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Briefly Ascending to the Spotlight, Britons Take Their Place Among Giants



Andrew Testa for The New York Times

Rachel Wardell, right, spent her allotted hour on a plinth in Trafalgar Square holding a sign for the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, while Jason Clark simply stood there.

LONDON — Trafalgar Square is a place of patriotism and past glory, of dead men posing in perpetuity on enormous pedestals. But on Monday, it became a place where Suren Seneviratne, a 22-year-old disc jockey, stood atop a 26-foot-high plinth, wearing a homemade panda costume and hyperkinetically talking on the phone.

His remarks may not have been profound — “I’m on the plinth!” he informed one caller, in an exchange caught by the microphone he was wearing — but Mr. Seneviratne was making art. He was the seventh participant in “One & Other,” a grand project that is meant to stretch the boundaries of sculpture by placing 2,400 people on the square’s usually vacant fourth plinth, for an hour apiece, from now through Oct. 6.

“This is not about privilege, not about power, not about war or honoring the dead,” said the artist, Antony Gormley. “It’s about celebrating the living.”

London’s mayor, Boris Johnson, had a different take: “It’s a triumphant meditation on the themes of fame and glory,” he declared. “My friends, someday your plinth will come.”

The idea seems simple, but has been fairly complicated to pull off. More than 17,000 people have applied for the slots, mostly through the Internet, with winners — who have to be over 16 and living in Britain — selected by a computer algorithm that accounts for geographical diversity. The slots for September and October have yet to be filled.

Plinthers, as they are being called, are allotted specific slots and expected to show up on time, even if it is, say, 2 a.m. or raining. They must spend the hour alone, but are otherwise allowed to do whatever they feel like doing, within reason.

They can even take their clothes off. "Nakedness is absolutely essential," Mr. Gormley said in an interview. "Nakedness is to art what the ball is to football."

How about sex? "No sex up there," he decreed. "Sex after art."

If plinthers miss their slots, substitutes take over, as they would at an airline check-in desk. It is unclear what happens if anyone suddenly needs to go to the bathroom.

Future participants have announced plans to hold birthday parties for themselves, to raise awareness for diseases, to honor dead parents and to communicate with the crowd via, for instance, semaphore flags. One plinther, an aquatic scientist, plans to "highlight the importance of clean water for people's health by dressing up in a poo costume," according to the organizers, before putting on a fish outfit "to illustrate the dangers of overfishing."

The proceedings are being broadcast in a live Webcast on <http://www.oneandother.co.uk/>, with a disclaimer, true to Mr. Gormley's warnings, that "offensive content" may appear.

At 9 a.m. on Monday, the first plinther, 35-year-old Rachel Wardell, a homemaker from Sleaford, England, was raised by a cherry picker onto the plinth (a safety net has been installed around it, lest people slip or, worse, try to jump off). She spent her allotted hour holding aloft a large green sign that said "N.S.P.C.C.," for the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

She was followed by Jason Clark, a 41-year-old nurse from Brighton, who just stood there. He looked poignant and vulnerable, surrounded by such larger-than-life bronze figures as the 19th-century general Sir Charles James Napier, over on a neighboring plinth.

Mr. Clark intended to provoke "questions about what right I have to be there," he said in an interview.

"I'm going there as a representative of ordinary people," he explained. "I had to decide what to do, and that's when I decided not to do anything."

Then 51-year-old Jill Gatum, a technology consultant, used a helium machine to blow up 60 balloons, each representing a charity, which she then released. Battling a sudden downpour, she treated herself to a bit of helium at one point, breaking into a few falsetto lines from "Follow the Yellow Brick Road."

Scott Illman, a pub owner dressed as an old-fashioned town crier, read aloud a rigorously rhyming poem about the superiority of his pubs. Steve Platt, 54, used a chalkboard to share his Twitteresque on-the-spot musings. "I am not a pigeon," he announced. And, "Where's my money, Ben?"

Down on the ground, spectators meditated on what they might do if they were up there. Suggestions ranged from doing "something to represent the need for world peace" to dressing as Napoleon and shaking a vengeful fist at Admiral Nelson, smugly lording it over everyone on his exceptionally tall column.

Mayor Johnson said, "I'd probably have to make an interminable Qaddafi-like speech about the bus subsidy."

"I'm not sure it's legal to do what I'd want to do," said Anna Drezec, a 28-year-old accountant.

Eliza Pimlott, a secretary, said: "I'm tempted to wear a high-visibility jacket and shout at people to stop doing whatever they're doing. I bet they would listen to me."

In an age when reality television blurs the line between entertainment and cruelty, Mr. Gormley said, one of the things he likes about his project is that it is competition-free.

"We're not voting people off the plinth because they haven't fulfilled our expectations," he said. "This is a celebration of self-expression."

Leslie Cooke, a 60-year-old executive secretary, pronounced herself confused by the furry little tail on the panda-outfitted Mr. Seneviratne. "If he's a normal person, why is he wearing that rabbit costume?" she said.