

Lucy Beech and Edward Thomasson: Together

Tate Britain London 25 April to 18 June

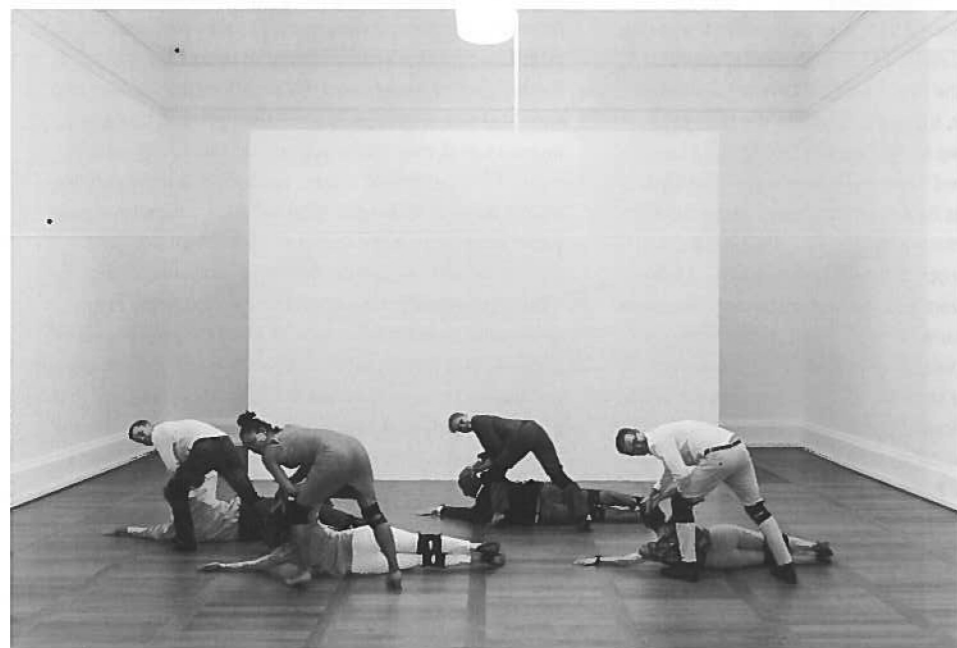
In Lucy Beech and Edward Thomasson's new performance piece *Together* and video companion *Together (Forever)*, presented at Tate Britain as part of its Art Now series, a complex choreography of theatrical combat and co-operation takes place. In the live performance, four couples emerge from behind a large white screen, each wearing kneepads over a combination of office-wear and smart-casual attire. One of each pair wears a radio mic, which they test accordingly. Grinning, they watch attentively as a female member of the group informs the audience that they are going to do some recording. One of the male performers is summoned and starts clicking his fingers into her microphone for just under a minute. 'Right, let's play that back,' she says. The performers all scramble to get in formation and suddenly the import of the kneepads becomes clear. Each member of each of the couples uses the other to make a series of jarring and faintly amusing sounds, which are also recorded: little exhalations; a belt snapped taut; a kneepad struck from behind; a jacket flung to the ground; a small empty plastic bottle crushed. These amplified sounds, layered over the clicking, are subsequently replayed as the team leader and her partner enact a sequence of physical shocks, variously throwing out legs and arms, reeling back or lying on their sides with their heads pulled up, perfectly timed to the noises produced by the group's previous movements. Then the other couples take centre stage, and reveal a mirror choreography of kicks and punches. The team leader and her partner then perform their gestures in the way of the others' simulated blows, which are delivered (and received) with comical gusto. Further variations of this choreography take place, set to an instrumental version of the Katy Perry song 'Firework': the main couple are playfully attacked by each couple in turn, then everybody takes it in turns to be aggressor and victim. Finally, as the music fades,

the performers all take on the role of victim. During this wind-down, their facial expressions become fractionally more muted, while one performer's backwards fall appears more rag-dollish than euphoric. At the end, smiles are exchanged and the performers take a bow.

Accompanying the performance, which is staged three times on Saturdays for the duration of the exhibition, the video *Together (Forever)* shows a slightly different variation of the work, screened in the gallery on a loop throughout the week. In the video, the performance takes place in front of a long white table covered with a white cloth, while the initial clicking is done by the team leader herself. There is no bow at the end. According to the exhibition information, the couples 'construct a safe space where they can reject social standards and express unspoken feelings' and 'as their actions play out, the gradual build-up of theatrical illusions seems to operate as a therapeutic exercise'. The closeness of the couples at the beginning and end carries a suggestion of couples' therapy, while their mostly smart-casual clothing could equally signal a team-building activity.

The mood in both video and live performance is jubilant, even manic. Borrowing from theatre as much as games, the participants make it clear that they are enjoying themselves, and the spectacle is undoubtedly entertaining. Though shorn of vocals, the choice of *Firework* as a backdrop is apposite given the artwork's therapeutic overtones: the song's lyrics include the lines 'you're original, cannot be replaced' and 'come on show 'em what you're worth'. Catharsis is implied, the unstated undercurrents in life and work seemingly resolved through the logic of a game. A parallel reading, of course, is that such impulses are simply being massaged and harnessed in the service of a different kind of performance, one calculated to maximise productivity. As Jonathan P Watts notes while discussing William Davies's book *The Happiness Industry* in his essay 'Happiness Inc.' (AM391), 'Happy, healthy people = productive, profitable people'.

Some of the more intriguing moments in the choreography occur when a performer holds a pose slightly too long or deviates briefly from the rest. These could be the result of over-zealousness or momentary glitches but could also be small



Lucy Beech and Edward Thomasson
Together 2017
performance

Victoria Lucas
Lay of the Land (and other such myths) 2017
installation view



expressions of individuality in a subsuming structure. What is striking about the performance is how taut and compressed it is, how much is communicated through the build-up of successive layers and with such economy (the running time of the performance is approximately ten minutes). With 'wellness' and play increasingly co-opted as corporate strategies, *Together* acknowledges a bleed between intrinsic suspicion of such group exercises and admission of their value. The performers' smiles, directed at one another but also at the audience, raise the question: who is in on what? ■

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Victoria Lucas: Lay of the Land (and other such myths)

AirSpace Gallery Stoke-on-Trent

5 May to 3 June

Satellite photographs published in late April this year showed that huge stretches of the normally dun-coloured California desert had, following unusually heavy rains, turned bright yellow and green in a 'super bloom' of wild flowers. Victoria Lucas also has transformative intentions towards the desert, using photographs of similar Californian examples. Seen from ground level, you recognise the topology – the rugged stone outcrops, bare scrubland growth and cruel-looking cactus formations – from the scenery used in old Westerns. But

showing here in the Potteries, an area that is for completely different reasons also haunted by the past, 'Lay of the Land' associates these American scenes of antique macho bravado with what is surely the most overlooked feature in the post-industrial British landscape: the brownfield site. Lucas's latest show is an audio-visual journey into places left for dead, which achieve special significance at a time when the future at home and in the US is worryingly uncertain.

Instead of bravado, Lucas is proposing a colourfully mind-bending alternative, filling AirSpace Gallery's lengthy space with a series of installations consisting of digital photographs saturated with pink, orange, turquoise and acid green using post-production software. Surrounding these images are large groups of giant, glittering rocks – the 'Gold Boulder' series, 2016-17 – which despite their bulk are actually made of polystyrene, and which as well as confronting the audience sculpturally also contribute to a theatrical sense of geographical otherness. In some cases, such as *Psychedelic Western #14*, 2016, the wall-sized image is further accompanied by two looped videos, *Imaginary Voice/Real Voice, #1* and *#2*, 2016, in which more desert scenes – with sands turning blue and skies of red – are inhabited by ebbing and flowing strips and folds of purple flesh and glossy-lipped mouths sampled from cosmetics adverts. Every few minutes a sigh, emitted from the soundwork *Release*, 2017, is audible, sometimes bleak and distant, sometimes close and hard. The viewer is entering science-fiction territory.

With another installation, *Concrete Island*, 2017, the artist homes in on the local, though the background image remains otherworldly. But the hyper-coloured desert image is accompanied by lumps of concrete and asphalt, piled onto the



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