

Allsop, Laura, *Lucy Beech and Edward Thomasson: Together*,
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| REVIEWS | EXHIBITIONS |

Lucy Beech and Edward Thomasson: Together

Tate Britain London 25 April to 18 June

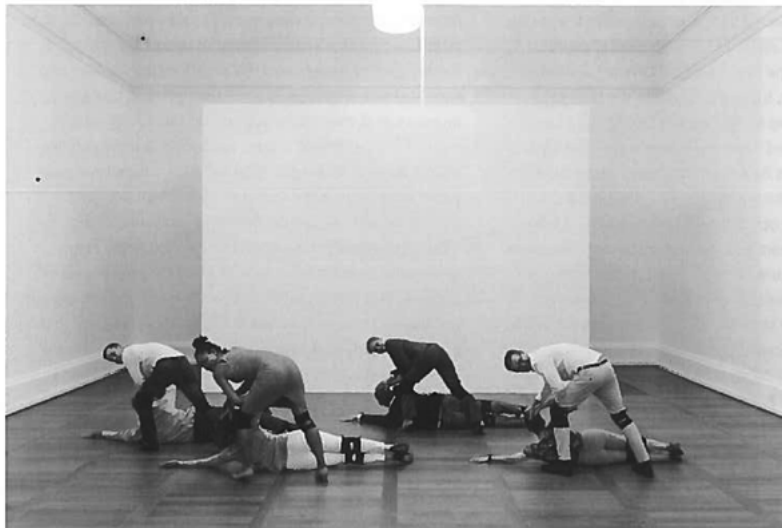
In Lucy Beech and Edward Thomasson's new performance piece *Together* and video companion *Together (Forever)*, presented at Tate Britain as part of its Art Now series, a complex choreography of theatrical combat and co-operation takes place. In the live performance, four couples emerge from behind a large white screen, each wearing kneepads over a combination of office-wear and smart-casual attire. One of each pair wears a radio mic, which they test accordingly. Grinning, they watch attentively as a female member of the group informs the audience that they are going to do some recording. One of the male performers is summoned and starts clicking his fingers into her microphone for just under a minute. 'Right, let's play that back,' she says. The performers all scramble to get in formation and suddenly the import of the kneepads becomes clear. Each member of each of the couples uses the other to make a series of jarring and faintly amusing sounds, which are also recorded: little exhalations; a belt snapped taut; a kneepad struck from behind; a jacket flung to the ground; a small empty plastic bottle crushed. These amplified sounds, layered over the clicking, are subsequently replayed as the team leader and her partner enact a sequence of physical shocks, variously throwing out legs and arms, reeling back or lying on their sides with their heads pulled up, perfectly timed to the noises produced by the group's previous movements. Then the other couples take centre stage, and reveal a mirror choreography of kicks and punches. The team leader and her partner then perform their gestures in the way of the others' simulated blows, which are delivered (and received) with comical gusto. Further variations of this choreography take place, set to an instrumental version of the Katy Perry song 'Firework': the main couple are playfully attacked by each couple in turn, then everybody takes it in turns to be aggressor and victim. Finally, as the music fades,

the performers all take on the role of victim. During this wind-down, their facial expressions become fractionally more muted, while one performer's backwards fall appears more rag-dollish than euphoric. At the end, smiles are exchanged and the performers take a bow.

Accompanying the performance, which is staged three times on Saturdays for the duration of the exhibition, the video *Together (Forever)* shows a slightly different variation of the work, screened in the gallery on a loop throughout the week. In the video, the performance takes place in front of a long white table covered with a white cloth, while the initial clicking is done by the team leader herself. There is no bow at the end. According to the exhibition information, the couples 'construct a safe space where they can reject social standards and express unspoken feelings' and 'as their actions play out, the gradual build-up of theatrical illusions seems to operate as a therapeutic exercise'. The closeness of the couples at the beginning and end carries a suggestion of couples' therapy, while their mostly smart-casual clothing could equally signal team-building activity.

The mood in both video and live performance is jubilant, even manic. Borrowing from theatre as much as games, the participants make it clear that they are enjoying themselves, and the spectacle is undoubtedly entertaining. Though shorn of vocals, the choice of *Firework* as a backdrop is apposite given the artwork's therapeutic overtones: the song's lyrics include the lines 'you're original, cannot be replaced' and 'come on show 'em what you're worth'. Catharsis is implied, the unstated undercurrents in life and work seemingly resolved through the logic of a game. A parallel reading, of course, is that such impulses are simply being massaged and harnessed in the service of a different kind of performance, one calculated to maximise productivity. As Jonathan P Watts notes while discussing William Davies's book *The Happiness Industry* in his essay 'Happiness Inc.' (*AM*391), 'Happy, healthy people = productive, profitable people'.

Some of the more intriguing moments in the choreography occur when a performer holds a pose slightly too long or deviates briefly from the rest. These could be the result of over-zealousness or momentary glitches but could also be small



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expressions of individuality in a subsuming structure. What is striking about the performance is how taut and compressed it is, how much is communicated through the build-up of successive layers and with such economy (the running time of the performance is approximately ten minutes). With 'wellness' and play increasingly co-opted as corporate strategies, *Together* acknowledges a bleed between intrinsic suspicion of such group exercises and admission of their value. The performers' smiles, directed at one another but also at the audience, raise the question: who is in on what? ■

LAURA ALLSOP is a writer and editor based in London.
