

DAD IN CONVERSATION with

Roy Smith

Lives and works in Hythe, Kent

“How have you interpreted/responded to the project title transmettre/transmit?”

I am exploring conversations with the customers and staff of a Polish cafe in Dover Town centre. This is a remarkable place where people from Eastern Europe meet and buy and talk. You could easily miss this shop which is a cafe which is an information centre which is a place of conversation. Culturally it is divided from the rest of Dover, many of the customers do not speak very good English despite being here for over a year, others speak very well and have only just arrived. Some stayed for money, some stayed for love, all hope for a better future. Physically it is divided even though it is within the usual walkways but is denied passing trade by the underpass that leads to the waterfront.

I interpret the transmission of information through the conversations I am having with the people I encounter in the shop. My work is about the interrelations between people, contingent encounters that are more meaningful than a bus stop conversation. I am intrigued by the 'grey areas' that exist within our urban spaces that often suggest a distinctiveness that can create a boundary which can be difficult to cross. I set myself up at a table and I drink my Polish coffee and I try to talk to each and every person that comes into the shop about the food that they have bought. I know that language is a difficulty here and I am attempting to find ways to circumvent this. Often there will be couples and one will translate for the other, sometimes they answer me in the shakiest brave English and we communicate through basic words and images. The conversations move from food, to politics, to home, to hopes...mine included, this transfer of information is important and it is necessary to give as well as take in a conversation.

It is very difficult having an open conversation with strangers and in this shop I am stranger than most. How important is this communication? What do we

have to gain in a situation where I put myself forward and hope for the generosity of someone I have never met? I believe that within all of this something extraordinarily valuable is happening. I record all conversations (with permission) and I photograph the items that we discuss while they hold them.

In addition to your references to Transmettre/Transmit, how has the project's location in heritage sites impacted conceptually on your practice?

Exhibiting within heritage sites is certainly challenging for most forms of representation. The sites are so protected that you have to consider very carefully the methods or techniques that may be used. This is a practical consideration and not directly connected to conceptual concerns although the two have a strong influence upon each other ultimately due to the compromises that are necessary. The brutality and the grandeur of the structures themselves are intended to be intimidating and awesome, this has to have a definite affect upon practice and for me this has enhanced my considerations of historical sites. Within a 'white cube' there is no historical significance, it is by nature, virginal. There is nothing virginal about these sites, they are containing and rhetoric, asserting their hold over territory and population. All very interesting foils to my own work which attempts to cross barriers and create a dialogue.

The historical significance of these places is extremely important to me especially the redefinition of their purpose over time (the Jesuit Chapel was once a garage). I do not intend to reflect the site itself, but rather what it signifies in terms of context or contrasting ideology. The invasion of The Loyal Orange Lodge into a former Catholic Chapel questions its lost purpose in the light of recent ideological conflicts and a small Polish shop in Dover can represent something with greater relevance to contemporary life than a million tons of stone, but a million tons of stone may give it weight.