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30 April 2009

Kelly Large, Our Name is Legion, 2009



A residency at Kesteven and Sleaford High School, Lincolnshire

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In November 2008, Beacon Art Project commissioned artist Kelly Large to take up residence at Kesteven & Sleaford High School and produce an art work in response to this educational context located within a historic, rural town. She observed the school day, where roughly between the hours of 8.30 am and 3.30 pm, the pupils' movements and behaviours were precisely managed and contained within the school's boundaries. Wandering around town between these times there was little evidence that Sleaford contained three secondary schools in spitting distance of the town centre. As a consequence of the lack of presence the students had in the town during school time, the after school routine, when approximately 2,500 young people from nearby secondary schools exited the school grounds and spilled into the town centre, took on an extraordinary quality. The artist was preoccupied by the sheer volume of students who amassed and dispersed and the affect this had on the town. The atmospheric changes, increased noise levels, sudden traffic jams all indicated a momentary shift in the status quo, where one demographic group outnumbered all others.

The production of *Our Name is Legion* took place on Thursday 30 April. At the end of the school

day, Large invited all secondary and sixth-form students from Sleaford schools to don a florescent yellow high-visibility vest from the moment they left school to the moment they arrived home. Thus the pupils were transformed into a mass of singular colour as they followed their usual routes. They flowed along the main thoroughfares, congregated in habitual locations such as the central Market Place and bus stops, and then, over a period of one hour, gradually disbanded. The mass spectacle was filmed from high buildings in the town.

In the direct context of Sleaford, *Our Name is Legion* signaled the complex relationship the students had with the town. The appropriation of this routine, daily fluctuation as art work looked to make vivid a daily occurrence in order to explore resident's awareness of their town's social structure. Each student was local, an inhabitant of Sleaford or the surrounding area, yet the mass assembly differentiated between town and school populations, temporarily defining the youth as an anonymous, culturally defined group, that was simultaneously inside the community and separate from it. This interplay between mass and individual, lack of, or excess public prominence, in a specific geographical and cultural environment, reflected to some extent the status of young people within wider society, as they start to forge an identity for themselves that is both individual and conforms to societal expectations.

However, this is not an art work about the representation of young people. Those who were excluded from or chose not to take part, such as the town's people, the artist, the commissioner and the student dissenters were not absent from the moment. Their lack of engagement is writ large on the art work - signalled through the dilute effect their clothing has on the spectacle, and as such they remain visible participants. The title of the art work, *Our Name is Legion* has military connotations and is taken from a biblical parable in which Jesus meets a man possessed by many demons, and when asked their name, they respond: 'Our name is legion, for we are many'. It has been referenced in political and pop culture contexts, used to suggest the destabilising power of the assembling mass and the ambiguous power-play between multitude and individual. Used here, it points towards the art work offering possibilities for acting collectively or alone and the agency these positions afford in different social arenas; it also acknowledges society's uneasy and agoraphobic relationship to the colonization of public space by groups of people.

Our Name is Legion was made possible with the support of the partners below



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