

Critical Openness: A Study of Poetry in Public Places

by Julia Forster

Poems on the Underground

Travel on any underground line in London and you're bombarded by advertising. Descend by escalator and posters advertising West End productions clamour for your attention; on the platform automatic dispensers tempt you to buy chocolate and mini maps of the capital; waiting for the tube you'll see huge posters promoting everything from legal practices to loan finance, contraceptives to charitable causes. So, when you finally take your seat, removing a flyer advertising a high concept hair salon torn from a free Metro newspaper, you're surprised to find, above the head of the man opposite, a poster with 'First Fig' by Edna St Vincent Millay printed on it:

'My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah! my foes, and oh, my friends -
It gives a lovely light!'

And, for a moment, you're transported between tube stops into an imagined territory. What effect does publishing poetry in public places have on the public, creative artist or the poet and what is the future of poetry in public spaces? To answer these questions, we'll study a few examples of artistic installations in Western Europe.

Launched in 1986 by Judith Chernaik, Cicely Herbert and Gerard Benson, London's Poems on the Underground have spawned many replica projects around the world. The poems themselves resist categorisation; one cannot say 'where' or 'when' the poems are as they're constantly on the move, lifted out of

biographical, geographical and literary context with the only common thread between them being that they are short enough to fit into an advertising space measuring 27.5 by 61 centimetres. As such, the underground project pre-empted a new means of anthologising, taking a new frame through which to create a collection: the poem's ability to 'shrink to fit.' In the editors' own words, they described the initial idea for the project as being 'somewhat far-fetched, if not preposterous' (Poems on the Underground, Anniversary Edition: 19) and yet the programme still successfully runs two decades later. This is poetry as media for entertainment, consumption and, ultimately, for commercial ends; the ninth edition of the anthology sold over a staggering 250,000 copies. But, as we'll see in the work of the visionary and activist Françoise Schein, art in public places can also play a political role.

Parque

As part of her work for the organisation Inscire, Françoise Schein has designed and installed works of art with the intent to raise awareness of the human rights movement in many underground stations, including some in London, Lisbon and Paris. Schein's agenda when she created the installation at the Parque metro station in Lisbon in 1994 was to integrate the theme of the Portuguese Discoveries with the World Declaration of Human Rights in a shared environment. The writer José Gil comments:

'in this subterranean space, unlike in any other coded space, a sign no longer exists to distinguish one social status from another, one nationality from another. First and foremost, the passenger is anybody' (Parque: 18)

So, like human rights, art or poetry in public places does not discriminate. There is no marker to make the public aware that they are about to enter the 'philosophy', 'poetry' or 'politics' section as they descend the subway. The

relationship between the work of art and the public is direct and unmediated. This recalls what Ian McMillan, the poet who was once in residence on Northern Spirit trains, said his hope for poetry was for the twenty-first century: 'no more split between writer and reader, performer and audience.'

Clearly, creatives placing poems in public environments have to be aware of the poems' ultimate destination and they must be able to respond in a positive way to the opportunity to communicate: be it communicating about politics or love, war or peace. Schein's work is an apt example of how this can be achieved: although working with a limited underground space, she creates an amalgamation of expansive thought. Despite the underground being a place dictated by the clock, Schein manages to embody it with the notion that human thought is timeless by engraving quotations from ancient philosophers next to those from twentieth-century thinkers. Her use of a transient space forces the commuters to question where they actually desire to go *en masse*, as the collective noun, 'humankind.'

Sue Hubbard

Let us turn to another poetic installation, this time Sue Hubbard's at Waterloo station in London. Commissioned to write and design a mural displayed along a subway running from exit five of Waterloo towards the South Bank Centre and the IMAX cinema, Hubbard wrote a poem inspired by the underground setting and referred to the myth of Orpheus and his beloved Eurydice for inspiration. Eurydice, lost to the underworld when she was bitten by a deadly snake, was given one chance to return to upper air by Hades. Charmed by Orpheus' song, Hades commanded that Orpheus may bring Eurydice back to the overworld on the condition that, during their ascent, Orpheus does not look behind him which – as we all tragically know – he does. Hubbard's poem begins:

'I am not afraid as I descend/step by step, leaving behind the salt
wind/blowing...'

And ends, at the exit of the subway by the illuminated cinema:

'Soon, soon I will climb/from this blackened earth/into the diffident light.'

Hubbard's poetry, then, relates intimately to its location. In her words, it has grown out of a 'spatial or architectonic dialectic with the locality.' The poem is open to its environment, informed by its three-dimensional setting during the creative process of being composed.

Ian Hamilton Finlay

To take this concept further, the Scottish concrete poet Ian Hamilton Finlay publishes some of his poetry in his garden 'Stonypath' with the result that gardening itself becomes part of his creative process. Finlay 'writes' poems with not just words, but with organic and natural materials such as trees, water and glass. This three-dimensional work challenges how we categorise poetry. Alan Young says of Finlay's work:

'at once minimalist and expansive. Words, letters and even numbers are explored as objects or signs which may be reorganised in typographical space so that we may see new scope in them as poetic language. (British Poetry Since 1970: 114).

Young writes that in experiencing Finlay's poems, a 'critical openness' (Ibid: 114) in what we are to include in our poetic language is called for. We must use a vocabulary that will take not only language into account, but also the taxonomy of the landscape and the quality of light at the particular time that we experience

his poetry. Finlay's poems are dependent on their context. The poems' meanings are constructed on a specific relationship to their surroundings; this construction is unutterable, based on the idea of acting out the poem rather than reading it. So, when a poem by Finlay is sandblasted into glass, the very process of inscribing it becomes a feature of its poetic existence.

Like Schein, Finlay's aesthetics widens to take into account *where* poetry exists. We 'live' the poems as well as reading them. Quite simply, if you step into Finlay's 'The Great Piece of Turf' – a stone inscription by a small pond called 'Temple Pool' 'you'll get your feet wet' (Wood Notes Wild: 198).

David Morley

In a collaborative project to rejuvenate Coventry inner city with poetry, David Morley writes that he had to take a 'bird's eye perception' (Binary Myths 2: 85) of the project in order to envisage how poetry would feature at actual scale. The very fact that a map charting the programme goes into such practical detail illustrates how the poet's working method is affected by this three-dimensional venture. Morley writes:

'the poem(s) must map and plot the place you are working on, as though you are drawing a city on a page then splicing those pages into a book' (Binary Myths 2: 85)

The skills demanded of David Morley during composition include those of an urban strategist. Rather than just work with the micro-scale of words, Morley had to employ a macro-poetics, as much about the economy of syntax as it is about the economy of space. Such projects as Morley, Finlay and Hubbard undertake demand the precision of a cartographer coupled with the expansive vision of a poet. In order for these poems to succeed within contained public

places, either the poetry or its application must be challenging enough to affect the day-to-day life of the general public enhancing the relationship that the public has with the environment.

This is a fine balance to achieve, and I would argue that it is an art in itself. Finlay created a new grammar that contained organic materials in order to compose his concrete poetry; Morley widened not only the sheet of paper on which he was writing, but also his poetic outlook; Hubbard experienced first hand the feelings aroused by walking along the gloomy subway at Waterloo and transformed the experience into a mythic poem. Each poet, then, took a phenomenological approach by allowing lived experience to inform the imagination.

I think the success of Poems on The Underground is due to how this project 'inverts' the relationship between poem and environment. As a tube commuter, you have precious opportunity to daydream en route and, if you're unlucky enough to commute at rush hour, there is seldom time to even think when you have your ear in a stranger's armpit or head against a tourist's backpack. Publishing poetry in public places is vital if we are to keep it at the forefront of the human consciousness, where it can inspire, heal and transform. I would argue that it is crucial for urban architects and town planners to collaborate with poets, for urban strategists to inform their practice with poetry. We find ourselves twenty years on from the initial idea of publishing poetry on the London Underground. Let us continue to be critically open when considering where poetry can be best promoted.