

## **PACT Zollverein Residency**

### **Motivation statement**

Over the past four years, our collaborative practice has prioritized momentum and plurality of gesture - undertaking numerous works, sometimes light and fleeting, across diverse contexts. Rather than committing ourselves to the development of hefty, singular pieces, we have been preoccupied by the process and aesthetic qualities brought about by a fidgeting enquiry and oblique questioning. We have grown confident and articulate in our weak aesthetic, and align this process with a legacy of critical conceptual practice, and the figure and physicality of the clown (where our practice began). However, as interdisciplinary artists interested in minor and tangential gestures, our work often struggles when presented in awkward and unsupported conditions.

We apply for two interrelated reasons:

- To reflect on our body of work in dialogue with the team at PACT Zollverein, in order to critically reassess what we have 'dug up' over the past few years. We hope to recognize subtle priorities and tactics recurring throughout our work; and to understand what we can put down and move on from. We recognize the limitations of our own perspective on our work; due to the interdisciplinary nature our practice, we think PACT is perfectly situated to critically advise, support and question us during this process.
- To develop the seeds of a new project for either stage or gallery spaces upon which we can more directly focus our efforts. Our works often eschew traditional compositional logics in the pursuit of minimalist, serial and durational propositions; we are interested in challenging ourselves to work at a scale that demands a greater complexity of proposition, rhythm and logic.

Neither a representation nor a summary of these past years, we see this new work as establishing a more confident chapter of our practice; critically departing from our history of work while insisting on the value and originality of our ideas within the wider performance scene.

### **Summary of project description**

This project aims:

- To synthesise our interest in minor gestures, our identification with the figure of the fool, and our growing interest in (and use of) slapstick as a paradigm of performance technique.
- To develop a new movement language/technique - to hone our habits and knowledge into something more tangible, which might then be more readily shared or taught across performance and dance training institutions.
- To identify the seeds of a major performance work that might occupy a gallery or stage space; one that invites (or forces) material and technical decisions that could push our work beyond the minimalist proposition.

How will we undertake this?

- Through conversations with the team at PACT about our work.
- Through studio based research.
- Through testing out ideas in stage and exhibition spaces early on, in order to embolden with scale and resources our imagination, interests and ambitions.

What might we leave with?

- Articulacy and clarity around a major new work, with which to further existing dialogues with performance institutions in the UK, with the aim of presenting this work in Autumn 2018.
- A more articulate and workable set of understandings of our own work, with which to continue to present our existing body of work with a greater confidence and skill.
- The beginning of relationships with artists, theorists and producers outside of the UK, which might hopefully open up possibilities for international touring and collaboration.

### **Project description**

This residency confronts a dilemma within our collaboration: how can we begin to undertake larger scale projects, considering our practice's insistence on pursuing and valuing minor and peripheral distractions? Over the past 24 months we've gained a confidence and understanding of our work, finding a rigor and persistence across an accumulation of propositions and gestures. We have been able to boldly undertake work composed with the surprising (and fleeting) power of negligible actions; in presenting this work we frequently feel we are making a unique contribution to the contexts, and their attendant conversations. But we also have an urge to work with a certain scale - to challenge ourselves, to work with larger platforms and contexts, and to assume the authority and responsibilities these platforms demand. Can we trust our existing methods and techniques to approach this larger work? Will it demand an entirely different sensibility - not just in terms of our sense of composition, or on our working relationship - but in how we generate curiosity within ourselves and sustain (or delve into) our interests?

\* (1) What would we do at PACT? \*

We see ourselves doing three things on this residency:

- hanging out together in and around the studio with the mood of general playfulness that we undertake all of our work - which inevitably leads to the production of a number of minor works, and exciting conversations with the wider circle of peers and practitioners around the space.
- having an extensive conversation with the PACT team helping us think through some of the contradictions, possibilities or limitations of our existing practice.
- an attempt to force ourselves to begin to work on a more expansive or demanding work that might sit within either a gallery or stage space.

This last aim is unnatural for us and deviates from our regular methods and approach; we feel trepidatious about working on this scale, and excited by the prospect of developing new strategies of working to meet this expectation. This new work has the provisional title 'This'. As 'This' has begun to take shape through some initial conversations and play, it has become evident that it represents, or has the potential to represent, a culmination of our research to date. In creating 'This' we would begin with the following points of consideration:

- What does it mean for a performer to refer to 'this', 'that', 'here' or 'there'? What are the ways that meaning and reference can be built, stacked, become corrupted, or cascade through these gestures and utterances? We are interested in the subtlety of suggestion, and the smallest of gestures with which reference can emerge - and the ways in which these

gestures might then lose their ability to reference.

- The growing influence of slapstick within our work. In what ways might we be able to understand the performer's body with a more articulate understanding of this history? Could we find the exact points in which this history meets, and diverges from, our interests?

- A critique of the ways in which sensation, thought, and affect are presented (or performed) within contemporary performance; and the conventions or clichés in the way that private sensation is referred to, or acted out. We are particularly aware of how somatic dance practices (which have been particularly welcomed within performances of dance in gallery spaces) have a particular stake in the performance of these sensations, yet might often deny their conventions and clichés by supposing or demanding authenticity. In exploring the materiality of the gestures of sensation we might approach (or exploit) the ways in which private sensation is referred to through advertising (headaches and indigestion pain; erotics, thought, etc.).

- Ludwig Wittgenstein's unfinished text 'Philosophical Investigations', which ties together these interests - in particular the ways in which it discusses the tangibility of private sensation and temporary meaning making (and languages) through highly comic and slapstick-inspired thought experiments. Wittgenstein's words continually return to the body, and present it as a site in which meaning and intension can become confused.

'This' might look something like this: two performers proposing games, through speech gesture and mute proposition; developments, confusions, collapse; further propositions, double-entendre, insistence, further collapse, reorientations, substitutions, swapping, dumbness, muteness, babbling, further insistence, further dumbness; a collision of meaning and meaninglessness, material and reference, gesture and body. People using their body as an object in space. Or using the other body as an object in space. Adding one thing to whatever the last person did, or taking something away. Perhaps quite slow - or perhaps very very fast and insistent. Or perhaps it might look like: two performers trapped in a smooth space, endlessly and suggestively rubbing, patting, tapping the walls and floors, themselves or each other; digging into and exhausting the materiality of flesh and architecture, comprehending a new separation; all the while muttering and declaiming 'this', 'that', 'here', or 'there'; hazily and eerily slinking in and out of unison, repetition, exchange, inversion, interpretation, indifference.

\* (2) How have we come about these influences, and where has this desire (or need?) to make something bigger come from? \*

Trained in fine art, philosophy and dance, our fidgeting enquiry is a meeting point between disciplines - developed within and in response to the unique questions and unspoken expectations the contexts in which we find ourselves. We work with photography, video, participatory writing projects, pedagogy, stage work, durational performance and writing - however, what is common to these is a formal simplicity and game-like propositions. Our playful and gestural work mediates on questions we face as artists; how to collaborate? (Floorplan, 2015); how do we present one of our works beside another? (Pointing the Finger, 2016); how do we contextualise ourselves? (Finding the Frame, 2016); what does it mean to choose this, over that? (Some Possibilities, 2016); what does it mean to learn and reproduce dance movements (Empty Gestures, 2016); what is our relationship to an audience? (VVVV, 2017)

Indecisive in the face of these anxieties, we strive to skewer and sidestep these problems through a persistence and poetic simplicity that takes place over many light and fidgety works. Much of these works start from collapsing idioms and turns of phrase into material gesture and proposition - "floorplan", "testing the water", "what's up their sleeves?", "it's just one thing on top of another". These works see us (idiotically?) literalising these phrases; creating banal images, gestures and propositions which remain somehow charged or loaded with the meanings and expectations derived from their idiomatic titles. Seeking lightness and simplicity through an attentiveness towards the particular medium at hand, the minimalism of these pieces retains a poetic quality while confronting the viewer with explicit questions: over form and expectations, wider political or social concerns, the value and meaning of art, and their own spectatorship. Through each individual work resisting being reduced to any fixed and communicative message, our practice instead foregrounds the complex materiality of the body - fleshy, uncertain, demanding, awkward, restless, lethargic, playful, and deeply political - as it is held, presented or complicated by the particular form, conditions and context. Through a *via negativa*, a continuous questioning as to how we can challenge ourselves to do less and less, we have become attracted to a certain weakness (weak positions, weak gestures, weak ideas and weak images), aligning ourselves with a history of critical and conceptual practice while directly borrowing from the figure and physicality of the fool. We are idiots, stumbling into situations which appear to confound us; forcing ourselves to playfully adapt in the hope of generating liberating new possibilities.

Our largest works to date for the stage propose and restrict themselves to strict singular propositional logics. 'Empty Gestures' sees two performers reproduce in unison a strict list of memorised gestures over 15 minutes. 'Infinite Tango' stages 10 performers for 45 minutes endlessly dancing an amorphous social dance, ending in a strange choreography in which objects, clothes and refreshments are repeatedly picked up and placed down. The 35 minute long 'Meaningless Dance 15 (Some Possibilities)' stages two performers presenting numerous different pedestrian dances, yet its multiplicity remains captured within the strict and repeated rule of each performer continually interrupting the other to propose a new choreography - "what about this?", "what about this?". Each individual proposition - bouncing, jogging, rubbing, patting, etc. - remain isolated, gestural, singular, indifferent. How can we develop a larger-scale stage work which continually feeds in this wider playfulness - risks becoming unwieldy and unbalanced, threatening the compositional frames it proposes with collapse - ultimately forcing it to construct something new out of its own rubble?

Although working across video, photography, print and sculpture, we are primarily influenced by (and critically respond to) artists and theorists concerned with the recent wave of choreography presented within gallery spaces. While many of these artists have established themselves either exclusively within dance or the visual arts, we are uniquely informed by both perspectives, our practice having developed within and in response to each discipline's unique questions and unspoken expectations. While our growing interest in the conceptual figure and position of the fool has developed within our work, we have also become interested in the ways in which it might propose an alternative performance paradigm to a received understanding of what might mean to present a 'neutral' body to an audience. Contemporary gallery performance predominantly present a 'neutral, task-like body' (via '60s minimalist practice) or an excessively expressive and uncontainable subject (drawing from '70s feminist performance). Given the deeply political potential of performance, we feel urgent to critically address and reorientate these legacies through an alternative methodology of

slapstick.

Slapstick presents a clumsy, irresponsible and difficult body; unlike the smoothly efficient 'task-like' body, it disrupts flows and the processes of a factory. Uncontainable and full of problems, it sidesteps the charged recognition as a identitarian subject through its anonymity and irreverence. Over the past few years, our work has begun to develop a technique for this alternative framework of performance - fleshy, awkward, nonchalant and imprecise - our performers playfully cause problems for the strict formal constraints they inhabit. Our project would draw from histories of conceptual and performance practice, alongside our own archive of work, to further make a case for clumsiness and excess - and contribute to the wider calls by artists and theorists to insist on the political project in insisting on art as a space for waste, uselessness, laziness, and excess.

\* (3) Why now, why at PACT? \*

As a collaborative enquiry, we know already that residencies and concentrated studio time are essential to our practice. They provide uninterrupted space for an accelerated dialogue; combining critical reflection with the rapid testing of multiple ideas. They are also a vital opportunity to become sensitive to irresponsible and tangential distractions to which we would otherwise not give due focus. These are invariably the most vital and enriching for our work: directly generating new artworks or forming core insights that drive larger projects over the following months. We know this already. But at PACT, we have the additional concern, or project, of continually rerouting our distractions and energies into the development of a larger piece.

This feels particularly vital to us and our work now, after having built up a strong body of work. Over the past year, this has included presentation of work at numerous festivals (Continuum, Bethnal Green Working Men's Club, London; SET me Free/Off, VeNe in collaboration with the Festival de Videodanse de Bourgogne, Venice), group exhibitions (Provocations, ICW, Blackpool; Low Stakes, River Studios London), and organising our own platforms and events (Plus One, Dance4, Nottingham; Fiver Friday, Chisenhale Dance Space, London) and residencies (Summer Lodge, Nottingham Trent University; Top Shed, Norfolk; Hospitalfield Interdisciplinary, Arbroath). We are developing conversations with institutions including Rich Mix (London), Attenborough Arts Centre (Leicester), and Dance4 (Nottingham) - we are keen to be able to further these relationships around a more tangible and major project like 'This'.

Working at PACT Zollverein would offer us an unique opportunity to encounter artists and institutions outside of the UK within a supportive and critically engaged network. We feel strongly informed by, yet removed from, the contemporary performance practice taking place on the continent, and its surrounding discourse. Through this residency, we would seek to make new friends, and gain an understanding of how our work and values might connect to, or form dissensus with, a distinct arts scene. We hope our practice might find new contexts in which to place itself, and discover new ways to reorient ourselves in the spaces in which we are already situated.

Strongly identifying our work as research, we feel it imperative to engage with discourse and share our knowledge beyond the production of artworks. Over the past couple of years, we have presented our work and spoken at conferences (Yes Conference, ATW Institut, Giessen; February 2016, The International Conference on Artistic Research, Society for Artistic Research, University of the Arts and Leiden University, The Hague; April 2016 and

Dialogues on Dance, Philosophy and Performance in the Contemporary, Neoliberal Moment, Coventry University, June 2017) and a postgraduate symposium (Positioning, University of Roehampton, London; May 2016 ).

We are inspired by the role of discourse and critical engagement associated with PACT Zollverein, and hope this residency will begin a dialogue with the team at PACT Zollverein and its community of artists and researchers. But even more importantly, we hope this huge opportunity would give us the opportunity to initiate a new stage in our practice; to become more reflective and empowered in our choices; and to support us feeding back our ideas, work and research into the international performance community.