

At least, there are still performances

By Marianne Mulvey

I have been invited by artists Laura Eldret and Sarah Williams to write alongside their exhibition *The Multiplicity of a Moment*, 2010. The text can be anything I want, and having considering their open invitation, the latent performativity and comic timing of their objects, I decided to tell you something that happened on London's South Bank, almost eight years ago – I cannot quite remember. It is a story about a performance that did not move, or to put it another way, a sculpture that performed, and how in the end both were broken. I like this story because it articulates something about performance and stillness, the experience of watching nothing happen, some sugar dissolving slowly in a glass, which moved me. I hope you like it too.

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South Bank, London, a warmish day in early autumn, perhaps as long ago as 2003. We ambled along from London Bridge towards Tate Modern; and all of a sudden there she was, swathed in white sheets, frozen, gesturing towards the little crowd that had gathered to watch. In her left hand she grasped fake flowers, while the right held another bunch up to brush her whitened cheek. The paint on her skin was hastily and badly applied, still showing fleshy pink around the nostrils and palms; this was no seasoned street performer, no theatre graduate used to the routine rigour of making up for a daily show. Poorly dressed underneath her bed-linen robes, a pair of charity-shop trainers peeped from beneath the long skirt, and an old piece of cloth covered her head around which more plastic blooms had been bent into a wreath, so that the whole effect was something of a poor man's Botticelli.

In her sombre face, Florence's sweet eyes were ever so gently and sadly sagging at the sides, and I caught a glimpse of what my sister might look like when she grew older. Shut tight from concentration, perhaps this pose allowed her to focus on keeping still without so much as a blink? I certainly hadn't seen another living statue with eyes so tightly closed before, and I'd passed many, always irritated by their knack of causing unnecessary pedestrian congestion. Despite her poor attire, it was clear to those gathered that Florence's technique was second to none: standing atop her blue crate, deep in meditation she radiated stillness. For a whole twenty minutes she did not move a flicker, during which time many people drifted past, pausing to marvel at her quiet talent and leaving coins for the struggling statue. Captivated by her unflinching composure some drew in, staring intently at her face to detect some sign of life. Coming closer too, we investigated her delicate hands, how perfectly unmoving they were; I wanted to touch them and feel their coldness, the hard plastic flowers they precariously held in an unusually loose grip – but I daren't extend my fingers. Florence/*Flora*, 2003 was a work of art. The people around us gasped at her ability, and we – the artist, my sister and I – smiled knowingly to ourselves.

But standing next to Florence as she looked at herself cast in wax, I nervously wondered whether anyone would notice the resemblance of this pretty girl to the sad looking waxwork masquerading as flesh and blood? Would they find us out, as we watched them watching her... when all of a sudden the statue began to shudder gently in the breeze. With their inanimate wobble, in the end it was those hands that gave her away – not the strange angle of her right wrist, or little finger held unnaturally taught – but their vulnerability to the light zephyrs coming off the Thames.

'She's not real, look at her hands!' exclaimed a spectator, realising that the object of his intent and fascinated gaze was in fact, just an object. Unbeknownst to the passing trade, *Flora*, 2003 by artist Rory Macbeth had been cleverly constructed from a wax face and hands – cast from my own dear sister – attached to an old mannequin, cheaply painted and dressed, and placed on the river bank next to Tate Modern where she was earning something in the region of £20 an hour.¹ We promptly retreated to sit on a wall and watch the spectacle from a safe vantage point, where Rory suggested a pint from the pub next door, and, stealthily creaming off several pound coins from the collection in *Flora's* shabby basket, he sauntered off to the bar.

What changed when the audience found out that this living statue was not a street performer at all, but a performing sculpture? In fact there was no angry uprising, no outing and routing of the artist and his two conspirators, as I had anticipated. The whole scene was rather innocuous: those who realised were as intrigued by this new proposition for entertainment provided by the waxwork, as they had been fascinated by the living statue's incredible stillness. Eventually getting bored and moving on, they made way for a new bunch of spectators. But as the wind gradually picked up, the newly arriving audience could not rebuild that perfect moment of charade. Soon we realised the performance was over, and with Rory hoisting *Flora* over his shoulder, we made our exit stage left to a side street where the artist's white hearse was parked up and waiting.

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Thinking back to what we were looking at that afternoon, I'm left wondering where the performance was – was it the statue with her delicately curling fingers that would not let go? Or was it a private show performed by passers-by, who, playing their parts as enthralled and appreciative audience for the artist, his muse and her sister, unwittingly paid for their interval refreshments? We – they – were all gathered staring at something that did not move. Entertained by *Flora's* seeming skill, the pleasure of the crowd increased the longer she stayed still, and was punctuated only when a sudden gust of wind caused the statue to shake unnaturally. In this type of cheap street theatre that *Flora* was mimicking, it is the performer's non-movement that produces the entertainment, which, depending on their ability might be valuable enough for us to remunerate them with a little loose change.

¹ As Rory Macbeth remembers of that day, it was not long before *Flora* had paid for her own production.

When such stillness erupts in the theatre however, having paid for one's seat, it is not so easy to watch. In a recent paper given at Other Durations, part of the week-long Performing Idea Symposium at Toynbee Studios held last month, Bojana Kunst described the difficulty in viewing choreographer Eszter Salamon's 2007 dance performance *Nvsbl*, where four female dancers advance so slowly across the stage, as to render their movement imperceptible: 'their bodies seem to slide from one flickering image to another, but cannot be retained in the memory.'² As philosopher Cristina Demaria also writes of this work, 'they are not so much composing figures as being figures, apparently motionless but actually changing. Figures that become [...] at times also laboriously alienating for a public [...] as we try to watch *Nvsbl*'.³ I like very much this 'trying' to watch. Demaria envisions an audience working surprisingly hard to calmly observe bodies as tense with stillness as they are themselves; so unlike the riverbank tourists, or the gallery viewer who self-determines how much time to spend looking.

Unpacking the tension between watching and waiting, another speaker in the symposium, Lara Shalson, used philosopher Henri Bergson's example of watching sugar dissolve in a glass of water to think through the sometimes painful experience of durational performance art:

If I want to mix a glass of sugar and water, I must, willy-nilly, wait until the sugar melts. This little fact is big with meaning. For here the time to wait is not that mathematical time which would apply equally well to the entire history of the material world [...] It coincides with my impatience, that is to say, with a certain portion of my own duration, which I cannot protract or contract as I like. It is no longer something thought, it is something lived. It is no longer a relation, it is an absolute. What else can this mean than that the glass of water, the sugar, and the process of the sugar's melting in the water are abstractions, and that the Whole within which they have been cut out by my senses and understanding progresses [...] in the manner of a consciousness?⁴

For Bergson the scientific process of the sugar and water mixing into a sweet solution is merged with our own perception of it, to become an experience of duration. In her paper, Shalson described how in its not-yet-clear state the water and gently swirling sugar granules is the site of all our frustration, desire and boredom. To try and watch this happen, as Demaria 'tries' to watch *Nvsbl*, awakens our desire for it to have happened already, but the frustration of waiting for something happen with no perceptible progress made, is totally boring. And still, we watch and wait; here Shalson aligns Bergson's sugary water with witnessing durational performance work, where watching 'nothing' unfold, an audience or individual may feel 'dispossessed'⁵ of time, that the performance has taken up too much time, that it has wasted our time.

Augusto Corrieri's *Photographs of a dance rehearsal*, is another such work that pushes the limits of patience, but in a rather different direction. First shown at the Camden Arts Centre in 2008, the work is a three-hour performance installation, where 'a group of professional dancers execute actions and movement sequences' inside a room closed from view. Whenever a visitor opens the door to enter the space, the dancers freeze in whatever position they find themselves in. Rather than enforcing an uncomfortable experience of duration on the spectator, as the artist describes *Photographs of a dance rehearsal*, 'plays with eluding' her. Meddling with the 'basic rule of the theatre, [that] a show begins once the audience arrives, and ends when the audience leaves', and our expectations as cultural consumers who have made the trek to Camden Arts Centre, Corrieri simply denies his audience the experience of a good show, by ending it as soon as they get there. The performance 'offers' instead a teaser of what the audience has missed – cries overheard as they approach the room, the gentle landing thud of a dancer mid-leap when they enter, and the 'spectacle of trembling-dancing bodies' that heavy-breathe in recuperation as the audience walks in and amongst them.⁶ Left to imagine what they might have seen, the only thing given to watch are the dancers' super human efforts at keeping still after bouts of aerobic exercise.

The micro-movements of Corrieri's quivering bodies brings me back to the story of Flora's malfunctioning movement as she shook in the breeze, which I want to (mis)align with some final thoughts on duration from Bojana Kunst: 'Duration becomes apparent when something does not work, stops or hardly moves... [duration] shows that we ourselves are actually not moving but are being moved, that our inner perception of time (the time of someone who freely and flexibly projects their own subjectivity) is in fact heavily socially and economically conditioned.'⁷

Flora's success as street performer that day was not insignificant – she made nearly £200 – but it was contingent on her object-ness being kept under wraps. It was only by behaving like all good objects should (and I include here the art objects in *The Multiplicity of a Moment*) and keeping still, that she worked as a living statue, objectified by the audience's gaze. Like all good street performers however, she eventually gave something away – though it was not a wink or a hand-blown kiss to reward her attentive audience – but an unexpected wavering in the wind, that in turn gave her away as an object. Having happily forgotten the time lost in their contemplation of the living statue, at this moment I suspect the small audience gathered became very aware of *their* time (and perhaps money) spent watching a statue (hence our hasty retreat). Any number of feelings could have ensued – anger, embarrassment, amusement and further curiosity – but when Flora lost control of her composure, it caused everybody present to call their own bodies into check: just what had they been doing gawping at a statue all this time? In fact it was Flora's accidental *movement* that broke her charade of living, breathing stillness and remembered time, bringing duration into the equation and reminding us that we, as Kunst says, are 'not moving but [...] being moved'. In the end it was some other process of water and air that intervened into this multiple moment of performing and watching and waiting, that moved us, as it so often does, on to elsewhere – the light breeze coming off the Thames.

² Bojana Kunst, *Duration as Non-functioning: How Time Can Dispossess*, an unpublished paper given at Other Durations, part of the Performing Idea Symposium at Toynbee Studios, London, October 2010.

³ Cristina Demaria, <http://www.eszter-salamon.com/WWW/nvsbl.htm>

⁴ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, Random House, Inc., 1944, page 12-13.

⁵ Bojana Kunst also spoke of duration as a dispossession of time that we feel when faced with something – performance art or otherwise – that breaks down, goes slow or doesn't work at the speed we're accustomed to, 'the duration literally intervenes into the subject that witnesses this halt. It appropriates the subject's inner feeling of time; the subject feels that he has been dispossessed, that he needs to slow down and wait.' Op. cit.

⁶ Augusto Corrieri, 2008 <http://www.augustocorrieri.com/eng/photosdancerehearsal.html>

⁷ Bojana Kunst, op. cit.