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Generous, but no' social (twenty year voyage beyond the bath-tub)

Abstract

This article reflects upon two projects in Glasgow (1990-91) and Liverpool (2008) self-initiated by artist and lecturer Alan Dunn. Both projects evolved from and were disseminated in the context of daily public transport journeys. As thousands of people are repetitively shuttled around cities and artists sit amongst them, grey areas of mental spaces open up, spaces that Dunn proposes are conducive to creative experiences. He reflects upon art away from the studio, home, work or commerce place, when the act of moving is passive and responsibility-free. The two projects highlight certain themes, strategies, problems and rhizomic thinking around public art. Is it public if one does not know what the public think of it? Can it be public if it is neither social nor conversational? Are the envisaged stories stronger than those overheard? Can it be public if it is in the background and goes unnoticed? Is public an intention rather than a state?



Figure 1 Cover of 'Bellgrove' catalogue, designed by Alan Dunn & Pavel Büchler, 1991

Generous, but no' social (twenty year voyage beyond the bath-tub)

It's been going on for about a year, I don't know, it keeps changing. It's a bit like Twin Peaks. 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....

I am sitting on the train traveling to art school when I overhear this conversation. It is 1991 and parts of Glasgow are still buzzing from a year as European Capital of Culture. The Gulf War rages, the national census is being carried out and I am in the last of six years studying in the Environmental Art Department at Glasgow School of Art (GSA). The couple glances over at a blue and green poster that simply reads 'Walk a million miles'. At the time there are very few established outlets for young artists to show their work in Glasgow, making the emergence of Environmental Art at GSA all the more pertinent.

Founded by David Harding in the mid-1980s with the Artists' Placement Group mantra 'the context is half the work', the Department encouraged us from an early stage to find our own locations in the city and negotiate permissions to present temporary artworks in public contexts. In my second year I try to create a piece of work for the arches of an East End railway station, but lack the means or know-how to see it through. However, the notion that one could put art in places where family, friends or enemies could stumble across it – or ignore it - seems very exciting for a young creative person brought up on museum art.

'The Bellgrove Station Billboard Project' 1990-91

I travel to and from art school on the same train almost every day for six years, from a suburban environment in the east to the castle on the hill in the west that is GSA. The journey goes from Easterhouse (community art, home to aunt) to Garrowhill (home to parents) to Shettleston (home to aunts) to Carntyne (home to aunt and uncle) and into Bellgrove.

Traveling east to west there is a turning point in this journey as the train pulls into Bellgrove station. New possibilities ask the next generation to go in new directions, against the grain of tradition. Bellgrove is near the home my parents had before I was born. They moved further east. I am 22 and quiet, but filled with Environmental Art's drive and ambition and curious to travel west. Celtic Football Club and the dying steel forges recede into the grey fog as the train pulls out of Bellgrove and slips west on to High Street, the city centre and the art school. For those not familiar with the line, it submerges and travels underground after Bellgrove, slipping under the abattoir and only emerging into daylight again after it has passed through the city centre.

This is the spot for art for my public, a familiar public. I know their houses, backgrounds, haircuts, words, football allegiances, loves and hates. In the late 1800's an anonymous photographer calling himself The Shadow documented this grey East End and in 1988 I had started to put work on billboards across the East End, exploring some of the area's landmarks and myths.

The Scottish Arts Council crucially change their grants policy in 1990, making it possible for students to access small funds. I apply for, and am awarded, the princely sum of £1,000 and alongside another £2,000 raised from private sources, I am able to design, construct and install a 20x5ft panoramic billboard across the Victorian retaining wall at Bellgrove, presenting seventeen new hand-painted posterworks and publishing a catalogue designed by the artist and project participant Pavel Büchler. The rail and billboard companies, ScotRail and Mills & Allen (now JC Decaux) are incredibly casual, cooperative and curious as to what will happen.

The posters can only be seen from the Bellgrove Station platform and the trains passing through it. I curate the billboard for a year, producing works for it alongside invited pieces from fellow students, established artists such as Dean of CalArts Thomas Lawson and a wider mix of participants including the acclaimed Glasgow writer James Kelman and urban planner Hildebrand Frey from the University of Strathclyde. The billboard is a backdrop to the 9,300 train passengers using Bellgrove each week and a loop is established

between myself as member of that commuting public, as project instigator and as producer of content. I give no theme to participants but encourage an experiential visit to the station beforehand followed by a trip to a local Scottish Italian café. Without fully understanding why, I plan The Bellgrove Station Billboard Project as a passive project with nothing appearing on the billboard, platform or local media giving away the changing boards as art.

From Kelman we use a short extract about memorial towers as the Station lies in the shadow of the two serrated Camlachie tower blocks. German-born artist Brigitte Jurack deploys fake brick wallpaper to camouflage her billboard against the wall and delicately weaves white footprints over the surface in a figure of eight and Pavel Büchler's mirrored texts reverberate through train windows' double glazing. Craig Richardson, then an Environmental Art student, offers us the text piece 'Slowly all around you will pass away' to take home as snow falls and our screens fill with images of precision bombing. Another recent graduate from Environmental Art, Douglas Gordon's *Walk a million miles* coincides with Billy Graham preaching at Celtic Park. My parents had met at a Billy Graham rally in Glasgow in the 1950s and I sit on the train thriving in those personal connections and overhearing the couple enjoying the *Twin Peaks* (Lynch, 1990) nature of it. Thomas Lawson plans his work to coincide with the Sunday of a Rangers-Celtic game at Celtic Park and presents us with a painting of the police as real police patrol the station platform. In the first month after Glasgow's European Capital of Culture status, I seek an image that has not appeared in any context during 1990. I choose a still of Archie Gemmill moments after he scored *that goal* in the 1978 World Cup, five seconds of sheer brilliance from 14,000 years



Figure 2 Bellgrove billboard being installed, September 1990



Figure 3 Brigitte Jurack, 'Untitled', wallpaper and padded velvet



Figure 4: Craig Richardson, 'Slowly all around you will pass away', paint on paper, Bellgrove, 1991.



Figure 5: Alan Dunn, '68 minutes', paint and collage on paper, Bellgrove, 1991.

(1) One story suggests that Satie was having lunch with the painter Fernand Leger but the restaurant's orchestra was so loud that the diners had to leave. Satie responded with a set of new compositions that would become part of the surroundings. His 'Furniture Music' premiered in March 1920 during the intervals of a play at the Galerie Barbazanges in Paris.

of Scottish history, five years before the goal is immortalized in *Trainspotting* (Boyle, 1996) and ten years before Scottish choreographer Andy Howitt devises a dance sequence based on it. Some people glance over at the billboards and smile, exclaiming warmly 'It's Archie Gemmill!' Fellow student Ross Sinclair proposes a black frame, Union Jack and the word HATE. The billboard company agrees, but get cold feet when installing it and slide the sheets one section to the right – HAT! My first experience of discussing ethics with public bodies leads to the word HAT being removed. The billboard then suffers the project's only vandalism, some red spray-painted NFs (National Front), before we arrange for this to be pasted over with white, and Sinclair redesigns the poster with a red-less flag and the word ACHE.

Bellgrove station has neither clock nor electronic announcements. I collaborate with local aromatherapist Angela Trainer to coat a large piece of canvas with the relaxing lilac haze colour and stretch it over the complete billboard frame. As the late evening sun hits Bellgrove, shadows of pylons slowly and quietly drift across the calming surface. I watch a woman waiting for her train and glancing across at the shadows, wondering whether she is thinking of planetary alignment or which bread to buy. The exact location of Bellgrove is crucial as, for me, beyond the personal it represents the meeting of the grass-roots community art of Easterhouse and Cranhill in the east with the Avant-garde billboard art of the west.

I heard recently of an Environmental Art public art project which began with students throwing darts at a map of Glasgow and being asked to respond to that location, which requires a different set of skills (and is perhaps less about a journey *through a location*). A fading white advertising strapline runs high up along the retaining wall at Bellgrove, reading OPEN TO THE PUBLIC. The Bellgrove project is public in the sense that it is outdoors and shared. A popular book at the time introduces me to the notion of Schrödinger's Cat and as a young student I embrace this, thinking that to ask people what they think of the posters would be to draw attention to them in a leading manner, identifying them as art and bringing them to the foreground. The only true way to gauge impact is for me to sit on that train as normal and observe and listen. As Erik Satie screamed at audiences in 1918 as they stopped chatting to listen to his background music, 'Keep talking during my work!' (1)

Many people on these trains never look at the art and this does not perturb me. The intention of the project is for a young artist to explore creativity en route to art school rather than wait to cross a threshold of new thinking. I am not interested in viewing figures, feedback, reports, monitoring or evaluation and this freedom is backed up by the collaborating rail and billboard agencies who are not quite so obsessed with such outcomes as we now seem to be. Their interest is altruistic. I am of the mindset that when one reads a good book, one does not necessarily contact the author straight away. One could argue that Bellgrove is public but not social as there is no way of contacting me about it while it takes place. It is generous in giving for free and also passive, an experiment by a young student granted some resources and trust by his city.

The billboard at Bellgrove is removed after 12 months and all that remains are two vertical strips of paint at either end where the frame has been over-painted. Bellgrove became a planting of seeds and its impact comes months and years later. Through word of mouth, Bellgrove is posthumously featured in *Artscribe International* and as a model its legacy continues with each year bringing new requests for the catalogue as tracking down artists becomes easier. I now lecture art students and ask them to start thinking creatively en route to art school rather than wait to swipe into a creative environment. The exact location of one's work strikes me as fundamental to its reading and when artists are in a loop of audience as well as producer, we are given a certain license, and even responsibility, to inject something thought provoking in the time and space between A and B.



Figure 6 Ross Sinclair, 'Four-letter word', paint on paper



Figure 7 Bellgrove billboard after removal, 1991

‘Soundtrack for a Mersey Tunnel’ 2008

Take the 33a bus (every 30 minutes on the hour and half hour) which drops off on Jubits Lane by the Smithy Manor pub, or the 33 bus (every 10 minutes) which drops off at Forest Road, close to the former Colliery gates. The 17a also provides an hourly service (at 27 minutes past the hour) from Hall Street in the town centre (2).

As a non-driver, public transport is unavoidable. Public transport is the moving audience, shuttling around cities in metal boxes giving us time to think, grey areas between necessary tasks. Beyond making sure we do not miss the stop, we dispose of responsibility, opening up space for creative thinking. We can now open laptops, connect to the world while gazing out at our roads, farms or cities.

Fifteen years after Bellgrove, I am living on Merseyside and working as lead artist on the community Internet TV project tenantspin (3). Every day I take the 433 bus through one of the Mersey Tunnels to and from work and as I wait to see that illuminated 433 on the front of the bus, I think of John Cage’s silence. Or rather, that the duration, and whatever occurs within that duration, is the subject.

On the 433 we sit back and are shuttled between the Wirral peninsula and Liverpool in a forty-year old Mersey Tunnel that has seen better days. People listen to their iPods and talk on their phones, signals drifting in and out under the river. I time the journeys at an average of 2’33” and wonder what might change if everyone could listen to the same sounds just for that 2’33”.

People have their own playback devices and I arrive at the simple idea of producing a compilation CD which is given away randomly at the tollbooths each vehicle has to stop at. Each track lasts exactly 2’33” and there are only 433 copies of the CD. While the compilation is very considered, I decide to dispense with control over distribution. Tunnel managing agents Mersey Travel agree to assist and stock the CDs by one of the tollbooths on the premise that they may give one out to the 433rd driver on any given day, give away 43 in one week or go 433 days without distributing any. David Harding’s notion of the nominated Town Artist as part of a community producing work interests me but I want to explore a more anonymous background role.

I raise funds from the Arts Council to cover production costs. The Soundtrack for a Mersey Tunnel CD brings together students, artists, writers and musicians, an audio Bellgrove flying around inside cars and buses filled with ideas of claustrophobia, drowning, Vespas, Cage’s silence, Morse code and wormholes.

I enjoy the fact that a driver may one day be handed a CD or that the Liverpool coach, travelling under the river to a pre-season game at Tranmere, might acquire a copy and that Jamie Carragher may sit going through the Mersey Tunnel listening to Pavel Büchler and Matt Wand’s edited silences from John Cage LPs.

Sound artist Chris Watson donates 2’33” of crystal clear underwater recordings from the Galapagos Islands and visual artist James Chinneck digitally stretches the phrase Are we nearly there yet? to last 2’33”. I arrange for the tunnel to be closed one day to record Wirral-based poet Roger Cliffe-Thomson reading his mythical tunnel poems and writer Jeff Young and musician Pete Wylie composing their dark tale of childhood fears of trips under the Mersey to New Brighton. I collaborate with artist Wibke Hott to form an impromptu choir with some Tunnel workers and we record them singing deep down under the air vents. I invite students to produce works to sit alongside more established artists and recent graduate Claire Potter creates ‘Under the bed’, a softly spoken vocal piece from a female laying under a bed, seductively poking her finger up through the mattress. Listening to this while travelling through the tunnel brings a real sense of impending doom and temptation.

The notion of giving an audience a choice over whether or not to experience public art is one that interests me with the Soundtrack for a Mersey Tunnel. In 1949 the Muzak Corporation begins piping music into the Washington DC

(2) Public transport directions to Jaume Plensa’s ‘Dream’ on the official Dream website, <http://www.dreamsthelens.com> (accessed October 2010). Dream is a large permanent sculpture in St.Helens by the Barcelona-based artist, unveiled in 2009.

(3) <http://www.tenantspin.org> (accessed October 2010).



Figure 8 Mersey Tunnel, replica 433 bus



Figure 9 Soundtrack for a Mersey Tunnel CD sleeve design

(4) I start each University lecture with this George Wyllie quote 'It should be obvious that an adventurous voyage is most unlikely in the shallow waters of a bath-tub. But the illusion of that possibility persists and is exemplified by art that never sails beyond the gallery' from the essay 'Twenty year voyage beyond the bath-tub'.

public transport system and is taken to court by two passengers claiming a violation of the constitutional right to privacy. At one point I explore the possibility of transmitting sounds from a boat moored on the Mersey or broadcasting sounds through the emergency tannoy systems but I am drawn to a more passive distribution means.

For the cover of the CD I buy my son a tiny replica of the 433 bus and photograph him playing with it outside a section of the tunnel closed down in the 1960s. I watch him make noises during the little journeys. On the back of the CD is an image of my parents looking out at a tanker on the Mersey, directly above where the tunnel – my tunnel – burrows through the water and mud. I recall a conversation from my student days with visiting artist George Wylie in which he traces a loss of creativity to the day the Glasgow shipyards closed. Wylie constructs spectacular sculptural works celebrating the means of travel, namely the bicycle, locomotive or boat. While his 'Straw Locomotive' never arrived and went up in flames hanging from a crane by The Clyde, his 'Paper Boat' did make the voyage to New York with him in it. I naively retort that my generation's engineering masterpieces are tower blocks and tunnels. He sailed the great oceans and I want my own adventurous journeys on urban trains and buses (4). The CD sleeve presents me as both son and father caught between playing with little buses and seeing transportation in a more pragmatic industrial mode.

Andrew Nairne, the then Director of the Third Eye Centre (now Centre for Contemporary Art under the stewardship of Francis McKee) called Bellgrove New Community Art which at the time I understood as presenting an eclectic and high quality mix of students and artists in a contemporary post-mural framework. It may also mean championing the personal voice within a shared-authorship project. Bellgrove is a personal coming of age voyage, breaking free of one community and travelling to the threshold of another, literally a journey into the void as the train leaves Bellgrove and slides underground. Soundtrack for a Mersey Tunnel is also personal, about traveling alone, being a father and wanting to reach out to people during that 2'33" with voices other than my own.

Every week I sit at Birkenhead Park station to meet my daughter from the train after school. The station is almost a clone of Bellgrove, complete with tower block in the background. Last year it became home to a new public sculpture by Stephen Hitchin entitled 'Time and Place', a permanent piece comprising large circular discs mounted high up on black poles away from vandalism. They are installed at the end of the platform where very few people stand and the lazer-cut imagery on the discs is a collection of well-known Merseyside icons such as the Liver Building, Grand National and the football clubs. Set amongst these icons are Antony Gormley's 'Another Place' and Tara Chiezo's 'Superlambanana'.

This is public art *about public art*, reinforcing the more permanent and monumental in a permanent monument. I detect none of Hitchin's own history in the work and subtly the sculpture suggests that people are – or should be - using public transport for leisure or tourist purposes; in a post-European Culture Capital and Biennial climate, the sculpture becomes a mere signpost along a route, declaring *here are some venues and public artworks you may wish to visit by public transport in this thriving urban context*.

Sculptures such as 'Time and place' reinforce the notion that public transport must serve only *to get us there*. One glance at any car advert illustrates the freedom and creativity one may enjoy while travelling but choose to publicly share a journey and *the act of arriving* becomes the only concern.

If the context really is half the work, the amount of meaningful context one can gleam from any given location has interested me ever since Bellgrove. I have found myself most challenged with sites and situations which I use and face every day. Kraftwerk's 'Trans Europe Express' and Brian Eno's 'Music for airports' both toy with the notion of being heard in the context of moving. The Lumiere Brothers' 'Arrival of a Train at a Station' may have shocked viewers but it was Mitchell & Kenyon's early footage taken *from trams* which introduced the notion of the tracking shot and the potential for cinema to tell stories and to dream.

The urban spaces opened up by public transport become thinking spaces, slicing through aspects of modern life



Figure 10 Soundtrack for a Mersey tunnel, recording Jeff Young in an empty tunnel, 2008



Figure 11 Study for sleeve of CD, Birkenhead

that are regulated to deny us time to think and dream. As an inter-city commuting lecturer in Contemporary Art, I would like to take this a step further and propose a future art school that exists solely on a train (5). We speak to students at interviews of *leaving home* for the first time or *arriving at University*, often overlooking the journey between. Communities of part-time lecturers would chop and change at Crewe, swapping modules on laptops and beginning their seminars before allowing students to gaze out of windows to dream up new visions and sounds for their daily journeys.

'Bellgrove' and 'Soundtrack for a Mersey Tunnel' both advocate the local and the repeated daily view as against the touring public art(ist) of the Biennial circuit in which an artist from City A proposes an artwork for City B after a relatively brief visit. They are often shuttled around in a car and shown the local sights and sites and the artist's proposed work is then organized (facilitated or project managed) by a younger creative worker in City B. The manner in which the artist physically arrives at City B is rarely part of the work – it is about *the arrival itself*.

The two projects are also based on idealized views of public transport, devoid of delays, abuse, dirt, noise, sadness or anger. Eno devised Music for airports while sitting waiting in Cologne Airport dreaming up music to match the impressive architecture. Musicians Black Dog recently countered his acclaimed suite with their own 'Music for real airports' proclaiming a more accurate response to environments which are frustrating, dehumanizing and catalysts for some of the worst in human behaviour (6).

In terms of 'Soundtrack', the reality is that the journey through the Mersey Tunnel on the 433 bus is so loud that hearing anything without high quality headphones is difficult. Are we nearly there yet? represents the boredom of the journey but reality should never stop us dreaming and planning for an ideal society of sensitive airports and humane transport systems.

I sit on this train every week travelling from Liverpool to Leeds Metropolitan University to lecture, armed with laptop and glancing out the window for possibilities. As I type, I have installed a billboard image of the moon at Leeds Station alongside a little fragment from Apollo 8, offering passengers the chance to contemplate travel and journeys on a different scale. We are negotiating with the station to announce an *Express to the moon* over their tannoy system and invite someone in an astronaut outfit to slowly walk across the concourse.

Without ever arriving at the planned destination, Apollo 13's *journey* was enough to make the film. If one does takes the 33a bus to see Plensa's Dream, chances are that a choice has been made to experience public art rather than to experience the 33a bus journey. If during the journey one glances over to see Archie Gemmill or are suddenly handed a soundtrack CD, one is being asked to make a choice – accept everything that happens during the voyage as the art, or sit back, close your eyes and wait until the destination is reached.

The couple takes one final glance over at the Bellgrove poster: '... maybe it's a subliminal form of ... yes, but there's also something dangerous.... Yes, anyway, as I was saying'

They return to their pre-Bellgrove conversation.

(5) In a related experiment, the Unite Union are planning a 'Learning on a train' day between Wrexham and London. See http://www.unitetheunion.org/resources/lifelong_learning_home_page/learning_skills_case_studies/learning_on_a_train_nov_2010.aspx (accessed October 2010).

(6) Some titles from Black Dog's suite include 'Strip Light Hate', 'Delay', 'Sleep Deprivation' and 'Passport Control'. Eno's four titles are simply '1/1', '2/1', '1 /2' and '2/2'.

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