

Marvin Gaye Chetwynd

in conversation with Laura Moreton-Griffiths



Govanhill Baths

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LMG: Marvin Gaye Chetwynd is your trading name, your nom de guerre. It claims kinship with Motown singer Marvin Gaye, a son shot by his father with his own gun, and emotes irony and sorrow. And your previous name, Spartacus, evokes revolt and the protective solidarity of freed slaves. You obviously felt the need to channel these qualities and be emotionally more robust. When you were the first performance artist nominated for the Turner Prize in 2012, you were told that your work needed to be more robust to meet museum audience expectation. What does robust mean to you?

MGC: Wow your question is so full, it is full of empathy and connection, I don't think I mind the prompt to become robust, the need to become more capable. It feels like growing pains or problem solving. So I don't think of it as a bad thing.

I am not sure I am channelling the qualities of Spartacus or Marvin Gaye's life stories. I think I am using them as shields to deflect a certain public scrutiny. I am using the life stories of these heroes to make a joke. I am not saying I am as good as them or that I want to be them. I am saying God forbid that what happened to them happens to me. It's a private joke for myself, for me to remember to not let that happen. To be robust is a bit like having a giant belly and deflecting any petty problems by bouncing them off your giant belly, I would love to be like that. To be like a giant blobby bouncy castle of a giant who could dispel the problems of the world with a wobble of my belly flesh, a God of humour and good will, buoyancy and laughter.

LMG: In making your work more robust, you have had to resolve the tension between your informal way of working and market expectation. You came to film as a way of extending your narrative and allowing people to experience some of the mayhem of your

performances without you having to be present. You also display your costumes and props in the gallery while you are not there. It is a generous solution. Increasingly you have become a filmmaker. Do you still approach each performance as unique and the film simply its documentation, or have the films become more important in their own right?

MGC: Wow, u know everything...he he...it's as if we have already talked at length, thanks! Yes, I can say yes to all of the above. I do think of each performance as a unique experiment and opportunity. I am trying to make the live event fun, wild and exciting, rather than trying to make a good video or film, so often the documentation is not of good quality. It's a sacrifice. I think I take the films seriously and I balance the ability to create the film with the ability to make the crazy events happen. It is too ambitious and it doesn't really work in a perfect way, but it does seem to hold my attention and I am not bored of trying to achieve it.

LMG: What comes across through all of your performances is your excitement to be alive, and determination to keep going. You say that your name changes were a private joke that kept you going, and you share this drive with your participants and audience – to keep them going and to feel good in the moment. Your performances are break out, transcendental moments of irresponsibility, and mayhem; you even kidnap your audiences. Yet your narratives are radical and about contemporary anxiety and ask questions of who we are, the systems that we operate in and hold us captive. A question that runs through your work is whether or not we have a quality of morale suitable to the digital, multisensory time in which we live - and can we update or create a new morality. Can you tell me more about this heady mix of optimism and anarchy?

MGC: Geeze, I am not used to someone actually listening to what I say! U have totally compiled everything I am into! Yes. I am optimistic and pragmatic. I believe in a model outlined by Harold Pinter in his speech for the Nobel Prize. He described how he works in an abstract way; almost blindly, he waits for the text to fall onto the page. He is not conscious and a strategist in his creative output. He almost describes the plays arriving as a visionary flash, not geeked/eeeked out and planned. Then he describes his ability to be a fully conscious civilian, critical of the powers that be and willing to follow procedure and analyse if it is moral, correct or worth?

I like this model. I like that it allows the artist to be as free and wild as they like. Then also, there is the same person's ability to be aware and contribute to society as a conscious adult, responsible and clear sighted.

I discussed this with my husband recently and he said Frank Zappa was another person like this - wild in his free rein of creative mayhem and then also a calm family man with a mortgage!

I was introduced to the work by De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday things*, by Nils Norman. In this text the idea that people are able to shift and react in small subtle forms of rebellion and agency is made clear.

I really enjoy the idea that through human adaptability we can be excited for the future. That there will be all sorts of subtle and delicate forms taking shape that will guide the next horizon for the planet.



A Tax Haven Run By Women, 14-17 October 2010

LMG: Amongst the laughter and absurdity, there is much politics in your work, including Mediterranean refugees and debt culture. I don't believe you set out with an agenda, and imagine that as you get more involved in a project and develop your ideas, connections and associations reveal themselves; like the multiplicity of the unconscious mind, subconscious politics are present and open to interpretation. Possibly a way of being political without saying these are my politics - hiding in plain sight. It is interesting that you say you can't have a statement, and that you pose questions mindful of the art world's dislike of stance. How do you see the relationship between your stories and politics?

MGC: Crumbs, I am a little unsure now. U are brighter than me, perhaps u are a replicant like the ones in *Blade Runner*! Maybe u are burning brightly and soon will burn out? But Oh how brightly u shall have burned! He he. One answer could be that I was really influenced by magic realism. When I went to UCL to study History and Social Anthropology, I did a year of Latin American History. It was very repetitive, and confusing. The amount of the same patterns of small revolutions that happened was totally baffling, until I read Gabriel García Márquez's *100 years of Solitude*. The flow of this novel fitted and made sense of the factual information, the repetition and the loss of sense, the insomnia and fantasy - it all worked a spell over me and made me understand the essence of what had happened. I decided that the cleverness of magic realism was worth paying attention to; the persuasiveness of literature rather than fact to theory; the short cut of non-verbal communication of the words between; the trust and faith of being alive; the empathy and ambiguity rather than the exposure to deadening formality that was promoting impenetrable fact. I really enjoy the idea of social fluidity. I am curious. I don't want to

go to just the upper echelon's parties, I want to go to all the parties.

I would say I am political. I am thrilled hearing Jeremy Corbyn speak! It is as if a spell has been broken. I have never heard a person with integrity speak from a position of authority in the UK in my lifetime. I moved away from Britain to try to find a country to live in that reflected the politics I felt. I went to live in France, and learnt about the Frac system that supports artists. I lived in Holland and was shocked by the amazing support for artists there, for example, art students could expect up to four years of financial support after leaving college. And I lived in Estonia. I then moved to Scotland. I think oddly Scotland feels like it is close to how I feel politically. I feel Scottish people have what I think of as integrity and I am interested in living there.

Your questions are hard, as I do hide my faith (Catholic) and my politics (Acephalous Society). I am used to being motivated and questioning through the yearning of the politics I hold in my heart. It is hard to be motivated by just the art world. It is easier to be inspired by exasperation at the state of world affairs! Or feeling you should be brave because you can; we live in a liberated, generous society.

LMG: Your stories literally journey to underground caves, analogous to the workings of the subconscious mind, visualised with a whole calamity of chaotic and interweaving imagery and events. Your imagery and narratives are accessible and call to mind sci-fi movies and sitcoms of our childhoods and appeal to the child in us. You mix the carnivalesque, antiquated and highbrow. Your performances are like going to a rave and dancing all night. Can you tell me more about your themes?

MG: Themes... I know I have been told that I often am promoting the rehabilitation of underdogs. I want to celebrate and share information that is neglected or not well known. For example, I have made costumes or 'characters' about Ugliers like Jabba (*Star Wars*), or Snails, Mandrake Man, Nero, 'An Arsehole', 'Turtle entrails', Richard Dadd, a Witchety Grub, the Brain Bug (*StarShip Troopers*).

LMG: You say that you are very lucky to have given complete artistic freedom. I agree - you have a unique voice - you had a colourful, free, and exotic childhood, lived in a nudist commune in Peckham and have degrees in Anthropology and Fine Art. You must do a lot of historical and cultural research. You talk about building a frame around which your troupe of participants is enabled to contribute and be free. There must be a fine line between control and mayhem. Creating a robust narrative, visualising the costumes,

puppets and interactions, increasingly from a filmic point of view. Your working process is held in your head, held together for a short period of time and then let go. Do you formalise your research in to script or storyboard?

MGC: Wow, your questions are so good, so full. I feel as if the less I say the better! I do hold them in my head. I have learnt a lot in the process of making the series *Hermitos Children*. I have learnt that I enrage and stress anyone who has a knowledge of 'what filming should be like'... anyone who is professional who expects storyboards and a sense of what will happen in detailed script form. I have worked out that I work well with people who for unknown reasons know what I am doing. Now, I work well with a small team: my husband Jedrek Cichosz, Jenny Sims, Adam Christensen, Marc David Jacobs, Joe Campbell & Oscar Oldershaw. They are people who I have made the performances with but who



The Snail Race, Galleria Massimo De Carlo, Milan

also work and study film. I have worked on a puppet film over four years called *Vision Vertical*. It was a commission by Le Consortium. It was a breakthrough for me as it is a film made to be a film (not documentation of a live event that is layered and tweeted to qualify as a 'film' in it's own right). I used the interviews in Jan Svankmeyer documentaries to make a dialogue for the the puppets, so they are really intelligent and auto-reflexive. Also, in Liverpool this year for the Biennial, I made a film with up to 73 kids and young adults. It is called *DogsyMa Bone*. Again, I used a trick of re-writing the intellectual analysis of Brecht's work and slipped the word 'we' in place of Brecht and it made the most exciting script. I was so excited about the script idea that I couldn't sleep at night. I knew it was good, and I was working with kids who can retain information and could say lines! They trusted me to deliver an interesting project. I have had a lot of feedback about this film. People seem to really like it. I can tell it's because I am learning in public and this film seems like a breakthrough.

LMG: If its bad its abysmal, if its good its punk. You make props and puppets out of scrunched and pigment painted cardboard, and quick costumes - your aesthetic is informed by your impatience to get on and make and perform your ideas. In the making you manage to capture your fun and excitement. I am interested in the political economy to something of value that doesn't play to the usual norms of capitalist economies and production. You seem to make something out of nothing, and leave little trace, other than an indexical bum print on a wall. Early on you were captivated by Yves Klein's early performance work *Anthropologies* (1960), where he used the naked female body as a brush - you paint with your own naked body. All your elements: puppets, objects, costumes, participants, dancers, all formalised through film, come together to unmistakably use the

language of painting - but aren't discrete saleable objects. Your gallery must monetise your work. You also teach, and there is the Marvin Gaye Chetwynd Supporters Circle. How do you fund your projects?

MGC: Again your question is so full! It is full to the brim, like a 'Salambo' feast! I know the quote from the start of your question, it comes from the Dutch interview at Witte de Witte - it is funny! And who are the 'the Marvin Gaye Chetwynd Supporters Circle'?? I think I need to know them. I could do with loads of help! (agh agha agha Popeye Laugh). I need to live to a budget and balance my books! I believe in living by earning money through a 'mixed economy'. It's important to earn funds from different sources so that you are not dominated by one - from day jobs (teaching and design work), and artist fees and through sales of products yes. I was really influenced by Virginia Woolf's book *A Room of One's Own*. In it, she talks about how it is essential that to be creative, unbiased and original, it is important to have no debt to the source that is funding you. I do a lot of work unpaid. this interview, your questions I am answering without thinking - I do not get paid for the time I am spending enjoying the exchange with you. It is natural and some how, it's important to be generous, to have loose reins.

I fund my own projects and bring some budgets from one project to another. I find it easy to make work with low economy. It is easy to invite friends who live locally, and to make costumes from fabric out of scraps and from free cycle. Most things do not cost a lot. I also take pride that the idea can work without a huge budget behind it. I put nearly all of the income from my art back into the projects. If u were to look at the model of my small business compared to a business plan for another company that started in 2000, u would see that they perhaps ploughed the profit into the company for the first three

years and after that began to cream a wage that was suitable to their working hours. I have continued to put the profit back into my projects and it is 2016. I am pretty sure a lot of artists do not pay themselves. When I am paid either through commercial representation or through an institution, I will nearly always pay half back into the project. I still fail to hold my fee away from paying for production. I live in Glasgow in a Network Rail subsidised flat. It's £395 a month for a 3 bedroom flat. One room is my studio. I pay for nursery for my son to go to outdoor nursery in the woods. I have teaching jobs and I love them. Teaching exposes me to critical thinking. To be honest I take nearly all the work I am offered.

LMG: A recent commission *The Idol*, a soft

play centre in Barking called on your love of problem solving and managed to blend a paid-for commission with authentic artistic practice. You didn't want the children dictated to by sentimentality and the usual norms of public design, so working true to your practice; you connected the parents' area with the children's play area, decorating the walls and apparatus with monochrome pattern and imagery that collaged together the old and the new. As a motif, you placed the Dagenham Idol, a Neolithic or early Bronze Age figure in a robot suit. The imagery was collaged together and printed on to permanent wallpaper. The process was similar to the process you used for your 2014 exhibition at Sadie Coles HQ; but different - the gallery walls were lined with images and excerpts from the Canterbury



Odd Man Out, Sadie Coles HQ, 2014

Tales, blown up on a photocopier and stuck together with cello tape. You also used the technique at Studio Voltaire. The project was an interesting experiment again, with being robust, and allying your informal working methods with the rigors of public art and health and safety. You worked collaboratively with local children, the team and construction engineers. So in undertaking a commercial project you successfully aligned your fresh, excitable way of working and functionality sympathetic to the demands of the project. It looks great. It must have been very satisfying. How did that commission come about? Was Barking hands-off or did executing that balance require lots of negotiation?

MGC: Again I love your FULL question! He he he... we are going to have to be friends!! I think u know more what I am about than anyone I know!! I was very involved in *The Idol's* coming into existence. I worked with Marijke Steedman (the *Create Curator*) and Grace Fidler (the *House of Play* designer) through Skype. We had meetings once a week, on Tuesdays. I was very excited to get the job. It is the job that I wanted more than any other job I have ever done! More than the Turner Prize, *The Softplay!* I had to compete against four other artists, and then there was the phone call. Waiting to know if I had won it! I was too scared to answer in case they were telling me no! I let the phone ring and then listened to the message, but annoyingly they left no message, so I had to ring back and wait to hear, and yes I got it!

It was because I wanted to work on a project where you feel 'useful', where as an artist you are actually useful!

I realised I have so many skills working on that job. I am compliant and then again able to be effective. I understood I had to visit the 'House of Play' company in Doncaster that made the soft play structures. Once I had visited the factory I knew what the parameters where, what shapes and ambitious places I could reach, what was a reality! I loved working on the commission. I feel like it proved to me that artists can be USEFUL and now of course this is all very apparent with 'Assembly' winning the Turner Prize. Whether artists should only be useful is another question!

LMG: You have many projects and performances taking place nationally and internationally. This year alone you have worked with children in Liverpool to create *Dogsy Ma Bone* and worked with older people in Norway to create *The Elixia App*, a performative futurology of channeled geriatric knowledge. You are working on *Hermitos Children 3*. What next?

MGC: I have a solo show at CCA Glasgow opening Nov 11th, that is going to be a next step for *Hermitos Children 3*. I have two further parts of the work to complete for *Praxes* and *Bergen Assembly* in October and November. Next year, I have a potential children's play area commission for Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo Turin, with a show. I go on a site visit in two weeks. I am teaching three days at Rijksakademie, Amsterdam next week. And I have a solo show at Sadie Coles HQ coming up and there are other projects too.

LMG: Wow!



Kinning Hall