

Notes on Site/Ad-site

Nick Ferguson, 2019

In 2007 the private hire car company Addison Lee installed a number of cigarette bins to the fronts of restaurants, bars, shops and services around the UK. The bins, measuring around 35cm x 25cm x 10 cm were of milled steel, powder-coated in black and were supplied with a padlock that permitted the bin to be opened, emptied and sealed again. Each bin also sported an A4 sized Perspex panel facing the street and which was designed to house a sheet of paper, suitable for advertising and protected from the weather. In other words, the bins afforded dual capability, cigarette disposal and advertising, a capability for which they were popularly dubbed “ad-bins”. The advertising panel was accessible from the inside and protected by the same padlock as the cavity designated for the cigarette butts. The bins were provided without charge to the premises and the installation date roughly coincided with a smoking ban imposed on enclosed work places in the UK, following the Health Act, 2006.

In his book *Rebel Cities* the political geographer David Harvey writes: “The distinction between urban public goods and urban commons is both fluid and dangerously porous. How often are developmental projects subsidized by the state in the name of the common interest when the true beneficiaries are a few landlords, financiers and developers” (2012 :79). Harvey’s observations bring into the present a theme of central importance to classical liberal political and economic thought. The Scottish philosopher and economist David Hume had argued that the logic of commerce – for Hume the pursuit of private interests – will be for the greater public good (Hume 1994). Harvey is only one of many voices across geography, political science, and the arts that have placed Hume’s proposition under renewed scrutiny in the context of urbanism. A backdrop of gentrification and private wealth creation on the one hand, and growing social inequality on the other, has brought into focus the potential divisiveness of economic practices justified by the fluidity of public and private benefits. It has also brought into focus the seemingly innocuous and public-spirited gesture of Addison Lee.

For artists such as myself and my collaborator Adrian Lee, the public/private ambivalence has set agendas. One concern has been to document as many of the multiple gestures made on the part of residents, small businesses and larger corporations who take as given the public benefit of private pursuits. Addison Lee’s bins are one such example. Another has been to find out more about the protagonists whose business practices fit this model. There is something at once intriguing and repelling about mavericks who have spotted and exploited the gaps in the laws. Intriguing, insofar as they betray a version of creativity - in the form of attentiveness, imagination, and craftiness - not unrelated to

competences useful to the artist. There is for sure an artistry about their activity, even if it is not formally claimed as art. The fact that the practices under scrutiny may be overtly indifferent to public spiritedness serves to create a sense of discomfort. Not least, it brings to mind the ugly underbelly of the art world, driven as it is by international markets, art fairs, and a cosy relationship between publicly-funded institutions and private dealers, but none of this readily detracts from the artfulness. Another concern has been to think about how to position our art practice in relation to these activities. With this in mind, a core challenge has been to acknowledge the extent to which, if capital follows culture, art practices are implicated in the very problems socially-engaged artists decry. A third challenge has been to rival, at an artistic level, what has already been achieved. As Allan Kaprow once wrote: “[N]onart is more art than Art art” (1993: 98).

Our premonition about the artist in Addison Lee’s director was about right. On a February night the Effra Pub, Brixton, we met up with a former employee of the firm. We learned that the firm had been owned by one John Griffin, a self-made businessman, who started in 1975 and by 2012 ran a gig economy with 4000 self-employed drivers. Griffin worked on instinct. He had sold the firm in 2014 to Carlyle Group for £300 million on the eve of Uber’s bid to saturate London with a new kind of private hire car. He was a man of the moment. He’d bought 100,000 of the bins, and had the idea put them where all of a sudden smokers had found themselves standing around in the street. He thought he’d sell the advertising space to third parties, though he’d not done the market research and in the event not many firms took up the offer of space, just the offer of a bin, so the space were used to advertise his cabs. In terms of the cigarette disposal, his line was always: Who could complain about a free bin? We learned too that the ad-bins were one of many hairbrained projects. Another was to hire a dredger during the civil war in Sierra Leone sent it up and down the Teye river in search of diamonds. All this was run out of an office in Kings Cross. That in 2012 Griffin was taken to court by Westminster City Council and asked to remove the bins on the grounds that their advertising was in itself a form of litter. In Westminster they were taken down. Elsewhere they were abandoned, and remain in place until a building is restored.

The artwork *Site/Ad-site* responds to the conditions that have been narrated, taking the form of an ongoing, slow-burn public-realm photographic work. Referencing the registers of architectural surveying, as well as the tradition of *mise-en-abime* in which a picture recursively appears within itself, each abandoned bin within a defined neighbourhood has been photographed to produce an in-situ elevation, and the printed image then inserted into the former advertising space, before being re-photographed. For as long as they are left in situ, the images will provide a record of the street frontage in a time of rapid urban change.

To date, the work has been selected for exhibition as part of Deptford X 2018 and Art Night Kings Cross, 22nd June 2019. Scroll down for full information and walking tour schedule for Art Night 2019.

References

Harvey, D. 2012. *Rebel Cities. From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. Verso

Hume, D. 'Of the Independency of Parliament'. In: Hume, D. 1994. *Political Essays*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Kaprow, A. 1993. *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. Ed. Jeff Kelley. Berkeley, LA and London. University of California Press.

ArtNight Kings Cross, 22nd June 2019.

For Art Night 2019 Adrian and Nick will conduct two walking tours of the installations in the Kings Cross area, starting from Lincoln Lounge, 52 York Way, Kings Cross, London N1 9AB.

Schedule: Saturday June 22 at 7pm, Sunday June 23 at 2pm.

Duration: 50 minutes per tour.

Link to Art Night programme: <http://www.artnight.london>