

Dear Prudence.

The image to the left, resembling an oversized sandwich board is the result of a temporary public art commission I undertook for the city of Brussels earlier this year. I had been offered this commission on the simple premise that nearly all of my work relates to mountains and that the site of the commission, a hill overlooking the city, was known as Mont des Arts. The added bonus that my works often engaged the public in a participatory fashion, a plus when considering public art, was enough to convince the commissioning body that their chosen combination of artist and site would work and as it happened they were right.

'Dear Prudence', as the work was to become known, took about three months in the planning during which time several ideas materialized of which I eventually settled on one, the sandwich board, a common enough object around Mont des Arts and an obvious motif or reference to a mountain. This motif, once increased in height to 6m acquired a certain Magritte quality, always a good connection when working in Belgium. Shortly after came the Edward Whymper quote 'Climb if you want but remember that strength and courage are nothing without prudence'. The emphasis on the word 'Prudence' then became the foundation on which the finished work grew. The title for work 'Dear Prudence' taken from the John Lennon song, the idea being that the message within the lyrics of song "won't you come out to play" would somehow act as a subliminal echo within the work itself

From the start Dear Prudence was an ambitious project, not only with respect to its size but also with respect to its location, the hyper conservative and 'prudent' museum quarter of Brussels. Perhaps more ambitious though, considering the climate of health and safety which effects all activity taking place in public spaces today, was the commissioning bodies acceptance of my condition that the public should be free to engage with the artwork as they saw fit; which of course they did. Even before the work was fully completed, the public responded to Whymper's words and began to climb, just as I had hoped they would, even if a little prematurely.

The 'steps' on the lower face, like those cut in a snow slope (a homage to Belgium artist Hergé and his front cover of 'Tin Tin in Tibet') had been designed in such a way as to make them at first easy to ascend. But with height the steps became smaller and wider spaced. Until on reaching the final step at half height 'the public', in the precarious position of having only one good foot hold and precious little else to cling to where faced with a decision. To continue climbing, using only the letters, or to go down. Which would be the more prudent? (Prudence, being the law governing self-interest.) There was no avoiding this decision, and as one would expect most on reaching the last of the 'steps' thought better of their decision to climb and prudently reversed or jumped onto the old mattresses below. But many others, a surprising number in fact, in skirts, high street fashion, and over sized trainers, crimped with their fingers the 4mm wide MDF letters of 'STRENGTH' and 'COURAGE' and went for the 8mm edge of 'REMEMBER' and then the 12mm of 'BUT', until finally committed in a manner not normally experienced when encountering art they grasped the true meaning of the phrase that had got them there in the first place 'CLIMB IF YOU WANT', an 18mm edge. And from that point, both the first and the last line in the story, some managed to pull through to the top, but the majority fell in spectacular fashion to the applause of the public, landing safely on the mattresses. After which, if they still felt the need to reach the summit they could, by walking a round to the back face of the sandwich board and climbing the ladder to the top to enjoy the view. On the way up they would pass another text, this time not Whymper's words but my own, which read "AND PRUDENCE IS NOTHING WITHOUT A LITTLE COURAGE".

One aim with this work was clearly to highlight questions concerning personal responsibility etc expressing the necessity in life to take risk as well as to be prudent. But not simple with respect to the individual it refers to art also. Contemporary Art traditionally takes risks, but it is surprising that after so long it still looks much the same. And maybe this is a necessary quality of art enabling us to recognize it when we encounter it. By incorporating within Dear Prudence actual lived physical and mental experiences not normally anticipated when engaging with art but more commonly associated with the life which art then attempt to represent, some will find Dear Prudence hard to recognize, accept, or understand as art, To those I would urge them simply to look at it on the level of an experience, one that can be shared with others, discussed and reflected on. In doing so ideas are

exchanged. If this is all that happens then this is fine as for me around the objects of art it is the sharing of ideas and experience that matters most in art.

Dear Prudence was out to play on Place Royale, Mont des Arts, Brussels for three days during March 2007.

Neal Beggs.