

Revisiting the Retrospective of the Work of Jordan McKenzie

Angela Bartram

- *to be read in conjunction with the accompanying video, played one section at a time to correspond with McKenzie's answers.*

In 2016 I simultaneously staged the *Alternative Document* symposium and exhibition, as the inception to a project of which this exhibition and symposium at BSAD are a part. The 2016 event included *Retrospective 2027* by Jordan McKenzie as keynote performance in the symposium. McKenzie is UK-based artist working independently and through collaboration exploring drawing in the expanded field and issues of sexuality and queerness. McKenzie's work includes *Shame Chorus*, a collaborative art and music project exploring sexuality made with The London Gay Men's Chorus at Freud Museum in 2016, and *LUPA (Lock Up Performance Art)* an artist run exhibition space operating from a garage in a council estate in East London, and the character Monsieur Poo-Pourri that roams about pointing at things.

Positioned in the symposium rather than the exhibition, the alignment challenges traditional formats of structural placement, primarily opening the retrospective to critical debate over observation. This text analyses McKenzie's retrospective and includes excerpts from my critical conversation with the artist, which took place in the members room in Tate Modern in September 2017, the home to big retrospectives like that of Rauschenberg that had taken place that year. The conversation, which discusses, analyses and unravels the tensions in McKenzie's work for the symposium asks what

this means for the performed and ephemeral artwork and its document. We revisited that conversation six months on in a meeting room in Primary in Nottingham in March 2018, and what you see here is McKenzie reading a script of his own words that I transcribed for an article. Read in a rather cold space, very unlike that in Tate Modern, McKenzie became a visitor himself to his own words and experience.

The conversation went.... [with video]

ANGELA BARTRAM: Proposed for the projected year cited as 2027, your retrospective introduced a chronological displacement and shift to normal proceedings. It asked your audience to oscillate back and forth in time as they encountered the work through the oral histories you performed. As the artist, how did the event resonate with you, of watching those watching you as audience in the performance space, and in terms of what you imagined this might communicate?

JORDAN MCKENZIE: *play video; section 1*

AB: By not translating experience or the happening the document is a decontextualisation of the ephemeral art event, so within a retrospective the effect is doubled. Carolee Schneeman said of the photographic documents of her 1975 performance *Interior Scroll*, “these [still] images become the work and a substantiation of it,” a duality in effect, which is both evidence of something happening whilst being a replacement. The photograph fragments the experience by reducing it to a 125th of a second and sits between the event and further experience whilst providing an anchor to help imagine what it might have been like to be there, whilst also operating as a singular, concise viewpoint of an aspect

of the event. With this in mind the document is a semi fake representation of the event, so how is it fit for purpose for ephemeral and experiential artwork?

JM: *play video; section 2*

AB: Do the gestures in the retrospective make a new type of collective and singular document of that time? Indeed, is the retrospective a new artwork and document of those performances simultaneously and how does this function? Is the lighting of the match, for example, a different document of the original, a visual memory or landmark?

JM: *play video; section 3*

AB: Yes, but a temporal substitute, as you perform your memories and descriptions of works, talking through them as if in dialogue. This concerns being present with the work again, yet looking back on and beyond its origins.

JM: *play video; section 4*

AB: Perhaps being in a different type of location too, a non-gallery space within a performing arts centre rather than a gallery enhanced the distanced and fractural effect from the originals. I deliberately scheduled your work in a dance studio, a place of rehearsal, try out and process (similar to an artist's studio perhaps), to move it beyond the tropes of the exhibition venue. Much in the same way as programming your work into the symposium rather than the exhibition, to align it with discourse rather than exposition, the choice of space added to that shift in positionality. A new-ness could therefore emerge, born of document perhaps, but given agency by precise and considered structural switches. Do you think these

tactics helped forge a translation beyond documentary ‘telling’ of the originals, to be more than this?

JM: *play video; section 5*

AB: The dance space is a very different space from those from where the actions originate. The work’s context as retrospective is perhaps unstable through you being alive (as retrospectives are usually the preserve of the dead like Rauschenberg and other big art historical names), the site, situation, and the choice of gesture over object. How was this for you as the artist, and where did the changes in translation and delivery occur as a result?

JM: *play video; section 6*

AB: You approached this performance without script or rehearsal. Do you think the audience believed it to be choreographed, and more ordered than what you intended?

JM: *play video; section 7*

AB: They tend to be out of time, historicised as accounts and regimes of looking back. Your fictionalised version is divergent and polemic because it is the antithesis of these conventions – it defies a delivery of fact, object and completeness, offering a space of provocation, gesture and liveness instead.

JM: *play video; section 8*

AB: What are the conflicts there, if one exists at all, as a looking back and moving towards simultaneously, a un-fixity that seeks to perpetually exist between two

points? The retrospective of 2016 is now history itself as we meet over one year later in 2017, so I wonder how it would if remade?

JM: *play video; section 9*

AB: That is the opportunity of this kind of retrospective perhaps. Lens documents are lifeless, lost to, and of time. They aim to demonstrate the active and experiential whilst failing miserably. A dichotomy of representation and misrepresentation - the work experiences mistranslation in its partial exposure.

JM: *play video; section 10*

Which is a good thing perhaps, as there is no lens documentation of McKenzie's event in 2016.