

# In Case There's a Reason: The Theatre of Mistakes

Gabriel Coxhead   Reviews   20 October 2017   ArtReview



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Raven Row, London, 30 June – 6 August

There’s a strongly pedagogical flavour to this exhibition. Partly, of course, that’s the nature of a survey show about a performance-art group, where the format is pretty much bound to include archival material – especially as The Theatre of Mistakes (as the group was known from 1974 to their end in 1981), or The Ting (to use the name of a previous, looser incarnation), seem to have been particularly assiduous in documenting their activities. Much of the show, then, consists of vitrines of photographs, texts and ephemera, either representing specific pieces – such as *The Street* (1975), where a residential road in Kentish Town became for one evening a setting for various choreographed actions, or *Ascent of The Stedelijk* (1976), in which the floor of the Dutch museum was laboriously traversed as if climbing a vertical cliff face – or offering a more general glimpse into the close-knit art scene in England during the 1970s.

But beyond that, ideas of instructing and informing were central to the group’s own practice. The performances were typically intricate and meticulously planned, often following the logic of some organisational principle or system – a fact that clearly comes through in the serial, gridlike charts and abstract diagrams used to determine sequences of blocking and positioning, or to plot complex permutations of interactions between performers. There are resemblances to various conceptual artworks from the period, perhaps most notably the drawings of Sol LeWitt. Indeed, the whole idea of The Theatre of Mistakes was to develop a similar sort of language, a conceptual, rule-based methodology, for performance art.

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This strand of thinking extends to one of the two live components of the show: the daily workshops conducted by Anthony Howell, one of the group’s six core members, which derive from the book he coauthored in 1976, *Elements of Performance Art* – a primer-cum-manifesto for performance art in Britain. The workshops are lessons, essentially, which anyone can sign up for and participate in. Though you can also just watch (during my visit, participants were doing entertaining exercises on stillness and interaction) – so they’re performances, too. Just like all teaching, to continue the pedagogical vein, is indeed a kind of performance.

The second live element is the nightly enactment of what’s often considered The Theatre of Mistakes’s signature work, *Going* (1977), directed by the group’s other main driving force, Fiona Templeton. The piece is a vaguely Beckettian play in five acts: an undefined, institutional scenario in which five office-suited performers progress through a sequence of spoken lines and gestures relating to an impending but perpetually deferred departure, continually rotating between characters and replicating each other’s actions in shifting combinations. The tone is dour and oppressive, as befits this cyclical, white-collar purgatory; yet, especially for the mathematically inclined, it’s an absolute joy to watch. The sense is of a rigidly mechanistic, clockwork universe, one in which occasional malfunctions or anomalies are the only way for the overall narrative to change track and progress; or perhaps a more up-to-date analogy would be some kind of glitchy, buggy computer program. Indeed, one of the pleasures of the piece is how well it manages to adapt to a contemporary audience; how, by virtue of its adherence to a systemic, impersonal, rule-based structure, it manages to avoid the concerns around expression and authenticity that have attached to other recreated works of historical performance art in recent years. Also, once again, it’s fascinating to see the themes of knowledge and learning emerge – this time in the form of the play’s characters, who seem in some way to comprehend the system they inhabit, and who sometimes manage to step out of the action enough to make fractional adjustments, directing the course of events to ensure the play itself arrives at its rightful, liberating conclusion.

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