

Colm Clarke: O U I #2 Bleak Actions

by Kiran Tanna

Black – head to toe – paint – hood – coat – boots – save the hands – white hands

Colm Clarke paces back and forth in the York Memorial Gardens. He moves between trees like a scrap of fabric blowing in the wind: he is always in the corner of the eye but one must focus on him or he slips by, unnoticed by the conscious mind. Passers-by stop, stand, watch, wait ... move on. Sometimes they speak to Clarke; though he remains silent, transient and fixed within his routine. They ask him what he is doing or shout requests or wonder out loud as to why he is stood – or sometimes lain on the ground – in the Memorial Gardens. He has traveled from Ireland and along the way he has produced photographs which he is editing in York ... by hand. By scratching and stripping away thin lines across the surface of each photograph he is making changes to his journey.

Thirty feet down the footpath sits a homeless man who offered to help him when he thought that Clarke too was homeless. Sometimes those who stop and watch Clarke also notice the hunched figure – not intentionally part of the performance – and go on to speak with him, to buy him a drink or to give him silver change. Clarke added a dimension to the otherwise ignored gardens. He provoked conversation and query on the part of the public. In its ambiguity, his work raised questions: in its unclear motives. In its aesthetics it drew the eye away from the perceived “regular” into the absurd, the “unexpected” and the irrational. Certainly it was bleak, and in bleakness there was contrast – without something to define a landscape as “bleak” is it not simply empty?

And in contrast there was power: the power to grip the eye or to release it and the ability to shape that landscape by its presence. He ended his work by climbing bodily into a nearby pool, through the ice and fallen leaves, and comically raising one fist into the air as he blew into a party blower. Absurd and disturbing the comedy arose from discomfort and the sympathetic discomfort we felt for him as his audience.

Clarke delivered a ritual and allowed us to be part of it: he physicalised something of himself and allowed us to make of it – of him – what we could and would. In that it was powerful and – in his singularity therein – was bleak. As the black paint washes away from his face it is replaced by muddy streaks of water, before he climbs out towards us.

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In response to Colm Clarke at O U I #2 Bleak Actions, Jan 23rd 2011, York.
More Information at <http://www.ouiperformance.org.uk/vn-02>.

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