

# CURTAIN

# UP

COLLECTIVE  
EFFERVESCENCE

When sociologist Émile Durkheim first coined the term collective effervescence, he placed it in a sacred context. Durkheim was interested in the way that collective gathering was, and still is, often an intrinsic part of religious ritual, and sought to encapsulate the unique quality of shared experience. He understood that in a crowd, where participants are united by a common belief, the feelings and actions of others become a potent force, transforming the experience<sup>1</sup>. Since its initial conception in 1912, the idea of collective effervescence has adapted, finding resonance in secular contexts. In contemporary thought, collective effervescence has been applied to myriad examples of mass gathering, including protests and rallies, sporting events, concerts and other examples of live performance. The inability to share space during the covid-19 pandemic brought into sharp relief, the role of collective environments, such as those explored in *Curtain Up*, in facilitating the intense emotional contagion that Durkheim associated with gathering.

The energy of collectivity runs deep in **Ulla von Brandenburg's** newly commissioned work *Spirits are Matter*. The bold, geometric abstraction of the curtain is reflective of the artist's interest in the development of the abstract tradition, particularly its relationship with spiritualism and esoteric philosophies like Theosophy. In 1905, the Theosophist writer, Annie Besant, developed her theory

of thought forms, proposing that when humans experience thoughts or emotions, these have a manifest vibrational energy as well as a colour profile visible only to those with a heightened awareness<sup>2</sup>. Von Brandenburg's vibrant chromatic patchwork reflects the mingling of individual emotions and states of mind within an audience, that generate collective effervescence. In *Spirits are Matter*, colour and form work together to create a viewing experience reminiscent of a theatre audience. The textile materiality of the work adds another dimension. Like the experience of being in the audience at a venue like Lowry, where multiple senses are activated, the tactility of the work displaces visual stimulation as the primary way of seeing. The dismantling of conventional hierarchies also manifests in the visual reference to the stage curtain. Where traditionally, the curtain acts as a boundary between the audience and the stage, Von Brandenburg transforms it into a threshold, repurposing the curtain's function and inviting viewers in. Viewers are admitted into the space, gaining access to the back of the curtain, where its construction is exposed.





The visual language of theatre is also a key reference for artists **Ryan Mosley** and **Chris Paul Daniels**. Mosley uses theatrical motifs as compositional devices in his paintings. In *Cave Inn* and *Dance of the Nobleman*, the stage is a physical anchor on the canvas,

while the backs of the audience's heads serve as a frame for each image. However, these real-world pictorial references give way to a surrealism that is typical of Mosley's work with fantastic characters recurring throughout his paintings. In *Dance of the Nobleman*, the figure is depicted with anatomically absurd elements that give the work a carnivalesque quality. Mikhail Bakhtin characterised the Carnavalesque in his 1968 text, *Rabelais and his World*, citing the medieval custom of celebrations, such as the Feast of Fools, which served to flip the established societal order and momentarily disrupt these hierarchies<sup>3</sup>. These celebrations gave people of all classes license to embrace chaos and absurdity, a tradition which Mosley draws on visually by altering the Nobleman's feet. Not only are they an anatomical impossibility, being a hand and a skull, but they draw the attention to the lower half of the body, a trait of the carnivalesque. This focus contrasts from the upper body and its neurological centres of thought and reasoning. The topsy-turvy world that Mosley places us in exemplifies his tendency to cross the line between fact and fiction.

Artist filmmaker Chris Paul Daniels uses the visual cues and illusionary nature of theatre as a lens to explore personal identity and self-projection. Responding to Lowry's history as a performance venue, *Give Yourself a Round of Applause* brings together footage from the North West Film archive, showing numerous art forms in different performance environments. The footage illustrates the mechanics of



storytelling and foregrounds the artifice of theatre. Daniels finds resonance between this artifice and the attempt to present oneself authentically. The film enters a kind of third act where this tension comes to the fore. There is a shift in the narration towards deeper personal contemplation, however the intentional use of an alternative narrator adds a secondary layer to this reflection. Daniels often considers



the idea of unreliable narration through his scripts, using it as a tool to demonstrate how outward identities can be constructed and performed. The blurring of imagination and reality in both Mosley's and Daniel's works speak to a social contract in which audience members suspend disbelief in an inbetween state for the duration of a performance.

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The fleetingness of live performance is captured in **Abigail Reynolds'** sculptural collages. Her series, *The Universal Now*, takes its name from the strand of Einsteinian physics, which questions whether there is such a thing as common time. The collages depict an open-air performance space in Cornwall, and the notion of time pervades, even in their subject matter. Nestled in a cliffside in Porthcurno, the Minack Theatre

recalls an amphitheatre, where an ancient theatrical performance is easily imagined. It was in fact built in the 1930s. Reynolds sources images from outdated guidebooks of the same location, taken from the same angle, years, sometimes decades apart. Placing the images side by side, intertwined with each other, she accentuates the uniqueness of individual audience experiences and their transient nature.



Despite the difference in setting and medium, **Denzil Forrester's** works consider a similar

conundrum to Reynolds'. Forrester's preparatory sketches for *DJ Mix*, like much of his work at the time, were created in situ in a London night club. His painted documents of London's dub music scene, began as quick, instinctive drawings, created during moments of live performance. Forrester's work is something of an attempt to translate these ephemeral moments, first onto paper, then onto canvas. Each version takes us further from the original moment, emphasising the particularity of the moments Forrester pictures. Instead, technique and style act as stand ins, capturing the atmosphere and energy in the room. Ultimately, both artists grapple with the difficulty of depicting a particular moment. Each work presents us with a moment in time, frozen by the medium, but still removed from the original experience.



**Joy Labinjo's** 2023 work, *Enjoyment*, takes us away from the familiar architectural spaces that host audiences. Removed from a traditional theatre or concert hall, the setting is immediately more relaxed with audience and performers sharing the space, and their equal level speaks to the communality of this scene. In *Enjoyment*, intimacy is created by the familiarity of the figures, who are at ease with each other. Although the scene gives us a glimpse of gathering on a much smaller scale than many of the works cited earlier, *Enjoyment* emphasises Durkheim's insistence on shared space and purpose as the essential components of collective effervescence. **Bridget Smith** depicts a different kind of intimacy in *Blueprint for a Sea (rising)*. The viewer is placed at the back of an empty cinema auditorium, totally devoid of human presence. Despite the allusion to waves, there is an intense stillness in the scene that oscillates between tranquillity and eeriness. Without its usual inhabitants, the auditorium takes on a different character, no longer recognisable as a space of collective experience. Instead, Smith presents an alternate version of this familiar architectural vision, one of solitude for a viewer, and the reflection it prompts is the ultimate intimacy.

In contrast to Smith's scene where viewers are absent, **Simeon Barclay's** work looks at how the presence of others affects the way we present ourselves. *Look No Hands* explores the British Jazz Dance scene as an arena for self-expression. In the accompanying footage, Barclay uses imagery of technical skill in dancing and football, as well as show ponies, as concise summations of the kind of virtuosic displays that occurred during dance offs. Fuelled by a competitive edge, these interactions were not just about demonstrating skill but also communicating



pro prowess and exhibiting masculinity. *Look No Hands* positions the dance-off as a moment of spectacle, interrogating the implications of being watched and how this can verge into contrivance.



The feeling of being observed is also present in **Rowland Hill's** newly commissioned installation, *Relic*. The subject of *Relic* is Loughborough Fair, the travelling attraction that has been visiting Hill's hometown, since 1221. The installation is an in-the-round experience, reflecting the experience of fairgoers, who often find themselves looking either outward or inward on rides. *Relic* enables participants to look at each other as they peer into the installation, heightening their awareness of the presence of others, compounded by the watchful eyes of celebrities in the signature fairground signage that recurs in the footage. Hill's varied artistic practice includes performance work, which she describes as uncomfortable and confronting, and this translates into an installation format. The architecture of *Relic* confuses who the audience is, casting uncertainty on who is watching and who is being watched. Like the other works in this show, *Relic* demonstrates the undeniable impact of experiencing events communally and exposes both the obvious and subtle implications of congregation.



### Grace Buckley, Assistant Curator

1.

Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life: A New Translation by Karen E. Fields* (New York: The Free Press, 1995)

2.

Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms* (London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1905), 18

3.

Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World: Translated by Helene Iswolsky* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 5

**LOWRY**