

Tripping toward the Light Fantastic; afterwords on Jane Watt's AIR commission

1. An Unbearable Light

"The indifference shown by all these men and women was immense, while the brutal beams of light beat down upon them. Tranquility would have liked to wake them up. She would have liked to run in front of them and wake them up. She had no idea how she could do it, but that is what she wanted. Perhaps all that was needed was to shout to each of them, just once, at the top of her voice: "WAKE UP!" ... (Le Clezio 2008: 51)

Now comes the nightlife with its hooded glow, the signs of night at once attractive and repellant: orange streetlights, glaring arcs of tumescent lights, the floodlit, the neon, and the strip-light city, crisscrossed with the unforgiving beams of vehicles. Against and within this cacophony of illumination, a column of light, of pale pinkish hue, barely discernible at dusk but growing in its density and intensity as the darkness around it builds, begins to hover in the air. A tented haze of iridescent rose materialises, a luminescent pink that seems to reflect and highlight the objects, forms and movement caught in its diffusion, in beautiful caresses. Not brutal orange or lit by the glare of awkward flashbulbs, but a light that is unbearable in its magical transformative glow, a fantastic trap that wraps its mist over, above and around the objects that are drawn into its arc. The shuffling pedestrians transform into gliding forms, exhaling and inhaling the intoxication of silent unofficial reveries, twirling in ecstasy.

2. Bringing to light.

They've closed up the Arches where we're going to sleep tonight,
Our haven of rest,
They're building flats where the Arches used to be,
There's somebody eating where we used to be sleeping,
They're paying rents where we once lived rent-free (Flanagan and Allen: 2010/1941)

Everything speaks here of half-loved compromise, a waiting for the day of the bulldozer and dynamite that might tear away what is essential and present in order to build new structures that may or may not satisfy current complaints and present malfunctioning. But let us celebrate now the use of the buildings and the places we have, and not defer always towards the future. Let us dance, dream and cavort, celebrating and re-creating them as spaces of open, free exchange. Not to give them over unconditionally to places that we are only allowed to pass through in a respectably quiet manner – but places full of diversity, difference and possibility: in skateboarding feats, rollerblading parties, dance halls, discos, a quotidian theatre or gallery, filled

with the unexpected and thought provoking; a troupe of elegantly dressed couples, dancing together, in the freezing February air.

There is something strangely prescient that behind the glass doors of Archway Tower, *The Office of the Public Guardian*, represents 'the vulnerable'. For there is a question of certain protocols, agreements and negotiations taking place – a making public of what is ordinarily concealed or taken for granted. That the civility invested in artists' working in and within an ostensibly public arena is not just about being polite or tolerant but in being politic and combative, by contesting and broadening what should be allowed. It begs the question just how much negotiation has taken place, how much groundwork and civility expended to overrule this seemingly empty concrete space with a beam of pink light.

3. Artificial Light (Pink light?)

I stretched my vision like a kid glove, stretched it on a board, out across the blue neighbourhood of the sea...
Swiftly and rapaciously, and with feudal fury, I surveyed the domain of my purview.
That is how you dip the eye into a goblet brimful so that a mote will come out.
Only then did I begin to understand the obligatory force of colour – the ecstasy of bright blue and orange sports shirts – and to realize that colour is no more than the sense of the start of a race, tinged by distance and circumscribed in its space. (Mandelstam: 363)

Whose feelings' count the most, whose artifice and expression? Is this a new form of lighting as mood enhancement or deterrent? Uncannily, it appears those pubescent public nuisances, the teenager, can be deterred from hanging around 'public' spaces by the strategic location of pink lighting. A pink glow is said to have a calming influence, but also to highlight skin blemishesⁱ, apparently showing up teenagers' spots. This stops them from standing around in its glow, and according to the police helps curb anti-social behaviour.

What other lights will be installed to deter asylum seekers from dreaming, to deflect lingering couples from embracing, or curb workers from smoking under the protective lee of buildings? We can only imagine. We can only wonder: bright purple, livid green, a dark tar.

And yet in the pink pools of light that spotted Archway, there is an invitation and provocation to reach into the light, to practice and perform other ways of moving, being moved or of understanding. These pools of artificial light, seeping out from their borders, exposed to everyone, for everyone, as an open invitation to pause, to perform, to be in another place, to make of the space other dreams. And as you stand in the pool of light you begin to imagine other pools of light... other zones of micro-exception, where the body wrapped in pink, swirls in a strange

magenta mist, surreal, alternately unreal, then, real.

4. Tripped Light Switches - the permission of mis/rule.

'I'll tell you all my ideas about Looking-glass House. First, there's the room you can see through the glass—that's just the same as our drawing room, only the things go the other way. I can see all of it when I get upon a chair—all but the bit behind the fireplace. Oh! I do so wish I could see THAT bit!'

(from *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* by Lewis Carroll)

It is as if the lights have all gone out, and in the disconcerting darkness, disorientated, everything is suddenly re-illuminated by the new and spectacular light of a torch beam – a light that is wholly other, almost magical. Everything now seems that bit different, arranged anew, unleashing a set of mini or micro-encounters where the lie of the land seems imperceptibly altered while being utterly transformed. In seeking out an unannounced, found audience; uninhibited, given the license to join in the spectacle, *spect-actors*, tapping feet, wondering at the sheer madness of it all, the winter nights unshackled by a play of light, dancing feet and laughter. Enjoinment and entertainment, enjoyment and dissonance, the permissions of misrule; in the breathless laughter of feeling suddenly free, in a place that seemed so ordinary, even non-descript, a trip switch to freedom.

This switch has unleashed a movement that is all about light and the aerial; the human desire to dance, to free themselves from the bonds of their bodies, leapingly, to move in another way, to express their body. And in shop-fronts, and office windows the images – silently photographed, trapped in their worlds – now fragmented, beat out a rhythm: up against, sandwiched, behind the glass image, splintered towers of light...these images, wordless gesturing signs, that are underneath, behind, on top off, and through the glass, playing their games on the other side. The belly dancing, swinging, jiving, jelly-rolling, rocking, shifting forms, suddenly released.

5. Scavenged moments of de/light

'Knowing how to free oneself is nothing; the difficult thing is knowing how to live with that freedom.' (Gide 2000: 15)

Here on the street, the circulation of people demonstrates the principles of communality, the need for conversation, acknowledgement, small acts of civility and happy habitualism. A beatific confluence of shared experiences, of a desire for recognition, jostles with the fear and violence of redevelopment, alterations and initiatives, incidents that cannot just be side-stepped.

But for now in the rustling of fragments, plastic, natural, organic, inorganic, concrete, liquid, the detritus of the city sings the constellation of colour to delight the eye, sooth, invigorate, agitate. Pulsing through the air in clouds of interference, the pink light shimmers and settles on bodies moving to coat them in wavelengths of luxuriant saturation – the body absorbing and transmitting the revolutionary principles of vision – the obligatory and ecstatic force of colour. All this life and movement brought to this unpromising, almost drab location to give it life, a living, breathing place that gets under your skin, and lets the eye scan, scavenge and scatter the profusion of unexpected mixtures, collisions, elisions and juxtapositions. Isn't that worth knowing, and isn't that the truth, that if you spend the time, stop and listen, you too can see and witness the most extraordinary delights – shrouded or illuminated with their own unique being – living momentarily in their own (shocking pink) fantastical light.

6. LightAIR - place/space the light that gets under your skin

'Politics by contrast, consists in transforming this space of 'moving along', of circulation, into a space for the appearance of a subject: the people, the workers, the citizens. It consists in re-figuring space, that is in what is to be done, to be seen and to be named in it. It is the instituting of a dispute over the distribution of the sensible.' (Ranciere 2010: 37)

What appears in the everyday circulation of the street is workers, shoppers and travelers is a new light, a space for actions, and events that ordinarily do not appear, in a place that appears at first only to be a transit hub. Unexpectedly confronted by images of playful intensity, concentrated in pink light, the weary passer-bys are transformed, enraptured by their own imagined dance, they turn, twist, leap and glide. A new lightness haunts the air with the potential of the unintentional. It has got under their skins, freeing them to create new temporary yet fantastical spaces, within this (infra)ordinary place.

7. An After light:

Dance, dance, dance - *give into dance* - dancing as a way of stilling oneself, not accelerating but staying and being in one place, as a being in, one place, an "I" spreading outwards towards another. Here there is a promise of overruling the regulations, and expectations, with everyday activities of play as a form of fleeting resistance: no deviant behaviour, no congregating of gangs, no pissing, puking or kissing in the lingering half light and certainly no ball games, ball gowns, or ballroom dancing. And yet all these rules upset by the joy and jostling – in new havens of play – journeying, without license, trespassing and transgressing, exposing the unexposed, by creating three temporary, yet genuine, platforms for mis/rule into the everyday street activity of Archway.

Charlie Fox 2010

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