

Cécile B Evans – Futue Adaptions

26 November 2021 – 22 January 2022

**Growing Pains**

**Notations for an Adaptation of Giselle (welcome to whatever forever)**

*All successful life is*

*Adaptable,*

*Opportunistic,*

*Tenacious,*

*Interconnected,*

*and Fecund.*

*Understand this.*

*Use it.*

*Octavia E. Butler, Parable of the Sower*

*Future Adaptations* is Cécile B. Evans' second exhibition at Layr, Vienna. The exhibition brings together several stages from their ongoing body of work *A Future Adaptation*, about the struggle to adapt the Industrial Era ballet *Giselle* as a revolutionary eco-thriller while the modern is collapsing. The exhibition is composed of two major video installations (scenes from the ongoing adaptation) shown at altered scales, a film prop-stroke-prototype of a microbial fuel cell battery, and two collaged sketches of a future nomadic superstructure.

The largest (and smallest) scale work on display is *Notations for an Adaptation of Giselle (welcome to whatever forever)* (2020) a six-channel video installation that serves as the lynchpin which has occupied the artist's practice for the last several years. Focused on the crucial transition moment at the heart of the fable, *Notations* follows the process of adapting a centuries old ballet. Originally commissioned by the Centre Pompidou for the MOVE festival in October 2020, it is a work produced and performed at a confluence of crises, in a moment where grief and fear of the future have become the most reliable part of life. These crises have opened centuries old wounds created by a white supremacist patriarchy under capitalism and other destructive systems rooted in colonialism and harm. We are hurt, intergenerationally, systemically and individually, and as fissures in these systems get bigger, the calls for change are getting louder. Some yearn to return to normal, though it is clear that normal never was: it too was embedded in these rigorous, dissonant practices of inequity, binaries, extraction, and exhaustion. How can we adapt and move forward without reproducing violence? What choreographic notations can we write as we commit to living with and through change?

*Giselle* was first performed in the newly gas lit theatres of Paris in 1841, at a moment with striking parallels to our own uncertain times. It was a time of large, institutionalised capital flows, colonial industrialisation, mass migration, vast wealth and extreme poverty that set the stage for a backlash that would lead to growing nationalism and brewing revolution. *Giselle* is by no means an anti-capitalist ballet, but an archetypal story of conflict and transgression with themes of class and displacement, that blends the real and the supernatural. *Giselle* is a mercurial character, mutating from early innocence to despair, dancing herself to death, then shifting into otherworldliness as an adopted member of the Wilis –a group of spirits of scorned women, who perform death dances. Through the anti-patriarchal community of the Wilis, we recognise what it means to stand on the margins of society. Today I associate the Wilis with those identities that have been forged in the crucibles of difference, those who are othered and excluded, categorised as poor, migrant, gender non-conforming, queer or disabled, those who know that survival cannot be taught in institutions, but embodied through the lived experience of holding those differences and learning to make them powers.

In Evans' *Notations(...)*, *Giselle* co-founds a micronation called Carcinollex, creating a cooperative community in a rural village near the failing nation state of Venetox which faces an energy crisis and ecological collapse. The Carcinollox community work together to reset society, to be in right relationship to nature, running *Giselle*'s family distillery using an indigenous super-bacteria to produce barley wine. The community comes under threat by Venetox, whose scientists recognise that the Carcinollex bacteria serves a role of providing boundless electricity through the conversion of energy derived from microbial decomposition. Venetox sends an envoy in the form of Albrecht, who may or may not be artificially intelligent, who *Giselle* falls in love with, thereby exposing her community to enemy surveillance. Venetox then implements a violent siege on the small community, which triggers a resistance and mutation in the bacteria. *Giselle*, in this version, dies not just because of a broken heart but because she has compromised a way of life.

From the beginning of the performance, which takes place across six screens, we witness the complex nature of a community in struggle. *Giselle* and Leonida (Alexandrina Hemsley and Lily McMenamy), who are resisting the siege of their distillery and extraction of their indigenous bacteria, are introduced to the audience with their friendship in a state of discord. It is only when Myrthe (Queen of the Wilis, performed by Sakeema Crook) arrives that a state of transition begins. Myrthe comes from an even more distant future, as a manifestation of 'microbes and stardust shimmering' provoked through the destabilization of the bacteria's metabolic processes. Dancing to a haunting rendition of Song to the Siren, performed by Ms Carrie Stacks (arranged by the score's musician Hinako Omori, composer Paul Purgas, and sound designer Joe Namy), Myrthe is mesmerizing. Under a falling moon (and later a rising sun), we are invited into Myrthe's vital instability, a representation of another time and space to where *Giselle* and Leonida eventually transition to, summoned through another kind of death dance ritual. Myrthe is the embodiment of a realm of ultra-mutability, her image in a notable lack of stasis that affirms the power of an unfixed identity and the possibility of a constantly shifting idea of community and time. In their dance amongst the shimmer of mutation that is Myrthe, decomposing the violence enacted on Carcinollex, we are shown that change is the path to liberating a community in resistance. The path is left open to possibilities, letting things emerge rather than closing things down with a clear outcome.

It is both in the narrative and characters of *Notations* that we see 'intentional adaptation' in practice. adrienne maree brown (who has been pivotal in reframing Octavia Butler's work as political texts) speaks of intentional adaptation as "the orientation and movement towards life, towards longing, is made graceful in the act of adaptation. This is the process of changing while staying in touch with our deeper purpose and longing." How can we live in change with collective purpose? How can we work in ways that actually disintegrate the violent systems of oppression we are escaping? How do we practice the vulnerability and openness needed to break calcified cultures of harm that are embedded in the institutions we occupy? What we experience in *Notations* is an attempt to embody in the process and form of the work, that intentional adaptation is a non-linear and collective process.

This complex adaptation functions on a formal level, a vulnerability embedded in the relationship between recorded sound, live streamed CCTV performances, and both recorded and found footage across multiple video mediums, transmitted via a networked program developed so that each element is dependent on and working together. Moving across the multiple screens embedded in scaffold stations, these glitching, shifting, multiplying bodies are not closed loops. We follow their movements; enter their rhythms, as the characters dance between screens, timelines and keyed sets. In the complete and chaotic range of materials and mediums employed, we see that the community of *Notations* does not propose the shedding of difference, or the pretense that these differences do not exist, but embodies a folding in of possibility and vulnerability. The choreography of the dancers, but also that of the technology and systems that hold *Notations* as a live performance, is about interconnection, interdependence and risk. It makes plain the ways in which we co-create one another.

*Notations* is also represented in the space as in a miniaturized form that contains the entirety of the work, condensed into a scale-model using construction and display methods that have appeared throughout Evans' exhibitions. The scale-model is accompanied by instructions, specifications and media that permit the work to be expanded into a full-scale installation for public display and viewing. All of the generic material components required to stage the work at exhibition scale, including monitors and scaffolding, can be obtained as-needed on occasions when the work is being exhibited. In this, Evans lays their own process bare as they attempt to find more sustainable and adaptable ways of working.

With *Future Adaptation of Giselle (Willis' battle of whatever forever)* (2021)- here shown in medium scale- Evans' shifting process is further revealed. Produced during lockdown and working with the Ballet National de Marseille, we have a *Future Adaptation* presenting multiple realities including direct references to Evans' mutating working practices. Asking questions of how a radical politics of collaboration and openness can be embedded within wider capitalist structures of the art world, and everyday existence, we witness a family comprised of a plant, a camera, and a baby trying to adapt and respond to the hard edges of the unsustainability of capitalism whilst trying to practice living otherwise. Referencing the moment in the original ballet, where Giselle transitions to the underworld, we witness the moment a community of performers/characters/and the artist's family rally together to fight for their combined futures.

*Future Adaptations* is an offering, a choreographed death dance in narrative and form. Through intentional adaptation the process of this work is a commitment to its own themes of transparency and mutability, conscious of our changing identities as societies, communities and as artists.

In practice, we find ourselves within the growing pains of working within, whilst trying to reckon with, the violence of dominant white supremacist, capitalist and unidirectional systems that will eventually result in our extinction. These growing pains are felt the most when we try to make work that holds space for change, within institutions and working processes that are built on supremacist ideology, which is competitive, entitled and violent.

Nested in the different works across the gallery are microbial fuel cells surrounded by plants set in cases, acting as both set props and prototypes of power panels holding the immortal super bacteria as it produces energy through decomposition. Two collages, *Nomadic Structure for a Future Adaptation (Giselle's House)* and *Nomadic Structure for a Future Adaptation (Exploded [Giselle's House])*, produced especially for the exhibition depict sketches for a future nomadic structure that will further deepen this sense of temporality. Each of these works are containers for cells and ideas in a constant state of both living and dying. What does it mean to carry death into new life? Can we hold an intention to adapt and decompose violence within ourselves before we decompose it in the world? A commitment like this iterates through a deep desire to adapt our ways of working and being through intention, action and practice. In this moment we are collectively grieving; grieving the loss of our ecosystems, people, and a world we once thought we were part of. Giselle says, "the revolution is uncertainty, not me". To live in adaptation, we must dance the way Giselle and Leonida dance with Myrthe into the mutating, shimmering energy of change and battle alongside the Willis towards a whatever forever of no linear fucking time. We don't know what is coming, we don't know what is happening and we don't know what is next.

Text adapted from the original essay by Amal Khalaf commissioned by the Centre Pompidou for the MOVE festival. Original French version can be found [here](#).