

## BOB AND ROBERTA SMITH'S FACTORY OUTLET

**Exhibition:** 7 November 2009 – 21 February 2010

**Residency:** 22 February 2009 – 21 February 2010

**Online:** you can listen to Bob reading this text online at [www.beaconsfield.ltd.uk/works](http://www.beaconsfield.ltd.uk/works)

### **Let's do something or 'we must do something'**

After my degree show in 1993 three people came up to me and uttered the words, 'lets do something'. Jay Joplin visited the 1993 Goldsmith's MA degree show but although we all stood by our beds, i.e. loitered around our spaces, he did not say 'lets do something' to any of us. Maybe it was because we were 'not ready'. Maybe he saw a video I had made where I called my fellow students a *pot pourri* of bums and losers. Anthony Wilkinson who ran a gallery in his front room actually did say 'we must do something'. Sarah Staton who ran Sarah Staton's Super Store said, 'you can put something in my store if you want,' and Naomi Siderfin introduced herself to me at the opening of the degree show and started telling me about something called Nosepaint. The art world is divided into three groups, those who have, 'lets do something' said to them, those who say, 'Lets do something', and those who do nothing and fade away. Thankfully, although I do not exclusively belong to the first group, like Damian and Tracy, I do not belong in the last category.

I never understood why the club night Naomi and David Crawforth invented was called Nosepaint. The name sounded very much like Face Paint and I immediately thought it was an education workshop with toddlers. A few weeks later I went to a Nosepaint event in which one of the invited guests was an artist I had known before called Justine Daf. Actually, Justine Daf was a pseudonym for Pete Lewis. Peter Lewis and Runa Islam were working together under that name. Runa is now a big star. Lewis, then as now, was an important questioner of the petty orthodoxies of the art world. I can't remember what he displayed at Nosepaint, except for the fact it consisted of side lamps placed in pools of water with lots of private view cards scattered about. I think there was an element of ouija boards and voices from the dead about it. There were no toddlers.

There were other elements to Nosepaint. Just as you entered the vast railway arch there was a stage to your left. On the night I visited there was a series of performances that combined the kind of Performance art pioneered by Marina Abramovic with a vaudeville irony. There was an element of Vic Reeves comedy to some of the works. I had evolved the character of Bob Smith in New York in a monthly performance club called Epoche and Nosepaint seemed to be doing many of the same things: straight, old school performance, sometimes involving blood and often nakedness, experimental theatre and something approaching 'stand up' comedy. Naomi offered me the same slot Peter Lewis had for the following month. This was essentially the opportunity: to use a large backspace as a forum for performance or installation. I asked if there was a budget to transport my work to the space? Naomi said they could pay for a van.

At the Goldsmith degree show I had made two works that I thought could be staged at Nosepaint. One was a video of humiliation stories about my treatment by the art world and the other was a series of songs I had written which existed as a songbook. For a long time I thought I would simply learn the *Humiliation* stories and recite them like a 'stand up'. The problem was that I was not a 'stand up'. I did not have the skill or confidence required, so I decided to develop the songs.

At that time I had been friendly for a few years with Victor Mount who ran The Ding Dong Twist Club. Vic and two of his friends put the club on every few months and it consisted of dancing to comedy records of the 1960's (Pinky and Perky, Ken Dodd). We drank thunderbird cocktails from Flash floor-cleaning bottles. It's hard to convey the attraction of this activity to someone who doesn't immediately see the charm of it but it certainly appealed to me and my wife Jessie.

Vic had been developing a band that would embody the ideals of the Ding Dong Twist Club. There was a funny video of people leaving while they played in a club in Camden. Vic suggested I come to some rehearsals. I suggested we use Nosepaint as our first gig. I developed a kind of game show with different stages. In between the stages the band would play, David Letterman style. During that month the band rehearsed every weekend. When I joined the Band it was called The Fancy Cheese People. The name had been chosen by the other leader of the band, Paul Gorman. Gorman is now a big cheese himself in Rock journalism. I got on well with Paul but I think he thought I was taking over his band and after the Nosepaint gig I never saw him again. Vic renamed the band the Ken Ardley Playboys. We went on from Nosepaint and for about ten years we played regularly. Martin Creed wrote us a song, *Work 98*, and we played in New York twice and toured in Germany. We made two albums recorded at Toe Rag, where the White Stripes were later to record, and Billy Childish put out our first single. All this activity might not have happened if the open-ended invitation Naomi presented to me had not been given.

Actually, it would have happened but that initial invitation meant that somehow there might be an audience for such a thing and there might be venues in which to develop artists making music. For a time afterwards artists forming bands was quite a noticeable development. The Ken Ardley Playboys was really the first of that wave. Sometimes we were the best, but not always. The most remembered is Martin Creed's Owada and Paul Roony's Roony, but Mathew Collings had a band called Interspecies Love Child, and in Manchester there was Die Kunst. For a time we all used to play on the same bill.

After the gig I followed Nosepaint for a while. I went to a great event, *Birnam* - on common land, enclosures and fortresses, which was a walk around central London. Two elements stood out about this Happening. Firstly, David Crawforth did a performance dressed as a business man where he simply walked along and tripped and fell repeatedly. This impressed me, as we must have walked for at least two hours with David continually falling down. The other was a band in which the drummer from the Blue Orchids (who was amazing playing drum kits of pots and pans) provided virtuosic changes in rhythm for two female sax players. I lost touch with Nosepaint after that. Jessie and I went to dinner with Naomi and David once in their squat flat in Oval Mansions where most of the artists who were to be important in the years after the first flush of the YBA's lived: Fiona Banner, Paul Noble and the City Racing gang. I did not come across them again until a friend of mine, Wayne Lloyd, offered me a few days work on a building site.

During the mid nineties I was stuck in a terrible rut of the most miserable part-time jobs. Everything apart from my marriage to the artist Jessie Voorsanger seemed to go from shit to shitter. I worked for Westminster Council clearing out old people's rooms of their possessions after they had died. I wiped the arses of disabled people and took them to prostitutes behind Kings Cross. I had to stand on the corner of

Goodsway and Caledonian Road in the rain while the occupants of the car I had been driving gently made it rock from side to side. I cleaned up the syringes of the homeless. Worst of all I had to be nice to rich artists and move their terrible work around. Wayne knew I was broke and got me a few days work putting in the downstairs ladies toilet at what is now Beaconsfield. It amazed me that David and Naomi had transformed their once-a-month club into Beaconsfield. It was not that I did not think them capable of building London's experimental arts venue, just that the effort required was completely bonkers. It was wonderful. It was like seeing the ICA being built.

Wayne and I put in the ladies toilet floor but in truth Wayne did most of the work and my life of rubbish jobs continued until 1995 when Jessie told me she was pregnant. This changed everything and weirdly, a more responsible me got a regular teaching job that left me with enough time to make my work and look after Etta our daughter. To my shame I never visited Beaconsfield in its first ten years of operation. I put this down to being wrapped up with looking after our kids, teaching and being rather self-obsessed.

In 1998 Beaconsfield organized the British Links show at the Museum of Modern art in Oslo. This was a great event. Bruce Gilchrist made a wonderful piece using brain-wave patterns. He discovered the inventor of the computer mouse just by looking at his brain activity. He said to the man, 'I don't want to frighten you but you have no activity on the left side of your brain.' The man replied 'I live on the right'. Hayley Newman made a piece involving a pair of scales and some vegetables and I sign-painted whatever people wanted to protest about. This piece, called *Stop it Write Now*, was developed to form my contribution to the first Tate Triennial in 2000 curated by Charles Esche and Virginia Button.

Later Jessie and I were part of a show in Turku in Finland (*Realm of the Senses*, 2001) where we developed our *Family Art Project*. We took our kids and made art with the public, then the kids hung it in the Gallery at their eye height. Everything was low down.

Another time Beaconsfield asked me to perform in an avant-garde music festival, again in Oslo. This was a wonderful weekend where I got to see and meet amazing musicians like Pierre Bastion, Jeans Team and Avvico. My act was well received although actually I think it was pretty horrible. I formed a one person band with guitar and kick-drum and played Ken Ardley songs.

In 2005 Beaconsfield hosted a ten week long exhibition/event called *Chronic Epoch* to celebrate 10 years of their manifestation at 22 Newport Street. I was asked to make a piece in the cafe area. I decided upon wallpaper with a concrete poem I had discovered in my daughter's bedroom, of all her hiding places. I adapted it a little for Beaconsfield and then wallpapered the walls of the cafe area. It looked pretty good. I also acted as waiter serving people with concrete puddings and meals made in my makeshift concrete kitchen. Every Sunday I booked different bands to play in the afternoon. The show was well attended and I think people enjoyed the commitment which all the artists in that event put into it. The Ken Ardley Playboys played at the finale – *Mother of all Parties*.

Now I am in the process of completing a residency at Beaconsfield. The idea of a residency appeals to me because I am interested more in what creativity looks like than in the production of artworks. The reality of art production is what is important. Last year I made far too much work. Now I am burdened with lots of large pieces which I don't have homes for. I have also been working on lots of projects. My studio schedule is made up on the hoof and I try not to say 'no' to projects but this means a lot of overlapping and juggling, not only of what I am

doing but also of how to finance my activity. I now (when I can afford it) use two very skilful assistants to help me make my projects.

If you visit Beaconsfield during this residency you will not see me diligently crafting my art or even trying things out, but rather a genuine reflection on what it means to make art: lots of running around, lots of trying to carve up time to make something, often in my case, by my own hand. Beyond all that, what's important is the politics. In Beaconsfield's case it's the creation of a political space that says 'be uncompromising about art.' In my own case it's the space to be uncompromising about politics. It's important for artists to be uncompromising. Most of my and Beaconsfield's generation of artists have turned culture into cash. The art-world is funded by the Government, banks and oligarchs, none of whom are remotely interested in experimental or political art. They don't want it, they don't need it and they won't fund it. If anyone tells you that you can't make art that is experimental or political, just ignore them.

Spaces like Beaconsfield, Peer, Resonance FM and Matt's Gallery do not provide jumping off points for aspirational artists rather they offer venues for experimental and ephemeral approaches to art. A new generation of artists is seeking out these spaces.

Recently I attended a talk by Gustav Metzgar at Beaconsfield, it was full of young students. Metzgar said, 'There should be no Art Market or private galleries'. If I am brutally honest I don't really agree with him, but his point is well made.

My ears burn because, so much of the time that I was developing what I do now, many of my fellow artists were like heat seeking missiles after money and fame. Importantly during that time Beaconsfield, Peer, Resonance FM and Matt's Gallery were encouraging work to be made where the demands inherent in the work were the only things that were important.

### **Bob and Roberta Smith 09**