

Chris Lewis-Jones artist/flaneur
Primary

Who I am and what I do

I am fine artist, educator, performer and lecturer based at Primary, one of the newest and most exciting artist-run spaces in the UK. I am also an Associate Artist at Nottingham Contemporary, where I work with the other three Associate Artists (Sian Watson-Taylor, Jo Dacombe and Gillian Brent), members of the Learning Team and other colleagues to nurture the widest possible community of practice (see AA's statement below). I run lots of courses and workshops at Nottingham Contemporary, and am hoping to do the same at Primary, once the dust has settled and paint has dried!



Primary, formerly Douglas Primary School, in Radford, Nottingham

My practice is informed by my interests in the semiotics of fashion, psychogeography, folk culture, the environment and what Nu Urban Gardeners describe as 'an active engagement with the idea of landscape'. The commonest means by which I undertake this (active engagement) is the psychogeographic derive (or stroll). This equips me with the physical detritus that I use in my collages and assemblages and also the photographic and written responses that both inspire work and sustain engagement. Since teaming up with Simon Withers to form NUGs, the derive has also become a means of engaging with a wider public and generating income.

critical context

Even the work I produced as 'an emerging artist' was concerned with this notion of an 'active engagement with the idea of landscape'. I wrote my BA dissertation on prehistoric land art and was much influenced during its writing by an emerging English version of land art, especially the small scale/low impact interventions and documented journeys of Hamish Fulton and Richard Long. My engagement was further enhanced by my employment and campaigning activities. I was 'Habitat Coordinator' for Sunderland Friends of the Earth, between in 1977 and 1979. I initiated street theatre events and interventions in Redditch, Hackney and Sunderland, the most extravagant of which was the staging of 'a nuclear accident' in the Bridges Shopping Centre in Sunderland in 1978. In 1977/8 I was commissioned (by Pete Relf) to exhibit a body of work based on subjective interpretations of Ordnance Survey Maps at The Midland Arts Centre in Birmingham. In 1979 I worked as a municipal gardener for Sunderland Borough Council and, in 1980, I began volunteering as a 'digger' for Northants Archaeology Unit. This soon led to a full time job as Archaeological Illustrator for the unit, which I did until in 1987, when I left to peruse a freelance career. I can't pretend that I saw my work with Friends of the Earth, Sunderland Borough Council or Northants Archaeology Unit as being part of a 'fine art practice', but it was certainly part of what Michel de Certeau calls 'the practice of everyday life' and it informed, and continues to inform, my fine art practice.

From the late 1980's my practice was informed by post-modernist analysis (especially Lyotard and Derrida) and the notion of 'the death of the author'. I was commissioned to do some interesting work on this theme by Angel Row Gallery in 1994, and this work toured to several other venues across the region, but I failed to build on this achievement, in terms of developing either my practice or my career. I found the inevitability of repetition and, ultimately, 'the futility of practice', an inevitable consequence of the concerns I was addressing. I didn't produce much work until I undertook postgraduate studies at the University of Derby in 2001, when I began to reevaluate who I was and where I wanted to go, which included an analysis of my 'cultural identity'. As well as deconstructing my own 'perceived' identity (that of the white, middle-aged, middle class, heterosexual Englishman) I also became interested in deconstructing the notion of the 'box' and all systems of taxonomy, seeing them as part of the problem, not the solution. I exhibited and collaborated with other artists exploring similar issues, notably Samson Kambalu, with whom I shared a studio at Oldknows and Lizzie Soden, with whom I made the film Searching for Albion at Tate Modern. This exploration and deconstruction of identity culminated in the North and South exhibition at Southampton Gallery (curated by Tim Craven) in 2007. Although I was proud of the paintings, installation, performance and assemblage that I exhibited there, I felt the need to move beyond this (no longer contentious) discourse. This was partly because I was tired of turning up at events dressed in my trademark costume of knotted head-hanky, Morris whites, cricket pads, socks and sandals and bloody crusader cross shirt...and partly because of the thrill of seeing my work exhibited (at Southampton Art Gallery) next to Richard Long's (documented 100 mile walk). What excited me about Long's work was its active engagement with landscape, a thread that had been present in my work but had been submerged by a torrent of post-modern irony. It struck me that, as this sense of engagement was still central to my lifestyle, it should be central to my fine art practice, and so it has become.

I am excited by the revaluation of the once discredited notion of the authentic/subjective response of the artist to his/her environment that is evidenced in the work of Mark Wallinger, Cornelia Parker, Mona Hatoum, Hamish Fulton, Daniel Dorell, Mika Rottenburg, Pippa Hale and Mimi Joung. I am also excited by the evolving theory of Relational Aesthetics, as propounded by Nicholas Bourriaud, which offers a logical way forward for practitioners who felt their integrity too much undermined by the relativity of post modernism, but are still excited (as am I) by the multiplicity of narrative interpretation and liberal use of irony that are its defining characteristics.

I have become an artistic flaneur: exploring environments both urban and rural, exploring anything and everything, using any medium, in any context, from gallery to tram... travelling rather than arriving. My practice includes: live art/performance, painting, drawing, gardening, collage, assemblage, printmaking, montage, projection, music/sound, photography, mapping, writing and intervention. I should like it to include more gardening (guerrilla gardening, gardening at Primary and more performative events in gardens, allotments and orchards etc). I have an especially close working relationship with Simon Withers, with whom I established: Cyril Seaton's Cycle Roots, CRUISER, Nottingham Cabaret Collective and, most recently, Nu-Urban Gardeners. Our studio at Primary is the Headquarters of Nu Urban Gardeners. More than a studio, it is a venue in which performative collaboration and philosophical discourse flourish.

Chris Lewis-Jones

Associate Artist's Statement (Nottingham Contemporary)

My practice is dialogic, informed and inspired by the diversity of contexts in which I operate and the diversity of people with whom I collaborate. For several years my work explored evolving notions of cultural identity. I did this using assemblage, installation, printmaking, film, projection and live art. More recently, I have explored my relationships/encounters with landscapes. This exploration is informed by an interest in psychogeography and includes walking art, documented derives and costumed interventions. I often take students and workshop participants on a derive (or stroll) around the area in which Nottingham Contemporary is located, believing that Hundertwasser was spot-on when he declared:

'the lines I make with my feet, walking to the gallery, are more important than the lines I find there, hanging on the walls'

I have become something of a flaneur, for whom the journey is more important than the destination.

I love working with the diversity of visitors that Nottingham Contemporary attracts. I see myself as a facilitator rather than a teacher and try to build a community of practice with all of the participants with whom I work. Nottingham Contemporary is a place in which interesting conversations take place and affinities are nurtured. I am delighted when former students and participants continue to meet, work, socialise and invest their energies in this place. For me, that's what it's all about.

wassailing at St Ann's Community orchard Jan 2012



Spending a sunny, if very cold, Sunday afternoon following the artist Chris Lewis Jones (in full Plough Bullock make up with an accordion), his drum-beating assistant Bibi, and sixty or so others around the Community Orchard at the St Ann's Allotments - well, it proved to be a *surprising* way of passing the time in the heart of an inner city. Not only was a bonfire lit, marshmallows toasted and pizzas baked in a wood oven, the trees were given a traditional wassailing with apple juice poured at the roots and bread scattered over it, while a variety of chants and songs were sung to the sound of that accordion, drum and any tins and sticks that came to hand. Somewhere in the middle of all this, I had the opportunity to perform a few of the *Six Wassail Songs* that feature in The Apple Sequence, copies of the book were circulated and the crowd was happy to open to the designated pages and join in on all the choruses (including the one that runs to a challenging, tongue-twisting six lines).

All in all, a pleasure to take part, and in case you' re wondering why we were doing the wassail on the 15th instead of the more traditional 6th Jan (Twelfth Night) and why Chris is wearing a blacked-out face, both relate to to the old Plough Monday customs that were largely stamped out under the influence of Methodism (so its claimed) during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The black make-up doesn' t refer (as some Mummers' Play roles do) to the character of the Moor, but, according to Chris, was a device that disguised participants in Plough Monday mischief-making, which could involve a team of Ploughboys taking a harrow to the garden of any wealthy or influential townsman who refused to pay the tokens demanded: apparently the expedient of a disguise was considered essential to avoid reprisals during the rest of the year, so it' s a tradition more in the vein of Commando or Ninja tactics than Minstrel shows.

For more on the Nottinghamshire Plough Monday and Plough Bullocks traditions, [Peter Millington' s various researches](#) are by far the best starting point.





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