



E3G

Speech by John Ashton

Motorbike Receding

Reflections on Art, Politics and Climate Change

Sustain RCA talks: *Breaking through the barriers*

Royal College of Art, London, 30 October 2013

Before we get properly under way I wonder if I could persuade a couple of volunteers to come up and join us. With Gina's permission I'd like to start by doing something quite primitive together.

Two female volunteers hesitantly stand up, both near the centre of fully occupied rows of seats. Thank you both for coming forward without knowing exactly what you are letting yourselves in for. I see you are precisely the two people in this room with the maximum number of other people's legs to climb over to get to the front. Gina, can I ask you also to join our volunteers?

Ladies and gentlemen, please give a big hand to our valiant human guinea pigs here.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, a warning. Please: don't try this at home. It is best done wearing surgical gloves - though actually I see we have Marigolds tonight. There will be fumes which if inhaled can be intoxicating. Afterwards we may need industrial cleaning products.

I'd like to ask you each, if I may, to put on one of these rubber gloves. Your left hand or your right hand, either will do, but please pull the glove on nice and tight.

Now, flex your hand as far as you can, with each finger stretching out, make a real hand shape, and place your hand flat on the sheet. That's perfect, thanks, hold it just like that. Now, this is where it gets interesting.

The speaker picks up the paint can, and holds it a few inches in front of the sheet over one of the gloved hands. He presses the nozzle. Nothing happens. He tries again, with the same result. A look of alarm crosses his face. He turns towards the audience.

Oh dear, I may need some help here. I can't understand why no paint is coming out.

A member of audience shouts from the upper tier: "the black plastic has to fall out. Hold the can upside down". The speaker does as instructed and appears relieved as a small annular sleeve that had been locking the nozzle falls to the ground. He holds up the can and presses. A pulse of sprayed paint issues from the nozzle, together with heavy fumes. The speaker relaxes.

Thank you sir. That had me worried for a moment. And I'm sure nobody would want to suggest that you or anyone else here tonight might have prior experience of these matters for example in relation to spraying paint on outdoor walls.

Turns back to volunteers. Now let's try again.

The speaker repeats his previous action. This time the can sprays paint. A stencilled outline of the volunteer's hand takes shape in rich brown near the upper left corner of the sheet. He repeats the action with the second volunteer, whose hand is about 18 inches away, upper right on the sheet.

Gina, we're going to do your hand now. Remember this is the Royal College of Art. Please don't just put your hand anywhere. Position it carefully in relation to our other two hands applying all the aesthetic considerations appropriate for this institution. Remember the Golden Mean.

Gina places her hand carefully a few inches lower than the other two hands, and slightly off centre to the left. The speaker presses the nozzle. There are now three hand outlines on the sheet. Together they form a striking and indeed somewhat primitive image.

Ladies and gentlemen thank you for bearing with me, and please thank Gina and our two volunteers. *Applause.*

Now, for the time being, let's just leave the hands hanging there, as a kind of motif for what may for while seem like a circuitous journey through a landscape of art, politics and climate change. But we'll come back to the hands and, trust me, they will help us make sense of the road we have travelled.

Atom Heart Mother

Now, let's have a change of medium.

Has anybody here heard of Pink Floyd? Please raise your arm if you have. *Everyone raises an arm.* Please now keep your arm in the air if the title *Atom Heart Mother* means anything to you, otherwise lower it now. *Almost every arm goes down; only five remain raised. The rest of the audience looks puzzled.*

Now, sorry, this is a bit self-indulgent, it's just for my curiosity, but you five ladies and gentlemen can you keep your arm raised if you like *Atom Heart Mother*. *All five arms remain raised*.

Well I'm so pleased to see that. Not many people nowadays have heard of it, but those who know it do tend to like it.

Atom Heart Mother is an album by Pink Floyd. It came out in 1970, after the great *Ummagumma* double album and before *Meddle*.

It's now almost forgotten. It did get to the top of the album charts but the critics didn't really like it. There is a clash of idioms, an interplay between the kind of instrumentation you'd expect from Pink Floyd - guitar, bass, drums and so on - and a more classical orchestral sound with lots of brass. It surprised people and some found it pretentious.

The final nail in the coffin for *Atom Heart Mother* came when, a few years later, the band themselves started to say disparaging things about it, especially Roger Waters and David Gilmour. Indeed they pretty much disowned it. So it has ended up as little more than a footnote in the musical canon of the times.

But I've always had a soft spot for it. Yes, it did come out when I was at an impressionable age, 13 or 14 I guess. But there is a certain grandeur to it; there are passages of tenderness; and there is in places a richly lyrical quality to match anything you can find in the music of that era.

Anyway, I'm going to play you a bit of it, just a minute or so. In fact I'll give you a choice.

I want you to listen carefully for the sound of a motorbike. When you hear the bike, can you please shout or scream - you can make any noise you like as long as it's loud. But you don't have to do that. If you make no noise, I'll know you are pretending you haven't heard the bike. And in that case you can have 15 more minutes of Pink Floyd. But if you'd rather hear the rest of this talk, make a noise. So we're at a crossroads - it's basically up to you!

The speaker presses a button. The sound system plays the passage running from 1:00 – 2:15 into the title track of the Atom Heart Mother album. As the passage ends there is the sound of a motorbike being started and ridden off: it recedes into the distance. The audience shouts cacophonously and the speaker switches off the sound.

So you decided to hear it. Thank you for that. If you were listening carefully you might also have noticed, just before the bike, what could be a bomb falling from a plane, that descending whining sound, a sound of 20th century war.

Atom Heart Mother – Motorbike Receding

When I listen to *Atom Heart Mother*, I always sense a poignancy, an atmosphere of loss, and nowhere more than in the passage I've just played, the motorbike receding.

I never knew why this music made me feel like that. Then quite recently I heard an interview on the radio with Roger Waters, it could have been on Desert Island Discs. He was talking with great intensity about his father, during the war. You got the sense that this was the period around which his whole life had subsequently revolved, that all his music had been a kind of quest to make sense of what happened at that time, maybe also to liberate himself from it ¹.

His father had been a pacifist. When the war began he declared himself a conscientious objector. But later he changed his mind, he joined the army and went off to fight. And not long afterwards Mrs Waters received a telegram informing her that her husband was missing presumed dead, in the titanic battle for Montecassino, between Naples and Rome, where so much blood spilled into that warm soil of antiquity through the Spring of 1944.

At the time, Roger was 5 months old.

So a picture comes into your mind, almost as if it were a scene from a film. A suburban street somewhere in Surrey, that's where they lived. It's probably autumn or early winter 1943, leaves on the ground, maybe overcast and damp, lights on already in the houses.

And an open front door. Just outside it, perhaps framed in yellow light from the hallway, Roger's young mother, 1940's pretty, coiffed hair and print dress, newborn Roger in her arms. And Roger's dad, in brand new khaki, with his arms round them both, farewell kisses, one of those awful moments when you hope time will stop because you don't want to do what you have to do next.

"Come home soon".

"Home soon".

Finally he turns and mounts his bike. It's one of those throaty old British bikes, a Norton perhaps or a Triumph. The engine starts and he sets off, turning to wave, "home soon", and Mrs Waters waves back, and maybe she holds Roger's arm and waves that too.

The motorbike recedes.

"Home soon".

Only, you just know, watching the film, he never comes home. He dies bravely and never comes home to be a father to his new son.

As I said, a sense of loss.

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¹ In a TV interview seen by the speaker after delivering the speech, Waters says: "I want to be engaged, probably in a way my father would approve of".

Atom Heart Mother - Art

Now I want to use that moment, that scene, to draw a general conclusion about art. But I do this with enormous hesitation.

I may be transported by art, perhaps too easily for my own good, but I am not an artist. And many of you in the room are proper artists. Some of you will no doubt become famous even, perish the thought, distinguished. And who am I in such a room to offer you of all people solemn declarations about the nature of art?

So please bear with me. This may not be how you experience art. It is only something I feel myself, but anyway it's something I'd like if I may to share.

Also, heaven knows, *Atom Heart Mother* is hardly Beethoven's Ninth. I don't even know if Roger Waters intended with the bike sound to evoke his father's last farewell.

But to me anyway that short passage from a forgotten album is full of meaning.

You see, we all have dads. And they always turn our world upside down, because eventually they always leave us and never come back - unless, that is, we leave them first, in that even more unbearable inversion that fate at its cruellest sometimes inflicts on human beings.

The idea of a father who leaves is universal, it is in the human condition, it is part of who we are.

And here's my point.

We need, in any healthy culture, to be talking to each other constantly about who we are, about the human condition as we are experiencing it: reflecting, reviewing, questioning; constantly. Otto, that's surely what you were talking about when you mentioned the unsettling idea of the "hotel civilization". If we don't keep that conversation going, we lose our awareness of ourselves, we lose our humanity.

And we can't have that conversation without art.

Art is not the only medium, but it is a leading medium, for our conversation with ourselves about who we are. It is essential to that conversation, because it reminds us in its constantly questioning way of what we have in common, of what is universal.

The Solution

But of course, life isn't only about who we are.

If that were the only thing that got us going, we'd just sit around endlessly peering into our own and other people's navels like existentially troubled teenagers.

Life is also about what we do, our choices and our actions. And that's politics. If you think about it, politics is how we make choices together. In fact it's the only way we have to make choices together, so it had better work well: if politics stops working we are in trouble.

So now I want to make a generalization about politics, and to help me I'm going to read a poem by Bertholt Brecht, written in June 1953, towards the end of his life. It's called *The Solution*.

It goes like this:

After the uprising of 17th June

The Secretary of the Writers Union

Had leaflets distributed in the Stalinallee

Stating that the people

Had forfeited the confidence of the government

And could win it back only

By redoubled efforts. Would it not be easier

In that case for the government

To dissolve the people

And elect another?

Now, you have to be careful with Brecht. He was a scourge of the fascists. His mesmerizing play about Arturo Ui - Hitler as Al Capone – is on now in London.

But after the war, Brecht lived in East Berlin. He came to some kind of accommodation with the Communist regime, and in doing so he gave them cultural cover for their repressive behavior.

But then, on 17 June 1953, there was an uprising. It was started by construction workers and quickly spread. It is less well known nowadays than Budapest 56 and Prague 68, but it was an important event in the history of the Cold War.

Anyway, the authorities responded with violence, and tanks. People died, people were rounded up, and the uprising was soon defeated.

And that was too much for Brecht. At this point he turned against the regime. *The Solution*, written just a few days later, was his way of doing that.

It is a typically pungent attack on the arrogance of power, the arrogance of incumbent power.

“We may rule on your behalf” the voice of authority in the world of this poem might say, “but never think we are here to serve you. We are the masters, and if you the people misbehave we will dissolve you. “Dissolve the people”, what a brilliant, chilling phrase, in the middle of a century that came to define itself by the industrial scale on which peoples were dissolved by arrogant incumbent power at its worst.

The Solution - Politics

And my point here is that there is always an incumbency, and it is always arrogant. Otto, Lise, Josephine, you’ve all talked tonight in different ways about that arrogance of incumbencies.

And the incumbency sits at the top of politics, the machinery of government both national and local, the media, business, finance, even dare I say it sometimes universities. It has the power, its hands are on the levers, it pulls the levers on behalf of the people.

But power tends to corrupt. There is always a temptation to exploit the power you have in order to seek more of it; and never - really, never - any inclination to yield power without exacting some significant price in return.

The incumbency will always claim to be acting in the best interests of the people. But if it faces a choice between the people’s interests and its own, its reflex is to look after its own interests first. That’s just in its nature.

And so if the people start making a nuisance of themselves, the incumbency, that is “the government” in Brecht’s poem, may at first try to ignore the people. But if that doesn’t work, the next step is likely to be an attempt to shut the people up, which is to dissolve the people, because in politics if you have no voice you are nothing.

And that’s why in any healthy society there needs to be a constant challenge to the incumbency, why we have evolved systems of checks and balances, institutions of democracy, accountability, and the rule of law, so that power can’t be abused and we all have a reasonable expectation of being treated by it with fairness, tolerance, and humanity.

But power is never satisfied, always hungry. The incumbency is always looking, often without knowing it, for ways of subverting even those mechanisms. Sometimes it manages to hollow out the rules, conventions, forms and processes designed to protect the people against, as it were, being dissolved.

And that’s when the government, the incumbency, inevitably forfeits the confidence of the people. A gap opens as the people realize they are not getting the outcomes they have a right to expect in return for their compliance and for the taxes they pay.

And whenever that happens it is essential that the failure of politics is acknowledged, that it is quickly addressed and corrected. Because if it isn't, you either get a repressive reaction and the people do get dissolved. Or the gap just gets wider and into it pour populists, demagogues, false prophets and pied pipers of every kind, all offering the illusion of simplicity in a complex world, inevitably paving a path that itself leads inevitably to repression and, again, to the dissolution of the people. The outcome is the same.

That is a lesson of history, never more telling than in Brecht's own time.

So just to summarize: an incumbency will always try to resist real change - even while sometimes positioning itself as a champion of change, just like the aristocrat Tancredi in Lampedusa's novel who famously declared: "something is going to have to change around here if we want things to stay the same".

Just as a healthy culture needs art to ask questions about who we are, a healthy society needs politics that constantly questions incumbent power about what we are going to do.

Politics and Art

You may by now be wondering where climate change comes into this and I'll have something to say about that in a moment. But first it is worth having a quick look at the relationship between art and politics.

You see, another thing that the incumbency tends to do, often can't stop itself trying to do, is to coopt art for its own ends. Power wants art on its side not the other side.

It was the coopted Writer's Union that put up the posters in the Stalinallee.

But art is not part of politics. It can never be part of politics. If it forgets that for a moment (again this is my personal view) it loses its potency as art and becomes either propaganda or kitsch.

I'm not really here to give you advice. But please, promise me, if ever you receive an invitation from the Prime Minister to attend a reception at 10 Downing Street, you'll decline it, especially if photographs are to be taken (and photographs are, as we know, always taken, because the politician like the policeman is always on duty).

It seems to me that art by definition is always in contraposition to incumbent power. Art cannot enter the edifice of power; its proper place is tunneling under the foundations of that edifice: all the time tunneling, probing, exploring; undermining not propping up.

There is only one place where art and politics come into direct contact, like the Fifth Province at the mythic centre of Ireland where opposing chieftains could meet and feast at the same table. That place is in the ancient tradition of satire, much practised of course by the Celts themselves. But in satire, the aim of art is to expose the incumbency to ridicule. Of all the checks and balances ever devised, satire is perhaps the most potent.

Climate Change

OK, I admit I've been avoiding the subject, but let me at this point say something about climate change.

The extraordinary thing about climate change is that it fits comfortably into both these frames of reference even though, as we've seen, they are inherently separate one from the other. Climate change is about who we are; and it is about what we do.

We have an awful tendency to overcomplicate the discussion about climate change. Really the problem is very easy to state and so is the solution.

The problem is that we have locked ourselves into a system of production and consumption that depends on fossil fuels. When we burn those fossil fuels we destabilize the climate. If there is no climate security, then we cannot have food, water or energy security. Ultimately, as Josephine said, we will have competition not cooperation; competition tending increasingly towards conflict.

Increasingly we will feel we are losing control of our destiny, our capacity to build the future we want. We will feel more and more at the mercy of forces beyond our comprehension let alone our control.

But we know the solution, and we have the means to put it into effect.

We need to stop burning fossil fuels.

We need to use electricity to do more things in smarter ways while taking carbon emissions out of electricity. That will be quicker and easier if at the same time we are using energy of all kinds in more efficient ways.

We know what technologies we can use to do that and they are available now. We know we can afford it, particularly now with the huge reservoirs of idle private capital that have built up following the financial crisis. We know the policies that will unlock that capital.

Climate - Politics

But we are not doing it. We can do it but we are not doing it.

Could that be something to do with politics, with tendency of incumbencies to resist change?

The fossil energy system and the power system turn out to be very closely related.

I'm not just talking about the obvious producer interests, big oil, big coal and so on.

It's more complicated than that. Big oil and big coal are not separate from us, the people. We are intertwined, in all kinds of ways.

When you put petrol in your car, the tax you pay goes to the Treasury and pays for schools and hospitals. Make big oil a bit smaller and you make public services smaller.

If you are saving for a pension, its value probably depends on the value of shares in companies like Shell and BP. Shrink big oil and your pension shrinks.

The effort to deal with climate change will not really be about technology or economics or policy. It will be a political struggle, a struggle between the incumbency forces of high carbon business as usual and those of transformation, to a new low carbon growth model, built around a carbon neutral energy system.

It will be a messy struggle because of that intertwining of interests. In a sense, though the incumbency is clearly on the side of business as usual, we the people start off on both sides at the same time. And it will be an uphill struggle because at the moment the forces of incumbency, including big oil and big coal, are stronger, wealthier, better organized and better at manipulating power than are the people - after all they are part of the incumbency.

The key to winning the struggle will be to assemble what Gramsci called the countervailing force.

There are many interests in society that stand naturally on the side of transformation, of an effective response to climate change. The trouble is they are not yet mobilized. They have no common language let alone a common agenda, and they have not yet come together into a coalition.

The most powerful of those interests is you. I mean, young people. My generation is pulling the levers. Your generation is going to face the consequences of how we pull them.

You are the first cohort for a very long time to face a prospect that is worse than the one your parents inherited. As a generation you have already lost confidence in the incumbency, and in the political institutions it has shaped in its own image, to look after your interests. You are turning your backs.

Don't turn away. You have every right to take your place inside the institutions where the incumbency wields its power, if necessary to push your way into them. Your voice has enormous authority but you are not using it so you are not heard by the incumbency. It is not even trying to dissolve you yet, just ignoring you.

Our country, in fact our world, needs a new conversation about how to rebuild the contract between the generations. The whole of society revolves around that contract. When it breaks down we lose everything, and it has broken down.

And any contract that does not include an effective response to climate change will not be a contract worth signing.

Climate: Art

But there is another way of looking at climate change.

Prometheus stole the secret of fire from the Gods.

Zeus in anger had Prometheus chained to a rock. Each day an eagle would come and peck out his liver. At night it would grow back and then the next day the eagle would return and peck it out again. And so on, for ever, for poor Prometheus it was always Groundhog Day but without the laughs.

Like Prometheus we have stolen fire, for our own gratification, without regard to the consequences, even now we know what they are.

And by now we can feel - I bet every single one of you can feel - the pecking of the eagle's beak.

We behaved as Gods knowing we are mortal.

We behaved as if we were separate from Nature, had dominion over Nature, knowing that we are part of it, subject like everything else to its rules and rhythms.

We behaved as if we had the right to define ourselves only according to what makes us different from our neighbours, all the while tightening the screws of our mutual dependency so that now it is the condition that defines our era. Unless we imbue our sense of who we are with a celebration of what binds us to each other, we will not be able to manage the forces we have unleashed. Our destiny will spin out of our control.

This is not a story about what we should do. It is about who we are. Told in that way it is a subject not for politics but for art.

Climate - Artists

We can do our best to win the political struggle. We must do our best.

But if we don't come to terms with what climate change tells us about who we are, if we fail in the cultural struggle, we will fail in the political struggle. The incumbency will win, though the victory this time will be pyrrhic because in the face of climate change there will in the end be no winners.

Climate change is not just a challenge in its own right. It signifies the deeper predicament into which we have fallen by daring to place ourselves outside nature, by claiming for ourselves a luxury of detachment that is permitted only to gods not to mortals.

Not one of us is will be looking on from the audience as this epic drama plays itself out. We are all on the stage, and we are improvising the script line by line. And we have come to the pivotal moment in the drama.

If we fail the cultural and political examination that climate change confronts us with, we will never again have confidence in our capacity to shape the future. We will come to see ourselves, in the words of the German philosopher Thomas Metzinger, as failing beings.

If we succeed, for the first time in the 200,000 years *homo sapiens* has walked the Earth, we shall have attained a state of collective self-awareness as a species, and learned to act on it. That would be a passage as significant as any in our ascent, from the utterance of the first word to the present day.

And if we make that passage and those who come after us look back on it, it will be in our art that the story is told.

The transformational art of climate change will not be about climate change explicitly. It will draw inspiration from the springs of our identity. It will give us new languages of accountability and mutuality. In it we will discover the mythic meaning of the choices we face and learn to summon the strength of mythic heroes in making those choices.

In other words the transformational art of climate change will be not be climate art, it will just be art. And likewise of course the transformational politics of climate change won't be climate politics, just politics. Those are the true arenas.

Hands II

Let's now go back to the hands on the sheet.

Over much of the world, from Spain to Australia, wherever our palaeolithic ancestors roamed, they left images on the walls of caves. We are most familiar with the animals: the bison, reindeer, horses, and sabre toothed tigers.

But in many of the caves where these early artists depicted the animals in whose midst they lived, they also left a more mysterious emblem. They left the outlines of their hands, exactly like the ones on the sheet – in fact if you Google these images you'll see that the likeness is quite uncanny.

It is thought they made these images by holding their hands flat on the surface - just as our volunteers did - and blowing pigment at them through tubes. It was recently discovered that nearly all the hands are womens' hands - you can apparently tell from the relative sizes of the fingers. Josephine, this was clearly an example of the kind of less testosterone-driven activity you were calling for.

Why was it so important to our ancestors to leave their hands on the wall? These images must have been full of meaning. Nobody knows today what that might have been.

But consider. When you leave your hand on the wall like that, you are not giving up anything from your hand. You may get a bit of cramp if you hold it there too long but basically your hand is exactly the same after you have left the image as it was before.

And yet, you have somehow imparted to the wall the essence of your hand. And because your hands are such an important part of your body you have in doing so made a statement about who you are, a celebration of your humanity.

And at the same time your hand is what you use to hold a tool, to do the things you need to do. So it is kind of a bridge between who you are and what you do, between - metaphorically - art and politics.

These are images, your hands on the sheet, our ancestors' hands on the wall, that can help us draw together the two aspects of climate change with which we now have to come to terms, the art and the politics. Actually they are more than a metaphor. They are an origin: as close as we can get to where art began and where politics began.

We have come a long way from the origin. But if we want to go further we need to look back at it again and draw inspiration from what happened to us at that moment.

You

I'm not going to attempt a conclusion. I have no manifesto to suggest, neither political nor artistic: I wouldn't dare. Except to say this: whether you express yourselves in politics or art, climate change and what we do or don't do about it will affect your lives profoundly. It's better to reflect on that, and draw your own conclusions from it, than to pretend it's not going to happen. So engage with it; and find a path across the terrain it is exposing that feels right for you.

And don't, whatever you do, take anything the incumbency says to you at face value. If it feels like business as usual - whether explicit or disguised as Tancredi's change-to-stay-the-same - then have nothing to do with it.

From now on, whenever I find myself close to any of your RCA campuses, I will keep an eye on the walls I walk past. If I see one or two ghostly hands stenciled on them, I will know that what I have said tonight has made some sense to you.

The motorbike never comes back. The father never comes back. But we grow, we come to terms with our loss and we draw strength from it, strength for the struggle to come.

John Ashton

30 October 2013

John Ashton is an independent commentator and adviser on the politics of climate change. From 2006-12 he served as Special Representative for Climate Change to three successive UK Foreign Secretaries, spanning the current Coalition and the previous Labour Government. He

was a cofounder and, from 2004-6, the first Chief Executive of the think tank E3G. From 1978-2002, after a brief period as a research astronomer, he was a career diplomat, with a particular focus on China.

John is a Fellow of the European Climate Foundation; a Non Executive Director of E3G; a visiting professor at the London University School of Oriental and African Studies; a Distinguished Policy Fellow at the Grantham Institute for Climate Change at Imperial College; and a Trustee of the UK Youth Climate Coalition and Tipping Point.



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