

Jill Greenhalgh

A Necklace

*The greatest self betrayal for an artist is
... in fashioning acceptable semblances
of truth'*
Susan Hiller¹

A milestone shows us how far we have been and how much further we have to go. Sometimes the stone indicates that we must reconsider our direction. A milestone is an instance that remains consciously recorded in the memory of a culture or an individual, as a pivotal moment of change.

1. Susan Hiller, *Women, Language and Truth: Thinking about Art - Conversations with Susan Hiller*, Ed. Barbara Einzeg, Manchester University Press, 1996.



STONE

Last week I visited Stonehenge, the megaliths that have imposed their mighty presence on the plains of Salisbury in Wiltshire, England, for 5,000 years. We arrived at the site at 9.30 a.m. and already hundreds had gathered to pay English Heritage GB£ 5.40, to become part of a compact, weaving snake crowd, on a path that circled the stones.

Perversely, I found myself estimating that English Heritage must be raking in GB£ 3,000 an hour - perhaps GB£ 21,000 a day - in the height of the season. With little maintenance or overhead costs, for an edifice that has withstood 5,000 years of British weather, this must be one of the most lucrative cultural products in existence.

No one knows exactly why or how the monument was built. With stones weighing in the region of fifty tons, theories and stories have proliferated throughout history as to how and why they were moved and then erected into the seemingly impossible structure that still remains. The inner circle of eighty smaller bluestones - each weighing a mere five tons - was somehow transported from the Preseli Mountains, close to my home in West Wales, 250 miles from Salisbury Plain.

The presence, shape, size and longevity of Stonehenge are literally awe-inspiring. There is nothing like it in the world. To be in the proximity of this ancient, simple yet perfect formation of stone circles fills my soul with wonder and reaches a core, primal emotion in me.

I want to understand what this is.

SURVIVAL

Like all those who are serious about their work, I have been in constant battle with form. I have never been content with anything I have made. I am haunted and distressed and agitated throughout any process. It is not pleasant at all. In my youth



Glass fragments. Photo: Mike Brookes

I thought that if I practised with dedication and honesty my efforts would be rewarded, and respect as an artist would eventually follow. This is the sad delusion that ensures endeavour and progress in any discipline. Now fifty, I feel I know less than when I began and I have many more questions than I had at twenty-five.

I have been trying to refine one question, which, if I can answer in the form of a piece of work, might mark a milestone in my progress. Today, it emerges thus: can I harness and channel enough will, strength and intellect to make real a singular, useful and impressive idea in defiance of impossibility, without causing harm?

There are acts that remain; work that survives in the landscape of art; milestones that show us - we struggling in the deserts of uncertainty - the next way, the possible new pathway. These occur when artists transgress the form as opposed to offering further translation of that form; when they manage to manifest form in answer to whatever question haunts them.

Once this milestone is placed and the new direction indicated, we, who come after,

need not fear being lost - we can follow a pathway already trodden by the pioneer.

I have a tongue-in-cheek theory: that the most glorious, rare flower emerges from the biggest pile of shit. In order for a single work of great beauty, force or revelation to emerge, and become a signpost, that work will have been fertilised, influenced, challenged and encouraged by the efforts and explorations of the many who attempt to make meaningful work. This theory is my comfort blanket - at the very least it can give meaning and purpose to the shit I keep producing.

SEA

I have so many confused and unformed notions exploding in my undisciplined mind, but I have learnt to trust that chaos is the departure gate from the comfort zone of conformity.

I woke very early this morning and unable to get back to sleep I walked to the beach. As always, almost unconsciously, I set to seeking pieces of broken glass washed up by the night tide. Blue, white, green shards - their sharp edges softened by their time in the sea. In the seven years that I have been in this village I have collected tins full of these fragments. One day I will make something new from them all - a necklace, perhaps; something that I can wear that holds all my walks by the sea.

I make performances in this way: collected fragments that catch my eye, composed and assembled into new forms that they, the fragments, were never meant to be a part of. Something new constructed from the shards of other - now discarded and forgotten - things.

At this time of year, the dog and I can only have the beach to ourselves in the early morning - in summer the early mornings are wonderful in Wales. But by 10 a.m. the beach is teeming with families who,

having claimed their patch of sand, are all facing towards the everything nothingness of the sea, preparing themselves to frolic and dive in her vastness.

We rush to the sea to look out where there is nothing. If we are rich enough, we might bob around in boats that gradually become the size of houses and that eventually, I suppose, will become cities. And her nothingness will be no more.

Our pioneers, however, will always seek out more empty space for us.

Within the next three years Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic Company plans to launch tours into space. For GB£ 115,000 you will be able to buy a seat on SpaceShipOne, for a three hour trip orbiting the earth, sixty-two miles above her vastness. He has plans for a hotel too, one day, up there in space.

What is the opposite of space?

SOUND

Without its opposing force life cannot sustain itself.

I am walking, at dusk, along a very sedate suburban street of semi-detached houses. I am singing out loud. I am nineteen years old. I suddenly hear someone running very fast up behind me.

I think: "God, how embarrassing: they must have heard me singing; they sound like they are panicking - why are they running so fast, something must have happened, there must be an emergency? I'll not turn around, I am too embarrassed. I'll get out of the way quickly and let them pass."

This set of thoughts I remember as clearly today as when they occurred, thirty years ago. And they all took place in a split second. In fact what happened was this: a man was lying in wait like a predator, as I ambled past his lair he ran and sprang to grab me from behind. He threw his arm

across my chest and his hand over my mouth, the other hand held a knife in my back. He growled: "One sound and I'll kill you" and he began to drag me down the driveway towards what I guessed was an empty house and garden. His hand, I remember, so clearly, was not quite covering my mouth.

The "fight or flight" response is a primitive, inbuilt survival instinct which kicks in when we are in any kind of stress or danger, whether real or imagined. It is a mechanism that precedes rational thought; the body switches off non-essential processes and prepares itself for instant action. The nervous system signals for the release of adrenaline and other hormones into the blood stream; the heart rate rises and there is an increased supply of blood to the muscles. Our awareness intensifies, sight sharpens, impulses quicken and our perception of pain diminishes.

My hands went up to grab his arm, I struggled fiercely kicking with my legs and squirming my body into as many distorted shapes as I could. I found a huge sound within me and I let out repeated screams that were fierce and stronger than anything that had ever hitherto erupted from my body. The man became frightened, I could smell his panic; he dropped me and disappeared along the side of the empty house and into the woods at the back of the garden. I stood up and calmly continued on my way. I imagine I was in shock. But I had saved myself from being raped, maybe worse, with a single sound.

SILENCE

These days I obsessively contemplate and consider stillness, space and silence. I don't want any more. I want less. I am too full up. The escapism of a well made narrative or a layered and complex dramaturgy no longer satisfies my hunger in performance. I yearn

to witness, or have the skill and courage to make, just the one right action in the empty space; or the one right mark on the blank page.

She has believed words wrongly flung in her direction; not quick witted enough to spit back she swallowed the poison. She has crumbled inside. Felt her very organs deflate, her bones crush to powder. She is trying to become smaller, hopefully to disappear.

She has felt those crumbled innards begin to reassemble, reconstitute and become a roaring inside. That eventually, unable to remain contained, forces its way from the stomach, passes by the heart, hits the throat, swallowing, swallowing back. And swallowing back does not work; it enters the mouth, forces its way over the top of the tongue and meets the teeth. Pushing through the teeth and the stiffened lips, the mouth is open wide and the words, the cry is out, spewed into the world and never to be taken back inside - broken silence - causing shame and remorse no matter how much she protests that she never meant it to happen.

Were these sounds that could not, and should not, have stayed inside the body any longer; or sounds that with time and silence - hidden and mouldering inside a body - might transform to wiser and quieter utterance in times to come.

Like the shards of broken glass perhaps destined, eventually, to become a necklace, these raging words and sounds, conflicts, shit moments, bitter hurtful arguments, ignorant assumptions articulated, polarised opinions and positions, words carved to cause damage, need time to be softened by the seas of time. I believe they will not disappear, they will return, if only for brief moments, to the shoreline of memory, either to be gathered and reassembled into someone else's story, or a distorted history, or return to the

softening shadows of the waters, the places of forgetting.

Time heals but cannot erase.

STRENGTH

I was twenty-four in the winter of 1979.

I had crossed East Germany by train to Poland despite being repeatedly warned not to attempt the journey as this part of Europe was experiencing the worst snow on record. But I had been waiting for three years for this invitation and had sacrificed my job in a theatre company in order to accept it. Caution was an irrelevance. It took me three days to travel the 300 kilometres from Hanover to Wrocław to attend a Tree of People Project at Jerzy Grotowski's Teatr Laboratorium.

What I remember most clearly about the journey was a coffee, bitter and brown, served in a small white china cup, in the shabby station café at my final destination. I can recall every detail of the shape, smell, taste and touch of this insignificant event.

Arriving at the Laboratorium I was told that the Project was cancelled due to the severe weather conditions. Telegrams had been sent to all participants; however, sixty of the two hundred and fifty invitees had nevertheless arrived and the company were proposing a seven day experiment, not in the forest as expected, but in the building next door to the theatre; a three-storey space with three large empty rooms.

"Sleep here", we were told. In the rooms above and below the working room, there were already rows of sleeping bags. "Eat here"; we were shown a small alcove under the stairs where a table stood, spread with bread and cheese and other foods to snack on whenever we might be hungry. "And here, you work". This was our last instruction, as we were led into a large empty space.

Days, and nights, passed. We became lost to time - timeless. Was it late one night - or was it noon, I didn't know: the windows were shuttered. People had been dancing, shouting, groping, groaning, crying, laughing and singing in the room - it seemed eternally.

I was meandering through the space, joining or rejecting the actions as they emerged, established and then died; alternately sceptical and involved. I had nowhere else to be and I had agreed to be here.

One of the Laboratorium actors, Zbigniew Cynkutis, put his hand gently on my shoulder, commanding my attention and stillness; I recall the feel of his hand - persuasive but light - and he whispered two words in my ear. They were the first words I had heard in the "room" for days. "Fight me" he breathed. Without a moment's hesitation I sprang at him and threw him to the floor, pinned him down, wrestled him, pushed him, pulled him, fought him fiercely. The crowd formed a circle. After I don't know how long, he was weak with tiredness and, breathless, he backed away. Another man took his place. The same happened again. I exhausted the second, the third. I don't know how many replacements emerged in all. It seemed like hours - perhaps it was minutes. Then the whole group became involved, everyone; some stood behind me, as though seeking protection, others tried to pass me to reach to those under my protection. I felt like a cornered lioness guarding her cubs. Then my protégées tried to escape and my work became multi-focused: holding them in, keeping them out. I was enforcing physical control over them all. I don't know how long it lasted. I hurt no one, but I exhausted many.

From somewhere I had tapped an extra-ordinary resource of strength and energy that made me matchless, for that period of time. I believe I must have entered

a state of trance. Whatever had happened, mysterious or mundane, I now had an irreversible cognisance of my power and tirelessness.

This remains my most significant milestone.

I remember talking to Cynkutis after the project had completed. I remember asking him what had happened and why. But I can't recall a single word he said to me.

SHADOW

Experience forms us: cathartic or unassuming. Things lodge within us and mould the unique individuality that is our body, psyche and soul. And the memory of these experiences becomes the base material for our striving attempts to communicate our personal, political and aesthetic complexities, as we struggle to defy the mundane.

We all know that memory makes choices. What remains in the mind, as a record of events, for one person, would be utterly distinct from that of another. Memory - and her documenter, history - enacts untruth, inevitably. The most traumatic incidences perpetrated upon us, or perhaps that we perpetrate, are relegated to the darkest parts of the mind, the place where things want to be forgotten.

Words give shape to false memory. I know there are times when words must make shapes in the world; and there are times that we must choose to respect silence, space and secrets. Silence or words? Stillness or movement? Space or what is the opposite of space? When, which?

There are shouts that cause harm. There are shouts that prevent harm being done; times when the scream must be loud, enraged and furious; and the opposite, soft suggestion, the silence of sympathy and compassion.

The great stones of Stonehenge still stand. Knowledge of the primary impulse to create these marvellous monuments is lost. Perhaps it is just the simple fact of time that leaves us only able to feel awe at the work itself. Whoever it was that carried those stones, the people who had the fortitude and will to manifest that vision, have disappeared from conscious collective memory. But the work remains.

Zbigniew Cynkutis died in a car crash on January 7th, 1987. I have decided that the date of his death is the date I will remember and record as the day the Magdalena Project proposed to become an entity beyond an event. Truth or lie, fact or fiction, memory or mistake, I offer this as a milestone placed for those who follow to accept or refute as a semblance of truth; a shard that might or might not become part of a necklace that encircles the sounds, stillness, strengths, silences, struggles and shadows of memories, to give shape to the survival of an idea.

JILL GREENHALGH (Wales) is a theatre practitioner. In 1986 she founded the Magdalena Project, International Network of Women in Contemporary Theatre. She has taken up the post of Lecturer in Performance Studies at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. She is married, has two daughters and a dog, and lives on the west coast of rural Wales.