

Transcribe of YSP 'In Conversation' Bob Levene with William Rose
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WR: As an artist when you come into an expansive context such as the park, one of the first things you do is to identify the parameters and the edges of the space you have to work in. You did this in a few different ways, one of which was using maps and the other was walking around the park. Maybe you could start by talking about those two different experiences and how they differed.

BL: Well, there was the practical thing that I lived one side of the park and my studio was at the other, so I had to walk through the park everyday which was 2km one way, I would be at one point in the park and try to understand it, identify it, figure out where I was in it and then walk to the other side of the park and look back on that same place. Through that process of 'walking to work' I became interested in things that stood out visual signals, landmarks, different tones of colour, groups of trees, they became a way to orientate myself. It also became a way to see how something changed the further away you got from it and I started to think about how it was easier to identify or quantify or describe something when your further away from it, when your closer there is so much more information to choose from so it's not as easy to select.

WR: What about using maps, what was the correlation between what you'd perceive to be a scientific reading of the topography of the land and your experiences in the place.

BL: After these wanderings I would go back to the studio and mark where I'd been and measure how long I'd walked and I couldn't marry these two different experiences and that became important, trying to work out what these maps meant, I mean I know they gave me facts and figures and that they told me certain bits of information about what I had been doing but I couldn't relate it to the experience even if I was trying to objectify my experience in the land.

WR: This is something that the first piece of work that we're going to show, which is a collection relates to that idea and shows how long you've been interested or curious about maps and cartography, these are things that you've been collecting since 1999, 2000 and I remember when you first showed them to me you got them out of an envelope, there really interesting collection of things and subsequently you've had a number of them framed and that is a result of the process you've gone through in the park.

BL: What I've done is when ever somebody's drawn me a map to show me directions or they've verbalised directions and I've drawn it down I've kept the maps, some are as a result of other peoples conversations, which I've asked to keep. But I've never asked people to draw me a map unless there was a purpose or reason to do that. If I new what I would eventually be doing with them I would have been a bit more rigorous and noted down where and when they were drawn, some I can remember what they are and some I have know Idea, but actually I quite like that, trying to figure out what that meant and where it was from.

WR: What I really like about them is the way they seemed to celebrate human error, but also things you said were interested in that the fabric seems to imbed the time and place in which they were made.

BL: They seem to break all the rules of mapping, there's no scale, there not accurate in mapping terms, but most of them still function they still get you from A to B, you begin recognise that all maps are selective they all have there own purpose and what goes on them is determined by that purpose. What I like about this map (RED) is the designed mapped on the flyer combined with the scribble map, it's like the London Underground map in the sense there is no real relationship to geographical location, but its been refined to make it easier to read,

WR: Which actually often doesn't make it easier to read.

BL: Depends if it's a good design or not. They show a personality through them, some of them are really particular people won't let go of them until all the information is down and the roads are at the right angle, they show there own history and once the collection starts building up and they begin to relate to each other they become even more interesting.

WR: These lead into a piece of work that you've done towards the end of the residency, when I first saw these last week, seemed a very resolved piece of work. Could you explain a little bit about them, maybe starting with the title.

BL: They are a series of 5 framed pieces entitled 'As Far As the Eye Can See' They are based on 5 fixed points within the park where I stand up and look for the furthest horizon line I can see and identify and mark it on an OS map, then I follow this by turning 360 degrees in order to continue the plotted line. The 5 different points were chosen to cover the breadth of the park as well as they variations in height and different expansiveness of views, the smallest one being the size of my thumbprint and the largest being over a metre in length.

WR: Maybe you can talk about the framing and the composition of them as a set.

BL: They all have the same size frames and if you were to layer them on top of one another then they would line up and refer to the grid references of the OS Map. It was important to keep the frame size the same in order to keep continuity so you could see the view you didn't see, meaning, the emptiness in one frame would refer to what was in view in another frame.

WR: Maybe we could talk a bit about the process, because you spent 3 days working with a retired cartographer from the Ordnance Survey on these maps and it was a very involved process.

BL: I worked with Jim who recently retired from Surveying for the Ordnance Survey, it took 3 days to map 5 pieces and it was quite intense experience. The first 2 maps were a difficult process where we struggled to find common ground and a methodology of working. The problem was that this isn't how you make maps and you wouldn't ever try to do that (from a OS approach). Through lots of discussion we began to find common ground and we started to develop our own set of rules and our own language so for instance, we came up with the term 'horizon jump' which represented the point when one horizon line is cut in and interrupted by another. If you transfer that to a map then there might be 20km jump between one hill to the other, we decided to represent the 'horizon jump' by joining the 2 hills with a straight ruler line, which referred to the 'line of sight' looking at something directly from point to point as apposed to following the contours of the land. We called the fixed points where we stood 'standing points' and so on.

There were different levels of accuracy, for instance the 'standing points' were fixed by triangulation, then there were things in the landscape that were marked on the map that we could identify like a fence or a cluster of walled trees, we also new through maths that if our standing point was correct then every thing we saw had to be in line from that point otherwise we couldn't in theory see it. We were also informed by things we new to be true and not to be true by already being familiar with the landscape, when we reached very long distances it became a matter of what we called guesstamology, basing our decisions on the heights and contours the maps gave us and a matter of deduction, it can't be that or that we are looking at, so it must be that.

WR: I think what's interesting is that he talked about using certain technologies like GPS as a way of travelling out to those places and very accurately tell where you were, but you chose not to employ that method, which I think is interesting because again it takes it back to a method of the difference between subjective and objective experience and makes the point you were stood at really important. For me they are amazing things because they map the sensory boundaries around people and it's amazing how limiting they are, I was thinking of them as sensory islands and I find them quite bleak.

Claire: Did your eyesight limit you in anyway?

BL: My eyesight wasn't the limiting factor it was how well you looked that became more important, we learnt to look through this process, more than I ever had before, by the end we were fine tuned in spotting small grey bumps of land in the far of horizon. We'd be spending almost half a day starring out into the land from the same point and that intensity of look meant we learnt to see more.

WR: Also, other things must have effected the work like the seasons, how much foliage was on the trees could radically effect how far you could see and the time of day, the climate or the weather changing, so the

works also become records of the particular time and day in which they were made.

BL: We had one very clear day, one semi clear day where we could see but the far distances became very hard and one very foggy day, which meant one of the very far horizons which we new to exist just disappeared, so we didn't map it because we couldn't see it. Jim also, being over 6ft tall had to repeatedly bend down to see the world from might view point of a standing height of 5ft 2 in order to confirm what I saw.

WR: So how did he feel, did he perceive what he was doing as a science, I guess surveying is a mathematical and scientific process and what you were doing was really a subjective process, how did he respond to that?

BL: We were either ends of the scale and through this process we both learnt a lot, In a way we broke each others thinking. At the beginning Jim didn't fully understand what it was I was trying to do and he really struggled because he felt concerned that when he made a decision or mark that it wasn't correct and I had to say it was Ok to make a mark based on the information that we had and equally my perception of the OS map was altered from being everything and the truth to being inaccurate and selective, things in the landscape change at a fast rate, trees come and go, there simply isn't enough money to map everything all the time.

WR: I think at this point it seemed to open up mapping into a much wider area, which goes beyond the idea of maps and cartography and more into the areas of psychology of perception and representation. There is a short quote by Gregory Bates that I think talks about the same thing.

“ We say the map is different from the territory, what is the territory? Operationally somebody went out with a retina and measuring stick and made representations, which were then put on paper, what is on the paper map is a representation of what was in the retinal representation in the man who made the map. As you push back the question what you find is an infinite regress an infinite series of maps, the territory never gets in at all, always the process of representation will filter it out so that the mental world is only maps of maps ad infinitum”

It sums up the aged old thing of the map not being equal to the territory.

BL: As I look at them now, as finished and framed pieces I find it equally hard to imagine the landscape they represent. I really like the contradictions and conflicts that are raised when trying to represent the perceived 3 dimensional world onto flat paper, the challenge to represent space, distance and time in 2 dimensions.

WR: For me, from a philosophical point of view they seem to represent that idea that how can you know something to exist if its not within you sensory data as if they were sensory islands.

BL: This is all that exists in my world at that point and there is nothing beyond this.

WR: Maybe you can talk a little bit about the early experiments you did with beacons.

BL: When I arrived at the park I new I wanted to explore sight and sound over long distances and I've always had an interest in recording and communication technology so it natural turned to a focus on forms of long distance communication. I read a lot about the use of beacons over the land and when I arrived at the park they already had some braziers built, so we placed for beacons at the far corners of the park 3 of which were in direct line of sight to each other and only pair was without. Setting them up in line of sight was a really difficult task, especially as it was more than two. We used radio communication to help set them during the day, there was a great moment where it dawned on me that we were using the radio communication as way to line up the very system that they used to communicate with. This played on my mind as did the different forms of communication, by foot with runners or by sight or through electricity or by radio essentially speed of light or speed of sound. I like the fact that still today some of the new technologies still depend on peaks and line of sight just as the beacons did.

WR: Emely Mast became fascinating for you and its function is exactly that, to transmit radio and

microwave.

BL: Yes, it seemed to embody so much of what I was thinking about and I didn't know how to deal with it, but just over a week ago I finally got permission to go up it, so hopefully something might come of it. I think all of it became about this idea of the speed at which you can communicate something and also contrast and clarity, like a signal to noise ratio be it visual or audible, so the tower became not just a transmitter but a physical tower as a landmark.

WR: Your over arching interest in early communication comes from the idea of distance and the shortening of distance.

BL: Yes, there is a story in a book called *The Victorian Internet*, which talks about an incidence that brought the idea of the electric telegraph into the popular imagination prior to which it was received with scepticism. A chap called John Tawell had murdered his mistress after which he boarded a train to London, somebody witnessed the event and which train he got on and so called the police, this track was one of the few that had a telegraph system running along side, so the police sent a morse code to London and subsequently when John Tawell got off the train he was arrested. You have to remember that other than this new technology nothing went faster than a train. The public referred to the telegraph as 'The Chords that hung John Tawell'

WR: That's what struck me about the transatlantic cable where two boats would set off and they'd meet in the middle and connect the cable this would take two months and then another two months to get back, to find out it wasn't working and have to spend another two months travelling out again checking the line and so it went on.

BL: This is a completely different world

WR: You've taken this on board with a piece you initiated just before the residency with Zoe Irvine

BL: Zoe's work also has an interest in communication technologies, so we had chat about a lot of the ideas we've just talked about and decided that we would try and communicate with each other without using pre-existing communication systems ie post, email, telephone, she lives in Edinburgh and I live on Hull. So just before the residency I stuck a note to a small Dictaphone and to it to a festival in York and recorded myself asking a number of people if they knew an artist called Zoe Irvine, after 3 or 4 attempts I found someone who did and who was willing to take it back down to London with her in order to meet up with a friend who was going to Newcastle, who could then pass it on to someone else. Zoe doesn't know this and I have the feeling something is on its way to me.

WR: She was also really interested in Chinese Whispers

BL: Yes, which is part of the reason that I chose the Dictaphone so then you get a recorded document of the journey as well.

WR: That takes us back to sound, maybe we can go back to the park where you did a series of experiments that you did with visual and audio.

BL: It was in the first week when I was exploring the park and making notes on the maps, I began to think about the idea of mapping in the landscape, so taking measured units of distance and a formal understanding of space and putting back in the Landscape, but I also wanted to experience distance through different senses, sound being one of them. So I divided the far field into 3 seconds by plotting blue flags every 323 metres, which is what I thought the distance sound travel over one second I also created smaller orange flags to sub divided the second into 3 as a way of making it visually easier to deal with. It turns out that its actually 340 metres per second at 0 degrees and + .6m for every degree more, It was also slightly floored as I measured these distances with a metre rule on the ground as apposed to as sound travels in the air. So on those slightly rocky principles I carried on and brought in some volunteers and recorded them at various different flags up the field playing horns and whistles whilst I remained at 0 seconds recording them, but in order to get a sense of the speed of sound I needed something to compare it to which in this case became the radio communication. So we kept open radio communication during the recording, this meant when they

made a sound I would hear it though the radio almost immediately, at the speed of light and then after a slight delay the acoustic sound would arrive. Of course the further away they got the acoustic sound had a longer the delay and lower volume, by the final flag it was almost inaudible just under 1 Km

WR: I wanted to talk a bit about your interest in Kids Science experiments and books, because these experiments are something that you might see in a science class because they are pretty basic tests maybe you could talk a bit about why it is important to re-visit them as an artist, those phenomenological experiments.

BL: Well initially to re-learn and kids books are a great way to get to the basic information you need. I've done a lot of research into listening and hearing and read though long academic texts books only to realise that although its fascinating, but as an artist trying to make work it is far too much information and complicates and clouds the very thing that got me interested in the first place, which is the simplicity of the phenomenon. The experiments in these books have a real playfulness that I like to use as a basis for my own work. It goes back to this idea when a technology first emerges and has yet to have social rules and there is no cultural around it and its not settled yet, maybe it doesn't even know what it is for, people are still using it and experimenting with it and the experiments in these science books have that feel about them, they say look at the world around us isn't this basic principal really exiting. It reminds me of some of the early films were made and they would play with the medium or question the material they use or explore the very nature of the thing they are. They capture a simplicity of the basic principles of something.

WR: I think its something that's not done very often, I think a lot of work done these days in media art is done over vast networks where the implications the natural delay of sounds just don't come into it. Those sensations of being able to experience the two things together, its irrelevant to a lot of work for instance that uses the internet, but to do it in a closer context reaffirms it in someway.

BL: I kept using the term 'human scale' to my self, its just something that I made up, what I think I meant by it was something a movement or time period that we can perceive, which we can do with sound but not with light, well not over those distances.

WR: Quote from James Benning

BL: Shows Park

BL: Park is a forerunner to the ideas that I went on to develop here, Park was much more about cinema and the screen and what I wanted to do here was much more about the real and the landscape. I was questioning the decision one has to make in film when using sound, what sound relates to the image to reiterate that this is an image, its not real and I like highlighting that in a very simple way.

WR: So in this case is the microphone away from the camera

BL: Yes, I don't do a lot of this in post production and then in the installation the speaker was placed as far as it could be within the gallery space

WR: There is something that relates from this piece and the next piece that was made at the park that I was curious about and that is the element of humour and what you make of that particularly in the way Benning describes it, there is something funny in people realising what is happening. I wondered if that was intentional.

BL: Are you saying my work is funny

WR: No

BL: Oh..... I'm never conscious of it and I can't really explain it other than that I'm really open to the playfulness and silliness and I like that early experimentation. I think there is a certain inevitability about humour coming through, maybe it's because I'm prepared to be daft. I also think it might be about how simple the work can get.

WR: I think you identify what it going on but then you slip into actually experiencing it, its like to different kinds of ways of experiencing it. Which is an interesting thing.

BL: *Showed Jump and explained the work....*

WR: When we talked about this before, I called it noise

BL: And I disagreed

WR: A sound that doesn't really classically suit the landscape and that's something that your interested in. Going back to that idea of contrast, to create a sound or a situation that questions what nature and the landscape is as well as what works within it.

BL: When I first arrived in the park I did use whistles and horns because I knew they would travel well and they were portable. But the more I used them the more uncomfortable I felt about using them because they somehow already had references to the landscape and had a history within it, but I wasn't interested in exploring that. At the same time I was interested in this idea of signal to noise and contrast whether it be visual or audible in order to stand out from the landscape.

So it became important with this work that the action that created the sound

One of the things that I hadn't explored with the other works but I have with this, is something that refers back to the cinema and the work like Park, The Space Between. I'm interested in understanding the sound that your hearing through the action that making it and the most simple way I could do that was through jumping, because even at a long distance you can identify very subtle movements of a human being particular when the backdrop is the sky. There is something instinctive when watching the jump happen, you know when the sound should be heard, its much more inherent when there is clarity in what the source is. Then it came down to what was the loudest material I could use in that situation.

WR: I think what's interesting about the materials is that it essential creates a classical plinth

BL: I didn't intend that but it works really well

WR: It creates a sculptural form and the positioning of the box between the trees makes it very classical and monumental

BL: The positioning of the box on Oxley Bank was very important partly to do with the propagation of the sound, it was on a high ridge so you didn't loose much in the sound as it travelled and it was important for the contrast and the clarity of the figure against the sky. The natural framing between the trees drew your eyes to the figure in the centre.

Handmade was played.

BL: This ties in quite closely with the other work, it goes back to this idea of the source of the sound, I always liked the idea that when you were recording a sound, you were some how stealing it away from its original source, the speakers give out a source that doesn't belong to them. What you have with the cymbal is a dual layer of sound, you have the sound of the cymbal as a physical surface then you have the sound if itself embedded onto the surface, hidden.

Questions:

Katy Woods: It seems that there is a re-occurring theme to make rules and parameters for yourself, whether its to work within or without and I was just wondering what that was about, if it was to do you're your interest in science or maths or perhaps its something to do with keeping a purity or sincerity within the work?

BL: I think it's a bit of both, I've always been interested and at the same time slightly at odds with learning

how things work, its at the core of my work but at the same time I get frustrated because that's not solely what I do and my capacity for learning how things work without investing a lot of time is limited. I find it difficult to know at what point to stop learning about how something works, Maybe the rules are there to excuse me for not knowing something or maybe there is a point where I should stop learning otherwise I won't have that freshness when I look at it.

Katy Woods: I think it's interesting in relation to the hand drawn maps, you made a rule that they had to have been used for a real purpose, it's almost keeps a quality about it, where things could get a bit messy.

BL: Well I think it gives the work a focus.

WR: I suppose its something to say that the Hand Drawn Maps are quite different to your other work, you said you were pleased that you got to this point because you mentioned that you wanted to get to a new way of working.

BL: This residency has created a shift in my practise, when I applied for it I wanted the way I worked and working with the landscape over long distances was a complete contrast to my usual processes and it became a challenge, it took me away from the comfort zones that I'd inadvertently set up for myself.

Paul Levene: When you stood for the first time on your fixed points (*ref: As Far As The Eye Can See*) could you have imagined that the map would have turned out like they have, where in fact your seeing very little of the 360 degrees around and that they'd have such slithers.

BL: No, I didn't visualise what I thought the maps were going to be. I didn't think they'd be so dramatic as they are, I wasn't aware of the extent of the shards (*ref: horizon jumps*).

Paul Levene: So when we are standing in the open countryside, do we imagine what is there, rather than seeing?

BL: Yes, absolutely, things soften and melt into each other and one of the things that I haven't shown today is the experiments I did at night, because I was interested in what happens when these visual signifiers disappear and that was exploring how your imagination fills in the bits in between. Its also about how we look, we were referring early to the artist James Benning, he is also a lecturer and he would make his students visit different environments and spend hours just looking and listening and in fact my tutor and now collaborator did a similar thing with listening exercises. It's about that lack of time we give to something to see what it is, when you don't it all comes together rather neatly.

WR: You also spent a lot of time not recording and that's a way Benning worked, he would tell his students you weren't aloud to take notes or sound recorder, you weren't even aloud to look through a camera because he wanted the overall to be pervasive and I think that's what you've done in this residency.

BL: Yes, that way you begin to understand an environment in an entirely different way. This is where I also became interested in scale and 'human scale' which was partly do with the pace walking, when your walking on foot the world around you moves at a slow rate compared to being on a horse or train for instance and you absorb at a different rate, so it became about me and my limitations as a human within the landscape, which became a thread all the way through the residency.