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 @SearleAdrianTuesday 12 July 2016
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I last encountered the provocateur [Michael Portnoy](#) when I took part in an absurd live gameshow he hosted at Documenta 12. Portnoy's [Relational Stalinism: The Musical](#) at the Black-E is a stunning performance, as much theatre and parlour game as art. I never thought choreographed blinking or thumb-wagging could be so absurdly, pathetically affecting and hilarious. There are routines that parody choreographer [Yvonne Rainer](#) and take down Tino Sehgal, Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe's collective [Ann-Lee avatar](#), turning the homeless manga figure into a dysfunctional, resentful robot.

Audience members who weren't paying due attention to Portnoy's bizarre language games got thrown out, and performers were humiliated by impossible demands. He seems to have a troubled, complicated relationship to art, other artists, the art world and the audience. This is healthy. It is cathartic. This is what we really need, not a faculty of curators.

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Liverpool Biennial 2016

BY AMY SHERLOCK

Michael Portnoy, *Relational Stalinism: The Musical*, 2016, The Black-E, Thursday 7, Friday 8 & Sat 9 July

The title says it all: a deliciously smart, imaginative and, at moments, catty takedown of the dogmatism and self-regard of certain well-known practitioners of what were erstwhile considered 'radical' or 'engaged' performative practices. Somewhere between Andy Kaufman and Monty Python, *Relational Stalinism* ... is hilarious if you enjoy that ticklish uncertainty of not knowing whether you are being laughed at or laughing along with.

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by JEREMY MILLAR

Liverpool Biennial

VARIOUS LOCATIONS, Liverpool

July 9–October 16, 2016

Michael Portnoy is also possessed of a keen ear, and eye. If his targets—the pat assumptions of the art world, especially—are less urgent than extrajudicial state killings, that does not make his performative analyses any less necessary. Over ninety minutes his extraordinary dancers, singers, and improvisors work through nine works under the title *Relational Stalinism – The Musical* (2016). Sometimes they perform solo, sometimes together, sometimes co-opting—even bullying—the audience in ways simple and absurd. Using a basic grammar of words, phrases, and gestures, the works shift between the tragic, pathetic, dramatic, and comic. But nearly always brilliant. Originally commissioned by Rotterdam’s Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art together with A.P.E. (Art Projects Era), the work was repeated here with only one public performance. If you have the opportunity to see it elsewhere, do so: it may not happen again.

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Reviews

Liverpool Biennial 2016 Hits the Spot Between Eccentric and Politically Engaged

Freewheeling performances and sophisticated moving image works lead the pack.

Lorena Muñoz-Alonso, July 12, 2016

Performance is a strong element in the biennial’s program, and it reached its apex with the superb performance of Michael Portnoy’s *Relational Stalinism: The Musical* (2016), which was performed during the preview and opening days. Although not a new piece for the biennial—it was originally commissioned in exhibition format for the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam earlier this year—it’s most definitely one of its highlights.

The piece is formed by nine acts featuring a group of seven phenomenal performers who act, dance, and sing, to hysterical results most of the time. The content is a witty take down of the “radical chic” criticality that has conquered museums and kunstvereins all over the world, particularly where it concerns the use of concepts such as performativity and immaterial labor as weapons to be brandished by *bien pensant* curators, critics, and artists.

During the opening act, titled *Mental Footnotes*, for example, three actors pass books between each other while Portnoy reads their titles out loud, which include: “Duration for dummies,” “Curators say: dance good, theater bad,” “Post-dance: using your laptop on stage with grace,” “Overcoming your fear of materials and learning to sculpt again: a dancer’s journey.”

Another act, meanwhile, involves a performer assuming the role of An(al) Lee(k), a discarded Japanese robot too malfunctioning to perform in Tino Sehgal’s *Ann Lee* piece, which itself borrowed the Annlee character, first appropriated in turn by Pierre Huyghe and Phillipe Parreno back in 1999.

Portnoy’s might craft cheeky insider’s jokes for art geeks, but if you are one, it works, and it’s hilarious. It’s a performance with something to say and with a great way of saying it. And it’s a success to which the strength of each of the performers no doubt contributes to.

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Throughout the opening weekend, temporary communities formed around performances by Dennis McNulty and Michael Portnoy, as well as a secret project involving colored pencils and a nondisclosure agreement.. Originally plotted as a kind of progressive theatre at Rotterdam’s Witte de With, Portnoy’s *Relational Stalinism: The Musical* reveled in an elasticity both physical and semantic, his performers spinning mesmerizing half-truths out of seemingly incomprehensible combinations of words, gestures, slogans, synchronized blinking, and Skype calls to Citibank. The speed-of-light scripts were sprinkled with satirical digs at overly ambitious press releases while openly checking the art world’s reluctance to embrace theater the way it has choreography. “If your disgust for being in a theater becomes too unbearable, in the blackouts you can imagine you are walking from one cool grey room to the next in a contemporary arts institution,” Portnoy teased the audience. Those who appeared too engaged in their own thoughts were singled out of their seats and treated to private performances (presumably corrective in nature).

— [Kate Sutton](#)

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