

SISSY

a Study Room Guide on effeminacy, queer visibility and social violence



Compiled & written by Nando Messias

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Sissy: a Study Room Guide on effeminacy, queer visibility and social violence

Compiled and written by Nando Messias, 2018

This Study Room Guide outlines the theoretical and practical research I have developed throughout the creation of my Sissy series, which includes a trilogy—*Sissy!* (2008), *The Sissy's Progress* (2015) and *Shoot the Sissy* (2016)—and an epilogue, *Death and the Sissy* (2017). In writing it, I have practised wearing the two hats of my life—the artist and the para-academic—simultaneously. Two hats in one go: a rather glorious image, if you ask me.

Writing has always been central to my artistic practice. I have written essays that function as companions to each of my Sissy performances. This Study Room Guide marks, in turn, the beginning of my journey post-Sissy. This character, which I have recently buried, has been the subject of four live performances, a doctoral thesis, three publications (plus a fourth on the way), tours, workshops, talks, lectures, readings and seminars. The sources that make up the Guide are therefore a map with which to navigate the construction and the destruction of Sissy. Endings are always new beginnings and looking back has allowed me a chance to gather my thoughts before turning around to move forward. I hope the reader finds this record helpful too.

Sissy:

an effeminate man

a male-bodied individual with marked effeminate gender traits

'effeminate' rather than 'feminine'

un-masculine, approximating femininity and therefore failing at both genders

a defiant, resilient and visibly queer member of a minority-within-a-minority group

a person who proudly embraces their misalignment, resolutely remains unaligned, exaggerates the gesture, piles on the makeup, shakes their hips wildly when walking (preferably in towering heels), transforming what others see as a 'mistake' into their most powerful political statement: my body is my weapon

I have repeated the following story so many times that I have grown tired of hearing my own voice telling it. The pauses seem to fall invariably in the same places. I wait for the expressions of empathy that reflect back to me the feeling that what happened that day

really was not OK. Perhaps I needed the constant repetition: a rehearsal of sorts, training for the brain, a soothing mantra. I'll tell it for one last time:

Sissy was my artistic response to a violent homophobic attack I suffered on my own street. In inventing Sissy, I created a fictional character. I needed the critical distance, someone else to stand in my place. Some other being to stand up again after yet another fall. Someone to lead the way: a Virgil to my Dante, an Orpheus to my Eurydice. A figure who could fight in stiletto heels, fire-engine-red lipstick and thick black mascara: the stilettos a knife with which to defend me, the red of the lipstick to highlight my body's state of emergency and the mascara as the minutest mask to protect my face against the insults that hit up against it. If I cry, a trace of black will fall down my cheeks and red will smudge from my lips.

It was a summer evening in 2005. I was wearing a veiled hat coming back from the theatre. The hat got destroyed in the attack along with my clutch bag and optimistic dreams of a Muñozean queer future. Eight young men pushed me to the ground, punching and kicking. Once home, I saw my knees were bruised and so too my pride. The torn veil and battered clutch went in the bin. My anger did not.

How long will it be before I have to tell this story for the next last time?

After a while of retelling my story, I began to feel like a stuck record, like I was going round and round in circles, repeating myself in a Sisyphean sort of hell. Audre Lorde has said that the need to repeat a message is symptomatic of not feeling heard. Am I shouting into an abyss? Is no one listening? The metaphor of the stuck record forever revolving in circles seemed pointed. It was the foundation for *Death and the Sissy*.

Death and the Sissy (2017) was presented as a one-off event at Toynbee Studios. This epilogue to the Sissy trilogy, was a theatricalised funeral. Death was explored as a theme in the tradition of Renaissance art. The *Danse Macabre* was a central organising structure. As a genre, the *Danse Macabre* explores the universality of death through two main figures: the personification of death (often depicted as a skeleton) and another character (a king, a pope, an emperor, a labourer or, more typically, a maiden) who is being danced along to their grave. This artistic *memento mori* seemed the perfect frame for my final performance



Death and the Sissy
Images by Holly Revell

as Sissy. On it, I was able to hang a group of ideas, all unified by death and reflecting on mortality. Some of the materials that inspired me in rehearsal and stage were:

- in music (Schubert's *Death and the Maiden*, Mozart's *Requiem*, *Rock 'n' Roll Suicide* by David Bowie and *Gloomy Sunday* by Billie Holiday)
- in ballet (*Giselle*: choreography by Marius Petipa, music by Adolphe Adam and libretto by Théophile Gautier and *The Dying Swan*: choreography by Mikhail Fokine, music by Camille Saint-Saëns)
- Butoh, the dance of darkness, especially in the figure of Kazuo Ohno

To mark the death of Sissy, I commissioned four writers to contribute a eulogy to each of the Sissies plus an obituary. I wondered what effect this body of work had had on those who had seen it and on the sector as a whole. Did it really exist or was it all just happening in my imagination? The eulogies were written by Stephen Farrier (RCSSD), Catherine Silverstone (QMUL) and Lois Keidan (LADA). They were printed on the back of holy cards with photos by Holly Revell on the front and distributed to the audience (**P3546**). The obituary was written by Ruth McCarthy (Outburst Festival) and printed on the programme. The programme is printed in full at the end of this guide.

Also accompanying the live performance, I set up *The Museum of the Sissy*, displaying the archive accumulated throughout the ten years of work: costumes, perfumes, notebooks with sketches, photographs and other material that often remains hidden from the public. Conceptually, my intention was to engage with political and creative strategies that guide my work on stage. *The Museum*, in other words, was actively creating space for a discourse, a body and a history that had had no space before. *The Museum of the Sissy* made visible what had been erased, hidden or silenced. A photographic triptych of Sissies was created in collaboration with photographer Holly Revell to hang in the museum (which now hangs in LADA's space). The three Sissies were my Three Fates and appeared on stage with me, like ghosts, for their final performance.

As has been the case with all other Sissy performances, I wrote a critical reflection offering an account of influences, inspirations and references at the time of creation. *Death and the Sissy* is accompanied by *Injurious Acts: a Struggle With Sissy in Performance* (available

online: www.chorosjournal.com/issues.asp?magID=7). Critical sources that have guided me include: Lee Edelman's *No Future, Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Judith Butler's *Precarious Life, the Powers of Mourning and Violence* and *Cruising Utopia, The Then and There of Queer Futurity (P2806)* by José Estebán Muñoz. My spiritual companions in studio were Pina Bausch (**D1670**) (**P2967**), Kazuo Ohno (**P3299**) and Samuel Beckett (**P1483**).

Like the 'herald dream' of psychoanalysis, *Sissy!* (2008) (**D2107**) poignantly encapsulates all the major issues that came to be developed in the three performances that followed it. This dance-theatre duet with Biño Sautzvy was created as a companion to my doctoral thesis (2011). It was during this creative process that the two 'Judys' (Butler and Garland) entered my consciousness in a way that appeared to marshal a whole new set of pressing questions. *Judy! Live at Carnegie Hall* was my constant soundtrack in studio whilst Butler was my main reading material. Other thinkers who have offered fundamental guidance in the early formation of *Sissy* are: Jack Halberstam (**P2196**) and (**P2232**), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (**P1276**), Quentin Crisp and his memoirs *The Naked Civil Servant* and Matt Holbrook with *Queer London, Perils and Pleasure in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957*.

Whereas the backbone of the project as a whole has been queer visibility, social violence and effeminacy, each of the four performances confronted specific themes more directly. In *The Sissy's Progress* (2015), walking performances were the central focus of the research. This project was about public engagement and originated as a direct response to the attack I mentioned above. As such, it was a form of protest as well as an artistic production. For the final three performances of *The Sissy's Progress*, I took my audience to the actual site of the attack, reclaiming my place on the streets through a hyperbolic display of visibility. We paraded together on the streets of Whitechapel, followed by a marching band.

An early draft of *The Sissy's Progress* came in the form of a short performance where I lip-synch to a recording of Judith Butler's voice. The act of walking and the dangers of queer visibility are the main focus in *Walking Failure*. One of its main sources of inspiration is the documentary *Paris is Burning (D2186)*. *Walking Failure* was first performed as part of LADA's *Performance Matters: Trashing Performance* at Toynbee Studios in 2011 (**D2104**). I performed it again as part of LADA's *Just Like a Woman* programme in Slovenia's City of Women Festival in 2013. *Just Like a Woman* was revived for a New York City Edition at the Abrons Arts Center and for Sacred Festival in London (**EF5238**), both in 2015. A version of



Death and the Sissy
Images by Manuel Vason

Walking Failure was especially created for film in collaboration with director Sam Williams (EF5236).

Walking Failure was my first attempt at articulating walking and the perils of appearing in public and *The Sissy's Progress* was my final word on it. Artists-activists who guided me down that path include Janet Cardiff (P0259), Adrian Piper (P2396) and (P2837) (especially her *Catalysis* series), Suzanne Lacy (*Three Weeks in May*), Stephen Cohen (D1189) and Leigh Bowery (D0213) (P0673). Essential reads included Karen O'Rourke's *Walking and Mapping, Artists as Cartographers* and Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust, a History of Walking* (P0400). The *Sissy's Progress* is accompanied by the chapter 'Sissy That Walk: The Sissy's Progress' in *Queer Dramaturgies, International Perspectives on Where Performance Leads Queer* (P3168).

The final piece in the trilogy, ***Shoot the Sissy*** (2017) is a study of self-consciousness, self-knowledge, displacement and how to relate to the world. Like *The Sissy's Progress*, it is also a form of non-violent protest. This time, against the 2016 Orlando shootings. The word 'shoot' came into sharp focus in my mind at the time. I realised that as a visibly queer subject, one is always a moving target, a sitting duck. The attraction *Shoot the Freak* became a reference and so I began to research the Victorian freak show. I grappled in my creative process with the question of what makes it acceptable for a society to display 'freak' bodies as a form of entertainment. My readings, both academic and fiction, included *Freaks: We Who Are Not As Others* (P3051) by Daniel P. Mannix. Two works were particularly inspiring in my creative process leading up to the performance. One was a novel suggested to me by Lois Keidan - *Geek Love* by Katherine Dunn, which has become one of my favourites. The second was Tod Browning's film *Freaks* (D2236). Book and film exist in this fairground universe filled with sawdust, anatomical wonders and illusion. Freak shows tend to work with stock characters: the bearded lady, the seal boy, the Geek, the Siamese twins. As a genre, it plays with an exaggeration of physical traits by manipulating the set and the costumes and by inventing a backstory.

For *Shoot the Sissy*, I imagined my own backstory in order to enhance my queerness. The Sissy in this show was born with hot pink skin, a sign that she was the queen her tribe had been so anxiously expecting. In her native Sissylandia, the custom was to sacrifice the newborn queen by stoning her to death. She escaped her fate by being placed on a ship

and ending up in London, where she joined the circus as a sideshow attraction. Her show consisted of a series of shootings: the very fate she had narrowly escaped at birth. The seven shootings were progressively trying and culminated in her naked body being shot in the heart in front of the audience. Like *Walking Failure*, *Shoot the Sissy* has also been re-imagined for film (EF5235). It was created again in collaboration with Sam Williams. *Shoot the Sissy, Film* is accompanied by a commentary, published on the back of the programme (P3181) distributed at the launch of the film as part of LADA Screens (2017). I have explored the development of this particular piece more extensively in a chapter, 'visibility: Performance and Activism' in *Performing Interdisciplinarity*.

Post-Sissy: looking ahead

In moving forward, I take my lead once more from Adrian Piper. In *Thwarted Projects, Dashed Hopes, A Moment of Embarrassment* (2012), Piper declared she had retired from being black. The declaration, published in her website, appeared alongside a portrait that had been seemingly altered to make her skin tone darker. Piper's provocation challenges the notion of a single and stable identity. She courageously moves into a realm beyond identity politics and disturbs the false stability that seems to come as a result of occupying a specific gender, ethnicity, or race. In following her lead, I declare to have retired from being a Sissy. I too want to disrupt the comfort of the identities we inhabit. I do believe we can have a genuine future, if only we remain open to the possibilities within ourselves.



The Sissy's Progress
Image by Richard Eaton

For further reading, watching and researching, see:

LADA Study Room Resources

Butler, J. (1990), *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York and London: Routledge. Ref. P356

Crisp, Q. (1985) *The Naked Civil Servant*, London and New York: Harper Perennial. Ref P3567

Dunn, K. (1983) *Geek Love*, London: Abacus. Ref P3566

Edelman, L. (2004) *No Future, Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Durham and London: Duke University Press. Ref P3565

Grey Gardens (1975), [Documentary], Dir. A. and D. Maysles. Ref D2298

Lorde, A. (2017), *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, London: Silver Press. P3564

O'Rourke, K. (2013) *Walking and Mapping, Artists as Cartographers*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press. P3563

Further Reading

Butler, J. (2009), *Frames of War, When is Life Grievable?*, London and New York: Verso.

Butler, J. (2004), *Undoing Gender*, London: Routledge.

Butler, J. (2004b), *Prearious Life, the Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London and New York: Verso.

Houlbrook, M. (2005) *Queer London, Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Messias, N. (2017) 'visibility: Performance and Activism' in E. Bryon (ed.) *Performing Interdisciplinarity: Working Across Interdisciplinary Boundaries Through an Active Aesthetic*, 185-198, London: Routledge.

About the Artist

Nando Messias' work straddles performance art, dance and theatre. His performances combine beautiful images with a fierce critique of gender, visibility and violence. He has performed at prestigious venues such as Hayward Gallery, V&A, Tate Tanks, Roundhouse, Royal Vauxhall Tavern, Tate Britain and ICA, among other spaces across the UK. He has also worked extensively on the international circuit.



The Sissy's Progress
Image by Richard Eaton

12 October 2017
NANDO MESSIAS
WHERE 4 ROADS MEET:
DEATH AND THE SISSY

Creation, concept and visuals: Nando Messias

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Musical director and co-performer: Jordan Hunt

Costume: Ed Marler

Lighting: Salvatore Scollo

Producer: Laura Sweeney

Assistant producer: Michael Norton

Production assistants: Keziah Methuen-Jones and Caroline Tyka

PR: Anna Goodman, Abstrakt Publicity

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ABOUT

Toybee Studios is Artsadmin's unique centre for the development and presentation of new work. The studios comprise of a 280-seat theatre, rehearsal spaces, technical facilities, and the Arts Bar & Café: all of which host performances and events throughout the year.

Artsadmin produces, supports and presents the work of contemporary artists, creating projects that are bold, inventive, unusual and extraordinary and supporting artists across the UK. The organisation offers a range of artist development services, including a free advisory service and mentoring schemes, as well as the bursary scheme. Artsadmin is supported using public funding by Arts Council England.

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Obituary for The Sissy

by Ruth McCarthy

I don't know what I'm allowed to say about him.
Are we allowed to talk about this?

“How to Write an Obituary

1. Announcement of Death. Begin with the name, age, and place of residence of the deceased, along with the time and place of death.”

The Sissy is dead.

We aren't supposed to talk about you out loud. You were always just a whisper, a stifled snigger at the bus stop. A discreet corrective dig in the shoulder from the mother of someone who should know better than to laugh at those who “can't help being that way”.

All the films said you would die alone. And you did, in your own chosen moment, folding away the dress someone else had picked for you to wear a long time ago.
Exhausted.

“2. Biographical Sketch. Sketch is the key word here.”

**Even as a child he had hands like painted shovels.
By the age of four he was very fond of taffeta, less fond of larger dogs and older boys.**

An untidy giveaway sibilant “s”, tucked back in neatly by kindly therapist Dr Harvey, second cousin to your mother. Though little could be done about the legs “skinnier than anything on a bird”.

You slept with the light on, an expert in angling for another story and another story and another story until you were too leaden with tiredness to feel alone and afraid.

Your school uniform never felt ample enough, missing yards and yards to swirl or hide in.

“3. Make sure that you are honouring the person's life instead of focusing on his death.”

The Sissy was an excellent teacher, if somewhat initially resistant to the profession.

You taught us what we should keep hidden. To conceal ourselves in crowds with a knowing roll of the eyes when you skipped by. You taught us how to silence our own humiliation with barking that deafened you, how to harbour our hatred of women in the blatantly ridiculous and evidently punch-able.

He had a natural flare for the creative arts, first treading the boards in his teens and building a somewhat necessary career as a performer that lasted right up until his death.

You walked on stage in your sister's tight blouse, with scraped back hair and soft, full, reddened lips. We all wanted you and wanted not to, straightening ourselves and striding emphatically to the bar for something to help us sit with the feeling for just a little longer.

20 years later, HungDaddy4U will call you a “f*cking pansy” on Grindr and remind you that he said “no femmes”.

“4. Remember those three words you thought would best describe the person.”

Disquieting. Vulnerable. Radiant.

“5. Make sure that your thoughts are clearly communicated.”

Are we allowed to talk about this?