

frieze

Contemporary Art and Culture
No. 240 January/February 2024



Six Love Letters to LA • The Last Hayao Miyazaki Film
Goshka Macuga on Rose Finn-Kelcey • Profile: Ellen Gallagher
Conversation: Meredith Monk and Marina Rosenfeld

UK £8.50 US \$15 €12
40
97 70962 067045

1,500 Words
by Goshka Macuga

Flying Through Space Forever

For 'Women in Revolt!', Tate Britain
has raised Rose Finn-Kelcey's flag,
Here Is a Gale Warning (1971), from its roof.
Here, *Goshka Macuga* reflects on
how the artist remains a potent influence
on her own work

Recently, I put two images side-by-side on my computer screen. In one, a young woman performs a handstand on an empty beach, her pleated skirt cascading over her face. In the other, a towering metallic rocket rises like an imposing phallus. While initially these two artworks – the first is Rose Finn-Kelcey's *The Restless Image: a discrepancy between the seen position and the felt position* (1975); the second, my *GONOGO* (2023) – seemed unrelated, I soon noticed a striking similarity between them. Despite their distinct forms, both create a dynamic interplay with space that simultaneously connects and disconnects the ground from the beyond. Symbolically, they both point towards the power structures that shape our society.

Staged at Dungeness in Kent, Finn-Kelcey's photograph was inspired by a snapshot of her mother doing a handstand on the beach. Exuberant and expressive, *The Restless Image* reveals a glimpse of (historically forbidden) flesh whilst concealing what is usually most acceptable in a Western context: the artist's face. Borrowing its title from René König's 1971 book on the political history of women's dress, the work doubles as a portrait of sartorial convention and transgression. With her thighs bared for the camera, the artist seems ready to launch into the sky: we have lift-off.

GONOGO was initially conceived as my proposal for the Fourth Plinth in London's Trafalgar Square. It aimed to challenge concepts of public space and the narratives around monuments by evoking a sense of transcending earthly boundaries. I didn't receive the commission, but the sculpture premiered this year at Palazzo Strozzi in Florence and will be exhibited next year on San Giacomo Island in Venice with the support of Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo.



Though I wasn't thinking of Finn-Kelcey's work when I created *GONOGO*, I later discovered a kinship between our practices in as much as we both delve into the problematic aspects of culture and language in a society where patriarchy, inequality and gender stereotyping still exert their influence.

Finn-Kelcey began experimenting with public art in the late 1960s, in a bid to challenge the institutionalized nature of art. As she once claimed in an interview: 'I realized that I don't want to work in the gallery system all the time, and that actually a lot of my work is inspired by a location, and by

the history or the architecture of that particular location, so when I'm confronted with a gallery, I don't have that.' Between 1968 and 1973, Finn-Kelcey created several, text-based flag works in public settings – including *Here Is a Gale Warning* (1971) on Alexandra Palace in north London, then home to the BBC, and *Power for the People* (1972) at Battersea Power Station in south London – which perfectly embodied the artist's subversive approach by reconceiving an object universally

I don't want to work in the gallery system all the time.

Rose Finn-Kelcey

recognized as a symbol of authority as a provocative yet poetic artwork. When *Here Is a Gale Warning* was installed, the BBC switchboard was flooded with calls from people concerned about the threat of extreme weather. As Finn-Kelcey explained: 'Although weather is directly experienced through the senses, forecasts and reports are conveyed via various media channels such as television, radio and newspapers. The effect of weather and weather changes on human action and reaction is part of the complex interplay between man and his environment.'

It is remarkable to me that, in the early 1970s, Finn-Kelcey was already commenting on the relationship between humans and their environment in the context of climate change. Yet, 50 years on, we have done little to heed those 'gale warnings'. Finn-Kelcey argued that flags reflect upon ephemerality, value and the power of words, highlighting how we communicate, interpret and amplify messages. Moreover, by their very nature, flags demonstrate how a message can change from truth to absurdity with a sudden shift in the wind. They can also be read as metaphors for a political climate, a commentary on how attitudes change in fundamental – though not necessarily truthful – ways, depending on which direction the winds of history blow. In the current social and cultural context, this seems highly poignant.

Like Finn-Kelcey's, my practice has also responded to and been shaped by my environment. From creating art in my own house and in other artist-run spaces during the late 1990s, to more recent projects such as 'Exhibition M' (2019) – which centred around the history and collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York – I'm fascinated by how context influences an artwork. Working across a range

Previous page
Rose Finn-Kelcey,
The Restless Image:
a discrepancy between
the seen position and
the felt position (detail),
1975. Unless otherwise
stated, all images
courtesy: © Estate of
Rose Finn-Kelcey
and Kate MacGarry,
London

Left
Rose Finn-Kelcey,
Here is a Gale Warning,
1971, black bunting
and silver tissue,
6.7 × 9 m, documentary
still from *Flags*

Opposite page
Goshka Macuga,
GONOGO, 2023, instal-
lation view. Courtesy:
the artist and OKNO
Studio; photograph:
Ela Bialkowska

of media, Finn-Kelcey was an artist you could never quite pin down: she created *for* the spaces in which she showed, rather than trying to bend the environment to suit her work. I share her lack of commitment to any specific medium: my practice evolves in response to concepts, settings and personal circumstances.

For a recent commission to mark the 300th anniversary of the Belvedere Museum in Vienna, I created a work titled *"I could have gone on flying through space forever but I have always loved a window, especially an open one."* (2023). Like Finn-Kelcey's *Here Is a Gale Warning*, this piece addresses issues related to the current environmental crisis and utilizes text-based flags. Installed in the middle of the large lake that

Finn-Kelcey was an artist you could never pin down.

fronts the Upper Belvedere, the work features three creatures perched on the outside of a space capsule that appears to have just landed on Earth. The origin of these characters is uncertain and their enigmatic banners offer little clarity regarding their purpose or intentions: one reads, 'SPACE FOR ALL'; another asks, 'AM I COMING OR GOING?' The third banner combines a quote from the first human in space, Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, with one from the American writer and environmental activist Wendell Berry. The futuristic, sci-fi elements of the work draw on the metaphorical strategies employed by writers who lived under oppressive and truth-denying regimes, such as the Polish author Stanisław Lem, who encoded a critique of the political systems of his time.

The animal figures reference motifs from the original garden designs for the Belvedere, as well as 19th-century American political cartoons in which animals – an elephant for the Republican Party; a donkey for the Democrats – were deployed to distil complex ideas into more comprehensible and humorous symbolic representations. Today, however, many of those same creatures that once denoted power and bravery on coats of arms and family crests in previous centuries now speak to the collapse of ecosystems and threats to our existence on Earth. Both the lion on the British royal family crest and the elephant of the Republican mascot are endangered.

In recent protests about climate change – such as those held in October in France against Atlas Ocean Voyager's arctic cruises – demonstrators have dressed as animals to engage in what Kevin DeLuca has described as 'disidentification' with the accepted social values of progress and human dominance over nature. By identifying with animals, these protestors simultaneously 'disidentify' with the humans causing the destruction of our natural environment. Another point of resonance for these demonstrators is the subculture of furry fandom, which grew considerably in popularity following the 38th World Science Fiction Convention in Boston in 1980, whose proponents aim to transcend the prevailing social climate of alienation by adopting new anthropomorphic bodies.

When Finn-Kelcey died in 2014 at the age of 68, she left behind such an inventive and broad-ranging body of work that there could be no doubt as to her pivotal status within the artistic community of her time. Yet, despite being recognized as an important artist and teacher by her peers and her students alike, she was never the subject of a major institutional show in her own lifetime in the UK. In fact, it is only in recent years that, thanks to the efforts of her friends and supporters, her work has been preserved and popularized internationally, and is now frequently exhibited.

For me, *Here Is a Gale Warning* can also be seen as a metaphor for those historical forces that drive people out of spaces – that limit where we can go, where we can live, where we can exhibit. The fact that some of Finn-Kelcey's public artworks, such as her flags, which were originally designed for spaces outside of the museum, are now being shown in institutions that otherwise took little interest in her work during her lifetime follows a familiar, circular narrative: the artist receives the attention she deserved after her death. The gale blows in, then it blows elsewhere ●

Opposite page, above
Goshka Macuga,
*"I could have gone on
flying through space
forever but I have
always loved a window,
especially an open one."*,
2023, mixed-media
installation. Courtesy:
the artist and Belvedere,
Vienna; photograph:
Johannes Stoll

Opposite page, below
Rose Finn-Kelcey, *Power
for the People*, 1972/2011,
colour photograph
mounted on aluminium,
1.1 x 1.6 m

Goshka Macuga is an artist. Recent exhibitions include 'Public Matters: Contemporary Art in the Belvedere Garden' (2023) at the Belvedere Museum, Vienna, Austria, and 'Paraventi: Folding Screens from the 17th to 21st Centuries' (2023–24) at Fondazione Prada, Venice, Italy.