

**'Leave No Trace': The Art of Wasted Space– The People's Republic of Stokes Croft**

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The city of Bristol in England, the home of one of the oldest theatres in the UK - the historic Bristol Old Vic Theatre - is losing its live performance venues. This is largely due to government arts funding cuts, linked to a shortage of funds in the lead-up to the London Olympic Games of 2012. The Old Vic itself, remains closed, with an uncertain future. Meanwhile the performing life of the city is being redistributed, to a number of fringe venues, with only minor public funding. For the moment the hopes of long-term regeneration are resting with community groups like The People's Republic of Stokes Croft, a group of artists and activists who aim to transform the urban space of Stokes Croft for its inhabitants, for motorists who wait out traffic jams and for the pedestrians who drift (used in the Situationist sense) through its territory.

In this article, I will argue that the act of drifting or walking through Stokes Croft is an immersive experience and enactment of performance. Like a walk through Stokes Croft this article also combines a variety of narratives in the form of theoretical writings on community performance, visual orders and urban environments. The relationship of these texts to twenty-first century Stokes Croft, is quite explicit, in the heady mix of the bodily experience of the place with its largely drug and alcohol-related recreational activities and the creative application of theory in the politicisation of its status as an eyesore or a spectacle.

The performativity of walking as a creative act has been posed by a number of writers from the Romantic poets, the psychogeographers and even claimed as a rhetoric by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, where the French *tourner un parcours* or 'composing a path' is a way of 'being' and 'making' in the everyday (1988: 100). For its explicit examination of the connection between consciousness and urban patterns of walking, the psychogeographic project is still a fascination to postmodern thinkers. The

concept of the *drift* in psychogeography is a complex model of moving about through the city, moderated by desire, a curiosity for unorthodox space, a disdain for tourist attractions and a pleasure in the familiarity of regular, relatively obscure and much-loved routes.

The site-specificity of the installations and the creative act of walking through Stokes Croft has resonances with radical performance genres. Within a context of emerging performance practice, it is significant to acknowledge that contemporary performance theory looks beyond theatre as the venue for radical change. According to Baz Kershaw, 'Performance beyond theatre has a much better chance of turning the trick of cultural production back against the commodifying depredations of late-capitalism' (1999: 84). Rather than being a condemnation of theatre by Kershaw, his championing of the extension of the theatrical boundary to the urban neighbourhood as sites of performance and installation work, has been a cogent force for the past thirty years, especially in Britain. In relation to radical performance, the politicisation of aesthetics is read in Kershaw's reappraisal of the links between Brecht and Baudrillard: 'An up-to-date politics of performance should, in fact, recognise the contiguities between Brecht and Baudrillard, between, say, a vision of theatre as a dynamic arena for social experiment and a view of the social as an experiment so thoroughly imbued with a potential for a sense of reflexive performativity' (1999: 84)

This contemporary junction in performance theory envisions a synthesis of didactic content, within playful and counter-cultural structures. Most relevant to the issue of performance space is Kershaw's appraisal of the vibrancy of radical site-specific performance in contrast to the traditional venues confined to the structures of late capitalism:

This is a project that performance in traditional or mainstream theatre venues is hard pressed to join, because the disciplinary forces at work in such spaces have been reinforced by the downside of the postmodern, its collusions with the logic of late capitalism. There, the commodifications of consumerism foster a creative sclerosis that is the

enemy of radicalism, and where performative excess struggles to appear it is inevitably neutered by the operations of the market-place. So while theatre is both the first and last place we might expect to find democratised empowerment through the exercise of creative freedom, it is generally now rendered the end of the line for performance's powers of resistance and transgression. (1999: 84-85)

Kershaw's observation of the political cul-de-sac of contemporary theatre relates very closely to the radicalised space of the abandoned artist's squat and neglected building-as-canvas. This is especially relevant, given Bristol's current lack of a flagship, producing theatre company, despite a strong subculture of fringe performance practices and festivals, including new circus, documentary film-making and animation. It is within this creative context that the PRSC has such a diverse and enthusiastic membership and the confidence to anticipate a receptive public. The PRSC's spectatorship is, therefore, partially formed of those who appreciate the inventiveness of liminal art forms and the politics of collaboration. To a great extent, too, there is a captive spectatorship of local inhabitants, from diverse backgrounds who are also complicit in the presentation and representation of their neighbourhood.

### *The Sewer of the City*

To describe its dimensions, the region of Stokes Croft in Bristol, covers an area with a half-kilometre radius, immediately North of the central business district. Stokes Croft is not only the name of a region but also a segment of road that grows from the traffic roundabout of St James Barton and transforms into Cheltenham and Gloucester Roads as it winds northwards into the suburbs. It has the usual urban social and public health problems of drug addiction, homelessness, alcoholism, prostitution and endemic drug-related violence mirrored, aesthetically, by the degradation of its buildings and services but with the added vulnerability of the vacancy of at least a fifth of its commercial properties. This microcosm of urban decline, environmental and ecological degradation is the predicate for radical reinvention and one that is not 'neutered by the operations of the market-place' (to reiterate Kershaw).

To this effect, The People's Republic of Stokes Croft <http://www.prsc.org.uk> has declared this degraded region to be 'Bristol's Cultural Quarter'. Whether travelling into the city or in the opposite direction to the suburbs, spectators cannot avoid this highly spectacular region. The immediacy and proximity of the PRSC's murals and installations with their provocations about the urban environment, dominate the visual order of the area. The colourful pastiche of billboard announcements, encourages the public to emerge from a culture of fear and to re-think its physical space, and its attitudes and behaviours towards the environment. The group is led by Chris Chalkley, whose democratising definition of 'the artist' as 'any citizen' encourages every member of the community to effectively become the author of their own future. The organisation's website has an image gallery of neglected sites in the neighbourhood which it urges members of the public to rescue with original artwork. Like other performing and visual arts collectives, the PRSC have published a manifesto: 'We believe that Stokes Croft has been criminally and deliberately neglected by government . . . That local government has tacitly believed and accepted that Stokes Croft is the sink, the sewer of the city' (<http://www.prsc.org.uk/politics.htm>).

The imagination of the PRSC has been spawned by the unlikely beauty of wasted space and the spectacle of human detritus. The PSRC adopts a brand of rhetoric behind its artwork that voices an affected nostalgia for the district's past, with its nineteenth century allegories of 'truth' and 'beauty' adorning a number of buildings, as well as a contemporary self-reflexivity and even a utopian vision for the future.

When the spectator takes a walk past the PRSC's more prominent murals, the effect is like that of an anti-theme park dedicated to the breakdown of capitalism and urban infrastructure. In its anti-model of a broken city, the cumulative effect of the PRSC's aesthetics forms a dystopian space, where the parodic images daubed on its walls could be read as either a protest at the region's state of disrepair or as a mirror to the inhabitants whose social reality could render them as co-conspirators in this downfall. (Since mid April

2008, a number of the Stokes Croft nightclubs, such as Lakota and the Blue Mountain Club, which have enjoyed international appeal in the dance club subcultures, have been forced to close down and plans are in place to for the area to be redeveloped into apartment blocks). While the billboards, placards and graffiti of the PRSC remain in place for the time being, spectators are still forced to engage with the incongruities of their city.

These incongruities exist in the appearance of public furniture, traffic islands and small parks rather than simply derelict buildings. The space known to locals as Turbo Island is at the junction of Stokes Croft and Jamaica Street. The grassy area is popular for drinkers or for the homeless to occasionally sit, sleep or socialise, despite a police-imposed drinking ban on the area. Above the painted work of Turbo Island, an advertising billboard of oscillating images is mounted. When the image in Figure One was captured, the product being advertised was a casino. Spectators who approach the image on foot, from the North, or driving in their cars towards the city centre, are forced to engage with both levels of simulation and are faced with the choices of their own consumption. These incongruities are welcomed in postmodern art practices, where the propaganda and the parody prosper side-by-side. Similarly, the question of subject-object relation is posed by the fairy tale imagery painted on the electricity sub-station (see Figure One).



Figure One. Photo: Pamela Karantonis

Is there an ironic visual pun here which imitates the gaze of the spectator drinking heavily, taking recreational drugs or emerging from the utopia promised by the ephemeral, themed nights of the city's nightclubs?

For its consciousness-raising capacity, Stokes Croft occupies a liminal place being both a public gallery and a site of real social dereliction. Reading Stokes Croft must therefore take into account the performative and site-specific temporalities, aesthetics and occasional 'diagnostics' of the images and objects presented there. A prominent representation of the troubled social realities of the neighbourhood of Stokes Croft is located in the abandoned site of Westmoreland House: a partly demolished concrete building capped with the image of a skull and crocodile. It has been the site of an illegal skating park and is now secured with barbed wire and chains to prevent trespassers from accessing the site and injuring themselves and it is curated by council-sanctioned squatters (see Figure Two). The building sits behind the abandoned nineteenth century Carriage Works depot, which shows no signs of being listed for restoration. It is believed that Westmoreland House has remained in a state of disrepair for nearly thirty years because it was being used as financial collateral for property developers to expand their profits on building sites in other parts of Bristol:

The large tract of property has been derelict since the late '70's, and is the subject of heated debate. Currently owned by Comer Homes, who have offered up several, generally intensive development schemes over the years, the land is currently the subject of a compulsory purchase order by Bristol City Council. On the face of it, this offers up exciting prospects, but it seems that the Council is determined that any development scheme should cost the State nothing.

<http://www.prsc.org.uk/070905stokecroftartsplan2a.doc>



Figure Two. Photo: Pamela Karantonis

The effort to provide labour and material resources to improve the landscape, therefore, falls currently to the volunteers from the local community and this is why their efforts are so diverse, vibrant and radical – they are not being hampered by the ‘creative sclerosis’ of commercial objectives, to paraphrase Kershaw (1999: 84-85). This collaborative practice of group-devised and team-assembled installation can be seen from time to time by the spectator walking through Stokes Croft. It is quite common to see groups of volunteers handing boards and painting materials to their team members who are atop ladders. (Footage of the installation at Westmoreland House can be viewed on: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljEUA3UpS4sT>).

As a predicate to its virtual presence on the web, three bright yellow notice boards are affixed to the fence wire outside a building adjacent to the Carriage Works inviting the public to inscribe comments upon the future of



Stokes Croft as well as displaying the PRSC's designs for the future of the area, a practice of transparent consultation which might be core to community arts practice, but is arguably lacking in the conduct of property developers and local councils. This discursive approach to space invites the heteroglossiac (in the Bakhtinian sense), with messages ranging from poetry to tagging. For instance, there is a layered history of other posters behind these notice boards, with one bearing the words: 'This poster kills fascists' (See Figure Three). This region of the landscape is a palimpsest of multiple voices from the community, rather than a unified over-painting of a PRSC-authored political stance. Landscapes are able to speak with multiple voices, as will be considered in the ecological discourses which relate to landscape and cultural hermeneutics, in the latter part of this article.



Figure Three. Photo: Pamela Karantonis

So while the PRSC's ethos is to sustain and encourage multiple voices, their primary images are unambiguous: they are designed to confront the politics behind commercial property development and negligent council planning, while delicately side-stepping a mentality of 'selling out' by re-branding the space as an exclusive open-air gallery to benefit individual artists. This is ironic, given the fact that Banksy's Mild, Mild West mural is painted on the side of a building overlooking an abandoned office block in the precinct and



the PRSC-branded yellow garbage bin. The establishment status of the graffiti/stencil artist Banksy, potentially legitimises the presence and marketability of art works on derelict buildings. The Banksy work, while independent of the PRSC, is iconic of Stokes Croft history and is a creative practice that is now celebrated for its political force and pseudo-anonymity (in that the artist now rarely signs his work and that spectators take some pride in second-guessing his involvement). *Mild, Mild West* depicts a giant Molotov-cocktail-throwing teddy bear battling with three police officers in riot gear (see Figure three), a reference to the history of turbulence in the Stokes Croft region over the past two centuries, which include public riots in 1831 and the more recent race riots of 1981. The PRSC have advocated for this mural's conservation in any plans for the site by commercial developers. The PRSC's declaration of connectivity to Stokes Croft's past and its present community and its desire for open collaboration suggests a model that communities in urban environments other than Stokes Croft and which are subject to a culture of fear and neglect, might also develop. Of course the PRSC's tactics also developed out of existing discourses and practices, in particular the recent legitimisation of graffiti and street art in championing progressive discourses, of which Banksy is the prime example.

### *Visual orders*

The performative works and images seen in Stokes Croft are symptomatic of the degraded appearance of this region of the city. Whether they function as a call to radicalism or a cure for social ills, the vibrant patina of street art masks the city's failure to present itself as functional and ideologically stable and this has a radical effect on the thinking, behaviour and aesthetics exhibited by its inhabitants. There is an awareness of spectatorship and self-reflexivity in the rhetoric of many Stokes Croft works, particularly in the performative claim 'This poster kills fascists'. The question of whether or not the visual order of a city can shape the social fabric (at perhaps a subtler level than killing fascists), was the preoccupation of the psychogeographers, who saw visual orders as being both the goal and the outcome of capitalism. In his landmark work *The Society of the Spectacle*, philosopher and Situationist, Guy Debord

refers to the engagement that subjects have with their urban environment as being one wholly predicated upon visual orders:

The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that was once directly lived has become mere representation. [ . . . ] The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images. [ . . . ] Understood in its totality, the spectacle is both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production. It is not something added to the real world – not a decorative element so to speak. On the contrary, it is the very heart of society's real unreality. In all its specific manifestations – news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment – the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life. (Debord: 1994; 1967: 1-13, 46).

Therefore visual orders in urban space are beyond being decorative or functional but are self-reflexive cultural texts. A literary precedent to the Situationists in its appraisal of unorthodox walking experiences, was produced by English Romantic writer Thomas De Quincey in 1821, with the title *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. It was an aesthetic response to the deadly, functional lines of post-Enlightenment urban architecture. De Quincey's spatial metaphors were fascinating to the Situationists due to his mapping of nautical passages upon dry land. He wrote of London: 'seeking ambitiously of a north-west passage, instead of circumnavigating all the capes and head-lands I had doubled on my outward voyage, I came suddenly on knotty problems as alleys' (in Sadler 1998: 76). It further suggests that the individual negotiates the subject-object relation of walking through landscape; when the nautical pathway is mapped onto an urban landscape, the resulting flows and obstructions are the product of an altered consciousness. As it was developed by the French Situationists over a century later, the psychogeographic theory was quite radical in arguing that the urban environment could change consciousness productively and radically, so the

act of walking becomes more active politically, than the passive consumption of images embodied by Walter Benjamin's flaneur, dazzled by commerce.

Most recently, psychogeography has been reinvented, to a younger generation of global (not merely urban) travellers, with the release of Will Self's latest publication *Psychogeography*, based on the New York Times column of the same name. The event which brought his project to fame was 'the walk from London Heathrow to JFK Airport New York', which was in fact a walk from his home in London to Heathrow Airport, an international flight and then a walk from JFK Airport to his accommodation in Manhattan. The author claims that his body was telling his mind he had in fact walked the entire journey (Self: Arnolfini, 2007). He further suggests that human consciousness has not really 'caught up with' the physical phenomenon of air travel, unlike our familiar narration of the act of walking. When Self speaks of a 'pornography of place' it is an attack on the commodity fetish of the destination, in the activity of global travel, with no regard to the labour of the journey. The neo-Romantic picturesque of exotic locations is perpetuated by global package travel but is undermined by what he argues is the latent romance of walking through urban space. He believes passionately in the act of walking through unorthodox space, especially highway underpasses and canals, which are bypassed by mass transport. This seems to be a solitary and creative act – that when we walk this way, we discover spaces that are yet to be narrated. This kind of experience is becoming increasingly rarefied in contemporary urban spaces that are prescribed a commercial value. However, when this experience is collectivised and anticipated by those assembling objects within the unorthodox spaces of neglected streets, the experience is altogether different.

Through the rhetoric of resistance, the PRSC borrows from the Situationists and British punk movement in their concrete poetics. The concept of *détournement* has cultural currency in both Francophone and Anglophone traditions:

The closest English translation of *détournement* lies somewhere between 'diversion' and 'subversion'. It is a turning around and a reclamation of lost meaning: a way of putting the stasis of spectacle in motion. It is plagiaristic, because its materials are those which already appear within the spectacle, and subversive, since its tactics are those of the "reversal of perspective", a challenge to meaning aimed at the context in which it arises. (Plant: 1992, 86)



Figure Four. Photo: Pamela Karantonis

The issue of consumption is expressed more blatantly in the painted boarding which is situated north of Stokes Croft, along Cheltenham Road. In it, the caption "Let them eat culture" accompanies the macabre images of a myopic skull and blinded Mickey Mouse twins (see Figure Four). The success of the grotesque here is that the work is found among the shop fronts and next to another brothel. The potent contrast suggests the liberatory potential of abandoned buildings as canvasses – the absence of a landlord means that this visual space is not for sale to advertisers but the variegated voice of the community. 'Let them Eat Culture', echoes the imperialist rhetoric of Marie

Antoinette's France, but renders it within an irreverent post-punk pastiche of popular Disney icons. These plagiaristic strategies, labelled as *détournement* were not therefore restricted to the French left-wing intellectuals, there is in fact a history of their appropriation by the British punk movement:

Two of punk's leading protagonists, Jamie Reid, a graphic artist, and Malcolm McLaren, manager of the Sex Pistols, were well-versed in situationist ideas [ . . . ] Much of punk continued the tradition in which the situationists had worked [ . . . ] Its graphics, for which Reid was largely responsible, cut up newspapers, safety-pinned clothes, rewrote comics, and parodied official notices'. (Plant: 1992, 144)

One of the more amusing punk-era announcements was printed on an official-looking sticker and placed in situ in supermarkets: 'This store will soon be closing owing to the pending collapse of monopoly capitalism and the worldwide exhaustion of raw materials' (Plant 144). Some of these attacks targeted new urban developments or supermarkets specifically; while others were reactionary jibes aimed at the Left. For instance, the PRSC re-boardings of one of the Carriage Works windows as a place to 'slum it (sic) in style' is an ironic gesture towards post-punk critique of the degraded capitalist city. It can also be read as an attack on the lack of affordable housing in the area, where the middle class are the only ones who can afford to buy housing in the same area as a homelessness assessment shelter. It is unclear then, which of the spectators are invited to 'slum it' in style (see Figure Five). To the left of the placard and spray painted on the wall, is a much older piece of yellow and red stencil art, depicting the Carriage Works in miniature. The building's iconic appearance is the only reality its spectators can experience: as it is a piece of redundant and boarded up nineteenth century infrastructure – when Bristol had a functioning tramway system instead of traffic jams.

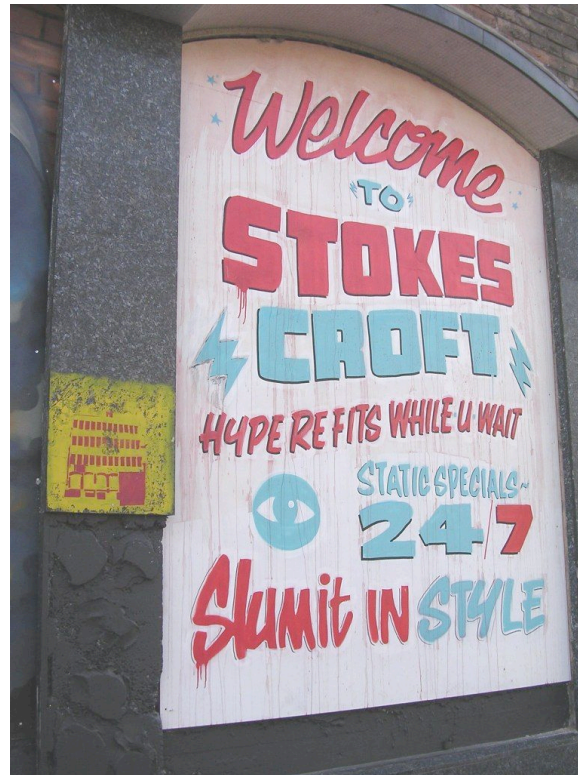


Figure Five. Photo: Pamela Karantonis

### *Social Relations*

A phenomenon of the urban diversity of Stokes Croft is that a number of temporary visitors negotiate a series of social limits and taboos – with police tolerance of open brothels, a bail hostel, a government-sponsored drug service, a ban on drinking in the streets and the distribution office of the magazine *The Big Issue*. This brings pedestrians into the area whose social relations create the need for tolerance and understanding from those who live in Stokes Croft. These sites and services are located in very close proximity to a number of evangelical Christian establishments, the Seventh-Day Adventists Church, a city Mission and a large Salvation Army facility. The Refugee Service had long been situated in Stokes Croft but recently moved location. The area has a mix of non-English-speaking cultures, many residents originating from Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Jamaica. To add to the political texture of the area even further, the local Afro-Caribbean meeting place is the Malcolm X Community Centre, which memorialises America's civil rights movement. This centre is a focal point for



the annual St Paul's Carnival, which features a spectacular *mardi gras*, ending in a street party, with live music from many African and Afro-Caribbean traditions.

This kind of diversity throws the early Situationist's almost exclusively French, male subjectivity into relief. Guy Debord and Asger Jorn's 1959 *Mémoires* in which images of the city are spliced with women's half-clothed, fragmented bodies were politicised as anti-capitalist at the time, but also charged with models of desire that pre-date an awareness of feminist discourse: 'So psychogeography offered a sense of violent emotive possession over the streets. Exotic and exciting treasures were to be found in the city by those drifters able to conquer her' (Sadler, 81). The inherent sexism and ethnocentrism of the Parisian movement was challenged by Debord's wife, the writer Michèle Bernstein and Algerian psychogeographer Abdelhafid Khatib; the latter's defiance of the French police curfew upon Algerian residents indicated a more blatantly performative act than the hallucinatory recollections of canonised Romantic poets.

It is significant to acknowledge the experience of real and revelatory social encounters alongside the playful parade of images arranged through the space. In the entrance to Stokes Croft, the pedestrian underpass, with its network of tunnels, is purely functional; it is designed to allow pedestrians access to other streets. It is often inhabited by people whose everyday routine is begging for cash and the pedestrian's greeting for making the transition from the commercial centre to 'Bristol's Cultural Quarter' is marked by the plaintive chant 'spare change please'. This interaction is also a crucial moment of transition within the Stokes Croft walk. Does the spectacle look any different to those who have decided to pay the 'entrance fee'? The notion of junctions and crossroads are not just a phenomenon of traffic systems but characterised by the Situationists as stations of psychogeographic flow. The term in French, *plaques tournantes*, had many meanings:

The term punned on so many meanings that it is not possible to translate it straightforwardly. A *plaques tournantes* can be the center

[sic] of something; it can be a railway turntable; or it can be a place of exchange . . . As a center for markets, drinking, prostitution, and drugs, Les Halles was clearly a *plaques tournantes* in all these senses. Abdelhafid Khatib noted this area of Paris as not only one of commercial exchange but of “social deterioration, acculturation, [and a] mixing of populations which is the favourable environment for cultural exchanges”. (Sadler 1998: 88-89)

*Plaques tournantes* therefore symbolise a pattern in the urban experience where the fault lines in late capitalism foster unique and diverse social networks, rather than a demonised criminal subculture. The notion of a junction as not only a feature of landscape but as a social faultline is a re-mapping of the city that remains potent within the Stokes Croft phenomenon. While the city is no longer narrated with the singular voice of the solitary male writer, as in the texts of De Quincey and Debord, the latter’s articulation of ‘places of exchange’ as retaining psychogeographic flow has arguably paved the way for the inscription of multiple discursive practices within urban spectacle.

### *Acts of walking*

The act of walking towards Stokes Croft is thus done with the expectation of further similar encounters on the walking route. There is a resultant integration of icons of domestic comfort within the aesthetics of the installations. This is most evident in the space of Turbo Island or the ‘red carpet’ effect of the painted steps of Westmoreland House’s entrance. These are framing devices for the inhabitants of the space who either add to, deface, ignore or sleep beneath, images and texts which do not contain messages of law enforcement or moralising statements. Rather, they oddly legitimise the nomadic status of the transitory residents. Given the multiplicity of discourses at play at the junctions of diverse social networks, is the most democratic model of performative space, one which encourages random participation or do systematic ethics need to be in place to combat cultures of fear? Nicolas Bourriaud in ‘Relational Form’ tries to reconcile the discourse of ‘community

performance' with the historical avant-garde in the use of public space for radical artistic practice:

Nowadays, modernity extends to the practices of cultural do-it-yourself and recycling, into the invention of the everyday [ . . . ] The city has ushered in and spread the hands-on experience: it is the tangible symbol and historical setting of the state of society, that "state of encounter imposed on people," to use Althusser's expression [ . . . ] Once raised to the power of an absolute rule of civilisation, this system of intensive encounters has ended up producing linked artistic practices: an art form where the substrate is formed by inter subjectivity, and which takes being-together as a central theme, the 'encounter' between beholder and picture. (2007: 103)

The reinvention of 'the everyday' in Stokes Croft is one which takes homelessness and substance abuse into account without demonising inhabitants, while drawing attention to the aesthetic revelry possible in derelict spaces to wider audiences. This shared subjectivity, of artists and spectators alike, as dissidents within a materially neglected space, is one which potentially safeguards the region from discourses that are politically regressive. In the case of the PRSC, it is an outdoor gallery – an inverted curatorial space or neo-Dadaist theme park which secures the dissident foothold on the multiple discourses operating in the space. One of the images illustrates the active choices available to spectators, participants, consumers and dissidents, in its provocative juxtaposition to functioning brothels, where women are commodified. The image of a young girl who has 'control' (quite literally in terms of handling a remote control), stands in defiance of the sex trade (see Figure Six) and is far removed from the mapping of erotic womanhood onto urban space by Debord and Jorn. Far from being moralising though, her image is of a subject with an intense gaze of defiance; she is a depersonalised emblem of the future generation. Her presence disrupts the passive gaze of pedestrians walking back from the city centre, potentially festooned with shopping bags or recovering from a night of reverie.



Figure Six. Photo: Pamela Karantonis



Figure Seven. Photo: Pamela Karantonis

The most didactic intervention carried out by the images, is the PRSC's demand for better public arts policies at local government level. The PRSC performs its own aims for legitimacy by simulating its imagined future. In the entrance to the Carriage Works, the boarding is covered with a colour-coded directory for the arts bodies that the building might (or should) house as an arts and cultural venue. The brightly-coloured directory is flanked by a life-sized image of a man standing on the threshold of an imagined future for Westmoreland House - (see Figure Seven). The man's image mirrors the urban fashion look of the heavy metal music fans who frequent the nearby pubs and suggests that this art negotiates an inter-subjectivity – where the artist and the subject are mutually self-reflexive. It is significant to note that the man's face has been scratched out and that the steps are still used as a sleeping area for the homeless. The PRSC makes no attempt to discipline or 'repair' this canvas. There is self-reflexivity in the PRSC's sense of legacy too. To the spectator's left of the building's (sealed) entrance, is a fictional advertisement for Tate Britain, anticipating the day when the anti-social and territorial act of vandalism known as 'tagging' will be a celebrated trademark of Bristol and included in the curatorial spaces of high art establishment (see Figure Eight). This is where the PRSC is arguably unique from community arts projects. It reflects ironically upon its own anti-establishment status, in that it gathers much of its radical force by the fact that it does not receive any official government or commercial sponsorship or funding. It is therefore important to recognise the PRSC's relative immunity from the discursive politics of community performance and art, where the content and remit may be subject to disciplinary regulation by external bodies or institutions. The PRSC also avoids the potential problem of there being an hierarchical system of relations between an 'appointed artist' and 'the community'.





Figure Eight. Photo: Pamela Karantonis

### *The performativity of urban design*

If cities are performative spaces, like theatres, then they are ultimately responsive to the need for meta-commentary about their own limits and vulnerabilities. In forming his definition of an ecological democracy, Berkeley-based landscape architect and urban designer, Randolph Hester, reflects the Derridean language of iterability in the flawed construction of the twentieth century city:

The vicious iterative cycle in which insecure and unrooted individuals make insecure and unrooted cities, which make even more insecure and unrooted individuals, was generations in the making and will be generations in the undoing. Shifts that disrupt the unhealthy cycle are



essential [ . . . ] Neither applied ecology nor direct democracy alone can overcome these problems, but when combined they offer hope. Ecological democracy is an antidote to the poisons we have inflicted on ourselves and habitation. (2006: 3-4)

In Stokes Croft, one of the objections to the current urban design, is that there is a mean-spirited approach to public seating, which is symbolic of social relations. This forces people to curtail their social occupation of the space. Rather than sitting comfortably on a bench, subjects are forced to occupy single space seats in the pedestrian pathway, located in the desolate concrete space of 'the bear pit'. This may be read as an obvious tactic by town planners to avoid individuals from 'sleeping rough' or abusing substances and recovering from those effects in public places. However, it simply displaces these activities, further into the Stokes Croft region, rather than making them disappear (as if by magic).

The performativity of urban design is illustrated in a more democratic light by what Hester calls 'instructive and argumentative landscapes' (345, 350). Hester contends that in order to achieve 'ecological democracy', our cities need to be re-designed for greater transparency of the environmental impact of human habitation. This transparency is quite literal and would involve the taking down of walls and the inversion of the city's functions, so that bland walls are broken down to reveal their contents. His explanation reads as a primer for a piece of didactic theatre:

The city is a museum – a repository of local history and of the ways that nature and culture have inspired or simply accommodated each other. Unfortunately, much of the most interesting and important kinds of knowledge of the city – especially the urban-ecology functions and principles – are hidden by blank concrete walls, segregated land uses, chain-link fences, and impenetrable, impervious paving. (345)

The new ways of thinking of the city as 'educative' is to expose young people to these urban-ecological and infrastructural processes in their formative

years. At a material level, it means making those concrete walls transparent by replacing them with glass or puncturing them with peep-holes; thereby inverting the panoptic surveillance of industry, with the gaze belonging to the citizens on the street, rather

than those in authority. Consistent with the museum-like status of the city, curatorship could include the visibility of social services and a welcoming environment for those service users thus undermining the culture of fear that often separates the affluent from the socially excluded. At the biological level, the city-as-museum would also embed symbolic displays of extinct species and landscapes.

What Debord bemoaned as the functional city of the urbanised West in the 1950s, can be reviewed in the twenty-first century as having concealed, due to fear and greed, the environmental ills of capitalism. Hester deploys a theatrical metaphor when he describes a 'naturalistic' landscape in contrast to a more self-reflexive and self-critical urban environment that he calls 'ecorevelatory':

Usually, impending ecological disasters are not revealed in the landscape. They are hidden by design or complexity. But it is possible to memorialize [sic] ruination to heighten awareness to prevent similar calamity in the future. Aggressive revelation can focus attention on deadly contaminants hidden in soils, water, and air'. (350)

'Aggressive revelation' sounds like a language of the theatre and could be identified in a few images in the PRSC oeuvre which arrest the gaze of the spectator on immediate environmental issues. The notion of the 'ecorevelatory', in its application to the urban setting includes strategies, which are evidently along the same lines of installation or performance art (one prominent example would be the work of Joseph Beuys); with Hester's examples addressing both the reliance on private transport by car and the ghettoisation of populations of the socially excluded: 'Environmental ruination that is caused by the cumulative impacts of the harmful habits of everyday life is a greater challenge. In these cases, industry is a culprit, but thoughtless

consumers are coconspirators [sic]'. In relation to the use of cars, he raises the question as to why public education campaigns do not enter into the same tactic of 'quit smoking' to 'quit car travel' and cites Stanley Marsh's installation Cadillac Ranch, featuring a row of ten vehicles vertically impaling the earth, in Amarillo, Texas as a suitable provocation to motoring enthusiasts.



Figure Nine. Photo: Pamela Karantonis

### *Leave no trace*

Similarly, the PRSC response to this environmental issue is in a mural situated on the main street of Stokes Croft. It is painted upon chipboard concealing a dilapidated shop front. Motorists who are heading into the Broadmead central business district from the more affluent suburbs of Bristol's northwest are able to witness this mural while stuck in traffic. As an example of an argumentative landscape, it presents spectators with the statistics of world population versus car ownership. In 1850, the world had zero cars but in 2050, there will be 2000 million cars. There is a natural progression of this timeline, punctuated by a black car being driven over the end of a symbolic black path (Figure Nine). There is a connectedness of this image to the spectator, if we recognise the actual performance of motorists

behind the wheel of their car, operating a machine that is undermined by the discourse of the landscape.



Figure Ten. Photo: Pamela Karantonis

The message 'Leave no Trace' accompanies an image of hyperbolic street signage that addresses both the temporary reveller and local residents, in a way that unites the spectatorship in a shared subjectivity of passing through in a way that does not inscribe the space with their environmental footprint (see Figure Ten). It addresses the issue of consumption in a parody of public service advertising, with the faded caption mimicking both the ecological principle of biodegradability and its own instability as a public installation. Although the image was defaced soon after its completion by a participant who wished to leave a 'trace', the image was subsequently repaired by another and has most recently been replaced with an entirely different icon of a stylised crocodile with its jaws thrust open. Perhaps it is an imitation of the icon atop of Westmoreland House or a symbol of the transitory status of the

PRSC? As the cultural survival of the Stokes Croft region is under threat, there is a greater value to the works on display and their messages may be read with greater poignancy, as property developers move in to homogenise the city's landscape.

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