

Experiments in epiphany



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Against the backdrop of a blank white studio wall an actress composes herself, staring straight into the lens of the camera while invisible bodies move across the room and settle. All that can be heard is the hiss of the microphone, the murmur of hushed voices and the faint sound of receding footsteps. As soon as there is quiet, the actress opens her mouth to speak.

I Remember All by Maeve Rendle was inspired by an extract from Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*. The extract is from a play within the play written by the central character Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplyov. Tired of the status quo in modern theatre, Konstantin's experimental new work is performed to friends and family against the backdrop of a misty lake at dusk, using the natural landscape and elemental conditions with limited special effects.

In Konstantin's play, aspiring young actress Nina plays the Soul of the World, a mythical character whose adversary, the Devil, prevents any new life from springing forth. Nina is in awe of the theatrical establishment, represented in the scene by Konstantin's mother, herself a famous actress, and the feted novelist Trigorin. Whether a result of stage fright or poor acting skills, Nina rushes through an epic monologue describing the succession of barren millennia that will pass before spirit and matter unite in wondrous harmony.

In a conversation about *I Remember All*, Maeve Rendle recalls the moment where, in a recent stage version of *The Seagull*, she waited for Nina's monologue with baited breath only to find that it was rattled off in a hurry, its allegorical power wasted. In print, the monologue tears itself off the page. On stage, it seems to be a device to reveal Konstantin's artistic heroism, Nina's naivety and the dismissive attitude of an impervious audience. In a discussion at The International 3 last year, Maeve Rendle described the moments of epiphany that catalyse her work. Whether arising in the process of reading a novel, seeing a play, or through some other lived experience, a moment of involuntary recognition signals to the artist that something requires attention. Her initial task, she suggests, is to extend the moment in time and space so that it can be properly explored.

I Remember All stretches Chekhov's text out by putting it on repeat in the mouth of Scottish actress Nicola Ferguson who, in a sense, plays both Nina and the Soul of the World, creating layer upon layer of interpretation and performance that echoes the repeating, mutating cycle of life described in the text. As Nicola attempts to deliver her looping monologue a second time, a chorus of mezzo-sopranos launch into the familiar but unexpected backing melody of Lou's Reed's *Walk on the Wild Side*. What results is one of those game-changing moments in art when two things you never imagined together are now fused into an indivisible new whole.

Nicola's performance, and therefore the meaning of the text, shifts with each new repetition of the fragmented script. At times provoked, at times carried along on a wave of voices, the actress is defiant and then resigned, energised and then exhausted. *I Remember All* creates a natural symphony where the opera singers instinctively change their power and pitch in relation to the actress's delivery, and the work becomes a symbiosis of two previously unimaginable halves.

This text has been commissioned by The International 3 to mark the first public performance of *I Remember All* by Maeve Rendle at The Harris Museum & Art Gallery on Wednesday 5 April 2017. The event is part of The Harris Museum & Art Gallery's *Dance First, Think Later* programme of contemporary art curated by Clarissa Corfe and supported by Arts Council England, Friends of the Harris, Lancashire County Council, Foyle Foundation, Garfield Weston Foundation, Granada Foundation and Brian Mercer Charitable Trust.

In Maeve Rendle's practice, each moment of transcendence is a found object to be pulled apart and investigated. The artist instinctively creates a new set of conditions – a durational experiment – in which to turn the moment over until something happens. The artist has said that she avoids over-thinking so as not to stifle the intrinsic potential of material. Like Konstantin, she uses only what is necessary to support a moment of heightened consciousness. Once all found material, text or otherwise, has been broken down into its constituent parts, the artist reassembles these elements within new structures, or according to new rules, to draw our attention to the peculiarities of human experience.

Instructions to performers are just enough to allow the work to evolve or often, as in the case of *Mabel* (2013), provide an impossible moving target. In this earlier work, a concert pianist listens to a Dictaphone recording of the soundtrack from Cassavetes' *A Woman Under the Influence* until she is able to work out the melody. With repeat rewinding and re-playing, the Dictaphone creeps out of key, distorting the music and rendering the task impossible. Undeterred, the pianist drags the melody up a key and unwittingly brings about a paradigm shift where Mabel's drunken, melancholy earworm becomes a rousing piano bar tune.

In the making of *I Remember All*, although certain parameters were established, such as the instruction to Nicola to stare into the lens of the camera and keep going whatever happened, nothing was rehearsed in order to let things unravel in their own way. In pitching Lou Reed's backing melody against Chekhov's epic monologue, the artist creates new dramatic tension which grips you in a continuous present. The viewer, witnessing the actress's frustration and determination, is on an emotional rollercoaster that is in perfect synchrony with her own experience. In an unexpected twist, the essential power of the text is restored and the actress embodies the World Spirit, who is as harried and weary in Chekhov's text as the actress is in the artist's studio.

The magical effect of these pitfalls and happy accidents is that we witness something in the performance that is unperformed and utterly human. In *I Remember All*, the actress's cheeks redden with real effort. Her staring eyes fill with real tears. In *Mabel*, although the pianist is almost completely out of shot, we hear her play, stop and re-wind the Dictaphone. Somehow, we hear her listening. Not only that, her determined effort to make sense of the shifting score seems to mimic the disjuncture between Mabel's inner life and the world around her. Like much of the artist's output, *Mabel* and *I Remember All* demonstrate a virtuosic ability to work with the idiosyncratic medium of the human being to successfully convey the complexity of human experience.

Maeve attributes her reluctance to leave too great a mark on the work to a desire to permit it a life of its own. She described the early paintings she made as a Foundation student and the realisation that she was becoming competent at applying diffused paint to canvas to create a perfectly balanced composition. Although painting and photography have been fruitful media for the artist, it seems their fixedness prompted her to turn to the ephemeral, durational qualities of film and performance.

If she is wary of being too much in control, she put it to mesmerising effect in the making of her first moving image work *La Berma's Voice* (2008). Her starting point was Proust's account of seeing a performer so magnificent that she disappears from view and becomes Phèdre. In *La Berma's Voice*, a recording of a pianist rehearsing is edited to create the illusion of a body that has merged with its instrument. Perhaps, in contrast with *Mabel* or *I Remember All*, the artist was uncomfortable in taking control of the material after the fact, just as she was uneasy with becoming too expert at applying paint to canvas.

The artist has said that all the work she can make already exists within her, that her task is to arrange or re-arrange things to bring it into being. Her aim is to achieve that delicate balance of control and chance which allows something unexpected and unnameable to emerge. Perhaps all art is a balance of invention and naturally-occurring phenomena, but it takes an extraordinary artist to evoke lived experience with such grace.

Amy Botfield

Maeve Rendle is a British artist based in Preston, Lancashire. Recent projects include solo exhibitions *Gabriel's Gretta*, *Gretta's Gabriel* at The International 3, Salford and *Unframe* at the Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool, group exhibitions *New and recent acquisitions for the Grundy Collection*, Grundy Art Gallery, *Die Dritte Hand* Last Exit Painting, Salon Dahlmann, Berlin, Innsbruck International Festival of the Arts and *The Way We Do Art Now*, Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin and performances at Manchester City Art Gallery, Manchester Contemporary, Poppositions Brussels and London Art Fair. She is the recipient of a University of Central Lancashire research grant and Arts Council England Artists' International Development Fund grant, which supported the research and development of *I Remember All*. She was nominated for the Paul Hamlyn Foundation Award for Visual Arts in 2014 and for the Northern Art Prize in 2008. Maeve Rendle is represented by The International 3. For further information please contact Paulette Terry Brien at ptb@international3.com or visit www.international3.com

Amy Botfield works in the visual arts team at Arts Council England and is a writer, editor and curator. Recent projects include curating the group exhibition *Every bird brings a different melody to the garden* with artist Robert Dowling, *Suppono Subpono – Fish Slides* – a text on the work of David Osbaldeston & Joe Devlin and Lawrence Leaman, editorial work on artist books by Lindsay Seers and Jordan Baseman and writing on acclaimed sculptor, poet and activist Jimmie Durham for *The New Décor* at the Hayward Gallery.

La Berma's Voice was commissioned by the Royal Northern College of Music and first shown at the Whitworth Art Gallery in 2008. *Mabel* was first shown in *Every bird brings a different melody to the garden* in 2013.

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