

Original citation:

Whybrow, Nicolas (2016) Complex Coventry : towards an urban sensography. In: Davies, Trevor and Verwilt, Katrien, (eds.) *Changing Metropolis III : Metropolis 2012-15. Laboratory and festival for art and performance in urban space.* Copenhagen: Copenhagen International Theatre, pp. 91-96.

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Complex Coventry: Towards an Urban Sensography

Nicolas Whybrow

Like Copenhagen's Metropolis Festival my concern is with the way art engages with urban contexts in increasingly varied ways. My research makes the case for art to be seen as implicitly constitutive of the city; in the same way as we accept that architects, engineers and planners *build* cities, so art actively contributes to their construction via the precipitation of not only urban imaginaries but also realities. As Metropolis has shown public art in cities has infinitely widened its scope in recent times. A multifarious new aesthetic has emerged – incorporating the official and unofficial – that locates itself in, and is contingent upon urban contexts, and that frequently enlists a participatory spectatorship, so the citizen is central. The significance of urban art rests, then, on it holding a vital and integrated position that is thoroughly implicated within the quotidian workings of urban life and can therefore be said to be as essential as any other public amenity available in the city. Thus, art proves itself to be indispensable and this is accounted for in part by its capacities to tease out the *complexities* of 21st century urban living. This may include drawing attention to the latter's precarious, often fragmented or dispersed nature and, therefore, the challenges to its sustainability. So, part of the implicit function of art is to initiate and facilitate forms of public critique for the general good of the urban populace. Via its inherent pre-occupation with creativity and culture, it has a decisive role to play in shaping as well as drawing conclusions about the constitution of urban futures as habitable public space.

The sense of a city

With the city of Coventry undergoing radical regeneration and preparing to bid in 2017 to become UK City of Culture in 2021, the implementation of arts practices as the means to track and galvanise transformation is an idea that is very much 'in play' in the city at this point in time. A collaborative practice-based research project I have in preparation is entitled *Sensing the City*. This will undertake a series of site-specific studies of urban rhythms, atmospheres, textures, practices and patterns of behaviour using the sensate, performing human body as a data-gathering sensor and applying techniques of writing and notation, as well as technologies of sound/oral recording, photography and film to respond to, document and process fieldwork activity. The final phase will involve visualising documented text, sound, movement and image material as an online, interactive mapping of the urban sites in question. It is an aim of the proposed research that its findings will be able to contribute directly to the project of revitalisation in the city, not least since such endeavours

frequently become ensnared in abstract planning, ignoring such factors as embodied interactions with public space and the ‘felt’, experiential and creative sides of everyday urban living.

Uniquely the *Sensing the City* project will seek to utilise performance-based techniques to arrive at what one might call (social) scientific outcomes. In other words it aims to make use of the presence and movement of the sensitised human body in urban space – drawing on methods ranging from dance-based practices, to employing the film camera as an extension of the body, to walking as performance – in a manner equivalent to the advanced, data-gathering digital sensor typically implemented as smart technology by engineering and the sciences. Its premise as performance is less to perform for an immediate audience in situ – though there will be occasions when this proves appropriate (with commissioned work from artists, for example) – than to engage the body for its capacities to register and convey crucial details relating to the human senses in selected urban contexts. Importantly, as Carl Lavery points out in his prefacing remarks to his ‘ecography’ of Paris, the body here is ‘not synonymous with subjectivity (reflective consciousness), and neither is it contained by the skin; rather it is psycho-physical matter, a type of instrument engaged in a logic of intensities and speeds. To have a body is to be affected, to be open to the flux and flow of anonymous forces, the chaos of molecules’. Thus, he concludes, drawing on the work on aesthetics and atmospheres of the philosopher Gernot Böhme, we can ‘attempt to capture how the materiality of the environment impacts on [the body], provoking intangible moods and sensations’ (2014: 58).

Specifically the project’s outcomes will seek to draw conclusions about the constitution, character and morphology of urban space by monitoring the instinctive reactions of the body. In other words, it will be centrally concerned, as a symptom of the degree to which cities are changing in the 21st century, to examine the effects on the practices and behaviours of urban dwellers of key features of modern-day urban space, including such factors as: defensible space, retail/consumer space and gated space; the effects of surveillance technologies, motorised traffic and smart phone use; the integration of ‘wild’ as well as ‘domesticated’ nature in urban planning and living. City centres such as that of Coventry, which will serve as the focal point for the research, are changing rapidly in the way they are being used (or are permitted to be used) and there is currently profound uncertainty about their future purpose as significant aspects of new or recent life practices – many of them linked to developments in technologies – are brought to bear. So, for example, online shopping has reduced the need to have centralised retail outlets, above all when it comes to the ubiquitous chain-store and so the very need for the centre-piece of most, if not all, cities, the shopping mall, is being undermined. Interestingly, it is now those trades and outlets that require the physical presence of

the body – cafes/pubs, tattoo parlours, nail bars – that are more likely to thrive in urban centres. Moreover, widespread CCTV coverage – particularly in the UK, boasting as it does more than the rest of Europe combined – which seems primarily to exist so as to provide security for property and consumer activity, has implications for the way citizens interact with one another in public space, arguably creating a particular ‘climate’ that paradoxically has the effect of generating fear and suspicion rather than alleviating it, and producing an ‘averted gaze’ in members of the public. That is, surveillance mechanisms have arguably ‘stolen’ the human gaze that looks outwards, makes eye contact with others and takes responsibility for that which takes place in public situations. Such surveillance is also heavily bound up with an escalating tension between public and private space whereby what is taken to be the former often turns out to be the latter (shopping malls, as we know, are *not* public space and operate their own private security firms). Similarly, the spread of mobile/smart phone use produces ‘distracted’ behaviours; while users may be physically present in a busy public location such as an urban square, effectively their focus is ‘elsewhere’ and, as such, they are prone to inconsiderate, even dangerous movements that impinge adversely on other citizens.

Citycity: a Coventry sensography

Sensing the City will divide into four micro-projects, led from the respective perspectives of dance, film, site-specific immersive performance and walking as performance.. The last of these, led by me and entitled *Citycity*, will seek to instigate a series of repeated and durational observational encounters with selected urban sites on foot, using the nine junctions of the problematic ring-road that encircles the city centre as points of departure. The invented notion of *citycity* is intended to encapsulate something akin to the *feel* of a city or that which may be said to constitute a quality of *city-ness* based on a sensuous response to urban atmospheres, rhythms and textures (in the same way, say, that ‘audacity’ seeks to convey a sense of being audacious). Such urban features are made up of and come about in diverse ways but are dependent on certain obvious common factors relating to the basic interaction of time, space and the movement of bodies, as well as such less apparent nuances as climate, weather, seasons and time of day. The city can be said, then, implicitly to present itself as an aesthetic, affective phenomenon that engages and motivates the senses of the human body in particular ways. As Amin and Thrift put it, the city is ‘a force-field of passions that associate and pulse bodies’ (2002: 84). Moreover, each urban environment produces its own highly distinct set of atmospherics and behaviours that emerge as a consequence of a complex combination of factors as wide-ranging as the organisation of a city’s built environment (including the way ‘nature’ is incorporated), historical evolution, demographics, amenities, industries, governance and so on. Having stated that, it should also be said that such a felt response to the

aesthetics of the city tends to be something that is, at best, taken for granted and more usually ignored completely. A phenomenon such as atmosphere is by its very nature difficult to pin down as anything other than a vague or implicit ‘sense’, yet it is also something that recognisably exists and should not therefore be dismissed as the source of serious contemplation in appraising the habitability of cities, as Böhme has shown.

Coventry has a particularly resonant recent history of mid-20th century destruction and erasure after the devastating bombing of the city in 1940, which effaced its medieval origins (including its cathedral), followed by rapidly implemented post-war modernist reconstruction based principally on serving the city’s burgeoning car industry and creating a civic-minded, functional city for working citizens. Now, in the early 21st century, the city finds itself again in a transitional moment, poised as it is for a further phase of significant regeneration, this time of its declining post-war infrastructure. This has witnessed a second radical effacement in the form of a car industry that has been rendered almost non-existence owing to a range of socio-economic factors and developments. As such Coventry offers a plethora of highly intriguing and revealing public sites, often circumscribed or governed by atrophying or neglected instances of functionalist modernist architecture, street furniture and the built environment in general, that were designed and constructed at a time of high local authority investment in an ideal of civic responsibility, democratic participation, welfare provision and social commitment, to say nothing of industrial optimism.

The purpose of *Citycity* is to attempt to be attentive to that which is triggered for the sensitised body by strategically selected locales. The conceptual point of departure for an experience of Coventry in particular is the two-lane ring-road that has encircled its centre since its construction in the period after the end of World War 2. As a medieval cathedral town once surrounded by a ‘defensive’ wall, Coventry’s morphology was in any case concentric, so the post-war construction of the ring-road, after the city’s dramatic flattening by German bombers, maintained the centre’s essential form. To its credit the much-lauded civic plan for the development of the centre’s built environment after 1945, famously conceived and implemented by the city council’s architecture department under Donald Gibson, incorporated a significantly pedestrianised aspect, but the presence of the ring-road also clearly – and typically for the time – foresaw the use and mobility of the private car as a necessary transportational feature of modern urban living. As a city that staked its post-war identity on the development of a burgeoning car industry, whose success was dependent on more and more ‘never-had-it-so-good’ citizens acquiring its product for private use, it was hardly surprising that Coventry saw it as appropriate to facilitate the attraction of vehicles into the centre of the city. A

ring-road, with its nine strategically spaced junctions, seemed like a good way of ensuring easy flow and dispersal. In truth, the ring-road proved to be a poorly conceived, unwieldy structure. With its sudden turn-offs, tight bends and cramped traffic merging designs – seen popularly, and ironically (given this is ‘car town’), as providing an invitation to crash – it is arguably too small and confined in its dimensions to justify itself as a functional necessity. (The city centre is but a good kilometre in diameter and can be crossed in approximately ten minutes on foot.) Moreover, with its brutalist concrete design and predominantly raised structure, which means its grey, darkening underbelly effectively looms over large parts of the centre’s immediate perimeter, it easily takes on the aspect of an oppressive carbuncle that strangulates the city centre, arguably rendering the cultivation of humane urban living an impossibility. In the meantime, of course, the car industry in Coventry has been reduced to almost nothing for a range of complex socio-economic reasons and so even the ring-road’s symbolic *raison d’être*, as a form of architectural celebration befitting of a burgeoning ‘motor city’, has disappeared too. Instead it stands now as sad testament to a misconceived 20th century fantasy of the private car as the solution to mobility in small cities.

The ring-road’s symbolic obsolescence aside, *Citycity* will also focus on its phenomenological presence as a brutal(ist) structure. In particular it will adopt as its paradigmatic point of departure, first, the fact that it is in itself inaccessible for the pedestrian, yet it occupies a prime position within the built environment of the city centre (even riding a bike round it – strictly allowable – would be taking your life into your own hands). And, second, that it represents a form of barrier in the mental image that the pedestrian-citizen has of the city, rudely blocking the way between the outlying residential areas surrounding it and the civic centre, which, in an era of internet shopping, increasingly struggles to sustain its purpose as a functioning public location. In the same way as Walter Benjamin saw the 19th century metropolitan arcade, with its apparent order, pragmatism and promises of the fulfilment of urban dwellers’ desires, as being effectively in radical decline – the epitome of the transience and inherent ‘will to decay’ of a ‘phantasmagorical capitalism’ – so the Coventry ring-road represents a mistaken 20th century investment in a dehumanising ‘cars and concrete’ policy of urban living. As such, its nine junctions will be seen here as structural *disjunctions*, as actual and figurative points from which the pedestrian is physically repelled or *dislocated*, spinning off to alternative spaces in search of a humanising experience or, indeed, of ‘finding a voice’: as a trope, being sent to Coventry implies being rendered mute or being ostracised, thus, in its capacity as an architectural paradigm of the city, the ring-road, much like the anodyne M25 of Iain Sinclair’s portrayal in *London Orbital*, points towards a form of condemnation to endless and anaesthetised circulation that leaves one ‘speechless’.

The nine sites of displacement will include key Coventry locales such as the old and new cathedrals, the War Memorial Park, IKEA, Coventry Station and London Road Cemetery. In each case the presence of the human body as a form of sensor or receptor will be implemented in a range of methodological ways from spending extended periods of time deliberately loitering, observing and walking, to repeated visits at different times of day and in differing seasons. In this preliminary raw-data-gathering phase, the body's sensorium, still photography and note-taking will function as primary tools in the tracking and capturing of atmosphere, rhythms, and objects in space, the city effectively being framed as an 'affective archive' that acts on the body. As Nicolas Bourriaud suggests, capturing a city means following its movement, adding that wandering represents a form of enquiry into the city: 'It is writing on the move and a critique of the urban, understood as the matrix of the scenarios in which we move' (2009: 100). While de Certeau's influence in establishing that walking can be seen as a way of performing the city has been widely referenced, Lavery has highlighted the 'less remarked upon' way that 'textures and surfaces of the city perform on the body and produce a type of embodied writing that is sensate and sensitive to fleeting moods, and floating perceptions' (2014: 62). Importantly, *Citycity*'s focus will be on the non-representational, referring to that which cannot easily be assigned cognitive meaning or signifying sense but that operates more in the realm of sensuous experience or a 'logic of intensities'.

Following from the fieldwork, the micro-project will shift to a data processing phase in which the nine sites-as-disjunctions will effectively be replicated as topographical assemblages, effectively creating in sum their own, off-kilter 'cartographic ring' as a felt evocation of the city. Thus, making use of still photographs and documented notes, the gathered material will be translated into a performative text-and-image site-montage consciously based on a sensitivity to rhythm, texture and atmosphere. Visual imagery will be utilised to evoke space and form, while text will privilege that which writing can suggest structurally and materially rather than semantically. This sensography will be presented and expanded into a 3D visualisation online as part of a larger *Sensing the City* mapping of Coventry that can be navigated in an infinite number of ways by the user, as well as a smartphone app that invites users to submit to a similarly sensuous exploration of urban locations.

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