The Thick and the Sticky

What struck me as I made my way across the industrial estate that separates my house in Kincorth from the neighbouring residential area of Torry was its strange geography, distinctly separate from the life of the areas around it. This was an area so close to where I live and yet becoming visible to me for the first time. Nestled behind low, homogeneous warehouse structures and delivery lorries I was drawn to mountains of rusting materials, turning my imagination from consumption to waste. The shift felt as huge as the small journey that brought me there. As the event began I stood chatting to someone from Torry attending the one off performance curated by Rachel Grant to bring attention to the planned building of an incinerator. Along with him I found it easy to imagine that a councillor, delivered here by car, would mark the area out in his imagination as somewhere separate, out of the way. In the same way that a river divides a landscape in our psychology, so this place seemed somewhere else. Yet in the course of the performance I felt compelled to reconsider that distance and the imaginative borders that we fix in our consciousness to create it.

I saw Grant ahead of me setting up makeshift signs to guide people. Parked on a small corner her little car was the only other signifier of an event, amongst this landscape of ruins. Her car boot was open, offering tea and biscuits for the small crowd that gathered. At first the performance felt off centre here, offered as a recorded voice through headphones. This was the second surprise for me. I could see Yvette Bathgate, the artist who created the piece and somehow, maybe fresh from the previous day of performance in the Anatomy rooms, I expected something live with a beginning and end. Instead the performance was somehow both missing and multiplied as Bathgate’s disembodied voice circulated among us. I looked around, calculating, and worrying there would not be enough headphones for everybody. I felt some anxiety in having to borrow a set as I used my phone to get connected to the audio, watching others who had figured it out. Maybe this detail of less equipment rather than plenty is accidental but there is also a relaxed feeling to the gathering, space to move. The slick presentation of the art subject is not the first concern – consumption of it is almost an after thought – after all there could have been a live performance – demanding attention, setting up active and passive parties. Instead the performance is both absent and goes on all around us like air – which is a joint focus both for the community activists and for the artist – if it is possible or right to even separate those categories. If you listen you can hear the living out of a slow breathing process, reimagined in light of the incinerator that, also absent or yet to come, provides the backdrop to the event.

What does it mean for a thing to be here, all pervasive – the justification for the whole event – the reason everyone is here – and also not here at all? Its no surprise that air is the focus for the performance. I could see folk who already had headphones make their way to a fence which marks the beginning of Bathgate’s slow and meditative piece – a boundary line framing a point in space but also in time. As we look at the seagulls and the empty patch of land beyond the fence we’re asked to imagine something else there, what we imagine is open. The piece is about being given the space to imagine – something, a number of campaigners point out, Aberdeen City council has not granted.

On the recording Bathgate starts:

‘The bars block our view. Don’t let us in. Contaminated soils beneath, the air surrounds us – same air inside and out. Metal bars are elipse, surrounding inescapable – a presence you can’t quite ignore – ribcage of the site – protection and invasion – air can still get out. Inhale. Exhale’

With the reference to breath the pace slows down as she invites us to think about the boundaries between things, about the cages we set up for ourselves but also of those things that defy such rigid separation. Abjection occurs here on these borderlands, disrupting the space between things. As environmental artist Meirle Laderman Ukeles notes in her extensive meditation on the materials that structure our consciousness, we move back and forth between collecting and discarding. Inhale. Exhale. Laderman concludes that making waste is a process of unnaming. In this vein the incinerator has also been unnamed in planning narratives becoming the energy from waste facility. Campaigners dispute this change of title with a number of counter narratives. Grant and Bathgate have picked up on perhaps the most evocative – that a change of name will not change the resulting air quality. Amidst the politics of waste Ukeles chose to focus on the people who clear the waste, dissecting the process through which their identity as maintenance workers was elided by the collective unconscious of her city, so that they merge with the rubbish they are in charge of stewarding. Undervalued and often abused these sanitation men became the housewives of the city. How does this resonate with Torry? Campigners feel it has been treated to similar categories of abuse in Aberdeen’s popular imagination, becoming, if not a house wife, then certainly a dustbin. Yet living there and creating projects they see it as a place with a unique voice that should be acknowledged in planning structures.

Bathgate asks

‘Is air sticky, viscous thick?’ continuing ‘smell its thickness breath it in’

‘continue without losing consciousness’. In. Out.

As we listen Bathgate sets herself the task of working, in the opposite direction to Ukeles, who shifts ponderous piles of things, with thin ait itself. Yet the result is similar, as we listen, focused on our own breath, do we feel ‘threatening vulnerability.’ Her material of course is also voice, which unlike an image, is tricky to pin down. It gets into our own bodies as we stand contemplating the wasteground, confronting us with improbable things: Is the area of our lungs tennis court sized? This question prompts another one for me: What scales should we work on to confront environmental issues? Can attention to hidden details in small communities be reproportioned to tackle the issues we face inside our consciousness and outside in the wider environment that global activists face?

All the while we are asked to breath. To imagine the thin air and invisible particles transformed by our lungs into the thick and sticky stuff of abjection, mucus like materials made to remove unhealthy invasion. Reminding us that, to a point, the body itself is a sophisticated cleaning machine. And meanwhile I’m left thinking about the thick and sticky waste material.

Some people don’t listen, they have come to talk about what they know, that’s where Grant comes in. We watch on, stand still, walk about, in and out of the place. Slowed down as Bathgate’s voice continues to chart a progress a micro journey, guiding us through veins and hairs, becoming a mantra now and an endurance of sorts. My headphone anxiety lessens. I watch Grant chatting to the other folk there, who have no interest in getting headphones. I think about what it means to be open to listening? To turn up at a place, to invite people and listen to their concerns?

‘Stay there for years don’t ever come out’ the voice tells me. Is that possible for the community in Torry? To stay in doors? One of the visitors to the event let me know how close this world here, with its vast depositories of unnamed stuff is to the local primary school. Can you ask kids to stay indoors? I remember, as a kid, laughing at an overheard conversation between adults about how one felt she was climbing the walls. It seemed to be an impossible and ridiculous proposition.

The event had the same feel to it as much that I have experienced of Grant’s curatorial practice. A sense of absurdity at climbing walls. Just as air can get out so can curatorial practice, we know this from a long history of land art, freed from the regimented space of the white cube, a place too often for alienated subjectivities. This is not just a matter of physical insides and outsides, it is about the passage between. An imperfect movement back and forth that asks for a dialogue, invoking the movement of voice between different bodies and interest groups. Earlier in the week Peacock Visual arts invited artist Alana Jelinek to do a workshop that considered audience and participation. She spoke of art as creating cracks in the fabric of public space, small moments that enact democratic possibility. Grant and Bathgate seem to be chipping away, questioning the limits to citizenship, arriving to speak and listen on contaminated ground.