

Alan Dunn **Bellgrove to Lime Street, return**



Cover of Bellgrove Station Billboard Project Catalogue, 1991, photograph: Alan Dunn

hi·jack or high·jack vt

1. to take control of a public transport vehicle

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A key early project for me was the Bellgrove Station Billboard Project¹ in 1990. As a 22-year old student in Environmental Art at Glasgow School of Art I raised money to fund, design and own a billboard for a year, installing it at an east end railway station that I passed through every day en route to Art School. Over a year I presented seventeen new hand-painted artworks about music, life, war and football by students, writers and artists including Douglas Gordon, Brigitte Jurack, Ross Sinclair, Pavel Büchler, Thomas Lawson, Julie Roberts and James Kelman.



Bellgrove Station Billboard Project, Ross Sinclair's HATE, installed incorrectly, 1991, photograph: Ross Sinclair

¹ The act of placing non-commercial art on advertising hoardings or billboards may be traced back to Joseph Kosuth's *Class 4, Matter, I. Matter In General*, Albuquerque, New Mexico 1968.

The public was familiar to me, their houses, backgrounds, haircuts, words, football allegiances, loves and hates. I did not ask them what they thought of the artworks or how they understood them. The project was impulse driven, breaking up my own journey, asking myself to be alert between home and Art School. It was public but not necessarily social. People glanced over at the billboards as the train pulled in to the station:

It's been going on for about a year, I don't know, it's a bit like *Twin Peaks*, it keeps changing. Maybe it's subliminal? Definitely, there's just something about it; maybe it's a subliminal form of ... yes, but there's also something dangerous.²

There was nothing on the billboard announcing it as art and no explanatory labeling on the platform, no funders' logos, educational programme nor marketing campaign. It offered the public a chance to misinterpret. I had no other tactics. We had been talked through how to approach external agencies requesting various permissions. The nerves of the first call to the rail company, the first meeting with the billboard company or the hesitant Arts Council application³ became the strokes on the canvas.

As a non-driver, public transport is unavoidable. The industry is the moving audience, shuttling around cities in metal boxes creating grey areas between chores, pleasures and responsibilities. Mitchell & Kenyon's early footage from trams introduced the notion of the tracking shot, and cinema began to explore narrative and imagination. The BBC brings us narrations over footage from train windows, inner voices as we give up control. Beyond making sure we don't miss the stop, we dispose of responsibility, opening up precious space for thinking. In 1963 Cedric Price envisaged a mobile educational institution on an abandoned 100-year-old railway network in Staffordshire. In the 1980's two carriages of a Long Island train are used to deliver an MBA and in October 2010 The Unite Union stage a *Learning on a train day* between Wrexham and London. Perhaps Art Schools on trains are indeed a thing of the future.

Model railways

With *Bellgrove* I had arrived at a model of working that continues to serve me to this day. And I still don't drive. I am writing this on a train. Next stop, Liverpool, take care when alighting etc. I like locations that I am familiar with, saturated by on a daily basis, needing to be part of the viewing public, part-hijacking the views, stirring my own work in with that of students, poets, musicians and artists. Brian Eno is in his own words *steering-wheel-phobic*, and he thinks a lot about the background. A tactic is to offer free art to people I share buses or trains with, but to do it from the background.

Since 1988 I have been placing artworks on billboards and since 1995 these have been in and around Liverpool. I rarely stage launch events and spend virtually no money on marketing. I don't solicit responses but they do come, usually years later. According to Titan Outdoor, each billboard is viewed around 150,000 times per week and thus the chance exists that someone reading this text may have seen some of the artworks listed below.

- The Wayne Rooney billboard in the Bluecoat courtyard
- Pavel Bűchler's billboard on Park Road that said SORRY with once section upside down
- The Pierluigi Collina billboards on Leece Street
- The *Self portrait with last cigarette* on the BBC Big Screen
- The binocular billboard by the tunnel inspired by the PIES graffiti around Liverpool
- The collages on Leece Street with Dmitry Gutov's elderly mum and dad kicking a

² *Bellgrove*, Dunn/Bűchler, Cambridge 1991.

³ In 1989 the Scottish Arts Council changed their policy to enable students to apply. Budget for Billboard Project was £1,000.

football in the Russian wastelands

- A close-up of the beautiful yellow limestone walls of Lime Street, as a billboard by the Slater Street car park



Liverpool Billboard Project, Pavel Büchler sorry, 1999, photograph: Leo McDonough

The above were interventions with full permissions. The billboards were hired, when funding became available, for short periods from commercial companies with grandiose names such as Titan, Maiden or Concept. As time progressed, it became clear that controversy was not on my agenda⁴ and the billboard companies stopped asking to see the images up front before installation. To them, I was a small customer but their trust was invaluable.



Liverpool Billboard Project, Pierre Huyghe untitled, 1999, photograph: Alan Dunn

⁴ With the inadvertent exception of the Rooney billboard which used heavily-altered images culled from the Internet without crediting or paying the original image owners. The problem only came to light when an image of the billboard appeared in another level of 'public-ness' namely a national newspaper. The temporary nature of a billboard greatly helped placate concerns over long-term misuse of the images, with a promise not to ever reproduce the work in print again.

A slower, playful and more passive relationship with a public audience was being developed. Collaborating with the artist Godfrey Burke, we invited French artist Pierre Huyghe to Liverpool to produce a billboard for the corner of Seel Street and Slater Street⁵. One sunny Saturday afternoon he stopped a couple under the old ADAMS CLUB sign and asked them to kiss. He presented that image on the adjacent billboard, putting the familiar back amidst the familiar. Six years later while working with *tenantspin* I employed someone whose friend turned out to be that original kisser. His friend recalled remorsefully "That was actually the first and only time I ever kissed her."

Bellgrove reprise

The east end of Glasgow was my aunts and uncles' grey streets of meat markets, bookies, windowless pubs and scrap yards, a damp area documented in Victorian times by a photographer calling himself The Shadow. We had very few shadows. The west end was the colour of Sauchiehall Street, Kelvingrove Park and the Environmental Art Department. At art school in the mid-80s I became interested in grey, bringing some of it from the east on the train.

In 2010 I put together a CD called *Grey is the colour of hope*. It featured art students alongside Gerhard Richter, Agnes Martin, Leadbelly, Bill Drummond, Midge Ure, Henry Miller and Lydia Lunch, all celebrating grey. I arranged for ex-Manchester City striker Rodney Marsh to go into a studio in Miami to record the line he uttered when leaving England – "English football is a grey game played on grey days by grey people." The CDs will be allowed to mature for a few years before they are all distributed. Irina Ratushinskaya's prison diaries, after which the CD is named, took seven years to be made public, her husband smuggling out lines at a time inscribed on microscopic cigarette papers. Rather than a compilation, the tracks and fragments clouded over each other into a pale grey sound that veered from hip-hop to industrial.

John Major became Prime Minister whilst I was doing my MA and in 1993 I produced Europe's biggest mural at the time, turning a vast car park's grey surface green. The public, and The Sun, slated it. Looking back, I wish I had had the guts to paint it grey. I should have been more passive.

2001-7 FACT

69-year old artist Alfons Schilling arrived in Liverpool from Vienna with his custom-built perspective-reversing glasses built from mirrors and prism lenses salvaged from Russian tanks. We took a bus together out to Sefton Park with a group of pensioners. They slipped the glasses on and gasped in astonishment and a little fear as the sky shot forward and the grass receded into the background. Boulders become concave. A hand in front on the face shot back behind the background. The group gazed at life as they had never ever seen it before and wondered what reality really is, while thinking up some new questions for their opticians. The bus journey back was not the same as the journey out.

This incident comes from the *tenantspin* community project of which I was lead artist between 2001-7. *tenantspin* had just been set up when I started and I was metaphorically handed the keys to the bus and asked to steer it in new directions. Over six years we combined football, music, collaborative art, Liverpool, communities, optics, regeneration, artists' commissions, workshops, fundraising, local quirks, students, global profiles and technological advances in the free distribution of art.

⁵ The corner of Seel Street and Slater Street always fascinated me. It felt like a point where the city centre became drunk, artistic and confused; the unpredictable racket from the Jacaranda or Slaters Bar, the derelict corrugated metal building structure, the antique art supplies in Jacksons window, the Cream shop, the flyposting wall advertising Dirty Planet, Tease or The Story of Erics, and the car park backing onto ADAMS CLUB, once host to Mick Hucknall's early punk outings. On this car park wall was a 20x10ft billboard panel that I used to present artists' works.

tenantspin was a TV station transmitted over the Internet in which the producers were elderly tower block tenants faced with relocation as part of a major rethink on high-rise living. The project did not prevent any of the demolitions, but it enabled them to collaborate on content with a wide range of cultural and social figures and bodies. Individuals changed and the project morphed through varying phases of community need and artistic need.



Liverpool demolitions filmed and discussed by tenantspin, 2001-5

We made films on train journeys. We would meet every two or three days and the project created some extraordinarily bizarre and cultural hybrid moments. I likened *tenantspin* to an endless train journey with the artistic projects the stations. It continues as a project to this day.

Writer Jeff Young's *SuperBlock* asked tenants to think ahead forty years in the future, beyond their own lifetime to imagine a rebuilding of all the demolished tower blocks, but this time on top of each other. With a strong track record of unsettling radio works such as *Carandiru*, *The Don* and *Wormwood*, Young co-wrote the 80-minute piece with six tenants, often developing ideas on roofs of tower blocks, weaving a story through estranged characters that inhabited Floor 365 or Floor 786. As the invented SuperBlock architect returned to ascend his own 14,000ft high creation, so his mental state collapsed until he reached the top and jumped. Tenants were invited to an empty tower block to record the piece, alongside George Costigan and Sunetra Sarker and the piece was webcast on *tenantspin* and broadcast simultaneously on BBC Radio 3, piercing old and new airwaves with a community darkness. By setting the work in an imaginary future and asking citizens not to be nostalgic, we had released contemporary anger and frustrations at the regeneration system and traditional consultation processes.

The nut that held its ground



Chris Watson recording A winter's tale at 2am in Sefton Park with tenantspin, 2004, photograph: Alan Dunn

tenantspin were invited to Wiesbaden in 2002 to take part in the *Forty Years of Fluxus* celebrations and during the trip we took a bus to view Michael Craig-Martins' *An Oak Tree*. Created in 1973, the same year as Dublin's CityArts founded, we stood in front of *An Oak Tree* and tried to locate it on our journey. Two years later, Chris Watson, founder member of Cabaret Voltaire and award-winning wildlife sound recordist with David Attenborough, was invited to work with *tenantspin* to explore the specific habitat of high-rise living. With the tenants Chris created a very simple sound portrait of their surrounds. Having double-glazed silent views of the Mersey coastline and Liverpool's twin-Cathedral skyline, the flats were turned into listening towers, releasing that which could be seen but not heard. At two in the morning, Chris and the tenants stood in an almost pitch black park by the blocks, recording the sound of an oak leaf falling on damp grass.

Updating notions of the Muzak piped in to 1950s dream homes, the utopian period just prior to the blocks being built, we found a way of freely transmitting these carefully recorded sounds back into flats through the CCTV system via regular TVs. High-rise tenants were offered round-the-clock sounds from sights they could see or dream of, but not hear. Kath Healy sat at her armchair on the 12th floor gazing out towards Liverpool Cathedral, tuning into channel 44 for the sounds of distant foxes and channel 45 for the sound of the last Mersey Ferry of the day.

Across the Mersey



The remains of an Art School, Central Park, Liscard 2008, photograph: Alan Dunn

Visually impaired tenant Margo Hogg was a professional cabaret singer until she retired in 1991. She wrote dystopian stories of the SuperBlock lift breaking down and sang *You'll never walk alone* on the first *tenantspin* CD. From the roof of her 14-storey block one can see out across the Mersey Estuary. With the Admiralty forbidding bridges over the Mersey, the only methods to travel from Liverpool to the Wirral peninsula are the Ferry or one of the tunnels. Since 1993 I have lived over the water in Wallasey.

Our house is three minutes from Central Park, a simple park opened in 1891 and once the grounds of Liscard Hall. The building was more recently used as an Art College with alumni including OMD's Andy McCluskey, but on the 7 July 2008 it was razed to the ground.

I went out at night to photograph the remaining rubble of Liscard Hall and used the dark image on the cover of a CD entitled *Artists' uses of the word 'revolution'*. This CD, featuring Douglas Gordon, Sisters of Revolution, art students, Aldous Huxley, Raul

Castro, Mexican hip-hop, Spanish punk, Herbert Marcuse, youtube amateurs, Chopin, Marcel Duchampe and Chumbawamba, was given away freely and left on buses and in phone boxes.⁶

Silence!



Alan Dunn Soundtrack for a Mersey Tunnel, 2008, empty tunnel photograph: Alan Dunn

Once a year the Mersey Tunnels are closed to traffic and the public invited to walk through them. I went a few years ago and, approaching the start, I spotted a man wearing a bib with the number 433 on it. I explained to him what I had done and exchanged a CD for that bib which I wore through the tunnel. Working with *tenantspin*, I took the 433 bus every day through the Mersey Tunnel to get to work in Liverpool and sat and watched people listen to their iPods or talk on their phones. The journeys would last on average 2'33 and signals would drift in and out.

I put together 433 copies of a CD compilation and arranged for it to be given away freely to travelers at random from the toll booths. Exactly who gets a copy is out of my hands, but the publishing of work creates an instant physical relationship, catching people unaware and slipping into their memory like a Guided by Voices tune.⁷

Does one contact the author each time one finishes a good book? The actual significance of some public art, even temporary interventions, must come years later. Seeds are planted around cities and their mental resonance allowed to mature. The *Soundtrack for a Mersey Tunnel* CD brought together students, artists, poets, writers and musicians; an audio Bellgrove in which all tracks lasted exactly 2'33. Into cars and buses artists slipped musings on claustrophobia, Cage's silence, sex, morse code, *Repo Man* and wormholes.

This was not art from a publicly advertised commissioning process with agency-advised short-listing and quasi-democratic selection processes. This was a CD that may be handed to you one day as you pay your £1.50 to cross the river. You may press play and hear Claire Potter crawl under a metal bed frame and whisper about poking a finger up through the moist bed above. Or shuffle to Wibke Hott singing with the scratch choir of tunnel workers recorded deep in the bowels

⁶ Douglas Gordon's piece for the CD was entitled +44 7966 450 969

⁷ Robert Pollard, the genius songwriter behind Guided by Voices, would retreat to his basement and create LPs from his own impulses that his band members would have to secretly sneak out to make public. To this day Guided by Voices and Pollard eschew major labels, pioneering the lo-fi DIY spirit which punk proposed. A recurring figure in my projects, Pollard donated a track to the *Revolution* CD and in 2006 I arranged for one of his collages to be installed on a billboard just off Slater Street (<http://www.alandunn67.co.uk/obscurer.html>).

of the vent shaft, then flick back to Chris Watson's crystal clear underwater recordings from the Galapagos Islands. It begins with the *Repo Man*-esque *Tazzle* ends with a new piece from Jeff Young and Pete Wylie:

This is the horror my grandfather filled our dreams with
Our seaside holidays were stained with fear
We dreamed the dreadful ocean rolling over us
As the dreaded long drive home was drawing near

Possible misinterpretation. I receive calls from Mersey Tunnels saying that they are worried by the words 'horror' and 'fear' heard in these musty forty-year old tunnels. We emerge at the other end and drive on. The Liverpool coach passes through en route to the pre-season friendly against Tranmere. The driver is given a copy and passes it back. Does Jamie Carragher fancy a listen or is Suarez aware of Cage? Gerrard instead sits pensively and listens to Pete Wylie belting out *Heart as big as Liverpool* to around 20,000 Liverpool fans in Istanbul. Community art on tour, with no danger of misinterpretation.

What might have been

Regeneration, refurbishment, demolition, redevelopment – Liverpool is a fertile landscape upon which to plant seeds. Moving across Merseyside in trains and buses, looking for new Bellgroves, new Berlins, new gaps in which to slot new works, projects emerge from tunnels and look for stations at which to begin their journeys. Some break down at the point of departure and never go any further. Delays and cancellations also create space to think.

Cancellations (three projects that never happened)⁸

Responding to a call for a permanent work for the refurbished Strand in Bootle I proposed a folly escalator that would take people nowhere except a few feet forward or backwards. A little moment of "what the ...?" in a shopping environment devoid of surprise.

Prior to regeneration, *Ropewalks 7am* was a series of events to be staged in the hours before the busy Ropewalks area became populated each day. In a foggy early morning film-set, tight-rope walkers would make their way from Wood Street to Seel Street and horses roam along Slater Street with the unfolding events filmed and given away freely to the public on DVD later in the same day.

At the junction of Hanover Street, Canning Place and Duke Street once stood The Liverpool Sailors Home. After its demolition, the plot of land hosted an extraordinary scaffolding structure that existed only to hold up around 15 billboards. I proposed a major artwork for all fifteen that would make its way into the plot of *Brookside*. Mersey TV were interested for a while in an artwork that would somehow impact upon a fictionalized relationship within the show.

Legacies and myths

In such a changing city, fleeting and temporary have always struck me as appropriate operative tactics. As such, nothing permanent remains in Liverpool except one small collaboration that inadvertently gained a legacy. Working with another artist, I was commissioned to create a piece that would last six months for a vacant plot in London Road. Every city has a London Road; near the central train or coach station, run-down and seedy, tiny pubs with military pictures lining smoky wallpapered walls, jukeboxes full of Tina Turner and Rod Stewart, debris and a closed down cinema.

⁸ I think that Nina Edge may have been awarded the first commission, the second was rejected due to 'a lack of funding to cover sufficient security for the horses' and the third drifted as my contact at Mersey TV left.

Responding to some graffiti at the back for the plot we created two very simple chairs facing each other⁹. The sculpture, named *RAY + JULIE* after that graffiti, bizarrely remains today, despite the original two names long having faded. One day a student from LIPA found out about the chairs' origins and went out at night to re-spray the text *RAY + JULIE*.

In 2009, fifteen years after installation, *RAY + JULIE* was named in The Guardian's Top Ten Secret Public Artworks of Britain, alongside Tony Cragg, Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth and Antony Gormley. In October 2010 the wall behind *JULIE* was adorned with a huge Converse advert featuring New Order's Bernard Sumner as *RAY* was daubed with HULME MASSIVE and MCFC graffiti. I then received a phone call to say that an eviction notice from Mersey Travel had been taped to the chairs. Phoning them I was told that London Road is to be widened by about a metre in the next few years to accommodate the much-discussed return of trams to Liverpool city centre. Describing the chairs to the man, he laughed and said "well, as they're set that far back they may be ok and, who knows, they may even be used as a tram stop."

Daytrippers

All that remains at Bellgrove are two thinly painted stripes on the retaining wall pillars, left from a slight overpainting when the frame colour was changed. As I type this, I sit at Birkenhead Park, a railway station built to the exact same template as Bellgrove. The station recently gained some new public artwork from Stephen Hitchin¹⁰, a series of metal discs forged in strong black metal placed high up on poles to reduce interference. The images contained with the sculptures are well-known views of Merseyside such as the Liver Birds, Beatles, football, Grand National and the two Cathedrals. In amongst the regular icons I also see two pieces of public art illustrated, namely Antony Gormley's *Another Place* and Taro Chiezo's *Superlambanana*. It strikes me that this has become public art about public art. It is train station public art as advert and historic signpost, reinforcing permanence with permanence and placing public artworks on tourist maps. It is taking place as place rather than point of departure. It does not fill thinking time.

Unlike Birkenhead Park, Bellgrove station had neither clock nor electronic announcement board. I collaborated with aromatherapist Angela Trainer to coat a large piece of canvas with the Lilac Haze colour and stretch it over the complete billboard frame. As the late evening sun hit Bellgrove, shadows of pylons slowly and quietly drifted across the calming surface, subtly altering the flow of time. Betty stood waiting for the delayed Airdrie train, thinking about the positions of the planets and what to have for tea.

The leaving of the tunnel



⁹ Total manufacture, install and artists' fees budget for project in 1995 for *RAY + JULIE* was £1,000. Total budget for the 2-week billboard ten years later was £650.

¹⁰ <http://www.dupecreative.com/clientsites/stephenhitchin/blog.html>

For years Liverpool was shrinking. From a list of artists I collaborated with in 2003, many have sailed further; Pdraig to the port of Naples, Becky to Sheffield, Stefania and Fabrizio to the west coast of Ireland, Kelly to Birmingham, Hilary to Bristol, Clive to the east coast of Scotland and, like thousands before them, Duncan and Rodney set sail for New York. Sitting every day on the 433 I occasionally felt the same melancholy I experienced as a youngster in Glasgow viewing a mediated Liverpool through *Scully* (escaping to a Liverpool game), *The Stowaways* (escaping on the Mersey Ferry), *One Summer* (escaping to Wales) or pictures of Echo & The Bunnymen in Icelandic landscapes. They always seemed to be on the move, hopping on buses, trains and boats to escape.

Silence, part 2!

As the 433 approaches the tunnel from the Liverpool side, there is a prominent 96-sheet billboard. In 2005 I invited Bill Drummond, one-time Bunnymen manager, to produce a new billboard for the site. His work spelled out *NOTICE – NO MUSIC DAY* in large red letters on a white ground. This was the start of Bill's campaign to stage a day with no music which led to his 17 choir project proclaiming the death of recorded music in favour of shared or remembered sounds.

Taking the 433 bus over to Liverpool to prepare a work for another survey at the redeveloped Bluecoat, I start scribbling shared and remembered sounds, taking care not to miss my stop.

Recordings from a dark city (2011-1995)

- The sound of sixty-two Liverpool artists, vehemently debating in The Irish Centre, before it closed
- The sound of artists sitting in The Monro, before it became a trendy eatery, discussing Jamie Reid
- The sound of echo, echo, echo, echo
- The sound of the kilted man bashing away on his rising piano at The Phil, prior to *The Bicycle Thief*
- The sound of a cold Le Mystere Des Voix Bulgares in a cold Catholic Cathedral
- The sound of the rickety old wooden Cyclone rollercoaster at Southport's Pleasure Beach, before it closed
- The sound of Jack Roberts trying to light his roll-up before exploding into Heart Attack at the Everyman
- The sound of snow falling in Sefton Park in April, as a man explains to his son how to build an igloo
- The sound of being verbally harassed in Toxteth Sports Centre while playing badminton
- The sound of George McK on TV talking about negative scouse images
- The sound of old bowlers in Victoria Park in Widnes – *y'er supposed tae learn at xxxing school – no efter it*
- The sound of Captain Hans Tibor chatting away in the Pumphouse before sailing The Coastal Bay to Dublin
- The sound of Tony Chestnut's poems
- The sound of Sheil Park exploding and Josie's tears
- The sound of The Melvins at FACT
- The sound of Rampworx
- The sound of Museum Man, before it closed
- The sound of Paul Rooney's red 12" *Lucy over Lancashire*
- The sound of Joey Barton
- The sound of CJ taunting his kid sister in the grid
- The sound of Melt Banana downstairs in the Magnet
- The sound of dripping water in the Williamson Tunnels
- The sound of Irvine Welsh happily guzzling Lucozade at Lime Street
- The sound of a grenade going off across the road from 60 Canning Street

- The sound of the Leeds & Liverpool canal in Jeff Young's *River Fever* at the Unity
- The sound of wee feral kids chucking stones at you while in the allotment by St. Michaels
- The sound of chatting with Miranda Sawyer and Anthony Wilson about *tenantspin*
- The sound of Bob Paisley's son discussing stained glass in St. Peter's Church in Woolton
- The sound of *Teenage Kicks* in The Swan as John Peel dies
- The sound of an oak leaf falling on the ground outside the Palm House, at two in the morning, with Chris Watson
- The sound of Liverpool University's anechoic chamber
- The sound of the Woolton woman who wanted to smash glass
- The sound of Suggs singing *Shipbuilding* in the Magnet
- The sound of whining in Ye Cracke, or the Cambridge, Albert, Crown, Pilgrim, Grapes, Post Office, Coopers or
- The sound of hip-hop projects in Walton jail and a young inmate crying *I just want to be a famous DJ*
- The sound of Barry on Bold Street
- The sound of the 433 bus through the Mersey Tunnel
- The sound of *SuperBlock*
- The sound of dub spoons featuring Doug Wimbish (Madonna, Talking Heads) and John McGuirk (*tenantspin*), in Greenland Street
- The sound of homing pigeons flying from Arena Studios on Duke Street, before they closed, courtesy of Rosie Farrell
- The sound of Brian Eno playing *It's gonna rain* in Hope University
- The sound of Delta Taxi drivers discussing Yoko
- The sound of reading Frank Cottrell-Boyce's *Millions* to your children while on holiday in Carla Bayle, France
- The sound of The Turner Prize going to Wallinger and imagining one hundred people in bear costumes standing still on Crosby Beach
- The sound of the Torres Song
- The sound of the caller from Huyton on Roger Phillips
- The sound of disco music coming from the 24" long model of The Royal Iris in New Brighton's 1932 Boating Pond
- The sound of expressing gratitude to bus drivers

SuperBlock by Jeff Young



tenantspin, Jeff Young and Alan Dunn *SuperBlock*, 2002, photograph: Sean Halligan

You might not think it to look at the place but, for me the part of Liverpool on which the Sheil Park high rises stood is saturated in myth. During the Second World War my father played in the air raid shelters on this piece of land, collecting shrapnel, pretending to be a Messerschmitt as he ran wild in the blitzed ruins of the city. My mum and dad met – passing notes through the railings that divided the boys playground from the girls – at Bowler Street school. From a balcony high up in the Sheil Park tower block I looked down at the empty space where the school once stood and I could see my dad in 1940 playing football and wowing my swooning 10 year old mother.

In the 1960's I saw these tower blocks being built. In the late 1800's Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show came to Newsham Park across the road and when we were kids we used to gaze into the boating lake looking for the bodies of children someone told us had been drowned there for being naughty. As I explored Sheil Park and its stories my own stories seeped into the mythology of the place and it became more haunted and strange.

In 2003 we sent out questionnaires to tenants asking them for stories; we spent afternoons drinking tea with people who had lived most of their lives in the sky. Time and time again people told us how much they loved living in these buildings. A woman called Josie Crawford talked to me of beauty. When she woke in the morning she could hear the sound of the milk man all those floors below and in the evening she told me she could see the river and it shone like sweet wrappers. I asked Josie Crawford to write down her feelings about living in the sky and when I came to write the script for the BBC Radio 3 play *SuperBlock* about these towers I used Josie's words almost verbatim because she was a better poet than I'd ever be. The notion that someone could find beauty and value in a building considered to be a dystopian hell hole was inspirational. Josie Crawford had re-imagined this place just as my father had done in the Blitz and now it was up to us to re-imagine the place again.

We imagined a 14,000 foot high rise stretching into space, built from the bricks and rubble of 65 demolished tower blocks. The ghosts and traumas of those "deceased" tower blocks somehow possessed the fabric of the SuperBlock and contaminated the new building. Some tenants suffered from vertigo and nightmares, some tenants ran amok, some tenants entered into the enervated dream states of the oxygen starved and some feared the world on the ground miles below where, it was rumoured civil wars raged.

If you ask old people to tell you a story nine times out of ten they will tell you about the past. Because we didn't want this play to be a nostalgic remembrance piece, dwelling on the cobbles and the old flat cap, we asked them to think themselves into the future and to then imagine themselves looking nostalgically back at the year 2003. Characters look back fondly on the hits of Kylie Minogue. The ghost of Rio Ferdinand is seen at night in the Liverpool sky over the sweet wrapper river.

A resident told me a story about an old man she met every day in the lift. He always carried a bowling bag and she always wondered what was in it. She never asked and they never said much more than hello and goodbye. Then one day he wasn't in the lift and he had disappeared. Old men had disappeared for years from buildings just like this and one could only assume that they had walked away forever, walked into myth. When the council broke into the old man's flat it was completely empty apart from a self portrait over the fireplace. The man became a character in the radio play whose bowling bag was a kind of miniature removal vehicle. For twenty years he had been systematically moving out of his flat and when he'd moved the last few bits and pieces he was free to wander the globe. The cavities and echo chambers of the high rises became an integral part of the character of the play and I imagined lost children living in ventilator shafts and ducting. Such a child was brilliantly brought to life by the actor Emily Aston as a character called Zoo, lost in the echoing world of the buildings ventricles and veins. Composer Skyray devised ambient evocations of these haunted atmospheres. The building was alive; you could hear its asthmatic breathing.

We held a public meeting at the Flying Picket chaired by Radio Merseyside's Roger

Philips. The announcement by the architect that the building of the SuperBlock was scheduled to go ahead was met with outrage. One tenant rose to her feet and, in withering terms told the panel they ought to be ashamed of themselves for foisting this monstrosity on future generations. She had to be reminded that this was make believe but as she sat down I still think she believed it was really going to happen.

Some of the residents had political points to make; Jim Jones was a left leaning firebrand who had issues with the planners and architects who had built these monstrosities in the first place. Even though Jim had an axe to grind about the way tenants had been treated over the years he was fiercely proud of his home and had declared his intention to barricade himself in when the day of demolition came. (He would actually go on to be cast as a character in the radio play). From Jim's political perspective and insight we fashioned a demonic, visionary architect, brilliantly played by George Costigan who had come to visit the SuperBlock and see for himself the nightmare, Ballardian tower he had carelessly imagined for these people to live in. Through the magic of radio drama we were able to confront this monstrous egotist with some of the questions Jim had never been allowed to ask the architects and planners. At the end of his journey, appalled by the monster he created, faced with the fury of some of the tenants and the madness of others, the architect has no choice but to leap to his death from the very summit of his visionary folly.

Before he leaps he has an encounter with the ghost of a small boy – and this boy presented himself to me on the day we went to witness a high rise demolition. As the ghost dust of the collapsing building enveloped the audience there in the dust on a hopscotch grid stood a small boy in short trousers looking directly at me and sending a shiver down my spine. His likeness was captured forever by photographer Sean Halligan. That boy was my father in 1940, playing in the rubble of the blitz on a piece of land where the high rises had yet to be built. Time and the world had collapsed, just like the real Sheil Park flats and just like imaginary SuperBlock¹¹.

¹¹ Thanks to SuperBlock director Kate Rowland, Alan Dunn, Amy Buscombe, Paul Simpson, Sean Halligan, the cast of SuperBlock and Jim, Freda and Josie.