

more of an avalanche: Phoebe Collings-James

transcript

John Bloomfield 00:01

Phoebe Collings-James is a Jamaican British artist born in London and living in New York. Her practice is intentionally messy and sprawling, focused on how we live with getting bodied. Her work takes form in drawing videos, sculpture, text and music with a distinctly corporeal approach. She burdens ubiquitous materials with a process of symbolic layering, all in order to explore emotional connections to the politics and erotics of violence, language and fear. On this current residency at Wysing with Last Yearz Interesting Negro/Jamila Johnson-Small, Phoebe will create a collaborative work embodied for a symbiotic relationship between dance, music, and sculpture, asking what an anti assimilationist practice might look and sound like in 2018. I'll get out of your way.

Phoebe Collings-James 01:05

Can you let me know when it's time? Hi. I guess I'm more nervous than I thought I was. Yeah, so I'm going to speak a bit about the projects that me and Jamila are working on. And we've been here for a few weeks already. So I guess we kind of have a bit of a sense of what we thought we were going to do and what's actually been happening and how those two things might differ a bit. So obviously John read my bio, so I guess my background comes more in the visual arts, the breadth of what that means, and Jamila

has an artist background has been mainly in dance and performance or through dance and performance. Yeah, and so I guess where we come together is at a point of intention for our work, and also an old friendship of over 15 years now. And a combined intuition around the role of sound in our work and lives. The projects we're doing at Wysing is based around a title of sound for survival sound as weapons. And to start with I'm going to share some of our initial propositions for this work. So, our idea will be centred around a conceptual deconstruction of percussion, as it functions instrumentally and also as a radical proposition to the various ways you can think about the power of striking an object. We will use the foundational logic of percussion to create our own instruments made of ceramics and other materials. They will be over an undersized, shifting in scale tone timbre, and they will be oddly shaped to create new boundaries for our bodies to navigate in the sensory labor of their being played. We will use the recording studio to work on our original music production, it will act as a supplementary soundtrack for the performance, or as a composition to be recreated or responded to live with new instruments. At this early stage, we imagine that we will record sounds we will create in workshop sessions with musicians we will invite to engage with our ideas and the percussive sculptures we create and in the first instance, to share their knowledge, passion for percussion, and also to document and study their different and specific gestures whilst playing, as research towards the construction and choreography, choreographic potential of our own instruments. All this alongside spoken word fragments of the field recordings. We will consider our multi-disciplinary genre disobedient practices as artists in the black British and Caribbean diaspora who use sound, sculpture, and dance as primary modes in their work to create shifting images, intense atmospheres and different physical states. As artists we create work that has an inherently disobedient intention, challenging binary perceptions of how

black people should behave, and expectations put on black bodies to perform a spectacle, asking what an anti-assimilation practice might look like, requiring the audience to both engage emotionally and conceptually not separating the embodied experience from the intellectual processing. Lucumí, Voodoo and spiritual figures like Anansi summoned in our work as traditions to both uphold and evolve with, while contemporary traditions in western music, and dance are challenged in powerful and sonic movement based discourse. So I guess those were our original intentions. And in the last few weeks, we've been trying to work through these ideas. This involved a lot of late night chats in the farmhouse, interesting you talking about...Leah talking about kind of like the time spent on these residences and what they might look like. And definitely for Jamila and I it was listening to our bodies what we needed. Some of our most fruitful conversations were when Jamila was in the bath at 2am. Sorry Wilf, and and yeah, I was sitting on the floor, and we were working through things. And then some of the most more focused moments were inviting people to come other artists to come and work with us, we did an open call and it was fairly open in terms of the disciplines that people could bring and mainly, it was about an engagement with our ideas. Yeah. So as well as working with the ceramic instruments I had made that included bells, textured orbs, and a version of a triangle, microphones balanced so that we had to crouch reach or bend to sing through them and a lot of dancing. This figure of Anansi, that we've been thinking about previously came through and kind of movements around the studio, trying to I guess, embody, embody the sort of idea and animal in the space. Something that also led from thinking about that was also thinking about this idea of a knowledge that is internal, which could also be like maybe a childhood knowledge or things that are learned through osmosis opposed to an institutional, or book knowledge, even if it's within the home, but like the different contexts books are in and what you get from the

different contexts. This was through Jamila talking about the fact that Anansi came to her as a childhood story, you know, and so it was something that's been in different contexts in her life. And yeah, and how I guess in terms of like, not only anti-assimilation, but kind of like, what I would describe as maybe getting over the trauma of going to art school is thinking about, like relocating and re-prioritising and privileging and valuing different knowledges that were maybe drummed into you that were not as important. And that's also something that seems to come up for lots of the other artists who, who were somewhat different in ages and moments when they had been in different institutions. Yeah, we spent a lot of time in the dark listening to dub, trying to locate the pressure it resonated in our bodies. That required a little imagination too as we were working with no sub. We concentrated on the micro movements of our bodies, and worked sound into our bodies using a practice of organ breathing, which is kind of something we did laying on the floor. And I guess it's the kind of sound that you make when you're like, 'Ahhhhhh'. I'm trying to like, push that down, find different ways of moving our mouths and opening our throats to see how far see if you could actually imagine your kidneys and sing into the kidneys. And some people got further down and Jamila was like in her toe somewhere. But yeah. But it was an interesting process of, of both thinking about these ideas of both conceptually and physically. I think the word embodied is one that I feel like I probably use a lot and maybe lots of other people do too to describe how we get, how we ingest all of this, these ideas and pump them through us and then eventually make work. And so it was interesting to do that work that was actually very truly embodied. So we lay in the dark listening to a recording by artist, Rindon Johnson, who spoke about the skin as an organ and the hide being a skin without a body. Have I ever felt like a hide, a transformative switch between myself my objects and subjects, the hide and the cloak? In between these more physical exercises

we did a lot of talking and I'm now going to read some thoughts I had from these conversations. I need movement I need to not know. Assimilation is formula is you asking a question and me having an answer that fits in neatly with the order of things, one that does not change. Is a person's practice the work? I'm thinking that there are potentials for the way we practice to be anti-assimilationist, but that the performance of the work would always involve some assimilation to the walls of the space it is held in, the conditions and demands of the people holding power, the dynamic of the audience and performer, maybe it is best to consider anti-assimilation in the same way we do joy. I don't expect joy to be constant. It is a peak moment, felt in multitude of ways, like food pushing through a gut or something getting absorbed by the intestinal membrane along the way, I guess in this sense, needs constant feeding action. However, perhaps it is possible for anti-assimilation to reach a critical mass chaos chorus osmosis, I can imagine the performers laying on the floor doing the organ exercises, then monologues and then peeling away to interact with other stations. Stations of these kind of points that we in some of the exercises kind of set out, so there was like a microphone on a bench, sort of like kind of high up there was these sort of ceramic bells and orbs in one section, there was the projector that Jamila put on this really horrible Emma Watson video, but anyone could come and turn it off, put something else on, we had sound recorders, just different things around the room. I had like a string of ball bearings. But in my mind was a kind of like, opened up Kabasa or something just let the thread out. Yeah, I lost my...chorus osmosis...I can imagine performers laying down on the floor. Thinking of levels perhaps we could build slim body size platforms at different heights for people to be laying on. Colonization and decolonization is simply a question of relative strength, Fanon said in 'Wretched of the Earth'. I feel the tension of this relation, but I don't want to believe it is the only way because relative strength holds

only death, where can life grow from there between the cracks? Unless it is about reconsidering strength? What strength could actually mean in this context? If it is not the strength of the gun, knife, rope, that Fanon speaks of then what could it be? I was left feeling tired but full from the workshop days. That did not feel like assimilation, but where it recorded, shared, translated into it would have felt violent. So what is their privacy opacity? We are from anywhere we cannot go back there is no back and perhaps there is no future with us in this current flesh. What is there beyond holding or being filled with something else? Overflow overwhelmed spilling relative strength. So this is where we are at so far. We look forward to sharing more with you soon. Thank you.

audience applause