

SOMEWHERE CLOSE BY

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The opening shot of ‘Bata-ville: We Are Not Afraid of the Future’ (see map 1), Karen Guthrie and Nina Pope’s 2005 film, captures a group of British visitors walking through a tree-filled Czech cemetery on a sunny spring day. They are led by two hostesses in pink dresses and short red capes – Guthrie and Pope themselves. Pausing at the grave of Tomáš Baťa, the Czech industrialist who died in 1932, Guthrie reads his last will: ‘The first principle of the prosperity of our works is that you should not consider that the works are only for you or exist just for your sakes ...’. His words continue on, a booming endorsement of the value of collective work.

It is not surprising that Guthrie and Pope were fascinated by this character and drawn to his words. Collaboration has been central to their activities. They have worked as creative partners since the mid 1990s. *Somewhere*, a name they adopted in 2002, has also been a platform for collaboration with other artists, cinematographers and composers. In the case of their documentary films, this is hardly remarkable – the medium requires teamwork. But collaboration for Guthrie and Pope is much more than sheer pragmatism: it is close to an ethos or an animating principle. From their very earliest projects they have created structures to share and broadcast the creativity of others, some of whom would not claim the title artist. In March and April 1996, for instance, they created ‘A Hypertext Journal’ (see map 2), a live, on-line travelogue by retracing a journey to the Western Isles of Scotland taken by writers James Boswell and Samuel Johnson in 1773. Using laptops, modems and a digital camera, they relayed their daily experiences on a live blog. Not only could audiences on the Web – then only a tiny fraction of the number of users on-line today – read their daily journal, they could also comment on the day’s events, and make suggestions of places to visit. For instance, Guthrie and Pope danced in kilts at the top of the highest hill on the Isle of Raasay, after one of their interlocutors wrote: ‘It is said that Johnson, or was it Boswell?! danced a hornpipe on Raasay’s flat-topped mountain Dun Caan. I hope you also plan to do this. I will look out for a report.’

‘A Hypertext Journal’ took interactivity seriously, with Guthrie and Pope investing a lot of energy into promoting the project, effectively gathering contributors before embarking on their journey. Reflecting on the project soon after its completion in 1996, they wrote: ‘We began from the assumption that “interaction” is a meaningful two-way exchange between artist(s) and audience, and further to be an exchange that can in turn affect the course of the art work at the stage of creation rather than completion.’¹ Reading their words today, they seem like a commonplace but remember, Guthrie and Pope were testing the potential of interactivity long before ‘user generated content’, ‘collective intelligence’ and other Web 2.0 fanfares.

Guthrie and Pope were filmed by the BBC when making their Highlands tour. The television industry was becoming aware of the revolution that the Internet was likely to bring to broadcasting, and the commissioners of the BBC’s *Horizon* series of documentaries invited producer Andrew Chitty to investigate what the future of TV might be when available on demand or accompanied by hyperlinks to Web content. Chitty speculated about TV future by revisiting its past, the early experimental years of the 1930s before it settled into its familiar formats. Of Guthrie and Pope’s project, the programme’s narrator announced that ‘interviewing local people, visiting ancient sites and reinterpreting an historic journey are the classic elements of TV documentary. But, like the pioneers of early television, Nina and Karen are having to learn how to reinvent the form with the technologies of a new medium’.²

As a framework for shared creativity and interactivity, the Internet may play a far smaller role in *Somewhere*’s subsequent projects, but the spirit of collaboration remains. In 2005, for instance, they made a remarkable film entitled ‘Bata-ville: We are Not Afraid of

the Future’ which, like ‘A Hypertext Journal’, is a documentary record, in this case of a journey by bus which they organised for two groups of former workers from shoe factories in Maryport in West Cumbria and East Tilbury on the Thames Estuary to Zlín in the Czech Republic. Their destination was the headquarters of the Bata Company, the world’s largest shoemaker between the world wars and the parent of the Maryport and East Tilbury outposts. The founder of the company Tomáš Baťa had been a visionary industrialist, commissioning leading Czech architects to design its striking shops and factories. The company provided high quality housing for its workers in Zlín and many of its other factory towns around the world. A charismatic and patrician figure, Baťa was fond of slogans, and was, in fact, the author of the phrase that shapes the film, ‘We are Not Afraid of the Future.’

The Bata factories in Britain have closed down (East Tilbury in 2005 during the making of the film) with predictably negative effects on the towns and shoe production has shifted to Kenya, India and elsewhere. Like a number of *Somewhere*’s projects, ‘Bata-ville’ began its life as an attempt to regenerate a declining part of the post-industrial world, in this case East Tilbury. As a film, ‘Bata-ville: We are Not Afraid of the Future’ is both a scripted series of scenes that Guthrie and Pope orchestrate whilst dressed as retro-futurist hostesses from some kind of travel agency, and a record of the journey of these workers as they visit not only the heart of the Bata empire but also one of the company’s fully-automated shoe-factories in the Netherlands. This episode provides one of the most touching moments in the film, when former workers in the two factories are confronted with the untiring robotic arms that have made them redundant. Tired from the journey perhaps, they still look stunned.

Through the film, the question ‘Are you afraid of the future?’ is asked directly of all participants – including the travellers, the people they meet in the Netherlands and Zlín, and even the film crew. Combined with memories of East Tilbury or Maryport in their heydays, the answers – often given by elderly former employees – are genuinely affecting in a way that most artistic investigations into the rise and fall of modernist utopias are not. Guthrie and Pope ask the question of themselves and, in answering, express their own doubts about the uses of art in regeneration: ‘I am much more afraid for the future of places like Maryport than for my own future ...’ says Guthrie, ‘tourist centres, heritage centres, nature trails, sculpture trails. I cannot join them up with the people we’ve just spent a week with. I cannot see where they are going to fit in.’ Regeneration projects often fail to serve the people who are most affected by decline. One inference to be drawn from this film is that such schemes also fail to ask these people for their views in meaningful ways.

Guthrie and Pope also appear in costume in their 2007 film, ‘Living with the Tudors’ (see map 3). A study of people who spend three weeks each year living in the grounds of Kentwell Hall, a historic house in rural Suffolk, to recreate life in Tudor England. Forming a community of up to 400 people, they sleep, work and play as the residents of Kentwell manor might have done more than four centuries ago. This is also the setting for re-enactments of life in Britain in the Second World War, often performed by the same people. The public can visit, paying an entry fee to witness these spectacles (and converting the cash in their pockets into groats to spend on site). The re-enactors – all amateurs – maintain the illusion of historical distance. In the Tudor re-enactments they speak in archaic versions of English and assume what are taken to be the conventions of polite behavior in the sixteenth century.

The product of their immersion over four years in what Guthrie and Pope call the ‘historical re-enactment scene’ in the UK, ‘Living with the Tudors’ has much in common with the social science method of ‘participant observation’. Traditionally, this involves an extended

period of time spent ‘in the field’ living with the social group being studied. In this way, unspoken practices and attitudes – like social taboos – can be scrutinised. To immerse themselves in the tight-knit community which forms each June at Kentwell, Guthrie and Pope had to assume historic roles too (as limners – painters of portrait miniatures), eating authentic vittles, adopting the argot, and wearing ruffs and bodices.

Being a filmmaker at Kentwell is, of course, not the same as being an anthropologist. Guthrie and Pope had to direct their film crew ‘remotely’, to fulfill their duties as re-enactors. They also had to persuade their fellow re-enactors to allow filming to take place. Some felt strongly that the camera was an intrusion into ‘their’ private world (despite the fact that Kentwell is open to the public). This antipathy adds a twist of drama to the film’s narrative. Whilst ‘Living with the Tudors’ is ostensibly a study of the principles and techniques of the re-enactments, it is the way in which this temporary community forms every year that is fascinating. Moreover, the re-enactors interviewed by Guthrie and Pope are thoughtful analysts of the social dynamics of forming a community that then performs the rigid ranks of class from another time. Often it is the similarities and continuities that stand out.

‘Living with the Tudors’ is a highly sympathetic, humorous and intimate portrait of re-enactment, a theme which could have been easily satirised. In fact, *Somewhere*’s projects display very little of the ironic distance which has characterised much of the art made by their contemporaries. Irony allows for the embrace and disavowal of a subject at the same time. It is two-faced. By contrast, Guthrie and Pope have a sincere interest in the lives of their subjects at Kentwell, Maryport or the Western Islands. As Grant Kester has claimed ‘there is some discomfort in the mainstream art world with projects that don’t incorporate a sufficient degree of ironic detachment, especially socially engaged or community-based practices.’³ Perhaps the only direct approach to emotion unfiltered by irony in art is when deep trauma is its theme. By contrast, Guthrie and Pope have, it seems, increasingly been interested in approaching sentiment and emotion in ordinary lives in typical places, often with commonplace problems.

Like irony, ‘kitsch’ describes a distancing effect, one that passes judgment on the taste of others. To make an art work, which is called ‘Titchy/Kitschy’ (2007) (see map 4) might seem to belong to the lofty position claimed by those who have superior judgment. But the pair of diminutive ceramic homes which carry this name are part of an exploration by *Somewhere* into the deep attachment that people feel for the rural home in both England and Japan.

The art work has its origins in an invitation to undertake a residency in rural North West Japan supported by Grizedale Arts who are based in the Lake District. Guthrie and Pope’s time was to be spent in a way that would ‘be useful’ to the remote village of Toge where they were to be based. Knowing that the residents of the village were fretful about the demise of farming in the area and the haemorrhage of young people to the cities, the two artists wondered whether one of the industries that thrives in the Lake District (where Guthrie lives) could provide a boost to the economy of Toge. They asked Lilliput Lane, the highly successful maker of collectable model cottages, to supply moulds with which the villagers could experiment. One of a number of activities, which Guthrie and Pope shared with villagers during their three-week stay, it seems to have had an impact. When, six months later, a group from Toge came to the Lake District, they wanted to visit the Lilliput Lane factory. *Somewhere* also commissioned former Lilliput Lane sculptor, Mike Atkinson, to prepare two new designs – one based on Lawson Park, the home of both Karen and Grizedale Arts, and the other on one of the oldest timber-framed and thatched Kayabuki houses in Toge. The moulds returned to Toge, along with ceramic examples of ‘Titchy/Kitschy’, works from a limited artist’s edition.

Also concerned with the deep-seated appeal of home, ‘Jaywick Escapes’ (2012) (see map 5) is *Somewhere*’s third documentary film. It is also the least performative. Guthrie and Pope do not appear on screen. Instead, the film follows the lives of three residents of Jaywick who talk candidly about their reasons for coming to Jaywick, a town on the Essex coast, which during filming in 2010 was declared to be the most deprived place in the United Kingdom. Originally intended as an inexpensive holiday resort for Londoners, Jaywick’s housing stock was built quickly and cheaply, and much is dilapidated today. Yet, for at least some of its new residents – including Nick the Cap, one of the central figures in the film – the town holds happy memories of childhood.

Shot over the course of two years, Guthrie and Pope filmed in phases; in the periods in between, the optimism of their subjects receded and relationships broke down. Occasionally, the listener can hear either Guthrie or Pope off camera asking a question, but this is not the acousmatic voice of omniscient narrator who knows what will happen. And, although tragedy seems to hover in the background, often in asides made by its residents, this is not a campaigning film. No disaster has befallen this coastal town since the North Sea Floods of 1953: it is simply experiencing a long and slow decline. And, in fact, very little happens on screen. Compared to their earlier works, ‘Jaywick Escapes’ is almost spartan. There is very little scripting of scenes, or playful filming (though the broad beach and wide skies over the sea draw the camera’s lens). One wonders whether the poverty of the place itself places some kind of limit on fancy, at least in the minds of Guthrie and Pope.

It is striking that this ‘Jaywick Escapes’ – which has been screened at documentary film festivals and is being shown in ‘Past, Present, Future’ at Kettle’s Yard – will probably never be broadcast on mainstream television. It belongs to a tradition of observational documentaries, which were made by filmmakers like Paul Watson in the 1970s. His pioneering series ‘The Family’ (1974) was recorded in the home of the Wilkins, an ordinary family in Reading, itself a very ordinary British town. Today this tradition has been largely replaced, at least on television, by what is called ‘Reality TV’, a form of spectacle, which treats its subjects as freaks. Asked about how they found the central figures in ‘Jaywick Escapes’, Guthrie says ‘Once you’ve assured them that you’re not working for the BBC and doing an exposé, which they’re quite sceptical about, people have the time to talk to you.’

Viewing *Somewhere*’s works, one encounters lost worlds, which once offered the stability of life-long employment; the tradition of social documentary; Japanese cottages and the English seaside. One might wonder whether what unites these projects is nostalgia. ‘Modern nostalgia’, claims Svetlana Boym, ‘is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values ... the edenic unity of time and space before entry into history.’⁴ This is what gives nostalgia its melancholic character. And certainly some of *Somewhere*’s subjects, like Nick the Cap, are nostalgic. But for all their interest in the past, *Somewhere*’s projects are rather more preoccupied with the present. In fact, Guthrie and Pope seem to be particularly concerned with making *Somewhere*’s work act on the world. Nothing in the present is certain or resolved. Speculative and involving the unpredictable creativity of others, they are perhaps best understood as propositions: a journey, like that taken by the Bata workers, might be life-changing; kitsch souvenirs, usually the subjects of reverie, could be a resource against decline; and the fantasy of dressing and acting in the manner of the past can be a way of making community in the present.

This is a shorter version of an essay that can be read in full at: www.somewhere.org.uk kettlesyard.co.uk

[1]

Nina Pope and Karen J Guthrie, “A Hypertext Journal” - the WWW as Live Interface - <http://www.somewhere.org.uk/hypertext/journal/proj.info/> - accessed 26/08/14.

[2]

‘TV is Dead. Long Live TV!’ a *Horizon* Special broadcast on 2 November 1996.

[3]

Grant Kester in Tom Finkelpearl, ed., *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013) p.116

[4]

Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p.8.