

Alongside their practices as individual artists, Nick Crowe & Ian Rawlinson have made collaborative works since 1996. Their major collaborations together have often emerged from the intersection of the concerns that populate their individual practices. These works fuse Rawlinson's preoccupation with the structures of containment inherent in the urban environment with Crowe's concern with how human experience is mediated through the structures of information. In doing so they produce an examination of the city as a coded physical and psychological environment - one which frames both the individual and nature as subsidiary cultural, economic, and social entities.

The artists' most recent collaboration, *Explaining Urbanism to Wild Animals*, forms the latest part in a trilogy of works that examine the dynamics of dislocation inherent in the operations of the city. Like two previous works made in collaboration with Graham Parker - 1996's acclaimed *Mugger Music* and *Project for the River Medlock*, 1998 - *Explaining Urbanism to Wild Animals* uses the structures and problematics of their local environment - the city of Manchester and its surrounding areas - to create works that interrogate their local context, but which simultaneously produce universally applicable metaphors for the urban condition.

Over time, we inevitably come to feel a sense of familiarity and belonging in the city in which we live. We assimilate its geography, build up routines, and sow personal narratives into its fabric through the process of living within it. These are all attempts at fixing the city within our grasp, making it legible in some way, manageable. Inevitably, however, the city is mutating away from our image of it even as we go through the process of fixing it in our personal framework. In fact it is more likely to be this personal framework that we attach ourselves to, declare familiarity with, rather than the restless reality of the city.

*Mugger Music* highlighted the fragility of the constructs we erect in an attempt to establish familiarity with our own city. Conducted in Manchester over a period of twenty-four hours, the work consisted of forty-six guided walks structured in a continuous relay. Once every thirty minutes between 00.01 and 22.45 a single viewer was met by a single stranger on the steps of the town hall. The stranger would introduce himself as the guide and lead the viewer to a waiting car. In this simple action the viewer's perceived authority over their environment began to be severed. Despite the viewer's knowledge that they were participating in an artwork, the act of getting into a car with a stranger was still a fundamental surrender of control. Once in the car the viewer was taken on a short journey. While they were driven a taped interview was played on the car stereo in which an individual was asked a stream of questions about their relationship to cities - "In which city do you live? How long have you lived in that city? Were you born in that city? How many other people live in that city? Could you give me the names of some of those people?" The viewer may have been conscious that the discussion coming out of the stereo was part of the work or they may not. They have been preoccupied with where the car was taking them. They may have been excited. Many have said they were nervous.

After a short while, the car stopped at a prearranged spot. Here the guide demonstrated the route on a map, instructed the viewer to put on a personal stereo, and then led them silently on the walk. The personal stereo played a soundtrack of pre-recorded urban sound: the noise of the street, snatches of conversations or laughter, radios overheard, nightclub music mixed with traffic. Isolated within these displaced sounds of the city, unaware of their orientation apart from their physical relationship to their guide, the viewer was doubly dislocated from their environment. Along the way the viewer was instructed to carry out a series of standardised actions, some everyday, some less so. Isolated by sound and under conscious instruction, the process of navigating the city, even of buying an item from a supermarket, became unfamiliar. *Mugger Music* attempted to strip away the framework the viewer had constructed over the city to let them see the city as it was, free, if only for a short time, of their personal dislocations.

The route walked in *Mugger Music* may have seemed arbitrary to most of the work's audience, united perhaps only by a sense of urban abuse - be that industrial, corporate, civic, that of neglect, or even that of

strangers in the street. The route, however, actually followed the path of a minor local river, the Medlock, as closely as was possible within the contemporary urban terrain. If *Mugger Music* was an attempt to construct a time in which the city could be re-read free of personal association, it was logical that the artists' next collaborative work would go one step further.

Having already identified the fractured and disguised presence of the river for *Mugger Music*, the artists decided to make the issue of its legibility the core of the work they would create for the sprawling *Artranspenine* exhibition in 1998, which spanned sites in Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds and Hull. *Project for the River Medlock* was an attempt to unpeel the layers of the city to reveal the natural landscape it is imposed upon. In a simple way, the work was an attempt to bridge the dislocation the city executes between the individual and the physical and historical landscape they exist within.

Manchester was established on the banks of the Medlock but the explosion of industrialisation quickly grew to erase the river's visual presence from the landscape, as it became the world's first industrialised metropolis. The river was initially culverted beneath the Manchester ship canal, and subsequently buried under layers of development until it became the barely visible, polluted and forgotten artery it is today. The artists' intervention to reinstate the river in the city was carried out on Manchester's busy Oxford Road, where a metal parapet ironically painted with bold letters proclaiming the Medlock's presence obscured the river from view. The artists' removed metal sheets from the parapet and replaced them with glass, allowing the river a visual presence again. Alongside the newly revealed view, the artist's played amplified sound recordings from loud speakers made at the source of the river, high in the hills to the north of the city. Using technology designed for railway station announcement systems, the volume rose and fell automatically with the background noise levels, linking the viewer's awareness of the river with that of the city around them. In doing so, their intervention temporarily gave a voice back to a natural form that was otherwise drowned out by the sound of human social and commercial activity.

Unlike the previous works, *Explaining Urbanism to Wild Animals* does not locate itself within the urban fabric of Manchester, but instead documents a series of picturesque locations in the Cheshire green belt between Manchester and Macclesfield. These locations are presented as large-scale landscape photographs accompanied by videos of the artists undertaking activities within them. Although in some sense representing generic sites – so many small woods and ponds in England look like those chosen by Crowe and Rawlinson – *Explaining Urbanism to Wild Animals* is again generated by, and exists within, a relationship with its specific, local context.

The countryside corridor between Macclesfield and Manchester is one of the few remaining greenbelt areas on the edge of the sprawling conurbation. The once geographically distinct towns of Stockport, Oldham, Rochdale, Bolton and Bury have all been joined to Manchester by urban development that has crept along the major arterial roads between the towns. Macclesfield is one of the few nearby towns that still have a measurable area of countryside between it and its greater neighbour. This greenbelt, like many others, has been legally protected from urban development in recent decades, but the Government's recent comprehensive spending review has brought into doubt whether such areas will be protected for much longer, swamped instead by the demand for housing.

The issues raised by the urbanisation of the countryside are inevitably complex. Within an environment of conflicting data and vociferous argument, any government's attempts to make policy are fraught with the questionable possibility of separating a true assessment of local and national need from what the numerous interested parties claim those needs to be. The complications of this terrain can be more easily understood when brought down to the desires and decisions of individuals. Many of us are used to the convenience of urban living yet hanker for the trappings of the countryside. These trappings of the countryside are also aspiration markers to many, success being measured in the ability to acquire larger property, with more land, within or near a country setting. We want access to the countryside but we want convenience. Many of us therefore aspire to live precisely at the edge where urban convenience and country ambience rubs shoulders. And that edge is the edge of the greenbelt.

In *Explaining Urbanism to Wild Animals*, each video of the separate locations – near an animal’s burrow, in a pond, deep in a wood, or at its edge – shows the artists in the act of playing audio recordings of Manchester construction sites (each of which is located within 200 metres of their city centre studio) through loud speakers at the different wildlife habitats. In each specific environment the artists adopt the methodology most suited to their purpose. In *Burrow* they are seen inserting mini-walkman speakers into a burrow at the base of a tree. In *Pond*, the artists are seen in wellingtons wading through the water, sweeping domestic loudspeakers back and forth above the water’s surface.

*Explaining Urbanism to Wild Animals* appears to reverse the dynamic found in *Project for the River Medlock*. Rather than exposing the inhabitants of the city to the natural source of their hidden river as in the previous work, in *Explaining Urbanism to Wild Animals* the artists broadcast the process of urbanisation to the unwitting inhabitants of the countryside. And there is a deliberate and wholly suitable poignancy in the artists’ choice to broadcast this sound to the indigenous wildlife of the area and not its human inhabitants. The new work is in many ways a direct extension of the agenda within *Project for the River Medlock* - that of revealing the unseen to those who cannot see it. The sound that the artists so dutifully broadcast to the animals is the sound of a process that may eventually destroy their habitats as Manchester and Macclesfield move inexorably together. It is the sound of a process the animals have no conception of, as alien to them as the sound of the source of the Medlock was to many Mancunians. But these dislocated sounds of the city’s relentless development are the harbingers of a more than possible future. They herald a time when wood, pond, burrow, and woodland edge will only exist as the names of streets in housing estates, a trace of an unseen past, like the name of the Medlock painted on the side of the very parapet that obscures its existence.

So where do the artists locate *Explaining Urbanism to Wild Animals* within the charged context of urban growth? Their actions are conducted with a mixture of perfunctory efficiency and earnestness that makes their relationship to the task in hand hard to pin down. There is a concerned air about their enterprise, but is this the concern of a scientist carrying out a dispassionate behavioural experiment, or the environmentalist attempting to deliver a solemn warning?

It would be easy, and not unsatisfying in an attempt to give their work sense of romantic commitment, to choose the later possibility. Indeed it is surely not a coincidence that in its titling, performative nature, and attempt to communicate with animals across the barriers of language and species, *Explaining Urbanism to Wild Animals* gives off muted but distinct echoes of Joseph Beuys’s legendary 1965 lecture *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*. The artists’ demonstrable intent to succeed in their attempt to warn the defenceless Cheshire wildlife of its potential fate, appears to differ little from the earnestness with which Beuys started a political party for animals two years after his performance, claiming their elemental energy may achieve more in the way of political innovation than any human.

Unlike Beuys, however, Crowe & Rawlinson do not build their work from allegory and symbolism, nor does *Explaining Urbanism to Wild Animals* project Beuys’ belief in a New World Order achievable through a re-connection with the natural world. To take the work at face value, to believe the artists’ feel there is any possibility of communicating with their stated (animal) public, is to afford the futility of their endeavour a seriousness that only compounds its absurdity. But the artists deliberately deploy such a seriousness themselves, encouraging us to believe in their purpose. It is a strategy that begs us to question their behaviour, and when we do an unspoken, perverse humour is revealed at the heart of the work. That humour is the humour of a particular place, and that place is not the greenbelt, but the gallows. It is a dark humour that exposes the work to be more of a satire, designed to underline the unpalatable politics of the situation, than the direct action it masquerades as. Crowe and Rawlinson took their sound equipment into the countryside to warn the Cheshire wildlife that their gallows will probably arrive one day soon. But there was never a chance that the animals could understand that when it does it will be shaped like a bulldozer.