

Abstract

This writing and these images describe an ongoing curatorial enquiry by artist and curator Jason E. Bowman with the artist group The Theatre of Mistakes, founded in London in 1974 by writer, dancer and performer Anthony Howell. For the 2015 PARSE conference on Time, Bowman invited Howell to deliver a workshop based on the Theatre of Mistakes' self-published volume *Elements of Performance Art* (1976), co-authored by Howell and Fiona Templeton. Practitioners from different disciplinary backgrounds gathered to reconstruct, then perform games-based and instructional exercises originally distilled by the company between 1974 and 1976.

Bowman's writing considers the temporalities processed when curating the works and practices of a disbanded performance collective. The still images are of a performance at the conference derived from the workshop and the entire videoed event is available via the online publication.

Towards a Purposeful Accident: Elements of Performance Art via The Ting: The Theatre of Mistakes

JASON E. BOWMAN

Jason E. Bowman is an artist with a curatorial practice. He is MFA Fine Art Programme Leader at the Valand Academy, University of Gothenburg. He was a co-researcher on the Swedish Research Council funded project Trust and Unfolding Dialogue (with Principal Investigator Esther Shalev-Gerz), for which he edited the volume, Esther Shalev-Gerz: *The Contemporary Art of Trusting Uncertainty and Unfolding Dialogues* (Stockholm: Art and Theory, 2013). He curated the inaugural European career survey of the practice of Yvonne Rainer in live dance, film, teach-ins and public readings (Tramway, Glasgow, 2010) and in 2017 will curate a survey of the work of the Theatre of Mistakes in live performance, artefact and document at Raven Row, London. He is currently Principal Researcher (with co-researchers Mick Wilson and Julie Crawshaw) on *Stretched*, a three-year long enquiry into artist-led cultures, also funded by the Swedish Research Council.

ANTHONY HOWELL

A former dancer with the Royal Ballet, Anthony Howell was an editor of *Wallpaper Magazine* and founder of The Theatre of Mistakes, which performed at the Paris Biennale, the Theater for the New City and the Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. He is editor of *Grey Suit: Video for Art and Literature*. His solo performances have been seen at the Hayward Gallery and at the Sydney Biennale. He teaches Tango for Balance—for people with Parkinson's Disease. His book *The Analysis of Performance Art* was published by Routledge in 1999. He is also a poet whose first collection, *Inside the Castle*, was published in 1969. His novel *In the Company of Others* was published by Marion Boyars in 1986. His articles on visual art, dance, performance and poetry have appeared in many publications. He is a contributing editor of the *Fortnightly Review*.

*Working without a watch and without a tape-measure, the performance artist may come to rely on a sense of “performance time”—where yards are expressed by strides and feet by paces, where minutes are expressed by counts and, where time and space are expressed by any means that may be devised.*¹

Having moved home in 2006 I unpacked books that had been in storage. I re-discovered a slim, A5 format, comb-bound publication with silver embossed text on black card covers entitled *Elements of Performance Art* by Anthony Howell and Fiona Templeton.² Consequently a curatorial enquiry began on how to research, conceptualise and realise a survey of the practices and artworks (of which this publication is an early exemplar) of a disbanded interdisciplinary art collective, active from their base in London and internationally from 1974 until 1981, known initially as The Ting, then subsequently as The Ting: Theatre of Mistakes, and finally as The Theatre of Mistakes.

Writer and dancer Anthony Howell instigated The Ting in 1971 through an initial set of interdisciplinary experiments, which by 1974 had become The Ting: The Theatre of Mistakes, a collaborative itinerant platform for co-devising performances from a series of instructions and game-based exercises co-authored at advertised open sessions between 1974 and 1976. Contributions (“soundings”) were recorded in written notes in what is referred to as The Gymnasium. In 1975 core members Anthony Howell, Fiona Templeton, Michael Greenall and Patricia Murphy performed *The Street*, which drew from the exercises of The Gymnasium and was structured by additive triggering, which would become an implicit method also in future works.³

In 1976 The Soundings logged in The Gymnasium were refined, edited and introduced by Howell and Templeton and self-published by The Ting: The Theatre of Mistakes as *Elements of Performance Art*

in an initial edition of 60 (1976) and in a revised edition of 800 (1977). Designed as an instructional manual with an introductory manifesto, *Elements of Performance Art* explicates The Ting: The Theatre of Mistakes’ ethos and methods of production against six convergent elements: conditions, body, aural, time/space, equipment and manifestation, with a total of 42 exercises to be structured via chance, allowing for multiple formations and focalised structures. From 1976 the collective became less concerned with instigating open events and happenings, and thus began a further five years of collaborative works devised by a core membership of Michael Greenall, Anthony Howell, Glenys Johnson, Miranda Payne, Peter Stickland and Fiona Templeton towards formalist performances that were highly structured by internalised systems and rules yet incorporated the potential for mishaps and slip-ups. This included what is seen to be their signature performance work, *Going* (1977), in which each performer seeks to be the others through a complex structuring of aural mimicry and physical mirroring.

The multiple processes and forms of research conducted to date have included locating both consistent members and sporadic affiliates of the collective in order to gain a multi-perspectival narration, but also access to personal and institutional records. Unlike many of their peers working in performance at that time, this collective laid great emphasis on documentation and kept exhaustive records, which has led to the cataloguing of almost 4,000 pieces of ephemera, such as correspondence between the members of the collective, institutions, curators, funding bodies and other artists and practitioners; drafts of and notations on prefatory manifestos, scripts and instructions for works; promotional materials and reviews; diagrams for performances outlining the temporal-spatial dynamics of durational works; video, audio and photographic documentation and objects, props and costumes.⁴

This material—possibly less of an archive and more a collection—describes the collective’s organisational

impulses and its incremental decision-making procedures both in terms of actual production and also preparation, including years of peer-working and intermittent experimentation at a rural farm in Hampshire, and through a cultural milieu in which it interfaced with artist-led spaces, such as The Dairy (also the home of London Film-makers' Co-op), Artslab and studio complexes, and institutional frameworks, including Arts Council and galleries such as the Serpentine, the Hayward and Arnolfini. Work was also developed internationally, including at the Biennale de Paris, the Stedelijk Museum, The Belgrade Student Centre, and at commercial galleries such as New York's Paula Cooper Gallery, as well as in unexpected situations such as the Pittsburgh State Penitentiary.

An abundance of residual material is available that will shape my curatorial intercession, not only documentation of finalised art works but also of the methods and procedures of The Theatre of Mistakes' collectivised practices. Knowledge being produced includes the designation of a vivid turn within curating towards the restaging and remediation of performance and temporalised practices of the era shared by the company; a commitment to discursive and apperceptive processes and approaches between myself as curator, ex-members and associates of the collective, the director and representatives of Raven Row (the gallery where the exhibition, *Accidentally on Purpose: The Theatre of Mistakes* will occur in Summer 2017). A further repercussion is also at play, one that we may think of less as related to exhibition-making and more in terms of making an exhibition "happen".

The happenstance, coincidence or accidental nature of finding *Elements of Performance Art* has become a generative spoor for ten years of intermittent research, the sporadic nature of which has demanded a heterochronic curatorial methodology that weaves between the engrossment of the people involved, heterogeneously interrogating the records of their art to uncover criss-crossed patterning of processes over the collective's lifespan, and the temporal complexities of the programme and working practices of the gallery in which the project is to be sited (as Raven Row has, since 2009, been dedicated to unearthing and exhibiting like-minded, obscured or purposefully marginal practices and art works).

An implication of an approach such as heterochronic curating is that it acts in contrast to the teleological impulses that seek a chronological narrativisation, an approach that is often sui generis to how institutions organise and delineate the notion of retrospection when making survey exhibitions. The approach towards making *Accidentally on Purpose* happen has, until now, temporally traversed concepts such as art historian Michael Baxandall's thesis on "the periodic eye" as a means to consider how visibility is formed and perceived within social relations and cultural practices of a given time; the implications of conducting ethnographic research via cultural theorist Irit Rogoff's conceptualisation of "gossip as testimony", a route towards recognising multi-perspectival complicities and contradictions of fact, sensibility, opinion and concept as productive of exchange; and curator Beatrice von Bismarck's notion of exhibiting as a temporalised "type of action" that produces multiple

1. Howell, Anthony and Fiona Templeton. *Elements of Performance Art*. London: The Ting: Theatre of Mistakes. 1976. p. 7.

2. Ibid.

3. As if a game were at play, the mediation of elements of choice or chance would allow for "mistakes" to occur. Accordingly, the recognition of a mistake would then activate (trigger) another series of choices, rules or instructions.

4. Research on this process was conducted collaboratively, in 2008-2009, with art historian Dr. Marie-Anne Mancio.

5. Baxandall, Michael. *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1988; Rogoff, Irit. "Gossip as Testimony: A Postmodern Signature". In *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, Griselda Pollock (ed.). London: Routledge. 1996. pp. 58-65.; Von Bismarck, Beatrice. "Introduction". In *Cultures of the Curatorial 2 Timing: On the Temporal Dimension of Exhibiting*, Beatrice von Bismarck, Rike Frank, Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer, Jörn Schafaff, Thomas Weski (eds.). Berlin: Sternberg Press. 2012. pp. 7-10.

relations between the actors involved, physical materials and objects and in this case a recurrent spectre of erstwhile performances.⁵ Hence, the happening towards this exhibition has sought neither to follow a linear chronology nor backtrack through one. The interrogation of things and people has not been sequential. New things appear, discussions continue, complicities and disagreements arise and logistics permeate—each providing filters through which the exhibition becomes consequential.

In 2015, however, I clarified that I was about to curate an exhibition including live works for which I was actually too young to have seen and so an interstice

in the research process was prompted and a reoccurrence put into play with Theatre of Mistakes founder Anthony Howell. We returned to *Elements of Performance Art* where he and the collective had more or less begun, and where I had also started (though with three decades in between). Over two days we revisited and work-shopped the exercises gathered in the publication with a group of volunteers. The findings of working with the soundings were made public at *Time*, the 2015 PARSE conference, and a subsequent decision was made to then include such a venture in the exhibition at Raven Row. Another curatorial coincidence will become consequential.



Jason E. Bowman and Anthony Howell in conversation regarding the impetus for *Elements of Performance Art*. Photograph by Kjell Caminha.



*Jason E. Bowman interrupted by Anthony Howell responding to an initial triggering of exercises from Elements of Performance Art.
Photograph by Kjell Caminha.*



Jason E. Bowman and Anthony Howell responding to and creating triggers of exercises from Elements of Performance Art. Photograph by Kjell Caminha.



Workshop participants responding to and creating triggers of exercises from Elements of Performance Art. Photograph by Kjell Caminha.

Workshop participants responding to and creating triggers of exercises from Elements of Performance Art, continued. Photograph by Kjell Caminha.



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