bodies are very important in *I am not a joke*. Their bodies are not just the material to be simply present on stage, but they are in some moment also the topic of the performance. The body is un/dressed, shaken, talked about and most important shown, but mostly so to say unprofessional, shaky and dilettantish.

Primitivism and dilettantism go together. On one hand both is considered as low-cultured and unintellectual and on the other hand they can be used as clever tools to perform. Women are “more ‘primitive,’ than the implicitly higher primate, white Man.”²⁴ But:

„[I]n contemporary feminist work it is the primitivized, or sexualized herself who (re)performs her primitivization. [...] She is already primitive, already transgressive. Given this, the primitivized herself deploys or re-plays her primitivization back across her body in a kind of double take, an effort to expose the cultural foundations of shock.“²⁵

Means, that women’s body’s inappropriateness is used to subvert. It is reused and unveiled. Schneider states, that women artists take their body literal and more important back and get rid of the symbolism, which is put on them throughout history:

„Unfolding the body, as if pulling back velvet curtains to expose a stage, the performance artists [...] peel back layers of signification that surround their bodies like ghosts at a grave. Peeling at signification, bringing ghosts to visibility, they are interested to expose not an originary, true, or redemptive body, but the sedimented layers of signification themselves.“²⁶

It’s the female body which is made explicit and used for *I am not a joke* by *the kill joys*.

²² Cf. Schneider 1997, p. 38 and 3.

²³ Schneider 1997, p. 3.

²⁴ Schneider 1997, p. 1.

²⁵ Schneider 1997, p. 5.

²⁶ Schneider 1997, p. 2.

Jumping, awkwardly dancing, stripping and painted nipples are only some of the elements, which are used to focus the audience's view on the literal female body, but more important it's the lyrics and manifests written by the performers, which depict the masculinized definition of the (in)appropriate female body.

Schneider concludes, that a body does not necessarily have to be naked to be explicit.²⁷ Her theory about the explicit body goes further. It is about unfolding the layers, which define a body. This happens for example with Drozd's body. Instead of hiding her "fat" body, it is shown explicit on two levels. First explicit naked and second in it's literality and not as symbol. She is unveiling the expected embodiment of female bodies and at the same time embodying her individual body, which is regarded as inappropriate. By doing so, she is in fact re-appropriating her body and it's description. Her explicit body is no longer defined by a male gaze and sexualized, instead it becomes hers and it becomes the subject, while it was the object before.²⁸ Same happens with disidentificational processes. Something what has been taken away, for example the not sexualized definition of a female body, is taken back by disidentifying with the explicitly sexualized body.

4.2 Disidentification

Another subversion through repetition can be done through disidentification. It can be used to make the exclusiveness of certain categories visible.²⁹ Disidentification is a subversive, powerful tool, described by Muñoz also as "survival strategy".³⁰ It is about "subjects whose identities are formed in response to the cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and misogyny".³¹ By putting on, doing or embodying stereotypes in a performative act as disidentification, the shown subject is never done perfect and spotless. It is more the obvious construction, which is shown. One could read disidentificational performances also as dilettantish and bad art. This is why *the kill joys* can be analysed with this theory.

Muñoz works especially with examples of „minority subjects“. I wouldn't say, that the two *kill joy* performers belong to minority subject groups, but as women, they do have to oppress and fight against a patriarchal system, they are living in.³² Muñoz calls these intersectional subjects "identities-in-difference." „These identities-in-difference emerge from a failed interpellation within the dominant public sphere.“³³ Even *the kill joys* don't dress up as

²⁷ Cf. Schneider 1997, p. 35–36 and 40.

²⁸ Cf. Schneider 1997, p. 3.

²⁹ Cf. Muñoz 1999, p. 14.

³⁰ Muñoz 1999, p. 5.

³¹ Muñoz 1999, p. 5.

³² Cf. Muñoz 1999, p. 6.

³³ Muñoz 1999, p. 7.

patriarchs or sexists during *I am not a joke*, they produce a female subject, an identity-in-difference, by singing certain lyrics and reading texts, which describe stereotypical women, produced through a male gaze.

The actress Kim has an Asian immigrant status. While living in German speaking countries, she's living an intersectional live. Discriminations can occur against her sex, gender identity and race. In *I am not a joke* they have a part, where they sing "ich bin Asiatin und du bist fett". The other girl, Drozd, defines herself as fat, by singing so. Also she can experience intersectional harassment, as a woman and then again as a "fat" woman. These descriptions "Asiatic" and "fat" are repeatedly added as categories from the outside on them. The girls use for a disidentificational part in the performance these categories.

Muñoz uses Sedgwicks statement considering identifying with something also means to know the other, the "counteridentity".³⁴ Or to say with Butler's theory, to become a subject is always connected with not-becoming the opposite.³⁵ The kill joys, know their enemies, their opposite identity, the other. This is the patriarchal masculine subject. "This endless struggle with "man" is indicative of a stage in feminist discourse in which counteridentification with men is the only way in which one became a woman."³⁶ On one hand this is wrong, then a woman is never just a woman, because she is not a man, but on the other hand this is fruitful for *the kill joys* performance. As they use dilettantism as creative tool it makes perfectly sense, to have a simple level of (dis)identification in the performance. By repeating stereotypical notions regarding the relationship of women and men, the ridiculousness is unveiled. They clearly identify themselves as not male, by saying, what male subjects have done or said to them.

4.3 Shame

Disidentification is connected with shame. Both are made visible as acts of resistance, when they are shown in the right frame. This is important to mention, as especially disidentification can be understood as nonsense and joke, if it is not included in a performance of identities. The frame is also the element, which allows considering *I am not a joke* as art.

Shame forms identities, as Sedgwick states.³⁷ Other then disidentification, which is about doing a subject, is shame about being a subject.³⁸ Shame is put from outside onto someone. As for example Drozd is called fat. This description of a body is in our capitalistic, neoliberal

³⁴ Cf. Muñoz 1999, p. 8.

³⁵ Cf. Butler, Judith: *Das Unbehagen der Geschlechter*. Frankfurt am Main 1991, p. 17.

³⁶ Muñoz 1999, p. 22.

³⁷ Sedgwick 1993, p. 5 and 14.

³⁸ Sedgwick 1993, p. 12.

and heteronormative society something negative. But instead of being ashamed of one's shame, the awareness and acceptance of it can be used as subversive strategy as well. Shame is a “structuring fact of identity: one that has its own, powerfully productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities.”³⁹

In the end of *I am not a joke* the two performers sing: “I’m not fucking sorry, for not being sorry”. Primary, Drozd is not ashamed of being fat, and shakes and shows her body very comfortably during the whole performance and second on a bigger level, she and Kim are not ashamed of being women. Drozd’s body is shamed as fat from the outside. She’s likely told, that it doesn’t fit the skinny, healthy normative body images. But instead of being ashamed of it and hiding her body, she is not ashamed of the shame. Thinking again about something being inappropriate, they don’t care in the performance. Many times do they swear, walk around naked in the beginning and take their time, to start scenes.

Further is shame a powerful tool, maybe more than pride, as it brings awareness to the subject but also it’s environment, that it is shamed for something. This awareness can be made useful for subversion. Shame can also be put back to the outside, as it is put from outside on a subject. By using it for a performance, making it visible, it is again back in people’s minds, but looked at critically.⁴⁰

5. Conclusion

To conclude we see, that theories mainly focusing on a narrower queer definition can be used for feminist analysis as well.

Schneider’s, Muñoz’ and Sedgwick’s here used texts were all written in the 90s after Judith Butler had published her highly reviewed book “gender trouble” 1990 and her essay regarding performativity in 1988. I’d suggest seeing her work as basis for several following theories, which apply, criticise or rewrite Butler’s performativity definition. Following theories make it in general easier to understand Butler, as they pick example cases and focus more on certain aspects as for example shame, disidentification and explicit bodies. These concepts have in common, that they can all be subversive by repetition.

I showed that disidentification, which is thought by Muñoz primarily around queers of colour, could also be used for bodies, especially female bodies, which are sexualized and censored at the same time. By using this kind of disidentification, *the kill joys* make their symbolic bodies literal. They use the enemies’ view on their identities to subvert and backlash. Same goes with shaming of their bodies and ethnicities, whereas it’s presence is re-appropriated and taken for

³⁹ Sedgwick 1993, p. 14.

⁴⁰ Cf. Sedgwick 1993, p. 14.

personal use by not being ashamed of this certain shame. The third theory I had a closer look at is Schneider's dichotomy of literal and symbolic bodies, their definition made by someone and most important them being inappropriate. *I am not a joke* shows with lyrics and movements, that definitions of female subjects should be reconsidered and redone by women themselves. Meaning appropriating and defining as (in)appropriate as personal act by taking agency.

To finish I want to have a final look at the speechact again. Performativity can have two meanings: "one indicates something done 'for show', while the other indicates something done 'for real'", write Henry Bial and Sara Brady in their collection *Performance Studies*.⁴¹ "Theatre artists [...] often hope that their work can effect social change, that their 'unreal' behaviour can have 'real' effects."⁴² Thinking about this, we see, that the unreal, dilettantish behaviour of *the kill joys* should be able and maybe also is intended to have an effect and change.

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