

Jim Brook and Claudia Zeiske in conversation with Umesh Maddanahalli at Drumblair Lodge, Forgue, near Huntly

Umesh, we invited you to Huntly for a residency to address the context of an ageing community. Something seen as a problem in many rural European locations. How did you take the residency on?

Before I even came to Huntly we talked about the idea that I should contribute to the Halloween festival here. I was comfortable with working in a 'non-artist' community context. The question was whether we do it just for the fun or in a religious sense. So the question is whether me, the artist is placed on a red carpet, or whether I, the artist should engage in the town, in the pub - like what I would call a 'piss artist'! What I needed was a structure. I was building up a story for Halloween to have different generations for the performance. Taking the rituals and the festivals as a horizontal line, the vertical line is where you fuse the generations and the artwork. Halloween provides the opportunity, and we look for making the art. To have this process we need some kind of a structure on how to incorporate the people here. Many lines can be drawn from Birth to Death, from Death to Birth, these are the generational lines. Then we are criss-crossing those lines, the rebellion line, introducing new people, keep it happening, keep creating, if there is any history there is as a vertical line, geography too....criss-crossing those lines, that could be read on many levels as a metaphor.

Yes, vertical laser lines were created to represent the time line from generation to generation or from past to future. Horizontal lines depicted present connections. Audience members and other participants were drawn into the performance, representing different generations... You had done residencies before across the world, how was this one different, in Huntly, a small town with limited resources, how did it influence your work?

In formal residency centres you get a certain pattern of resources. Those are limited here. For me that is no problem. There is no avant-garde movement here. Coming to a place like Huntly you lack infrastructure, equipment and all that. Coming here is more like being a performer and the challenge is to find out what can I work with, and not what do I need. This is an interesting thing I have been exploring in my work.

You come to a place where people may have never seen the kind of work you do. Elsewhere people would have known why the work exists, but here they may not even know why art happens. In years to come, the work might begin to resonate with people as in a delayed reaction. Do you find that rewarding? If you were to spend more time explaining, would that destroy the work?

Yes, of course. A historical legacy which could change the meaning of the work. Naturally, people come with a fresh mind. For me there is no such thing as prejudice.

In your performance was it intended that the people should feel a bit uncomfortable? Was that part of your thinking? Because the audience was not in control, only the participants.

I wanted more of a structure; at the end I was a bit upset, not everything was perfect. But that is a totally personal thing - my baby was meant to be beautiful.

Why, what were the expectations? Was there something that was not met?

No, maybe only technical, but that is selfish, the structure was clear. My control of dimensions of sound and time within the work successfully guided the piece into a performance as a work of art. I am glad for what it was.

Do you think that the fact that the event was promoted as High Art rather than community art makes a difference to people's expectations?

During the preparations I did not think about the infrastructure; arriving here I at first thought Huntly was smaller, but the longer I was here the bigger it became. I got connected to the social system and was able to touch the pulse of people's emotions. Information came through the pubs and not through the Yellow Pages or technicians. That's all. The idea of making work in a far away place is very challenging.

How would that work in India? How does the art infrastructure work there?

The context is different. But that is not so important for me. For *Earth Works* I needed lots of people's involvement. That was easy there. Here it could have been different. But the whole artwork ends in the same way. I need to ask people to participate, that is how it works for me.

The recording studio which I used at Drumblair Lodge, I did not even think that there was something like this. The work comes together because of what has been possible. It would have happened even without this. It would have just been different.

Interestingly a year ago, we had no Drumblair Lodge. So the work goes together with what we have, how we develop as an art organisation, as a community.

In terms of audience, in India, how would that have been different?

In Indian social structure, I might have used different materials, like telephones, laser, or radio. If I had used exactly the same it may have been a good performance or maybe spectacular, but in India the festivals are very visual and decorative. People would maybe have laughed at me. There the artist's role is more about bringing in people and entertaining them. The question is what kind of people would I have brought in.

As you place yourself in a role as performer as well as creator, because you are inside the work, is it therefore important that the people see you as part of the work and if so do you take on a kind of role of a shaman? Something unseen, a kind of conjurer of the unseen?

I see myself as a performer in my art work. I am finished once I have designed everything. Getting myself into the atmosphere of the performance so I can make the characters much stronger, for example when I was taking the light of Death I could make the movement sharper, etc. That was a key point though there is space for improvisation.

Is the improvisation based on the behaviour of the audience?

Yes, it is a ping pong between the audience and the performer. One of the most important thing in all this was the Halloween festival and the structuring of it. You have invited somebody, a Hindu who never celebrated Halloween, to orchestrate a major part of its context.

That is interesting because we had problems with the word 'Halloween' here. There is a Council policy that applies to some schools not to use the word. Halloween is not a Christian festival, it is pagan. It would be much more difficult with a Christian festival, Christmas for example. So, maybe not being Christian can be almost like being pagan in the local context. Therefore you are an ideal candidate to run Halloween, and the community welcomes you to do that!

Artists like Gilbert and George make their life as sculpture by creating sculpture through dressing up, as typically British people, like office workers. You are playing up to people's expectations of an artist, you are a performer continuing the role of the artist being outside of society rather than inside. Therefore the audience is drawn to you immediately, as this person who is from another society. You are immediately recognizable.

In *Here to There* the element of choice was important, emphasising our need for control despite the contingencies of birth and death. The instruments contributed both as an idea, (the musicians being like the storytellers from one generation to the next) and as a sound track.

Participants were asked to take on the role of musicians, in the hope they would take on that role. Was that important, and the witnessing of it healthy for a society?

We know how it is going to be, or at least we can assume how it is going to be. We can just imagine more. Plato never had any problem with that.

Probably we found ourselves in a situation where this area of philosophy or knowledge won't go any further, it has come to a dead end. Do you feel that so much has already been said?

No I do not think that. The video about rewinding, the light goes further, the depth takes all the light. In the performance there is a sound of stone, which starts a new era. The line goes further.

It goes further to an earlier stage, a stage that might be more akin to that community and old things. We use the idea of stone as a beginning. Even in the aspect of the schools being worried about the word Halloween, could be a new strong starting point. Is there an element of stopping of light as if there was a higher power at the end? Was this big sound at the end connected to this idea?

I used the sound of a train, big sound, high frequency screaming sound. I wanted to have this sound creating an image within the performance as a travel line, travel, travel.... So the story ends somewhere, but the moral of the story is that the line has got to continue.

The humming and murmuring thing worked very well in the way it connected back to the audience. Of all the elements sound was one of the most important and effective, from

the tapping of stones to the crescendo of high pitched computer generated noise, back to the low hum at the end, completing the life-death circle. It complemented the visual.

Your second work *Rewinding for ?????* is again depicting the idea of ageing. Can you explain what gave you the idea to do this work?

This work is about nostalgia, our idea about glamourising the past, like when people say 'it used to be so nice', 'it was so great'. We acknowledge these things only afterwards. The film is about a female character who is watching a TV monitor, controlled by an almost invisible hand which is also controlling us. During this process the woman is watching TV at the age of 25, and when she is 35 she is still watching this TV monitor but now with her kid. When she dreams about the past, she rewinds with the remote. The moment she starts rewinding, she has to loose the child. Sometimes we are in control and still not get what we want. Perhaps we would like to manipulate time in order to improve our future – the downside being that this will inevitably change the present. Or rewinding for future?

Memory is the issue. I watched a TV programme the other night about people who cannot remember. And there was somebody who cannot remember how to remember, the whole concept of remembering. Terrifying thought. ....

This character does not have any next step. She has her remote control and she can easily rewind. She does not want to loose her child and therefore she must go forward again.

Is this a film that you could have done anywhere?

I have been thinking for a while of the idea of how people in developed countries are in some ways remote controlled; when you are being programmed you are glamourising the past and than you get into the comfortable situation where you programme yourself. Programme your existence; the remote control is like a metaphor.

Returning to your interest in the travelling line. You are a bit of a nomad, you have done a lot of residencies, you move about a lot. Every one of your visits must be different. How do you feel, how can you react to the spaces? In what way is Huntly different?

All residencies are different; the Huntly one is of course very different. For example in the Czech republic I did not do any work of art, it is a second world country which is a transit country of illegal immigrants. This was important for me, I collected people's stories and they provided me with a script. In formal residency centres there are normally all kinds of workshops, technicians. You can't complain. Here in Huntly things are different, your resources are the audience. One interesting thing is that the residency does not physically exist, because Deveron Arts has no building. If somebody comes they could find me in the shop, which I rented as a studio. If I was on a pedestal people may get suspicious and maybe feel inferior, and I would not get any feedback or stories from them.

That is interesting, because Deveron Arts has not got a building there is nobody easily to complain to. So people have to talk to themselves. That is an advantage for us, so the focal point is on the art. You do not look for the people who are responsible, but you have to talk to yourselves.

The key to these residencies is on the social side. Your willingness to share aspects of your own culture, through your cooking, your magic tricks and your stories, and to relate stories from your wider travels. That is vital. That is the art of residencies.

If somebody came up to you today, a local person, If they said 'art is not for me' what would you say?

He is right, as long as he still has an openness and playfulness. It is not just the museum stuff that makes art exist. Important is that you have something to share. It is something to do with a higher sense of aesthetic.

We realise the need to be able to communicate what we are about. That we are about encouraging the town to look at itself with fresh eyes, about creating discussion, debate and such things. Art production and experimentation is a vehicle for this, and therefore it is not about presenting or buying in polished work. We are taking the same risk as the artist and the participants.

You have to be careful. As soon as you use language you enter into problems; you enter into art language. After all, farmers do ploughing championships. It is an aesthetic judgement.

The language is constantly challenging, we need to constantly reconsider it. People normally distinguish between high art and community art. If we promote it as high art then people get easily disappointed if it is experimental and not polished. But of course we are not traditionally 'community art' promoter either.

Yes, when people see an art video, then they are often disappointed, because they need to be entertained, they may even be bored. But that is maybe important, even if some may have rejected it in the past it may be ok.

I do not mind 'piss artist'. But I get annoyed, when there are professional curators around who do not say anything. One day we go to Documenta, Venice, next day to Huntly. It is important to be part of the society, to talk to the people, Huntly audiences are these people here.

Many artists work chronologically. Your work does not happen if you do not communicate. It is responding to the audience as you work with organisations, audiences, people...

Yes, I work with all kinds of people. Like if any farmer comes and asks you about art. The art I am making right now, whatever I am making I call that art. I don't have to cut my ear like Van Gogh and paint.

Is this a kind of a Beuys approach? Does that count for the farmer we were talking about too?

There are lots of examples, Foucault says a farmer is just a farmer. I think just because he is not using a canvass for his work – it doesn't mean to say that he couldn't be an artist.

Lets say we promoted you as a magician or conjurer, we or you never say that you are an artist, but you make magic, would that be freeing for you?

Yes, very much, if I am working with somebody I do not have to use the language. It is a communication level that you are normally forced into because of the funding, the visa, the contracts and so on. I do not have to use the language when I work with the people, I do not need to say art, art, art...

As a performance artist, even when you are going to the bank you are making art, as people see you doing something. This is different from a painter; they would see him as a painter who does go to the bank. Because of the context, they think of you as an artist at all times. The farmer would be a farmer that goes to the bank.

Not if you know him in a different context, you may know the farmer as your colleague from the Rotary Club, or one of the other fathers at the Cubs.

We could imagine that we have somebody else, not an artist, but lets say a shark tamer. Oh, there goes the shark tamer, he is going to the bank. The big thing is that people have not seen your work before. The artist is coming in from a side way. This is a very strong way, if you came in directly like the painter, that is what they are used to. You might even call it insidious. I mean not in a negative way.

... in fact we never had a painter here ....

The question that remains for me, is whether you feel at home at all these places?

No, I have a house everywhere but there is no home.

Do you miss home?

I miss some of the people; but it is not India or any specific place. No. But I wouldn't mind to settle, here in Huntly or anywhere else.

I hope you consider us as part of those people because we are going to miss you.

Thank you Umesh. It was great having you here.

Jim Brook is an artist living at Drumblair near Huntly

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