



FEATURE

Two wars and no satisfaction: The Coffin Jump and In Search of Dinozord

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by [Sandy Di Yu](#)

The interpretation of art, much like the interpretation of anything, is a comparative practice. *The Coffin Jump* by Katrina Palmer and *In Search of Dinozord* by Faustin Linyekula reviewed in tandem creates a new dynamic about art concerning war.

Last Friday, ArtRabbit was invited to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park for the unveiling of a new work by Katrina Palmer. Along with YSP, *The Coffin Jump* was co-commissioned by 14-18 NOW, the United Kingdom's arts programme for the First World War centenary. The itinerary organised for the day out in Wakefield, Yorkshire included lunch with the artist, being among the first to view the artwork, afternoon tea with champagne, meeting HRH Princess Anne, mingling with some of the UK's richest and most powerful, and somehow, me. The event at times felt surreal, not least because it was as if I accidentally stumbled into the scene in films where a repugnant individual gets a makeover and is finally allowed to hang out with the cool kids, but also for my own internal battles of being a great admirer of Katrina Palmer's work while having my reservations about anything so entrenched in imperialism.

But more on that later.



Katrina Palmer: *The Coffin Jump*. Courtesy of Yorkshire Sculpture Park

The interpretation of art, much like the interpretation of anything, is a comparative practice. The day trip out to Wakefield left me satisfied, tired and cosy, wrapped up as I was in my thoughts on how to write about Palmer's work. But that evening, I had to make room for other thoughts as I went to see the theatre performance *In Search of Dinozord* by Faustin Linyekula, part of LIFT 2018.

Had I not gone, my two cents on *The Coffin Jump* might've been spent differently. I left the Yorkshire Sculpture Park satisfied in my experience, but the performance at [The Place](#) agitated that satisfaction to a severe degree. And perhaps this was the intention of the show. Unabashedly political but in many ways as graceful as it was uncomfortable, *In Search of Dinozord* featured talented dancers, singers, and poets who told the deeply troubled history of the Democratic Republic of Congo through what felt like a dream sequence, touching on the scars (or wounds, as they have yet to heal) left by European colonialism and the capitalist machine, the biopolitics of crossing borders, the violence that remains to this day, and the individual stories of political prisoners sentenced to, then escaping death.



In Search of Dinozord. Photo by Steve Gunther

The performance was about individual stories, true stories that Congolese choreographer Linyekula and his collaborators lived through, set against the context of regional conflicts and post-colonial wounds and through the tale of memory, loss, and recovery. It starts off with the slow, abstract movements of the dancers, pushing their bodies in extreme yet poetic ways. One dancer manipulates the body of another into a headstand. He dances away from the upside-down figure, and the body falls with a heavy thud, flesh to floor, reverberating soundwaves and pain, its gravity foreshadowing the gravity of the plot that's to develop. Revolutionary fervour offsets words that evoke images of intense violence, of unforgiving torture and brutal injustices.



In Search of Dinozord. Photo by Steve Gunther

Dance is always about the body, and sometimes inconsequentially. But not this one. This dance saw to a commentary about the patrol of foreign bodies, both through the stories it weaved and the patrol that the performers saw their bodies undergo. One such performer is an asylum seeker in Canada, and visa issues prevented him from leaving Canada to be able to attend the performance that night. He joined instead via Skype. There was also the man sitting in a corner of the stage making inconspicuous tap tap noises on a typewriter. He was later revealed to be Antoine Vumilia, theatre student turned convict who was detained for 9 years and sentenced to death before he managed to escape. The performance was anything but inconsequential, heavy with politics as it told the gut-wrenching tales of conflict, and heavy with the burden of narrative that each body in the performance bore. It's about bodies, and it's about war, not just the surface level horrors that war threatens with, but underlying power dynamics, colonial, imperial, and otherwise, that sets the table for war to manifest. It's about conflict, historical and personal.



In Search of Dinozord. Photo by Steve Gunther

By contrast, the Yorkshire Sculpture Park is a refuge of quiet solace, no bodies and only objects. Katrina Palmer's newest commission *The Coffin Jump* is about war, but not conflict. It references the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry, an all-female voluntary crew that rescued wounded men on the battlefield, initially by horse and later by motorised vehicles. The group still exists today as the Princess Royal's Volunteer Corps. The artwork itself comprises in a land intervention, a trench with a fence on which phrases are inscribed. The work also includes soundtrack and performance, where on occasion, a horse and rider will jump over the trench and structure. Friday's opening was one such an occasion.

Like all of Palmer's previous works, *The Coffin Jump* was meticulously researched, bringing together space, history, and philosophy. Like her other works, it also plays with a lack, at least to a degree, and configures text as a sculptural form. The phrase painted on the back of the fence, "NOTHING SPECIAL HAPPENED", suggests both. It denotes the underappreciation of women in military spaces, one that the FANY also faced wherein the British Army initially refused to be associated with them despite their life-saving role. Today, the FANY positions themselves to be called upon in times of crisis, and in the past years has proven their importance in response to disasters and attacks such as the Grenfell Tower fires and the Manchester bombings.



Katrina Palmer: The Coffin Jump. Courtesy of Yorkshire Sculpture Park

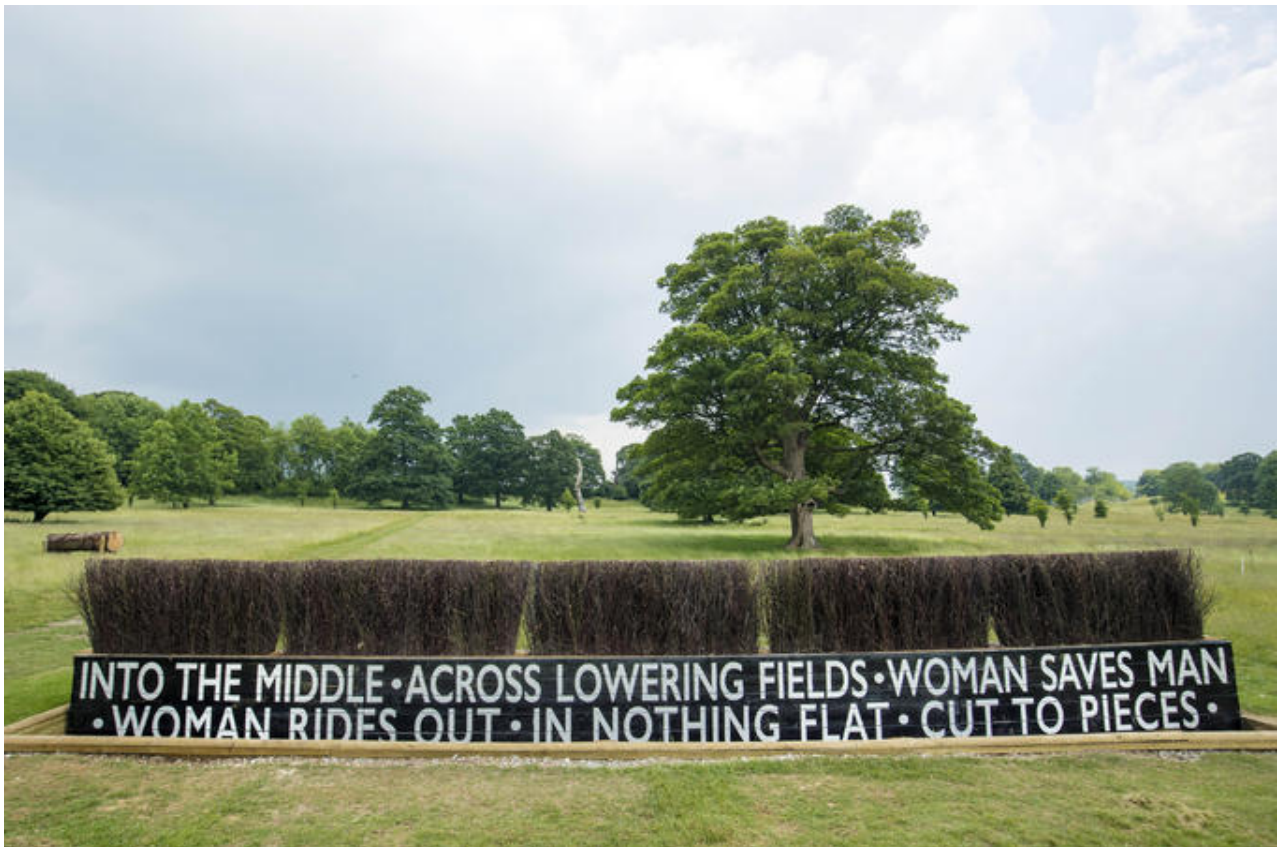
The artwork speaks to an anti-heroism that exemplifies women's work, an important part of history not just in military work but throughout the trajectory of capitalism. However, the events of the day seemed to contradict this sentiment. Coming back to London that afternoon, I wasn't sure whether the ceremonious events surrounding the unveiling of the work augmented the experience in a positive way. Palmer's work itself was without superfluous pageantry, and yet the fancy lunch, the appearance of Princess Anne, the cohorts of philanthropists and press all suggested a want for reverence. Whether this reverence was to be directed at the work itself, the members of the FANY, or the military body as a whole, I couldn't be sure.

That's not to say that every part of the events of the day was amiss. Also in attendance were current members of FANY, donned in handsome uniform. Their presence was a much-appreciated antidote to the clichéd, testosterone-infected hyper-macho spaces of military work. Most surprisingly, HRH Princess Anne, commandant-in-chief of the FANY as of 1999 also arrived in uniform, and gave a speech following the unveiling that was poignant, punchy, and full of humour. Who knew a member of the monarch could sound relatable?



Katrina Palmer: The Coffin Jump. Courtesy of Yorkshire Sculpture Park

Palmer's work purposefully denies hero worship. The Coffin Jump is about war, about mortality, and the ability to cheat this mortality. It's about overlooked parts of history, now cemented in relevance by the institutional powers that be. When thinking back to it after having seen *In Search of Dinozord*, the ceremony surrounding the unveiling seemed slightly absurd, but the work itself stood strong. *In Search of Dinozord* is a performance about current conflict that comes together in its ability to produce an energy can only be for those still living. The Coffin Jump, on the other hand, perhaps plays into the double entendre of its name well in that it is a mausoleum, to enshrine the important acts of yesteryear. It finds its perfect setting in the green pastures of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, scenic and peaceful, the ideal place to find rest.



Katrina Palmer: The Coffin Jump. Courtesy of Yorkshire Sculpture Park

I make the comparison between the performance at the Place and the artwork at Yorkshire Sculpture Park not to disparage one or the other, but to say that while we may commemorate the bravery in response to conflict, conflict is far from over, and art isn't always just the preservation of dead phenomena. I was firmly reminded of this when viewing *In Search of Dinozord*. Because it's in part about a devastating war, *The Coffin Jump* should not be considered in isolation, and it certainly shouldn't be looked at purely through an occidental lens. This is perhaps not on the UK-specific 14-18 NOW to enforce, pedagogical in their mission as they are, but to view this work in the wider context of violence done to bodies of history as well as bodies of now is a responsibility that cultural institutions must undertake for the sake of positive cultural growth.

Both works were about a war, but one was strangely apolitical, even serene, while the other was uncomfortable, almost fantastical at times, and so full of energy that it could resurrect the dead. The importance of having a dialectic about polemical issues continues to reveal itself in cultural spheres. It may be nearly a hundred years since the First World War ended, but war rages on elsewhere. One war finding peace shouldn't let us forget that.

**EXHIBITION****Katrina Palmer: The Coffin Jump**

16 Jun 2018 – 16 Jun 2019

Yorkshire Sculpture Park

Wakefield, United Kingdom

The Coffin Jump is on at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park until June 16th, 2019. Open daily except Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, 10.00–18.00. Entrance is free; you only need to pay for parking. SatNav WF4 4JX brings you to the main car park.

Other commissions by 14-18 NOW, in partnership with LIFT:

**EVENT****Fly By Night**

21 Jun 2018 – 23 Jun 2018

Crossness Pumping Station

London, United Kingdom

About the writer:

Sandy Di Yu, London-based writer, art theorist and artist. Follow her on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#), or visit her [website](#).

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