
Performance

Hester Reeve: YMEDACA

Hester Reeve is zooming around the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in a Gator truck dressed in a beige goddess-like artist's smock, hair streaming in the wind. She is dispensing flasks of tea and coffee to outlying groups participating in her project to transform the YSP into a contemporary version of Plato's 'Academos', YMEDACA. Plato was unforthcoming about the exact nature of his proto-academy except that it took place in a 'large garden'. Reeve has taken this blank template and mapped into it a one-day conceptual sculpture, proceeding from dawn to dusk. She has not added to YSP's already considerable complement of massive sculptures; rather, she has created a transparent overlay of assigned meeting places and other topographical synapses where knowledge could flourish. So, it's a 'pop-up academy', if we must call it that, though it has taken shape far from instantly.

One building in a cluster of otherwise empty 1960s structures at the park, once part of Bretton Hall College, still houses the National Arts Education Archive, now in the care of YSP. It is a valuable but curious aggregation of disparate historical collections, among which Reeve found the similarly unclassifiable private book collection of the polymath artist, curator and educator Philip Rawson (1924-1995). For this project, Reeve redesignated the Archive's exhibition space as a 'Temple of the Muses'. Here are invoked the spirits of Martin Heidegger, Raymond Roussel and Herbert

Read in the form of further inspiring items she uncovered in the Archive. Reeves has also re-presented Rawson's books here for the public to read, as YMEDACA's 'central library'. They form a tower of bookshelves from the interior of which the sound of cicadas intermittently emerges (according to Plato, cicadas were inspired by the muses to sing ceaselessly).

Stationed around the park are the members

of seven regional groups of enthusiasts and serious amateurs, all prepared to present actions and enter into discourse related to the Platonic question, 'how can education link to the joy of the soul?' Astronomers, naturalists, traditional handtool users, stage magicians, the British Legion, pagans and a choir – each group's activities are matched with one of Plato's Academic precepts. The Handtool Users United, for example, are concerned with 'Practices of Transcendence over the Mundane', which in their case takes the form of the scything of reeds by the lake. But what sounded like a guest list of off-kilter British eccentrics was really not that at all. During my day spent locating them in the park and conversing with them, I met, without exception, rational, independent, quietly passionate people. I left every encounter buzzing with ideas – inspired, even.

A separate prefatory exhibition in the YSP's visitor centre presented a series of staged photographic tableaux depicting some unspecified ritual undertaken by these seven groups and their appointed 'Guardians' (Plato's appellation for a holder of true knowledge). Reminiscent of Romantic history painting, each nocturnal image features the shadowy form of one of the YSP's collection of large-scale sculptures, like a totemic menhir. In every photograph the artist, in her assumed identity as 'the Theosarch', is shown asleep or in suspended animation, lying on a park worker's trolley in long gown and ludicrous metal helmet – like a character in an Edwardian civic pageant.

There is a side to Reeve's practice that warmly embraces a British sense of the absurd. There is also often present in her work a nicely accomplished scattering of retrospective elements, suggesting that she may feel that the unalloyed spirit of exaltation often engendered by less reserved earlier manifestations of performance art and alternative culture would





be worth reclaiming. Attending the naturist life-drawing class that was part of YMEDACA, I could not help recalling Jennifer Binnie's Neo-Naturist performances of the 1980s. The photographic tableaux described above could be



Hester Reeve YMEDACA 2014 performance at Yorkshire Sculpture Park

LP covers for the Incredible String Band circa 1969.

Equally a live artist, graphic artist, sculptor, philosopher and fine art lecturer, Reeve's practice resists categorisation. Her work always succeeds in sidestepping the most predictable tropes of current live art and participative art. Particularly distinctive is the hands-on graphic framework of inked line drawings and handwritten texts within which her projects are framed. But she will also tell you, with only a touch of irony, that she devised this project solely to provide a means for her to read Plato properly. With YMEDACA, Reeve has evidently borne in mind Read's inaugural address as the first Fellow of Bretton Hall College in 1961: 'The only property I am asked to share with you is that of knowledge or experience, and I come to you with the intention, not only of giving, but also of receiving.' ■

Hester Reeve's YMEDACA was performed at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield, 30 August.

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