

A conversation between Jonah Westerman and Florence Peake held on 26th June 2015 as part of Florence Peake's exhibition *Hall of the Swell* at Gallery Lejeune.



Florence Peake - *Swell the thickening surface of*, 2014 Installation view, *MIRRORCITY: London artists on fiction and reality*, Hayward Gallery, London, Dancers: Hamish Macpherson and Rosalie Wahlfried Photo: © Michael Brzezinski

Jonah Westerman: By way of framing the questions I have for you, I can say a little bit more about the Tate project I'm working on. *Performance at Tate* is interested in the place of performance in the history of modern and contemporary art from mid-century, especially as it relates to Tate's collection and programming. So that means thinking about the ways performance-based practices have started to come into collections and gallery and museum exhibitions over the last 20 years, and how this so-called resurgence leads directly onto a much longer history of expanded practice, or interrogating what art is and how it works in relation to time, the influence of specific spaces or sites, processes of iterability, dependence on audiences to varying degrees, and so on. So this history comprises not only performance practices (like dance), but also practices and works that don't look like performance – like sculptural objects or paintings – and the labour of the project involves articulating both what these different kinds of work share in and what it is that makes them particular and specific.

So, moving on to your paintings: In the past week you and I have been talking a lot about media and what different media do – what dance is as a medium, what painting is as a medium and what it means to go from one to the other. Can you start us off by saying something about these paintings in relation to the dance project to which they are related, and how you think of that relationship?

Gallery Lejeune

Florence Peake: It's a project that started through a mentoring programme with a movement practitioner called Helen Poynor who works on South West coast of England on the Jurassic coast. She does a lot of work in the environment relating to movement meditation practices. I worked with her for 4 years, mentored for 1 year. I wanted to address and challenge myself with some questions about spirituality and ideas around unanswerable questions like "who is God?" or "what is life?" or "what is our deepest fear?".. You know very kind of big big questions in a way I knew they wouldn't get answered but how I could, in my practice translate them into making art or movement. This then came under, and I didn't expect this at the time, a larger project umbrella, called *Swell the thickening surface of* and that has had a series of different shows the first show being *Chorus: Swell the thickening surface of* and then the Hayward exhibition *Swell the thickening surface of* and finally here at Gallery Lejeune *Hall of the Swell*. Each of the permeations has this kind of driving under the surface these are the questions at the heart of whatever the manifestation of it is. So the first one was a sculpture and sound installation where the sculptures they were figurative sculptures (at Tin-type Gallery) which all talked to each other, and implanted into the sculptural forms were vocal monologues. I did palm readings from members of the public and developed portrait monologues from my palm readings about peoples' deepest longing and obsessions and things like that. So the text is quite obsessive in nature and with a particular kind of cadence to them and I wanted to give that sense of interiority to the sculptures, to give them an interior life in a way. So sometimes if you walked into the room there would be a loud chorus of the sculptures talking to each other and shouting out to each other but other times complete silence or just one talking. So there is always a sense of an imagined life of an object or a human being I project outwards.



Florence Peake - *Swell the thickening surface of, 2104* Installation view, *MIRRORCITY: London artists on fiction and reality*, Hayward Gallery, London, Stage by Pil and Galia Kollektiv. Photo: Fergus Daly.

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Then this quickly became the shaking practice. It was something I had encountered in spiritual practice I'd done in my twenties whilst travelling in India and here I developed a methodology with dancers whereby wherever you have contact with a surface that body part shakes. So if my feet are on the ground, my bum is on the chair that's where I am shaking from- So it's not a kind of random hippy shaking that's all over the place it's a very specific and very particular. I added to this the idea of two dancers together so they are in contact with each other and they shake from the contact with the surfaces and each other.

So there are a few different versions of that leading to the Hayward Gallery where we did it for 3 months. I had 13 different dancers who would pair up with different partners and you would shake for roughly 3 hours with breaks as well. And there was kind of this circuit through the gallery, through the exhibition where they would roll and move using the architecture and shaking at the same time. So what fascinates me about the shaking is that it can create kind of multiplicity of readings - it can look very much like someone who's in the throws of a very emotional experience or a very orgasmic experience or something that's like drug withdrawal or something that's very ecstatic, subtle and delicate. And each couple would have a very different way of doing it. Amaara Raheem and Carolyn Roy who are in the corner in the exhibition here were very subtle whereas Lizzy Le Quesne and Nando Messais were bombastic going through the space which was quite kind of cathartic. Very different kind of things each performer brought to the practice. I like to look at it as a practice rather than it just being a kind of an instruction that has to be carried out. So these images here are from performance within that work, of intense sorts of experiences or an altered state of consciousness... I wanted to in the painting to get to that kind of experience. They are figurative and kind of literal in a way but I also wanted to try and somehow evoke that kind of physicality, that experience of the intensity of performing

JW: I want to continue to defer the painting for a second in order to get an even fuller picture of what's happening in your physical processes in different performances. I think there's a really fascinating line between the intentional and accidental, between this inner motivation and outward expression of something. The idea that the sculptures in the first work are emanating these monologues; the monologues are not meant to be directly of them, 'speaking' the mind of the sculpture or something, but are rather from people whose palms you've read. And of course palm readings are not meant to be direct reflections of the conscious subjectivities of the person whose palm you're reading; the reading reflects how something from somewhere else is being channeled through that person, which then gets channeled through you and then gets channeled through audio and finally goes through the sculpture. There is a sort of similar thing happening with the shaking, and I really like the way you talk about how there is a sort of double contact improvisation happening: first, between the dancers' bodies, and second between each dancer and various objects – floors, stairs, etc. And I can't help but think about the piece you did for Block Universe, *Voicings*.

FP: Definitely, there's that kind of theme of channelling in all of these things and especially if what you are channelling is the floor there is a real question of what it is you are putting into the work and what you are allowing the work to do on its own.

JW: So the question is: How do you think about *where* you are in relation to actually producing things? That is, what is it that is actually moving the bodies? How much is that motivating force coming from somewhere beyond you as a choreographer or dancer? How much of it comes from outside and how much from inside? Can you tell?

FP: I think that is almost one of those big questions I had at the beginning, if we go right back, I can have sort of imaginative responses to that I feel that it's Prana or it's life or it's a kind of intention, you know there's many different things ... Katie Coe who's in the work, calls it 'attention',

Gallery Lejeune

and how being a performer is a kind of agency, and as a performer you become ‘agentful’. I think that this kind of training (Somatic dance training) is about opening up and allowing something to occur. I sometimes feel a little bit anxious talking about it in that way because that sounds like it’s kind of flaky or something but there’s a hell of a lot of rigour required due to the concentration and the way of simultaneously trying to let go and at the same time being very focused. There are these kind of contradictions happening at the same time, how you open and allow for energy or an idea or an image or an intention to pass through the body and at the same time how you set up a frame



Hall of the Swell installation shot, Gallery Lejeune, 2015

work to operate within that physically. There’s lots of different processes, methodologies and practices with that slight contradiction- Skinner releasing technique, Deborah Hay’s practice for example. There are lots of different ways I have experienced these methods, to allow for more possibility of more presence in the moving or more experience of what is occurring when you’re moving. And at the same time it’s very specific. It’s strange thing to manage or explain really.

JW: That was a really nice way of talking about the physical processes, how you initiate and set up what an audience sees. But I just noticed that even in presenting the work as purely physical and transient, you foreground some experience of representational understanding – critics tend to split these two and see them as antithetical – but for you it seems the ‘raw’, ‘immediate’ physicality instantly becomes representational when it meets an audience...

FP: I talked a lot about how I wanted the shaking to remain liquid, the meanings or the representations to become liquid, so you know “its mother Mary, no, it’s somebody masturbating, no, its something else...”, so that it doesn’t get fixed during the performance. So that it quickly changes to look like something else, it has this fluidity and openness to it. I really like that in a live

Gallery Lejeune

performance, performing and working with the dancers. It can very much stay fluid but that's a strange thing when it comes to painting because then this impossible thing, how to keep it alive and fluid in that way. I was in there earlier and I was trying to think about how and what it is in those paintings. I was finding it quite difficult in that way to articulate that – it's something that I am trying to do anyway with them.

JW: There are two kinds of mobility that you are identifying in the performative element: one is the movement itself, that just keeps moving and changing and that, for you, is the ground of the second mobility, the flux of interpretation. With the dance, the first mobility seems to secure the second, ensuring that interpretation doesn't solidify into one thing but remains many different things. But then, of course, as you just said, when it's a painting it's there on the wall, not moving. So tell us a little bit about the process of doing the painting and trying to keep some kind of mobility working somehow. Why does it look the way that it does, how did you arrive at that particular configuration?



Hall of the Swell installation shot, Gallery Lejeune, 2015

FP: So , quite often after performing... so when I did *Swell the thickening of* at the David Roberts Foundation, we used costume in it which somehow fixed it. We had these big hair suits that meant it immediately became very kind of primal which did look great but I somehow didn't understand what happened in that performance, there was this kind of very altered state or place I had gone into. I started looking at photographs of the performance, it felt sometimes shocking because what's

there is this very strong inner experience of the action and then looking at the photograph it's like seeing two twin things next to each other but they don't look the same, this very odd sort of experience of seeing the inner and the outer, so with the photograph it feels very like the inner is missing. So here, with the wall painting, I wanted this quite tacky holographic wallpaper as the inner idea to come through, this vibration and glimmering surface, akin to what the shaking does – so the figures become kind of vibrating bodies. A very vibrational led activity that happened inside as well as outside to be represented through the shimmering sort of tacky holographic stuff...

JW: The back and forth between the inside and the outside is something I would like to think about – it's interesting because you are saying you wanted to do something that represents what got away from you somehow, like you couldn't put your finger on what was going on inside, you didn't know what was going on, it had gotten beyond you somehow, but when you saw the photographs they didn't correspond to what you had experienced. So then you went to painting which is a very traditional way of bringing the inside on the outside; it seems to me that's what you wanted the painting to do, to make your internal experience visible, verifiable by its projection onto a perceptible outside. By putting the inside on the outside you could check what was going on – you could see it. To me, it's like the first instance of the work almost turns bodies into objects because you're asking people to channel floors and tables, experience the putative inside of the object world. And then with the painting you are trying to turn the object (the wall or the pigment) into a person.

FP: Yes, actually what's interesting is when I did those talking sculptures I did have a go at shaking with the dancers talking with the wigs over their faces and that did happen actually, the dancers became more object like and the sculptures became more alive, so there was this odd presence. I mean I don't know if I am necessarily achieving that but it's what I'm trying to do and there's an excitement and frustration within that, but that's something I'm trying to sort of make happen – make those bodies perform again, performing in that space, somehow also respond to one another and the space.

JW: So it's traveling the same road but going the other way, turning the objects into a body. So is that transformation somehow crucial to 'performance'? I see how the two instantiations are linked, as they execute the same operation, just backwards, as it were. But what do you mean when you say it is a performance when you take the object and make it into a body? How do the paintings perform?

FP: There were a few different things happening in that room that were failing, failing to perform, you know they weren't like "5,6,7,8!" What happened was I originally wanted quite small figures tumbling into big figures so this kind of perspective happened around the space, but it wasn't working... Soon it was apparent they needed to be quite god-like so the scale is an important element to get them to be alive, to perform and to respond - when they were little figures it was like decoration, some nice wallpaper, interior decorating so there was something about them occupying their own spaces, how they are composed around the room and how you see the negative space, the space around them, as the positive space so even in them you can see the shining stuff coming through a little bit as well. I work very quickly, I work fast with the paint strokes. I'm wanting there to be that energetic response in the way that I am making marks.

JW: It's funny, when I look at them, the bodies feel very heavy, as you put it god-like, but when I look at the holographic stuff it looks very light to me, it sort of dissipates the feeling of the body, suspends it almost. The two-dimensionality reasserts itself. I think it speaks to the tension you spoke about earlier, and again it has to do with that question of inside and outside. Maybe there is a link in the role imagined for the audience going into that room? With the dance, you thought about

Gallery Lejeune

what was like for them to see a body shaking and how it might lead to playing out different narratives – do you think there is a connection on that level?

FP: I think something different is happening, I think there is something different – when people are watching the shaking people they have said it's very transferrable, it's almost a symbiosis or something, so there's that sort of feeling that there is a kinaesthetic empathy that happens in the response to the live work. That's why I did the whole-wall painting, is there is an immersive experience. I don't think there is that transferability or empathy there. The audience is more autonomous, feeling your looking into the surroundings. The scale is important as they are almost the same size but slightly bigger than you.

JW: It's interesting you put it that way. For me it chimes with the idea of turning bodies into objects and objects into bodies – that this is where the performance happens, but that these two different versions might reverse their priorities. You said you wanted to make the paintings to combat or cope with a sense of loss of self. The dance piece in fact promoted that kind of loss, which is why we could imagine the shaking to be catching, that it could travel like a contagion. Whereas if it is indeed the case that with the painting you are trying to remember and verify some kind of subjective experience of that performance, it's interesting to think that the pursuit of solidity (as opposed to uncontrollable shaking) would be something reflected in the audience's experience of being in the room, being centrally located with that sense of position, being able to survey everything from the solidified, grounded position...

FP: I would love that there would be a kind of kinaesthetic empathy through the paintings but I'm not sure for others, I feel a kind of sense of physicality from the paintings, a sense of tension or muscularity, I would like there to be a sense of your own body in relationship - not that you are just looking out there at a painting, not an objective or detached thing - I would like the sense that you are part of the performance in that space as well. They do feel like they have a language that is very intense and different from the language of a spectator, you know standing, looking, hands in pocket ... you know thinking "whatever", it's a different set of gestures ... I feel like there is an intention to kind of lull the audience into that as well...

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About

Florence Peake

Florence Peake is a London-based artist and choreographer. With extensive training in dance and a background in painting, her performance practice combines a variety of media—from drawing to sculpture—in relation to the moving body. Site and audience, live and recorded text, wit and humour are key to her work.

Her interdisciplinary projects, made both independently and collaboratively, have been exhibited and performed nationally and internationally since 1995 in New York, San Francisco, Seattle, Prague, Sweden and Latvia. Peake's work has also been commissioned and shown at prestigious venues such as the National Portrait Gallery (2008), National Review of Live Art (2009), Yorkshire Sculpture Park (2012), Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art (2013) and Hayward Gallery (2014).

Jonah Westerman

Jonah Westerman holds a PhD in Art History from The Graduate Center, City University of New York (CUNY) and a BA from Harvard University. He is now working on a two-year, AHRC-funded research project, 'Performance at Tate', which interrogates the place of performance in the museum's collection and programming. He has published on the relationship between performance and its media in journals and edited collections, and has taught courses on modern and contemporary art at Brooklyn College, CUNY and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

About Gallery Lejeune

Gallery Lejeune, an exhibition programme that investigates ways in which context-based, performative and ephemeral work can be archived and collected.

Each exhibition is built around a series of events such as dinners, performances, talks etc. These programmes create a context from which to discuss notions of value and legacy in relation to ephemerality and permanence.

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