

A Raw-mess: Within

An essay by Toby Upton, written to accompany *Paracosmic Revue*,
11 January - 3 February 2019. Transition Two, London

'In every culture, the way the artistic forms are structured reflects the way in which contemporary culture views reality. [...] The possibility which the work's openness makes available always works within a given field of relations.'^[1] **Umberto Eco**

Eco's concept of the 'open work'^[2] is a fitting philosophical mirror to hold against the social-political situation I find myself living in: a post-political state,^[3] where the freedom exhaled by those in positions of control opens the door to divided ideals of social 'correctness'.

From religion to politics, hegemonic structures have always *conducted* through cultural phenomena and apparatus of 'soft' power.^[4] My reality lacks this sort of definite structure however. The openness created by my privileged freedom is both precarious and poisonous: I am enslaved not by an object-other but the fear of subjective-difference. My reality is based upon the tempo, the beats, and the melody of the orchestra. Governed by the faceless fear of not fitting harmoniously in with my fellows, and by extension the perception that I reject the logical direction of our nameless conductor.

The struggle to stay in time with this 'unifying tempo' is being exacerbated by the *spectacular data*^[5] flowing 24/7 from our often cracked phone screens; in turn, feeding an anxiety to perform in line with the conductor's mediations – in other words, the norm.

Eco's notion suggests that without the *authors* framework to comply within, a work of art cannot be a work. The same can be said for our social body, where a 'mistake'; a note out of tune; a gasp of breath made at the wrong time, is perceived as a direct move against the crowd. Not singing from the same hymn

sheet, in other words, means our society risks becoming 'a mere conglomeration [constellation, to use Benjamin's terminology] of random components ready to emerge from chaos.'^[1]

Like a computer virus, the result of this breathless need to stay in tune, far from 'a country that works for everyone',^[6] is constructing a society gripped by a poisonous fear, which is infecting our health, our liberty, and in turn is fuelling a growth in cultural tension, depression, and isolation.^[7]

If we are all players in the collective symphony of the *Big Society*,^[8] working towards making the 21st century's ideal of a global post-utopian state a reality, then the question needs to be asked, 'whose logic are we following?'

PARACOSMIC REVUE

Not a statement on, nor action towards, society, Politics, or the global situation. But an *exhibition in movement*,^[1] a space of active transcendence.

Over the last 100 years or so, when the social-political climate has cultivated public tensions, artistic practices have moved towards the avant-garde: synthesising art and life, aiming to somehow mediate or even change the status-quo.

Far from a modern phenomenon, the role of the arts, artists and the aesthetics' of political formulation, have been explored throughout western cultural history; with their affective power seemingly taking centre stage in postmodern times.^[9]

'Don't start with the good old things but the bad new ones.'^[9] **Bertolt Brecht**

'The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.'^[11]

John Berger

Returning to Eco, and touching upon the Platonian concept of *the stage*^[12] - as an 'essential space, simultaneously a locus of public activity and an exhibition-space for 'fantasies' which disturb the clear partition of identities, activities, and spaces'^[3] - *Paracosmic Revue* is constructed as a heterogeneous collage,^[13] in the form of a radical theatre.

An artistic response to our shared *Zeitgeist Paracosmic Revue's* season follows the lineage of the historic avant-garde; using absurdist strategies^[14] to explore our contemporary social situation; along with Plato's concept of the 'structure-giving form of the regime of the arts in general'.^[3]

Over four weeks the exhibition brings together five artists,^[15] each with autonomous practices, to create a hyperrealisation^[16] of (a) social reality.

Taking the lead in charging the space, Paige Perkins – whose practice explores the borders between human and animal, fantasy and reality, through dark and unruly paintings – transforms the white cube into a contained ritual ground for transcendence; in turn supporting the development of a holding space,^[17] where a quartet of 'performers' take it in turns to co-inhibit the theatre's sanctuary space^[18], each animating one of the *normative* routines shaping our social-cultural symphony.

THE STAGE

A paracosum of animal other; a quasi-spiritual container for raw Nature and carnivalesque energies.

In 1921 Andre Breton coined the phrase 'Artificial Hells' to describe the DADA events which were moving from the Cabaret to the streets. Some 40 years later the same *absurd* strategies were again being used by the *Situationist International* and alike, on both sides of the Atlantic, to synthesise cultural theory and social life.

Influenced by mysticism, fairy tales, and a sense of a very personal folklore, Paige Perkins delves into her subconscious to create twisted stories, visionary worlds; paracosums where time and space unfold with strange logic. Instead of moving the theater into the streets, Perkins' 'returns *Hell* to the cabaret' by providing a podium through which each performance artists video unfolds.

More than an othered cacophony, *Paracosmic Revue's* methodology of constant change, ensures the gallery retains its 'othered' status as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* reverberating with (quasi)energies in flux.

THE SEASON

'Artist's particular license to speak up, to misbehave, mock, and intermediate reality, to blur genres and disciplines, must be deployed to prevent the normalisation of the emerging authoritarian paradigm.'^[19]

Gregory Sholette

Following in the footsteps of Brecht's *Absurd Theatre*,^[20] The melodies, which make up *Paracosmic Revue's* season of 'digital other' revolve around dichotomies between reality and fakeness, 'pop' and culture, social norms and absurd regimes. Instead of presenting distinguishable narratives each performance artist uses play, pastiche, and other *rear-guard actions*^[21] to somehow queer the seemingly logical.

'Film has the ability to escape the limitations of what might be called the 'invisibility attached to reality'. Thus, commenting upon the idea that the audience is merely the fourth wall of the stage.'^[22] **Gordon Graham**

In keeping with modern means of data dissemination – via the screen – the spectacular mediations, animated through *Paracosmic Revue*, create room for *participant*^[23] to quietly question the *conductor's* logic; occulted regimes; and social norms. As a conscientization^[26] of *radical* video performances, the season,

mirrors the absurdist 'search for answers in an answerless world,'^[25] because as Gordon Graham suggests; 'revolutionary art does not represent things in familiar and comfortable ways, which most art does, but in unfamiliar and disturbing guises.'^[22]

CURATORIAL STATEMENT

A generative pool; a hot bed of energy; a transcendent space in flux.

An othered theatre, populated by fantastical beings, where carnivalesque strategies are employed to affect logic and reason.

Paracosmic Revue's season unfolds over four acts. Placing the spiritual in contact with the human, the animal in contact with the machine; seeking to reject the known and the 'norm' in favour of a reality based upon possibility.

Each act pastiches our 21st century reality - one where the screen is our gateway to transcendence.

Each performer presents a conflicted aesthetic, which awkwardly mimics our precarious means of coping with (and manoeuvring within) the maelstrom we call contemporary life.

The intangible spiritual essence contained within Paracosmic Revue's transformed space uses play and an aesthetic in flux, to present alternatives to the monotonous every day; creating a space to ask; 'whose logic am I following?'

Toby Upson, 2019.

Written on the occasion of *Paracosmic Revue*. An exhibition at Transition Two – 11 January - 3 February 2019.

[1] Carolina A. Drake, 'Umberto Eco, The Open Work and its Constraints' (areyouhungup, 2013) <https://areyouhungup.wordpress.com/2013/07/31/umberto-eco-what-is-freeing-what-is-liberating-about-an-open-work/>.

I have appropriated Eco's term work in movement, which describes works of art that consists of unplanned or physically incomplete structural units, which need to be completed with an ongoing dialectic between the author's intentions and the performer's choices among those options he [the performer / audience member] is given' and applied it to *Paracosmic Revue* as a gesamtkunstwerk: 'exhibition in movement' therefore takes on the same connotation.

[2] Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, (Translated by Anna Cancogni) (Harvard University Press, 1989) https://monoskop.org/images/6/6b/Eco_Umberto_The_Open_Work.pdf.

[3] Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, translated by Gabriel Rockhill (Bloomsbury Revelations, 2002).

[4] Visual devices and cultural phenomena such as stained glass and propaganda posters have been used guide the social mass in the 'right' direction, according to those at the top of the social hierarchy.

[5] I use the term Spectacular data to indicate the dissemination of images (visual material) via social media, 24-hour news, and click-bate, which act as instruments creating both a sense of FOMO, and a guiding dictum forming social routines (the perception of norm). The use of Spectacular is in reference to Guy Debord's 1967's theory of 'the spectacle' (as seen in *La société du spectacle*, (Buchet-Chastel, 1967) // English translation: *The Society of the Spectacle* (Red and Black, 1970). Data I used in the sense: 'datum', to give or a given.

[6] 'Statement from the new Prime Minister Theresa May' *Gov.UK* (2013), <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/statement-from-the-new-prime-minister-theresa-may>.

[7] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books 2009). Fisher's book succinctly articulates the damaging effect of our contemporary social-political situation.

[8] Reference to David Cameron's Government's ideas of a Big Society where we collectively have a responsibility for each other and supporting a 'better UK'. 'David Cameron Big Society', *Gov.uk* <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-on-big-society>.

[9] The art life dichotomy seems to be best recorded post-war, with notable neo-avant-garde practices (Bodily, performative, video and practices encompassing notions of activism) being recorded and analysed in a similar way to Greenbergian Art.

[10] Bertolt Brecht's maxum.

[11] Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Conversations with Brecht*, trans. Anya Bostock, (Verso, 2016)

<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2820-walter-benjamin-conversations-with-brecht>

[12] As discussed in Plato's *Republic*, under his concept of the Ideal State.

[13] A heterogenous collage generally takes the form of shock, which revealed some world hidden behind another.

[14] 'We are creatures that need meaning but we are abandoned in a universe filled with meaninglessness. So, we cry into the wilderness and get no response, but we keep on trying anyway.' Luis Enrique Parra. Drawing upon the absurd position we find ourselves living in, the artists in *Paracosmic Revue* abandon the 'norm' and the 'right', as perceived by those in positions of power, to produce works in movement (see [1]). Each uses play, pastiche or mimicker to create possibilities for the audience.

Absurdity: 'The search for answers in an answerless world.'

[15] Paige Perkins (figurative painter); Richard Porter, Christian Noelle Charles, Pádraig Condrón, David Sherry (performative artists / digital performers). I 'define' each artists practice here as a guide to the work featured in this exhibition, I do not mean to typecast nor limit the practice of each artists.

[16] Hyperrealization (Hyperreality) a term coined by Jean Baudrillard to describe 'a special kind of social reality in which a reality is created or simulated from models, or defined by reference to models. The term has implications of 'too much reality' – everything being on the surface, without mystery; 'more real than reality' – too perfect and schematic to be true, like special effects; and 'para-reality', an extra layer laid over, or instead of, reality.

Hyperreality differs from other realities in that the division between reality and imaginary disappears.' Andrew Robinson, 'An A to Z of Theory: Jean Baudrillard: Hyperreality and Implosion', *Ceasefire Magazine*, 2012 [online] <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-baudrillard-9/>.

[17] Linda Finlay, 'Holding space': conceived from Donald Winnicott's 'holding environment' (2015) <http://relational-integrative-psychotherapy.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Chapter-5-Therapeutic-Holding-and-Containing-handout.pdf> where emotions can be expressed 'safely'.

In an artistic context, I use holding space to denote a gesamtkunstwerk (primarily) where the artist or producer creates the nurturing environment where an audience can learn, think through, understand and contain or express emotions in a safe, and freeing manner.

[18] Sanctuary: a sacred place (a shrine). Used in the Latin (sanctuarium) sense here to denote a container for holy things, and the physical presence of God – or some kind of divine.

[19] Gregory Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Pluto Press, 2017).

[20] Absurd Theatre: 'The Theatre of the Absurd abandoned plot and dialogue in favour of meaningless repetition and pointless action, with the intention of making the shapeless, non-narrative nature of actual lives apparent on stage. It would thereby expose (its proponents imagined) the extent to which traditional theatre mislead by imposing narrative form on the necessarily formless, and turning lives into 'life stories'. These plays were shaped by the political turmoil, scientific

breakthrough, and social upheaval going on in the world around the playwrights during these times.'

Gordon Graham

'The Theatre of the Absurd attacks the comfortable certainties of religious or political orthodoxy. It aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation as these writers see it. But the challenge behind this message is anything but one of despair. It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, nobly, responsibly; precisely because there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. And that is why, in the last resort, the Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation.' Martin Esslin

[21] Peter Halley's rear-guard, as opposed to avant-garde, actions worthless: guerrilla ideas that know how to keep their cover; eccentric ideas that seem innocuous and so are admitted unnoticed by the media mechanism; doubtful ideas that are not invested in their own truth and thus are not damaged when they are manipulated; nihilistic ideas that get dismissed for being too depressing.

Peter Halley, 1987: 'Notes on Abstraction', *Arts Magazine*, New York, Vol. 61, 1987, <https://www.peterhalley.com/notes-on-abstraction>

[22] Gordon Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts: An introduction to aesthetics*, Third Edition (Routledge, 2005) <http://staff.uny.ac.id/sites/default/files/pendidikan/paulus-kurnianta-spd-sfil-mhum/philosophy-arts-3rd-ed.pdf>

[20] The dichotomy between postmodern painting, in the Greenbergian vein of 'A' Art, and postmodernist artists using more 'feminine' approaches to conceptual production, specifically those with body or temporal outputs.

[23] Participant is used here to indicate a being that partakes in the completion of the work (see [2]) and Eco's concept of open work and work in movement.

[24] Conscientization (consciousness raising or critical consciousness) a term popularised by the theorist Paulo Freire in his 1970 work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Meaning breaking through prevailing mythologies to reach new levels of awareness—in particular, awareness of oppression, being an 'object of others' will rather than a self-determining 'subject.' The process of conscientization involves identifying contradictions in experience through dialogue and becoming part of the process of changing the world.'

[25] Luis Enrique Parra's comments on Absurdity. 'The search for answers in an answerless world. We are creatures that need meaning but we are abandoned in a universe filled with meaninglessness. So, we cry into the wilderness and get no response, but we keep on trying anyway.'