

# situations papers

## material city 1

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A dialogue between Paul Rooney and archaeologist Dr. Dan Hicks

Based on an original conversation at Arnolfini, Bristol on Wednesday 15 February 2006

**PR** The first piece that I'm going to show is from a video I made in 1999. I was working with an artist group called Common Culture at that time. I'd been painting up until then, but the Common Culture work gave me the impetus to break out and take risks with my own solo practice. So initially I started making music: this piece is a video called 'Throw Away', based on a Rooney song, which was my 'fictional' band at the time.

[Screened work: 'At a Loose End Waiting. Five songs', 1999-2002, excerpt: song number 2 entitled 'Throw Away', 4 mins]

**DH** I wanted to ask you about notions of the *everyday* in this work, especially in relation to everyday *enchantments*, which is a theme I know that we'll be seeing more of later this evening. In *At a Loose End Waiting*, you're using pretty mundane objects, like those kitchen magnets there on the fridge or the washing machine, and describing everyday activities – but I guess you're exploring how these can be involved in significant, even enchanting, moments for people in their everyday lives?

**PR** Yes, that's right. Initially I suppose with this work I was interested in using fairly 'neutral' or mundane subject matter in the context of a musical performance or a musical setting, and seeing how the music makes the meaning of that content unstable. I'm also interested in the everyday as a potential space for creativity, or a space to breakout of certain kinds of rigid life patterns. And looking back at that piece it is all about being aimless, staring out the window, those moments of not focusing... We've been talking via email about Jane Bennett's book *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, which I've found a really interesting text because it talks about acknowledging 'enchantment' in a range of contexts in the contemporary world. I've found the book a useful way into thinking about how enchantment represents a balance between, on the one side, a sense of *wonder*, if you like, in a particular experience, and on the other a sense of *disturbance*. In all the work that I've done that uses music, I've been looking for that kind of

fluctuating quality, so that you're not quite able to pinpoint whether it is sad, funny or scary, or exactly how you're supposed to *fix* it.

**DH** Yes, Bennett talks about the relationships between the notion of enchantment and singing – how 'enchanting' is related to surrounding with song, or magical incantation: often with great transformative potential. And your work seems to explore similar ephemeral enchantments, underlining how all around us – and especially in everyday objects – there is the chance of enchantment and in an apparently disenchanted world. Here, your interest in everyday objects is paralleled in your interest in a low-fi, 'DIY', even a punk ethos in the music.

**PR** That's true, yes. I was hoping that the 'At a Loose End Waiting' series of videos would bring together the everyday subject matter of the lyrics with the same kind of domestic, home made quality in the music. I was interested in bands, in the early to mid 90s – bands like Pavement, Sebadoh, Sentridoh, and a bit later Arab Strap – who were called 'low-fi' (although this is an inadequate label for the music). I was influenced by how those musicians were trying to retrieve part of the punk ethic in some senses, so there was an honesty not only about the lyrical content of the work but also about the way it was performed and recorded; the home made, do-it-yourself approach. John Lydon used to talk about how surprised he was that a lot of punk music that came out in the late 70s was incredibly conservative, and pop culture sometimes does tend towards the safe option, the more polished and marketable forms. I was interested in resisting that, but also acknowledging that home-made or domestically made music can actually be *more* powerful. In the work that I was making in the late nineties, the relationship between the domesticated, everyday lyrics and the home-made methodology – in other words the *ethic* of the music – was quite an important thing.

**DH** So how does that relate to your interest

in ephemeral enchantments? Like with the post-it notes in the video, which are the sort of thing that we chuck away everyday, and yet which you're using to communicate something apparently so significant.

**PR** I think it is important that the subjects, in this case writing on post-it notes, or losing concentration whilst listening to the radio, are in some ways not valued, I think there's an interesting space there. That is because the experiences are outside the normal categories of what is defined and administered, they slip out of the normal circuit of controllable experience. Because these experiences are difficult to pin down and neutralise, it means they are actually very valuable, paradoxically. Although Jane Bennett doesn't explore this theme very far in her book, for me enchantment happens most obviously when music or art helps us realise, or notice, the potential that these 'openings' within ordinary life have.

**DH** Right, I see. Shall we move onto the second of the five pieces of work?

**PR** Okay, the next clip is again an excerpt of a long piece. It's called 'Something Happening', and was commissioned by the Site Gallery in Sheffield. It's mainly about The Human League, and a particular story related to the singer Phil Oakey, discovering the two girls, who are now members of The Human League, in a night club in Sheffield. The story goes that he saw them on the dance floor and within two weeks they were on Top of the Pops. My research process involved finding out where that night club, the 'Crazy Daisy', was, which I discovered is now a building society in Sheffield. I located where the entrance to the club was and also spoke to somebody who works in the building society, as it is now, who coincidentally used to go to the club in its heyday. By this time – this is 2003 – I'd started collaborating or working with people who were involved in certain situations or who worked in certain places, to write lyrics for some of the songs. So this is an example of that. It's basically the tune of The Human League's 'Sound of the Crowd': the chorus is the same as The Human League song but the verse's

text has been replaced by fragments of my interview with Pauline Congreve, who works in the building society.

[Screened work: 'Something Happening', 2003, excerpt 3 mins]

**DH** I wonder whether we could talk a little more about your research process and especially about how in your work you're aiming to *rediscover* situations. Clearly in this work, the discovery in the early '80s of the two girls who then go on to be transformed into pop stars is mirrored by your own rediscovery: the contemporary urban landscape of a doorway, which is a bank window. There's a very interesting symmetry there between what you're looking at in the past and what you're engaging with in the present.

**PR** OK, yes, this was quite a focused piece in that there was one particular place that I made the work about, one person I spoke to, and one story that I focused on. Around the same time I did another piece called 'Let Me Take You There', a video piece about a field in West Yorkshire. I took quite an 'archaeological' approach to the research. The field's appearance on a Joy Division album cover was the starting point for it. But other links emerged, like a film of the photograph used on the cover being taken, from a Granada TV programme about photographers. Sylvia Plath was buried not far away and Ted Hughes was born in that area, so I worked in references to those two. I brought a visual reference to Trotsky, and Russ Abbott was a major part of the whole piece, simply because of the relationship between his song 'Atmosphere' and the Joy Division song of the same name that the whole piece was based on. So in that case it was me 'digging around' for these little cultural moments that I could stitch together in some way.

When I was a student I was really interested in Walter Benjamin, particularly his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, and especially his idea of the 'angel of history', on which I based my final degree 'dissertation'. This was in the form of a film script for an unmade film, rather than a normal essay. Benjamin uses Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* to evoke the idea of the angel

of history, with his face turned towards the past, witnessing history not as a linear progression, as we normally think of history, but as a single catastrophe. Reading Benjamin encouraged me to think about potentially stopping time, creating a space that ruptures that continuum. I have recently started to think about how Benjamin's influence is still informing my recent work, even without me being directly aware of this when the work was being made. So in some of these recent pieces, particularly the ones that have a static camera view of a particular space, my research process can involve trying to assemble historical references or connections with that location in order to allow them to inform the frozen time of that empty space. It's not a question of *literally* stopping time like a photograph would – it's still a real time piece. But it's about trying to think about history as something that you can activate in the real time of the present. It's a philosophy of history, of time, based on the idea of the present era as part of a constellation with other historical eras; in which past events only really exist if they are referred to the present. If you pause and focus on a particular place, then these ghosts can, you know, come forth...

**DH** ...can *emerge*, exactly. Yes, it's a surprise isn't it, that the entrance of the night club is there still, in the contemporary world. You're right to see your research process as archaeological – after all, archaeology is practiced in the present, on the remains of what survive from many different periods. Archaeologists are constantly aware of how things from many different periods survive, juxtaposed, all around us in the urban environment.

At the same time though, your research in 'Something Happening' isn't just about engaging with the material remains: there's also the woman who's working in the bank...

**PR** Yes, sure.

**DH** She visited the venue at the time and works there now. The transformations of people's lives that happened to Susanne and Joanne from the Human League in the 1980s after walking through the night-club door, according to pop mythology, are mirrored in much more ordinary

contemporary transformations of people's lives in the new environment – we're looking at a desk of a high street bank, across which mortgages are arranged, across which rather more everyday alterations in people's life courses are worked out. In that context, I wonder if you could tell us more about how you're using the voice of the individual working there, and how important that is to your work.

**PR** Yes, that kind of collaboration is really important for these works: I'm interested in trying to capture the specific, everyday experience of that person in that space, and to relate that to the wider historical contexts that inform the piece. A good example is a piece I did with a nightclub cloakroom attendant. It had shots of the empty nightclub on a Sunday morning, and the soundtrack song was an interview with the cloakroom attendant about her experiences of the job. I was interested in people who are very visible and front-of-house in particular situations or institutions, but are at the same time paradoxically marginalized or invisible.

But of course this kind of work is not an attempt at documentary. It's not an attempt to try and *really* represent what that experience is like. I mean the experience of being a cloakroom attendant or a bank clerk in Sheffield for, say, ten years: you could never fully represent that. I'm not attempting to cover the totality of that experience.

**DH**: Of course – what would that look like, after all?

**PR** Yes, so for instance the fragments of the interview that I use are really brief and really simple. In order to engage with that particular situation, the audience have to have room to participate – so I'm trying to create a space for the viewer to empathise or engage with what that experience of being that bank clerk in that bank is like.

**DH** So in the course of your work, are you aiming to achieve that by sitting and almost listening to the place? Your work certainly seems to *take its time* in that place. As we watch it and we listen to the voice of the person that works there, these echoes of the past are evoked.

It's about telling stories, but in quite intimate, or site-specific ways. After all, presumably the bank worker was unaware that she had been to the building before, 20 years earlier?

**PR** That's right. I asked a lot of people around Sheffield and got lots of different variations of where people thought that the Crazy Daisy Club used to be. The people in the bank were assuming that it was the entrance next door, which is a solicitors or something. So it is interesting when you're working with real people who actively engage with the places that I'm making work about in a real way, and have their own very particular experiences or memories of it. But having said that, I'm also aware of the limits to the representation of all of that. In a video work in the documentary tradition, the building society clerk, on camera, would maybe talk for hours about what it's like to do the job that she does, maybe reminiscing about Sheffield and so on. In that kind of work there's often an attempt to be all-encompassing and in a sense to try and dominate or interpret that experience. In the work I want to make, there's an attempt to involve the viewer, so *you* have to participate or *you* have to engage with it and create that experience for yourself. That's why the spaces are left, that's why time is almost frozen, so you have the room for that active, imaginative engagement. We're bombarded with so many images it's often difficult to find that space to engage.

**Audience** I'm just wondering, was the exhibition all about Sheffield?

**PR** No, it was a two person show – myself and an artist called Susan Phillipsz, who also works with music.

**Audience** Were you showing that video on a loop?

**PR** Yes.

**Audience** How did you support it? Was there information about the two girls and The Human League available in the gallery space? Was there any back up material?

**PR** Neil Mulholland, who's a critic/art historian, provided an overview of the show in a little booklet, which was made available. Also, there

was a handout which talked about the work and maybe filled in some of the gaps. But, yes, it's an interesting point because I think somebody could come to that piece and not necessarily know a lot about Sheffield's pop history, but I would hope that they would still get *something*. The piece could be appreciated simply as a daydreaming persona staring out of the window singing this customised pop song as she does so. So it could be seen as a piece about those openings within everyday experience that I talked about before, but also about that relationship between individual subjective experience and being part of the 'crowd', the desire for, and the anxiety about, others, society. It is a paradox that the intense emotion of our separate, individual experience of pop music can also be about belonging, about being part of a group of other fans or believers. But as well as those general ideas, there are also clues in the work itself to the story about the two girls being discovered, so I think the local 'myth' about the girls is the next layer of meaning in the work, if you like. There are clues throughout the lyrics: she remembers when it was a nightclub and went there, but it wasn't really "her scene", and so on.

I should explain how it was installed in that show. The speakers were actually at the back of the little space in which it was projected, which is a really interesting effect, because there's a degree of separation between the image and the sound. We are looking at the space of the little office and the exterior space of the street, but the voice is in *our* space, in the gallery. In some ways, that's another way of encouraging a more immediate engagement with that experience – having an 'internal voice' in the 'real', not in the illusory, space. It also acknowledges the separateness of the sound and the image, and the separation between subjective experience and 'the world out there.

**Audience** I still wonder how much you can appreciate the piece without knowing any of the story

**PR** OK, well, there's only a certain amount that you can 'front load' in the actual piece itself.

I think it's useful to have back-up material in exhibitions and that's usually what happens anyway. As Dan mentioned there's a kind of transformation story of Phil Oakey discovering these two girls at the night-club and it's a story about power – he's kind of manipulating them, in order to give The Human League a new and distinctive look. But what's really crucial for me is that the girls *retained control*, especially when the story was mythologized through their 'Don't You Want Me?' song, in which one of the girls sings: "I would have found a much better place, either with or without you"...Jo and Susanne remained two working class lasses from Sheffield, with the street glamour, stiff dances and slightly flat singing still intact. They remained themselves.

**DH** I guess this goes to the heart of how you're approaching the issues of representation and interpretation. You've suggested that rather than trying to represent or to document, you're exploring alternative ways of evoking the 'sense of place'. For you, it seems to be crucial that there's no single story 'out there' for the audience to know anyway – but rather multiple narratives that you seek to evoke through situated practice.

**PR** Yes, that's right. It relates back to the difficulty of attempting to represent 'full' experiences. It also matters little to me whether the Crazy Daisy story is true or not. Its not likely to be true, as the girls were fairly well known in Sheffield even before they joined the band, so the idea that Phil Oakey had never seen them before is unlikely. For me, it's the power of the meaning of the story that is important questions of truth or completeness are beside the point I think.

**DH** So you're trying to convey a sense of open-endedness?

**PR** Oh sure yeah. In situations like this, even when the events are only a couple of decades ago, things are always partial, things have inevitably been lost and drifted in and out of legibility. It also goes for the sonic reception of the pieces. With a lot of my musical works, because of the nature of the way they're presented, you can only pick out fragments of the text anyway.

It's not meant to be a simple transmission of information, the whole experience of sound in space – creatively misreading lyrics, misunderstanding accents, voices buried by drum fills – that's all part of the nature of the beast, and is interesting in itself.

**DH** On the theme of how your work aims to *rediscover* past moments, I think the next piece of work that we're going to be talking about, perhaps in a rather different way, also engages with what it is that survives from the past and how contemporary interventions can explore that.

**PR** Okay, yes, let's talk about the next piece. I did a residency in a tower block in Liverpool that was about to be demolished (Further Up in the Air). I wanted to talk to somebody who'd just moved out of the block.

**DH** That's a very archaeological situation. Archaeologists very often find themselves on the sites of demolition and regeneration, although sadly we rarely stop to talk to the people who are moving out.

**PR** I asked an ex-resident, Doreen, to describe objects that were in three rooms in her flat. The piece is designed to be shown in a gallery on three separate monitors with images of the rooms and with a separate sound piece on each monitor. The main harmony focuses on certain objects that were made by Doreen's husband. Doreen focused really strongly on these objects that were a kind of memorial to him in her eyes. This piece became quite a personal engagement with her experience as well as a general engagement with the situation of the flats.

*[Screened work: 'Flat 23', 2002, excerpt 3 mins]*

**DH** Well, there we have a moment of abandonment really: that really interesting moment at which the people have gone and yet the building isn't yet pulled down. And that's the moment at which, although you choose to make your intervention and we have the words of the individual who lived there, the woman who lived there who's recently lost her husband.

**PR** Yes, it's her words, but the audio voice is that of another resident who lived in the flats.

By having someone else read her words, I'm trying to achieve a degree of distance from the experience.

**DH** Okay, so the words are her own ...

**PR** That's right, yes.

**DH** Okay, and they're listing objects. These are very empirical, descriptive words: a catalogue almost, an inventory of the things that are left in the rooms before the building's pulled down. That's a really interesting moment for me, as an archaeologist. I mean, especially in a city like Bristol where there is so much urban regeneration right, it's always striking how as part of any redevelopment, there is always a period of abandonment. In many ways, abandonment becomes an inherent part of urban change – a crucial phase of the process of regeneration.

**PR** That's interesting, yes. This piece was partly about the pathos of the whole attempt in the 50s and 60s to reorganise urban space in a new way – failed projects that are leading to more reorganisations today. In this case, everybody from that block of flats was moving into little bungalows built around the site. Doreen had just moved into this bungalow with Bernie, but he died just as they were moving

I'm interested in dealing with the emotional aspects of this sort of process: the messiness of emotion and human empathy. Though there's a danger sometimes – particularly when you're working with music which in itself provokes emotional responses – things can be too mawkish or too close to the specifics of a particular emotional experience or loss. And that proximity can mean that you lose the space to also be able to engage intellectually with the work. But hopefully, because I try and work with as minimal means as possible, you don't get overwhelmed with the specifics of that *particular* experience. It's about keeping the right balance in the work.

**DH** Right, but there is still an immediacy here. Of course objects are often very important in people's mediation of loss and also memory, aren't they? There's a very broad literature around the role of objects in commemorating

change – whether in museums, memorials and cemeteries, or in more intimate contexts such as mementoes, photograph albums or clutter held onto in the attic. In your example, the role of objects is especially interesting. It's a context of radical change (and of course, loss) in the built environment, and also in individual people's lives. By listing the objects – like a probate inventory – you're able to evoke the way in which highly intimate and personal worlds can be constructed through things – even against the modernist architecture of a tower block. This is a theme that Victor Buchli explored in his book *An Archaeology of Socialism* about a communal house in Moscow. He describes the importance of the 'scraps' out of which people create their domestic space. Against the modernist architecture, these can appear as tiny acts of resistance, as people build their homes out of objects – pictures on the wall, objects on the mantelpiece or windowsill, and so on. You're looking at these things at a moment of radical transition. The building's going to be demolished – and the objects I guess will either go with the people, or be left behind and destroyed.

**PR** Yes, even though Doreen had only moved close by and taken most of the things with her, there were still a few traces of her in the old flat – one or two little things left on the wall. Some of the residents had died fairly recently, apparently without any close family members. So there were at least two or three flats that had all of the objects still there, including photographs; they were really sad places in some ways.

In the case of this piece, Doreen had already moved almost all of the objects out, but I asked her to remember which things were in each room of her old flat. We all try to make our environments our own through things, as you suggested – even though, of course, very many of these objects were consumer objects or standard mass produced objects. Through choice or placement, these sort of things can be customised, so to speak. But it's interesting that the objects Doreen described that Bernie made were hand-made objects. It evokes a traditional idea of manual labour as creative, rather than as out of the control of the labourer. If you can imbue

*yourself* into the objects that you create, they become your own memorial.

**DH** Absolutely. At the same time those objects are looking beyond the immediate situation – surviving from one time to another. In some ways, it's a process similar to the central image in this piece, and in the previous one, of looking out of the window. You seem always to be looking beyond the particular material environment, but in some ways so are these things. In this piece, they are remembered or collected, but then also mobilised in this lament for loss. And at the same time, they're *hopeful* fragments aren't they?

**PR** Absolutely. Again, I very much like Walter Benjamin's writing on collecting, the taking of objects out of the normal circuits of commodity exchange. While they lose conventional values, for use or exchange (Benjamin wrote that they were 'enslaved' to these values), they gain a value for the collector, and are freed up, resurrected. The space is then created for them to become *historical* objects. They're able to evoke these historical resonances, which leads onto the next piece.

**DH** I guess it's inevitable that in a conversation with an archaeologist we have ended up talking about material things, and garbage. But also another thing as archaeologists that we're concerned about, and which we've already touched upon, is how we write the past, how our narratives about the are formed. You've already highlighted your interest in Benjamin – and in the *Passagenwerk*, Benjamin not only collected and juxtaposed, he also connected and explored the visual dimensions of narrative. In many ways, that's the main focus of the final two pieces of work we're going to look at isn't it? In this latest work, you're exploring alternative approaches to narrative screenwork, truth and fiction.

**PR** Yeah, with this next piece things start to get a little bit more muddy, especially in relation to ideas of 'authenticity'. It started out as an interview with a hotel room attendant in Australia. The hotel that the piece is about the Radisson Hotel, Manchester is built on the site of the

Peterloo Massacre, and was also the site of the famous Bob Dylan 'Judas' gig. The hotel is full of reminders of these events. There are suites named after radicals like Henry Hunt that spoke at Peterloo, and Samuel Bamford. And one of the most expensive suites is the Dylan Suite on the top floor! At the end of the video, the room attendant just 'lets go' – she leaves the mess of the room and just observes it instead. It's moment of resistance, in some ways.

We're just going to play the first bit, which relates to her description of the Peterloo events. This came out of a historical text that Samuel Bamford wrote after the massacre. At the end of his description of the massacre is just a sort of inventory – a description of a few of the objects that were left in the field after the violent events of the day.

[Screened work: 'Dear Guest', 2005, excerpt 4 mins]

**DH** So here we have a hotel which is built on the site of St Peter's Field, at which the Peterloo Massacre of 1819 was carried out. And the building is a conversion of the Free Trade Hall, which was a major venue in the recent history of Manchester music – perhaps most famously in 1966 when Dylan controversially 'went electric'. And then of course as well we have the contemporary use of the building as a hotel with rooms that are named after selected aspects of this history. The full work gives a very powerful evocation, I think, of how walking around the hotel you move in a random way, in between one bit of history and another (with much, of course, left out!).

Can we begin by talking about that sense of history – about the choices of what to include and what to miss out? I wanted especially to ask about your choice of what are in some ways *alternative* histories. You're not presenting grand narratives of Manchester's civic history but rather stories about conflict there – very political histories in all sorts of ways. Conflict and politics is there in the decision to go electric – in the sense of betraying folk musicians and folk fans, and his supposed 'folk roots'. And most clearly, Peterloo is a story about violent conflict and the history of radicalism. But also

maybe there is also politics and conflict in the contemporary situation of the woman working as the room attendant. I'm interested in how you're approaching relationships between the broad alternative, political histories that you're highlighting, and if you like the micro histories – the untold story of the hotel worker, and the debris left behind from all these different situations.

**PR** Okay, Dan, yes, let's start by talking about how I'm approaching historical narrative. I guess the whole piece was an attempt to explore how discarded objects evoke a kind of historical presence, partly because of the nature of the building and the history that it has, but also because I wanted to focus on the objects themselves, throughout the video there's a slight discrepancy or a discontinuity between the narrative (what's been spoken) and the images that are supposed to stand in for it. That's the case with a lot of my work. The viewer can watch it and try to transpose what's being said onto the bit of litter, or see the people assembled in the field as discarded matches. So the audience provide their own imaginative links up to a point, but overall there is a lack of coherence between the images and the sound. It's a more obviously political piece, as you say, not only because of the connections with the Peterloo Massacre, but also because of the complexity of the conflict between certain traditional folk 'conservatives' in the audience at the Dylan gig, and his attempt to move on or to do something new.

Then at the end of the piece the room attendant just flakes out on the bed. She wastes time in the room, smells the perfume on the bed, and eats some of the left-over breakfast. . It's only at this point that the objects described in the voice over are actually pictured on screen, the images and the voice cohere for a moment, so suddenly we get a sense of being in the room in the present, almost at the moment that the room attendant is writing about, but not quite. She then says in her letter that she leaves all the mess as she has described it and walks out of the room.

**DH** In a contemporary act of resistance of some sort? Of course her role is to tidy up and to clean up – this is a piece of work about fragments, about the debris left over. You're juxtaposing that wonderfully evocative contemporary account from 1819 of the debris that's left after the Peterloo Massacre with the survivals of the fabric of the Free Trade Hall in the hotel, and the named rooms, and of course the debris of a party in a hotel room in the contemporary world.

**PR** Sure, exactly. After I made this piece I read an essay about Jeff Walls' work which mentioned his photograph 'Housekeeping', which presents a hotel room in perfect order, absolutely spotless, with the housekeeper just leaving. There's a fascinating temporality to this idea: in many ways what the housekeeper or room attendant does is erase history. In my piece I wanted to see how history is evoked by leaving the messiness visible, whereas normally it would be swept under the carpet, so to speak.

**DH** Okay, so you're interested in using video to tell histories which aren't tidied up, but are discursive as you suggested earlier. Shall we look at how you've explored that issue in your most recent work?

**PR** Well, while the hotel piece was based on an actual interview, most of it was my fictionalisation of that encounter. So, I just made up the letter, and the conversation she has with the concierge, and so on. I'm not particularly interested, like I said, in the authenticity of an 'original voice' that is unadulterated and pure in some way. Since the Rooney albums and before I had been writing purely fictional texts as part of my practice, or texts that mixed fact and fiction, so 'Dear Guest' was not that much of a new departure. This next piece is entirely fictionalised. There's no other source apart from some references to a George Orwell novel called *Coming Up for Air*. The final piece is a 13 minute video with a voice over of somebody describing trying to park his car in Stoke-on-Trent. Because he sees the street sign of Bethesda Street, he is reminded of the nearby chapel of the same name which he attended as a child. The majority of the work is taken up with him remembering

absurd and comical moments from his childhood, all triggered by seeing the street sign.

It's an imaginative encounter with the space – the parts of the video that deal with memory are (in contrast to a lot of the other work) moving camera shots. So you get a sense of memory as being fluid, of moving into different territories.

[Screened work: 'A Pox in your Guts', 2005, 13 mins]

**DH** I want to really begin by thinking about Bethesda Chapel which a lot of people may have seen before on the BBC's 'Restoration' programme in 2003. Of course, the most memorable thing about its appearance on the show was that it didn't win – it was a runner-up...

**PR** It was fourth.

**DH** Right, it came fourth. So, this is a runner-up heritage site in the *Pop Idol* of the world of archaeological conservation! And the fact it didn't win, well, that forms part of the potential of a site like Bethesda for you, I guess. It's an awkward building, it's a building that shouldn't be here anymore, but it is. It's a building that's hopeless in some ways. Could you ever restore it? Would the Methodist community even want it? It's not clear what it's for. I wonder whether we could begin by talking about why you were attracted to highlighting the decay and the ruin of the building.

**PR** Well, when I was asked to do the commission in 2004, I remembered Bethesda from the Restoration programme. Very often, particularly with public commissions, artists are encouraged to celebrate the history of a particular community, environment or building. But the main thing that struck me about the chapel was that sense of *failure* – the amazing neglect of the space. For me, there was no way of encountering that space other than to think about malaise and sickness, and a sort of desperation. In Stoke-on-Trent, initially the museum were a little bit uncertain about that kind of approach because I guess the more celebratory approach was what they expected. But most people seemed to engage with it in the spirit that was intended.

**DH** At the same time though this isn't a piece

that aims to celebrate or to highlight the decay for its own sake, in an uncritical way. It's hardly a romantic piece of work. There are moments when you are dealing with 'ruin' in an aesthetic manner, but at the same time it's at points a strong, almost angry, piece of work that doesn't try to remove us from the real world. After all, it all begins with the male character trying to park his car in central Stoke-on-Trent, so, you know, it's hardly a Wordsworthian, 'Tintern Abbey' approach to ruin is it?

**PR** There are certainly aspects even now of the building which are incredibly beautiful ... But rather than just focusing on decay and ruin I wanted to look at the building as a kind of stage set for a piece about memory. I did research into the history of the building, into Methodism and Methodist hymn writing, and all of that was really interesting to me and had initially attracted me to the project, but in the end I didn't use any of it, I had to use this totally fictional approach to the script. It was influenced by the Orwell novel *Coming up for Air*, as I said before, which is about a middle aged guy who's unhappy with his life and at one crucial point in the book remembers a particular childhood Sunday in church. He finds comfort in memory at first, but loses this sense of comfort by the end of the novel. The piece is largely about involuntary forms of memory. Voluntary memory is evoked by predictable means, such as souvenirs, family photographs, the 'memorial' objects that we talked about earlier, and it is usually predictable in its content and form. Involuntary memory, however, is triggered by unexpected stimuli, like the street sign in Stoke, and is more unpredictable in the way it can carry us away. It can be much richer as an experience, but also quite immersive and even suffocating, in a way. So there are ways of looking at memory: whether as a nostalgic escape from the present, or, what's more interesting, as a disruption, a way of enlivening and upsetting the present and the way we live our lives now.

**DH** Certainly one thing we can do with the past is we can tell stories, and that's the approach you've taken here. In earlier pieces of your work

we've encountered *enchantment* and *rediscovery*, and those two things come together in a lot of ways in this piece around this issue of *narrative*. I wonder whether you could speak a little about how you were approaching fact and fiction in this piece. In particular, what happens when you go *to* a place in order to tell a story. That seems to be an important part of your practice here – the site-specific dimension of your approach to narrative.

**PR** When my work has involved collaborating with people, interviewing people about their experiences of particular places, I always used these simply as a springboard for my own engagements with place and situation. In this case, I'm simply using the Orwell book as a starting point, juxtaposing it with the site. I'm always keen to mobilise lots of different sources, and to retain the fragmentary character of the narrative, even in a piece like this. I mean, the narrative in this case consists of little images or moments that are simply strung together. It isn't a conventional narrative but a more complex picture, framed by the encounter with the site, and the nature of memory. So narrative as a form is a useful way of making links between things, and of constructing our thoughts in a meaningful way. Stories are unavoidable in a sense, we can't make meaning out of the world without them.

**DH** At points, this work is working *against* the place. The other pieces we've seen really take their time in evoking, often very successfully, an aura or the feel of a place – the haunted dimension of a place or the presence of the past, if you like. But here are you approaching the site in a rather different way?

**PR** Yes, I am approaching it differently – but really only in response to the character of the place. So I am trying to be true to place in a different way, not through the facts about the site or through other people's engagements with the place, but through a direct personal engagement with it by myself, even using my own childhood memories, for instance. I'm implicating myself with the space, it made me feel desperately sad, and I responded to that.

**DH** Yes, and acknowledging those emotional

dimensions of the heritage is often difficult. But one of the distinctive aspects of working on the archaeology of the recent and contemporary past is that just so much survives, and so no single narrative can ever suffice. There are a great range of stories that we're able to tell, and many have strong contemporary relevance – as in the case of the industrial remains contemporary Stoke-on-Trent for example. Especially when the sites are part of the modern urban fabric, and it may be, you know, the guy parking his car outside who actually has something fresh to say.

It's been inspiring to discuss this work with you – you're working in very many of the same locations as people like me who work on the materialities of the recent past find themselves. Indeed, contemporary artists and curators not only increasingly find themselves in the same places as archaeologists, but also find themselves running up against the same issues, challenges and opportunities, around the nature of rediscovery is and about what we can say about these places.

**PR** Sure yes, absolutely, it does seem that 'contemporary archaeology' has a lot to contribute to explorations of the fluidity of our encounters with places, encounters that aren't necessarily about fixed stories or a hierarchy of knowledge, but are rather about less defined experiences of place, memories that people have about particular objects or spaces, stories that quite often don't cohere or are difficult to pin down. In a way I'm trying to deal with the fluid, sensory and emotional nature of that encounter with the past.

**DH** Well, we're left with that highly evocative metaphor in your last piece of the past 'rising up' into the present like water. It's been great to talk the work over with you, and to learn more about the fascinating intersections between contemporary art, materiality and archaeological practice (which are both, of course, often both site-specific and often creative interventions). We'll look forward to the explorations of these issues further as the *Material City* programme develops. Thank you very much for taking the time to share your work with us.

**PR** Well thank you.

## Information about the speakers

**Dr Dan Hicks** MA (Oxon), PhD, MIFALecturer in Archaeology and Anthropology at Bristol University, where he co-directs the MA in Archaeology for Screen Media (an interdisciplinary programme with the Department of Drama). He is a specialist in the materialities of the very recent and contemporary past, and in the intersections between archaeological, anthropological and creative practices in their study. He is part of the team leading a current English Heritage-funded research project 'Change and Creation: English landscape character 1950-2000', which explores alternative approaches to the value and potential of things which survive from the most recent past. Such work ranges from abandoned or forgotten places or things – ephemerality, loss and decay – to the remembered past – the role of material culture in memory, storytelling or conflicting histories.

He has published widely in historical and contemporary archaeology: his 'Cambridge Companion to Historical Archaeology' (Cambridge University Press, edited with Mary Beaudry, Boston University) will be published in August 2006, and a 'Field Guide to the 20th Century' is in preparation for English Heritage. He is currently developing research projects which explore archaeological and anthropological perspectives upon contemporary art and is co-organiser of the Material City programme with Claire Doherty at Situations, University of the West of England.

## Recommended reading

*Got Up Late The Other Day*, monograph on Paul Rooney with essays by Michael Bracewell and Claire Doherty: Colchester: Firstsite with Cornerhouse Publications 2006

W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*. London: Pimlico, 1999

J. Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings and Ethics*, Princeton University Press, 2001

V. Buchli and G. Lucas, *Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past*, London: Routledge, 2001

E. Cocker, Jaspar Joseph-Lester and Sharon Kivland, *Transmission: Speaking & Listening Volume 4*, Sheffield Hallam University, 2005 (Paul Rooney)

E. Daley (ed.), *Pass the Time of Day* with essays by Michael Bracewell and Paul Rooney: London: Gasworks, 2004

C. Renfrew, *Figuring it Out: The Parallel Visions of Archaeologists and Artists*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2004

A. Schneider and C. Wright (eds), *Contemporary Art and Anthropology*, Oxford: Berg, 2005

**Paul Rooney** trained at Edinburgh College of Art and was a founder member of artist group Common Culture, who exhibited at EAST International in 1999. Paul began to focus his individual practice from 1998 to 2000 on the music of the 'Rooney' CDs and performances, with a Radio 1FM 'Peel session' broadcast in October 1999. He now works primarily with video and sound and has recently completed projects with KunstWerke, Berlin, Baltic, Gateshead, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham and Site Gallery, Sheffield.

He has held residencies at Dundee Contemporary Arts/University of Dundee VRC and Projecto Batiscafo, Cuba. He was Tate Liverpool MOMART Fellow 2002-2003, ACE Oxford-Melbourne Artist Fellow 2004, and is the ACE University of Wolverhampton United Artists Fellow 2004-2007. His recent curated exhibition *Pass the Time of Day* for Gasworks Gallery, London toured throughout the UK. He was winner of the first 'Art Prize North' in 2003 and was selected for the British Art Show 6 which tours to Bristol in summer 2006.

## Material City

Material City is a programme of interdisciplinary conversations, commissioned projects and creative responses which investigate imagination and the urban environment. It is led by Situations at the University of the West of England, Bristol in association with Arnolfini and the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Bristol. For further information visit [www.situations.org.uk](http://www.situations.org.uk)

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