



Event Sculpture 8
Urs Fischer
16 February 2015

Response by Agnieszka Gratza, 18 February 2015

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'Bit of clay will bring them out in numbers,' the Librarian says matter-of-factly as we come out together through the entrance of the Henry Moore Institute and survey the scene. The landing and the steps leading up to it are teeming with people, mostly, but by no means all, children, busy kneading, rolling, patting, smoothing, fashioning things out of clay. To our left, a group of five-year-olds stick letters onto the black granite façade to make up their names; older kids amuse themselves by throwing lumps of clay at it. Beneath our feet, the pavement is littered with grey clay pellets, flattened out and glued to the floor like bubble gum. The place is abuzz with chatter, laughter, the odd shriek. It feels like an invasion. Or a jamboree.

The penultimate Monday in *The Event Sculpture* series happened to coincide with the start of half term. Small wonder, then, that the number of children and accompanying adults grew steadily through the day. And yet there was something miraculous about the spontaneity of this particular occasion and the way the public – young and old – responded to it. The eighth event had not been advertised in any way. *The Event Sculpture* website gave little away. Unlike the remaining eight events, the brief description of Urs Fischer's piece-to-come had no title. It still has none.

No call for volunteers was put out by the artist, inviting members of the public to create clay sculptures, as was the case in Fischer's ongoing work 'Yes!' (2011–). When presented in Los Angeles at the Museum of Contemporary Art's Geffen Contemporary wing in 2013 some 1,500 volunteers were enlisted to take part in a twenty-five-day event, and they got through three hundred tons of clay between them. The blue clay bags neatly piled up on wood pallets at the top of the steps in front of the Henry Moore Institute – most of which were emptied of their contents by the end of the five-hour event – weighed a more modest two tons – all the same, it took cranes to hoist them up, as with the sixth Event Sculpture, Lara Favaretto's slabs of marble. The clay was supplied by Valentine Clays, a family-run manufacturer based in the area. Fischer specifically requested unprocessed, locally-sourced clay, made using no colourants and no preservatives. A raw, pure material fit for, as the artist puts it, 'a simple, pure act of sculpture.'

The clay felt cool, moist and smooth to the touch as I had a go myself at fashioning the protean material into shapes soon after the event began, at half past noon or so. I made something ear-resembling, then a pebble, followed by a potato. It reminded me of pre-school. 'Sculpture for beginners,' I muttered. But Fischer, who had just turned a slab of clay into a life-size hog's head, begged to differ. To begin with, it was just the artist and his two friends, sporting white gauzy overcoats, who worked away at the clay. It did not take long, though, for the first children and their parents to join in. Like Maria Nordman's event, the fifth Event Sculpture, this one sought to involve the younger members of the public especially. Fischer's interest in the creativity of children lies behind this participatory artwork with its performative aspects. The Swiss-born artist makes his own Picasso's claim: 'Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up.'

Soon our collective clay offerings graced the steps, the hand rails, the plinths beneath them, and the Institute's façade, gradually transformed into a low-relief mural as the day wore on. An array of mainly figurative forms, beguiling in their simplicity: snails, owls, cars, pyramids, pretzels, bunches of grapes, bananas, dinosaurs, Masonic eyes, miniature Stonehenges, Henry Moore sculptures. Propped up against one of the steps, three chunky capital letters followed by a question mark spelled out: 'ART?' The handiwork of Fischer's London gallerist Sadie Coles – one of the two women sporting white overcoats – of all people, it had an air of defiance. As I walked past it later in the day, the question mark was gone, its clay material no doubt put to some better use.