



To the Day

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Northumbria University, Newcastle.
Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory. UoA 32.



**Northumbria
University**
NEWCASTLE

TO THE DAY





Type of output:
Performance
(2 solo performances,
public talk,
workshop,
publication)

by
Sandra Johnston

Cover:
To the Day (Pt2),
solo performance,
Center for Art on Migration
Politics, Copenhagen, Denmark.
Photo credit: Britta My Thomsen

Left:
To the Day (Pt2)
solo performance,
Trampoline House,
Copenhagen, Denmark.
Photo credit: Britta My Thomsen

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SUMMARY

To the Day is comprised of two site-responsive performances created by Johnston for Center for Art on Migration Politics (CAMP) addressing issues of trauma and social invisibility among migrant communities in Denmark.

The purpose of the work was to produce performance actions which created direct interactions with people caught within the asylum process and with arts audiences, transcending barriers of access, interpretation and dissemination. Johnston sought to develop dialogues with volunteers, social workers and refugees around questions of displacement and social exclusion. She publicly articulated personal perspectives on the Northern Irish ‘Troubles’ as part of the project aims to identify and engage with issues of global conflict and of the mechanics of differentiation exploited by media reporting.

To the Day was commissioned by CAMP – a non-state funded humanitarian centre for refugees and an art venue – as part of *We Shout and Shout, but No One Listens: Art from Conflict Zones*, an extensive arts programme addressing migration politics. Recognizing the ethical sensitivities of social engagement (Bishop 2012), as well as prescient ideas of compassion fatigue (Moeller 1999), the project extended Johnston’s research concerning the realities of war and issues of representing conflict from embodied, female perspectives.

Johnston spent eight days between the social/humanitarian facilities of Trampoline House and the CAMP gallery, participating in group sessions and interacting with daily users of the building. The resultant performance interventions drew from this engagement, utilizing familiar objects from within that environment, ensuring gestures and materials provided inclusive, non-verbal points of interpretation for the audiences and yet transformed habitual meanings through processes of improvisation.

During a two-day symposium at CAMP, Johnston performed twice, spoke on a panel, led a workshop and was interviewed by Bridge refugee radio station. An e-publication drew the project together with philosophical and artistic perspectives on representations of war including essays by Butler and Mirzoeff.

TIMELINE

2016 Dec	2017 Jan	2017 Feb	2017 Mar
<p>20th December, Discussions with Kuratorisk Aktion (KA) a Danish anti-capitalist, decolonial curatorial collective formed by Frederikke Hansen and Tone Olaf Nielsen.</p>	<p>19th January, Submission of content for e-publication and plan for performance materials.</p>	<p>25th February, Arrive in Copenhagen for six day production period in Trampoline House, building sculptures, and involvement in regular house sessions.</p>	<p>1st March, Interviewed by Refugee Radio.</p> <p>4th March, <i>To the Day</i> (Pt 1) Performance at opening event.</p> <p>5th March, <i>To the Day</i> (Pt 2) Performance, workshop and participation in panel discussion at War images: How to Show that Black Lives Matter.</p>

Right:
Trampoline House installation
preparation in Kitchen B.
Photo credit: Sandra Johnston

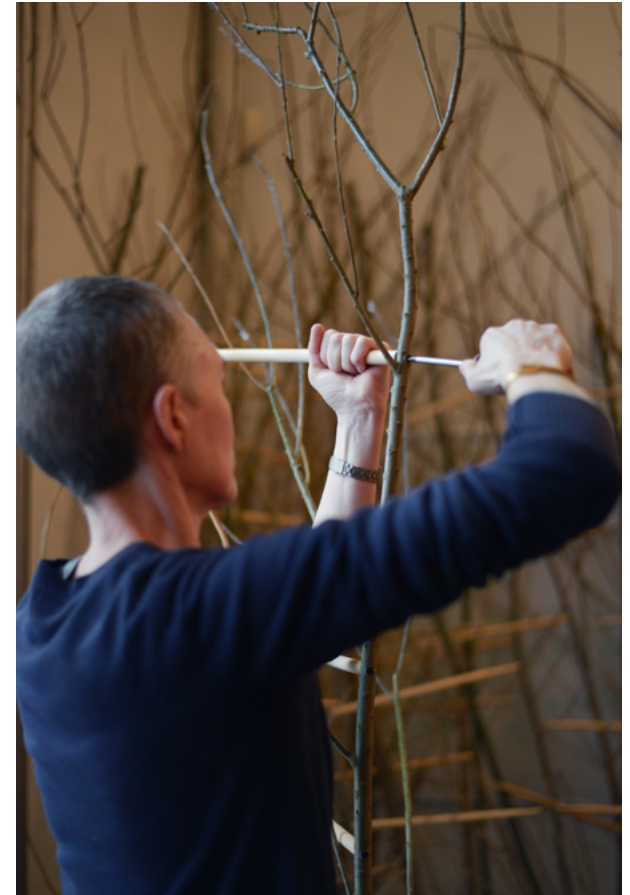


INTRODUCTION

To the Day was developed by interacting directly within the social amenity areas of Trampoline House, building a sculptural installation with two hundred willow branches that were utilized in the first performance during one of the two public events. This layer of social interaction with staff and volunteers was integral to the process as a dialogical encounter, based on listening and receiving first-hand accounts from those experiencing the asylum process in Denmark. As the only artist working directly in the center it was important that Johnston's presence was accepted by the refugee community and that the work was non-threatening to people suffering from PTSD. In this regard, the branches became sculptural residues, having an extensive afterlife beyond the performance as Trampoline activists requested to keep them and reused them during public demonstrations thereafter for displaying their banners. This indicated that the community understood and accepted the concept of the branches as markers, signposts and barriers.

Right:
Trampoline House installation
preparation in Kitchen B.
Photo credit: Sandra Johnston





Above: Installation preparation in Kitchen B,
talking with resident community.

Photo credit: Anna Emy



Left: *To the Day (pt1)*, solo performance began in the street outside Trampoline House as the audience arrived.

Photo credit: Britta My Thomsen

Below: Exterior of Trampoline House building.

Photo credit: Sandra Johnston



RESEARCH CHALLENGE

The main aims were to produce performance artworks that could be interpreted equally by both refugee and arts audiences. As a maker of non-verbal actions in the midst of spoken presentations, Johnston's performances were improvised and precarious and thereby functioned to rupture the space of discussion with a reminder of the social precarity permeating those present in the room. Subsequently, by participating in a panel discussion and delivering a workshop, Johnston aimed to diversify the forms of communication - admitting both embodied and verbal - through which the concerns and experiences of the refugee community could be engaged.



Right: *To the Day (Pt1)*,
solo performance, Trampoline House.

Photo credit: Britta My Thomsen



Above:
To the Day, (Pt1) solo performance (2-hours)
performed during the opening event directly
within the social facilities of Trampoline House.
Photo credit: Britta My Thomsen

Below:
Curator Tone Olaf Nielsen
contextualising Johnston's performance
for the audience after completion.
Photo credit: Britta My Thomsen

Right and below:
Interpretative sessions in the CAMP
gallery led by the artists and volunteers.
Photo credit: Britta My Thomsen



CONTEXT

The CAMP organisation is located within Trampoline House, which was founded in 2010 by artists and activists as a community center for asylum seekers, refugees and Danish citizens concerned at the inhumane circumstances of asylum in Denmark. Whilst functioning as a humanitarian center, it also exists as an influential art venue promoting challenging exhibitions and platforming dialogical encounters.

The production of participatory interventions in contested environments requires acute awareness of the potentially harmful aspects of social engagement (Bishop 2012). Johnston's practice does not employ a participatory model, instead it is based upon observation, listening and interacting with the traces of habitual behaviour present in environments. In this regard, the work is not invasive of people's trust, but has a capacity to illuminate aspects of how environments function, and how they are sensed by those who inhabit them. This exploration of 'kinesthetic empathy' resonates with somatic practices of social interaction (Reason and Reynolds 2012).

Right:
To the Day (Pt2)
solo performance,
Trampoline House,
Copenhagen, Denmark.
Photo credit: Britta My Thomsen



Conceptually the project was framed by Judith Butler's ideas of "grievability" (2016), signalling the urgent need for conscientious action against racial injustice. All of the invited artists: Alfredo Jaar (Chile), Khaled Barakeh (Syria), Nermine Hammam (Egypt), Amel Ibrahimović (Bosnia-Herzegovina) and Gohar Dashti (Iran), use their artworks to expose issues of compassion fatigue and the negative impact of mediatization from various geographic/cultural perspectives. Johnston's involvement through live interactions firmly positioned the idea of taking responsibility ongoingly, through one's own actions and reactions to witnessing social trauma.

The actions Johnston developed conveyed aspects of a feminist aesthetic of commemoration comparable with Mexican artist Elvira Santa Maria's extensive series of performances addressing social mourning through sited gestures and Guatemalan artist Regina José Galindo's performance activism based on passivist tactics and resilience. Similarly, Johnston's interactions frequently engage the politics of slow-time, stillness and micro gestures to explore how individual small acts have the capacity to create moments of collective connection and awareness.

Below:

To the Day (Pt2) solo performance,
Trampoline House, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Photo credit: Britta My Thomsen



METHODS AND PROCESSES

To the Day (Pt1) was two hours in duration and was performed during the opening event directly within the social area of Trampoline House. The action both altered and purposefully obstructed the architecture of the communal space. Occasionally people intervened to assist with building the structure bridging between three pillars. The sculpture was finally cut loose from the architecture and, with audience assistance, coiled into a free-standing structure. Various connotations of division and entanglement were conveyed and viewers later articulated the structure as being evocative of different kinds of territorial boundaries.

Johnston's performance, *To the Day (Pt2)* took place prior to the panel discussion and workshops. All the materials were sourced directly in the amenity's spaces so they were familiar to those who regularly used the center. Examples include a sewing machine available for anyone mending or making clothes and other objects such as: butter, candles and flowers. Such items were brought directly from their places in the various rooms as Johnston moved through the audience. In this way, actions were choreographed as a process of displacing and defamiliarizing, yet continuing to provide clear points of recognition as meanings altered within the improvisation.



Right:
To the Day (Pt2)
solo performance,
Trampoline House,
Copenhagen, Denmark.
Photo credit: Britta My Thomsen

Discursive events are central to CAMP's ethos and Johnston's performance was preceded and to some extent framed by a presentation from political theorist Achille Mbembe (Cameroon / South Africa). Johnston then participated in the main discussion event: *War Images: How to Show That Black Lives Matter*, moderated by theorist Mathias Danbolt. The panel involved all of the participating artists, each responding from diverse cultural perspectives on the problematics of making art in response to war whilst fully recognising the ethical complexities of representation. Johnston contributed insights from the Northern Ireland peace process based upon the ongoing search for justice in the absence of a truth commission, and the role of ephemeral acts within the trajectory of commemoration.

Johnston facilitated a workshop after the panel discussion involving simple exercises based on breath, which led into an intensive debate about the potential of embodied practices as an alternative means to address traumatic memory.

Right:
Johnston, Panel Discussion:
*War images: How to Show that Black
Lives Matter*, Trampoline House.
Photo credit: Britta My Thomsen





Above:
Panel Discussion:
*War images: How to Show that Black
Lives Matter*, Trampoline House.
Photo credit: Britta My Thomsen

DISSEMINATION

The project was disseminated via website, exhibition, and symposium.

<http://campcph.org/past/22112016>

An e-catalogue was produced with essays by Judith Butler (USA) and Nicholas Mirzoeff (USA).

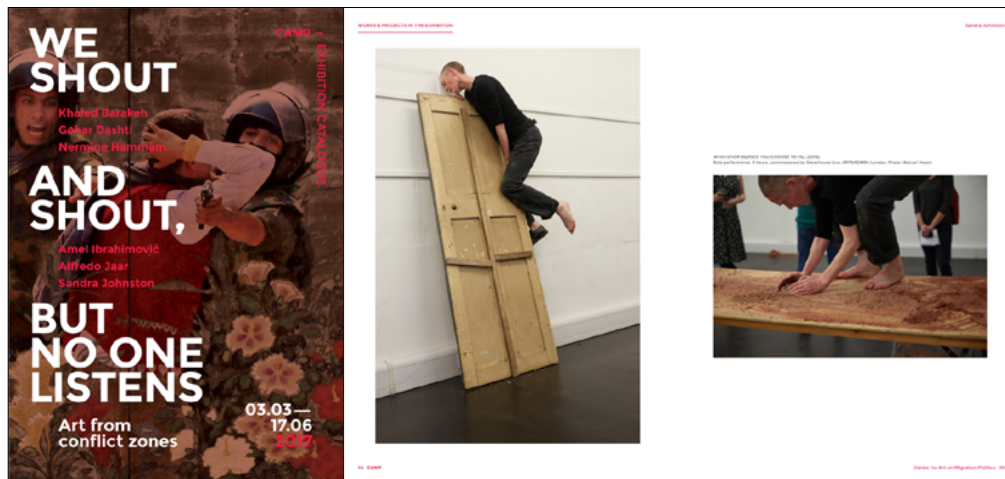
<http://campcph.org/we-shout/>

Johnston was interviewed by BRIDGE refugee radio station, broadcast during the run of the exhibition.

A podcast link from the panel discussion was made available on the CAMP website.

Below:

E-catalogue available on CAMP website.



Reviews:

Kristian Vistrup Madsen, “Regarding the pain of others” / review on *Arterritory.com*, March 12, 2017.

Alix Rothnie, “Curating the Border between Aesthetics and Action” / feature on *Curatingthecontemporary.org*, May 7, 2017.

Mette Sandbye, “Vi råber og råber” / review in *Weekendavisen*, March 10, 2017.

Below:

Review by Mette Sandbye in *Weekendavisen*.



REFERENCES

Bishop, C. (2012), *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. Verso, London.

Butler, J. (2020) *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind: The Ethical in the Political*, Verso, London.

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Reason, M. & Reynolds, D. (ed), (2012), *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*, Intellect books.

Moeller, S, D. (1999), *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death*, Routledge.

Artworks:

Elvira Santa Maria, *Escala 1:1* (2007),
48.480 blancos y uno rojo (2007)

Regina José Galindo, *Who Can Erase the Traces* (2003),
Exhalación (Estoy Viva), (2014)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Kuratorisk Aktion

CAMP Center for Art on Migration Politics

Trampoline House



Right:
CAMP Center for Art on
Migration Politics, banner.

