



## 4 Going bananas

# Yes, we have bananas – 30,000 of them.

## Nelson surveys square's latest installation

BY ARIFA AKBAR

WELL BEFORE dawn, the early birds around Trafalgar Square realised something was amiss. Bananas, hundreds of them, were being piled in a huge heap. That they were positioned next to the National Gallery offered a clue. The hundreds became 30,000 by 5am and London's most famous square had its latest art installation.

The bananas provoked much scratching of heads as the crowds of tourists and passers-by pondered what the latest statement on the North Terrace could possibly mean.

Its creator, Doug Fishbone, was giving away few clues. He and 20 dedicated friends had arrived in a truck at 1.30am yesterday with six tons of Cavendish bananas to create the eight-foot-high mound. This, though, was a temporary installation and by 3pm, Mr Fishbone, a 35-year-old New Yorker, had begun to dismantle his creation and distributed all the bananas to passers-by.

During the day, the artwork was described in a variety of ways: a post-modern work of staggering genius; a cunning marketing ploy; a chimpanzee's dream. But by the time the bananas were given away, no one seemed to care. A scrum of tourists, office workers and students battled to bag themselves a bunch. "I'm going to sell these at the Tube station. If he can call a bunch of bananas art, then I think I can too – and make a profit," said Aidan Ashton Griffiths, 16, from North London.

Two Russian women, who reckoned the artist's message was one of communist abundance ("to each according to his needs"), had arrived early with carrier bags to fill with free fruit. "We were told about this by the guide in our hotel. These will be our souvenirs," said Emilia Finkel, 70, from St Petersburg.

Art students guarded the work to ensure it was not dismantled prematurely by bystanders and many were admonished for attempting to eat the artwork.

Despite being pressured by the public



for an explanation, Fishbone remained silent. So the crowd resorted to their own theories. Some thought it was a war memorial. An Australian couple thought it might be the work of activists protesting against banana importation and Marxists felt it was a comment on capitalist greed. Art students admired its vivid colour and composition.

Fishbone said the discussion was exactly what he had set out to achieve. "A lot of people have asked me what it means but I'm stepping back. I want this to involve the audience. It's such a big physical presence and changes so much in different contexts that I cannot honestly say any more whether it still has its original meaning," he said.

He said he was inspired to build the sculpture while living in South America and had created five similar installations in Ecuador, Costa Rica, Poland and New York. He explained: "I was living in Ecuador and I came across a heap of plantains dumped on the road to sell. I

stopped in my tracks and thought that it looked magnificent and wanted to see it in an artistic context."

Critics were reluctant to accept the sculpture as anything other than a prosaic heap of bananas.

Anna Somers Cocks, founding editor of The Art Newspaper, said the "wow factor" had to be distinguished from its actual meaning, if any, while Brian Sewell condemned it as a hollow "attention grabbing" exercise. "It is merely the Elephant Man syndrome when people congregate to see something freakish," he said. "I could grab the same kind of public attention by standing on my head. What is not art ... is a heap of bananas in Trafalgar Square."

And what about dissent from the crowd of passers-by? John and Sonia Kemp, both 70, from Walton Creek, near San Francisco, were mystified: "When the folks back home see these pictures, they are going to think the Brits are a bunch of loonies," said Mr Kemp.

Doug Fishbone is an artist who creates installations, in which everyday objects are put together in unusual situations. For one of these installations, he built a huge pile of bananas outside the National Gallery in London. Later that afternoon, Fishbone dismantled his art and gave all the bananas away.

**1 Before you read, discuss the following.**

What do you think tourists, passers-by and art critics made of Doug Fishbone's pile of bananas? How would you react?

**Glossary**

- 1 going bananas: going mad
- 2 Nelson = Lord Nelson, the Admiral who fought Napoleon Bonaparte at the Battle of Trafalgar. Nelson's statue stands in Trafalgar Square.
- 3 scratching of heads: confusion, puzzlement
- 4 to bag: to get (something in demand)
- 5 the Tube: the London Underground network
- 6 plantain: a tropical fruit similar to a banana
- 7 Elephant Man: a Victorian man who attracted attention because of his unusual looks
- 8 loonies: mad people

**2 As you read, match the words from the article 1-9 with their meaning a-i.**

- |               |                                      |
|---------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1 passers-by  | a) take down (the opposite of build) |
| 2 pondered    | b) large quantities of               |
| 3 dismantle   | c) criticised, told off              |
| 4 abundance   | d) found or met (by chance)          |
| 5 prematurely | e) people going past                 |
| 6 admonished  | f) thought about                     |
| 7 came across | g) weird, strange, unnatural         |
| 8 freakish    | h) very puzzled                      |
| 9 mystified   | i) too early                         |

**3 Now circle T (True) or F (False).**

- a Trucks started bringing the bananas before 5am. T / F
- b Doug Fishbone was happy to talk about his installation. T / F
- c The installation was built to last. T / F
- d The installation was dismantled just before midnight. T / F
- e A respectful queue formed as the installation was taken down. T / F
- f Mrs Finkel brought a suitcase to fill with bananas. T / F
- g Doug Fishbone has created similar installations before. T / F

- h He was inspired by a pile of plantains in a supermarket. T / F
- i Art critic Brian Sewell loved the work. T / F
- j The Kemps, an American couple, did not understand the installation. T / F

**4 Now discuss the following.**

- a What do you think of Doug Fishbone's installation? Is it a work of art or a waste of time and money?
- b What is art? Is it important? Why/Why not?
- c Is there a difference between high art (opera, ballet) and popular art (soap operas, pop music)? Which is more important?
- d Is a fresco by Leonardo da Vinci any better than graffiti art spray-painted on a wall?
- e Should governments subsidise the arts? If you answer yes, which of the following kinds of art would you give funding to?

|               |            |           |
|---------------|------------|-----------|
| installations | folk music | pop music |
| opera         | theatre    | buskers   |
|               |            | poetry    |

- f Would money be better spent on something more useful, like medical research?

**Fact file**

Go to [www.christojeanneclaude.net](http://www.christojeanneclaude.net) to see the work of the world's most famous installation artists, Christo and his wife Jeanne-Claude. Their work includes:

- stretching a 12,780 square metre orange curtain across the Rifle Valley in California.
- wrapping the German Parliament building in 75,000 metres of silver fabric and 8,000 metres of rope.
- an installation of 1,340 blue umbrellas (each six metres tall) in Ibaraki, Japan.

**5 Your group have been asked to make a piece of installation art for a modern art exhibition. Read the Fact file. Then, using the objects in the room around you, create your own installation.**

- a Decide what objects you are going to use.
- b Give your installation a name.
- c Build it. Write a short text explaining what the piece means.
- d Show and explain your installation to the rest of the class. Use the following language.

*Our installation is called ... and it consists of ...  
We gave it this name because ...  
The meaning of this piece is ...*

**Ask other groups what they think of it.**