

JESSE JONES: THE STRUGGLE --- AGAINST --- OURSELVES

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JESSE JONES: THE STRUGGLE AGAINST OURSELVES

Interview with Jesse Jones
By Clara Kim

Clara Kim: Your new work for REDCAT departs from your interest in the Russian avant-garde theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold and his concept of the human body as machine, which had great impact on thinkers and cultural producers of the time including Sergei Eisenstein. Can you talk about Meyerhold and his biomechanics etudes as it relates to your broader interest in Marxist ideology and its relevance today?

Jesse Jones: I have been interested in Meyerhold for a long time, mostly in terms of the physical construction of theatrical space and the collaborations he made with people like Lyubov Popova in the 1920s and that radical transformation of the physical space of theatre. For example in *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922), there is an amazing dynamic between politics and the organization of physical space, it is a very constructivist thing, influenced by Taylorism and time-motion studies but incredibly spectacular.

I suppose this is the essence of biomechanics also—that the body is not isolated but in motion within a social, relational system. It came out of the ether of that revolutionary moment but is not socialist realist in anyway, there is something else at play, some other form of possible mass spectacle. I had been interested for a long time in how this period of the early 1920s had this amazing potential for a kind of mass culture based on that early socialist cultural optimism, this is where my interest in the theremin also came about.

Leon Theremin invented it in 1919 in Russia and one of the first people he brought it to was Lenin. Lenin was fascinated by it and wanted to learn “The Internationale” on it as he felt that electronic music would liberate music from the conservatory and be the soundtrack to the twentieth century. In a way he was right but far later than he predicted. Lenin never got to learn “The Internationale” as Theremin left Russia to try to get the instrument into mass production in America. He was later kidnapped by the KGB and brought back to Russia to build the first spy technology of the Cold War. So in my film *The Spectre and the Sphere* (2008), I was very interested in this potential other version of history and mass culture, one in which “The Internationale” is played by a theremin. It is a symbolic gesture that makes this unfulfilled dream of Lenin’s come true. It is also to think about the socialist anthem as more of a metaphysical thing, more ephemeral. In the film, I asked Lydia Kavina to perform the song, which was significant because she is the great niece of Leon Theremin and had learned to play from him as a child, so it was important to have this lineage to the original moment in time. I was nervous that she would not want to participate since her uncle had been a prisoner of the USSR and the song had been the anthem of Stalinism during his house arrest, so it was interesting to have it recuperated in this way.

I also became interested in the link between sci-fi and Marxism. In 2006, I made a project that was a drive-in cinema, which played films about labor and Marxism. I wanted to use the social space of the drive-in as a potential space for political discussion and encounter. The project was a kind of recuperation of the 1950s drive-in as a symbol of the Cold War fear of the “other,” and the B-movies of aliens landing to destroy American culture. This metaphorical anti-Communism ironically stole Theremin’s sound—the high electronic sound of the theremin always rings when the invading alien force lands!

There is something continuous also in *The Struggle Against Ourselves* (2011), there is this relationship between this Meyerhold constructivist spectacle and the capitalist spectacle of Busby Berkeley’s films—the formal symmetry between the chasm of difference—which became ideologically fascinating to me. I wanted to pose this high-Hollywood moment and the Russian avant-garde together to see what meanings this might reveal.

CK: Your work often involves intense collaborative processes, working with a range of individuals in the production of your works—in the drive-in project *12 Angry Films* that you mentioned, you conducted a series of film/video workshops with a community of non-English speaking immigrants in Dublin; in *The Spectre and the Sphere* with Lydia Kavina; in *Zarathustra* (2008), the Artane Boys Band playing the theme song of Kubrick’s *2001* (Strauss’ “Thus Spoke Zarathustra”) amidst the derelict remains of Ballymun, the troubled social housing project of late-1960s Dublin; and in the new work *The Struggle Against Ourselves* with a group of CalArts students learning and performing Meyerhold’s etudes led by the LA-based theater director Chi-wang Yang. I was so impressed by your ease in deftly negotiating and mobilizing different individuals towards this collective effort. You once told me that this way of working was informed by your experience working as an activist. Can you talk more about the space of social or political action as it relates to the constructed space of theater or performance—as this intersection is a pivotal to your work?

JJ: My background in activism has always been important in how I form projects. In many ways it is this social encounter with artistic research that is at the heart of things for me. In thinking about these historical moments—such as the theremin and its invention, or pop culture around 1968 (as in the project with the Artane Boys Band)—it is important that these historical moments are kind of “remade” in the present. For example, in the Meyerhold etudes I was interested in how the embodiment of these etudes could be useful again socially in a wholly different context and how they might speak back to us through time.

Activism is really about a kind of embodiment. It is not something you are passive to or a spectator of, it is about an embodied knowledge, and to me this is fundamentally interesting to art practice—that art can present experiences and opportunities for collaboration, and that art can reoccupy the space of historical knowledge and find things that are useful in them. The title of the film *The Struggle Against Ourselves* is also from a Latin American activist group called *Colectivo Situaciones* and, in particular, a comment made in relation to how we might transform our reality beyond the expectations of industrial capital. They are a really interesting group, emerging from the crisis in Argentina in the 1990s, engaged with what they termed “militant research” meaning a type of research that was extra-institutional, was part of the social movements, propelling knowledge through action.

I was most interested in the activist origins of the phrase cited in the opening chapter of J.K. Gibson-Graham’s book *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)*. Gibson-Graham traces the phrase to a meeting in the mid 1990s that took place in a factory reclaimed by an Argentine cooperative. The workers discussed how they could reoccupy the space of the factory in an entirely different way to the previous economic system, without working from a template of learned behavior of capitalism, literally how to struggle against ourselves. This idea really struck a chord with me in relation to how Taylorism and the body formed a kind of existential relationship. I also really feel that this is the possibility of activist knowledge or “militant research” as *Colectivo Situaciones* called it, and that social collaboration can reveal new types of experiences and knowledge about the world that are extra-academic.

In my projects, the collaborations I make are elective, that is, people come to the project because they have a shared interest or because it is something they want to be involved in, it is important that this experience is a good one for people involved. This is just as important to me, if not more so, as the final work. The collaboration and the making of the project exist as a space and time in and of itself. It is not just part of a process for me but it is the whole point. Although the final artwork is not indexically related to the

collaboration, it is there but the film should arrive at a different place in the end. This is why I really wanted to frame the workshop as the first scene within *Struggle*. However, in the final film something shifts away from that space too and, in the collaboration, something of a group unconsciousness is formed. This is partly why I work in film; on the day, you have a sense that you know what you are doing and everything is planned and thought out, but a week later you see it and it is something else completely. What begins as a reenactment of a Meyerhold workshop from the 1920s becomes a dream sequence. I had been interested in Meyerhold for a long time but it was coming to LA that really allowed me to research it further. It would be too pure, or too historically intact in any other context. I am interested in how history and meaning is scrambled by mass culture, how mass culture with its broad sweeping strokes misses the details. When you pull focus on that and return to the origin really incredible ideas can be revealed.

CK: The film is made up of two parts: the workshops in which the performers are shown in the process of being taught and learning the etudes and what you call the “dream sequence” which pictures the etudes in full execution/formation with a distinctive soundtrack. Can you talk about the structure of the film?

JJ: In the first section of the film, there is definitely a type of theatre of pedagogy at play. The location was specifically an educational institution with mid 1970s aesthetic in the design and mise en scene. I wanted this section to be very faithful to the workshop process; therefore it is quite a relaxed, observational style. I was interested in how the etudes formed a type of language themselves, how this could be discursive. There were three intense workshops before the days of the film shoot. On the first day, Chi-wang introduced some of the historical context of the etudes to the students, speaking about Taylorism and the Russian revolution and the avant-garde. I found it incredible that Chi-wang was in constant motion while speaking—a sense of the embodiment of knowledge, that to speak about these events and to make them tangible again it was necessary to re-animate them physically. From this initial workshop, I completely trusted the process and the physicality of learning that was at play.

The second half of the film moves into a more surreal dream sequence. It is like one of those moments in a Busby Berkeley movie where the dream sequence is inserted for no narrative reason. This sequence in *Struggle* is heightened by the soundtrack that alludes to a kind of utopian-infinite blue space where the bodies are in elegant motion, some gestures referencing the revolutionary tableaux, for instance, the right fist clenched in the etude called “The Bow.” In fact, it was the students who choreographed these motions, selecting micro-gestures from an etude, and performed them in a looped sequence. The camera moves across this grouping of actors as a kind of a bas-relief within this blue backdrop. On the first track pass their motion seems hopeful, optimistic, yet the camera moves back and repeats the motion, we see they are in a constant repetition like the Taylorist studies. They are mechanical in their movement. This then becomes more of a dystopic space as the sound begins to loop mirrored by the tracking shot where the camera moves back and forth in a repetitive motion like a conveyor belt. I also like that you can have two very contrasting realities at play—the realism of the workshop and the hyper-illusionist dream sequence, but in the space of cinema this kind of dual existence is possible.

CK: In your thinking about Meyerhold, Alexander Grinberg’s photographs of the biomechanics poses (“The Harmonium,” “The Stone,” “The Bow”) played a major role—as historical artifacts of a particularly rich moment, both culturally and ideologically, of the Russian avant-garde and its eventual repression by the Stalinist regime

that persecuted both Meyerhold and Grinberg with Meyerhold becoming a fatal casualty of that oppression with his execution. You were also reading Siegfried Kracauer’s “The Mass Ornament,” written in Weimar Germany about the “American distraction factories” that created Tiller Girls and eventually Busby Berkeley. Given how history has played out, what do you make of these “cultural artifacts” that we are left with, in our current contemporary moment of post-modern, global capitalist world order, in which the body politic or the representation of the collective, social body has perhaps been usurped by wholly different forces?

JJ: When Kracauer was thinking about the Tiller Girls in the early twentieth century, he was really predicting a type of political totalitarianism that manifested in the 1930s. He saw the danger of how this mass spectacle of bodies in unison could produce a mass spectatorship. It is interesting how he saw that as a kind of precipice to an extremely brutal political landscape, one in which mass consent was constructed through this alignment of power. It really feels like the stronger the visual spectacle of power, the more coherent and symmetrical its representation is and the less we seem to question it. The phenomenologists really tracked those ideas from the start. I also love the way those texts circulated in newspapers. (“The Mass Ornament” was originally published in the daily newspaper *Die Frankfurter Zeitung* on 28 October 1927 where Kracauer contributed nearly two thousand articles during the 1920s and 1930s.) They were critiques of everyday life. The critique of everyday life and pop culture is so useful and it is a pity that it has since been relegated to academia. It is why I am so interested in the etudes as they have a totally different function to the Busby Berkeley spectacles. The etudes were more about how the actor was symbolic in a way of a universal body, that there was a human tableaux at play in his or her body gesture that could communicate complex social meaning to a public, rather than operate as distracting ornament. There is a deliberate non-alienation at play between actor and spectator.

Berkeley was very much the opposite of this; the Busby body and, in particular, the female body is relegated to a cog within a machine of motion. It is pure industrial capitalism. Berkeley’s choreography comes from his experience as a drill sergeant in the First World War. There is a fundamental violence in the formations that is benign. The bodies are militaristic. Meyerhold, on the other hand, emerges from a different historical context, one in which ideas of future cohesive social bodies take precedent and, for a moment, are believed to be possible. Meyerholdian theatre in the 1920s was often quite epic in scale; performances were made for large audiences, thousands at a time, during this post-revolution period of mass convergences. Plays would often be interrupted by projections of news bulletins, so that a very particular form of mass culture emerged in which consciousness-raising ideas, information, and entertainment were all part of the same thing. Distraction was not part of the agenda at all.

But they were also very anti-realist. They were really preserved in the imaginative space of theatre. Meyerhold was very anti-illusionistic and he felt that art should not operate directly as a stand-in for real life, it should be an entirely different space; although it can be temporarily immersive, we must know that it is an illusion and, in the end, we must return to life itself. This is why he was so interested in early sci-fi as well as the works of Vladimir Mayakovsky in particular. This is also partly why he was persecuted by the Stalinist regime in the end, as he was against socialist realism. He felt that it would be dangerous and create a political passivity in the Russian people. I think there is an interesting dynamic between socialist realism as a kind of self-heroism of the masses and post-modernism where the consumer appears as the central locus of power but has no actual power at all. We are part of the spectacle but have no control over it.



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¹⁻² Stills from *The Spectre and the Sphere*, 2008

³⁻⁴ Stills from *The Struggle Against Ourselves*, 2011

⁷⁻⁸ Production stills from *The Struggle Against Ourselves*, 2011 (photo: Chiara Giovando)

Exhibition Checklist

The Struggle Against Ourselves, 2011
super 16mm film transferred to digital video, 21 min.
Commissioned by REDCAT. Courtesy the artist.

CAST

Cieara Adams
Cristina Frias
Jemar Rovie Frenchwood
Kaitlin Cornuelle
William Cotter
Christian R. Gibbs
Kaiso Hill
Heather Hewko
Brittany Lau
Gilbert Molina
Eva G. Sinotte
Michael Voorhees Aurelio

MEYERHOLD FACILITATOR/DIRECTOR

Chi-wang Yang

PRODUCER

Chiara Giovando

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Thomas Burns

1ST ASSISTANT CAMERA

Jennifer Braddock

ASSISTANT PRODUCER/SOUND RECORDING

Francisco Janes

DOLLY

Elizabeth Reynolds

ADDITIONAL SOUND/LIGHTING TECHNICIAN

Andrea Franco

EDITOR

Michael Higgins

PRODUCTION ASSISTANT

Natalia Sookias

CASTING SUPPORT

Marissa Chibas

Deena Selenow

THEREMIN

performed by Lydia Kavina

"ICH RUF' ZU DIR, HERR JESU CHRIST"

By Johann Sebastian Bach,

Recorded by Mark Crozer

SOUND DESIGN

Mark Greaney

Tony Jones

SPECIAL THANKS TO

Patty Palmer

Kwe Potter

Kim Beom

Rua Red Arts Centre Dublin

The Spectre and the Sphere, 2008-
super 16mm film transferred to digital video, 12 min.
21 sec. Courtesy the artist.

Jesse Jones

Born in 1978 in Dublin, Ireland
Lives and works in Dublin, Ireland

Education

M.A. Visual Arts Practices, Dun Laoghaire Institute of
Art, Design, and Technology, Dublin, 2005

B.F.A. Sculpture, The National College of Art and
Design, Dublin, 2002

Solo Exhibitions

2011

Against the Realm of the Absolute, Collective,
Edinburgh, UK

2010

Mahogany, Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne

2008

The Spectre and the Sphere, Blackwood Gallery,
University of Toronto Mississauga

The Spectre and the Sphere, Project Arts Centre,
Dublin

Screenings and Group Exhibitions

2011

Artists' Film Club, ICA, London

The Swimming Naked Prophecy, Mermaid Arts Centre,
Wicklow, Ireland

2010

The Truth About Sancho Panza, Glasgow Film Theatre,
Glasgow, Scotland

Unbuilding, Mermaid Arts Centre, Wicklow, Ireland

Closure, Location One, New York

What to do with the cheese after the hole is gone,
curated by WHW, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea della
Sicilia, Italy

Citing Cinema in Artists' Film, Glasgow International,
Glasgow, Scotland

Voices in the Landscape, Mermaid Arts Centre,
Wicklow, Ireland

2009

What Keeps Mankind Alive?, 11th International
Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, Turkey

Closed Forever, Auto Italia, London

Red Thread, curated by WHW, Tanas, Berlin

I Have Doubts, Centre for Visual Introspection,
Bucharest, Romania

Ubersong, Plan 9, Bristol, UK

Housewarming, Red Rua, Tallaght, Ireland

2008

Historians of the Present 2: Ghosts of Buildings,
Blancpain Art Contemporain, Geneva, Switzerland

Culturstruction, The Irish Architecture Foundation,
Dublin

Nought to Sixty, ICA, London

2:MOVE, Belfast Exposed, Belfast, Ireland

Art In The Life World, Ballymun, Dublin

2007

Synesthesia Sat, Birr Vintage Week & Arts Festival,
Birr, Ireland

2006

2:MOVE, Belfast Exposed, Belfast, Ireland

2005

12 Angry Films, Fire Station Artists' Studios,
Dublin Docklands Development Authority, Dublin

On the Waterfront, Pallas Heights, Dublin

Fellowships/Awards/Residencies

2010

Irish Arts Council Bursary Award

2009-10

Fellowship Residency Program, Location One,
New York

2009

International Artist Residency, Gertrude
Contemporary, Melbourne

Irish Arts Council Bursary Award

2008

Irish Arts Council Bursary Award

Irish Arts Council Project New Works Award

2007

Irish Arts Council Bursary Award

2006-09

Fire Station Artists' Studios Residency, Dublin

2003

Ev+a Joint Award

2002

Victor Tracey Award

Selected Bibliography

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Screen. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

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New York: New Museum and Phaidon Press, 2009.

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Frieze 136 (January–February 2011): 87.

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the world show," The Guardian, 23 September 2009,
G2:22.

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Jones, Jesse. "Men in Dark Times," Map 22
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—. "Things Could be Otherwise," The Visual Artists'
News Sheet, January–February 2011, 30.

Long, Angela. "A new take on drive-in movies,"
The Irish Times, 3 November 2006, 6.

Oakley, Jason. "Unabashedly Instrumental," The
Visual Artists' News Sheet, May–June 2011, 20.

Stott, Tim. "Jesse Jones," Frieze 117 (September
2008): 199.

12 Angry Films. Exhibition catalogue. Dublin: Fire
Station Artists' Studios, 2007.

What Keeps Mankind Alive?: 11th International
Istanbul Biennial. Exhibition catalogue. Istanbul:
Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, 2009.