

Art

MONTHLY

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Ulay

Interviewed by Dominic Johnson

Love AIDS Riots

Chris McCormack

Roll Over SI

Paul Walsh

belit sağ

Profile by George Vasey



usefully explore eroticism and queer auto-ethnography.

'Journeys with the Initiated' is haunted by the spectre of another exhibition in which these artists talk to each other freely without having to do so via the inhibiting, intrusive, unnecessary and even at times offensive medium of Fichte. This disconnect was a repeated refrain during an accompanying panel discussion; Kilomba eloquently detailed her deep disquiet with the project's power imbalances and imbrication in the legacies of colonialism and imperialism. The placement of Fichte's writings next to those of Lévi-Strauss on the 'reading room' tables underscores how such issues are acknowledged but not dealt with at a curatorial level. How, precisely, does Fichte differ from Lévi-Strauss, if he does? How do Mau's photographs of Harlem diverge from any number of ethnographically inflected street studies produced during the 20th century? Why devote such resources to ventriloquising Fichte, and why now? The claim is that Fichte's difference lies in his queerness. Fichte's writings might well be subversive, and intersect productively with the histories of gay, lesbian and trans people of colour, but at Participant Inc and at e-flux – and even reading *The Black City* – it is difficult to get a clear understanding of how his sexuality shaped his politics, specifically his perspectives on constructs of race and ethnicity, and the relevance of that to the contemporary moment. The repeated invocation of Fichte as a queer subject starts to feel suspect, as if this is being offered as a palliative for neocolonialism.

Perhaps answers to these pressing questions emerge at the macrocosmic level, but experiencing all the *Love and Ethnography* exhibitions will be an initiation available to only a very select few. During the panel, Franke and Diederichsen gave the impression that they felt they had to acknowledge the project's deep-seated problems, but never convincingly addressed whether incorporating critique provided justification enough. 'Journeys with the Initiated' suggests otherwise; it is rare to encounter an exhibition in which the works seem so ambivalent about its premise, and it is a testament to the practices of Gaines, McClodden, de Medeiros, Ifekoya and Kilomba, and, by extension, Umolu's curatorship, is that, while the show represents a particularly complex instance of intellectual production, their combined efforts result in a knowingly conflicted and difficult-to-read display. There may be an awful lot of anxious outsourcing occurring on Franke's and Diederichsen's parts, but not everyone is doing the labour desired. This provides some small relief in an otherwise deeply uncomfortable, queasy experience. ■

Catherine Spencer is a lecturer at the University of St Andrews.

The Ground Beneath Your Feet

Castlefield Gallery Manchester

16 November to 8 January

'Go into the dark space,' the sign told me, 'Close the curtain tight behind you ... Wait ... and wait.' Anticipating something, in a pitch-dark room, feels a bit like predicting the outcome of this country's Brexit negotiations. The sign went on to tell me that lurking invisibly some distance away in that small, dark space, downstairs at the Castlefield Gallery, was an

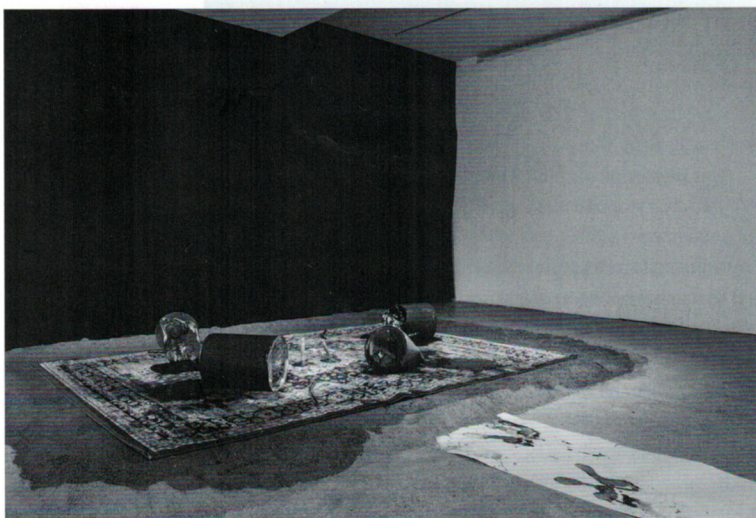
object that might be capable of emitting light, very faintly, if I waited long enough and stared hard enough. It was described as 'a luminous fungus'. Did I detect a faint glow beginning to appear? Or was that little patch of light I thought I could detect really a figment of my imagination?

This mysterious exhibit is part of an installation called *Progress has stopped making sense (but there is still neighbourliness)*, 2018, by the Manchester-based artist Jane Lawson. It concerns mycorrhizal networks and the mutual aid that exists between plants and fungi in a given ecosystem, reflecting the impact of books, like Peter McCoy's *Radical Mycology* and Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, in which the valuable and non-competitive role of fungi in ecological networks is made central. Another section of Lawson's installation displays bulging, cylindrical filter bags full of sawdust, each one seeded with mushroom spores, including grey, yellow and white oyster, lion's mane and morels. Linked together in the wild, each type of mushroom provides an element of support for the greater community: the morel, for instance, converts sunlight to energy and therefore provides power, while the lion's mane organises and removes waste, thus providing sanitation. When I saw the bags grouped together, those mushrooms were just beginning to appear. Lawson admits the gallery setting cannot possibly start to act in the same way a 'real' mycorrhizal network functions in nature, but by presenting her installation here she is attempting to map nature on to her own personal experience of a human system where mutual aid operated successfully – in her case, at the UK Camps for Climate Action between 2006 and 2010.

'The Ground Beneath Our Feet' is a show about the way these natural and cultural complexities are ignored and distorted in the current political climate, rendering them as difficult to make out as a mushroom's glow. Attending the opening, Iranian artist Omid Asadi performed *Dammam*, 2018, in which he and a group of four accomplices used metal rods to beat a rhythm on oil barrels until they fractured, one by one. A dark substance resembling crude oil spilled out on to the Persian carpet on which all participants sat. The artist comes from an oil-rich province, and the funereal character of the ritualistic rhythm seemed to mourn the damage and ruination caused by oil. As the artist had explained earlier to the surrounding audience, the carpet's traditional design symbolised all four corners of the earth, woven together in all their colourful intricacy and interconnectedness.

The smallest piece in the show caused the most controversy when it was first exhibited. *The Intruder*, 2015, by Ecuadorian artist Oscar Santillan is a small piece of stone taken from a cairn on the 3,029ft-high summit of Scafell Pike, Cumbria. Controversy ensued when it was first exhibited at London's Copperfield Gallery as the 'uppermost inch of the highest mountain in England'. Conservationists demanded the stone's return, and Cumbria Tourism announced: 'We want our mountain back.' The fact that the cairn was made of stones placed there by visitors did not seem to make much difference: the symbolic significance of its former position and the fact that it had been removed was all that mattered. Looking back on the event from the perspective of a nation plunged into political turmoil by the results of the Brexit referendum, this tiny piece of stone seems not so much a symbol of England's tallest point, but also of the extent to which the country has become fragmented.

The UK artist Tulani Hlalo also attempted to find some essential truth about homeland and origin by filming herself in the locations where both her parents were born. In *Fatherland*, 2016, we see her facing the camera in the countryside outside Bulawayo, smearing her body, her face and her white swimsuit



Omid Asadi
Dammam 2018

in dry, red Zimbabwean earth, much of which blows away. In *Motherland*, 2016, wearing the same swimsuit, the artist stands ankle-deep under variegated grey skies in the choppy waters of the River Tyne, while seagulls screech and waves crash coldly, sending shivers into the viewer's mind. While Hlalo's discomfort is apparent in both scenarios, the contrasting nature of her surroundings – rural Zimbabwe and industrial-maritime Tyneside – leaps out as much as her patient attempts to interact with each of them.

Another perspective on belonging and the ideological link between home and the concept of homeland emerges in Roee Rosen's film *The Dust Channel*, 2016, a kind of mini-opera describing the domestic life of an Israeli couple obsessed with cleanliness. Their singing, which is supported by a group of fellow musicians performing a score composed by Igor Krutogolov, is obsessive, anxious and funny. The couple interact in bizarre, hilarious ways with their modern household appliances – their Dyson vacuum cleaner in particular, which emerges as a character in its own right, complete with its transparent body through which you can see all the captured dirt entering and swirling around, a vital aspect of its appeal, as its designer James Dyson himself points out in a clip. In the neurotically controlled environment of the home, the machine becomes sexualised.

Meanwhile, the outside world of the dusty Negev desert becomes an increasingly disturbing intrusion, flashing into view in the form of clips from television news reports that describe, in particular, the Holot detention centre, where asylum seekers from Sudan and Eritrea have been detained (or 'voluntarily returned' to their countries of origin) since 2012.

While the *Dust Channel's* central characters focus all their attention on their pleasant, middle-class living quarters, others lack any such havens. This is reflected in an installation by the Museum of Homelessness, consisting of a selection of items from their 2017-18 State of the Nation project. These donated items include a piece of corn cob from the action group Grow Heathrow Transition Town, representing the potential to build ecologically sustainable homes from such materials, and *The Banner*, by Focus 15 campaign, Newham, London, protesting against the arrest of EU rough sleepers in east London. These 'shared stories' offer a valuable counterpoint to familiar assumptions and narratives misrepresenting and often demonising homeless people in the UK.

Many artists have focused their attention on banknotes and the arbitrary and absurd assignment of design-based

value to the essential, commonplace substance they are made of: paper. The Scottish artist Michael White's *Believe It Because You Want To*, 2016, is a series of ink and gouache works executed on demonetised Zimbabwean banknotes from the period between 2009 and 2015 when the currency hyperinflated and dollar notes were printed with multi-million units of value. On these, White has painted characters based on WW Denslow's original illustrations from Frank L Baum's book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Published in 1900, decades before Judy Garland personified Dorothy on film, the book echoed the dreams and nightmares of the 1890s, when the US experienced economic depression, bank failures and a rise in populist politics. With these in mind, it seems quite appropriate to decorate your money with a picture of a tin man or a cowardly lion.

Nearby, items presented for visitors to purchase cheaply, in the slightly more stable UK currency, by the artists' collective Keep It Complex, attempt to go against the current (highly mediated) mood of frustration and pessimism. This group, formed in response to the EU referendum campaign in 2016, has produced merchandise visitors can display to the world, including T-shirts announcing 'Potatoes are Immigrants' or 'I Might Be Wrong'. Whether such wit and sincerity can have much effect in present circumstances is difficult to say, especially during a period when heavily bankrolled organisations pay for propaganda to appear on social media or to be plastered on the sides of buses. As in the case of the glow emitted by the mushroom in the darkened room, we will all have to wait and see what happens. ■

Bob Dickinson is a writer and PhD researcher based in Manchester.

Penny Woolcock: Fantastic Cities

Modern Art Oxford 17 November to 3 March

Penny Woolcock has been making films since the mid 1980s, often casting non-professional actors and working with urban communities to find ways of bringing the issues that affect them to the screen. Until recently, her work was chiefly seen on television, and this, her first major art exhibition, introduces audiences to an eclectic selection, from recent videos shot in locations including London and Oxford, to etchings and photographs made in the 1970s and 1980s, when she lived in Oxford and co-founded the printmaking collective Oxford Printmakers.

Woolcock's autobiographical installation *Big Girl*, 2018, a colossal nude female figure fashioned from tan-coloured tights stuffed with wadding, is folded into the gallery's smallest room. Passing under the sculpture's knee and squeezing into the space to be surrounded by her trapped body, one can listen to an audio recording in which Woolcock speaks about her childhood in an expat 'bubble' in South America, attending boarding schools and enduring a difficult relationship with her mother. She describes her powerful identification with a tramp she sees, and her decision to turn away from her privileged upbringing and pursue a more uncertain and creative life instead. Clearly, being able to make such decisions constitutes further privilege, but Woolcock seeks to embed herself within the subjects she observes.