



# Johanna Billing

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Camden Arts Centre / July—September 2009

File Note #41 **Johanna Billing:** *I'm Lost Without Your Rhythm*

Bruce Haines

# I'm Lost Without Your Rhythm

Johanna Billing's videos have reflected on routine, rehearsal and ritual which through a deft observational style place subtle emphasis on both the fragility of individual performance and the power of collective experience. Billing has said that she is obsessed by circularity and retrospection. Music, sound and rhythm have woven a continuous thread through her video works and young people have frequently become a focus of her camera's 'eye', despite each work having hugely divergent contexts and content at their heart. The methodologies she employs turn film making into projects where the participants are an intrinsic part of their process – their people, locations, activities, recording and sounds coming together in a lengthy post-production editing process which she acknowledges is approached in an often rhythmical way – just as music can convey atmosphere, so can the nature of the edit.

Like many of her contemporaries, Billing's interests are wide, taking in philosophy, music and social science as well as influence from her artist-friends' practices. It is the co-joining of the political with the collaborative that often results in her work being defined as 'participative' though she is more often than not creating an open structure in which people function in a way that is much more democratic. Her skill lies in combining the choreography of the individuals whose trust she earns with facilitating their freedom to behave naturally or spontaneously. Johanna Billing brings a unique perspective to, and forges an emotional connection with, the viewers of her films because of the investment she makes in the people who feature in them. Perhaps as she has intimated herself, the most interesting place to occupy as a 'participant' is that space between the collective experience of producing an art work and the private experience of seeing it in the context of an art gallery or cinema.



## Works in the exhibition:

*I'm Lost Without Your Rhythm* (2009) (cover, above) is Johanna's new film made as part of the '3 series' of new commissions with Arnolfini and Modern Art Oxford. The film is based around the recording of a live choreography event involving amateur Romanian dancers and acting students in Iasi during the Periferic 8 Biennial of Contemporary Art in Romania in October 2008. Led by Swedish choreographer Anna Vnuk with whom Billing last worked over a decade ago, there is no final performance as such. The resulting video links several days' activity into a continuous process of live improvisation between choreographer, dancers and local musicians, watched by an audience who were free to come and go as they pleased. For Billing, the project was an attempt to explore, along with the participating individuals and the audience, what contemporary dance can be, or means today, especially in relation to a developing country and economy such as Romania. Consequently the work becomes about movement in general, choreography closer to everyday life than might first be imagined.



*You Don't Love Me Yet* (2002–09) (above) is an ongoing project based around a forgotten song *You Don't Love Me Yet* by Texan singer-songwriter Roky Erickson (1984). Johanna Billing invited different bands to perform their own version of this tune, in a live tour that has so far been to eighteen different cities. It looks at the idea of the quality of a work being defined by its performance and not by the original idea, common in the music industry but anathema in the art-world where the pressure to come up with original material is all pervading. At the same time the song emotionally dredges the pressures we all face about how to 'live successfully'. A resulting film features a group of artists performing *You Don't Love Me Yet* in a recording studio in Sweden and the table in the exhibition documents all the different live recordings made during the tour that visitors to the exhibition are free to listen to.

*Magical World* (2005) (opposite, top) is a collaboration with a group of school children from a free after-school music club based at a run down 1980s cultural centre in a suburb of Zagreb, Croatia. Johanna introduced a song originally written by Afro-American singer Sidney Barnes (1968), whose lyrics are a melancholic description of transformation which resounds strongly with this young country struggling to assert its own national identity within the European Union. The children too struggle to grasp the content of the song's loaded lyrics together with the fact that its language is not their own.

*Magic and Loss* (2005) (bottom) shows a group of people gathered in an apartment in Amsterdam who were invited to pack and move the belongings of another unknown person. The work is monotonous, slow and repetitive but carefully organised. It isn't made clear why the house is abandoned or its relationship with the buying and selling of property. The title refers to an album by Lou Reed recorded at a time when he too was dealing with the loss of people he loved around him.

*Where She Is At* (2001) (back cover) was filmed at Ingierstrand Bath in Oslo, Norway which was designed by Ole Lind Schistad and Eyvind Mostue in 1934. It is one of the few surviving examples of functionalist architecture in Oslo. Built at a time when there was a general euphoria about health and well-being amongst the general population, the baths are now run down and abandoned. In her film, Johanna's protagonist waits and ponders the act of whether to jump from the high diving board, the ensuing tension palpable to the end.



*This Is How We Walk On The Moon* (2007) (below) is a film commissioned by Collective Gallery in Edinburgh and which was subsequently shown at Documenta 12 in Kassel. Set on the Firth of Forth, below its iconic road bridge, the film shows a group of novice sailors negotiating the various activities required to set sail. In fact these individuals were members of a music collective in the city, and Johanna, struck by how the city's proximity to the North Sea largely goes unacknowledged in the general population living there, decided to engage directly with it in this way. The musicians were invited to take part in a two day sailing course and the musicians in turn collaborated with Johanna on the accompanying musical score, an interpretation of a 1980s song *This Is How We Walk On The Moon* by experimental New York based musician Arthur Russell.

Bruce Haines is Exhibitions Organiser at Camden Arts Centre.



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**Johanna Billing** was born in 1973 in Jönköping, Sweden. She attended Konstfack in Stockholm where she has lived and worked since graduating in 1999. She became known for video works set in Stockholm such as *Project for a Revolution* (2000), *Missing Out* (2001) and *You Don't Love Me Yet* performance events (2003–ongoing) which launched her international career. Recent major solo exhibitions include *Taking Turns*, Kemper Museum, Kansas City; *This is How We Walk On The Moon*, Malmö Konsthall, Malmö (both 2008); *Forever Changes*, Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel and *Keep on Doing*, Dundee Contemporary Arts, Dundee (both 2007). She has participated in survey shows such as Documenta 12, Kassel (2007); Singapore Biennale (2006), 9<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial; 1<sup>st</sup> Moscow Biennale (both 2005) and 50<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (2003). Johanna also runs the record label *Make it Happen* with her brother Anders publishing music and arranging live performances.

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#### Reading/Viewing list

- *The Golden Age for Children*, Stefan Constantinescu, Pionier Press (2008)
- *The Ministry of Pain*, Dubravka Ugresic, Saqi Books (2005)
- *Nowhere Man*, Aleksandar Hemon, Picador (2004)
- *12:08 East of Bucharest*, dir. Corneliu Porumboiu (2007)
- *Play Time*, dir. Jacques Tati (1967)
- *Minnie and Moskowitz*, dir. John Cassavetes (1971)
- *In the Mirror of Maya Deren* (2002)
- *The Salesman*, dir. Albert and David Maysles (1969)
- *To Be and To Have*, dir. Nicolas Philibert (2002)
- *Ole Dole Doff*, dir. Jan Troell (1968)

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‘Often I think I am after a way of communicating – sometimes perhaps with oneself – that we have lost contact with.’  
—Johanna Billing, Iasi, October 2008

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