

Spencer Tunick, Baltic, Newcastle-Gateshead - 21st January – 26th March 2006

Review by Dany Louise

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Spencer Tunick's installations predictably make for great press and plenty of column inches. His process – that of inviting hundreds or even thousands of people to simultaneously pose naked in the great cities of the world - is unique, titillating, spectacular and weird. For participants, as I was for the Newcastle-Gateshead work, it is all the above and a great leveller, liberating and unusual, if rather chilly.

You could say Tunick is onto a good thing; a guaranteed money-spinner and a lifetime of exotic travel. Furthermore, he ticks a lot of boxes for publicly funded galleries. He has an accessible USP and inherent marketing punch. Want to engage a new audience with a precisely measurable number of individuals? Stage a Tunick and then invite the participants to their own special preview, crowding the gallery to capacity. Thrill to the joy of seeing them really look at the work, examining every visual inch, before triumphantly singing out to friends and family: "That's me! There's you!" or slightly disturbingly – "there's my father!"

The opening of the Baltic's Spencer Tunick exhibition was a curator's dream. But what about the art? For all the frothy column inches and big photographic spreads, there has not been much consideration of the quality of the work. His very marketability, it seems, is in danger of obscuring his artistry.

His process is enormously rich, involving as it does, the willing collusion of his naked collaborators. Ostensibly, Tunick is in control, puppet master on a grand scale, seeing each naked person as a tool, a tiny piece of texture in his viewfinder vision. But there is anxiety for him here, because collusion can turn to rebellion with a moment's miscalculation. He must use organisation and skill to keep his naked people on message for the duration. In reality, both power and reward is shared in a delicate balance; Tunick's artistic need is fulfilled thru the grace of his participants.

The Baltic's show then, is the culmination of the extraordinary Tunick process. He has produced seven prints and a documentary video, all fitting neatly into one room. Facing visitors as they enter is a vast image of several hundred people, lying interlocked with their heads resting on the thighs of the person next to them. Beautifully composed, it becomes a tender display of

dependency, serenity and trust. In another image, standing figures ten-deep gaze into the distance, mirroring the iconic shape of the Sage: Destination Newcastle's wet dream. In another, hundreds of figures kneel as if in deep obeisance to an unknown deity, dwarfed by the grand architecture of Newcastle's Dean Street, disappearing into the distance under a magnificent bridge. One of the more visually satisfying images, Tunick has used the textures of homogenised mass nudity to transform and revitalise this already striking city street.

Similar questions may occur to participant and non-participant alike. So far, Tunick's installations have taken place within the sophisticated material societies of the industrialised world. What does it say about the norms, inhibitions and taboos of our society that collective nudity becomes an exhilarating and daring defiance? Why are the resultant images, at their best, so affecting? Why are the vast majority of faces that stare out of his tableaux pink and white?

As documents of an unusual and bold temporary installation, these prints are spectacular. As works in their own right they are variable, with some awkward croppings and no uniform size. There is a strong dystopian undercurrent, especially in the images of people lying on the ground. The figures lie flat, cold and impeccably ordered, as if the mass dead, of no further consequence except as the horrific playthings of a crazed autocrat or an impersonal bureaucracy. These images plunge the viewer into a nihilistic world, blurring the boundaries between the safe and familiar, and the horrors we know about but can't face. With this realisation, all playfulness disappears, and analysis of the formal qualities of the work seems irrelevant. This may be Tunick in transition and reaching for a greater depth, but embedding a darker narrative into some works can overwhelm their other, equally striking, qualities.

The size and (perhaps necessarily) limited scope of the show forces an emphasis onto the Newcastle-Gateshead process and strips Tunick of a wider context. It is enjoyable and thought-provoking, as far as it goes, but there is a better exhibition waiting to happen in a few years I hope: a Tunick mid-career retrospective where we are able to experience and consider a contextualised and significant body of work.