

Together as One: the symbiotic practice of Laurence Payot

... Thus it seems we have human minds on the one hand, and a material world of landscape and artefacts on the other. That, you might think, should cover just about everything. But does it? Where do we put the sun, moon and stars? Sunlight... when you breathe, and feel the wind on your face, are you engaging with the material world?

- Tim Ingold

We are a walking symbiosis.

- Dr Ewan Minter

Laurence Payot's Living Sculptures are an exercise in symbiosis. Taking inspiration from microbiology, she is fascinated by the potential for two organisms to become one, such as in mitochondrial fusion. 'Genetic complementation' allows two mitochondrial genomes with different defects to individually encode what the other lacks, becoming a complete, new entity. The emergent properties that each exhibit are what allows symbiosis to take place ('symbiosis' coming from the Greek for 'living together'). To approach social art practice in this way is to hope for a certain kind of magic, making it possible for people to be transformed through the objects they embody, and the bonds forged between them and their environments. Whether conjuring a change in atmosphere, a lightening of mood or a shift in perception, Payot creates the conditions for something new and connective to emerge.

In *We Are Now* (2013), Payot worked with residents of Dunstable and surrounding areas to create wind charms, sculptures that became extensions of individual's bodies and part of a shared ritual to celebrate the strong winds that blow (often) disruptively through the Downs. The menacing but benign metaphor of the 'Angel of Tempest' emerged from local folklore, a visual concept elaborated through discussions and workshops led by Payot. The 'charms' or sculptures took the form of ribbons, pyramids and diamond shapes which resembled kites, all in a unifying silver foil. Payot, working closely with individuals and groups throughout the summer, 'collected breezes' in and around the town, culminating in the first Dunstable Wind Charming event. While it was the wind that set these objects and narratives into motion, the silver accoutrements and their bearers became both individual conduits a kind of collective weathervane. A giant geometric flying structure, collaboratively designed and created by locals with Payot, was released into the air like an offering, all clean lines and shimmering triangles.

For Payot, it is important to give something back to each individual who plays a role in her works, and who indeed, brings her art to life. They might take away an idea, a vision, an extraordinary experience, a feeling of belonging, a social connection, discover a different way of connecting, or a sense that they not only took part in an artwork but were instrumental in some way. This unique experience is also precisely what allows the work to come into being, to take its final form. In her series, *Symbiosis: Social Experiments with Living Sculptures* (2015-present), the work is only complete when it is taken up and given life by people. As the title

suggests, these works involve sculptural elements that both precede and act as a catalyst for encounters. This is important, because Payot's practice is not 'purely' social, and in almost every case involves materials and structures that enable connections between people and the worlds they inhabit.

In order for the art to 'happen', there must be a fusion or interrelationship established between the objects she creates and the people that wield or wear them – they are two parts of a whole. Her work for RESOURCE, a group show at the Bluecoat in Liverpool, involved specially designed mirrors, gloves and copper tubes hanging or standing inert within an area of the gallery, waiting to be activated. Visitors were invited to connect with each other through them: their faces merged through the perforated patterns and angles of the mirrors; their fingers metaphorically extended through gloves ending in straps, thin copper tubes suspending their bodies against one another. Individuals are merged, physically and perceptually, through the connective tissue of Payot's objects (an idea reinforced by the soft, flesh-tone colours of the materials), in a series of unions that are themselves sculptures.

Payot's work has a distinct visual aesthetic – organic or geometric patterns and a desaturated palette, drawing inspiration from Renaissance painting, recur throughout many of her projects – yet there is a sense that all materials and structures remain in stasis until they are brought to life by people. Creating conditions in which this might happen is crucial to the alchemic reaction of each work, so that uniform props, clothing, accessories or instructions are subtly interpreted by each person at a particular moment in time. That something unexpected might happen, such as a story inspired by an experience, or a change in the weather causing the materials or people to react in a different way, is what determines the final expression of each project. For example, in *I in a Million You* (2013), Payot's tattoo transfers were adapted to different faces around the world, then photographed and shared on social media. The patterns could be separated and applied to each person's face and documented according to a loose set of instructions, a flexible system that allowed for infinite variations.

In art, as in magic, there is no guarantee that a spell will work, or if it will have the desired effect. If we think of the artist as a conjurer, or perhaps an alchemist, her ability to alter or transform is contingent on variables which she cannot always predict or control. Climate, biology, natural and artificial materials, individual and collective consciousness, unconsciousness, perception, imagination, chance, happenstance, communication channels... all of these factors play a role in determining the final work, and entering into the process is an act of faith on the part of everyone involved.

Payot recently led a series of 'Dusk Walks' in Bracknell town and surrounding woodland in Berkshire, taking small groups along a predetermined path and stopping to share stories and respond to particular sites along the way. The sunset and the dramatic use of head torches, given to each person at the start, cast the streets and woodland paths in a new, uncanny light. Throughout each walk, or quest, the artist was forced to examine her own role in the process, and how much or little she should be involved, if at all. Payot experimented with different formats, with a live storyteller, poems read out loud by participants, and more informal sharing of personal stories and thoughts. For those involved, there was freedom to take the work in different directions, sharing memories or exploring individually, or at times creating a 'visual consensus'

when the whole group turned their torches on a particular area or object. The agency of each person was integral to the work, yet none of it would be possible if Payot wasn't able to create an atmosphere, to ensure that people felt comfortable and open to something happening. Her role is to work with forces of nature and other people to temporarily transform reality, to gain access to worlds that are not normally perceivable. Establishing trust is essential to such discoveries, wherein gateways are only revealed and passed through by way of collective imagination.

Illusion, it might be argued, is key to the success of any artwork (and by success I simply mean the ability of a work to have some kind of effect, in the widest possible sense). Part of an artist's role is to create and suspend an illusion, to take us out of our quotidian patterns and imagine something different, something buried deep within, or completely beyond ourselves. Art, at its most affective, has the potential to transform us and the world we inhabit. In order for this to happen, it must trick us into forgetting, into believing in something beyond the ordinary, whether metaphysical or seemingly impossible, if only for a moment. Perhaps it is when we share that illusion and find each other through and within it, that we are able to feel most connected.

Payot's work is dependent on people, objects and environments, and the delicate interconnections that form between them. While she is careful to maintain a certain amount of artistic control over her process, aware that there is a 'composition' or feeling she would like to see materialise, the multiple forces at play in a given project are what ultimately determine and constitute its form. Closely attending to the moment when an artwork is 'activated' or brought to life, Payot nimbly sidesteps the production-reception binary without tipping fully into participatory or 'user-led' practice. More accurately, her work might be described in alchemic terms, a benign kind of sorcery, in which elements are brought together and mutually transformed.

Lara Eggleton