



Singing the sound of silence

Alan Dunn

In a talk at ZKM Gallery in Karlsruhe in March 2001, David Harding recounts the tale of Douglas Gordon being asked by a curator, “What were you taught in the Environmental Art Department?”, and Douglas replying, “To sing. Not how to sing but simply, to sing.” I understand this, but I think that I learnt something different in my time in Environmental Art – the same time as Douglas – and that was to keep quiet.

It seemed important to me to step back from situations and quietly observe, whether that be in and around the murals in South Chicago, on scaffolding attached to the gable-ends of Blackhill, Glasgow amongst the complex words and ideas of Richard De Marco or John Latham, visiting the Barlinnie Special Unit in Wormwood Scrubbs, walking through East Berlin before re-unification or making the long trips to experience the National Review of Live Art in London.

We were asked to find our own relationships with different social situations, and I took this to understand that as ‘social artists’ we needn’t always be in the centre of it all.

I left Environmental Art in 1991 and spent ten years away from Glasgow, ‘in the field’, working on an enormous mural in Hamilton, public interventions on the Raffles Estate in Carlisle, billboard posters with the Great North Run in Newcastle, posters with the Big Issue In The North, in Manchester, projects with schools in Cologne, Salford and Washington DC, hoardings and banners as part of Euro ’96, artworks with Wirral Drug Services, The Domino and Bowling Club of Widnes, The European Special Olympics, education work for the Tate Gallery, co-curating The Liverpool Billboard Project and some University work.

When handed the keys to the *tenantspin* project in May 2001, the vehicle had just been assembled, revved up once and then left, uncertain who could drive it or even which direction it could point. It had been set up by FACT, Superflex and HAT as an idealistic model for social change, bringing together elderly people with streaming technology, a real housing development programme and an enthusiastic arts agency.

There were grievances to air, life stories to share, songs to sing, spoons to play and a new approach to saying it all. What was needed, was someone quiet to make all this noise happen. In my *tenantspin* interview, when asked to describe some recent works that informed my thinking, I mentioned a little known piece by Douglas comprising the words, ‘A minute’s silence’, that appeared silently on an outdoor screen for sixty seconds, still my favourite work of his.

I was to be Malcolm McLaren bringing his New York Dolls ideas to London, with hopes of changing the system, and Sir Alex Ferguson arriving in Manchester to build on his work at Aberdeen. Whereas my Grandfather worked in the Govan shipyard near Ferguson’s house, he was, unlike Ferguson, a totally silent man all his life, getting on with the job and trying to get along with people. Yet he helped create some extraordinary structures in which other people journeyed.

FACT’s founder, Eddie Berg, called me into his office on my first day and outlined a desire for *tenantspin* to become an internationally-known model for good practice in the field of technology, social engagement, sustainable work, high quality commissioning and media art.

Such ambition for a ‘community project’, and this before access to broadband, Liverpool’s European Capital of Culture status or even the FACT Centre. I shared Eddie’s belief that the ingredients were there for something radical.

And *tenantspin* did become everything Eddie dreamt of. We took risks, had fun, inspired thousands, changed hundreds of lives, had bundles of PhDs written about us, surprised ourselves, made some noise, confused some people and left some silence. I recently heard that the filmmaker David Lynch has been watching *tenantspin* webcasts from his base in Hollywood. I also worked in a remote part of Cumbria recently, and the people there had heard of *tenantspin*. I took enquiries from the outback of Australia from someone “wanting a *tenantspin*”, and we presented work in India, Brazil, Korea, across Europe, America and the South Pole.

A *tenantspin* participant bizarrely even made it on to the Eurovision Song Contest, representing Britain in Latvia, in 2003. Unfortunately, that was the year there were claims that the sound had been sabotaged.

Still, even out-of-synch singing doesn’t get in the way of a good *tenantspin* story.



Left
Sunday Matinee The Red Day launch, *Foreign Investment* [detail], (2003).

Top
Will Self and *Josie Crawford* interview. (2002).