Nothing to see here

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We haven’t got enough gloves, so we need some new Napoleons

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The quotations throughout the publication are taken from cards, written out by all members of the group, to inform work on the day.
Introduction

On the 1st of October, 2011, we gathered in Bradford for the Ways of Looking festival. The co-authors of this volume had been planning a fringe event for a couple of weeks, which ultimately involved inviting the artist Lee Hassall to travel to two sites in Bradford in order to respond to them, along with Denise McIlroy. Before we get to this series of events, I want to sketch some of the wider regional context against which this art and photography festival took place, but as this will be a fairly polemical piece of writing, it is also necessary to immediately point out the great worth the festival provided for the city of Bradford, with its tenacious organisers, Ann McNeil and Caroline Hick. Yet dealing with the city - and with Hassall and McIlroy’s responses to it - inevitably involves engaging with complex meshes of the negative and positive.

In his recent book, A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain, Owen Hatherley begins his chapter on the West Riding of Yorkshire by describing Will Alsop’s Supercity, unveiled at the equally utopian and doomed Urbis, in Manchester, in 2005. Hatherley’s critique largely points at New Labour’s continuation of a kind of state-led neoliberalism, which he views as having a mixed legacy at best. Urbis itself was a kind of default New Labour icon, opening and finally collapsing at the same time as it became clear the party was going to be unelectable. Urbis characterised the public-private partnerships of Anthony Giddens’ ‘Third Way’ policy advice. But Urbis also suffered from a bad identity crisis which it would ultimately be swept away by.

Alsop’s Supercity proposal was to connect vast swathes of the northwest up along the M62 corridor. This vein is crucial to the region as a whole. Go and stand on the footbridge across the M62, just above Littleborough, and in the relentless roar of hundreds of droning lorries and screaming businessmen, you may scry David Harvey’s voice, explaining how the movement of capital cannot ever stop, not even for a nanosecond. You will need at least one alcoholic drink after this, and I suggest returning to the White House pub, just beyond the bridge. You may even feel, as I did later on, that you need to look up the details of the journey to be made with Charon across limbo into the world of the dead.

From the White House, it is possible to look over to Rochdale’s Seven Sisters, high rise flats which are perceived as icons for the utter failure of modernism. Charles Jencks gives a very precise (and, I think, problematic) date and time to both the end of modernism and the rise of postmodernism: 3 PM on March the 16th, 1972, the destruction of the Pruitt-Igoe housing estate in St. Louis, Missouri. His thesis therefore places my own lifespan right at the start of the postmodern world. I was in gestation when Pruitt-Igoe dropped, emerging three and a half months later, as the rubble was being cleared away. Yet the subject of postmodernism often seems far from precise. At this point all bets are off, aesthetically at least, and for those who are positive about the playful mixing which characterises postmodernism, it is the beginning of a much more open epoch. Whether you believe in it or not, the ‘end of grand narratives’ from this point onwards is firmly written into history. But the problem with postmodernism - as discussed with Robert Galeta
and others in this volume during the event it documents - is that it masks the persistence and continued rise of the real Grand Narrative: capitalism. One of the earliest anti-modern tracts about architecture was the fantastic Death and Life of Great American Cities by Jane Jacobs, but Owen Hatherley’s critique follows up on those of Jameson and Harvey before him, to argue that postmodernism provided few solutions to Jacobs’ many concerns.

Hatherley cites the vorticist painter Edward Wadsworth, also looking down from the moors above nearby Halifax, where he proclaimed, enthusiastically, ‘it’s like hell isn’t it?’ This is effectively a prelude to descriptions of the old Halifax plc headquarters, Trinity Road, now HBOS, a brutal postmodern shrine to its masonic origins, alongside appropriations of Russian constructivism and all the ‘devices of “left” architecture’.

For Hatherley, it is icons such as these which exist ‘in place of a Supercity’. To be fair, Hatherley is actually quite keen on Alsop’s basic concept for Supercity, that we already have an ‘environmentally destructive’ network in place in the northwest - internal combustion engine powered - belting across the highest and bleakest motorway in the country, twenty four hours a day, which, if it were planned properly, could be employed much more usefully and ethically. Hatherley places the Emley Moor TV mast at the centre of the M62 Supercity zone, ‘a Stadtkrone monument without a Stadt’, a centre of town without a town. That Hatherley picks a television transmitter is poetic, and returns me to Raymond Williams’s simultaneously clunky but accurate term ‘mobile privatisation’, used to describe the effects of the rise of private transport
– cars - and private information networks, which at the
time he was writing meant television, which was soon
to hybridize with all other available forms of media. But
standing outside the Midland Hotel at night, what was
amazing about Bradford was how deserted the streets
were. The cars at this point were as frequent as donkey
carts in tiny Tuscan towns, despite their steaming out of
town during the rush hour with some of the relentless
violence of the M62.

This moves my argument closer to the weekend’s events
which proposed that we make this book in the first place,
and so I will return to Hatherley’s description of Brad-
ford now, and Will Alsop’s original plans for the centre
of town, a proposed wetlands in one of the wettest of
cities, which then stalled financially after 2008, leaving a
hole right at its centre, which inevitably does fill up with
water on a regular basis. It was here that Lee Hassall and
Denise McIlroy chose to perform their first interventions
of the day.

Initially, Hassall stared into the tiny viewing window
in the fence around the hole in Bradford for some time,
shredding bread behind his back, before scattering bird-
seed, ringing a cowbell, and picking up a ‘ballot box’,
actually a banana box from Ecuador, which he wore
around his neck like an usherette. The urban and rural
began to collapse in his use of the bowler hat, originally
poacher’s headgear, appropriated for urban life, along
with the scattering of seed and the ringing of the bell. The
space lit up with his incantatory walking, which was part
warning, and part exorcism. The free range, occasional
cars, glimpsed the night before, began to suggest a de-
serted city, what Patrick Keiller meant by the ‘city of the
future’, which is actually the city of the Edwardian past,
with mixed modes of transport and a limited gas supply.

Robert Galeta, giving a talk on Simon Ford and Colin
Lloyd’s work The Tracker Chronicles up at the Univer-
sity, described the term ‘the new middle ages’. Hather-
ley’s critiques, and those of Zygmunt Bauman, point to
the private estates, gated communities and ultimately the
private armies of the super-rich to indicate a return to a
sort of new feudalism.

One other origin of the weekend’s interventions was
detailed research into the Mechanics’ Institute on Sun-
bridge Road by Denise McIlroy, who set up nearby with
an ironing board, stamping ‘learning receipts’ for peo-
ple. After the Millbank disturbances last year, and more
recently the riots in England, it seemed that a crisis in
both education and certain notions of class had moved to
the fore again. The first national system of education was
created in 1870, by the Forster Education Act. William
Forster was a Bradford industrialist and Liberal MP. The
fact that vocational education no longer simply provides
metal-bashing skills doesn’t exempt the labour force they
produce from being bracketed as ‘blue collar’. Hair and
beauty courses are not just classed, but gendered, and
potentially pathologising. Denise McIlroy’s ‘learning
receipts’ were built on images of Forster’s face, stamped
with images of the old Mechanics’ institute, and logos
from a fictional, but clearly gendered ‘Right Worshipful
Laundry Company’.

Driving through nearby Burnley, one could be mistaken
for thinking that it no longer has any need to exist, but it
does, and a Mechanics Institute still operates in its centre, although its primary function is to entertain and distract, rather than to teach its citizens. James Hole’s 1853 characterisation of the polarizing nature of capitalism has not changed in the intervening years, in fact it has become much more pronounced:

‘With frigid indifference we have seen growing up amid our refined and luxurious civilisation, the densest, brutalest ignorance, – side by side with our enormous wealth, an incredible amount of human misery, – the palaces of the rich elbowed by the nests of fever and the hovels of despairing wretchedness. While we have been squabbling about who shall teach the children, and what they shall be taught, hundreds of thousands have grown up untaught in all save vice. [...] What “interests,” West Indian, Cotton, Shipping, or any other, can be compared with the “Working-Class Interest,” and what duties of more moment than attention to the moral and social advancement of our swarming population?’

Again, David Harvey recently warned that if capital were to be asked to pay the full cost of its responsibilities to those who create the surplus-value it feeds on – the care of the elderly, education, welfare, etc – it would collapse. He then advised us to demand that capital pay this whole cost and nothing less. On the day of the interventions, in Manchester, the Conservative Party were about to announce that they had suddenly ‘found’ a few billion for council tax-capping, as thousands of protesters prepared to march on their gathering. George Osborne was being lambasted for his failure to stimulate anything near the magical three percent growth, viewed as the amount the waterline needs to rise, moment-on-moment, for capitalism to remain ‘static’. David Harvey’s more recent work barely attempts to hide its ridicule of this idea, proclaiming the desperate need for a low or zero growth economics to emerge from this period of deep crisis. George Osborne spoke on Radio 4 a few days later, explaining how ‘multi-nationals were leaving Britain’, a tautology as worthy of the status of myth as the idea of ‘a national economy’. On the 1st of October, we had peculiar but welcome weather - a heatwave - as brown leaves dropped from the trees, signalling the onset of winter, with warnings of hurricanes to follow. For Harvey the growth questions are desperately linked to the ecology questions, but he understands the hideously entwined and dangerous complexity of this.

After the day’s performances, we walked around the New Beehive Inn where Hassall was staying, where we saw early social housing, with arts and crafts features, reduced to a quotation from the HBO TV series The Wire. The whole frontage is pasted over with steel panels, with a piece of community art placed at its centre, where the utopian balcony bulges, with a slogan which reads ‘come on city, come on city’, a desperate cry for an unconscious, swollen patient to wake from a coma. Just down the road is High Point, built for the rather benign Yorkshire Building Society, and Hatherley rightly reserves some of his most rhetorical language for this building:

‘It’s utterly freakish, the severed head of some Japanese giant robot, glaring out at the city through blood red windows, the strangest urban artefact in a city which does not lack for architectural interest [...] the combination of wild technological daring, Cold War paranoia, shabby corruption and crushed dreams which defined the Wilson era.’
My frank response to this building is unprintable, it is the fact that capitalism no longer serves us, but that we serve it, in the form of an enormous, will-power draining physical insult. But the interventions created by Hassall and McIlroy on the day opened up a space of hope for me, which is neither stupidly utopian, nor mournfully negative, but rather the essential dialogue we all should be having with and in places like Bradford. The symbolic functions of art were vividly awake during the performances, particularly the first one, and completely swept away some of the conversations I heard the night before, about who was or wasn’t selling to Gagosian, and who was or wasn’t entitled to make symbolic interventions in the world.

As Lee Hassall finished his part of the performance, again staring out into the hole at the centre of Bradford, through windows small enough to announce their own guilt, a young Asian man gingerly approached his back, having watched some of his movements, and asked, ‘are you alright mate?’ If only for that moment, there was a small rebuttal to the excessively total arguments still being made by Zygmunt Bauman about the death of public life, although later that day, Hassall himself would be ejected from what appeared to be a public space for the crime of eating fish and chips there. In this we have a key thesis and antithesis of our era. Just behind the chippy where he bought his lunch is a wall which continues right past the old Co-Op building, down to the spot where Billy Liar was filmed, a fictional document of the fantasies and self-deceptions of imaginary life in the north, a film which, if applied metaphorically, can ask much wider questions about the realities we all inhabit: The V&A are currently hosting a retrospective of postmodernism. This weekend I discussed with colleagues at the festival how its given end point of 1990 is both accurate and misleading. I remember going to university in 1992 and witnessing the end of the £5 note as an option at cashpoints. That the £5 note has just re-appeared at ATMs speaks volumes, in fact, I think both historical moments delineate the near and far ends of the bubble. After 1990, postmodernism had simply exited its avant-garde phase, after which it was pushed into an expanded, public, credit-inflated unreality which thereafter swamped everybody’s life.

What I am certain about in this most uncertain of times is that ‘after postmodernism’ isn’t going to mean some new round of even fresher irony, the ‘post-postmodern times’ glibly announced by Andrea Schlieker et al in the British Art Show 6 catalogue in 2005, just before the crash of crashes. But nor is it likely to return us to the stronger ‘meta-narratives’ of political unity.

Under these conditions, the only thing to do is to hold on to the practice of collaboration and dialogue - as we tried to here - and to continually question and open-out the dialectics of our times.
There aren’t enough shoes, so we must stop growing legs

References


Harvey, David (2011) ‘Nice day for a revolution: Why May Day should be a date to stand up and change the system’, in The Independent, April 29


Lee Hassall - some notes on practice

Above all remember that this process is one of exchange. Differences of opinion are sought, and notions of originality and authorship challenged. The creative process attaches us to others. The emphasis is on research and process. Utilise what is around you, investigate your subject and surroundings with fresh eyes and ears. Use your faculties and senses as a resource – memory as mental recall, and bodily recall – not as an indulgence in nostalgia, not necessarily to tell your own individual story, but to tell a broader, non-solipsistic narrative. Critical evaluation is essential if you are to develop creatively. You may have to give up your affection for the familiar. No hanging on to what appears to be important, it is then that you will find unexpected connections.

You are already participating in the process now. Engage with words, marks, debate, noise, looking, touch, texture, and viewing, reasoning, pondering and believing. Memorize all the signs between where you are living and the university – the route you traverse daily. Think of other people. Encourage your peers, critique their work, give them time and opinion, and steal their ideas, focus on the group. Your peers will not only be your colleagues and collaborators but also your audience. Learn from people from different frames of references, students on other courses and also those who have nothing to do with the university, art, or your lifestyle. Avoid art that talks only to itself. Is there more to life than art?

Remember we want to communicate with other worlds of thought. Remember those who do not have artistic, political and intellectual freedom. Pay no attention to those who say that studying art is of no worth; you have the opportunity to become part of a great tradition. You will need to work hard and be dedicated. It is selfish and foolish to rely on your self in isolation. Creativity and ideas thrive on being cross-fertilized. Be suspicious of your ability. Ability will only take you so far. Be wary of talent and the talented. Take your studies seriously but look for a sense of humour. Develop the ability to listen, nurture each other’s fledgling and fragmented ideas. Court failure, experimentation and a love of work.

Enjoy your doubts and fears. Explore new pathways, vary your route. See with fresh eyes, as somebody who isn’t world-weary, lacklustre, bored, fed-up or burned-out by fixed notions.
I come to you as myth
It used to service us...
...now we service it
Nothing to see here

Galeta
Hanson
Hassall
McIlroy
Weaver

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