

The Difference

Unravelling the given-ness of the present.

Ruth Ewan is interested in moments in time when change happens, paradigm shifts in power relationships which create new lines of flight through established structures. In these moments an opening is made for alternatives and the creation of heterotopias and propositions.

Philosopher Brian Massumi describes these moments: “Sometimes tensions draw to the breaking point and a crisis ensues. Recuperative mechanisms usually ensure that the breakout is a breakdown leading back to the grid. The categories reactivate. The leash tightens. In rare instances, breakdown veers into breakaway, a line of escape [...] This is called ‘art’ whether or not a poem or painting is ever produced.”¹

This aligns the moment of art with the moment of revolt. Many of Ewan’s projects do likewise, with reference to events like the Peasant’s Revolt and the French Revolution. Some recent works are drawn from the new structures which emerge from these moments of breakaway, where there is the potential that things can be made anew; quotidian things, which structure and inflect our everyday lives. The idea of the decimal clock instigated after the French Revolution (‘We Could Have Been Anything That We Wanted to Be’) whose division of the day into ten rather than twenty-four hours, is still upheld by astronomers and those tracing planetary movements, but is otherwise obsolete. Likewise the post-revolutionary calendar, made material in her work ‘Back to the Fields’ which eschews religious and royalist iconography in favour of the diurnal and the horticultural. The work suggests that the linear time of everyday life (influenced by capital accumulation and industrial or digital technologies) cannot entirely supersede the cyclical time of equinoxes and biology. The work also intimates that the reassertion of the former structure (the calendar was in use for only 12 years), cannot entirely eclipse or negate the revolutionary moment when things were different.

The idea that these inherent, embedded structures which control our lives are subject to change is, in current times, almost unthinkable yet there are points in time, like those investigated by Ewan, and described by Massumi, when this kind of reimagining of the future becomes possible and which, in a specific way, she has sought to bring about in this new project – ‘The Difference’.



Elizabeth Grosz suggests that ‘The task is not so much to plan for the future, organise our resources towards it, to envision it before it comes about, for this reduces the future to the present. It is to make the future, to invent it’² To do this, though, it is necessary to return to the past, ‘The past produces the resources for multiple futures, for open pathways, for indeterminable consequences, as well as for those regularities and norms that currently prevail. The present, with its structures of domination, has actualised elements, fragments of the past, while rendering the rest dormant, inactive, virtual. This means that the future, possible futures, have the inexhaustible resources of the past, of the realm of the past still untouched by the present, to bring about a critical response to the present and ideally to replace it with what is better in the future.’³ This commissioning programme and this project in particular, uses moments from the past, in this case those of the creation of the Magna Carta and Charter of the Forest’ as ‘ a site for the unravelling of the given-ness of the present’⁴ in the same way that the 24 hour clock or the Gregorian calendar or the map of the world is a given.

The world map has had similar moments of shift. The Mercator projection which famously under-represented the scale of countries near the equator and was accused of cartographic imperialism, was superseded by the Peters projection which though ostensibly an ‘egalitarian world map which alone can demonstrate the parity of all peoples of the earth’⁵, also (like all cylindrical projections) contains distortions of certain areas.

Ewan’s globe in the work “The Difference” is not concerned with cartographic accuracies but perhaps with unravelling the orthodoxies of our current understanding of the world, as filtered by young people from a Lincoln primary school. Children are perhaps best placed to do this as the ‘given-ness’ is not yet engrained for them, it is easier for them to imagine things differently – not to plan for the future, to invent it. Rules for living by can be invented for a new global order. In a previous audio work – ‘How we might live’ year ten students suggested ‘ There are no borders and countries no longer have names. Because there are no countries we can all be together.’⁶ In this work, there are countries and names but they are very much changed and repositioned, (Skegness is assigned nation-statehood, as is Loveland) and are part of a global commons where there is an imperative to ‘share the

things that are in the country' and to 'use your common sense'⁷. The work is sited in a place where the idea of the commons still has daily resonance – a public library - where there is shared access to knowledge and narrative.

The work holds the political and the aesthetic in a temporary tension in the shape of an object whose purpose is uncertain. It is a map, but a highly subjective one and it is overlaying young hand and voice onto a complex global context and a highly crafted and traditional object. Using the past, it endeavours to unravel the given-ness of the present by aligning, as Massumi suggests, the moment of art and the moment of politics. If Wilde was right when he said "a map of the world that does not include utopia is not even worth glancing at"⁸, 'The Difference' certainly merits that glance.

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¹ A users guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia, Brian Massumi (MIT 1992), p 77, with reference to Deleuze & Guattari's idea of 'Lines of flight'

² Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution and the Untimely*, Duke University Press, 2004, as quoted by Raqs Media Collective in 'A Letter to Amalia Jyran, Who will be Fifty Four in 2061 CE.' Catalogue of The 6th Momentum Biennial, 2011

^{3, 4} *ibid*

⁵ Peters, Arno (1983). *Die Neue Kartographie/The New Cartography* (in German and English). Klagenfurt, Austria: Carinthia University; New York: Friendship Press.

⁶ 'How we might live', Ruth Ewan, broadcast on Radio 4 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01rmnn9>

⁷ Perhaps channeling Thomas Paine's 1776 pamphlet 'Common Sense' which advocated independence and republicanism and called for an American version of Magna Carta. The young people's other edict 'Kings and Queens

are banned' is also echoed in Paine's 'In free countries the law ought to be king and there ought to be no other'. See Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberty & Commons for All* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2008) p. 120-121

⁸ Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, (Boston: J.W. Luce and Company, 1910), 27.