

Art Licks Weekend London 2-4 October

on Oct 8, 2015

Art Licks Weekend is like a treasure hunt. Now in its third year, the festival for young emerging artists, curators and project spaces organised by Holly Willats has grown exponentially to involve over ninety venues from Hackney to Deptford. I began my tour at Queens Road Peckham station where I was immediately confronted by Lucy Joyce's 'Motorway Becomes Sea', a site specific billboard commissioned by The Ballad of Peckham Rye, an anti-gallery with a 'nomadic curatorial process'. Sites are chosen for their relationship to the environment and Joyce's billboard, on a busy transport hub where rail and road bisect, plays the urban space against natural landscape; it embodies the idea of, in the artist's words, 'the city washed clean'. The high-tech, slick advertising and mass consumerism that billboards usually represent is countered by something low-fi, homemade and not for profit, tinged with the 'romantic melancholy' of conceptual idealism.



Lucy Joyce – Motorway Becomes Sea. Photo courtesy Jenny Judova @ Art Map London

The site specific or 'nomadic' is certainly one of the distinctive features of Art Licks Weekend. Art Licks director Holly Willats sees this trend increasing as young artists find it ever more difficult to secure spaces and funding to show their work. Jill Quigley's 'Inter//vention' curated by Seen Fifteen at Safehouse 1 was a flawless match of artwork to site. Quigley's photographs of abandoned 19th century 'famine cottages' in Co. Donegal are set within an abandoned 19th century terrace house in Peckham. In each the romantic ruin is reanimated and subverted by a 'private performance' using neon spray paints, string arrangements and graffiti, asserting the artist's presence and the present moment; the same process is repeated in the exhibition venue itself, layering and doubling the effect yet also drawing attention to the contrast of urban/rural space.

Some projects were more nomadic than others – actively mobile in fact. Millington?Marriott presented 'Tokyo Drift', which, they cheerfully admit, is 'Sean's mum's car' pimped up by four specially commissioned young artists with vinyl graffiti, screen printed fabric interiors and ceramic snails on the hub caps, travelling about the city. Likewise, Cheap Drinks Van, though stationary, represents no less than twenty artists from a van in Choumert Grove Car Park. There is a lot to experience here – it is like a mini theme park in fact – from dramatic one-to-one performances in the back of the van to a conversely calm and hypnotic video/sound piece in the blacked out passenger seat. The project, we are told, evolved as a form of activism promoting 'neutrality' (hence the van, in neutral) in the face of a demanding commercial art world. This opportunity to hear the artists and curators describe their own work and ambitions, unfiltered by gallery PR or media, is another real perk of Art Licks.



Ladette Space. Photo courtesy Jenny Judova @ Art Map London

And then there was the pop-up: a number of projects were displayed in the front rooms of artists' or curators' flats – for instance Ladette Space's 'Rubber' themed installation and 38b, a 'book fair/ interactive sculpture'– or in otherwise prosaic commercial premises. David Blandy's '16-bit' is curated by A—Z @ Four Quarters, a games arcade on Rye Lane. His 90s-style arcade game 'Duels and Dualities: Battle of the Soul' might well be mistaken for just that, while 'Backgrounds', projected onto the opposite wall, uses the same quaintly dated low-res graphics to show Blandy and his father walking through the landscapes of his father's paintings, their dialogue rolling out from a flashing cursor in speech bubbles. The location makes it an immersive experience, encouraging one to engage, to dive into Blandy's virtual world, and so to confront the contemporary power of such alternative/constructed realities in today's culture. (Blandy and A—Z won the Artquest Workweek Prize for the best artist-led or independent curatorial project in the Art Licks Weekend).



DK:UK. Photo Courtesy Jenny Judova @ Art Map London

DK:UK also engages with commercial and popular culture in a unique way. Just steps away down a dingy shopping arcade off Rye Lane, their 'gallery' is a working hair salon, the clients effectively funding DK:UK's two-monthly art commissions. For 'It Want It' Jack Strange stages a single hair dancing perpetually, surrounded by looming cameras and a disco ball as if auditioning for 'The X Factor'; the live feed is played in place of a mirror, so that the client unwittingly becomes a participant in the performance as well as funding its continuation. Cut hair, fund art, watch art, repeat: it is neatly self-perpetuating.

It is this inventiveness, thinking outside the boundaries of the traditional gallery space, that makes Art Licks so fresh and exciting. There is a far greater connection with the urban environment and local community, art rubbing shoulders with the life of the streets, as opposed to the rarefied and exclusive atmosphere that a gallery space inevitably exudes. There is an ease and ubiquity to the use of digital means to enhance the multisensory aesthetic experience. I could happily have continued to seek out treasures all day, so varied and rewarding were the nuggets I found. While not all of the works I saw would stand up in a 'white cube'

West End gallery, that's not the point. Taking art out of its traditional milieu has engendered a new energy, a dynamic, innovative, experimental spirit – which is, most importantly, fun.

By Kitty Hudson