

WALKS INBETWEEN

The following text is from a walking conversation between Ilona Sagar and Lucy Gunning, starting from Ilona Sagar's studio in Monument and finishing at Bermondsey Tube Station, the site of the artist's Art Licks Weekend performance. *Human Factors* took place at 3pm on Saturday 5 October 2013.

Lucy Gunning: I noticed both the text and performance seem to contain a political voice, or to hold a mirror to a certain social context. I wondered if that politicised voice within the work is recent or has always been there? Where has that come from?

Ilona Sagar: I think there is always an innately political context that I try to look at in my work. I use architecture as a framework to talk about how we negotiate shared space and politics is inherent within that. I don't think you can avoid talking about politics if you're talking about social interactions and I'm not afraid of working with those languages, but I also don't think it has to be explicit. What interests me is how ready we are to absorb spatial constructs without really considering them. We are designed into an experience of our environment, which can be a very passive way of operating within space.

LG: When you were working with Bermondsey tube station as the site for your performance, did you do a lot of research into the building and its history, the bureaucratic and social context? Did this influence you, for example, in the text for *Human Factors*. Was that found text?

IS: Often if I'm asked to make work in a specific space I look at the history, or the design of the space to see what that kicks up. The text from *Human Factors* referenced the development PR for the station, which was written by Ian Ritchie Architects. I was surprised by how poetic the language was, as I was expecting something functional and dry. It was quite brilliant. The text [*Human Factors*] is a patchwork – it is something that I devised, although I included some fragments of found text. The piece played with an unexpected use of language to turn the station into something quite filmic that you pass through. I wanted to make it very intimate and awkward. Underlying this research was an interest in gentrification, but I didn't feel I wanted to tackle it head on.

LG: It becomes a context within which you are working, rather than the content.

IS: Definitely, it's not that I'm being timid, but I'm far more interested in it as context rather than the work becoming somehow didactic.

It was really great to hear people's feedback after the performance; they talked as much about the people who inadvertently became part of the performance by passing through the space as they did about the performers themselves. That was a huge part of the work- the performers looked like they were at the centre of the piece, but they were actually just the frame for the building and people in it.

LG: It's often the case when doing something in a public space- the work becomes a kind of mirror. I recently did a performance/event involving a walk from Camberwell to the Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre. It was very simple, and involved two people carrying a large white half-circle. It was like a screen. But the image wasn't on the screen, it was everywhere around it - the space – what it was moving through and past. By working in a public space what you do becomes a reflector or an amplifier.

LG: Shall we go down there?

IS: I think this street takes us to the station.

IS: This street is very much a cross-section of Bermondsey, with the back of these warehouses alongside a new development and built around a mock-Tudor house. It's very typical of London. But I find there is a problem with this way of observing a city. You can become very nostalgic and romantic through attempting to be poignant.

LG: In a way it's a form of ownership. Can you explain a little bit more what you mean about being romantic about it?

IS: Using the urban environment as a space of research, or acting as a finger-pointer, can be seen as a fairly privileged position. By romanticising the urban decay or the misfit-ness of London you end up generalising or avoid discussing anything difficult or complex about the city. In trying to talk about the eclectic nature of communities coming together, there is a danger of falling into some kind of standard way of discussing them.

LG: How do you think you engaged with the audience that came to your performance?

IS: The performance at Bermondsey tube station clearly had two very different audiences. There was a group of people who were passing through the station to travel, and they witnessed each of the different elements of the piece, but in a hidden way. Then there was the group who came specifically for the Art Licks Weekend who got a very theatrical experience of the performance. That difference in itself is interesting. Being invited to perform in public space means that on the one hand you are performing to the general public, and on the other hand you are performing to a knowing audience.

When you go specifically to see a live performance, without even realising it you have an internal theatre space in your head. You think 'I am the audience'. This was the Art Licks audience. The audience who were using the station practically, without intending or expecting to see my performance would have had a very different attitude to seeing or hearing what was happening around them in the station. I don't mind that there were two different audiences.

LG: At least two! There may have been more.

Am I right in thinking there was more than the two dancers for the performance, there was also someone who repeatedly went up and down the escalators reciting your text, and the two people with the cardboard box, were they part of it?

IS: The cardboard box people weren't part of it.

LG: I think it's really interesting that the audience couldn't be entirely sure who was part of the performance, and who wasn't. When I saw the person going down the escalator I did wonder if they were another element, or not - in a way, we were all part of it.

IS: There were two actors on the escalators but they operated in a very different way to the dancers. The actors stood very close to the back of people's necks, delivering the text to people as they entered or left the station.

People naturally transformed the steps at the entrance of the station and it in to an auditorium. The dancers played with a dynamic, on one level about being theatrical and turning Bermondsey station into a conventional theatre space, and on another level the choreography was talking about something more complex, about how they related to the space. It was meant to function awkwardly. If you were to hear the text you would have a very different relationship to the dancers at the top of the stairs to those who were watching it as a spectacle. Even if you chose not to be involved you inadvertently became involved: the periphery became the spectacle.

LG: When we were speaking earlier you mentioned Post-Fordism - people like Mark Fisher immediately spring to mind. Are there writers or texts that feel particularly pertinent to you?

IS: I agree with a lot of Mark Fisher's argument in *Capitalist Realism*. Another book I found really influential was *Ground Control* by Anna Minton. Socially, I think we have reached a point where we don't collectively feel we have any control over our environment or political space. Susan Sontag's *On Style*, and Jacques Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator* were also really important texts to me. But I wouldn't say I research in a linear way. The way I research is a lot more in action. For me filmmaking and performance is a way of testing space and seeing it in practice.

LG: *Human Factors* is both a film and performance. There seems to be a difference between the choreographed, orchestrated event of *Human Factors* as a performance in real time, in a public space, in comparison to the mediated environment of the video work, in which you are controlling our point of view and how much of the image we are seeing.

IS: Definitely, there is something interesting in taking on the role of director. I don't tend to appear in my own performances as I like to work with other people, and there is a similar kind of control in this process as there is in making a film. The Bermondsey tube station performance was a very controlled piece. Although it wasn't explicit, there was a sense of a 'point of view', it was 'felt' there was a place

from which you should observe. The way the dancers and actors were placed meant there was a real sense of the audience being guided through something, you couldn't just meander. Similarly, in film there are particular things I want to point to by using different angles or treatments; both approaches certainly have a connection.

LG: The big difference for me between the two is that in the performance there is a sense of context. Whereas the video is shot and edited very close-in and there are very few wide shots. The result is something more visceral and sensory than the performance. In the live work the edifice and the performer are inseparable.

IS: It's really hard to perform in a public space, particularly a train station, which already has an embedded sense of spectacle to overcome. I was trying to embrace that but also wanted to confuse it. The audience had to negotiate this space, which already comes with a fixed set of rules, whilst the performance had its own logic, it defined the space and created a backdrop to what was already there.

IS: How do you negotiate performing live, or working live?

LG: It varies for each context or situation. I haven't done a lot of live performance but when I have I tend to think of them as events rather than performances; as something I sent out into the world to interact with whatever it encounters. They are set up to engage with chance and real life rather than an art audience.

IS: The difficulty is, where does the work sit? I'm really comfortable with things sitting in-between, but I think there is a tendency to want to lock things down.

LG: The in-between is more interesting, and this opens it up to being collaborative: people are working with you and you are working with them, and they bring things to it.

We enter Bermondsey tube station

IS: You see what I mean about the space? It's been, or seems to be designed to create a performance from people walking through the station. There is a sense of a promenade or announcing yourself into the space, which is quite dramatic. I think that's why I wasn't so concerned about the performance being fragmented, with the dancers and then the actors on the escalators. The dancers were being overtly theatrical, but there is an innate theatricality to the space and the actors enhanced that. As there is only one station exit the performance had to be negotiated or confronted

Ilona and Lucy both finished the interview at the station and took the Underground home.