

IN CONVERSATION WITH EDWARD CHELL

Edward Chell discusses his recent work in a range of media which draws on disregarded places, borderlands and peripheries, from stairwells to motorway verges and car parks to landfill sites.

Amy Halliday: You were commissioned to make a piece responding to the work and ideas of the 18th Century natural historian, philosopher and mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg. You installed a handrail in the stairwell of Swedenborg House. What made you choose this rather awkward location?

Edward Chell: Swedenborg is a fascinating character. Central to his thinking was the idea of ‘correspondences’ – the notion that a spiritual reality is manifest in physical phenomena. He disregarded the barriers between disciplines and conventions of thinking that existed in his time, and was able to make some startling connections. For instance, he was one of the first scientists to formulate our modern understanding of the blood and circulatory system. I wanted to capture something of Swedenborg’s approach to the world around him.

I saw the building itself as a collection of narratives, and as I wandered through the archive section, the library, the hall, I realised, the one thing that connects them all is the staircase. For me, the stairwell represents a kind of main artery for the building – a conduit through which everybody travels but rarely pays attention to. I wanted to heighten people’s awareness of this non-space and its odd resonances.

AH: How did you interweave this idea of the correspondences between the natural and spiritual world into your installation?

EC: The handrail is one of the very first things you touch to make contact with a building. It’s important phenomenologically, this sense of touch, and it struck me – again with correspondences between the ventricular system and touch – that Swedenborg had the idea that blood was the vessel through which God communicated spiritually with man. St John of the Cross had a similar idea; that blood humours were essential to the passage between the spiritual and the physical – the interface between them.

AH: I wanted to ask about the salience of the blood allusion – the arterial shaping of the handrails and the throbbing red colour.

EC: This idea of blood suddenly became apparent, and it was a quick step to the idea of handrails that could very easily look like giant vials of blood. There’s a sense in which it becomes a metaphor for transubstantiation, the Catholic Mass and the idea of wine being transformed into the blood of Christ. Perhaps not physically...perhaps the idea of transformation is more compelling.

Blood is a very rich colour. I did play with the idea of using different colours, thinking of oxygenation and how blood is transformed through breathing. It changes colour: it goes from a dark red to a very bright scarlet red. In terms of making, it would have been very complicated to do, and it might have detracted from the piece. Edmund Burke, the eighteenth century philosopher, had the idea of the sublime being

initiated through visual repetition and homogeneity that can give rise to a sense of boundless extension, a sense of infinity. By keeping the colour all the same I wanted to keep a subliminal continuity. And of course in the stairwell, at any one point, you never see the rail in its entirety. You can't see a beginning or an end – it's just there, continuing out of sight.

AH: The handrail includes a text in Braille, a form that few visitors will understand...

EC: I've always been interested in the ideas behind the poem 'The Dark Night of the Soul' by St John of the Cross, the notion that redemption can come through intense pain and suffering – like the Biblical refiner's fire. I didn't want people to *see* the text, but inscribing the poem in Braille means that people can feel it, almost like goosebumps. Something felt but not understood.

Both Swedenborg and St John had what we might nowadays recognise as a breakdown - Swedenborg talking with angels and St John having a crisis of faith. In his poem, St John seems to say that it's literally through a dark night, going down into the depths of the abyss, that one can find salvation. Holding the rail as they descend the stairs, a Braille reader will follow the poem from the top of the building down to the basement.

AH: Braille is a point of denial for many visitors, a sort of inaccessible text that refuses to yield itself up in a straightforward way.

EC: Braille is only accessible to those who can read it. For most fully sighted people it will just be knobbles on the handrail, but they'll see this deep, blood red, which a blind person wouldn't experience. I'm interested in this fracturing between different types of knowledge: both equally valid and both being a form of access, but rarely coinciding. It is knowledge pertaining to the same thing, but from two different sides, which is rather wonderful. They are different states, different types of understanding. Epistemological and ontological knowledge perhaps?

AH: Despite its conceptual correspondences, the formal appearance of the work also evokes minimalist aesthetics in its use of industrial materials, repeated forms, and neutral surfaces. What kind of dialogue do you think the work sets up with those art histories and traditions?

EC: Well I'm a painter, and this piece is rooted in painting, not least because of its connection to surface and lustre. Those are things that interest me: whatever I'm making, there's always an important surface element, whether it's plaques, paintings or handrails. Braille itself is a form of surface; it's tactile.

There *are* links with things like readymades. If you think of Donald Judd's work, some of the girder pieces initially seem uniform, industrially spray-finished in reds, greens, blues – primaries. But the more you look at those yellows and reds, you realise they're not all the same. They're quite intuitive, painterly in fact.

I started making objects in 2006 because there are these strange analogies and back-stories about locatedness and the way things are made that you can't readily address

through painting. Objects invite touch and there's a sort of fetishism associated with this hands on relationship to surface that, of course, again, you can't have in the same way with painting.

AH: You mentioned the idea of images and objects having a back-story or a narrative. What draws you to this notion of the 'life of things'?

EC: This piece's back-story seems, at first, unexceptional. It is a utilitarian object in a utilitarian space, but then people are very surprised to encounter these knobbly bits on the handrails. It affects them. The building isn't a normal gallery, and this stairwell isn't where you might expect to find art. But you stop. And you find that this stairwell has a story...like the circulatory system... connecting areas and lives. It conjures up the architectural notion of *tokonoma*, a Japanese term used by Frank Lloyd Wright to refer to the fireplace: the ceremonial 'heartbeat' of the building.

The handrails themselves are made of wood, the grain of which just shows through the lacquer. It's iroko, a very hard wood that won't bend (unlike soft wood, which can shrink, especially under lacquer). I was very concerned about it being a responsibly sourced hardwood. If you go to the Hayward Gallery and look at the main stairwell, you can see the imprint of the shuttering used for the concrete pouring that was Japanese hardwood. And the imprints of all the beautiful knots and lines of this shuttering represent something that was ultimately thrown away. It's almost a sarcophagus of a hardwood forest, a really powerful thing just existing – once again – in the stairwell. An unintended readymade, if you like.

AH: Your concern with the wood being 'responsibly sourced' resonates with the eco-political ethic that seems to underpin your recent work.

EC: I wouldn't call myself a 'green' artist - that can lend itself to propaganda – but yes there is a strong eco-political element. I'm interested in ideological collisions, inconsistencies and paradoxes. It's another borderland – the space between what we subscribe to and how we actually live.

Even our ideals of 'natural' and 'unspoilt' landscape are completely artificial. The word itself has its roots in the Dutch term *landschap* which meant an artificial, farmed or managed landscape. The way in which landscape has been visualised and aestheticised historically reflects ownership. For instance, John Berger talks about Reynolds' painting, *Mr and Mrs Andrews* where he imagines a sign next to them saying 'Private Property Keep Out'. Also, Paul Sandby, one of the founders of the picturesque landscape tradition, started out in the mid 18th Century as a military topographer charting contemporary battlegrounds such as Culloden, where the English finally conquered the Scots thereby acquiring state ownership to lands which had to be quantified and measured and visually described in terms of ownership.

AH: So landscape – which is never natural but always already a site of mediation, of representation – is inherently politicised?

You can never divorce representations of landscape – especially border territories, because borders suggest conflicts of interest, of language, of territory, and rhetoric, and ownership – from a socio-political element. Power relationships are embedded in

landscapes. During my teens I had a summer job working in a Yorkshire mill and one of my workmates used to go round local golf courses detonating charges on the greens and in the holes. He saw this as common land that had been taken from the people so this was his act of protest. It would make a great art piece – like Cai Guo Qiang’s symbolic detonations.

Notions of ‘enclosure’ persist in our experience of landscape today. I don’t just mean the Enclosure Act, though this was an important touchstone in igniting popular unrest and direct actions. There are all sorts of other enclosures - just look at planning regulations and the interests they reflect and how these govern our landscape – from designated National Parks and heritage sites to town centres. Like when Tesco want to site large stores in economically vulnerable areas, the public outcry is a kind of protest against commercial enclosure.

AH: How do you explore these relationships visually?

EC: Looking at the motorway verges I’ve been painting, they’re strangely forbidden zones. They’re Ballardian spaces! You’re not allowed to stop there – if you do you’ll be picked up by the police within ten minutes! These are amazing landscapes – full of wildflowers – just really beautiful. Motorways are extremely hard and loud and dangerous, and yet, running alongside them we have these pesticide-free strips which offer us one of the few ‘wilderness’ places in England. It’s a sort of buffer zone between the intense agrochemical farming and the tarmac. There’s something like forty thousand hectares of this land – it’s been described as Britain’s largest unofficial nature reserve!

Again, it makes me think of the enclosure act of the eighteenth century. Private landowners built walls around the most fertile common land claiming it as their own. They left little avenues for poorer people so they could access only the remaining marginal land. In a way, the motorways and verges are, through modern planning, a latter day form of enclosure. While the government owns the motorway land and the highways agency manage it, we’re not allowed to visit it. We can only look at it at great speed. We can’t walk on it, or have picnics on it, or build a house on it. There’s a dystopic separation from the land immediately around us.

For me, the motorway verge represents a powerful visual metaphor. It signifies on the one hand the power of the state to order, monitor, control and restrict access and on the other hand, the complex frothing patterns of the flowers and vegetation seem like a kind of scurrilous rococo flourish of uncontrollable nature - freedom. These are landscapes that are miniature in scale but which run laterally and largely unchecked for thousands of miles.

AH: You also have a series of works called *Carboretum*. Could you say a bit more about this?

Carboretum is a continuing series of installations that also explore collisions in car culture, tourism and the exploitation of landscape.

A few years ago, I saw a plaque in Dulwich Park next to a magnificent old oak. It said, ‘*Quercus Cerris*, The Great Turkey Oak, Part of the Named Trees of London,

Sponsored by Esso, UK Plc.’ Petrochemical giants and oil companies sponsoring trees! What next? So that triggered the original *Carboretum*. It plays on the idea of a collection – specimens; objectifying this relationship, this destructive love affair with both cars and the natural environment. These were boxed paintings, embedded with brass plaques bearing both the Latin genus of the trees depicted and parallel ICI Autocolour codes and names. Plaques often have dubious authority and in this case began to seem like caskets.

The second *Carboretum- Acer to Quercus* was commissioned by Stour Valley Arts for their car park adjoining woodland in Kent. I staked out the space with ‘private’ car number plates inscribed with the Latin names of local native trees. A car park, like a stair well is a place you tend to pass through. Again, I wanted to heighten awareness of this odd non-place that people drive to in order to reach a ‘natural’ environment - which is ironic because much of it is plantation, or hybrid woodland. And sometimes people sit in their cars with a flask of coffee, looking out at this rural idyll through the windscreen. In this series I can play with these conundrums.

AH: Boundaries are clearly a recurring theme in your works, as is the exploration of liminal or transitional spaces. What is it about the liminal that you find particularly compelling?

EC: It’s to do with change. These spaces, be they verges, car parks or stairwells, can’t be pinned down as one thing or the other. They are on the edges of things, and I like the slippage that occurs within these places. Different viewpoints emerge, which allows for the opening up of meaning. In fact it comes back to an uncanny similarity with Swedenborg’s law of *correspondences*. There are fissures in our established understanding of the world; points at which the ordinary laws and values don’t hold. There is a dematerialisation of the art object. Artists like Robert Smithson and Gordon Matta-Clark were interested in the in-between. Smithson, particularly - he did pieces with tracts of land between buildings, unoccupied, unclaimed bits of land that nobody wanted - what you might call ‘terrain vague’.

AH: How does this exploration of boundaries work in terms of your use of materials?

EC: One of the things I’ve discovered through painting is patination, another surface attribute. Especially working on varnish, you can develop this ‘shot’ quality, where the paint is more matt than the varnish. And depending on the angle of incident light, as you move past, the surface appearance changes. They take on a metallic effect, like oxidation on old silver bromide prints. They begin to look like negatives so the photographic allusion is strong.

Ultimately, I envision a whole room of paintings like this, a series of monochromes – an infinite repetition where you don’t notice the beginning and the end. I think that moving around a whole room of them would give you a sense of immersion, akin to the bubble of travelling at speed down the motorway.

AH: How do the paintings and objects work together?

I'm interested in making work that evades categorisation. The handrail is playing with the idea of furniture, a functional object that escapes its designated function. I like work that shifts the terms on which we encounter things. The patinas I just talked about are relevant here also. In the case of the handrail, the transparent, layered lacquer not only gives a sense of a deep and luminous liquidity, but also invites touch; a fetishistic contact, like touching a wound.

It goes both ways. For example, I've placed my motorway verge paintings in Little Chef restaurants - they didn't look like Little Chef décor, they were almost like homeless and out-of-place objects. They didn't neatly fit in any category. I put them in locations where people would stand still, say, behind cash registers; places where they wouldn't normally expect to see art works. Little Chef is a place where we don't expect to find art, and so, in a surreptitious and stealthy but playful way, it slips under the radar and can be slightly disconcerting.

AH: So 'place' is important, as it is in the stairwell?

Yes, particularly, the peripheral and unexpected. Our urban terrain is peppered with industrial sites, warehousing, strategic oil and power complexes, all fenced in with territorial claims and which we are forbidden from entering. Even our airspace is highly regulated and monitored.

To come back to the stairwell, Swedenborg is sometimes seen as a less known, somewhat eccentric and marginalised thinker. This is to do him a profound disservice. Swedenborg was interested in the edges of things, where different sites of interest would cross each other, fertilize and mutate, whether it's the edge of consciousness and the unconscious, belief and the rational - the boundaries of possibilities between seemingly conflicting principles. You might call it the liminal. Borderlands and thresholds are like this, whether they be the layered residues of modern landscape or the experience of ascending a staircase.

2,924