

15 MINUTES OF SHAKING THE TATE

By Cecilie Nusselein Gravesen (*artist and freelance curator*)

It's 16.25, and I am strolling through the upper galleries of a busy Tate Modern. Three invigilators have gathered below a sign reading 'even clean hands cause damage'. One of their walkie-talkies blare out loudly '*Calling Jamie! Get ready for clapping time! Over and out!*'. Jamie promptly replies '*Oh man, I'm really excited!*' in a voice that reveals an anxious undercurrent. The three look at their watches, then quickly disperse to their different posts.

I belong to the initiated crowd, and thus have a faint idea of what is about to happen. However, events like these never go according to plan, and my anticipation is sincere when hearing the first scattered handclaps. They come at 16.28: two middle-aged ladies with rucksacks stop at centre stage in the gallery, and hesitatingly start to clap while fishing for approval from the invigilators. Then a few more hands and rumbling on the stairway. It all goes pretty fast. At 16.30, without further warning, a massive wave of clapping rises upwards to surround the gallery. The hair on my neck rises too. It's the thrill of collective excitement, but also the lurking fear of crowds and power. I can't quite discern whether this is a celebratory applause. Besides, is it an act of mass conformity when hordes of people obey the neat signposts requesting everyone to clap in time? Or has this day been chosen to finally make a loud tribute to the artists and works on display, after decades of silent admiration?

At 16.32 I am on the landing where the clapping is steady and more structured. People stand around conversing, and while they do so, their hands move rhythmically back and forth as if somehow disembodied. Hordes of kids are busy inventing clapping games. By the escalator, a man starts bowing rhythmically. At the entrance to the gallery, two invigilators dutifully clap between handing out audio guides. A family of four discuss whether we're trying to beat some world record.

It's 16.35 and I am moving down the stairs that have transformed into a tree trunk of sound. Along its branches run tentacles of clatter that surprisingly condense the diffuse architectural experience of Tate Modern. A flock of teenage girls are making their way up, and I ask them what they're clapping at; '*well, like, if everyone claps, it's, like, s'posed to be aaahhrt!*' (translated as art minus the chewing gum, a good thing to hide behind). From the windows I spot one of the ants far below on the turbine bridge, eagerly clapping in front of a baby stroller. His offspring seems to be a welcome point of attention amongst the awkward gesticulations and glances down there. Perhaps detecting his dad's agenda, the kid squalls loudly.

By 16.38, the volume falls and rises in the turbine hall. Upon entering from outside and taking a glance at the row of clapping security guards, most visitors promptly follow suit without questioning. Outside the bookshop, a blond girl is performing a solitary salute that leaves her cheeks blushing red, but inside the shop all is silent. The girls at the counter look apologetic but somewhat relieved; '*we just couldn't serve with one hand and clap with the other...*'

By the lift, someone starts responding to the blonde girl. Some people clap together. Some are being left out. I wonder whether, when I choose not to clap I become the one that they clap at, or if a third, safe position exists to observe the applauders and the applauded. For the two artists, the simple act of clapping provides an experimental space in which to test their fascination with social groups and their inherent tension. Against the complex public space of the Tate, the work takes on a new meaning by playing the game of transference between participation and detachment in a more amorphous social setting than previously. Not only does this situation refuse to be controlled, it is also unpredictable, and the mischievousness suits the otherwise very meticulous project.

At 16.40 one of the applause is clearly distinguished from the rest, as if someone decided it was time to salute the act of clapping all together. And suddenly it's all over. A few newcomers try their luck, but embarrassingly realise that the momentum has passed. In the cloakroom queue, one boy turns to another: '*It might have been a group of visitors moving together, and staying in touch with the help of sound, you know, like the big whales!*'