Bloc Projects from the outside

Bloc Projects is the gallery I’ve been going to since I arrived in Sheffield in 2005. Whenever I go there I feel I am visiting from the outside. By this I mean two things—firstly that I go expecting an encounter with something that I do not know about or even understand and second that I go to experience a place I am not quitepart of. I think the first motivation is typical of anyone who likes to be surprised and challenged in art galleries. The second one might be more particular to me.

Bloc Projects was one of the ways that I got to know what Sheffield was or could be. I came to the city when I was 28. I’d decided to do a PhD. I’d worked in contemporary art, but had left that and London behind. I didn’t know any artists when I moved here. Part of my motivation for visiting Bloc was to be around them, because I like being around artists and finding out about their ideas and work.

I’m not clear how I discovered the gallery. I probably went to the Showroom Cinema a few months after moving here and I probably went through all of the leaflets and flyers they still have out on the shelves in the foyer, and one of them was probably from Bloc Projects, and I probably showed up to an event or maybe subscribed to a mailing list.

I’ve searched my email records and the first mention of the gallery on my computer is from 2007 when I sent an email asking to be taken off the mailing list. Reading it now has reminded me of all the post Bloc used to send out. In my email I suggested sending emails instead, or to quote myself: ‘You should utilise social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook more.’

Well!

I’d like to point out that I didn’t write because I am the sort of person to send unsolicited email on contact preferences to arts organisations. I want to make that clear. It’s rather I was (probably) responding to a now lost email or postcard from Bloc Projects asking for feedback on contact preferences. And in answering, I was probably, almost certainly, procrastinating. Anyone who has ever done an extended project like a PhD knows that requests for feedback or surveys are dutifully filled in, often under the pretence of helping other researchers out, but really so that you don’t have to do your own research. In the same email I also responded to the question

What impact do you think Bloc has on the city as a whole?

Which is a hard one to answer. Even after another decade I’m not qualified to answer that. Back then I put ‘It's accessible to everyone—doesn't exclude people or market itself as exclusive’.

I’m still not sure what Sheffield is, as a whole. My understanding changes depending on where I am. Bloc Projects was one of the places where I got to know the city outside of the university where I studied and later worked. It had a different agenda: it lacked a corporate mission, it was closer to the ground. That’s not to say that the gallery transcends all socio-economic, gender, ethnic and class divisions, but it tries. I learnt, through Bloc Projects, that Sheffield was independent, contemporary, open and politically responsible. I learnt that Sheffield wasn’t boring. It could be silly and it could be intelligent. It was cool without being fashionable. It had cheap beer. Sometimes free beer.

My first memory of the gallery—which may be a later memory—I’m not sure—but my first big impression was of an event when both Bloc Projects and Bloc Studios were open. There was a show and performances in the courtyard which culminated with someone silhouetted behind a screen, dressed as some kind of wolf, on a balcony, screaming into a microphone. It was loud and funny and atmospheric and mysterious and definitely of its time. I’ll never forget it: one of those moments that encapsulated my 2000s (that weird, shifting decade).

I also went on a date to Bloc Projects. She was doing a PhD in Ecology (or Plant sciences, I can’t quite remember) and hadn’t spent much time outside her circle of expat researchers. I suggested Bloc because it stood in such a contrast to the bubble of the University of Sheffield (which, unlike Sheffield Hallam University, doesn’t have an art school). There was an opening that evening and an open studio at the same time. We visited the gallery and a number of studios (memorably Peep Priestley’s). My date and I had a drink and talked to people and looked at the exhibits, then I asked her whether I could walk her home, and she said, ‘yes please.’

I’m not sure if she ever came back, but I have, many times. I got to know the curators, Lesley, Charlotte and now David. I was asked to sit on their Board of Directors and have done my best to contribute in a more formal way, aside from just showing up. Despite all this, I still feel as if I am visiting ‘from the outside’ as it were, which is, to be honest, exactly where I like to be, learning and seeing more of contemporary art and the city’s artistic community. In fact, it’s precisely this sense of ‘welcome distance’ that I love so much about the place. It takes what is not part of me me and allows me to approach it. As in art, as in people, as in places.

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