

work by

PHIL COY

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with an essay by
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amidst the susurrations of motorways

The projects that Phil Coy has put in place are made in response to a number of locations whose co-ordinates are limned by the concrete geometries of the campus of Brunel University, the hissing tarmac bands of the M4, M40 and M25, and the glyphs and runes of the spreading runways of Heathrow Airport. The works he has developed illuminate discrete parts of the territory and map possible lines of narrative and interrelation across these architectures and landscapes.

The works speak not only of space, but of time. Or rather, different sets of nested periods of time. There is the short period of time occupied by a choreographed walk made by thirty hi-viz volunteers in *fallen eight* (2019), which was recorded using the CCTV cameras that normally monitor the University's customers and service providers. These movements through space and time are re-assembled into cubist temporal planes of *site office [closed circuit meditation facility]* (2019), where patterns can be seen in the geometries of the digital zoom and liquid crystal screen. There are the longer, recursive, time-loops in the work, *conical forms [three listening devices]* (2020): where the sounds of 'now' (the patter and roar of life unfolding around the spectator/listener, birdsong, snatches of conversation) are captured and reflected back and amplified by the concrete horns that are shaped in forms of 'then', cones that ghost pre-electric listening devices developed before the introduction of radar, military technologies designed to pick up the sound waves of distant approaching aircraft. They also reference the horns of the hand-cranked gramophones that were once manufactured in the nearby HMV factory.

These cones are made using recycled aggregate from the demolished John Crank Building. This had been the 'Mathematics Building' when the organisation was a 'College of Advanced Technology', a title, part blank description, part utopian mission statement, that seems imbued with traces of the 'white heat' of the 'scientific revolution' that Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced would be the crucible for making a 'New Britain' in his famous 1964 speech. In 1966 the College expanded to become a University, and that same year, François Truffaut, surfing the cool cutting edge of the French New Wave, made *Fahrenheit 451* at the nearby Pinewood studios. This film, based on Ray Bradbury's novel, shows a future where people are mesmerised by an interactive television series called 'The Family' - a scrambled premonition of 'Big Brother' perhaps - and printed books are banned and burned by the firemen. A sect called the 'book people' seeks to preserve these prohibited texts by committing them to memory. In *somewhere somewhere nowhere* (2006) Coy took the opening sequence of this film and replaced the colourised constructivist wire frames of domestic television ariels that Truffaut zoomed into, with satellite dishes. This updated analogue forms into the digital age, so bringing a past vision of the future back into the present. A similar translation across technologies and eras occurs in *as far as i know* (2015), where Coy restaged on London Transport, a scene from *Fahrenheit 451* of commuters on a monorail. The recordings of this event were then distributed across media formats and platforms unknown to Bradbury or Truffaut: .gifs and Instagram posts on crystal screens.

These works make us freshly alert to histories and futures, revealing complex ways they are entangled with locations in and around Brunel University, inevitably leading us to a consideration of wider or larger temporal boundaries. That is, the horizon where the conditions that allow the possibilities of these structures first came into play, as well as the (future) boundary where they will start to slip into the past. When or where does the susurrations of motorways recorded in, *the cars hiss by my window like the waves down on the beach* (2019), start? Where did the patterns of flight paths start to be generated? What is the span of the interactions and parallels of technology and the natural world that *eleven windsocks for Brunel* (2019) alludes to? What are the conditions that allow the flight control towers of Heathrow to rise, that generate the emerging simple geometries of the 1960s pale concrete buildings that Coy memorialises in Henk Snoek's black and white images on the *youarehere.work* website, and which supports their sublimation into dust as documented in the film *grey goo* (2020)?

A point of origin is signposted by the name Brunel itself. This heroic engineer, born in 1806, was lauded as one of the greatest figures of the Industrial Revolution. His building of railways and steamships, his development of bridges and tunnels, was crucial to the expansive new releases of liberated carbon across the globe's entire surface, gleefully building on the work started in 1784 when James Watt's steam engines laid their traces of carbon worldwide. This marked the emergence of our modern era and our modern culture. Over time these releases have

expanded, both in mass and in the variety of matter: carbon gasses augmented with black carbons, with methanes, with the thin layer of Carboniferous Period through repeated white hot scientific revolutions; through the promiscuous development of concrete buildings to research and build technologies (the manufacture of concrete accounts for about 8% of global emissions of CO² each year, if concrete were a country, it would be the third largest emitter in the world); we have built new airports and runways (aviation accounts for roughly 2.5 percent of carbon emissions), nodes that are served by the sleek lines of motorways (road transport accounts for 10.5% of emissions and all transport for approximately 14 percent). Brunel, Heathrow, the motorways, have been both at the centre and margin of these carbon narratives, simultaneously generators and that which has been generated, and their histories allow us to trace how our understandings are changing. Brunel is the University that honoured Margaret Thatcher, whose administration did more to encourage the actions of unconstrained expansive market forces in the UK than any other, whilst the roads around Heathrow are where Boris Johnson felt it useful to (briefly) threaten to lay down in front of earth moving equipment to delay the market driven expansion of the Airport. The optimisms and expansions of the Modernist forms of the 'Mathematics Building', speak as strongly of the hopes for a utopian future, as the documentation of its demolition in *grey goo* speaks of contemporary fears of a dystopian future emerging from its work. 'Grey goo' is also the name of a future scenario, where self-replicating molecular nano machines consume the biomass of Earth.

If you draw a line almost due south from the site of the demolished 'Mathematics Building', down past the western end of Heathrow Airport's Terminal 3, and extend it again the same distance, we have a ley line that connects Brunel, Heathrow and the unremarkable suburb of Shepperton. This was the home of J.G. Ballard between 1960 and 2009. Ballard, described by Will Self as "among a handful of the most significant and influential writers of the English language since the second war"¹ wrote a series of extraordinary books, where the buildings and geographies become the sites of strange change and catastrophe. *The Drowned World* (1962) imagines a journey through London that is now underwater. "The central conceit of *The Drowned World*... is that under pressure of an environmental change tantamount to a new Triassic age, the human mind might itself regress"² *The Burning World* (1964) describes a future where man-made polymers released into the oceans prevent evaporation and stop rainfall. *Crystal World* (1966) is about a strange process of crystallisation spreading out of the rain forests and everglades to transform the rest of the globe.

Central to Ballard's work is an exploration of ways that catastrophic or extreme events might shape the human psyche and trigger transformative inner change. We are not at that point yet, but Coy's project signals that we are now somewhere different from where we once imagined, and that we are where new imaginings might start to emerge.

We are living at a moment where the future is rapidly changing. This essay is being written in November 2019, the fictional date that Deckard tracks down 'Replicants' in the Los Angeles of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). We now know that the world of *Blade Runner* only partially overlaps with the one that is outside my window, even if it shares the same date. *youarehere!* signals that the futures anticipated by Brunel, by Heathrow, are fading, and we find ourselves surrounded by auguries and artefacts and signs that indicate that the future we thought might happen will no longer happen. The old future was more linear, it had a trajectory, it was seemingly efficient - getting better at getting better - and it was taking us somewhere, to a place where we would have greater agency and where we would have greater control. And *youarehere!* talks of the different ways this future is ceasing to be. It talks of imaging new futures, of the necessity of imaging new futures that are only now in the process of revealing themselves to us. Otherwise they will remain unknowable, inchoate and without possibility.

Richard Grayson, 2019

1. BBC Radio 4 'Open Book: Will Self', 2008
2. *Ballard's Drowned World*, Will Self, The Telegraph, 31 August, 2013