



External Space

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James Knott

AN EFFIGY (TO THE GIRL OF OUR DREAMS)

May 26 - July 8, 2023

Beat you to it

An Effigy (to the Girl of Our Dreams) (2021) opens with the rattle and hum of a 16-millimeter projector. The title emerges shakily, in white handwritten type. Fuchsia pink parted lips appear inside a projected box to deliver an acapella cabaret recitation, sultry and slowed, of the opening lines to Irish punk group The Undertone's wet dream anthem Teenage Kicks:

Are teenage dreams so hard to beat?!

Across the following three movements, James Knott enacts a cast of characters. Without missing any beats, English post-punk band The Pop Group's 1979 funky, bouncy, disco banger "She Is Beyond Good and Evil" plays as The Girl of Our Dreams throws her arms behind her head and gazes at the viewer in burlesque stance. Fitted in black lingerie: black bra, black garters, and hoes with lacey tops, she poses for us. "My little girl was born on a ray of sound!"¹ proclaims the Male Protagonist. In shades, white dress shirt buttoned nearly all the way down, and black tie loosened, his white-gloved hands grooving, clutching, reaching. He is occasionally doubled, for the better, to pipe in with his own backup vocals. He flirts, clutches, and reaches, pointing, aiming, for her, for us.

¹ "The Pop Group – She Is beyond Good and Evil," Genius, accessed May 24, 2023, <https://genius.com/The-pop-group-she-is-beyond-good-and-evil-lyrics>.

In tune with the punching guitar, *The Girl of Our Dreams* is tripled, double exposed. She's stolen his fit and styled it like a schoolgirl ripped from the dusty cardboard cover of a VHS porno. With Knott's insertion of themself into the role of *The Girl of Our Dreams*, they practice a sort of consensual, self-fetishization, beating them (us?) to it, and offer the viewer a queered reimagining, an anachronistic rendition, a correction, a revisitation, an amendment.

Through the thoughtful appropriation of punk anthems that uphold heteronormative, infantilizing, misogynist, and sometimes pedophilic narratives, what emerges is a queering of traditional punk values that pays homage to and plucks from the aesthetics and politics of the past.

The second act, *The Rite of Spring*, with choreography borrowed from German dancer and choreographer Pina Bosh provides a temporary jolt in gesture. We hear a crackle before those white gloves reappear, isolated from *The Protagonist*, superimposed, and seemingly massaging the shoulders of the sacrificial dancing virgin, garbed in red; marked, chosen.

She who is lurching, clenching her gut in a fight, never peers behind her at the men who are dirty like Pina would have liked it, coveting, pining after her, with a longing like *The Undertones*. "How would you dance if you knew you were going to die?" Bausch asked her dancers while creating *The Rite of Spring* in 1975.² Serendipitously, I stumbled upon a review of the premiere of Bausch's work *Água* in a *New Yorker* that I haphazardly plucked from a pile. Of Bausch's process, the author writes:

"...she asked her dancers questions—"What do you do, in order to be loved?" was one—and they responded with stories and movements from their own lives and imaginations. With them, she would elaborate, cut, compile, and integrate the material into a dance."³

This methodology of assemblage is mirrored in *An Effigy (to the Girl of Our Dreams)*, where, by collaging and compiling references Knott generates a nuanced critique of subcultural history, ripe with disidentifications. Who (what) was (is) included and excluded? "If you know, you know,"⁴ James tells me, while we stare at the blank screen soon to be displaying the piece.

² Vanessa Manko, "Pina Bausch's *The Rite of Spring*," *The Paris Review*, October 11, 2017, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/10/11/pina-bauschs-rite-spring/>.

³ Jennifer Homans, "The Afterlife of Pina Bausch," *The New Yorker*, March 20, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/03/27/the-afterlife-of-pina-bausch>.

⁴ James Knott in conversation with the author, May 2023.

For the final act, Russian composer Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* accelerates, then stops. Our shaded Protagonist takes a seat, rolls up his sleeves, finds the beat, and nonchalantly starts the motor, miming like Chaplin. Much like the road ahead, his movements are mesmerizing, hypnotizing, enough to make you nod in and out. Our Girl is depicted from the back, decapitated and swaying to the French cover band Nouvelle Vague's 2004 "Psyche", a cover of Killing Joke's 1980 song. She is everywhere/nowhere. Her white body, lingered and wriggling. Here comes her head! Floating, painted for the Gods for a lipsticked lip-sync. She is evoking the Warholian screen test, though, swap the boring, unflinching gaze of Edie Sedgwick,⁵ stunned, silent, and blinking for a soft punk queen with hard edges, a master of the lip jitter and the eye roll. Winnipeg icons, The Guess Who,⁶ play us out: "She didn't know what she was headed for/and when I found what she was headed for/it was too late."⁷

Knott asks us how we are complicit.⁸ Should we pull over that Wet Dream King on the lamb, sheets still soaked all thanks to The Girl in His Dreams to check his trunks? He keeps going, haunted. She's undone, haunting. Who do we become once undone?

Troubling commodification, identification, lust, and desire, Knott's provocative piece oozes with sexiness and joy all the while interrogating the underbelly of the scenes and in-betweens.

Keeping with the tradition of counterculture, Knott presents patrons with a fanzine to savour for later. Peering at the full-colour prototype that gives facsimile Xerox (how's that for a name of a punk band!) I imagine what she could become had her inks been subjected to the copier, to degrade and erode. Self-commodification, all packaged and printed for consumption. A piece of her to be remembered by; wanna hold her/wanna hold her tight.

- Delilah Rosier

⁵ Edith Minturn Sedgwick Post was an American It Girl, model, actress and muse of Andy Warhol.

⁶ See: http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/90/musicalhistory.shtml

⁷ "She's Come Undone," Genius, accessed May 23, 2023, <https://genius.com/22615399>

⁸ "An Effigy (to the Girl of Our Dreams)," Xpace Cultural Centre, accessed May 23, 2023, <https://www.xpace.info/exhibition-event/an-effigy-to-the-girl-of-our-dreams/>.