

Iain Sinclair at mima: 15/3/12

As part of the AV Festival this year (the theme for which was *slow*), WALK co-curated a programme of art-walks. They turned out to be hugely successful, with every event fully booked. The programme began with a talk by the leading writer, filmmaker, poet and psychogeographer, Iain Sinclair, which, although a discreet event itself, raised a number of issues that helped to provide a context for the five walks (by Hamish Fulton, Chris Watson, Laura Harrington, Tim Brennen and Mike Collier) that followed over the next three weekends.

Sinclair had been invited to ‘make’ a solitary walk in and around Middlesbrough prior to the talk. For a day and half he wandered around the area surrounding MIMA and he began the evening event there by explaining how crucial walking was to our understanding of the post-civic spaces he had encountered. In his short meanders, he had begun to absorb some of the local history, developing a ‘dialogue’ between memory and memorials: the **memory** embedded within the regional culture of both the city (in libraries and reading rooms) and the surrounding Cleveland Hills - a rich seam of historical and archaeological information; and the **memorial**, represented through a series of local statues (a cruder way of marking history and place, he suggested).

He reflected on the democratic nature of the horizontal spaces he experienced and the vertical, fascistic energy of the high-rise buildings and shopping malls. He mused about how current global corporate thinking was destroying a sense of local identity and suggested that the theme of this year’s AV Festival – *Slow* – provided an antidote to this culture of accelerated globalisation in the name of progress. Slowness, he thought, revealed a certain type of England; it gave us a breathing space within which to foreground a rich ‘other’ side to our landscape experience; and he underlined the importance of *drifting* and *wandering* through spaces.

Sinclair is probably best known at the moment for his on-going critique of the Olympic Project (London 2012) – a topic he explores in his recent book – *Ghost Milk: Calling Time on the Grand Project* (described by his publisher as ‘a personal investigation of landscapes ravaged by vanity architectures.’)

During the talk, he read extracts from *Ghost Milk*. In the section *Northlands*, he talked about the architect Will Alsop’s dream of a SuperCity highway stretching the length of the M62 from Liverpool to Hull. ‘The architect’ explained Sinclair, ‘proposed a SuperCity folded around the entire road. He published an illustrated book of supporting essays. And he promoted the idea, vigorously, with a television film’. Sinclair took to the road himself in 2009, travelling the length of the M62, but found that nothing along ‘the entire span of the road had actually been built by Alsop’. However, Sinclair did manage to visit one surviving project from the SuperCity dream ‘built’ by Alsop during the naughties - the toilet block of the now redundant Earth Centre at Conisbrough, near Doncaster (some miles south of the M62).

Sinclair explained that the Earth Centre ‘dated from the era when New Labour was an unsullied novelty, rattling out promises without having to deliver. Slush funds siphoned from millennial lotteries, were being channelled towards northern areas deemed fit for regeneration. Brownfield anaemia doctored with booster shots of fresh green capital.’

Sinclair went on to say that 'A deal was done with the National Coal Board to re-landscape the slagheaps. They already had a vineyard and a perfectly decent hut where you could get something to eat. A nice little project too successful to be left alone. Then the terrible thing happened: they (Alsop) got the loot.' Fifty million pounds. And then 'fifty million stretched as these things do to eighty. It started to get serious. And visible.'

"Following Earth Centre's progress" said The Guardian in 1999, tracking the project's development "was a roller coaster ride of false starts, wild hopes and dashed plans". The initial aim was for a gradual development of the site, incorporating community-led projects and the first stage of the Centre opened in 1994. It included a sustainable aquaculture centre and a community farm. However, the influx of major lottery funding created (said Sinclair) a 'headline-making disaster ... snatched from the jaws of a minor local success'.

Earth Centre re-opened in May 2001. More money from grants and other sources became available; A pirate ship was built, a crazy golf course and indoor 'Amazon Adventure' play area. However, by 2003 it was obvious that the target visitor numbers were not being met, and by 2004, as increasing numbers of staff were leaving, the attraction closed to the public. 'The benefit of the grand project to the Conisborough community', said Sinclair, 'was zilch.' The strategy, as Alsop explained it, had been to "expound in a vivid, hands-on way, the principles of sustainable development". And in a negative fashion, this is exactly what the Earth Centre achieved. They proved that nature sustains itself. It abhors the spoilers of a vacuum.'

When Sinclair visited the site in 2009, he found 'abandoned mine-workings' that 'after a few years left to themselves' had 'a wild beauty which includes visible traces of a previous history: the rusted rails, coils of wire, scars and fissures. The boys on bicycles. The dog-walkers.' ... 'Here at last' explained Sinclair, 'was a fitting monument to the SuperCity: a wilderness loud with ghosts from a noble industrial heritage. A desolate theme park conceived from the embryonic wraiths of a discontinued future. A conceptual landscape where reality was declared bankrupt'.

Sinclair is often associated with the philosophy of Psychogeography which has been defined as "a whole toy box full of playful, inventive strategies for exploring cities ... just about anything that takes pedestrians off their predictable paths and jolts them into a new awareness of the urban landscape." I get where Sinclair is coming from ... completely. These grand projects often bulldoze and erase any sense of local distinctiveness. They pigeon hole us as corporate consumers – our routes within them are usually pre-defined – places where we *can* go and places we *can't*. We are 'free' to wander – but only along pre-determined tramlines. There are often lots of so-called interactive, 'educational tools' in such 'beasts' – but where is the interactivity in pressing a set of three buttons to decide which of three options is correct (right and wrong often not questioned, by the way)? Real interactivity is about wandering; getting lost; being surprised; discovering unexpected links between layers of history. It is not about **having** to do something, **having** to go somewhere ... as Sinclair says towards the end of *Ghost Milk* .. 'Unless you walk everywhere, the new England is unutterably strange – a carousel of disorienting jumpcuts; coming off-road is like random digital stutter ... Sunk in apathetic reverie, like all those other ghosts in neon cafeterias, I began to wonder if grand projects had ever been successful" ...

I recommend *Ghost Milk*. It is a powerful corrective to current global trends; to bigger, more powerful multi-national corporations (one thinks of Barclay's for instance); failed millennial projects, and overarching urban planning that excludes the individual. Reading Sinclair's wry, edgy prose, one might expect him to be dogmatic and curmudgeonly; he is, however, a charming, witty, generous and engaging speaker. His talk was a model performance – delivered without notes for exactly an hour – and he took questions with an open mind and seemed prepared to accept that good intentions often lie behind such failures. He casts a forensic and wary eye on these 'visionary (hubristic?)' schemes; but he doesn't propose solutions – that in itself would be, I guess, to fall into the trap set by these grand projects;

And what of the talk's relevance to the programme of walks that followed over the forthcoming three weekends? Sinclair suggests that we slow down and properly explore and value our environment (preferably by walking through it). He looks for the unexpected, the individual and the personal. He celebrates local distinctiveness, burrowing beneath the meta-narratives of history (both regional and international). He listens. He questions the familiar, and the surface of contemporary culture we are 'sold'. His engagement with our environment is sensuous, but not romantic, conservative or parochial. He looks for beauty in the urban Edgelands and celebrates nature's ability to reclaim and outlive the grand schemes he critiques. These are all 'issues' that were explored, either directly or indirectly, in the five walks that followed this excellent talk.

Footnote. In an attempt to succinctly explain the ideas that Sinclair explored in his hour-long talk, I have taken the liberty of focusing the narrative on just one aspect of the talk (The Earth Centre) and have included some quotes from *Ghost Milk* that were not in Sinclair's narrative on the evening.

ⁱ Sinclair, I (2011) *Ghost Milk - Calling Time on the Grand Project*. London, Penguin Books