

Art

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Mohamed Bourouissa

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The Un-artist

Michael Corris

Practice

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DON'T

PERFORMANCE

Florence Peake: MAKE

The activity of transporting, moving, unpacking and installing sculpture is ever present at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, proceeding unobtrusively around the park, outdoors and indoors. It is a continuous performance, unnoticed until one chooses to focus upon it, rather like birdwatching. Huge lorries lumber quietly into the periphery of the park to offload massive sculptures, each bringing with it an equal mass of packing materials – wooden crates, polystyrene, foam rubber, cardboard, adhesive tape – all of which has to be removed and hidden away.

Florence Peake became aware of this unappreciated activity in 2010, when she was one of five artists to take part in a project conceived by artist Joshua Sofaer for the Live Art Development Agency in collaboration with the Yorkshire Sculpture Park to develop a 'bespoke proposal' for a new work related to the park. *MAKE*, a substantial live work produced in partnership with Dance Art Foundation, is the outcome of that process. Probably uniquely, it serves to reframe this hidden performative life of sculptural art objects and their carers.

It took place in the spacious gallery at Longside, in a far-flung part of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park empty between exhibitions. This is also where Arts Council England stores its sculpture collection. Unlike her previous solo and duo performance works, Peake does not perform in this work herself. It is for ten female performers, most, if not all, trained in 'movement practice'. At the beginning of *MAKE*, each performer takes one of a series of lengths of two-by-one timber that are leaning against the long wall behind them like an embryonic minimal sculpture and covers it completely using a roll of adhesive tape, each a different colour. Some performers complete this task quickly, others not quite so. No music accompanies the performance, nor does it incorporate any spoken text (as Peake has done in the past). But the performance is far from silent, and the loud sounds of adhesive tape being unrolled en masse, sonorously rending the echoing air of an empty art gallery, are both memorable and identifiable as sounds heard while packing a busy exhibition.

Duos and small groups of performers move to various points within the space, carrying with them one or more of the coloured sticks, arranging them carefully tip to tip in sculptural

ways, temporarily forming spatial-linear objects reminiscent of the abstract sculpture of, say, John Panton or George Rickey. At each configuration the performers holding the coloured sticks pause and pose, presenting the sculptural forms they have quickly made to us, the audience, for our appraisal and serious consideration – and it is quite possible to enter into that relationship. But there is also heavy irony in the air, a commentary upon the utmost seriousness which abstract sculpture of a certain kind must be accorded. Like Mel Brimfield (Reviews AM349) but in a different way, Peake pokes fun at the stereotype of the classic US male minimalist sculptors.

Three performers are singled out to be 'packed', gradually accreted like caddis fly larvae with pieces of cardboard, fragments of polystyrene, styrofoam balls, adhesive tape – the detritus of an exhibition installation. The three resultant totemic figures update the cubist costumes made by Picasso in 1917 for Satie's ballet *Parade*. Left alone, they move about blindly and clumsily, eventually keeling over. Forlornly, these encased figures allow themselves to be combined by the other performers into one large, completely objectivised sculptural monolith, from beneath which its reluctant inhabitants extricate themselves. To one side of this now inanimate object, the performers, as a group, repeat the actions characteristic of exhibition technicians but without tools. The 'sculpture' is dismantled (before it deconstructs itself), and as at the end of any exhibition installation or de-installation, the space is neatly tidied up, before the audience leaves.

Peake's artistic background is interesting. She trained formally as a dancer and currently teaches in that field. But she grew up in a family where the active professional practice of visual art was ever present, and she has had several solo shows of her paintings, drawings and sculpture. The objects which appear in Peake's performances are as important as the performers, and she aims to achieve a 'dialogue between animate and inanimate performers'. *MAKE* is described as having been 'choreographed', but it is not a piece of contemporary dance about sculpture – thank goodness. This is a parallel world of activity, one that is genuinely funny without trying too hard to amuse. Peake's performance work has lately featured ad-hoc objects cobbled together from brightly coloured things that seem to have been found in the skip round the back of a Staples store. She has referred to them as 'joke sculptures or mock sculptures that have infiltrated their way into the "white cube" gallery space'. Elsewhere she has said that the performers in *MAKE* are undertaking



performer taking part in Florence Peake's *MAKE*

'a continual task of framing and reframing both themselves and the space itself', which is what the exhibitions at Longside do. The specific context within which it was performed was crucial to the impact of this skilfully paced, meticulously devised, very engaging opus. During the performance at Longside, the canonical and literal weight of so much sculpture present in store nearby, but completely out of sight, was almost tangible. ■

Florence Peake's *MAKE* took place at Yorkshire Sculpture Park on 7 April.

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