

Through the Looking Glass: A Travelogue

by Mary Paterson

I'm a twenty-first century traveller, so my route is marked out in high street logos. Costa Coffee, PoundSaver, Sports Direct – those modern day lighthouses – beam into the brisk November air as I arrive in St. Helens. It's my first time here, so I follow the logos from the train station to the town centre until their bright lights fade from view, which is to say: the logos are still there, but I don't notice them as much. They illuminate the landscape to my stranger's eyes.

Gradually, I notice the town in more detail. The glow of a pub behind its stained glass windows. An eccentric Christmas display in a home-wares shop. The friendly assistant in Subway, who chats about her upcoming trip to the Citadel.

*

There's a naivety and a romance to being an outsider – naturally drawn to everything that is familiar, and hyper-aware of everything that's different. It is on this brink that I find the artist Marcia Farquhar teetering, precariously, the following morning. She is standing on the edge of the canal in the centre of St. Helens wearing a swimming costume and a fake fur coat. The air is bitterly cold. Beneath Marcia, a rusty shopping trolley bobs up and down in the water. Beside her, a small crowd pauses to watch, on their way to shopping at The Range.

Both a real person and a larger-than-life persona, Marcia is leading a walking tour of St. Helens, she says, from an outsider's perspective. She is a glamorous Londoner with a charming smile, and she begins with an anecdote about her relationship to swimming, before attempting to release an electronic fish into the canal. Her day-long performance is part reminiscence, part imagination, and part homage to the history of the town: famously, the canal was once so heated by emissions from the local factory, that tropical fish could survive in its waters. Like Marcia herself, *A Song for St. Helens* is never anything less than thoroughly entertaining.

It is also one artwork in 'Through the Looking Glass', a "weekend of performances to watch and be part of"¹ curated by the Live Art Development Agency (LADA) for Heart of Glass. Heart of Glass is a cultural organisation supported by the Arts Council's 'Creative People and Places' fund – a fund that "focuses on parts of the country where involvement in the arts is significantly below the national average."² In other words, this charismatic performer regaling a dozen people with her tall tales is, also, part of a multi-layered, institutional intervention into the fabric of the town.

*

¹ Through the Looking Glass brochure, 2015

² <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/apply-funding/funding-programmes/creative-people-and-places-fund/#sthash.FBRA8rFd.dpuf> accessed 01/04/2016

Later that afternoon, I sit in an airy room next to the Heart of Glass office and watch Ian Greenall give a presentation about a 'Festival of Failure' for St. Helens. A lecturer based nearby, Ian took part in a workshop organised by LADA and led by the artists Joshua Sofaer and Karen Christopher. The workshop was called *This Will Never Happen*, and it was part of LADA's annual peer-to-peer professional development programme, *DIY*, run by and for artists. This particular workshop asked local artists to develop ambitious ideas, un-daunted by the real-life concerns of budgets, space or the probability that anything will come to fruition. (The presentation of those ideas, in a series of 10 minute talks, is another fixture in the 'Through the Looking Glass' programme.)

St. Helens' 'Festival of Failure', Ian says, will formally excise the town of all its complaints. He is delivering a performance lecture (both a real lecture, and a character performing one) that imagines he is talking to an audience of 'stakeholders' – the kinds of people who might make decisions about public money and public space. The kinds of people like Heart of Glass, for instance, or the local councils, government agencies, businessmen and community leaders that help them realise their ideas.

The local community will be invited to moan about everything that has gone wrong, Ian explains: to air all their personal and collective shortcomings, and make an offering to a specially built helter-skelter that rises out of the reservoir each year. In return for this ritual, no-one will complain for the next 365 days – until it's time for the 'Festival of Failure' the following year.

*

A couple of months later, I talk to Patrick Fox, the director of Heart of Glass, about his ambitious plans for the organisation. He describes four interweaving strands that Heart of Glass supports: Art, The Arts, Practice and Participation. Over the coming years, he hopes, Heart of Glass will present high quality art in St. Helens; make sure the arts are a thriving and well represented part of the community; help artists develop their careers; and encourage local people to take part in one or more of these activities, in one or more ways.

In other words, while the reason Heart of Glass exists may be to reverse the trend, observed by the national gaze of Creative People and Places, of lower than average participation in the arts in St. Helens, its *raison d'être* is to position art as a process, rather than an indicator. "Our philosophy and approach as a project," Patrick writes in a recent article for *Arts Professional*, "is rooted in collaboration."³ In the context of art, 'collaboration' is a heavily loaded term: digging even deeper than participation, it implies fair and equal relationships, attention to detail and careful communication.

It is this tension between the (necessarily) broad focus of a laudable initiative like Creative People and Places and the (necessarily) more sensitive, local focus of a delivery arm like Heart of Glass, that Ian navigates so skilfully, and so hilariously, in his presentation. He

³ Patrick Fox 'On the touchline' *Arts Professional*, first published 26.01.16
<http://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/article/touchline> Accessed 31.01.16

combines the outsider's eye – the national gaze that marks St. Helens as a 'failure' – with his insider's knowledge. He presents grand ambition and pizzazz – a helter-skelter! rising like a phoenix! – in the local vernacular: with a knowing wink, Ian reminds us not to complain about the benches that have recently, and controversially, been removed from the shopping centre.

The room laughs. 'This will *never* happen,' indeed. Can art really help St. Helens break free from its post-industrial 'failure'? And, if so, could it really be the job of an artist from St. Helens to reimagine the town? Isn't that normally the role of the glamorous outsider – someone internationally famous, perhaps, like Joshua Sofaer or Karen Christopher, the artists who came up from London to run the workshop in the first place?

*

The first presentation in *This Will Never Happen* is from the artist Catherine Shea, who barges through the audience in the guise of a cleaner. She pretends to have overheard some artists talking about "socially engaged practice," an art-world term that means, loosely, art that exists in relationships, rather than objects.

The 'cleaner' is not sure what it is, she says, but it sounds like the kind of thing that will save the world. She heard the plan was to imitate world leaders, sort out everyone's problems, institute world peace, and retire the old politicians to a tropical island. "And then, perhaps another group of socially engaged artists might like to do some work with *them* ..."

Like Ian's talk, Catherine's act is bitingly funny. The joke, of course, is that the people identifying the 'failing' town or community targeted for 'socially engaged practice' are not normally the members of that community themselves. This is the hallmark of 'culture-led regeneration' – a form of social policy that invests in the cultural value of a geographic area, in order to stimulate economic growth. When Ian and Catherine perform 'impossibility' by returning an institutional gaze, this is the institution that they are staring at.

*

The term 'culture-led regeneration' may not be familiar to everyone in the room, but the target of this humour certainly is. Audience members from St. Helens laugh at the smooth misrepresentation of their real lives. Audience members from elsewhere laugh at the discomfort of judging an unknown place. And Heart of Glass, which has a foot in both camps – both the tool of a national idea, and the guiding hand of a local consortium – laughs along in its own space: the space in which all this is invited to happen.

Like Marcia, then, Heart of Glass teeters on the edge of a dangerous fall. It is tasked with bringing something new to St. Helens, without replacing what is already here. Or, in the words of *Creative People and Places*, it should "demonstrate the power of the arts to enrich

the lives of individuals and make positive changes in communities”⁴ – without alienating the communities it seeks to change.

Perhaps this is why Patrick says he prefers to think about ‘civic participation’ – ways to draw attention to social bonds and stories. In Joshua Sofaer’s *Your Name Here*, for example, a local park was renamed after a local person, following a public competition. The eventual winner was announced in September 2015 as Vera Page, the childhood name of local resident Vera Bowes, who nominated herself and her personal history overcoming grief, ill health and domestic abuse.

In the process of *Your Name Here*, Patrick says, people kept asking, “when does the art happen?” They were expecting there to be a sign or a ceremony that would establish the artistic value of this collective act. But the ‘art’ was there all along – from the idea that a park could be renamed by the public, to the nominations received by local people, and the fact the judges chose to honour a private person with a powerful life-story.

Here, and across Heart of Glass’s approach as a whole, the ‘work’ of art is not the opportunity to look at different things, but the space to look at things differently. It is not, then, a culture imposed from outside, but a changing focus on the cultures that are already here – like a street festooned in recognisable logos, it uses the diffuse glare of the outside world to illuminate the details unique to that place.

This variable perspective is the reason why everyone at the presentations for *This Will Never Happen* is laughing. Each and every one of us – insider or out, audience or artist – is in on the joke. In other words, this is not really a joke; this is a conversation.

*

St. Helens (as Marcia will tell you) is known, historically, for its glass factory and rugby teams. But, to the outsider’s eye at least, it is characterised, these days, by shopping. It’s not just the familiarity of logos that draws me into the heart of town, in fact, but also the sheer number of them. There are two large shopping centres, a sprawling pedestrianized zone, and a vast car park in the centre of town. To walk through St. Helens on a weekend is to lose yourself in the rhythm of a steady flow of shoppers – families, friends, couples, comfortable and relaxed in the distracted half-attention of being courted by slightly more desirable versions of ourselves.

Maybe this rhythm is due, in part, to the controversial removal of those benches – the benches that Ian referred to in his talk. The Hardshaw Centre is the largest shopping centre in town, and its wide, well-lit corridors constitute a large part of St. Helens public space (albeit, privately owned public space). Now the benches have gone, there is nowhere to meet, eat, talk, wait, loiter or read inside the shopping centre. The only thing to do is shop.

⁴ <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/apply-funding/funding-programmes/creative-people-and-places-fund/#sthash.XEVgOXtF.dpuf>, 1/2/16

Unless you are in The Hardshaw Centre on a particular cold November morning, that is. I have come here to look for The Institute For The Art and Practice of Dissent at Home (the artists Lena Simic and Gary Andersen, alongside their four young children), who are presenting *Manifestoval* – a day long, public workshop in which they invite people to write manifestos for the town. They have arrived with their own bench.

Ostensibly, the bench is a prop to encourage people to stay and chat. But, in this context, it is also a direct statement about the (private) design of this (public) space. And, importantly, it is not what was agreed with Heart of Glass – which counts the shopping centre amongst one of its most important allies.

I hear whispers about the bench before I see it. It is occupied by a mother and daughter who have a lot to say about the removal of the old ones. As interventions into the flow of shopping in this space, both the bench and *Manifestoval* as a whole, send ripples through the town. The work pierces the gloss and the rhythm of a shopping Saturday and asks, implicitly, what (else) are you going to do?

It also puts the event organisers in a difficult position. Perhaps inevitably, the Institute gets thrown out of the shopping centre. This marks a clear division between in and out, shopping and not-shopping, local and non-local. Effectively, it means that bystanders, audience members and artists are forced to take sides between two different types of activity: art, or shopping?

*

Back in the town centre earlier in the day, Marcia is taking us to see *Pedigree Chums*, a workshop run by the artists Susannah Hewlett and Steve Nice. They have spent the morning next to the shopping centre café, inviting adults and children to dress up as animals. Why? For no obvious reason – it's not a marketing exercise, like the bouncy people in the town square who really want to chat about your mobile phone provider; it's not a shopping promotion, like the luminous signs flashing from every shop window; it is not even a workshop designed to foster ambition and creative ideas. At 1pm the animals – people dressed in chaotic costumes of tinsel, glitter and gaudy fabric – parade proudly past the shops and shoppers. Security guards march over to take a look.

It's not the first time Susannah and Steve have raised eyebrows in St. Helens. The night before they performed a humorous skit on the spirit of dating, as part of *Duckie* at The Citadel. *Duckie* bills its event as a '21st century Music Hall' – a cabaret night of karaoke, comedy, strip tease and a pinch of audience-participation. It is also the opening act for 'Through the Looking Glass': a Friday night bonanza to kick off the weekend.

Duckie has been running for 20 years in south London, at the vanguard of the LGBT, alternative and avant-garde performance scenes. Here, in St. Helens, it's a newcomer. Even so, The Citadel, which is more often filled with mainstream names and tribute acts, is packed. "Who's from Manchester?" shouts Amy Lamé, the evening's charming and glamorous hostess. A loud cheer rings out from the back of the room. "Who's from Liverpool? Who's from St. Helens?"

People have travelled from across the country to watch this collage of different acts, including *Duckie* stalwarts like Ursula Martinez, and newer performers like Tallulah Haddon, a fragile-looking nineteen-year old who, it turns out, is both an innocent starlet and a ravenous cannibal.

Ursula has been running a workshop nearby, also part of LADA's *DIY* series, called *Don't Wait Tables: Make An Act*. The idea is to get artists to turn their artwork into money – put together an act to supplement your income, instead of doing casual work. *Duckie* features a handful of artists who have come through previous versions of this workshop in other towns, including Katy Baird, who gleefully smashes a laptop to the sound of *I Can't Live Without You*.

*

In many ways, the irreverence of *Duckie* is just as alternative and activist as the *Manifestoval*. But it is much less provocative – even when it is being openly provocative, like when Sam Reynolds takes a middle-aged man away from his seat with his wife, puts him centre stage, and treats him to an extremely energetic striptease.

While both experiences are expansive and surprising, the difference between *Duckie* and *Manifestoval* lies in the way they move. *Manifestoval*, adopting an historic strategy of the avant-garde, sends a shock through public space. It splinters the flow of the shopping centre, chipping attention onto other things. *Duckie*, in contrast, is continuously in flux. It is fast paced, it is various, and it checks in with the crowd. "Are you alright?" asks Amy. "Are you having a good time?"

Here in The Citadel on a Friday night, in the midst of the laughter and the music, is a spectrum of different acts – from the polished to the provisional, from the moving to the straightforwardly silly. Here is a spectrum of different audience members – from the local arts crowd to *Duckie* aficionados from further afield. And here, as a result, is a dialogue – between the people on stage and the people eating chips in the dress circle; between the avant-garde and the mainstream; between the local and the traveller.

*

Duckie is not only a conversation, but a conversation between equals. And it is not only a conversation between equals, but a conversation between people moving together. This, of course, is how all the best conversations happen – the kind you stay up late for, the kind you remember for the rest of your life.

And this is the tone of the conversations Heart of Glass is trying to establish as a whole. Heart of Glass is, itself, a complex, fluid and mobile context. It is an organisation for and about St. Helens, with a decade-long vision, and a commitment to community and participation. It is also a publicly funded body, supported by a Conservative government, in partnership with private enterprise. It is concerned with Art, The Arts, Practice and

Participation. It is concerned with people who live here, who visit here, and who have not yet thought of coming.

Importantly, however, Heart of Glass is not necessarily concerned with all these people at the same time. By inviting LADA to curate a weekend of Live Art – a field which includes strategies you could file under ‘socially engaged practice’ or ‘collaboration’, as well as those you might call ‘high risk’ or ‘the avant-garde’ – Heart of Glass is in conversation with art as an international discourse, as well as with St. Helens as a location. Some of these conversations move more easily than others; all of them invite movement and exchange.

*

Perhaps this is why the other presentations in *This Will Never Happen* are all concerned with movement and change, too. Naoise Johnson Martin and Ryannon Parry suggest a roaming artists’ residency on a plane, where art is made over thousands of miles and across time zones. Claire Weetman proposes a giant maze made of human gestures that will stretch across national borders. Formed of volunteers performing the gestures of politicians and statesman, the maze will repurpose photo opportunities, symbolically, into real action. And Jeni McConnell describes a giant, mirrored dome to seal off a disputed piece of public space, reflecting its ontology back onto the people who can’t decide what it means.

These artists’ versions of the impossible all transcend comfortable definitions. They float above geographical, political and societal borders, intervene in the functions of the physical world, and suggest new types of belonging. In this sense, like Ian and Catherine, they are in conversation with the cultural bureaucracy that has to map ‘community’, ‘place’ or, indeed ‘the arts’ as measurable entities: the cultural bureaucracy, in other words, that makes it possible for things like ‘Through the Looking Glass’ and ‘Heart of Glass’ to happen.

Art is never funded by public money for purely aesthetic reasons but always, as in the case of Creative People and Places, on the understanding that it is good for people – economically, socially or even physically. And yet, part of art’s success is that it doesn’t fit neatly into any of these categories – art is, of course, not (just) economics, it is not social engineering, it is not healthcare.

This, ultimately, is what separates art from a leisure activity like (for example) shopping: you can measure a shop’s success by the number of people who shop there; but art is more than a single transaction. And, while you can measure art’s discrete economic, social or physical benefits when you look backwards, you can’t predict its effects by mapping forwards in the same way. In the context of public funding, then, art meets public aims because it is aesthetic (multiple and complicated), but it gets public money for the reasons it’s not (because it’s good for people).

*

We are late for Peter Darwin’s Music shop on George Street. The cold is beginning to bite and everyone is looking forward to heading inside. Marcia pushes the door, and the shopkeeper, John, greets us with a broad grin. He has the look of someone who doesn’t

quite believe this is happening – twenty strangers, piled into his shop, soon to join him in a jam and sing-along to *Dirty Old Town* by Ewan MacColl. There follows music, photographs and warm smiles, then just as we're all making to leave, a friend of John's comes in, wearing sunglasses and carrying a suitcase full of poems.

He'd heard we were going to be here, he says.

"Can we have a poem?" asks Marcia.

The man opens his suitcase and takes out two wooden sticks. He performs a stunning rendition of his own verse – funny, irreverent, sharp – to the rhythm of the sticks, which he beats together in front of his chest. The room erupts in applause. When the clapping has died down Marcia, a conduit for everyone's delight, says, excitedly, "You must tell us your name!"

"Tommy Two Sticks," says the poet.

Of course.

*

As an experience, *A Song for St. Helens*, like the rest of the 'Through the Looking Glass' programme and like *Heart of Glass* itself, is a wandering exchange, full of surprising encounters, fizzing with unfamiliar ideas, understood by stories told in retrospect. While, now, I can't imagine a better name for the visiting poet, I would never have guessed it in advance. And while his performance feels like a natural part of Marcia's peripatetic show, it was in fact a chance meeting – we were all running late, and he arrived half an hour after Marcia had planned to leave.

This, then, is art that exists in relationships rather than objects. Nothing here is static and nothing is predictable – not the artists, not the audience members, not the place, not its streets, none of our histories and none of our futures.

And this, then, is art that persists in conversation with the cultural bureaucracies of measurement, surveillance and visibility that permeate every aspect of modern life. We live in a world that predicts our TV viewing habits based on our age and our ideology based on what we wear on our heads. In return, we navigate public spaces using convenient short hand: Google, Facebook, Poundsaver, Costa Coffee. We collect loyalty card stamps like passport visas. We wander the precincts of pedestrianized zones, gesturing to each other with the logos on our T-shirts.

Just like the outsider's perspective that marks St. Helens a 'failure' in order to reward it with investment, this wider cultural measurement is necessary, inevitable, limiting, and it sets us free. Its allure lies in its contrast to the competing rhythms of life: it is the stable base from which we can launch our mobile selves; from which we can swing backwards and forwards in time, ideas and relationships; from which we can dance between versions of ourselves, make stories out of the world, and gather handfuls of different perspectives.

Heart of Glass is borne from the definitions of place, identity and stability that measure a town and its people. But it exists as an ongoing, enriching, cultural conversation. It is the accidental encounter between Tommy Two Sticks and a group of tourists to the town. It is the curiosity of two security guards at a parade of people dressed like animals. It defies its own definitions; and all that you or I can do is tell stories about it in retrospect. The stories will never contain what has happened. Instead, they make it happen again: they continue the conversation, they illuminate the detail, they invite you to participate.

Mary Paterson is a writer, artist and curator working across text, performance and technology.

www.marypaterson.tumblr.com

HEART OF GLASS is an arts programme making work with, for and about St Helens people and place. Funded through Arts Council England's Creative People and Places programme, HOG have a ten year vision to support the creation and presentation of great art in St Helens.

www.heartofglass.org.uk

The Live Art Development Agency (LADA) is the world's leading organisation for Live Art, producing specialized projects, opportunities, resources and publications for those who make, watch, research, study, teach, produce, present, write about and archive Live Art, and creating conditions in which diversity, innovation and risk in contemporary culture can thrive.

www.thisisliveart.co.uk