

## The Design of Sighs

The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it  
John 3:6

My own voice cheered me, and, far more, the mind's  
Internal echo of the imperfect sound  
Wm. Wordsworth

### i. Vexed 'spiration

These visually arresting, aurally enigmatic new video works by Nick Crowe and Ian Rawlinson broach a complicated set of themes. Edging toward the manifestation of a curious and reflective kind of space, they achieve what they do obliquely, and they ask to be treated obliquely. So, let me start with an anecdote. It is almost personal.

A little while ago I attended a conference about art, society and, as an agent between them, the future freedom of art education. Terms like art, society and education make for a familiar conjunction, often summoning more weariness than excitement. But, the conference was anything but tedious. In part, this was by design. Artists and architects and critics attended. Politically minded artists and architects and critics, as well as activists from more easily recognised political spheres – labour representatives, camp workers and such, from around the world. These were people so different from each other when it came to their understanding of art, that there was no real chance for any pointless misunderstandings to arise; only real ones.

The absence of dreariness was also to do with the fact that 'conference' was quite the wrong word to describe what happened there. Certainly there was talking. And there were presentations and arguments. There was huffing and barbing and laughing – all the things that you might expect to hear when artists and critics gather to get peppery over the next pressing question. Conference is the wrong word here because all of the sparkling and animated conversation that went on seemed to represent only a kind of occasion. No new field of concern was directly elaborated. No new or specific facts or information were imparted. No positions were occupied or defended – not plausibly, at least. And there were no manifestoes. What all this conversation in fact represented was an alibi. An alibi for people to be present and to bear witness to the possible appearance of a new form of intellectual and artistic association; one that that was dreamed of fervently by many of those who'd come.

Talk was of others; of how to imagine the types of remarks and vocabularies that could help one avoid becoming ventriloquised by preconceptions of those others. A desire was articulated: How to become non-aligned, how to go about a discussion of the world in an artistic and critical language that is understandable and yet unconstrained by prejudices; how

to proceed in a language which is able to attend to things that are already plainly evident, whilst capable at the same of discerning and motioning towards those vital yet unseizable facets of modern society that drive what artists do.

The delights and difficulties of the weekend's proceedings lay in the complexity of that desire, and the way that it occasionally propelled speakers towards a fumbling wordlessness. Regularly, speakers reached thresholds where words failed to adequately convey a sensed intuition or new impression. Sometimes this happens when well formed, self-confident languages come into close propinquity over shared subjects. Because of this abrupt confluence of certainties about the world, the best moments of three days of talking were made only of movements in the breath of language. These breaths were eloquent, phatic gestures, and touching for the way that they presaged a stumbling or grasping for the comfort of reliable (though insufficient) verbal formulae. They signalled the invigoration that accompanies the joyful dawning of realised incomprehension.

At the most intense moments during the event, in the place of technically precise grammar there was suddenly just colourful air – expletive air, calming air, appreciative air, frustrated, resigned and dignified air, angry and surprised air, scornful air, blissful, optimistic air, inspired air. Those instants of the primacy in communication of breathed punctuation that came to characterise our meeting, marked more than failures of spoken language. These sighs and gasps, harrumphs, ahs, seesoos, rsseeisses and oos, gave lineaments to both a conceptual cartography and a kind of hoped for sociability. They indicated that here, and here and here, some important thing had been broached, but a thing of which there was yet nothing more concrete to say. Something had happened, but no one was ready yet to describe just what. We'd have to wait and work with each other on the new and appropriate terms, and only later decide what to make of them. It was exciting, then. And exciting because of the way that each air-filled failure of speech opened onto a negotiable civic compact where speaker and listener could find a commonality in their conditioned inability to grasp something they thought that they already knew.

I was there to talk about architecture. And, like others, by day two of the event I was finding myself stumped for words. I went for a walk. We were in Berlin. The temperature was 30C, and there had been some tremendous early summer storms. This mid-morning's sky was dazzling blue, though. I headed for the Tiergarten, all pensiveness. I ambled about. I sat. I fretted and ached. I sipped water. I bit my nails. I dodged the cyclists and runners, and the occasional nudists.

The Tiergarten wears its undergrowth well. The park is made of clearings in it. In one of these clearings there was a teacher with a large group of children. Despite the raucousness of their play as they ran about tossing a ball to one another, they scarcely registered with me. Just some kids, and their teacher. Mumbling to myself about education and pastoral metaphors, I continued round the park, and then back, retracing my steps. When I passed the children again, their teacher had gone. They were still scampering about, squealing, however. One of the gardeners had turned on a great standing hose. It shot a tremendous hissing jet of water high into the air. Soaked, the children were cupping their hands over the nozzle, and creating a fine mist above them. In this mist there were rainbows.

Children of all creeds and races playing together, while rainbows dance about them. I gazed, still and dumb, at one of the great cheesy images of popular religious iconography. It struck me as a confection so implausible that I doubted my eyes' ability to witness and record it. Because I am fond of plastic Madonnas, and neon-lit shrines, because I like the eccentricity of the ways that people go to church and seek their quotidian kinds of devotional bliss, I couldn't even be certain that I was actually seeing what I thought I saw: the rainbows were so fleeting.

Anyway, I trotted off back to the conference and told everyone about this improbable bit of urban social architecture, and my questionable status as a witness to it. Had it called to me, or did I summon it? In fact, this didn't matter. For, what I remember vividly now, is the way I quickly discarded the one interpretation that had immediately leapt to mind. There is a stanza in *Little Gidding*, one of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. A part of it reads:

The dove descending breaks the air  
With flame of incandescent terror  
Of which the tongues declare  
The one discharge from sin and error

Throughout *Four Quartets*, he is big on the stillness of air. For a moment, Eliot's language of air and light and judgment seemed appropriate. It has been pointed out before that the body of poetry, the impression of the sweet or wheezing, and otherwise aspiring air of language that is frequently worked by poetry, is none of Eliot's concern – not at all. Rhyme and pattern were all for him, and the figure of broken air is one of an arresting, timeless spirituality. It is the always given endpoint of an ineluctable and pervading religious and philosophical truth; one that is beyond time and industry, beyond the bad manners of everyday living, and beyond the sway and metre of national politics. I'd say he might have had in mind a kind of pranayama, were it not for the fact that the variety of Christianity that Eliot advocated is fundamentally tied to a metaphor of the Holy Spirit as a still and uncomplicated breath. Spirit and spiration are connected by more than merely etymological means.

Little, semi-rural moments of epiphany like my glimpsing of rainbows, serve as excuses for the poetry of the *Four Quartets*. So, the inadequacy of Eliot's imagery in offering a platform from which to catch a hold of the everyday awesomeness of these rainbows, their mundanity and whatever else they may intimate, became quite startling. It evinced a lack of appreciation of both the politically creative abundance of the lives of others and the socially productive, rather than introverted quiet that this sometimes demands. As didact, Eliot's stern and scolding oversight suggested to me a portal onto the currency of religious iconography in the social formation of unexpected space.

This is what I should have told the conference, but didn't. In turn, this is for the simple fact that as that image of children prancing with rainbows has returned to me almost daily since, it was only later that I remembered the sound of my own breath. I remember how it marked the liminal oddness of the time I stood staring. I remember how I doubted the creaking theatricality of my breathing as an annotation of what I saw, as it floundered unbidden, oeing and coeing. The qualities of that breath very soon constituted an alibi for me. It became a

means for me to get through subsequent conversations with artists, and to engage in odd, reflective and frequently touching sociable encounters about education. The point I want to take from all this is that there is a vivid relationship between breath (as a space of uncertain interpretation) and the vantage on the workings of the world that is supplied by the secular exercise of religious images. Nick Crowe and Ian Rawlinson have put a finger on that.

## ii. God and Fireworks

With these new works, Crowe and Rawlinson have revealed the considered design of the conventions of sighing as a thoroughly developed, sophisticated vehicle for the exploration not only of the everyday, autobiographical oddities of social existence, but also the ways that these rub up against the rhetoric of spiritual profundity. That they manage this at all, without diminishing either sphere or falling for some fey mollification, is something to applaud. That they have effected this via the aural representation of air is a considerable formal achievement.

Their interest in spoken air has been longstanding. The quartet of new pieces exhibited here – *The Name of God*, *Two Leprechauns*, *The Fireworks*, *The Carriers' Prayer* as well as the slightly earlier piece, *Two Burning Bushes* – are presaged by others, one of which is worth mentioning in passing. In 1997, they revisited Lower Manhattan (a favourite haunt), and made a series of recordings, which were later edited together under the general rubric of *Two Speakers*. This work, made up of interviews initially conducted during the production of a piece called *Mugger Music*, which Crowe and Rawlinson made in collaboration with Graham Parker, is marked by a simple formality. Questions were put to people who lived and worked in the area, inquiring about their circumstance and sensibilities. The questions were the same to each, and the resulting interviews were subsequently arrayed in pairs, one overlaying another. Certainly, the interviews uncover empirical facts about the personal histories caught up by the workings of this centre of global commerce. At the same time something much more rewarding is revealed – the makings of a kind of music. The pitches, rests, rhythms, timbres, the portamentos of people's vocal carriage, all contrive to suggest the nature of a complex and paradoxical aural social fabric. The rich and imperfect new rhythms generated were all drawn directly from that fabric.

In the same place, John Cage broached a similar territory fifty years previously with his *Williams Mix*. When he did, his aim was to produce abstract aural images upon which an educated or sympathetic audience might dwell, in an appropriately Zen-like, existential sort of way. The *Two Speakers* pieces differ from Cage's edited soundwork, in that they insist on addressing the material realities of urban intersubjectivity. The questions were put in concert. Two Manchester accents, similar, but just dissimilar enough to register significant difference: "In Which City Do You Live?", "How Long Have You Lived In That City?", "Were You Born In That City?", and so on. The intimate counterpoints involved in the interviewers' voices open onto fabulous enough possibilities. But when the answers come, the syncopations flood in, endlessly intriguing, inveigling as they do the grace notes of historically modulated accents, class and family backgrounds, senses of humour or anxiety, pulmonary health and varyingly pneumatic approaches to sociability.

In these moments of response, meditations become possible on civic questions of how people rub along, and proffer their voices in a chattering economy of deportment. The questions that Crowe and Rawlinson asked were also designed to elicit different kinds of responses. The early ones make for short, certain and unhesitating answers – Manhattan, Eight Years, and so on. But the responses to the later questions, such as “How Many People Live In The City You Live In?”, “Can You Give Me The Names Of Some Of Those People?” are much longer. They invariably commence with a phatic breath – a hmm, an umm or err – before moving to list personal relationships and undetailed reflections on the character of them. It is interesting that the ordering of these questions and responses produces an overall acoustic form not so very different from the almost orgasmic structure of *The Fireworks*, exhibited here.

The complexity of the urban soundscape apprehended by *Two Speakers* formally describes an enigmaticalness. The umms and errs involved are both mundane and ineffable. Readily read elements of the social treaties evoked by conversation, these hesitations also presage a delineation of an individual’s social milieu, its character and how they seem to think of it. They are breathed moments of uncertain thought; and cherishable. In this, the *Two Speakers* pieces share something else with Cage’s *Williams Mix*. The sounds of vocal sociability that they articulate are construed according to the form of parables. Cage was very keen to allow his listeners utter license in the interpretation of the sounds he presented. For him the structure of parables, or more properly Buddhist koans, was of enormous significance. Though possessed of formal outlines, beginnings, middles, ends, they have no specific or given meanings. They are occasions, and have been prized over centuries for their ensured failure to tell anything specific. They allow readers to see themselves and others in them, rather than be instructed by them on whom they should be. Cage appreciated a political freedom in koans and parables; the luxury of not being held to account for everything unlikely that may be perceived.

Like the works on exhibition here, *Two Speakers* is not an approximate work. It is careful in both the general social questions it articulates, and its forestalling of any glib remarks about them. As with the rhapsodies of speech and hesitations provoked by *Two Speakers*, the new works have a parable structure. They remain incomplete without the active, speculative or interrogative habits of a curious and participative listener. More, and perhaps this is really what I want to get at, the enigmatic element of the parable observable in *Two Speakers*, and continued through to the present, is paradox – not contradiction. The raw materials of the works are not required to subordinate themselves to some greater narrative synthesis. They are asked to maintain their oblique dignities as a space, as an inhabitable architecture. And with this, a kind of extended meditative time is produced – musical in character, or something like that – which recuperates the significance of the overlooked details of unruly public life in an unforclosed present; a present that is ripe with the possibilities for productive misunderstanding. T.S Eliot would not have celebrated this type of aurally precipitated time, and perhaps neither would have Cage. This is because these works are very much of their time, and concerned with the profanities of it. Wry, they seem happy in their time too. At least, they are happier with their time, than with the liberal coyness of Cage’s time, or Eliot’s aching for no time.

Though prefiguring much, there are significant differences between *Two Speakers* and Crowe and Rawlinson's new works. Most glaringly, *Two Speakers* is quite innocent of the post-9/11 rhetoric that may be heard banging about the environs of the later adventures. It is difficult to imagine how the smoke and flares that accompanies the whizzing exhalations of *The Fireworks*, could be viewed without seeing the skyline over Baghdad in May 2003. It is difficult to hear the trilled Mazel Tovs and Salaams of the *Two Leprechauns* without feeling pricked by Palestine. Can the religious contest for the meaning of Moses escape the *Two Burning Bushes*? Can the pixellated messages of the suicide bomber be scoured from the curious candles in *The Carriers' Prayer*? And, in *The Name of God*, can the constant acoustic signature of hissing sparklers be taken for anything but an urge to peaceability, as Jews and Muslims and Christians write their words for the deity in the air? Well, no. But so crashing and unlikely are these justifying narratives that they can only be passed over immediately, to be revisited perhaps in a later light. The technical accomplishment of the instant disregard of expected readings marks the locus of achievement for these artworks. It can be certain that any squabbles or confrontations that may arise, any stake defended or matter contemplated between the works and their audiences will not refer in the first place to a reduced or received conjecture on God and the State.

Such possible squabbles represent only a set of coordinates from which to depart towards more enigmatic terrains. Exactly which meanings are inverted by the architecture of *The Carriers' Prayer*, for example? What is to be made of the euphoric, pryotechnical hoots of souls dashing to the heavens – especially when you note that these roman candles are conjured from the smouldering dribbles of polythene bags from Morrisons and Sainsbury. What is meant by the cod-Irishness of the greetings squeaked by the voices in *Two Leprechauns*? Is there some human avarice here, some deceitfulness caused by the possession of a treasure? Or is some more local quality of the relationship between the speakers being developed imperceptibly? Do those two burning bushes refer to a species of creative twilight vandalism, the outlawed excuse for a mode of semi-rural flanerier? Maybe.

And this is the point. By turning swiftly from the ostensible subjects of their apparent discourse, these works are able to point to inspecific terrains of social activity. They are terrains that might not welcome mapping, either, only inhabitation. In part, these are grounds where life's excitements, even religious life's excitements are to be found in untolerated forms of activity that appear to have no point, no end realisation – other than the fact that they are the things that people get up to.

Of this group of intimately connected works, it is the astonishments of *The Carriers' Prayer* which for me best epitomise the methods of the exhibition overall. The simple conceits of the piece are compelling. To a certain extent it is because I am already interested in the conjuring of unlikely architectural space that I am interested in *The Carriers' Prayer*. The lingering of the accurately paraphrased details of a Methodist chapel in the northern outskirts of Manchester is sentimental and cheering. This visual stroking of the more mundane signifying components of devotional space suggests a set of unsettling and enigmatic footnotes that might allow our attentions to suddenly be carried away from the central theatre of the work – which is oblique enough in itself. Overly plain chairs, uncompromisingly functional wall-mounted heaters, electrical sockets all stand as mutely enigmatic witnesses to the demanding

spectacle of pyrotechnology. These knotted polythene carrier bags appear at once as votive candles (incongruous here) and as fuses. The breath produced by these as they burn is a whoop. Tiny incendiaries ignite as the bags burn and melt, shooting blobs and sparks to the ceiling.

As I say, it is hard at first to resist the impression of an essay on ultimate religious sacrifice and the joys thereof, here. But it needs to be noted that these powerfully concentrated visual metaphors and singing glimmers address themselves as much to St. John of the Cross as to al-Hajj Umar Tall, as much to John Wesley as to Simone Weill. And what is signalled by this considered overdetermination of the candle/fuse is the ways that the political and existential precepts offered by such diverging theologies as these noted offer languages for the articulation of the odd emotional and intellectual spaces produced by art, and the kinds of social encounters that these spaces allow. In a sense, this observation is highlighted by the sensitivities addressed by *Two Leprechauns*. The cartoon accents worn by Crowe and Rawlinson indicate the ways that well meant words of greeting often invite only prejudice and stereotypification. This point is made touchingly, but still more is alluded to. The speakers appear caught helpless in the forces of global politics that such gestures make. Inasmuch, as artists, Crowe and Rawlinson become representative modern personae caught in a profound nimbus of unknowing – even if their privately held attitudes might be clear and well defined.

Each of the works here articulates a complexly formulated modern breath as a modern parable. That enigmatic breath may arise as a welcoming word abstracted by accent, the disorienting crackles of toy ordnance, or the low, sustained howl of kerosene blazing on the branches of a found sapling. In every case, these breaths function as the direction away from well-behaved interpretative practice and towards other things. Just what those somethings else are though, as they pirouette, epiphors on the sighing air ... well, those are for us to talk about, and educate ourselves through – oddly. The critic had it just about right when speaking of such new sounds as new lives given to the world, “a resuscitation not just of the ear, but of the springs of being”.

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