a letter from…

Andrew Walker

…no-place:

Nomad or precariat – tales of decentralised praxis

1   Digital Janus? The God of transitions appropriately oversees my metronomic morning arrival at the Bevenden Street studio.

Where am I when not in reality or my imagination?

Caveat 1. This is not a manifesto, a philosophical treatise, an argument, or even a pitch.

Caveat 2. Nor is it a romantic fabrication or panglossian paean to some fake flaneur-hood, but rather a fleeting glimpse into a day in the life of an itinerant designer coming to terms with stasis.

Caveat 3. Sadly I am neither Keats nor Kerouac. The following kaleidoscopic collage of introspective confessions and disjunctive diary extracts is the result of an unintentionally public literary capoeira. An erratic ballet of scribbles and ink smudges made as I hastily tried to jot down recollections of the previous forty-eight hours on a surprisingly crowded late-night train bound for Langdon Park, a curiously brutal and dissident pocket of London that, for now, I call home. Home – a strange, almost contradictory concept for such an ambulant existence.

Throughout my time in academia, on both sides of the lectern, the term 'flux' has been in vogue – far outstripping the metaphorical constraints of modernism's obsession with speed, however I never anticipated that its physical manifestations would destabilise my own rhythms quite so quickly. For example, in the past few months alone, I have been split between squatting in an abandoned attic in Camden earmarked for demolition (while attempting to co-curate interactive sonorous sculptures with a Generation Z-inspired drummer and sound artist), sat peg-nosed in a charity-run Nottingham studio (adjacent to a fellow artist whose primary medium appears to be rotting food), and loitering in the corner of the nearest community hackspace, tinkering through frost-bitten fingers with robotic drawing machines until the sun comes up.
  My first confession comes through accepting an old Marxist meme regarding the myth of autonomy and our social agency – the struggle of having to make
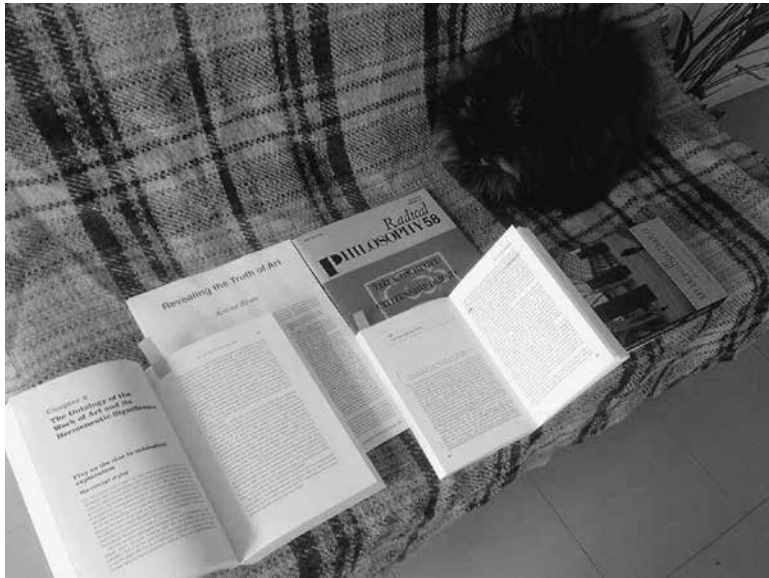
2   Balfron Desk: Multitasking cat-sitting duties with lecture preparations.

choices in situations not of our own design – and of course the constant reminder of our material constraints and parallel alternative lives. What Heidegger calls the 'nullity' (negativity) of one's freedom, what most call the 'what if' syndrome. However in an age of tyrannical individualism, of lickspittles and decadence, where entrepreneurs are hailed as prophets, and where cereal cafes appear to be the nexus about which society pivots, it is important to state that this journey was only partially of my own volition, and its sustainability relied (and relies) heavily on good fortune.

Upon finishing my Master's, especially after a therapeutically vigorous examination of my work ('navigating indeterminate architectures') with Perry Kulper, I felt too many stones were left unturned – too many grounds only partially excavated to simply terminate my research. Yet, equally, I felt an inevitable irreconcilability between any further intellectual archaeology and conventional practice. This in combination with a political restlessness left me searching for an alternative mode of practice. But in what spatio-cultural territory could one undertake such an expedition?

Perhaps we could learn something from a biological analogy – that of saccadic vision. As occularcentric beings our perception evolved to become finely tuned to contrast. As the old saying goes: 'We need light in order to see, darkness in order to see

something.' However when our eyes enter a state of rapid, reflexive movement, we increasingly ignore the space between objects, the gaps, the background, thus leaving these neglected voids / remnants as potential territories for 'chance' disturbances. James Turrell's installations exploit this principle by 'emptying a space of specific information and then filling it with elements that compromise vision' creating ambiguous subspaces of hyper-sedulousness. It is in these gaps that our imagination can be most nurtured. Nooks, crannies, and cavities, which have partially escaped the irresistible pull of capitalism's gravity, where time is afforded to explore, develop, and even test ideas.

However, gone are the Bowery-esque neighbourhoods where contemporary Matta-Clarks can seize unwanted 'non-sites' for a few bucks apiece in-between whipping up surreal used car strews and sawing entire buildings in half. Evaporated into an ether of scorn is the 'option' to cocoon oneself in affordable council-let chrysalides where the next Morrisseys of the world are dropping out to hone their voices. These physical sites / platforms that enable creatives to function on a societal level as Turrell's artworks can operate on a psychological one, are increasingly rare. The requirements for design agility in this accelerationist universe are caught between subversion and conformity. It's pointless to say architecture gives us reason to breathe if practice (however novel) takes that breath

away. Where are our breathing spaces?

When first setting up my own research practice I spent most of my time calling in favours. I got lucky! My first address was a donated spare room at a podiatrist's in the suburbs of Nottingham. I transformed this leftover cubicle into a miniature laboratory to test roaming cybernetic drawing machines – each catapulting their loads across the room to form porous barriers from colloidal plumes of chalk dust, all in a very obvious nod to Gormley's white room. At the same time I used what little money I had left over from my student prizes to fly out to Canada on a shoestring budget to attend a course in self-organising systems with a posse of young programmers offering tips for liquor.

Another confession; there is a danger in romanticising these manoeuvres as 'liberty with danger' but my days, however unusual, had an absurdist quality not too dissimilar to the tale of the asthmatic Spaniard in Camus' *The Plague*. Only instead of the ritual of moving peas from one bowl to another, I was chasing commissions and staving off eviction. Risk lurked not behind the shadows of adrenaline, but between the echoes of 'there is no Plan B'.

Presently I find myself haunting the fifteenth floor of Goldfinger's iconic brutalist prototype, Balfron Tower. Diagonally opposite its smaller sibling, an insular and radical cooperative, this particular concrete obelisk has become a lightning rod for controversy over social cleansing. I console myself through the knowledge I'm not actually a resident, just semi-legally subletting under the guise of 'cat-sitter' for two New York philosophers who seem to have walked straight off the pages of a Woody Allen screenplay. While they abscond to Sicily to write up their respective PhDs on the history of debt, my flatmate and I are charged with one simple instruction – the cat mustn't die!

(a) Typical day

6.15am
A lie-in by normal standards, though the increasingly laconic feline still sits demandingly outside my door. Today is pitch day. Evidence of the previous night's brandy-punctuated research binge

3   Borrowed Space: Making use of the studio's workshop after hours to test sound-visualisation hardware.

was scattered all over the coffee table. After a hasty rummage I gather the articles I need and head to the 24-hour corner shop to make photocopies to annotate. Earlier in the week I had received an invitation to devise a one-week project as part of Newcastle University's charrette week. The previous semester I had been drafted in last minute to help run a unit on 'hacking perception'. This time I had already had my eureka moment and given the brief of the 'spectacle' I knew exactly what I wanted to pitch. Something polemically immaterial – a spatialised instrument, a Brechtian prop, a Paskian environment. The idea was there but I knew I couldn't deliver this one alone. I quickly glance at my inbox to see a predictably prompt response from the person I invited to collaborate with me. Kyveli Anastasiadi – a former unit-mate and fellow Bartlett graduate – but someone who shook the institution to its foundations during her time there, part dancer, part architect, and pioneer of physical thinking and performance architecture. Today we had to meet to plan the workshop and let her in on my ambitions. It's not the first time

I've trodden on the toes of other disciplines – only a fortnight earlier I was writing algorithms with a neuroscientist friend that translate electric impulses into drawing commands – but this time we would be responsible for nearly fifty students.

8.45am

In London it's not the boogieman under the bed we're scared of, but the accountant living under the stairs. In the five years I've intermittently lived here, it's almost beyond parody how the housing situation has metastasised to such extortionately opportunistic levels. For me, returning to London this time meant sacrificing an artist residency I held in Nottingham, and a subsidised studio rent of £40 per month. I returned without a plan. I was foolishly quixotic – but had managed to survive through blind couch surfing, furniture commissions, freelancing and lecturing on the side. But while my schedule had the luxury of elasticity, my pockets didn't. This is why at 8.45am I find myself emerging from Old Street station and heading for my 9 to 5. Before starting this new chapter I was

fearful I would be too rusty – anxious that I needed rebooting for more traditional practice – but despite a few very tempting and generous offers, I rolled the dice and took a chance on what I thought might just be the dream job at an interactive arts and architecture studio.

Today, like every other, is a smorgasbord of intriguing challenges. I know from this week's calendar that this morning I am responsible for sketching up and researching an experimental installation that makes use of recaptured heat as a material. In the afternoon I'm aiding a pitch for a cybernetic swarm of social media responsive screens for one of New York's most iconic buildings. Of all the 9 to 5s I could have opted for, few would have suited me more.

6.05pm

A perk of working at such a dynamically diverse and supportive practice is that extra-curricular research and experimentation are actively encouraged as it feeds back into the creative processes that circulate within the studio. The resulting works both in and around the studio are an amazing cross-pollination of concepts, craft, and

4   Nottingham Hackspace: Late night dismantling of old drawing robots to harvest parts for new work.

5   Plume – Unstable Enclosures: Testing the first cloud-printing prototype, catapulting talc powder around a borrowed room above a podiatrists.

technical virtuosity. There is an open-source philosophy that breeds enthusiasm, rather than stifling ideas through routines of authority and ego.

After work and a quick caffeinated brainstorming with Kyveli, it was time to dig out the soldering iron. Using the studio's workshop and a botched code I found online, I began rapidly testing dozens of second hand LED pixel matrixes for sound to light proof of concepts. I had to work quickly as I needed to be in St Pancras for 7pm.

10.21pm
I arrived into Nottingham nearly half an hour late. Just enough extra time to draw up the dxf files I needed for the local hackspace's laser cutter. I was cutting replacement screens for a series of lumino-kinetic props that had been commissioned for a kinetic arts fair in London, but singeing styrene is a health and safety nightmare – this sort of noxious job needed to be conducted at night.

To justify the travel costs this whistle-stop visit needed a dual purpose. I was also here to scavenge parts and harvest components from my earlier models that are still stored in the space. Once I'd detoxified the air and reattached the reflectors, I stuffed my pockets full of the infrared proximity sensors and Arduino nanos that I peeled off my old work and took a slow walk down the road to the local coach station.

7.12am
After a 4.5-hour coach journey down to London I arrive back half comatose only to see the flat has been transformed into a film set. Blurry-eyed and exhausted, there was little time for such a surreal sight to register. I had to be on a train to Canterbury in under an hour.

4.30pm
I had just spent the day as a guest of the local architecture school. An invitation in no small part down to the familial nature of Unit 14. In the familiar role of critic I had already been dazzled by Maholy-Nagy inspired light installations, Paik-esque superimposed projection art, and most comically – whimsically John Cage-like Lionel Richie musical chair. By now, despite an invigorating parade of props and curation, I was running on fumes. Barely functioning I

escape briefly to cancel an appointment I had in Hoxton for this evening to dismantle a vacuum cleaner. I'll save that glamorous date for another time.

'Artistic creation, after all, is not subject to absolute laws, valid from age to age; since it is related to the more general aim of mastery of the world, it has an infinite number of facets, the vincula that connect man with his vital activity; and even if the path towards knowledge is unending, no step that takes man nearer to a full understanding of the meaning of his existence can be too small to count.'
Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*

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Author's biography
Andrew is an Architectural Researcher and Academic, founder of experimental practice Atelier14, and currently works as a Designer at Jason Bruges Studio.

Through interactive lumino-kinetic props, immersive audio-visual Installations and aleatoric/reflexive drawing environments, Andrew's work attempts to playfully hack, subvert and destabilise our perceptual mechanisms with the aim of creating more participatory spatial systems and conversational architectures that stir more active forms of occupation.

Positioned against the hegemony of the static and non-dialogical space, his work aims to bring into question notions of spatial authorship / 'control' and focusses on re-engaging occupants with more 'active' visual perception. Drawing inspiration from 'aleatoricism' and principles of uncertainty, Andrew's work hypothesises concepts of 'orchestrated chance' in the creation of architectural space, with particular emphasis given to edge-recognition and the creative potential of ambiguity in spatial production.

Most recently his work has been expressed through a series of deployable lumino-kinetic drawing-machine prototypes, designed to be embedded onto sites, forming new interactive sub-architectures – scotopic labyrinths of perpetual novelty and surprise.

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