

Constructing Negative Space – Curating Knowledge Talk at Axis Arts Centre

It goes like this...

I intend to write about the project in the evening

But we've just finished the show and everyone else is going to the Duke of Gloucester for a drink...

So I go...

Mole has a few drinks – Alex has a few drinks – Tim has a few drinks – I have an apple and raspberry J20, Rebecca has some wine and her usual slow speech pattern speeds up considerably...

In-between all the banter – about Alex protesting he hadn't disappeared on Monday night to pursue his 'Grinder' obsession... Or Rebecca and Alex talking about their Christmas break and taking a walk around Hadrian's wall (sign). Or Mole and Tim recalling at least 5 instances over the course of their friendship where the over-indulgence of alcohol has led to some hilarious anecdote that just has to be shared.

At some point, amongst our sharing of stories and memories, in between our attempts at 'making the piss' out of all of us, there is an inevitable shift back to the work, to the company, to the project.

Mole, after a few drinks, can't stop himself- his passion for the art we make and the frustration of not being able to deliver in a way that 'fits' with the out-dated touring system we are controlled by – and his continual battle with the Arts Council who are meant to be 'supporting' the development of these projects and the company – it all comes out.

The company: agenda and touring model

Mole has managed, against all the odds, to work in this sector for over 25 years – this is his only job, Reckless Sleepers. He somehow has managed to keep going, to not give up on it – much of this is about proving people wrong – he's quite stubborn in that respect – but that's what I admire about him. Despite the knock backs, despite the push to get companies to make work that is 'tourable' and 'economical' in the eyes of the Arts Council – he says 'fuck you' – he wants to make work and tour work and run the company the way he would like, and not be dictated by models and systems that impose certain restrictions. That's why we make these large structures, that's why we work with a large team of artists and don't make solo shows – in a culture where companies have to 'plug and play', to make work that is easy to get-in, perform, and get-out of a venue in 12 hours – where venues and programmers are only interested in 1 night performances – where the relationship with the artist begins and ends on the same day... Reckless Sleepers don't want that – with these large structures, by touring with a team of 8 of us, something that is often financially and physically difficult to manage in the one-nighter system – we make work that is fighting against this. Yes, it is not easy to do – to pay everybody – to hire a van and transport the set – for the performers and technicians to build and rig and rehearse – but it is necessary. Reckless Sleepers are interested in people, in art,

in having a physical conversation with anyone who wants to engage in what we do – we have to be able to do this – and that doesn't work if you are part of the conveyor-belt system that many venues employ. Mole works hard to break this kind of relationship with each venue – we ask to do 2 nights – firstly, for our well-being and sanity as it's very tiring doing it all on one day, but secondly to be present in the venue for a longer period of time – to have more of an opportunity to exist in the venue, to strike up conversations, to talk about the work, and to forge new friendships. We are always surprised that these venues don't want this – surely they too are interested in the art, in the artists, in the conversations, in their audience's engagement with these works? We get people outside of the company to get involved – to share the experience – to observe rehearsals, to help make the set, to work as ambassadors and promote the performances, to contribute and respond to what we are doing... This exhibition itself is part of that – a chance to have a more meaningful relationship with the venues we tour to – where the company and the work is visible for 2 weeks – where the venue gets to understand something about us, and we understand something about the people who work there, and the audiences that attend.

M: I talk about the triple A status – and that is Art, Artists, and Audiences – the 3 really key ingredients for why we do what we do. And Art being at the top, and Artists being quite close to the top. And audiences being on the same level as artists. And the model for me is that we are given the opportunity to make more with less. So that might be doing a residency, or an exhibition, or a variety of things that gives us time to make connections.

The exhibition: history, process, a space to reflect, the start of a book...

As a company Reckless Sleepers make projects – they are not theatre performances, or gallery exhibitions, or workshops – they are all part of the same thing. The project of Negative Space is about ideas – sharing these ideas – and this can't be constrained to one particular medium. The project is about developing audiences, about presenting the work, about talking to venues and audiences, about writing a book, about making and designing the set, about this exhibition, about having post and pre-show discussions, about the development of workshops for schools and colleges that engages different audiences, about connecting with students and interns etc. It is not JUST a performance...

M: I first met Tim in 1992, and it was my first ever job as a lecturer, and Tim was a student. His first ever lecturer in that particular college – and I thought, 'ooh, he's brilliant – I'd love to work with him again' – and then a few years later there was an opportunity. And that's been a model that I've carried on with – like working at MMU I got to meet Rebecca and Alex – working on a project with them – and I thought they were brilliant – and I wanted to work with them again. But with Alex and Rebecca, we constructed a different way of doing that and took a project that we made in their final year and re-developed and toured it to other universities and venues in the UK. That was called our graduate programme, but under this thing I called 'Club Reckless'. And with the intention of bridging the gap from leaving a university course and becoming a professional. So quite a successful

partnership with MMU and Reckless Sleepers. At its height I think we were employing, either staff or graduates, around 13 people from MMU. We were the biggest employer in the north west of graduates and staff at MMU. This is a company that is organized and managed by myself. That was important. And there are different models of course – and I’ve met different students. A String Section was a similar project.

Here, we have an exhibition that allows us to reflect, intervene, and renegotiate a set of ideas and concerns that the project looks at. It is a work of art in its own right, that says something about the kind of process we have been on, and about the history of the company and the memories we share. But it is an archive too – a place to experience some of the other work that Reckless Sleepers has made – and to have some sense of a lineage across 25 years of making – the Negative Space project in some ways has been going since the company began. The work initially evolved from a series of ideas we were talking about whilst touring Schrodinger (about pushing some of the rules and logics we had created, about getting the same team of people together again, about processing material that was hidden from view in the performance, about the inverse (the negative) of Schrodinger – but Schrodinger itself was informed by Parasite (and others I imagine) – it is difficult to separate the mass of materials the company has created – and it is difficult to say exactly where it began, or how it began – but the archival nature of this exhibition allows you to see certain relationships – maybe a certain aesthetic, or way of working, that has developed over 25 years of thinking about and making performance.

The exhibition has given us some space to acknowledge, develop, and find these connections – that in the stagnant touring model – might not have been fully exploited. Axis Arts Centre has given us some space to think – to allow an audience to understand something more about the company and the work that might not be as accessible in the performance element of the project. It allows us to read and present the work from an alternative perspective, turns it upside down, on its side, makes us think in a different way – which the rehearsal process can not facilitate (again, this is a financial restraint – where we have to make the bloody thing and would love more time to work conceptually – but that’s why the relationship with venues is important here – they allow us to be artists in this sense – if they commit to supporting artists and not just presenting work that is...). The writing, images, and video footage here correlates with, and understands, its relationship to Negative Space, but supplements it by allowing other potential contexts and connections to be discovered, however tangential. It is an exchange; a dialogue; a meeting of alternative ways of reading and processing the material in front of us. It opens up the area of enquiry; it provides problems; we are able to notice, respond, and question the function of the work itself from the broader canvas of work, discussions, and nights out that have considerable value to us as a group.

L: It’s great. It is really important that it is great – I can’t imagine working intensively with a group of people on a project like this and then go home. In the evening we don’t talk a lot about the work – we talk about us – but it finds its way in again in the work somehow.

T: It's a real tonic for all of us too – we were saying just yesterday how our stomach muscles were hurting from laughing so much. It feels like a holiday being together and working again as a group.

M: Because it's so much fun. I like the idea of working with my friends – and it is important that we have a good laugh. It's a struggle enough as it is anyway. I could have a miserable time earning money in a bank – but I'd rather have a good laugh and work with my mates – and I think that reflects in the company and in the projects that we make.

L: There was this reviewer who said 'I really hope one day that I would have friends who I would trust to give them a hammer and say, "now come at me and hit near my head" and I think again, that it is really important – trust – that all of you are in good hands – and that you won't be hurt.

T: And we look after each other.

M: Yes, we look after each other inside the shows, but also outside.

The exhibition also demonstrates a particular way of working for us as a company – we fluctuate between order and chaos, between a serious intention and an opportunity to mess about. You will see this in the writings – some casual references, some thoughtful responses, and some ridiculous moments. But when creating this, it was important that we didn't take it too seriously. We are in this to have fun – we are a company that appreciates the value of a process as something that responds to us as a dysfunctional, crazy, slightly mental group of individuals. We had this conversation last night, and we agreed that Rebecca is the most 'normal' of all of us... She wins that one.

When we are in the rehearsal space we record everything – we capture as many moments as possible, just in case – and it also means we have a variety of memories – funny memories – that are continually added to the company's range of anecdotes.

M: 'I don't want to share!' – When we make a new piece of work, we always go out. Sometimes we get drunk, but we go out for a meal – it's a social thing. Making theatre is a social thing. But we just take that a little too far sometimes. And the time we got together for this project, Leen wanted some of Kevin's pudding but Kevin wouldn't share it, so Leen in the middle of this restaurant shouted, 'but you said that you would share!'. So we keep that – that's one of our little stories.

But there are little things that come in – like I was a little obsessed with Sense and Sensibility. There was a behaviour in that film that I kind of wanted to seep into the show. I can't actually tag it, but I think that playing around with all that other stuff that exists in our lives does end up in it. Plus the plasterboard is part of my real life – I've just refurbished a house – I understand this material and know how it works – so that real life stuff has seeped into the project.

T: Without knowing it these things influence the work – they creep in without you being conscious of it.

K: And when we talk about Negative Space we are talking about accessing those things that are normally hidden, and for us those anecdotes, those stories, those relationships are all part of this – that we want to be able to

***introduce them and access them in some way – because they are just as important to the process – to what happens in the rehearsal process.
M: And you can't do that if you do the old touring model where you just go and do a show and then fuck off again – there's no chance of having that kind of a discussion – a chance to share and express things with other people.***

In the rehearsals for Negative Space we had a large sheet of paper that lay on the floor – we used this to create a basic structure for the show – to look at the pairings and relationships, to see what structures are in use, what we might be doing. But having all of this written down – on a large sheet of paper – meant we could look at the bigger picture – see the thing in its entirety – and add/subtract, develop/ignore, as we moved on. This plasterboard does the same thing – we can take a tour of the ideas, we can interact with it on a larger scale rather than existing in our own individual notebooks – we can see those connections come to light...

We will collate and edit these ramblings – however inconsequential they may seem – and shape them into another medium. Turning it into a document, a book, that allows the reader to explore the project in a more formal manner – but that still takes this playful, tangential approach.

The archive: a real-time archive – a continuation of the exhibition

The Scored Theatre Project: Real-time archiving and interactive composition through the work of RS.

The scored theatre, archive, project is something we've been wanting to do for a while now, initially conceived as a way to document the creative process of a Schrodinger. We had some wild ideas about videoing the work from each performers' perspective and adding an audio track of our intentions and thoughts as we wondered through the performance. I'd still like to do this. But essentially, the scored theatre project, as I call it, is about the development of a real-time archive. About the scoring and mapping of a digital repository of ideas – that can be used as part of a devising process, but also as an interactive tool for users to create their own user-defined performance scores from a range of components; for users to choose certain elements of work to cross-reference against other projects, or for artists to develop a more comprehensive sharing of their creative process by documenting and filing materials in a number of ways... Similar to the way this exhibition works – each user reads the material, explores the material differently – and generates their own pathway through the chaos, through the detritus of each process, and each performance, that is being referenced. The user of the archive can create their own map of a particular project, or projects, and use this to gain further insight into the work/s or to use it as a basis for adapting the material/content themselves... We are trying to create a comprehensive score that refrains from fixing, or locating, meaning within a work but places the emphasis on the users interaction, on their ability to discover meaning through playing with the many components of a process.

The archive, as I see it, would also mimic Reckless Sleepers creative process and respond to the individual using it – so that if you are looking through material for a longer period of time the colour/background might change, or the text might become out of focus, or the archive would throw up some completely unrelated material – taking their interaction of the work in a different direction, or it might impose decisions for them in how it is structured that they then have to re-evaluate/process, or it might provide hyper-links to alternative projects that deal with similar thematic ideas.... That the archive provides a way of having control and relinquishing control at the same time – that the user sits between being passive and active – just as the performers in Negative Space (and in other projects) are negotiating the same struggle in how they manoeuvre themselves through the space.

For the rehearsal process – the archive can also help the artists and the director envisage changes without the performers being present – being able to change the dynamics, foregrounding of material, changing the structure of rehearsed materials with ease. Like a more comprehensive version of watching video footage and note-taking – that enables you to move these things around and change them, and that each ‘version’ of the score, each conception of the piece can be seen by those accessing the archive....

The documentation: process, meaning, thoughts on Negative Space (and what we might do with it...)

So, onto the actual performance – the process of making Negative Space. I’m going to ask a series of questions to the company for them to respond to – they don’t know this – but it’s important we put each other on the spot every now and again...

- What do you remember of the conversations we had whilst touring Schrodinger about the making of Negative Space?

L: Something about maths and numbers – I remember Mole saying he wanted to make a show that was entirely based on maths and numbers. And the second thing I remember, which I got very excited about, was when he said ‘I could even see you and Leen knitting in the show’. I really liked that idea but it never happened. We used to annoy several other people by taking up any free moment with knitting – and that became a frustration – so that might have made it but it didn’t. But it was very much about what happens on the outside of Schrödinger’s box.

R: I remember a conversation about everything you couldn’t see – that was behind and hidden – and how much of a shame that was for an audience.

A: I remember there was a conversation about what Schrödinger would look like with the box literally turned around.

R: That was the first idea – and then Kevin said well surely if we reverse it then the...

M: Ceiling should become the floor... And I went ‘Bastard!’. Because that would mean I would have to make a new model with a floor. It was a really clear moment for me. You bastard, it’s so simple, of course you turn

it upside down. We talked about Schrödinger being about love, so is this about hate? For us, there is no hate – but you could look at it and go ‘that’s a bit aggressive’. But the turning the Schrödinger set upside down just made complete sense. This whole stuff about it rains in Schrödinger and that goes down, so lets have steam in this one because it goes up... And it started a whole new debate thanks to Kevin – and that was in Nero’s café...

K: In Nottingham.

M: The conversation about maths was in Aberystwyth Arts Centre overlooking the sea...

- What happened in the first week of rehearsals, before the box was built?

T: We wrapped me in brown paper... We wrapped a chair in brown paper – a saw, a hammer...

R: We wrapped everything in brown paper.

M: I went to a lot of DIY shops.

L: We did some movement as well didn’t we?

M: I think for me it was important that we started with the set, but the set wasn’t ready. But then the set’s never ready and the first week is always a bit rubbish – and Monday’s are always rubbish. Because we went out the night before and didn’t share our cake! And we played around with some things – but it’s also about playing around and getting to know each other.

L: [to Tim] We had our first argument... We met for the first time..

T: And we argued within an hour...

K: But I don’t think any of the material in the first week appears in the project at all. Although it informed the relationships and our working practice...

T: And it led us on to something more useful...

- When did the project start to come together? Do you remember any specific moments where you thought – ‘yes, I’m getting this now – I can see where it might go’?

M: Loads. And then you go to rehearsals the next day and it just crumbled. And then you’d have another idea on the drive back and we’d have a conversation and we’d make complete sense, conceptual sense, and then try to articulate it to the rest of the group – and they’d go ‘what are you talking about?’... So it is a constant flow of making sense, and the sense disappearing, and making new sense. It’s a constant, ongoing evaluation. I’m still struggling with what happens in the show!

K: The flower is one of the most defining moments though...

T: Yeah, it went back to using something organic.

M: It’s very aggressive having a hammer, and we wanted to make something a little more gentle. And the same gesture with the hammer and the flower has a completely different meaning, different reading. And I was interested in bringing something delicate and organic to this space.

K: For me, one of the defining moments was the hug. We wanted to push this idea of contacts, which was something that had been developed in

Schrödinger. *We play this game in one part in Schrödinger, but we play this game all the way through Negative Space to some extent. Again, this was one moment we wanted to explore and extend in more detail – that logic of contacts. And then we discovered, in the few days with just the boys when we got the flower, that the hug – for the first time, we were using each other as contacts. Before, it had always been about contacts with objects – and suddenly, the hug resolved the whole issue – that the hug became the 2 contacts – it's not a one-sided thing – it became a joint agreement – a coalition. And this was a pivotal moment for us, that once we hugged the game of contacts was resolved.*

T: *We hadn't really thought about it before for some reason.*

R: *It was in Kent, when we discovered some kind of unspoken language that felt very natural.*

A: *I remember that week when it was just the boys and we discovered a lot of things. We didn't have the walls, and the whole show just seemed to open up again. And we had space, conceptually, for a week.*

K: *Yes – and that's why we ended up touching each other – because we didn't rely on the walls as our contacts.*

T: *And we didn't use the chairs either.*

- What do you think about when you are performing? What goes through your head? Are you conscious of exposing any images/ideas at particular moments and what are they?

T: *Well, apart from what the hell am I going to do next... I start to see my own journey, especially when the flower appears. For some reason last night I had this whole thing of really wanting to connect with someone and give the flower to someone – but never being able to give the flower to someone. And it became, until the very end when me and Alex pull the flowers apart, it becomes a very lonely experience. It's trying to make contact with someone for me – and all the way through, apart from when I'm sitting in the chair, it feels like I'm constantly on my own.*

L: *I think, until just before we performed the show in Leeds, I felt a little bit awkward about what I was doing in the show – because I felt always slightly outside of the action. Everyone is running around and I seem to be much more static. And I think for a while in the process that was a bit of a frustration. Thinking why can I not get involved in that. But when we did the showing in Gent – I honestly felt like I was going to die – because it became very violent – so I just ended up being in the corner, fearing for my life. And that made me realise that there is a place in the performance for serene behaviour – or calmness. So I think yesterday I was conscious of that – of keeping safe and staying calm. You can't do anything, it doesn't help if you join in with the battle, I'm just going to stay here and hope no one notices me. And that was a relief – realising that there is a point in doing that.*

M: *I worry a lot. I worry about everyone else. I worry about the audience. I worry about, are you having a good time. On stage, I look quite relaxed, but I'm actually quite worried about the piece. And at the moment I want to be in a place where I feel much more comfortable – and be in a place as*

a performer. So, I think I'm getting close to that – but I'm constantly worrying.

A: Stuffs coming, but I don't really know what it is yet. Why am I doing it? But it's not necessary – I'd rather, slowly and organically, work out what I'm doing in the show gradually over time. And naturally let it come – and that's ok.

R: I think there is something cathartic in it as a performer. But I think we need a bit more time on it before we really know what we're thinking...

- What is the one thing about this process that will always make you smile?

T: There's so many...

M: Just Tim falling through the set. Just Tim falling. That always makes me smile.

L: I think unfortunately – sorry Kevin – the moment when you cried...

M: And the moment he told us about his wife super-gluing her eye...

L: I think that situation was really telling about each of us. There was a moment in rehearsals where Leen wanted to try something where 3 people at the same time would climb through the middle hatch – and was very persistent that we try that. So, Kevin, Leen and Alex were going through the hole – and at a certain moment Mole had said, 'if you feel like you want to make noise, make noise, but you don't have to'. So, Kevin – at a certain moment from under the stage – starts wailing very loud. And Alex thinks, 'do I have to join in? He's really going for it here'. So he was asking questions about 'who am I?' – 'am I a character, do I have to join in?'. But Kevin actually had really, really hurt his fingers – and Mole and Tim were both just laughing their heads off. And I just ran out and came back with a bin bag of ice that was just way too much for Kevin's finger. But it was really great – and you should have been there. And if you could see a bit of video about how we operate – I think that would be a really good example.

Now go and explore the material – and come and talk to us – don't just listen – get involved – and tell us what you see, what you understand. Create your own score, your own map, your own version. It will be just as valid as ours...