

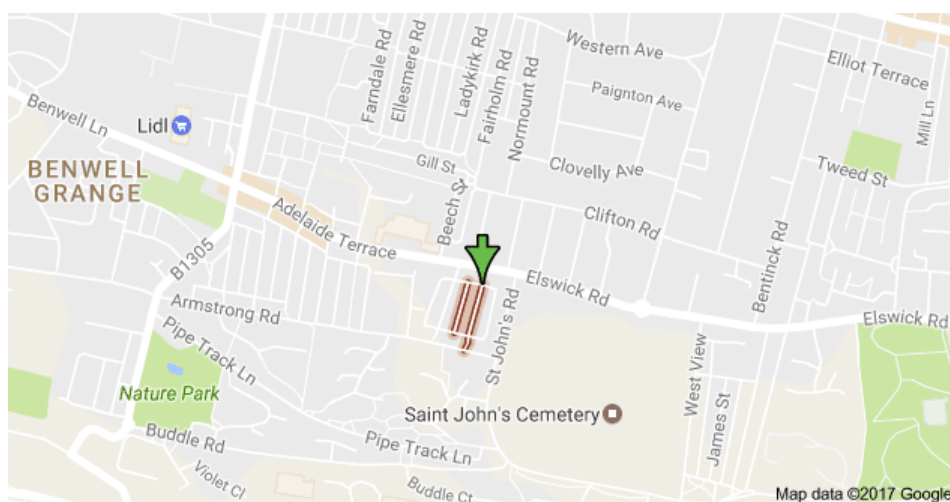
Caroline Street: Object research by Neil Armstrong and Dave Edwards

*There is a time in life when you expect the world to be always full of new things. And then comes a day when you realise that is not how it will be at all. You see that life will become a thing made of holes. Absences. Losses. Things that were there and are no longer. And you realise, too, that you have to grow around and between the gaps. **Helen Macdonald, H is for Hawk***



Introduction

In the mid-70s we shared an upstairs Tyneside flat in the Benwell area of Newcastle upon Tyne along with two others. In many ways, as students studying fine art at Newcastle Polytechnic, we parachuted ourselves - from West Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire respectively - into a community we initially had no obvious connection to.



Benwell was (and still is) quite run down; occupied by a mix of the socially impoverished from a multi ethnic background. Long since demolished, the space the flat once occupied is now overgrown scrubland. The landscape resembles an urban beach, where all manner of objects wash up and are held in grassy tentacles.

This upstairs flat on Caroline Street is our shared object, an object that once contained many other objects. A few of those objects still exist; most have been lost over time requiring re-construction by memory, imagination or by other means. Our primary subject, then, is absence. And in this collaborative project we are seeking to explore - from our joint as well as individual perspectives - the absence of something that is also a presence.

After college we eventually went our own ways; NA as a practicing artist and commercial designer/film maker, DE as an art therapist, psychotherapist and writer.

We have begun our collaborative investigations mainly as a written dialogue. As this 'conversation' has developed linked themes and areas of common interest are gradually beginning to emerge, but there is a long way to go. What follows are edited extracts from our 'conversations' to date.

Finding common ground

DE: *Over the years we've had a number of conversations about the possibility of 'collaborating' on various projects and one recurring theme in our conversations has concerned the 'objects', particularly their personal, cultural, psychological significance. What we discovered in these conversations is that although we more often than not approached these 'objects' from different perspectives – you as a practicing artist, myself as a practicing therapist - there are areas of overlap and mutual interest; not least of which is the means by which objects are invested with symbolic and psychological meaning, along with our attachment to these. Here at least we have been able to find some 'common ground'.*

NA: It intrigued me to think what might result from a dual perspective – to subvert the single vision and instead to try to make a work which could be seen from at least two perspectives. Not totally sure where it came from (maybe it's a time of life thing?) but anyway, given that you and I had talked about working together in the past, it occurred to me that we had Caroline Street in common and, once I discovered it was no more, that it could be an entry point, personal to us both, which isn't tainted by the nostalgia of its actual presence.

DE: *I rather like that phrase, 'tainted by the nostalgia of its actual presence', although I believe a degree of nostalgia is a) unavoidable and b) worthy of exploration as a theme in its own right. If by nostalgia you mean a wistful longing for the past what could be more contemporary? A major force in contemporary politics – not to mention the arts and popular TV - on both sides*

of the Atlantic is the idea of a return to greater and presumably happier past times. As we know, the reality of life in the North East was – for the majority, and certainly for the majority of the people who lived in Benwell during and prior to the 1970s - often brutal and unrelenting. And yet people still yearn for the era of milk in bottles, Brylcreem in tubs and Woodbines in packets of five.

NA: Yes, the idea of nostalgia for me is initially quite distasteful. I think of it as a less than objective longing for something that is collectively conceived and then manipulated by others for their own advantage. Having said that, I realise I am in the business of doing that too – and I also am not immune to adding emotion into the mix in order to make my audience respond.

DE: *Would you say then that your work has a political edge?*

NA: This whole idea that we could somehow return to a better place, make ourselves ‘great again’ is SUCH a relevant subject at the moment. It is also ludicrous one. Just a moment’s consideration shows up the complete falsity of such a notion. Caroline Street has certainly changed since our time there, but the socio-political undertones that were there in the 70s still appear to be simmering. I thought you might offer up other ways of adding to, and subverting, my singular vision, especially given your experience of working as a psychotherapist, and that together we might not so much ‘collaborate,’ but question and inform each other’s perspectives.

Reflections on the meaning of ‘nothingness’

DE: *How do you think you are going to approach your initial re-encounter with the space?*

NA: I’ve evolved a way of working that often starts with an object or space that is personal either to me or to someone else I’m connecting with.

DE: *In this case that would be me.*

NA: I use this as the entry point to explore subjects that interest me. With an open space it can be even more powerful, being that an open space invites you to consider the nature of ‘nothingness’.

DE: *I’m not sure what you mean by ‘nothingness’ in this context. Could you perhaps say a little more?*

NA: ‘Nothingness’ for me is a state of complete contradiction, in that there can never be ‘nothing’ in the world we inhabit. Even the word itself has substance. Physically we are left with ‘something’, even if that is the absence of the thing we are considering. It has the form of a concept and as such has validity.

DE: *This reminds me of Rachel Whiteread's House (1993) which explicitly plays with the idea of absence and presence; with the added irony that the local Council demolished the sculpture eleven weeks later.*



NA: I suppose, without getting overly philosophical or mystical about it, what intrigues most is that the absence of something can act as a portal and stimulation to discovery. There are many examples of this; a rabbit hole as metaphor; the unimaginable density of a black hole; the wardrobe to another world, etc.

DE: *For myself 'nothingness' links to a sense of absence, to emptiness, to the void, the blank screen or the empty page. When we think of absence, we might also become aware of a lack, of nonexistence and, ultimately, of death. More positively, and creatively perhaps, a consideration of 'nothingness' in relation to this particular landscape might allow us to project onto it our own memories, fantasies, dreams (or nightmares) and the rest. It is interesting too, I think, to consider what has been erased – lost, eliminated, eradicated or destroyed - by the demolition of the houses on Caroline Street and how this might be explored creatively.*

NA: In my own work I work intuitively. Ostensibly I chat to people, travel hopefully, from a point of absence of the actual 'thing'. It means that initially I'm open to anything, well in theory, but I guess the reality is that I am

always editing, making decisions about what to chase down, what to omit, and this has led me to be very aware of the process of recall and the nature of narrative in my own work.

DE: *Having been more engaged with the process of helping others creatively explore their inner and outer worlds in recent years my working method is less evolved. So for me, working on this project will – literally and metaphorically – require retracing my steps. A certain amount of wandering and wondering will be required to reconnect with my – and our past – and to better understand the ways this may be active in the present and shapes the way I think out art, place, relationships, politics and culture.*

The truth is out there

NA: One of the things I am particularly interested in is the notion of ‘truth’ and what that might be.

DE: *In the professional world I inhabit the concept of truth is clinically, not to say philosophically, tricky. For some clients (and apparently for some politicians and their representatives) there may be a huge disconnect between subjective truth and objective truth. In politics this leads inevitably to the construction of – so called – ‘alternative facts’ and in therapy to ‘false memories’. My own view is that ‘the truth’ is not actually ‘out there’ to be discovered as the X-Files would have us believe but must be negotiated – co-constructed - between people. If you are looking for ‘truth’, I suspect I am looking for something different.*

NA: Could you say a little more?

DE: *At this relatively early stage of the project my best guess is that what I’m looking to find through my involvement is what I would refer to as ‘narrative coherence’. By which I mean a story of some kind – be it visual, auditory or word based - that makes sense, emotionally as well as structurally. I’m looking to make sense of where I am now and how I got here and Caroline Street – past and present, real and imagined - is as good a place to start as any other.*

NA: I would agree. Truth is dead because it never existed. I’m not actually looking for it. In fact what interests me much more is the construction of narrative. I am I aware I walk a line sometimes between wanting to make my own presence in my work very obvious in order to keep that appearance of authorship up front, to be as honest as possible regarding my manipulation of the ‘facts’ or stories I incorporate. This can be a bit obtrusive or counter to the willing suspension of disbelief, but I suppose I sit in the Brechtian camp on that one. I like to remind the viewer that this is my version of events. That’s the only truth there is I think; that you honestly admit your deceit.

DE: *For now I’m afraid we will just have to agree to disagree on whether ‘truth is dead because it never existed’. Perhaps we can get back to that later?*

I would just like to note though is that this interest overlaps with my own; particularly in relation to the boundary between facts and fiction inside and outside the therapy room.

Remembering Caroline Street

NA: Things I remember about Caroline Street. It was an upstairs flat on a long descending street. It was in poor condition. A policeman once kicked the front door open for me when I was locked out one evening. The front room had a motorbike constructed in it at one point. There was oil on the rug. It was dirty – although this had no particular bearing at the time. I mainly used the bath to wash my clothes. The first room I had in the flat had a double bed and a Yale lock. There was room for nothing else. It was the end or the second to end of the terrace. It was built of red brick. It was one of many similar terraces.

DE: *When I looked at the photos you sent through of Caroline Street as it is now the first thing I felt was a deep sense of dislocation and it was initially difficult to find my bearings. It must be over forty years since I was anywhere near Caroline Street. It was difficult to recreate in my mind the exterior of the flat, let alone the interior. I can't even recall the actual address.*





Remembering the flat on Caroline Street and the local area became a little easier with time and effort, but how accurate my recollections are is difficult to determine. I seem to recall the flat was at the end of the terrace, but I'm not certain about that. I also experienced a sense of sadness; that a place I once lived in no longer physically exists.

Eventually one or two memories did surface; of Paul W building a motorbike (I think it was a Triumph) in the spare room; of being burgled and having a favourite jacket stolen, along with my radio; of Tony X cooking very large meals late in the evening then retiring to his room to get stoned while listening to John Peel on the radio; of huddling around an ancient two bar electric heater. No doubt there are other – seemingly random – memories awaiting recall.

DE: *So what's to be seen at Caroline Street now?*

NA: My initial attention was taken by a lime green and plastic space gun type water pistol; a menu fragment that lists 'European' dishes; a Mini Mouse Disney tee shirt; some weird light fitting; crushed lager cans; broken sunglasses. These are scattered quite wide and it's not clear quite how they get there.



DE: *Flotsam and jetsam washed up by the tides of time. Isn't it interesting that while neither of us have a direct physical connection to these objects they nonetheless evoke an emotional response in addition to arousing our curiosity?*

NA: I went back to Caroline Street to take some shots the other night, as I also had an idea to use the flash in order to control what I was looking at and to make it stark; devoid of emotion perhaps or maybe to add some magic? I'm not quite sure. Anyway I set the camera up on a tripod in the city-lit darkness. It was surprising how many people I came across. This is what I wrote just after I'd taken the pics. I wanted to record it.

Although it's a rough tip of a place, there were people passing through all the time, on their way somewhere else. I missed a trick when a group of five lads, maybe fourteen to eighteen years old, headed my way, hoodies up and walking with purpose, as if we had an arranged meeting.

The usual rhetorical question *"wotcha doing taken a picture of that sofa – it's shit."*

He wasn't really threatening in manner, the lad was just puzzled. It didn't compute.

I struggled to justify myself *"Oh I dunno"* I said *"I used to live here."*

That, as it turned out, was a good answer. No further questions were needed. They hung around for a short while.

“This place is disgusting” said one of them “they should clean it up.”

I agreed.

DE: *For me, there’s a strange paradox here. Human beings are by nature territorial. So much so that too many young men are willing to fight and if necessary kill ‘others’ who intrude into ‘their’ space. And yet in another sense these spaces are often neglected and seemingly belong to someone else; the ‘they’ who should clean it up.*

NA: Yes very much so – as if the lads (or any of the other locals I met for that matter) had no agency themselves.

Then off they ambled – saying their goodbyes. These weren’t bad lads in anybody’s book. They just happened to live round here. Should have asked them to sit on the sofa for a photo op I thought just after they’d gone, but I had been too busy being aware of ‘myself.’



Retracing our steps

DE: *As I spend so much of my time these days writing, whatever I end up making is, I think, likely to be word, as well as image based. It may also take the form of a pastiche (or homage). In retracing my steps I envisage revisiting my past art making processes and some of the ideas and trends around in the art world since the late 1970s that informed these. Through doing so I’m hoping I might arrive at a clearer understanding of my own creative process and place in the (art) world today.*

NA: What did you have in mind?

DE: *One possibility that occurred to me in relation to this is to stencil or paste various art related quotes in around the area of Caroline Street. Amongst the quotes and questions I've collected to date are the following:*

- ***Does art still have the power to forge new myths?***

NA: Art has the power to do whatever it decides to do, except it has no power at all unless it is recognised by at least one other. I have personal experience of constructing new myths from other people's memories.

- ***Art is what you can get away with***

NA: This statement implies there is actually something to get away with but I don't know what that would be? It implies deceit – would that be 'self' or 'third party' I wonder? It seems to say more about the prejudice of the notion itself.

DE: *You might be interested to know Neil that the person responsible for that particular quote was Andy Warhol.*

NA: Ha ha that's funny – Warhol was such a joker – an agent of provocation!

- ***The enemy of art is the absence of limitations***

NA: Everything is limited – there is no chance of escaping that condition. A blank sheet of paper is not blank.

- ***Art is longing. You never arrive, but you keep going in the hope that you will.***

NA: I agree – it typically has a number of staging posts, temporary resolutions but it never actually resolves.

- ***Where do we go from here?***

NA: Nowhere. You can only look forward or backwards from the present.

- ***Is all art nostalgic?***

NA: All art is living history, whether it is nostalgic depends on your own emotional buy-in. Can I just add one more question?

- ***Who cares whether it's art or not?***

To be continued...