

issue 12 march • april 2006 \$7.00

artus

U 6X 0321

\$7.00



FROM HERE TO "OVER THERE"

by Jeffery S. Librett

STATE OF THE DISUNION

by David Carrier

THE NEW ZOMBIE

by Gean Moreno

THEATER REVOLUTION

by Chris K. Lee

HIRSCHHORN'S CAMOTOPH

by Sue Spaid

TOM JOHNSON INTERVIEW

by Domenick Ammirati



04
0 56698 56675 15

POSTMORTEM

The Theory of Whiteness: An Interview with Tom Johnson

DOMENICK AMMIRATI

Last summer for a few hours every Saturday, a tall balding white man stood in P.S.1's sunny courtyard confined inside a metal locker, his head protruding through a table-like platform, talking to passersby. The piece by Tom Johnson, titled *Standing Date* (2005), was an extension of the artist's live and video monologues, sculpture, and drawing, all of which typically involve obsessions with gender, race, and the fundamental ontological questions of being in the world.

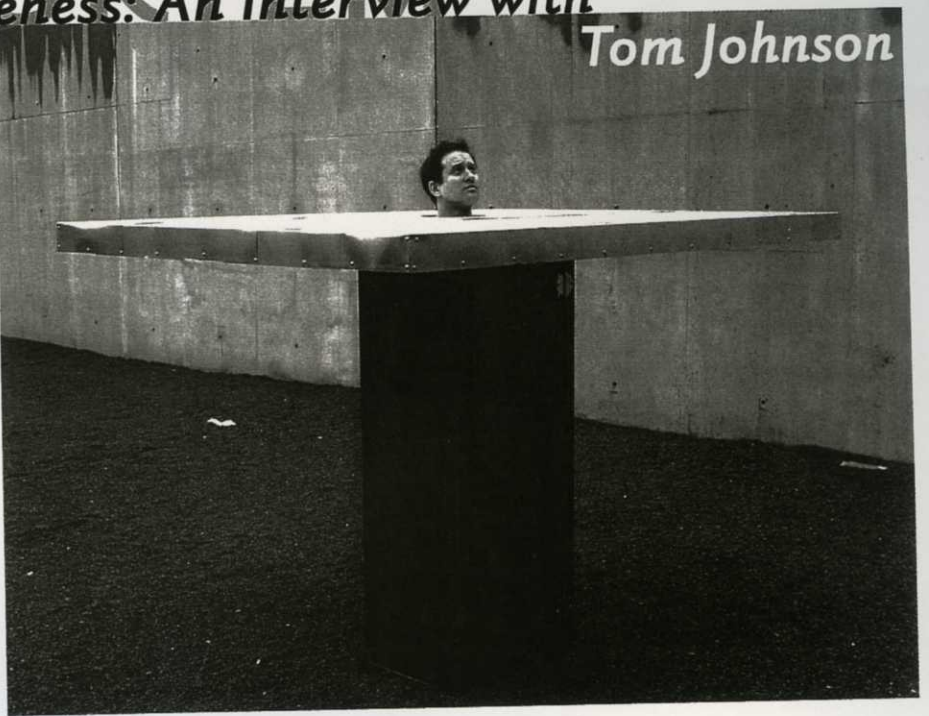
Johnson received his MFA from Bard College in 1999. In the years since, he's worked in New York in positions including studio assistant for Matthew Barney and massage therapist at one of the city's luxury hotels (one highlight: a massage given to ex-President George H.W. Bush). Since 2004 Johnson's work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at New York's CANADA and MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies and has been included in shows at New York's SculptureCenter and Arthouse in Austin, Texas, as well as in the first *Performa Biennial*. Johnson is performing *Standing Date* in the courtyard of the *Castello di Rivoli*, open to museumgoers and non-museumgoers alike, as part of the inaugural *Turin Triennial*, through January 2006. Tom and I spoke shortly before he left for Italy, two days before Halloween.

Domenick Ammirati: How are you? Insanely busy?

Tom Johnson: I'm a bit shocked that in just a week and a half I'm going to be standing in a metal box in the middle of an Italian town. Otherwise, yeah, busy. I've been doing a radio performance for that *Performa* thing, for WFMU.

DA: What did you talk about?

TJ: Well, it's called *Bedtime* [2005] and it's basically me in my bed with a microphone, talking. I'm trying to portray that state where you're alone in bed in an extremely safe yet obsessional place with



the covers around you and you're thinking through different thoughts. I recorded it mostly late at night. It has a very meandering, nighttime feeling. I talk about the bed and the night and the way the bed is like the night or the way the bed is like the ocean or the way the night is like the ocean and then I start thinking about how my leg is sort of like a tentacle—because I taped the piece just after they saw that giant squid [first photographed by Japanese researchers on September 28, 2005].

DA: Oh yeah, I heard about that.

TJ: Then I end up telling this story—I don't know where I read it, it was a short story. It's about this high school girl. She's in class where she has a crush on the boy in front of her, and she slides way down in the chair and she reaches her big toe across the space between their desks and she pushes her toe into his body, like through his skin, at the base of his spine. So she kind of fucks him from behind, with her toe, without him knowing, kinda.

DA: Are you sure you didn't invent this story?

TJ: Yeah. But I think I've made incredibly good use of it.

DA: It's very hot and strange. By the way, you never wrote a paper about the dangers of spanking, did you?

TJ: No.

DA: I found this thing online today, "The Sexual Dangers of Spanking" by Tom Johnson. It seemed plausible.

TJ: When you Google me I don't really come up, but there are a number of Tom Johnsons who do.

DA: It's impossible to find you online, your name is so Everyman. But I was thinking that that generic quality functions really well with your preoccupations.

TJ: In that first show I had at CANADA [2001], one of the phrases I used—it was in some of the titles—was "a white transparent medium." Like I was or could be a white transparent medium. I have this fantasy ambition towards this place of transparency; it's the same through all my stuff. Like I could massage anyone, you know, I'm so *clear* inside myself. I could massage George Bush, I could massage this bad person; I can stand right above the lingerie model and massage her breasts, which is a thing I had to do just the other week. But since I'm so *free* inside, I can do it all.

DA: Because you disappear.

TJ: Because I dis-a-fucking-peer. Which is the thing that I've been trying to do ever since I was little. And only recently, in art, have I begun this circuitous way of revealing that I now know that I can't disappear. I enact this peculiar presentness while I talk about being transparent. Like the box thing, for instance.

DA: That goal of transparency comes from a very classic, for lack of a better term, Cartesian subjectivity. It's like the idea that the traditionally white-male-defined subjectivity is this universal subjectivity.

TJ: Exactly. And that's like the white canvas. That first CANADA show had to do with different kinds of whiteness, and Wittgenstein, his writing about color, where he talks about the impossibility of conceiving of a thing called a white transparent medium. Then I was like, oh, fuck, I can turn that toward race.

DA: So what kind of reactions do you get from African Americans about your work, both art people and non-art people?

TJ: I've only had just the beginnings of a, whatever you'd say, "reception." The most elaborated responses I've gotten were when I did that monologue at SculptureCenter.

DA: *What a Black Man Feels Like* [2004].

TJ: Originally I was gonna do it as an installation with a number of black male collaborators. There would have been a video version of the monologue, just me talking into the camera, playing on a monitor, and then these performers who would pretend to be other viewers at the museum. They would engage the real viewers in conversations about what I was saying. They could say whatever they wanted. So people would come to the museum and they'd see this white guy, being me, going on and on about race; and then there'd be this black guy, who it'd seem would be just another viewer, who would start talking to them about what I was saying.

To find people who would be up for doing it, I wrote this very articulated three-page summary of the concept of

the piece and I posted it on Craigslist. Obviously there were plenty of people who just weren't interested, who didn't respond. But I got a whole bunch of responses from black male performers who felt like there actually was something to work with. And I interviewed, not that many, maybe six or eight.

The responses of people had a certain level of caution. Like, it was slightly dicey, in the sense that they had no idea who I was, as one never does, and then I'm putting forward this proposal of my sincerity and my availability to a real openness about this massive subject. The people who came and met me that were totally up for it were the performance types. A couple of the more theater-oriented people, actors really, wanted to come see it but didn't want to be involved. And then one of them called me back and asked me out. So in my opinion, I feel like he was interested.

DA: It's that sincerity you were talking about. You politely declined?

TJ: Well, I wasn't interested, in part 'cause I'm not attracted to men very powerfully.

DA: I just have this feeling that if I was black listening to that piece, I feel as if it would make me angry. I would just want you to shut up.

TJ: Well, yeah. I think that would actually be a mistake. In my opinion, that piece offers everyone, both black and white, more room than there had been previously.

DA: What if a white person wanted you to shut up?

TJ: I feel like a white person would want me to shut up just because—and you know, anybody who wanted me to shut up, black or white, would probably want me to shut up for this reason—just because they would think it was nothing but solipsism.



TOM JOHNSON, ME AND MUHAMMED, 2001, COLOR PHOTOGRAPH. COURTESY THE ARTIST & CANADA, NEW YORK.

