



Free Your Mind: The Art of Inner Course

TEXT / STEPHANIE BAILEY

Imagine walking into a Chelsea gallery from the din of New York City. The room is painted a neutral beige; two plywood benches are placed on either side. Strange, waxen sculptures lie in the center, hollowed out and resembling a womb. A secretary sits behind a desk. “Welcome to Inner Course,” she tells you, as you are handed a questionnaire inquiring about your familiarity with self-specificity, what you wish to explore during your “experience” at Inner Course and whether you have experienced inner course in the last twenty-four hours. Soon, a knock on the door behind the desk beckons you into the next room, a darkened, low-lit space. With few words, you are invited to lay on a massage bed by a “softer” in a cat suit who “softs” you by gently stroking your body until the lights dim and you are guided into a third room, presided over by Rya Kleinpeter and Tora Lopez—Inner Course—dressed in nude lingerie, pearls, towering heels, big hair, and a long, red penis-like adornment. Then imagine being invited to direct a performance that intimately expresses who you are or what you desire.

This is *Panties For Diamonds – A Psychodramatic Audition For Love In The Age Of Abandonment*, a three-act installation/performance comprising three rooms in Thomas Beale’s independently run Honey Space: The Waiting Room, The Softing Room, and The Audition Room [June 23–July 28, 2011]. Designed to “cleanse the palate of perception,”¹ the performance structure dissolved boundaries between art maker and art viewer: an

unscripted narrative developed through role play and interrogation in a project shaped by psychodramatic inquiry and the inner course of being.

As Kleinpeter and Lopez explain:

Through social interventions, we seduce the boundaries between audience and spectacle, public and private, outer and inner—blurring the lines between art maker and art viewer. Unbolted engagement with the audience is essential for the performance to be released. Absorbing chance encounters and improvisation frees us—performers and audience—to simultaneously flirt with and interrogate the spectrum of human emotion.²

In short, in *Panties for Diamonds*, the spectator becomes the spectacle or object, viewed through the eyes of the artists, who return an image back to the viewer, transforming the exhibition context into a mutual, rather than one-sided, experience. “The idea of the audition was fascinating to us because we were putting theater into psychotherapy,” notes Kleinpeter. “Lots of secrets were told in The Audition Room. We re-enacted all kinds of scenarios, from mundane to extremely personal and emotional, to the completely outrageous outlandish fantasy-scapes.”³

The physical and conceptual format of *Panties for Diamonds* riffs off the structure of therapy, first through the bureaucracy of waiting, and later through the performative release brought about by the auditions,

none of which were recorded. “Each experience leading to the final audition space was integral to having that release happen,” continues Lopez.

Thinking about the questionnaire, there’s a bit of playfulness and also—depending on how you take it—potentially serious inquiries. Having time to think about those things in the Waiting Room, then having the “softing” experience—this very calming, unexpected, human exchange—we really took our time with the auditions and did our best to pay attention to the details of people’s lives in a caring, loving way. We aren’t trained technicians or therapists, so there was a lot of responsibility in inviting people to open themselves up.

Participants were advised to visit the space once a week, for an experience that took, on average, fifty minutes, the standard duration of a therapy session. “A lot of people ended up coming back,” Kleinpeter recalls.

Panties for Diamonds builds on a collaboration that began in San Francisco where Kleinpeter and Lopez first met some fifteen years ago, when they were in their early twenties. They began spending their weekends prank calling random strangers, which Lopez admits, “was quite juvenile for that age.” Developing characters such as Nadia, the Italian dominatrix who lived in the jungle surrounded by animals, Lopez recalls, “The calls were pretty ridiculous and definitely sexually orientated; we

INSIDE FRONT COVER: **Inner Course** [Tora Lopez + Rya Kleinpeter], detail of *Panties For Diamonds – A Psychodramatic Audition For Love In The Age Of Abandonment*, 2011, three-act installation/performance: part three: The Audition (photo: Benjamin Heller) / OPPOSITE + ABOVE LEFT: **Inner Course**, detail of *Panties For Diamonds*, part one: The Waiting Room (photo: Benjamin Heller) / ABOVE, RIGHT: **Inner Course**, detail of *Panties For Diamonds*, part one: The Waiting Room, secretary: Hellen Mathers (photo: Benjamin Heller)



did a lot of animals and sexual animal kingdom stuff.” And yet people enjoyed the pranks so much that the women were often asked to call their subjects back. The pair came together again in 2010 when invited to work on a project for the Life is Art Foundation. It was then that Inner Course evolved into its current manifestation. “We basically started back with this kind of dialogue and vernacular that we had created fifteen years ago with a more refined approach.”

This approach covers a range of performative inquiries conceptually united by ideas of gender, participation, communication, and ultimately loneliness and social isolation in a twenty-first century not yet fully articulated as generations grapple with the speed at which technologically facilitated communication has taken root in contemporary culture. Presented at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Tasmania in early 2011, *Many Rumors of Renni Esruoc*, a three-part performance that preceded *Panties for Diamonds*, visualized this tension. The artists staged performances in utility and machine rooms in the underbelly of the museum, selecting these spaces specifically for their lack of prior use as exhibition spaces. “These rooms were kind of secret, but we knew storytelling would occur. That was part of the experience,” says Kleinpeter. Discovered mainly through word of mouth, the MONA performances explored the intimate space between strangers, playing on the sharing of information as a seed for discovery and non-discovery, as well as the drama of rumor as a non-realized truth.

“In one room, essentially the brain or heart of the museum, we worked with nine local Tasmanian women aged three to seventy-five, who sang Tasmanian folk songs over this very intense, loud white noise coming

from the machinery, which the women struggled to sing over,” Lopez describes, a metaphor for the distance technology creates between history, culture, expression, and interaction. At the same time, the images of the women, dressed in flamboyant red costumes and caged in the machine room, touch on suppression, simultaneously juxtaposing the oppressive aesthetics and mechanisms of the machine with the power of human actions and utterances. There is a sense that, without the efforts of the audience to discover this room, such expressions would have been made in vain, casting the audience once more in a crucial role within the performative structure.

The other two components of the performance included a long, forty-foot corridor lined by electrical wiring and plumbing, leading to a darkened broom closet, where Inner Course performed under a theatrical spotlight, once again dressed in nude lingerie, on a red velvet bed. The pair answered toll-free calls on The Red Telephone, engaging in conversation with respondents to advertisements placed by Inner Course for anything from the sale of old appliances to personal ads from the United States, Canada, and Australia. “We would subvert these phone calls, especially those of a more sexual nature, to discuss secrets, do dream interpretations and really just talk,” Kleinpeter explains. Like the auditions in *Panties for Diamonds*, none of the calls were recorded, again instilling a sense of trust, respect, and non-judgement. Echoing the prank calls that instituted Inner Course, the use of sex and commodity as excuses to facilitate communication is a reminder that, though sex and consumption often easily substitute for real physical and emotional interaction, they also veil a deeper desire for intimacy. As Kleinpeter notes: “Inner Course

plays on femininity and overt sexuality, which can be very unsettling. It also ironically touches on how much sex is used to sell or commodified in its own way.”

While, at MONA, callers were not able to see the seedy and sexually provocative staging, *Panties for Diamonds* ventures into a more physical plane. Kleinpeter says,

At Honey Space we were so exposed and laughable that, whatever people did, they couldn’t have possibly looked as ridiculous as us. We were really looking at this temporary autonomous zone where people could feel safe and expose themselves. In many ways it really came to be about the liberation of desire, allowing people to expose themselves, be really honest, and own it.

Lopez elaborates: “We play with these ideas of sexuality but in many ways it’s symbolic. We are not really that sexy; I didn’t feel remarkably sexy in this outfit, I felt a little trashy. But it’s designed to break people down and make them feel comfortable.”

Here lies the crux of Inner Course’s oeuvre. Discussing the reparative process in her essay “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You’re so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick remarks upon the flexibility of Melanie Klein’s concept of positions, which describes the characteristic posture that the ego takes up with respect to its objects. She observes: “Once assembled to one’s own specifications, the more satisfying object is available both to be identified with and to offer one nourishment and comfort in turn. Among Klein’s names for the reparative process is love.”⁴ According to Lopez, “Love was absolutely exchanged in every single performance; sometimes it was not

the theme of the performance piece, but, centering on the space that was supporting the performance, the background of the whole exchange was about love.” As performers, Kleinpeter underscores the importance of “being conscious to really engage and explore what unconditional love is, how that has to do with being oneself and focusing on everybody as a community while exploring public service, too.” Here, the public service was the empowerment of visitors to construct their own performance as an art object.

Panties for Diamonds was not an audition for erotic love. Instead, it was a rehearsal space for a kind of self-love that might extend toward the other, be it friend or stranger. As Inner Course wrote in their own performance description, they promised to “shake the *other* like a lover.”⁵ Tellingly, in the *Panties for Diamonds* auditions, quite a number of births were performed. There is a sense of rebirth in the act of self-revelation facilitated by intimate confession. Perhaps this may be why the idea of abandonment is central to *Panties for Diamonds*. “The word abandonment in the title works in two ways; literally, in the age of abandonment, we are all kind of like damaged children, with abandonment issues. The second is the idea of reckless abandon,” says Kleinpeter. “Often, people are taking a risk by coming into The Audition Room. They don’t know what is behind each door. To kind of throw caution to the wind and be vulnerable with strangers requires the abandonment of certain notions.”

In the age of constructed Facebook profiles and ambiguous friend requests, this idea of personal exposure might strike a chord with many who have grown accustomed to managing a public persona with a very private and closely guarded self. In her essay, Sedgwick asks if we’ve all

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: **Inner Course**, detail of *Panties For Diamonds*, part three: The Audition Room (photo: Benjamin Heller)

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: **Inner Course**, detail of *Panties For Diamonds*, part two: The Softing Room (photo: Benjamin Heller); **Inner Course**, detail of *Panties For Diamonds*, part three: The Audition Room (photo: Benjamin Heller)



grown so paranoid of the unknown that we have become incapable of revealing our true thoughts and therefore our true inner selves in fear of being humiliated.⁶ Indeed, has technological communication complicated interaction to such an extent that we have lost the ability to be truly vulnerable in our communication with each other?

“Absolutely,” says Lopez. “Breaking through that technology was a very important dialogue. Everyone is confused about how to communicate now that technology rules so much of our communication. This is a very interesting reality for everybody to think about: walls are being broken down and built at the same time.” The idea of auditioning for love in the age of abandonment speaks to our culture’s negotiation of complex social structures, which increasingly define interaction as our electronic footprint continues to grow. If this new reality is indeed in operation, there really is a sense of abandonment in that exposing oneself, or opening oneself up to genuine encounters, is often marred—knowingly or not—by the influence of social media, the effect of which are as yet unknown, or uncertain.

Consider the performative nature of social media. Ponder the complexities of a world embroiled in crises superficially mediated by telecommunications. Then admit that even the art world rarely reveals its core. Isn’t it time, then, to revisit the age-old adage that all the world is a stage? And yet, could we not be more than mere players wielding enough masks to suit a plethora of situations? “I think anything we can do to ask people to examine themselves in some sort of performative context related to their own lives will make people think,” says Kleinpeter. In the case of *Panties for Diamonds*, Lopez adds, “It’s very inspiring to think that in less than an

hour, you can have a really, incredibly meaningful exchange. And it has to do with one’s approach.” Asking ourselves when we last had inner course may well be the first step in overcoming the many obstacles that keep us from interacting with the world around us. Saying that, it might even bring us closer to the unconditional love we all desire.

NOTES

1. Kickstarter. “INNER COURSE solo exhibition at Honey Space Gallery.” Accessed February 1, 2012. <http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/innercourse/inner-course-solo-exhibition-at-honey-space-gallery>.
2. Ibid.
3. All subsequent quotes by Kleinpeter and Lopez are taken from the author’s interview with the artists, July 30, 2011.
4. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, 128.
5. Kickstarter. “INNER COURSE solo exhibition at Honey Space Gallery.”
6. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 123–153.

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ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: **Inner Course**, detail of *Panties For Diamonds*, part three: The Audition (photo: Nina Mouritzen); **Inner Course**, propaganda for *Panties For Diamonds* (photo: Thomas Beale) OPPOSITE, TOP, LEFT: **Inner Course**, detail of *Many Rumors Of Renni Esruoci*, 2011, at the Museum of Old and New Art, Tasmania, Australia, installation/performance: part three: I Want Your ESP (courtesy of the artists); OPPOSITE, TOP, RIGHT + BOTTOM: **Inner Course**, detail of *Panties For Diamonds*, part three: The Audition Room (photo: Benjamin Heller)

