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INFINITE OPERA

On the 3rd March, 2020 we had the pleasure of hosting an event Nocturnes: Ethereal Science / Constructing Beauty as part of our Barber Lates programme. This event asked Infinite Opera to make a response to the Barber's recently acquired Constructivist sculpture, 'Linear Construction in Space No. 1' (1942–43), by the Russian artist Naum Gabo in the recent exhibition 'Cornwall as Crucible'.

Infinite Opera is a Birminghambased opera troupe, creating new works to explain and describe the wonders of our universe through the art form of opera.

We use this opportunity to look back upon Infinite Opera's performance and ask them to share with us their reflection that you can read below.



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We (Infinite Opera) were asked to create an artistic and musical response to the piece Linear Construction 1.

During my research of Naum Gabo I soon found his Realism Manifesto, created in collaboration with his brother (Arthur Pevsner). This laid out a constructivist approach to sculpture and the visual arts. It seemed that most of Gabo's work since writing this was imbued with the affirmations of the manifesto. Linear Construction in Space No. 1 seemed particularly to embody a lot of the manifesto.

Daniel and I decided to structure the piece in a way that would include the entire gallery space, as well as the exhibition space itself. In order to achieve this we decided to split the event into two parts. The first would consist of a parade around the gallery space, and the second would be a kind of ritual in the exhibition space and in front of the sculpture.



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PART 1 - THE PARADE

During the parade I decided to make use of the manifesto whilst also providing a chronological theoretical background of the philosophy that underpins the manifesto. The reason for making the text chronological was to reflect the gallery itself as that takes a chronological journey from Renaissance to 20th century works.

The text for this part has two interweaving sections. These are the "Manifesto Statements", which describe everything being renounced and affirmed by the artist, and the introduction of different philosophers and their ideas to the audience. The "Manifesto Statements" are to be delivered spoken in a very bombastic and authoritarian style, while the introduction of philosophers is sung on a melody composed (by Dani) in response to the sculpture. The performance of the sung sections is far more humble and plaintive. The spoken manifesto also includes some interaction and direct communication, almost discussion, with the audience.

The philosophers I chose in response to Gabo's work and writings were: Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant, Schopenhauer and Einstein. Plato is referenced in Gabo's understanding of form as abstract. Aristotle's question of how different elements within a form can be more or less informed (i.e. a brick in a wall or a whole house) is reflected in Gabo's use of materials to create 3-D volumes. Aquinas' description of some elements of the form as accidental and based on individual perception (such as colour), are very directly referenced in Gabo's manifesto. Kant lays the groundwork for future discourses such as phenomenology, all of which discuss the ideas around the real external world and the projected human mind. This was a key development towards constructivist artistic ideals. Schopenhauer describes how our actions are manifestations of "the will" which relates to the fluid and kinetic nature of Gabo's work, in which there is an emphasis on moving from moment to moment. Finally Einstein's work laid the mathematical and theoretical structures for the development of string theory which has clear connections to Gabo's description of mass as moving energy (or moving strings).

The costume for this was a simple grey dress with 5 string-like strips of black material sewn on to reflect the Gabo sculpture.

The bell used is a clear glass bell. This was used to reflect Gabo's use of transparent materials which help to mix light with mass.



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PART 2 - THE RITUAL

For this section I had two print outs, both measuring 116 cm x 116 cm. One of these I had cut into pieces. The lines I had cut were shaped so they would appear almost like a series of petals surrounding a the central piece. The central piece is a similar shape to the centre of the sculpture but smaller. This was also aiming to reflect the Barbara Hepworth study - Oval Form with Strings (1960) The words are all words I had chosen from my research about Gabo, his life and his work.

During the ritual, whilst arranging the jigsaw, I sang the text on top of the strings, and spoke the text in the middle. To signal to the musicians that I was moving between speaking and singing I again used the bell.

REFLECTION

Upon reflection I was able to notice that we had structured the piece with 3 elements which could relate very well to the artwork. Firstly there was the physical structure of the piece (the parade leading to the exhibition) which is relatable to the perspex frame. Secondly there was the music played by the musicians. The musicians were arranged so that they were spread across the gallery. This meant that as the audience follows the performer (in this case myself) around the gallery the different

instruments become louder and softer as they move closer or further away from them. Eventually the audience are led to a part of the gallery where all of the musicians are distant. In this respect the musicians and the sound of the music was representative of the nylon strings that are wound around the perspex. Finally the central performer (the singer) is the point of focus and represents the way your eye is drawn around the sculpture. In this sense we were attempting to capture the kinetic within a static piece, just as Gabo achieves in his work.

Through the recreation of the image below in Part 2, I was able to arrange the cut outs to reflect a drawing in the exhibition that looks almost like a study for this sculpture, even though it was drawn by Barbara Hepworth.

For this part of the performance I felt that there needed to be some extra element of tension that was missing. During the arrangement of the jigsaw I felt a lot of pressure as the performer to put the pieces together in the right way. I felt that with further work this pressure and release could be transferred to the audience in a more obvious manner.

The construction of the image, which in the end is a fragmented and new version of the original was a metaphorical representation (through performance) of the dichotomy between perception and reality. The outcome of the performance saw the stress of the performer, and pressure of the performance, leading to a deformed and twisted version of the original. In this I was depicting something missing from the manifesto - how our psychological states will affect the perceived form and structure of objects and images.



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I have found that researching and contemplating the work and philosophies of Naum Gabo have helped me to further understand and develop the way I view my own practice. The fully constructivist approach is extremely relevant to my work. Going back to Bourdieu and his theories of habitus I have been able to use archetypes and mythology as a means to transfer information on complicated topics. Understanding the psychology behind some of the reception of the stories I produce, and the way the characters are portrayed, will provide key frameworks through which I can write and perform.

Thinking about Gabo in relation to Aristotle's concept of form has helped me to consider which elements of the form are the most important to create the right overall impression. In this I mean finding a way to store the information in the form of the work without providing too much information (e.g. information of each and every brick making up the whole wall or a blurry image of what might be a brick wall but could equally be a barrier of any other form). By working with a visual artist and a composer I am expanding the elements of form that can store the information. It is however important that the work I produce is able to transfer the elements of form I have chosen to be important to my collaborators. In order to ensure this I am keeping them updated of all my conceptual progressions and research, via email.

Parts of the manifesto also highlight the inefficacy of superficial elements to really inform the perceiver of the essence of an object. For example the colour of a chair does not affect our understanding of a chair as a chair. This has highlighted to me the importance of going beyond the surface level interpretation of the science I am working with. For example I had initially experimented with creating poetic metre based on the data and sequences generated from the telescopes. Upon further reflection I have decided that this approach adds nothing to the audience's understanding of the science and that it is far more important that I focus on embedding, the principles behind the data collection, and processing, rather than embedding the data itself.

The story I am currently working on is a creation story and in the process of research I am researching creation stories throughout history. Many of these (especially Hindu) express the initial world as sound - i.e. as energy rather than matter. This is connected to Gabo's Manifesto as he rejects static rhythms in preference to kinetic rhythms. This is in turn reflected in the work of Einstein and the following String Theorists who assert all matter can be described as energy or vibration.



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INFINITE OPERA PERFORMANCE SCRIPT

PART 1: PROMENADE AROUND THE GALLERY.

Begin in the space outside the entrance to the gallery. Before starting inform the audience of the manifesto and ring the bell.

PART 1

Sung. Singer can fit as many or as few of each words onto each block of melody. The singer is also allowed to improvise around this text and embellish or remove parts as feels necessary with the audience present. For this first section stand at the front of the gallery near the paintings of Daphne and Apollo.

Eidos - Form.

An armature of reality
Space forged from time
From Plato the constructed chair
To which our thought is directed
The energy of mind looking outside of itself

But what of the informed?
Where is information in form?

Ring the bell.

Spoken - Delivered in a high energy manner. Presented as a rhetorical question to the audience. On the affirmation of depth lead the audiences eyes to look down the gallery.

MANIFESTO STATEMENT 3:

We renounce volume as a pictorial and plastic form of space; one cannot measure space in volumes as one cannot measure liquid in yards: look at our space... what is it if not one continuous depth?

We affirm depth as the only pictorial and plastic form of space.

Ring the bell.

PART 2

Sung in front of the first alcove where there is the trumpeter. Look at the paintings to think about colour:

What say you Aquinas?

You hereby grant the accidental form.

The chosen properties - colour, angles, material

Let them not define our quality

Ring the bell.

Spoken.

Use hand gestures to emphasise the "light absorbing body":

MANIFESTO STATEMENT 1:

Thence in painting we renounce colour as a pictorial element, colour is the idealized optical surface of objects; an exterior and superficial impression of them; colour is accidental and it has nothing in common with the innermost essence of a thing.

We affirm that the tone of a substance, i, .e. its light-absorbing material body is its only pic-torial reality.

Ring the bell.

PART 3

Sung in the entrance to gallery 2:

Interesting

But what of Kant?

Who disagreed with Plato.

Form cannot be abstract form must be man made.

Mind made.

Just a projection of collected thought?

Spoken:

MANIFESTO STATEMENT 2:

We renounce in a line, its descriptive value; in real life there are no descriptive lines, de-scription is an accidental trace of a man on things, it is not bound up with the essential life and constant structure of the body. Descriptiveness is an element of graphic illustration and decoration. We affirm the line only as a direction of the static forces and their rhythm in objects.

Ring the bell

PART 4

Walk into the next gallery and sing this next section in front of the violinist.
Sung:

Then perhaps there is some truth in Schopenhauer's Will?
The driving and mindless irrational impulse, aimlessly energising everything.
Our movement nothing but a manifestation of the Will.

Ring the bell.

Spoken. During this address the audience as both engineers and sculptors:

MANIFESTO STATEMENT 4:

We renounce in sculpture, the mass as a sculptural element. It is known to every engineer that the static forces of a solid body and its material strength do not depend on the quantity of the mass... example a rail, a T-beam, etc. But you sculptors of all shades and directions, you still adhere to the age-old prejudice that you cannot free the volume of mass. Here (in this exhibition) we take four planes and we construct with them the same volume as of four tons of mass. Thus we bring back to sculpture the line as a direction and in it we affirm depth as the one form of space.

Ring the bell.

PART 5

Move to the final gallery.

Sung:

But if we take everything down as far as it goes
Continuously cutting
A progressive diminution
Maybe Einstein - you might be right
"Forces are permitted to become mass
Matter is permitted to become light"
All that is left are the strings

Ring the bell.

Announce this final statement very emphatically.

Spoken:

MANIFESTO STATEMENT 5:

We renounce the thousand-year-old delusion in art that held the static rhythms as the only elements of the plastic and pictorial arts. We affirm in these arts a new element the kinetic rhythms as the basic forms of our perception of real time.

PART 2: SCULPTURE RITUAL

A sung jigsaw - During this sing the words which are in the part of the image that has strings. As soon as you come to a word in the gap, ring the bell and speak them. Then ring the bell to signify that you will carry on singing words.

The image is cut into a jigsaw and arranged during the performance to look like the Barbara Hepworth study in the exhibition.