

## A Conversation between Composer Nico Muhly and Sculptor Nick Hornby - 2017

**Nico and Nick met in 1999, in The Garden of Cosmic Speculation in Portrack, Scotland. The garden was conceived by Maggie Keswick and Charles Jencks, who is also known as having coined the term "Postmodern." Almost 20 years on, they have a conversation about performativity and the landscape. Nick currently has an exhibition of sculpture in the gardens of Glyndebourne Opera house and Nico's world Premiere of "Marnie" based on the famous Hitchcock film of the same name, gets its World Premiere at the ENO in London in November.**

**NM: Unlike many world-famous opera houses, Glyndebourne is equally well known for its position in the natural world that surrounds it. There is also a codified sense of ritual around attending a show there. Discuss.**

NH: Nico I agree. But first I'm distracted by the word "natural," especially the idea of nature as oppositional to culture. Glyndebourne has a Haha separating the more manicured garden from the sheep in the field. The evolution of sculpture is as much to do with the innovations of the objects as to do with their relationship to the site.... If you start with Egypt where those famous "walking" figures are glued to the walls, and then classical figures aloft on plinth, and more recently Henry Moores' stepping off the plinths and into the natural landscape. To return to your question... you're right, Glyndebourne isn't "natural" — picnicking in Black-tie isn't an everyday affair (I normally picnic in jeans and spill ketchup down my shirt). Glyndebourne is leisure that's hard-work. But I want to put it to you that this is no bad thing... I'm not a gardener, I'm a sculptor - and I love culture more than nature. And I love hard work ...these objects take months and months of design, and cutting and sanding. The first time to the opera at Glyndebourne was the opening night of this years festival - I was guest of Gus and its was a very memorable night. In the run up I was pretty resistant to dressing up (I was worried about the ketchup) but when it came down to it I was extremely pleased — I became a participant in the ritual and as a result embraced the un-reality of the opera more. Do you like music when it's aloft on a plinth, separate from reality, or in the landscape? I feel your work has moments of familiarity mixed with things more out-of-this-world.

**NM: It's something I'm constantly aware of inasmuch as I write music that's designed for concert halls & opera houses and "traditional" things of this nature, but then also have recently been doing these sort of site-specific installation things (such as a piece designed to exist in a darkened room in which the only object is the Wilton Diptych). Then, also, I write a lot of church music which, of course, has its own rituals (and is, itself, a form of ritual). Your work there is public in one sense but private in another — the demographics of the place are specific, and the way to get there is not as simple as, for instance, getting to see the fourth plinth which is sort of an inevitable part of being in central london trying to catch a bus. To get to Glyndebourne, there is a bus of a different nature...?**

NH: You're right. However, I don't think that public is "good" and private is "bad." I've made work in a NY Park funded by private donors, and I've made work in the Tate funded by the government (DCMS). I think the lines quickly blur. For example, blue chip galleries which represent the commercial extremity of the commodifiable art world are freely open to the public.... anyone can walk in off the street and see Picasso at Gagosian. Equally, cultural capital generated in public projects can be instantaneously hoovered up by the market. I think the history of patronage and collection is fascinating. But you're right Glyndebourne's not a public place. I actually requested my show could be viewable "by appointment" - meaning that anyone can call up and arrange permission to see the works. They agreed. This is a first for them. It was important for me.

**NM: I'm glad to hear that you can ring up; that's a very good idea. I suppose inasmuch as you and I met in just such a private garden, I'd hoped you'd allow for a small chink in the armour. Do you think about performance and ritual in your work?**

NH: Performance yes, ritual I've not before. The idea of Performance is so entrenched in the history of sculpture — marble figures frozen from stories - Discus throwers, David and Goliath, Jesus, Men on horses. In the 60s, around discussions of minimalism, performativity became a dirty word. My works are arguably extremely theatrical - there is the idea of "walking around the sculpture" and the "reveal" of seeing different facets. This type of performativity doesn't interest me so much - I feel the issue has been raised and answered thoroughly by other artists and writers. What does interest me is legibility of narrative in process. The performativity of a CNC carving machine or fingers working clay. In Michelangelo's "Captives" you can see the marks made by the claw hammer - and these imply the maker. I imagine this issue of legibility is important to you too? In music some things are laid bare - the vibrating string is clear to see, but the workings of computers ("meta-mediums") hide their function.

**NM: Well: YOU KNOW. In what they'd call "classical american minimalism" — and I'm thinking here things like Reich's Clapping Music or Glass's Music in Similar Motion and things of that era — one of the things that happens is that the structure of the music is laid totally bare. Yes, we can follow along with Mozart symphonies and know more or less where we are in the building (sort of**

like how Most Churches have the same set of objects). But with this minimal tradition the whole THING becomes about seeing precisely where we are.

NH: I always find I get LOST in Clapping Music. I can hear “structure” but I can’t work out the how the small units fit into the large units. With Donald Judd you can see how many units make up the whole. You see both simultaneously. I’ve heard you speak about opera’s ability to have simultaneity “danger and beauty” or lyricism and jaggedness. In your opera - Marni changes her name, she’s a liar, she’s beautiful. For someone notable to hold onto the structure of Reich - maybe narrative helps carry multiple ideas.

NM: But then of course, the romance of the reveal appeals even to the most austere artists, don’t you think?

NH: The idea of romantic artist I find quite comic. Authenticity is a struggle. No? One has to wear so many hats - bookish nerd, fabricator, administrator, flamboyant fun person....

NM: My goodness, yes. I have the luxury of never having to learn fluent “Grantese” or “Applicationese,” because I had jobs through and right after university. I have friends for whom a large part of the process is designing this brilliant thing, and then figuring out how/who will pay for it. How does this enter into your process? In a totally crass question: do you have ideas that are outside of your (even theoretical) budget?

NH: That sculpture of a submarine balancing on the tip of the Empire State? Sculpture has the imperative of gravity and materiality. Of course all art forms transition from idea to material and this always costs -- but in sculpture it’s quite pronounced. A painter can draw a line half way up a canvas... but as a sculptor, if I want to put a line in the air - it either has to have legs or strings.... and both cost. Sculpture require a lot of meetings. To return to “ritual...” I don’t normally think about things in terms of Ritual... but to reflect on it.... the art world certainly has modes of behaviour which perhaps are very ritualistic: Show openings, nob-nobbing, auctions. And the repetitions: initial email, meetings, stress, Press release, invitations, the opening night, documentation, the final week, de-install, follow up, archive. Repeat.

NM: Yes! That is a form of ritual! But I suppose one of the things one learns sitting around churches is that people, when they view (particularly ecclesiastical) sculpture, have such intense and personal ways forward — I followed a woman around a chapel in Naples (with the Cristo Vellato) who always did the same thing: brush past the object, then look back at it from a distance, come back, read the placard, and then look. I suppose I’m asking if you have a ritual when you look at other work, versus how you expect yours to be seen.

NH: Isn’t that a wonderful thing? That this woman had such an intimate and present reaction to a sculpture made in a different era by an artist long dead? I’ve done a very similar thing - flirting with a marble figure - wanting to touch it, then touching it. As a participant of the contemporary art world, I’m interested in the debate - so I read the placards. Sometimes a show’s purpose is more about the overarching curatorial narrative and the artworks are a means to that end, other times you can zoom into one work and everything else fades.

“Nick Hornby Sculpture (1504 – 2017) is on view at Glyndebourne until March 2018. “Marnie” gets its World Premiere on Nov. 18 at the ENO in London.