

Unrelenting Jet-Lag

Thomas Lawson

Looking back on a year of unrelenting jet-lag, a year of monthly trips from Los Angeles to Britain in order to undertake frantic rounds of shows, studios, and meetings; remembering the huge number of slides and videos, the interviews with artists, the lobbying from interested parties, the discussions, the badgering, the wheedling, the pleading; I have to ask, "What did we accomplish?"

The following essay is an attempt to find an answer. I have written a partial reconstruction, from memory and some notes, of the discussions Richard Cork, Rose Finn-Kelcey and I had as we came to agree on the show, mixed with my understanding of what the show is, what the art amounts to. This will be a bit of a tale, a rewriting in search of coherence, done in the knowledge that too much coherence is a lie.

I think it would be truthful to begin by saying that we all wanted the exhibition to be ambitious in the sense that it would exercise the public's reception of contemporary art. We did not want to be pointlessly ingratiating, but rather to make our viewers somewhat uncomfortable with their preconceived ideas about art. Above all we wanted to create an exhibition that would encourage those who saw it to take responsibility for their own ideas about the work, and not accept the artists' views, or ours, or those expressed in the press.

An example of the kind of difficulty I have in mind here can be found in Christine Borland's uncompromising *From Life*, * which was first shown at Tramway in Glasgow in October 1994. The central matter of this piece is a consideration of how we interpret the clues and signs offered by the material world, and how we use this interpretation to make life meaningful. The material clue on offer here is a human skeleton, and three Portakabins contain three possible ways to approach it. The first presents the skeleton itself, packed in a box and placed casually on a folding table. The second functions as a kind of library in which are stored and displayed a range of interpretative tools, from forensic science to TV thrillers. In here we see (on slide and video) the artist at work with teams of scientists, 'medical artists', and other experts. The final room is set up more like an art gallery and contains a bronze head on a plinth and a short text outlining some characteristics that might adhere to a actual person whose features can be deduced from the skeleton in the box in the first Portakabin. Overall the exhibit has the air of an educational service; you expect to be lead around by an earnest docent pointing out the lessons to be learnt. But it is not didactic in that sense. The work is disconcertingly open-ended, insisting in a quiet, non-threatening way that the meaning of the experience has to be constructed by each individual who confronts it. What Borland achieves

is a radical questioning of the issue of responsibility in regard to representation. How, and by whom, is a life to be understood?

A similar question animates Georgina Starr's goofy but perceptive investigations of representational orthodoxies. Partial to using complex ways of getting simple results, Starr engineers chance through picturesque acts to get at systems of meaning. She will try to learn about a Dutch writer, for example, not by meeting him or reading his work, but by consulting astrologists, palmreaders, handwriting specialists, and so on. (This comic resort to expert witness recalls Borland's straight faced use of authorities, but where Borland consults the law Starr entertains diviners who are away with the fairies.) She similarly inverts the conventional organisation of knowledge in her comprehensive work, *Nine Collections of the Seventh Museum*. This parody of museum practices consists of snapshots, bricabrac, personal objects made and collected by a lonely, self-obsessed girl and all brought together in a photo archive, a poster and a CD Rom that project a relentless cheeriness and sad doggedness at once. The realisation that this museum is a hotel room and its collections the result of a two week artist residency reframes the project as a both a critique of museum culture and a sly excursion into sexual politics.

This in turn leads to various issues concerning narrative, questions of beginnings and ends, of completeness, of lessons learned, or refused. An example of what I mean can be found in Sam Taylor Wood's video installation *Killing Time*. First exhibited at The Showroom in London in July 1994, this savvy mixture of high fantasy and everyday squalor, myth and its modern descendent, soap, appears quite casual but is actually rigorous in form. From the title onwards, *Killing Time* offers an oscillation between banality and hysteria, between sullen silence and a depravity of possession, such that the viewer is sucked into a vortex of contradictory meanings. Despite its casual, even sloppy air the piece is precise in a funny and dislocating way as it lays bare the emotional structure of narrative.

By contrast, Tacita Dean's reflections on narrativity steeped in feminist theory take on a more serious appearance. *Girl Stowaway*, with its intricately woven narratives presented as film, storyboard, newspaper clippings and other images, is a highly complex affair. Here Dean takes a found story and alters it by using accidental rhyme, the evidence of newspaper archives, the happenstance of everyday events, coincidence and a willful imagination. This insistent reframing provides an analysis of story telling that proceeds from the construction of sexual identity to the larger issue of the construction of a history. The viewer is led, charmed by the grace of a tale of adventure on the high seas, to a confrontation with the over-arching authority of the master narrative. The falseness of the unitary voice of interpretation is made clear as Dean opens up the fecund possibilities of multiple, and very likely (mis)readings. Again and again as we consider the work in the show, we confront the problem

of authorship, and the crisis of authentic histories that that problem always provokes. In a sense these questions can all be subsumed into the great question of identity -- of the subject, of the context, of the discourse, of art. The one thing these artists show only passing interest in is the question of Britishness.

Yet we selectors felt we had to face up to the imposing title, The British Art Show, at some point during the process. In fact we objected to that title from the beginning. Exhibitions are so often expected to carry unreasonable metaphysical baggage, offering insight into the human condition and so on. To face up to that and be expected to take on some responsibility for a notion of Britishness that none of us could identify just seemed too much. From the outset we argued for a shrinking of outside expectations, saying the show could not hope to be a survey of national trends but a selection of what we three could agree was the most challenging work made by emergent artists in Britain during the past five years. Thus we early on gave character to a show we eventually discovered could not be un-named.

Of course any exhibition burdened with such a title may raise questions and hackles all across Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. This is understandable. Yet it is a mistake to seek a representation of the diversity of lived experience in Britain today by playing some kind of numbers game. Contemporary art is a complex business in which artist/producers attempt to circulate their images and ideas through various international markets. To do this successfully they need access to distribution systems and to a decent range of jobs that will allow them to pay the rent without taking away too much time from the studio. London, with its network of galleries, magazines, art schools and other artists, provides this in a way no other city in the country can. So inevitably the most ambitious artists gravitate there, at least for the years it takes to establish their careers. This truth is very clearly borne out by a glance at the bios of the artists in this show. Birthplaces dot the map, not only of this country, but of the globe, and indeed the artists here come from a rich variety of backgrounds. Most began their education locally, and then moved to London to finish their undergraduate education or to pursue a post-graduate degree. An adventurous few chose to work on post-graduate studies in Belfast, Glasgow, or abroad, but I think it would be difficult to draw any useful conclusion about this from their work. All have now developed enviable exhibition histories in London and across Europe.

The title might have diverted us into a statistical analysis of the land. But had we followed this path we would have participated in the worst type of bureaucratic tokenism, mounting a show that only a Heritage Ministry could love. Instead we were agreed that what we wanted was an exhibition of artwork that slips across boundaries of all sorts, finding meaning between the gaps of the well-known and the expected. The circumstances of this particular exhibition helped here;

the multiple sites across three cities almost dictated that the show feature fewer artists than in the past, and allow each an extended space in which to show a body of work.

In the early months of the selection process Rose Finn-Kelcey and I spent a day together in London looking at art. We criss-crossed the city, from Waddington's to Chisenhale, looking at the artworks on offer. The British question continued to nag, and a special exhibit of Prince Charles' watercolours at Sotheby's was irresistible. Since the National Gallery debacle Prince Charles has assumed the mantle of spokesperson for traditional taste and value. It was no surprise that his pictures were mostly views of landscapes and houses in Scotland, Wales and other picturesque parts of the world that he and his relations own. What they display is an unthinking allegiance to an order of representation that is still feudal at heart. Mischievously, we did briefly consider including this stuff in the show, as a way of highlighting the problem of identifying authentic Britishness. We quickly discarded the idea as we realised that what really gave the little pictures their interest, what provided the necessary ironic framework that made them interesting, was the elaborate presentation of insignia and signature repeated over the simple but elegant room dividers that served as their support.

Of course the real crown prince of British art is Damien Hirst, and he has achieved that eminence by acting like an American artist. His enthusiastic understanding of the way in which spectacular materials and presentation guarantee the attention of the press has given him the kind of notoriety more usually associated with Warhol, Schnabel, or Koons. More interesting however, is Hirst's ability to mount an encyclopaedic barrage of metaphor such that the viewer reels from the accumulation of perversity, vulgarity and raw emotion. The suspended rot of actual flesh in formaldehyde is juxtaposed with large stretched canvases covered only with aimless dots. A vast collection of medical instruments is laid out in massive metal and glass cabinets as if to overwhelm us with a vision of the clinical, while nearby flies buzz around an enclosed bug zapper. Thousands of exotic butterflies are let loose to live out their span in the gallery, or alternatively an array of preserved ones are rather haphazardly pasted to canvas with bright pastel colours. The effect is both dizzying and dazzling, an undeniable kick in the pants to any expectations of propriety in art. It is also quite clear that Hirst has no interest in analysing the state of Britain or contemporary Britishness.

Mark Wallinger emphatically does. Of all the artists in this show it is Wallinger who places the question of national identity most centrally at the core of his work. He is fascinated by all aspects of the social structure and takes great glee in unmasking the absurd

ideologies of power and privilege that seek to keep us all in our rightful places. Using monumentally scaled paintings treated in a realist manner, documentary style video footage, video installation using clips pirated from broadcast TV, an actual racehorse, bought and trained to run, he throws together images of thoroughbred racing and royalty in a delirious critique of primogeniture. Here we see pictured the rituals of the stud farm, and the results of these rituals; the purebred colts with a lineage tracing back to stallions commemorated by Stubbs, and the mechanically smiling, armwaving, hatwearing descendants of families portrayed by Reynolds. But if Wallinger only trained his wit on this reflection of a class-bound world where race, sex and breeding count for everything his work would remain social satire. Instead, by cross-pollinating this with images from the music hall tradition he broadens his scope to include a entire national pathology.

If the pantomime horse is the ridiculous inverse of the stud, Tommy Cooper, in the installation *Regard a Mere Mad Rager*, becomes a sadly dysfunctional everyman mimicking the formal public gestures of the monarchy. Here, in the funhouse non-space created by a videotape playing backwards in front of a wall-sized mirror, we see the old lag comedian doing his bit with the tatty old hats of empire. He harangues us with anxious grins and grimaces, eliciting a disconnected laughter from the disembodied studio audience. We are left to deal with a spatial and associative dislocation, only too aware of how pathetic has become the national culture the comedian hopelessly mimes.

A different hopelessness, a different dysfunction informs Douglas Gordon's *10ms*. A large screen rests on the floor, at a precarious angle to a vertical pole. On the screen flickers a projected image, uncertain, scratchy footage of a male figure, nearly naked, attempting, and failing to stand up. The man's determined bearing and the suggestion of an iron bedstead in the background hint at a military context. This and the apparent age of the film make us think of the First World War, and the existentially fraught image turns political. Yet so much of Gordon's work to date has been concerned with the distortions to understanding created by uncertain memory. This must mean that my desire to read *10ms* as a piece about the sacrifice of ordinary working people during the last terrible gasp of a respectable British nationalism is simply overdetermined by the narrative flung up by the context of *The British Art Show*.

The selection process moved ahead. We met monthly and were slowly coming to an agreement about what was important for us. We had begun the process with a wide brief to fulfill. Such freedom of scope was disorienting in its own way as it meant our main guide had to be the distinctly individual and quite differing takes we each had on what

was interesting. This meant we spent a fair amount of time discussing the overall shape of the exhibition we wanted. We looked at the pros and cons of older artists versus younger (in the end we opted for a preference, but not a rule, in favour of artists who emerged in the first five years of the nineties), the desirability of commissioning work, and the complexity of doing justice to a scene that relied to a great extent on the interpersonal dynamics of mixed shows organised by the participants. Although only a few British artists were touched by the frenzies of the eighties artmarket there were enough to infect all with a sense of excitement and possibility. But the economic benefits were so limited that people here did not become dependent on ever increasing sales as they did in hot gallery towns like New York and Koln. Thus the collapse of the market in the early nineties, which seems to have paralysed activity in New York, did not damage the collective psyche of British artists to such an extent. And anyway alternative strategies for showing work and circulating ideas have always been more a way of life here. Certainly in Britain these past five years or so there has been a clear trend of artists taking the initiative to organise shows -- the legacy of Damien Hirst's Freeze has reverberated throughout the period, as have the interventions of hit and run organisations like Rear Window. Along with this has been a growth of small, specialist spaces around London, places like Matt's Gallery, The Showroom, The Agency, and City Racing which have concentrated on showing the newer work being done in London and around the country. These places in turn link up with more established collectives with strong local bases and a desire to reach a wider, international community, places like the revitalised Transmission in Glasgow.

In the end practical considerations ruled our deliberations. The logistics of inviting a group like The Bank to interrupt our show with their own ultimately ruled against what might have been an exciting and risky alternative to the weighty survey show. Again, the nature and variety of the gallery spaces available kept us thinking of site specific works, but a combination of factors began to move us away from that. So we decided in favour of more moveable installations, like those of Borland, Mat Collishaw, Lucia Noguiera or Georgina Starr, installations that exist within an imaginary museum. Which is to say, work that could be said to operate with an idea of ideal space rather than the specifics of place.

Midway through our discussions of the selection it became clear that the show we were designing relied to an unprecedented extent on new electronic technologies, especially new video projection capabilities. As this became apparent we came under pressure to reconsider traditional categories of artmaking, with a special plea being made for the place of painting. This pressure gave me a lens with which to focus more clearly on the nature of our deliberations, and the quality of the decisions we had made to that point. That in turn confirmed the

direction we had taken, and made me confident at least that we were on the right track.

The issue foregrounded by the painting question is that of post-modernity. What are the appropriate methods and responses for an artist today? Does it make sense to maintain rigid categories of work to address the transient world of the culture we actually inhabit, the culture of global consumerism? If we are all to some extent tourists to our own experience does it not make better sense to work episodically, glancing here and there as necessary rather than devotedly pursuing a singular craft? How confront, or contest the dominant desire for heterogeneous experiences? Can painting offer anything fresh at this historical moment? Or is it merely a throwback grimly loved by those who are mired in sentimentality for the modern. Can painting, alone, be deployed with irony, but not seem coy?

The best art being done in this country, regardless of medium, is actively informed and enlivened by a grasp of various cultural and political theories. But in the main the grasp is light, and is leavened by a sense of humour. Yet perhaps because the idea of painting has become central to most arguments concerning the value and use of contemporary art, many painters, right now, seem encumbered and beleaguered.

How do the painters in the show relate to this? Hirst and Wallinger simply use the medium when it suits, treating painting almost as a prop, as a complex sign that mingles image and material and handling in a rich brew. This heady carnival of referencing, a vertigo of meaning, also occurs when an installation artist like Anya Gallacio enriches her work with references to painting: the slow staining plane of red gerberas sandwiched between glass, the densely brushed chocolate, the garishly coloured flowers literally carpeting a woodland glade. Gallacio's Stroke, a dark, pungent cell pregnant with conflicting significance, suggests both the euphoria of a chocolate binge and the claustrophobic terror of the 'dirty protest.' The Freudian inspired identification of expressionist painting with an infantile fascination with human waste is now commonplace in art schools and Chris Ofili tackles this head on by placing giant elephant shits on the surface of canvases he has prepared with dizzying patterns of tiny spots of colour. These patterns, so aggravating to the eye, seem inspired by the dream time paintings of the aboriginal people of Australia, but the underlying images in Ofili's most recent work are based on William Blake's drawings for Albion. Thus a new kind of history painting is conceived, a hybrid form that flushes rigorous categorical thinking down the plug hole of aesthetics.

By late May the disorientation I was suffering as a result of jet-lag had taken on the characteristics of a philosophy. The simple,

straight-ahead task of getting from one place to another had so scrambled my senses that I moved as in a dream world. The pre-occupations of a day at work in studio or school would merge into the fitful consciousness of second-rate movies, forced meals, and interrupted naps that constitutes jet travel, only to mix again with the stop and go of discussions and information updates in airless neuks and crannies deep in the South Bank Centre. It made perfect sense to me that the artists we were most interested in all seem fascinated by issues of emotional distress, psychic unease, identity confusion. It also suited my state of mind that they address these concerns with a deliberate heterogeneity of means that accepts newer technologies with an uncomplicated grace that simply dismisses the relevance of the older categories of artmaking.

I think it is clear that the work in this exhibition is not content to sit quietly on the wall; it is attention-grabbing, eye-popping, ear-bending. Most of the works on display require an investment in time just to absorb what is on offer. Beyond that the artists insist that we each think through the implications of what we see. But it is not always necessary for art to be large and complicated to make a complex point. As evidence here, witness the eloquent silence of Ceal Floyer's sneaky interventions in movie theatres around town, twiddling her thumbs at us as we look for greater meaning. The pleasures art offers are many, great and small. Sometimes they offer enlightenment, sometimes just a laugh or a squirm of delight. The point is they are not there to be given, but for us to take.

Footnotes

1. In an essay on Damien Hirst in *Modern Painters*, summer 1994, Will Self claims that William Empson once characterised the typical exhibition catalogue essay as; "A steady iron-hard jet of absolutely total nonsense." I leave it to the reader to decide on the merits of this essay.

2. I discuss a number of works here that proved unavailable for the show. I regret this, but since they were important in giving shape to my thinking before the practicalities of exhibition making took over, I include them anyway.

what might have been an exciting and risky alternative to the weighty survey show. Again, th(%)å≤q}fr+8\$84{417

