

Philip Ewe
THE FOURTH WALL

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Strange Field
105–109 French Street
G40 4NE

The Sacred Baby Poo Poo of Art¹

Freya Field-Donovan

In a 1978 interview the theorist and *Semiotext(e)* editor Sylvère Lotringer asked the American artist Jack Smith if he had ever thought of a different type of society. Smith answered that he could think of a billion ways for the world to be completely different. Elaborating on one of these ideas, he suggested that in the middle of the city there should be a “repository of objects that people don’t want any more” amassed in a giant junkyard. “That would form an organisation”, Smith continued “[that] the city would be organised around... I think this centre of unused objects and unwanted objects would become a centre of intellectual activity. Things would grow up around it.”²

The London-based performance artist Philip Ewe has taken up the mantle of Smith’s conceit. Like Smith, Derek Jarman, and Gordon Matta Clark before him, Ewe makes deindustrializing zones of the city his artistic material and collaborator. His live performances draw their audiences to marginal, meanwhile, and transitioning urban sites. From an old storefront in the now demolished Elephant and Castle shopping centre (*Go Big or Go Home*, 2020), to a theatre at a London art school (*Elephant in the Room*, 2018), to the roof of a soon to be re-developed art studio in an old industrial area of Peckham (*Trouble*, 2022), spectators are afforded a view of dilapidated sites of erstwhile productivity in a city animated by voracious redevelopment.

Ewe crafts intricate, improvised events with himself as the sole performer, assembling various props and theatrical devices to play with the notions of chance and ambiguity that have long occupied artists who work with the city as material. Labour, leisure, mass society, alienation, public, private, paranoia, disorientation, surveillance, bureaucracy, sex, insanity, and absurdity are all played with through various characters that Ewe has developed over many years of performing. His movement around the provisional stages he creates unlocks different moods and outbursts that set in motion a crackling and mercurial atmosphere. Somewhere between slapstick, character acting, choreography, and assemblage sculpture, Ewe has honed a form that is intentionally “not always in control of itself”.³

In this way, parallels with Smith, Jarman and Matta Clark are pertinent to Ewe’s practice. Urban decay and sites of industrial decline make up the backdrop and the context of his work. These places still function as they did in the 1970s and 1980s as areas where artistic communities gather and make work, drawn in by the space and price points in an otherwise impossible city. But our historical juncture has some important differences. Whilst many artists studios and dwellings are still ‘meanwhile’ spaces, whole tertiary industries have grown up to mediate and profit from these sites, with the ‘artist’ now a well heeled agent of change. Ewe calibrates the marriage of development and creativity into his performances, mingling the language of middle management and HR departments with the dull motivational platitudes of the wellness industry. These bits of dialogue feel like a spoken word collage cut up from an arts council application crossed with a moment of inebriated bonding at a party with someone you’ve never met before.

Ewe is patently critiquing the role of the ‘creative’ as the lubricant that smooths over the social cleansing at play across the UK’s cities, but the strength of the work is that it doesn’t just leave it there. It is not another endlessly self-reflexive critique of the art world’s absurdities and contradictions. Something more fundamental is going on that wrestles art back from being condemned as purely instrumental. Instead, Ewe flits between these veiled

references to art and development and moments that are playful, strange and immediate. There is a generous humour in the work that makes Ewe’s performances feel welcoming rather than scornful. By recycling phrasing like “be whatever you want to be” and mimicking flirtatious eye rolls and coquettish head movements, Ewe reminds us that no matter how flimsy and contrived these gestures and words are, they form an important part of how we make bonds with other people. Humour, flirtation, rudeness, whatever - we mimic and repeat behaviour, yet it is also our own. Ironised and replicated again and again, these phrases and gestures start to become something like a rhythm or a pattern in the work. In this way, they start to shed connections to a particular context and, in moments, become abstract.

Ewe’s solo performances canvass an array of characters, akin to psychoanalytic archetypes: the neurotic; the obsessive; the hysteric; the narcissist. Watching the performances is to run through the psychological textures of your own day spent moving through the city, reminiscent of the strange mix of fantasy and banality that shape the relationship between the internal and external world. To watch him is to realise how often we move from states of composure to a loss of control, from hypervigilance to introspection, or from mania to exhaustion throughout the course of the day.

Ewe returns again and again to the idea of space in his work. His persistent interest in how space moderates and encourages certain possibilities is mirrored by his choice of locations. He picks sites that ensure contingencies in the interaction between the audience and the performer. *Go Big or Go Home* (2020), at Peak in the Elephant and Castle shopping centre was a durational piece played out in public. Those who came to see it could stay for as long as they chose, perhaps they would walk to get a coffee or a snack and come back, maybe not. Passersby would stop and watch and become part of the audience. This latter part is important. Unlike a lot of performance art, there is a genuine popular appeal in Ewe’s work. The performances are physically compelling, funny, graceful, and laced with jeopardy. He incorporates multiple props, ambitious tech setups and physical feats that inject the performances with that thrill of potential glory or the embarrassment that comes with the risk of staking something, of putting an effort into something that might not come off. Ewe reminds us that embarrassment is important to life, and that art can help us deal with embarrassment, not by abolishing it but by refining it and putting it to good human purpose. Art with its unique combination of private and the public offers a view to human behaviour distanced from the particularity of our personal narratives. Both worrying and funny, Ewe’s performances give shape to the various techniques we all use to search for some kind of sustaining place.

¹ The title is taken from Sylvère Lotringer’s 1978 interview with Jack Smith. “Uncle Fishook and the Sacred Baby Poo Poo of Art”, Jack Smith interviewed by Sylvère Lotringer, *Semiotext(e)* (1978).

² Jack Smith quoted in *Semiotext(e)* (1978).

³ Quoted from a conversation with Philip Ewe (2023).