

T E N

Denys Blacker

In 2015, I received an invitation from Victoria Gray and Nathan Walker to make a performance with Lee Hassall for OUI Performance, in the Guildhall in York, a stone building originating from the 15th century to house the city's guilds.

The ten columns in the hall are shaped from individual oak tree trunks, cut down in their prime. They are replacements after the original hall was bombed in 1942 by the Luftwaffe in the so called Baedeker raids. This is known as a haunted hall. Although we had both prepared a performance to be made consecutively we eventually make the work simultaneously for a duration of three hours.

The time and space are agreed ahead of time. The objects, imagined and crafted, the event anticipated. There is a feeling for the future.



The starting point for my performance is the number **ten**; **Ten** oak trees, said to live for a thousand years.

The number ten in the I Ching is Lü and translates as Treading or Respectful Conduct; there is an element of caution; "treading upon the tail of the tiger" or "the small and cheerful (Tui) treads upon the large and strong (Ch'ien)".

Number ten in the periodic table corresponds to the noble gas neon. Neon is named from the Greek word "neos" or new. It is lighter than air and extremely volatile.

The tenth of March 1586 is the day that Margaret Clitherow was arrested and brought before the Council of York, accused of harbouring Catholic priests. She refused a trial in order to protect her children from being called to give evidence against her. She was sentenced to "peine forte et dure" right here in the Guildhall, guilt hall.

They placed a sharp stone "as much as a man's fist" under her back and laid a door on-top of her. This was piled with heavy weights until she broke to death fifteen minutes later in the tollbooth on Ousebridge. We visited the shrine to her, "the Pearl of York" at number ten, Shambles, this morning before the performance.

Treading lightly. Respectful Conduct.

I had imagined that I would be alone in the hall, my objects set between the ten columns. Now as we commence our pieces, another idea begins to emerge. We have, without talking, begun to work. There is an unspoken agreement to leave the objects where they have been unpacked, a consent born from a curiosity to find out what happens next; interpresence. I unwrap the fine paper-like porcelain pieces and place them



on the floor. Thirty-nine fine strips in a row, then the ten moon-plate-discs. Papery white porcelain, white cloth, white stick, white wool, white gloves, white jersey. This must all be handled carefully to avoid breaks or stains. White as a pearl. There are peripheral witnesses to our pondering first steps. Their supportive presence allows for a fast deepening of focus.

I can feel my mother too, even when I can't see her. We two are bound by a cellular memory deeper than the rational.

On a dark wooden trestle, Lee is balancing a thin wooden bar, then three acid yellow lemons. A chair-back-step-ladder that is not for sitting or climbing rests on a wooden platform. A selection of shillelagh, whittled and polished are on the floor. The wood of these objects reflects the colour of the magnificent oak columns holding up the roof of the Guildhall with its carved bosses. Instruments and tools lie in readiness

for a bizarre operation; perhaps for a medieval extraction procedure or as a prosthesis for a strange creature. White latex gloves, iron, wool and stone all placed in readiness. A green man, foliage erupting from his mouth looks down at us from the ceiling.

I lay out the canvas triangle that will be pulled taut between two of the columns, like Margaret's hands pulled outwards in the shape of a cross from underneath the door. "Jesu, Jesu, Jesu, have mercy on me" were her last words. We saw her right hand in St Mary's Covent this morning; relic, respect. The past is weighing down in the Guildhall.

I need all this to move upwards, weightless.

White gloves with scraping knife-nails, to be filled with warm



flesh, light touch on the stone walls. Without any previous agreement, we have both brought white gloves for that cold hand.

The space we have decided to share is drawn by our gaze, "the eye of the eye, the breath of the breath", the trust is blind. Connecting and reconnecting, coming close together, then a sharp turn inwards without letting go of this fragile thin line that we have traced between us for this agreed time. We calibrate.

The objects emanate their own design. Moved to and by them, we occupy the space. There is a time that is not ours but theirs. Condensed in this material, forgotten trains of thought are reconstituted, brought to the present and resumed, travelling a new journey of associations into a yet undiscovered landscape. We're taking time to become

acquainted with their intent.

I register the arrival of people in the quiet. Doors opening and closing, clothes rustling. We are avoiding each other's eyes now. There's only this instinctive knowing, gently nurtured and held within, and the sense that it may be lost if disturbed. From now on, we will be accompanied alone together, eyes in the back of our heads. This kind of intimacy is not personal, it's a 360° spatial agreement, dwelling together in cohabitation, inter-habitation, intra-habitation. The seconds, minutes, hours mean nothing.

This consented time, in this place, is for as long as it takes. Synchrony can be like a deep black river, what is below the water can hit you unprepared. So you must pay heed and catch it coming, by listening lightly, sensing the other.



But now my mind's off. I'm walking around the space drawing out a stone to stone vibration on the white polished flagstones with a porcelain sword.

The visitors are here now, standing close to the walls, following with their eyes. I take the ball of white wool and stand amongst them, watching. I thread the wool through the eye of a needle and place the needle between my teeth. Biting down hard, I lay the ball on the ground and take aim, kicking it hard with my foot. The ball curls across the room, unravelling in a zigzag.

On my back, cold to cold, I'm winding white wool onto white stick, round and round the ball spins back behind me. Rolling here and there, directed by an invisible hand tracing a path that I feel but can't see. I have only this task, it was clear in my mind's eye before I began. I'm in no hurry to end. The sense that I have, of someone else at my shoulder, is not mine alone.

They're also looking at the unrestrained ball of wool. I am winding in the thoughts, winding into the next moment.

Taking up the white canvas sail, I fit my face into the cloth, made to measure; porcelain beak pointing down, scraping the floor. Now on my face, now on my head.

I have the white circles laid out in the middle of the space. My shoes are off like Margaret's, who sent hers to her daughter in a symbolic act "follow in my footsteps".

This is going to be a cold walk. Step by step, I tread with bare feet on thin sheets. Lü; the strongest and the weakest are close together. Two steps forward, one step back. I try to levitate as I put my foot down onto the porcelain. I think about them not cracking, but they do. I'm trying lightness by intention,



wanting upwards, but my body's still fighting gravity. There are nine of them. I left the tenth one out. The first one is broken. Failure; one down, eight to go.

I want to levitate, but to be weightless I need to try harder not to try. Step back.

Now I touch the ancient walls with knife hands, delicate line between stone and mortar. Whispering walls, hand receiving indecipherable vibrations. They move out of my way silently, watch your back!

I go to the white circles. This is my place of regeneration. I'll come here to concentrate. Mind and body willing. I'm still failing to float my body upwards, like noble gas. Three down, six to go.

I know he's there but I hardly see him, just for brief moments;

fresh egg poised on wood, mouth on egg, teeth around lemon. Black birds wings. We both want to be in flight. Mirrored by a chalk line drawn faintly, I take a moment's stand, arm and intention pointing upwards.

I try to hang the cloth between two of the columns. I've measured it but for some reason now it's too short. I climb up the ladder and try to pull it to fit. It's not going to work. I pull again, the porcelain cracks. The stitching tears and I manage to hang it on the hooks above me.

My face is covered. I push out the white wing with my head. Head suspended I try to see myself gliding. White sail waiting to be converted into bird in half flight, pulled upwards, probing beak to the sky and down to the ground.

Then to the circles. I'm almost sure to break them: two steps



forward three steps back. Six down, three to go.

Failure is part of the agreement with myself. I feel the porcelain crack, like Margaret's ribs, on the ball of my foot, bone on bone sending the fracture upwards.

I take up the white jersey and pull the long neck over, over, over and over my head. It's tightening round my throat, rolls of cloth pushing my head away from my shoulders. Hoping skywards, like neon, so light that it flows away from the earth, into the universe.

I'm on the porcelain circles, not much thicker than an egg shell, cracking them like the lightning that is said to hit the oak tree more than any other; igniting. Lightning strike, lightning up, but still bearing down, unbearable weight.

Eight down, one to go.

Person to person, I make an out of focus scan around the room and stop on him, young, leaning away from me, legs crossed. Pulling up the cloth over my eyes up above my head, I step towards him, arms stretched out. I know what I want, but I don't want to assume anything about this young man who I don't know. His reticence is mine too.

I step back away from him, his hands holding on to the cloth. The neck unfolds and begins to slip back over my head, our connection growing. Backing off, I know he's still holding on but I can't see him and my ears are filled with the susurrus of cloth on cartilage. I let the jersey unwrap from my body, my arms, my head, my burning ears, emerging dishevelled. Face to face, amicable.

Picking up the two knives, fitting in my hands like ball and socket.



I'm going back to the circles, feet stepping failure, every time. Pointing down with the knife-tips, I press into an unbroken circle. I want to hear it fracture, and fragment, stoneware on porcelain, punished for its fragility and for not collaborating. I'm tired and not disposed to trying again.

All down, none to go. I'm on the journey out.

I turn and look across the hall, then bend down and with a twist of wrist, slide the second knife fast across the floor towards him. Retracing the line our eyes drew, spinning, singing, it veers to the left, missing his legs and hits an upright wooden pole.

The pole flies, the porcelain breaks. That's done now. Leaning in towards the oak, the duir, I press the knife-point against this rootless, branchless tree, leaning on it, tensing abdominals, breath held. It's not opening. He's down again

though, this time face up and weighed down with wood and stone. The hessian folded protection means he's thinking about Margaret but he's not splitting his sides, ribs broken. Thank God we failed.

I give way to the simplicity of not knowing, feeling it arrive like a ghostly possession, pressure released. Face into cloth, fragile proboscis grazing stone, I'm looking into the dark.

Letting go of weightlessness, taking 360° back to a tiny point on the floor.

I slip the cone onto my right hand, precious as a relic, then to my belly leaning against the oak for leaning's sake.

I cross the room towards Lee, eye to eye, thought to thought,



we are erasing the line we sought to hold for this consented time. Coming out of this space is like going in, eyes in the back of the head, decompressing.

Treading lightly. Respectful Conduct.

I'm leaving the hall with a stone to stone vibration behind me in this oak grove of the failed in-between.

The time and space were agreed ahead of time. The objects have been used and transformed.

The event is over.

There is a sense of the past.

Denys Blacker, Madremanya, 2016

Photos: Nathan Walker & Amy Norris.