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RULES AND REGS RESIDENCY

The Nightingale Theatre, Brighton
1 June - 1 July 2012

By: Martine Rouleau

Week 2: Why Give Answers When You Can Ask Questions?

What has become of the rules? Just as they had become opportunities for the R & R artists more or less as soon as they were made public, the rules have now evolved to take on different shapes. Some have even developed a tangible presence. They have started leaving a trace on the world as objects, processes, performative impulses, relationships or questions. The focus of the 19th of June was on presenting these manifestations to the “Outside Eye”. That is, presenting work in progress in order to obtain constructive feedback from Steven Brett, host curator, and Ju Row Farr, founder member of Blast Theory and the guest.

Whether you call it an “Outside Eye”, a “crit” or a “convenor”, this process is something that doesn’t happen nearly often enough after art school. Perhaps that is because once they move away from the institutional setting of college, artists come to rely on a chosen few who know their work to provide them with feedback.

Perhaps that is also partly explained by the fact that, no matter how supportive and constructive the feedback might be, it is always nerve-wracking to submit tender, novel ideas that haven’t quite been fully contextualized.

Sometimes a new element comes into an established practice with tentative fragility and it might feel like a substantial risk to engage with it too publically, in too committed a way, before it has fully settled in. Yet, sharing ideas will rarely make them irrelevant. Rather, it is often very useful to formalise a new aspect of a practice, with the help of language, conversation, by testing it against other people’s perspective in order to situate it more clearly, to own it more thoroughly.



Jan Machacek. Photos: Kristian Wilding. Courtesy: copyright 2012 Rules and Regs.

This is also the case for the R&R artists who have to produce work in new and challenging conditions. For instance, Theo started with a very strong conceptual framework that allowed for a correspondence between the rules, his interests and his practice. In a potent alliance between the burlesque aesthetic and the discourse of intolerance used by Christian fundamentalist American preachers targeting homosexuality, he engages with both “Now you see me, now you don’t” and “ Follow the Yellow Brick Road”. The two come together in an ghostly performance experienced in two times, at once uncanny and titillating. A disembodied lap dance is made possible through the magic of a highly reflective plexiglass sheet and well devised lighting while, in another room, a terrifying sermon vilifying homosexuality as well as the world of witches and magic depicted by The Wizard of Oz is being delivered.

How do these two scenarios work together? What does the sound achieve with regards to the visuals and the movement? The outside eye discussion appeared useful for Theo when it came to addressing the articulation of these elements with the logistics. Working with sound and movement to deliver a tightly choreographed one-to-one experience requires a thorough understanding of all variables involved and the articulations that exist between them.

Megumi brought her investigation of language to bear on her experience of movement, testing ways to integrate the two. Devising a performance in two parts, she started by setting the scene, asking one of us to sit a table set on the stage and then walked out, leaving us to wonder what would happen next. What happened was a breathtakingly physical performance that started with Megumi entering the room in the most unexpected way: by throwing herself flat on the floor, repeatedly, almost beating a rhythm on the ground as she flipped her whole body from front to back to side and back again without the use of her hands. All the while, her face was mostly hidden by her hair and a hood she’d pulled over her head. Somehow this detail steered the viewer away from empathy, allowing for the movements to be viewed almost as the perpetual motion of a machine gone awry.

This crashing yet controlled movement concludes with the audience being invited to ask the artist questions that can be answered by yes or no. This change of pace leads to an absorbing discussion around what the artist wants the pairing of these elements to achieve. The role of the audience appears to hover between passivity and forced engagement. Language is so inadequate a material in the face of the powerful physicality we just witnessed. How can the audience respond if they are only allowed a controlled use of language?

Jan also articulated language and performance, albeit in a very different way. He set up a playful environment where words cut out of gossip magazines and printed in reverse could be deciphered in a mirror and combined to produce statements, titles and odd sentences. The combination of so many elements of superficial gossip somehow manages to make sense out of their context. Once the words are combined by the participating audience members, they read it out loud for Jan to record and this is then used as material to

produce a sound piece that will be used later in a performative second part. Participants can also choose a word to be transferred to their skin a bit like a temporary tattoo. This simple process is something that Jan explores further by turning it on himself as a performative act. While the sound piece produced with the previous recordings plays, Jan slowly covers his skin with the bright, garish words in a slow and deliberate manner. It's a very strong image that comes out of the repetition of this simple gesture, reminiscent of the pivotal scene in Terry Gilliam's film *Brazil* when Archibald Tuttle, the anarchist/plumber gets smothered by discarded newspapers till he disappears altogether under the mounds of printed paper. It's quite an evocative metaphor in the era of the fall of the Murdoch Empire.

Michi took us out of the Nightingale and into the immediate urban environment. He took what first appeared to be a literal approach to "working outside the studio" and, as he darted in and out of shops, trains and alleyways he was also giving us a taste of "Now you see me, now you don't". For those who could keep up, the artist staged playful transgressive gestures. He slipped a photo of himself in someone's mail slot, he bought a pint of milk from one shop and placed it in the refrigerated section of another, he moved the contents of one recycling bin to another. He was not breaking any explicit rules, yet his gestures appeared somewhat provocative and absurd. This work helps to rethink what rules are, why we feel we must obey them and whether there are circumstances where it's fine to break them, test them or at least question them. Most of the actions were done in jest, yet they were enacted with a straight face by Michi who did not address his audience much. In a way, this approach kept us from being complicit in the transgressions, witnessing them rather than joining in. The question of the audience's role emerged again with regards to this dynamic. Did the artist need an audience at all for his transgressive walk to happen? Should we have felt more included or was the alienation from the artist and his actions part of the work? Does an artist have a duty of care for his or her audience and, if so, what does it entail?

With all these questions stemming from the work that was presented to us on that day, I was reminded that it can be just as trying to find oneself on the other side of this relationship, as the one who provides the feedback. Art affects people, triggers reactions that are often not the outcome of thorough reflection, yet the purpose of the feedback is not to express opinions or feelings but to outline areas that require more definition, to question the underlying motivations and to explore ideas that the experience of the work might have generated. This exchange is about the work rather than about individuals, but it is at times difficult to maintain that focus. Part of what made this process more than the mere sharing of opinions was the diversity of directions the members of the panel adopted: both Ju and Steven focused on the conceptual grounding and on the potential experience of the audience, but from different perspectives. Seth was present and contributing questions and comments that focused more on logistics. This led to a lot of interesting questions being asked... and few of them getting answered. This is potentially the sign of a successful feedback session. Perhaps this is even a new rule in the making: answer questions with other questions until you have a work of art.

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Writer detail:

I am a freelance curator, writer and lecturer based in London. My projects focus on collaborative processes with practitioners from various disciplines. I have worked with Tate Britain, Tate Modern, the ICA, the Brighton Photo Fringe and Electra Productions among others. I completed a PhD pertaining to collaborative processes involving artists, audiences and public art institutions at the London Consortium in 2009. I am a founding editor of the Static (<http://www.static.londonconsortium.com/>) website . I currently in the Art Education at the Arts Management and Policy MA programme of Birkbeck College. More about my work can be found at <http://www.martinerouleau.co.uk/>.

Venue detail:

The Nightingale Theatre
29-30 Surrey Street Brighton BN1 3PA

www.rulesandregs.org/ng12.html