

On Sanctum Claire Doherty

Temple Church is not dead. It has just been sleeping.

On 24th November 1940, Bristol was subject to 10,000 incendiary bombs and 160 tons of high explosive in the second night blitz of WWII. As the Lord Mayor of Bristol described at the time, "the City of Churches had in one night become the city of ruins".

A fire raged through Temple Church, close to the primary target of the railway station, burning pews, shattering stained glass windows and destroying its internal fabric. Some weeks later, its ultimate destruction was saved by a passer-by who prevented two ministry officials from setting off explosive charges under the leaning tower, informing them that the tower was not a recent casualty. It had leaned, in fact, since 1390. The first English parish church to be taken into the ownership of the Ministry of Works, Temple Church has been protected under the care English Heritage ever since – but not primarily because of its 14th century shell, but due to the remains of the original 12th century circular church of the Knights Templar, which lie hidden under its foundations. To the Dobunni Celtic tribe, Temple Church was, and remains in contemporary Celtic tradition, a sacred place due to ley line alignment. And to the thousands who will gather in small groups here over the 24 days of Sanctum, it is a new gathering place to hear the city as never before. It is a site, then, that declines one history, one story.

On the invitation to create his first public project in the UK, Gates was drawn to Temple Church as a once sacred site, now silent.

"I imagine that materials and spaces have life in them", Gates suggests, "that they have something extremely sacred inside them, that might be sleeping or may have been put into a coma, but which is living. We have to find ways to activate the living."

The artist's Dorchester Projects in Chicago has become the touchstone for cultural regeneration in the international art field over the past few years. The project began in 2006, when Gates made a former sweetshop his home on South Dorchester Avenue and subsequently renovated the adjacent buildings using repurposed materials from across the city to rehouse retired collections of objects, such as 14,000 books from the former Prairie Avenue Bookstore, 60,000 glass slides from the University of Chicago's department of art history, and 8,000 records from the now-closed Dr Wax record store. Dorchester Projects became a vibrant gathering point for film screenings, soul food dinners, research and listening, and a place of work for many individuals from the neighbourhood.

Dorchester Projects led subsequently to establishment of the Rebuild Foundation and to the opening of Stony Island Arts Bank on Chicago's South Side in 2015, Gates' radically restored community savings and loan bank which will serve as a library, archive, exhibition space, scholar and artist resource.

Gates' international projects and exhibitions radiate out from his studio's base in Chicago. Most notably of recent years, *12 Ballads for Huguenot House* (his ambitious project involving the renovation of an abandoned house in Kassel, Germany for the exhibition

dOCUMENTA (13) in 2012), *The Black Monastic* (his residency with the Black Monks of Mississippi at the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Portugal in 2014),

Freedom of Assembly (his solo exhibition at White Cube, London in spring 2015) and *Three or Four Shades of Blues* (his two-storey installation for the 14th Istanbul Biennial in autumn 2015). The latter's title is a nod to jazz musician Charles Mingus, whose style of collective improvisation and his free jazz contemporaries, have influenced Gates' on-going interest in combining and conflating styles, histories and collaborative endeavours.

"If we were to think about the way Ornette Coleman plays saxophone," Gates suggests, *"there is a melodic structure that represents time, maybe even form. Coleman is making decisions to accumulate ideas, over and over again, so that even though time is moving forward, because the melody is playing itself over and over, time is also standing still, and as time stands still, Ornette Coleman can accumulate ideas, musical ideas. That's the way I think of materials. Histories conflate, because we keep reliving the same things over and over. It feels like in some ways there was a 1920s moment that turned into a 1960s moment that turned into a Ferguson moment. The fact that we have to keep living civil rights means that I can make a thing and it will seem like time has stood still. That's not always a good thing when you think about certain politics, but the work is asking questions about how materials accumulate, how a place accumulates; how time is not as linear as we imagine."*

Gates does not indulge in the nostalgia of the salvaged object or the derelict site, but rather employs its historical significance to address contemporary realities of social injustice, inequality and exclusion. Temple Church, therefore, offered a treasured, but overlooked site at the centre of the city – a place in which to gather multiple desires, histories and aspirations.

Into this charged site, which has remained locked to public access for some years due to the fragile nature of the building, enter now a series of materials which themselves speak of the city's complex stories – roof joists from an 18th century warehouse, bricks from the Salvation Army's citadel in the east of the city, and ten sets of wooden doors from a now defunct chocolate factory. The city's histories collide – the slave trader and sugar merchant Thomas Farr gave his name to the harbourfront location on which the warehouse stood; the Salvation Army's bricks were fired from local clay in the Cattybrook brickworks which supplied bricks for the building of the city's tobacco factories; the chocolate factory at Greenbank, once the employer of hundreds, is a now site over which opposing visions of the city's social and economic future battle. Aspiration, exploitation, labour, faith, wealth and poverty – they course through this newly built structure at Temple Church, resistant to being silenced.

Within the frame of Bristol 2015 European Green Capital, the city has been asking itself what we might need to sustain our future cities. The valuing of local resources has been at the heart of city-wide campaigns throughout the year. Commentators on Bristol 2015's cultural programme have endeavoured to tie these artistic endeavours directly to a set of awareness-raising objectives – re-cycling, conservation of energy, the implications of climate change. And yet, the arts are not merely a mechanism of explanation or illustration of such issues. *Sanctum* is not a history lesson, nor simply a representation of the benefits of re-use. Rather, as Gates' previous projects have shown, artists give us the opportunity to

see the world as if it were different. Works such as *Sanctum* are both a visually compelling symbolic act and a real life intervention.

Gates noted on his first visit to Bristol that this was a city of makers – a cultural crucible – but he also noted that it was an economically divided city. 16% of Bristol's residents live in the most deprived areas in England and though this statistic is less than many of English core cities, deprivation in Bristol has increased more than those core cities in the last five years, despite the dominant story of economic growth here.

So what are the needs and desires of this city? "*Could,*" Gates has asked, "*concerned artist citizens play a hand at thinking about what the needs are at a place, so that it's culturally rich, and take that on not necessarily as an art-project, but as a kind of human desire?*"

For certain, Gates' Bristol project begins with restoring life and sound to Temple Church, but as he suggests, "we have to do more than simply restore buildings. If it stops there, then I'm just a handy man. What shifts it to a territory that is more vigorous and less known? I think it has something to do with how we regard the use of space, what happens whilst the space is being restored and who accesses the space once they're done."

Sanctum is a symbolic act rather than the creation of another performance venue. Bristol, after all, is the city of performance – brimming with theatre from the grandeur of Bristol Old Vic to The Wardrobe above the White Bear pub and energised by experimental performance from Mayfest to In Between Time. The city's heartbeat are the hundreds of gigs which fill pubs, boats, bars and backrooms across the city on a weekly basis - from the Louisiana to The Fleece, Thekla to The Canteen, Trinity Centre to Start the Bus.

A stone's throw from the construction site of Bristol's new 12,000 seater arena, Gates set about fashioning a temporary, intimate gathering space for just 50 people at a time. It was then the decision to sustain the sound of *Sanctum*, as a continuous, unending series of performances, readings, notes, chords, spoken words, protests and talks day and night from the evening of 29th October to the evening of 21st November, which then gave *Sanctum* its primary organising principle.

Sanctum unfolds over time – minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day, 24 by 24. It begins as British summertime ends - the dusk encroaching faster like the tide as we move towards the final minute – 17.59 on Saturday 21st November 2015. The conventional rhythm of working weekdays and weekends at leisure are certainly there: the morning chorus, the call to prayer, the young voices babbling through the afternoon, the cheekiness of an early evening samba, the drum and bass of night, the grime of the early hours, and then the quiet patience of the early hours – what writer Jon McGregor refers to as "the still point".

*"And the silence drops down from out of the night, into this city, the briefest of silences, like a falter between heartbeats, like a darkness between blinks. Secretly, there is always this moment, an unexpected pause, a hesitation as one day is left behind and a new one begins."*¹

But the programme also serves to subvert the expectations of what the day might bring. Experimental performance breaks through the quiet of a Sunday morning; flash fiction

spoken word lights up 3am; sacred harp gives way to dubstep, R&B to stone percussion. Cellos, trumpets and pipes are joined by cement mixers, a potter's wheel and a tuning fork. The schedule itself remains secret, allowing *Sanctum* to function in its own right as a total work of art, rather than simply a gig venue, and exposing visitors through the day and night to unexpected encounters. In this way, *Sanctum* acts as a platform for the aspiration to be heard.

The programme is 552 hours long which connects *Sanctum* directly to the genre of long-term durational performances known for testing the limits of an audience's attention span, for example Forced Entertainment's renowned 24-hour performances such as *Quizoola*, a 24-hour continuous performance of 2,000 questions, or *Who Can Sing A Song to Unfrighten Me?* and Marina Abramović's 512-hour-long performance last year at the Serpentine Gallery.

The experience of such durational projects is usually partial for all but the artist, but in this case the experience for the artists and performances is also partial. It is impossible to hear *Sanctum* in its entirety, not only because this would induce profound sleep deprivation, but also because the size of the structure restricts capacity to just 50 people including performers. *Sanctum* is immense and small in scale at the same time.

In this sense, *Sanctum* emerges out of Situations' commitment to exploring public time as well as public space in its projects of recent years. *One Day Sculpture*, for example was a year-long series of 24-hour public sculptures across five regions in New Zealand in 2008-9, which sought to expand conventional ideas about the lifespan of public artworks. Through the dispersal of the works, by artists such as Thomas Hirschhorn, Javier Tellez and Paola Pivi, across time and space, *One Day Sculpture* denied the standard art tourist's view in one easy bite-sized consumption. The organising principle of 24 hours gave each artist a frame within which to work, and against which to kick, whilst also operating as a connecting device between each of the diverse artistic responses.

Breaking away from the conventional frames through which we experience the arts (whether that be the white walls of a gallery or the opening hours or times of a performance), allows an artist's vision to bleed out into the world, directly connecting with life as it is lived. There is, without doubt, value in those special contexts for the experience and study of the arts, as Gates' *Stony Island Arts Bank* testifies, but alongside the reinvention of those institutions, the practice of reimagining the sites which have been overlooked and allowing new spaces and times for the under-heard remains a vital part of sustaining the future of our cities.

Claire Doherty, October 2015