

## Malcolm Peacock Interviewed by Emily Zimmerman

*Installation and performance that hold a space for healing.*



Installation view of Malcolm Peacock, *How to address the full capacity of our will*, 2023, graphite on paper, kanekalon on paper, athletic wear, dry food, toiletries, bedding, fitness equipment, water, sweat. Photo by Filip Wolak. Courtesy of Artists Space, New York.

Malcolm Peacock's art considers the affective landscape of interactive work and the powerful choreographies of small group interactions. His current exhibition at Artists Space in New York City includes a series of one-on-one morning breathing exercises with visitors during which he will call out the names of Black individuals who make prayer requests in advance.

—Emily Zimmerman

### Emily Zimmerman

Could you walk us through the exhibition at Artists Space? What will visitors see, and perhaps more importantly what will they not see?

### Malcolm Peacock

Entering Artists Space, on the right there is a large camper raised sixteen inches off the ground. There are two long ramps on opposite sides for walking and wheelchair access into the camper. Inside, there are different physical objects that mark a space of waiting, refuge, and quietude. The work is a holder and in-between place of rest for an athlete embarking on a long, arduous, extensive journey across the southern panhandle of the United States.

The piece refers to the 1928 and 1929 Bunion Derbies, which were two of the first ultra-marathons. My interest in this race is in the way it was historically spoken about and not spoken about. There are many athletes who don't finish ultra-marathons due to the difficult nature of the race; but there were Black athletes who competed in this race, and the stories of them are underwritten if not unknown. I was trying to conceptualize a space in which I was projecting myself into that experience and into the very minimal amount of information on these races.



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**EZ**

Running is a theme in your work in *Prospect 5* in New Orleans and in this current exhibition. Could you talk about the different facets of your relationship to running?

**MP**

*Prospect 5* is a triennial that requires work for an extended amount of time. With *Prospect 1* I had never intended to run and speak at the same time; it was improvised. I had just gotten back from a month away for evacuating from Hurricane Ida. When I returned to the city, the exhibition was three weeks from opening. I was trying to find a way to make tangible experiences in the food service industry that were, frankly, quite graphic and which I knew I wouldn't be able to recreate. And I thought, I think you just need to say everything that happened, and run.

I think of running as a constant introduction. It's a repetitive introduction in which every time your foot takes a step and you breathe at the same time, there are two forces—one into the air and one into the ground—that introduce and emphasize your presence into your environment. It's a reminder both to yourself and the earth that you have a presence. I think that the issues that I was bringing up in the work made me feel so absorbed and so small that I mobilized the language in a way that would reintroduce it both to myself and to the public. I was thinking about how to introduce the closest thing that can be tangibly felt inside someone else's body, and the way to do that was to use sound and the act of running so that someone could hear my footsteps and my breath as close to their body as they could. There are these moments of clarification and spiritualization that can happen in artworks that I don't think are so far removed from what is within us. I'm often looking to go deep so I can excavate something that can feel abstract, to concretize it in the body. And in the act of running, I'm often trying to achieve the same thing. It doesn't happen with every run, but there are runs that are great spiritual epiphanies that make me feel like that repetitive introduction was cemented or sealed. I left those runs feeling like I learned.

I try to be actively open to that space without locking myself or visitors into what a work might be. Inside of the work there may be great moments of discovery, and running is really just the frame that I'm using. I think one of the larger meanings is a space of the unknown and embracing that inside of difficult experiences. We don't know what our reactions will be in confronting them, but if we give ourselves the chance to step into relation with them, there might be something transformative that is able to be catalyzed for us.



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**EZ**

Previous artworks have been informed by concepts of physical pace and choreography, and I was wondering how those concepts were being folded into this exhibition.

**MP**

The way that you mark if you're running comfortably is if you can have a full-blown conversation. One of the things that I'm doing is taking that as a form and expanding it out with some different folks who are then occupying that space alongside me. It's the choreography of two people being together. The way I've started to think about choreography is folks being together or folks not even physically being in the same place but being emotionally tapped into something at the same time. The other way that I'm thinking about choreography are these sunrise breathing exercises. At the end of the invitation for them, it clearly states to please wear attire and shoes suitable for physical exercise. The reason that I don't name it running is because it does not necessarily have to be running but rather moments of vulnerability with ourselves and with others. I realized that many of us don't have a practice of breathing on our own in a designated time. We exist in shared breath, like on the subway, but we definitely don't have an intentional space of shared breath. I'm framing it in that way because I'm less interested in people doing what I want them to do and more interested in the way that they interpret and embody the idea of shared breath. Choreography is also a way to think about developing comfort inside of risk: holding the presence of someone, whether they're physically there or not, and holding their potency within your body. Holding ancestry is how so many people have gotten through so many things for centuries.

With the sunrise breathing exercises I'm trying to see to what extent someone will not only allow themselves to be seen and heard in their breathing, but also to what extent they might be willing to share that in a moment of vulnerability as well as being that close together during an hour at sunrise and moving from not being visible inside of the gallery to being exposed by the first moments of the light of day.

**EZ**

That also raises the issues of trust and risk that appear so beautifully in your work. Can you talk about how those arise?

**MP**

In December of 2017, I was at Rutgers at the end of my first semester. I was coordinating the visiting artist series, and my coworker, Colleen Billing, and I had invited EJ Hill to visit. It was an interesting time to talk to him about risk and trust. I was making a piece that had the largest risk at play in my work up to that point. In it I would leave my ID and studio key for people, and they would come and open my studio door, and I would be there in the dark in my underwear. The first time EJ and I talked, he said, "Have you thought about risk? Someone could really hurt



you in your studio." And one of the things that can make me not consider the risk is the possibility for connection. There are these sorts of gambles that happen in the work, and I'm always trying to check in with myself and with my friends about my negotiations. One of the things that also drives me is the risk that the public is taking. Sometimes I'm so baffled by the way a person engages that it then makes me feel like this person is taking a huge risk, and that creates some shared trust. It's never spoken, but it's this unspoken navigation of the situation. It's a dance of who is in charge here. At the same time, why is that a question? Why does there have to be a "host" here? Could we both just share that responsibility?



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EZ

Caring for community is an essential part of your practice, and I was wondering how you're holding space for care in this artwork?

MP

In this work it shows up in some tangible ways. There's food and water that are clearly items of nourishment. There is a part of the work that we haven't discussed yet which is the spoken part of the breathing exercise. There is a sign-up for prayer requests that repeats the text "Let me," and the last lines say, "Let me see you / Spread the weight / Through my bones." For me taking these requests from Black individuals is telling a person that you are willing to hold a part of the weight of their life. Whether in the form of prayer requests or something else, the moment of asking for help requires such great strength. Inside of a capitalist regime, it's often seen as not productive and goes against the winner-takes-all narrative. But asking someone to hold part of the weight of something that you're really struggling with in your life requires so many levels of care. You are caring for yourself, but you're also extending something to someone else in the form of trust. I think of trust as a practiced form of care. You're offering them the space to practice healing.