

BPA//
Berlin program
for artists

Rob
Crosse

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Patrick
Langley

The Sound of Restoration

Patrick Langley

I stare in fascination at my grandmother's hands. They are resting on the keyboard of her piano. I sit beside her on the stool, observing the crinkled texture of her skin, the liver-spots that speckle her knuckles. Her fingers, bent by rheumatoid arthritis, splay over the black and white keys. This crookedness strikes me less as evidence of deterioration than the product of experience, a marker of skill. Her hands have evolved that way, I think, after a lifetime of practice.

Music has marked itself on her body in other, less visible ways. Stored in her muscle-memory are countless phrases, melodies, and cadences from her career as a pianist, a language I can learn from but not yet speak. The lesson must have been successful. I don't remember much from my early childhood, but sometimes I catch myself singing that song.

*O did you wash your father's shirt?
O did you scrub it clean?
O have you hung it on the line
by the village green?*

Earlier this year, during a Skype conversation with the artist Rob Crosse, I remembered that song and my grandmother's hands. Crosse's videos and performances, which focus on older individuals and groups to explore duties of care, secular rituals, and intergenerational desire, felt especially relevant in the midst of a pandemic in which elderly people—my grandmother, now ninety, among them—were especially at risk. We spoke about the ambiguities of intergenerational relationships, whether framed by familial, social, or sexual contexts, or (as is most often and accurately the case) a combination of all at once. We discussed the different meanings of the word 'score': a mark, a record, a scar, a tune—a tempo to try to keep step with.

Crosse and I moved on to his development of new work, which at that time comprised a series of interests: older men's bodies, car garages, ritualized

actions and gestures, the shades, weights, and textures of obsolescent machines, processes of ageing and repair. I thought back to a series of photographs included in a 2018 exhibition of his work in London. Titled *Before, During, and After*, these tender close-ups of creased skin and white hair could be read as a kind of score, a cadence of images through which an older man's body is appreciated and an experience narrativized, alongside its preparations and afterglows.



Rob Crosse 'During', (2018), Inkjet print, Installation view, Jerwood Visual Arts, photo Anna Arca

Crosse then mentioned that his body of new work was driven, in part, by the following inquiry: 'What's the sound of restoration?'

Shortly after our Skype conversation, I received a download link containing an audio file. Crosse had recently visited a garage in Wedding, Berlin, observing the mechanics as they restored classic cars that were no longer in production. A straightforward answer to his question presented itself. I listened to the tapestry of sounds that Crosse had captured: the sizzle of welding torches, the clack-clack of hammers, the silvery tinkle of bolts being dropped to the floor, the nasal fury of an angle-grinder. Restoration, in this case, sounded like a form of industrial surgery: a skilful dis- and reassembly of a body's constituent parts.

I wondered whether these sounds—which haven't changed in the last century or more—were articulating how meaning is communicated in Crosse's work. As the recordings demonstrate, sound pays less heed to boundaries than sight. It moves through walls, skin, windows; it ricochets past corners and through history. In a medical context, auscultation is the diagnostic act of listening to internal organs, such as the lungs or heart, and allows us access to the body's interior. Rather than supplying a neutral acoustic backdrop—which is why I hesitate to describe them as 'ambient'—the soundtracks in Crosse's videos register as acoustic maps of coded spaces, in which meaning is often transmitted wordlessly. I wondered what they revealed about the layering of history in his work, evident from the palimpsests of older men's skin (liver-spots and crinkles recalling my grandmother's hands) and from the places he often films at.

His 2016 video *Clear as a bell*, shot in the National Railway Museum in York, UK, follows a group of impeccably dressed older men as they navigate the levers and signals of a model railway system designed to educate trainees in block signalling, a form of communication rendered obsolete by digital technology. The men swap subtle nods and hooded glances, their quick steps and watchful gestures evocative of a wordless choreography through which unspoken—or unspeakable—desires are sublimated, circulated, distributed.



Rob Crosse 'Clear as a bell' (2016) Video still, Commissioned by Kingsgate Projects. Supported by Arts Council England

The close-ups of levers and chains is anatomical in its focus, which suggests another reading: that we are inside a body just as real as those belonging to the men who tend to it. Is this what restoration sounds like? Not the desire to fix what has been damaged, but to preserve and appreciate an otherwise obsolete organism? To keep something alive? That the soundtrack lacks

overdubbed or scripted speech—direct expression of that which lies beneath the surface of the chimes, clicks, switches, and whirs of the soundtrack—may be a matter of survival.

'Shhh! Keep your voice down,' whispering into my ear as you penetrate me. 'The workmen outside might hear us.'

I thought back to the piano lesson. The power dynamic was clear enough: my grandmother was the adult and I the child; she the master and I the student. Still, something less consequential or definable—a recognition of damage, perhaps, and a will to protect—moved in the other direction. The tension and tenderness of that memory derives, in part, from an awareness of her mortality, which complicated her authority. We were following a score—one very different from the groups of older men in Crosse's films—but one just as open to connection, to misinterpretation, to synchronicity and folly.

*What sound does the body want to make?
The aged body in movement.
The movement of the engine?*

Crosse's most recent video, 2019's *Dear Samuel*, marks a departure. For the first time in his videos, Crosse provides narration, describing a series of encounters with an older male lover. Interspersed with the account is a love song in which the narrator commits himself to caring for his lover through senility and death, helping him across the street, washing and changing him. The subtitles appear, karaoke-style, from left to right as if to invite the viewer's participation, but there is no music to guide us. How to sing in the absence of a song, a hymn sheet, a teacher? Or do those caged birds set the tune?

*Each solitary note feels like a call for me to join you.
But I don't know this song, so I wait and listen.*

(August, 2020)

Quotations:

1. Traditional, date unknown, anonymous.
2. From *Dear Samuel*, 2019, by Rob Crosse.
3. From untitled notebooks, 2020, by Rob Crosse.
4. From *Dear Samuel*, 2019, by Rob Crosse.

Rob Crosse

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Rob Crosse was awarded the 2021 Ars Viva prize for visual art. Recent exhibitions include *Bad Bodies* (2019), Tomorrow Maybe, Eaton (HK); *Solo Presentations* (2018), Jerwood, London (GB); and *Prime Time* (2017), Grundy, Blackpool (GB). His films have been screened as part of *Queer: Both sides Now V*, Videotage, Hong Kong; *Different Ways*, Lux, London; and *Transactions of desire*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, among others.

Patrick Langley

Patrick Langley's first novel, *Arkady*, was published in 2018; his second is forthcoming in 2021. He is an editor at *art agenda* and a contributing editor at *The White Review*.

BPA // Berlin program for artists was founded in 2016 by Angela Bulloch, Simon Denny, and Willem de Rooij, facilitating exchange between emerging and established Berlin-based artists. The mentoring program organizes reciprocal studio visits, public lectures, and joint exhibitions.

BPA at Gropius Studios is a new collaboration between the Gropius Bau and BPA // Berlin program for artists, which begins in autumn 2020. Running up until the end of that year, eleven participating artists will use rooms at the Gropius Bau as studios and show their work in public presentations.

BPA at Gropius Studios
1. Oct–31. Dec 2020

Opening hours
Fri–Wed 10–19,
Thu 10–21, Tuesday closed

Gropius Bau
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