

## CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: PATRICK STAFF

**Patrick Staff**

*The Foundation*

20 February - 12 April 2015

*Katie Guggenheim: We started talking to you about this project, which has become The Foundation, almost two years ago now. How did it start?*

**Patrick Staff:** I first visited the Tom of Finland Foundation in the summer of 2012. I was in Los Angeles because I had a little show at a project space there. A friend told me that about the foundation. She said 'you should go, you'd love it.' I thought it would be a fairly standard archive, but then I turned up to find this amazing place. Obviously I knew of Tom of Finland's work but I wouldn't say I visited so much as a fan, more out of intrigue. I was really blown away by visiting the house. I was particularly struck by how I couldn't tell who lived there and who worked there; how the space felt so mixed, and that all the expected roles felt blurred.

*KG: How long did you spend there?*

**PS:** I spent a day there and hung out with Durk a bit, then with Sharp. We did a sort of tour of the house, had a drink and flicked through some of the material in the archive. They gossiped about Robert Mapplethorpe and they asked me about being an artist, and the UK, what I was doing in LA...

*KG: Durk and Sharp both appear in your film. Could you explain their roles at the foundation?*

**PS:** Durk bought the house in the 1970s with a group of other guys - lovers, friends - as a sort of leather cooperative, commune, brotherhood, sex space... you know, very '70s. At that time, that whole Echo Park area of LA was where the leather scene was happening. It was kind of rough. The guys that lived in the house were involved - with the photographer Bob Mizer - in bringing Tom to LA and hosting him. It gets a little murky because I've been told the story in a few different ways, but Tom had seen pictures of Durk that had been taken by Bruce Weber in New York - Durk was a model.

*KG: So Durk was already embodying the images that Tom was drawing when they met?*

**PS:** I think the whole community was. It's a total feedback loop of image making. Durk was living in the leather community that was

modeling itself on Tom of Finland drawings but also Tom was idolising those guys. They met in the middle. Tom just needed somewhere to stay.

**KG:** *Was he still based in Finland at that point?*

**PS:** Yes. He was travelling round Europe a fair bit and also going to America because that was where his work was popular. It was around the same time that Mapplethorpe was pushing the limits of exhibiting what was considered pornographic in the 'legitimate' art world. Tom became part of that, through the work of Durk, Mapplethorpe, Mizer.

**KG:** *How did the idea for the work develop from this first encounter with the foundation?*

**PS:** When I came back to London I was working on other projects but thinking about the guys at the foundation and the house a lot. I was wary of making work *about* them. I mean, the house is so beautiful, they're charismatic people and the story is so interesting. It would be so easy to follow a straightforward documentary model but, as much as that is a form I flirt with, it's one I am very skeptical of.

I began to sketch out a proposal for a film in order to get funding to go back and formulate a way of making a work *with* them, but it was difficult. The people at the foundation aren't actors, you can't storyboard it, you just have to go and see what you get. I didn't really know what was going to happen but I knew that I wanted to go back and stay with them and I wanted to work within the house in some way.

**KG:** *When we first spoke to you about the project you were doing a lot of writing.*

**PS:** I did a couple of residencies where I was thinking about the project. Looking back, I'm really glad that I had this kind of forced distance for a year. I literally couldn't afford to be in LA. I spent time trying to work out what my relationship to the Tom of Finland Foundation is: what my interest in the house is and where I sit in the whole thing. To begin with I was much more interested in them but then I spent a year away thinking about myself. I was writing and playing around with materials; writing fictions, forming associations or fantasies getting away from the idea of making something so straight as a documentary. We began working on the production and fundraising for the project all together – Chisenhale Gallery and Spike Island – at the end of 2013. I spent most of 2014 going back and forth to LA, shooting, spending time at the foundation, digitising material in their film and video archive... It's been a really long project!

**KG:** *We often talk about the film as having two distinct halves: the documentary footage shot at the foundation in LA and the second part, which was shot on a set that you built at Spike Island in Bristol. It's actually less clear-cut than that. There are excerpts of material from the Tom of Finland Foundation's film and video archive, like the degraded VHS footage of a party that you've used towards the end. There is also a second layer of documentary footage, shot on your iPhone when you're attending events at the foundation for example or touring the house. With the iPhone footage it's like you're looking around and taking notes. I really like the section when you're outside at the back of the house looking around at the washing machines and then up at the palm trees.*

**PS:** There were a few months last year when I was spending almost every day at the foundation. The 'legitimate' documentary footage was shot over just three days – a tiny fraction of the time I spent there. I worked with a small crew; it was just me, the cinematographer Michelle Lawler, her assistant and a sound recordist. The iPhone footage was shot over quite a long period of time. A lot of it was shot on the days when I was just working there, volunteering. The house still acts very much as a cooperative. If you're there, if you're hanging around, it doesn't take long for someone to say 'we need your help moving this cabinet, can you do this or that...' The footage that you see of Tom's birthday party, there were maybe four of us who organised that party...

**KG:** *Oh so you organised that? I didn't realise.*

**PS:** I helped, and I was the projectionist. I mean, other volunteers at the foundation – Stuart, Jeff – did a lot more. Projectionist was my job for the evening.

**KG:** *Did you choose the film?*

**PS:** Yes, with Stuart. We showed a whole range of 8mm porno. I'd been spending a lot of my time there going through all the film and video in the archive. They had tubs and tubs of old super 8, old 16mm, old VHS tapes, cassette tapes that need attention...

**KG:** *What is that material, mostly? The foundation has a dual function as an archive for erotic art, right? So does the archive consist of films that people have sent in or films that the community at the house have produced?*

**PS:** It's a mixture. There are cassette tapes recording the Tom of Finland Foundation board meetings since the 1990s... at a certain point in the 1980s they were making their own porn films. There's a huge amount of really old porn in the archive that people have donated to

them: unmarked reels from the 1960s, stuff like that, and then VHS tapes of their parties. In the '90s they had a big VHS camera. A lot of the time Durk would come to me with things and be like 'Patrick, no one's ever seen what's on this tape, you need to digitise it'. Everyone knew I was there working on my own project and Durk would say 'use whatever you want, if you find anything interesting, use it'. They have this constant desire to get things from the archive out into the world. The music that I used in the dance sequence section of my video is from a film that I digitised. The VHS footage was just something I stumbled across.

**KG:** *Did you feel like part of the community, through the work and the volunteering, or like an outsider who was there to make a film?*

**PS:** I guess because they knew I was there making a video I got pegged with that job in the archive. In the bit you mentioned, where I'm filming the washing machines at the back of the house on my iPhone, we were cleaning filing cabinets that day. You see a section of a cabinet on its end. I was stood there scrubbing them and took a break for a minute and started to look around with my phone. With the birthday party and us having dinner at the house, you see the core group at that point and snippets of down time. It's a record of my own informal time at the house, of which there was a lot. Although I don't think it's necessarily important for a viewer to read it this way, this folds my own labour at the foundation back into the film. My own time spent living in that space. The archive footage shows films that I digitised, the iPhone footage is material that I shot when I was volunteering, helping out, working, making dinner or just hanging out.

**KG:** *You can see the layering of the activities and relationships that the foundation comprises through these different types of footage.*

**PS:** In the VHS footage you're seeing a community that used to occupy that space. You see Durk when he was younger. I think the tape I've used is from '91 or '92. It focuses on people's faces, people looking around at the camera, which I think is what drew me to it. I'm not sure who filmed it. Sometimes I feel like this work I've made is so much about grief and that footage to me is incredibly poignant.

A lot of the footage I shot was about looking: often the camera is looking at something but I'm adjusting something else over here and people are talking over here and something gets moved in or out of the shot. It's very much about the experience of going to an archive and looking, searching, but being aware that there's a whole context around it. It really folds in on itself in that VHS moment. It's like looking into the past with this group of men who are probably largely dead now; it's seeing the guys at the house now and looking back at this community

that I was never part of, or might be part of now, but it's unclear.

*KG: There is a moment in your film, in your interview with Durk, when he's talking about the time when he met Tom. He realises that he is now the age that Tom was then, and, I guess, you are roughly the age that he was?*

**PS:** Yes, exactly. It's a moment which suggests some kind of lineage. But it's not quite so straightforward as a family line and that's what the work explores. I think of it in terms of disidentification, a concept that Judith Butler identified and was later developed by José Esteban Muñoz and others. The experience of standing underneath a sign that you simultaneously belong to and also don't - that there is more to identity than identifying either with or against a dominant culture. From my first visit to the foundation that was my prevalent experience: of a certain access to that space, but a difficulty also. It's such a bodily experience for me, being at the foundation, looking at those images, being with those men... it's so body-oriented and so physical. In that year that I had working on the project when I couldn't afford to go to LA, I began to think much more about my identity and the dichotomy of being queer, identifying as trans, and trying to understand my relationship to the home of a certain kind of image of masculinity.

*KG: This is something that you explore in the footage shot on the set that you built at Spike...*

**PS:** The crassest way of looking at it is that all the footage shot in LA at the foundation is me in-taking things and then the footage shot at Spike is me then pushing it back out again: it's this productive intake and excretion. Maybe a part of that is just about processing things in the way that I know, which is oriented around performance and choreography.

*KG: I think of the part of the film shot at Spike as clearly distinct from the foundation footage. It feels like a self-contained performance. It would be good to hear more about your approach to making this part of the work.*

**PS:** I started to think through this idea of a play, or a theatrical moment, which could unfold simultaneously to the documentary footage. It was about wanting to operate in two registers and to push them against each other. Exploring the potential authorities of both forms, but burrowing into the more supple moments of each. It feels a lot like making and undoing, or consuming and excreting, or making something very fixed through the documentary form and then making it very fluid again through the register of experimental theatre.

**KG:** *It's interesting that you're talking about it as a play. I've never heard you describe it so directly before – almost like it could have been a live performance. You had a set of scenes planned out and you worked through them, and what we have in the film is a relatively straightforward document of what happened live.*

**PS:** Yes, totally. I think that in this work, as in a lot of my work, I'm using dance, choreography and performance to think through how knowledge is exchanged between a group of people. Whether that's through notation and the historical ways that dances are passed down through generations or, in the context of my project for the Tanks at Tate Modern in 2012, much more about the way a group of people can build an improvised choreography from the ground up. How, if you spend enough time on something together it can start to take a form, which has a certain effect once an audience comes into that space. That's always driven my interest in dance and in dance training and performance. It's always been about how knowledge circulates and is manifested physically.

**KG:** *So you're talking about performance in terms of embodiment rather than physical proficiency and spectacle?*

**PS:** Yes, and that's very tied into gender theory, but also the writing of Michel Foucault, Beatriz Preciado, and the idea of the body as a living, political archive. For me that's totally tied into my queer and trans identity and understanding that my body carries an inherent set of registers that are scrambled. It's about constantly trying to understand what a body does and doesn't do, and can and cannot do, and in what way it is disciplined and what way it can wriggle out of those disciplines. But you inevitably wriggle out of one and into another. With choreography and dance, I've always been interested in how knowledge circulates in that context. In most dance forms there are very specific rules about who can teach a dance to whom and exactly where this authority is located.

**KG:** *You've mentioned before that Japanese Noh theatre was an important influence for you when you were working on the film. Could you explain why?*

**PS:** For the performance I really wanted to develop a relationship with an older actor: very much the type of man you would meet at the foundation. When we cast the actor it ended up being really important that he implicitly knew who Tom of Finland was; he's a bit of a daddy, he hangs out in those scenes and so he could *be* it. I wanted to understand, through a theatrical register, how knowledge, experience and power went back and forth between the two of us. I got very into Japanese theatre, Noh theatre in particular, mostly because, historically,

**KG:** *The idea of a dance form passed down through generations is very interesting in relation to what you've been saying about your relationship to the men at the foundation and intergenerational inheritance and, thinking about this through bodies, performance and knowledge.*

**PS:** Yes, in the film Francis - the actor - and I are working through the implications of our bodies in terms of that feedback loop that we were talking about earlier, where the image and the affect it produces happen almost in tandem. It really comes to a head in the third section of the film where Francis is moving my body for ages and then we suddenly jump into the scene of life drawing at the foundation. The dialogue afterwards – the boomerang of our clothing, make up and expressions and the one spoken line – is really the emotional pinnacle of the work. A friend referred to it as 'the kick in the gut.' The line that Francis speaks comes out of an experience I had. An older artist, a sort of mentor, scolded me once; implying that I should identify as a gay man and that I should feel a sense of responsibility to do so. The ways we choose to articulate our identities have ties to certain political affinities, but perhaps I'd never *felt* it as such a responsibility before, in terms of living an identity in order to honour an inheritance or lineage. And the pain of feeling and thinking, well, I don't identify in that way. Does that mean I am severing my ties?

**KG:** *The notion of identity as a privilege not a right?*

**PS:** I think for anyone who identifies as transgender but is not transsexual or choosing not to medically transition – if you're in any way on the borders of that, in the hinterlands of gender somehow – then people do see it as a choice and a privilege. To say I'm trans but to also be assigned male at birth and presenting pretty masculine – it's as if you're a kind of dilettante, or you're just a man playing with ideas. It's a very particular gap that a lot of people exist in. Society grants us very little freedom in our gender. 'I' am always in relation to 'you', which means the potential for flexibility around my gender identifications is only as malleable or fluid as 'you' will allow, to paraphrase Terre Thaemlitz. When we were watching the film in the gallery just now I had this moment when I realised that this whole work is about my own gender dysphoria: a complete gender meltdown.

**KG:** *In terms of your relationship to an older generation of gay men, represented by the foundation?*

**PS:** Yes, how I can be simultaneously part of this community and outside of it and how these images are or aren't meant to represent my sexuality and my identity. But also, am I meant to look after these images? They're important to me personally, and historically. Am

I meant to be the child of them? Is gay culture supposed to travel through me somehow? And what happens when these guys die? Where is this archive and this history going?

***KG:** The foundation works as a very powerful metaphor for these ideas about inheritance, especially the emphasis that you give to the building and how it's materially constituted: how it's like a family home for a set of ideas around identity and politics.*

**PS:** I think I was very drawn to spending time at the foundation because it felt like a nexus for a lot of issues I had been grappling with. We talk a lot in LGBTQ contexts of 'choosing our family'. We've said it together at the foundation before. In that context they have, and do, take in young guys because they've been thrown out of home. You could literally turn up there with a bag because you had nowhere else to stay. I feel like they're my funny inappropriate dads at this point! It is really familial and that house is really a home in that respect. The writing that I was doing in the early stages of working on the project was about how knowledge is inherited and passed down in a really particular way; that very particular types of knowledge exist within power play and BDSM. I wrote a text about being pissed on and the type of knowledge that's circulated through these roles. It comes back to my interest in choreography in that regard.

***KG:** We've talked about the influence of theatre and dance on the performative elements of the work but I also wanted to ask you about the set that you build for the shoot at Spike Island: your choices about the structure and the materials and how some of these elements have been translated into the installation of the film at Chisenhale?*

**PS:** For a few years now I've been interested in strategies from theatre and I've used them in my work. There's an aspect of that going on here. I was interested in highlighting certain materials, technologies and structures implicit in the house. My interest in unfinished plays and in partially constructed sets feels like it's really about the construction and deconstruction of identity through provisional or liminal moments. It's trying to feel out the work that is done to create a set of conditions.

The install is a continuation of what is being explored in the set. I knew with both that I wanted to extrapolate on the material associations that take place within the house. I also really wanted to investigate the pressing together of different materials. It's almost like a disidentification of the materials. It always really struck me at the foundation, being in this old wooden house, and having these really intense pencil drawings of leather in plastic wallets being looked after by guys wearing leather, who are obviously all flesh and hair, bad posture or paunchy stomachs... It feels the same to have rubber curtains



that lead you on to carpet underlay and then to have this structure that's like the beginning of something being built in the space. The structure that the screen is installed on could be the blueprint for building a wall in the gallery but rather than seeing the scaffolding as we're used to, we have this ephemeral clear plastic that catches and refracts the light from the film. It's so much about fixity versus fluidity. I was thinking of the installation in the gallery as an environment that holds you and can be incredibly luxurious or difficult. You can elicit so many different types of feeling with how you hold people, how you accommodate them, and I suppose I wanted to create a messy sort of care. I really like the idea of sitting uncomfortably on carpet underlay: something heavy on something soft and the kind of imprint this creates. This idea is most closely related to the sequence at the end of the film with the foam. Everything is touched by this ephemeral form and stained and soaked by it. The foam dies, it dissipates, but everything has been touched indefinitely from then onwards. In that moment it's like all of these feelings and all of these questions and all of that history are on everything and in everything.

***KG:** Finally, you're presenting this work, in which you evoke one organisation, the Tom of Finland Foundation – as a set of relations and ideas – within another organisation, Chisenhale Gallery. To what extent are you bringing these two organisations into relation with one another?*

**PS:** Organisations, from the Tom of Finland Foundation to Chisenhale Gallery, are as much about bodies as anything else. Institutions – the family, the foundation or others – are constituted organisationally, legally but also bodily. And as such they become about questions of legitimacy. Does presenting this work – this set of concerns – in the context of an exhibition at Chisenhale make it a legitimate endeavor? Does it make my identity a legitimate one? And if so, to whom and on what grounds? My conversations with Gil Leung about this have certainly been illuminating for me. In an interview we did recently for *Mousse* magazine we tried to think through some of this; that we are constituted by these materials, structures and histories, at least in part. For me, it becomes about intimacy, care and responsibility. It's more about the complexity of forming relationships under these conditions, rather than a process of deinstitutionalisation or the establishing of a counter-culture. The foundation has this complicated status. It's totally embedded in a particular history of queer culture but their mission statement has the inherent aim of increasing the mainstream visibility of non-mainstream subjects. It's always fraught. This remains an open and complex question.

*Patrick Staff interviewed by Katie Guggenheim, Exhibitions and Events,  
Curator, Chisenhale Gallery, February 2015. Chisenhale Interviews, series  
editor, Polly Staple, Director, Chisenhale Gallery.*