

The Act of Reading - Interview with Adam Carr

*This interview accompanied the presentation of 'The Act of Reading', MOSTYN, 2017
Adam Carr is curator at MOSTYN and internationally*

Adam Carr: Your pieces mostly take on the genre of performance, but would you describe yourself as a performance artist?

Nicola Dale: I call myself an artist first, sculptor second and performance artist third. I hesitate to use "performance artist" because it sounds overly theatrical for the kind of work I make. Because I come to it from a history of making objects, I use performance to think about what it means to be an object, or to be perceived as an object. I'm a twitchy person, I'm always on the move, but performance is a rare opportunity to be still. I become a sculpture. My view of the world shifts a little. I'm visible and invisible at the same time - it's that "private view" feeling - everyone's there but no-one is really looking at the work. What does the work think about that?

How did you come to concentrate on knowledge and information, taking in the way in which they are disseminated and consumed?

I am deeply suspicious of the way that *information* is presented as neutral (it's "only" or "just" information), whereas *knowledge* is laden down with associations around hierarchy, institution, identity etc. This difference cuts to the heart of what we are and what we will become. A world where *Information is King* is a world without curiosity or imagination and that spells the end of creativity. The topic is therefore impossible to ignore.

Although books are not obsolete, it is clear that devices have primacy. I grew up with books - I owe pretty much everything I am to them - but these objects are now second-class citizens. The strange thing here is that although we are still more likely to trust statements arising from a printed page than a screen, we devote much more time and energy to the screen. We seem to be drawn towards distraction rather than concentration. I think this is really sad. I resent the false pretence of technological advancement when it comes to creativity. A book will redouble the efforts I make with it, but the online world takes a lot more than it ever gives back. That's the starting point for my work.

So there is a contradiction then between your starting points — how knowledge is passed through tangible objects – and how your work takes place – mostly through performance, immaterial gestures...?

Well, that might depend on whether you see me - my body - as a tangible object or not. You could think of me as a book opened to a page marked 'performance', or even as a (complicated) machine that can deliver performance actions! My gestures and materiality may be fleeting but they're still subject to timing - I expect to outlive pretty much all devices that are manufactured today, but I don't expect to outlive a lot of books. Maybe it is also a question of form – what are the outer limits of a gesture? Does a gesture seep into the person who encounters it?

When we were discussing what work to present at MOSTYN, the way that the exhibition programme has addressed MOSTYN's history was an interest for you, particularly the shows 'Women's Art Society' and Women's Art Society II that I curated which were based in part on the history of the Gwynedd Ladies Art Society at the gallery. Your piece, *The Act of Reading*, is a performance piece of you recreating poses derived from historical depictions of women reading, and it seemed apt considering the history of MOSTYN. I was also thinking about how your piece requires people to slow down their viewing, the work encourages passive being in a way, but it also demands attention, and I was thinking here about the context of LLAWN and the idea of arts festivals overall which are generally quite spectacle driven...

There's so much pressure on artists to produce spectacle and it's easy to work out why: it's entertaining, it appeals to a broad audience, it can make you feel good in a sugar-rush kind of a way, but it's rare that spectacle rewards a second look and it's surprisingly easy to forget. It's like trying to remember individual fireworks - there's no depth to the memory of a single one of them.

I wish there were a way of helping people to understand the rewards of taking the time to look, but advertising culture really conspires against it. The majority of visual messages we see every day boil down to the same meaning ("Buy this product") so it's not worth our while to bother looking for any length of time... which is exactly why I want to make slower, quieter, subtler work. I want to show what looking really looks like. The lovely thing about "*The Act of Reading*" is that people who notice the work immediately become part of it, so that the piece expands, but not in a spectacular way - to the unobservant bystander it's just another person standing or sitting near them, not moving much. There's an ebb and flow built into the work that spectacle can't offer. Spectacle jolts you out of yourself for a time, but I hope the opposite for my work. I would like it to draw people into more of an awareness of themselves.