

Graeme Miller

interviewed by Carl Lavery

Walking the Walk, Talking the Talk: Re-imagining the Urban Landscape

The following interview is intended as a companion piece to the preceding article by Carl Lavery, 'The Pepys of E11: Graeme Miller and the Politics of *Linked*'. The interview took place in East London in late August 2004.

CARL LAVERY *The subject matter of Linked literally speaks for itself: it's about the human cost of constructing the M11 link road in the mid-1990s. But how did you decide on the form of the work? After all, you send the audience on a site-specific walk through North-East London and invite them to listen to the experiences of actual people. In terms of form, that's very striking.*

GRAEME MILLER In 1994, when the road protests in Hackney and Wanstead were at their height, I was in Salisbury making a piece of work with the artist Mary Lemley called *Listening Ground, Lost Acres*, which is about the eighteen-mile alignment that runs between Stonehenge and the spire of the Salisbury cathedral in Old Sarum. When I'd come home to East London to take a break from the project, houses would simply disappear. I'd walk past a corner and everything was suddenly different. Things I knew had vanished. That affected me profoundly, as it did everyone in the neighbourhood. It seemed that normality had been turned on its head. Later, when my own house was demolished, I went back to my old street and was unable to fit the building back into the void that was now there. A lot of other people had that sensation too, of being disconnected from the past. And I realized then that dwelling, living somewhere, is actually to do with narrative. We write ourselves into the landscape. We own space because we can tell stories about it. And I thought that by making a narrative piece about the neighbourhood, I could put my life

back on the map and re-appropriate ten years worth of memories that had been stolen.

The documentary aspect of the work – the fact that real people are talking about personal experience – creates a collective memory bag: a place where the past can be stored so that everyone involved can access it. I think there's an ecology of narrative. Stories encourage other stories. But you need a place for that 'telling' to happen. Motorways sterilize the land: they kill the ecology of narrative. By broadcasting the testimonies of local people and inviting audience members to walk beside the link road listening to them, I tried to reclaim that ecology, that habitat, by sending out seed crop. That was the point, really: to re-establish a network of living narratives that had been destroyed by the construction of the link road.

So by getting people to tell stories about their experience of place, and then by inviting outsiders to listen to them, you contest the void of the motorway, its destruction of narrative and, ultimately, of memory?

Yes, that's exactly it. You can't make up a story about a motorway. When you break down on the side of a motorway, there's this incredible lack of meaning. Time stops. You don't know where you are. It's impossible – or at least it takes a real effort – to contribute anything to it and/or to take anything away from it. There's no smell to a motorway. My experience of a street full of houses, with its nooks and crannies, corners and windows, passers-by, moss growing out of bricks, is

totally different. A street is full of narrative, you're constantly trying to write it and make sense of it. A motorway, on the other hand, is senseless: it moves too fast.

In this context, then, performance is a creative salvage act, a type of conservationism. Is that right?

Definitely. I was impressed by a story that I heard about a community in Bratislava during the Soviet era who kept their synagogue alive by reconstructing it from memory. Apparently, the synagogue, which was one of the oldest in Europe, was destroyed to make way for a bridge. In order to resist that destruction, that banality, the community started to draw the ground plans of the synagogue in chalk on an elevated section of the road. It would get rubbed out every day and then it would be drawn again. Some Danish friends of mine told me that when you talked to the people, they spoke as if the road wasn't there and that the synagogue was. They started to add to the synagogue by drawing in the baker's shop that was next to it and so on. That story motivated *Linked*. It showed that you could intervene in the landscape through an act of imagination. Memory could be restored by re-drawing ground plans and sketching out memory maps.

Where they used chalk, you use technology?

Yes. The transmitters broadcast an alternative history – a micro-history – of the neighbourhood, reminding those who tune into them that the motorway was once inhabited by people. I think of the twenty transmitters as nesting boxes for narrative. They allow you to re-imagine the houses and buildings that used to be there.

But to go back to the question you asked about form: *Linked* borrows the same style or technique I used when I was making *Listening Ground*, *Lost Acres* with Mary. In that work, I interviewed people who crossed the alignment at random and then asked them to talk about their experiences of life. I broadcast their comments and insights from a series of radio transmitters I had installed along the line. Walking the route – the whole thing took eight hours – was a crucial part of

that work. It seemed that the act of journeying, of going on a pilgrimage, really did affect the audience emotionally. One person burst into tears, for example, when s/he reached the transmitters installed on a council estate on the outskirts of Salisbury.

I'm sure this was caused by the physical act of walking, which invites you to merge your experience, your narrative, with those of the stories you hear on the headset. What happens when you walk and listen is that you start to write your own story. All 'the chaff' disappears. Obviously that leads you back into the past, into memory, into repressed emotions. You are involved. It's a pilgrimage, an investment. You are no longer a spectator but a witness.

And to do that you had to reject the conventional theatre space?

After my play *The Desire Paths* (1994), which was a translation of actual walks into a staged narrative, I wanted to watch the theatre walls crumble and disrupt the fiction that theatre gives you by blurring the boundaries between inside/outside, internal/external, and dream/reality. Setting the work in real time and real place allowed for that. In *Linked*, reality constantly interrupts the dream and generates a trade between an interior landscape and an external one.

The Politics of *Linked*

*Did you have the idea for *Linked* as early as 1994? When Lynn Gardner interviewed you in the Guardian in the June of that year, I noticed that you seemed to be saying the same things about motorways, walking, and narrative as you did in the publicity for *Linked*.*

No, the idea for *Linked* came later. Initially, it was fuelled by revenge. I'd been evicted from my house in Grove Green Road in Leyton by police in riot gear who smashed the front door down at 8.30 a.m. and went through every file in the house. They thought I was one of the ringleaders of the operation. The whole thing was hugely traumatic, especially for my son, who's handicapped. Anyway, I immediately knew that I had to

respond in some way against this act of state aggression, but it took a couple of years for the trauma to subside and for the idea of the work to take shape.

Also, I think that the whole community – and I was a member of that community, too – wanted to get on with their lives in the immediate aftermath of the road protests. It was shattering, exhausting, depressing. We all wanted to forget for a while. We had to. And then, gradually, I realized that I wanted to articulate what had happened and to document the amazing things that had gone on during the road protests.

So was the revenge motive replaced by an obligation, a desire to do something for the community – to set the record straight?

Both. I wanted to get revenge *and* do something for the community. It's hard these days to know if something has actually happened, and I thought that by making *Linked* I could prove that something did happen in East London in 1994. I wanted to do that for myself and the community – to leave some kind of marker. As long as the transmitters get a supply of electricity, they'll last for at least a hundred years. It's interesting to think about how the interpretation of the work will have changed a hundred years from now. I quite like the idea of Japanese tourists coming along to this unfashionable area of London and being curious about what happened there. They would no longer be tourists but witnesses.

*For me *Linked* is political without ever being ideological. In my essay on *Linked*, I argue that you are interested in a politics of space, a politics of everyday life. Would you agree with that?*

My work is not intended to be political; rather it comes out of the certainty that the political is inevitable. It's too easy, I think, for artists to do the shrug thing and say that they don't care about politics because no amount of art work is going to change the world. Now while I don't think that my performance work is going to make that much of a difference, I do hope that it might contribute in some way. It might, for instance, make urban life more enjoyable and creative, help share the burden of the past, act as a wit-

nessing device. That sort of thing. But – and I think that's what you are saying – the work doesn't offer positions or tell people what to think. It's political because it simply focuses attention on what has gone and how government policy affects people in a concrete way.

Making *Linked*

*How was *Linked* made? How did you manage to collect the stories?*

I had a team of five interviewers who curated the work for me. I was like a Shakespearean king who sends his messengers out into the country to find news from the north, news from the south, gathering information from here and there. We ended up with about sixty mini-discs full of material. Much more than you hear on the walk (the discs have since become part of the Museum of London's urban art collection). And from those discs I skimmed the interviews and took fragments and samples from them. The lines I liked best, the ones with most resonance.

How did you get the people to participate in the project? Did you put out an advert in the local paper, for instance?

We tried that method, but it wasn't very productive. The work was mostly done by foot and word of mouth. Knocking on doors and talking to people. Someone knew someone who knew someone, etc. People were keen to enlist their neighbours and friends in the project. It just sort of snowballed, really.

All the testimonies are delivered in the present tense. Did you rehearse your interviewees?

Not really. We just asked them to shut their eyes and imagine the past. Then we asked them questions like, 'Where are you?', 'What can you see?' And they'd say things like, 'I'm in the garden', or 'John's in the trundle car'. So what you are left with is a past that is still there, recovered, being re-experienced, re-lived in the present. There are moments when you hear trawling in their voices, as if they're groping about in the past, dredging up memories that are not really memories

because they are being lived again in the present. It all gets quite confusing.

The speakers were never introduced by name. As a listener, you're suddenly plunged into a world of memory. Everything is made up of fragmented memories that seem to come out of nowhere.

That's right. It's not a radio documentary, it's too fragmentary for that. I want the listener to guess, to imagine, who the people speaking are. Some bits will link with other bits. That's why I sampled and mixed up the narratives. The listeners have to join the dots as they walk. They have to piece it together as they see fit.

The memories broadcast from specific transmitters, do they concern the street or area where they have been installed?

Yes, they're all specific to the locality. The people recorded lived in the streets where the transmitters are installed. Their narratives reconstruct their houses from the void of the motorway. Their voices re-appropriate space, fill in an empty trench.

How does the whole operation work, technologically speaking?

Well, the technology is really simple. Marconi could have made *Linked*. The receivers are tuned to a single frequency or radio wave and the transmitters dotted along the route are on the same wavelength. As you approach the transmitter, the receiver will register the strongest signal and then shut down when the signal weakens – that's to say, when you walk away from it. You can imagine the whole thing as a series of showerheads. You walk under a transmitter and get wet (with sound).

Why did you decide to add music to the voices? What was the reason behind that?

If I had been more rigorous, perhaps I would have stayed with the voices alone. But I wanted to get people into a different state of mind as they walked for four miles through London, to make reality wobble a bit. And the music does that: it has a psycho-acoustic effect that for me is very evocative and

strange. Music suspends time and place: it supports the words, too, by giving them a greater power than they would normally have. In theatre terms, the music in *Linked* is like a lighting design. It's meant to provoke a smoky atmosphere where things are blurred. As a composer, I'm a collagist, a sampler. I take what's already there, edit it, and then re-use it.

Did the music reflect your experience of place? Was it expressive of something in you?

That's a complex question. Of course, I couldn't separate myself from the area. The music is personal: it comes from me and from my own relationship with that space, that environment. Since much of what I knew has gone, I'm expressing a sense of mourning in the music, I suppose. But then, added to that, there is still my desire to create a disturbance between what you can see and what you can hear. I wanted to make the past come alive, to throw you into a wrong-end-of-the-telescope view of the present moment. The music is intended to transport you back into the past so that it all seems like a dream, to distance you from your immediate surroundings. So yes, it's expressive, but it's also functional. It has a purpose.

Mourning, Community, and Art

*It's interesting that you used the word 'mourning' a minute ago. I believe that *Linked* is very definitely a work of mourning in the psycho-analytical sense of the word. I felt optimistic when I finished the walk but melancholic during it. The work – or maybe it was the walk – seemed to change something, to permit a shift in emotion.*

Linked is a work of mourning in the same way that Irish and Scottish fiddle music, these little laments, are also about mourning. Fiddle music is functional music. It marks a specific event and allows for a transition. It's also about everyday life, small things. *Linked* is like fiddle music, in that respect; it is made for a similar purpose: to allow the people in Leytonstone to face and then get over the trauma caused by the link road. And I notice now that, although the streets bordering the

link road have been turned into blank sheets of 'miserable-ness' (shopping malls, truncated roads, retail centres, etc.), Leytonstone is fine, it's carrying on. So in a sense, *Linked* is meant to mark that re-birth too. A celebration of life.

I don't see why public art always has to be so grandiose, so dramatic. Tragedy doesn't only happen in Manhattan. It's happening all the time. And it doesn't always have to involve the loss of life, either. In *Linked*, for example, part of the reason you feel optimistic is that there is a sense that a certain block of houses sacrificed themselves so that other houses might live on. To that extent, the destruction caused by the motorway releases a certain amount of mythical meaning into the landscape, into what remains. And I think *Linked* makes you aware of that.

It appears, from the testimonies of the people you interviewed, that the community came together during the road protests. That it became a community through loss, through mourning. Is that true?

Yes and no. On the one hand, the community came together in adversity – it was torn together, if you like. Having your back to the wall produces a certain utopianism, a certain daring. Colville Road was the most radically utopian of all the streets because it was the one that was under threat the longest. In Colville Road, working-class people and artists got together to create this incredibly open and festive street where everyone was welcome and where old prejudices were shoved aside. But that occurred because of the threat to the community generated by the road. The whole thing is incredibly complex and paradoxical. As well as a community being torn together, there was also – and we shouldn't forget this – a community that was torn apart. Not everyone welcomed the presence of the anarchists, pagans, and crusties in the neighbourhood.

*Would you agree if I said that *Linked* is a type of civic art?*

Of course. I see *Linked*, like *Feet of Memory, Boots of Nottingham* (1995) and *Basslines* (2004),

as a civic structure. These works are cheap to build and hopefully useful in some sense. If I could make a fountain, I'd make a fountain. But because I'm bad at that, I build these structures that aerate the atmosphere in a different way. They give the city a mood, a colour, and they alter reality by simply revealing what's there. That's their function, that's how they aerate. People can use them as they want; they need a listener-walker to activate them.

It's important to say something else, though. *Linked* is not just civic because it deals with a local community in London. It's civic because it invites other people, strangers like you, to come and see the community, to witness what happened there and to speak about it.

The whole point of your form of civic art, it seems to me, is to make the city a creative space and to make people into producers of their own environment.

That's right, and there's no great mystery to it. My craft is to be a good builder or someone who is good at laying treasure trails. Some people are good at hiding Easter eggs for kids and some are bad at it. I like to think I can lay interesting treasure trails, design things well. That's basically what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to make things that invite people to interact with them and which will run by themselves. The imaginative life of the city exists anyway. You don't need to make things up; you just have to provide a way of accessing that life, stimulating the imagination. It's like putting a fantasy telescope on reality. I guess you could say making things strange. It seems to me that things become mysterious in that strangeness. The world goes wobbly. This produces affective environments that alter people, causing them to re-imagine the world differently, to create it for themselves.

To become artists of everyday life?

Yes, but not just that, though. I wanted the spectator to be a witness, an advocate, a judge and jury and also to be aware of taking on these roles.