

### ***Rehearsing Memory, Belton 2015.***

It's a chilly winter day when I get to Belton House, with the sort of low, golden sun that makes you squint, and a sharp wind that reddens the cheeks and whips tears from your eyes. The visitor centre is full of the bustle and babble of small children and their parents; toggled up in waterproofs and wellies, the little ones are clearly bursting with energy, and impatient for the park and its adventure playground.

I am equally eager, though I am here for a rather different kind of adventure, one that will involve a sort of time-travel as I navigate *Rehearsing Memory, Belton 2015*, a contemporary art commission in four parts. The video, audio and print works developed by artists Belén Cerezo and Rebecca Lee are intended to commemorate the centenary of the Machine Gun Corps training camp at the estate, and are the product of a repeated investigation of the designed landscape, of sustained archival research, and very many hours of conversation with the staff, volunteers and visitors at Belton. Their project isn't only about the Corps, however, but attends to the complexities of the place as a whole, carefully holding its past, present and future in creative tension: to encounter this much visited National Trust property via these works is to experience a series of surprising temporal shifts.

The headphones provided for the audio walk are snug over my ears as I step out of the Marble Hall. They give instructions that lead me away from the house, beyond the ha-ha separating garden from park, and towards the avenue of chestnuts stretching up the hill to the eye-catching folly at the top. As I walk there's the sonic backdrop of children's voices, and I look around expecting to see some of the visitor centre tots scampering nearby but there's no one in sight apart from other walkers wearing headphones, similarly attentive to the audio's direction. It's the first moment for time-travelling: there's a little jolt as I realise the children I hear belong to a previous summer when Rebecca Lee must have walked this territory with her sound recording kit. That her recordings are 'binaural' has the uncanny effect of placing subsequent listeners at the heart of the sound they are hearing, and right into the location from which it came.

The main voice on the walk is a kind of narrator who offers a host of fascinating facts about the park: about its original design and the current management of its trees; about its appearance in several TV and film productions; about the planning and construction of the Machine Gun Corps camp; about the military training and how men would learn to read and sketch the land and its lines of sight; and about the handling and preparation of the guns themselves. It frequently directs me to note actual elements of the parkland around me as, for instance, where young trees have been planted closely adjacent to older specimens. These understudies, as they are described, are there to replace their senescent counterparts as part of planned landscape renewal. Once again I feel time at work as I think of the park one hundred years into the future and how the tree cover will have shifted sideways, with the adolescents themselves become veterans.

At points the narrative wanders, allowing for such curiosities as the note on how one geographer had worked out the proportion of upland and lowland in the Downs by cutting up and weighing the appropriate parts of a paper map... The anecdote takes me to an entirely different scientific era, its basic approach to measurement far from the accuracy of geophysical technology employed by recent archaeologists surveying at Belton. Throughout the walk several other voices are heard, amongst them the Head Ranger for the park, and a retired schoolteacher now volunteering there; multiple stories are told, they resonate in my ears and in my mind. I find myself sent adrift, floating somewhere between the hereand- now, and the that-was-then of histories being recounted.

Whilst walking I imagine those I hear about, but of course I never see them directly; it's only when I venture down the narrow cast iron spiral staircase to the dimness of the Billiard Room that I meet some of the people who currently populate the place. Belén Cerezo's video documentary-essay-installation reveals an archivist's carefully gloved hands unfurling a map from its tissue paper carapace; shows a youthful archaeologist passing back and forth across the grass with scanning equipment; and it seats us right next to the Head Ranger in his Land Rover as he talks about trees grown twisted by years of wind. Finally, the piece shows us the faces of soldiers who trained in the Machine Gun Corps camp somewhere between 1915 and 1920, images made by filming historic photographs with a powerful lens. Akin to the archaeologist, Cerezo tracks repeatedly across her field

of inquiry, but here the old black and white pictures of young uniformed men shimmer under such close inspection: the artist seemingly peers through them, delving beneath the surface image to reveal only grainy texture, the imperfections of hairs on the negative and its scratched photographic emulsion.

Elsewhere in the piece, an accompanying voiceover remarks the way images tremble (in a philosophical sense) despite a photographer's best efforts to ensure steadiness with a tripod for their camera. That the machine gun might rest atop a similar tripod provides a neat counterpoint here, though its work results in other more terrible kinds of trembling – human fear, or that of the very earth itself, shaken by mechanized barrage. Conceptual echoes between the war and more pastoral matters ripple through the commission: we are told how trees under stress can 'throw off' a branch with a crack like a gunshot, and the wound can gush with sap.

There's a subtle element in Cerezo's film where, for a very short time, the playback is reversed such that cars are seen to travel backwards along the road that intersects Belton's parkland. This episode disrupts any sense that she will pursue a relentless narrative direction towards some definitive conclusion, or that there will be an emotional finale in which all the threads will be drawn tightly together. Here in the screening, time very literally loops: played continuously we may have joined the film's telling at any point, so that each viewing may start from a different moment in the history it relates. Its discrete and sometimes digressive stories suggest a consciously critical interrogation of remembering. *Rehearsing Memory, Belton 2015* offers a perspective on big history; it recognises the epochal social, cultural and technological shifts brought about through the First World War, but at the same time, it also attends to a more intimate and immediate register. This is very evident in the selection of items brought along by people connected to the Machine Gun Corps, which were photographed for a printed edition distributed to those living in the vicinity of the estate. The picturing of these modest things, each of which could be held in the hand – a watch, compass, pipe, letter, and so forth – references specific individual lifetimes, some cut short by war, and their assembly came via many conversations with the soldiers' relatives. Whilst the project commemorates the presence of the military camp, and the particular experience of those thousands who trained there, along with its consequences for their families in other places, it also sets this period into a much longer view of humanity through its references to landscape formation and archaeology. The artists hold these differing scales in relation throughout the works, allowing room to reflect on the incremental accumulations of history; to navigate the park and its memories via the commission is to experience a slow time travel, and to alter forever your relationship to its present.

Throughout this centenary many artistic projects have sought to offer ways of commemorating the self-sacrifice, bravery and extraordinary loss of the First World War; whilst *Rehearsing Memory, Belton 2015* certainly provokes emotional affect, its engagement with this powerful subject is, I think, rather different. What seems important in this suite of works is that they investigate the diverse ways it is possible to come to know and understand this history, and a sense – implied by its title – that remembering requires various attempts before anything is fixed. The artists here have pursued several lines of inquiry, from traditional archival work and interviews to artistic practices of walking, sound recording, photography and video. They clearly know that what can be discerned from the memories passed down through families is other than that available from documents, that looking through a lens at an existing image or an actual place can act to slow and alter attention, and that walking in a landscape offers insights beyond those that any theoretical focus on military history can allow; they have attended carefully to the major social, cultural and political factors of the World War, but also its intimacies and its curiosities. What they encountered is then explored and distilled through processes of accumulation and editing: information and ideas are essayed through sustained writing, re-voicing and transformative temporal sequencing. The works are conceptually layered, with points of particular focus drawn out through visual or verbal echoes between artefacts; that these have emerged from both individual and collaborative approaches seems important – sometimes ideas raised in one artist's work are imaged in a piece by the other, or a similar concept is made visible by both artists but via very distinct media, or in diverse locations across the estate. The historical research has been amplified through this artwork, and the outcome is a complicated engagement with past and present people and their relationship to Belton, as well as to the land defined as Great Britain, and to the world beyond its

shores. Instead of simplifying all this into a neat narrative arc as popular history seeks to do, the multiple strands of the project hold the resulting insights alongside one another, generating poetic and critical ripples stronger in effect than could be told by the usual descriptions with which we are familiar. *Rehearsing Memory, Belton 2015* is certainly specific to this place and its history, and to this period in which it was first developed and presented, but more broadly it suggests how major events can be creatively rethought and retold. The project reveals the value of having artists operate as investigators, interrogators and communicators of history: in this work their practice has made for a richer and more nuanced telling, whereby the very complexity of that tale remains visible and accessible, able to be both felt and analysed, and where the material they have made now operates as a resonant archive in its own right.

Joanne Lee 2016