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Unfinished Sympathies

A new album by theatre group Object Collection warns against political nostalgia

BY ANDREW HULTKRANS

How do political radicals of a certain age address the problem raised in R.E.M.'s 1986 song 'Begin the Begin', namely: 'The insurgency began and you missed it'? If you are writer/director Kara Feely and composer/musician Travis Just, the New York-based couple behind the experimental musical theatre group Object Collection, you're too young to have participated in the upheavals of the 1960s and '70s. So, you stage your own revolutions as confrontational, non-narrative theatre pieces, critically interrogating the nostalgia for past insurgencies while attempting to stoke a revolutionary spirit in the present.

Acolytes and alumni of playwright and director Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysterical Theater and composer Robert Ashley's avant-garde operas, Feely and Just founded Object Collection in 2004 and have mounted 13 shows

to date, steadily acquiring accolades from mentors and audiences alike. Their most recent works, *cheap&easy* *OCTOBER* (2015) and *It's All True* (2016), were written in parallel and represent related inquiries into revolutionary flash points: those evanescent moments when an old order has just been toppled and anything seems possible.



Object Collection, *cheap&easy* *OCTOBER*, 2015, performance documentation at La MaMa, New York. Courtesy: the artists; photograph: Hunter Canning

The former piece, which was released as an album this year by Infrequent Seams, concerns the 1917 Russian Revolution and its commemorations, using as source texts John Reed's *Ten Days that Shook the World* (1919), Leon Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* (1930), Sergei Eisenstein's film *October: Ten Days that Shook the World*

(1928), the founding of the art journal *OCTOBER* by former Artforum editors Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson in 1976, and recorded conversations about the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Turkey. *It's All True* – which borrows its title from an unfinished, vaguely political Orson Welles film about Latin America – distills interstitial moments from the post-hardcore band Fugazi's archive of live recordings: roughly 900 concerts, in which amp feedback, guitar tuning and other preparatory instrumental sounds underscore political rants, absurd anecdotes and audience admonishments from the band's guitarists/vocalists, Ian MacKaye and Guy Picciotto.

When grime was a nascent music genre, a friend compared listening to Dizze Rascal to the feeling of being beaten up by multiple assailants inside a video game. Experiencing an Object Collection performance subjects audience members to a similarly disorienting, multi-sensory attack. Four manic actors, crackling with live-wire energy, bark seemingly unrelated lines at you from all directions, as abstract music – at times, irregular plinking and snare hits; at others, relentless pounding and pummelling – flattens you into submission. It is more analogue than grime, but it's equally unsettling.

It is music without resolution - all tension, no release.

In both *cheap&easy OCTOBER* and *It's All True*, the actors often engage in fugue-like crosstalk reminiscent of radical proto-rap collectives The Watts Prophets and The Last Poets. Indeed, the rapidly repeated opening line of the latter's 'Run, Nigger' (1970) – 'I understand that time is running out' – prefigures Object Collection's work in both content and tonal urgency. This chattering, multi-vocal delivery also recalls 1960s performance generally. One can hear traces of The Living Theatre, the Acid Tests, Peter Brook's 1967 staging of *Marat/Sade* (1963) and such artefacts of patchouli politics as 'Suppose They Give a War (And No One Comes)' (1967), a song by The West Coast Pop Art Experimental Band. Given this period resonance, Object Collection actors often come off as living situationist *détournements*; like the comic-strip characters whose word balloons were repurposed to radical ends, the actors perform mundane tasks – moving standing lamps, arranging random objects on a table – as they convey political slogans and narratives seemingly unrelated to their physical activities.

Beyond the crosstalk, the actors' phrasing as they speak or shout their lines is highly mannered – analogous to the consciously stilted, over-enunciated style David Mamet once insisted his stage actors employ – and indicates rigorous rehearsal. As a dramatist, Feely is squarely in the Antonin Artaud tradition (continued by Foreman) of creating apparent theatrical chaos with disciplined, heavily drilled performers. The most notable mannerism is the actors' roughly duotone delivery: portions of lines will be spoken in one register and then leap to a falsetto. These higher-pitched sections remind me of an incidental passage in 'Two Brothers with Checks (San Francisco, Harvey)', the most surreal rap by the dependably eccentric Ultramagnetic MCs. At the end of the track, the MCs say: 'City, city, city,' in a sing-song falsetto using similarly dissonant intervals – though I'm sure Feely cribbed this technique from a more rarefied source.

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Object Collection, *cheap&easy* OCTOBER, 2015, performance documentation at La MaMa, New York. Courtesy: the artists; photograph: Hunter Canning

As for the scores, you soon understand why Just was attracted to the challenge of composing music based on random, inter-song sonics for *It's All True*: his compositional sensibility is already interstitial in nature. Even in *cheap&easy* OCTOBER, which was not sourced from inter-song moments, the bulk of the music sounds either like the instrument tuning and drum flourishes preceding a song or the crash-cymbal wash that bands resort to when there is no clear ending. It is music without resolution – all tension, no release – like composing a piece using nothing but suspended chords.

These temporarily suspended moments, similar to the buildup before a sneeze or the act of blowing up a balloon and holding it shut rather than tying it off, are central to Object Collection's practice. As Feely put it in an October

2015 interview with *BOMB* magazine: 'These interludes or in-between moments where performers are coming down off the high of some song, but they're about to ramp up for the next one – what is that moment? It's both things at once and has an energy of potentiality that's sort of uncharted.' Appropriately, the opening scene of *It's All True* features one of the cast members blowing up a balloon, holding it momentarily as he says his lines, then letting it go.

What binds the methods of Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Foreman and their artistic progeny in experimental theatre, including *Object Collection*, is the notion that the revolution will not be dramatized. The conventional model of conflict and catharsis in traditional narrative theatre keeps audiences personally and politically complacent. Only by immersing attendees in destabilizing, diffuse, non-linear, intentionally startling performances can the playwright hope to create engaged audiences – engaged not only while they are in the theatre, but also in the political realm beyond. Further, quasi-realistic attempts to re-enact or commemorate political or aesthetic ruptures merely depoliticize the events or figures being represented. In the same *BOMB* interview, Just laments this dilution in tributes to radical composers: 'People don't want to remember. Even if you have Sun Ra at Lincoln Center [New York], it is going to be all wrong [...] even [John] Cage's centenary was just defanging Cage, just the most polite Cage performances you can imagine, and it is sort of hard to remember what that stuff originally was. So, *cheap&easy* *OCTOBER* is about how commemoration ripped the wings off all the butterflies.'

One wonders whether *It's All True* rips the wings off Fugazi's MacKaye – the closest thing to an avenging angel that punk ever produced. Founder of the 'straight edge' subculture of sober punks, promulgator of impeccable anti-corporate values (he turned down a US\$10 million deal from Atlantic Records that offered Fugazi complete creative control), MacKaye was the hectoring opponent of slam dancing and stage diving. Feely and Just, on the other hand, actually ratchet up the confrontational tension of the source concerts. MacKaye's most common stage admonishment, 'Take two steps back after every song,' is not used in *It's All True*, and this is telling. If anything, *Object Collection* would ask audiences to take two steps closer after every song. Their work seems as likely to provoke violence as to defuse it. 'It's about a change,' as the actors repeat in tandem at the end of *It's All True* – and change rarely comes without a fight.

Main image: Object Collection, It's All True, 2016, performance documentation at Borealis Festival, Bergen. Courtesy: the artists; photograph: Henrik Beck

ANDREW HULTKRANS

Andrew Hultkrans is a writer based in New York, USA. He is the author of *Forever Changes* (Bloomsbury, 2003).



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