

Transcript of propeller talk _given at _Transition Town Totnes ARTS meeting,

Birdwood House_ 24th January 2007

_Pete

Hi, good evening.

Well, first of all I'll introduce us. My name is Pete Harrison, and this is Emma Bush. We work together in a collaborative performance company called propeller. Now, during the talk tonight if we mention the name of a group or an individual that you want to find more information on, or want to get to know us better, please do come see us afterwards . Artists have a vital role to play in Transition Town Totnes and it's a real privilege to be asked to talk tonight. And we see this as the beginning of a process that will continue in the upcoming weeks, months and years.

So, first of all I'd like to draw your attention to this flyer, the familiar Transition Town Totnes flyer. Here it asks, Can you imagine a Totnes beyond oil? The key word for me here is, imagine.

All around us so much time, energy and money is invested by corporations and other governing bodies into shaping our thoughts towards their ideas and products and ways of living. To find a way of weaving through the bombardment, of imagining an alternative, is in itself a political act of great power.

Artist and writers have throughout history been asking questions, provoking, pushing forward ideas that do not accept the status quo, that imagine alternative ways of being with each other – not exclusively people meeting up, but bringing into the conversation those life forms that are so often forgotten; ferns, birds, insects, weather systems; the lives all around us that makes possible the lives we live.

Emma

propeller was formed in August 2003 a group of artists who from the beginning were seeking ways of collaborating making ideas meet and develop into work. Our two performance works have been, a devised theatre show, *The world rushed in* and a performance lecture, *we are the rivers we swim*

through. Both pieces toured in the UK at venues from BAC in London to the Green Room in Manchester.

The world rushed in was a show that brought together different pieces of research and writing to make a show that was both funny and unsettling. The show had a kind of school assembly aesthetic to it and used an abstract language to try and express the underlying concerns of our research. Our research centred on our perceptions of and deep rooted fears about global warming and the unsustainability of current capitalist lifestyles. In the show we had this bunch of animals that amongst other things stood around this block of ice, which melted throughout the duration of the performance.

“There is a real promise in propeller’s work, and this lies in both its intent and its voice - The world rushed in could not be more serious in its subject, yet there is a lightness of touch which is moving and provocative. And it made me reflect that, perhaps to deal with the global dysfunction of today we need another voice - not one that talks earnestly or rationally, (how can you about such insanity?), but one that whispers in our ears and shocks us with laughter.” - Extract of reflections on *The world rushed in* by Dan Gretton, Co-director, PLATFORM

Because of the show using a performance language which resisted a clear message a lot of the research material could never find a clear outlet. This prompted us to make our second work the performance lecture, *we are the rivers we swim through*.

The lecture draws together multiple forms of research to address the disappearance of species and the collapse of the planets ecological infrastructure. The research was broad and with five writers contributing quite wide ranging, we used different sources and styles; journalistic, reflective, poetic and scientific. Supporting the writing was a film of the pages of an old book showing hundreds of different species in succession. Placed with the writing the visual imagery added a very melancholic effect and spoke directly about the real threat of things disappearing from the world.

“I was very struck by it, it hit me strongly. You really had something you wanted to say. You really needed me in the audience to understand what you perceive in the world, I find that very important, for me art grabs the viewer by the collar, sometimes gently, and says look at this, its important for me that you look at this. It was so different from the night before – I felt you were saying I need you to understand this, look again now, please – I felt you had that.” Reflections on *we are the rivers we swim through* by James Marriot Co-director, PLATFORM

As a group our imaginations are filled with attractions to ideas of landscape, gardens, soil, insects, sky, bio-diversity and 'ecology'. We are curious to train ourselves in new ways of 'looking at the world' spending prolonged periods of time outside (outside of the studio) together, walking, working and having conversations. Seeing how all of this affects our reading; of the literature we bring, the space around us and our intentions for future work.

Propeller have been developing workshops together and sharing our practice with students in art centres and universities in these workshops we spend time outside practicing different ways of perceiving, experiencing and responding to place. We begin with a series of walks and practical tasks aimed at slowing down our habitual patterns of seeing and recognising what is around us; details, patterns, flows, ephemeral and substantial events.

Is it possible to see and discover what's in front of us, not through the preconceived mental images we have of it but by participating in its physical presence? How can we catch a glimpse of novelty, beauty, or terror, behind phenomena that we normally ignore or take for granted?

We work with ways of responding to this material by working and presenting a small event; using performance, text, and installation, participants are invited to engage with words, natural processes, bodies and internal and external landscapes.

Pete

Last October we were invited to Desire Lines, an arts and ecology symposium at Dartington College. It was in its second year, and in the first year we had presented the two performances Emma talked about. In October we took over an office, Alan Boldon's office, and used it as our HQ, from which we invited people in to have conversations with us on a range of diverse issues. Conversations, and listening, are at the heart of how we make work, and we responded to these conversations by translating them into performative acts in improvisations that we staged. Alongside the verbal conversations, we set up a series of other ways of communicating with people. He led people on walks, we presented meals, and we ran outdoor workshops, using the exercises Emma talked about.

Currently, propeller have just embarked on the research phase of making a new performance. At the heart of this new show is a desire to explore the extraordinary diversity of life on this planet, and

through celebrating that finding ways of prioritizing their conservation. Its going to be a very funny and hopeful show, because, as Al Gore says, to many people go from deny there's a problem, into despair, without stopping in the middle to do something about it.

Emma

Recently in London we saw John Jordan speak at a conference on art and ecology. He spoke of returning to activism after several years and remembering the thrill of doing something that felt creative. To be active to be pursuing an end point. To be expressing his belief through direct action..

This week in a discussion group with my fellow Art and Ecology MA students we talked about this pull between art and activism. Which at times when faced with the urgency of climate change feels like an unsettling place to be in. Whether to set up a direct action campaign and pour all of ones energy into trying to change a very particular social/environmental injustice (for example the Save Dartington campaign). Or whether to allow oneself to relinquish these ideas or pressures and let ones practice meander, take new unexpected turns and become what it will become.

Maybe it is not a question of either or. Activist or artist. We try to be efficient to use our creative powers effectively to act accordingly to the global situation we find ourselves in. In propeller we find ourselves attracted to research and performance work which up until now has never had a specific destination in mind from the outset.

We talk about a creative activism such as John Jordan in Reclaim the Streets where there is still room for the unexpected chance encounters with police, passers-by or site-workers. The playfulness is still very much alive.

We talk about an activism in research such as Platforms where no stone has been left unturned. We recently saw Dan Gretton reading from his upcoming book, The Desk Killer, which investigates corporate behaviour in relation to the holocaust. Whilst he was reading his hands shook and his voice broke. The anger and grief of those who have done this difficult work is felt by every person in the room. It is tangible in the air - their nerves are frayed. They talk about slowing down but they have lost their lives to their work their work is their life and their edges are raw.

When someone in the room suggests that the edges are so frayed that they have lost the space to dream around the work I am not sure if I agree. The writing is so deeply moving and thought provoking, so rigorous and heart wrenching, so amazingly educating for me and every other person in the room. I thank god they are doing that work and I hope they don't get to frayed by it.

It is necessary to be absolutely steadfast in these times and to pursue those images and fleeting ideas. The artist does not and should not have an intricate map of his creative design marked out clearly at the beginning of a project with each cause and effect neatly predicted. This would be a hideous denial of the process of emergence which happens when any artwork opens itself up to the beautiful and terrifying complexity of the world we live in.

To allow oneself to be lost, to work slowly and without a fixed 'state of knowing' is in itself a political act. Everywhere in our lives we are given the sense that playfulness something that is the reserve of some lucky children and that dream and reverie are stuff to be sniffed at and looked down upon by profit driven and blinded good working citizens.

Claude Levi-Strauss wrote; 'Art survives within modern civilization rather like little islands of wilderness saved to show us where we came from.'

As we journey from place to place with our creative impulses and attractions we are often unaware of the underlying motivations which propel us from one outpost to another.

Penny Guthrie, artist and curator is currently working on an art/education project which involves infiltrating people's everyday language with the words daydreaming and reverie. If we talk about it more and become aware of it as an action and activity perhaps its value will increase. It is precious to me and it would be utterly fatal if I were never allowed to daydream and yet it is seen as an indulgence or worse still an utter waste of time.

It is difficult to trace the end results or pathways of the poetic images that we as artists send out into the world. My friend Mary suggested that doing a performance might be like throwing a prayer out and through doing that providing people with a way to make or feel a response. If the work is open enough for the witness to create his own response then it is art, it is not about dictating a closed set of ideals and responses.

It is the mysterious in art provoking us to ask fundamental questions and think critically about the

world.

We spoke about a recent exhibition at the Tate Modern by Carsten Holler. Huge big slides for adults and children too. People relinquishing control and being thrown into a different dimension. The slides opening the senses as a preparation for the gallery. Art as an amusement park. The work is frivolous and subversive. Imagine if everyone went on a slide ride every day before going to work in the city, or elsewhere.

Our research in propeller has become intellectual, conversational and experiential. This experiential research is I believe extremely valuable. It is not an easy task to stop and do nothing – or rather actively cultivate a discipline of looking at the world. Sometimes I have found myself for a moment suddenly taken up by the world that surrounds me. You could say lost in the world. As opposed to the usual habit of being lost in my head with the endless noise of ideas, worries, plans and conversations that may never take place. Uncovering this hidden world which surrounds us all the time is a part of what we hope to do. Every waking moment we give away our attention to things voluntarily and involuntarily, we often do not have the chance to direct our gaze or focus and simply look at one particular view, object or angle. It is virtually impossible not to get caught up in the speed of life and even why we try to maintain an effort to slow down and observe it is not the same as being given a dedicated space to do so. “Sometimes I have to mutually mutate into a wild animal in order to cope with living out here.” Timothy Treadwell, Grizzly Man. My current project is going to involve model houses and this little bear. In a field I will lie down next to them in the recovery position from sunset to sunrise. Cezanne states; ‘things are disappearing we have to hurry if we want to see anything.’ Yes, there is a feeling of urgency of things disappearing. We have a growing knowledge that our way of living and business as usual attitude contributes daily to raising global extinction levels higher and higher. Things are changing and we are in awe of the pace. It does not help us however to respond to this ecological catastrophe from a position of fear. Fear is what enabled us to build a capitalist society which perpetuates itself through fear of not having enough time, food, money. A more useful response or beginning might be simply to take time to notice what is there whilst it is still there. At the beginning of the summer my friend Teresa went to a wedding when she came back spoke about how much of the time was spent arranging people in groups for photos - the conscious manipulating of the crowd. We both agreed that if we ever got married we would prefer to have photos to happen invisibly in the background of the event.

Later on in the summer I went camping in East Prawle with my boyfriend Leigh and his two children,

Ruby who is 8 and Jasper who is 10. I remembered my conversation with Teresa around taking photos and somehow resisted the desire (habit) to capture/collect through the camera.

I was really excited when one day Ruby taught us how to take pictures with our eyes. One time Ruby and I took a picture with our eyes of Leigh standing across the field. The sky was hazy with sun going down behind him so he was kind of silhouetted against the sky with his hat and grizzly beard looking very cowboy. He at the same time took one of Ruby and I facing him but I do not know what that one looks like as it is in his mind.

Instructions for taking pictures with your eyes. 1. See something you like the look of very much. 2. Stop. 3. Look at the image for ten seconds. 4. Shut eyes tight for ten seconds. 5. Open eyes.

On the same camping trip one night Ruby stalked a moth across the field and watched it for ages in the moonlight. The next day at the beach she carried on observing and studying nature collecting shells, building miniature houses from sticks.

Jasper, her brother, said something very interesting on the beach as he looked up from his gameboy; "I'm not interested in looking at things I prefer buying things then you get to keep them."

This reminded of a passage Pete wrote for our lecture we are the rivers we swim through:

Pete

"For the general public we must be aware that a wave of distraction rolls into our lives every morning, into our homes and market places, creating a version of the world which rests on our unthinking addiction to buy and sell. The immense distractions flicker like a flame catching our eye, while in the peripheries uncharted species fall into extinction. There are now very few human acts, very few physical places on the planet and internal spaces of the mind that are not awash in the flood of commerce."

In the core of that is a frustration I have about the dominance of economics. So much of the way the energy crisis and climate change is reported has to do with the economic consequences. No doubt the Stern Report is a welcome intervention into the thinking of governments and corporations, but it seems a very un-human response to these issues. The way we hear of the shrinking snow on the Alps, and

how that will affect tourism, is another example of the economic lens.

A project that turns the lens around, and could be seen as a radical art project, was the work of two researchers at Cornell University in New York State. They calculated the economic value of the insect population of the US, and came up with the figure of 57 billion dollars. Most of that is accounted by the insects being a food source for the wildlife across the country, and wildlife, in its many forms, is a 50 billion dollar business. So, using the language and the strategies of economics, these two researchers focused attention onto the plight of North American insects.

If we think about the root of the word, economics, it comes from the Greek, and translates to the long-term stewardship of the household.

Stewart Wallis from the New Economic Foundation talks about tackling the language of economics, for example in the phrase 'free trade' and coming up with new visions. As we bring other ways of being into our thinking, we can prioritize happiness and wellbeing. The key to wellbeing is relationships, how we are valued, and how we value others, not only other humans, but also, to use David Abram's phrase, the more-than-human world around us.

The fact is, the economic status quo is the driving force behind the energy and ecological crisis. The invasion of Iraq was not because of WMD, or Saddam Hussein, or to bring democracy to the Middle East. Iraq is a resource war. It is an oil war. What is happening to the oil in Iraq? PLATFORM are finding answers to that question, in a project appropriately called Unraveling The Carbon Web.

So, we go to war for oil. We negotiate with dictatorships and oppressive governments for gas. The biggest companies in the world are energy companies, and their influence across governments is unrivaled in industry. You only need to reflect for a moment on the huge success energy companies have had in confusing the public on climate change to conclude that the world we live in is absurd.

We have reached a peak of absurdity, and it is very connected to this peak of consumerism. In the last few days, absurdity has come to the Devon coastline. The scavenging of the containers in Branscombe beach marries an environmental crisis a strange desire for consumer goods, no matter what. Here now, Emma talks about other absurd situations.

Emma

Sales rocketed just before Christmas we are at the peak of consumerism with a government who still believe everything will be alright as long as we keep on spending. We are also at a parallel peak of absurdity where the ridiculous confronts us at every turn.

The Palm Jebel Ali is located of the coast of Dubai. This recent building development is the vision of the Sultan of Dubai a ridiculous attempt to move beyond the age oil into the age of tourism. Billions of pounds lavishly poured into property development. But the concrete is poured by guest workers who are treated as less than human who are living a nightmare and nobody cares. All apartments sold here within 72 hours buyers snapped up every home on this the first of three artificial islands.

Another site is called The World and it is a replica of The World, with each private island representing a continent. Posh and Becks apparently own one of these 30 million pound islands. This ridiculous attempt at bio-mimicry may be a brilliant but outrageous business plan; “but in the process, environmentalists say, Dubai has killed coral, disturbed turtle nesting sites, and upset the marine ecology of the Western Persian gulf.”

This is not to mention the fact that if global warming continues to increase at the rate we are currently experiencing then these islands stand a good chance of being submerged in the sea before very long.

Pete

Here now is a pepper I bought today from Morrisons. When I look at this shrink-wrapped pepper, I do wonder what is going on! This plastic is not recyclable, it'll be around for many years and it's totally superfluous.

The Independent newspaper has this week has launched a campaign against packaging. And that's an example of how we can refuse to accept the absurdity of the world picture offered us.

I'm going to now talk about two artists that inspire us, and have a very hands-on, practical approach to these concerns. You may also know them, as they both have connections here in Totnes.

Wayne Hill has insulated Schumacher college, working as an artist, not as an engineer, though he used the skills of an engineer to insulate the boiler room and set reflective panels behind radiators. This project, which is called Mainsail, reduces the college's emissions and saves them money.

Another friend of ours, and someone we admire, is Beth Hamer. A project she is launching in the next few months is called *Bike Trailer*. If you imagine a bike, and here you have the trailer, well the trailer opens up to reveal a library of books on shelves, a computer, a printer, and a sewing kit. You have to pedal the bike to get the juice into the computer and the printer, and the idea is you read the books, think about what you want to write, and then write it, print it out, make your own book by sewing the pages together, and then adding that book to the collection. Beth plans to ride the bike across the country, and although this is an object that can be installed in a gallery space, its power stems from people's active participation to leave the gallery and contribute to debate in the world.

In this way it's a very hopeful, a very optimistic project. At the peak of absurdity we cannot forget hope. Ed Gillespie, from the Royal Society of Art, talks about the role of hope, and uses the famous Martin Luther King speech as an example of hope in the worst of times. How different would it have been if King, instead of saying I have a dream, had said I have a nightmare.

There are, and always will be reasons to be cheerful. We are living through a time of opportunity, where the work we do, the way we are towards each other, can sculpt a way of living that respects the finite resources of the earth. To do that, we must look to and really learn from the mistakes of the past, but we can also look to the future with confidence. As we meet here tonight we can never forget that the course of history changes with small groups and individuals taking on conventional thinking, daring to imagine better alternatives. From the civil rights movement, to the suffragettes, to the abolition of slavery, it begins with people meeting and thinking through ideas. As artists we are licensed to use our creativity, but we must also remember the words of Coomraswamy; "The artist is not a special kind of man, but every man is a special kind of artist."

We must above all be humble, broaden out the circle of debate and have faith in the instinctive goodness of the public.

At long last the American public have turned round to realizing that the Bush presidency has failed. His poll ratings are the lowest they have been. The last time a president was this unpopular, it was Nixon a few months before he resigned due to Watergate. Last month one of America's most

prominent historians declared Bush to be the worst president in history. That's 43rd out of 43. Bush's legacy is one of failure, an enormous waste of time, money, natural resources and lives. His plans to cut gasoline use announced in last night's State of the Union address is to be welcomed, but it is rhetoric that is decades too late, and is not mandatory. Bush fiddles while Rome burns.

Whatever happens in November 2008, the fact is the next president of the United States will not be George W. Bush. Last week Hillary Clinton, and this man, Barak Obama, took the first steps to joining the race to be the next president. In the next year these two will snowball themselves into our lives and with Obama there is a great excitement that he's the real deal. Obama has not yet shown he has the capabilities of Martin Luther King, but at least he quotes Martin Luther King, in stump speeches he makes in speeches across America. He talks of hope, of being tenacious and provocative, and then he says, "The moral arc of the Universe is long, but it bends towards justice."