

## THE PUBLIC IS ABSENT *by Echo & Narcissus*

### ONE

Between 1999 and 2009, Birmingham's Museum of Science and Industry (MSI), which formerly occupied the Newhall Square site, lay empty, dark, and derelict. Prior to being a much-loved museum, the site had been the world-famous electroplating factory of Elkington & Co, one of Birmingham's most successful, innovative, and illustrious firms. In the late nineteenth century the Elkingtons' glitzy showrooms and vast, landmark factory was the historic gateway between the traditional artisans' Metalware workshops of the Jewellery Quarter and Chamberlain's modern, Victorian city centre. As the place where both electroplating was pioneered, and where Birmingham's most popular museum once was, one might expect the site's history to be well known and documented. However, the darkness and dereliction that descended in 1999 seemed to symbolize the sense of amnesia that surrounds this site's history. It was as if this important part of the city centre had no past to speak of.

At the public opening of the Newhall Square project in May 2006 short video interviews were made with many former visitors and staff who still had strong feelings about the old Science Museum. They were asked what the place had meant to them. The depth of the emotional responses that emerged when they were interviewed, so many years after it the museum had closed, surprised many of the interviewees. Not only the staff who had worked for many years at the museum before losing their jobs, but also visitors for whom it was both a social gathering place, and a cultural shrine of great emotional and spiritual significance. The working title for the interviews was *Museum of Memories*. There was, and still is, a lot of blind anger in Birmingham at the old museum's closure. The nostalgia felt for its dispersed collections and its lost factory spaces masked a powerful sense of grief at its loss. It was as if part of the city's past had simply vanished. Simply by being interviewed in a place that they had not been allowed to visit for ten years gave some of the interviewees a chance to access and express all kinds of unprocessed emotions within themselves. In truth, everybody was mourning the loss of who they once were. Not only the individual that they were at the time they used to visit the museum, but the collective sense of identity that the museum allowed them to feel part of. The word 'community' is so abused and misused that it is almost meaningless today, but the interviews revealed very visibly, in anger and tears, how important feeling connected to a community spirit is through significant periods of every individual life.

## TWO

Two ‘performance art’ installations by other artists have informed this work by *Echo & Narcissus*. The first is a video installation by Caitlin Griffiths called *2-into-1*. The video records a conversation between the artist and a man named George. In the course of the conversation it emerges that George, who has an indefinable, European-sounding accent, suffers from a rare condition called *Foreign Accent Syndrome*, which he developed following a severe stroke. As the conversation develops Caitlin Griffiths empathically relates George’s account of the onset of his condition to a story from her own past. The viewer feels that they are being allowed to eavesdrop on a very intimate, but familiar social scene, as George describes the Kafkaesque experience of realizing that he now speaks with what sounds like another person’s voice, the artist tries to assimilate his story into a frame of reference she can understand in terms of her own life experiences. Two people’s memories merge *2-into-1*. Except, there is a twist. Following the conversation George and Caitlin’s voices are swapped and lip-synched on the video to make it appear as if each is speaking the other’s words. The intimacy of the conversation is redoubled in this exchange of voices. The role of the artist and interviewee, and the wider audience witnessing their *social contract* was thrown into uncertainty; or rather the unconscious uncertainty of their ‘agreed’ roles was made visible. The term *social contract* can describe both the social and emotional agreement between people, but also, in a classic sense used by philosophers like Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, it describes how people give up sovereignty to a ruler, government, or other ‘higher’ authority in order to maintain an agreed social order through the rule of law. Either use of the term implies an unspoken, often unconscious, agreement by the governed upon the set of rules by which they are governed. The interview process often creates a quasi-therapeutic, official-seeming forum in which interviewees feel allowed to speak aloud, and to relive and recover (from?) strong, unresolved feelings in a given moment of cathexis.

The second ‘performance art’ installation that has informed this work by *Echo & Narcissus* is *The Artist is Present* by Marina Abramovic. This was a huge cultural spectacle at MOMA in New York earlier this year. Thousands of people queued, both to participate and watch, as the artist sat at a desk opposite members of the public in silence. The public exposure of the experience provoked many of the public to cry. It was a mass spectacle that looked very like a chess match between public novitiates queuing to be psychologically broken by a (self-appointed and institutionally endorsed) grandmaster. It was mass entertainment, but there was no game a stake. Abramovic’s uncontained

playing with people's emotions in public, under the auspices of an imposing American institution, had an air of 'rendition'. It was a quasi-official, unethical and debasing interview procedure using a torturous form of emotional endurance. It owed its spectacle entirely to 'over-the-top' and so-called 'reality' TV. The general public got angry that MOMA allowed celebrities to queue jump.

The gentle intimacy of 2-into-1 and the public spectacle of *The Artist is Present* both expose the extent to which art has become a public/media spectacle. We take it for granted that it is to be freely shared by all. One is often left wondering if art exists at all outside of the given moment it appropriates for itself in some media spotlight. This is especially so in 'conceptual' art, which is often highly context dependent, or 'performance' art, which is a happening. However, regardless of where or when it happens, is recorded and resounds, art (like life itself) remains always, ultimately, an existentially inner experience. What each individual takes away from art is very private and subjective, and only begins to exist in a social sense when it is talked about after the event.

### THREE

In Book 3 of *Metamorphoses*, Ovid told the story of *Echo & Narcissus* by fusing two stories together, thus inextricably linking two people: Echo, a mountain-nymph, and Narcissus, a hunter who falls in love with his own reflection. Prior to Ovid's intervention the two stories had been unconnected, and Ovid's retelling of their tales was the first time the two stories had been heard together. All art is wedded together this way, a *bricolage* of creative re-combinations, or re-contextualization of earlier, pre-existing stories. Echo is a "talkative nymph" who "yet a chatterbox, had no other use of speech than she has now, that she could repeat only the last words out of many." She falls in love with Narcissus, whom she catches sight of when he is "chasing frightened deer into his nets". Eventually, after "burning with a closer flame", Echo is revealed to Narcissus, who, in a tragic-comic scene, rejects her love. Echo wastes away, but "remains a voice" that is "heard by all". Thus Ovid neatly explains the aural effect, which is now named after her. Meanwhile Narcissus, tired from hunting and the heat rests by a pool to slake his thirst. However, "a new thirst grows inside him" as he becomes vainly "captivated by the image of beauty he has seen", and he falls deeply in love with himself. He too wastes away with self-love, gazing on his own image in vain, which echoes the manner in which Echo died. When his body is wasted, in its place is a flower, the daffodil (narcissus).

*Echo & Narcissus*