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The Edinburgh Arts Festival 2012: Diaries, Pilgrims and the Importance of Cats

The Edinburgh Arts Festival 2012

by MK PALOMAR

A breakfast at The Fruit Market Gallery launched the opening of Edinburgh Arts Festival 2012, and while balancing a cup of coffee and a sticky pastry I watched stacks of Dieter Roth Monitors (130 in all), showing documentation of Roth's last year of life.

An art critic (apparently trapped in the distant past), spluttered "The ego of the man – who buys this sort of thing?" – but watching Roth going through the motions of his days very soon became a participatory narrative. As my eyes skipped the screens, some saturated stain-glass colours, others grainy or over exposed, each one relaying a different time and series of events, my watching selected a change to the order of his life. Every frame there for us to witness; from his getting up to his going to bed – through work and play and eating and urinating. Not so much Kurt Kren's 1967 *16/67: September 20—Gunter Brus* in which Kren focuses graphically on the process and produce of human mastications,¹ but rather a consideration of what it is to be a sentient being. As Jonathan Jones in his 2 August 2012 Guardian Review observes: "*even when we see him on the loo he is reading and thinking.*"

Roth's meditative method, pulling on socks, sipping drinks, thinking, writing or drawing in his books, is entrancing in its gentle everyday way. Intrigued by this careful old man, even though separated by the difference in time, I could have spent an hour savouring his company, grateful for the opportunity to take part in his contemplation. Upstairs double-sided frames hanging sideways to the wall, show images of motions, thoughts and designs. A technician fixed a long piece of wood over the bottom of the last of many shelves of archive boxes, keeping them safe from our probing fingers. Now all those boxes, all those thoughts, are hidden and locked away. We must be grateful then that he has given to us so many windows into his life on film.

Keeping up with a gaggle of festival instant reviewers we climb the scenic (fit person's) route up Jacobs's ladder (steep steps), to The Old Calton Burial Ground where the artist [Susan Philipsz is launching her Timeline 2012](#), the sound of her voice sounding the chord of G out over Edinburgh at one o'clock every day. Philipsz's voice (in this work) is like a ships' horn yet with her slight build and long red hair she might be the very Nicnevin² of this 2012 Festival.

The chord of G fading in my mind's ear, I split from the gaggle of reviewers, dodged the rain clouds and found a bus heading east to Restalrig, searching for the Hebridean collective 6° West³ at St. Triduana's Chapel.

"From the medieval chapels of the Isle of Iona and Inch Kenneth to St. Triduana's Chapel in Restalrig, Edinburgh, 6° West [are travelling] a creative pilgrimage." Their interactions with site and place resonate with the spiritual, the strange and the extraordinary, hidden in the "... *spiritual fabric of ancient sites*".⁴ 6° West names the coordinates of the collective (The Hebridean Isle of Mull) and its number of working components. Four artists, one curator and, like the extra chair at the table (ready for the unexpected visitor), there is a space left open for a collaborator (in the case of the Edinburgh Arts Festival 2012 the sixth element is the hexagonal St Triduana's Chapel).

Recently founded on Eilean nam Ban (Island of Women 6°22 W April 2011) this refreshing collective, like the best of those first true saunterers journeying to the Holy land⁵, have about them a sense of sea breeze potent with strange and

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6° West



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haunting tales. At Inch Kenneth, a tiny isolated island once used as the garden for Iona's Abbey community, later home to the Mitford family, 6° West's residency faced hauntings of the holy and the terribly flawed. "You look into the mirrors there and you know Unity would have looked into the same glass."⁶ But the works of 6°West reach beyond ghoulish rumour-mongering, and through constructing images, objects and interactions, they delve deeper into the natural and spiritual condition of the island from multiple perspectives. St Triduana also has a tragic tale – a saint troubled by love blinded herself to keep the suitor away. Happily, 6° West have a strong creative breeze behind them and will not be grounded on the sadness of such tragic women. Onward, saunterers, forward to your next pilgrimage.



Among other events and shows to look out for at the Edinburgh Arts Festival 2012 are Tania Kovats's River installation at Jupiter Artland.⁷ "[...] *Specimens of water from 100 rivers around Britain and Ireland, [...] distilled into 100 sealed museum-quality jars and stored inside a new boathouse, at Jupiter Artland.*" Engaged with environment and conservation (in 2006 Kovats transported a *Meadow* on a canal boat via inland waterways from Oxford to London,⁸ and in 2009 Kovats's *Tree*⁹ – celebrating Darwin's centenary – became the only permanent contemporary installation at the Natural History Museum), Kovats's *Rivers* is perhaps both a warning to us of the consequences of our consumptions, and also a vault¹⁰ or Library of Water¹¹ keeping these precious samples safe for our futures.

There is also Summerhall, still in transition between Veterinary School and an ambitious new Edinburgh art space – suffering from initial chaos and uneven curation the exhibitions and events are mixed- though you might be lucky (as I was) to buy an orange juice for music legend Robert (and his wife Elsie) Wyatt or talk about the importance of the company of cats with the iconic multidisciplinary American artist Carolee Schneemann¹². Schneemann is as elegant and poised today as in the documentation of her 1972 work *Skating Naked*. The images show Schneemann skating unclothed apart from scarf, skates and a cat in her arms, and visiting this Scottish environment they offer The Reverend Robert Walker (currently over at the National Gallery of Scotland)¹³ the possibility of an invigorating skating companion.

As well as gracing us with her presence Schneemann also regaled us – the few lucky tea time companions – with her memories of a specific area of anatomy belonging to the man who documented some of her performances – all hail to such women who so elegantly continue to relish and inspire life. Would that we could all be as vital in any of our years.

References

1. Austrian film maker Peter Tcherkassky in his 1996 text *Lord of the Frames: Kurt Kren* describes his fellow countrymen's oeuvre as "Expanded Cinema" (<http://www.hi-beam.net/mkr/kk/kk-bio.html>), involved with the Vienna Actionists (1960-71) Kren used his friend the performer Gunter Brus as the subject for his 16/67: September 20—Gunter Brus (a.k.a., Eating, Drinking, Pissing, Shitting Film) <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/24/kren.php>
2. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicnevin>
3. <http://6degreeswest.blogspot.co.uk/>
4. <http://www.edinburghartfestival.com/exhibitions/6B0west/>
5. The American Naturalist and philosopher Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) in his text *Walking*, celebrated the art of true sauntering and recounts that the term comes from the Middle Ages when people roamed about seeking others to 'ask charity, under pretence of going "à la sainte terre," to the Holy Land, till the children exclaimed, "There goes a Sainte-Terrer", a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander'. Thoreau tells us that the word may also derive 'from sans terre', meaning having no particular home, but equally (being) at home everywhere', and it is this condition that Thoreau believes is 'the secret of successful sauntering'. H. Thoreau: *The Portable Thoreau*, ed. G. Bodo, US and UK:

sauntering . H. Moreau, *The Portable Moreau*, ed. C. Bode, US and UK.
Penguin books, 1982, p. 592.

6. It is said that Unity Mitford (friend of Adolf Hitler) having shot herself at the declaration of war between Britain and Germany was taken to Inch Kenneth by her father where she stayed until her death –however all manner of rumours about her condition and possible following life in Scotland add to the Islands mystery <http://forargyll.com/2011/09/inch-kenneth-mitfords-and-mysteries/>

7. <http://edinburghfestival.list.co.uk/event/253958-tania-kovats-rivers/>

8. <http://grizedalesculpture.org/index.php/tania-kovats>

9. Ibid.

10. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Svalbard_Global_Seed_Vault

11. Roni Horn, *Vatnasafn/Library of Water* 2007

http://www.artangel.org.uk/projects/2007/vatnasafn_library_of_water

12. From 1981-1988 Schneemann made her work *Infinity Kisses* photographic documentations of the kisses she shared with her cats.

<http://www.caroleeschneemann.com/infinitykisses.html>

13. Sir Henry Raeburn's painting of The Reverend Robert Walker was painted in 1794- Guardian Art critic Jonathan Jones chose this painting as his Portrait of the week on 30th Dec 2000 "*The Reverend Robert Walker Skating on Duddingston Loch. A Presbyterian minister in black frock coat, black hat and black stockings; his face is dignified, grave - but with a twinkle of laughter. He is as graceful as a Degas dancer, perfectly balanced, poised on the ice scarred with lines made by previous skaters.*"

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2000/dec/30/art>

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