

# THE PRACTICE OF EMPTYING SPACE

The rules of this space are:

No shoes

No socks

No jewellery

You can fight in whatever you're wearing right now, but if you would like to get changed there is a dressing room over here, and there are some clothes that you can make use of.

When you are ready to fight you will go and stand there, on that X, and when I am ready to fight again I will stand here on this X.

The aim of the fight – is *to fight*. We are going to take the fight seriously, but our intention is not to permanently damage or injure the other person.

You can 'tap out' to stop the fight temporarily. If a fighter taps out you separate physically, and then resume the fight until the timer goes.

But there is also a safe word. If either fighter says the safe word, the fight stops immediately and does not resume, and no questions are asked.

Tonight the safe word is:

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There is a tape-lined square of thick foam mats. The audience sit on three sides. On the fourth side is a bench, a performer, a bottle of water and a light grey towel, a screen. There are two large white crosses taped to the floor.

The space of the theatre both does and does not matter. Like how this space, here – or there, where you are – has the potential to matter and not matter. It's a container. An always different room in which we put the work. Our relationship to the room is fleeting. Yet we spend long periods of time trying to understand each new space. To place the objects, the speakers, the screen, the microphone. To learn how the light falls. To organise the bodies. Every time trying to orient ourselves, towards the room and each other.

At a certain moment the space is also energetic. Energetic with its specificity of who is there and how the bodies compose themselves, and how sound travels, and light travels, and air moves. It becomes hot. It becomes hazy over time. The boundaries blur sometimes, the distance shifts. The space is changeable, and sometimes it is changed. It holds all of the relations of tonight. The space is a container, but another word for contain could be embrace.

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Take a moment to listen.

Fight #26: Heavy thumping. One body that is audibly bigger than the other. An attack with little hesitation.

Fight #61: The echo of a fall, again and again and again.

Fight #155: Are those the hooves of horses?

Fight #73: Noises like the cries of fantasy monsters.

Fight #202: Too many noises all at once.

Fight #174: The size and shape of the theatre. The height of empty space above the heads of the audience. The density of the ground beneath them.

Fight #12: You are this thumping body.

Fight #159: Or you are this person sitting in the audience with empty space above you. You are laughing or flinching.

Fight #22: You are holding your breath or just breathing.

Fight #186: You are wrapping your forearm around my throat.

Fight #128: You are pushing your palm against the flat of my forehead to hold me at a distance, it fits perfectly.

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I have been spending hours making bodies disappear. Deleting – pixel by pixel – skin, flesh, hair, fabric that clings to thighs, biceps, pubic mounds. The tips of teeth. The toes, the heel. Bones, by implication, the parts of you we don't see. The occasional edge of a wet tongue. A bubble or a string of saliva.

It's hard work. Not hard like heavy labour, not hard like muscle strain. Hard like precision, repetition, detail work.

It feels close to erotic to pay such precise attention to the edges of another person. When we fight we are mostly weight and heat and force and personality. We're all physics and aura, if you believe in that kind of thing. I rarely think about the arch of the other person's foot, the line where their t-shirt tucks into their tracksuit bottoms.

When I have a philosophical whim, I think: what does it mean to be erasing these bodies? But it gives me something to do.

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I started running. Not well and not fast, but still.

I started wearing lipstick to the supermarket in an attempt to be seen.

I sat on a park bench in public because I liked being in public. I did not know if this publicness was allowed.

I started narrating my life more than usual. Describing my own experiences for myself or for an imagined other.

I let the boundaries collapse. I let the mediated online social spaces invade my bed, my bathroom. I let the voices of strangers and semi-acquaintances wake me in the morning and prevent me from sleeping at night. I thought about what these people would think of my behaviour. I let them police me, virtually, and I wondered how it would all be different if we were in close proximity. The possibility of transmission, of contamination, so near. The possibility of a body language. I wondered if we were becoming more or less accountable to each other in these distant, disembodied realms.

I let the boundaries do the opposite of collapse, be built up, maintained. I got suspicious of people I had no reason to be suspicious of, I became judgmental of people I had no right to judge. I did not leave the house for many days. Against my better judgement I let myself feel afraid of touching people. In the presence of fear and in the absence of people, I began touching myself more. Stroking the back of my neck while waiting for the coffee to boil. Fingering my ribs in the shower. Lying with my knuckles pressed into my armpits whilst scrolling on my phone.

I found myself more attracted to people in the street because the thought of being close to them felt even more transgressive than usual. I let the passing smell of unfamiliar perfume turn my head.

I ate with my fingers and left sticky prints on the letters of my keyboard.

I let myself project myself into a future where all these statements became about something that had been in the past.

I have never been so good at being in the present moment, and I am getting increasingly worse.

I cried very little, which seemed like an unexpected response to uncertainty. I thought maybe there were already too many people crying and we were burning through tears like fossil fuel.

I spilled beer on my fingers and kept on typing. My keyboard became a sticky mess.

I used the phrase 'up and down' to describe my well-being, my mood, my motivation, my libido, my spirit, my appetite, my sleep. My internalised neoliberalism, though, was well and truly up.

I saw the faces of friends in large online meetings but did not address them, just smiling at the laptop screen, hoping they would know that I was smiling specifically at them.

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Both shadow and person pixels are dark, and it is impossible to tell where the shadow ends and the person begins. Things that are in motion are caught in a blur on a photo. So much nuance is lost when you make a body a solid block. The changes in pigmentation as you move along the surface of the skin. The crease between forearm and bicep.

What might fill the space that is left behind? What might we put in there, instead of these heaving bodies? It feels like an opportunity, but I'm still mourning the absent people.

I zoom way in. I am looking in granular detail at the shape of an arched body, a loose body, an angry body, a tired body, a surprised body. The task of it is close, it produces an unexpected sense of proximity. A one-sided intimacy, an unrequited love.

I remind myself that pixels are not skin, that photos of bodies are not bodies.

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I fight with a friend and afterwards he tells me that he couldn't help but be aware all the time, of my nipples visible through my t-shirt. She holds herself low to the ground, making slow and small movements, followed by very rapid holds. Later in the bar she tells me that she has been observing how animals fight. I slap him hard in the face and he slaps me back. She sits still on the mat, refusing to fight, a public protest against what had until that moment seemed inevitable. I fight with an ex-lover and they tell me they wish our sex had been more like this fight. A woman in the audience asks me: how much of this, what you are saying now, is a script? Power bouncing around the room, like a soft ball of light, or a balloon we are trying to keep in the air. I hold the back of her neck and use it to push her body to the ground. It feels temporarily cruel. I enjoy being dragged around by my ankles, I enjoy being flipped over. I am talking and they are listening. I am asked if what they did was okay. I am told they feel bad. I am told I have made them look bad. I am told they feel exhilarated. I get beaten again and again and again and again, and I start to really resent that beating, even though I have asked for it. I am asked why. I am told, several times, that somebody is holding back, and I am reminded that I am small, light, and weak, which I tend to forget.

Take a space, empty it. Take everything that was on the inside and put it on the outside. In the process of emptying it, it is likely you will see in a different way what it has been filled with.

And what might fill the space that is left behind? It feels like an opportunity, but I'm still mourning the absent people.

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One of the side-effects of this practice is that I look at people in public now, and imagine fighting them.

Take a seat, somewhere you can people watch. Look at the people who inhabit or pass through this place. Imagine what it would be like to fight them.

Fight #258: A woman trips and stumbles slightly in the post office queue and I place my hands on her elbows. It's the first contact I've had with a stranger in ten weeks.

Fight #244: A young couple ask me to take a photo of them, holding a disposable camera in an outstretched hand. I am so taken aback by the request for me to touch the object of their camera that I do it without question.

Fight #65: We are both running, distracted and looking down, and the right sides of my body collides with the right side of theirs. It is hard but does not hurt. We bounce back from each other, in the way that flesh is soft, and stand out of breath, mouths open, it is unclear how to proceed.

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The audience are ushered out, gently. Those of us left exhale something, become a bit more relaxed. The music is cut out. The house lights are brought up, the space instantly less aesthetic, and more *used*. White tape crosses are pulled up off the floor. The sweaty clothes the audience have fought in are piled and put in a bag, to be washed. The unused water bottles too, the half-drunk ones are put in the bin. The microphone is turned down, there is the subtle change of a space no longer being amplified. The ice pack is retrieved from the freezer in the dressing room. The mats are wiped down, cleaned of hair, footprints. They are taken apart, giant puzzle pieces. They are slid four at a time into worn cardboard boxes, and the boxes are taped shut. The towel and wet costume are put in the to-be-washed bag: vest, sports bra, shorts, socks. The chargers are coiled. The chairs are rearranged, or straightened, or stacked.

Tomorrow, the bench is returned to the school gym it was borrowed from.