

Article Title: Drawing and the street texts of Chapeltown

Abstract

This article is a meditation on a field text that explores the concept of the sentient street. The graffiti walls of Chapeltown, a multi-cultural area of Leeds, a Northern English city, talk to an artist embedded within its community and these street texts give rise to drawings that embody that experience. Nancy's concept that a drawing does not become information, but a sense, is used as a guide to the way textual information becomes embedded into the feeling tone of a drawing.

Keywords

Graffiti

In situ drawing

Post situ drawing

Walking

The unconscious

Mapping

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Drawing and the street texts of Chapeltown

Chapeltown is a multicultural area of the northern English city of Leeds. It has been a home to various and shifting populations over the last hundred years and during this time its walls have often been a support for the words of street poets, especially those that have messages that go beyond the traditional graffiti tag.

This article suggests the concept of what could be called a sentient street, it implies that wall texts can become more than mere graffiti and that they can provide a key to how an artist's drawings of the area can sensitise themselves to the feeling tone of the place.

The process of making drawings that embed within them a complex dialogue between spaces, people and the stories that they engender is in many ways one that follows a traditional path. The artist conducts field research by walking through the locality and making observational drawings. As he makes these drawings he meets people and talks to them and their stories become additional field texts that can be used to provide narratives to support the development of post situ drawings. However the streets themselves provide another voice and it is this voice that gives the post situ drawings their charge, it is the street voice that gives poetic shape to the drawn image, and this essay seeks to follow these street stories and their affect.

If you take a sharp right off Chapeltown Road and head down some of the terraced back streets there you might find yourself reading a narrative of heightened psychic activity, one that sometimes emerges quietly and at other times erupts as a torrent of words, and one that is then cleaned away by the ever aware local authority. The dialogue between the graffiti cleaners and the street poets opens out opportunities for the streets to construct an ever changing score, a palimpsest of layers constantly

emerging. One voice tends to dominate, one that suggests a continuing vampiric drug rapture or an approaching gangland Armageddon and it is this voice that becomes the street song, the wall's own passages that open out into imagined ginnels and fantastic passageways.



Figure 1: *Chapelton graffiti*, 2011. Photographic print. 9 x 13cm. Leeds. © The Author

Take a walk through the street texts. A row of shops have their shutters drawn, on the left-hand side of the first one we come to the words, 'DOUBLE SUNGLASSES' are sprayed in black next to a descending column of three words, 'RA IS DOOMED'. The shutters of the next shop have the words 'WITS BREATH EDION' in large confident letters traced across them. We know who these streets belong to because facing these shops is a wall stating, 'HITTITE GIPT C.P.T.' C.T.P. is the Chapelton tag, there's one on the front of the artist's house, it means this place is safe for dealing, across the road the message is slightly different, 'C.T.P. SUCK HAND' a message about submission. Something is going on and it's not just drug dealing. As we walk down a side street next to the shops, in blue paint on a red brick wall 'PRECINCT GOBLIN WORSHIPPERS JAM' is written over an already fading previous white text, we turn a corner and in pale blue letters on a grey painted wall the words 'THE EATING OF PACKETS OF BRAIN DAMAGE TABLETS' float menacingly above 'IRFANE. B', a later addition in white.

A story begins to unfold, 'IT'S A DRUGS BARON IN A UNIFORM' is neatly painted in the spaces between rows of red bricks, 'COB WEBS' is sprayed in large organic letters in blue over red, the final 'S' already beginning to fade into the wall, and now finding itself making a new sentence, the 's' now both an ending and a beginning. 'S' 'END OF HOUSE KEYS AND YOUR MIND BUBBLE' an incomprehensible statement but one that suggests the end of some sort of mind control.

Just as a story appears to be emerging we turn a corner and realise there is another narrative. 'SHORTAGE OF PLATEAU OXES' is sprayed in blue over the fast fading single word 'EGG'. The text is getting denser now, the further we get from the main road, the texts multiply. The statement, 'TAROT QUAKES' confronts us as we look across the street and in thin tall letters 'TRILLION EXCHANGE' sits high above spiky letters that fall to the bottom of the wall, and spell out a hard to read, 'BLACK NATION'. 'LIVING WITH CRAZED RUNAWAY TAR ROT MURDERERS' suggests either 'TAROT' OR 'TAR ROT' either being a potential fit on these walls. 'BIG GANG OF DRACULAS' is written next to an electrical control box, the words 'BLOOD SACRIFICING RELIGION BOYS NOT SHINING' has been sprayed over with the word 'ADAR' in giant white letters. As we turn another corner, it becomes obvious that we are now looking at what can only be

described as the nerve centre of these streets. A high wall, of red brick finish, with bricked in windows is covered with text. Words written in white, green, yellow and red paint, pile up one on top of the other, sometimes obscuring the text below and at others standing sharp and clear. Whoever was writing these texts needed a ladder, some of these words are 15 to 20 feet up on the wall, covering the bricked in rectangles of what were first floor windows. It feels as if something bad is going on here. 'HELLISH BEAST WORSHIPPERS FOLLOWERS'; 'ARK RAIDER'; 'ZOMBIE MAKERS IN PROGRESS'; 'DON'T BELIEVE IN HEADACHES'; 'VOODOO YELLOW ILL EYES'; 'BRAIN ENSLAVEMENT'; 'DEALING WITH WHO THEY ARE'; 'TRAMPLING SEASON'; 'CRAZY STUNT MAN STYLES'; 'TOMES MUSEUMS', one phrase replaces another; these are the readable texts, the ones beneath suggest darker thoughts, thoughts that needed to be driven down out of sight. Statements are written in paint, one on top of another, the lone word 'ABYSS' is picked out in white alongside crazy the football scores, 'DANGER 0'; 'DANGER 2'; 'DANGER 4' and a crude drawing of a rabbit. It feels uncomfortable staring at these walls for too long, but their message is coming through loud if not clear.

As you turn away from these streets and cross back over Chapeltown Road the wall surfaces change, they are mainly Yorkshire millstone grit, the sandstone of local quarries. The walls however still have words and they speak now with a more religious tongue. A low stone wall has the words 'SAC REDNESS' and 'EARTH'S RULNG OWNER' painted in black along its top edge. Ivy covered sandstone walls have another message for us; 'FIRMAMENTS FOUR'; 'FIGURATIVE RUMBLE'; '7 THUNDERS WITNESS'; 'RIWAN NIGHTMARES'; 'TUBS TO DO', 'CLOT JAGGEDLY'; and 'REV 2:13'. If you look the biblical reference up, you get another message, *"I know thy works and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is and thou holdest fast my name and hast not denied my faith even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you where Satan dwelleth"*. (The Bible, Revelations: 2:13)



Figure 2: *Chapeltown graffiti*, 2011. Photographic print. 9 x 13cm. Leeds. © The Author

As we walk down the hill, the sandstone walls are replaced by raw concrete, but the text continues to follow us. 'MASSA GOD SAY' is sprayed across a fetid, mildewed surface and on the last remaining concrete skim over a rapidly eroding wall surface, someone has written, 'SKULL BUCKLING'. How can these street texts be read? One way is to follow how they appear. Two days after the words 'DOUBLE SUNGLASSES' appeared on the shop window shutter, the words, 'TINTED FUSION' were written underneath. 'RA IS DOOMED' now butted alongside the new phrase. On the other side of the road the text, 'MASSALANTIS BUMMER, SMITH AXIS SAGA' had the words 'CANT WORSHIP IT POSEIDON' painted in below only one day later. It can feel as if the streets are talking

to themselves, in the mind of the reader sentences are built from scattered phrases, there is an emerging image of a sea god and a drowned world hammered out by Wayland Smith as he fights the neo-Nazis. These street texts are image rich, if you lay them over the newspaper coverage of the area and add in the street conversations that have taken place with local people, any portrait of the area becomes cracked by something mythic slumped against the edges of normality. The Hayfield public house has had one too many shootings and is now closed and bulldozed, replaced by a library and health centre. But its image remains in the drawing mind. Sheaves of mown grasses stand watching over the area, wheat planting now healing the ground where men were shot.



Figure 3: *The eye of the Hayfield*, 2017. Pen, brush and ink 29.7 x 42.0 cm. Leeds. © The Author

On the corner of the street, next to what was the old library is now a bench. If you do read the text cut into the bench plaque you will find that it was engraved in memory of David Oluwale, a Nigerian immigrant who was kicked to death by the Leeds police. On the opposite side of the street is Cantor's fish and chip shop, a former Jewish establishment, still trading under Harold Cantor's name but now serving Southern Fried Chicken as well as fish and chips. The large Jewish synagogue that stands just down the road from there is now a dance school. The street graffiti binds these stories together, on the wall outside the dance school is written, 'VENOM GOD SAY', and as we walk back towards Cantors the wall on our right which is straight across the road from the Oluwale bench, says 'JUDGE AFTER'. On the corner of the street where the Hayfield public house once stood someone has sprayed, 'When David fought Goliath, WHO WON?', and on a new standing stone erected to keep cars from driving onto the green, written in yellow paint, it simply says, 'GOD'.

Images, compound upon images. The map of the area that is composed from the walking and drawing that the artist has done, in the studio now dissolves under the acid rain of graffiti words that etch themselves into the subconscious. The image has to re-emerge and as it does stories jostle for inclusion, but how to include the tone but not the words, the effect but not a literal translation, the visual feeling tone and not the particularity of written text?



Figure 4: *Allegorical map of Chapeltown*, 2013. Pen and ink 213.36 x 137.16 cm. Leeds. © The Author

Drawings are made and rubbed out, only for their remains to suggest another drawing, it too often being inadequate for the visualisation of these words.

Gradually images do however emerge, images that in the face of such chthonic words have to dig deep into subconscious reserves. Images that are as much about the nature of space and how we move through it as the way we read texts. As a text sidesteps the reader, so a drawing's space can be made to bend or warp itself, in order to un-nerve the observer. The affordances of these post-situ drawings have come from very difficult to read clues, possibilities for action shaped by dense aggregations of texts surrounding and shaping perceptions of the streets. Sometimes the drawings are map like and at other times they become totemic, standing in for the hidden tribe that writes on the walls. The artist in both cases working as a conduit, the drawings made being an attempt to create a sensitive membrane that can be touched in order to make contact with what may well now be dead. The streets of Chapeltown have lately remained free of graffiti, it is as if a voice has been silenced, only the photographs taken with the artist's old instamatic camera now exist as proof of these street stories, only memories and rapidly fading stories of their coming and going remain. (Barker, 2012) The drawings done in response to these texts will now have to stand alone, but hopefully something of the original otherness did rub off, something that left a trace, no matter how slight.

When a drawing is being informed by written text, there is the question of what in this context a reproduction or illustration of the text means and at a deeper level what indeed any form of mimesis means. Jean-Luc Nancy in 'The Pleasure of Drawing' states, "What mimesis must take hold of and make evident, what it must show or present, is nothing other than the Idea". (2013, p. 20). So what is the idea when one is experiencing the wall texts of Chapeltown? Is it an idea about religion? Is it an idea about drug or gang culture? For instance on a wall that sits on the divide between streets controlled by a Jamaican gang and an Asian one is the text, 'KHALI SNAK'. Because the observer is an outsider what the idea is will always be a miss-translation, but a translation nevertheless. Nancy follows his observations on mimesis and the idea, with this thought, "If,...drawing can find its worth as an element or dimension common to all aesthetic fields, it is because what one calls "aesthetic" concerns a "feeling", not as a sensory faculty that records information but a *sensing*, in other words, a faculty of making sense, or of letting it be formed". (2013, p.21) He goes on to explain that a drawing does not become information, but a sense. (Ibid).

The artist would agree with Nancy that this is what these drawings aim to achieve; a sense or feeling tone of what it is to live in the area. Both drawings of imaginary aerial views and centralised images designed to evoke the presence of whatever lies behind the writing of these street texts, are driven by a need to find a shape and form that suggests the shape of a sensibility, that gives a viewer an experience rather than an illustration of the texts. It could therefore be argued that when making drawn figurative images in response to a situation, be this written text or a direct perceptual experience of a place or event, there is a delicate tightrope for an artist to walk. There can be a tendency to directly 'illustrate' the situation by producing work that 'looks like' the subject and audiences will sometimes need reassurances that there is a direct link between the experience or text and the resultant image. However, this approach can miss the 'idea' by not reshaping the information in order to capture the 'shape of a sensibility'. It is during the process of an image's arrival, whilst it is being constantly worked on by being added to and removed that the artist needs to be attuned to this situation. Watching for a shape or series of forms that can visually hold the sensation or feeling tone of an experience is not unlike working in a state of mindfulness. The artist has to be constantly aware, in that state often referred to as "disinterested interest", so that the image is discovered rather than predicted, revealed rather than planned. If the artist can stay on this tightrope, what becomes a discovery for the maker will hopefully become for the audience, something to be sensed and experience rather than understood.

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