



Alex Mirutziu. *Doing sub thinking*. Performance at The Yard as part of Quoz Arts Fest 2020. Photography by Augustine Paredes | Seeing Things

VOICING A MOVEMENT

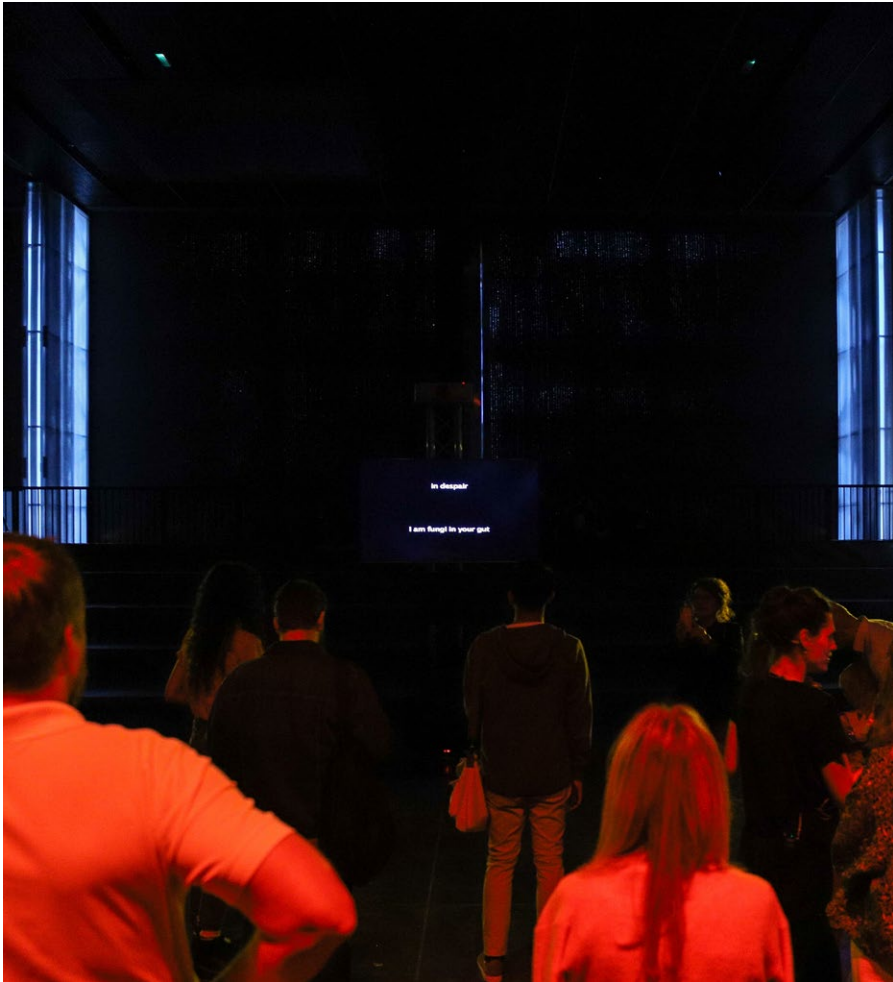
Block Universe is not only a boundary-pushing performance art festival in London and female-led commissioning body, it has launched the careers of under-represented artists. Following their first tie-up with Alserkal at the Venice Biennale last year, Block Universe came to the avenue for the first time on 24–25 January, joining the roster of events for **Alserkal Avenue’s** Quoz Arts Fest. A triathlon of performances saw Alex Mirutziu, Eglė Budvytytė and Himali Singh Soin take the industrial area by storm, exploring aspects of ecofeminism, collectivity and non-human perspectives.

Words by Mohammad El-Jachi

MEASURES OF COLLECTIVITY

In *Doing sub thinking*, a performance by Romanian multi-disciplinary artist Alex Mirutziu, the boundaries between performer, bystander and backdrop are blurred. Drawing from object-oriented ontology and John Dewey’s theory of art as a life-informing experience, Mirutziu explored social manoeuvres and the subsuming of the individual within a crowd. Expanding on the audience’s reaction and interaction, the performance alluded to the nexus of agents operating in real time, from objects and architecture to phenomena and language, in order to highlight their influence on the personal and social experiences of space. “It’s ontological design – not entirely to do with the performer or the individual, but more about an awareness of the performativity of all objects shaping the world,”

Mirutziu said. Clearly, he cared less about the destination and more about the journey. “I focus on the activity of doing and not so much on the activity of arriving,” he explained. “If I somehow get to an inherent meaning, then that is incidental in my performances.” Dressed in football kits, three performers ran through a series of gestures and vocalisations, at times absurd, pointing at different angles. They wove their way through the crowd, inserting themselves into groups and engaging in mimicry and parody, evoking jovial responses from children whose low inhibitions prompted a mirror game of splits and cartwheels, which were then unintentionally (and seamlessly) incorporated into the performance. This push-pull method, visible in the group movement from



Eglė Budvytytė. *Incantation Karaoke*. Performance at Concrete as part of Quoz Arts Fest 2020. Photography by Augustine Paredes | Seeing Things

centre to periphery and back, challenged notions of viewership and drove home Mirutziu’s points on leaving the space open for unintentionality and the agency of people – both in relation to each other and to objects. For him, this was simply an example of social behaviour. “I would say that *what performs* has more to say than *who performs*,” he said, highlighting the nuances embedded in different kinds of subjectivity. While driven by strong philosophical underpinnings, the performance was only warmly received by a bemused audience who we can assume were, by and large, oblivious to the points being made throughout.

KARAOKE IN THE DARK

In her participatory performance *Incantation Karaoke*, Lithuanian artist Eglė Budvytytė led a group recitation, referencing mushroom death suits, medicinal flora and menstruation, taking cues from sci-fi theories and ecofeminism. A hunched figure in Concrete’s semi-darkness, Budvytytė rose to deliver a series of affirmative utterances – playful and menacing in equal part – to the apprehensive viewers. Although public spaces are her preferred venue, the intimacy of Concrete was a welcome change. “I wanted a more contained environment. There are a lot of unpredictable elements in a public space,” she explained in a talk after the performance. What she found equally liberating was getting rid of the fourth wall –



the imaginary boundary between performer and audience. “Its absence allows for a permeability,” she continued, enabling a reciprocation of energies between her and the congregation, mediated through gaze, physical proximity and sonic transmission on a shared stage. “I was curious about collective singing and whether I could act as a host who facilitates the situation,” she mused. With the audience closely grouped, she distributed microphones as a screen lit up with lines of text informed by ecofeminist Donna J. Haraway and writer Octavia E. Butler. A rumination on health and the ills of consumerism, they channelled different small-scale organisms and a sense of extinction: *I am a worm / I make holes / in your privacy / your property / your real estate / your integrity / your memory / and I thrive...* “The text features a corporeal and cannibalistic, semi-erotic and semi-threatening attitude from the non-human forms of life to the human,” she explained. This expressed Budvytytė’s idea that the contraceptive pill and plastic age have done little to help us. At times, *Incantation Karaoke* felt like an exercise in wanting to be heard, bringing to mind the people’s microphone used in sit-ins and protests where a whole crowd gathers around a single speaker, amplifying their speech through collective repetition. With the individual both transmitting and receiving, they are at once the medium and the message.

DEEP TIME

In *we are opposite like that*, a commission for the 2019 Frieze Artist Award curated by Diana Campbell Betancourt, **Himali Singh Soin** portrays an alienating world set in remote areas within the Arctic and Antarctic circles. Brought to **Quoz Arts Fest** by London’s **Block Universe** as part of a six-year cycle of research into archival practices of embodiment, it incorporated fieldwork from a 2017 Svalbard residency and live narration, playing on 19th-century Victorian fears in a poetics of paranoia.

Words by Nadine Khalil



Himali Singh Soin. *we are opposite like that*. 2019. (Still + print on aluminium). HD video, stereo sound, colour. Image courtesy of the artist

There’s an added dimensionality to viewership when a film is performed in real time – it expands the frame. That’s what happened when *we are opposite like that* was staged at Alserkal Avenue’s Concrete to live music. Himali Singh Soin was present in person as in moving image, shrouded in a metallic silver suit that looked like aluminium foil of the sci-fi kind. “In the film, I’m wearing an emergency blanket, the kind first used by NASA to cover space robots because it contains heat,” she explained. “The body and the landscape – both of which are containers of histories that are being lost – mirror each other.” But it was more than just a prop providing a reflective surface. “The body is losing heat and the landscape is melting. The silver wrapping articulated this relationship.”

Lending a sculptural effect, the suit became a textural feature, crackling like ice – like an instrument. It added to the ominous sounds of an

encroaching collapse. “I collaborated with musicians and an animator to make ice – seemingly so still and inanimate – move,” she continued. The impulse was both atmospheric and archival as Soin dug deep into a Victorian anxiety about an impending Ice Age that would take over Britain. “Thrust into deep time, Victorians are cast as ‘interglacial beings’, existing fortuitously in a brief and unreliable moment of melt,” the film reveals. Soin also drew from *The Arctic Home in the Vedas*, Bal Gangadhar Tilak’s 1903 book on the North Pole being the origin of the Aryans in 8000 B.C., which responded to her prompt, “the state of the nation”, with obvious political connotations. The underlying narrative here is a fear of annihilation of Empire, and an equating of historic glacial catastrophe with our climate catastrophe.



Himali Singh Soin. *we are opposite like that*. Performance at Concrete as part of Quoz Arts Fest 2020. Image courtesy of the artist, Block Universe and Alserkal Avenue. Photography by Jandri Angelo Aguilor



In layered images, ice is portrayed as all-subsuming, seductive, annihilating and crystalline. Reimagining the polar landscape as a post-human place of postcolonial ruins, destitute whaling stations, frozen fossils and rusted debris, the film opens with an inverted mountain rippling, and this mirage of a pixelated glacier regularly returns. “The Arctic, for me, is a space of non-knowing, despite recorded observations of the Aurora Borealis. There’s a lack of certainty there because of the mirages. There are explorers who reported two suns and a red sky in their diaries, yet no one is really able to put a finger on reality,” Soin explained.

In her recent article in *Momus*, “*There’s a Tongue for This*”: *Aurora as Art Writing*, she references a 1882 Swedish expedition that illustrated an aurora sighting in terms of a language of signs or ‘scrawlings’. “Could the aurora be a form of art writing? A new criticism, a different way of listening to the world?” By incorporating her own writing practice into the film, she is asking: what would ice say, if it were to speak? As an age-old witness of dramatic ecological destruction, ice is envisaged as a melting archive. The ice becomes her; a cyborg, a creature, a sound.

Soin further considers how an environment so hostile to human life is key to the survival of the planet as a whole – “*we are opposite like that* is about the tension between these intertwined opposites” – a tug of war that manifests in the eeriness of looming boulders of ice, immovable and yet moving in thick sheets. The sense of calamity, of “futures foreseen”, is carried through the music, a mix of an original score for a string quartet and fragments of the Victorian composition *The Snow* by Edward Elgar. “I found many of the Arctic explorers describe the landscape in the tonality of muted strings,” Soin added, explaining that her collaborator and partner David Tappeser coded the music’s tempo with a graph of the latitudes, longitudes and temperature variances of her journey to the North Pole.

The visual layers are similarly coded, like a palimpsest, or an otherworldly time warp, part of the past and the future. As she orates in the film, “The last frayed edges of what she knew wilted... What had survived was ancient. She found fossils of ferns stacked in stone from way back when. Her own landscape was once opposite like that... She was thawing, dripping afterlife, still a thin haze persisted.”