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Duncan McLaren

A SAINT-NAZAIRE EXPERIENCE.

Out the door, and into the lift, and down eleven floors, and out into the lobby, and out into the street, and it's good to be out in the fresh air, and we're walking.

We pass the ex-U-boat base without stopping for more than a quick video that Neal wanted to take of the awesome concrete. There's a cashpoint machine in one of the old submarine bays and that's where I've been getting my Euros all week. I feel completely safe when standing there putting in my PIN number, maybe because the prompts are in English.

We pass a dead rat of a variety unknown to us (it's huge and beaver-like) at the side of the same road going alongside the docks. Neal wants his video of it to convey the size of the thing, so he asks me to crouch by the dead animal and to put my hand close to its head. "Just a little closer", urges Neal. I have to remind myself that the emotion I should be feeling here is sorrow. That a creature which was alive is no longer so, and has been killed before its time by a car. But I go too far with this and it's all I can do not to stroke the poor thing's fur.

We walk fast and then we stop at a road junction. It's mid-afternoon but already there is a fair stream of traffic coming out of the docks. Neal videos the oncoming cars. Every single one of the drivers or front seat passengers has a good old stare and a look round at us, and it is only a matter of time before this camerawork gets us into trouble, surely. It must look as if we're doing some kind of official survey, and no doubt the docks has its share of illegal immigrant workers, social security fraudsters and the like. As I say, every single driver seems to be glaring at us: not much fun for either party. I'm glad when Neal desists. He can think about whether this is a subject that he wants to take further at a later date. For now, we're walking on.

We pause again to mess about on a railway servicing the docks. Neal puts his video camera on the rail and asks if I'll walk along the rail, away from the camera. So I do that, then I come back to the camera and Neal does the walking along the rail bit. It's a strong composition, the road-like rail swings away from the camera in a swooping loop. Besides, it's a lot less stressful than filming docks. I'd happily piss around on this piece of track for hours. Though that would be a waste of time, and we both know it.

It's our last chance to get some refreshment before entering a less built up area, so we go into a bar called La Liberté. It's the sort of place that only fills up when the dockers get off work for the day. We can't be at the end of a shift yet, because the place is empty. Neal has the camera out and the owner has already clocked Neal videoing the front of his premises, and is clearly uneasy about this. But Neal talks to the guy in Franglais, and tells him that he's an artist, that the pub has a beautiful façade, and the man soon relaxes. Sitting down with our beers, we fold the screen out from the side of the video camera and watch the footage that we've already shot this afternoon. None of it will be used for anything in particular; all of it serves a general purpose. We talk about the kind of attitude you need to make videos in public. You have to be decisive, relaxed, focussed, ready for anything, and you have to gain people's trust. It shouldn't be you on one side of the

camera, and them on the other. It should be you with them, sharing the wonderful life that is all around us, everywhere we care to look. At least sometimes it should be like that.

We're walking on along quiet roads now. Neal notices our shadows against the tarmac, and that by raising his arms he can create an American airman effect. The distant view through the high-rise flat's kitchen window of the statue of the liberating airman –sword held in right hand at end of outstretched arm– has been a slow-burning motif. Neal's got his mini-recorder device in his outstretched grip, because he wants to record bits of our conversation as we walk along. And I've got the camera in my right hand because I want to record bits of our dual American airmen impersonation.

I realise that I want to say a little more to Neal about the Nevil Shute book *Most Secret* which I've kept returning to this week, no doubt because of the omnipresence of the old German sub base and the American airman. In the 1945 novel, a team of misfit allies set up a flame thrower on a harmless looking French fishing vessel, and with it terrorise the occupying German fleet if not at Saint Nazaire then only a few miles up the Breton coast. I want to say a little more about this book because Neal has just told me that one of the students at Nantes school of art –as a tribute to something his own grandfather did–organised a swim across the 200-metre wide Loire at a lull in the tide. In his role as tutor, Neal has been encouraging the student to pay more attention to how he sets up the work and documents it. In other words, if one-off, risky, personal, performance events are worth doing, why not do them in a way that maximises the chance of an art audience or even a general audience taking an interest?

This gives me an excuse to mention the fate of the American officer on the *Geneviève*. After terrorising the German *Raumboot* for a few missions, the fishing boat with the hidden flame-thrower is eventually attacked by a much bigger boat, and blasted to kingdom come. The American officer finds himself in the water a mile or so from shore, and he realises that he'd rather swim for it than be picked up or picked off by the gunboat. So he does that: he swims for shore. He knows the tides and the current, so he knows he'll have to swim for several hours, but he's from California, he's used to swimming, albeit in warmer waters. Anyway, he makes it. Exhausted he pulls himself on shore. He further exhausts himself in the climb up the cliff of a coastline, and then collapses in a heap. When he wakes up he crawls around and soon works out exactly where he is. He realises that he'll get shot or arrested if he tries to go inland, and that if he sticks to the coast it will take him days to get to where he needs to go. However, he could get there more directly. He calculates that he needs to get into the water again, for several more hours of swimming. So he waits until the tides are right (he knows all about them because he was the navigator on the boat) and then he swims for it a second time. This is a longer swim than the last one, and he hasn't eaten anything in the meantime, but he makes it! This time it's a flat shore, but that means there is more security in the form of barbed wire which he has to negotiate before he can climb into and through a bush and go to sleep hidden from philistine eyes.

I'm telling the story. Neal is audio-recording it. And I'm taking photos of the pair of us walking along though we no longer have our arms aloft. A dog finds the airman. It belongs to a peasant woman who is friendly. She tells him to wait in the bush and under cover of darkness her husband will come along and lead him to safety. So that happens, and the American is in their farmhouse, eating bowl after bowl of hot broth. A sort of airman's residency if you like, with great views over the surrounding countryside. But what he really needs now is a rowing boat so that he can row across the channel and get back to England. Well, as it happens the French pair know of a little rowing boat that's more or less seaworthy, with one good oar and one not so good. But that is perfect as far as the airman is concerned, or at least it is more than he could have hoped for. He gets half way across the channel before he slumps exhausted in his little boat. He's not finished, not by a long chalk. But he is having to wait a long time for his fourth –or is it his fifth– wind. In the nick of time (some would say), he's picked up by a ship. A sticky journey then, but never any real doubt as to the final outcome.

I go on to say to Neal that people were heroes in those days, not like now when a single dead rat will freak us out just as easily as off-hand looks from surly dockers. Neal points out that the book in which the swimming exploit takes place is a work of commercial fiction, far-fetched in the extreme. But I never get reality and fiction mixed up, so I stand my ground. I stand by my swimmer circa 1942. Neal wonders aloud if he could fix up a

tutorial for tomorrow between the swimming event student and myself. Well, tomorrow is the day I'm supposed to go back to Blighty so I really have to prioritise flying over swimming for that whole day. Or else I'll find myself in a rowing boat halfway between Dover and Calais wondering what the undiluted French is for "Bonjour, tug captain, can you point me in the direction of the English-speaking world, s'il vous plait?"

For a while, as we walk along Neal and I practise our French, systematically adding to what starts off as a fairly rudimentary vocabulary:

Me: "Avez-vous got a spare oar, tug captain, because this one is..."

Neal (picking up from where I finish lamely): "Avez-vous un spare oar, monsieur, parce que c'est oar ici est un flame-thrower."

Me (picking up from where Neal fades off): "Avez-vous un oar alternatif, monsieur le capitain, parce que c'est oar ici est une pipe de feu, un pièce de résistance, un..."

Neal (interrupting my flow): "Avez-vous un iMac, monsieur le capitain, parce que ce laptop ici est..."

Me (interrupting): "Avez vous un iMac, madame la principal de Le Grand Café, parce que mon ami joue avec le laptop tout jour. Aussi, je désire voir his videos extraordinaires."

Neal: "Mon videos extraordinaires, Duncan?"

Me: "Oui, oui. Votre videos extraordinaires."

God, how tiring is that! No wonder Neal is finding it hard to become completely fluent in the language hommekind calls Francais.

We come to a bridge that takes a motorway over the little road we have been ambling along. The overhead road is the one that becomes a long bridge over the estuary, and this spectacular thread of bridge is something you can see in the distance from the high-rise flat, just past where the new Queen Mary lies in dry dock. So that all links up neatly.

Neal wants me to film him climbing the vertical slab of concrete. I don't see how it's possible –I mean the climbing, not the videoing. Neal points to a crack in the concrete that goes all the way up. Not a crack, rather it's a one-inch vertical gap between two huge slabs of concrete. Neal puts his hand in the gap, then his other hand in the gap just below. He squeezes his right foot into the crack of a gap, and then the left, and sure enough he's going up. I'm keeping him in the middle of the shot as he mounts the wall... He stops about twenty feet up, and comes down.

He wants me to give it a go. What he means, of course, is he wants me to stand there firmly rooted to the ground while he captures my complete lack of climbing prowess on video. But that's fine by me. I actually try to follow Neal's instructions. I brace my hand in between the two slabs of concrete. I twist my feet to the side so as to wedge them into the crack. But it's no good, I just can't get anything like the purchase needed to move in an upward direction. Maybe if I was on my own, and given an hour to come to terms with the situation. Yes, if I could just relax with my body and the task I was setting it... Hey! –I nearly made it off the ground then. But not quite.

Neal goes up the wall again, up another gap between slab-like sections, just as three young lads on bicycles go past noisily shouting. Haven't they seen anyone climbing sheer slopes of concrete on the support structures for motorways before? Apparently not. Come to think of it, I haven't either. Though in Neal's video, "Expressway", he traverses sideways across a bit of wall flanking a dual carriageway. He goes slowly, while vehicles zoom past in both directions, the odd driver unable to resist sounding his horn in mockery or tribute or whatever it is. In this case the kids stop their bicycles and look back, shout a few more indecipherables at us, and scoot off again.

We walk on. Neal tells me that he thinks the main piece of work for the show will involve large stones or boulders sited in the gallery. He points out a row of stones that are running

alongside the road that we're on which leads down to a few caravans. The boulders have been placed there by the council, and apparently these crop up all over St-Nazaire, though often there's just a single stone and it's used to block vehicular access down a road or track. Neal hopes to arrange for the council to deliver some of these stones to the gallery. Yes, that should be easy enough. Just a matter of getting someone at the Le Grand Café to make a phonecall. Probably not Neal, though. It would probably be better if it was someone who knew what the French was for "please send round a dozen of your best boulders". But why is Neal into this? I think about that question as we each select a big yellowish stone and sit on it. And I start the ball rolling by simply asking him.

Well, firstly he doesn't want all the work in the show to be video (and neither does Sophie LeGrandjacques). He wants something that makes as strong an aesthetic statement – highlighting the same kind of relationship between gallery and world, rural and urban areas– as did his piece at Glasgow's Centre for Contemporary Art. For the corridor leading to the CCA on Sauchiehall Street, Neal produced a text installation. On one side of the corridor, was a list of all the mountains in Scotland over 3,000 feet high (Munros as they're called). On the other side, was a list of all the tower blocks over ten stories high (was it ten stories or am I just making that up because the flat in Saint-Nazaire is on the eleventh floor?). Anyway, after each mountain or tower block listing there appeared an empty printed box. And when, during the year-long duration of the installation, after Neal physically climbed the tower block or the Munro in question, he would fill the box with a transfer containing a tick of black sticky-back plastic. After the two of us climbed Schehallion, I was given the honour of climbing step-ladders and marking the appropriate box. But of course the idea was to encourage the people of Glasgow, and anybody who was lucky enough to visit the exhibition, to further explore their environment, mentally or physically. Or both.

Back to the stones. Maybe there will be a mapping element to the piece. Neal has worked with maps before, producing from his laptop meticulously contoured, principally white, winter maps of the Ben Nevis area of the Scottish Highlands, for example, with the contours marking the height of the snowy ground. So I dare say he'll be tempted to get a map of Saint-Nazaire and to mark on it where the boulders lie. I don't know. But I'm already thinking that as a visitor to Le Grand Café, I would be walking back into the town taking the show out there with me. And I'd be revisiting the show, so to speak, every time I came across one of these stones. But I'm getting ahead of the situation. Let the work evolve at its own pace and in the head of its maker, not in mine.

There's a climbing dimension to all this as well. In 2001 John Frankland had an enormous boulder carried from a quarry on the south coast of England to the gardens of Compton Verney in the English Midlands. The huge boulder was plonked down on the lawn in front of the ex-country house turned contemporary art gallery. And Frankland invited various climber friends, including Neal, to do some bouldering upon it. I hadn't known that bouldering was a major subdivision of modern climbing. And it was fascinating to climb the boulder (by the easy route) and to watch Neal, John and a third climber searching for and practising various alternative ways up the near-vertical flanks.

I'm musing about this when I realise that we're being approached by the three boy cyclists who passed us earlier. They shout questions to first Neal and then me, and we have to tell them that we can't speak French. The three of them stop beside me, jabbering away. I'm peeling an orange, but I look up and repeat to them in apologetic tones that I don't speak French. And I smile. They're about ten. They're the children of gypsies, I guess, judging by their dark looks, their clothes, and the caravans a hundred yards further down the road. One of them is riding a bike without tyres. I briefly wonder what the French is for "boneshaker", but realise I have to pay more attention to what is actually happening here.

They're continuing to talk to me, quite aggressively asking for information. They are too young to be a real problem, but they bring back memories of the wild children that used to make life so unpleasant when I was growing up in the west of Scotland. They're still at an age when they don't really know what it is to be a social animal amongst social animals. They don't acknowledge other people's existence as being fundamentally equivalent to their own.

"Je ne parle Francais.", I repeat, missing out the word "pas", which annoys me. Perhaps it annoys them as well, because they shout back at me, all three simultaneously. The one

who seems to be the leader has a scar on his face and a sensual look about his eyes and mouth. I'm glad he's not a few years older.

"Je ne parle pas Français.", I repeat, word perfect. "Je parle Anglais.",

I add, with what I hope looks like a self-deprecating shrug.

Well, they still don't like something very much. There's a shaven-headed one who seems quieter than the others, less trouble. But his mates are frowning and gesticulating with their hands. The leader rams his tyreless front wheel at the kerb. He does this several times, trying to get a reaction out of me. I remind myself that I am in no physical danger here and that for sure Neal will be recording the scene on video from his seat on a stone a few yards away from my boulder. So, for the sake of art, I decide I will do nothing to foreshorten the conversation. And we'll just see what happens.

"Je parle Anglais.", I repeat, quietly. "Et je suis Écosse.", I add, in case that means anything to them. They're all talking at once again now that I've thrown them a bone they can play with. Each one takes it in turn to speak slowly and loudly, but I'm sorry lads, I just don't get it. I'm far too tense now to relax sufficiently to take in words that are probably quite simple. Christ, is this what it would have been like if I'd gone to the art school at Le Mans as I was asked? No, surely the students wouldn't have been sitting on bikes. Surely, it would have been individual tutorials. Surely Dettie Flynn wasn't exaggerating when she claimed that all her students –she was obviously proud of them– spoke good conversational English.

One boy is repeating a single word or short phrase over and over again. He cannot believe that I don't know what he means. But I don't. It's as simple as that. Are you getting this Neal? I look in his direction. He's holding the video camera at his waist, pointing it at the scene. My head turn has alerted the boys to what's happening, as I thought it might. One approaches the camera. Neal tilts the screen so that the boy can see what he's filming. The rock, me, and his two buddies, I'm reckoning. Two of the boys are now approaching the camera, making loud noises and pulling faces for its benefit. They shout, scream, dance, and laugh. But they don't touch the camera, they don't touch Neal, and they don't touch me. Certain basic human rights are being respected, then.

Back to me, it seems. The dusky boy with the pouting mouth and the scar puts his hand to his groin and makes a derogatory noise, a yelping. His friends laugh. The oldest boy could be saying anything now. Just how depraved are these kids? Or maybe it's fairly innocuous stuff. One thing's for sure, they're really getting off on the fact that they've got the upper hand over a couple of adults. The fact that we can't understand what they're saying, means they can get away with murder. Language is power. Oh, there are physical limits. But unless they transgress them they are basically in charge of this situation. What is "Language is Power" in French? I don't know. The older boy is staring at me aggressively now. He's pushing for more status within his group, more power over the stranger. I stare back, neutrally, but for just long enough for him to know that I'm holding his gaze. But then words are being shouted at me from one of his mates, so that gives me a chance to turn away before the first one can feel too intimidated. And so it goes on. Christ, are you getting this Neal? Is it worth it? I assume so. Anyway, I won't be the person that puts an end to the engagement.

One of the boys tries to say something to me. Yet again. Yet again, I shrug patiently. But he points insistently to my hands and then behind me. Oh, yeah, he's telling me where I can get rid of the orange peel. Well, I don't think now is the time for a discussion on the bio-degradability of orange peel, so I just make exaggerated nodding movements to show him I've understood what he's trying to tell me, and I smile to show him that my glimmer of understanding has a joke-quality to it, and I slowly get up off the stone, walk a few yards, and deposit the peel in a hole full of rubbish. Of course as I come back to my boulder the leader is speaking loudly and with bogus authority, trying to get me to turn back. "And what? Do something else with la peel de terre? Well, that just isn't going to happen, now is it?" And he shuts up.

A second or two later and they've gone. "How was your orange?" asks Neal. "That was one juicy fucker." And I hope that Neal captured every drop of fresh and fruity orange that dribbled from my mouth down over my chin.

We watch some of the footage on the camera's fold out screen. Just how insulting were they being? We realise that the word they were going on about at one point was "Adidas". They could not believe that we were unaware of the multinational corporation. We run that bit again: "Adidas," shouts one boy, hands clutching either end of the handlebars of his bike. "A-di-das !" shouts the second one, throwing his arms into the air in frustration. "A-did-as !" shouts the third, ramming the front wheel into the kerb again and again. All they were doing then was looking for a bit of common ground. I feel sorry that between us – a writer and an artist, professional communicators– we couldn't give them what they were looking for.

Neal suggests that we go on to what I'm referring to as the gypsy encampment, and I laugh off the suggestion. Row, row, row your boat, Neal ! It's where the boys have gone. For sure, they'll have fathers and older brothers, and they'll talk nonsense about us to them. Our equipment is expensive and vulnerable and it would be hard for us to talk our way out of trouble. I don't want to go into the enclosure; Neal does. But that's a difference between our working practises. Neal is always pushing himself; I am forever pacing myself. I think we've made a strong swimming team this week, but let's not get back into difficult waters quite so soon.

We find a couple more of the boulders off the beaten track, and we sit down. Neal has a smoke. I think about the last week. The visuals have been great. From the view from the flat to the sight of these sulphur-yellow boulders. There have been problems in communicating though, from the French-guided tour of the Queen Mary to that last little adventure. Damn, we should have asked the boys whether these stones were igneous, metamorphic or sedimentary rocks. What a lost opportunity! Yes, there have been ups and there have bloody well been downs.

All in all, it's been a great week for me. Water, fire, air... and finally this earth, these stones. Flying, swimming; flying, walking; and finally sitting here on this so-solid boulder. I hope, I really hope, it's been a great week as well for Neal, the three boys on their bikes, and all the dockers in their cars.

But I know, I really know, it's been a bad week for that rat.

In the midst of life we are in death.

Say it again now – life.

Duncan McLaren, october 2004