



Jimmy Robert

1 BK: How did you experience the past 3 months of lockdown in Berlin?

JR: There was a lot planned, a mid-career survey, a performance touring the UK, starting my professorship at UdK (Universität der Künste) – probably the busiest time of my career. At first I felt relief to avoid the all stress this would have caused, but then a mega-void. Who I am if not defined by what I do? Anxiety... I had planned to read books, to watch stuff and I did nothing instead, embracing this nothingness. The society we live in is so based on performance that I felt irrelevant. I could not contribute and fell silent. Into stillness. It was a period of introspection, looking into what mattered most. Since ongoing regulations forced cultural institutions to shut their doors, artists could not help to think or to produce around this situation. Of course, there was an artist response to Covid-19, but this was not interesting, as we are all still in this situation and cannot yet respond to it. It is only now that I am starting to find my voice back, let's see if I like how it sounds.

2 BK: You were born in Guadeloupe, France – when and why did you come to Berlin?

JR: Yes, I was born there and left at the age of five. My grandparents got a place for us to live in together and felt comfortable enough in Paris. I lived Paris and its suburbs until I was 19 and fled the city for a gay romance. I went to London, where I stayed for 10 years. Afterwards I spent time in Amsterdam and Brussels, where I met my partner, who accepted a job in Berlin, so I followed him as I did not want yet another long-distance relationship. So it was love that brought me to Berlin.

3 BK: What is the most important question, the main theme around which your art revolves?

JR: Existentialism. What I do is concerned with images and our approach to them whether from a formal point of view or surrounding the narrative of their content, but it does not stop there. I am also interested in their physicality or how they come to be exhibited and how the audience can relate to them. How do you place your body and its personal history in relation to them, but also simply how you approach them physically, are they close to you? Behind glass? Are they precious? Can you touch them? Do they touch you, literally or not? By extension, which art history is told, are you part of it? How can you be made part of it? Can it be inclusive? Diversified?

4 BK: What do you want to achieve with your art?

JR: I want people to think. I am not here to entertain, I want to learn and I want to ask questions. Watching or experiencing art is not a passive action. You got to work, sorry, not sorry. How do you think you get to see an image rather than an other, if you are not interested in these questions my work will bore you. I don't want to be didactic and I am also obsessed with a certain idea of beauty which I collected along the way with Modernity in literature and art, a certain idea of measure and reduction which I am still learning. Trying this balancing act.

5 BK: What fascinates you about performance, about the relation between space and human body?

JR: Maybe the aforementioned beauty and by this I mean how the body is a form itself, a material that can be carved despite all its imperfection and accidents. The live act is ephemeral and no performance is the same, as the audience is never the same so I will not try to categorize that. I am curious to know if we actually fit in the spaces around us, conceptually as much as physically and if not, why? Do we have the right perception of ourselves and if not why? How is this perception constructed and how are we responsible for it? Do we have agency in terms of implementing the changes we need?

6 BK: In which way does your professorship and your students at the UdK Berlin influence your artistic work?

JR: I was a guest professor for two years and I have just started my actual professorship in the middle of the lockdown, so I might need a little more time to answer this question. I would say that we influence each other; I want to respond to them and be in a discursive mode. I don't want them to reproduce my work, I want them to be independent artist and thinkers. I want to give them the feeling that they are already artists, so just like me perhaps they end up having confidence in themselves and their thoughts and allow themselves to be who they want to be. That's not an easy task, I am still working on it myself but this is the greatest thing I learned at art school and that I want to give back: emancipation. They also learn just as much from their friends or other students. It's the best times where this intertwining of the professional and the social tend to consolidate the kind of person one could end up being – crucial times which lately have been dramatically sabotaged.

7 BK: One of your most recent works was *Plié* at Papiermuseum Düren. What was this exhibition about and what do you like about paper?

JR: I am a paper fetishist. I have to admit it, in so far that I respect it with all its finest and absurdity, its porosity being like skin. It's an organic material and you can project all your fantasies onto it, by writing text or drawing images. Paper is nothing, it's fragile, but at the same time it can cut you, not unlike ourselves really... The show was in part taking elements of the collection, which is huge and incredible, and relates them to texts, which were either existing already or written by myself. They could be seen as instructions for performances, which each folded image ends up being, meaning that I look at the pieces as sculptures, but also frozen dances. The paper is dancing and I am dancing with it and we are contextualized by the museum and its history with paper. Later on, the texts were sung by a local singer, Ina Hagenau, thus suggesting different ways of inhabiting the relationship of text, image and instructions or protocol.

8 BK: What question regarding your art moves you the most at the moment?

JR: Equality, representation, fairness, transparency. When are we going to be able to do what we do again and how will our relation to each other be affected, mental illness. Different manifestations of care is what moves me the most at the moment.

9 BK: Do you have shows and performances planned?

JR: I have this mid-career survey which opened and then closed again. It is supposed to tour to Italy (Museion) and then France (CRAC de Sète). I have just been invited to this Ural Biennial and I am also planning this summer festival of contemporary art in Charlottenburg, *Balade Charlottenburg*, where I will screen a film titled *Cruising* in a cinema as well as a show with my gallery in Berlin Tanya Leighton. I am looking forward to everything, but things are all so uncertain in the cultural field right now, that I feel somewhat insecure. A major thing at Gropius Bau has just been canceled for example. Will people flow to museums when things reopen or will they be raving in the fields like in the 90s or will it be like the Roaring Twenties...?

10 BK: As a performer, which relation do you have to Berlin and happenings?

JR: It activates the city and reminds some of us about the necessity of artistic expression as a fuel for the city, but it should be made more accessible to everybody, so everybody from Kreuzberg to Wedding, Lichtenberg to Charlottenburg. I have only participated once, as Peles Empire, a collective of artists, generously opened up their studio for three other artists, Sung Tieu, Nona Inescu and myself. It was a group show in their studio space. This is the kind of solidarity we need more of: artists supporting and helping other artists. Less of the big shot, big production power displays, an economy of means that is maybe more representative of the city.

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