# This won’t happen

I’ve talked about *The Clearing* a lot. We stayed as caretakers in the summer and had hundreds of visitors. Some would ask a general ‘what’s this about?’ question, others were more pointed—‘why were you chosen to be here?’ or ‘can I fish in the lake?’. Answering was easy to begin with, but became harder as I changed with the project. When we left I found it difficult to be specific about my experiences there. It was easy to say, ‘it was amazing’ but I found it hard to go deeper. The artwork is certainly well named. It certainly represents a space in my mind.

I can remember receiving the email confirming we’d be caretakers. I told my wife that ‘we’ve been invited to do something really special. We’ve been accepted to live in an art project that imagines the world after the apocalypse.’ I can remember her saying, ‘Right…?’. I told her we’d stay for a week off grid in a kind of survivalist fantasy set in the grounds of a stately home/art gallery. I told her it would be special. We’d be living in a geodesic dome: a self-sustaining geodesic dome. And the public will visit us and experience the apocalyptic future. And this will be the art. She nodded. I showed her the press coverage and the email that began ‘Welcome to the future!’. I said that I would really like to go, that it would mean a lot to me.

In terms of day to day living neither of us had much of an idea what to expect. Not surprising really, considering that this wasn’t, obviously, a run of the mill thing to do. I suppose I did expect some sort of ‘encounter’. Something that would change me. At the very least I believed I would read and think deeply and get some writing done every day. I packed books, clothes and whisky. We caught the train from Marylebone and then took a bus that circled small villages, a car manufacturing plant and the British Motor Museum, where their annual bus festival was taking place. I remember some of the attendees walked over from their vintage buses to take a photo of our bus in service.

The driver dropped us off at the gates of Compton Verney, an eighteenth century house that sits in a landscape designed by Capability Brown. There’s a chapel, stables, an obelisk and a lake. The house had been home to aristocrats, industrialists and the army, before lying derelict until it was developed as an art gallery at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This is where *The Clearing* is sited, as a contemporary ‘eye-catcher’ on the banks of the lake. The artists have a website where they describes the project as

[A] vision of the future in the grounds of Compton Verney Art Gallery and Park. We’re building a living, breathing encampment, in the shadow of the former stately home, where people can come together to learn how to live in the world that’s coming our way. From March to December 2017, *The Clearing* will become part school, part shelter and part folly.

In the middle of *The Clearing* is a geodesic dome. Inside the dome, a series of workshops will teach you the skills you’ll need once the sea levels rise and the global economy collapses. Outside of these workshops, a series of caretakers will occupy the dome, to chop wood, feed the chickens, and keep the vision alive.

I certainly chopped wood and fed chickens. I did not write and I hardly read. Much of what I planned to do didn’t happen. I sawed a lot of logs. I kept fires going. I ate and enjoyed eating. I was happy being with my wife. She did more or less the same things I did, although (I suppose) she was better at lighting fires. I thought we would have much more sex there then we actually did. Mostly we were too tired and it was just a bit awkward in terms of space and time. In fact I felt profoundly unerotic for much of my time there. I sat in the sun and blinked. I wandered to the big house twice. I did explain the project to visitors, especially at the start of my stay, but then I stopped explaining it so much. I fed chickens. I enjoyed being with them. My mode switched to one of being in the world, not of looking at the world.

At the end of the week, someone asked me what I had learnt from my experiences in the future and I couldn’t answer the question. Of course I was tired from being in the sun sawing wood and looking after children and chickens. More than that though, the question puzzled me. I didn’t feel like someone who had ‘experiences’. Or a person to which other things happened to. I remember the man asking me. I sat there in the sun and I replied, ‘That’s a good question. I feel I have lost the ability to think of myself as someone who even has experiences.’

Looking back, I don’t think he thought I was being pretentious, because it was clear that I meant it. But it’s hard to get back to that state of mind. In fact, it’s impossible, as that state of mind is not compatible with looking back and analysing, which is what I’m trying to do now.

Losing the ability to reflect seems to have gone hand-in-hand with not having any media. I didn’t use my phone. I didn’t check my emails. I hardly read anything, despite my intentions. I didn’t use power. Actually there was a clockwork radio but we broke it on the second day. I didn’t travel anywhere—a couple of walks but not much really. We stayed in one single place for a whole week, day and night. We went to the Welcome Centre every day to collect water and even that felt like an exotic place with electric lights and things for sale and people who journeyed there. Many of those people came to visit us too. We were there in August, high summer. There must have been at least 100 people a day who stopped by. Although it was only a week it seemed much, much longer.

I only realised how much ‘media’ there was when I left *The Clearing* and went back to the world. Media is not quite the right word for what I mean. Or maybe it is. I don’t mean just ‘news and entertainment’ but rather a kind of self-generating communicative connected fluid. Not just the internet, but phone calls too, adverts, printed things, just the whole mass of connective stuff that ties up the world and keeps us going from place to place. I never realised how much I thought through this. So losing this fabric—of communication and standpoints and things being sold—losing all of that went hand-in-hand with losing my sense of self-reflection.

I stopped thinking ‘well what do I think about that’ and stopped placing myself in the world in a responsive, critical way. It was a very peculiar experience. Living in *The Clearing* unravelled the way I’ve been trained to think. When I began to experience moving about in the media again, I felt my sense of self return. The deep and peaceful blue sky person melted away and I got my familiar self back. Perhaps this is how the media-world flatters you: it makes you think there’s a ‘you’ and that ‘you’ is important.

It sounds disingenuous to claim that I lost my sense of self inside such a provocative and thoughtful environment. I was, after all living in a geodesic dome with its own distinctive branding, in an art project surrounded by contextual stories of dramatic environmental change on the edge of a Capability Brown designed lake. It wasn’t as if I was living as a hermit in a stark and bare hut. I was in an extraordinary managed landscape. Indeed, our presence was a key part of the communicative object. I was a caretaker and part of my role was to explain my environment.

And yet it did happen. I think it is very much to do with having a total break from all the instruments that typically form and reflect my mind. That and the repetitive action of making food, working with my wife, solving day to day problems, sawing logs, becoming absorbed in making it through the day in the same place. Usually I am absorbed in something else. In working, in teaching, writing, in more distant places than the world in front of my eyes. Usually I try to spend the least possible amount of time tending to my day-to-day survival.

I think that’s one of the clever and interesting things about *The Clearing*: it disturbs the general story of what we all agree on, a general sense of the world and where the world is, where it is going and what it is doing. It replaces all of that with a narrative of apocalypse, which sounds dramatic and complex but is in fact simple and straightforward as it insists you are left with what is in front of your face and that’s it. There may be Men with Guns coming but you don’t know and you can’t tell. Fire needs to be started, wood chopped, plants watered and chickens fed. I found it easy to be part of this story and was happy discussing it with people.

I remember leaving the story. Asking someone else a question in Banbury station. Asking them which train went to London. Then sharing the train with someone else, a stranger, who I did not have a relationship with and who did not want to speak to me. That was odd. I looked at him for a long time and can still picture him now. I remember coming into London, walking into the Tube, spending money. Plugging headphones in and listening to recorded music! When I returned it was the weekend of the Notting Hill Carnival. People had their faces painted with flags from the Caribbean.

In terms of climate change, in terms of the causes of apocalypse, leaving *The Clearing* did not drastically change my habits. I became a little more diligent at recycling, which is not saying much, as I was not particularly diligent. What changed was my keener awareness of my own complicity in how the world forms my identity and renders my subjectivity. Being displaced from that disturbed me. To finally answer the man’s question, I suppose I learnt how dependent I am on the subtle presence of ‘what the world is’ as expressed in a really loose and ambient definition of media, movement and pervasive capitalism.

This is shocking and jarring because I like to think that, as a writer and researcher, I have come a long way into becoming a critical and independent person. Staying in *The Clearing* taught me that I am very much a creature of the world, deeply dependent on it in ways I never realised, in a far more abstract way to that which the chickens were once dependent on me. Perhaps this is why my sensitivity to the erotic diminished. Along with the labour I was performing, I lost the means by which my psyche is motivated and purposed. The obvious conclusion is that I am constantly kept in some kind of low-level eroticised state by media, movement and pervasive capitalism.

Once I left *The Clearing*, I became interested in how the artists, Tom James and Alex Hartley, constructed their story and worldview. Much was embedded in the fabric of the place: the dome architecture and makeshift construction that drew on 60s and 70s communal living transplanted into a eighteenth century landscape. Threaded through the structure was the story told via signage, emails, blog posts, brochures, web sites and workshops. They spoke of a) apocalyptic, dramatic and cataclysmic change and b) survival in terms of homespun achievable everyday domesticity. The contrast and friction between these aspects gave humour and purpose to the project. This manifests in the recurring characters of the story: the chickens, Big Sainsbury’s, Men with Guns, maybe even the caretakers themselves.

Time was compressed at *The Clearing*. Not only did the 1960s collapse into the 1760s into the imagined future/present, but this was marked out by a series of workshops that spanned a new civilisation. The titles tell the story:

Build a fire

Drink the water

Build a toilet

Food part one: finding it

Food part two: growing it

Our daily bread part one

Our daily bread part two

Working with wool

Keeping chickens

Soap: staying clean in the anthropocene

Making medicine

Making mead

The printed word

Harnessing the wind

Post-apocalypse pop

Listen to the radio

Rebuilding democracy

Astronomy for survivors

How to die in the future

The physical environment of *The Clearing* evolved with this story. We arrived when there were bottles of mead fermenting on a shelf. Weeks later we returned to see a radio antenna on the porch. As a caretaker, it was the sort of story you could add to by developing the house and grounds. Before I arrived I thought this was quite a radical aspect but once I’d lived there for a few days I realised that there were limits on what you could and could not do. Much of this was dictated by the time it took to perform daily tasks or speak to visitors. There was also a sense of being a caretaker, of looking after and maintaining a world rather than actively building a new one. The artists were the ones who had created and built this colony in the future. The caretakers were the ones who maintained the vision, tweaking it now and again, but keeping it essentially on track. In this there was a sense of trust and responsibility at being given something unique, comfortable and warm to make a home in. Many of the visitors asked how they themselves could stay. We felt lucky to have been chosen to do so and treated the experience with a sense of duty.

The wider landscape intensified this. The grounds and lake had been restored to work in dialogue with Capability Brown’s plan and a more contemporary appreciation of the natural world. While *The Clearing* had chickens, the lake was full of fish and boasted kingfishers, otters, swans, ducks and moorhen. I became attached to a particular duck, an expert scavenger who always had an eye on what I was doing. I also admired a limping moorhen that studiously ignored me with a similar sense of determination. It may not sound like much but that duck and moorhen were a big part of my imaginative world whilst I was there.

I wonder what would have happened if a stranger arrived and claimed the house from us. It is difficult imagining anyone mistreating it or letting it fall into disrepair. There was a stability to its existence that mirrored and reflected the stately home over the water. Both are ordering principles, places that project a mind-set and concept. Both contain the other in their fantasy worlds. From Compton Verney’s point of view, *The Clearing* was a contemporary ‘eye-catcher’, a curious talking point that enlivened and entertained the artistic landscape.

From *The Clearing’s* point of view there was something unsustainable about big stone houses. Inside the geodesic dome there was a small reproduction of *The Hay Wain* by John Constable. This may have been a comment on art galleries, scarcity and access to culture. It also satirised our acquisitive urges and the value systems that accompany them. *The Clearing* was an attempt to project a vision of the future within the ruins of that mentality. Compton Verney stood rather like a memorial, a shell containing art across the water. There was a sympathy between the two, both being reclaimed properties, both developed from previous visions of the world.

The ‘big house’ supplied the space, context and audience for the project. It was not, however, explicitly addressed in the contextual story surrounding and maintaining the artwork. The gallery walls were invisible, the ‘big other’ within its tale of apocalypse and meltdown. This silence is symptomatic of the art world that *The Clearing* rejected and yet inhabited by necessity, a contradictory world, at once underfunded and privileged, riven with familiar divisions between artists and consumers, patrons and publics. *The Clearing* disturbed these categories, but drew on them, as it emerged from a world ruthlessly organised by capital and simultaneously dependent on people’s love and generosity.

Tom would often mention Big Sainsbury’s in the workshops. It was shorthand for all the compromises that people make with the world. Big Sainsbury’s stood in opposition to self-sufficiency and yet wasn’t an obvious villain (like the Men with Guns), but something that caretakers would interface with daily: when we consumed treats that we hadn’t produced—a chocolate bar perhaps or a glass of whisky—we said they were looted from the shell of Big Sainsbury’s up the road. Thinking about this now I wonder whether Big Sainsbury’s also represents Compton Verney. Both are symptomatic of a series of compromises and bargains that support and construct the current situation in the friendliest and kindest possible way.

Arriving at a critical position against friendly and ostensibly kind things like Compton Verney and Big Sainsbury’s is difficult. It involves placing yourself in dialogue with history. *The Clearing* achieved this by occupying an endless ‘Future Present’ that mixed the contemporary with a blank future where nothing else exists. This had the effect of making the present strange and questionable.But even then, the artwork wasn’t clear on what questions to ask. Do you want to slide into cataclysm and apocalypse; do you want to drift into ever-greater inequalities? Obviously not. Is Big Sainsbury’s unsustainable? Yes. So what do you stand in opposition to? Everything? Some things? Which things?

*The Clearing* is not a confrontational project. It did not force issues but cloaked them in day-to-day domesticity. As such it was and is successful at engendering critical positions by offering something for all sorts of people to focus on and think through. For example, there were some makeshift fishing rods on the porch that overlooked the water. Birch branches, line, hooks and a tub of maggots. Out of all the aspects of the project that you could respond to, from alternative living, architecture, home grown food, makeshift technology, apocalypse, etc., certain people would zero in on fishing. There were two or three I met who loved fishing and were very skilled at it. There were others, often children, who were curious about fishing and wanted to try their hand at it. There were some who saw fishing as a metaphor for a richer life in the future, surviving on the edge of a lake, fishing to think and eat. There were those who remembered fishing in the lake when they were young, when the big house was itself a ruin. My point is, there were many points in the project that gave people an opening. It did not force critical subject positions. It slowly engendered them through day-to-day domesticity.

There were reminders of the old world printed on the reclaimed materials that the dome was built from. There were barcodes and instructions and brand names on the wooden panels which lined the interior—‘To unpack remove this side and lift’, ‘1560-99-613’, ‘Jaguar’. Caretakers had written practical signs in chalk (‘Be careful the stove and chimney are hot’), others had painted more pointed slogans:

‘Strong & stable…?’

‘Worried about tomorrow? Start preparing today!'

‘Space and time to think’

‘Come with me if you want to live’

‘Take care’

None of these were particularly poetic or profound, but they seemed to fit the homespun, make-do-with-what-you-have philosophy of the place. There were remnants of craft projects lying around, things like nettle cordage, knitting and carving: art emanating from work. Being part of *The Clearing* made me understand and appreciate folk arts more than I ever had. As my own critical faculties and imagination seemed to diminish I began to appreciate the work and the labour that went on around and before me. Perhaps I was influenced by the collection of British folk art in the big house. Original, critical and disruptive work did not seem as important or as relevant as working with the grain of the world, of shaping, developing and improving what was there already. This could be in the form of fixes around the house or in adorning something practical and useful. With this the artistic mode of interpellation shifted. The individual will striving forth and claiming, originating, penetrating and impregnating seemed less relevant and less at home here.

Perhaps because I lost myself in *The Clearing*, I try to contribute to it now, by remembering it. All these anxious words are written in contrast to their absence in the clear summer sky. I found it hard to write there. My notebook recorded thoughts slowly burbling out of my head, single words that mean little now, like a brain coagulating into goo, exercised in a different sense, exorcised. I remember sitting in the sun on the veranda, all the people gone, my wife gone even, and myself left in the future, a post-apocalyptic kingfisher fluttering to rest on the perch and a glass of looted whiskey tasting good and looking at the big house in the evening sun and feeling like I had been there longer, sitting there on the lake. It felt I had been there forever. And I seem to recall the force of that feeling now without knowing the sense that accompanied it.

How is art remembered? Does it matter when everything is ending? Are we living in a time of prophecy? How long till all things die? Will nothing be the same in ten, twenty, thirty years? Should we have children? What does this place matter, in a landscape that speaks to eighteenth century ancients, to classical architecture, to stately homes, to nature in harmony. What does it mean to bring apocalypse here. How long before The Clearing rots and decays? Will it last longer as an item on artists’ CVs? Will it be remembered in the critical discourse? What will survive of that? What is going to happen to all the words and images, all the pressured and pleasured weight of the media that I sidestepped for a week and contribute to now.

Tifa, my wife, and I lived for eight weeks in the present and then went back to attend the workshop on democracy in the future. We took the train from Marylebone. There were about thirty other people at the workshop, all sitting around in a circle. We learnt about collective decision-making and we attempted to reach consensus on ‘who gets fed at *The Clearing*?', a question given to us by Tom. As you might expect, there were a number of interpretations and versions of what this meant to those present. Were we talking about who gets to eat at the workshops themselves, were we talking about the daily visitors to Compton Verney and whether they can eat the caretakers’ food? Or were we talking about food supply in the future? How many were still alive? What if a starving stranger arrived? Should they be given food? How precious was food?

Because time collapses in *The Clearing* it was possible to complete the exercise with different versions of the future going on at the same time. Some people at the workshop believed that the apocalypse has already happened. It is here and we live and walk amongst it already, under the shadow of the Men with Guns. As one of the workshop facilitators pointed out, slavery is happening now, not that far from *The Clearing*. A taxi ride away. There is extinction happening now. There is death and competition for resources. There are failing crops. We are living through the middle of it, through a time of furious denial, where some refuse or are too blind to recognise what is happening. We prevaricate.

Most people don’t know one way or the other. They haven’t made up their minds. Consensus has not been achieved. It is clear that there is not going to be an event to mark its coming. There is not going to be a moment or act of history. The earth is not going to split in two. There will be no meteor strike: instead we will have a gradual turning inside-out. A long tail of diminishing public services and Big Sainsbury’s and websites and media and discussion and talking and more art and words and commentary. None of these things will end but gradually people will turn to another mind set. Recognising it shares some similarities with faith—not because the signs aren’t obvious, but because there is such an information war concerning its presence, that making your mind up resembles an act of faith. Empiricism slips away under such a wealth and depth of media. Subject positions begin to look like religions. Fanatics mark the end of days.

And yet these are old problems too. When does one thing become another? Take a pile of sand and then, everyday, remove one grain. When does that pile of sand become a heap? When does ‘a lot of sand’ become ‘quite a lot of sand’ become ‘some sand’ become ‘a little bit of sand’? A grain goes every day. When will our world disappear? Today or tomorrow or the day after? Next year? There are no lines or rules or laws defining such complex states. Forming an opinion on environmental change is a political act. If the world is changing dramatically then we cannot continue to think of it as a resource to be exploited. We need to balance growth and temper capitalism. Maybe even redistribute much of the wealth that has already been created. These are disruptive political sentiments. As such there is a blizzard of ‘information’ influencing the forming of those opinions.

Still a grain of sand is taken away, despite all these words. How comforting it will be, when the pile is reduced to a few grains and the end is obviously here! When it is absolutely clear what has happened and no one can deny that all the big houses are ruined and unsustainable. When collapse is undeniable, failure incontrovertible and all the old wealth leeches from the territory as other value systems assert themselves.

*The Clearing* was an experiment in inhabiting these alternative value systems. It asked people to imagine how they would survive in such a landscape. In fact, it actively encouraged them to step into a future that was friendly and welcoming. Despite this, sometimes, when I explained the project to families, I would sound a flat note. I would explain that climate change was happening, the sea levels were rising and the world had fallen apart. More than once, a child asked me what had happened to all the people. Were they all dead? I would answer that what you see is all we have left. There were a few families who took this very seriously. Perhaps this is why a strong sense of irony and humour runs through all the communications surrounding *The Clearing*. You have to laugh because death is all around.

There is an aspect of the project that asks what ‘the good life’ is. It draws on the experience of communities that have lived and worked outside the matrix of consumer-capitalism. Some of these have been searching for a life beyond capitalism, others have been looking for relaxed social norms, all have been resistant or counter-cultural in someway. I found stepping beyond the hyper-competitive, acquisitive, unequal world profound and unsettling. Some visitors came to *The Clearing* because they themselves already lived in similar properties. I asked one family, who lived in a community of yurts in Portugal, what it was like to live every day in the future. She told me that it was ‘never-ending’. I asked her what that meant and she said that building your own world was absorbing and endless. Sometimes, she said, you have to force yourself to stop working because there is always something to do.

Ever-increasing ‘busyness’ has been a prevailing concern of contemporary times. Pervasive connectedness and intense capitalism has led to a wash of information and work demands that can be both exhilarating and exhausting. And yet ‘busyness’ is not the problem here. We are busy creatures. Work should not be thought of as a problem. Work is dignifying. The problem is when the interests of others control much of our time and labour, not just in paid employment, but also in the way we think through the media around us. The problem lies in the difference between contemporary work, and work in *The Clearing* or the community of yurts in Portugal.

The last caretakers left *The Clearing* in December 2017. It has been a successful project for Compton Verney. People came to see it and people talked about it in the media. Because it was so successful, there was some debate as to what would happen after its lifespan as an occupied artwork finished. The artists and Amber, the project co-ordinator, had British Lottery funding to support the caretakers for a year. The structure itself had planning permission for two more years. Could people continue to live there after the project funding had run out? Who owned it? Could Compton Verney turn it into a guesthouse? Should it be destroyed?

Such questions are interesting because they interrogate the value systems orbiting the project. What if it was opened as an AirBnB and marketed as a place where guests could reflect on sustainable living whilst enjoying a beautiful landscape. What would be wrong with that? Compton Verney would generate extra revenue and the artwork would retain some of its original purpose. This would, in some ways, be a fitting end for the project. It would be absorbed back, in the subtlest of ways, into capitalism. It would be turned, as so many artworks are, into an item of exchange, which could be bought and sold. Guests at the AirBnB would expect elements of service. They would want a fridge. They would not want to speak to visitors. Most importantly, they would want a holiday. They would want a break from the terrible busyness of the world out there. They would have bought the right to ignore the apocalypse. They could pretend it wasn’t happening.