

# HOLLYBUSH GARDENS

LGBTQIA+ histories can offer communities who have been oppressed a chance to work through that hostility.

Admittedly, a queer reading of Irish art is still in its infancy, yet it profoundly demonstrates that meanings of artworks are neither fixed nor impervious to fresh interpretations. I would add, however, that queering the museum should not simply enhance the visibility of queer heritage in the arts; it must also scrutinise the extent to which institutions actively construct or uphold unequal systems through entrenched processes like selection and classification or formal structures that habitually obscure more entangled but inclusive museological alternatives.

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Anna Barham, *As felt as if*, 2021, performance

## London Summer Round-up

Performance Exchange • Hollybush Gardens • Kupfer

‘Welcome’, breathes a serene, untroubled voice. This disembodied utterance enters around the seventh minute of Abbas Zahedi and Sadie Murdoch’s *A Case of Medd(ing)tation*, performed at Belmacz and conceived in collaboration with Toby Upton. ‘Just take a moment to settle yourself’, the soundtrack continues, following a wash of ambient synth strains, the sort which might precede a mid-breathing exercise behind a paywall on a tastefully designed wellness app. ‘In 1, 2, 3, 4 / And / Out 1, 2, 3, 4.’ A performer wanders with quiet purpose through the space and along the pavement outside as the voice gently segues into absurdity and back again: ‘Come on / You winefizzling ginsizzling boozeguzzling existences! / And, just bringing attention / Now back to the body.’ The performer clutches and sets down a hand-held klaxon, mute but nonetheless suggestive of potential sonic rupture.

*Medd(ing)tation* – half mock guided meditation à la Headspace or buddhify, half linguistic experimentation à la James Joyce – forms part of Performance Exchange, a multi-sited programme of performative artworks staged across a network of commercial galleries. Originally intended to unfold over three consecutive days, the programme was destabilised by some ill-timed contact-tracing ‘pings’ and its third day was delayed by two weeks. It is testament to the strength of Performance Exchange that it was able to be split and to be shifted, allowing plenty of time to explore London’s summer exhibition offerings in the interval.

At Chelsea Space, Anna Barham (presented by Arcade) performs in the muted light of her window commission *Knives*, 2017. *Knives* consists of a written

score, printed on white sheets of A1 paper and reverse fly-posted onto the ceiling-height gallery windows. Composed with the aid of speech-to-text software, over 100 versions of a short passage extracted from Vilem Flusser’s philosophical-zoological treatise *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* are here combined, each dictated by the inconsistencies of human and machine errors, as well as the spoken inflections of reading aloud. Held in place between the windowpane and paper, a seemingly random scatter of objects hang, snagging and buckling around such foreign bodies as a microphone, an oyster shell and a short length of orange coil cable, the detritus acting as both punctures and punctuation. This score forms the script and *mise-en-scène* of Barham’s 2021 performance work, *As felt as if*.

In Flusser’s text, reason is a tool which ‘cuts appearances into defined and workable rations’. Humankind’s urge to rationalise, he argues, ‘works like a knife’, dissecting the world in order that we might digest it in bite-sized chunks. The AI-generated script of *As felt as if* can be seen as slicing through the reason of metaphor itself, divesting text of known semantics in order to construct a new etymology of purely sonic association. ‘Cooing mouths’ and ‘minefields’ are smuggled into Flusser’s theory; some slips of the tongue or misunderstandings of the code mean that ‘reason’ starts ‘dancing’. Barham tells me that the technology couldn’t quite grasp the word ‘squid’, so it mutates, instead, to squint or square. The soft edges of speech jar with the technology’s need for clear-cut consonants so that the word ‘oysters’, for instance, becomes ‘poisonous’. A new venom enters the language and semantic potential opens up. By an irresistible homonym, a score is also an incision.

Barham is one of many artists in the programme to work with a written score. Indeed, the Performance Exchange website is populated with acquisition documents – part of curator Rose Lejeune’s mission to render the process of collecting performance more transparent. These in turn might be read as scores themselves, laying out the terms of future enactment and instructions for future performers. What, in performance, is collectible? Is it the score where value lives? Tim Etchells’s *Now That I Am Here I Am Ready to Leave*, performed at Vitrine, includes, for the collector, a score of archival acrylic drawings which ‘set out the text and its changing iterations’. The acquisition document for Paul Maheke’s *Taboo Durag* (a highlight of the programme presented by Goodman Gallery and Sultana, so honest and intimate that it felt strange to watch it by daylight), includes a time-stamped transcript and ‘Dance Notations’.

For *Shouting in Whispers*, Helen Cammock reads and sings from three scripts at the bandstand in Arnold Circus (presented by Kate MacGarry). Each script is a rhapsodic stitching-together of words by activists, writers and singers, the artist’s voice a sharp needle. *The Long Note*, 2018, begins at the battle of Jericho and proceeds by way of Nina Simone, Andy White, Frantz Fanon and Bernadette Devlin McAliskey. Like Barham, Cammock is well aware of the potential of mishearing/misreading to open up new fields of meaning. ‘But I read it wrong’ – she says of the Waterside to Cityside Peace bridge across the River Foyle in Derry – ‘And I thought it said skies / And with that word change / I heard a whole other story.’ This association creates a point of entry for a poem by Collette Bryce: ‘I stepped from my skies and

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stumbled in...’ Such slippages of understanding, Cammock suggests, allow for new voices and alternative stories to pierce the surface.

At Hollybush Gardens, **Ellen Lesperance**’s first solo exhibition in London, ‘Will There Be Womanly Times?’, traces a distaff line of craft and protest through research into the knitted garments worn by the activists of the Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp. Occupied from 1981 to 2000, the camp saw thousands of women circle and repeatedly surmount the nine-mile fence perimeter of an RAF airbase in Berkshire where the British government had agreed to locate 96 US nuclear weapons. The protesters cast impenetrable webs of yarn around their ad hoc quarters and danced on the missile silos. Although the women were known for their ‘argumentative jumpers’, as Lesperance terms them, these handmade textiles are nowhere to be found in existing archives. They bear symbols and slogans of resistance: ‘babies against bombs’; ‘stop a convoy today’; witches on broomsticks; placidly smiling violet moons. Their archival absence may be put down to repeated police raids on the encampments, but ultimately speaks to a historic devaluation of craft in the museum and beyond.

Here, Greenham Common knitwear takes centre stage. In the main space hang eight works of gouache dotted on hand-gridded, tea-stained paper in the manner of Symbolcraft, a universal yet complex shorthand code for knitting patterns. Intended to function as working blueprints (scores, even) for new facsimiles of unpreserved history – ‘to pattern them so that they could live on in a future world’ – these paintings operate as translations of jumpers identified in photos and footage, tailed across sources to secure as much detail as possible. A darkened annexe features a slideshow of archival images gathered by the artist, where keen-eyed viewers can scout the starring knits in action. The paintings themselves are arresting nets of colour: flat yet inherently suggestive of the curvature of an absent body; wide sleeves reaching downwards like thighs; figurative of wearers past and future. The pixels which represent individual stitches are meticulously overlapped so that each garment might be folded into one single pictorial plane. It could all appear very cosy, but at a time when the creeping reality of the criminalisation of protest looms imminently, Lesperance’s work feels less a memorial and more a call to arms.

Conversely, ‘**Let X = X**’ at Kupfer Projects is a show pointedly devoid of clothing. It brings together, for the first time, Brazilian artists Alair Gomes and Hudinilson Jr, both of whose creative output derives a subversive charge from depicting explicitly sexualised



Ellen Lesperance, *The Only Revolution This World Has Ever Seen is the Little Man Against the Bigger Man, but They're All Mens to Me*, 2021

male bodies in the buff. Despite belonging to different generations (Gomes was born in 1921, Hudinilson in 1957), both worked under a dictatorial regime in which censorship, homophobic violence and militaristic tactics of civil repression were endemic. While Gomes worked from the privacy of his own home, inviting his subjects to pose there or scoping them out through binoculars at his window, Hudinilson’s methods of creation and distribution were determinedly performative. Their pairing, here, puts forward a defiantly libidinal vernacular from military rule-era Brazil’s queer underground.

Twelve works from Gomes’s vast 1,767-photograph series ‘Symphony of Erotic Icons’, 1966–78, occupy one wall like a troupe of faceless performers. Each frames a portion of an idealised male body – young, muscular, reminiscent of classical sculpture – in explicit monochrome detail: a navel emerging from a tangle of semen-wet body hair; a close-up of a spent condom; an erect penis. His obsessive formal documentation sits on a fault line between intimate, tender observation and violent fragmentation, its gaze verging on taxonomical.

Flanking the voyeur is the narcissist, Hudinilson, whose ‘Xerox-Action’ works, 1979–80, involved him scanning his own body into near abstraction. Photographs on the left wall show the young artist draped across a photocopier as if engaged in a sexual act, bare skin pressed to glass, hands gripping the machine’s edge in an embrace. These sessions were to produce Xerox collage works in which Hudinilson’s blown-up anatomy is repeated and patchworked across large sheets of paper, one of which sits opposite the documentation of its creation. The heightened contrast, flattened detail and grainy texture of the relatively new reproductive technology was to generate a haptic imagery in which skin and surface are confused: flesh stretched taut against the copier’s broad lens and marked with thick scrawls of body hair. Equally captivating are the two volumes – Hudinilson’s *cadernos de referência* – which sit on a shelf by the window, thick with sketches, letters and cuttings from magazines and newspapers. Depending on where they fall open, one spread might find a work by Pablo Picasso pasted next to an emphatic close-up of anal penetration, or a gymnast mid-leap into a telephone number. This summer continues to be full of surprises.

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Hudinilson Jr, ‘Xerox-Action’, 1979–80