

Mini Chu

When someone asks me what I do for a living, and I mean *really ask*, I'm lost for words.

It happened at the Bird's Nest, just after Italy beat Belgium. We were on the corner, away from the screen, and a group was gathering on our table. Some guys dressed as Elvis head in, I imagine they're performers, with beautiful faces, beat to perfection. Then, the most robust mohawk – hot pink – I've seen since I was 13. A man in a hat, studded leather jacket and doc martens sits opposite. We sing him a jumbled happy birthday and then my friend gets waylaid into another conversation with that guy we'd met earlier who was continuing his performance lecture about fascists and the problems of Europe. I was vaping sour apple – one of the many giveaways of my status as a gentrifier, wearing leather bought with granny's money.



M: You having a good birthday?

X: What? Oh right.

M: It's a silly question. Why should one day be any different?

X: Thing is love, it's all the same... it's all jus'...comin' here, this lot...Captain Morgan.. but it's stuck the same every day.

M: Yeah, but then lots of people get used to routine, like those people who eat the same sandwich everyday.

X: You what?

M: At work, you know businessmen who go to Pret and...*[I'd lost him by this point. What the hell was I thinking?]*

A little later, he asked me what my job was.

M: I work for a magazine.

X: Oh. What one's that then?

M: An art magazine..

X: Art is it?

M: Yeah...

[awkward silence]

X: The thing is right. You artists, you spend all your time explain' what it is you do, defining what art is. Tell you what I did - spray art. You just spray. And that's it – you just spray.

Any doubts I'd had about the arbitrary value system that drives my chosen industry and exclude the public were confirmed at this moment. Art can't contain Deptford.

--

Since it started in 1998, Deptford X has centred artists, local and international. But, for the first time, this year's edition has dissolved the role of the curator and the hierarchies of the working structure. While in 2019, the art director Nathalie Boobis selected seven artists as participators in the main show and five as part of a jury for an open call, this year she has been more judicious, choosing all but three – Chila Kumari Singh Burman, Sahra Hersi and Harold Offeh – all of whom have a personal connection to the place. They, in turn, have selected the individuals that make up the Peer Network, a group of artists, curators, and people that don't necessarily consider themselves as artists that has produced site-responsive performances and works. The network has employed interactive means for facilitating the relationships between artists, organisers and audiences, in reaction to the elitist structures of the art industry.

In June 1973, Liberation Films (a team of seven filmmakers) went out to Balham, south London, and discussed the state of the streets, housing and road safety with the local residents. They recorded the interviews with hand-held video cameras and brought some extra to encourage the participants to do the same. This all went into a 'trigger' film they screened at a community show alongside films about other parts of London. The original interviewees and audience members who had shown enthusiasm towards the project were subsequently given the basic training to shoot their own videos about the local issues in their area, which they then edited collaboratively. The consequent documentary *Starting to Happen* (1974) is a compilation of this string of shifting artist and audience dynamics, which might be seen as a reflection of the workings of Deptford X this year.

Some of the projects have or will be several years in the making. The peer network developed through an open call, and, for this edition, was opened exclusively to early career Black artists and People of Colour from Lewisham. 'Crowds create revolutions, not singular people,' artist and curator Monica Tolia told me when I asked her about how she saw her network developing.

In his autobiography *Familiar Stranger*, Stuart Hall describes the new political world of modern Jamaica in the 1940s: a place where 'vernacular lived cultures spoke more powerfully than – and as substitute for – formal politics.' Following the founding of the People's National Party in 1938 and before Jamaica's independence in 1962, large numbers of working-class people had no political representation, which paradoxically transformed popular religion and urban culture into a 'proxy symbolic resource' for finding expression for social discontents and starting revolution. Describing the experience of looking back on this period, which he witnessed partially as a child growing up in a middle-class family in Kingston, Hall recounts a 'feeling of being anachronistic', a 'syndrome of recognizing oneself, strangely, as 'becoming historical'.'

At the risk of falling into the trap of overthinking, Hall's observation brought my mind back to X, telling me about the paintings he sprayed and printed in Deptford. The man's gaze seemed to soften in that strange, out of body experience that comes with remembering a fervent energy that's since dimmed.

CHILA KUMARI SINGH BURMAN, *THE DEPTFORD MERMAID*

Chila Burman's scintillating iconographies bounce across meanings and scales, possessing both an immediacy and formal eloquence that keeps you wanting to keep looking. Her pop-art infused immediate aesthetic takes the form of a water spirit on the ground floor of Deptford Lounge – an ancient deity, rich and fertile, whose form flips across fairy tales, early modern vessels and 1970s light shows: a larger-than-life fluorescent mermaid.

Burman has the distinctive ability to awaken histories that are at once universal and specific. The mermaid carries a multiplicity of associations without dissolving into vagueness – every sinew of her being roots her. Inspired by a vivid memory of seeing giant mermaids at the Blackpool illuminations, Burman loves the sexual agency and no crap attitude of the voluptuous nymph. Whether in the water or posing on the shoreline, the mermaid demands a vital presence and is constantly evolving, moving through histories of religion, migration, trade and commerce, and popularised across the globe.

Growing up working class near the docks in Liverpool, Burman sees the mermaid as a symbol still awaiting expression. Her family emigrated to the outskirts of the city in the 1950s from north India and her parents would host get-togethers with friends in their vibrantly decorated home, providing a welcoming space for their south Asian neighbours. Flowering with loud colours, Burman's mermaid sends rays of light across the whole of Deptford, from Brookmill Park, across the Creek, to Pepys Park where a dockyard and victualling yard used to be.

Burman incorporates the symbol's use as a good luck charm, often depicted on the bows of ships. But whose ships? She has sought inspiration from Deptford's dockyard, which, in the 16th century served as a base for building vessels belonging to Walter Raleigh, Captain Cook and other colonial explorers, likely from the profits of stolen goods and enslaved labour. By the start of the 17th century – when Raleigh had become associated with the epithet, 'Whoever commands the sea commands the trade, whoever commands the trade commands the riches of the world' – the East India Company established a shipyard, ironworks and extensive storage facilities by Deptford Creek.

With ancient origins in the Indian subcontinent and sub-Saharan Africa, the water spirit has countless variations. The Makara (Sanskrit for sea dragon or water monster) is depicted adorning deities, overturning ships and protecting seamen, and can be found on the gates of Hindu and Buddhist temples in India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh among other places. In west, south and central Africa, we find another dualistic underwater talisman, the Mami Wata (mother water), which travelled to the Caribbean, the Americas and Europe between 15th and 20th centuries. As the symbol increased in popularity, it became widely associated with bringing money. It has been claimed that the Mami Wata would never have become a mermaid if it wasn't for the Europeans, a dented argument, which pays

little attention to the variety and multiplicity carried by this symbol, nor to the stories of the diasporas that disseminated it. Burman's mermaid casts a spell against these white supremacist readings, Raleigh and his legacy.

Effervescent and resourceful, Burman's mermaid reflects Deptford.

HAROLD OFFEH, *URBANE DANCE MARATHON*

Sometimes, in art galleries, I feel this weird pressure to suggest I somehow understand the work I'm seeing. This can show in a nod or grunt, which I'm guilty of doing occasionally, although it annoys the hell out of me. Harold Offeh presents a countermeasure to this dynamic.

Urbane Dance Marathon is an audio work and score experienced via headphones, leading listeners on a walk in Deptford and giving them a series of prompts to feel their way into the sound and location and physically respond to music through movement. Groups of up to six might form, two metres apart, observing or mirroring each other's moves.

For Offeh, social distancing is a 'mass choreographic performance' of sorts. There's that 'special awareness of comic moments' that comes with 'trying to dive out of people's way or avoid inadvertent eye contact', he points out over email. Occurring days before the Prime Minister's plan to scrap social distancing comes into effect, Offeh's work recognises the changing, often strained and irrational experience of following someone else's prompt.

Laying bare the everyday performance of living is something Offeh does shatteringly well.

His 2001 video *Smile* is a stripped back, literal interpretation of Nat King Cole's eponymous single (1954), originally written by Charlie Chaplin. Cropped in a single shot, Offeh's expression shifts with the line breaks, sometimes almost lip-syncing, teeth never unclenching, eyes popping. Offeh purges the song, inciting moments of shared humour, pained association and friction with the audience.

Offeh is interested in the gestures and actions inscribed on our daily routines. Drawing on Allan Kaprow's conceptual actions of the late 1960s, *Urbane Dance Marathon* encourages audiences to engage happenstance. The artist doesn't control the chain of events that will take place; the score only serves to prompt a series of actions, passed through the listeners. Echoing *Liberation Films in Starting to Happen*, Offeh's approach is reciprocal. One of the participants in the 1974 documentary observes 'that hiding or blooming that takes place when we encounter each other through a medium'. Offeh's score might create a similar hiding or blooming in Deptford.

Building on a wider project with choreographer Vania Gala, which will be exhibited on 15 July 2021 at the Wellcome Collection, *Urbane Dance Marathon* has enabled Offeh to develop his research into the effects of collective movement. He and Gala have been exploring how dance has historically manifested to combat societal trauma and pain, and how it enables people to connect physically through a shared affliction. Offeh mentions dancing plagues from the medieval

period as well as AIDS Dance-a-thons as among the duo's starting points for the project, which they began before the pandemic. *Urbane Dance Marathon* is an invitation to adjust, uninhibited, to the bustle of Deptford's streets – a means of acclimatizing to socially surprising situations.

SAHRA HERSI, *DEPTFORD X POP UP*

New Market Yard next to Deptford train station is an award-winning £50 million capital development project, completed in 2016, of 132 new homes, 14 independent retailers, seven shops and two restaurants. On busy summer weekends, creative professionals gather in hundreds on the cobbles with craft beer and spritz, purchased from bars under the arches beneath the railway. In the 1960s, the arches were used as workshop spaces for artists. Now they're where you can get an oat flat white, jerk chicken salad and gluten-free brownie in the same beautifully designed complex.

Throughout her research as a multidisciplinary designer, Sahra Hersi is concerned with exposing the social injustices present in architecture and how a building's design traces the personalities of its inhabitants. Frequently working with students who have an interest in the built environment, she runs workshops that ask: how can our public spaces better reflect the communities that exist within them?

Hersi's no nonsense approach to design and architecture stems from what she saw as the shortcomings in her university education. Combining probing textual prompts with an emphasis on practical skills, Hersi encourages collaborators to rethink public spaces and develop their own portfolio. In 2018, she hosted a workshop at The White House on Dagenham's Becontree estate, a community art centre where the group were encouraged to reimagine the building as an image of the president's home (*The (Not So) White House Past, Present and Future*).

Increasing exposure to the creative arts for Black people is something Hersi has been especially concerned about. She grew up on a Peabody Trust estate in Ilford and has become acutely aware of the white exclusivity of much of the UK's cultural spaces. In 2019, she produced a billboard of her former home with SPACE Ilford, bringing a personal dimension to the façade. Recently, Hersi has collaborated with other architects and firms in an open call to develop the Thamesmead Waterfront – an £8 billion project by Peabody and Lendlease.

Occupying the New Market Yard for the duration of the festival, Hersi's bright and alluring information hub also doubles up as a performance space. Made from recycled materials and lending itself to a host of contexts, the structure is as malleable socially as it is physically.

The New Market Yard is heralded as a place of sustainably sourced, good quality produce but that comes as no surprise – this is Deptford after all. Moreover, its price point is a lot higher than other equivalents on the high street. The flats in the textbook-coloured block above the station are priced at around £1,600 to rent per month. But the yard shouldn't be solely for people with that kind of cashflow.

Greeting people as they pass through, Hersi's architectural intervention returns Deptford's DIY resourcefulness back to the New Market Yard. Since 2018, it has also been home to AAJA radio, a community radio station, record label, bar and event space, which will be broadcasting commissioned artworks in partnership with Deptford X, every day at noon, from Monday 12th – Sunday 18th July. One of the commissioned works is a soundscape by Linett Kamala, an artist from Kensal Green whose practice celebrates the positive impact of carnival arts and spray can art on the wellbeing of a community.

Have You Eaten Yet, a performance and evolving exhibition by Cường Phạm, Ghost & John, Jessie Jing, Monica Tolia, Songsoo Kim, Taey lohe & Youngsook Choi, explores the significance of food to Asian diasporas in Lewisham. Overcoming stereotypes about east and southeast Asian food and acts of service, the performance and programme takes a close look at the role of eating in rooting migration histories and connecting people.

Walk down the high street at any time of day, and you'll hear friendly exchanges, favours and gossip passing between Deptford's grocers, market sellers and residents. Even though it's only a food transaction, there is always more to the story. *Have You Eaten Yet* picks up on this dynamic, both in the performance and in the relationships between the artists.

Describing the dynamic she has with her peers, Tolia explains, 'we don't need someone to come along and legitimise us, we legitimise ourselves.' She's also quick to point that this is not something to be romanticised. Criticising the top-down structure and white hegemony of the art industry, Tolia and the group realise that 'it only feels possible to achieve when you're being held by others and vice versa.'

Anti-Asian violence has become increasingly visible this year, particularly through rallies against hate crimes in the US. *Have You Eaten Yet* responds to the rise of the Stop Asian Hate movement by focusing in on the 'direct nourishment' of Asian food, physical and spiritual. Ghost & John – a group of artists based between London and Hong Kong – will be staging a 20-minute outdoor dance drama with voiceover for the festival, involving a dialogue between two characters (human and alien) about questions of home, displacement and memory.

Bryan Giuseppi Rodriguez Cambana's party/performance *Dancing with my Future to Salserin* also involves dialogue, this time through music. He will be performing to Salserin's 'De Sol a Sol' (1993) building on an existing body of research into the many variations of salsa music and dance across the Global South. Cambana's salsa party nicely echoes Offeh's project in its use of dance and sound to connect people and histories.

Over coffee, Boobis tells me that, in Deptford X festival's early years, there was a lot more exhibition space and curators tended highlight work by established artists to bring in the crowds. Now that regeneration projects are cropping up throughout the area, Boobis's less is more approach is refreshing. Most of these works are exhibited outside and have a loudness that's appropriate to Deptford without being overwhelming. Each work traces a rich process of collaboration

and research, which opens our understanding of the place. And, instead of appealing to an exclusive art crowd, the works acknowledge that Deptford's story is one to be told by everyone – artists and non-artists. We might not always get along, but we can enjoy a drink together from time to time.

Commission by Deptford X for Deptford X Festival 2021