

Interalia Magazine

An online magazine dedicated to the interactions between the arts, sciences and consciousness.

Mindfully Dizzy

Harold Offeh is an artist working in a range of media including performance, video, photography, learning and social arts practice. Offeh, often employs humour as a means to confront the viewer with historical narratives and contemporary culture and is interested in the space created by the inhabiting or embodying of history.

- [Harold Offeh \(https://www.interaliomag.org/author/hoffeh/\)](https://www.interaliomag.org/author/hoffeh/)
- November 2019
- in [Interviews \(https://www.interaliomag.org/category/interviews/\)](https://www.interaliomag.org/category/interviews/)
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Richard Bright: Can we begin by you saying something about your background?

Harold Offeh: I was born in Ghana, but grew up in North London. I am particularly interested in performance and education. A lot of my work and previous projects have explored how performativity and role-play can be used to explore history. I often draw from historical materials while making reference to contemporary culture through music, dance and other cultural sources. I studied art at the University of Brighton and then did an MA at the Royal College of Art. As well as being a practising artist, I also teach at Leeds Beckett University, Goldsmiths and the Royal College of Art.

RB: Have there been any particular influences to your art practice?

HO: I draw upon many influences in my practice. My influences will often emerge in relation to a specific project. Generally, I'm influenced by popular culture, with music and literature sometimes appearing as references within the work. Previous projects have used album cover artwork as the starting point for a series of photographs and performances. In 2008, I recreated an image of Grace Jones' *Island life* album cover. One of my earliest performances involved trying to hold a smile for as long as possible whilst recording myself listening to Nat King Cole's version of the song *Smile*. The video lasted for 37 minutes and overtime turned from a smile into a grimace. I've also been influenced by many contemporary artists including; Adrian Piper, Sonia Boyce and Ming Wong amongst others.



Croydon Plays Itself. Installation view, Turf Project, 2019
Photo by Tim Bowditch & Turf Projects



Croydon Plays Itself. Installation view, Turf Project, 2019
Photo by Tim Bowditch & Turf Projects

RB: What is the underlying focus of your work?

HO: The underlying focus of my work is definitely the process of learning. I try to map and share my experience of learning and engaging with different subjects. I'm interested in how we might learn to appreciate and understand our experience of places and histories through actual physical interactions. So, to give a clear example of this, earlier this year I was invited by a gallery called Turf Projects to respond to a number of objects in the Museum of Croydon's collection in South London. I chose five items to respond to from the collection. With each item I selected, I tried to think about connections with contemporary culture. One item was an image in a book by Victorian sexologist Havelock Ellis. Ellis who lived in Croydon, as well as being a pioneer in mapping human sexual behaviour and sexuality was also for a time, a eugenicist. I found an image in one of his books, of a prisoner who was photographed in a mirrored device that captured his head from multiple angles. This was an early device for profiling, which allowed authorities to ascertain criminal types and features. All of which we now know is totally spurious. Based on the historical image, I recreated the mirror as a sculpture within the gallery, audiences were invited to take selfies in the mirror thereby subverting its original purpose. I try to make things that are engaging and playful but also allow for questioning. And through the Havelock Ellis sculpture I wanted audiences to think about how photography is used and for what purpose. And fundamentally what it means to present an image or representation of oneself.



Havelock Mirror Documentation. 2019, Sculpture.
The Cambridge Show, 2019. Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge.
Courtesy Kettle's Yard. Photo: Stephen White



Havelock Mirror Documentation. 2019, Sculpture.
The Cambridge Show, 2019. Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge.
Courtesy Kettle's Yard. Photo: Stephen White

RB: You are taking part in the Science Gallery, London exhibition 'ON EDGE: LIVING IN AN AGE OF ANXIETY', with the work *Mindfully Dizzy*. Can you say something about this work?

HO: *Mindfully Dizzy*, the work I've created for the science gallery exhibition On Edge, emerges from a conversation I had with the exhibition curator Mette Kjærgaard Præst. The work explores contemporary readings of anxiety. I feel anxiety has become a buzzword, which is used to describe a collective societal malaise. It's become perhaps so overused that it's difficult to retain a sense of

its meaning. I decided to focus on two aspects of anxiety. Drawing on Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard's famous quote 'anxiety is the dizziness of freedom' I want to focus on the sensation of dizziness as a conceptual and physical manifestation of anxiety. There is something universal about the experience of dizziness, we can all identify with the experience of dizziness. Using Kierkegaard's quote, I love its implicit critique of freedom. It seems to suggest that liberty and freedom with the concurrent multiple choices and decisions that freedom gives us is conversely traumatising. This quote seems to speak to a very contemporary experience of capitalism.



Mindfully Dizzy, Science Gallery, London exhibition 'ON EDGE: LIVING IN AN AGE OF ANXIETY' 2019

I wanted to contrast this reading of dizziness with an assessment of mindfulness. Mindfulness is presented as a contemporary treatment for anxiety. It seeks to offer those who practice it the tools to deal with the anxieties and stresses of everyday life. While I think it does present some important practices that can help individuals, I also feel it inherently avoids tackling major social problems. Mindfulness, has become a corporate tool that allows institutions and organisations to shift emphasis on to the individual responsibilities. There is a complete negation of collective, social and corporate responsibility. Mindfulness teaches you how to individually cope with a difficult or problematic situation. This means the structural problems that may actually be the cause of your individual anxiety, such as: low pay, bad employment conditions, lack of job security or housing go unchallenged.

In the work in the exhibition these ideas are brought together through text, image and sound.



Mindfully Dizzy, Science Gallery, London exhibition 'ON EDGE: LIVING IN AN AGE OF ANXIETY' 2019

I've especially made a new lenticular print that is installed in the foyer of the Science Gallery. The print includes a series of wax rubbings that I made with a group of patients on the Croydon PICU Ward at the Royal Bethlem Hospital. Working with the charity Hospital Rooms, I did a workshop the group. I asked them to map different surfaces and textures in and around the ward. The activity was meant to be an aid to discussing their experience of the ward and their immediate environment. The patterns, which are based on surface rubbings of bricks, manhole covers and radiators have been layered and brought together. In the lenticular print design, the text 'don't look down you'll get dizzy' it is printed over the top of the patterns. The work is installed in the Science gallery, as viewers move around the image, it shifts and different elements of the text and patterns emerge and disappear.

Upstairs, in the main gallery, I've made an audio work which uses a sample from jazz musician, Dizzy Gillespie's track, *A Dizzy Atmosphere*. Over the top of this track, voices can be heard reading various definitions of the words 'dizzy' and 'mindfulness'.

RB: In terms of the viewer, what are you trying to communicate in this exhibition?

HO: With the work *Mindfully Dizzy*, I'm trying to communicate the complexity of the ideas and practices that are trying to define our experiences of anxiety. I try to pull together various references from lived experiences to philosophical positions to popular cultural mantras. These different readings and perspectives are brought together and I hope viewers can navigate these references. The work is designed to be playful, by using a lenticular print format. As a result the design is animated by the viewers movement. In this work, I want the viewer to physically shift and change

position in order to see the design and text appear and disappear. In many ways, it's quite a cheesy metaphor that supports the need to shift position and adopt new perspectives in order to gain a better understanding of a subject.



Selfie Choreography, Performance, Lost Senses, Guest Projects. 2017
Photo: Holly Revell and Lost Senses

RB: Can you say something about your work *Selfie Choreography* (2017)?

HO: *Selfie Choreography*, is a project I developed to think about and explore some of the wider implications of selfie culture. I was particularly interested in trying to embrace some of the actions and gestures that seem to result from people taking selfies. The project mostly exists as a workshop, participants are invited to use a selfie sticks to explore taking images of themselves and others. I take them through some exercises and give them a crash course in how to use the selfie stick. For some, people they are deeply unfashionable and annoying, so they don't actually know how to use

them. For me the selfie stick has become a tool to think about how using ourselves and our bodies you might create new and exciting images. I should be clear I try to steer participants clear of conventional selfie images. I suggest people put the selfie stick through their sleeves and take a photo. The project is really about subverting this overused approach to photography, by asking how can you see yourself differently?

RB: How important is humour in your work and what role does it play?

HO: Humour is important in my work. I'm always looking for ways to engage audiences. I think lots of people have prejudices and barriers to engaging with art. People are often worried about whether they will understand or get what the artwork is about. For me, using humour can have to disarm intimidation and anxiety people feel. I also use humour to deliberately address often difficult or socially awkward topics. I feel it's often a good strategy to get people to engage with subjects which in other situations they might choose to avoid



Choreograph Me, Performance, Roskilde, Denmark 2016. Photo Credit Joe Kniesek

RB: Your project *Choreograph Me at An Age of Our Own Making* invites audiences to use your body as a material for the production of a series of performative gestures. Can you say more about this?

HO: *Choreograph Me* is a project where I invite audiences to give me instructions. I'm particularly interested in relationship between performer and audience and how this might be subverted and played with. So, in offering myself as material for the audience to choreograph and shape I'm inviting them to author the work. But with the invitation comes a set of challenges the audience have to decide how they want to work with me. Do they want to work together or individually? The dynamics of the work can shift quite wildly, from me performing for a large crowd to the whole audience collectively performing. Again, I'm interested in those shifts. Looking at this project for me, the success of the work means, I am the audience and audience on the performers.



Choreograph Me, Performance, Roskilde, Denmark 2016. Photo Credit Joe Kniesek

RB: In your view, what are the lines that connect art and science?

HO: I think the outcomes of art and science can be very different. However, I think the practical processes can be quite similar. Central to both art and science is the desire to question and explore meaning in the world. Both are heavily dependent on research, testing, observing, experimentation, production and the presentation of results. Culturally, I think both are equally misunderstood and often face distrust and hostility. But you can't have one without the other, but art and science are essential to understanding of our lives and the world around us. I should be clear when I say art, I mean art in the broadest definition which for me includes most creative and cultural outputs: Music, theatre, dance and design etc. I often say to people, if you don't think art is important, try to imagine a world all society that has no art? The same of course goes for science.

RB: What other projects are you currently working on?

HO: I seem to be on roll with regards to working with science and arts collaborations. I'm currently developing a new commission for the Wellcome Collection. I'm exploring histories and examples of outbreaks of social joy and happiness in different societies. The starting point for this project has involved looking at images in the Wellcome Collections archive. I'm keen to explore how collective joy can and has been a radical agent of social change. I'm aiming to produce a large-scale video installation, which will be presented next spring in 2020.

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<http://haroldoffeh.com> (<http://haroldoffeh.com>)/

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About Harold Offeh

Avatar



Harold Offeh is an artist working in a range of media including performance, video, photography, learning and social arts practice. Offeh, often employs humour as a means to confront the viewer with historical narratives and contemporary culture and is interested in the space created by the inhabiting or embodying of history. He has exhibited widely in the UK and internationally including Tate Britain and Tate Modern, London, Studio Museum Harlem, USA, South London Gallery, London MAC VAL, Paris, France, Kulturhuset, Stockholm, Sweden and Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen, Denmark. In 2019, he had a solo exhibition at Turf Projects in London and was artist in residence and exhibited at the Contemporary Art Centre, Art Tower Mito, Japan. He studied Fine Art Critical Practice at The University of Brighton and MA Fine Art Photography at the Royal College of Art. He lives in Cambridge and works in London and Leeds, UK where he is currently a Reader in Fine Art at Leeds Beckett University and visiting tutor at the Royal College of Art and Goldsmiths in London. www.haroldoffeh.com [View all posts with Harold Offeh → \(https://www.interaliomag.org/author/hoffeh/\)](https://www.interaliomag.org/author/hoffeh/)
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