

'Power For The People' (1972) by Rose Finn-Kelcey

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Rose Finn-Kelcey's work in the early 1970s aimed to challenge the institution of art 'by putting forward proposals that re-integrate ... art with life.'¹ A sophistication about the reading of objects in particular contexts became one of twentieth-century art's enduring legacies as it moved out of the circuit of museums and art galleries into the public realm. Finn-Kelcey's early flag works focused on both authorship and context. Often they carried a verbal formula, such as 'Here is a Gale Warning' (1971) that was flown from the mast at the BBC's Alexandra Palace in North London, a site that was still used by the BBC at the time for news broadcasts. This was part of a project titled *Art Spectrum*, a survey of new British art. The piece could not, of course, function, unless there was already a high wind, and many people who saw the kinetic sculpture from a distance took the 'warning' seriously: BBC2's switchboard became jammed, reflecting what Guy Brett called 'the ambiguities of "exhibiting"'.²

In 1972 Finn-Kelcey produced 'Power For The People' for Battersea Power Station as a part of The London Festival. A flag was placed on the left and right hand sides of the emblematic building as viewed from the river with the title emblazoned across its surface. The initial proposal, however, was for many flags to be flown from buildings along the course of the Thames. For six months she sought permission from various departments of the Greater London Council (GLC) to fly flags from government buildings. The cumulative interactions of the flag statements were essential, and this first idea required a large number of flags to work properly. 'It took weeks to get any reply ... since my letters were shuffled from one office to another in typically

¹ Brett, Guy, 'Tissues of Thought', *Third Text*, Vol. 22, March 2008, p. 237.

² *Ibid.*, p. 245.

bureaucratic fashion. Phoning the men concerned proved impossible.³ The GLC refused to support the piece in its entirety, and Finn-Kelcey decided to focus on flags for power stations and entered into discussion with the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB). In a 1971 meeting with two PR men from the company, the wording on the flags was discussed. Highly sensitive to the Board's public image, they 'agreed with the idea in principle but emphasised that the words, phrases or statements must not refer directly or indirectly to pollution.'⁴ Finn-Kelcey considered a number of statements that described the reality of electricity, deciding on 'Power For The People', which underlined the service provided by Battersea Power Station. In June 1972 support was secured, and a date for installation was arranged.

The silver tissue and black bunting flags, both reading 'Power For The People', each measured 5.79 x 8.53 metres. They were colossal when spread on the floor where Finn-Kelcey hand-stitched them. The density of their blackness, paired with the mercurial silver lettering, created a flatness similar to Warhol's silk-screen prints, where likewise the message is key. Once at Battersea Power Station it was agreed that the existing flagpoles on the building needed to be lengthened so the works could be hoisted on 30 June. On 29 June, the day before the work was scheduled to be realised, Finn-Kelcey was asked to change the wording to read 'Power For The Nation', which she refused to do.

The 18 July–3August 1972 edition of *Time Out* reported that:

Two flags saying 'Power For The People – commissioned by the Central Electricity Generating Board, at £70 each from Rose Finn-Kel[c]ey, fluttered briefly over Battersea Power Station last week. Someone got cold feet and, in

³ Archival document typed summary of events by Rose Finn-Kelcey, The Estate of Rose Finn-Kelcey.

⁴ Ibid.

spite of its being London Festival time, and in spite of Rose's nine month's negotiations with the Board over the precise wording of the flags – it was all off. Someone, under the Kafkaesque title of 'Director of Generation', decided that 'people' should be changed to 'nation' if there was to be any hope of this part of Rose Finn-Kel[c]ey's project to fly message flags all along the river was to come off. Rose stuck to her ground; 'for the People ' was what she wanted to say ... Still, the lads at the Power Station enjoyed the whole episode – and somehow someone forgot to take them down till midnight.

Although the time of 'Power For The People' in situ was limited, its legacy in Finn-Kelcey's career is substantial, and registers an interest in the transient and ephemeral within her work, seen again in performative pieces such as 'One for Sorrow, Two for Joy' (1976) and 'Steam Installation' (1992). Later in her career in 'Angel' (2004), once again any reading of the piece is altered by the wind, which perpetuates a 'changed state' of both materials and reading.

Rose Finn-Kelcey's work creates an alchemy where natural elements and human spectators transform a material. 'Power For The People' in both its conception and legacy is typical of her work. Today the images of the flags on the power station remain as an editioned work, and as a message as rich in ambiguity now as then.