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HAROLD OFFEH YOUTH

An interview with artist and educator Harold Offeh

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MICOL
CURATOLO:

This is Micol, I am the project coordinator of PUBLICS Youth Advisory Board.

HAROLD
OFFEH:

Hello. I'm Harold Offeh. I'm an artist and educator based in Cambridge and London in the UK.

MC:

Great to have you here Harold! You've been working with PUBLICS Youth consistently throughout the year, and you've been playing and thinking a lot with them around the representation and the narrative of voices in popular culture. How do you think that doing so: starting from popular culture helps us to understand the politics of voice - in contemporary art more specifically, maybe?

HO:

I think that's a really good question and I think the way you frame it around thinking about the relationship between popular culture and contemporary arts, and more broadly the overarching theme, really, of this idea of the voice, I think they've been really useful ways of opening things up: opening up that kind of conversation. I think something that I'm generally quite concerned with is really thinking about cultural hierarchies and how they can be exclusionary, or intimidating maybe, to people who are approaching cultural production. And I think for me it was really useful to think about this relationship between popular culture and culture more broadly - the broader spectrum of cultural engagements - for PUBLICS Youth to think about themselves as cultural consumers and cultural producers as well, who fully engage.

Often, I think, when one's working maybe in a contemporary art context - people maybe who don't have as much experience or is new to it, are feeling like they're lacking knowledge or, you know... and something that I really wanted to recognize was the fact that everyone on PUBLICS Youth are really super engaged in consuming contemporary culture, politics. And I think it's important that they recognize that as well.

So we did a very simple exercise, for example, on one of the early meetings where we did this "YouTube Cinema" where they shared an example of something from culture that they were interested in: like a two minute clip, a short clip, that we just screened together. For me that was just about allowing them to bring their cultural influences into the space.

I mean... in regards to the theme of the voice... I think that's also really, really, a powerful theme to engage with; because I think that's the immediacy of your own voice, and the materiality of speaking and being heard, and the power dynamics that sets up in terms of thinking about who is speaking and who is listening, but also more metaphorically to really think about power dynamics, cultural relations in terms of different sorts of voicing, modes

MC:

of transmission and reception. So I think that's been a really lovely container.

Yeah, I think that starting from this YouTube Cinema you did quite early on, what's really powerful in a simple way is that bringing back art – which, as you say, with this power dynamics and this hierarchies that affect people but also affect the things we produce, right? So art being taught to young people in education as something that it's above other form of cultures, in terms of whatever it represents, in terms of how we can engage with it, what's allowed and what's not allowed, right? - art as culture is just one of the many things we do as social beings, it's a stuff we make. And just as much as we strive to bring our language and our image and our modes of communication up to date with who we are as individuals and as communities, so we should learn - or unlearn some of the stuff that is taught to us - and learn to feel free to do things with art and to art. When you find yourself in a project like this, where you welcome in an organisation that works with contemporary art people who are under 22 [y.o.]: where do you start from to tear down these barriers of “how should I behave around art? What am I allowed to say or not? Am I supposed to like it all?”

This topic of playfulness really stuck with them. I don't remember... I think it came up really early on in your collaboration. It's an idea that really kept coming up in our work together through the year. I was wondering how in your experience - and I think I will also try to think back of my conversations with them - how do playfulness and voice come together as a method to learn to be active, to contribute actively to our surroundings? Be it, you know, politically, artistically professionally. Yeah, how do you see that relationship?

HO:

I think notions of playfulness and the voice are really important. I think central. I mean, I recognize that by the fact that I think there's increasingly less opportunity to engage with playfulness, you know, particularly for young adults, in terms of societal expectations. The demands of education and economy, social structures. And for me what playfulness represents is that space of intellectual inquiry and curiosity, of discovery, of agency, that sense in which you might test and navigate and experiment, fail. And failure is really central to play, in terms of the pedagogical experience of what you learn from failing. Also judging what is a failure, and how sometimes the failure is also a success and a moment of discovery. I mean all of those things are what emerges from access to playfulness. I mean we see that as central to who we are as human beings, you know: essential to that experience of being children. I think super important particularly for young

MC:

adults - if I think about the demographic that PUBLICS Youth are - is to have that space, is to have agency. And that is intrinsically linked to notions of the voice, and being able to speak both literally and metaphorically; you know, having the agency and power to speak and address things, also to share and disseminate, to broadcast, to transmit, to collaborate... all of these are for me aspects of voicing. You know, to set up that really important dialogical kind of relationship. If we think about our role within society: that idea of being part of a conversation.

Absolutely! And I think actually that playfulness was something that was raised up by them, that came up as we started to think about voice and sound. So the fact that it naturally came up, you know, highlights how much need there seems to be from their side to get out of... reclaiming playfulness as a way of reclaiming this space of freedom from this hyper fixation on figuring yourself out super early, of knowing what you're doing, of carrying yourself and your ideas without ever doubting them. And I think that they find themselves - and I can absolutely relate - in this moment in their lives where they're being asked of becoming adults very quickly and of professionalising themselves very quickly. Reclaiming playfulness as a worthy tool to do that - you know, a serious thing - in a way gave them a lot of freedom. That's at least the kind of conversations that I've been having with them through the year.

I was reading Brandon LaBelle's *Lexicon of the Mouth* a couple of weeks ago and there is this beautiful thing that Brandon writes, that is "I speak to bring myself close to you". That there is a physical movement, there's an agency in words, in me voicing myself, right? And this conscious act of giving voice as making public... it is not a self-contained process: it comes from listening to yourself and to others, it comes from sounding yourself. You know, moving inwards and then outwards and all of these social relations. Really language is so much of a social, relational practice and method, in many ways.

HO:

I think some of my favourite moments were... like we did this thing where they, PUBLICS Youth, took me to see a show in Helsinki - which is a great show - and then we had a discussion about that, and then they walked me to this café and it was sort of like a 20 minute walk. And it was that conversation on the walk: it was really amazing, really really great in terms of them talking about their experiences and [their] relation to the city, and pointing out aspects of the city that led to these cultural conversations about the dynamics of Helsinki and how it's changing and their relationship to that; the relationship to making as a thinking about arts... they're asking me about my experiences. I just thought that

there was something really [about] that walking, and talking, and the space that was kind of held by that conversation. Very inter-generational conversation. I'm in my mid forties... very different. But for me, it was really really great. And so for me, it was really important that you know... they were the experts: in terms of, the guides and they chose where we went for lunch and... I guess the anatomy of the conversation in terms of [how] conversations can be structured in different ways.

And I think it's been really nice to have that sort of platform to really think through what is that they want to say, what is that they want to share. For me also just recognising that it's a learning experience as well: I mean, something hopefully I was trying to be transparent about. And I hope that idea of a shared learning experience - It's like an exchange.

MC:

I think this shared learning experience has been really maybe the core of this first year of PUBLICS Youth, because also us individually and as an organisation, we're learning how to do this. And I've tried to be as open as possible about this: about the things that I was learning from them and with them on the way, but also about how the structure of us working together changed through time - because we were learning and we decided "okay some of the things we've been doing maybe don't work that well, or lead us to ways that we don't want to go", and then changing on the way. I feel like being transparent with them about these ongoing also structural changes is something valuable in many ways.

What I have been thinking about in the past couple of months has been, you know, as an organisation who decides to work with young people, being able to construct a balance, a safe ethical position between the organisation's voice and the young people's individual and collective voices, is a delicate task. It is an ongoing process. You are also an educator; you're also a teacher: do you have in mind any good practices that help in pursuing this, whether it be connected to PUBLICS Youth or to other of your experiences?

HO:

It's actually increasingly difficult, I think, to hold that space open of the speculative and the playful that I think has been afforded by working with an organisation like PUBLICS. And that's partly because, you know, art schools and universities... increasingly the ethos is a business kind of ethos. So it can be quite transactional. So that relationship is constructed in a way that is set around being a service provider, delivering to customers consumers; and the students and young artists embody this position. I mean, I say that partly just as a kind of counterbalance actually, to what is afforded by this idea of PUBLICS Youth. In terms of my own practice, thinking through this format of forum, of the

MC:

workshop: really thinking about this idea of offering it approaching things in relation to embodiment and the body, thinking about structures. Not necessarily non-hierarchical structures, because actually I think sometimes in these spaces I've recognized that being a facilitator can actually bring people in; I think there can be a tyranny of openness where you just say "hey, let's make up something!" You know, it predicates that people have agency or confidence to navigate that space of openness. So I think I increasingly recognize that role of facilitation where you may be, create, a kind of scaffold or a structure that allows people into a space of exploration and play. Then, for me the idea is always to take that structure away and allow them to navigate things more independently, allow them to either individually or collaboratively generate their own structures and forms.

I think often for me that idea of drawing on popular culture - which you've talked about - drawing on the body and embodiment, and thinking about how it's not purely about a scopic kind - you know, looking at something and analyzing it - but maybe actually it might be about sensuality. It might be about how your body feels, or creating an experience, or leading with touch or taste or sound: these other sensory experiences that can often emancipate experiences of learning and play.

I think there is a really subtle balance between supporting them with our infrastructure, with our personal and shared knowledges, with providing an overall idea of what's happening through each session or throughout the year; but also to not strip them of responsibility. Because this is a really interesting point about a project like PUBLICS Youth, that takes inspiration from Index Foundation Teen Advisory Board and PRAKSIS Tenn Advisory Board in Stockholm and Oslo: these two projects from which institutionally we are learning, right? So there is this ongoing collaboration and it's not just about the three groups meeting, but it's also about PUBLICS learning from years of experience of Index and PRAKSIS, and myself learning from years of experience of Marit [Silsand] and Isabella [Tjäder] who are doing my job over there.

Asking them [the Youth members] to take responsibility over their actions as employees; but also asking them to slowly become part of a teamwork, that in such a small organisation where there is four people working, five people working, and then you add six more: it really becomes a necessity of getting into these dynamics, understand how that works; but, at the same time, not leaving them without a support structure. Really trying to tear down that lingo that one starts using as they enter the professional world: trying to give, to build with them the tools to, not adjust necessarily to how contemporary art works, but being aware of

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HO:

that, being able to read it, and then have the tools to carry their own definitions and their own voices as they navigate contemporary art - be it for fun or professionally, I think.

Something that I find valuable in articulating is - I mean, it's a little bit corporate but - the idea of transferable skills: like, the transferability of experiences that can come out of this way of working. For me that's slightly about recognizing value, what's the value of the experience. It's partly maybe because there are so many dominant narratives that are out there that say that an engagement with arts and culture is not valuable, or is a luxury, or is a waste of time. So for me sometimes it's really important to articulate the value of it. And that's obviously something many people have to negotiate for themselves. But I think for me that sense in which that playfulness and creativity that emerges from an engagement with the arts and culture does provide transferable experiences and skills. You know, it's not necessarily just about being an artist, or a curator, or an art writer, or all those things - which it would be great if people want to do that - but if they don't, I think for me that kind of holistic sense in which this is about you as a person in the world, who's culturally engaged and sensitive and maybe able to navigate the world as a result, and understanding culture.

MC:

Yeah for sure. And I think in this sense, from our side - now that a [new] open call is up, for example - being able, making the effort - which again doesn't happen overnight to get results out of it - making the effort of reach out of PUBLICS's audience in order to actually reach out to those for whom art is not an option necessarily. That is something that we've been trying to do. But really we have so much to grow on that side, still. To keep giving time, and not it happening only during the open call, but being present there through the year: being present in other parts of the city again. Maybe this is like remapping: like moving, and talking, and going places, and being physically present not just in one place - that also becomes like a really key point.

I guess hopefully the final goal will be that things don't just look different, but that they are different, right? That it's not just a surface kind of change, but that we bring people in and they bring themselves and that's how change happens.

HO:

Absolutely. Yeah.

MC:

Hey, thanks so much for this chat, and for the work that you've been doing with PUBLICS Youth through the year!

HO:

Thank you. Thank you so much.