

Those who go with real life will be the winners in history.

The ever-present, evanescent
So entropically effervescent
Melts, transforming through a pleasant
Fizzing, bubbling, popping.
Utopianistic in it's resplendent,
Abnegation of Transcendent,
Such a wondrous evanescent,
Contemporaneous,
Here and Now and then,
Dissolved,
Into thin air
Like Berman's son
Poignantly remembered.

As Opposed To The Argument That Follows

I've become impatient lately with what I feel is an over-reliance on osmotic transfer in contemporary culture- in particular the vogue amongst contemporary artists for a time-based, site-specific practice that is fleeting but somehow imagines itself to resonate and reverberate long after it has melted away. My conclusion, after twenty odd years of making work in this way, is that years after the fact, most of the work is effectively gone. Dissolved, rooked, forgotten, dead.

This *devil's advocate* position is not so much a challenge to the documenting and archiving of such work – that and the paucity of critical writing and evaluation of such projects can be discussed elsewhere. This position is rather a fundamental assertion that there is a woolliness and unthinking set of assumptions at the heart of the structure of much temporary practice, that seems not to care to attend to how it endures. An over-reliance on osmosis is like the left's wishful thinking that it's enough, in its unaligned, disorganised ways, to *hope* to overcome an organised and aligned right.

I am asserting that we are condemned by these traditions to political passivity by default, and I connect this suspicion to a sister grumble that I harbour, that artists from the later part of the twentieth century onwards, are culturally inculcated to refuse to address how the work, works - how the complications of *function* might be plotted, etc. My own practice has been concerned with notions of site and time specificity for over 20 years and I regularly argue *for* the temporal and fleeting nature of such work, (and at some length in a recent publication 'Cultural Hijack', which attempts to chart and then rethink the role of artist's intervention in our

cityscapes). But practice that has transience at its heart, places a lot of faith in our errant memories and the political *power* and social reach of cultural osmosis. In rethinking my own assumptions as artist and educator, I'm driven to explore my thinking about the limitations of these systems and how to negotiate new process in relationship to remembering, re-activating, making 'permanent'.

In response to this scratchy irritation, I proposed and made Psychic Dérive for a DIY Festival in 2009. In essence, this was a process of negotiating a way of remembering and re-activating the 'experience' of site-specific and moment-specific works and events that I didn't want to be forgotten. Sure, these works linger in the memory of individuals who experience them but I decided I wanted a formal, collective remembering of this work, assisted by the performative re-embodiment, where everyone has their part to play.

For a number of years since the DIY Festival, strangers have been gathered on a regular basis to take a psychic dérive through the backstreets of Glasgow. It makes for a very convivial evening, billed as a "*nocturnal, city-wide, time-travelling pub crawl/picnic, a forensic foray into the traces of transient artworks from the past*". Who could resist! Over three or four hours, participants navigate the exclusions and forgotten traces of ephemeral art events, acts of political resistance and the odd apocryphal rumour, that echo and reverberate around the city at some subliminal, sub-base frequency. *Rétrovisseurs* – (bakelite, battery-operated slide viewers), are handed out at the start of these excursions and upon arriving at each site, a multiple slide or set of slides are circulated. The play is to align yourself and your own point of view, with that of the photographer who originally documented the work pictured.

Each site has the quality of an event, as the characteristics, associations and known history of each designated place/artwork are discussed. Questions are raised regarding the world that we live in and the meanings we ascribe to it. Sharing of images and exchange of slide viewers take place within the group. The process positions individuals 'in the work' and this helps the aim of re-inscribing and embodying the sense of what was once there.

When beginning in the Merchant City, we start with Laura Rees *Pet Burial* on Brunswick Street then move along to James Thornhill's *Letter-Twocker*, Hutcheson Street, pass *Borrowed Light*, (Stephen Skrynka, Peter McCaughey), on the corner of Hutcheson and Ingram Street and then move into the upper part of John Street and one of those strange, liminal spaces within the city, a square bounded by two arches and the back ends of two municipal buildings. Here we have come to a favourite moment - Ross Sinclair's (We Love) Real Life Scotland from Radiance 2005. Sinclair had chosen John Street, behind the City Chambers, to temporarily install 13 neon signs on the façade of the City Council's rear end. Each sign declared its undying luminous love for *Alcohol, Failure, Culloden 1746, Robert Burns, Edwin Landseer, Walter Scott, Bannockburn, Harry Lauder, Parsimony the Highland Clearances, Queen*

Victoria, and Bonnie Prince Charlie, with the glorious *We heart Real Life Scotland* as a centrepiece.

Five years later, a plumber from Cambuslang, two folk from a call centre, two retired ladies from Pollok, an arts officer from the Scottish Arts Council, a co-ordinator from the Commonwealth Games, a builder and his wife from Anniesland, a lawyer, and a detective, raise their *Rétroviseurs* to re-create the work.

The 'psychic' part of this *dérive* entails a participative attempt to re-make these live works. To imagine them back into existence for a moment. With Sinclair's piece split between 13 parts, each participant gets an image of a section -*parsimony, Lauder, Burns...* Together, guided by a print of the overall work, participants shuffle to arrange themselves in the right order. Ultimately, with the individuals aligned, the work clicks into place and this ex-neon constellation – with its bombardment of cornerstones and clichés of Scottish identity, re-emerges glowing with pride.

Together we muse on the work- on how the same spluttering, electrified rare gas that fed the Barrowland sign in the East End and the Iron Brew sign above Central Station, once made this artwork pulse. Like the neons themselves, there is something retro and something sci-fi about the experience, as though we might be gazing predictively forward as well as back in time. There is also a sense of a detecting something lingering, some sort of Sinclair spectrum, gleaned by phase shift or x-ray specs, just below the surface of the building's façade.

A moment from 2005 is described to the group. It's a tale about Sinclair's work that he himself didn't know at the time, as he went about installing this epic work for *Radiance*. Like a scenario from the text accompanying Sinclair's *Real Life Rocky Mountain 1996*, (where in a dystopian future, Scotland has become one huge heritage museum and councillors proscribe an anodyne, repetitive culture), this story carries a warning about officially legislative culture and the collapse of an arm's length principle. In the case of *Radiance*, a local councillor, (completely ignoring the irony present in the work), became concerned that journalists would report Sinclair's work as an affirmation of drinking culture -*We love Alcohol* and, unbelievably, a move was made to have the work edited - to delete the *We love Alcohol* sign from the installation.

The story captures the moment a relatively benign city council, genuinely attempting to re-educate itself and embrace contemporary art, crosses a line to crush a work - a hug becomes a smother. Step in the director of *Radiance 2005*, Angus Farquhar, and a terse stand-off ensues, as the festival is placed in jeopardy during an hour-long debate over the work, censorship, and the need to support a critical culture..... The victory to leave the work untouched is significant and largely unknown and the psychics are handed a hot toddy, (whiskey, lemon, cloves, hot water), to celebrate.

As we stand here, I also raise the spectre that some day, someone will have the wit to commission Mr Sinclair to make a permanent work in the city, maybe even to buy and re-install this work. We move off round the corner to Jim Colquhoun's *Erection* outside the City Chambers, (he stood tickling his imagination, saluting the civic institutions), and on to the Battle of George Square. Our night will end in a few hours in the Scotia Bar.

Of course I feel a concern as I write, that this tour performs perfectly within Sinclair's brilliant parody of our future state in his RLRM critique -there's a danger that the tour I conduct, fits perfectly into the cloying, suffocating premise of a national heritage industry, condemned forever to repeat and re-enact like those horrid ghost tours in York, with eejits leaping out at you dressed as pox ridden lepers. What offsets this, is that though the weight of focus of the psychic *dérive* walks is on the past, there is also implicitly the idea that these traces evoke and co-exist with the ever-changing, on-going state of becoming. The attempt to share an embodied idea, is an attempt to ensure that the memory of the artwork retains an 'endless recycling of meaning'. In his essay, 'Between History and Memory', Pierre Nora criticises a society that puts history above the importance of memory. Nora is concerned that when we celebrate an event or look back at an old photograph, history has replaced memory and thus what remains is 'no longer quite life, not yet death like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded.'¹ For Nora, there must be a 'will to remember' and a play between 'memory and history' in order to successfully acknowledge and celebrate the past, in a way that is relevant to contemporary life today.¹

One of the factors is that the walk becomes a work itself, caught and described in later walks as part of itself. As such, at the end, as an entreaty to the participants, each chooses a slide and is asked to carry a torch for that work, telling the story to whoever will listen. In addition, often participants start to contribute their own - site-specific stories and to inscribe themselves into the process and the lived city.

The wondering as to whether our actions and the memories we leave behind will or will not be remembered, is a creative node I'm proposing should be the subject of investigation and invention, not the end point but a point of departure. In thinking about the work now, in the relative warmth of my flat, I think of the dialogue between Thornhill's unsanctioned uNb0unDed neon, and the negotiation around Sinclair's neons, that in being subject to potential compromise are somehow more interesting for that- the romanticism of unbounded versus the pragmatism of bound.

I also think of the 'Real Life' project, now 20 years old, and how the character that Ross invokes in these works is not unlike one of Pessoa's heteronyms through which he wrote- somehow a version of you without being you. For all the potential parody

and critique through over-identification in this practice, something else lingers here, the trace of / inclusion of *self* within the critique- the warmth of Sinclair's own bodily investment in the work, from the hymns sung to the journeys recently taken in Huntly.

Like the Stockholm Syndrome phenomenon, perhaps we begin to align ourselves with the thing that captures us. Something else happens as we are seduced by the power of the situation observed. Critique and parody are cold tools that dissect from a distance, wielded to articulate a position of disinterest. Yet anyone who knows Sinclair, knows he is far from disinterested. He accepts, even embraces the way his body responds to the powerful ideas that attempt to colonise it – to be curious about being moved by a bogus scene in a movie or the words in a hymn, that you suspect to be intellectually bankrupt but still makes you cry, is to acknowledge that these things have their place in our imperfect human lives and that the body holds its own way of knowing.

This book focuses on a new departure for Sinclair, the expansive project in Huntly that draws together so many strands of previous work and has much in common with the psychic *dérive*, as a peripatetic, embodied, artist-led procession/promenade- making flaneurs, *dérivers*, tourists of us all.

Augusto Boal pioneered the idea of the real life /real time theatre in Invisible Theatre, where the space between audience and performer was physically and conceptually collapsed, through the hijack of the unnamed/ unframed act. Benjamin adopted the concept of the urban observer, both as an analytical tool *and as a lifestyle*, a person who walks the city in order to experience it. Danto compared artworks that disturb us from our comfortable present to pagan rituals-in that they hold the power to provoke transcendent, cathartic, transformation. This all resonates with the work in Huntly. where there is the sense that a collision with the work disrupts the everyday to become the everyday.

My feeling is that Huntly marks a major point of departure for Sinclair and that the proximity to the town's people has become a binding factor in amping up the real life/real time aspirations of his work. Real life History, coming to a town near you-sooner than you might think.

Peter McCaughey 2012

© Nora, Pierre. 'Between History and Memory'. [Online] Sarah MacDonald DIY 2009

<http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/classes/201/articles/89NoraLieuxIntroRepresentations.pdf> [16-12-09]