

FlockOmania: Body, Space, Object

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‘FlockOmania: Body, Space, Object’

Lanchester Gallery, Coventry, 19 January–19 February 2015

Reviewed by Jill Journeaux and Sarah Whatley, Coventry University, UK

FlockOmania was a solo exhibition by jeweller Zoe Robertson held in the Lanchester Gallery, Coventry, from the 19th January to the 19th February 2015 (www.flockomania.com). In their initial discussions about this exhibition Judith Mottram, the then Director of the Lanchester Gallery, Coventry, and jewellery artist Zoe Robertson Course Director for the BA Hons Jewellery Design and Related Products at Birmingham City University, identified the potential of using the Lanchester Gallery as a laboratory space to explore ideas of objectness in relation to performativity and to jewellery making. The aim was to move beyond ‘the static display of objects of veneration normally associated with jewellery display’ (Mottram, 2015:7), to create large-scale wearable jewellery using a mix of traditional and contemporary making skills.

FlockOmania took the form of an installation consisting of a series of scaled up jewellery objects, which were presented in a format that enabled physical interaction to occur. The exhibition offered an opportunity for audiences to engage with, and reshape the interactions between body, objects and space. Robertson and Mottram constructed the conditions for collaboration at the inception of the work, throughout its making and during the life of the actual exhibition. Collaborating artists included Christian Kipp, Cath Cullinane, Daren Pickles, Nicholas Peters and Sellotape Cinema. Robertson recorded the development and making stages of the work using her Twitter feed to expose her working methods in the run up to the exhibition, thus creating an archive offering others insights into her methodology and her thinking processes, and how these find form through making. The final night’s performance was the result of an open ended collaborative enquiry with contemporary dance artists Natalie Garrett Brown and Amy Voris, which created a dynamic environment for improvisation and the exploration of relationships of scale and movement to the body.

Illustration 1.

The exhibition was made up of oversized jewellery like objects, setting a theatrical tone, which was enhanced by a monochromatic colour palette intended to emphasize the simplicity of the constructed forms and the potential for bodily interaction with them. These objects had been meticulously handcrafted using traditional fabrication techniques in combination with industrial processes and new technologies. Robertson used a range of materials, predominantly plastics, some of which are sheet or vacuum formed, whilst others are solid blocks of high-density engineering foams, which are formed by hand or machine, or by both. This work requires hours of sanding, filling and re-sanding in order to achieve smooth and perfectly formed surfaces. Industrial materials are used, which are related to mass production, and situate the work at a distance from traditional precious stone and metal jewellery making. The time intensive processes of making and forming the objects imbued them with a physicality which can connect the maker and the making to the audience and participants as they re-enact some of the physical and tactile movements of the maker such as stroking and holding parts of the installation, and leaning over the larger sphere’s in order to feel their form and shape them to the body.

Discussing the work of artist Jana Sterbak, in 1995, Richard Noble writes: 'For Sterbak the body is the starting point: her art proceeds from it and her works constantly recall us to it' (Noble, 1996: 51). This interplay between body and object has been central to the Flock0mania installation. Most of the individual objects were suspended from a steel gantry system reminiscent of parallel bars, playground furniture, climbing frames, swings and exercise machines, whilst the use of red fabric straps to form the harnesses to suspend various items, evoked allusions to gymnasia and to rehabilitation and physical therapy equipment. The use of lighting and projected moving images added a reiterative layering to the experience, effectively folding the making and remaking of the work via dance, into a constantly evolving and energized whole. The colour scheme and pink projected lights suggested a sensuality, which was not borne out through tactile engagement and thus proved deceptive. The surfaces offered contradictory messages about tactility and feel, suggesting softness and warmth, for instance on those objects covered with flock, but when these were touched the perceptual and visual impressions of softness and warmth was undermined. Alongside this, Robertson used hints of reference to bondage and constraint to counter a sense of exploration and play, thus creating a subtle but sinister undertone of control. This was re-enforced by the use of minimal stripped black linear aspects of three-dimensional drawing, such as the use of spring hooks to secure items to the steel support structure, which operate against the suggested softness of other flocked elements to draw attention to the vulnerability of the female body.

Illustration 2.

Questions arise as to the identity of the theatrically presented and oversized jewellery objects – are they jewellery, sculpture or choreographic objects which provide new or alternative sites and opportunities for bodily actions (Forsythe, 2008)? Who is the author and how does this relate to artistic intention on the part of the collaborating team?

The final night event on February 19th 2015, took this question of authorial intention one stage further by bringing the audience into the space and directly into the action, transforming the exhibition into a living, moving installation (<https://vimeo.com/127816443>). After a period of working in site, animating the exhibition through improvisational dance and score development, the dancers, Garrett Brown and Voris, brought their sound, photography and design collaborators together for an evening finale that demonstrated the full interactive potential of Robertson's up-scaled jewellery, or wearable objects.

Illustration 3.

The space hummed with an intense, insistent electronic soundscape (by Pickles and Peters) as the dancers, dressed in boiler suits, evoked a sense of women at work. Accompanied by Robertson and her 'scene shifting' assistants, they invited the audience to join them in moving through, with and in response to the objects. The dark of the city gallery at night was punctured with the coloured lights emitting from many of the objects, from films projected on floors, bodies and objects (by Sellotape Cinema) and by Cullinane's vivid theatrical lighting. Hand-held projectors played

with the passage of light and shadows, producing textures that fed through into Kipp's stunning photography.

The space soon became a playground as the audience rolled objects freely across the gallery, giant oversized necklaces were modeled, and chandeliers of flock shades were climbed under and tested for their weight and volume. There was obvious pleasure displayed by the audience at the irreverence permitted as objects were passed between friends and tried on for size, a conga chain momentarily formed to extend the party atmosphere. The congenial play between artists and audience created a continually changing and immersive environment where suspended objects became costumes, toys, theatrical props, occasional prosthetics, or 'surrogate performers' (Lepecki, 2012: [76](#)).

In his book, *Art as performance*, David Davies argues that artworks should be thought of as performances through which artists articulate a statement or narrative by working through specific media. He proposes that

'one kind of legitimate interest in any artwork takes the work to be, or be representative of, a performance which constitutes some sort of achievement. While this is not the only legitimate interest in an artwork, it is an interest that grounds much of our discourse about art, and is central to discourse about the self-referential and self-reflexive art of the late twentieth century [i.e. postmodernism]' (Davies, 2004: 198).

The question of where the art content of FlockOmania sits can be related to the notion of aesthetic empiricism (Lamarque, 2010: [124](#)) and the view that it is only what is immediately accessible to experience that is of consequence for the viewer or audience.

Play might have dominated the activity but the exhibition's references to the body and the female form continued to infuse the space, in the predominance of circles, spheres, and in the roundness of curved structures. Some objects resembled breasts or swollen bellies whilst clusters of smaller spheres suggested ova. Elsewhere, tiny balls scattered as a broken string of beads. The tactile nature of the space, replete with these multiple, often-illuminated spheres that were lovingly held, caressed and passed between friends, felt fecund. The audience bore witness to a birthing act, doula-like to support the emergence of a new life force.

Illustration 4.

Dancers Garrett Brown and Voris moved sometimes independently within the installation, sometimes in concert with the audience. Their dance was at times slowed and stilled in a studied exploration of a single object to transmit a conversation of sculptural form; body acting on object, object acting on body; touched and being touched. These women moved, danced, rolled, extending their bodies between, through, under the structures, enveloped, womblike. Sometimes pedestrian, sometimes moving at speed, they took care in balancing, carrying, transporting and lifting each other and the objects. The collaborating men were at their desks controlling sound, or behind cameras filming the action, expressing perhaps an unspoken desire to handle. Activity thus coalesced to create a gendered space.

But the objects, however transported, rearranged or repositioned, retained their own authority; unruly and disruptive whilst also open to manipulation as movable structures. At times the action spilled out of the gallery into the street, surprising passers-by who were met by artists and audiences adorned in strange frames of lighted orbs, dissolving the barrier between gallery and street. Above all FlockOmania created a relational space, a space of social interaction. The artists, all of them, were the conduits for this social and participatory experience. The objects, performers and audience negotiated their place in relation to each other, to the urban environment in which the exhibition was placed and to the history of the work. An archive of the project's development process was posted on one wall of the gallery. Tools, drills, assorted manufacturing processes were sketched out, tracing the stages through which the exhibition and environment took shape, documenting the labour involved; the transition from making to product, from utility object to artwork.

Asking questions about the relationship of and boundaries between, sculpture and jewellery, this exhibition draws on a history of female sculpture making, most obviously Helen Chadwick who – in her work *Ego Geometria Sum* (1984) – used her body to lift, move and engage with box objects covered with images of her own body, thus bringing together the seductive and decorative, with ideas of work, labour and the female body (Racz, 2015: 136). Later Mona Hartoum's large-scale installations explored the tensions between desire, seduction and fascination, and revulsion, which placing the viewer in a space of oscillating physical and psychological sensations (Racz, 2015: 98). However, whilst Hartoum transformed everyday and familiar items into surreal objects, Robertson's objects are less fixed and their qualities are activated in action and interaction through the physical senses rather than just the visual.

Robertson has scaled up her jewels to objects of apparent weight and mass, but the resultant objects lack the density of material associated with either jewellery or sculpture. The hollowness of many of Robertson's large pieces is part of their surprise when activated, but this actual hollowness is also a disappointment. The actuality of the spheres confounds the viewers' expectations of weight and substance based on their initial visual perceptions of the objects. However, more senses come into play in FlockOmania's concluding final night event. Performers and the public were brought into the investigation of how to push traditional methods of jewellery construction and display, to fracture traditional relationships between body, object and space, and to build on a growing practice of reciprocity that sees dance venturing into the gallery and the gallery aesthetic infusing the theatrical space of dance.

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List of Illustrations

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