

Reviews /



BY JENNIFER HIGGIE
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Michael Clark Company

Tate Modern's cavernous Turbine Hall on a rainy Saturday night is not what you'd call inviting. Even after repeated visits in the ten years since Tate Modern opened, the sheer, breathtaking scale of the space tends to make me feel like a small, pale dot floating inside a whale. How apt, then, that Michael Clark Company – for who the body, obviously, is the prime expressive tool, and whose performances have reiterated, again and again, that a dancer can electrify, respond to, grapple with, and even seemingly expand or contract any space they find themselves in – have been doing a residency there for the past seven weeks.

In a gesture that reflects the museum as a free, communal space, the company invited members of the public to join in – the only stipulation being that they had never trained as a dancer. About 75 people rose to the challenge and rehearsed every Friday for around an hour. Apparently they were treated as part of the company; Clark worked them hard and many had the bruises to show for it. What transpired was the best public art I've seen in a long time. It was appropriate that it took place in what was once a former power station.

An untitled work-in-progress (the finished production will be staged next June), the evening's free performance began with the company (alone, without the untrained dancers) dancing to Kraftwerk's 'Hall of Mirrors'; it opens on a gorgeous sci-fi glissando that segues into a distilled fusion of chilly detachment and brooding, self-absorbed repetition.



The floor of the Turbine Hall was painted in black and white; a circular black and white projection added to the sense that the dancers – costumed, too, in minimal black and white – were moving across a target or a giant, skewed chess board. Moving in a stately, introspective fashion, every lift of the leg or raised arm hinted at the power they were yet to unleash. Their physical restraint was melancholic, they seemed pained by the sad narcissism of the lyrics: 'Living in the mirror / With the echoes of himself / Even the greatest stars live their lives in the looking glass'. Their immobile faces reflected the concentrated blankness of Kraftwerk's music, but it's a pretend blankness that messes with your heart (that such cold music can be so moving is part – or perhaps the core – of the band's genius).

Despite the minimalism of their moves, the dancers weren't dwarfed by the space – they rose to it. It was a mesmerizing prelude to what followed. The lyrics to David Bowie's rousing 1980 lament about representation and de-humanization, 'It's No Game', suited the vast, potentially alienating space of the Turbine Hall down to the ground: 'Silhouettes and shadows / Watch the revolution / No more free steps to heaven.' Into the waves of the song's thumping, hypnotic, even bewildered, exhortations ('I am barred from the event / I really don't understand the situation / So where's the moral / People have their fingers broken / To be insulted by these fascists it's so degrading' etc) came the 75 untrained dancers, dressed in black, in strict, practically Olympian, formations; they were all sizes, ages and rhythmic ability. They walked, ran, wove in and out of each other and lay down; lifted their legs and bums and arms; got it right and wrong; were leaden and elegant and touching. Despite the group choreography it was impossible not to focus on the struggles of individuals to keep up, and harder still not to cheer them on. As Catherine Wood, one of the curators of the event (the other is Kathy Noble) observed, it was like watching people learning a language – full of hesitations, false starts and flashes of bravery. The result was a performance of clumsy, compelling beauty that was as much about possibility as actuality. It made me realize how little we normally exploit the potential of our bodies. (Which is not to say these plain movements don't possess their own idiosyncratic grace and dignity – of course they do. But there's so much more they're capable of.) This was emphasized when the trained dancers came on; weaving in and out of the untrained dancers, they were like Lamborghini's to the untrained dancers' family sedans.

Fully in the swing now, the company returned alone for the next number, which was performed to the lush, bleak, romantic Bowie track 'Sweet Thing' ('If you want it, boys, get it here, thing / Cause hope, boys, is a cheap thing, cheap thing.). Spot-lit dancers on two bars at either end of the floor moved slowly and sensuously; their movements building up to long, remarkably fast sprints through this immense space. (How did they not slip? How did they stop?) Once again I was reminded: this is what bodies can do – spin, float, invert, co-ordinate, fracture; move collectively in ways that are achingly expressive about isolation. Then the light turned blood-red, the song stopped and the untrained dancers came back to a reprise of 'It's No Game'. It was euphoric and I didn't want it to stop. I can't wait for next June.

Michael Clark has worked with so many artists, musicians, dancer and designers (from Leigh Bowery and Sarah Lucas to Hussein Chalayan, Charles Atlas, The Fall, Bowie et al), has been so influential, and, it must be said, so loved for almost 30 years (I wrote about him 11 years ago) that it's impossible to do him justice, obviously, in this brief blog. However, suffice to say that YouTube links were flying back and forth between me and my friends after the Turbine Hall performance. Here, though, from David Company, was my favourite reminiscence – 'Here's Michael Clark in the 1984/5 video for Scritti Politti's 'Wood Beez':

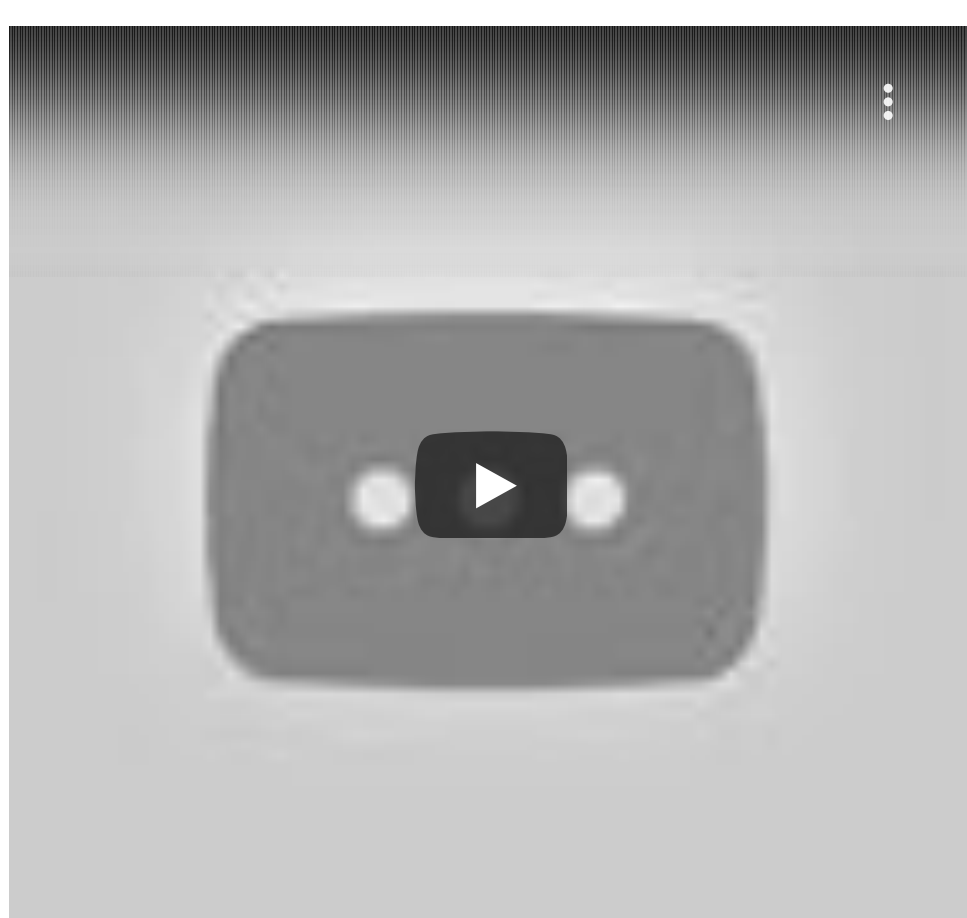


Green Gartside, the clever-pretty white boy primped-up like Princess Diana, 'praying like Aretha Franklin', black-power saluting, and singing 'There's nothing I wouldn't be / Oh that's the gift of / Schizo'. All the while Clark improvises those stop-go, fast-slow, backwards-forwards moves to rhythms slinked out by New York's best sessioneers. Quite deliriously brilliant. In 1984 I was totally bored and not sure what to do with my life. Seeing this video and buying the album *Cupid & Psyche* really woke me up to something. While I was still trying to figure out what it was, Clark, had moved onto a collaboration with The Fall.

Here he is with them:



There's not much of Clark's more recent work online but here's an excerpt of *Hail the New Puritan* – shot at Chisenhale Gallery by Charles Atlas:

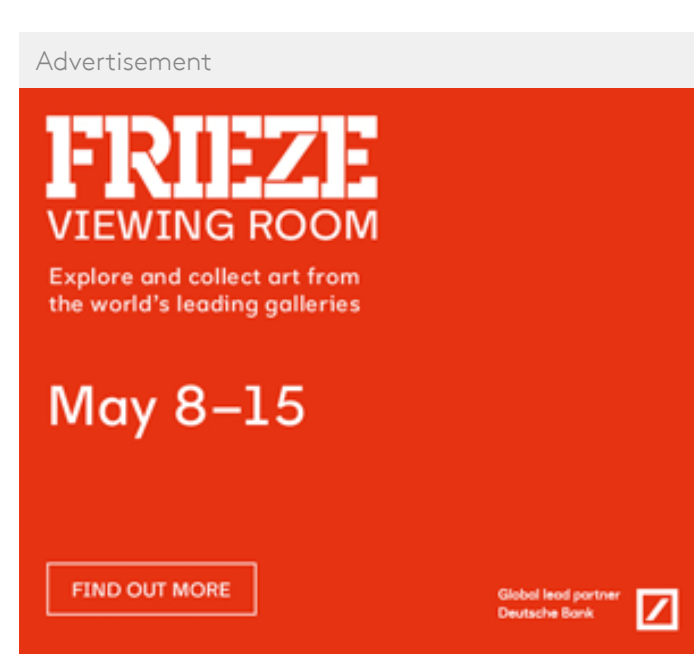


There is a video of the Turbine Hall on [Facebook](#), but let me know if any others are posted elsewhere!

JENNIFER HIGGIE

Jennifer Higgie is editor-at-large of *frieze*, based in London, UK. She is the host of *frieze*'s first podcast, *Bow Down: Women in Art History*. Her book *The Mirror and the Palette* is forthcoming from Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

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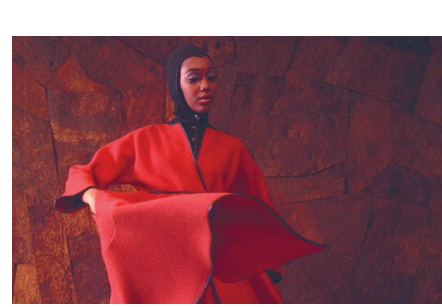


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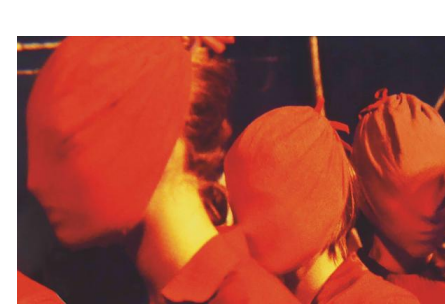
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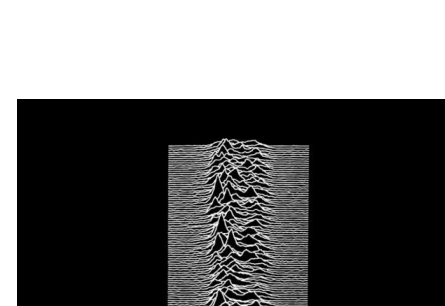
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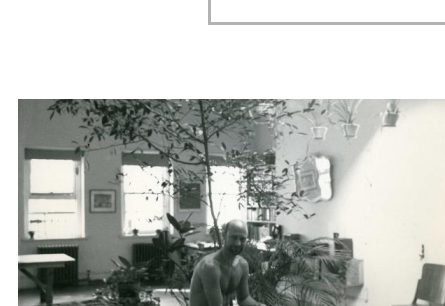
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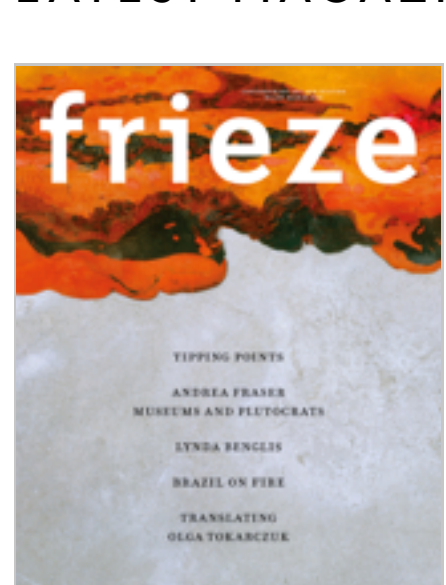


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