



TO SEE OURSELVES some thoughts from a participant in Choice Takes

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In 2000, as part of Glasgow's millennium cultural programme, Nicola Atkinson.Davidson interviewed a series of Glaswegians, who were selected in a unique chain of associations, originating with one person choosing two individuals whom she felt were significant in her life. Face to face interviews were conducted and from these scripts Atkinson Griffith developed her strategy for the filmed conversations, which she interwove with images from the daily environments of the subjects. The result was Choice Takes, first shown at a private view for those who had featured in this unique glimpse of Glasgow's people at the turn of the new century.

Being asked to be involved in a film, - and a filmed interview at that- is a tantalising proposition. There is the urge to self-revelation in all of us, however well disguised, whether or in some form of display or gesture or in the confidences of friendship. So it is intriguing to be given the opportunity. But to learn that an artist sees fit to make a serious piece from such interviews and that a third party has especially nominated you for a place in the project begins to induce a certain nervousness. What's the game? Do I want to talk to this person whom I hardly know? What will she entice me to reveal, for there are always corners we need to keep dark, or at least in the shadows. But aside even from serious matters of the heart, we are perhaps rightly reluctant to have our chance comments frozen in time, where they can take on a resonance far beyond their

intrinsic worth. More to the point, what has my nominator, the previous link in the chain, been saying about me? Then, of course, there always the perverted vanity of the Scot; better keep ones light under the bushel for fear of having it exposed as a guttering glimmer.'And is that really what I look like? So locked into the very substance of the project is a fundamental paradox; that within us we carry both the impulse to reveal ourselves to the world, to make our unique mark, however small, and the opposing tendency to protect the inner self, that territory which rightly is suspicious of exposure and delineation.

Nonetheless I am persuaded to participate, and my initiation involves a gently rambling interview with Margaret Archibald. Margaret is pivotal to the whole project, in being the single point of departure for the two sets of links that provide the raw material of the piece. The rationale is this; Margaret gets to choose two individuals who have been a formative or otherwise interesting influence on her life. These two each make one choice to continue their chain, and so on. I come third in one of the chains which started with Margaret, who then chose Ray, her art school tutor, who then chose me.

So Ray chose me? Suddenly he is more present to me, simply because he had brought me to mind. Our student days come to mind we were not particularly close, but shared a lot of common ground. Working links over the past couple of years have renewed the warm regard between our two households, and now this project has introduced another kind of affirmation. My own choice is easily made, half with a view to honour Ronnie, in her personal and community selves, but also with an eye on the project. Not much use if were all from the arts world; Ronnie serves as representative of all my fellow Glaswegians. Our paths crossed during Glasgow 1999 and its preparatory period. One of the good things about my job at 1999 (UK City of Architecture and Design) was to meet people from throughout the city, putting ourselves into the very areas where architecture and design would not necessarily be seen as top priorities. I was conscious with Ronnie of having come into the presence of someone who knew who she was,

and perhaps because of that was able to take other people on as they were, without compromising her clear sense of what is important. Honouring her - I hope she saw it like that helped me revisit the personal challenge she presented to my preoccupations, my comforts, my position in life. Whether I ever get to know her better, and almost irrespective of that, the passing glimpse of her in her life goes with me in mine, and I am the better for it.

The interview approaches. I have already asked Nicola if she will have lunch with me (she has traveled out to my house on the train so its natural to offer) She seems strangely diffident about this is it a fear of imposing or something about the roles we are about to adopt? Will it be more difficult to switch from guest to interviewer? (There are never crumbs on Jeremy Paxmans tie). In the end she accepts and I hear something about her life, which is helpful. It turns out we couldn't have more different backgrounds, mine solid, safe and Scottish, hers creative, peripatetic and bohemian. The danger of seeing greener grass in others more overtly intriguing lives is a besetting sin for me, so it comes as a comfort to have my own life seen by one from the other side, not with a reciprocal envy, but with the steady eye which sees and values the uniqueness of things and people.

These reflections reveal another quite powerful set of contradictions, which mirror the revelation/diffidence paradox mentioned earlier. Here is an artist who spends her life making work and in doing so offers her creative acts for public consumption. That's what artists do, but many of them are personally retiring, almost to the point of reclusivity. There is nothing retiring about Nicola, but neither is she forward, the ultimate criticism of the I kent your father school of Scottish put-downs. She can at first, however, be quite dauntingly self confident, something that takes a little understanding. Nature or nurture? It doesn't matter; Nicolas confidence allows her to do the work she does, which is precisely to allow others to investigate and celebrate their own place in the world. And if she is successful in that, it demonstrates that her confidence (courage?) - isn't that of the show-off, who feigns interest in the other but who, finally is only interested in

their own, needy reflection. On the contrary, her legitimate artistic preoccupation with self seems to have placed her in the position of observing other selves with both detachment and affection, and her confidence in herself and her creative purpose allows the sublimation of the first person in the task of supporting her subjects to explore the infinite variety of their own lives and environments.

Back to the interview. Lunch over, Nicola explains what she's going to do; a series of questions will take their own course, but will allow me to explore themes that matter to me. She unpacks her very impressive video equipment and turns intently to setting it up. We busy around finding a suitable setting. Suddenly I feel a confidence in this woman professionalism and my trepidation subsides.

And then the interview itself. How do I find myself relating the anecdote of the cakes? (A blast from childhood in a big family; a ritual for the avoidance of conflict in the allocation of pineapple cakes, the literal *creme de la creme* in the standard box of Glasgow goodies). Of course, once uttered, Nicola would then want to use it; it's quite quirky and clearly has iconic significance in our family lore. What's interesting is that I shared it at all not the kind of thing that anyone could have known to ask about, or that I would have thought to raise. And so many more home truths, that, transcribed, are enough to raise a blush. Not that anything is misrepresented, just that the interviewer skill has created a situation in which these are the themes we wish to speak of. Piling paradox upon paradox, Nicola takes these moments of self-revelation, these ingenuous confidences, and then makes them public. Betrayal it is not, since there is complicity among all the parties in the task in hand. But it is quite a feat. The interviewer's skill I don't remember many questions, and certainly not penetrating or insistent ones. So much for fears of hawkish scrutiny or journalistic deviousness. Maybe it's something to do with the medium itself, the camera lens providing a sort of confessional curtain which at once permits the penitent to unburden himself and the confessor to hear those things he alone is permitted to hear, but not to judge. There is a physical context to this, of course. Nicola is filming us in our own

locations. She shoots me in the porch, where there is good light, but where there is almost nothing of any physical character. So there is something else going on 'I'm taken in my context, but the viewer is none the wiser of that. I'm face to camera almost discomfitingly so. But perversely, no one gets to see my face in the final piece, something she has indicated as we go along. Perhaps my hands, though it ends up being my cat, slouching around the plant pots at the door, and a mayfly, spread-eagled on the window glass. Incidentals of my life, any life, but a life observed. Observed and recorded, though in a fragmentary style which mirrors that combination of the profound and the utterly trivial, the colliding of big issues, life obligations, with the transient delights and irritations that come with each day.

Affections, concern, memory; deep themes, interwoven with a glimpse of a cardigan sleeve, a stairway, a cat, scudding clouds. The complicated stuff of daily life, set in contrasting locations around the city: a potato scone bakery, a Possilpark youth project, a cottage on the rural fringes. Seemingly arbitrary footage which for others may be of passing visual interest, carrying the narrative, speaks to those who recognise it as their place and see it redefined in juxtaposition with other places, other voices. An example; at its first screening, to my surprise I see shots of a beautiful stretch of countryside, from the final section of the train ride I have been taking for 25 years, caught by Nicolas lens on her way out to the interview. It so happens that this 5 minute daily episode acts for me as both metaphorical leave-taking and re-entry to the life of the city, the wheels teasingly drumming the question Why do you go? Why did I go? Nicola chooses to include these shots, partly no doubt for their intrinsic loveliness. But did she also somehow pick up that potential ambivalence? Or did I rediscover it for myself in watching the piece? Random linkages are made between lives, places and the incidents that occasion the meetings. Glasgow 1999 is the context for both my links. Yet the superficial link has very little to do with it. For Ray and me, its about lives lived in parallel over 25 years and the quiet regard that doesn't need the lubrication of regular contact. With Ronnie it's about a

glimpse of someone in her place and time, a good person beyond the call, of service, and of personal strength.

Goodness this was a feature of the linkages, something remarked upon by Nicola. How did that happen? Did Margaret, the Glaswegian woman charged with naming the first links in the chain cast her own values on to the task, choosing people whom she valued for different reasons, her father and Ray? Did we all unconsciously absorb that attitude? Or was it the need to feel worthy by association? And what is this goodness? Nothing about prim do-gooding here. Substance might be the better word, a grounding of values in personality. So the Magic Circle is the canvas on which the friendship of several of the subjects emerges and is individuated in well-loved detail and anecdote. Possilpark becomes the place where real, not documentary, lives are led. The context is at once vital to the story, yet perhaps matters little, finally, to the real content of the tale.

Nicola describes her work as questioning peoples perception of their environment, producing frameworks which enable the public to contemplate other views of the world, and presenting thoughts, questions and concepts which gently challenge the safe and familiar cocoon within which we tend to embed ourselves.

In another project, Secrets of the World, she has invited people to consign to her care their most precious secrets. In a much more profound act of trust than Choice Takes, people give to Nicola some inner part of their life, which by definition has had to remain locked away. Why would they do that? And what does Nicola get out of it, other than a somewhat questionable sense of power? Since the whole point is that confidence is utterly respected, in what does the art consist, since no-one else is to know? This is something deeper than just the

refractory effect of the lens in Choice Takes. It is almost as if Nicola has assumed the role of confessor, whose role is to absorb the burdens of the individual penitent and in that sacramental act, place them alongside the struggles and yearnings of the whole world. In so doing, these secret revelations are both raised to a new status and absolved/dissolved into eternal anonymity. A sacred contract between two human beings has been entered into, and the world is changed. This may be the key to Nicola's creative achievement. In order to do work of the quality she does, Nicola has not only to communicate her project to the uninitiated subject but has simultaneously and spontaneously to be vested with the personal authority that enables her to take the singular role we have been exploring. That has to be freely given by her subjects, and it is clear from the narratives that she elicits from participants, and from their generosity of engagement, that this trust has been won. Nicola is thus given permission to offer back to us her visions of our selves, not as isolated individuals, but as bound in relationships more delicate and complex than we can imagine.

Robert Burns, who understood the dueling qualities of vanity and self-abasement in his fellow Scots says it well: Oh wad some Powr the giftie gie us To see ourselves as others see us(1)

Don't even try; but the facts may be kinder than we think.

Notes

1. * Oh, that the Almighty would give us the chance to see ourselves as others see us To a Louse, on seeing one on a Lady's bonnet at church