

SOLO SITE: Sandra Johnston

By Clare Nattress

O U I Performance saw a welcomed return to York this week proudly presenting the work of performance artist Sandra Johnston. Situated in historic Bedern Hall, a 14th century building originally part of the College of the Vicars Choral of York Minster, Johnston presented a two hour durational work in response to the site.

Johnston is a visual artist from Northern Ireland, working in the areas of site-responsive performance, drawing and video installations. The performance actions are both creative and experiential in nature, developed from the direct revelations of a body inhabiting space, often with an interest in notions of territoriality and stimulated by the behaviour of random audiences. Each work is a search for fluidity and clarity in the present yet evanescent moment (Johnston, 2014).

Upon walking into the space, which has been renovated in more recent years, the audience is greeted with the best of the old and the new. A warm heat immediately surrounds the body, the flicker of a candle soothes and the situated horseshoe shaped table and chairs allow for comfort throughout the duration.

The artist sits peacefully centrally facing the audience and is surrounded by selected objects of familiarity. At one end of the horseshoe table to Johnston's left lies eight identical drinking glasses, two large candles one of which is burning, a silver bowl, an old flannel, a jug of water, white napkins and blackboard chalk. To Johnston's right, on the other side of the table lies numerous bird feathers all of variable sizes grouped in their similar lengths. At the table end a white powder is generously scattered spreading over the edge and continuing onto the floor adding to a veritable playground of items of which a story of interaction is undoubtedly about to take place.

After a short time the seated, artist begins to prise open her mouth with her fingers allowing us to become instantly engaged by the visceral and unflinching announcement of the performance. With gentle and unhurried motions she begins to slowly seemingly regurgitate a blueish liquid which trickles down her length and

collects on the stone floor below, injecting the room with a splash of previously unseen colour. In repeating this action, the artist's slight body begins to communicate with, and inhabit the space as well as captivate her audience.

She then moves over to her ample collection of feathers and begins to select and position them individually between her fingers until her hand is transformed into an other. The feathers become a visible extension of the body allowing Johnston to pass as something that she is not, that she can never be, but draws us into the world of visual acceptance. To add an extra dimension to the performance this new bodily extension is then regrettably introduced to the situated candle, beautifully combining two opposing textures. The feathers crackle as they ignite creating an orchestral element of sound, our senses are heightened further by the potent smell emanating around the room.

As the performance continues and Johnston engages more with the objects and substances surrounding her, such as the powder and candle wax, we become aware of the artists affection for using two opposing objects/matter to add a defining characteristic to her work.

Our understanding of interaction is then furthered as Johnston becomes more physically involved within the piece as she removes one leg from her dark coloured trousers and one arm from her dark top and ties the vacant material around her body. She lays face down onto the wooden table, half on and half off its surface with close proximity to her audience and holds on to its edges for some considerable time. Her seemingly fragile body is underestimated and her strength becomes apparent as the artist holds her ground. Inevitably though the leg muscles begin to rhythmically shake and her body succumbs to the pressure as she begins to slip and falls to the floor in a few short, sharp and dramatic motions all the while however maintaining a corporeal connection between her and the table as her foot remains intact in its original position until that too soon follows. This dynamic shift allows us to be captivated differently than before by combining a durational element and a physicality to Johnston's piece allowing us a more diverse understanding of the artists intentions.

To enhance our visceral engagement further a mass of feathers are collected soon after and forced into Johnston's mouth, too many to keep count. Her dry mouth is felt around the room and her actions provoke a response of choke throughout the audience. She positions herself with her body flush against the stone wall but with her face at an angle limited by what her mouth now clenches. She moves her body across the wall with an agitation that we have never witnessed, scraping the feathers along it as she goes allowing the two contrasting surfaces to be co-joined. We soon hear the sound of

snapping from the ones that have fallen victim to the action. Perhaps this action communicates Johnston's interests in space as we can draw similarities between her actions and the territorial actions of birds in marking out areas which they defend against others. We can also pinpoint in Johnston's work that there is often a sense of inventing privacy, then a 'precise protecting of its parameters' (Johnston, 2014)

Illuminating an element of repetitive composition, the artist again climbs upon the table but this time stands centrally with her back to the majority of the audience as she lifts one leg and aims to balance despite her shaking movements. Her foot slowly lowers between the join where the two tables meet hooking her toes around the edges as she grips on her way down. During her slow descent to the floor, her foot visibly weakens but she remains surprisingly balanced. Her movements on the situated furniture elucidate her innate ability to communicate with the specifics of the room and defines her ability to apply a physical attribute to her performances and an overwhelming concentration of purpose.

The performance, despite only pinpointing particular elements here, was mesmerizing. Her interests in exploring concepts of human-scale monuments and creative actions that exist on the cusp of public visibility, both as artworks in themselves and as activist interventions, were evident and intimately explored. Even though each individual performance is invented, and tuned to the specifics of the space and country that has commissioned it, I feel I was introduced to the breadth of artistic processes that underpin her practice.

Artist detail

Johnston has presented work internationally since 1992 in a diverse range of contexts and interdisciplinary forms, including representing Northern Ireland at the Venice Biennale in 2005.

Recently she has performed for audiences in galleries in Finland, Denmark, Poland, Romania, Israel, Spain, Norway and Ireland. York was certainly lucky to witness the performative nature and creative interventions of Sandra Johnston practice with her visceral engagement with materials having a profound effect on the audience.

Writer detail

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