

NUHÉ

ROSE LEJEUNE

Performance (North South East West)

Seven poles, around two metres high, are placed in a circle, each is approximately twenty centimetres in diameter. Three have been encased completely in copper-coloured wire. Neatly finished in the thin metal, they resemble large drill bits, totemic elements of machinery. Their surfaces are mostly smooth but also criss-crossed in places, giving them an alternately shiny metallic and matt casing – nevertheless weaved perfectly.

Four performers work individually at the other four poles. The internal cores of these four pillars show themselves to be tree trunks or thick branches, knotted and patinated. Immediately, I understand that they will be worked upon until they too are completely covered. The performers each hold a spool of copper-coloured thread. They pass the fine wire around the trunks, passing it around the back to the front and between their hands in rotation. One stands on a box, reaching high to the top of her pole. Another creates a full body motion from his action, his arms stretching wide and his torso rolling through as he circles around. Though they are bound in a common task, each performer works in solipsistic solitude, alone, creating their own rhythm and motion, using their own technique and pace.

Through the temperature of their movement I can sense how long each has been performing. The speed with which they work seems to be inversely proportional to their absorption in their task; at the beginning, the heat each generates is fierce, their labour is clear and self-conscious. As they become absorbed in the practice, they cool, the force of the gesture slows. They conserve energy and yet become more focused, as if the trick of time is to absorb the body into the work, transforming the task into a process of automation and meditation.

Their action is ritualistic, seemingly unaware of its audience and context – of the flow of people walking past, stopping, watching, whether for a moment or some time. The performers are engrossed in their action. I am incidental. They do not perform for me, instead they work intently, intensely, automatically, so that I can sense the transience of my own viewing. They were here before I arrived, they will remain after I leave.

Ritual extends from large-scale social and political processes to the most intimate aspects of our experience. It is a process of transformation, a rite that can transcend one state into another. Here, it changes not only wood into metal, but performer into material – gradually they change from being the makers of the work into the work itself – copper, wood and body act together and alter each other in a performative circuit.

This is a performance relating both to the theatre of the gallery and tethered to a ritual far from this place. I am simply its witness and I must decide how long to stay, where to stand and how to connect to the ancient ritual that it relates to, that exists elsewhere.

Performers memorising the structural elements of the work through their motion, working in parallel with one another, morph the familiar tree branches into totems of the unknowable and intangible.

Nuhé

Once fully memorised, these poles will be assembled together with others. The complete work will have twenty-one poles, together forming a nuhé. A nuhé is a Colombian Kogi temple from the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. The construction of a nuhé is the physical and architectural expression of the community – a gathering place that is both spiritual and political. A site of gathering. A temple, a cosmic observatory. The nuhé is both the structure within which the transformation takes place and the portal through which it is possible to see the spiritual.

North South East West. Through the performance, we witness a vanishing act in which the natural wood of each pole is gradually bound until it is gone. Ritually disappeared, petrified in copper. The finished poles have been orientated so as to point to something outside, another place – one to which the performers were attuned during their action, a disappearing act that has created a new space. Made of copper, the first mineral material used by mankind, malleable and ductile, its power lies in its conductive mutability, the material is self-contained and immersive. Mummified and built, the construction transfers electricity and heat. It is both primitive and wholly contemporary.

Here, within the structure, I am afforded time to configure myself in relation not only to it but the space of the gallery within which it sits – the strangeness of the construction of the white cube containing this ritual object. I walk around, through, within. I see how it interacts with time through sun and shadow. I think about how the building sits on the site, in the city, the world, the cosmos – sites bigger and bigger until I can't make sense of them.

Here, copper is the material that records, now stilled and a material of memory itself. Pulled thin, into thread-like wire, it becomes a material to weave with and with which to create a physical structure connected to the ground it sits on as much as the clouds above.

North South East West. Copper totems capture and distribute the vital energies of the poles. Through the ritual of memorising, I witness the making of new meaning.

Nuhé. The nuhé works with two verbs: to see and to seize.

‘You will see what exists and you will seize what of that suits you.’