

Paul Hughes, Future Collect Conference proposal, August 2021

*I always speak out against bullying.
I know when someone's overstepped the mark.
I know exactly where the mark is.
I never overstep the mark.*

I'm an artist, performer and writer, raised in Ireland and living in Nottingham UK. I make most of my work – performances, exhibitions, videos, curatorial projects – with Rohanne Udall under the name Chatting Tanum <<https://www.chattingtanum.info/>>. Since 2020, I have been undertaking a PhD at the University of Roehampton and Sadler's Wells Theatre exploring how the sensitivities and skills of choreographic practice might help us rethink institutional models of curation, commissioning and hosting <<https://www.chattingtanum.info/phd>>.

I am particularly interested in temporary curatorial projects led by freelance artists that are somewhat incommensurate to their host institution. Their distance from existing structures of scrutiny, legitimisation and evaluation give the potential for intimate, transformative and liberating processes; yet make them ripe for abuse. One outcome of this research is 'Self-possession', a 10-15 minute solo performance, that I propose to present at the Future Collect Conference.

The work is designed for non-theatre spaces (foyers, galleries, readings, openings, etc.). A performer stands, walks around, sits, leans, looks, and speaks. They make a series of moral claims: calmly moving from the poetic, banal, extreme and absurd in an exhaustive and self-contradictory attempt to account for the endless complexity of ethical relation. Tracing the unstable lines between invitation, intimacy, flirtation, grooming and abuse, they move from the languages of political activism to neoliberal self-affirmation; and draw attention to how our ethical norms are shaped by legal, medical, professional, and religious institutions.

The mood is uncanny. The performer recites the long text from memory, and are seemingly indifferent to shifts between banal and extreme ethical propositions ("I go to appropriate lengths to ensure other people's comfort and safety. I refrain from dangerous activities. I am not overly swayed by fear. I would never deliberately contract HIV.") They are wearing black contact lenses. This gentle yet heightened theatricality destabilises the form of the 'reading', to instead attune the audience to the tensions, complexities and risks of our encounters in the day-to-day.

The work is informed by contemporary feminist writing that insist on the irreducibly complex nature of desire (Katherine Angel, Maggy Nelson) and ethical relation (Judith Butler). It draws from my own experience of curation and facilitation, and engagement with institutional processes to try and account for systemic harm. It emerges within a wider cultural moment of #MeToo, and of widespread moral challenge to those who hold institutional office. While this work urgently evokes the need for robust processes of safeguarding and accountability, it equally suggests how susceptible any process or rhetorics might be to manipulation and abuse.

Formally simple and with no technical demands, I anticipate Self-Possessed to be a potent contribution to Future Collect, that could stimulate discussion and critical reflection into the rhetorics and practices of care throughout the day.