

Urbanscape +Ruralsprawl

Sean Catlin

Summerhall's rich and storied past is written into its hundreds of walls. Previously the Royal School of Veterinary Studies, the building is now a major hub of the creative industry. As well as showcasing the work of artists, musicians, theatre groups, and many other fields, the building itself is a treasure trove of crumbling relics and dormant rooms. Summerhall is as much a place of growth as one of decay.

Upon being inhaled into its gaping maw, I found myself immediately confronted with the feeling of being a mere cell in a vast living organism. Streams of staff and tourists surged past as I strove to make my way through. Tendrils sprouted in all directions, I counted myself lucky I was here for a guided tour. I was then expelled into the courtyard, where an excited and somewhat apprehensive tour group had gathered.

Tim Knowles and Ania Bas are artists who currently specialise on the subject of walking. Recently, Knowles has experimented with the idea of placing control over one's direction in the hands of the environment, as in his *Windwalks* series, in which the walker's movement through the landscape was controlled by the direction of the wind. Bas' work, such as *The Walking Reading Group* - a book club which met on the streets of London to discuss literature whilst moving through the city - focuses on interpersonal relations and how the environment colours and shapes these experiences. Collectively, Bas and Knowles' work covers a wide range of topics such as the presence of the body within a space, social interaction within groups, and free will. Their latest work, *Urbanscape + Ruralsprawl*, is a guided walk which sneaks into the territory of performance art.

The first walk was led by Tim Knowles, who began by asserting a set of ground rules in order to organise an unusual group dynamic. We were instructed to follow closely in single file and assigned numbers which were to be repeated periodically in sequence to ensure that we stayed together. This, as well as the requirement that anything Tim said was to be repeated down the line to each member of the group, had an interesting side-effect. Patterns of behaviour quickly took hold and it was not long until each of us had surrendered our will to the leader.

Tim led the way as we snaked around the intestinal corridors of Summerhall. Often he would point things out and fire off a remark which would quickly filter its way to the end of the group. Although the route was certainly rehearsed, his manner had an improvisational quality which gave the illusion of flowing like water, taking the path of least resistance. We hurtled round the labyrinthine building at an impressive pace.

At one point, Tim warned that if anyone was afraid of heights or bees, they should stay behind. Almost everyone followed him up a ladder to the roof where we were confronted with a gorgeous view of Edinburgh as well as a row of half a dozen beehives. Tim warned us to move slowly as hundreds of bees drifted indifferently around us, allowing us

to soak in the serene beauty of the moment. The hives seemed like the perfect metaphor for the feeling of being in Summerhall, amongst a flood of artists, actors, and technicians, all working as one towards a common goal, each just a drop in an uncaring ocean. This Russian nesting doll of cooperative systems - the bees, the tour group, Summerhall – brought to mind the necessity of organisation and control. For without the building, or the tour, both systems of control, we would never have been had this experience. Without the hyper-organised hexagonal matrix of the bees, there would be no honey. It was a surreal experience, one that perfectly and poetically encapsulated the crux of the performance.

After coming down from the roof, Tim sped off once again. Moments blurred together, remarks echoed down the chain. I had the feeling of being trapped inside an Escher painting, having relinquished my will to a cult-like hypnosis which bound the group together. Passing through a dark room of bleeping arcade machines, it became unclear what was part of the tour and what was not. I showed the person behind me a piece of dried-out honeycomb I had picked up on the roof as a souvenir. Clearly locked into the patterns of behaviour Tim had conditioned into us, she looked at the piece of honeycomb, smiled, and passed it to the person behind her, who passed it behind them, and so on. Each person assumed that it was just another message from the front to be passed along until it reached the end, never to be seen again.

The second walk was led by Ania, who instructed us to write down some of the things we associate with going for a walk. We then held up our cards and matched ourselves with someone who made similar associations. Ania then informed us that on this walk, we were to talk to this person as earnestly as possible about whatever subject happened to come up, however personal or obscure. This simple instruction worked better than any ‘icebreaker’ activity I had ever taken part in. Normally these activities are incredibly cold and artificial, leaving the only way to bond being over the absurdity of the situation. This, however, opened the floor to genuine human expression.

This section had a lot in common with the end of Tim’s tour, when he told us that for fifteen minutes, we could go wherever we liked. Hearing this was immensely liberating and I made no hesitations before diving headfirst into the twisted, decaying underbelly of Summerhall. Similarly, when Ania told us that whatever we said was to be kept strictly between ourselves, the imaginary barriers of social convention suddenly evaporated. This allowed both parties to engage in a more intimate and sincere social interaction than empty small-talk could possibly offer.

Following this, Ania asked us to split up and find new partners. We then proceeded to follow the exact same path we had taken. This time however, we were asked not to speak to each other at all. This altered the experience drastically, as I became aware of how little mind I had given to my surroundings on the first walk. I noticed artworks that had merely sat on the periphery before. Despite this, the nagging feeling that something was missing sat in my stomach. As silence hung in the air, beckoning to be broken, I yearned for the unfiltered discourse of the previous walk. By contrasting the two experiences with each other, Ania had deftly demonstrated two things: That in becoming completely absorbed in

conversation, one ignores the world around them. Secondly, that if one focuses too much on their surroundings, they miss out on the fantastic depths of human interaction.

For the final segment of the tour, Ania brought us back to the courtyard, split up the pairs and reassembled them anew. She then informed us that we were going to take the walk a third time, however, one person must have their eyes closed, whilst the other acts as their guide. As I led my new companion up stairs and through corridors, I felt the urge to describe the surroundings to her, as she did for me when it was time to swap roles. The constant threat of causing the other harm meant that we never became too engrossed in our environment, as communication was vital. At the same time we never got too deep into conversation, as this would cause inattentiveness to the environment. As I was walked down the steps and out into the courtyard, sunlight brightened my vision and I opened my eyes. The walk had struck a perfect balance of personal and environmental interaction, bringing them together in a meditative dialectic.

Urbanscape + Ruralsprawl offered a fascinating way of looking at the ways in which the environment, as well as the dynamics and structure of groups, influences social interaction. Both tours toyed with the idea of flânerie – the act of attentive wandering that Honoré de Balzac termed ‘gastronomy of the eye’. Tim practised a sort of inverted flânerie, exerting his will on the group, directing our attention towards things rather than letting our gaze drift aimlessly. In doing so, he presented us with a fascinating glimpse into the depths and heights of Summerhall, revealing things that would never have been apparent otherwise. Ania’s tour presented us with an ideal to strive for; a delicate synthesis of socialisation and flânerie. Ultimately, *Urbanscape + Ruralsprawl* reminds us of the fundamentals of going for a walk; that by merely existing in a place, we become part of a massive, incomprehensible system. A place where forces both visible and invisible shape the way we act, move, and think. A place of simultaneous growth and decay - a body.