

# Beyond Belief

Conversations with Emma Cocker

**Emma Cocker:** Your work often interrogates the complex ritual performances and social practices that surround various closed communities or structures of belief. How do you select the groups that you work with? Is it to do with their *specific* beliefs?

**Ben Judd:** I am interested in people who are attached to communities that are separated or even ostracised from the larger societal group. On residency in Colombia [*I Will Heal You*, 2007] I worked with a witch—a figure both ostracised and respected within the community. There is an aura of respect surrounding witchcraft, even if you think it is nonsense. The same is also true of the power that surrounds a *séance*.

**EC:** Whilst witches and spirit mediums have a certain power, in your earlier work, the groups that you were associating yourself with or trying to infiltrate seemed rather impotent or powerless? In video works such as *I Love you* you adopt a personae in order to infiltrate a group of amateur photographers, whilst in *I Miss*, your attention turns to a group of trainspotters.

**BJ:** Thinking about these earlier videos, perhaps the groups do have a power, but in a very different way to witchcraft. It is still an unknown or secretive activity; it still has codes and is ritualistic. Morris dancing is an obvious example; trainspotting too. To us it doesn't make any sense. Why would somebody endlessly write down a list of train numbers? Yet to them it makes perfect sense and I have a fascination in the structure that they have set up. Maybe this is to do with a certain kind of power. My position within these contexts was as participant *and* observer. The subcultures that I am now getting involved with affect people in a different way, on a more emotional level. Witches do have a perceived power. In Colombia, I was warned against seeing the witch; my interaction with these people reinforces that notion of power.

**EC:** Marginal practices have a curious latent power perhaps because they exist outside of the mainstream power structures; they have an exempted status or manage to operate beneath the radar. There seems to be a greater degree of risk involved in your recent work.

**BJ:** I think so. The worst that could have happened in some of the earlier work is that the trainspotters could have caught me, and in fact they often realised that I was videoing them. It feels much more dangerous to try to believe in witchcraft; the danger is unknown—I genuinely don't know what might happen. In Colombia, during the cleansing ritual [which forms part of the video *I Will Heal You*] it definitely felt like something was having an impact on me. In retrospect, I am not sure whether that fear was in fact me just believing the witch's hype. Objects appeared to be transformed through the ritual—a lime, an egg and some sugar took on very different meanings—they had a talismanic property. I did genuinely believe if only for a short period of time.

**EC:** In a number of your video works and performances, you appear to simultaneously inhabit the position of participant *and* observer, or of a believer and non-believer. The idea of remaining between positions or of not arriving at a single position seems to be central to your work. Do you think that being inconsistent can be critically recuperated as a positive quality?

**BJ:** I consider my work from that position. Sometimes I don't know whether what I am doing is a real experience or an imagined experience. I really enjoy that ambivalence.

**EC:** Your work seems to rely on the *tension* between belief and non-belief. In your work you seem to be on a quest searching for an encounter with belief, whilst simultaneously hoping that this belief-encounter won't ever be lasting. Is the tension between wanting and *not* wanting to believe central to your endeavour?

**BJ:** It is a quest for an unresolved or in-between position rather than a quest for true belief. It is a very strange position of wanting to believe and yet still disbelieving. I would like to believe in clairvoyance and when I stood up in front of a class and tried to demonstrate my clairvoyance [*Close To You*, 2008], I felt that something genuinely did happen. On the other hand, it feels like quite a constructed experience. Being a non-believer or an atheist is still also a belief system. I try to become the *medium* through which other people experience these different positions; this is why it is important for me to physically be present in some of the work. Hopefully people can see from my own expressions that I am going through a very intensive period of questioning, and perhaps they can put themselves in my position.

**EC:** Is adopting different characters used as a way to put the authenticity of the *self* into doubt? If you can inhabit one position and put that into doubt, surely the sense of the original position is also subject to questioning?

**BJ:** Absolutely, it makes you wonder whether you inhabit those roles anyway, on a day-to-day basis. If I inhabit a role then at least part of me believes it to be authentic, which seems like a contradiction, because how can it be authentic when it is also a role?

**EC:** Role-play still requires a particular investment though, a certain kind of immersion. Inhabiting a role still involves the participation of the body and the potential that emotions

are brought into play. There is a point at which things might slip and have the potential to be felt as *real*.

**BJ:** They are very real emotions. When I was working with spirit mediums in *Close to You*, the nature of the role I adopted took on a whole new meaning or became a new moral problem. People who were bereaved, for example, were looking for a connection with someone and I was supposedly making that connection. I think that the level of uncertainty or even ambivalence—the question of whether I should even be doing this in the first place, whether it is ethically wrong or in bad taste—can hopefully create a tension or uneasiness which I think is important.

**EC:** The issues of ethics and exploitation must need to be carefully negotiated within your practice. During your residency in Colombia, you worked very closely with a local woman, Verónica Mardel, who had already initiated her own one-person quasi-religious organisation called The Ministry of Universal Culture. You describe how you had to keep reminding her that what was happening was part of an art practice, a construct. Was there a danger of the work endorsing her fantasy?

**BJ:** I had invented a new movement, *I Will Heal You*, which was partially based on Verónica's Ministry, and I suppose there was always a question of whether I was furthering her delusion or fantasy. It is a fine line, because on the one hand I was encouraging her to talk about her ideas, but then I was setting up a movement that I had to invest in, that I had to start believing in. There was a very strange moment where she arranged a TV interview and kept introducing me as her minister from London. I kept saying that I was not this at all—that I was an artist from England making some work that partially involved her. At other times she would come with other ideas for her movement. For example, she said that she had invented the equation of universality. It was a very beautiful idea with a certain kind of logic to it. I would take her seriously; but there is still the question of what happens if you keep pushing this. I found that increasingly the more I pushed it—fabricated this world—the more I had to start inhabiting it, being physically invested. There was a reality to things.

**EC:** There seems to be a tension, then, between wanting to set up a movement whilst at the same time stating that it is only a construct. Does the presence of a true believer—like Verónica—unsettle this tension, this balance of contradictions that operates at the heart of your work? What is the difference between *actually* setting up a movement and setting up a movement within a practice?

**BJ:** You could argue that there isn't any difference. I had written a manifesto and had created artefacts. The movement had a logo and I had given a public lecture. So you could say that this was a genuine movement, but created for particular purposes.

**EC:** The same could be said of a film set. A production team might make an explosion or a whole new world yet this exists within a particular 'fictional' frame and only has logic within this frame which everyone present understands. There is a sense of knowingly inhabiting a construct

or alternatively perceiving something to be for real. There is always the question of which group you belong to, what kinds of games are being played, what kind of languages are being used.

**BJ:** I am fascinated by that idea. I set up a performance, *Presence*, in which I invited two clairvoyants to conduct a séance. There was a strange clash between two worlds—between an art audience and the *believers*. I normally think of an art audience as being open-minded but in this particular instance I don't think they were—they appeared sceptical. It created some very awkward moments. The overlap between the constructed world of an art experience and another group which also has its own beliefs was interesting—what happens when these two groups collide or are brought together? Perhaps there are different ways of looking at the world, which are then overlapped.

### State of potential

**EC:** According to Victor Turner, ritual performance has three stages: separation, transition, and reintegration. Within most rites of passage ceremonies there are always these three stages. The middle or transitional stage is described by Turner as that of liminality, where the ritual initiate is 'no longer and not yet' classified. This in-between status cannot quite be defined, yet it still has a distinct character. Turner discusses the *unruliness* of the liminal phase as certain identities or beliefs are abandoned and new ones not yet taken on board.

**BJ:** I imagine this as a blind spot. There is something that you are experiencing but you can't quite see it or it is slightly out of your vision. When I look at a piece of art that I think is successful, I feel that I am looking at it through a blind spot. I am seeing it but also *not* seeing it at the same time. It is a very strange experience that is unique to art. For me, this is the criterion for a successful piece of work. It doesn't happen very often.

**EC:** Do you mean that you are seeing something whilst not knowing what you are seeing?

**BJ:** Maybe I am experiencing something and there is a set of experiences that are coming together to form one experience, and I have never had that combination of experiences before, so I don't know how to describe it. It is a totally new experience. It is almost so new that I can't quite see it. This is art's *promise*.

**EC:** Art's promise is that it opens up a gap into which something *other* is imagined. It is capable of rupturing what already exists and promising something new. However this promise of the new often remains propositional, it is not always sustained or developed. There is always the risk that it will not quite hit the mark. The promise of art contains the threat of its potential failure. In your work there seems to be a sense of a quest for something—for belief perhaps—but also a sense of the absurdity or potential failure of the endeavour.

**BJ:** In some ways it is a doomed quest. The manifesto for *I Will Heal You* was full of promises such as, 'If you join us you will achieve a wonderful nirvana, a blissful experience' but at the same time warning that it was a sham, that people should stay away, that it was quite dangerous for them to even consider joining. It was setting up the possibility of something otherworldly or magical at the same time dismantling the possibility of this ever happening. It was like saying you can have this if you want it but I am just going to keep it out of reach as well. You will never actually get there. It is the idea of constantly being on the edge of experiencing it and the promise that is important; a perpetual becoming. Once it is inhabited it is no longer a utopia—it becomes something else. This is certainly true of the The Brotherhood of Subterranea, an exhibition I curated at Kunstbunker, Nuremberg in 2008. It seemed idealistic initially, but it became quite an austere exhibition.

**EC:** Your work explores questions around the idea of belonging and not belonging, what it means to operate inside or outside of a particular community. In earlier work, you adopted a much more peripheral role as a kind of interloper or infiltrator observing a particular group, however more recently you are the one who is creating the terms of the community, for example with The Brotherhood or the movement *I Will Heal You*.

**BJ:** Even if I am the initiator it is still from a position of trying to be both participant and observer, and also be both connected and disconnected. For my residency at the Banff Centre in 2009 my role became much more one of being a host. When I arrived for the residency I was given a guided tour, and I imagined what would happen if I brought other individuals—such as a shaman or spirit medium—to this space, and asked them to interpret it. They would give a guided tour of the site but for very different reasons, pointing out very different things [*The Symbol* and *Parallelism*]. There is an overlap and within this overlap, how do I position myself? Which side am I on? Ideally, I am on both, listening to what they say and attempting to understand it.

**EC:** I wonder whether your role is to operate as a catalyst that brings these different positions into dialogue? Your work seems then to be less about locating yourself in one position but more about attempting to keep the two possibilities in dialogue; your position appears somewhat unstable.

**BJ:** I think it is. I hope that the experience feels difficult or uncomfortable. The idea of questioning my own beliefs or systems of belief is very important. I don't want to find a position of stability.

### **A kind of dance**

**EC:** I am interested in the slippage between character and self in your work, the fray that occurs when someone who is performing a particular role or operating in an official capacity gives to reveal a sense of the individual therein. In *The Symbol* the shaman tries to turn the tables a little and interrogate you. However, he does this through the voices of others; his own doubts and questions about your project become ventriloquised through the voices of the spirits that he is

purporting to mediate. In your video works, you also appear to shift between positions rather than remaining static or even neutral.

**BJ:** Yes, the way I work is different to the neutrality of a documentary filmmaker. I don't want the work to have an investigative or journalistic edge; my expressions are important. It is important that my role mirrors the individuals that I am filming. Their roles are multiple and so are mine. Both are unstable.

**EC:** In *The Symbol*, you and the shaman appear to be testing each other's limits. There is a feeling of circling, a sense of tension or a feeling of working each other out. Both of you are required to suspend certain judgments—there is a sense that you both have questions or reservations about each other's practice. It seems as though both of you are trying to test a limit without breaking it.

**BJ:** It is a kind of dance. Inevitably there is a gap between my perspective and his. I invited him to give a reading of the site and I didn't expect to be tested in the way that I was. I am not sure whether I am being indoctrinated or not. There is a part in the work where the shaman talks to a tree and then wants me to do the same. He takes his shoes and socks off and walks through the snow and says that it isn't cold. I have to draw the line there and can't believe him. He looks disappointed that I don't just take his word for it and do it.

**EC:** The marking out of two poles (belief and non-belief for example) draws attention to the shades of grey between. By suspending certain expectations or beliefs it also becomes possible to escape the terms of a given situation, a particular belief structure.

**BJ:** Yes, there is a spectrum of possibility between these two options and the question becomes one of where you place yourself. If there are specific positions, then what does it mean to be able to jump from one to the other or for them to merge? In fact, you are probably always moving between different positions. As soon as you suspend your sense of disbelief things *do* start to happen. When I met with another shaman at Banff, he laid out his ritual paraphernalia on the ground. On one level, it was just a feather, a shell, a rock—but they also had a charged quality to them. I absolutely believed in the power of these inanimate objects. Perhaps this is another metaphor for making art. It is about suspending disbelief or investing objects with a specific quality that in most other situations they wouldn't have. In art something has the capacity to suggest something else that it wouldn't unless the artist invested it with those properties.

### **Amateur unruliness**

**EC:** I'm interested in your work with amateurs because there is an unruliness that is both exciting and dangerous, where you're not quite sure what the professional parameters are. You invite an audience and performers into a situation where they might not be aware of the parameters, and what might happen in that context.

**BJ:** I've recently used amateur choirs, in *Assemblage* [2013].

**EC:** On reflection, the figure of the amateur is present in many of the groups that you've previously infiltrated and in the recent performances; they all seem to be relatively amateur groups.

**BJ:** Such as the trainee psychics.

**EC:** Or the group of amateur photographers or trainspotters; people who are doing an activity as a hobby rather than as a profession. Does your role as the initiate mirror their role as an amateur?

**BJ:** Yes, I've been aware of my position mirroring theirs; the trainspotters in *I Miss* is a good example. Being aware of them as a somewhat outsider group, and my position in relation to their group being peripheral, uninitiated and perhaps amateur.

**EC:** Both the amateur and the initiate hover at the limits of a particular community: for example, the amateur hovers at the limits of professionalism, has some knowledge of the language but hasn't fully stepped into the fold. Like the amateur, there is also something quite unruly about the status of the novice.

**BJ:** You can get away with a bit more. I've often adopted the position of the novice, or I am simply the amateur by definition, because I'm not experienced in the group or activity that I'm encountering.

**EC:** The amateur is also interesting because there's a sense of a dual role that they inhabit. The amateur dimension of their life, or the hobby that they have a passion for is often something that is quite clandestine, or it's the thing they do outside of their more professional roles. Perhaps it's something to do with not fully inhabiting a role?

**BJ:** It's an activity that might be difficult to disclose publicly, such as some of the witches I've worked with, who also had quite ordinary professions that they pursued alongside their pagan beliefs. They would consider themselves professional witches, but I'm sure to everyone else it seems like something they do on the side.

**EC:** Which could be seen as liberating—there are certain permissions that come with that status that are interesting.

**BJ:** In the class for amateur psychics in *Close To You*, in some ways I found the audience a more interesting subject than the teacher. She was quite polished in what she did—she ran the class and demonstrated clairvoyance very well. The people in the audience were just ordinary people and I was allowed to witness this other side of them.

**EC:** In *Close To You* there's a distinct sense of more than one audience who are experiencing the same event from more than one perspective. You also describe the strange meeting or collision in *Presence*, where there is both the art world audience and the psychics in the audience. This feeling of two distinct audiences being present is also there in *Polyrhythm*. In your work, there's a sense of not necessarily creating something that a viewer watches, but more that the work functions as a meeting point.

**BJ:** There was a sense of that in *Concerning the Difference*, when the audience and performers were initially indistinguishable from each other; how the two might be melded together I find very interesting. The performances are suggestive of other kinds of meetings, such as the Quakers, where people come and go and wait for something to happen. Sometimes nothing happens at all, or it might but it's not vocalised. But there's the potential there, the possibility that something could happen. And it's that potential that creates a tension, a feeling of expectation. It's not specified what is about to take place, but I'm interested that the audience could feel that as a genuine emotion—it's not something that's being forced upon them. It's something that surrounds them so that they become part of it.

#### **As if**

**EC:** I am interested in how the notion of performing or doing something 'as if' might refer to the work of an actor, but it also belongs to the vocabulary of ritual. It's used to refer to the subjunctive, a particular modality that's to do with wishing and hoping, emotions to do with longing or wanting something. It feels as if the quality of 'as if' is in a lot of your work in different ways, whether it's the 'as if' of role-play where you inhabit a space 'as if' you are a glamour photographer or a clairvoyant. In later work the quality of 'as if' seems more about propositions being made—the communities that are being proposed in the work have a quality of 'as if'. The properties of utopia are very much in the modality of thinking in this way.

**BJ:** You're right, a lot of the later work is a proposition. My recent film *I Am On Top of the World* [2013] which doesn't have a dedicated audience apart from members of the public who happened to be there, was shot on a boating lake in a park in London. Performers are on separate boats and gradually converge on an island, where they perform a series of choreographed movements and choral singing. It's a testing out of some of those earlier suggestions. What happens if I find an island and I put people on the island? It's partly out of curiosity, I want to see what that looks and feels like. It's a ridiculous proposition—it's quite obvious it's an island on a boating lake in a park, and there is a revealing of that, such as in the sound of traffic from a nearby road. But there's a fleeting moment, a bit like some of the other performances, there's a sense of potential.

**EC:** It seems that in your work, something gets set up and then collapses, a utopian proposition gets revealed in its absurdity or in its pedestrian qualities.

**BJ:** Yes, but at the *same time* as it's being realised. I think I want it to actually happen at the same time as me and everybody else realising that it's not. A bit like my role in the work, in which I might be genuinely engaged in an activity at the same time as observing and recording it. Or the actors I've worked with, who you know are performing but you also feel as if they might affect you in some way, and that they genuinely believe what they're doing.

**EC:** We've previously discussed what would happen if you were to cross the threshold from non-belief to belief, or if you achieved the thing that you were setting out to achieve. You've talked of *moments* in your work when you did believe. Rather than the work revolving around ideas of belief and non-belief or utopia and its collapse (things being either/or) there is a quality of glimmering or glimpsing. There is a sense of a fragmentary or fleeting encounter with something, so that instead of either/or it's possible to encounter both.

**BJ:** So that these two things are pushed together and are experienced simultaneously. It's an interesting conundrum—can you experience two opposing views at the same time?

**EC:** Like with Wittgenstein's proposal of the duck-rabbit—it's not possible to see both of them simultaneously, but it is possible for them to be perpetually oscillating. I am thinking of this in relation to your collaborative performances with Sidsel Christensen, *Conversations With the Other Side*. The performances ask the question: is it possible for the scientific and empirical to coexist with the visionary and magical?

**BJ:** Hopefully the performances experimented with those ideas, to bring them together somehow; the physical gallery space and the imaginary space that she was encountering. That seems to be a state that I'm aspiring to.

**EC:** A dynamic is set up, where you are inviting people to join in yet telling them to stay away in the same breath. There's a feeling of being drawn to and repelled by the situation; feeling fascinated but also being made to feel uncomfortable.

**BJ:** In *Parallelism* the psychic's view and my more objective view were presented at the same time. I like the idea of each of these views being punctured by the other, so that through the puncturing you can catch a glimmer of the other, opposing view. In *Conversations With the Other Side*, the projection of Sidsel is like a puncturing, a portal, a way of looking through something that is physical and real.

**EC:** This reminds me of the way glass functions, it has the capacity to be both looked through and also reflect back. The capacity to see through something but to also get enchanted by its surface. As in a lot of your work, there is something quite enchanting, but the audience can still recognise that it's a construction. As in your use of a magic lantern, you can see the construct and yet it still has the capacity to be enchanting, or propose something that is magical.

**BJ:** Pepper's ghost is another example. Yes it's an interesting paradox; something that reveals its process has the potential to be enchanting and magical. A digital version of a magic lantern I would find boring, which is partly because I *can't* see how it works. The revealing of a process allows you to see how it's constructed at the same time as being enchanted by it. My 3D photographs also operate in a similar way.

### Choreographic assemblages

**EC:** Although there are communities present in your earlier work, there seems to be a shift towards choreographic assemblages, towards communities that evolve rhythmically or choreographically.

**BJ:** *Polyrhythm* was a precursor to this—the idea that the performers would move in stages towards a centre, and the movement have a rhythm. It was partly the rhythm of the city being absorbed into the performance. This relates to my interest in rituals, which are usually systematic and have particular structures; similarly, I've been thinking about ways in which the movements of performers can be more carefully controlled. In the same way that music has the potential to transform and enchant you, dance also allows you to lose yourself. For *I Am On Top of the World*, the singing and choreography have a particular relationship to each other. So instead of the performers dancing to a tune, there is a rhythm that's built up through the use of vocal warm up exercises.

**EC:** Your engagement with Morris dancers and even trainspotters also reveals something choreographic. There is something subversive about the trainspotters' behaviour on a train platform; it's unlike the other rhythms that are going on, but it speaks of a collective activity nonetheless. As in *Polyrhythm*, the performers' rhythm is a counter flow to the other people. The choreographic can operate in a dual way, as it has the capacity to be both disruptive and affirmative; a disruption of the normative flow of the space gradually starts to build pace and suggest its own collective choreography.

**BJ:** In later performances with actors, a pattern might start emerging from a group of people, and that pattern is increasingly about a physical centring, a coming together. I wanted to try that out on a larger scale, as in the lake in *I Am On Top of the World*, to test out an extension of recent choreographic concerns.

**EC:** There's a utopian proposition in the work, which does not suggest moving to a different location but instead changing the tempo of a particular situation. Which I think is political and potentially disruptive.

**BJ:** A bit like the Burt Lancaster character in Frank Perry's film *The Swimmer*, who reimagines bourgeois suburbia as a romantic 'river of pools' that he can navigate. This imagined place doesn't necessarily mean wandering off into an Arcadia, it could be experienced right here.

**EC:** Which makes the fact that in *I Am On Top of the World* it's an island on a boating lake in London particularly resonant.

**BJ:** It relates to my work where people sit in a room in a circle. It's an ordinary situation but there's the possibility that collectively some kind of encounter could take place and we might be transported, or enchanted.

**EC:** As in *I Will Heal You*, you set up a movement which claimed it could transform its disciples, but then there's also a caution in there. It seems as if there's a question around the desirability of the utopian proposition as a model. In the earlier work the oscillation, the push and pull, is more visible, such as asking people to join *I Will Heal You* at the same time as warning them to stay away. In the later work the double-edged quality is more complicated.

**BJ:** As in the idea of enchantment, it suggests being led somewhere, perhaps against your will.

**EC:** Or being captivated—in folkloric tales, enchantment always has a spell-like quality to it.

**BJ:** Yes, where you might lose yourself or lose your mind.

**EC:** Within your work there's the double threat of the collective: there's the closed collective that's secretive, and there's the overly inclusive collective that wants to make the others 'we', to make them join, to pull them in.

**BJ:** This is an ongoing concern for me, in the work and in general. Of wanting to be part of a group, and resisting it at the same time. A wariness of being drawn into something, but then having to negotiate that and find a way of doing both, because we all have to do both. I think the same is true of all our relationships. How do you position yourself—where are you in relation to this person, or group? I need both, to belong and to not belong, and maybe that's a hard thing to reconcile.

### **Preparatory and propositional**

**EC:** You've talked about the idea of rehearsal being of interest in the work.

**BJ:** In some instances the rehearsal has been more successful than the performance itself, perhaps because there's less pressure for it to be 'professional'. It's a more open space.

**EC:** We've talked about the fray between the actor and the role that they're performing, which is more complex in rehearsal. It's the fledgling status, they are in the process of becoming, and are not quite fully inhabiting their roles. It's distinctly transitional as a mode of performance.

**BJ:** Sometimes rehearsals are quite brief, which can be a positive thing. I would like to keep that feeling of the transitional in the performances themselves. That's part of my interest in warm up vocal exercises, they're a way of getting into something, before you actually do the thing.

**EC:** There's also something quite ambivalent about the nature of rehearsal. On the one hand rehearsal is a gesture that's moving towards something, towards performance, but it's also keeping performance at bay; a deferral. The concept of utopia is entirely predicated on the preparatory, on longing, on desiring, but always keeping the object of desire at a distance because it doesn't exist. It's something that can only ever exist as a proposition.

**BJ:** The performance and film on the island *I Am On Top of the World* could be seen as a rehearsal for this unreachable place. I want to suggest in the work that this place could be reached, albeit very briefly, when the performers physically come together, at the moment of synchronicity. There is the idea in the work that the cinematic set piece could be a symbol of that synchronicity; such a choreographed moment could imply an idealised sense of coming together. Cinematic set pieces which contain dance and structured movement are also suggestive of the choreographed elements of religious ritual; it is this blurred boundary between a dramatic performance and a liturgical drama that is central to the work.

### **Free space**

**EC:** The spaces that your work occupies feel increasingly important, including the space of the island in recent work. I think of the spaces you've used as receptacles for certain kinds of activities. For example, the hall in Swedenborg House in *Concerning the Difference* or the forest in *The Symbol* seem to be charged, demarcated spaces. The performance itself also functions to establish a particular sense of space, the terms of the community, rather than the community existing prior to the performance. The performance creates the space, demarcates space, rather like street performers who throw string on the ground and it suddenly creates a stage. There is something of an invocation or a gesture in the performance itself that makes the 'magic circle'.

**BJ:** I have explored this in different ways, most directly during the Wiccan ritual in *Observance*, when the circle was cast. But also more subtly, for example in *Polyrhythm*, in which there are pre-existing demarcations in a public square, and the work reinterprets those markings. In *Concerning the Difference* the hall already contained chairs which were all facing in one direction, and which I repositioned into a circle. Similarly the bandstand in *Assemblage*, I saw as an island-like space which I could open up and then close down.

**EC:** I see this element in the work as being an appropriation of existing ritual spaces, the functions of which are then reinterpreted.

**BJ:** For *Observance*, the careful placing of artworks in the curation of the exhibition Radical Nature was reemployed in the careful, deliberate choreography of a ritual. Different artworks were used to represent the four elements so that existing patterns within the exhibition space were reimagined.

**EC:** I am reminded of Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, where he gives the example of the indigenous people of America who continued to practice their own beliefs but under the cover of rituals practised by the invading Europeans. Your work also invisibly changes the function of something through how it is performed.

**BJ:** As Christianity absorbed and reinterpreted Pagan beliefs, including magic.

**EC:** In that model the dominant force absorbed something through a position of power. The alternative model is to take the vocabulary of the dominant culture and use it for your own ends without taking possession of it. So that it's not to do with assimilation, it's to do with resistance. Power relations and ideas around power seem to be addressed in your work.

**BJ:** It's ambiguous where the power is located, whether it's with me or the audience, or the performers. This is further explored in *I Am On Top of the World*, in which the notion of an audience, who might or might not become involved, is shifted to include anyone who happens to be in a boat on the lake.

**EC:** By implication anyone else in a boat becomes part of the utopian project, even if they're going in the opposite direction they suddenly become co-opted into a performance. There are two flip sides to utopia then—exclusion and recruitment. One model seeks to exclude non-believers and the other model wants to make others join. Your practice attempts to leave the possibilities open, which is both problematic and interesting.

**BJ:** My performances might suggest a ritual, they have a structure and a moment of coming together, but they are deliberately inconclusive.

**EC:** And non-teleological as they don't have a purpose. It performs the mechanisms of ritual but it doesn't serve to increase status or contain a rite of passage, other than the potentially transformative qualities which art arguably already contains. Its ritual function is propositional and ambiguous.

**BJ:** Thinking about the non-hierarchical nature of *communitas*, I don't want or expect anyone to change permanently, it's a fleeting moment that might take place, and then it's gone. I want the performers to appear from the crowd and then to disappear back into it. There is no sense of knowing what's happened, or why.

**EC:** The work connects with ideas to do with play, and a sense of 'what if...?' It's a testing out, rehearsing the idea of a ritual without performing it.

**BJ:** There's the potential though that something magical could happen, even during the rehearsal. I enjoy that feeling of play when working with actors. Some of them have said to me that the performances are fun, that they involve the kind of improvisational activities they normally do in rehearsals. I like the idea that it can feel like a free space.