

My Life as a Dashboard

Lucy Kimbell 2005

#1

If I look back now, the thing I'm struck by is a sort of delirious optimism we had, the people I knew and was involved with. It was very heated. All the people were hot, the work was hot but then the wider context was hot too. Everything seemed to matter. Being an artist was intensely tied up with people's sense of themselves. You only took seriously other artists. You tried to see everything, and had to have a considered opinion about it. Being an artist was about saying 'I am an artist' and making art and talking about art and thinking about art because it was some index of what mattered in the world. If I think back now to the things that I was getting worked up about I can say, oh, that's youth, lovely youth, that's keeping yourself busy to distract yourself from what's happening in the world. But I'm not just looking at myself as a person, there's also this work to look at over there, separate from me. It's very busy. Hot things cool down eventually. Because we were close to the process of being taught, we had this sense of history. The history of art. Some of the people I knew were very concerned with their place in history and where they were going, where it was going. Where we were going was, well, where we are going is, just onwards, like everyone else; towards death.

#2

The conventional way to look back at an artist's career is to look at their work. How the work develops. But at the time it was more like, who am I talking to, who am listening to. Listening. Who was I listening to? The model of the artist in their studio working on their own coming up with great works is a bit like that idea that was current at the time of listening to yourself. The idea that inside you, is the answer. I was beginning, just beginning, to get an inkling that I probably didn't know very much. So I went and did a post-graduate course and, sure enough, found some ideas I was excited by although I was terrified of revealing to anyone how little I knew.

And I found some people. I'd get together with people and talk about what we were all doing and it felt important. It really did. Especially when you compared yourself to other people you knew working in, oh, I don't know, the media, or the public sector or teaching. Although teaching's a bit different... I had more interesting conversations with people involved in the arts. I wanted to talk to them. Not the other people. But because I was talking to them, there was this pressure to keep on doing things. I was having a conversation with these people but the only way of doing this was by having something to show them.

#3

I imagine it's always been like this, that you have a look at the things which are supposed to be great, or at least are in fashion, and you simply can't relate to them. They're like artefacts produced by an alien species but not any old aliens, because these are the ones who are taking over the world or running it already. And you look at this stuff and you can't see, anywhere, your world, or the world you see, in it. And this begins to matter more when you have been involved in a field of practice for a few years, when you are part of it, and you have a peer group and you have some projects under your belt. But,

thank god, there are a few bands of stragglers here and there, resisting the aliens and meeting in caves and peddling their junk, keeping their heads down and you carry on with what you are doing. In a cave.

And it's a struggle, of course, and you expected that but you and the other people you know are part of the resistance. And then one day someone comes along who you thought was an alien and starts talking to you. And then another one. And you realise the aliens have their own groups of resisters and their own caves. If you want, you might then have an opportunity to start travelling and meet some of these people. In their caves.

#4

There was one year I remember where it began to feel quite different. I looked at my diary and I thought, how am I supposed to do all these things? I didn't want to turn any of it down. But how was I going to cope? All the endless conversations I had had with people about how we related to the market, the institutions, the commissions, and the power of critics, or curators, or collectors, and who were the right people or festivals or shows to be associated with ... how to do what we wanted to do and whether thinking like this deformed art. I'd been having these conversations for years and now I was faced with decision making, almost week by week, without the time to go and talk to someone else about it. And still the terrible fear that you are missing out. That you are making the wrong choices.

That time had something of the heat and the busyness of when I was younger but the implications were much more frightening. I can list some things I did, some things I made, what some people said about them. Who I got to know, some conversations I had, some shows I saw. But mostly what I remember is days spent wondering – is this the right thing to be doing? And then other days, head down, doing it.

#5

I can't believe it took so long to start looking a bit more widely at what else was happening around me. One of the things drummed into us at art school was the importance of discussion with your peers, and how to feed this back into your work. Of course it was up to us, up to me, to decide who the right peers were, and how much I should take on what they said. But I think I always had the assumption that it was other art people.

This tendency to be inward looking within art meant that I had two choices in dealing with the bigger picture of, you know, the rest of my life – I could socialise only with art people, so we could have the conversations we needed to have at parties and dinners and barbeques and what have you; or I could go and talk to other people. Within the 'other people' category there were people like architects or academics, say, with whom I could maybe talk more easily. With them, it required working out the right language and ignoring the "I haven't heard of you" look on their faces. At least their practices were directly to do with ideas. But even that wasn't always easy. I'd find myself explaining my work to someone. I used to tell my students that the whole point was that an artwork couldn't be explained, and there I would be, with a glass of wine in my hand, explaining. It made me wonder who I was doing it for.

We used to talk about 'the viewer'. In my various engagements with galleries and commissioners, to a greater or lesser extent, I would have to talk about the viewer or the

audience. The sort of shadowy viewer I could describe so eloquently was a way of externalising an idea, to close the deal. But the viewer didn't exist. I was never going to have a conversation with a viewer. The conversations I wanted to have, have almost always been with art people. And then occasionally I'd meet someone who did something completely different, completely different, and we'd have this interesting conversation and off I'd go and later remember something they'd said and it made me think, somehow.

Written for the group exhibition *What Business Are You In?* curated by Helena Reckitt at The Contemporary, Atlanta, Georgia, January-March 2005. In the gallery version this script is interpreted by Ruth Posner, recorded at the Royal College of Art with the help of Graham Lawson.