

situations

Colin Glen

A Cornucopia pouring from the camera lens

Writing Bursaries

Situations awarded new writing bursaries to two emerging writers in the South West. Each bursary offered the opportunity to visit one or more Situations events, have two mentoring sessions with an established critic or art historian, and the chance to publish the resulting text as part of Situations Papers.

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A Cornucopia pouring from the camera lens

“Our very sense of situation is now articulated by the camera’s interventions. The omnipresence of cameras persuasively suggests that time consists of interesting events, events worth photographing.”

Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 1979

It must have been about five o’clock in the evening of July the fourteenth as I finally approached the jack-knifed lorry of Heather and Ivan Morison. I and two friends had been enjoying the festival-like atmosphere of the British Art Show 6 on its first day in Bristol. We had begun at the A Bond warehouse and had meandered our way through R O O M, Station and Arnolfini. We were in the flush of sociability, and had been entertained by such activities as trying on the shoes of Adam Chodzco, gazing at the bubbles of Roger Hiorns and being enchanted by the video installation of Haluk Akakçe. However, the atmosphere on arriving at the Morisons’ piece had more urgency than the gentle flow of the previous events. My expectations of what they would present had been primed firstly by the card that I had received in the post a few days earlier:

African Grey Parrot, grey with red tail
feathers. I Lost Her Near Fantasy Island.
Life has not been the same

Cleethorpes, England

Secondly, there were the rumours of a ‘one day only’ jack-knifed lorry event. I had braced myself for a gruesome reconstruction of a violent road accident. However, the first thing that struck me as I approached from Narrow Quay was the pristine white rectangular shape of the lorry slightly tilting. It was of the generic type; cab and container, remarkable only by its pristine condition and lack of signage, its blank solidity suggesting a minimalist box. It was situated at the junction of what is effectively an enlarged traffic island which acts as the centre of Bristol, and the end of Narrow Quay, which houses the cultural and entertainment centre of the city. The wheels on one side were flat which caused the lorry to tilt at a disconcerting angle, counter-balanced by the cab at right angles which prevented the whole from crushing the crowd of pedestrians that buzzed around it. It was only when I noticed that the people milling around the back of the lorry taking flowers that had been part of the installation that I began to sense that I had missed the show. This was reinforced by the fact that a photographer was documenting the frenzied activity. The atmosphere had that feel of urgency when a public art event is disassembled, as the materials involved translate back from being the language of an artwork to their utilitarian function. Passers-by gripped handfuls of chrysanthemums and dahlias on their way home from work to put on the kitchen table. This well mannered deposition reminded me that the nature of the art event remains symbolic, not real. Yet as time has passed the event has begun to feel more real precisely because of its constructed theatricality, its formality, its combination of the symbolic and the material.

The presence of the photographer intrigued me. He was using a Hasselblad medium format camera without a tripod, which would mean that the images would have contain some

blurring of movement and short depth of field due to the slower exposure time compared to a snapshot camera. Either way the images would present a candid feel combined with the saturated and precise quality of image produced by such superior equipment. As a result of noticing this professional attention, the scene took on a sense of place, a sense of importance which had the connotations of the artificial rituals of the cinematic set. For a moment, I envisioned the possibility that the installation had been there only *to be photographed*. Suddenly a fragmentary recall of words on the card came to mind ‘...fantasy island...I lost...grey parrot...’ If the crash was not real, despite its material presence in front of me, then maybe the play of ideas that had been stimulated by the card prompted a reality of their own. The constructed arrangement of the fragile and beautiful ‘spilled’ flowers which had appeared to pour out from the back of the truck became a metaphor for loss itself. Not a dark mourning sorrow but a gay evacuation, a beautiful release, a contrived artifice of licence. The initial encounter with the form of the truck combined with this glimpse of theatricality suggested a narrative in which the pure white truck became the constructed solidity of Modernism out of which spilled the fluidity, disorder and excess of Post Modernism. The scatology of Richard Hamilton perhaps, particularly the smeared stain marks of his soft pink and soft blue landscapes from the 1970’s or flower arrangements with faeces in the foreground. But instead of the flowers being associated with turds through reference to painterly marks and a Rococo sense of fascination with end things, flowing from the rear end of the truck, the mess of the post-modern had been arranged into a display, a gesture, whose formality seemed to suggest further questions on the dialectic between the natural and the artificial, between fact and fiction. The arrangement of flowers, its crafting into an elegant flowing of flora, a tide of sensuous abandon, its sheer prettiness in contrast to the inert truck, was to stay with me.

A month later, while on holiday in Normandy I passed through the small town of Gamaches and I was captivated by an unlikely site of interest; a municipal arrangement of bedding plants. Garish pansies issued from a little wooden wheelbarrow which had ‘accidentally’ tipped up. This little genre scene of a picturesque accident involving the transportation of flowers seemed to be a sign of summer with its wealth of produce, and suggested parallels with the Morisons’ crash scene. Both connoted in my imagination the convention of the Cornucopia, the spilled horn of plenty, albeit from radically different perspectives. As I reached for my camera, only to discover that I had left it at our tent, a mental picture of the Morisons’ photographer popped up. He had been pre-determined by the event, as if it was his presence that had made it real for me. This curious relationship between the event and its documentation was later to be illuminated by Heather and Ivan Morison at the talk they gave at R O O M in Bristol.

The artists’ talk at R O O M, Redcliffe, Bristol

On Saturday 2 September 2006, the Morisons gave a talk about their installation *I lost her near Fantasy Island. Life has not been the same*. What struck me most was their projection of medium format slides to present the history of the work. The images showed the de-installation that I had seen the photographer record back in July. The images encapsulated the transience of the event as they focused on the people’s expressions as they took home their flowers. Yet the Morisons’ opening presentation, which involved the pair taking turns to relate, in an anecdotal fashion, the episodes which led to the installation was unaccompanied by projected images. The anecdotes were prefaced with, “it was at about that time...” when a friend crashed their van on the motorway, or when they lost their pet parrot. Each time they recounted these memories an image would form in my mind of the incident or place where the event could have occurred. I began to have the uncanny sense that it was irrelevant whether the event had actually happened or not; in the context of its retelling it felt real and that was all that seemed to matter. The images that were

subsequently shown from the projector and those that had been conjured up in the mind became interwoven and indistinguishable - and even more now, in the present context of my attempting to remember the specifics of the event itself. The anecdotes were related like snapshots, images in my mind of events never recorded. Even my memory of the photographer now seems like a snapshot image part of the story.

The crucial thing is that such memories are always attempts to put in place, to make a situation visible. To imagine a scene – which the Morisons described – is like creating a new and fictitious memory, made up of the associations that the anecdotes stimulated. The same relationship between images and narrative occurs in the work of W. G. Sebald; the story generates such living, almost inhabitable scenes, that the images dispersed by the author throughout the novel become as real remnants from that time and place¹. Incidentally, on pages 120 and 121 of the novel *Austerlitz*, published in 2001, there is an image of an African Grey Parrot standing perched on the shoulders of a man in morning dress of the Edwardian era. This could be the great grandfather of the character Gerald, a school friend of Austerlitz, the protagonist of the book. Sebald allows the narrative to sink through layers of remembered and related histories to such an extent that it is almost conceivable that the author wrote the book around found images rather than furnishing the text with illustrations. Could this reference have been the starting point for the *I lost her...* work? There are many other references that could be significant: For instance, the house Austerlitz describes is in North Wales, a place where the Morisons have begun an arboretum. Also, the description of the natural history collection in the house fits with the Morisons' use of images of dioramas from the American Natural History Museum in the work *Starmaker*, 2005/2006. In addition, Sebald uses phrases such as "It was from about the same period" to enhance a sense of remembering, the sense of time past.² The obvious thing would be to ask, but would that be relevant? It seems that the beauty of the Morisons' practice is to lay out certain elements which, when connected in the imagination of the viewer, make up the work. The desire to hunt for clues to find the answer to the title and the installation connect would be futile; it is in the process of researching, asking questions that the work exists in the mind of the viewer.

At the talk, the pair responded to my question regarding why they used medium format photography by explaining that it was the technology's nostalgic quality, specifically the saturation of colour in the transparencies, which appealed to them. This made sense of the projected images of the documentation of the event, the use of blurring and shallow depth of field, qualities of the snapshot genre. The snapshot has conventionally been associated with providing evidence, most notably in the theories of the C. S. Peirce, the late nineteenth century American pragmatic philosopher. His preference for the snapshot was due it being most representative of photography's indexical status, its direct contact with the world. Significantly, in *The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths*³, Rosalind Krauss used Peirce's theory to advance a new form of practice, which she set in opposition to the existing painterly Formalism championed by Clement Greenberg. The new work was made directly in relation to existing sites and social environments, as oppose to following a set of laws internal to painting itself. She cites as an example Lucio Pozzi, whose piece *P.S.1 Paint*, was installed at Project Studios 1, Long Island City, New York in the show *Rooms* in 1976. The work consisted of painted panels placed on the walls of the disused school building where there was a division between one colour and another. The photographic documentation of the work, in perfectly aligning the paint on the walls and that on the panels, gives the impression that the work is both a supplement to the building and also an integral part of it. Therefore, intrinsic to advocating 'site specific' practice, was Krauss's belief in photography's indexical status. In referring to Roland Barthes, she states, "This condition of having-been-there satisfies questions of verifiability at the level of the document. Truth is understood as a matter of evidence, rather than a function of logic."⁴

The Morisons' use of photographic documentation to illustrate their talk was anything but 'the index, pure and simple'. Indeed their delivery of anecdotes, half remembered stories, not merely made problematic the evidential veracity of the slides of the installation, but enhanced them to a level where more of the sense of the event, beyond material description, was relayed. In short, a greater 'truth' was communicated precisely in inverse relation to restricting of photographs to an indexical harness. The refusal to close down the possibilities of allusion in the work allowed, in the context of the talk, the images to take on the quality of illustrations in a story book. Like the Sebald's photographs, they became the fragments which remained from an unfolding scene, rather than replacing the scene as a description. And each scene was imagined in place. When the Morisons' described the motorway accident, we visualize the embankment, the bridges, the other cars, the slip road as well as the van and the spilled load. They present the anecdotes and we create the image in the mind's eye.

There is an interesting anecdote which can be used to inform this transformation of memories of real events into fictions. In the afterward to Norman Klein's 'The History of Forgetting', Verso, 1997, he cites a story told by Jorge Luis Borges' on his visit to Harvard in 1968⁵. Borges spoke of his father's interest in the psychology of memory and his theory of forgetting. "I think if I recall something," his father said, "for example, if today I look back on this morning, then I get an image of what I saw this morning. But if tonight, I'm thinking back on this morning, then what I'm really recalling is not the first image, by the first image in my memory. So that every time I recall something, I'm not recalling really, I'm recalling the last time I recalled it, I'm recalling the last memory of it. So that really, I have no memories whatever, I have no images whatever, about my childhood, about my youth." Borges agreed with the interviewer's question that "the past was invented, fictitious."

A sense of situation runs through the storytelling process. Each scene is imagined in place. Memory of place is used to inform these projected visualisations of situations which can never exist. A photograph stands in for a projected visualisation in the memory. However, it can act not only as a prosthetic memory of the past, but also as an imagined memory of place which could be experienced in the future. The mediated image suggests an experience which the viewer imagines as real – using their prior knowledge of similar contexts to picture it as real. Sontag has suggested that the condition of the photographic is the knowledge that a situation has the possibility to be photographed, to be translated into memorable lasting form. Yet the knowledge of photographic possibility also acts as a form of conditioning, of determining experience. I would argue that the photographic is a situation, an environment which we inhabit, immersed to such an extent that images and new experiences are stimulated without the need for the physical presence of a photographic image. The card that the Morisons sent out before the lorry installation conjured up an image, a story which has as its medium the knowledge that the parrot and the place where it was lost could be communicated photographically. In fact, the 'Lost' card format would usually be accompanied by an image of the pet prior to its disappearance. What has been lost, in this case is more than the bird. It seems an elegy to a time before the reliance on the reduction of communication by images.

So, every experience even imagined and never real, is set in the context of place. All the informing memories go to make an imagined location for the new event. The more knowledge that we have come to rely on from texts and the photographic image, the more our sense of being in place is affected. In one way, every experience of an image is a journey to that place, similar to being led to a place by an author, of which the quintessential example would be the invocation, through involuntary memory, of a whole town springing from Proust's cup of lime blossom tea and Madeleine cake. Similarly, in her essay "The New Situationists", Claire Doherty cites the example of Francis Alÿs to discuss new forms of practice which articulate the contemporary condition of displacement. The work, *When Faith*

Moves Mountains, which involved a line of 500 people moving a section of sand in Ventanilla, Peru, four inches, could not be located as either a site-specific act or as the film documentation later purchased by the Guggenheim in New York. Doherty refers to the work of Miwon Kwon on the subject; “if as Kwon suggests, “feeling out of place is the cultural symptom of late capitalism’s political and social reality” then to be ‘situated’ is effectively to be displaced.”⁶ The photographic condition not only involves a literal displacement of material, the indexical reflection of light onto the film or sensor, but also determines that any activity will be immediately out of place through its documentation, its continual transferral into another context. In this sense the place, the sand dune, fragments into a myriad of different memories, imagined in the minds of an audience who hear about the action, and for whom the photographic documentation is a relic rather than evidence. The experience of place is altered in this process the more an audience becomes aware of the possibility for its transference.

Edward Casey has made much progress into the philosophy of place memory and its pervasiveness in human experience.⁷ He has proposed that a revision of place as site, with its Cartesian notion of the mappable, in favour of the embodied experience of Merleau-Ponty’s ideas of ‘inhabitation’, which accounts for the kind of complex and rich variation of memory, beyond ironic play, which the work of Heather and Ivan Morison’s evokes. In this sense the event and installation in Bristol were already created in the mind of the viewer, in the photographic drive, unleashing the desire to recreate or re-invent not merely the appearance of something but to transfer a part of it metonymically. The removal of flowers, the literal displacement of the artwork which was punctuated by the presence of the photographer, and the subsequent images of those moments have made it impossible to separate memories of being at the event and the memories of seeing the images at the talk. However, the layers of memory, particularly as woven together with the anecdotal narratives of the Morisons’ talk and the way I approached the installation during the British Art Show day, have fused to create an alternately real experience.

The old adversary of recall, the imagination, is prompted by the play between the fictionalised account and its documentation⁸. The conceptual references to artists such as On Kawara⁹ or John Baldessari in the card sent out before the exhibition are transformed by the slide show, the talk, the novel and the installation. It is as if, emitting from the paired down minimal text of the card, through the associations that those few words evoked, a flowering of possibilities occurred. The sheer expansiveness of this terrain reminds us of the Morisons’ professed desire for their work to articulate, and connect with, the vast wonder of the universe.

¹ The suggestion of reading W.G. Sebald came from T.J. Demos during a mentoring session in the labyrinthine Art History Department at University College in London.

² W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, London: Penguin, 2002, p.119

³ Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT, 1985. Originally published in *October magazine*, 3 and 4, Spring and Fall, 1977, see p.214 for illustrations of Lucio Pozzi *P.S.1 Paint*.

⁴ *Ibid.* p.218

⁵ Norman Klein, *The History of Forgetting*, London: Verso, 1997, p.318

⁶ Claire Doherty, “The New Situationists”, in Claire Doherty ed. *Contemporary Art, from Studio to Situation*, London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004, p.10

⁷ I am using Celia Lury’s case for photographs as prosthetic memories, presented in her book *Prosthetic Culture: Photography, Memory, Identity*, London: Routledge, 1998

⁷ Edward Casey, *Remembering*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000

⁷ Edward Casey, *Remembering*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000

⁸ Paul Ricouer, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004

⁹ Mary Morlock draws this affiliation in her text on the Morisons in the catalogue *Art of the Garden*, London: Tate Britain, 2004