

LOGO

When I first read the title of this panel – ‘Poetry and Pavilions’ – unexpectedly, and entirely inappropriately, it brought to mind the phrase ‘Bread and Circuses’. I’m sure most of you are familiar with this phrase, but for those who aren’t, it’s a phrase coined by the Roman poet, Juvenal, early in the second century A.D. in the line...

“Two things only the people anxiously desire – bread and circuses”

He was using it as a criticism of his fellow Romans, who he believed sat passively by as the democratic Roman Republic fell and the autocratic Roman Empire began.

MICKEY MOUSE

This phrase has become contemporary shorthand to critique a populace seemingly controlled and placated by short-term solutions and the distractions of capitalism.

As professional artists, we exist in a system increasingly driven by the same concerns as big business – money, power, influence – and it can feel as though we are nothing more than a performer within someone else’s circus.

Of course, we all know that it is so much more than that.

That phrase coming to mind had nothing to do with The Ring project itself, it was purely an association brought about by the structure of the panel title and I’m very aware that this whole introduction could appear to be an inappropriately negative or critical position from which to begin, but I’ll do my best to unpack this association and, hopefully, contradict it.

What we're discussing today are a series of artworks that have existed temporarily in the public realm and the dialogues that surround such activity. It's important to clarify this, as we're not discussing public sculpture in a traditionally accepted sense – these works are not monuments or memorials, even though many are drawing on a past-use or activity that connects with this waterway.

Their temporary nature also locates them in a very different space to more traditional public works, as it brings a performative quality to the work, whether the work has a live element or not. There is a specific timeframe in which these works can be experienced, even if it's fairly extended. They are there, and then they're gone, leaving us only with our thoughts and, potentially, a slightly shifted perspective on our understanding of history or our everyday reality.

By their very nature, works like this have a different relationship with their audience than works that hang in a gallery. These are works that exist in the public realm - by definition, a realm inhabited by that most curious, uncontrollable and unpredictable of creatures – the public.

In a gallery context we can, at least, assume that the visitors have made a conscious choice to visit and engage with the art on display, whether they like it or not. But in the public realm we can't make this same assumption. Of course some people are consciously engaged in the process of visiting the work, but for many they are literal passers-by, unaware that at any moment an artwork will leap from behind a bush...

CATO

... like an art-version of Inspector Clouseau's manservant, Cato, leaving them with a heightened understanding of what it means to be alive or, potentially, just a slightly confused expression on their face.

The role of the audience in this situation is of particular interest to me in my own work and research - this primary audience, who I theoretically break down into two constituent parts – those people who have gone looking for the experience, or deliberately opted in, and those who unwittingly pass by or through the site of the work. Both are important and, I believe, can form part of the very fabric of the work.

In Alfred Gell's 1998 text, 'Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory', he sets out a series of equations to examine the relationship between what he identifies as indexes, agents and patients.

The index is essentially the physical artwork - which he identifies as an object that invites the viewer to make a causal inference of some kind, such as 'smoke' being an index of 'fire'. An agent is something that acts upon a patient, and a patient is the thing or person who is affected by the agent.

In the simplest example of his thinking, the artist is the agent, and the index, as the artwork produced by this agent, is the patient. These relationships can be rearranged in any number of sequences but, interestingly, Gell only considers the index as a pre-existing physical object, as opposed to a performance or other 'live' experience, so he offers no discussion or theory as to the agency that the recipient, or audience, has in the creation of the index or the artwork.

For me, the agency attached to the audience becomes key in the activation or completion of an artwork. This agency that an audience can, unknowingly, bring to the work momentarily turns the unfinished work into the patient - something to be acted upon and, in doing so, activated or completed.

To illustrate this, I'm going to briefly discuss two of my own works, both of which were temporary, both in the public realm, and very much the light side of monumental or memorial. Both of these works also tap into some of the wider concerns of The Ring project in terms of their engagement with histories and narratives.

RUSS IMAGE

The first I'd like to discuss is a performance called 'God So Loves Decay', made in Luton as part of a series commissioned by Sunridge Avenue Projects, which was a six month programme of commissions and activities all focusing on the town.

The background to the work was very simply some research I'd been doing in to the popular cultural history of the town and the fact that the post-punk band UK Decay came from there.

I took it upon myself to create a publication of the band's collected lyrics, which I printed in the form of a small prayer book.

SPLIT SINGLE

The religious reference started out as a nod back to the cover of the band's first single that pictured them outside a local church under a statue of Christ and part of the line from the bible –

"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish and have eternal life."

Personally, I have no religious affiliations, but I do have a long-standing interest in the difficult relationship that exists between the church and popular music, whether that be blues, rock n roll or heavy metal. I also do believe that the lyrics of songs that we love can have a profound impact on our world-view and how we choose to live our lives, in much the same way religious texts do for many people.

RUSS IMAGE 2

The performance itself consisted of a punk musician I've been friends with since I was a teenager – Russ Crimewave – reading the lyrics of UK Decay outside Luton Town Hall in much the same way as a street preacher would approach reading from a religious text. From an artist's perspective, I was interested in taking those lyrics that had been written nearly 40 years ago and reintroducing them back in to the environment that had informed them in the first place.

TOWN HALL BURNED

The choice of doing this outside the town hall was another nod back to the history of the town and the function of music as a form of provocation or protest, as in 1919 the original town hall was burnt down during the Peace Day Riots by ex-servicemen with grievances around unemployment and the state of their lives following the end of World War One.

So, at its core, this was a reanimation of various points of history and culture that I'd turned up through my research in to the town; a way to draw focus on these things for a contemporary audience but also, hopefully, create a space for new dialogues to exist.

In relation to those things I mentioned a few moments ago – the audience and their agency – everyone passing by that day, whether they stopped to view the work or not, were a fabric element of this work.

RUSS IMAGE – AUDIENCE – girl taking book

Russ shouting to no-one in an empty square would be one thing, but it was the presence of the audience and their active or passive engagement with the work that was the final element that brought it in to being. The words Russ was speaking simply going out in to the ether would be quite poetic, but those words landing in people's ears and entering their consciousness completes a loop being set up by the work. Words written in-and-about Luton nearly 40 years ago, being spoken back in to that space, now open to the contemporary interpretations of

the receiving audience and proposing a new relationship between those words and the world today.

Free copies of the lyric-prayer-book were given away to anyone who wanted one, which was another strategic part of the work's construction; the idea of an exchange - a gift of sorts – an object embarking on a journey of its own and the heightened relationship it establishes with the recipient

I'm also interested in the idea that within the context of the performance and the moment outside the town hall, this book had a very different role and presence than it does after being removed from the site. In that moment it is one piece of a complete jigsaw, the other pieces being Russ, the town hall, Luton, the audience etc. After it's been removed from that context, it becomes a fragment – much as Gell talks about 'smoke' being an 'index' of fire, ownership of this book becomes the index of an interaction with a street preacher, whilst at the same time retaining its integrity as something of a document of the performance.

In Marcel Mauss's essay 'The Gift', he explores the self-interested nature of gifting, specifically, the questions –

'What rule of legality and self-interest, in societies of a backward or archaic type, compels the gift that has been received to be obligatorily reciprocated? What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?'

On one level, it's this power of the gift to request pay back that I am trying to activate through the offering of these tokens, in an attempt to a draw future, deeper, or longer engagement with the work from the recipient.

PLECTRUM IMAGE

The second work I wanted to talk about is called 'Ganas de Vivir', which translates to mean 'will to live'. The 'token' or 'fragment' in this instance is the guitar plectrum you see there, and the work really exists in the journey that I imagined for that plectrum.

I'm a life-long music fan, more specifically rock and heavy metal. Like so many artists, as a teenager I was in a band and am, in my heart, a failed rock star. I play guitar and buy in to some of the romance of the idea that a kid learning guitar in their bedroom may be putting themselves on the road to somewhere bigger, better, brighter and new. In that same vein, I believe there's a cultural alchemy that takes place when a guitarist flicks a plectrum from the stage in to the hand of a fan.

In this exchange the plectrum ceases to be a utilitarian piece of plastic and becomes an embodiment of the moment and the creativity and spirit of the musician, song and band. There's a literal transference of some form of conceptual identity from musician, to plectrum, to fan, that attaches itself in the mind of the recipient, forever. Much like how you can go and see Turner's paintbrushes at the Tate as if you are somehow in the presence of genius merely by being in the room with the tools he used.

In Gell's text, he refers to such an object as a 'social agent' or a 'secondary agent' – something which is not a primary agent, in so far as it does not, or cannot, initiate happenings through an act of will, but something which is an objective embodiment of this power or capacity.

PLECTRUM AND JOEY

One of the people I was in a band with as a teenager stayed in that world and has worked his way up as a tour manager to some of the world's biggest acts. So, through him, I was able to contact this man – Joey Zampella – who is the guitarist in a band called, Life of Agony, who were a band we loved in the early 90s when we were attempting to make it ourselves.

It's common practice for rock guitarists to get their name or some artwork printed on to their plectrums and I proposed to Joey that he allow me to use one side of his plectrum to site an artwork, or to use Gell's term, a social or secondary agent. I also knew they had a world tour coming up and so requested that this be the plectrum that Joey used on that tour, ensuring as wide a distribution of these social agents as possible.

The text itself is the phrase 'you are bigger than this place', which I've translated in to Anglo-Saxon runes. Being very honest this, in part, came about because I was researching Anglo-Saxon alphabets for a separate project, but I was excited by the idea of encoding this message on to Joey's plectrum using an alphabet that is fairly recognisable and readily available online, meaning that should the recipient of the plectrum be so inclined, they could do a little bit of work and gain access to this other level of meaning.

Aesthetically the runes were appropriate to the context and they also drew a direct connection with a people who migrated across Europe. They were a literal embodiment of the sentiment – 'you are bigger than this place'.

So, what I was setting up was a fairly complex set of agent-to-patient relationships, wherein I was the agent in the creation of the plectrum, which I then passed to Joey, which makes him a recipient, but who then acted as an agent on my behalf in his distribution of the plectrum to his fans, at the same time bringing his own agency to bear on this secondary agent, in terms of that cultural alchemy that I referred to previously. The full scope of that journey is what constitutes the artwork – not simply the runes printed on the plectrum.

I'll refer one last time to Gell, specifically an idea he shares about spatio-temporality. In keeping with the inappropriate reference of Bread and Circuses, Gell uses the actions of Pol Pots soldiers in Cambodia to illustrate this idea. He says;

"We cannot speak of Pol Pot's soldier's without referring, in the same breath, to their weaponry, and the social context and military tactics which the possession of such weaponry implies. Their kind of agency would be unthinkable except in conjunction with the spatio-temporally expanded capacity for violence which the possession of mines makes possible. As agents they were not just where their bodies were, but in many different places and time, simultaneously. Those mines were components of their identities as human persons, just as much as their fingerprints or the litanies of hate and fear which inspired their actions."

It's this spatio-temporally expanded distribution of agency that I am locating within these plectrums. Whilst I was not there to distribute the plectrums myself, my agency was carried through every stage of that journey which was, in itself, designed in such a way as to add to my own agency before the plectrum metaphorically detonated in that moment of passing from Joey's hand to that of a delighted fan.

In answer to something I'm sure you may be wondering – No, I don't expect people to pick up on all of the references and nuances that I pour in to these works. They're unlikely to arrive at exactly the same place as me when they put the pieces back together, but what I do hope is that at least some of the audience who experience these works will be inquisitive enough to look beyond the immediate experience or exchange, and take these things on in some way.

But that's also not to negate the immediacy of the experience of the work itself...

FIGHT CLUB

For some people the film 'Fight Club' will always be a critique of the culture of capitalist consumerism and how it can shape toxic male identity, whereas for others it will always be a film about a hot guy who is good at fighting. Neither are wrong.

So, with all that I've said in mind, let's briefly return to that negative association of bread and circuses.

PEANUTS

All I really want to say, in conclusion, is that in my opinion, the very best in public work can provide, both, the metaphorical bread and the circus – the spectacle to draw us in and also the intellectual sustenance to help us make some other sense of our history and existence.

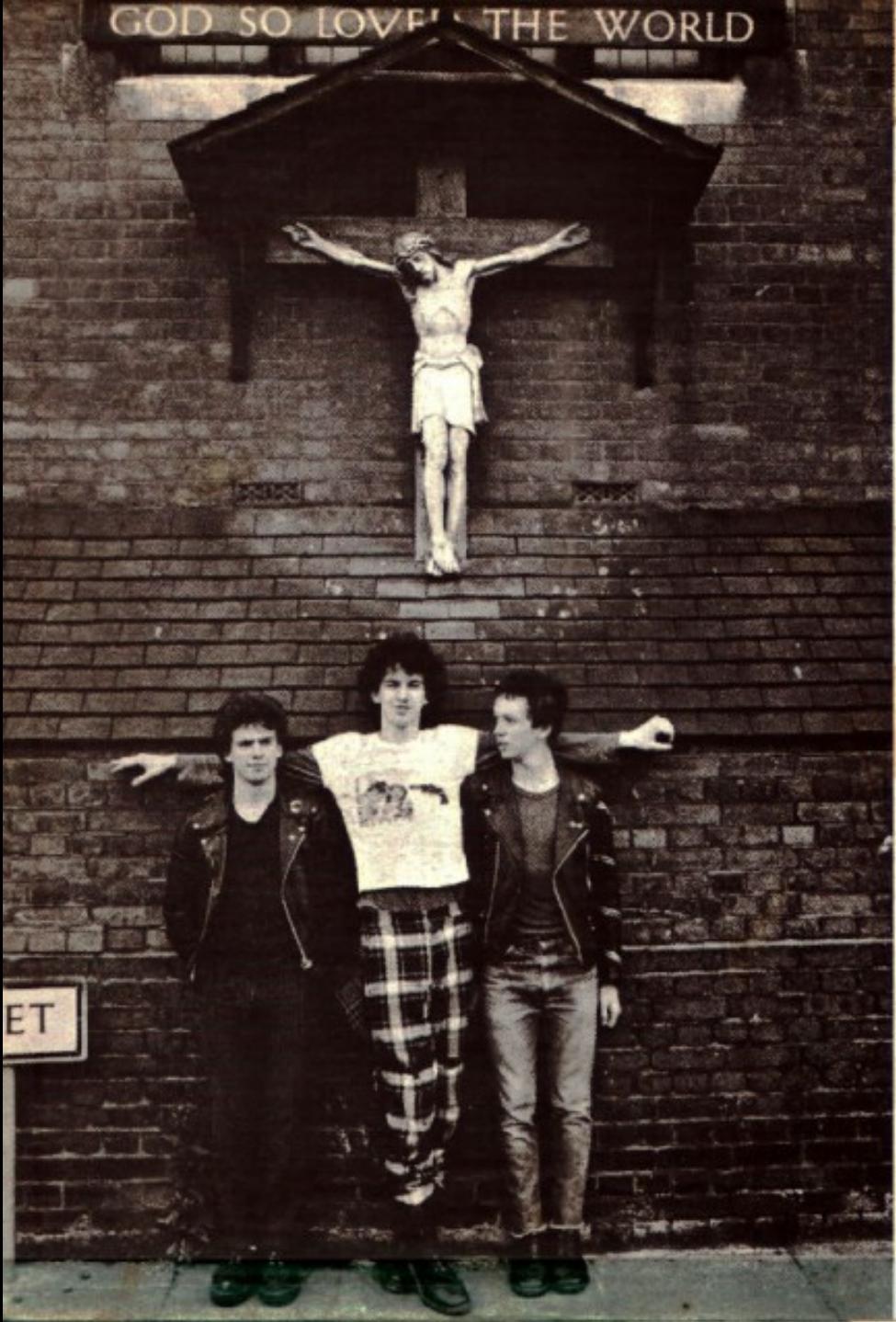


THE RING SYMPOSIUM











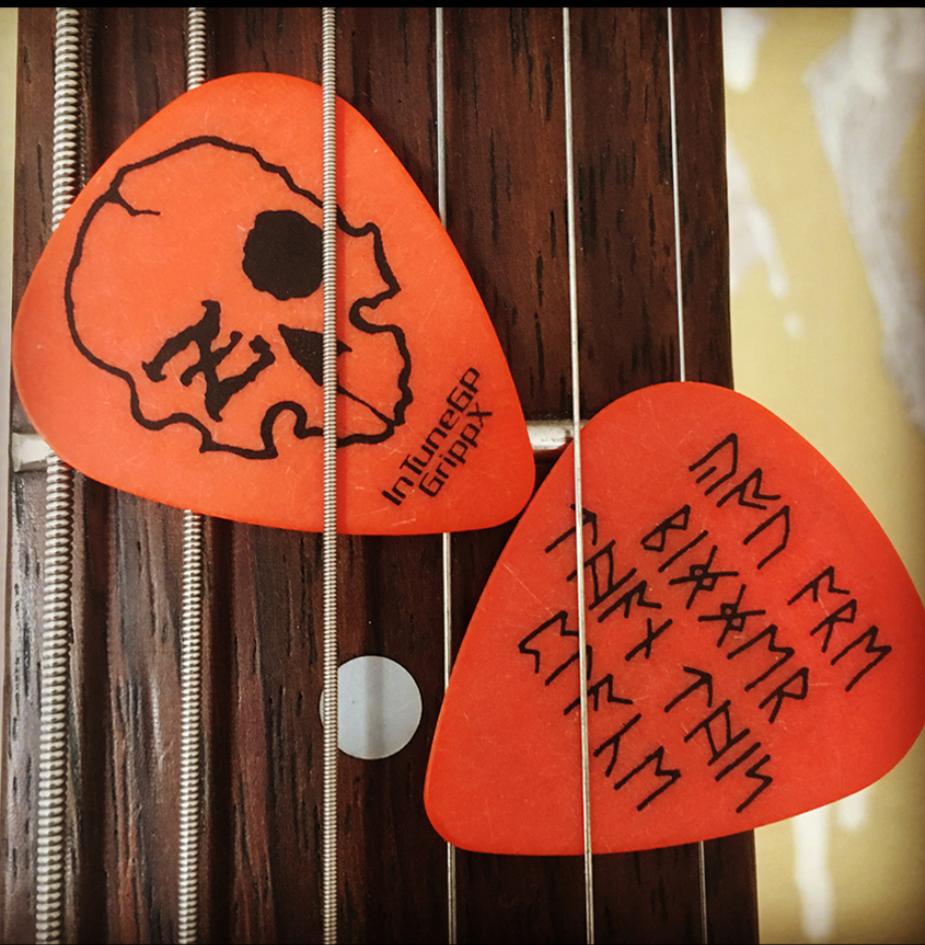


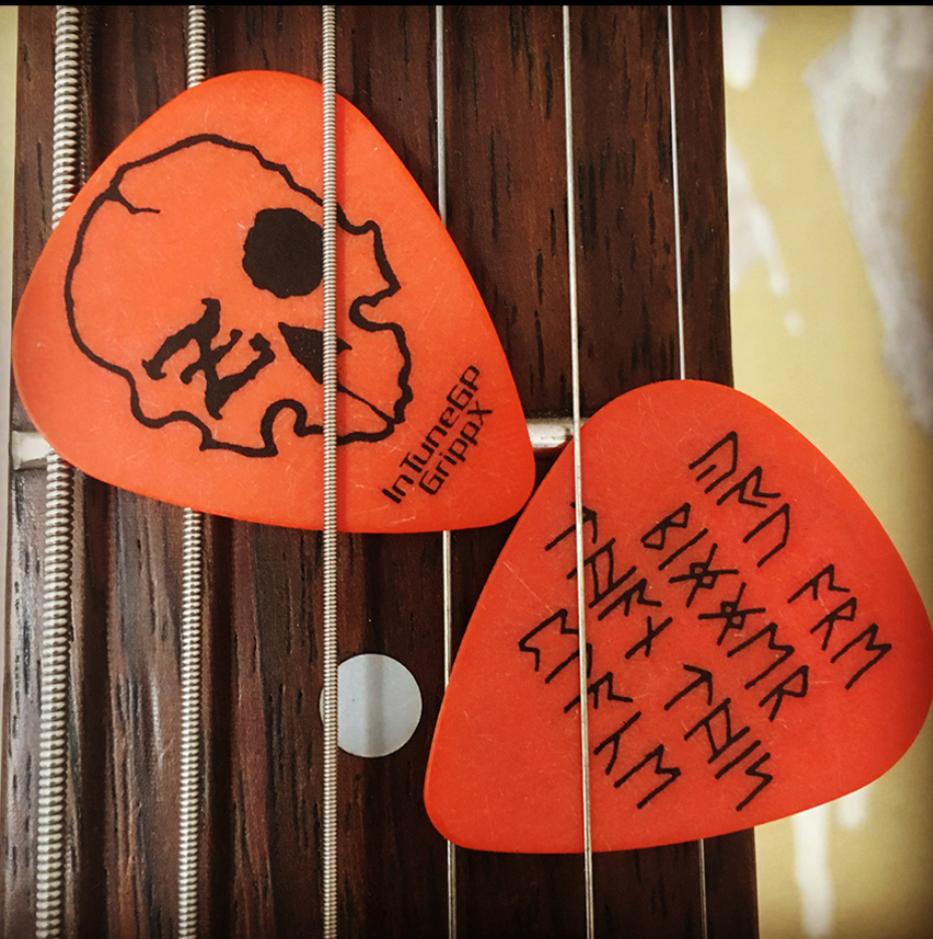
J. A. LASSINGTON
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D. R. DAVIS
C. DANIELS

OUGH OF LUTON
MEMORY OF
MEN OF LUTON
WHO FELL
IN THE
WORLD WAR

S ON THE LOWER PLINTH IS A LIST OF THE
WOMEN OF LUTON WHO ARE IN THE
SECOND WORLD WAR
OF THE ANGLO-EGYPTIAN WAR









"PEANUTS"

THIS SONG
ALWAYS
DEPRESSES ME



IT BRINGS BACK SUCH SAD
MEMORIES....YOU KNOW WHAT
I MEAN?



I'VE NEVER HEARD ANOTHER SONG
THAT DEPRESSES ME THE WAY
THIS ONE DOES...



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