

FAIL!

In this world I feel trapped. I can never make up my mind whether I want to fit in or whether I'm proud of being different. As independent and as free as I try to be, or think I am, I am relentlessly aware of being controlled. It is a constant reminder of the small part I play in society's game. I admire people brave enough to stand outside while I'm taking shelter in the porch, neither inside nor out. The controller is more than society to me, it is fear. Fear of ridicule, fear of disappointment, fear that no one will follow me, fear that if I let go everything that I work so hard to keep together will fall apart. It's like standing at the top of a bungee jump with common sense telling you in one ear that you are tied on and will bounce back, but gut instinct screaming in the other ear that you should not jump. I am constantly trapped at the top of that bungee jump. The tiny platform keeps me feeling safe but also restricts me and I look at the view and wish I could be there instead of where I am.

I march from day to day undertaking tasks that are thrown at me. They are never-ending and seem often pointless, but I do them anyway to keep people happy. I smile when required, walk a certain way, wear what I am supposed to, drive what I am supposed to, say all the right things and befriend all the right people, make my parents proud and my friends happy, and yet it never quite seems like I'm doing enough. I can step back and watch this farce in

action. I stare at myself bored of what I see, and disappointed at my willingness. I feel like a puppet on a string. Except I have the ability to turn my own wooden head upwards and glare fiercely at the puppeteer. At least, inside I'm glaring and shouting profanities. On the outside I'm probably smiling and inviting them over for tea.

I am a walking contradiction, with big dreams of rebellion, but this rebel still apologises for herself. I am longing to break the line that defines me, and to take loud heavy steps from white to black.

This is where I am coming from, the personal context. It is not something I set out to make a piece about, but ultimately the piece drew strong symbolic links to the emotions I have just described.

I could spout out countless names of artists that have in some way, consciously or subconsciously, influenced me before, during and after my final performance. Indeed, I started writing that essay, walking through the motions of completing another task as I was supposed to. But the absolute truth is those artists were not important to me during this process. It would be hugely ignorant to believe that they did not exist at all, of course they did and I will make mention where due, but for me the influences were vastly subliminal.

'If only we could take out our brains and use only our eyes'. Pablo Picasso¹

I started with a white box, a blank canvas on which to paint my performance. My first creative concern was aesthetic. I knew I wanted a clean crisp white space to start with, becoming progressively messy and chaotic throughout the duration of the hour with traces of my performers. I was painfully aware of wanting the impossible. At the very outset I did not want the performance to be 'about' anything, which of course paves a dangerous path towards a performance about the absence of meaning. I became adamant that I would discover my performance through play, through chance, through accident. The frustrations of rules in my life gave me impetus to attempt to free my creativity as much as possible from rules set by others. In my case, imposed rules and theory would block an artistic freedom that I was so excited to exercise. That is not how I like to work.

Exactly three weeks before the presentation date I lay flat on my back in the middle of Emily Davies Studio, Parry Williams Building, Aberystwyth. The only sound was the creaking of heating vents. I was alone, waiting for my performers to arrive for our first rehearsal. This was the time span I had allowed myself, three weeks. Nervously I reassured myself that I work best under pressure. If three weeks is all I have it is all that will be necessary for my

¹ Pablo Picasso quoted at *The Painter's Keys*

piece. I thought of improvisational companies whose incredible work I had seen before. Remembering the Red Moon Theatre Company's 'There She Flows'² that I had been spectator to in Chicago, a large scale visual feast of colour and costume on the banks of the Chicago River near the canal locks that memorably reversed the flow of the river completely in 1900. The costumes and props had taken some preparation, but were mostly found and gathered items by the company themselves. The text spoken was nonsense, words formed by an imaginary language that was used so convincingly to communicate between performers. Character and intention had been pre-established, but interaction was improvised. The performance was a celebration of all kinds of people gathered together. At this point there are few things I know for sure, but what I do know is in three weeks time two performers and an audience would share an hour together in this space. The space was empty, and the emptiness was vast. I had never realised the scale of the studio before. It dawned on me that my first challenge was finding away to control this space, rather than let myself and my work be swamped by it. I knew I would have to define it somehow, control the scale to fit my ideas not stretch my ideas to the scale of the space.

² Red Moon Theatre Company, *There She Flows*, Chicago Battery Park 10/10/2004

I walk around, looking from each side, and from as many heights as I could. A great feature of the Emily Davies is the walkway running around the room ten feet above the space. I like viewing the performers from this angle, although they looked very small. It was in this early investigation that I decided my performers would be controlled by a greater power than themselves. Looking down at them from the balcony I decided I wanted to create a world for them that could be looked in on by the audience as though they were looking in on animals in a cage. At this point I did not think of myself as that greater power, simply realised that their movement would be as a result of pressure from something external to that world. Later, the audience on the gantry would prove impractical as Health and Safety prohibited more than fifteen at once, and I did not want to limit my audience as I was only allotted the one performance slot. The control from above became manifested elsewhere, in the dropping and lowering of objects that demanded a new response from the performers. I still wanted to create a world that the audience were not a part of, but looking in on from outside. I decided this was just as achievable with the audience on the same level as the action, by creating two highly defined spaces that could not be crossed by either side. To combat the size of the room, and to accommodate Simone's performance in the same space, I divided the room by dropping floor to ceiling curtain. I had two thirds of the room and

Simone a third. Of my two thirds, I decided one third would be a white world and one third a black world. Already the space was more manageable. Sharing with Simone when my performance was so heavily scenographic in nature could have proved difficult when ensuring we both were able to fulfil our desires for our final project. Luckily, the division of space was something we instantly agreed on and worked together to create.

“Sometimes I use a brush but often prefer using a stick. Sometimes I pour the paint straight out of the can. I like to use a dripping, fluid paint. I also use sand, broken glass, string. A method of painting is a natural growth out of a need. I want to express my feelings rather than illustrate them. Technique is just a means of arriving at a statement.

When I am painting I have a general notion as to what I am about. I can control the flow of the paint. There is no accident, just as there is no beginning and no end. Sometimes I lose a painting, but I have no fear of changes, of destroying the image, because a painting has a life of its own. I try to let it live.”

Jackson Pollock³

I find art most fascinating when it is free, free like the dripping of paint. It was not the paint that Pollock controlled, it was the stick, and from the stick flowed colour, imagination and form both guided and unpredictable. Like Pollock, when I am devising I have a general notion of what I am about, but the work is free, as is the paint. The work had a life of its own, and I tried to let it live. It is only since the performance came to life that I have been able to sit back and

³ Namuth, Hans and Falkenburg (dir), *Jackson Pollock 51*. Pollock speaking.

understand what it was and how strongly the performance resembled my own struggles.

The space is divided neatly in two with a crisp line. The performance space, stark white and lit, and the audience space, black and unlit. There are instantly two worlds, an obvious divide between spectator and performer. On the upstage wall of the white world are projected two faces, those of the performers. They stare into the performance world, expressionless. The performers are playing 'piggy' between their own gaze and the gaze of the audience, the gaze of self and the gaze of other.

There were images burning the back of my mind that I did not know or understand. They did not seem to relate, they did not seem to follow on. I wanted bananas eaten, the 'YMCA' danced, Macdonald's fries scoffed with ketchup. I was not conscious of where these images came from. This was my struggle, to personify these images, each one important to me, and create one being from them. I was offered the analogy of a clothes line. My images were items of clothing and could be as varied in shape, size and colour as I wanted, but they needed to all hang on the line, the thing that bought them together. Establishing that line was a difficult and delicate process and forced me to look deeper. My resistance to name the thread was eventually the key. My early images were rebellious, non-conforming. A floating rock weighted down by a

balloon was my first vivid image, although it did not make the final piece in this form. I wanted to take expectations and invert them. I wanted to be free to express the way I saw the world, not tied within structures. It was at this point that Jackson Pollock 51 came into play. I remember how impressed I was in Pollock's description of his work the first time I heard him claim "*I have no fear of changes, of destroying the image, because a painting has a life of its own. I try to let it live.*"⁴.

I realised now that although I was creating aesthetically, the aesthetic I desired was one of remains, not finished product. It dawned on me that what the actions creating the remains were in many ways primary to the aesthetic, although when choosing the actions their traces were of high concern. I had to learn to master the stick and let the paint flow freely.

My exploration into action painting led me to more underground artists such as Boston based Matt Cheney, inspired by Pollock and who describes his painting as 'process based'. His painting 'Pink on Black' was created as he passed a canvas with a paintbrush that was positioned at the centre of a half pipe which Cheney was skateboarding on. Other works of his have been created skydiving or snowboarding.

⁴ Namuth, Hans and Falkenburg (dir), *Jackson Pollock 51*. Pollock speaking

‘ My art often reflects the way I live: action, motion, and the movement of my body are important in the work I do ... By integrating sports that I love, expressing myself becomes something uniquely different. I often do not know what the final results will be.’

Matthew Cheney⁵

The transformation of my space would be task based, the process, the tasks themselves, like Cheney’s sports would be primary to the finished product, a result of the tasks, not their *raison d’être*.

My performers arrive for the first rehearsal and I briefly described my initial concepts to them. The vision I had of the space was that of pure white corrupted by mess. This allowed me to picture how I wanted the space to look at the beginning and end, and gave me some idea of what needed to happen in between, but it did not give me content, I did know how the destruction of white would come about. Visions of Yves Klein’s *Blue Women Art*⁶ spring to mind, where bodies take the place of paint brushes. Klein used the bodies of his performers to bring life and colour to a blank canvas. Body in space was definitely something that was important to me artistically from the outset. I wanted movement and action to be recorded. But the eclectic nature of my ideas could only mean that the records would themselves be eclectic, unlike the continuous blue of the smears in Klein’s work.

⁵ Matt Cheney Official Website (entry: Artist Statement 2008).

⁶ Yves Klein *Blue Women Art* 1962 (excerpt of performance watched online)

As I had first entered the space I had tripped over a length of blue rope haphazardly coiled just inside the doorway. As this was the only thing in the room apart from our bodies I felt compelled to use it, and tied it roughly centre stage hanging from the lighting grid. A makeshift upright on the horizontal that was at least something we could 'play' with. I put on a randomly selected piece of Latin jazz music, *Muita Bobeira*⁷ to offer something into the space and tentatively started asking my performers to experiment in the space, both bodies attached to the single rope, exploring the possibilities of weight transfer and discovering movements that were only made possible to the human by the presence of the rope. I asked them to cement a sequence of movements, choreography to the music that was playing on repeat. They fixed their dance and repeated it over and over again. I switched off the music and allowed silence in the room but still asked them to repeat their movements over and over. All that could be heard was the sound of breathing, of bodies against the floor, the rope and each other. I called instructions to spark mediation; speed up, slow down, change the rhythm.

The rope dance was the first few minutes of final performance that we created. The method of creating material was simple, improvisational, tasked based, similar to those of RAT Theatre, and In All Languages, developed by

⁷ Luciana Souza *Muita Bobeira* recorded 2005

Mike Pearson, where a set of everyday actions can be improvised around and mediated to form interesting and complex sequences of movement. The rope dance became ritualistic to our morning rehearsals, always repeating it for a minimum of ten minutes before we began the day's work, and always adding different mediations to keep it alive and exciting. Even in the final performance, although the movements were established, the rhythm they landed in, the size and intensity of each gesture was new and improvised.

This is how I created my performance by setting tasks. Sometimes the task produced the material, such as the rope dance, and sometimes the task was the material. For example, while playing 'Loop D Loop'⁸, the sound track of eighty-nine year old Gladys Hardy struggling to communicate with an automated machine I set the performers the task of blowing up as many balloons as possible. An interesting situation occurred when Holly revealed that she genuinely cannot blow balloons up. It was actually strangely satisfying to me that she could not complete the task as I asked her to, similar to the feeling of inadequacy when trying to live up to a character that others want me to be. I began trying to set tasks that I knew my performers could not complete. The performance began to take on the life of their constant, almost autistic, strive to finish their tasks with impossible perfection.

⁸ Gladys Hardy, *I Love Jesus But I Drink A Little* recorded 2008

I stumbled my way through the devising process with feeling and intuition, placing one task carefully against another, treating the work as a musical composition, listening to the flow of sound, of movement, of colour, of rhythm. I listened and I watched, and I tried not to think. I discarded ninety percent of the work we produced if it did not please me to have it next to the other tasks. I tried to place fast next to slow, loud next to quiet et cetera and became particularly concerned with the use of juxtaposition in the visual and audio rhythms of the piece. The theatre is a space of potentiality and in this it is possible to challenge the norms of everyday life. Theatre can become a space to rebel against the daily predictability by creative means. For example, when you see a balloon tied to a rock it is predictable that the rock will be weighting down the balloon. In theatre there is nothing that says it should be this way. Working on the idea that something is made interesting when it is not as we expect it to be, I made the decision that I would allow whatever I felt most strongly about, whatever stirred my creative mind to infiltrate my finished product. My main concern was the flow, the rhythm, the light and dark and the hard and soft.

An audience enters the space and takes residence on the dark black half of the room, looking into the white world, where two performers, Holly and Jim are riding upside down bicycles. Everything is white, every spoke of the bicycle

wheel, and every inch of the white box. Holly wears a tutu, Jim pyjama like shirt and trousers, not too extraordinary but not every day. We see the ballerina and the young boy in an unblemished world. Everything conforms to the starched, military perfection apart from a tiny part of the world. The shoes they wear present a different story. Old battered shoes suggest that already this world is not as perfect as it first appears. The ballerina wears doc martin boots, and the young boy wears battered converse shoes. This world is not untouched or without individuality, and their battered shoes tell that they have been on a journey. In 'Jackson Pollock 51'⁹ we see Pollock sit down and put on his 'painting boots'. It is deliberately filmed; this is his ritual, part of his performance. The shoes have been on a creative journey, they are part of his art.

As well as looking ahead of them to the white world, performance happens amongst, behind and above the audience. I sit behind a table on which there is a laptop, a microphone and my notepad. On the floor next to my feet are speakers, and just above my head a metal bar with a collection of ropes tied on to it. From the bar the ropes can be traced upwards and fanning out across the grid above. To trace them further would be to realise that each rope is attached to something. On the first rope, a human being that releases paint,

⁹ Namuth, Hans and Falkenburg (dir), *Jackson Pollock 51*. Pollock speaking

other ropes lead to objects that are either lowered or tipped to empty their contents. I am in control of this. Not only because I am the director, but because I physically control what happens to the stage. By pulling on a rope I can change the space. I am present in the space almost as the puppeteer I myself glare at. Similarly to Thadeusz Kantor's role in 'The Dead Class', the director is personified as character in performance. While Kantor conducts his congregation of childhood memories I play with my performers, revelling in their obedience and not offering them reward. Hans-Thies Lehmann points out that *'In Kantor's theatre, however, the human actors appear under the spell of objects'*¹⁰ which is how I command my own performers. The props that I lower to them, the material that demands tasks of them are in control of the humans in the space, because the objects are a literal extension of my presence, my control. In true postdramatic fashion in this theatre objects are of higher status to humans, therefore *'the hierarchy vital for drama vanishes, a hierarchy in which everything (and every thing) revolves around human action, the things being mere props'*¹¹. Along with hierarchy, linear plot also disappears. The tasks set for my performers are isolated; once a new task is instigated the previous task is forgotten about and bears no influence on the future actions of the performers. Of course narratives can be drawn from the way that the separate

¹⁰ Lehman. *Postdramatic Theatre* p73

¹¹ Lehman. *Postdramatic Theatre* p73

tasks are placed next to each other, but linear storyline is not provided for an audience. My disinterest in linearity and obsession with aesthetics links my work most strongly with the work of Robert Wilson, or Bill Viola. As suggested in my proposal these artists would be very influential as their theatrical concerns when creating are visual, symbolic, and bizarre.

I did not stick whole heartedly to the ideas suggested in my proposal. The work was not palimpsestuous, was not dream like. Far from asking my audience to be lost in the world they are witness to, I now change the pace of my performance to keep their minds alert, and ask them to notice the stark contrast and distance between one world and another. The proposal for my final project was a very different performance to the one that was produced. In the proposal stages all I was certain of was that my mind was more concerned with aesthetic than linearity or plot which is why my attention turned to Wilson and Viola. I do not regret that I did not fulfil my proposal There is something really satisfying about producing a piece of work that you feel truly reflects yourself in that moment, in that place, in that time. The satisfaction is laced with pleasant surprise when that was not your intention, but is nevertheless the outcome, a personification of unexpressed emotion, an artefact of person and of being. I accept and embrace the final performance for everything that it was; the culmination of an internal battle against any

structure trying to inflict definition. I think the performance succeeded in many ways.

Aesthetically the space succeeded in its transformation from stark white to visually pleasing chaos. Conceptually, the presence of director, dictator, and controller was a powerful and absolutely necessary one in my eyes. The variety of interpretations that could be taken from placing series of tasks together in an order formed purely on juxtaposition of tempo and spatial awareness was extraordinary, but the umbrella rule that the tasks were never completed well enough, with the director only speaking to confirm their lack of success, was particularly important to me. This concept, in my eyes, was the metaphorical clothes line I previously mentioned that held the otherwise random collection of tasks and introduction of props together. The ever vocal director had a larger part to play than I was aware of during the process. On stage absolutely everything began its life moving downwards; from the gentle, controlled lowering of the bikes at the very beginning to the dropping of ping pong balls, everything started high and came down to the space from above. This effectively reflected the space being controlled by a higher power than those who inhabited it. Decisions on the final moments of the piece came extremely late in the process, but were perhaps successful because of this. After witnessing this world of despair, I struggled to find my ending. After some long

and often frustrating conversations with my performers and also with myself I made the decision that in the end would be hope. Jim would break free from the world of the controlled, and take steps into the world of the controlling. There is hope that you can change your life and your situation if you make the decision to take that step, cross that line, jump off that platform and trust that the bungee cord will catch you.

Rhythmically I feel that the first forty minutes of the performance functioned as I would have liked. The aesthetical and rhythmic flow was something that I was most concerned about and the first half of the piece was finally tuned, full of nuance and constantly changing, offering surprises with each new element that was introduced and keeping the performance interesting and fresh. I will readily admit that the latter half of the performance was not as successful. In all honesty, at forty minutes the piece was complete in my eyes, but in efforts to meet the sixty minute time requirement I forced more into the performance that in retrospect I would not include if not pressured by time. If I was to repeat the performance outside of academic structure, the length of the balls and cards game would be cut. The ending would most definitely be kept as a beacon of hope. But I was aware that the tasks were lasting just that bit too long broke mould with the snappy, ever changing rhythm that had been established.

For me, this is life. This is what I created, and yet I feel like I didn't create it, it was already there, I just expressed it. Perhaps it is my rebellious attitude bought on by years of conforming to rules and social codes without question. It's chaotic yet controlled; I want to fit in but cannot conform. I am in a place where I feel decisions are made for me, socially and politically, and yet I allow them to be made. Do I have to live life one task to another never feeling good enough, never feeling complete? My performers wear childlike clothes, and move with clownish rolls, naive yet pained, together yet struggling, behaved yet tired. Yes, for me, this is life.

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