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Autumn Knight: Disappointment as Pedagogy, or Eating in Costume

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Performance Review of Autumn Knight's *Eating in Costume*

Virtual, Fusebox Festival, April 24–26, 2020

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Photos: Permission granted by Autumn Knight.



Autumn Knight, *Eating in Costume* (still), 2020. Video performance. Courtesy of the artist.

I grabbed my phone as a reflective surface, pulled up a list on my computer “notes,” and poured a glass of water while feeling a bit self-conscious, even as my personal Zoom square remained darkened. Autumn Knight’s performances, such as this “workshop”-performance, *Eating in Costume*, 2020, that debuted at Fusebox Festival 2020: Virtual Edition over the weekend of April 24–26th, often employ the lecture-performance form or hybrid participatory models.¹ They are notoriously interactive, engaging her training in drama therapy.² Curator Ashley DeHoyos describes Knight’s particular interactivity as “the ability to create conditions that ignite a response, that question authority, while at the same time nourishing the imagination and emphasizing awkward silence through humor and play.”³ In 2019, I attended Knight’s performance of

M__ER at On the Boards, and witnessed as well as embodied the varied reactions to such participatory situations as Knight's Black *mother-ing* figure collided with *matter-ing* in public space, and even, a "threaten[ing]" *murder-ing* through tough love.⁴ In this sense, I knew what to expect; but at the same time, in *Eating in Costume*, Knight clandestinely guided participants through a pedagogy of disappointment.

After participants had culled materials, Knight proceeded to recall a colloquial phrase used in theater: eating in costume—a scenario wherein the performer is wearing full make-up, hair, and costume, but decides to eat before their entrance on stage and accidentally spills food on themselves. It's a minor catastrophe. It's disappointment. But to whom or what belongs or absorbs that disappointment? Oneself? The food, costume, or scenario? Knight then invited us all to spill our drinks of choice on ourselves—to abide in that disappointment with her. On each of our screens drinks tumbled clumsily, foreshadowing participatory and video-based displays of vulnerability that I would later observe in Knight's virtual performances in May, including *Our Water is Melted Snow: An experimental participatory performance* at Wa Na Wari, Seattle, and *For Pica* in the "Beyond Now" virtual fundraiser for the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art.⁵ The jocular invitation and its outcome became a cipher for—at that point—weeks of quarantine cancellations, postponements, and frustrations in self, government, and society (and now, in writing this review while executive-sanctioned violence by federal officers ensues in the streets of Portland, OR—brutality against Black people). Knight then shared her screen and flipped through images of disappointment, such as Kendrick Lamar's hair on fire. Some initially laughed, until she identified disappointment in the fact that the promotional image for Lamar's single failed to acknowledge Black women's braiding labor. The shock of hair engulfed in flames somehow made this disappointment secondary, when that was not how I actually felt about it. Without missing a beat, Knight audaciously read from rejection letters in the "art world," wondering about the possibility of racial justice in the United States, and querying when Black people have disappointed her.

Pivoting to lists, Knight asked us to attend to five questions: 1. Name one person that finds you disappointing right now; 2. Write own one person that you hope to never disappoint; 3. Write down one person you could care less about disappointing; 4. Identify

one way you've been disappointed socially; 5. Write down an example of Black disappointment. Asking participants to read them aloud, many volunteered the information—but I did not. As a white woman, I felt unsure of the final prompt—did it mean write down an example of a time when I was disappointed in a Black person? Or write down a time when Black disappointment existed as an abstract concept? In the United States, didn't it always exist—both abstractly and in an embodied sense—could the two even be separated? Is this assumption of existence or non-existence mine to make? If it exists, *how* did, does, and will it exist—did someone else cause it; did an event give rise to it; did systemic inequality render perpetuate it? In each of these scenarios, I felt disappointed in my inability to answer fully.

Knight curbed these self-reflexive thoughts. She paraphrased from contemporary philosopher Madeline Martin-Seaver, whose scholarship encourages readers to begin with and hold disappointment, creating bonds from mutual solidarity, expression, and the singular social contract among those experiencing the “funny sounding feeling,” as Knight called it.⁶ Parodying a lecture, and yet invoking critical race discourse, she seamlessly turned to the philosophical work of Bill E. Lawson and Knight recalled his concept of “social disappointment,” or “disappointment that comes from the failure of the government to satisfy the expectations of the majority of Blacks.”⁷ Disappointment, it seems, is far from an individual concern. It's a launching pad for collective political involvement, as witnessed by countless major cities and rural towns across the United States during the past weeks of protest against policing and for Black lives. Knight's thoughts invoked Martin-Seaver's takeaway that it is “within society's best interest its members to be happy and productive rather than alienated and resentful,” conjuring a clearing for revolution.⁸ But disappointment as a political tool demands much. In unaffected honesty, Knight emphasized the reality that Black bodies cope with disappointment differently. It becomes an appendage, she said, carried throughout time, and one must “work with it.”⁹

Clearly, disappointment is far more complex than first feel. At once it is an affective collective experience and yet also a manifestation of structural disappointment, or dispossession.¹⁰ Something perhaps expected but taken. In its place a gaping absence. “Empathy”—a popular and often flattened performance and social-practice term—could

not resolve this “workshop.” As a reaction, it felt suspect, and perhaps an extension or centering of whiteness. But Jessica Santone’s understanding of empathy offers as an initial entry point for Knight’s pedagogical thrust. It balances connectedness, perhaps what participants feel in sharing their lists, with political critique, or the “spill” of one’s biases upon oneself.¹¹ Full of affective entanglements, moments of being uncomfortable, and the impossibility of escape, such a guiding becomes, as Sandra Ruiz argues, a “perilous pedagogy,” but a necessary one.¹²

A solution? Knight provided no movement-based gesture intended to fix, or theatrical framework to refract this virtual disinterring of disappointment. She instead urged us to write another list, to resist turning disappointment into creative fuel (because “they’re not made of the same stuff”), and to realize that disappointment thrives on expectations and risks.¹³ In others words—she counseled us to exercise it.

¹ For more information on the Fusebox Festival 2020, see Laurel V. McLaughlin, “Fusebox Festival 2020: ‘Living Roots’ in the Virtual,” *Art Papers*, “Living and Working,” 44.1 (August 2020: 59-62).

² For more on Knight and her experience in drama therapy see: Autumn Knight and Phillip Townsend, “Interview: Autumn Knight and Phillip Townsend,” *Fusebox Written & Spoken*, February 5, 2020: <https://www.fuseboxfestival.com/post/2020/02/05/interview-autumn-knight-and-phillip-townsend>.

³ Ashley DeHoyos, “Autumn Knight: The Potency of Performance and Consumption,” *Fusebox Festival 2020*, eds. Anna Gallagher-Ross and Betelhem Makonnen. Austin, TX: Fusebox Festival, 2020.

⁴ Autumn Knight, *M_ _ _ER*, On the Boards Website, October 10–13, 2019, Accessed 21 July 2020: <https://www.ontheboards.org/performances/m-er>. See Lumi Tan for her discussion of performative interaction as potential threat in “Autumn Knight,” *CURA*. 33 “In the Middle of Nowhere.” Accessed 19 July 2020: <https://curamagazine.com/autumn-knight/>.

⁵ See Autumn Knight, *Our Water is Melted Snow: An experimental participatory performance* description, Wa Na Wari website, Accessed 22 July 2020: <https://www.wanawari.org/autumn-knight.html>; Autumn Knight, *For Pica*, Portland Institute of Contemporary Art YouTube Channel, 1:57:28, Accessed 22 July 2020: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aMY2Q_C0bdE.

⁶ Autumn Knight, *Eating in Costume* Description, Fusebox Festival 2020, April 24–26, 2020: <<http://virtual.fuseboxfestival.com/>>. See Madeline Martin-Seaver, “Begin from Disappointment: Black Existentialism and Political Solidarity,” *Perceptia* 1, no. 1 (2010): 1–7.

⁷ Bill E. Lawson, “Social Disappointment and The Black Sense of Self,” in *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon (New York: Routledge, 1997):149–156, 151. See also Autumn Knight’s video work concerning disappointment which draws upon Lawson’s work to a greater extent, *WV #1: Disappointment*, Artist Relief YouTube, Accessed 22 July 2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ESJA_EKoZw/>.

⁸ Martin-Seaver, “Begin from Disappointment: Black Existentialism and Political Solidarity,” 6. Quoted in Autumn Knight, *Eating in Costume*, Fusebox Festival 2020, April 25, 2020.

⁹ Autumn Knight, *Eating in Costume*, Fusebox Festival 2020, April 24–26, 2020.

¹⁰ See etymological entry for “disappoint,” which stems from the Middle English *disapointen*, referencing the act: to dispossess. “Disappoint.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disappoint>. Accessed 24 Jul. 2020.

¹¹ Jessica Santone, “Otherness and Empathy: Performing Affective Pedagogy,” *Gulf Coast: A Journal of Literature and Fine Arts*, Issue 27.1 (Winter/Spring 2015): 211–219, 219. Santone’s analysis refers to Jennifer Doyle’s pivotal text that engages the complexities of affect in contemporary art in *Hold it Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

¹² Sandra Ruiz, “Crossing the Line: The Here and Now of Race and Gender and the Entanglements of Love in Performance Art and Pedagogy,” *Autumn Knight: In Rehearsal* (Champaign, IL: Krannert Art Museum and Kinkead Pavilion with support from Project Row Houses, 2018), 57. Ruiz reads Knight’s pedagogy through José Esteban Muñoz’s pivotal essay, “Teaching Minoritarian Knowledge, and Love,” *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 14:2 (2005): 117–121.

¹³ Autumn Knight, *Eating in Costume*, Fusebox Festival 2020, April 24–26, 2020.