

Harold Offeh

Hearing from Artists

Harold Offeh works with performance, video, photography, learning and social practice to inhabit and embody histories. He lives in Cambridge, UK. In 2016 and 2017 he made performances at MIMA and in 2021 his work is part of In The Castle of my Skin, an exhibition at MIMA. Here, he is in conversation with Elinor Morgan, Head of Programme, in June 2020.

EM: You inhabit and embody narratives and images as a way of understanding and redressing histories. What is important about activating archives through performance and conversation in this way?

HO: I think my practice is very shaped by process. I'm particularly interested in inhabiting and embodying narratives and images. This process affords an opportunity to play, learn and reflect on materials and sources. I have most clearly utilised this process in the development of the *Covers* series. *Covers* saw me attempting to re-enact album covers by black female singers from the 1970s and 80s. The process of re-enacting these images gave me an opportunity to really explore the source material. It's easy to think that a parody or a copy is lazy and unintelligent or culturally unproductive. But I think it's important to acknowledge that copying is an intrinsic part of learning; mimicking is how we learn speech and acquire language. So, in attempting to embody these images of album covers, which in themselves are pieces of design



Selfie Choreography, 2020. Performance for In the Castle of My Skin. Eastside Projects, Birmingham. Photos by Ashley Carr

communication, I'm looking for a sense of the historical and social value of these images.

To answer the question more directly, there are two main things that are important: firstly, through physically trying to embody an image, there is a process of close observation, critical analysis and editorial decision making. By inhabiting the gestures and poses of someone else's body you gain new understanding of them.

Secondly, in presenting work I always try and contextualize it by placing it in proximity to original source images, i.e. the album covers. The audience is confronted with my re-enactment and the original image. In this respect, my re-enactments act as annotations or commentary, they're a way of inviting the gaze and directing that gaze to these historical images. This is made even more apparent when I perform the poses live in front of an audience. The audience sees me trying to hold the album cover pose next to the original image for 4-5 minutes – the length of an album track. So, an important aspect of the



Industry is a Drag, 2017. Performance. Middlesbrough Art Weekender. MIMA

swooping in and suddenly asking people to share or participate in a project in its very early stages. I was interested in the conditions for queer culture in an industrial town like Middlesbrough but there wasn't the time or budget for a big project to be realised. Brilliant artists like Hannah Quinlan and Rosie Hastings have explored Northern queer culture in works like 'The UK Gay bar Directory'.

Instead, I fell back on a more direct and physical approach. I became interested in the materiality of the industrial city. I was thinking about materials like metal, brick and concrete and the labour and power that shaped interactions with these materials. The idea that I might try carrying these materials began to form. I'm often interested in exploring situations and contexts by placing myself, my body in them. The piece evolved into the idea that I would be dragging industrial artefacts like a ship's anchor while wearing high heels. The title, *Industry is a Drag* is really just a bad pun, dragging industrial material while in (semi) drag. A last minute addition to the work was a soundtrack taken from Jlin's album *Black Origami*. Jlin is an amazing electronic musician and producer, from Gary, Indiana in the industrial Midwest of the US. She also used to work in a steel mill, so I became fascinated by these layers of coincidence with her music and biography. I don't think all these references were visible in the work, but my labour and slow failure of the work as I struggled with the heavy load were very apparent.

I'm reluctant to make claims about the work speaking to Middlesbrough's history or specific experiences of labour and gender. The work was informed by the context around MIMA. The openness of performing in a public place like the square in front of MIMA was the most exciting part of the work. A couple of teenage boys on bikes watched the piece, cycled around me and asked what I was doing. I tried to answer as best I could while carrying these heavy objects. I loved their curiosity and questioning. At that moment I was trying to genuinely think about the value of what I was doing.

project for me is getting people to look and think about those images. Importantly, I hope to replicate and share the process of my discovery with the audience. In effect, we're all locked in this process of observation and reflection.

EM: In 2017 you made a new performance titled *Industry is a Drag*. In this stunning piece you hauled an enormous chain, sandbags and an anchor around the periphery of MIMA, wearing a leotard and heels. How were you connecting with the area's histories of industry, labour and gender in this piece?

HO: I was invited by curator and academic Paul Stewart to develop a performance for the Middlesbrough Art Weekender in 2017. On previous visits to Middlesbrough I'd been quite curious about the queer scene on Teesside but felt really uncomfortable about



Covers Live: After Grace Jones, *Island Life*, 2015, Performance. MAC, Birmingham.
Photos by Timothy Pratt

EM: Your work often confronts ways that black people’s ideas, cultures, bodies and looks have been used in popular culture, by white and black people, within a culture industry dominated by white subjectivity. How do you make visible and interrupt this?

HO: I’m interested in representations of blackness in culture and popular culture in particular. However, you can easily spend a lot of time breaking down the constructs of blackness and its presence or absence in contemporary popular culture. I’m aware of how dominant white western structures shape thought production and reception of black culture and on a more basic level I’m aware of audiences watching my work. I don’t strategically set out to challenge white audiences.

In the development of the *Covers* series, I was really conscious of the role of duration in the

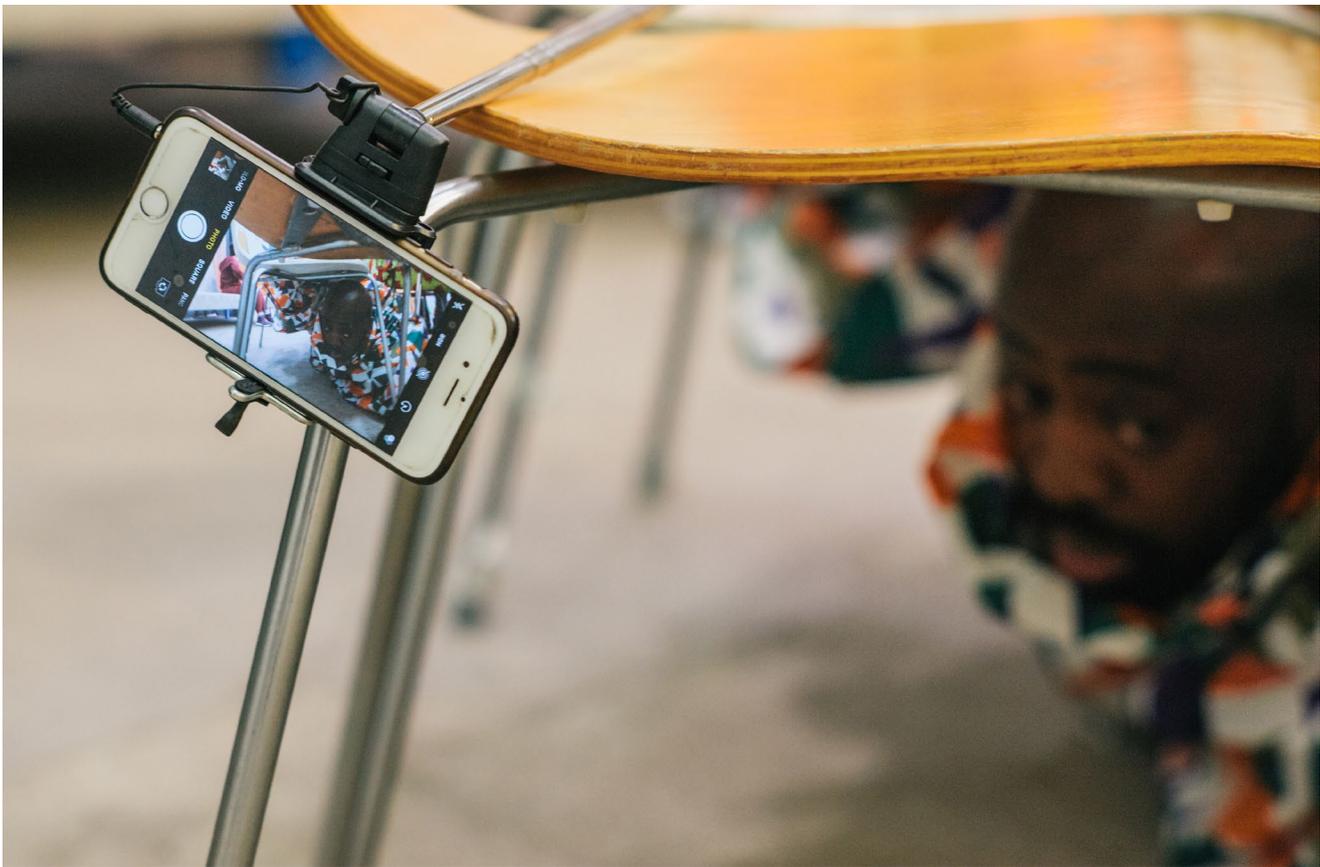
performance or spectacle of the black body. This work grapples with the cultural legacy of the commodification of black and brown bodies as labouring subjects. I am thinking of Paul Gilroy’s writing about the Black Atlantic experience and the performativity of Blackness that emerges from histories of slavery and colonialism. There are specific strategies that were employed, including ‘passing’ (as white), which, for the few who could get away with it was about absorption and invisibility.

Blacks performing a White version of blackness is something I’ve always been interested in. It’s the spectacle of blackness; blackness as entertainment. It’s a survival strategy, but it’s another form of commodification. These are the invisible histories that helped to build and enrich the capitalist western culture we know today. In performing those poses I’m aware of these histories, and as a black subject I’m interested in making the performance of labour visible. I have to confess I like a degree of awkwardness. The uncertainty it throws out and destabilizes things, well I hope it does.

I want to engage with audiences and I invite the viewer’s gaze with hope. I use humour or visual spectacles to draw people in. I think about the meeting of the work with the audience as a site of encounter. In that moment of encountering the work, I want to bring the audience closer to the work. This may lead to other things like awkwardness or discomfort, but that sense of the work being a catalyst for a journey is really important for me.

EM: One of your current series, *Selfie Choreography*, will be part of an exhibition at MIMA next year which is convened with artist Sonia Boyce (we can’t wait!). What happens in the piece and why did you make it?

HO: I’m really excited to be showing *Selfie Choreography* as part of the exhibition convened by Sonia Boyce. *Selfie Choreography* has been developed out of a series of workshops. I started doing it about four years ago. I was really interested in selfie sticks



Selfie Choreography, 2020. Performance for *In the Castle of My Skin*. Eastside Projects, Birmingham. Photos by Ashley Carr

as slightly redundant and cliched tools for image-making. In the workshop I became interested in creating a number of activities that would allow people to break away from the conventions of taking images with the sticks. Even today they are very formulaic ways of taking selfies: people will stand and pose in very particular ways that are less about capturing a moment and more about projecting a particular sense of self.

With *Selfie Choreography* I wanted to think about the creative potential of what could be generated by my movements, the body and the camera engaging with a particular space. I'm interested in how private and personal acts are played out in a very visible and public context. It's really great to perform *Selfie Choreography* with the people, particularly in different or unusual spaces. There is a sense of discovery in performing for the camera in the gallery space; you experience and map the space in a very different way. *Selfie Choreography* is a project I return to all the time because of its openness and its playfulness and its ability to allow me to generate interesting and challenging images.

EM: With so much of your work being made with other people and in social settings, how is social distancing affecting the work you're able to make?

HO: There is a very simple answer to this question: I have stopped making work. Well, the sort of work that is made with other people in social settings. There are a number of projects I was planning to finish this summer that are on hold. This includes a project about social and collective dance as a form of resistance to trauma. It's taken me a while, like everyone else, to re-adjust. But the lockdown reality has brought out another side of my practice which is actually very solitary and self-reliant. I've enjoyed just thinking about smaller, more manageable things. I like being reminded that I don't need huge budgets or elaborate structures to create. All you need is yourself, a degree of motivation and curiosity.