



*...herein lay an explicit concern of the project: to widen the scope of the common inside/outside binary – the distinction between gallery and off-site venues to also explore that of insider and outsider*

*Things here are subject unto change*

# Thinking of the Outside

Bristol, 21 May – 3 July, 2005

*Robin Wilson*

MAIN IMAGE *Iceman*, 2005.  
Nathan Coley. Installation view  
in St. John's Churchyard  
© Nathan Coley

There were undoubtedly moments of powerful imagery and insight within the six individual works on view in Bristol's *Thinking of the Outside* project. Its potential significance as an urban, social act was, however, also very much invested in the effect of the project in its totality and in the wider urban strategies of which it is a part. That totality inferred a not inconsiderable effort on the part of its viewers to travel between different sites, as they were located in a loose constellation of adapted venues around the historic core of the city.

The commissioning process behind the project involved close cooperation between local government, the University of the West of England (UWE) and local arts organisations. The curatorial impulse derived primarily from Claire Doherty, Research Fellow at the UWE, and head of the Situations research project into art and context. Somewhat unusually, the link between curatorial ambition and city council policy making goes beyond the merely financial dimension here and extends into a more-or-less shared notion of the role of art in public context. Jonathan Banks, senior art officer for the Bristol City Council, talks of a desire to use such projects to assist in

responding to rapid change in urban centres, by raising issues of identity and exclusion. In this sense, *Thinking of the Outside* formed one temporary manifestation of the council's long term public art initiative, *Legible City*, which has recently produced an extensive, city-wide identity and signage scheme.

Movement around the city was informed by a small booklet, with a map on its rear cover. This duplicated the map to be found on the information panels of the *Legible City* programme. The document suggested an order of itinerary, a narrative for our progression around the works. But there was no specific imperative to visit the works in sequence or, indeed, in a single session. The project's peripatetic aspect highlighted the potential for diverse experiential factors to affect the reading of works. This was not limited to the characteristics of the five locations, but might equally have been the result of the nature of the voyage between locations. And herein lay an explicit concern of the project: to widen the scope of the common inside /outside binary – the distinction between gallery and off-site venues to also explore that of *insider* and *outsider* – between, that is, the viewer as local inhabitant and as non-resident visitor to the city. &



*The foregrounding of otherwise marginal or suppressed elements of the city's contemporary culture or history was, in some sense, common to all the works.*



1 *The White Nightingale*,  
Filming for Joao Penalva's new work  
© Joao Penalva  
2 *the louder you scream, the faster  
we go*, 2005. Phil Collins  
© Phil Collins  
3 *Grande Spagna*, 2005  
Kathleen Herbert. Installation view  
© Kathleen Herbert

Kathleen Herbert was in fact the only one of the artists to have prior, local knowledge. Her work, *Grande Spagna*, sited in the empty, late 19th Century Huller warehouse, depicts a three-day voyage on board a cargo ship from Antwerp to Bristol. Using multiple video monitors and separate audio recordings, Herbert's emphasis is ostensibly on the monotony of the sea voyage and the container ship environment. Still or slow pan footage shows the alienating materiality of industrial transit, of the presence of the sea rendered down to fitful shifts in the suspension of ranks of identical cars in the hold, or a shuddering cornflakes packet in the crews' quarters. The work is extended by its contextual implications, questioning the nature of Bristol's identity as a port city. The warehouse is the last in this quarter of the central docklands to be developed, and its conversion into flats is imminent. Outside, and visible from Herbert's work, the leisure activities of a regenerated dockland frontage was in full swing, a flotilla of small, private leisure craft contrasting markedly with the scale of vessel implied in Herbert's videos. Such industrial shipping now steers well clear of Bristol to berth at nearby Avonmouth.

The walk to Herbert's installation along that dockland frontage revealed a quite motley gathering of the contemporary city's *leisured classes*. Teenage youths loiter in the quieter sections of the walk and away from the attention of terrace drinkers at a riverfront bar and balcony sunbathers in converted warehouse apartments. Large flocks of swans drift between day tripper boats and moored barges, home to a small population of water dwellers. The scene was harmonious though, the network of potential tensions neutralised by the hot sun. And yet the monotony of Herbert's cargo ship has an implication here. It would seem to point to the emptiness of the collective impulse

behind our visions for the contemporary city. The vessel from Antwerp is of course representative of the great hinterland of the suppressed of our contemporary culture: the hidden means of production, the support systems of our lifestyle.

The foregrounding of otherwise marginal or suppressed elements of the city's contemporary culture or history was, in some sense, common to all the works. Susan Hiller's video installation *Psychic Archaeology* – comprising two screens within the remaining fragment of the 12th Century castle vaults – articulates its subject matter very much in terms of the return of the suppressed. Here the issue in question is the city's Jewish history, represented through excerpts from recent and historical feature films. With Hiller, then, a specific local history – of the Jewish community in Bristol – is projected as the model for a European wide 'psychic history' of cultural protectionism and phobia, of which the current crisis over immigration is but the latest manifestation.

The event of preparing the various sites for the show was as much an archaeological process as that proposed by the works themselves. Herbert's occupation of the Huller warehouse was possible only after major clearance. The materiality of Silke Otto-Knapp's six paintings directed thought as much toward comparison with the decayed fabric of the site – the 19th Century Customs House – as they did to their own subject matter of fragments of garden and ordered landscapes. Indeed, many local arts professionals discovered the sites for the first time themselves. Jonathan Mosley, a Bristol based artist and architect conducting a tour of the works, drew attention to the project's capacity to break regular pathways of movement and to intersect with and overlay personal memories of the city.

Nathan Coley's piece, entitled *Iceman*, involved the opening of a garden and churchyard normally closed to the public. The St. John's Churchyard is like a forgotten corner of a country graveyard transplanted to the centre of the city. With fragile tombs and memorials, it is one of the few tangible pockets of continuity with the more ancient layers of pre World War II Bristol. Coley's work struggles to match the intriguing event of confronting the garden itself. *Iceman* is a quasi-architectural piece. A construction in ply, with an ambiguous range of possible connotations to various modern typologies, from the housing block to the electricity transformer. But its detailing, scale, and the way it meets the ground all seemed so sufficiently unresolved as to reduce the potential subtlety of the work and its reading of the contextual tensions of the site, on which the concept of the work was clearly founded.

One of the buildings within the 18th Century St. Nicholas Market was converted into a temporary cinema space for João Penalva's film *The White Nightingale*. If the response of the works thus far mentioned was, broadly speaking, archaeological, then Penalva immediately converted the findings of such research into the language of myth. His work alternates between long passages of text – the mythic narrative of the *White Nightingale* and its retreat into silence in a deep cave – with film footage of the bed of the River Avon below the Bristol Suspension Bridge. It is a complex and evocative work. But it is unclear if Penalva is trying to construct allegory founded in a specific relation to context, or is simply utilizing the local site as a starting point for meditations on more universal themes.

Penalva's piece and one further work by Phil Collins – a video project, shown at the Ashton Court music festival shortly after the conclusion

of the main show – prompted Claire Doherty to question the role of an initial brief for invited artists. Called *the louder you scream the faster we go*, like Penalva's film, Collins' work would seem to resist any kind of conclusive reading of context, but merely sought to activate a series of potentialities and scenarios within the found, local culture. Collins invited Bristol's unsigned amateur rock bands to submit tracks, from which three were chosen. For each, Collins then produced a promotional video, using local characters and locations. The piece cleverly weaves a network of conjunctions and disjunctions within Bristol's socio-cultural scene, utilizing the aspirations and idiosyncrasies of individuals, and allowing them to surface within the proceedings of the international music festival.

One of the project's programmatic adaptations of buildings is set to continue. Bristol council have agreed that the space in the St. Nicholas Market where Penalva showed his film should continue to function as a cinema.

Robin Wilson is a writer on art, architecture and landscape, and is currently completing a PhD on utopian theory, art and architecture at The Bartlett School of Architecture, U.C.L.

'Things here are subject unto change' is an extract from a 17th Century memorial inscription in St. John's Churchyard, Bristol.

www.situations.org.uk  
www.thinkingoftheoutside.com