Rose Finn-Kelcey, *Bureau de Change* (1987). Installation view from the exhibition *Rose Finn-Kelcey, Life, Belief and Beyond* (2017). Courtesy of Modern Art Oxford. Photo: Ben Westoby.

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Rose Finn-Kelcey: Life, Belief and Beyond

Reviewed by Maria Walsh

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The first solo exhibition of Rose Finn-Kelcey's work since her death in 2014 was also a return to the gallery of *Bureau de Change* (1987), an installation work that was the artist's contribution to a key group show at MAO in 1990, *Signs of the Times: A Decade of Video, Films & Slide-Tape Installation in Britain 1980–1990*.[1] *Bureau de Change* consists of £1000 worth of loose change arranged on the floor to depict Vincent Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* (1888), as if, by rendering it in filthy lucre, a very small part of its surplus value could be grounded, thereby allowing the viewer to conceive of the other $24 million dollars of its market value as a monetary sublime excess. Then as now, the monetary value of works of art by so-called modern masters such as Van Gogh exceeds even their immaterial values of status and desire. The difference today is not only that *Sunflowers* is valued at $62.8 million dollars, but any grounding in 'filthy lucre' is modified by the logic of speculative capital, which divorces currency from gold in favour of placing bets on the future, though Finn-Kelcey's point is still relevant. Viewed by one person at a time from a platform that supposedly suggests the viewpoint of the auctioneer, the securing of value is completed by a security guard and video monitor showing a live surveillance image of Finn-Kelcey's *Sunflowers*. On my visit, the 'guard', a gallery invigilator, walked around the perimeter of the false wooden floor, the capturing of his shadow on the monitor indicating the dark machinations of power behind the art market. Interestingly, this work has been 'performed' at venues in Ireland and the United States, in punts and euros in the one, yen, sterling and dollars in the other, a factor that again highlights the symbolic nature of a monetary system based on the abstraction of Capital.

There is undoubtedly a performative dimension to Finn-Kelcey's work, not just in her shift from photography and installation into making actual performances in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but also in the sense of the performativity of signs, an idea that Judith Butler borrows from Jacques Derrida.[2] For Derrida, a sign's meaning is inherently unstable and has the potential to signify otherwise, a potential that can be appropriated for meanings and rituals other than those promulgated by the dominant order. As a feminist artist, Finn-Kelcey was interested in making work that challenged habitual perceptions of how subjects engage with the world, especially through language. The work on show in the main space of MAO's upper gallery exemplified this. Although not by any means the largest work in the room,

1. *Signs of the Times* was curated by Chrissie Iles.

2. See Derrida's essay 'Signature Event Context' (1972) in Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (trans.) (1988), *Limited Inc.*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Power for the People (1972), a colour photograph documenting one of Finn-Kelcey's flag interventions – documentary footage of others in the series was also on show – dominated due to its high production values and to its iconic image of a smoking Battersea Power Station standing stark against an azure London sky. Commissioned by the Central Electricity Generating Board, Finn-Kelcey installed two flags made from silver tissue and black bunting at either end of the station. At one level the slogan on the flags, 'Power for the People', describes what the station produced and therefore could be read as advertising the Electricity Board. However, it also echoed then popular revolutionary slogans such as the Black Panther's 'All Power to the People' as well as John Lennon's 1970 song 'Power to the People', which redirects the sign's meaning from promoting commerce to advocating revolution. The double entendre was not lost on the residents across the river in Chelsea who complained to the Electricity Board, suggesting that the word 'people' be replaced by 'nation', a word evocative of dominant sovereignty rather than revolution and change. Finn-Kelcey refused, so Central Electricity removed the flags. Nonetheless the artistic gesture still packs a punch not least in relation to the current regeneration of the station into a luxury living complex. Her gesture acts as a reminder of what is left out of current urban development, i.e. any consideration of what constitutes 'the people'. Conceptual artistic gestures intervene in but do not stabilise meaning. Finn-Kelcey's sign, in which one and the same phrase acts simultaneously as endorsement and critique, highlights the distinction of an artistic gesture from an instrumental one. It exposes relations that would otherwise remain underexposed, in this case the nationalistic impetus of a sector of British society.

Speaking is mostly taken for granted and also considered a right by those who rule or feel entitled by their position in society. Speaking as a woman was not something taken for granted in the 1970s and 1980s but a subject position to be achieved. The issue then as now is whether one should strive to speak the language of dominant power or whether one attempts to find another voice in the hope of effecting change not just in oneself as a woman or an artist, but in society. This is also an issue of performativity. In order to be heard, it is necessary to be recognised, but recognition risks affirming the powers that be. Women artists and writers developed strategies to enable recognition of their status as subjects but also to destabilise existing gendered positions in the hope of re-signifying hackneyed meanings and inventing a new language of the body. One might think here of the playwright and novelist Hélène Cixous's 1976 essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa' in which she appropriates the image of female hysteria and diverts its negative connotations transforming it into a productive image of female embodiment and expression.[3] I do not know if Finn-Kelcey ever read Cixous, but I was put in mind of her work on encountering the documentation of Finn-Kelcey's performance *One for Sorrow, Two for Joy* (1976) and its related works *Song Sheet* (1976) and *Song Sheet* (1977).

The performance took place in the shop window of the ACME gallery in London as part of 'London Calling' a yearly series of performances and concerts. The MAO display included a vitrine of small photographs as well as two large wall mounted photographs of Finn-Kelcey as she occupied the window space with two magpies and various paraphernalia including wood, silver objects and food. Partly executed as a response to Joseph Beuys's *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974), in which he spent three, eight-hour days in a gallery with a coyote,[4] Finn-Kelcey explored the link between women and magpies and attempted in her performance to communicate with the birds on their terms. However, what appears in the photographs like a kind of hysterical Deleuzian becoming-woman/becoming-bird *avant la lettre*, in the performance was much more ecological in its assemblage of relations between humans and nonhuman others and the

3. See Hélène Cixous (1976), 'The laugh of the Medusa', (trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen), *Signs*, 1: 4, pp. 875–93.

4. Finn-Kelcey's work was often made in response to other artists' work, e.g. *Steam Installation* (1992) was a response to Cornelia Parker's *Cold Dark Matter* (1991), which preceded it at the Chisenhale Gallery, London.

inside and the outside of gallery space. Given that the most important aspect of this performance was the fact that the interactive sonic relations between Finn-Kelcey and the birds were relayed on speakers to the audience outside, it is tempting to see this work in the light of contemporary ideas about how differently worlded natures cohabit and share the universe. The magpies cawed, Finn-Kelcey shrieked, in what must have intermittently sounded like a primal guttural language of the body much as Cixous was advocating and enacting in her writing. In her notes for the performance also on display at MAO, the artist has crossed out five lines, two of which read: 'Mythical link between birds and women, women turning into birds', and 'Autibiographical [sic] in that the birds mirror much of my own behaviour'. It is as if she has had second thoughts about the potential danger of reducing woman to ornithological nature as if, during the course of the work, the birds' 'completely different levels of information' took on an autonomy irreducible to a mirroring of the human. In a recent interview Finn-Kelcey stated that 'through the magpie sounds I wanted to talk about the potential for another language, apart from the existing one that we tend to feel is the only one […] and through that to talk about a potential for women having a voice' (quoted in Battista 2012: 59).[5] However, for me, the work also suggests an affinity with animal consciousness as a capacity for expression beyond mere adaptation and links with her interest in communication systems more generally, as conveyed by the selection of work at MAO. However, the very thing that the performance was undertaken to find, that is, another language, another voice, is the very thing that is lost to time. While documentation transforms the ephemeral temporality of performance into a commoditised object, loss is also made sadly palpable by documentation, in this case the loss of sound.

Background reading is necessary to understand *Song Sheet* (1977), five cards arranged in a fan shape in a vitrine. Each card features an image of an open mouth, a flower petal lying on what looks like a prune atop its tongue. Below the images are English, French and Welsh phonetic translations of the seventeen sounds made by a magpie, which Finn-Kelcey found in a folklore library. She vocalised these sounds, presumably using the objects on her tongue, in another performance, *Her Mistress's Voice* (1977), which took place at Eisteddfod, Wales, one of Europe's oldest and largest cultural festivals.[6] A sublated eroticism of the body can just about be conjured by imagining voicing these phonemes with one's mouth full of silky or juicy objects, thereby supplementing the work's formal documentation with one's own body.

By contrast, the exhibited documentation of Finn-Kelcey's performance *The Boilermaker's Assistant* (1978) does not incite the imagination. Although some of Harry Walton's notes on the performance were included in the exhibition notes leaflet,[7] a viewer would be hard pressed to make sense of what is going on from the small black and white photograph, which was on display along with two pencil drawings, *Untitled bench drawing #1 and #2*. The photograph shows the artist seated on one side of a bench studded with silver lettering that reads: 'SEAT OF THE FIVE SENSES'. She holds a microphone and appears to be reading from a book. A stuffed magpie, equally spot lit, is perched on the other side of the bench. The performance, which was part of London Calling, took place in the artist's first floor studio on Shaftesbury Avenue in London, but again, the sound which was central to this performance is not only missing but was not inferred in the exhibition display, except by a brief reference to Walton's notes in the gallery leaflet. For more information, one needs to consult Guy Brett's survey of her work in the Ridinghouse publication that came out in 2012 shortly before her death and was for sale in MAO's bookshop in lieu of a catalogue. Reading aloud from a Victorian trades manual, Finn-Kelcey whispered instructions such as: 'where T is the thickness of the plate in mm and

5. Magpies are associated with witchcraft, magic, divination and prophecy in western society. In Native American animal lore, they are associated with trickery, but with a light-hearted, good-natured intention, all of which feature in Finn-Kelcey's work as a whole.

6. Kathy Battista (2012), *Renegotiating the Body: Feminist Art in 1970s London*, London: I. B. Tauris, p. 175.

7. Harry Walton was a close friend and sometimes collaborator. In his written documentation of this performance he refers to the tableau as being 'conceived in friendship with her "*technicien du rêve*" Harry Walton' (quoted in Finn-Kelcey 2012: 66). He also made *The Magpies Box* (1977) which was on display at MAO.

C is a co-efficient whose values are given, both for lapped joints and for double-butt strapped joints…' (2012: 66). Years later, artist Catherine Elwes, who witnessed this performance,[8] situated it as perhaps being a parody of art by women that used an overly confessional autobiographical voice, but from the evidence of the other work on display at MAO, one gets the sense that this work was as much about using one's body as a medium to channel something mysterious from a system that would seem to be devoid of extraneous meaning. Walton's notes read: 'Subdued and largely incomprehensible, the messages were both comic and mesmeric, drawing attention more to sound than sense' (quoted in Finn-Kelcey 2012: 66). Important here is the fact that Finn-Kelcey used a small joy-stick to guide her whispered instructions across four speakers, thereby spatially extending the sensory remit of the work and its almost occult address.

These impoverished performance documentations left me with a desire to see them re-enacted. I usually find Marina Abramović's re-enactments of key works from the history of performance art, including her own and works by other artists such as Beuys, as smacking of ego-mania and a further commodification of the ideals of performance as a medium. However, re-enactment can also give life to what on a gallery wall can seem dead and/or merely a part of urban legend that means little to those who did not witness the event. In the absence of Finn-Kelcey's whispering voice, we miss any sense of what Kathy Battista describes as the sound becoming 'the dematerialized subject of the piece rather than the performer' (2012: 61–62).

Sound was key to women artists' experimental practices at this time, it being a less traditional medium and having an affinity with voice, thence, a voice of one's own. A key essay on this topic, Jean Fisher's 'Reflections on echo: Notes towards a dialogue on sound by women artists', was included in the catalogue of the aforementioned MAO exhibition *Signs of the Times*. Although Fisher does not refer to Finn-Kelcey, focussing on Laurie Anderson, Tina Keane, Alanna O'Kelly and Mona Hatoum, much of what she says is applicable to Finn-Kelcey's context. Pointing out that 'discussions of media-based art rarely include a substantial review of sound, whether it is used as a component of or as the sole medium of a work', she goes on to say that:

> Sound is not simply laid on to provide a background unifying element to the flow of images of actions, but collaborates both in the production of meaning and extends the spatial dimension of the work. Sound evokes images; but it also positions the listener in a physical relation to the source of transmission, or in an illusory relation to distance (drawing nearer/fading away). (Fisher 2003: 161)

Fisher also underscores the gender bias ascribed to the senses in classical thought, which Finn-Kelcey clearly played off in *The Boilermaker's Assistant*. As Fisher says, the visionary role of insight was ascribed to men, even blind Tiresias, while Cassandra's 'utterances are considered inconsequential mad ravings' (2003: 163). Similarly Narcissus's embodiment is reliant on vision and his idealised mirror-image, while Echo is reduced to being a mimic without body. However, as Fisher points out, Echo 'is also an ear […] both audio receiver and transmitter' (2003: 163). Through technological extension, the immaterial otherness of voice can be transmitted in other times and spaces. This relates to Finn-Kelcey's concept of performance, which she called 'vacated performance',[9] a term suggested by Walton whereby the artist's body would absent itself, its life being transmitted to inanimate objects and the relations between them, hence the added difficulty of curating her work now, when she is no longer in the world. A good motif for this (creative) process is the section from

8. Catherine Elwes (1997), 'In Praise of Older Women', *MAKE magazine*, no. 78, pp. 17–19. Elwes was a fellow member of the Women Artists Collective, an offshoot of the Artists' Union, a support network that met every two to three weeks in the 1970s in a member's flat to discuss the issues involved in being a woman artist in a male-dominated market-driven art world. Feminist and identity politics were key to the group's discussions.

9. According to Kathy Battista, this term relates to Finn-Kelcey's use of 'role reversals, alter egos, the use of surrogates and stand-ins, impostures, and a quality of presence derived from physical absence' (2012: 74).

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* recounting the moment the exhausted inventor glimpses a spark of life in the dead matter he has been trying to animate, a recording of which passage was used by Finn-Kelcey in *Mind the Gap* (1980) performed as part of *About Time: Video, Performance and Installation by 21 Women Artists* curated by Elwes with Rose Garrard and Sandy Nairne at the ICA, London in 1980. For Guy Brett 'her absence, her deflection of attention to object, action, sound, space, time, paradoxically accentuated her dialogue with the audience' (quoted in Battista 2012: 63).

Dialogue was overt in two of the works at MAO, *Visual Questionnaire* (1996) and *Book and Pillow* (1978). The former consists of a display of the drawings by trainee priests rendered as responses to a questionnaire given them by the artist when she was a Sargent fellow at the British School in Rome. The responses to her two questions: 'Where does God Live?' and 'What Does God Look Like?' vary from realist religious iconography, squiggle drawings and a few text- based articulations of the impossibility of representing God. Viewers may laugh at or identify with the iconography depending on their own belief systems, yet what comes across is the human necessity of personalising the structures we use to prop up our lives. This necessity can lead to compulsive behaviours such as playing slot machines, eating chocolate and even praying; Finn-Kelcey condensing all three in a following work *It Pays To Pray* (1999). At MAO, a single vending machine dated 2017 represented this work, which was originally conceived for River Walk, Millennium Dome and consisted of four vending machines selling non-denominational prayers named after chocolate bars. The prayers, more akin to aphorisms or song lyrics, are accessed by feeding 20p into a slot, a kind of tongue-in-cheek comment on the quick fix of the comforts that get one through the day. The wall-mounted pillow in *Book and Pillow* dominated the smaller of the middle galleries, though one actually experiences part of the work before encountering the object in the sound of a fly buzzing in the room. The viewer is invited to lay their head on the pillow and use the attached magnifying glass to peer at the little red wax figure embedded in a clear resin page of the book. As one does this the buzzing stops, restarting as one removes one's head from the pillow. The succubus-like wax creature is another kind of alter ego for the artist, inspired by reading about Jung's concept of the animus (the masculinity principle). It was made by a model maker, Tony McVey, at the Natural History Museum based on notes Finn-Kelcey sent him including a list of characteristics she associated with her animus:

> I cannot describe his total appearance, but more his manipulative powers, his ability to enter my mind, interrupt my thoughts forcing me to look at myself from outside to be a spectator of my actions. He causes any thoughts in my head to vanish leaving a complete and terrifying void, he controls my tongue so that the words I utter are clumsily formed and is so small that he is unable to move both my tongue and my gullet simultaneously. Which means that he is constantly rushing from one to the other, so they are not synchronised. […] I reiterate parrot-wise the same old things, I become aggressive, frustrated because in that void are the half-glimpsed images which I know are there but for which I can find no words. The little wretch – poisonous little voice. Does he have ears – does he hear me? (Finn-Kelcey quoted in Brett 2012: 81)

Though not included in the exhibition notes, these working notes repeat themes of sonic transmission that circulated in much of the work on show at MAO. The mediumistic impetus recounted here is a good description of the creative process

and the dialogue with oneself that, while being the basis of connecting to others, is also what has to be transcended to communicate beyond the self. Finn-Kelcey's best work is a formal testament to the externalisation of inner voice/s and the transformation of them into objects that have a life of their own.

Ultimately, however, other than actual voice, something else was missing from the exhibition at MAO and that was the inclusion of at least one more of Finn-Kelcey's large-scale installations. Anyone new to her work would not get any sense of the ambition of works such as *Steam Installation* (1992) or *Pearly Gate* (1997), either of which could have been included in the Piper Gallery instead of the Aleksandra Mir installation *Space Tapestry, Earth Observation and Human Space Fighter* (2017). It may be gallery policy to have two exhibitions on at any one time. There may also have been logistical issues, but unlike, for example, the conceptual challenge of *Like Grazing Animals They Feel Their Way Across The Surface* (1974), a photographic installation consisting of eighty black-and-white photographs of the artist taken at a series of measured intervals viewing objects placed at a series of measured positions, MAO presented a single black-and-white photograph of the artist that only served, somewhat oddly in the context of her questioning of identity, as a portrait of the artist rather than, as I suspect, being an image from this early installation.

The MAO survey also made me think that, while the forms and approaches of Finn-Kelcey's work are not outmoded and actually appear quite fresh in relation to the conceptual materiality operative in much recent art in the United Kingdom, this work could not be made today. One obvious reason is the shift in political frameworks for conceiving of selfhood and identity, related to which is a loss of faith in art's power as protest, performative or otherwise. The most recent works in the exhibition were a series of small paper cuts: *Pakistan, 2/5/11* (2012) and *Libya 20th October 2011 (A dictator's hole No. 2)* (2012), both of which depict cartoonish scenes based on the media reports of recent terroristic wars. Clearly responses to contemporary media events in material form, these works, while strangely charming, have none of the confidence of Finn-Kelcey's answer to the Falklands War, the performance *Glory* (1983) in which she interacted with a 100 table scale, silhouette cut-outs of world leaders and famous people through history. Using a rake, Finn-Kelcey acted as animator and controller of the cut-outs, her actions mimicking 'those of the battlefield planner or the croupier' (Battista 2012: 100). Documentation sequences of the performance, which took place at the Serpentine Gallery in 1983, were edited into a stand-alone video of the same name. Although the scale of this projection at MAO meant that it appeared more like shadowy documentation than an experimental film, what came across was a sense of conviction that an artist could make a public political statement, whereas the recent papercuts signified a retreat into the private. This is not a personal criticism but more a difference in the ecology of the times we live in whereby faith in identity politics and protest has severely dwindled. Finn-Kelcey was working at a time when artistic thinking still pointed to a beyond, a gap between reality and representation, whereas now that gap appears closed. In writing this, I came across a diagnosis of this state by the Norwegian novelist, Karl Ove Knausgaard, which is apropos here. Detailing the shift from absolute modernism to the conceptual incorporation of objects from the real world into art, Knausgaard describes a situation whereby neither art nor science nor religion knows of a 'beyond' any longer. He says:

> the final remnants of something outside the human world have been abandoned […]. Our world is enclosed around itself, enclosed around us, and there is no way out of it, those in this situation who call for more intellectual depth, more spirituality have understood

> nothing, for the problem is that the intellect has taken over everything. […] Nowadays […] all those who have occupied themselves with the neutral, the negative, the non-human in art, have turned to language, that is where the incomprehensible and the otherness have been sought, as if they were to be found on the margins of human expression, in other words on the fringes of what we understand, and of course actually that is logical; where else would it be found in a world that no longer acknowledges that there is a beyond? (Knausgaard 2003: 201)

Finn-Kelcey's work pivots between the extremes of a transcendent beyond and an immanent recoiling in linguistic puns and non-sequiturs that still retains a glimpse of the otherness within the self integral to faith and politics. Its timeliness is that it keeps alive the juncture between materials and concepts in which the concept, thought itself, is not the commoditised entity it has become in a world in which everything is capable of being understood, but continues to channel magical thinking into the world.

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