

SITUATIONS

Atmosphere: the work of Paul Rooney

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In 1997, two English archaeologists named Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas undertook an excavation of a recently abandoned council house. They were looking to archaeological evidence to tell them who had occupied the house and why they had left so abruptly. Their project involved conventional methods – ‘base planning’ of room layouts on each floor, photographs of all ‘deposits’ and the database recording of the position of all contents, in addition to random spot samples of the floors, walls and woodwork.

Buchli and Lucas’ final analysis details every possible material fact about the house at the moment of its abandonment: from the dispersal of toys throughout the rooms to the quantities of male versus female toiletries. It is the application of this data combined with contextual evidence and the acknowledgement of the archaeologists’ complicity that leads to a surprisingly moving account of social circumstance. In effect what they give that final moment of flight is dimension.

Their account is part detective story, part material culture, but they resist the patriarchal tone of an impartial observer. They acknowledge that in this archaeology of the contemporary past, “any gap [between the archaeologist and what is studied] is constantly being contested and collapsed because we are implicated in what we do to an extent much more immediate than with any other kind of archaeology.”¹

Historical detachment is replaced by contemporary relevance. Buchli and Lucas’ report is shot through with a tension between observer and observed. For if, as the authors suggest, their profession is concerned primarily with the absent present and with “presencing absence”, they must implicate themselves in the social, political and economic reality that brought about their site for study.

When I stood in Flat 23 in the Linosa Close tower block of the Sheil Park housing estate in North Liverpool in autumn 2002, that is the tension I felt. I was an art visitor, drawn to Liverpool for the opening of the Biennial and had travelled from the city centre to see the much lauded independent project of artist residencies organised by Neville Gabie and Leo Fitzmaurice. The success of the creative responses in FURTHER Up in the Air drew on the uncanny associations of a building on the brink of demolition. Visiting the ‘studios’ was a strange and somewhat voyeuristic experience. We passed occupied flats en route to those transformed or adjusted by artists and writers. Flat 23 seemed emptier than any other.

Bare walls and naked windows. Three monitors showing static shots of the same bare walls and naked windows. A doubling of emptiness. And then the sound. That now familiar two-part acapella harmony, a kind of incantation that seemed at once a lament and a mnemonic. It was deeply emotive and disturbing, but it was simply a description of furnishings and decorations that had long since been removed.

"There were floral curtains with net curtains to windows. The walls were painted magnolia. There were plain green carpets, There were no pictures on the wall. There was a double bed and a bedroom suite in dark wood that had two wardrobes, a dressing table and two bedside cabinets. There was a homemade chair, and a Victoria chair with no arms and a straight back that looked a bit like a throne. It was covered with material."

The lyrics were composed from a list drawn up by the flat's former resident. Interspersed with these was a harmony which referenced those pieces of furniture which had been made by her late husband. The words are straight-forward. There is no nostalgia, just memory. What begins to happen through the repetition of melody and lyric is the conjuring up of the home and the lives of Doreen and Bernie Hughes. This is Paul Rooney's archaeology.

An overview of the artist's projects to date: his music, his texts and his videos might lead to an initial description of his practice as socially engaged. Rooney is drawn to the quotidian and actively encourages collaboration with his participants. His lyrics are characterised by the worker of late capitalism: call centre advisors, Big Issue sellers, cloakroom assistants, building society staff and hotel workers. He relies on the overlooked, the thoughts, and instructions, patterns that give everyday life its structure, that pass the time of day.

And though the tone of his songs is often melancholic (being described as "urban malaise" by one music critic), the character of works such *"Lights Go On. The song of the nightclub cloakroom attendant"* or *"In the Distance the Dawn is Breaking"*, a description of shop worker's' sleeping dream, is that of dedication. Rooney recognises the monotonous and impersonal nature of a job in the service industry and elevates that which demarcates the individual from the crowd: dreams, personal preoccupations and experiences. His songs are dedications to the unsung subject.

But his work can be distinguished from the kind of dialogic artistic practice as described in North America as New Genre Public Art or dialogical aesthetics and in the UK as littoral art or socially engaged practice, a field cogently investigated by Grant Kester in his book *Conversation Pieces*.² Kester describes conversational practice as that which *"unfolds through a process of performative interaction."*³ Whilst the production and presentation of Rooney's art involves various collaborators, often beginning with the search for a particular anecdote or personal history, each of Rooney's works is clearly authored by the artist. Collaboration is a means to end in these projects.

The integrity of Rooney's approaches and involvement of participants is consciously played against the apocryphal. This is strongest in his monologue pieces - *I Am Not Going to America, Let Me Take You There and Your Studio Host*. The first two are narrated by Alain Chamois, a fanzine writer. (I looked up Chamois, and supposing that Rooney's narrator is not also head of the distribution of spare

parts at a Munich car factory, I'm assuming he's fictional. In which case, why invent a fictional narrator? More on this later.)

All three pieces act like filmic prologues with establishing shots and uncanny coincidences. Rooney weaves plot lines, film, music and popular culture references. One moment he is quoting Ted Hughes, the next Russ Abbott. Rooney's narration is dead-pan, almost monotone, like the harmonies of his choral compositions. And what this creates is a sense of the unremarkable. Though the Stars in their Eyes studio is covered in "glittering stars", and the studio host Ted Robbins turns out to be a hero of the Little Britain team (who dedicated a fictional band to him "The Ted Robbins Warm Up Experience"), Rooney doesn't allow us to be star-struck. He's clearly captivated, dumb-struck even, by the studio host and the production of an audience, but his delivery describes the tension between observer and observed that I felt in Flat 23. *Your Studio Host* is a particularly bizarre scenario, pretence layered over pretence over pretence, and Rooney is implicated in this – playing to Robbins' characterisation of him as a "contemporary artist". And what connects *Your Studio Host* to *I Am Not Going to America* and *Let Me Take You There*, beyond the narrative style, is a sense of place.

Geographer Doreen Massey has suggested, "what gives place its specificity is not some long internalised history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations..."⁴ When Rooney brings Charlie Meecham's photograph of a field in Calderdale into proximity with the TV documentary of Charlie taking the photograph, Dermot Bucknall's outburst, Sylvia Path's resting place and Joy Division's 1980 12" single *Atmosphere*, he constructs that constellation of relations.

When he sets the Sound of the Crowd music by the Human League to the observations of a worker from a building society in Sheffield, whose window was the original entrance to the Crazy Daisy Club where female members of the band Jo and Susanne were discovered by Phil Oakey (*Something Happening*), he speaks without nostalgia nor sentimentality of the hidden history of that specific place over time, the constellation of relations.

Michel de Certeau's concept of the everyday proposed that our mode of being in this world is like renting an apartment. "It is another person's property moved into a space borrowed for a moment."⁵ Rooney asserts that same occupation of place through real and fictional occurrences, acknowledging the overlooked and proposing the equal status of urban myth and lived experience. His narrative forms – the first person or fictional narrator – are a way of establishing an occupant of place beyond himself, creating a set of characters all of whom have brought about the constellation of a particular set of conditions.

In early 1997, the band 'Rooney' was established with Paul Rooney on vocals and all instruments. He was eventually joined two years later by Ian Jackson on bass and Colin Cromer on drums. The first Rooney CD, the five song EP 'Got Up Late', with sleeve notes by Alain Chamois, was released towards the end of 1997. That

year, a mother with two young children had been working through a difficult relationship with the father of her children. He was addicted to heroin but had been prescribed methadone and was visiting them regularly in a council house some distance from his home. Despite the fact that leaving her council tenancy would make her "intentionally homeless" and therefore ineligible for state support, the young mother gave up on the relationship and her situation. Taking her children and her chances, whilst still packing, she suddenly got up and left.

End Notes

¹ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994

² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by S. Rednall, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988.

³ Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, Berkeley: University of California, 2004.

⁴ Kester, p. 10

⁵ Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas, "The archaeology of alienation: A late twentieth-century British council house", *Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001, pp.158-167

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