

ALICE
THEOBALD
AT
CHISENHOLE

'I'VE SAID YES NOW, THAT'S IT.'

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By Alice Theobald

Musicians

Gabriel Stones
Alice Theobald
Jack Wylie

Performers

Aymie Backler
Michael Garrad
Fay Nicolson
Rose O'Gallivan
Tom Woolner

Film

Richard Forbes-Hamilton
Fay Nicolson
Amy Stephens
Maxwell Wade

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Triangle Arts Trust, The British Council in Oman, The Royal Academy Schools, Adam De Cruz and Ivan Despues.

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SATURDAY 8 FEBRUARY 2014, 7PM

ONE NIGHT ONLY AT CHISENHALE GALLERY

Chisenhale Gallery re-launches *Interim* – a programme of event-based commissions for Chisenhale's unique gallery space – with a new performance by London-based artist Alice Theobald.

Theobald's live performances and videos explore authenticity and spectacle, borrowing and conflating theatrical techniques such as method acting and role-play. The performances reference the hybrid nature of their construction, often including musical scores composed by the artist, which borrow from the genres of pop music and film scores. Theobald frequently works in collaboration with a cast of non-professional actors and performers and employs repetition as a strategy to interrogate the unstable relationship between art, communication and representation. For her *Interim* commission, *I've said yes now, that's it*, Theobald will present a new work combining live music with vocal experimentation.

Alice Theobald (b. 1985, Leicester) lives and works in London. Recent performances and exhibitions include *They Keep Putting Words In My Mouth! An Operetta of Sorts*, Pilar Corrias, London; *Situation!Event*, Gasworks, London; *Alice Theobald, And/ Or* Gallery, London, *AFTER/HOURS/DROP/BOX*, Modern Art Oxford, Oxford and *Young London*, V22, London (all 2013).

With thanks to Pilar Corrias, London.

Interim 2013-14 is supported by Oscar Murillo.

INTERVIEW WITH ALICE THEOBALD

Katie Guggenheim: *This new performance, I've said yes now, that's it. brings together live music, spoken word and actions performed by a group, interspersed with projected video. I wanted to start by asking how these different elements came together. What was the process of making the work?*

Alice Theobald: I'm always taking notes and writing phrases. I always keep a pool of different elements, including lots of snippets of made up tunes. I've got hundreds of sound recordings on my phone. Often it's while I'm walking somewhere I'll sing to myself or think of lines for possible song lyrics that I like and I'll pretend that I'm on the phone to somebody and record it. I have lots of audio files, lots of notes and some ideas of stage designs. There's always these things going on and then it's a matter of picking and choosing – a process of collaging these different elements together – and it usually ends up being a performance and often requires people.

KG: *Why do you think you return to live performance as a format?*

AT: Performance is a way to tie in all the things that I like materially. It's a place where I can make music and use dance and lighting or create an atmosphere spatially. Then my work is also referencing the construction and nature of performance as well.

KG: *The chorus is something you've used previously and returned to again with this performance but in this case there is something almost cult-like about the way they speak and act as one. It seems contradictory, therefore, that they're asking questions about identity, for example, 'I don't look like the way that I feel', which has an awkwardness to it. It's like something you might say to yourself but not out loud, so to hear it sung and chanted like a mantra...*

AT: A lot of these things come from conversations I have with people. That particular phrase came about when someone took a photo of me. You know when you think you're doing quite a good pose and then you look at the picture and you think that you don't look like the way that you felt? That feeling extends into other things, like when your body is doing something and your mind is thinking of something completely different. I also quite like the awkwardness of it. I think the things that I say or the dialogue I use can be quite cringey sometimes and I like that people might wonder whether it's sincere or not, and it is sincere and it's also embarrassing. A lot of it is about how to deal with things that are emotional, or existential or difficult, or contradictions. I'm pointing

at those things.

KG: *It's interesting that you're taking something that is a real sentiment – that puzzles you and catches you somehow – and by repeating it and singing it and getting other people to repeat it back and forth you're testing it and examining it; stretching it almost like a physical material.*

AT: 'I don't look like the way that I feel' is talking about life experience but also about performance in a traditional sense, and acting. I'm fascinated by method acting, when people try to inhabit the fiction of their character but then think of something real in order to evoke emotion in their performance. It might be a different emotion to how it looks. When this line appears in the performance the performers are clearly taking instructions from me.

KG: *You often use untrained actors in your performances. Why is that?*

AT: An untrained actor somehow seems closer to some kind of truth or authenticity than a trained one. Or at least I think that's what should be logical. I find the concept of going through the process of training and rehearsing and refining, in order to make something appear more realistic or authentic, quite absurd. Learning to behave authentically... the very intent contradicts itself. It's kind of ridiculous when you strip it back and think about it too hard. People get awards for pretending to be somebody else – so essentially for being the best liars. I'm not against acting, I just think it's absurd and fascinating.

I really like the low-budget Film 4 productions that you would find on telly at 2am that use actors nobody have heard of, fresh out of drama school or you might recognise one from a British Gas advert or something. They had harsh lighting and the odd experimental camera shot. There is something quite raw and jarring about these production values that I really like. This, to me at least, seems more real or authentic than Hollywood.

KG: *In your work any attempt to represent reality is distorted by the fact that the actions and speech are performed by a group rather than an individual. It's clearly unnatural for people's thoughts and emotions to be synchronised. The group heightens the artificiality.*

AT: Having a group takes it away from the individual. It's not just about me. The voiceover talks directly about the anxiety of the individual in a group scenario and wanting to feel like an individual but also the feeling of collective empathy. You can sometimes feel very alone but there are lots of people who are very alone, we're in it

together.

KG: *What do you mean by collective empathy?*

AT: The way we all understand things that are represented over and over again. The cliché, for example. It's a cliché for a reason: because a lot of people can recognise it and know it too well. Like seeing something as a representation before you've experienced it. Like love or death on TV. You see it represented over and over again and you think that that's how it's supposed to be and then if you experience it differently you think you have a kind of deficiency.

KG: *Do you think you can experience a version of both in parallel – acting out what you think you are supposed to feel whilst simultaneously experiencing a different reaction? I'm thinking of your performance and the disjointedness that occurs... the deadpan faces of the performers and the language that they use... the emotive music and banal actions that accompany it. There's a kind of emotional misalignment.*

AT: I think I'm trying to have those elements play off each other as well, almost competing. The very straight faces – Godard-like. In the film I took away the faces completely. That's where emotion is conveyed usually, so I took it away and then it feels almost like a dirty trick to put music to something like that. It feels melancholic or nostalgic, even though there are no faces and no emotions expressed at all. The Godardian or Brechtian technique backfires. It ends up generating it's own kind of emotion through it's lack of emotion – it's sad not to have emotion!

I have a funny relationship with emotion, how it's used and manipulated. I guess that's why I try to pull it apart or deconstruct it in front of an audience and show the making of it. You can see the artificial lighting, the music is a bit over the top, the voiceover... It's like giving too much information and showing too much. Even though you're saying and revealing everything it becomes absurd.

KG: *By revealing everything in fact you create a new artifice.*

AT: Yes, it ends up being a bit of a paradox.

KG: *I wanted to ask about the way that you made this new performance because it seems like a different way of working for you. You told me that it's the first time you've written a script before working with the performers. When you were developing They Keep Putting Words in*

My Mouth! An Operetta of Sorts (2013) at AndOr Gallery, which was shown as a work in progress at Gasworks and then at Pilar Corrias, you were videoing all the rehearsals and watching them and this fed back into the work. Then you included live and pre-recorded footage in the performance itself. For I've said yes now, that's it you haven't done that at all. The video you're showing was shot on the residency you did in Oman in December.

AT: It's about trying to find different games and strategies for each performance. It's a kind of research method that keeps the work going and makes each performance different. Process is very important. I think that's revealed in the performances themselves. With this, the music came quite early. I was working with the musicians before working with the performers and I'd record that and I'd listen to that whilst I was writing, all the time, on loop. I'd also watch the film that I made, so it was those three elements – the music, the film and me writing.

KG: *It's interesting that the music came first in this case. You're also in a band and I wondered how much that practice overlaps with the way you've approached making this work?*

AT: It really helps being in Ravioli Me Away, the band, it's not a career band, it's like an elaborate hobby which takes away the pressure somehow. It makes the process of making less pressured, doing it within a DIY music scene, which feels quite separate to the art world. The band is a lot more of a collaborative process. You're taking away a bit of your own responsibility. It's a healthy process that I can take back into the way I make work myself. Sometimes the ideas I come up with the band are my best and I wish that I'd saved them for my own work! I did use a Ravioli Me Away song once in my work, *Mike Check* (2013).

KG: *In this performance you've positioned yourself on a stage in between the two musicians. the set up is very much like a band but you're addressing and interacting with the performers rather than performing a song and you've referred to it as a voice over. Could you say something more about how this functions?*

AT: When a voice-over is used in a song or a film it's in order to set a kind of truth. It's the 'thinking' voice that's set apart from the rest as if it's revealing something or sharing an important revelation. As thinking human beings we are always searching for our own truths and trying to balance our intuition with what we consider to be rational. When I was working on *I've said yes now, that's it*. I was listening to a lot of music that uses voice-overs, like Robert Ashley and Hal Hartley

soundtracks, and songs like *My Sex* by Elastica and Baz Lurhmann's sunscreen song from '99, which went to number one in the pop charts. I think that the UK's collective conscious needed a song like this to enter the Millennium. A voice-over can be quite loaded and almost god-like, quite epic, so it felt necessary for me to be on a stage to present this.

KG: *Where does the title, I've said yes now, that's it. come from?*

AT: It came from a conversation with a friend, actually when I was talking about this performance and I didn't know what I was going to do. With lots of things in life you say yes and yes as a word feels like a kind of opening but it's also a closing because it closes off other things.

KG: *Yes and no are both 'speech acts' as defined by J.L Austin. They are performative in that the act of saying them has an implication – like 'I do' in a marriage ceremony – something happens. I think it's amazing that the performance is about yes and no.*

AT: 'I've said no now, let's go' also acts as another opening. It indicates a movement and an action. Another bit, 'Action, action, expectation' references the fact of the performance itself and ends up being the performance. I think there's another layer about relationships and wanting to connect with each other. As human beings there is a need to connect.

KG: *What was the line about the mirror again?*

AT: 'You see a strange kind of reflection and one of you starts to replace expectation with reflection'. The performers are in pairs and so reflection is literal, as in a mirror image of another human being wearing the same things. But I also mean reflection as in thinking and then they try to harmonize, both musically and also as a relationship between two people. I go on to say 'which can be a difficult task because it requires listening and trust' and this is what you need to be able to harmonize in both senses. I'm always trying to make these connections apparent between the real world and the performance... making these things conflate somehow.

KG: *I wanted to ask you about the connections between the performance and the film. At the beginning of the piece the performers are alone in their little pools of light and the character in the film is alone in the hotel and gradually they come together – the performers are aligned and move as one unit and the film also ends with them together, in a social space.*

AT: Yes there's no interaction between the performers at the beginning but they're still synchronised. This is the feeling you have in a big chain hotel when you're surrounded by people in an identical situation to everyone else but very much on your own. There's something luxurious about hotels but they're used for both work and leisure, which are such different things.

KG: *That brings us onto the costumes that the performers are wearing. They're hilarious and puzzling at the same time, and quite beautiful with the coloured lines and the way they move. I think they're great. They're like overalls, they turn people into Plasticine Morph-like characters, but then they have an outfit drawn on. How would you describe that?*

AB: A shirt and belt hinting at a simple work or 'going to office' outfit. Smart-cas.

KG: *The outfits are interesting because they look like overalls, which refers to work and then they also look like onesies – something very much associated with leisure which is just to be worn at home.*

AT: They're quite Constructivist as well. I'm interested in the history of the uniform as being something egalitarian but also repressive.

KG: *Could you talk a bit about the nodding and shaking of the head? The yes and no again...*

AB: It's nodding as in nodding along to the music. It's something everyone can get, the collective beat and then there are these two different ways that you can nod your head to music, one meaning yes and the other meaning no.

KG: *In a simple, quite beautiful way it's about yes and no but it's just nodding along to the beat. The meaning is emptied out of those signs and replaced with the music. Yes and no become the same thing. This makes me think again about truth and authenticity.*

AT: With any performance, although it's constructed and rehearsed, there's the inevitable fact that it's real and live and so it's vulnerable to nerves or mistakes. There's something authentic about that and that sets it in friction with what it's being presented as. It makes it problematic and I'm happy for there to be problems in it. I'm not interested in making things that are watertight. I want this structure of things to mimic or mirror real life, which is also not watertight. It has its own problems and is very constructed and has boundaries and perimeters.

KG: *During this conversation we've been talking about the performance as if it exists in front of us and is easily examined, but it hasn't actually happened yet. There's a lot that you don't know.*

AT: I feel like I'm always discovering things along the way. It's a process of making connections as I'm doing it. It all starts to feel cyclical and meta somehow... and very hard to explain! All the elements are supposed to be experienced at the same time layered on top of each other and you can't explain them on top of each other! I'm trying to communicate something about the struggle of communication as well. The struggle of representing something, like thoughts into language or thoughts into action. It's the same with making music or any form of artistic expression or even just trying to communicate with someone.

Alice Theobald interviewed by Katie Guggenheim, Exhibitions and Events Organiser, Chisenhale Gallery, February 2014.

INTERIM:

Interim is a series of event-based projects taking place in between exhibitions and commissioned for Chisenhale's unique gallery space.

NEXT EXHIBITION:

Camille Henrot
The Pale Fox

28 February - 13 April 2014

Preview: Thursday 27 February 2014, 6.30–8.30pm

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Wednesday to Sunday 1–6pm

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