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Lick Piece and Its Slippage: The Archive and Its Documentation

Published in Ben Patterson's *Methods and Processes* (1962), a book of poems and events for public and private consumption, *Lick Piece* (1962) is a spectacle of the modernist female nude and its slippage between obscenity and flamboyance. "Slippage" is more than an apt description of its instability. Patterson employed the term "slippery" when characterizing his early practice, stating "works like *Methods & Processes* were very slippery, meant to infiltrate at a near-subliminal level and then exit, leaving behind little or no trace/evidence that a foreign matter had entered and tweaked a bit of your mind."[1] Attested to by his commitment to performance throughout his career, Patterson pursued an aesthetics framed by experience. Unplanned, however, in his proposed sense of imperceptibility were the results of performance actions, such as the actual and concrete objects created or leftover from actions. Indeed, despite embracing imperceptibility, Patterson's performance practice does not escape the lingering issue of documentation. *Lick Piece*, as well as other classic work by him like *Paper Piece* (1960), extend in and beyond embodiment, temporal fixity, and reach unintended audiences who must negotiate his work through documentation rather than performance.

While Patterson was receptive enough to the misinterpretation of *Paper Piece* to incorporate surprise alterations by others into its current state, he impeded upon *Lick Piece*'s descent as a sexist, raunchy happening by supplanting it with a comedic opera called *Tristan and Isolde*. However, I am not concerned with the performance's contemporary transformation in this short essay. Rather, in my research on Patterson, who stands as an impressive example of anti-capitalist and antiestablishment resistance in histories of US and Black art production, I am chiefly concerned with how documentation commingles as performance in the development of his conceptual aesthetic and praxis. Patterson's attempts to unfix the final forms of his work, and his

decision to not concretely visualize performances until they were monetizable at the turn of the century, seems a bold but chaotic creative position to inhabit. *Lick Piece* is a trial example of his destabilization of singular artistic genius, which itself presents the need to confront issues of historicity and control. Currently, two photographs have overdetermined the work's meaning. The work's depth and its historical circumstances deepen upon considering the constitutive features of his performance practice, which he scaffolds through linguistic emphases on form and experience that are traceable through performance as archive and archive as performance.

In the written supplement to my presentation, "Acts of Recognition: *Lick Piece* and the Female Body in Flux," I will outline the discourse framing *Lick Piece*. First, I engage how the performance operates across historical valences to emphasize its tangled relationship to gender. Second, I consider the photograph's role in orienting the gaze. By introducing unpublished photographs by Peter Moore, I argue for applying nuance to the conditions surrounding the performance, which seem practice because Ben Patterson is, in several ways, an icon. He is emblematic of new trends in experimental music, of a burgeoning arts intermediality, of Fluxus, of African American excellence despite segregationist and racist disenfranchisement, and of Black radical attitudes to art. Everyone is looking for him, including myself. But how might regarding him as a symbol of resistance risk disengaging with the specificity of his history? As a symbol, he is disconnected from complex histories that have manifested as straightforward narratives. My goal is not revisionist nor is it an attempt to dismantle binaries of excellence versus ordinariness. Instead, *Lick Piece* presents ways of considering "both/and" as a useful construct, wherein Patterson inhabits both the symbolic role of Black radicalism and an artistry that pressed against racial distinctions.

On May 9, 1964, Letty Lou Eisenhauer was the first woman to agree to any public performance of *Lick Piece*, which failed to debut in Copenhagen in 1962. It was in Copenhagen where Patterson likely encountered his first difficulty in finally enacting for the public one of the scores (*Lick Piece*) he published after settling in France. Nevertheless, Patterson, who set his sights on living a newlywed, bohemian lifestyle in Paris, continued with his work across print, assemblage, and performance. Alongside puzzle poems, which are influenced by Wolf Vostell's décollage approach of physically

rupturing visual images, Patterson began to design art expressly for individuals other than himself. This is distinct from his erudite and musically oriented work like *Variations for Double Bass* (1961), a work that relies in varying degrees upon the language of musicianship. A direct consequence of relying on an outside force for a performance is a work's potential inertia, which in the case of *Lick Piece*, necessitated a woman's consent.

The score for *Lick Piece* provocatively positions women as dessert such that any public enactment of Patterson's cheeky declarative sentences likely caused hesitation in Copenhagen. That a young woman who had already built a reputation for collaborating in avant-garde New York circles was the first to consent is grossly understated in the history of the performance. The practical steps towards finally realizing *Lick Piece* occurred in contexts of familiarity and confidentiality rather than from some daring, anonymous woman. Eisenhauer, Patterson, George Brecht, and Robert (Bob) Watts joined an audience of those with some stakes in Fluxus at their New York City central base on 359 Canal Street. From April 11 to May 23, Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, children I have yet to identify, and blurry and obscured individuals who bear resemblance to figures like Geoffrey Hendricks (to correct my symposium presentation), were in attendance. Patterson's debut occurred during the first stateside Fluxus festival, "Fully Guaranteed 12 Fluxus Concerts," which continued the festival approach of presentation. Patterson's score reads: "cover shapely female with whipped cream / Lick / . . . / Topping of chopped nuts and cherries is optional." Although his directions are ostensibly precise, presenters are left with making executive decisions in the literal absence of specificity: where does one place the cream? How much? Is the woman clothed, partially dressed, or fully nude?

Patterson's seemingly preposterous event score perfectly aligned with other gustatory uses of condiments, food, and women's flesh. For example, October 5, 1962, Alison Knowles performed Nam June Paik's *Serenade for Alison* in Amsterdam at Galerie Monet. In this performance, Knowles, wearing a garment of clips, bells, and more, removed layers of panties in front of a crowd of suits. Paik's work with cellist Charlotte Moorman, like *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* (1969), involved two small televisions as cups to hold Moorman's breasts. Knowles' *Nivea Cream Piece for Oscar (Emmett) Wil-*

liams (1962), amplified attention to flesh from intensifying sounds of lotion lathering the skin. Before Fluxus, Yves Klein approached his anthropometries, or images created from extending the creative act to models who painted and impressed their bodies on surfaces with his copyrighted blue, as uncomplicated. Each of these works reached toward something different, from apprehending the sonic layers of the quotidian to engaging relationships between technology and the human body, but what they collectively source as material and medium is a woman, either a muse or agent who also performs objectification. Patterson's *Lick Piece* is a magnet for feminist critiques of patriarchal domination and sexism because he seems to suggest that, rather than evading the stark overtones across contemporaneous works, what happens if the woman is actually consumed through direct touch and taste? Though it was likely an inside joke made with Fluxus and Fluxus-adjacent audiences in mind, Peter Moore's photograph acts an unreliable surrogate for today's audiences.

Curiously, Patterson's performance of *Lick Piece* at Fully Guaranteed 12 Fluxus Concerts was not reviewed in magazines like the *Village Voice*, which has covered Fluxus events through the writing of art critic Jill Johnston. Responses to *Lick Piece* appear in print with greater frequency in the 1990s onward, but there is evidence of student groups and other Fluxus artists leading independent performances. In the discipline of art history and performance, however, it was and remains targeted for hypersexualizing women and putting sexual content at the center of artistic activity. For example, Geoffrey Hendricks, when engaging George and Billie Maciunas' Fluxwedding, identifies eroticism in *Lick Piece*.[2] *Lick Piece* has been charged with stereotyping a dialectic of clean man/dirty woman relations, reflecting a sexist double standard for who can use the female nude unproblematically, reifying women's commodity status such that it was overturned by licking whipped cream from an automobile's surface. One likely source for this is the consternation and critique of the female nude in modernist and contemporary art, in which women's likeness and bodies have been oriented through and towards a heterosexual male gaze. The naked versus the nude, the object versus the actor, *Lick Piece* enters this visual arena and therefore implicates Patterson in the broader study of visual subjects and objects.

While collaborators have challenged feminist critiques of sexism, such as Elena Palumbo-Mosca's rejection that she was not an "object" or one of Klein's "living paintbrushes," Letty Eisenhauer's distant recollections of *Lick Piece* have fostered attention to its intersectional dynamics. Fred Moten's exploration of how the hypervisible yet unaddressed creative agency of Patterson demands an engagement with race in performance and Fluxus. Moten highlights Eisenhauer's misattribution of the work to Bob Watts as means for foregrounding a racial problematic at varying degrees of erasure, from that of his artistic negation and therefore the work's sociocultural elasticity to the significance his presence contributes to the performance.[3] In addition, recovery through Black study of *Lick Piece* has highlighted the work's mortal risk–lynching. Francesca T. Royster engages racial friction as a categorically potent reference to Patterson's racial difference in the Fluxhall performance space. The fraught dynamics of interracial sex and its policing link these two modes of inquiry to the underlying politics of race.[4] However, I want to encourage reconsideration of how the archive functions in the history of this performance to address additional contexts. Attention beyond Patterson as a singular actor in relation to Eisenhauer and the visibility of consensually simulated erotica, lends itself necessarily engaging the archive, which is notorious for concealing the complexity of historical subjects and endures as an ongoing issue of historicization.

Although two of Peter Moore's photographs have oriented understandings of Patterson's *Lick Piece*, the issue of specificity and uncertainty manifests across unpublished photographs that increase the narrative scope of the work. The Archiv Sohm in Stuttgart houses a total of twenty negatives that reveal Moore's capture of a developing scene. Outdoors, four casually dressed people–one holding two Fluxshop-related boxes, chat. Inside, a small young child grins gleefully as she holds a flower in paper. In another photo, Dick Higgins rounds a corner into the same space where George Maciunas is likely announcing Patterson's upcoming performance from a small sheet of paper in his hands. In several of the photographs *Lick Piece* emerges: in one muddled photograph unfit for reproduction, four men, instead of the three associated with the 1964 performance (Patterson, Brecht, Watts), cover Eisenhauer in whipped cream. In this batch of images, Moore never captured Eisenhauer before

whipped cream was unleashed, perhaps offering some sense of privacy or protection to her nudity in front of children, men, and women.

If the residue of their licking and touching offers any evidence, we can see that the white men–rather than Patterson–were most gluttonous, as their faces, chins, and forearms are stamped with cream. These men move Eisenhauer by the base of her seat to another area in the room as Patterson is barely visible to the right of all the action. Laughter and danger are simultaneously framed by a man holding a hammer as he leans towards Eisenhauer and/or against her transgressors. Patterson, with so few daubs of whipped cream on his nose, mustache, and chin, is knowingly implicated by Eisenhauer's transformative excess in a performance she noted was "only a 'pubic hair' away from being a 'blue performance'," in times of conservatism, an extreme pole to the 1967 arrest of Charlotte Moorman who performed in the nude at a grander scale and for a larger public.[5] Ideas oscillate in every frame, from the performance's capacity to continue charged engagements with women and their bodies in Fluxus, or to gratuitously stage a sensual act linked to sex, and to highlight adult play as a fraught concept deeply impacted by the relationship between the gaze to a politics of identity.

In 1974, Moore, who established a reputation for documenting avant-garde performance and dance of the 60s, expressed concern over biased cultures of publishing in an interview with Ronald Argelander in *The Drama Review*'s criticism issue. According to Moore, he understood photographic documentation as an attempt to present "as much of the total visual experience of an actual performance" from a spectator's viewpoint, avoid "impos[ing] your own view."[6] He described his own practice in terms of proximal movements, which shift from a general view of performances to specific, arresting moments, as he continues to shoot from an angle, or "the side." Citing Meredith Monk's frustration with one photograph representing a series of actions for *Juice* (1969), and Yvonne Rainer's avoidance of a popular photograph for *Three Seascapes* (1962), Moore reiterated his awareness about the connection between photography and publishing in distorting an artist's preferred selection. The continual reproduction of certain images builds a market for demand and structures interpretive approaches. Moreover, the question of power and ownership is an additional and urgent,

structural issue, but one unaddressed by Moore in this one interview. Archives and photographers like Moore field criticisms for gatekeeping a performer's work through copyright challenges, costs, and bureaucracy.

What audiences must contend with in the present day is the framing of *Lick Piece* by Peter Moore and the levels of relationality present in collaborative participation. For example, how might attention to the work's 1964 enactors, such as Bob Watts, amplify or inform understandings of power and subjugation, friendship and trust? Eisenhauer maintained a creative relationship with both Watts and Geoffrey Hendricks, both of whom instructed Eisenhauer and her classmates at Douglass College. Reflecting on her undergraduate, graduate school, and professional experience with Watts and Hendricks, Eisenhauer remarked: "what really happened was faculty like Bob Watts and Geoff Hendricks opened the door to experimenting for us. Anything you wanted to try, you could try." In Eisenhauer's case, this experiment also inherited the sociality among her as a former student and with Watts as a professor. To conclude, while *Lick Piece* affords an opportunity to address risks Patterson placed for himself and others, its larger archive serves as evidence of a suggestive situation–Patterson's foregrounding of a spectacle of adult white males' boyish exuberance and amusement that reveals something about who in the audience acts or restrains oneself from an undelectable proposition. Power on view.

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[1] Benjamin Patterson, "I'm Glad You Asked Me That Question," in *Benjamin Patterson: Born in the State of Fluxus* (Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, 2011): 116.

[2] Owen F. Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude* (San Diego State University, California): 222.

[3] Fred Moten, "Liner Notes for *Lick Piece*," in *Benjamin Patterson: Born in the State of Fluxus* (Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, 2011): 212-215.

[4] Francesca T. Royster, "Black Body Returned: A Response to George Lewis's talk 'In Search of Ben Patterson: An Improvised Journey," *Callaloo* 35, 4 (Fall 2012): 1015-1020.

[5] Moten, 212.

[6] Ronald Argelander, "Photo-Documentation: (And an Interview with Peter Moore)," *The Drama Review* 18, 3 Criticism Issue (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1974): 51-52.