

JOSHUA

LEON

AT

CHISENHOLE

23 FEBRUARY–21 APRIL 2024

# JOSHUA LEON

## 'THE MISSING O AND E'

*The Missing O and E* is a new commission and first solo presentation by London-based artist, poet, and writer Joshua Leon. Leon's text-led processes produce artworks and exhibitions that bind memoir with historical research. Spanning sculpture and sound, the installation traces a collapsing of personal memory and historical record to offer a nuanced exploration of Jewish life.

Three letters – C H N – are visible from nearby on Grove Road. Inlaid into the side of Chisenhale's building in c. 1940, Leon's exhibition tends to this sign, to reveal an otherwise ellipsed history. Two, possibly missing, letters – an O and an E – have been stained into the gallery's windows. Like a form of annotation, the last name of the building's former owner, Morris Cohen, is restored onto the building's surface, returning a forgotten history to the site.

Interpreting instances in which one's name might be erased, transformed, or deliberately withdrawn, *The Missing O and E* recognises misnomers, codes, and ellipses as both socially imposed and politically intentional. Leon works with glass and veneer – the latter evoking the building's history as a former veneer factory – to materially explore appearance and disappearance; asking what is at stake when a person, community, or history is hidden or made visible? Nine wall-mounted frames, constructed using veneer salvaged from the building's manufacturing years, ask *what's in a name?* Viewed through yellow stained glass, each contains a music programme detailing the gradual alteration of Leon's own grandfather's name – at times imposed, at others desired.

A single speaker emits the second violin part from Edward Elgar's *Enigma Variations*, a composition played by Leon's grandfather while in the London Philharmonic Orchestra in the 1950s. By isolating a single instrument, Leon amplifies one voice, otherwise concealed in the cacophony of the orchestra. Two 'f' shaped veneered benches evoke the holes on a violin; amplification devices that become support structures for listening. As the piece oscillates between sound and silence, visitors are invited to listen to which voices can and cannot be heard.

Joshua Leon's exhibition commences Chisenhale Gallery's Commissions Programme for 2024–25, which includes exhibitions by Rory Pilgrim, Sinnikiwe Buhlungu, and Bruno Zhu. Invitations to witness, gather, and gossip run through the programme, with material and temporal interrogations, built environments, and unscripted chance encounters pushing the boundaries of exhibition making.

# CHISENHALE BOOKS

**Joshua Leon**

*The Process*

Edited by Olivia Aherne and Amy Jones

Designed by Boris Meister

Texts by Olivia Aherne, Amy Jones, Joshua Leon and Zoé Whitley

**£16**

Leon's first book accompanies his new commission. The outcome of two years of writing and documenting his own research processes, the publication comprises original writing by Leon alongside archival material. Tracing history, memory, and self across time and site, the text traverses locations including a synagogue in Bordeaux, an American bar in Vienna, and a veneer factory in London's East End to reflect on the experiences of the Jewish diaspora in Europe and contemporary Jewish life.

In addition to Leon's text, the publication includes an essay by the exhibition's curators Olivia Aherne and Amy Jones and an afterword by Zoé Whitley. *The Process* is co-published by Chisenhale Gallery and Mousse Publishing.

## BIOGRAPHY

Joshua Leon is a writer, poet, and artist based in London. Selected exhibitions include: *Itinéraire Fantôme*, CAPC, Bordeaux; *Presque Partout*, 49 Nord 6 Est – Frac Lorraine, Metz (both forthcoming 2024); *THE ARCHIVE AS ...*, Kunstverein München, Munich (2023); *Revision*, PEER Gallery, London (2022); *POST*, Barbican, London (2022); *Expo en boîte*, 49 Nord 6 Est – Frac Lorraine, Metz (2022); *Governmental Fires*, FUTURA, Prague (2021); *Loose Routes Along the Familiar*, Madonna del Pozzo, Spoleto (2021); *Attendance(s) Close to the Close*, Daily Practice, Rotterdam (2020); *The Same Tendency*, Summer Hall Place, Edinburgh (2019); and *Everything Not Saved Will Be Lost*, Berlin Biennale, Berlin (2018).

# LIST OF WORKS

## Exterior

Visible from the canal bridge on Grove Road:

*C[ ]H[ ]N*

c. 1940

Inlaid brick

736 x 128 cm

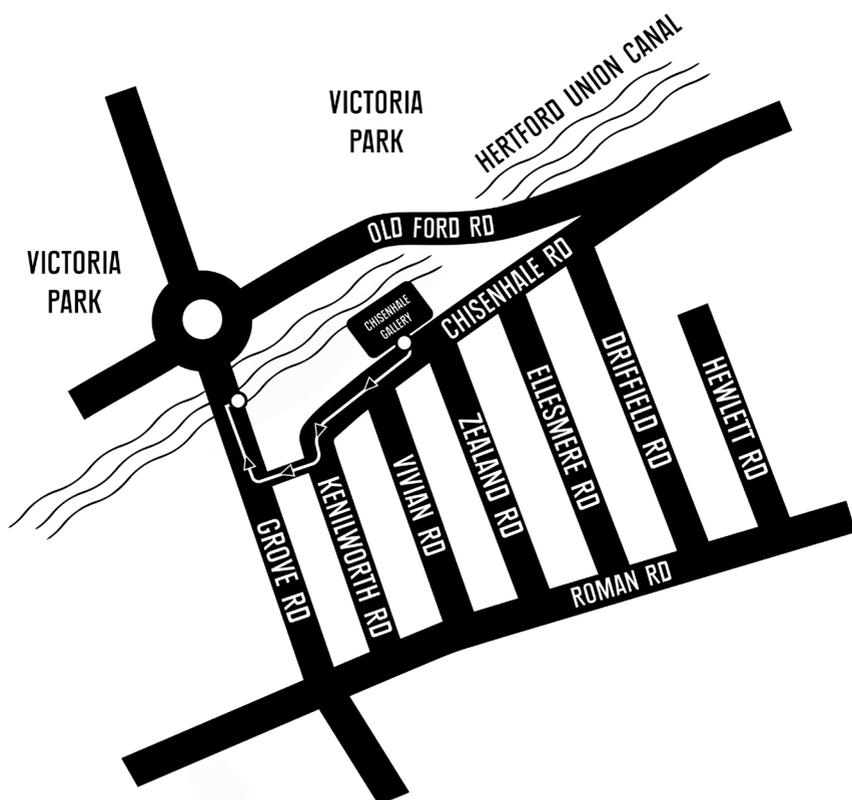
To the left of Chisenhale Gallery's entrance:

*"The facts"*

c. 1990

Bow Heritage Trail plaque

55 x 35 cm



## Gallery

### All works 2024

#### *[ ] O [ ] E [ ]*

21 Stained glass panes

31 x 50 cm each

#### *Kurt, Ken, Curtis, David (what's in a name?)*

9 Giclée prints, veneer, beech, stained glass

34.5 x 2 x 27 cm each

#### *A portrait in f I*

Antique rosewood veneer, sapele veneer, MDF, birch

257 x 60 x 47 cm

#### *A portrait in f II*

Antique rosewood veneer, sapele veneer, MDF, birch

257 x 60 x 47 cm

#### *Enigma Variations*

Single-channel audio installation, 36 minutes, 36 seconds, begins on the hour

Violin, silence, 8020 genelec speaker, speaker stand, Focusrite interface

Original composition by Edward Elgar (1899), performed by Athena

Octavia

## TALKS AND EVENTS

As part of the commissioning process, a programme of talks and events has been devised in collaboration with Joshua Leon, spanning the duration of the exhibition.

### **Saturday 9 March, 11–11.30am**

A walkthrough of *The Missing O and E* with Assistant Curator Oscar Abdulla.

### **Wednesday 13 March, 7–9pm**

Joshua Leon and Abbas Zahedi facilitate an open conversation about artistic practice, an iteration of their collaborative project, Kounsel.

### **Tuesday, 26 March, 7–9pm**

Chisenhale Gallery alum Caragh Thuring joins Peer Sessions (artists Kate Pickering and Charlotte Warne Thomas), inviting you to share work-in-progress.

### **Wednesday 27 March, 7–8.30pm**

#### **Austrian Cultural Forum London, 28 Rutland Gate, London, SW7 1PQ**

An evening of music and poetry in partnership with Austrian Cultural Forum London.

### **Thursday 4 April, 7–9pm**

The launch of Leon's new publication, *The Process*. Featuring a conversation between Leon and the exhibition's curators Olivia Aherne and Amy Jones.

### **Thursday 18 April, 7–9pm**

Cultural historian Juliet Steyn responds to themes in *The Missing O and E*, followed by a conversation with Leon.

*All events are free to attend and open to all. To book, please visit our website or talk to a member of staff.*

*We are committed to ensuring our events are accessible for all. Please contact [mail@chisenhale.org.uk](mailto:mail@chisenhale.org.uk) to discuss any access needs. We will endeavour to meet all requests where possible. Please be advised that requests should be made two weeks in advance of the event.*

## CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: JOSHUA LEON

**Olivia Aherne:** *The title of your Chisenhale Gallery exhibition, The Missing O and E, refers to a sign on the exterior of Chisenhale's building. Can you introduce us to this piece of text, the history it holds, and its significance in the commission?*

**Joshua Leon:** The Chisenhale building was owned by a Jewish businessman called Morris Cohen. Sometime in the early 1940s he installed three letters – C H N – into the brickwork on the side of the building, to signpost his businesses, Morris Cohen Veneers and C H N Veneers. People who see the letters from the canal side might imagine that it's a shortening of 'Chisenhale,' the name of the street the building is located on, rather than referring to its previous historical owner.

*The Missing O and E* refers to the two letters that I believe are missing from this textual inscription. They fill in a name that may or may not have ever been there. It's a way of thinking about what's missing in that sign, as well as functioning as a metaphor for what's missing elsewhere in other spaces, documents, or in books. It indicates the role of language in shaping such erasures. Throughout my research, I wondered if the C H N was an intentional play on words or letters by Morris Cohen. Did he leave those two letters out as a way to hide something about his identity? Cohen is a blatantly Jewish surname – was he uncomfortable being identifiable and recognisable in this way? The title indicates how those two missing letters can unfold a history. It is an absence that performs in relation to notions of legibility, hiding, and assimilation.

**Amy Jones:** *And some of those questions speak to the particular moment in history when the factory was active...*

**JL:** Yes. A name identifies a person, and Cohen lived during a moment in history when being identifiably Jewish was not a safe position. Cohen's factory operated during World War II, during the rise of fascism in Europe, a time that saw the return of the rhetoric that Jews were the evil of the world, a long-standing sentiment that had been building, even in the early 20th century.

Those questions also extend to a wider exploration of the social history of Jewish lives present in the exhibition. One that encompasses individual subjects like Morris Cohen, the Chisenhale building, and also my own grandfather. They are subjects that I find to be either hiding or not quite revealing the totality of themselves – which prompts me to question: what is being withheld? Why is it being withheld? Does it need to remain withheld? And is it a code that I can decipher? There's no attempt at totality in any of the work; I am never trying to answer these questions in full. My desire is to allow for my subjectivity to act as a key for unlocking, or loosening bits of information that indicate the potential held in these codifications and concealments, and to readdress histories in that manner.

Encountering the sign was a serendipitous moment in relation to what was already happening in my research and practice, which was – for lack of better description – fumbling and ruffling through archives, and looking for these lesser-known Jewish histories, the erasures or the overlooked, and developing affinities for them. I knew I wanted to pursue a deeper understanding of the history of the site and orient my body in relation to that history.

**OA:** *In the exhibition, you explore these specific histories, positions, and experiences by employing a range of different materials...*

**JL:** I think of materials as holding history. Rather than simply looking at the thing that's being represented, I want to deal with the thing that's holding that representation together and the ways in which social histories interact with materials.

Veneer appears throughout the exhibition. It's another reference to the history of the Chisenhale building that was purpose-built to manufacture veneer, but also to a history of furniture produced predominantly by Jewish émigré in the East End of London throughout the 1900s. I wanted to think about how veneer might hold and return us to some of that history. This engagement with material becomes another way of insisting that we don't overlook the lesser-seen or unseen things that are holding something inside of them. In the case of veneer, it's no longer used or produced in the same way. That means there is also a question of it fading out of relevance, and with that, a forgetting of history. The way I engage materials is similar to an act of remembrance.

In the exhibition, I employ different types of veneer including some that were produced during the years when the building was active as a veneer manufacturer. They're used to create devices for framing and devices for sitting – invitations to look more closely and to spend time. There's also an element of warmth and tactility to the veneer. It's about getting close to and feeling something. I'm making a constant approach, getting as close to materials and subjects as possible.

**AJ:** *Glass is a material that recurs in your practice and it reappears in your Chisenhale Gallery commission in [ ] O [ ] E [ ], through your engagement with the gallery windows, as well as in your choice of materials for the framed works Kurt, Ken, Curtis, David (what's in a name?). Can you speak about your ongoing interest in glass?*

**JL:** There's a moment in *The Process*, the book I produced alongside the exhibition, where I talk about the things you carry with you, one's luggage. Glass is a material that I've been working and thinking through for quite some time because of its personal relevance to me, and its wider historical relevance to violence against Jews, in particular Kristallnacht [the Night of Broken Glass]. My grandparents came to the UK on the Kindertransport as a result of Kristallnacht in 1938. If you consider that displacement within a larger social history, you encounter an engagement with the abuse of glass in relation to Jews who are just trying to get on with their daily lives, through their shops, their synagogues, and other interactions. For me, glass has this ongoing relationship to Jewish shop owners and their desire to be visible as part of the high street, to contribute to a community. When I am working with glass I am thinking about its charge in relation to all of these overlapping histories, of violence, and sadness, but also of joy and the sociality of community.

Glass and veneer are materials that anyone could use, it just so happens that they have also been shaped by Jewish interactions or events that happened to Jews. I work with the idea that history remains in the body, as memory, and so materials – glass, veneer, as well as others, like music and food – are treated as bodies of knowledge. They are materials I possess within myself. They are part of my luggage.

**OA:** *All of the glass that appears in the exhibition has been stained yellow. It has both a material and metaphorical significance. Can you articulate your interest in the notion of the 'stain,' what it allows for, and the significance of the colour yellow?*

**JL:** The stain is a form of poetic and theoretical inversion. It develops out of a desire to invert a slur that Jews are 'a stain on society'. This interpretation is a development of the label *marrano*, which was a name given to crypto-Jews from the time of the Spanish Inquisition in 1492, after the decrees that prohibited them from practising Judaism and demanded either their conversion, exile, or death. It refers to these Jews as black pigs, heretics, and deviants. These Jews were forced to live in secrecy, practising their faith, culture, and traditions in the privacy of their homes while purporting to be Christian in daily life. You can also understand my own surname as a stain. 'Leon' was a form of branding from the Spanish government during the inquisition to mark the Jews who came from León. Nowadays, it appears as this wonderful heritage; it marks where we come from, so there's also an interesting thing there in the way its meaning has changed.

Similarly, when we think of stained glass, we think of it as a beautifying tool. However, 'stained' as an isolated word conjures something that's dirty or disgusting. I am focused on holding these tensions, walking that invisible line between joy and something more violent. It's similar to the way that I'm using veneer to talk about what's hidden underneath. The stain is a reference to the power of resistance found in the secrecy of the *marranos*, and is also a way of making fun of an antisemitic slur. The notion of the stain allows me to inscribe invisible layers (histories of subjugation, encoding, and culture) into the work. It's a play on language, but also a play on how you can embody positions that were used against you, to suppress or oppress you, and invert them. In inverting the stain, the slur, what I'm proposing is that I get to choose how I perceive myself. It's an act of sovereignty.

The choice of yellow is a slippage. As I developed the commission, I found personal moments and embodied feelings started to interact with my research, informing how I wanted to react to the space. That slippage happens in the yellow of the stained glass. It references a missing memory from my own life, an event I've been told about but can't remember myself: the day I saved my mum's life. When I try to recall that memory, all I see is the colour yellow.

**AJ:** *Your artistic practice is rooted in various forms of writing. You often use writing as part of your research process and you also write poetry, for example. All of the works in the exhibition have a relationship to text. Can you talk about how forms of language and annotation play out across space?*

**JL:** The first thing you learn at synagogue is: *God is the Word and the Word is God*. Language is understood as a fundamental way of reading the world. I don't think of myself as involved in religious practice, but it is relevant when thinking about how I approach my artistic practice and exhibition making through writing. As I develop my ideas, I write through them, and other parts of me start to get involved. I might be thinking through a piece of research in relation to the building, trying to figure out how that could play out in the exhibition, and my memory will start to interact. That's what I like about writing as a process, and about exhibition making as a process that pulls from writing. The works in the exhibition, all in some way made up of letters or functioning as forms of grammar, can be understood as annotations to my writing process and vice versa. There's a constant feedback loop between those different registers. It allows me to produce a form of grammar that spans the exhibition and publication – my own kind of code.

**OA:** *Can you talk about how that unfolds across the series of framed music programmes titled Kurt, Ken, Curtis, David (what's in a name?)?*

**JL:** The framed programmes are my grandfather's old concert programmes that detail his multiple name changes. There's a relationship between the incomplete name (as I understand it) on the side of the Chisenhale building, and my grandfather's name, which is constantly being altered across the programmes. Some of the changes were made by him, others, like 'Ken Hutten,' are errors made by others. Both the sign and the programme address the preeminent question in the commission: what's *in* a name? I emphasise the 'in' to point to the abundance of information being held inside. It's about paying attention to the details of these little pieces of language, or these letters, that are there or not there. With the C H N, once you consider the O and E as missing, it's impossible to unsee it. In a similar vein, when you encounter the inconsistencies of my grandfather's name, Kurt Hutter, Curtis Hutter, Ken Hutten, and also Karl Hutter, a name that he annotates in pen on top of a newspaper clipping I found in his diary, you can't unsee the ellipsis, the failure, or the mistake. I became focused on finding these mishaps, and observing them, paying attention to them as indicators of potential meaning.

My grandfather changed his name back to Kurt later on. As with the C H N and the missing O and E, I'm left wondering if that decision was driven by antisemitism. Eventually, my grandfather left the UK and moved to Israel, citing antisemitism as the reason. When he left the UK, he changed his name to David. My grandfather eventually suffered a stroke and lost his ability to speak. That meant I never got to hear him tell his own story and I understood that experience, my inability to access that history, as another form of ellipsis.

**AJ:** *Rather than being fixed, names become an unreliable and malleable material in the exhibition, moving and shifting across time. Can you talk about this relationship between naming and movement?*

**JL:** The history of Jewish surnames is that they weren't very meaningful. Back in Spain before the Inquisition, Jews from that region would just have a tribe name like Levi or Cohen. Your first name would be your actual name; like mine in Hebrew is Yehoshua. However, when Jews were pushed into exile, they changed their names to safely cross borders, assimilate, and become a part of the societies that they were entering into. This movement in naming is echoed with my grandfather. He came here as a child as Kurt Hutter, his given name at birth. In the UK, he was identified as being non-British because of that name. After the war he decided to change his name to Curtis.

In *The Process*, I reference a quote by Joseph Roth where he states that Jews are not particularly attached to their names; they change them as they move through borders. It's well known that many Jews changed their names multiple times, as they moved from the Russian Empire through the Austria-Hungarian Empire, Germany and into the UK or the Americas. There are so many names that you might think of, that are quintessentially Jewish, that have actually been changed. There are also many names that few people would know are Jewish, or come from Jewish heritage. In a way these names are also related to visibility and invisibility, and the way in which Jews are constantly held in that tension.

**OA:** *Your interest in the form of language is continued in the two f-shaped benches that are also constructed from veneer. What forms of engagement do they invite?*

**JL:** The invitation is to spend time, because it takes time to get close to these fragments of history. I also want it to be an opportunity to engage with the space, the actual physical components of the building. It's an invitation to think about the building, and the way in which one's body relates to the space and its history.

The benches are also inversions of the holes in the body of a violin that amplify the sound of the instrument. I wanted to take that space of amplification and materialise it as an invitation to sit and get close.

**OA:** *The figure of the 'Wandering Jew' and the 'Wanderer' is something that you take up in *The Process*, the book published as part of the commission. This long piece of prose wanders across various sites, and through different parts of your research. Can you talk about your interest in the figure of the 'Wanderer'?*

**JL:** The 'Wandering Jew' was created in the New Testament, when Jesus places a curse on a Jew standing in the crowd, who shames him as he makes his way to the cross. The Jew is condemned to walk the earth forever, as an eternal wanderer, until the return of the Messiah. It's an antisemitic trope that conjures images of poor Jews who wander the earth without shoes, bearded, haggard, grotesque people. However, I think it can also be a way to address being from a diaspora and that this cursed figure can be turned into something worthy and valuable. Inverting this slur affords me the freedom to imaginatively move between places. That movement has become a methodology for revisiting or reimagining past lives and afterlives too. When writing *The Process*, I started to think about my own movement as a form of wandering. Not just the physical movement among places, but also movement through my own memories and the history of others. I write about travels to Vienna, London, Bordeaux, Munich, New York, and elsewhere – these sites all start to collapse in on each other as I write. They are also places where other Jewish lives have unfolded, and so slowly, it becomes a means of moving through social history once more.

All of this returns me to the question of how I got here. Being British Austrian is a condition of other movements – many of which were the result of my family fleeing persecution, or economic impingement. Wandering, as a methodology, is a way of understanding that history is constantly on the move rather than fixed.

**OA:** *In the exhibition, you are in conversation with the many different people and histories that you are bringing to the site. This notion of being with others is something that's been inherent to your practice for some time.*

**AJ:** *Yes, it feels like there's an invitation to join in a convening with history. A kind of collective remembering.*

**JL:** It seems relevant to me that if I'm going to engage with the idea of social history, that I also engage in practices of being social. In particular, I'm interested in questioning who has the right to participate, how said rights can be taken away, and the consequences of that participation. For me that sociality appears through conversation and by attempting to converse with those who cannot, or refuse to, speak back.

There are so many voices in the show and in the book, beyond Morris Cohen, my grandfather, and me. There's a conversation with a synagogue in Bordeaux, and there's a conversation around the story of how my great grandfather's registration card was hidden under the floorboards at Dachau concentration camp. Another veneering and concealing. There are conversations with other exhibition ideas, conversations with friends, and conversations with ghosts. An experience of history as a live subject, rather than a dead one.

Even the dead become alive when you're engaging with these fragments of history. I never heard my grandfather play violin. He had the stroke long before I was born, so my conversations with him didn't happen through talking. I'm using my memory to converse with him in a way I was never able to experience. I'm using my imagination to traverse the impossible and have a conversation in that space.

**AJ:** *You've referenced moments of 'collapse' throughout this conversation and it's an idea that we've returned to throughout the commissioning process, particularly in relation to personal memory and historical record. Can you speak about your engagement with instances where those two things collapse into one another and what you find interesting about that?*

**JL:** I wanted to think about how my memory stitches itself into social history. I was thinking about forms of witnessing and how my subjectivity, my way of reading if you like, is active when revisiting the past. Famous

memoirs, like Anne Frank's diary, function in this way. It's a historical document, the story of a person in hiding from Nazi persecution, but it's also a subjective form of witnessing history. It gives an account of oneself that colours in the stories of people outside of the grand narrative of dictators, warmongers, and masters. In certain forms of publishing, the witness makes themselves visible. I like to read a lot of memoirs for this reason. It makes visible these minor figures and their daily contributions to life. It's a beautiful thing, how resonant that kind of smallness can be. When you bring all that smallness together, you get this interaction with the everydayness of past lives. It's almost a celebration of life.

When I'm thinking about how my own memory slips or involves itself in these other histories, I'm cognisant of how I continue to give an account of myself alongside an account of the lives I am researching. That means also deciding how much of myself, and their stories, I make visible. The glass, for example, and its staining allows for transparency, to hold within it, moments of opacity.

**AJ:** *You undertook research in Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, London and YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York among other archives. Can you talk about how you carry through this idea of collapse into your work with archives?*

**JL:** Yes, I like the idea of upsetting the archive by allowing personal memory to intervene. Especially when dealing with lesser-known histories and how to conduct research in the archive. It creates a metaphysical tension that makes things move, and that movement is where I think about the collapse. To use a visual metaphor, it's a library in which things are falling off the shelves.

Ann Laura Stoler talks about the archive being a glass house, and of the necessity to create 'tremors' in the archive. Her book *Along the Archival Grain* talks about this in relation to the Dutch archives that were used to install the prowess of their colonial programme. In their production, they concealed and erased the labour of the enslaved people who built that prowess. What she suggests is that by creating a 'tremor' – her example is to throw a rock in the glass house – one can release this information from its concealment and reveal the reality of the history as one of violence and oppression.

In order to find those pieces of information in my own research, to create a ‘tremor’, I need to remove the demand in the archive for what we are supposed to engage with and what we are being denied access to, and also treat my own memories as being involved in that construction. The stain, the degenerate, the wanderer – these are embodied feelings of looking differently, or looking from an obscured angle. This collapsing is the moment personal memories, archival memories, and social histories interact.

**OA:** *Sound plays an important role in the exhibition in relation to these ideas of visibility and invisibility. Can you describe the work titled Enigma Variations and how it continues your exploration of announcing oneself?*

**JL:** Having spent time consulting my grandfather’s diary and the music concert programmes inserted within it, I began to think about his position as a second violinist in the orchestra. I wanted to imagine what it would feel and sound like to hear him play – a memory that doesn’t exist for me. Edward Elgar’s original composition, *Enigma Variations* (1899) stood out, as it has its own instance of coding, of enigma, which mirrors the running motifs of encoding and concealment within the commission. Elgar composed the fourteen variations as portraits of his friends and family; they’re all short, sonic biographies. He also encoded them within other musical compositions. It is a piece of music that is about people – coded biographies and coded lineages.

In the exhibition, we hear the second violin part only, which is another way of thinking about ellipsis and concealment. It’s a way of examining the fragment – something other than the totality, something that’s lesser told, lesser seen, or lesser heard. The entire exhibition contemplates how the hearing or seeing of those things might transform the way we understand historical, or present-day experience.

**OA:** *The experience of listening to the piece comprises moments of both sound and silence. Can you talk about the importance of listening to both?*

**JL:** Silence is a recurring theme in my practice. Sometimes it performs more than noise; it indicates something’s missing, and quite violently at times. The way *Enigma Variations* is constructed in the exhibition is as an anticipation of noise.

I don't think that's violent per se, but it's an invitation to listen closely. Like another metaphorical form of veneer, which is only revealed once you know it's concealed in the silence. I'm also dealing with silence theoretically, emotionally, poetically. Silence is fundamentally important in its similitude to the ellipsis and emptiness. It functions in a similar manner that's almost like a ghost haunting these histories or these texts. By restaging this solo violin from the second violins position, focusing in on one member of the orchestra, I've materialised something that seemingly never existed, or would have never been heard. The displacement of this single sound makes audible the role an individual plays within a community. In its solo state, it's as if one has been invited into a private performance – it's a doorway into this individual experience, a voice otherwise lost amongst others.

**OA:** *It creates a kind of sonic intimacy?*

**JL:** Yes, totally.

**OA:** *How is that reflected in your decision to use a single speaker in the exhibition space?*

**JL:** It's a way of highlighting or indicating a body. The speaker is positioned at a height equivalent to a seated violinist – a making visible of my grandfather's position in the orchestral ensemble. There's also something disconcerting about a single speaker in such a large space, it's lonely. Especially in the way that it's installed in the gallery, away from the centre. I am not trying to fill an emptiness, but participate in it. I didn't want the sound to swallow visitors, but I wanted it to encourage them to actively tune into both the sound and the silence.

There's a violent history of drowning people in classical music, which occurred in the concentration camps, and was a tactic of psychological warfare. It's a subtle history, but it's there and one I really want to refuse in this space. The piece needs to be allowed the space to breathe and to be respected, while it also needs to respect the bodies in its presence. Visitors who encounter the speaker in moments of silence are invited to spend time with the other works, before a collapse of the music, programmes, veneer, and glass occurs. The relationships change depending on the sound or silence.

**AJ:** *That shifting emotional resonance provides another frame for our experience of the exhibition...*

**JL:** Yes. The music has moments that are quite joyous. I like that the mood of the piece is hard to distinguish in its extracted state; it complicates a feeling, where joy is not singular but is attached to sorrow or loss. It functions in a similar way to the colour yellow, as a stand in for my lost memory. The emotional composition is complex, the joy is also bound to fear, and to loss. I don't want to refuse or deny that complexity.

There was a temptation to alter the music, but that would have moved away from treating it as something archival, another document. I want the works in the show to be what they are, to speak for themselves rather than acting on this urge to alter them, or transform them. I'm not trying to affect it with my hand. I'm not trying to smudge the details at all. All the materials in the exhibition are a form of document. I think there's a joy in research, in celebrating things for what they are. There's a pleasure that I'm situating myself in.

***A conversation between Joshua Leon, Olivia Aherne (Curator, Chisenhale Gallery), and Amy Jones (Associate Curator, Chisenhale Gallery), on Thursday 15 February 2024.***

## READING LIST

This reading list has been compiled with Joshua Leon to accompany the artist's Chisenhale Gallery commission, *The Missing O and E*. Spanning film, music, and text, the list highlights the literature and research from which the commission departs. Poetry by Maria Stepanova and Mahmoud Darwish is combined with works by thinkers including Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Jacques Derrida, to offer reflections on the entanglement of language, politics and memory. Texts by Juliet Steyn, Gerhom Scholem, and Joseph Roth draw together thoughts on Jewish history and identity. Also included is the absurdist fiction of Franz Kafka, alongside articles unearthing the layered meaning encoded in Elgar's compositions. Together, Leon's selections navigate the psychological terrain embedded within familiar grammars of language and music.

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