



Leah Capaldi interviewed
by Ellen Mara De Wachter on
14 November 2012



Ellen Mara De Wachter: Can you describe the performances you’ve devised for your Invites show?

Leah Capaldi: I have two pieces in the show. The first one, 2 x 3, is in the Invites space, and it’s a performance which will be happening every day from 12–6pm, using wooden structures and participants, who will be coming into the room and slotting themselves into spaces cut into the structures. They will be staying static for a period of time and then moving into new shapes at intervals. The second piece, called *Outing*, happens throughout the Matthew Darbyshire show, using it as a backdrop. Participants walk around making small interventions into the gallery viewing experience, looking at issues of etiquette and annoyance. They cough or sneeze loudly, blow their noses, rustle bags; to start to question what it is to view something, notions of class structures and what we expect from the gallery space, and how it changes when we are implicated in a performance we don’t explicitly know about. I hope people will realise that they are part of a bigger picture, but it’s not a major concern if they don’t.

EMDW: What are you exploring in staging the interface of the human body and sculpture? Where is the line in these works between the performing subject and the art object?

LC: I think that’s exactly what I am exploring: the point at which people become object or subject. Where is that pivot? I think it has something to do with surveillance and spectatorship. I’d like the audience to question themselves in relation to the work, and to look at how they see their own bodies and viewing habits, both within the wider world and the gallery space. That kind of interface is amplified in 2 x 3 because there is a video camera pointed at the spot where the flesh of the participant meets the wood, which is sent as a live image to a monitor outside the gallery

space. I want to amplify the transformation that’s taking place in this meeting, so that there is an abstract close-up image, which you don’t really understand at first, but then you walk into the space and end up being part of the conversation. Some of the poses will use 2” x 3” wood as part of the structures installed in the space. One of the participants will be sitting in a V-shape, with part of their leg hanging over the side. Others will be propped up by supports. A number of issues relating to propping, structure, support and sculptural terms to do with weight, space and form are discussed within the piece.

EMDW: You’re also exploring the sanctioned modes of behaviour in galleries. Why is this interesting to you, and what do you hope to achieve through these actions?

LC: It’s such a ‘safe’ space, the gallery space. Within a gallery, we can see the most horrendous images or we can be part of anything, and it’s diluted because of the confines of the art cathedral. If I can get people to experience the rupture or interruption of their viewing, I can shake them out of that. If they’re going around in a bit of a daydream, I wonder if there’s something I can do to prod them and draw them back, to realise that there’s something else happening that they weren’t aware of. There’s also a very accepted way of viewing work; why should there be? There are whole websites about gallery etiquette: things you should and shouldn’t do in a gallery. And I hope that my work introduces something that amplifies such a hierarchy, so that people notice it and have a more informed choice about being part of it.

EMDW: What role does the audience play in these performances? Do you actively seek to involve them in the art work, or are they passive viewers?

LC: They are a really important part of the work. I think about Vanessa Beecroft’s

performances in which the performers stand there, and only become active once the audience members start throwing their gaze on them. Without someone viewing my work, there isn’t that tension or awkwardness of seeing someone who isn’t moving, along with the awareness that they are in a body and we are in a body. With *Outing*, there isn’t a structure to riff off if an audience isn’t present. I make work for myself, but I always think of ways of involving the audience, because that’s where it becomes more alive and an active experience that lives on beyond the gallery, versus passive works like some sculptures or videos, which we have already learned how to deal with.

EMDW: How do you view your practice in relation to the history of performance art, and endurance-based practices such as those of Chris Burden, Marina Abramovic or Vito Acconci? Or, in relation to a very different kind of performative work like the sculptures of Richard Serra?

LC: Performance art has always been important for me, and I am aware of the weight of the history of performance. Chris Burden shot himself in the arm; there’s no point now in trying to kill yourself! So I have to think about a new way to address these common concerns in the history of art. Endurance used to be much more important to me than it is now; that changed when I started to take my own body out of my work. I was able to choreograph the viewer’s experience and give the work more subtlety, which is something I’ve always found difficult. But actually you can be just as loud with a whisper, and that’s been a very valuable thing to come to terms with. I love Serra’s work. There’s an energy to it, which you can feel. I did a show last year with Simon Bedwell, in a space called The Hole. It was about performance and performativity, and asked what that really means. Judith Butler’s performance of gender argument was for me the birth

of the idea of something, like gender, being performed on you. Having a performance practice is the only way for me to make art right now. Static stuff just feels old, and something is happening at the moment, with Tino Sehgal at dOCUMENTA 13 and the Tate Turbine Hall, the Tanks and other things, which I feel a part of, in relation to the activation of the audience in a different way. It’s a really vital time, full of energy. And working with participants as objects, like in 2 x 3, is about taking that animation out of people and rendering them into form, which is unsettling for the viewer.

EMDW: You have set up the bodies of your performers as quasi-objects, which is an interesting strategy in light of feminist critiques of Western society’s objectification of women’s bodies. However, this is mitigated by the fact that you have also included male performers. Is there a feminist agenda in your practice, and if so, are you able to describe it?

LC: A lot of where I am at the moment came from investigating my own body and what the messages of my own image meant. The body as an object is a really powerful tool to use, and it’s often overlooked. I’ve worked a lot with men and their form, and by using men and women, my work is more powerful. There are feminist undertones, and it has that history but it can be seen under a wider umbrella as well.

EMDW: Do you consider provocation as a tool? If so, what is the role of provocation in your work?

LC: It’s a very important tool, and if you use it well it can be powerful, but as I said before, it has been about learning that a whisper can be as powerful as a scream. Provoking people is about starting to prod into what they find comfortable and to touch on what begins to feel uncomfortable for them. It doesn’t have to be Santiago Sierra, it can be something that simply makes people trip up as they pass the threshold of what

they think they know. I really enjoy that subtlety and it has become very pleasurable for me to work with it. It’s about seeing how much you can get away with but also knowing when to rein it in: provocation in various dilutions.

Artist’s presentation
Leah Capaldi
Thursday 29 November, 7pm

Zabludowicz Collection Invites is dedicated to presenting UK-based artists who do not currently have representation by a commercial gallery in the UK. Taking the form of solo presentations, exhibitions will result from an open-ended invitation to exhibit new work.

Reverse:
Leah Capaldi
Bridge, 2012

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23 May–30 June
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26 September–3 November
Nicholas Brooks
7 November–15 December

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