

## Pull Up to the Bumper Baby

What exactly is the meaning of the word site in the concept of site specific? Or when borrowing the rhetorical device from the American writer Raymond Carver, what do we talk about when we talk about site specificity?

I would suggest that the obvious answer might be the most uninteresting one. Clearly, any kind of a site has its physical dimensions. The implications of a determined place and time. However, beside the physical aspects of a site, we have a wide variety of ways in which a given site is perceived, comprehended and conceptualized. We can also consider the content of a site as a particular type of taking part in a location: a location that comes around dressed in marvelous double-breasted suits and splendid Indian headwear called discourse, context or a situation. In one word, agenda.

With the help of a body of work by the Manchester based artists Nick Crowe and Ian Rawlinson, I will try to articulate a version of a site that is characteristically both discursive and political. The question is, quite frankly, what kind of discursiveness and politics am I talking about?

I will focus on three pieces by Nick and Ian. I am not going to talk about their work. Instead, my aim is to talk, walk, argue and quarrel with them: not in a sense of a unison or a consensus, but in the sense of what the philosophers with an ethical mind call a loving conflict.

I will start with a work called Two Lamps, from their series of investigations of the fast changes in urban environments. The work, in their own words, "documents the placement of two mock-Victorian picture lamps on the last remaining unsandblasted wall in an area that has been subject to rapid gentrification." Thus, what we have is an intervention. The artists have made their mark. They have altered a social space.

For me, the main point is that this alteration and intervention is very subtle. The work does not scream or shout, it does not seek to draw huge crowds or attention to itself. It is not a narcissistic piece of contemporary art. Whatever it does, it does it in a sly and sensible, almost sensual way, and it does it with a great consideration of the surroundings: it fits in - even when it is not supposed to.

The slyness - not shyness - of their strategy reminds me of a famous story by Isaiah Berlin who said, with reference to the works of the Russian writer Tolstoi, that there were two kinds of thinkers: a fox and a hedgehog. The latter is vehemently looking for a grand - style programme, model or answer, while the former is suspicious of all-encompassing narratives and searches instead for small-scale solutions and comprehensions.

In other words, the strategy in Nick and Ian's work is there to draw attention to things and matters that go normally unnoticed. Luckily or not, there is a proper term for this kind of activity. It is found in the writings of the French philosopher Michel Foucault, who towards the end of his life grew more and more interested in the possibilities of a subject to make a difference and fight back against the burden and impact of the processes of normalization, valid in and through our daily lives. Foucault's task was to find ways of stealing back the initiative, and trying to shape, from within, the ways we think, behave, eat, sleep and yes, have sex.

He called this process eventualization - a concept which gives away directly the core of its content. Thus, the task is to make an event out of a situation that is taken for granted. It is to stop, and to stare. Or to put two lamps with a hint of their past in a place where they do and do not belong. It is to mix the bag, trying to change the parameters of the site, of the ways of being in the place. It is the never-ending game that consists of playing with the gap between expectations and experience. Eventualization changes the rules of the game so slightly that while you still recognize what the object of your attention is, what happens next is beyond your control. It is a particular kind of game that necessarily acquires a strong sense of the past, the present and the wide-open field of future horizons.

So it is eventualization, in my view, that the works by Nick Crowe and Ian Rawlinson are about. Again and again, this begs and demands a more precise take. What kind of an event are they after? It is definitely not a spectacle. But it is neither just dry academic questioning, problematizing and analysis. For me, it seems to be a kind of totally earnest attitude that is backed up with an ironic smile. And please mind, it is a warm, not cool or cold, irony.

To make and shake an event so that it becomes meaningful to the agents and the probable audience, they have to put the finger where it burns and hurts. They do have to pull up to the bumper, and say, hi baby, how're you doing today. They do have to take the risk and do slightly wrong things in wrong places, which is, both concretely and descriptively speaking, a sure formula for getting your teeth knocked in.

For example, there is a work of theirs titled *Two First Impressions*, a piece which is deliciously easy to describe. It consists of two copies of Dale Carnegie's seminal business theory text "How to win Friends and Influence People." It is a classic of its kind, by one of the pioneers of the self-improvement manuals that later have turned into a huge industry of its own. It came out originally in 1936. Now, we see two books side by side in a presentation case. One has a green cover, the other is red – one is a Canadian and the other an American version. And yes, there is really nothing more that needs to be said. This work stands, and proudly, on its own.

The difference between green and red lends us an opening into the political implications of the work. To be sure, I am not talking about any kind of a direct effect, but about the special kind of a mind-set that *Two First Impressions* awakens. *Two First Impressions* is an event which can be situated in the major difference between politicking and politicization: a difference that, in politics, is far more than just another wonderfully boring play with words. This is not, apologies for my vulgar language, a wankers paradise.

In politicking versus politicization, politicking is a synonym for lobbying. It is a type of politics in which the actors already know. They have already decided, what it is that they want. They have made up their minds as to what is preferable, perhaps even what is correct, valid, right and what is definitely wrong in a given case. They know what they want and, with the means available for politicking, they go for it. Politicking is trying to achieve a predetermined outcome, a change of an agenda.

In the case of Dale Carnegie, politicking would be to argue against his views - his values, wants, interests, fears, and ultimately, the implications of his weltanschauung. It would mean that those doing the politicking already have a clear idea of an alternative to what is currently taken to be the valid truth.

But because Nick and Ian are not yet convinced, because they do not want to put forward and pursue an alternative way of organizing self-improvement, they are not politicking. Instead, in terms of politics, their activity is something that should be labeled as politicization. By putting side by side these two books, which are and are not the same, they have politicized their contents. Their act seems to be very modest, and seems to be executed without much evident presuppositions. But that is simply not true. They do have a point of view. There are dozens of highly vital deeply value-laden choices to make. They have something to say, they have an agenda that they participate in, and they can't claim otherwise. Remember, ignorance is never neutral.

They have highlighted a case that seems so innocent that it could seem to lack any political aspect. But the comparison blows us away. From one angle, the colours red and green, stop and go, are tainted with and the party political connotations: who is the real passively aggressive conservative force in a society? Or from the other side, we have the nation-states of Canada and the USA - and the whole truck load of connotations that come tumbling down with the simple setting side by side of idealizations of social democracy and the world hegemony. Something has been made political. Something is being questioned, opened up and scrutinized. The game is on, it has begun.

But how much of an effect can this kind of politicization have? One way to answer this would be to refer to slogans such as the personal is political or free your mind and your arse will follow, which I believe are, in fact, credible claims and statements, but that would be too easy. I don't want to push the button and jump out of the dilemma, out of the scene. I want to stay put, to stay with it.

To answer the question of the scale of the effect is to turn the table. In other words, if you are looking for an effect that you can calculate, verify and reproduce, please go and do politicking. With politicization, there is a different set of rules. Here the effect is never straightforward, but something else. It is something that could be called the beauty of the inherent failures of politicization. Of course, these acts do not change anything from black to white or back again, but they are not supposed to either. They are there to question, to open up the space for alternative ways of thinking and of being with - nothing more, nothing less.

And yes, I would claim that within this inherent and always present failure there is hope. There is and has to be a certain special kind of a blind leap: hope for a surprise, for the ability to see differently, to be aware of one's restrictions, prejudices and vanities. It is this hope that I see and sense in the work entitled Two Burning Bushes a film loop that shows two bushes burning with a flame that does not consume them. Something happens that breaks the symmetries of logic. It shakes the solid foundations of the linear consequences of the thing. This is an event that does not finish anything, but on the contrary, pushes something else forward, something that might emerge in the interaction of staying put, of being with.

Mika Hannula

Published in the exhibition catalogue for 'Nick Crowe and Ian Rawlinson',  
Manchester City Galleries, 2003.