999, Alchemist Trauma Centre / Power Centre

by Jorge De Hoyos

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Part I

Alexa Wilson and I met while both auditioning for a Masters Study Program in Solo Dance Authorship in Berlin in January 2018. We were prompted to critically respond to one of the 24 other 10-minute audition performances and then read it out in our interview the following days. Here's what I wrote then:

Himalayan Fem Trash Activation: Alexa Wilson a.k.a. The Angry Version

Similar to the 'trigger warnings' given before some performances within certain 'socially progressive' scenes in the past few years, New Zealand-born Alexa Wilson begins her bold, funny, and insightful piece by asking the audience, "Do you want the angry version or the reflective version?"

We said angry.

What follows is a chaotic, entangled mashup of dance, ritual healing with objects, and personal politics on a microphone that's too hard to hear over loud New Age and Hip Hop music. Alexa tells us from the start that the work is a Feminist Activist Healing Object Activation resulting from her recent role as curator of a 2-month residency programme in the Himalayas. Pulling from a legacy of 1970s punk-

feminist performance art, Alexa performs the healer, the self-help student, the nihilist, the Colonizer, the white woman appropriating hip hop, the tourist in India, and so on.

Each object, action and text activated seem to hold both a problem and a solution. For example, as she takes off her pants the word "share" appears, written on her panties—perhaps an enlightened, empowered invitation of sexual freedom or an ironic dare to a misogynistic gaze. She invites people to write spiritual insights on paper, but it's toilet paper and is therefore easily ripped. She launches into a visceral modern dance—perhaps as a way to find a cathartic physical response to nihilist questions—but then the movement gets too dense and re-tangled into the growing pile of individual-objects-become-trash.

"What are we talking about?" she asks as she sits on a yoga mat stabbing an apple to mushy pieces. Each material—object, movement, text, music—anxiously suggests that perhaps there is no way to truly purify the soul, at least for a western body addicted to consumerism, misleadingly propped up by privilege, or mostly just overwhelmed by globalized decline.



Then, a profound transformation occurs.

Alexa gathers on her person as much accumulated mess as possible and asks for her picture to be taken. She then drops the materials and disrobes to nudity as the music fades down and she walks off stage. The point was not to solve each question she posed or heal each object but rather to activate the materials—her stated intention from the beginning. By stirring them up with angry energy and eventually taking ownership of the problems (or ritual objects) by literally embracing them, she is then able to shed them like a too-tight skin that she intends to be free from.

Activation and shedding is thus proposed as a strategy for personal healing. However, the strategy has its contradictions. As a light-skinned person from an English-speaking developed country, the question can be asked: isn't leaving the baggage behind or shedding off the muck something that the First World does already? And doesn't this cause all the trash to accumulate in 'away' places or for industries to pollute third world countries? Would an Indian person living in poverty and extreme-urban density have the financial and political capability to relocate and leave the physical/metaphorical congested conditions behind?

The response might well be an angry "no". The performer might have shed the congesting materials, but the body walking offstage might still be clothed in invisible layers of first world privilege.

Part II

Two months later Alexa and I sit down for an interview at a quiet Kreuzberg café. It's our first official hang out. I recall what she told me at the audition, how much she appreciated the viscerality and existential provocations of my performance presentation. I remember telling her how I loved her direct and punk approach to spirituality and world issues, also visceral and existential in nature.

We sit on a comfortable couch at the back. I had been accepted into the program and will start in a few weeks. I'm really glad to avoid a second personal crisis this year—the first one being a major confrontation with my father while visiting home in Southern California over New Year. He insisted that my choice to be an

artist is irresponsible and doomed to poverty and unhappiness. Upon returning pre-audition to freezing, lonely, burnt-out, unemployed, and gray Berlin, I just about decided that I would quit art/art-life/life-as-I-know-it and finally get a real job. Channeling this crisis became the core of my audition presentation.

I still need a job.

We order from the barista. Alexa was not accepted into the program but she tells me that she got some New Zealand government funding for the project (called *999: Alchemist Trauma Centre / Power Centre*) and she is also enthusiastic about a non-residential MPhil and PhD program in New Zealand (AUT) which she will start next year. I learn that she financially supports herself through massage and other gigs. I ask, and she gives me the website to a cheap yet quality massage certification school that she completed a few years back.

We receive our coffees. I know that a week ago she showed a more developed version of the work at Lake Studios, a dance residency studio outside of the city center. I press record on my iPhone Voice Memos and ask her to continue speaking…

ALEXA WILSON At the end of every month Praxis für Heilkunde on Weserstraße does this Tarot walk where they pull a card for the coming month, and you literally walk into that month.

For April, it was the magician and the devil! That's a hardcore combination.

They're both very powerful, and I realized while walking that they're both about freedom. The magician is about empowerment, knowing that we create our own reality and can manifest with our thoughts.The way my friend who runs the event spoke about the two was interesting because she had a diplomatic way of talking about the devil, for example. She was saying that the devil is freed from morality--there's no good and bad. Just live and be ok with the shadow. It's alright. He's got eyes all over his body. He can see everything and accept all sides. This was nice for me to hear because it resonates with the process I'm going through at the moment, with this work but also generally in my life—this

breakdown of black and white, good and bad or evil, not being so Christian and all the things that brings up.

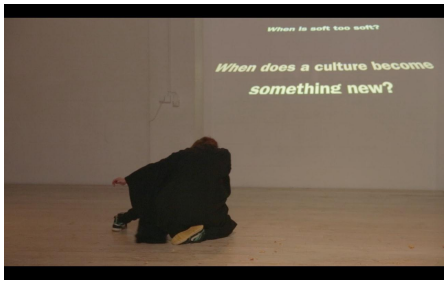
It all feels like it relates to my experience of the showing on Friday, where I had a lot of extreme responses from the audience. A lot of women thought it was very powerful and brave, something was releasing for them--a sense that one can be vulnerable and powerful, especially as a woman. But then there were some really oppressive male energies that felt as if they were trying to shut me down.



Alexa Wilson performing *999: Alchemist Trauma Centre / Power Centre*, at Lake Studios in *Unfinished Fridays*, 20th March 2018, video stills.



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AW (CONT) In the feedback circle afterwards, three different men were complaining and agreeing with each other that there was just too much going on or that I need to do this or that in a specific way. They said very critically that they couldn't see anything or that it should be just one idea. I suggested that maybe it's not about a single idea but rather more about a feeling and trying to get out of our head.

This older American man in particular said in an authoritative way, "you talk about fragility, but I don't think you were vulnerable at all." I was thinking in response, "well, that's your perspective as an older man, but how would you know what it's like to be courageous in this way? what it's like to do this work? You're just seeing it the way you want to see it." I was starting to feel claustrophobic from it, and I recognize this feeling. This patriarchy thing feels like it clenches [hands gesture near her throat]. It's like a wall.

In any case, that evening was a clash of different energies.

JORGE DE HOYOS How was the piece different this time than what I saw at the audition?

AW After I walk out naked, I basically just walk back in and say “Ok, so this is Part II” and that it is the “Reflected Angry Version”.

JDH And for Part I did you do the angry or reflective version?

AW They asked for the angry.

When I interviewed at the audition, the word feminism popped up as a keyword from the panel. Even though I was initially dealing more with my experiences in India, I realized there that feminism is a foundation that I'm working with.

My framing of the term was that I have agency to do and say whatever I like in this work. I fearlessly hold agency to be vulnerable, to be strong, to be sarcastic, layered and to also work across cultures which is a difficult path to tread. So then I became interested in playing more with that as well as questioning the notion of black as bad and in relationship to the female, and reversing certain cultural notions.

It could go in so many directions.

What I really pushed for this last showing was the void, or the blackness or darkness of the void or of the feminine. When I reenter naked, I start to put on only black clothing: black pants, black shoes to a pre-recorded text that’s all about black. I was referencing what I found written about Kali from India. I list words like “evil”, “dark”—negative words about black and the way it’s perceived. Then the words shift to how other cultures might see black like “embracing,” “receptive,” “feminine,” “illuminated consciousness,” “absorbing all colors,” “all knowing.”

This hardcoremusic from the recent Blade Runner soundtrack begins to play as I dance in the dark with a black cape. I start doing a shaking dance while repeating the word feminist as if I'm trying this word out in different ways. A video starts scrolling like the Star Wars scroll beginning with the title "The Reflective Angry Version" followed by all these questions: when does black become gray? Is it where it becomes white? When does cultural exchange become appropriation? When does transformation become healing, and when is it just traumatizing? …these gray-area questions... When does a movement become a brand? when does feminism suit me?



Alexa Wilson performing *999: Alchemist Trauma Centre / Power Centre*, at Agora Collective in *Vulva Club #19* by Female Trouble, Berlin, 1st May 2018. Photo: Bea Rodrigues.



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JDH Coincidentally, in tidying up my flat recently, I gave away a bag of black clothes that I was saving in my closet for a piece about black that I would make eventually. I was relieved to finally get rid of it but mostly because one of the shirts inside had Satanic imagery. I'm considerably Catholic, so Satan freaks me out. However, I dig your Tarot friend's description of the devil in that an active concern in my life and my art is to uncover and allow my darkness, or integrate the shadow, rather than keep it repressed and growing in a hidden place.

But how afraid are you of channeling darkness or evil?

AW Well, it's the essential core of the collective fear, especially a Western fear. In the last weeks there was a feeling of dread and doubt inside me of "what am I doing?" I had to trust in

the space of the void and confront those qualities of how the feminine and the black are still so demonized. And that's the Yin as well from the Chinese. It's being humble, open, receptive and just present…open. So I told myself, “this is going to be hard, and it's going to be like a nightmare feeling.”

I asked myself why I have to be brave? I think of my personal safety in terms of sharing it and pushing through those barriers.

JDH Pushing through barriers in terms of the reactions you might get?

AW Yes, and even energetically. They both go together. The way that people are responding to you is energetic. I've had experiences in the past where I was harshly blamed for some audience members becoming activated.

I literally say words like bad, evil, dark…witch---which is a particular word that I don’t like because it’s been used so negatively for such a long time. It feels so demonizing and not like a nice word to claim. I prefer words like, "healer." [laughs]

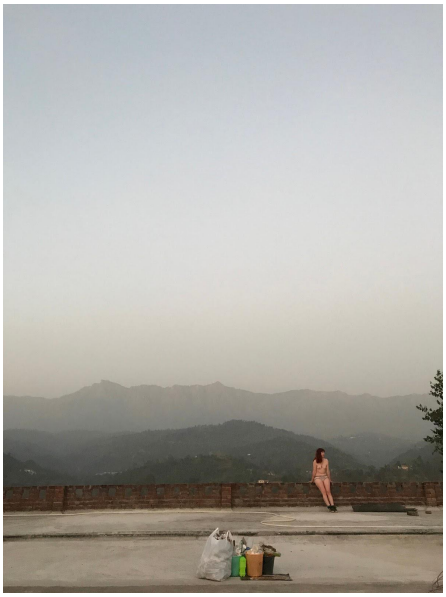
But some people were laughing when those words were being said because it was said with this robotic sci-fi voice: "PROSTITUTE," "WITCH." People thought that it was really funny. Others, I think, were just genuinely confronted by power, specifically female power or that combination of vulnerability and power. I'm very aware of that in Europe; it feels like the hardest place to present this combination. Even more than the United States or New Zealand, Europe feels really hardcore with patriarchy, and I think it's from the witch burning history and the latent energy in this deep, unconscious fear.

JDH Can you tell me about India, where you were just prior to the audition in Berlin. You curated 20 artists for a 2-month residency in the Himalayas. It inspired this work, which you’re now developing in Europe.

AW I remember in preparing for the audition in Berlin that I was doubting if it was a good idea to stage such chaos—I knew what this school could think: the director had called me an anarchist when I auditioned before. However, I remember making a decision after coming back from India, which is just such a chaotic place in my mind. I thought, “No, this chaos I perceive is true to India and my experience there. It shattered open my perceptions of the world, or my foundations, and I'm going to allow all of that”... at least for the first 15 minutes that you’ve seen. I decided to just be honest with myself regardless of the audition context. A woman remarked last week that the strength of the piece is that it’s never quite anywhere, but rather always hovering in-between different modes (i.e. dance, performance art, poetry, comedy, video, theatre). It reflects the experience of being between two cultures and all the ways they feed into each other.



Alexa Wilson picking up trash, Morni Hills Performance Residency, Haryana, India, December 2017. Photo: Sara Cowdell.



Alexa Wilson, first performance of *999* at Morni Hills, Performance Residency, Haryana, India, November 2017. Photo: Jonny Rowden.

Since January, I’m interviewing Indian artists about the exchange that occurred during my residency there and what is continuing to occur. It might come out as a video in the piece or a text. How will these contexts between India and Berlin and other places merge, especially as it’s about intersectional politics and such loaded

content? The piece itself is a conversation, and I want to be present and honest through the different stages.

But something was activated during those residency months that is now fading a bit being back in Germany. The piece is becoming something different; more of a Western conversation, which is fine. It's the way it is. My friend said that he likes that the piece is more Westernized somehow. He said that if it wasn't for one Indian New Age music track that I use, you wouldn't even notice the link to India. It could be completely invisible despite all the object-props in the trash bags I use being from India.

Part III

It's dark. The bottom of the grand marble staircase is adorned with now almost invisible props from India—I know there's toilet paper, a yoga mat, a small cactus in a pot, plastic bags, a plastic water bottle. This is my third time this year seeing them activated and shed, but the messy trash ritual still maintains a freshness. Nudity has already left, returned for PART II and is now transforming with the unlit space as Alexa, hidden beneath a black cape, shapeshifts into pitch black forms: a line, a rock, a crouching animal.

We are about 20 people, seated between two towering brewery vats in a classically-epic brewery-turned-museum-and-experimental-music-venue in Neukölln called König Otto. It's mid-June, and the last light before nighttime glows through the enormous windows.

Alexa's question from a few minutes earlier, "When does black become gray?" echoes in my head. It syncopates with my own thoughts: when does disorientation become hypnosis becomes healing becomes stress becomes activation? Tenacious would be a mild word to describe the persistent onslaught of new and contradictory images, ideas and activities that the piece embodies. As a performance artist, I admire this choreography of crashing waves. As a person trying to survive and thrive as a performance artist, I fear being crushed.

Alexa had pulled out a fake gun earlier telling us to breath deeply into our third eye. Now she lies on her black cape, microphone in

hand staring peacefully up to the ceiling in the distance. Still naked, she invites anyone who wants to join her lying down for a moment of meditation. It's a meditation on dissolving the distinctions between East and West, she says. It's an opportunity to dissolve belief systems. It's an opportunity to be vulnerable together. It's an opportunity to breathe. It's a meditation on light. It's a meditation on foundations.



Alexa Wilson performing *999: Alchemist Trauma Centre / Power Centre*, at Gr_und Gallery in *Intimate Gazing*, Berlin, 22nd May 2018. Photo: Bea Rodrigues.



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I begin to recall the argument with my father over New Year. He somehow sits beside me now in the audience watching the performance. His presence is dual in nature.

Frenetically…

he hurls critical words onto the stage and into my ears escalating the winds: bohemian, irresponsible, loser, anarchist, queer, complainer, punk. I try to defend myself: How CAN I take a deep breath if you point a gun at me? I DON'T know what to answer you, especially if you keep telling Google Translate on your phone to ask

me your questions in Māori. How CAN I listen to what your Indian artist friend has to say about responsibility? The hip hop music is blasting over the audio recording.

Calmly…

my father absorbs the chaotic bricolage, softening the stormy waves to a smoother swell. His gaze steadied by a practical knowledge of the world and an intimate understanding of weather. "The storm is powerful," his presence tells me. "It can either keep you stuck in its convulsive grasp, or you can use its force to launch yourself in a bold direction."

Watching the piece in its stages of development, thinking of my father as my year unfolds, hearing Alexa, and listening to my body…I feel enveloped in dualities. I feel accused yet allied, cynical yet hopeful, overwhelmed yet sharp in my mind and spirit, ready for action. Through her activation of unanswerable questions and overflowing performance strategies, Alexa ultimately offers the audience a taste of power, the energy needed to create.

But create what? Answers are not easily forthcoming. I'm left feeling lost yet powerful but then finally softer. It's a meditation on dissolving foundations that no longer serve us.

Biographies



Alexa Wilson is an interdisciplinary NZ artist who has been based in Berlin ten years, and is now living back in Aotearoa. She has presented video and performance work across Europe, Asia, North America and NZ. She has won awards for different works, choreographed for dance companies including Footnote NZ Dance (2014, 2017) and Touch Compass (2006) and curated Morni Hills Performance Residency in India (2017). She is the artistic director and founder of Experimental Dance Week Aotearoa (2019/2020) and is publishing her first book, *Theatre of Ocean*, in 2021.



Jorge De Hoyos is an American dancer and choreographer based in Berlin, Germany since 2012. He studied Cultural Anthropology at the University of California at Santa Cruz until 2007 and became active for five years in the dance/queer/etc performance community in San Francisco, California where he also got certified in Permaculture Design. As a dancer/ performer he collaborates with Meg Stuart/Damaged Goods, Keith Hennessy, and Sara Shelton Mann among others. As a choreographer, he has presented his own work in San Francisco and Berlin. He currently studies in the Masters Solo/Dance/Authorship program through the Inter-University Centre for Dance at the University of Art in Berlin.
jorgedehoyos.com

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