

This text was first published in 'newsletter 09' : centre d'art la Panera. Lleida. <http://www.lapanera.cat>

Antoni Jove Alba and Neal Beggs in discussion. Jan 2009.

*Antoni Jove Alba: When and why did you decide to link art to climbing?*

*Neal Beggs:* The link between art and climbing took about two and a half years to establish beginning with 'Tent on a ledge' in 1997. 'Surfaceaction' took place at the end of 98, followed by 'Expressway' and 'Corridor', a comparisons between Scottish mountains and Glasgow high-rise social housing. By 2000 the pattern was well established.

Climbing had played a major role in my life ever since I was a teenager, but I had never managed to connect it with my art practice. My practice fed more on Art than on lived experience. I knew this had to change. Once I had decided to relax my grip on painting the connection between art and climbing became an inevitability.

At the time all my energy went into making large grey monotonous. I would work the surfaces of these painting over and over again in an attempt to create a perfect surface. Impossible. Yet I was seduced by the activity and could not stop. Once I understood that it was the activity and not the paintings themselves, that I loved, it became possible for me to make other Works. I still continued to paint but now felt no urgency or necessity to finish. This freed up a lot of space in my mind, space that could now be directed toward what I hoped would evolve into a more vital, engaged and sustainable practice.

At first I made an series of indoor running tracks, then illuminated signs saying 'error', followed by an ice skating rink and so on. These new works whilst having little resemblance to painting always referenced painting, but in addition they also referenced something new, an action like running or skating and before long climbing too. So in answer to the question 'why' I would say that initially it came about as a natural consequence of a desire for a more vital art based on lived experience. Something that felt more authentic.

*AJA: Surfaceaction is a radical and stimulating work. How did you come up with this work?*

*NB:* The work came about due to the converging of several different circumstances, not the least of which was a strong sense of necessity. I had just finished my studies at Glasgow School of Art and felt the need to make a strong statement so as to establish my identity as an artist within the city. Surfaceaction fulfilled this need. The work however was not calculated solely to achieve this end. It evolved over time through a natural/artistic evolutionary process. Like many works it came about through conversation both with myself, and with friends, by simply putting 'two and two' together i.e. climbing and painting. It was a natural consequence of bringing together art and climbing.

As so often happens in art, works becomes concrete just when they are needed. So Surfaceaction fitted the time and context. It was, in a sense, a solution to a problem.

*AJA: Miquel Mont invited you to take part in the show. A show, that tries to analyze the current status of painting. Could we understand Surfaceaction as a wall painting? Could we connect it to painting?*

*NB:* Yes we can connect Surfaceaction to the world of painting and in so doing think of it as a wall painting, but only 'after the event' in retrospect. By this I mean that my original action was instinctive, the result of circumstance. I was not initially attempting to make a painting or expand painting. Of course it was an expression of a painter who was looking for new ways in which to work but I was not looking to make an objective critic with respect to painting. Surfaceaction was the result of the moment. I instinctively knew that this act made sense, and so I did it. As I explained, Surfaceaction and other works became possible only after I had removed painting from it prioritized position within my work. The word 'painting' can have a tendency to override the word 'art' as if painting in some way occupies a higher position. For this reason I personally am reluctant to give too much weight to the works obvious relation to painting. The work embraces more than painting alone. Having said this painting is still very much present within my practice. This I think is the crux of Miquel Mont's proposition, in that painting itself can and does refer to much more than painting alone.

(At Network Art in Aalst, I made an experiment taking Surfaceaction back into a painting, a wall painting.)

*AJA: On the other hand, could we understand Surfaceaction as an attack on the art institution, on the "white cube"?*

*NB:* Yes, but to do so would be to over look what for me is the more important and more relevant context of its creation. When I made the work I was more concerned with surviving as an artist than attacking the white cube or the art institutions. I was interested in freedom but that freedom lay inside and not outside these forums. In fact the beauty and seduction of the white cube in a sense initiated the work. I have always been a little skeptical toward the motivation behind claiming radical action while a 'general state of liberty' exist. Having said this there was indeed an instinctive attack on convention and

conservative values. Fundamentally Surfaceaction is about expanding the frontiers of art. That's what mountaineering tools are used for, to cover new ground and go beyond the normal conventions of what is

possible. This for me is how we should understand the work.

*AJA: In different texts and interviews you insisted that Surfaceaction is not a performance. In fact, you keep the process far from the public. You do it alone, without audience. Why did you decide to keep the intimacy and privacy of the process of work?*

NB: There are a few reasons for this 'privacy' and insistence on the work not being categorized as performance. Despite being an artist, I am basically not into the 'look at me' attitude. However sometimes in order to make a work it is necessary to place yourself within the frame. This is particularly true when the work involves some kind of physical activity such as climbing or 'heading a ball'; I'm referring here of the video work 'Chasing 1000' by Roderick Buchanan. Such works definitely do involve a 'per-formative-act', but they are not 'performances'. Being recorded by video camera and not a live audience they have more in common with objects than performance. The viewer discovers the looped video, watches it for a few seconds, minutes, or for its entirety, and then moves on. They are not required to clap, nor do they feel embarrassed if they choose to leave before the end. The experience of the work both for the viewer and for myself is not complicated by the complexity of real human dynamics commonly experienced within performance.

Surfaceaction works well without being seen as a live event. It is simply not necessary to make any more of a performance out of it than it already is, if you get my meaning.

*AJA: In your work the crossover between art and mountain activities, lead us to nature. What relation do you have with nature? Which value has nature in your work?*

NB: The question is very interesting, as in the past I would not have described myself in the classic sense as a 'nature lover'. My relationship with the natural had always been similar to that of the city, i.e. it presents an intense sense of stimulation, something to engage with. I could not simply look at it, as with art I had to do it, engage with it fully in a physical way. But you're quite right the crossover of art and mountains does lead us to nature and I am very happy to be discovering the importance of nature through my work; I am going through a process of re-education. But it does not only lead to nature, from nature we rebound back to the urban and technological world and of course the cultural and political. Nature is fundamental to the understanding of mankind. I guess I am interested in unearthing the code between man and nature that somehow seems to be written like DNA into the structures that man has involved.

*AJA: To what extent does the work of artists such as Hamish Fulton influence you?*

NB: Fulton is a kind of art hero. His single minded, yet open approach, to following through the two things he loves; art and walking, and then molding them into a single coherent form is exemplary. That 'straight line' quality that is so strongly exhibited with his work is something I would like to achieve, but I doubt I will ever do this. The path he treads is clearly exhibited on the surface where as its necessary to dig a little to uncover the trail I am on.

One of the most important things that an artist can do is open a new door for others to pass through. And this is what Fulton's work does for both artists and none artist. Fulton is definitely engaged in expanding the frontiers of art.

Last year I began my own walking project entitled 'From our house to the summit of Europe'. The project involves my walking from my home to the summit of Mount Blanc. The fact that such a project can be taken seriously within contemporary art is largely due to the work of Hamish Fulton. In many respects Fulton laid the foundations for this work. The concept of walking and the ideas of walkers such as Fulton and historic figures such as Rousseau are topic that I will address through this work.

*AJA: When I observe /watch your work I feel that it communicates a feeling of freedom. In fact, art is the place for freedom, but sometimes, institutions, trends, and the market, reduce artists' freedom. What is the secret to being free in artistic context?*

NB: I am not sure that I am free enough to answer this question! But following on this theme of walking, I guess freedom has to do with not having to follow the path that conventions set before us. This is fundamental but it is not the only thing that is fundamental to art. Art is a reflection of society and as such has its good and bad points just like the larger national and global structures that it inhabits. As artists we have to recognize this fact and decide upon our own level of engagement. More engagement does not necessarily mean less freedom, just as less engagement, does not necessarily mean more. Within the artistic context, as with all contexts, freedom is something we carry around with us, on our

person.

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