

CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: ALEX BACZYNSKI-JENKINS

Alex Baczynski-Jenkins

The tremble, the symptom, the swell and the hole together

20 January – 12 March

Ellen Greig: *Your new commission at Chisenhale Gallery, The tremble, the symptom, the swell and the hole together, places your choreographic practice into an exhibition. How did you develop a performance within the timeframe and format of an exhibition?*

Alex Baczynski-Jenkins: This is the first occasion I have worked with such a timeframe. From the outset I was interested in developing a choreography that would unfold and be distributed over the duration of the exhibition. The closest experience I have had to working on such an extended timescale is the project space, KEM that I co-run in Warsaw. This informed my thinking about a structure for experiencing the work that would itself be a social choreography. In devising the format I began thinking about different kinds of audience relationships to viewing and time in various contexts: the exhibition space, the theatre, watching a TV series or the intimate voyeurism of observing everyday life. I wanted to devise a format that would be a hybrid of these types of relations to time.

In tackling the question of how to use such an extensive timeframe, I wanted to develop a work that would encourage another kind of audience relationship to choreography. I arrived at the format of the 'Episodes' and 'Fugues' as a way of trying to gather a returning community of viewers, who would develop a relationship with the piece and performers over a period of time.

EG: *You have structured the work around two terms: Episodes, which happen fortnightly on Thursday evenings, and Fugues, which precede each Episode and take place from Friday to Sunday, 2-6pm. Why have you used these terms?*

ABJ: It struck me recently that both Episode and Fugue are compositional structures *and* structures of feeling. The idea of 'structures of feeling' comes from novelist and critic Raymond Williams, who uses this phrase as a way to characterise a social experience at a given moment in time. Feminist academic Sara Ahmed inverts this and writes about 'feeling structures' to describe how you sense certain infrastructures, disciplines or the production of subjectivity.

The word 'episode' refers to a number of things. There is the TV episode, which gathers a following over a period of time. TV episodes are a way of distracting yourself from the everyday and passing time with friends, as well as subjects of discussion. The use of the word 'episode' also carries with it a reference to 'having an episode' or the notion of a 'medical episode', both of which are usually connected to mental health.

Thinking about the episode then brought me to the term 'fugue'. The fugue is a baroque music composition, which contains a number of episodes within it. What I love about the notion of the episode within the fugue composition is that the main theme of the fugue is called the 'subject', and with each episode you have the subject that enters in a new key and is then fragmented and distributed through multiple voices. I realised that fugue composition is related to how my work often incorporates the distribution of a subject across a polyphony of voices and actions. In doing so the work brings attention to a shared subjectivity that is held between and across the performers.

There is also a 'fugue state', which is a dissociative state of temporary amnesia where the afflicted forgets who they are and frequently leaves what they know behind. It is characterised by loss of memory with the sufferer's surroundings becoming foreign to them. It comes from the Latin term

'fuga' meaning to flee or chase. This felt potent to me in relationship to the current moment, coupled with my interest in dance and distraction.

This brings us back to a conversation I had with my friend Andrew Hardwidge who is a performer and choreographer. He introduced me to a passage from Blaise Pascal's *The Pensées* (1669), which is set in the time of the 'dancing king', Louis XIV, who set up the academy and established dance as a discipline in Western history. The passage describes Louis XIV's relationship to dance as a distraction from sadness. Pascal offers another perspective on dance that has resonance for me. He frames dance as both pleasure and internal flight, describing its relationship to power. This line of thought has various inflections in both rave and queer culture. In the first Episode, *The tremble*, we sample a line from Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), "No change in surroundings." In this passage she describes an illness that no change in external surroundings can heal, whereby the experience of flight is all inside.

EG: The work is titled The tremble, the symptom, the swell and the hole together. Could you explain where this title comes from?

ABJ: The title of the work is composed of the four separate titles of each Episode. These words have been sampled from a poem by my friend Ezra Green, *The Seagulls* (2016). We've made the poem available for audiences to read.

EG: The use of repetition and looping is very significant in your previous work, as well as your current commission at Chisenhale Gallery. What is the importance of repetition in your work?

ABJ: Repetition in choreography is a useful procedure that brings out the materiality of what might often be considered as immaterial. By experiencing something again and again and again you go through waves of proximity, observation of detail, boredom and desire. You become more aware of subtle excesses, lacks and inflections. When a structure becomes very apparent, you begin to see the way the performer is navigating and engaging with that structure. The split between the performer and what they are doing, between the dancer and the dance becomes more apparent. The opposite is also true, here is an impossibility because these two elements can never be split.

EG: Could you talk about the role abstraction and fragmentation play in your work?

ABJ: A procedure I use a lot in my work is desynchronising, which is displacing a movement from where it usually happens. In this piece we work a lot with holding gestures. For example, the way you are touching your face now – what else is happening 'beside' our conversation? This is something I am interested in. Whether it is self-comforting or a place that contains memories. These are habitual gestures that we do not necessarily notice, but they are symptoms of something or someone. They might stem from desire or function as a way of giving comfort or supporting yourself.

One way of desynchronising these gestures is by removing touch from the surface of the body where it is usually located. Another form of desynchronisation occurs when the performers observe their own gestures. In this procedure we are zooming in on that gesture, as well as materialising a gap and creating a sensation of distance. The term that we are using for this is 'alienating gestures'.

EG: Is your interest in staging repetition and materialising distance related to othering or queering a space?

ABJ: Both materialise experiences of strangeness. Part of what queer performance is, is the production of space and the othering of space. Performance is a technology of other-worlding. Othering space and a sense of foreignness is at play in this work. So yes, this defamiliarisation is

shared between materialising a gap in experience and the queer experience that trouble heteronormative narratives.

In this case, I was partly interested in othering the gallery space by literalising the idea of staging. We have produced a four-layered, adaptive stage. I wanted to materialise a stage that would be made up of a few stages and could be choreographed over the exhibition.

EG: Yes, the stage brings focus to not only the performers but also focuses the position of the audience and how they relate to the performance. How does this work draw on or relate to theatre?

Through sampling incomplete or lo-fi theatrical operations like staging, sound and slight shifts in the use of the gallery lighting. The stage suggests a lo-fi, makeshift theatre but it also does not fit quite so easily in that. The octagon is an awkward stage shape, difficult to place as an object. Is it a stage or something else? Or a stage in denial? The stage introduces the implications of the theatre but I use it as a means to stage gestures that are intimate and of the everyday.

EG: Would you like to say something about the sound?

ABJ: The soundtrack is developed by Jayson Patterson. The sound changes throughout each Episode. There are materials that will have various iterations. For example, in the first Episode the ‘nothing’ sample is taken from a Sinead O’Connor’s *Nothing Compares 2 U* (1990) and looped, there is also a sound of a washing machine. All the sounds we are using are samples that we make very small adjustments to in pitch and treble.

EG: In the work there is a very intimate moment between the performers who paint each other’s nails with a blue nail polish. Can you talk about this moment?

ABJ: I see the intimacy of painting your nails or painting someone else’s nails as an act of caring. It also introduces a sense of being in a room with friends, hanging out, doing each other’s nails.

The nail painting is a way of caring for the surface but it is not superficial. It examines the disjunction between surface and sensation and how you perform surface. Working with the surface is a form of queer performance, staging the surface, troubling the interior and exterior. The colour blue is partly indebted to Derek Jarman’s *Blue* (1993). Interestingly, the first time blue appears in Jarman’s work is in a film called *Death Dance* (1973). I have not seen the film but apparently there is a scene with blue light and death dancing in white robes and killing the actors one by one.

EG: We have been talking about how your work deals with loss and distraction, seemingly quite morbid subjects, but then there is a lot of hope in this work. There are moments when you all look like you are having a lot of fun!

ABJ: Yes, that is very important. The moments of being with each and for each other are a big part of the work as well.

EG: You have recruited eight performers for this work. Could you talk about who you have worked with on this commission?

ABJ: I am collaborating with eight performers for this work and they will perform in various constellations throughout the eight-week period of the exhibition. The work is developed in collaboration with, as well as performed by Magda Chowaniec, Jia-Yu Corti, Kobe Darko, Jonathan Gonzalez, Samuel Kennedy, Matthew Morris, Jayson Patterson and Thelma Sharma. The sound design was developed in collaboration with Jayson who is also helping with production. And I have

been in dialogue closely with Krzysztof Bagiński as dramaturgical support, as well as Enad Marouf who helped in the research phase. The process is dialogical.

EG: What do you expect the experience of an audience member will be when they visit during a Fugue? And how does that differ from the experience an audience member might have during a one to two hour Episode?

ABJ: The structure of the work invokes two different relationships with time. The Episodes are a more condensed form of time, like an event. Whereas in the Fugues we will be working with a more extensive idea of time, diffracting parts of the work and zooming in on them. There will also be a stronger sense of intimacy.

EG: An audience member might visit for five minutes or they could stay for the full four hours. Because there are only three performers in each Fugue, I expect this will also be an intimate experience for the audience members?

ABJ: Definitely, that is a huge part of it.

EG: Your exhibition opens on the day of US President-elect Donald Trump's inauguration, the opening night is on the eve of his inauguration. There is a very particular mood we maybe experiencing such as fear and a lack of power or agency in the face of current world politics. How has this political atmosphere affected the way that you have approached this work at this specific moment in time?

ABJ: I was very aware that the work opens on the evening before Trump becomes president. And this relates to what I said previously about this sense of mourning and hopefulness. What we have is commons – this situation of gathering and affinities. It feels important to insist on that. The gestures express a sense of being at loss, but at the same time they embody the potential of intimacy, commons and complexity.

Alex Baczynski-Jenkins interviewed by Ellen Greig, Exhibitions and Events, Curator, Chisenhale Gallery on Friday 13 January at Chisenhale Gallery, London. Chisenhale Interviews, series editor, Polly Staple, Director, Chisenhale Gallery.