



Authenticity is a Feeling

Jacob Wren looks back on where it all started

I'm trying to remember but I remember almost nothing, though it was one of the most important first meetings of my life. The way Sylvie was talking about art – I was listening, trying to follow, she had so many strong opinions and with each one I thought, or had to ask myself: this is something new, this is something I haven't heard before, or is it. I remember how many times I had been told, as a critique of my young work, that everything had been done, that there was nothing new under the sun, and if I thought I was doing something new, which I did (or maybe I didn't but certainly had the desire to create something I'd never seen before)...but if I thought I was doing something new then I was most likely wrong. Talking to Sylvie was the first time I'd heard so many ideas about theatre and performance that weren't instantly recognizable, that I couldn't immediately place. I was also having difficulty understanding her Québécois accent.

Much later, Sylvie told me that the first time she saw my work she was really not sure it was good. But as she was about to dismiss it, she thought of an observation she'd often had about presenters: that when there was something new in art, when they saw something that might be truly new, they often didn't like it at first. They would dismiss it, using an always similar series of arguments: that we had all done stuff like that, all tried our hand at failed experiments when we were younger (or that our youthful experiments were better). That it was amateur, not professional, too chaotic. That it looks like things that were done in the sixties, seventies, and eighties, and those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it. That the artists don't know what they're doing. That of course it's important for art to be provocative, it's important be provoked, but this work isn't really doing that, fails to provoke them enough. That they of course like to be disturbed, but this work isn't really all that disturbing. And yet they would make all of these points with a lot of anger in their voices, with a strong surge of frustration. Saying that the work makes no impression on them but sounding angry and upset as they said it. Sylvie found herself thinking some or all of these things about "The Deafening Noise of Tupperware", and therefore wondered if she was seeing something that was in fact new.

It is flattering to my artistic ego to think I was, or am, doing something new. When I was starting out that was still definitely my overwhelming goal, and in many ways it still is, though it is now a goal I treat with the utmost suspicion. The idea of an avant-garde, of a modernist break, now seems to me connected to notions of progress that from, for example, an environmental perspective, are extremely misguided, perhaps even suicidal. I now also see there is something settler colonialist about it all, about saying this is new territory and, in doing so, implicitly erasing everything already there. Things do not move only forward. They go in circles, like the seasons. In art, when you feel you have made a breakthrough, when you feel you are making something new, you are most likely also coming around again to things that have been done before. At the same time, one cannot step in the same river twice, and

doing something that has been done before, but doing it now, with a different emphasis, in a different historical moment, with somewhat different questions, assumptions, desires, and hopes – can also (in some sense) be said to be new. Of course, capitalism thrives on novelty – the bright sticker saying "New and Improved" – and I continue to have such a strong desire to be and become anticapitalist. Though I am also constantly aware of just how close innovation in art is to innovation in capitalism.

It all seems so strange to me – in one sense every time we begin a process I am aiming for a breakthrough, hoping to surprise myself and make something that doesn't particularly remind me of anything I've seen, or if it does remind me of something else, if it does remind me of some other work, or some particular aspect of my own previous work, I still want it to do so in a surprising way. And yet on the other hand I no longer believe in any of these things, they seem to me only like some youthful fantasies that my current understanding of the world can no longer support. What's important, it now seems to me, must be something else: to make work that doesn't feel empty, that raises striking questions, where the content and form are inseparable. But also to deal with the collaborative process in an honest and human way, and for the integrity with which the work has been made to come across as we perform it.

I am still working on all of the same artistic questions I started with, and often wonder if they are now only bad habits, or if the fact that I'm still working on them displays a certain degree of necessary commitment and fidelity to my earliest artistic impulses. At the same time, I'm also working on a more recent set of questions, many of which almost completely contradict the earlier ones, and most often I make no attempt to resolve these contradictions. Everything I do brings me into paradox, and the paradoxes only deepen over time.

Nonetheless, as a matter of principle, I remain fiercely against those who say that everything has been done, even if I am gradually becoming one of them. Because how do they – how do we – know. There is always a certain energy and curiosity in believing that anything might still happen. As well, saying things go in circles has a different emphasis than saying everything has been done, since every time you come around again, the things you do are both the same but also, somehow, desperately not the same at all. 📌

Excerpt from Jacob Wren's 2018 book "Authenticity Is a Feeling: My Life in PME-ART" (page 20–22).

PME-ART | Jacob Wren | Meet the Artist
Authenticity Was A Feeling: A conversation between
Claudia La Rocco and Jacob Wren | talk
 24.8., 20:30 | 60min | Online