

Exorcising America

In connection with Merritt Johnson's exhibition at Kunsthall 3,14, Johnny Herbert spoke with the artist about using language and humor to explore limitations and possibilities in thinking and being.

JH: I'm interested in your selection of the term 'exorcise' in the title of Exorcising America. Could you say more about how you chose that term?

MJ: English is a strange language with so many words that have multiple meanings, sometimes they are spelled differently but pronounced the same; context becomes very important for spoken meaning. I use the term "exorcise" in the title because the videos aren't intended to provide the Americas with a workout, they are intended to exorcise America from people so we can participate in exorcising America from Land and everything Land sustains: everything living is connected and interdependent, relying on Land and Water to survive, so when Land is subjected to division and control, treated as a resource rather than a relative, every living thing is affected. So, in my thinking, America is a name for a demon. The America name was put on this Land early in an ongoing period of exploration, aggression, and control from outside, because colonization and control in service of capitalism isn't unique to a single nation in the Americas.

JH: The series contains a mixture of focusing on certain turns of phrase (e.g. 'keeping your pants on' or 'not biting the hand that feeds you') or innocuous practices (e.g. pain management, breathing exercises), unlinking them from aspects of their common usage and "taking them for a walk", so to speak, into intensified ambiguity. However, there are also videos that highlight certain unconscious social pressures (e.g. *Knowing Your Place*) dramatizing them, making this very much a bodily undertaking. How do you come upon ideas or 'exercises' to be performed in the videos?

MJ: Over time, my thoughts shift and flow around the work, the concepts, and language, but there are consistent intentions and reflections woven through these works. The videos are modelled after instructional videos for exercise or do-it-yourself-style tutorials; the accessibility and the familiarity of them are important. I think about the difficulty of using language because languages are so different in conceptualization and expression. For me, the series engages with limitations as much as with possibility. It feels like there is an intersection of an experience of being—being in a body—and the limitations, possibilities and dangers of that, with thought and expressions of thought in verbal terms. Engaging with English and its idioms as a form of communication is one way of communicating the things between language and experience. In many ways, language is a reflection of context and culture: it shifts and is shaped over time, reflecting how we think and interpret the world. But it can also limit our thinking or reflections on what we aren't thinking about, like what we literally don't have the words for.

A lot of the titles in *Exorcising America* are idioms in North America that come up often in conversation, media, and the news, phrases so common that we don't pay them much attention, yet they reflect how we live, how we think and how we act. For example, using the word “management” in the context of pain is so strange to me. Pain is a sensation we all experience; it's fundamental to existence for anything with a nervous system. It's not inherently good or bad, it's communication inside a living being about what's happening and is maybe a signal to act or respond, or not move. When we speak about “managing” it, we're using a language of control and there are assumptions and judgements being made: that we shouldn't feel pain, that pain is bad, that we don't want to show our experience of pain, that we're capable of controlling the sensation. We often seek to manage or control things without understanding or learning about them and this isn't limited to the world outside ourselves. So, the video *Pain Management* revolves around these exercises that don't alleviate pain, but instead redirect attention away from pain being experienced (physical, emotional, mental) by inflicting another pain, in this case physically. For me, this is something that we do, that we're taught to do, that we expect each other to do within the context of "America."

JH: The voiceover is very much in control and your earnest subservience to it invokes deadpan comic performance, a radical disconnection from the effect that one's actions might have. Yet, the monotone voiceover delivery is more like a mundane, "everyday deadpan" of public announcements or informational addresses. This makes me wonder if perhaps the videos parody—and function!—purposively informative addresses; the body showing/performing is here, then, more aligned to an apparent information giving, working against a sense of comic deadpan as causal disconnect. In this sense, there is a link to exorcism, in that there's an emphasis on bodily dispossession, that you're body is led by the words, so to speak. What do you think about the comic aspect of *Exorcising America*?

MJ: My mom always said that it's better to laugh than to cry, and I think that's a kind of tool for survival. As an adult and a parent, I'm continuously learning about experiencing and expressing a full range of emotion in healthy ways, including healing painful experiences. This is really challenging, as there is so much in the world (and in the experience of existing) that is painful. For me, finding ways to laugh at ourselves, at what happens around us (and to us) can help us face things that would hurt too much to function. Our capacity to function in healthy ways is foundational to our ability to contribute to the world in generative ways, so I think of these videos as being accessible in an emotional context as well: they're funny, they're absurd, and they can be sad and infuriating. The comic and absurd aspects are necessary. Some of the comedy is in the physical action while the text is deadpan, and, for me, some of them are funny in terms of the language or the way that language and performance intersect. The voiceovers are all funny to me because they're so affected and different from my normal speaking voice. I think about the voiceover as a kind of mash-up of public announcements, instructions for guided meditation or yoga relaxation, and newscaster and television commercials; they hover between authoritative and suggestive, enthusiastic, and bored, but always informative.

JH: Given that the videos will be shown in Norway at Kunsthall 3,14, I wonder how the 'America' of the title will be interpreted, or whether the 'actions' will be seen as directly

addressing the audience. Can you talk about the specificity of “America” in the title and how showing the videos elsewhere might alter the way visitors feel addressed by them?

MJ: I've thought about the videos in a global context for years and have done one or two that are "global exercises." I can't predict how people from outside the Americas will view them, but it is very important to me that people remember that America is not a country—it's been co-opted and branded that way by the United States, but the name “America” is applied to most of this hemisphere. *Exorcising America* is limited by my personal experiences in North America and the language here. However, we're all connected by the experience of being human, and these videos are very existential, so how people feel addressed by them is variable and according to each person's experience in the world. Nevertheless, I think there's value in being seen—by ourselves and those similar to us—and that it's equally valuable to be seen by those who have very different experiences. I feel like it's inherently necessary for us to see each other without a full understanding of all experiences. The capacity to see each other, to really see all living things without understanding them, is central to our ability to exist in a healthy, sustainable and generative relationship.