

## **SYMPOSIUM PAPER**

### **Disappearance of Latitude: Live Presence and Realtime in Contemporary Practice**

**School of Art in Chicago**

**Feb 23<sup>rd</sup> 2007**

A Taxi is a black cab not a white cube

today is Day 1775

and the meter is still running

This project began with a desire to bring my practice closer to home, to stitch it closer into my everyday life, to locate it within the neighbourhood in which I live.

#### **PART ONE Days 1 – 173**

The location is Cambridge, England – the Abbey district - an area designated by Cambridge City Council as one of urban deprivation – with a higher than average, for the city, number of unemployed, single parent families, pensioners etc. Two large social housing estates separated by the main arterial road between Cambridge and Newmarket – one with a slightly rougher image than the other –

I live at Number 38 Stanesfield Rd a street of 55 council houses, – many of which still occupied by elderly widows and widowers who have lived there since the houses were built in the 1950's. Neat front gardens and net curtains frowning on the odd neighbour who neglects to mow their lawn and fails to put their trash out on time. Polite, reserved, preferring to keep themselves to themselves, curbing their curiosity , anxious about the unfamiliar, fearful of the strange - a culturally disenfranchised neighbourhood, with little or no experience in viewing or responding to contemporary art practice.

I put a London Taxi a B Reg Austin FX4R, mechanically defunct but otherwise practically pristine in my own front garden.

for several months it operates simply as an object of curiosity ... occasionally passers by would stop me to ask "How did you get it in there?" It continues to be that some people notice this conundrum immediately whereas others need it pointing out.

## PART TWO : TAXI GALLERY

Days 174 – 1290

In the three years that the Taxi operated as a Gallery – I have worked with over 30 artists creating artworks, installations and performances for the Taxi

there were events in the Scout Hut conveniently adjacent to my house,

projects involving local schools,

and participatory installations involving the gathering of material and texts,

most ambitiously the Taxi acted as an FM radio station broadcasting live to the city over two long weekends ... showcasing a wide range of sound art work and producing a number of live and prerecorded programmes involving participants from the neighbourhood for the broadcast.

The audience for Taxi Gallery extended beyond my immediate neighbours, Local artists and people in the Cambridge art 'scene' have embraced and supported the project and through the website and e-list bulletins there is a national and international audience who experience the work through its online documentation.

I am often asked about my "own" work as an artist as if that must be something separate and different from the Taxi Gallery project I am aware of confusion when I reply that Taxi Gallery is an artwork and I am an artist not a curator.

In, *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicolas Bourriaud suggests that:

"If a work of art is successful, it will invariably set its sight beyond its mere presence in space: it will be open to dialogue, discussion and that form of inter-human negotiation that Marcel Duchamp called "the co-efficient of art" which is a temporal process, being played out here and now"

Logbook entry: Day 180

The gallery has been open for a week ... I've noticed that people walking by have begun to cross over to the other side of the street .... wanting to avoid this

strange thing that has appeared in their street? this is going to be a long conversation to get going .... I'm going to have to be patient.

Some teenage girls are gathered around the sign reading the notice – I go out to talk to them, they're bemused, they don't really 'get' it – I've tried to use accessible and plain language without being patronising – I explain that I'm using the Taxi as an unusual kind of art gallery – I am shocked when one of them asks "what is a gallery?"

Day 356

It's hard not to feel discouraged by the determined way that my neighbours seem to me to be ignoring Taxi Gallery - maybe they're sneaking a look when they can't see me around? Anne and Alf live in the house across the street today when I was delivering leaflets about the new exhibition they said said thank you for keeping us in touch but it's not really for people like us.

William James on new experiences or ideas:

**by far the most usual way of handling phenomena so novel that they would make for a serious rearrangement of our preconceptions is to ignore them altogether, or to abuse those who bear witness for them.**

I suppose that I should feel grateful that I'm only ignored - the lack of complaints, protest, abuse, burglary, vandalism, graffiti etc still feels the most tangibly positive response that I have received from my neighbourhood through its noticeable and surprising absence.

Day 509 – 512

Laura Robinson has just spent three days binding the taxi with 20 miles of farmer's baler twine. Marge (my 86 year old next door neighbour) for the first time does not ask me what it is meant to be – she's just keen to tell me that it is about strangulation .... Whereas her friend Peg says it reminds her of her confused mind.

Day 580

For her performance of 'Curtains' Elspeth Owen is living in the Taxi for three weeks, as Material Woman she is gathering materials and stitching curtains to caparison the Taxi . Whilst waiting for Fish & Chips one evening she tells me that 10 year old Jasmine who lives at the other end of the road asked her "Would you call what you're doing - Having an experience?"

Inevitably any caller to the house – to read the meter, sell me a new gas or electricity plan, delivering a package etc etc – there's always a conversation about the current show and the idea of Taxi Gallery generally. I'm aware of being seen as this slightly mad woman, traditions of the british eccentric and the folly come to mind

Day 813

Pierre Joris visits and gives me a copy of Nomad Poetics - his reflections on the strange ....

“The strange in the dictionary is first off the unfamiliar, the previously unknown; secondly it is the out of the ordinary, the unusual, the striking – that which differs from the normal. There are thus already two strangenesses: one that just happens at some point to be unknown but will become familiar once it has been experienced; and another one that is so other that it strikes you, that it opposes your familiarity so fiercely it remains other, keeping its strangeness.”

After over two years, whilst my neighbours have now become familiar with Taxi Gallery to the point where they are no longer crossing the street or avoiding catching my eye and small moments of conversation, response and exchange are now happening – it is still for them “strange”

I have not made it easy for them – quite apart from the monthly changes of artistic response to the Taxi – its placing behind the hedge with a narrow entrance demands of them quite some degree of confidence and urgent curiosity. I have imposed Taxi Gallery without invitation and consultation (except for my very immediate neighbours) and am arguably guilty of the charge levelled at Richard Serra for Tilted Arc of an “arrogant, highly inappropriate assertion of a private self on public grounds”.

I am conscious of Taxi Gallery holding a dialogue with two audiences – not entirely separate but only slightly overlapping. Taxi Gallery is not a community art project, it was not and is not setting out to educate, inspire or incorporate my neighbours into art connoisseurs, critics or even artists nor does it dare to presume to be usefully addressing the very real social issues that they face in their day to day lives.

Miwon Kwon in her book *One Place after Another* talks about the task of today's site-oriented practice as a relational specificity **holding** the "adjacencies and distances **between** one thing, one person, one place, one thought, one fragment **next** to another", she suggests that "this relational sensibility can turn local encounters into long term commitments and transform passing intimacies into indelible, intractable social marks"

For now the meter is still running .....

Day 903

Letter from No 12 Stanesfield Rd

Hello my name is Janet I'm new to the area and I've been so interested and curious about your Taxi Gallery as I am a creative person myself. I love gardening, painting, drawing, dressmaking and all kinds of other art. But as I have been suffering from agoraphobia for some time but now I am getting over it one day at a time yes I would like to visit your gallery sometime when I'm feeling a bit more better and I'm able to stay outside on my own for a longer time I would like to visit one of your exhibitions in the near future.

and there was I thinking as I delivered leaflets for each exhibition that I was wasting my time and if I hadn't bothered Janet wouldn't have had any idea of what was going on just a few doors away from her house.

Day 1171 July 2005

Last night a gaggle of noisy, drunk teenagers pass by and call out - "what is that?" and my stock reply "what do you think it is? predictable replies: alien, spaceship, insect .... but then one girl says "it looks like a snow covered mountain to me, I really like it, it's something different isn't? it's good to have something different round here ..."

Day 1183

I've decided to close Taxi Gallery. I'm curious to see what will happen when the Taxi Gallery is no longer there/here .... What are the effects of the absence of its presence .... just as I was curious three years ago to see what effect its presence would have ... . there are only so many ways that the Taxi can be responded to as a context for new work – over 30 exhibitions already – its time to stop before ideas become repetitive or overreach themselves in search of originality. And also, I'm tired. The last year has been exhausting. I'm tired of the demands and draining energy of a predominantly administrative role. I'm conscious of becoming too familiar and confident with it. I don't want to get trapped into this as my only way of working. How can I work more intuitively, physically and materially upon the ground laid by Taxi Gallery once it has gone?

I've been thinking about handshakes as introductions - provoked by a quote by Allan Kaprow that I came across "I am most interested in the handshake between the artist and others" - starting to realise that this might be the beginning not near the end - that the last three years has been an extended sustained handshake, an introduction and now the conversation might begin ..

Through Taxi Gallery I have effectively now introduced myself to the neighbourhood, multiple points of meeting and connection have emerged opening up the potential for an onward process and body of work in which my role as artist is less controlling and more dialogic, responsive and care-taking

(rather than curatorial) in its approach. The idea of the curator being someone who 'takes care' rather than imposing control is one that I am keen to pursue.

Day 2235

the word GALLERY has been overpainted with question marks

conversation with Jim in the Taxi

we got to talking about eccentrics and follies - in some ways the Taxi (whilst not an architectural folly) functions as one a curious landmark which appears to draw people towards it in the way that Follies do - Jim pointed out they functions as "destinations" and meeting points in the landscape. He also told me about Rousseau's Folly which was deliberately constructed to be "unfinished" this resonates me - I see the Taxi as being "unfinished" as a project, its lack of resolution and resistance to closure being difficult to handle –

Day 2260

Last night I had a dream/nightmare that I was driving the Taxi down a steep hill and the brakes failed, it was very scary I was crashing, careeing around the road, panicking, I knocked over an old lady and crashed into a motorcyclist ... all very obvious stuff ... taking it as a warning to myself ... I need to be careful, I need to take my time and not blunder in to making promises and undertaking projects that I'm not equipped or skilled to do. But on the other hand the Taxi has achieved a place in the neighbourhood ... People are telling me in different ways that they want it to stay .... It's a neighbourhood Taxi rather than a community

Taxi - in that a neighbourhood is a gathering of communities of interest sharing geographical proximity but often little else.

ABBEY TAXI - a neighbourhood landmark, noticeboard, information centre on local groups and activities - a shelter for information, conversation and exchange.

Day 2285

I've been using the signature "take care" on emails for years now - I like the expression of concern and reminder to pay attention that it offers.

In England we call janitors or custodian a "caretaker"

Caretakers literally enable access, they also "know" the place more fully than any other person involved in its remit, they know it when it's empty, early in the morning, late at night, they "know" all the people and groups who use it and why, they know its sounds and its silences, the texture of activities and moods over the course of the day, they know it from the contents of rubbish bins, and the footprints on the floors.

By starting to think of myself a 'care-taker' I am not only declaring my intention to offer "care" but also reminding myself to "take care", that I am not simply selflessly serving, I am also (and am perceived to be) in a position of power and control in relation to the Taxi and its future activities.

Day 1291 – the day after the Closing Event

Last night everyone expecting me to be sad - but I felt happy and excited ... they the artists and arts audience were responding to it as an end whereas I see it as a beginning.

the next morning ... Peg knocking on my door to say how pleased she is that the Taxi is staying ...

Throughout Taxi Gallery I have felt as if I've been communicating with two audiences - both happy to communicate with me but reluctant to engage with each other - I've felt at home with both, I'd hoped to bring the two closer, to activate conversations between, to comfortably inhabit a territory of difference - in this I seem to have failed - the arts audience were performing a wake and the neighbourhood audience are celebrating/applauding an onward role.

Day 1325

I'm unsure whether this is an interesting next step or simply my inability to let go? I have prevaricated and swayed and agonised over the "ending" of Taxi Gallery and continue to do so. This is a very difficult space right now - a waiting space. The days are wet and cold and short. The Taxi is a forlorn albatross in the front garden in a kind of limbo - renamed but unclear about its function - empty and waiting - present and yet absent of function and role

a Taxi waiting for the next passenger and another journey.

Day 1345 – and ongoing

ABBEY TAXI ABBEY TAXI (formerly known as Taxi Gallery) is a neighbourhood landmark and shelter for information, conversation and exchange.

Day 1345

MAGNETIC MESSAGES is launched .... an announcement service for local events, activities, personal messages, jokes - I hope some adhoc late night anagrammisations .... first requested message advertising Lisa Ucan's Oriental Belly Dancing on Saturday Mornings - she tells me she's had at least one person joining in because she saw it advertised on the Taxi!

Day 1380

Today the Taxi departed (temporarily for 10 days) to take part in 209radio's FM broadcast to the city - acting as an additional sound recording/listening space outside the radio studio. Last night it was shifted around by 90 degrees ready for loading on the transporter and around midnight I heard a gang of kids coming up the street shouting and laughing - there was a loud crash - but I didn't take much notice - this morning I discover the side window of the Taxi smashed. It's fascinating - after nearly 4 years of no vandalism - the night that it subtly shifts position it becomes a target. Change is so threatening?

Come back from 209Radio late tonight to find an egg has been thrown across the empty space left by the Taxi, smashed and dribbled down my living room window. (I have put out a board with a 209Radio poster explaining where the Taxi is and that it will be back - this remains untouched.

Day 1400

The Taxi is back - almost exactly in the same position - no more vandalism. Peg said it didn't feel like home without the Taxi.

Advertised a Drum Kit for sale on Magnetic Messages - 3 enquiries and sold within a week.

Day 1450

Returning from a week away I find that the Magnetic Message I put up has been plundered! – almost ALL the letters have disappeared.

Day 1470

Undaunted I have continued to put up signs – I have a bargain roll of magnetic material so its easy enough to stencil more letters. I did put up a msg asking for the letters back and today returning from swimming I found the letters F U C K O & F on my doormat.

June 17<sup>th</sup> 2006

Excerpt from a letter to Goat Island in response to their announcement of the ending of their work together as Goat Island ...

there's a paradise garden in the Taxi right now - a grass seated idyll in a vehicle in my front garden created by a neighbour (because she wanted to! - she says it's not art!!!) - a garden historian - there are roses and lavender honeysuckle and pinks - it smells heavenly and the birds are singing ... ... endings can be difficult and bring new possibilities – thank you for your announcement - so excited for you all, so glad you've been able together to make a powerful and creative statement about your decision at this stage - how fundamentally this will ground your final work together ... the recent transition of the Taxi was tough, emotionally challenging a little like parenting a child through adolescence so I am

restored by statements and actions like yours and by looking out of my window and seeing two boys on their bikes peering into the Taxi garden and smiling, and by the fact that the press and the TV and the radio have not included me in their copy at all - I am simply the care-taker now, that's where I need to be, where I want to be and where I find myself feeling right, fulfilled, creative and happy taking care in a neighbourhood that extends from Marge next door to you all there in Chicago. (btw the boys are now sitting on the Taxi on the turf seats smelling the flowers... my love to you all and looking forward to what comes take care Kirsten PS the boys have now cycled off down the road and the birds are still singing

a garden is a sight of transportation .....

K. Lavers

February 2007