

OBITUARY

The death of an artist: Adrian Henri, 1932–2000

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The death has occurred in Liverpool of the artist, poet and public health practitioner *manqué*, Adrian Henri. This is a reflection on a collaboration that crossed C P Snow's two cultures,¹ which lasted almost 20 years and paid rich dividends for public health on Merseyside and way beyond.

Many of us "children of the sixties" grew up on the Beatles and the Liverpool poets. In the "Summer of Love" of 1968, Adrian Henri who, as one of the speakers said at his funeral, "loved love", spoke for all of us:²

LOVE IS

Love is feeling cold in the back of vans
Love is a fan-club with only two fans
Love is walking holding painstained hands

Love is

Love is fish and chips on winter nights
Love is blankets full of strange delights
Love is when you don't put out the light

Love is

Love is the presents in Christmas shops
Love is when you're feeling top of the pops
Love is what happens when the music stops

Love is

Love is white panties lying all forlorn
Love is a pink nightdress still slightly warm
Love is when you have to leave at dawn

Love is

Love is you and love is me
Love is a prison and love is free
Love's what's there when you're away from me

Love is.

It was in another lifetime that I personally began to connect to Adrian in the flesh. The opportunity came up to play an active part in designing and running health promotion activities at the 1984 International Garden Festival, which was intended to kick-start the regeneration of this once great city enduring hard times. Adrian's book, *Total art— environments, happenings and performance*,³ was the obvious text, and it was about this time that Adrian and my paths converged. A five month long garden festival, with four and a half million visitors, presented a unique opportunity to use the whole environment to explore health issues in a holistic way.

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Extensive discussions took place with the Festival designers about how the whole site could be inseminated with a health perspective.⁴ One discussion, for example, was about the tides of the adjacent River Mersey and the observatory opposite; how an interpretation of this might give people insight into a large scale human habitat called Liverpool, its origins and *raison d'être*. Another discussion centred on using the Festival to explore the gulf between town and country, with its implicit loss of an understanding of the cycles of nature and the seasons that can afflict the urban poor, except for the impact of the cold in winter. Thinking was much influenced by a "happening" around the corner from Adrian's house in the centre of Liverpool, when a derelict site adjacent to the Cracke public house was turned into the seaside for the day for local children, made possible by the gift of truck-loads of sand from a local builder and complete with sandcastle competitions, ice creams and games.

The Health presence at the Garden Festival, though less ambitious than originally conceived, did manage to penetrate all quarters of the site. A static, large scale health fair (the first such to provide mass fitness testing and personal lifestyle advice) was complemented by static and dynamic displays, especially in the area given over to small vegetable gardens. Health orientated activities, such as aerobic dance, yoga, sports and public participation, music and poetry completed the picture.

In 1986, the Copenhagen office of the World Health Organisation began the Healthy City initiative, and I was asked to be the first coordinator. My collaboration with Adrian took off at this point, and eventually Adrian made contributions to public health through a wide range of media and activities.^{5,6}

At the first Healthy Cities conference, held in Lisbon in 1986, I presented a paper—"Esmedune 2000"—which sought to draw together a strategic vision for a future, regenerated Liverpool based on a coalescence of community initiatives and more formal, large scale public works projects. Adrian responded immediately by writing his poem entitled *City 2000*.⁷

CITY 2000

In this city
filled with the sound of alarm-bells
police-sirens howl
like animals mating.
Vagrants huddle together
in cardboard cities;
in a damp bed-sit
a girl dreams visions of Patmos

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Cool white spaces
 The dusk gleam of an ikon
 The night
 written in dripping white
 on a railway wall
 'Swarming city, city full of dreams'
 In this city
 the sound of the bulldozer is banished from the land
 Swingeing custodial sentences imposed
 on anyone designing a building finished in shuttered concrete
 Car parks burst into flower
 narcissi, blue-flags, lillies-of-the-valley
 pushing up through the tarmac,
 the streets heaped with yellow marigolds
 All planning decisions are referred to
 The postman Ferdinand Cheval
 Charles Rennie Mackintosh
 and
 Antoni Gaudi
 (all speaking through a medium)

This city
 no longer an embarrassment
 The too-much-loved-mother
 at the school speech day
 lipstick blurred
 smelling of gin-and-lime
 As the sun rises over this city
 Your morning face on the pillow
 Through strands of dark brown hair
 The river lying back open to the day
 the lace curtains of terrace houses
 Sing like school children

This city
 is your mother
 and your lover

She is your first thought
 and your last

She is your future and your past

Subsequently, despite a very full career as a mainstream artist (both fine and performance) and poet, Adrian Henri became ubiquitous in public health and work for Healthy Cities. Adrian regularly taught on the Liverpool Masters in Public Health course, his mural of *Esmedune* (fig 1) adorns the wall of a seminar room in the University of Liverpool's Public Health Department, and Adrian contributed the video

commentary for the highly successful International Healthy Cities conference held in Liverpool in 1988.⁷

In 1990, Spanish Healthy Cities links led to a British Council fellowship for Adrian to go to Valencia in Spain to explore the health dimensions of the famous Fallas festival with Carlos Alvarez and Concha Colomer—an extreme happening dating back to the middle ages involving community constructed installations, incendiary on a large scale. "Why is a British painter and poet (and occasional singer/songwriter and playwright) visiting Fallas under the auspices of Healthy Cities 2000?" Adrian asked, before answering his own question most convincingly.

In 1997, Liverpool celebrated 150 years of public health, having been the first British city to appoint a Medical Officer of Health (William Henry Duncan, in 1847) with whom Adrian shared a name—albeit spelled differently.⁸ Adrian became the Public Health Artist in Residence for the year, and set things off with his *Ode to Dr Duncan*.⁹

ODE TO DR DUNCAN

"... this Duncan
 Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
 So clear in his great efforts, that his virtues
 Will plead like angels . . ."

Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

As I was a-walking down Paradise Street
 a figure in black I happened to meet
 a smile on his face instead of a frown
 a ghost walks the streets of Liverpool Town

He presses his nose to the window
 to see rows of whirling glass eyes
 in the brightlit launderette
 like a child at Christmas.

*Choking cellars of Cazneau Street
 Dark courts of Duke Street . . .*

Turning on impulse to home, he walks down Seel Street;
 dazed by the neon lure of nightclubs,
 he does not notice the familiar figures
 huddled on the steps of the Mission of Charity.

*Cheapside and Lace Street
 Blind alleyways of Milton Street . . .*

He nods approvingly at grids and litterbins,
 tuts to himself as he notes cracked pavements,
 burst-open black bags, polystyrene food-trays,
 drifts of chip-papers, abandoned copies of THE BIG ISSUE.



Figure 1 Esmedune.



Figure 2 Dr Duncan in Seel Street.

*Effluent-filled entries of Edge Hill
Dark empire of the Necropolis . . .*

Tracing his daily route from Rodney Street
to work in Upper Parliament Street
he sees the girls' white familiar faces at the corner,
wonders only at the shortness of their skirts.

*Guiding Star, Garrick, Clare Wheeler
Ghost plague-ships haunt the Mersey mist . . .*

He smiles at the curtained glow of tidy houses
where typhoid and cholera once stalked the street,
does not see the bleak estates where skeletons dance
to the electric beat of poverty.

As I was a-walking down Paradise Street
a figure in black I happened to meet
a smile on his face instead of a frown
a ghost walks the streets of Liverpool Town

Joined by the crimolined shade of Kitty Wilkinson,
he pauses politely to offer an arm.
Beyond the traffic lights their figures fade
in the Grimshaw mist of the Old Dock Road.

Collaborating with Maggi Morris and The Duncan Society and, most importantly, his partner Catherine Marcangeli, Adrian went on to produce and facilitate an abundance of creative riches culminating in the “Dr Duncan Art Show”, which was wrapped around an exhibition in one of the city’s museums entitled “A Healthy Place to Live” that explained many themes of 150 years of public health in Liverpool. The Dr Duncan Art Show itself brought together the work of 15 Merseyside painters and sculptors, hand picked by Adrian and responding to his challenge to represent what public health meant to them through their own chosen medium. Adrian’s own contribution was to be one of his last large canvasses—*Dr Duncan in Seel Street* (fig 2), a representation of the public health pioneer in a contemporary streetscape of his old Liverpool stamping ground.

And there was much more to this most generous and humanistic man. Adrian was on hand to respond through the written word and canvass to the Hillsborough football disaster of 1988, contributing to understanding and to the healing process (fig 3).

THE BELL

The bell
toll'd all afternoon
we did not send to ask
for whom.
It told of flowers
heaped in a goalmouth,
red and blue scarves
heaped together at an altar;
it told of
eyes like TV screens
haunted by last night's images
tears dried by the April wind.
As the flags at half-mast
stirred overhead
the deep bell
still toll'd in our heads
long after the light had gone.



Figure 3 Flowers for Liverpool.

And in 1997, Adrian Henri's version of the "Hippocratic Oath" appeared in the *Observer* newspaper:¹⁰

"For a new oath you could apply
for joint finance from PFI*
or have a private ode from BUPA†
Super. Of course
the government regrets, but
'without fee or covenant',
'for benefit of my patients'
and all that ancient stuff
won't do. Frankly, we're
advising downsizing. Perhaps
a Hippocratic haiku,
seventeen syllables or less;
you won't get more
on the NHS."

Adrian felt that there had been a public assumption that contemporary artists were self indulgent and living in ivory towers. He completely dispelled any perception that this was how it had to be and in his holistic understanding of health he expressed an understanding that was at the very heart of the World Health Organisation's "Health for All" vision.

Sadly, and devastatingly, Adrian suffered a massive stroke at the beginning of 1999, and despite the wonderful devotion and therapy provided by Catherine, a marvellous demonstration of love in action, complete recovery was tantalisingly out of reach. A retrospective exhibition of Adrian's work at the Liverpool Walker Art Gallery in spring 2000 proved to be a tour de force of the range and power of this man's contribution to Merseyside's culture and beyond.¹¹ And in those final months,

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* Private Finance Initiative. † British United Provident Association. Formed in 1947, BUPA is now a global private health insurance company.

there were some poignant final contributions from the palate of faltering recovery.

At the very moment of universal civic acclaim—honorary degrees from the local university, freedom of the City of Liverpool—Adrian succumbed on 20 December 2000. He had, of course, been recognised by the public health community by the award of the prestigious Duncan Medal for his contributions to public health.

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