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Explaining Urbanism to Wild Animals

By Mark Crinson

While nostalgia for the bygone industrial age is plundered by the regeneration industry, some contemporary artists, working amidst the city's post-industrial reinvention, are attempting more nuanced engagements with urban histories and collective memory. Mark Crinson, co-curator of the 2002 show *Fabrications: New Art and Urban Memory*, writes on Nathan Coley, Adam Chodzko, Nick Crowe, Ian Rawlinson and Sarah Carne

animals_1 > Nathan Coley, *I Don't Have Another Land*, 2002

In 1846, intuiting that modernisation would entail transformations in the aesthetic, Baudelaire defined art as a technique of memorising artistic tradition in the face of loss. The artists who best triggered this 'mnemotechny of beauty', [1] or at least the subliminal artistic afterimages that Baudelaire wanted, were those who found some middle point between an excessive realism and an over-generalised idealism, creating 'deep avenues for the most adventurous imagination to wander down'. [2] As it transpired many modernist practices came to embody Baudelaire's fears; when not reflective of industrial technology or mimicking the forms of its commodities, art became assimilated to its associated myths of progress. [3]

Recently a mnemonic aspect has returned to many artistic practices, and one branch of this concerns the re-structuring of once-industrial cities. Where Rachel Whiteread and Richard Wentworth have addressed urban change through mute figures of loss or the gathering of topographical booty, other artists have avoided these fetishised traces. Instead of Whiteread's displacement of void by solid, of brick by concrete, they explore the map, the architect's model, the formalities of slide presentations, the performance of surveillance, and the re-evocation of film by video. They have not withdrawn from engagements with the politics of urban memory, rather the gallery has become a place of reappraisal with its own sitespecificity. These works take the contested nature of memory itself as their subject, avoiding melancholia, the setting of utopian agendas, or the vicarious compilation of community memories. They engage quizzically with the co-optation of memory to the advertising-speak of developers or to the *museé imaginaire* of the heritage lobby. They are reactions to a new wave of urban transformation aimed at finalising the projected post-industrial city on the very sites and in the very buildings of the old industrial city: the trumpeting of loft living, new urbanism, millennium squares, and public-private partnerships.

Take Nathan Coley's *I Don't Have Another Land* (2002), a site-specific work in the form of an architectural model; an object we might expect in the context of CUBE, a RIBA-sponsored gallery in Manchester. [4] Architectural models usually represent new proposals for buildings or record canonical structures. Sitting almost directly on the floor like a 1960s Minimalist sculpture, Coley's model is of the 1960s Marks & Spencer's building which was badly damaged and eventually pulled down as a result of the 1996 IRA bomb in Manchester. It is neither a new nor a distinctive building, in a strictly architectural sense, nor is it an instrument of design, of architectural development and the erasure of the past in the prospect of the future, as we might expect of the genre and as we might expect of CUBE. Instead it is a model of re-development or even anti- or ante-development. The architectural model's normal tense has changed from the future ('this will be') to the past ('this has been'), perhaps even the anterior future ('this has been', with a trace of 'this will be'). [5] Its dark sheened surfaces on which the name Marks & Spencer is shadowed, the stark views through the model, and the words that board up some of its windows like a letting agency, lend it the rhetoric of loss. The words in the windows are from an Israeli folksong, pointing, perhaps too portentously, to forced displacement and migration and their consequences in terms of terrorism. Yet the Marks & Spencer building will not be

remembered for its architecture; it would most likely simply disappear from official records and only remain within the living memories of those who shopped there, particularly those who remember it as a local icon of '60s consumerism. Such memories gain a critical edge in this blackened hulk, emerging through their evocation in CUBE as a memorial to the anachronistic.

On the face of it Adam Chodzko's Remixer (2002) takes a very different approach to the question of memory-building and the memorial broached in Coley's work. Here Manchester's legendary nightclub of the 1980s, the Hacienda, and the site of the 1996 IRA bomb are linked by a line across the city. Both places could be seen to have had catalytic roles in the regeneration of Manchester and both have since become absorbed within developer-led regeneration.

animals_2 > Adam Chodzko, Remixer, 2002

Remixer takes the form of several flyposter maps accompanied by a recording of A Certain Ratio's 'Flight' (1980), to some, the unacknowledged Manchester precursor to the dance music/club craze that was one catalyst for the city's urban renaissance. The song's arc of sound is remixed as if it were passing through the materials it might encounter on a direct flight one metre high through the intervening streets and buildings between the Hacienda and the bomb site: through walls, a car, the body of a street protester in 1991, and even through the flying fragments caused by the 1996 explosion. It also passes Albert Square, one of the city's principal commemorative spaces, with its statues and history of rallies and protests. In Chodzko's work these sites are not linked by a piece of sychogeography but by something more like a surveyor's cut across the city, an entirely imaginary vista conceivable only in terms of an inscription overlaid on a map and given mock accurate wave lengths depending upon the medium to be passed through. A vista is not just a view cut across space but a succession of remembered or anticipated events. It therefore combines the idea of a piece of surveyor's or landscapist's rationalism that channels space and organises the view, and also the ordering of time as it is experienced by the individual or community, in this case disparate moments in Manchester's recent history. Chodzko undertakes a kind of capricious urban planning in this work, fastidious in its execution but whimsical in its means, making a cross-section of the city that joins its 'weak' elements of memory, and slicing blithely through its steel and glass structures.

Another work by Chodzko, The Gorgies' Centre (2002), is in part also a mediation between two places. One of these is a gypsy site in Kent threatened with eviction because of its purchase by property developers. The other is Hulme in Manchester, where what the gypsies call 'gorgies', or house dwellers, live. Hulme is notorious for being twice demolished, redesigned and rebuilt since the war. The relocation of Hulme's residents has parallels with the impending relocation of the gypsies; both are subject to larger imperatives of land-use, planned environments, and the legalities of ownership, tenancy and squatting. Chodzko mines these parallels by arranging to have boxes of official documents relating to one of Hulme's housing developments distributed to Jo and Bridie Jones, one of the gypsy families whom he had got to know. Chodzko's ethnography suggests the possibilities of solidarity between two normally distinct groups of people, implying that those who exist on the margins, or who are most subject to planning, are also those who, because of their intimate awareness of shelter, property and security, have the closest relationship with the city.

[IMAGE] > Adam Chodzko, The Gorgies' Centre, 2002

The work is made up of two sequences of slides shown simultaneously. The slides have been taken as part of a series of meetings, processes and other interactions that led to the creation of the actual Gorgies' Centre. Yet they avoid merely witnessing those processes and interactions. They juxtapose images and text, foreground their pictorial devices, and refuse to transform static elements into a narrative drive. They mark a distinction between the engagement in a group of actual events that have

led to the transferral of an archive into the Jones's possession, and the way that these can be marked or recorded within the 'non-site' of the gallery. The Gorgies' Centre seeks to displace the official repository of public memory – the archive – so that displacement and transience, as the normally unrecorded aspects of urban policy, are foregrounded. It presents us with a point from outside the dominant culture in which the objects of memory, marked by the archive, can be estranged whilst simultaneously trying to avoid the 'ideological patronage' of the invoked other.[6] The work asks how we can come to terms, in a way that cannot be immediately recuperated, with the estranged or marginal circumstances of other people.

animals_3 > Nick Crowe and Ian Rawlinson, *Explaining Urbanism to Wild Animals*, 2002

Nick Crowe and Ian Rawlinson's *Explaining Urbanism to Wild Animals* (2002) suggests an uncomfortable answer.[7] The installation consists of four large photographs grouped on three walls around four DVD players: the images are of country scenes from an area between Manchester and Macclesfield, and each has a matching DVD. The photographs have the scale of sizeable landscape paintings and they represent the countryside head-on as a mass that fills the frame, facing the viewer directly with a bank of nettles, a woody pond, a hollowed-out tree, or a woodland opening. It is a curious, almost vertiginous experience that has similarities with the desire of Romantic landscape painters to create devices for the absorption of the viewer within the scene: 'you seek confirmation of your arrival, some motivative sign or plot that will explain why you are here... although you are placed before nothing that should command your attention, this void, pictured, seems already to imply your gaze.' [8] But the DVDs playing on the four screens puncture this seemingly engrossed experience of losing the self in nature's infinity. Now we see the two artists, tracking through the landscape with various pieces of audio equipment and setting them up in the woodland. Absurdly, they place a walkman inside the hollow tree or they wade through the pond slowly swinging loudspeakers across the water as they go, like mock Beuysian shamans. The sound of construction sites emanates from the equipment, mingling with the birdsong and rustling leaves.

One way to understand *Explaining Urbanism to Wild Animals* is as an environmentalist's warning. The landscape polluted by the sounds of the city is a portent of what will come: the green belt will be eroded by the Government's desire to allow house-building within such formerly preserved sites; the Romantic's absorption within the miraculous minutiae, density and extensiveness of nature, will become mere reminiscence or fantasy. Yet by thinking about it in relation to Chodzko's Gorgies' Centre, another aspect of Crowe and Rawlinson's work is highlighted. Their earnest tracking through the Cheshire woods transforms the idea of mediating between two places into a mock ethnography in which they appear as missionaries setting out to 'explain' an alien faith or warn against an augured cataclysm. They search out marginal and threatened life forms with whom, if they can ever be found, a conversation can never be staged. These life forms – the animals are mute, presumably unaware of Government policy, unable to acknowledge the warning presented by the recordings or to do anything about it if they were. The displacement of the normal conditions of artistic production typical of ethnographic artistic practice, is here shown to be a quixotic venture without even allegorical power. Furthermore, the photographs need not necessarily describe the virgin forest; their framed and symmetrical structure, awaiting perhaps only a Rückenfigur to indicate our appropriate response of awe or enchantment, is by now so familiar it is either overpopulated with memories of previous encounters, or the hope of natural plenitude is turned sour by the evidence of litter and pollution. It is, then, possible to suspend the terms of the environmentalist thesis. Instead, the concrete jungle is the unrepresentable in these scenes; the noise of building construction is the threatening force of another nature that has no consoling memories attached to it.

Another recent concern is with the double-coding of cities. Names pronounce this, but so too do certain urban forms. With its industrial eminence diminishing in the late nineteenth century, Manchester sought renewal by building a new ship canal and the world's first industrial park. Trafford Park became home to many large factories and warehouses served by docks and new railway lines, and also housed in its centre a small township built on a grid plan and further evoking American prototypes through its numbered street names. Sarah Carne's video projection *High Noon* (2002) ruminates on Trafford Park's peculiar and uncanny qualities, reworking the classic western *High Noon* (1954) as her source material. In Carne's video the film's script is spoken by office workers who read it completely straight, without play-acting. Occasionally the video cuts to an ominous view down the empty recession of Trafford Park's railway line, as if the expected train from *High Noon* might arrive. The scenario is, of course, absurd: the 'actors' are mostly stiff and disjointed and the text only holds together because the movie is so well known and its mythic resonances so engrained.

animals_5 > Sarah Carne, *High Noon*, 2002

Carne's work shares something with the recent use of video as a kind of archaicising medium,[9] evoking the confessional protocols of the video diary. Although it has become familiar in contemporary television, this is an essentially archaic aesthetic form, similar in its effects to what Hal Foster has called 'the outmoded'. [10] Particularly relevant is the question that Foster raises about whether such forms have now become so recuperated within mainstream media that their juxtaposition with the Hollywood western stimulates merely a humorous frisson. The critical element here is the relation of the outmoded to what Foster (citing Benjamin) calls the 'wish symbols' of the past, which might be extended to include newly mythical types and scenarios. In Zinnemann's *High Noon* the wish symbol of the tight-knit, interdependent community of propinquity is ultimately and necessarily replaced by another wish symbol, that of the good but flawed, brave yet reluctant man who transcends his weaknesses and those of his community through a kind of desperate integrity.

In the local context of post-industrial Trafford Park, with its management of amnesia that helps to co-opt and re-form the previous industrial and residential space, many of the exchanges in the original script of *High Noon* take on charged meaning: 'This is just a dirty little village in the middle of nowhere'; 'Now people up north are thinking of this town... sending money to build schools, factories and houses'; 'I've got no stake in this'. The static camera and the inactive recitation of the script seem to allow us to apply the film's messages to any period of Trafford Park's history, so that the coming of the baddie Miller could represent the Development Corporation, recession, even the original American firms that settled in the area. Essentially, though, this inaction (in which even the marshal is trapped) and the video's consequently open-ended allegorisation, is formally different from the inaction of the film's town's folk. It results from but also stands for a numbing of reflexes and a form of historical dislocation and oblivion that is part of the dubious achievement of the post-industrial city.

Carne's video causes mythic structures to cascade into the local politics of place, the non-synchronous confronting the progressive narrative of redevelopment. Recalling some of the contradictory relations that Trafford Park has had with America, the video also suggests collective memories of the American West – theme tunes, mythic structures, scraps of dialogue – now deeply inscribed in British popular culture. The very evocation of these memories acts as a way of resituating a highly mediated form of working class consciousness back into the deindustrialised and gentrified cityscape.

Earlier it was suggested that the relation of these artworks to urban memory is distinct from other contemporary forms of memory's co-optation by urbanism. This latter use of memory has been identified as 'a cultural retrieval system, an aesthetic means of legitimising a political present that has long lost its legitimisation.' [11] The crucial tack taken in these artworks, however, allowing them to avoid the instrumentalism of memory, is to treat acts of evocation, reminiscence or double-coding as

technologies in themselves. By doing this they accept that their relation to the city is a delicately balanced one, largely channelled by these intermediary actions and practices. These are now the 'deep avenues' that viewers' imaginations wander down. And it is in relation to such technologies that these new works act as searching supplements and oblique commentaries.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Charles Baudelaire, 'The Salon of 1846' in *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 77

[2] Ibid, p. 64

[3] Benjamin Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 2000, pp. 141-2

[4] All of the works discussed here, apart from Crowe and Rawlinson's, were commissioned for the exhibition *Fabrications: New Art and Urban Memory*, held at CUBE, Manchester 11 September – 2 November 2002. See also Mark Crinson, Helen Hills and Natalie Rudd, *Fabrications: New Art and Urban Memory in Manchester*, Manchester: UMIM, 2002

[5] See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, London: Vintage, 1993, pp. 76-77; 96; 99-100

[6] Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1996. p. 173

[7] *Explaining Urbanism to Wild Animals* was exhibited at Tmesis Gallery, Manchester, 21 September to 1 November 2002

[8] Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, London: Reaktion, 1995, pp. 5-6

[9] I am thinking of works like Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* (1993) and Stan Douglas's *Journey into Fear* (2001)

[10] Hal Foster, *Design and Crime*, London and New York: Verso, 2002, pp. 138-9

[11] Buchloh, 2000, p. 212

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