

# THE FOUR PRIVATE WORDS

Alan Dunn

## SUNSETS

Wednesday 20 January 2016 at 3.40pm and the sun drops behind the Holiday Inn hotel and Radio City Tower in Liverpool city centre. A large crowd, wrapped up against the cold, stare at the 31x7m digital screen adjacent to the lower section of the hotel. A series of bold four-word statements appear on the screen, each for ten seconds: LEARN TO READ (DIFFERENTLY), FEAR STIMULATES MY IMAGINATION, I REALLY HATE JANUARY, I NEED MORE WORDS. No questions, no products, no lifestyles, no special offers, no ... ADVANCED POETRY FOR BEGINNERS, YOUR PERSONAL IS POLITICAL, TIRED BOY AT BREAKFAST.



Sunday 16 September 2012 at 7.24pm and the sun drops behind the River Mersey. High up in Radio City Tower, a crowd of forty people sit as artist Jeff Young takes the microphone. Vidar Norheim gently taps the vibraphone and Martin Heslop caresses the bass guitar. Low sounds, high up. Jeff intones: "We will levitate like angels over Liverpool, a space station of strange travellers destined to be strangers in strange lands." We are the strange travellers he refers to. The audience turn from looking at Jeff, Vidar and Martin and watch the sun drop behind the river. We are bathed in the dying heat and light. As we stare out the space station we see Jeff in the reflection and the sun vanishes. Port city, not a single vessel on its river. He intones: "It is 1969. Neil Armstrong is moonwalking over Mathew Street. Lost in private contemplation. Watched by one hundred million eyes. I can see him from the top of St. John's Tower."

## TOWER

The tower we are in is officially St. John's Beacon but known locally as Radio City Tower after the commercial radio station it now accommodates. The 138m high tower is built in the year of the moon landing and used to have a rotating restaurant at the top, similar to Fernsehturm Berlin. In 2001, I invite artist Pavel Büchler to conduct a city tour for *Architecture Week* and he asks us to stand at the foot of the tower and contemplate the early days of live radio transmissions, conjuring up the RKO Radio Picture logo with its bolts of silent information.



## SCREEN

The large digital screen below the tower is installed to mark Liverpool's year as European Capital of Culture in 2008. It is a commercial advertising space and its graphic frame decorated with references to local landmarks such as the Liver Birds, the Beatles and the Mersey Ferry. There are also visual references to public art, such as Jorge Pardo's *Penelope*; public art about other public art. Or rather, public design about public art and public art as tourism. Over the years, the area around the screen presents numerous bland and meaningless straplines about the city: A WINNING SPIRIT, THE BEAT OF A DIFFERENT DRUM, FEEL ITS PASSIONS, A PLACE WHERE THINGS HAPPEN, USUALLY FOR THE FIRST TIME. These mantras are ingrained into a population over time. The screen faces the entrance and exit of the city's main railway sta-





tion, Lime Street, and is seen by an estimated one million adults per fortnight. WE LOVE REAL LIFE, STOP. RIGHT NOW. BREATHE, BREATHE IN. BREATHE OUT.

### BETWEEN

Every Monday morning I commute from Liverpool to Leeds to lecture in Art & Design. At Lime Street Station, I stop to observe the digital screen with the tower behind it. This is the between space, between home and work, the pause in commuting. I try to break up necessary journeys, as I do back in 1990 with the *Bellgrove* project, curating billboards for a railway station on the route between home and Glasgow School of Art. Artist Allan Kaprow calls it "doing life, consciously" - that is, being aware of one's immediate environment as the subject or location for artworks. In his publication *Cultural Hijack*, Ben Parry traces the relationship between contemporary art and the everyday as a series of encounters or moments, referencing Kaprow and philosopher Henri

Lefebvre. Kaprow claims that "the playground for experimental art was ordinary life" and Lefebvre writes: "everyday life is a primal arena for meaningful social change - the only arena - an inevitable starting point for the realisation of the possible." What if we interject some alternative mantras onto that digital screen, just for an hour? And what if we see the city from that tower and host a private event amidst all this public art? Do the mantras simply appear and then vanish forever? Do hidden private events ever truly dissipate into the city? HISTORY IN THE MAKING. VALUE! CRASH! CRUNCH! BOOM!

### PRIVATE

I begin developing some ideas for an event with Michael Jenkins, a recent graduate from Contemporary Art Practices at Leeds Beckett University. The tower closes to the public in 1983 and is one of the city's most private yet public architectural landmarks. We discover that anyone can hire two of the segments at the top of it for a modest cost. We are of course denied *public* arts funding for the event we title *PRIVATE*, but put together some funding from crowd-sourcing. We consider *PRIVATE* as a Happening. It occurs during the opening weekend of the Liverpool Biennial, but is not part of the festival of contemporary art. There are only forty invited people, a mix of artists, teenagers, pensioners, poets, musicians and writers. They are all



asked to wear blue and are served blue olives and Bols Blue curacao. We select fourteen artworks to present, from wall-mounted videos of helicopter trips to drunken bar dances, books and a weather balloon. Access to *PRIVATE* is by special invitation only and all guests receive a limited edition gift, designed by Amy Leak. *PRIVATE* is split across two rooms. The ZOO Room hosts a series of new performances, spoken word and music. The Silent Room offers guests a 30-track headphone soundtrack through which to consider the city below, with content from Scanner, John Baldessari, Haroon Mirza and a new work by Joy Division's Peter Hook. This room is also host to Foreign Investment's silent *1 square mile of sky* performance. They sit with maps of the city below and transplant land prices to sections of sky that they frame and capture in watercolour. We are up in the sky for two hours. We stand by the windows pointing out various specks on the city below, the silent city that we soundtrack. We look down towards Lime Street and see the structure behind the digital screen. It starts to drizzle. To the left of Lime Street we see St. George's Hall. We scan the headphone soundtrack to find excerpts



from Roxy Music's 1972 gig there. The Hall is bedecked with a new neon textwork from Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson as part of the Biennial. The four words flicker between *ThE riGHt tO RiGHt* and *ThE riGHt tO WrOnG*. The rain breaks and the sun drifts down behind the river.

### FOUR WORDS

Four years later, I hire the digital screen, known as Liverpool Media Wall, for one hour to present one-hundred ten-second animations. At the time, it is Europe's largest full-motion outdoor screen. I invite a range of people to create four-word statements that reflect upon January, a complex month in which many of us contemplate self-image, debt, the weather and our future. It is also a culturally-void month, grey and bleak. GET OFF OUR LAND, WOM-



ENS PAY IS LESS. Contributors range from the known (Andy Warhol c/o The Andy Warhol Foundation, David Shrigley, Fiona Banner, Gerhard Richter, Shaista Aziz, Jamie Reid) through to those for whom having a voice heard (seen) is a new experience that artists take for granted. I invite a priest, retired footballer, poet, imaginary school, seafarer, disability arts festival, community gardener, economist, urban planner and journalist to compose these statements that are seen by around 4,000 people between 3.00-4.00pm. Every few minutes we interject a fake advert from stock library footage of swaying palm trees or rotating confectionary, void of text, logo or strapline.



### ORDER AND CHAOS

*PRIVATE* and *FOUR WORDS* are disrupted by private lives. A teenage daughter is in the early throes of problematic gang grooming and grabs the alcohol. She flees and is chased through dark Liverpool streets as poet Roger Cliffe-Thompson reads in the tower. A drunk paces up and down outside Lime Street, his back to the screen, ranting at the growing crowd "Don't believe a fucking word the media tells you on that thing!" At that very moment, a huge throng of Exeter fans arrive for their FA Cup replay at Anfield. They look bemused but join the watching crowd. WE CAN DIE BETTER, REVOLUTION WILL BE TELEVISED, PEOPLE RESPOND TO INCENTIVES. Jayne Casey agrees to reform Pink Industry for one song only, *Don't let go*, high up in the tower, but their musician Ambrose Reynolds is the victim of a racist attack on Princes Avenue that afternoon. Throughout *PRIVATE* there is an extraordinary series of adhoc performances by Claire Potter, fuelled by the Bols Blue, leaving nobody quite sure where the confessional, drunk, domestic and public theatre begin and end. YOU CANT EAT IDENTITY, MONEY DISABLES US ALL, أنا امرأة (I AM A WOMAN), TRY MAKE AN IMPACT.

### ATLAS OF MIRRORS

Our city centre is glass and steel and private lives. Nothing exists once but in a multitude of planes. I wander inside Lime Street Station, luxuriating in not having to commute, and see reflections of LEARN TO READ (DIFFERENTLY) on the interior surfaces. In 1991 Pavel Büchler creates a mirrored work for *Bellgrove*, to be seen through reflected train surfaces. I watch the reflection of Marie-Anne McQuay staring down at Liverpool at night, listening to Stephen Vi-



tiello's recordings made from the windows of the World Trade Centre's 91st floor in 1999. I see a reflection of Jeff, intoning; "And now it's 2012 and we're standing on the observation deck, dreaming. Look. There are starships and space rockets zooming through the Liverpool skies." Reflections are a way of us avoiding "What do you think you're looking at?" and a way of avoiding direct conversation. The sun sets over the digital screen. The phrase LIME STREET BROKEN DREAMS shimmers across the 31m and a mirror image of the station appears (an image of us, rushing around every day, never stopping in the city, never offering alternatives, never not shopping, never claiming private spaces).

From where we are, how do we picture the world and ourselves? The arts community have different memories and experiences across the city. We access its towers, tunnels, closed buildings, billboards, empty shops, carparks, flagpoles, offices, radiowaves and pavements. We land projects gently over the city like particles falling over time.







Our projects are fleeting and require documentation to exist in any tangible form. Our project documentation becomes our instrument of navigation and our PDFs are our atlases. What do we see in ourselves when we use our city as playground? *PRIVATE* and *FOUR WORDS* reflect order amidst chaos, the static within the commute, personal statements next to abstract jingoism and reception against broadcast. Teenager: YOU OWE ME NOTHING. Community gardener: REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE.

## ENDS

Bob Wass creates a timelapse movie of the *FOUR WORDS* hour. Musician Forest Swords: YOU WILL NEVER LEARN. Artist Claire Potter: MATERIAL REFLECTION SOCIAL CONDITIONS. Poet Roger Cliffe-Thompson: JUST THINK OF SUMMER. Designer Jack Ehlen: MUM, CAN I HAVE. Artist Bryony Shakespeare-Smyth: VAGUE SYNOPSIS UNTITLED OPENLY. Filmmaker Rachel Reupke: TIRED BOY AT BREAKFAST. We recall again the RKO logo, the one that Orson Welles loves so much as it "reminds us to listen." The Radio City Tower stands empty, beaming out silent commercial messages while the screen at its base pumps out our silent mantras. Just for an hour, before Pavel Büchler's statements flash up and the sun appears from behind the Holiday Inn, slowly slides down behind the screen and we start all over again:

ENDS IN 10 SECONDS

ENDS IN 9 SECONDS

ENDS IN 8 SECONDS

ENDS IN 7 SECONDS

ENDS IN 6 SECONDS

ENDS IN 5 SECONDS

ENDS IN 4 SECONDS

ENDS IN 3 SECONDS

ENDS IN 2 SECONDS

ENDS IN 1 SECOND



## CREDITS AND REFERENCES

*PRIVATE* photographs by Leila Romaya, *FOUR WORDS* photographs by Brigitte Jurack, Mark McNulty, John McGlaughlin and Ashe McDonnell.

*PRIVATE*, 2012

<http://alandunn67.co.uk/private.html>

*FOUR WORDS*, 2016

<http://alandunn67.co.uk/fourwords.html>

*Bellgrove to Lime Street, return*, essay in *Cultural Hijack*, 2012

<http://alandunn67.co.uk/phdbellgrovertolimestreetreturn.pdf>

