

THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

Freelance

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Last week, you could have found me standing on a corner in Camden, next to my house, with a microphone in my hand. I was recording an orchestra consisting of a road drill, an air compressor, a cement mixer, a digger, a forklift truck and other fascinating road machinery that, when combined in their audible effort, can turn your daily existence into hell. They were successfully doing exactly that for the second time in six months. Camden Council is currently constructing “traffic calming” devices all over the area. The previously built hump was judged not big enough to create traffic jams, so the Council decided to destroy it and make a new one instead, bringing in even more equipment to increase the noise.

But this time it was for my benefit. I needed it as a soundtrack for the weekly radio programme West End which I present on the BBC Russian Service. The din was being recorded to illustrate a report on the recent happening at the ICA.

Concerto for Voice and Machinery was a so-called “re-enactment” of the performance by a Berlin-based band, Einsturzende Neubauten, who appeared on the ICA stage in 1984 armed with cement mixer, angle grinders and other industrial tools. During the re-enactment, as happened twenty years ago, bricks and bottles were thrown into the mixer, an old piano was sawn into parts; shards, dust and smoke from a welder flew over the heads of the audience, creating concrete music of the industrial revolution, in which human shrieks were “integrated” into factory noise. The reporter who attended the performance was so shocked by the event that he either forgot to press the button on the recorder at the right moment or, in panic, pressed the wrong one and the recording was erased.

I would have sent my cousin’s husband Stephen Morris to the event, but he was bedridden after an operation on the tendon of his right foot. Stephen would have handled the tape-recorder more deftly during the re-enactment because he is equally versatile in dealing with the art scene and demolition jobs. A graduate of the Royal Academy, he hasn’t so far persuaded the general public of the greatness of his masterful pearl-grey industrial landscapes depicting urban decay. Eventually, having got fed up with the misery of being an artist, he decided to change the urban landscape itself by becoming a property developer.

Artists and property developers are unacknowledged accomplices in the conspiracy of rising property prices in the neglected parts of London. Artists move in, create a bohemian local ambience and thereby transform the area into a booming property market.

Stephen recently acquired a semi-derelict building, which he planned to demolish in order to build a luxury apartment block instead. Before the demolition took place, at my prompting, he decided to merge the two aspects of his personality - the artist and the property developer -and organize in this space a kind of “demolition show” in which friends as well as professional artists were invited to exhibit works associated with the theme of ruins.

At the ICA, we saw how an act of vandalism was turned into art; at Stephen’s show a piece of art was ruined by a vandal. One exhibit was a video made by Matthew Brown, an artist who long ago turned art dealer. The video was a hip-hop montage of a pillow fight between boys mixed with footage of the bombing of Beirut by the Israelis.

(I am not implying that the bombing was conducted in collusion with property developers in Beirut.) The scene had a sinister effect on a Filipino girl, who came as part of the entourage of the rock band that was performing throughout.

The moment she saw the video she went totally berserk. Her verbal abuse was aimed at Zionist aggression and capitalist conspiracies, but the bottle of wine in her hand was hurled in the direction of a wall photograph depicting a naked torso with missing limbs of confusing gender. Her mates from the rock band joined her in creating an “industrial music” of bottles being smashed. The damage was considerable. There was no evidence that she was guided in her actions by Bakunin’s maxim that “the urge to destroy is also a creative urge”.

She just instinctively knew that a mere blow of a sledgehammer separates a piece of art from ruins.

Stephen suspects that it was while clearing the rubble left behind after the show that he damaged his foot. Or it might have happened earlier, when he was trying to fix a collapsed wall in his little house near Rome. In our age of live reporting, and especially since the destruction of the twin towers in Manhattan, we are haunted by images of wreck and disaster in different guises.

Ruins sedate people’s minds: they level all ambition and talent. A half-ruined building is not very different from a half- finished one. Each of us deserves, of course, our own ruins. At the same time, the ruins, like any common tragedy of the past, unite us; they add depth to our ephemeral present.

My father lost his leg on the front line during the Second World War. It was replaced with a prosthetic one. In my childhood, during a visit to the Moscow Museum of Fine Arts with him, I once encountered a statue of Aphrodite who was missing the lower part of her left leg, which had been replaced with a metallic rod, like my father’s prosthesis. In my eyes, my father became a statue of an ancient Greek or Roman god with a limb missing. In a world where borders between art and life are blurred, Stephen’s damaged foot took shape in my mind as a re-enactment of my father’s wounded leg.

During the ICA event, my radio reporter felt nervous but quite safe until the members of the group started to drill through the stage, having proclaimed the aim of breaking into the secret tunnel under the Mall to get to Buckingham Palace.

Part of the audience got over-excited and joined the spectacle of destruction, tearing apart the whole stage. The bouncers piled in, the police were called, and the performance was halted. In the ensuing pandemonium the recording was lost.

Only belatedly did we realize that the whole scene of the riot was carefully staged as it had been twenty years ago. It was a re- enactment, after all.

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