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Paul Neagu and Touch

Blind Bite

Any knowledge I can claim as my own about Paul Neagu and touch originates in an evening in 1975 in the Generative Art Group Office and Studio on the third floor of number 125 Shaftsbury Avenue, London, WC2 as a participant in a performance of *Blind Bite*. In the process of engaging with this wonderful exhibition, *Paul Neagu: Palpable Sculpture* and trying to work out what I could possibly contribute to the series of talks I have been anxious about (not to say already caught out by) the unreliability of memory in recounting anecdotes of my lived experience of Paul Neagu and his work. Conscious also about how ill equipped I am to play the role of art historian (to be caught out again) in the company of the distinguished contributors to the exhibition catalogue, including Kirstie Gregory here at HMI, who have made scholarly studies of Paul Neagu's work.¹

So when Jon Wood invited me to come here and talk on the subject of Paul Neagu and touch the sensible response would have been to reply thank you but no thank you because I don't think I have a lot to say about it. Except that Paul Neagu his work and his approach to teaching in the studios at Alexandra Palace on the BA in Fine Art between 1974 and 1977 at what as students we adamantly called Hornsey College of Art, even though it had, a year earlier in 1973 become part of Middlesex Polytechnic, were an important part of my formation as a young artist and for the kind of thinker and teacher I am today. I say young artist advisedly because that's how Paul Neagu regarded his students, and some of us he involved in his work in various ways. I experienced this twice. He invited (and paid) me to video record a performance with Perry Robinson (also a student at Horsey) at the Serpentine gallery, so it must have been *Hyphen-Ramp* in 1976. In those days the video technology was Portapak, real-to-reel videotape and in black and white, so the film showing here in the exhibition is not (as I first thought) the film I shot, because

¹ See Kirstie Gregory, *Paul Neagu: hyphen as consequence and catalyst*. Masters thesis, University of Huddersfield, 2014.

though not obvious at first, this one is in colour. Jon Wood was quite right to have me look more closely - in effect to check the desire to want it to be my recording.

Which raises the question *is* the film of the *Blind Bite* performance dated 1975 also showing here in the exhibition the one in which I participated? There is photographic documentation of a *Blind Bite* performance at Paul Neagu's flat at 73 Highbury, New Park in North London and the *mis-en-scene* in the film is different from the photograph, which I think is the small room I remember in the Shaftsbury Avenue Studio. I've watched the film many times, Matthew Perry is present (I travelled with him on the tube to Cambridge Circus) and Anish Kapoor, both of them fellow students in my year at Hornsey, so maybe I am the person on the right-hand side, second in after Paul, rarely visible, and after constant viewing I think I can hear the sound of my name when, by turns, we are asked to say who we are the final time we perform the ritual. I cannot be certain, but today I *can* hold in my hand a copy of *the Generative Art Group* publication Paul gave me after the performance.

This may be considered a rather self-indulgent beginning to a talk around the topic of touch in Paul Neagu's work – the 'I was there' claim to authenticity - nevertheless it is a helpful way to introduce something I find striking and productively poignant about this exhibition which has to do with relations between the palpable and the temporal, between then and now, the collective and the individual in Neagu's work until about 1977.

Paul Neagu Palpable Sculpture was reviewed by Davis Briers in the October 2015 issue of *Art Monthly* and he observes the most obvious effect of time on our experience of the palpable objects today, when he writes:

These fragile works incorporate low-quality material such as empty matchboxes and dried polenta, and of course they are no longer literally 'palpable' having achieved the status of archival relics. And most of them

have by now mellowed and discoloured somewhat, though not to their detriment.²

The review includes a reproduction of a photograph in the HMI show of Paul Neagu in 1969 in his *Palpable Art Exhibition* at the Richard Demarco Gallery in Edinburgh inviting two young women, in splendid 1960s attire, to explore by touch the 'Palpable and Tactile Boxes' that under actual exhibition conditions were suspended in a dark space to enhance the sense of touch. The photograph is a model for the entrancing, though now illuminated, reimagining in miniature of that exhibition here at the Henry Moore Institute, paradoxically now available only to the sense of sight, however the black and white photograph from 1969 and the group of actual palpable and tactile boxes are installed in close enough proximity to stimulate a thought provoking, time collapsing movement between then and now, touch and sight.

The *Generative Art Group: GAG, 1973-4* book, on show in the gallery, includes photographs of the collections of small objects of the kind I remember seeing set out on a large table in *Paul Neagu and his Generative Art Group*, his solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art Oxford in 1975, when as students Paul took us to see it. His occasional, informal palpable objects were too fragile to make it into any archive or collection, like the apples he carved with cells, one of which I found in my work space as a swap for a small object of mine he'd admired in a tutorial. The apple decayed but the gesture was typical of his approach to teaching as creative exchange that extended to the inclusion of his students as participants in events, not only *Blind Bite*, and *Hyphen Ramp* but also *Gradually Going Tornado* at the Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol in 1976, where Perry Robinson, Nina Horvitch, Matthew Perry and Anish Kapoor embodied four fictional members of the Generative Art Group assisting Paul in the performance: or as fellow fabricators – Matthew Perry soaked, bent and laminated wood for some of the Hyphens in his own workspace at Alexandra Palace.

² David Briers, *Art Monthly*, no. 390, (15 October 2015), pp. 26-27.

It was 'Untitled (Ceramic skull)' from 1973 with its cellular structure in the Upper Sculpture Study Gallery here in the exhibition that reminded me of my sculpted apple generator, but I was surprised by its uncharacteristic durability – ceramic is not a material I associated Paul's work. In the show there is also a captivating little photograph of Neagu with work in progress at the Ceramic Workshop in Edinburgh in 1971 in which he looks happy. The Ceramic workshop was founded in 1970 by Marilyn Smith to provide materials and technical advice for artists, potters and students. Smith managed the Workshop until it closed in 1974 so I emailed her with a list of questions hoping to find out more about Paul's time at the workshop. I asked:

1. When and why did Paul come to work with you?
2. What was his relationship with ceramics as a material?
3. Was this the one and only time he made ceramic objects?
4. Did he find that ceramics had limitations for what he wanted to achieve?

Marilyn answered:

1. Paul first came to the workshop when he had admired my work in an exhibition and asked to meet the artist. He visited and was enthralled by the atmosphere of artists at work. I invited him to join us and to take part in the Edinburgh Festival exhibition, *Earth Images* that I was curating for The Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art.
2. As is clear from his works, Paul loved craftsmanship, recognising that ideas develop in harmony with material. His father had been a shoemaker (mine a pharmacist) so he, like me, had grown up studying creative people making 'magic' with materials - mums in the kitchen, dads in workshop/dispensary. He loved to learn 'tricks of the trade'.
3. He came to Edinburgh as often as possible, often staying for weeks at a

time, until the workshop closed in 1975.

4. Paul never found the medium limiting, rather finding inspiration in what it offered. There was nothing that I could not help Paul to achieve in ceramic. All the artists supported one another, sharing technical abilities and ideas. Our priority was to achieve the best results regardless of author.

I enquired of Merilyn what she thought Paul wanted to achieve in ceramic?

'His aims for clay work', she said, '...was the same as in other materials, following his train of thought (cells, hyphens etc.) inspired by haptic delight. The cells you admired ('Anthropocosm' box with glazed ceramic 'cells') were part of a large *Running Man*, most cells being of finger size and filled with milk and honey'.³

The workshop must have provided a welcome community of artists at work for Neagu, who only the year before had relocated from Bucharest to London, and if the captivating little photograph of Paul there in 1971 smiling and surrounded by work-in-progress is anything to go by the environment suited him. There is a photograph of Merilyn Smith in the 1973-4 Generative Art Group catalogue amongst six named Generative Art Group/Collaborators and supporters.⁴

For me the elements of the exhibition that most evoke the palpable stage of Neagu's artmaking involving work with his objects and an actual (rather than fictional) community of participants are the four films here in the Upper Sculpture Study gallery, *Neagu's Boxes*, from 1968, *Hyphen Ramp: 588 Riots at the Serpentine*, 1976, *Cake-man Event*, 1971 and *Blind Bite*. Watching *Blind Bite* from the outside reminded me of what it felt like to participate in the action, blindfolded, fumbling to find the dishes of salt and honey, taking a bite of the waffle, groping again for the hand of my neighbor to pass on the sticky substance and it strikes me now that this particular iteration of *Blind Bite* is the most complete achievement of Paul Neagu's

³ Private email communication with Merilyn Smith.

⁴ *Generative Art Group: GAG 1973-1974*, p. 64.

ultimate aims for palpable sculpture declared in the Palpable Art Manifesto in Edinburgh in 1969: here are points 5, 6, and 7.

5. You can take things in better, more completely, with your ten fingers, pores and mucus membranes than with only two eyes.

6. These ideas are linked inseparably with the concept that art must function socially, yet never in a vulgarly naturalistic way.

7. Palpable art is a new joy for the “Blind” (in inverted commas) it is the most thoroughly three-dimensional study.⁵

As Kirstie Gregory notes in her helpful biography of Paul Neagu in the *Palpable Sculpture* catalogue, the fascinating film *Neagu's Boxes*, made in 1968 by Comis Laurian, documents some of the palpable, cellular sculptures, their opening doors and panels demonstrated by Paul Neagu together with his wife, actress Sibylla Oarcea.⁶ The film also shows some of the actions with the portable box sculptures on streets in Bucharest. The film highlights an aspect of Paul's performative practice that came back to haunt him later in Britain in a negative way, namely it's early links with theatre. There is a documentary photograph (SLIDE) in the Palpable Sculpture exhibition showing Paul in a red shirt with four of his cellular works and a box sculpture leaning against a wall of stacked bricks that echo their cell structures on a building site somewhere in Bucharest. The arrangement cleverly links art and life but it is also artfully *staged* to the extent that the trees on either side of the photograph form the two sides of a proscenium arch, the one on the left even seems to have been manipulated post production to enhance the effect.

When in 1976 Neagu performed *Gradually Going Tornado* spot-lit in the black space of what must have been the actual theatre or performance space at the

⁵ Paul Neagu, 'Palpable Art Manifesto', 1969.

⁶ *Palpable Sculpture: Paul Neagu*, Leeds, Henry Moore Foundation, 2015, p. 85

Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol with his four assistants the event was criticized for its theatricality, I was in the audience and it was theatrical. We can go some way to explaining why that was regarded as a negative quality in British sculpture in the mid 1970s if we attend to what Mel Gooding wrote about the effect of the philosophical underpinning of Paul's practice:

Through the 1960s and early 1970s, as the begetter of 'New Generation Sculpture, William Tucker was *Par excellence the propagator* of formalist dogma, with an insistence on the primacy of the non-referential, freestanding sculptural *object*. But the phenomenological English cast of his formalism was revealed when Tucker famously wrote of 'the condition of sculpture' as being subject to gravity, and revealed by light.' One might say to the contrary, that Neagu's later sculpture aspired to defy gravity, and to contain, generate, reflect and radiate light: at times, indeed, to show itself – within, around, between, above, its material forms – in Wittgenstein's terms, as *mystical*. For Neagu, object sculpture was a means to metaphysical contemplation and exposition; it was a threshold to the invisible.⁷

Not so in the sections of the film *Neagu's boxes* showing actions in the streets of Bucharest with the portable palpable box sculptures, designed to attract and intrigue passersby precisely with their materiality. As Kirstie Gregory writes, 'The freedom inherent in these mobile objects was opposed to the strictly regulated, inhibited environment created by the communist regime'.⁸ Indeed when in point one of the Palpable art manifesto Neagu declares:

The eye is fatigued, perverted, shallow, its culture is degenerate, degraded and obsolete, seduced by photography, film and television.

One might also add to that list the technologies of surveillance, one wonders just how dangerous it was not only to undertake but also to film those actions on the

⁷ Mel Gooding, 'Paul Neagu: A Romanian Artist in England' in *Palpable Sculpture: Paul Neagu*, Leeds, The Henry Moore Foundation, 2015, p. 8-9.

⁸ *Palpable Sculpture: Paul Neagu*, Leeds, Henry Moore Foundation, 2015, p. 85.

streets of the capital of Romania in a politically repressive environment.

Stylistically the film *Neagu's boxes* is of course suggestive of links between Neagu's works and the wider European avant-garde of the early decades of the 20th Century, particularly developments in expressionist cinema and theatre; the early unfolding segmented boxes would not look out of place in a scene from the particularly theatrical classic of German expressionist cinema, Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* made in 1920.

By contrast Mel Gooding's description of Neagu's later object sculptures as 'a means to metaphysical contemplation and exposition and a threshold to the invisible', to me suggests a growing drive to transcend materiality and the body demonstrated in the whirling dervish action in the Bristol *Gradually Going Tornado Performance* I witnessed at the Arnolfini. This inevitably included the waning of the idea of social and participatory sculpture, already problematic as early as 1972 resulting in the establishment of the Generative Art Group as a fictional collective as Neagu explained to Gooding.

Originally I wanted to do a real group with real artists and for some time I was talking to several individuals. In the end I realized it was going to be terribly difficult with real people because it's not easily that an artist gives up the idea of total self-control in what they are doing to the extent to which they are participating in a group work.⁹

While in the process of trying to get to grips with whatever it is I have to say about Paul's work I keep describing to friends and colleagues who also knew the man, as well the work, the moment I lost touch with it, or it lost touch with me. It was at the foot of a very large Hyphen sculpture installed in a park somewhere in London and I was with Matthew Perry who had probably helped to construct it. Researching

⁹ Interview with Mel Gooding in the British Library's *National Life Stories: Artist's Lives*, 'Paul Neagu 1994-1995'. See <http://sounds.bl.uk/related-content/TRANSCRIPTS/021T-C0466X0027XX-ZZZA0.pdf>

this talk I can now confirm the date as 1977, I was in Battersea Park and the sculpture was *Battersea Hyphen*, part of the Queen Elizabeth Jubilee exhibition. I could not relate to it any way at all, and that was that until in August of this year when I read Ileana Pintilie's sensitive and astute essay in the catalogue for *Paul Neagu Palpable Sculpture* called 'The Subject Generator: Spatial and Action concepts in Paul Neagu's Creation'. The essay also ends with a Hyphen, but a drawing, the 'hyphen of Three Levels' of 1976.

The three levels referred to the three-part plan Paul had for his work with a different form and title for each stage:

Triange = Blind Bite (palpable relations, palpable art)

Rectangle = Horizontal Rain (As I am we, we are I)

Spiral = Going Tornado (realization of freedom, atomization)

Pintilie's argument is that the 'Subject Generator/Hyphen sculptures gradually became the 'purified form' of 'the entire accumulation of meanings resulting from the performance-ritual experiments, which Neagu had made until 1977 when he stopped making performances'.¹⁰ The final paragraph of her essay reads as follows:

In a relatively short time this object sculpture developed into a metaphysical hallucination, abandoning it's archaic, experimental nature and the organic features that can be seen in his early works.¹¹

She sees this 'transmutation' in the drawing 'Hyphen of Three Levels', in which, she writes:

Neagu resumes the then already well-know form 'Hyphen' in a pure shape, placed on the page, tilted to one side, as if it were about to move. The three geometric figures, essential in defining the hierarchical levels' are marked with black, suddenly gaining immense gravity. Maybe this is why it seems to

¹⁰ Ileana Pintilie, 'The Subject Generator: Spatial and Action Concepts in Paul Neagu's Creation' in *Paul Neagu: Palpable Sculpture*, Leeds, The Henry Moore Foundation, 2015 p. 31.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 31

me that the drawing marks the end of a stage that was open to experiment, rich in diverse associations, and marks a swing in artistic practice towards closure and death, intuited in a flash'.¹²

Apart from being in itself an exquisite written articulation of Pintilie's own intuition about the direction of Neagu's work in 1976, it offers a way to formulate my sense of detachment in the presence of *Battersea Hyphen* in the park in 1977. A sculpture so removed from the experimental openness of touch and taste I experienced in the *Blind Bite* event, that modest but thoroughly social embodiment of three-dimensional study called palpable sculpture performed only two years earlier in Shaftsbury Avenue.

Lisa Le Feuvre in her catalogue essay speculates that it might be fruitful to make a study of Paul Neagu's engagement with tactile sculpture and that of the Brazilian artist Lygia Clark. In relation to tactility they moved in different directions, Clark from painting through neo-constructivist sculptures to audience interaction of various kinds with soft or ephemeral objects (like air and stone of 1966 made with an inflated plastic bag and a stone) she named 'ritual without myth', and finally into an actual practice of object centered psychotherapy.¹³ Paul moved in the opposite direction towards the third stage of his work plan: the realization of freedom as a discrete, freestanding sculpture that transcended the relational palpable body.¹⁴

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Guy Brett, 'Lygia Clark: In Search of the Body', *Art in America*, July 1994, p. 57.

¹⁴ 1977 was the year Paul Neagu was granted British Citizenship and the *Hyphen* in Battersea park was part of the Queen Elizabeth Jubilee exhibition, which included major figures in the British sculpture establishment amongst them Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth and Anthony Caro. I find myself speculating about the link between these events and Pintilie's analysis of the drawing *Hyphen of Three Levels* made the previous year.