

## **ON GALLERIES, SPACES and VIEWERS**

### ***The Plimsoll Inquiry: An Interview with David Clegg***

David Clegg is a contemporary artist based in New Plymouth, New Zealand. His work explores relationships between gallery/museum spaces and public spaces, and concepts of the archive and fragmentation. Composed of layered site-specific sound recordings, photographs and text, his works often have inter-active elements that invite the viewer's participation when installed in the gallery or online. In their technical and conceptual complexity, David's work seeks to challenge the viewer's perceptions of spatial and experiential boundaries and practices of collection and co-ordination.

I first met David in 2011 when I wrote about his work *failurespace* for the CAST/David Cross collaborative project *Iteration: Again* in Hobart. Since then we have maintained a correspondence built on a sharing of ideas, interests and writing. On the basis of this correspondence and the conceptual terrain of his works, it seemed remiss not to bring some of David's insights to The Plimsoll Inquiry. This is a raw and unedited record of his responses to my questions about gallery spaces in his work.

**EB:** *In your work on neighbourhood, how do you see the experience of the art gallery extending beyond its architectural space?*

**DC:** For me the space of the art gallery pushes out from the gallery itself, into a space or duration that operates like a sort of deferred threshold. I like to think it bypasses the line on the ground between the inside and outside, that it's a much more elastic and ambiguous zone.

I became very interested in the art gallery vestibule when I was making 'The Imaginary Museum.' I was intrigued by the way this small, enclosed space operated as a sort of airlock between the street and entrance foyer. It was especially noticeable if I was interviewing someone and the acoustics changed when we walked through it, or each time the doors operated.

The deferred threshold space was one of the ideas behind 'transmissionspace and the index of atmospheres' at ST Paul St Gallery. In a sense the project set out to make a series of atmospheres within a park adjacent to the art gallery, using sound recordings and photographs from different locations. The idea was that the seemingly insignificant sounds and views contained markers to residual thoughts and feelings, from which the gallery visit could be recovered and relocated as an ongoing event.

The title also refers to an encountered artwork operating as a type of indexical device. Following the move from the art gallery, the referenced artwork could continue to be remembered and reconstituted as the project optimistically documented its relocation to a series of benches within the protected space of the park.

**EB:** *Your 2002 work, 'The Imaginary Museum', reframed the experience of the museum by shifting our focus away from its normative spaces of display, and towards the 'other spaces' within its architecture where we might not expect to find meaning. In your new work, are you extending this idea of 'other spaces' within art institutions to the spaces that surround the gallery, its neighbourhood, or more broadly to public space - or is your focus on something else?*

**DC:** 'The Imaginary Museum' was quite straightforward, it asked workers to comment on the most basic aspects of their museum or gallery as a physical container – the floors, walls, stair, windows, furniture etc. I used their responses to produce a sort of visitors guide of audio and photos to the New Zealand venues where it was shown. While the project gave an outline of viewing conditions, it also provided an insight into institutional structures and attitudes through the language used.

I'm quite interested in this tangential sort of approach to fieldwork, especially as a starting

point. I'm working on a project that looks at the neighbourhood of small arts organisations. This time the project interviews workers about their relationship with the neighbourhood during a walk around its perimeter. But more from the viewpoint of their everyday involvements, as a type of relational space of incidental exchanges, rather than their programmed events. I've always thought that the art gallery visit begins and ends at a distance from the gallery, as a sort of overlapping of public space and gallery space, so hopefully the new project will take that a bit further.

**EB:** *You have approached the dynamics of the neighbourhood surrounding the art gallery as an 'atmosphere'. Can you explain what you mean by 'atmosphere'? How does it differ from 'environment'?*

**DC:** I began using the term when I was working on 'the miserable idea of measurement' (the title was borrowed from a passage in Nabokov's 'Ada') at Artspace. It was more a reference to the sound recordings I was making, and I was also thinking about invisible zones of sound and electrical interference. Especially how these zones or territories were constantly forming and overlapping one another, and disappearing-

I wanted to juxtapose the porosity and interconnectedness of these neighbourhood spaces with the very dislocated and enclosed room above Artspace, and to question the possibility of

establishing/re-establishing a connection between the two in an other than physical way, as some sort of voice or signal/ transmission between here and there. So the recordings are mostly focused on the different types of voice or signal of a location (in the way that a bird call or radio broadcast establishes its own territory), as well as those calls and signals that are also entering the location from the outside within the sampled passages of radio and the local ambient sounds, as a series of overlapping refrains and superimposed voices, calls and signals.

I also really liked the ambiguity of the references to air and weather, as well as something more undetermined or subjective. Since then the idea of atmosphere has been an important part of my work, maybe it's the idea that you can leave the gallery and still be within some sort of interior space. Which also seems to connect with the needs of the headphone-wearing passerby, who was also an important figure in that project.

**EB:** *In your works that deal with galleries or museums, the viewer (and in your recent work perhaps the arts worker?) is implicated in the production of meaning about the gallery space. What does this production of meaning depend upon?*

**DC:** In nearly all my projects it's been absolutely necessary to have the involvement of the viewer to activate the work. One way or another the work

has been about the production of various sorts of archive, or the gallery space as some sort of viewing machine (or both), accompanied to varying degrees by chance and doubt, or some other instability.

Quite a lot is asked of the viewer in terms of their engagement, and of course so much depends on what they themselves bring to the work. As a rule it seems that the results are better when the viewing conditions are more open and the viewer's involvement is less programmed. Thinking about a project like 'archivedestruct' with so many layers of highly fragmented data without any form of narrative, it's interesting to note how many viewers went through almost all the sets of images and sound tracks. It was a very process-based work, but it seems to have been possible to make some meaningful connection.

**EB:** *In an essay on your work, ('June, July') Charlotte Huddleston draws an analogy between Marc Augé's concept of the Paris Metro subway and the 'the transport potential of the gallery'. Can you elaborate on how you see the links between Augé's idea that 'everybody discovers in the subway...what they bring to it' and this transportive quality of the art gallery?*

**DC:** I think that's absolutely the case, in large part the visitor brings with them what they're seeking or hope to find inside. As we know the art gallery operates to bring them into contact with specific

sets of ideas and conditions, which are also largely separate from what's happening outside. I suppose it's a bit like a sort of visualisation machine that operates through the space or duration of that separation, that it will take you wherever you want to go, but also that something new is added to the already seen and heard. In those terms I suppose the Paris Metro is a pretty good analogy for some sort of subterranean traveller, moving below the surface of everyday appearances.

That piece of writing developed from a really nice collaborative involvement with the curator, which resulted in it having an important role in the exhibition. The project was initially motivated by two texts, one of which was Marc Augé's 'La traversée du Luxembourg.' It isn't available in an English translation, but the title has always greatly appealed to me as an imagined series of events (Tom Conley gives a helpful synopsis of it in the foreword to his translation of Augé's 'In the Metro').

**EB:** *Is there space in your work to consider the cultural specificity of particular galleries or museums or are you more interested in the dynamic of the gallery as a generic space that operates anywhere as a site for cultural imagination and exchange? How do you see the dynamics of the art gallery informing our experience of the city?*

**DC:** I've done examples of both, but usually I select specific buildings or organisations to work with, at least as a starting point, and there's often an historical or literary element. But once things are underway a different set of issues arise that are more specific.

Maybe there's a certain sort of paying attention that is able to move from the space of the art gallery into the space of the city. But more than anything I think it's the difference between being inside the art gallery and being outside it, and the movement between them, that's most important.

When I was making recordings for the third iteration of the *failurespace* project (posted on October 6, 2011), there were some birds making a racket in a tree in the middle of a parking lot. I was recording the local ambient sounds in a live mix with the broadcast from one of the local radio stations. Afterwards when I was editing the sound I was surprised I couldn't hear the birds, because at that moment their sound coincided almost exactly with the sound of Peter Sculthorp's 'Kakadu' that was on the radio. It was like the birds had disappeared from the recording of the parking lot. Also I found out later that the composer was from Tasmania.

Instead of travelling to make a work I have wondered about the possibility of somehow remaking myself as a new person, and whether or

not I would then be able to operate as a stranger in a new city.

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*Interview conducted with Eliza Burke via email, September/October 2013. All of the work and projects referred to are documented with images and sound files at [www.davidclegg.net](http://www.davidclegg.net)*