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Like every in-between

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LIKE EVERY IN-BETWEEN:

"To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time."

– Hannah Arendt,
The Human Condition

JACQUELINE DONACHIE'S NOTES FROM THE CLOSING
LECTURE FOR ARCHITECTURE FRINGE 2018 (JACQUELINE
DONACHIE/ ALICE RAWSTHORN/ STEPHANIE MACDONALD
EXPLORE THE THEME OF COMMON/ SENSES)



Let's talk about the in-betweens, as Hannah Arendt describes them. About those things that both connect and separate us in the world – through compulsion, necessity, need. Our buildings, our spaces, our families. I'd like to consider a few of my works, both objects and experiences, and look at how they might provide ways to navigate through a very complicated world. Most things, from concrete sculpture to pencil on paper, come from a desire to invoke a simple feeling or emotion. A sense of something.

When musing upon these in-betweens, Hannah Arendt suggests a table. I'm going to suggest a bar. And I'm going to use this bar, at once a sculpture and also an event, as an example of this 'world of things,' a world of objects and experiences. The piece I made recently at the Fruitmarket Gallery – "Advice Bar, Expanded for the Times" – was a new

words____jacqueline donachie
dublin____ireland

version of a work I made in 1995, on first arriving in New York City on a Fulbright scholarship.

Here, for this original version based on homesickness, loneliness, an uptown job as an analyst and a downtown job in a bar, I served drinks in my studio in a simple act of exchange; one drink in return for one problem. It was the work for my Robert Morris sculpture class. And I was very particular about the height of this bar, made as it was from a sturdy table and two piles of the Village Voice. A bar is made to be leaned on; a table is too low. It's a human interaction with an object, that in turn relates to another human, and so the physical interaction with that object was important.

Simple rules evolved and I set up makeshift Advice Bars in cool young artist group shows around Europe in the 1990's, solving problems – from floor surfacing to marriages – whilst drinking gin and smoking cigarettes. Always with a cardboard sign.

As I was planning the Fruitmarket exhibition there was an air of reflection that led to a consideration of whether a work made a long time ago in New York might have any relevance now; that first bar had also referenced the temporary wallpaper tables that I saw set up at weekends on Broadway by nurses, doctors and lawyers, to offer free advice to anyone in need in a first world economy with zero state support. I had never seen such a thing, known such a need. Now that world is creeping here. So it had to be a bigger bar.

The stories told to the Fresh Fruit team this time around give a gentle example of how a simple gesture requiring a leap of faith and some trust in a stranger, facilitated by – this time – a very sturdy but tactile and smooth concrete surface to lean into, can give rise to quite beautiful conversations: covering topics from relationships to iguanas, gloves and grandchildren.

During the exhibition we also ran a one-off day of open-access free advice, stacking the room with as many lawyers and expert advisory charities as we could persuade to come. This new bar, now bigger than ever, served to solve problems through talks and free professional advice on housing, immigration and benefits; a huge gap in Edinburgh that we wanted to highlight. It was a sign of our times. A place to lean in.

I make things that reference support. You can sit on them or lean on them.

Some other works, like the mobile trailer sculptures commissioned for GENERATION in 2014, take on landscape and journeying. The metal they are made from is textured checker plate, a familiar surface in industrial settings, stations and ferry ports. Sturdy, non-slip, often seen painted, usually scratched and scuffed through heavy use.

I use these common industrial materials often; thick aluminium or steel checker plate, building on earlier more

RULES FOR AN ADVICE BAR

USE A TABLE RAISED TO THE HEIGHT OF A BAR/

HAVE A SIGN. HAVE A LIGHT.

GIVE A DRINK IN EXCHANGE FOR A PROBLEM

TO ONE PERSON AT A TIME.

NO MONEY CHANGES HANDS/

NOTHING IS BINDING.



Currently, top to bottom

- Holger Mohaupt [Pose Work For Sisters, 2016]
- Jacqueline Donachie [Advice Bars, 1995–2001]
- Ruth Clark [Advice Bar, Expanded for the Times, 2017]
- Alan Dimmick [Huntly Slow Down, 2009]
- Ruth Clark [Deep in the Heart of Your Brain, 2016]
- Ruth Clark [Deep in the Heart of Your Brain, 2016]
- Alan Dimmick [The Trees, The Book And The Disc, 1999]

portrait based pieces using steel and aluminium scaffolding tubing such as “Winter Trees”, 2008 and “Winter Trees II”, 2013. Through referencing ramps, a recurring thought of mine is of their use; access for cars, vans, prams, trolleys and wheelchairs in settings that require a step or gap to be circumnavigated, avoided or conquered. The metal serves as a joining material.

Another of these ramp sculptures is called “Deep in the Heart of Your Brain is a Lever”, its title from a Patti Smith song. The lyric used here, synonymous with punk and chaos, has often spoken to me of care, and of caring. Of moments found deep within, where one must go to locate the strength to complete a task – something which Smith has written of in her later life. Caring is an experience we will all have; if not now, then in the future. So the darkness and toughness that Patti Smith represents here is domestic and suburban, not rock and roll.

Some of these times are public, but mostly they are very private, even if others are present. Many factors dictate whether they are or are not commonplace events, in common places, a daily occurrence, or a dark, isolated moment that asks much of a person. They can be easy to miss, as most are small, discreet, lonely moments that are endured. The use of the term ‘lever’ in the title is significant, the dictionary definition very accurate; it describes the process of ‘exerting pressure on someone to act in a certain way’.

Something heavy, hard to lift. Weighty.

These moments occur in many families living with disability and they require utter strength. Times when inner strength is required for something that must be done over and over, again and again. Ordinary, unglamorous, and with no medal. A lever in your brain that at times you must apply.

In addition to the materials used, the location where I first made one of these sculptures is also relevant: Leamington Spa Art Gallery and Museum, built into what was once the Spa therapy centre where the public library is in the former pool.

Rather than look at this medical museum of pulleys and swings from therapy baths, I was taken with the poignant testimony of a mother who used to bring her young children to the pool in the 1980s; her son had cerebral palsy, and she brought him and her other unaffected child to swim once a week after school. Both children loved the atmosphere there, her son benefitting from the therapeutic service available to him, mother and daughter relishing fun swimming time together whilst this took place. She spoke of how safe they all felt at these times, and how much they looked forward to them as a family. And so my questions were not about the medical artefacts on show, but instead where that family had gone when the facility closed in 1989? Was there a beautiful new therapy centre and pool available in the town? Or had

the service been removed completely, to be replaced with a cultural display?

My exhibition, or that of anyone else, was surely no substitute for this experience, and my purpose in making the sculpture was to present a loss that was, perhaps, brushed aside with the offer of culture. That the sculpture is there at all reflects a desire not to proffer information or direct questions, but to allude to something lost. To illuminate, through a measured presentation that causes viewers to consider why it is there and what decisions have been made to make it, by using their own memory and experience as a primary resource. Indicators such as title, material and a general ‘sense of something’ cold and dark are the beginning of this. The placing of a substantial dark object, a black hole one could say, in the centre of that exhibition space, alongside other artworks, becomes an artistic response to that situation. In a small local museum that was once a therapeutic swimming pool, what can a static metal sculpture invoke other than loss? It’s a beautiful thing but it isn’t a pool.

This theme of replacement is relevant to some of the debates around public space that have been rising lately. New building regulations demand public art strategies and

TAKE MORE RISKS, AND TRUST ARTISTS, AND DON’T ALWAYS ACCEPT THE SAFE PAIR OF HANDS WITH HEADED NOTEPAPER

engagement work by local authorities and house builders, but little thought is given to longevity or care once the initial project is over and slim funding put in place to produce it. And the brief is that the art must be everything.

Tourist attraction, social commentary, climbing frame.

Perhaps we have to slow down and notice gaps, and take the opportunity to memorialise what is being lost, or announce what was never there? To perhaps take more risks, and trust artists, and not always accept the safe pair of hands with headed notepaper. We are in danger of filling our public spaces with art that ticks the boxes of safe supplier and public consultation without detailed attention to conceptual rigour or even detail in making, as the timeline and budget that is given is so tight. And many of these intimate senses that we all benefit from considering are charrette-ed away by the loudest voices. But create opportunities for the right artist, and more artists, and we can have such diversity. They notice things, artists, they really do.

On reflection, quite a lot of my work acts as some kind of memorial; to football pitches, or unregulated public space lost through the rebuilding of an estate, as in “The Trees, The Book and the Disc” in Darnley (1998-99). Or an announcement of what was never there, what is missing – like safe cycle lanes, free from parked cars, or a joined-up path network (“Slow Down”). Or warmth in cold places; our studios and town squares. Something to make you stretch out like a cat on a warm roof, not huddle next to a heater (“South”, 1999; “South”, Oslo 2015).

To tie this all together, I will end with art. With an artwork that I think summarises the value of detailed observation, and does something that is so necessary in troubled times – gives voice to things that are hard to say. And it returns neatly to the most basic of concepts, of the relationship between bodies and object that I began with.

This piece is described as a ‘playful interpretation’ of an earlier work by the artist Bruce McLean. I taught a class with McLean in the 1990’s, and always liked the cut of his jib; his stance, his consideration of appearance and objects. I have





written about this at length, relating his 1971 piece “Pose Work for Plinths” to a very Scottish, I’d dare to even say Glaswegian, attitude to the term posing. A reference to the artist’s model, the posed reclining nude, yes, but McLean’s pose is also as defined by my Uncle Bill; your best outfit, boots shined, hair styled (or crimped, depending on your era) – heading out to a nightclub. A poser. That was very much my relationship with my older sister as a teenager. We didn’t speak much at home or school, but always had a solidly (made up) front in Glasgow nightclubs of the late 1980s. We were very alike.

McLean made “Pose Work for Plinths” as a comment on Henry Moore and the contrived shapes of women on plinths, and I have used his language to record my changed relationship with my sister, who was diagnosed with a degenerative form of inherited muscular dystrophy nearly 20 years ago. This piece was both a reference to his early work and some of mine from the late 1990s, when I used a photoshoot set up to accompany typed anecdotes about my own physicality. The setting of plinths against a white background and the looped repetition of the piece gives a simple, rhythmic rise and fall to the work that offers a portrait of both similarity and loss similar to that seen in the Glimmer drawings or Winter Trees sculptures. Two tall, slim middle-aged women wearing black, walking, sitting and standing. Posing. When static, little separates us, but in moving on and off the plinths there are subtle differences in gait, posture and ability that speak of inheritance in many forms. And it speaks of a loss I find hard to articulate privately, in my family – many of whom have this condition. So the process of observing and researching, of filming and editing, and the history of art behind me that gave me the vocabulary to describe this loss in a very public way.

In looking at the artworks here, what unites them all is their capacity to connect others – even if that’s simply through the act of looking. They’ve been made in both galleries and public spaces, which is something I thought was important as my method of approach is the same.

These are artworks that took time to consider their initial context as much as their making, often through residencies or extended research time. Substantial observation for something that in the end is gestural; loneliness, warmth, care, fear, loss. A dance on a hill at sunset. A long chat with a stranger.

Artists are such good value; treat them well, give them time, pay them and they will reward you with infinite insight. I hope we still have time for that.

And so, in a sense, that is my provocation to you.

Do we still have time for art?