

ROY FITZ - the new face of old London <http://royfitz.blogspot.com/>

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Roy In Ex-Holborn

To be honest, I walked towards Holborn in some trepidation, knowing it to be an area of Old London simply dripping with History and afraid it would overwhelm my knowledge and outstrip my vocabulary. But fortunately, as I turned off the Kingsway and found my way through some odd old alleys, I found that it wasn't there; i.e. that Holborn itself had disappeared; been eradicated from the London map.

As I stared East along what should have been Theobalds Road towards what should have been Grays Inn Road, all I could see was a kind of desert of neutral material, like a site from the computer-based pursuit once introduced to me as '2nd Life' where building was yet to begin, and that had come to inhabit this '1st Life' of my unjustly brief but nonetheless thankfully rich experience on earth. Just three structures rose up from that paucity; that dearth of detail. One very small object which turned out to be an isolated ATM or Cash Machine sprouting up from the grim grey void just to the height of my navel. Not far away, at about the distance of the width of Theobalds road -had it existed- there was a lively, illuminated and fully operational, traditional English Fish and Chip shop, complete with munching and queuing customers and Italian staff prodding, turning, sieving and shuffling the world famous fare as it spat, fried and bubbled in stainless steel vats. A little way off stood one admirable Georgian structure, a handsome 18th Century house in excellent repair, looming up alone in the barren landscape, its crisply set windows clear and dark, and with nothing beyond it but a featureless plain and an infinite horizon.

Needing, at this present moment, neither cash nor food of such a 'fast' variety; and patting my trusty Espresso flask to reassure myself that, should I require sustenance in this strange land a reliable dose of invigoration was close to hand, I walked in the direction of the house, which grew more impressive as I approached, until I was standing on its proud step and looking at a name written above a small metallic button which obviously operated some sort of doorbell. The name wasn't one I had ever come across before, and certainly didn't sound English. Neither was it a 'Mr', 'Mrs' or family name, but simply one ominous looking word, printed in a bold font, which led me to believe that this was some kind of business, perhaps even an art gallery? The name puzzled me, and so, hesitating to press the button and possibly thereby summon forth unprecedented or unmanageable events, I spoke the word aloud, as if accommodating its deep vowels and soft consonants on and around my tongue might make me feel a little more comfortable at this tense moment within such a disturbingly vacated neighbourhood.

" D O M O B A A L ", a little frozen cloud represented my breath in the cold January air as the word passed through my lips and into the world, but though the utterance seemed to subtly change the quality and meaning of the word it did nothing to interrupt the momentum of my impulsive index finger, which moved, like a helpless vessel inexorably destined to tumble over rapids, closer and closer to the button, until the whorled skin at the tip coincided with the button's smooth brushed aluminium, then pressed on, forcing the little disk to recede and thereby signal to whoever or whatever lay beyond the door that a visitor was seeking, either entry, or, at least some enlightenment as to what this singular establishment might be.

With a solid and satisfying 'click', equivalent in quality to an 18th century limousine door opening, the door released itself from its catch, apparently at the will of some remote electronic device, and enabled me to pass over the threshold into a stone vestibule. To my right stood a stack of boxes containing small bottles of one of my favourite drafts, Breton Cider of the kind I have often quaffed in magnanimous proportion during wasteful afternoons in The French House in Soho where that wonderful import is supplied in splendid quart bottles usually incongruous to these shores.

Using the bottle opener which lay to hand I availed myself of the effervescent and aromatic concoction as I began to mount some stairs which rose to my right, drawn by strange noises drifting down from above. At the the first floor landing I encountered another door and, gently pushing it open was pleased to find therein a party of aesthetes attentively listening to a strange kind of music performed by three rather studious looking men operating electronic equipment at a desk beneath the window. My entrance was barely acknowledged, the atmosphere being like that of a sceance or wake, as the audience concentrated -some with eyes closed- on the infinite subtleties and nuances of sounds rippling, bubbling, humming and gurgling from small speakers placed artfully about the room. I dutifully joined in the ritual and soon found my imagination both captivated and inspired by the exotic frequencies passing gently into my ears from the dimly lit room. Music is, of all the arts, notoriously the most difficult to describe in words or to enhance in any way with vocabulary, nevertheless, I can tell the reader that listening, and occasionally looking towards the source of the sounds, I found myself picturing great dams, power stations, and pylons by which these pure electronic emissions were fundamentally produced and transported here, so that, despite my rather compressed and crowded surroundings I was able to enjoy the sensation of mentally traversing enormous landscapes and encountering magnificent man-made phenomena, while each of these images was adjusted or supplanted according to new frequencies.

When the sounds eventually arrived at a gentle conclusion (the musicians removing their hands from the equipment and glancing briefly at one another with barely discernible expressions of satisfaction) the audience applauded politely and broke into mumbling discussions, expressing their responses to the experience. Then, as the small gathering dispersed into other rooms about the house, I followed, and found myself confronted by a most unexpected sight.

Above me, stairs ascended to further floors on which I was destined to never know what occurred because a small rope or chain was deftly hung across them disallowing me entrance. But what startled me at this point was the realisation that, for some purpose the walls of the entire house appeared to have been recently painted a rather sombre shade of grey, producing an atmosphere quite un-conducive to the perpetuation of the daily family life for which the building was surely originally intended. Gazing curiously up those forbidden stairs the reason for this adjusted context became apparent when my eyes met a very peculiar, indeed frankly incongruous fixture whose permanence was uncertain. It appeared to consist of a model of a building, produced with an intimate degree of care and attention to detail surpassing those projections often compiled by architects and property developers, and made at what I speculated was something like a 1:100 scale or ratio of reduction.

The model was set high above me, so that it was difficult to see the whole, which was obscured, not only by the similar modelling of the building's foundations and most immediate surroundings (the corner of a paved street) but further, by perhaps the most surprising element of all, a great lump of earth projecting down beneath the model, seemingly representing (in similar scale) several meters of the earth's true substance immediately beneath the location of the miniaturised establishment, so that, in looking up, not only was one intrigued and a little frustrated by one's inability to thoroughly deduce the character of the model, but one also found oneself slightly awed by this rather mortifying reminder of our own eventual return to the soil carelessly trodden by our lively feet in our relatively thoughtless pursuit of everyday goals. Furthermore, this communication of gravitas served to suspend one's considerations (as must surely be the purpose of any artwork -for this was surely the nature of the object with which I found myself engaged) just as surely as had the erstwhile technicians suspended, with great skill and confidence, said object in such an unnerving and precipitous position, half way up the grey-painted wall of a 2nd floor Georgian staircase.

By now the effects of the fruitsome alcohol could be felt, and they made themselves apparent in the unusually carefree manner with which I struck up conversation with one of the complete strangers mingling nearby on the stairwell. Upon enquiring a little regarding the uncanny apparition floating above our heads (though not so far and so fast as to break its phenomenal spell over me as a

result of a too-hasty acquisition of 'knowledge'-that arch foe of true intelligence) I learned that this was indeed an artwork and was attributable to one 'Steve Johnson' an English Sculptor who has -I learned from my new acquaintance- developed some renown for the design, manufacture and display of similar objects by way of several recent exhibitions on the continent (most notably in Germany).

Glancing up once more at the object as if to see it anew in light of this additional information, I found myself trying to ascertain the precise nature of the architectural example which had so inspired Mr Johnson's eye and imagination as to motivate him to take the by-no-means insignificant pains required to embark upon its miniaturised and very detailed replication. After some consideration I asserted that this was surely a model of the kind of establishment one might describe as 'seedy' or perhaps 'shady'; that is, the kind that necessarily shuts its windows both by day and by night and broadcasts a minimum of information on its exterior alluding to that which occurs in its interior; the kind of emporium -I should add- that anyone who regards himself as a gentlemen will always walk smartly by -and yet not without a feint sense of repressed and never-to-be-satisfied curiosity; with eyes seemingly, though never fully, averted.

At this point I began to sense some discomfiting connection between the artworks and my earlier experience of Holborn itself, which had appeared reduced to a few similarly isolated islands of architectural eventuality, like moments torn from a highly subjective encounter with this teeming world; or remaining fragments of a mind rapidly losing its ability to recall huge swathes of once contiguous images which, combined, should constitute lasting evidence of one life lived on this earth.

Moving and mooching along with the crowd, who skilfully gave equal attention to each other, to their drinks, and to the artworks, I entered another room, featuring the wonderful high ceiling characteristic of such houses and graced with windows which draped down to meet the floor, thereby giving the whole interior a sense of airy elegance conducive to the pursuit of delicate thoughts, posture, and manners. Here, the artist and his assistants had repeated and embellished the wizardry I had contemplated on the staircase at three sites about the room, all at a carefully designated height which made the upper parts of the sculptures almost obscured. Small worlds again floated eerily against the backdrop of the painted walls, but here the works emphasised a more lateral form, spreading out like brief horizons against the walls. One was artfully poised above the room's ornate fireplace -subtly evoking certain surrealist paintings I have seen, which transform the language of such household particulars into faintly disturbing dream scenarios .

Stretching my neck a little, along with the other curious visitors milling about me, I could make out various intriguing details. One of the Sculptures seemed to represent a German railway station platform, and the inclusion of a small figure who's back was turned towards the gallery wall immediately evoked that peculiar quality of time experienced by anyone who has ever endured the particularly modern experience of waiting alone for a train to come; a moment which, in my own experience, is likely to invoke a particular form of reverie -if that is, one is able to repress more base thoughts of impatience or resentment that one's transportation is not immediately to hand. The whole was again impressively detailed in its execution, even incorporating a clearly legible miniature advertisement of the kind that usually occupies such sites and which, at such moments, competes with more cherished and personal thoughts for our attention.

All the Sculptures repeated the motif previously described wherein a large area of earth extended below each of the 'islands', as if to anchor the seemingly superficial, everyday events represented as indicative of the surface of worldly experience, to the hidden or un-representable density of time, and to the repressed, but no-less real, profundity of our all-too-hasty passage through this life.

Another Sculpture featured the kind of 'fast food' kiosk one might find offering its fare at a convenient stop on a long and busy road, but just as the previous Sculpture had featured a figure, with face averted, apparently enacting a part in a 'non-event', so here, the diminutive retailer appeared closed for business as the shutters of this kiosk had been made by Mr Johnson to appear firmly shut, perhaps for the entire season, or perhaps set to be opened imminently by its proprietor on another busy day of rather confined, overheated and highly aromatic commerce. As if to emphasise a pervading sense of what I have heard referred to as 'down time', a large and jolly sunshade had been crafted by the skillful sculptor, albeit firmly furled and tied as if to emphatically confirm the sense of closure, acting like a full-stop at the end of a sentence.

The Sculpture above the fireplace was inevitably influenced by being suspended above that highly symbolic hearth, on who's mantelpiece one could easily imagine a Georgian gent leaning, brandy swilling in one hand, to regale his guests, or while subtly interrogating his daughter's beau regarding assets and intentions. On this piece of long, modelled earth, a low building had been painstakingly concocted by Mr Johnson. Again its windows appeared shuttered, as if it were a holiday home, or some building brought into use for some other purpose only at certain times of the year. At one end of its long roof a German flag had been carved so as to hang limply, as if to signal that even the weather, on this particularly 'Johnsonian' day, had decided to do nothing; as if the elements themselves had here closed their blinds and put up their feet for a well-earned rest.

However, at the other end of the roof, seemingly symbolically opposed to the traditional sign of national territory, what I believe is referred to as a 'satellite dish' peeked out optimistically, encouraging me to consider the possibility that some activity did indeed persist within the seemingly abandoned building, and conjuring thoughts regarding the fact that, in an age of highly technologised, mass and transnational communications there is more to the world than the national borders and boundaries which proved such troubling obstacles to human understanding in recent centuries.

By now, Mr Johnson's sculptures and their thoughtful setting within this splendid house had quite sated my occasional appetite for art and other kinds of special experience; while the Breton cider had delivered a slight pang of hunger to my midriff along with its welcome injection of a sense of rosy well-being, and so, making slight valedictory nods to my fellows I made my way back down the stairs to the handsome door which soon clicked satisfyingly shut behind me so that I found myself once again in that strangely vacated land that I can only describe as 'Ex-Holborn' -the well-known quartier having apparently been all but removed from its historical location.

As I proceeded Eastward I could see the beloved city looming in the distance, beyond the barren plain still punctuated only by the mushroom-like stub of the ATM machine and the still-illuminated Fish and Chippery. There lay the Southern edges of Bloomsbury, and, beyond the Kingsway -on which the occasional vehicle passed- the Westward drag towards the intoxicants of Soho. I thought of Fitz mansions over in Fitzrovia, of its presently empty cupboards and my equally empty digestive system, and, having searched in vain among my pockets for an old folded fiver or thick gold coin, conceded to utilising the services of the ATM or 'Cash Machine' which I was, at that very moment, passing. Having obtained the necessary note I marched over to sample the fried food I had earlier witnessed freshly frying, then wandered in a North westerly direction, taking occasional swigs from my trusty flask, and reflecting -as one invariably does after eating- on my recent experience.

Mr Johnson's sculptures -I mused- were not unlike a record of a wholly subjective experience -what might be called a 'radical empiricism'- whereby only those events of true note and use to ourselves register significantly on our mental landscape as we make what is ultimately a solipsistic journey through this world; something which literature has often described very well but which Mr Johnson seemed to now be claiming as the potential domain of sculptors.