

Review of An Audience with Helia at LUPA by Simon Raven for Nottingham Visual Arts

Grown-ups never understand anything for themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them

- Saint-Exupéry, The Little Prince, 1943

It was 8pm one crisp February evening in 2012. A large, friendly audience gathered, creating an expectant buzz, in a small car park in East London. All eyes were focused on the unassuming white door to a closed lock-up garage, the last in an identical row at the back of James Campbell House, Bethnal Green, a short walk from from The Approach pub/gallery. The only distinguishing feature of the space was the acronym/legend 'LUPA', written in gold capital letters above its door.

LUPA 5 (Lock Up Performance Art, also the name for a she-wolf, or prostitute in ancient Rome) was about to begin; the latest in a series of monthly, no-budget performance events initiated in 2011, co-curated by Kate Mahoney, Jordan Mackenzie and Aaron Williamson. Each event provides a temporary (one hour) platform for performances by up to three artists, from the emerging to the stellar, in and around the garage. The LUPA approach is refreshingly simple - a minimum of publicity is sent out previous to each event (emails and a Facebook page/archive mean no boxes of wasted over-print fliers) and, owing to the fact that it's outdoor, a disciplined start/end time. The fact that Williamson and Mackenzie are both respected performance artists themselves, and Kate Mahoney is studying Fine Art at Goldsmiths, also lends an air of curatorial experimentation, pedigree and fun to proceedings.

With hot gin served from a car-boot, and a single electricity supply taken from the back of a nearby newsagent, LUPA represents inventive, no-frills performance art at its unconventional best, followed by an open invitation to the pub for a post show get together. I'm going to write about one of the performances featured at LUPA 5, made by Nottingham-born artist Sian Robinson Davies, in collaboration with Emma Leach.

AN AUDEINCE WITH HELIA

The garage door swung open. Standing at the back of the small grey bunker, spot-lit by two DIY builder's lights, stood a little girl. I guessed she must have been ten years old, maybe younger. At first she stood still, shoe gazing, twirling her hair, appearing to be nervous. After an uncomfortable pause (on the part of the audience) she then stepped forward and took an extravagant, Shakespearian bow. This was the prologue to one of the stranger artworks in any medium that I've seen.

The initial shock of seeing a little girl in place of an adult performance artist, spookily lit at the back of a grungy garage, after dark in a city, was uncanny and cinematic. The image created recalled Diane Arbus' famous photograph of identical twin girls, and Stanley Kubrick's later re-working in 'The Shining', fused into a contemporary singularity. Given the slightly tomb-like nature of the space, the spectre of a missing girl wasn't far away. Then she began to speak.

Helia Murdock introduced herself with the bold, faux-familiarity of a seasoned celebrity interviewee. She then began an assured monologue, without any notes, encouragement or

coercion, about her love of acting, fear of spiders, and of having recently overcome a fear of water slides whilst on holiday in Egypt with her father. Only a crescendo of sirens wailing nearby cut through her concentrated narrative. Her favourite food, she told us, is pizza.

Helia (which means 'sun ray, shining light') spoke in a way reminiscent of how adults sometimes communicate with children, or jet lagged celebrities to interviewees: wide-eyed, punctuated with overly determined gestures and platitudes. Aaron Williamson stepped forward to the side of the garage frontage to provide sign interpretation of her monologue to the audience. It was equally fun to try (as someone who doesn't know sign) to attempt to follow his animated translation. It would be interesting to see a transcribed subtitle added to film footage of the performance.

Having spoken about acting, fear and food, Helia then introduced her dolls, produced from beneath a sheet at the back of the garage. The first, 'Hazel', was described as being shy, intelligent and sensible - but who sometimes got into trouble. Speaking of personal attributes via a form of ventriloquism, Helia appeared to drop her confident, 'acting' mask, and to engage the audience in a more direct and personal voice. It's the stuff of all art - we pretend to speak about pictures, objects, spaces and installations, whilst really we are talking about ourselves. Realising that she might have betrayed herself a bit, Helia put Hazel away and introduced Laura: sporty, active, but with 'anger management issues, for which her friends tried to support her'. It was funny, and a little alarming, to hear psychobabble flow so naturally from a child, whilst also displaying how we have developed a medical language for dealing with extreme emotional states. The last doll, 'Danielle', was described as a 'fashionista, who loves to go shopping, singing and dancing'.

Children ask better questions than adults. "May I have a cookie?" "Why is the sky blue?" and "What does a cow say?" are far more likely to elicit a cheerful response than "Where's your manuscript?" "Why haven't you called?" and "Who's your lawyer?"

- Fran Lebowitz

Having talked about herself, Helia then turned to the audience to ask for a volunteer. The usual hush descended, to which she quickly retorted 'tough crowd!' A man then volunteered to be interviewed. Seeing a child interview an adult at the back of a lock-up garage, in the context of a performance event, provided an unusual twist on the usual power relations between adults and children. On being asked about our hobbies and interests by a ten-year-old, we might consider our own 'inner child' - the games we play, and the means we might have developed of keeping in touch with a potential host of abandoned childhood selves. In psychological terms, a (wounded) inner child, or any number of child-born subpersonalities, can be referred to as 'exiles', because they tend to be excluded from consciousness in order to defend against the trauma that they carry. Some believe that deliberately nurturing an 'inner child' can hold one back from maturation by encouraging a victim stance. One criticism of the Jungian 'Divine Child' archetype, in which an a priori 'golden child' is used as a dream symbol of futurity and ultimate potential, is that by indulging in the notion of an idealised child, parents might unwittingly breed feelings of superiority in their progeny. That or an over-determined relationship between parent and child might develop that might hinder the child's later ability to form a generative relationship outside the family nest.

Between interviews it seemed Helia realised that being 'on stage' isn't necessarily as empowering or fun as it might look. Having dismissed one interviewee she challenged the audience, and her own objectification, saying 'SEE! It's not too bad being a volunteer??!' She was bright enough to sense the inhumanity of the position she had been asked to fulfil.

When childhood dies, its corpses are called adults and they enter society, one of the politer names of hell. That is why we dread children, even if we love them, they show us the state of our decay.

- Brian Aldiss

I wonder if, by placing a young girl as a performer in their place, Sian Robinson Davies and Emma Leach's intention was to provide an unguarded contrast with the creative aspirations of adult performers. For me, the work also led to a consideration of how it is possible to objectify and reveal cultural processes of over-identification with a wounded or idealised inner child (whilst showing how performance art as a medium can retroactively illuminate this process).

An example of how the pressures placed on children as symbols of potential, futurity, innocence and trauma can manifest was recently revealed in the press following the abduction of Madeline McCann. The McCanns were accused, vilified, hounded and abused by certain quarters of the press (now being held to account at The Leveson enquiry) The reason for this, apart from shifting newspapers, might be that the journalists and editors in question were enacting a transferral of traumatic emotional upheaval triggered by the disappearance of an idealised, angelic, innocent, inner-child archetype, to her parents. If so, this wounded inner child psychology played out in the most obscene manner.

Another abject example of over-identification with children as arbiters of adult personality formation (or its arrest) can be seen in the clichéd, gender specific 'pinkification' of anything associated with girls, and an idea of girlish femininity more broadly. In any large toy shop you will find an aisle in which every single object is pink, fluffy, and marketed (by adults) at girls. A similar colour palette is used for cheap hen party kits, and by charities aimed at women. Recently it was refreshing to see resistance to the 'pinkification' of breast cancer charities by performance artist Kristen Tedder, who launched her Punk Cancer movement as a means of acknowledging the visceral brutality of the disease, rather than attempting to prettify her experience in a sea of regressive, pink symbols.

Man is most nearly himself when he achieves the seriousness of a child at play.

- Heraclitus

Among other things, performance art might be celebrated as a medium through which it is possible for adults to retrieve, or to objectify, a connection with an exiled 'inner child' (without having to fetishise the toys) By performing, or by watching a good performance event, it is possible to open a pathway to a state in which traumatic experiences, or expectations, can be re-apprehended. Sian, Emma and Helia's performance, and LUPA itself, combined to create a wonderful and generous platform for this, in so much that the space and psychic economy that their combination afforded was not determined by egotism, institutional expectation, curatorial careerism, absurd rules, or the claims of sponsorship. It was also great fun. Check out the LUPA Facebook page for ongoing events and details.