

CHARACTER STYLES

ED HADFIELD

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CATALOGUE ESSAY

2 0 1 9

CATCHING UP WITH ED HADFIELD

'Catching up' is a common expression used by friends online or SMS text, and you could say that arranging rendezvous and catching up is an art in itself, mutual recognition that personal news and self-development is fastmoving, that we are often separated by location or work, and feel the need to catch up properly from time to time. This is often allied with the related phrase 'staying in touch' ie literal skin on skin contact, an occasion which now that so much of life is transacted in cyberspace, comes ironically at a premium. Both usages imply there are spatiotemporal lags, gaps and virtual chasms in modern social existence that need to be bridged periodically, if we are to avoid the hermetic solo existence which so-called smart technology is imposing, even as it opens up potential communicative pathways and horizons quite unimaginable a mere 20 or 30 years ago.

In retrospect looking at images of human beings in the 1960s and 70s (album covers are a good place to start), despite the modern exteriors and equipment, (particularly in the West), is to see the very last phase of a slow-paced, relatively low tech, late medieval lifestyle. So, the digital revolution really has been super-catastrophic, fundamentally altering the fabric and design of daily life through knowledge empowerment (despite the hazard of information overload), apparent increased connectivity, invisible online mass surveillance (reducing us to mere data points), and sharing/caring social media platforms, all radically accelerating the rate of cultural change. The result has been a quality time shortfall, and incremental breakdown in communication due to a loss of intimacy, not to mention the paradox that despite a staggering array of communication tools we often have nothing

meaningful or authentic to say! The birth of the postmodern hive mind has come at a price, which is why Ed Hadfield's novel, bespoke signage is important, for it invites us to quit the rat race, if only briefly, and cut through the noisy distractions of our 24/7 business activity, in order to catch up with him, and simultaneously -through the installation of his artfully wrought work either in the grimy streetscape or white wall artspace- each other too.

As an aid to writing this text, Hadfield sent me a fairly detailed description of his working methods, especially how the sign WARMZY, 2019, evolved from a fleeting workplace incident involving coffee foam that snagged in his mind, via a short Swiftian ditty "Walmzy, walmzy/hummed the hounyhms/ in the cazalam-pit", which itself metamorphosed into a carefully designed double-sided street slap, featuring his unique portmanteau word WARMZY "where the generous and warm meaning of the words had to force itself out of a fractured and compressed construction" (email 7 August 2019). Further background research was then constellated around the risqué figure of Oscar Wilde -someone writ large in Hadfield's personal mythology- and especially the theme of queer generosity to be found in his short stories such as 'The House of Pomegranates'.

The mental processes enacted in Hadfield's studio as try out CMYK colour matches bluetacked to the wall, reveal a phased development (one generally involving drawn-out negotiations over colour tone with sign manufacturers), steadily leaving behind the quirky conceptual messaging embodied in an earlier public work: the James Joyce stylistic appropriation in Peckham Square, ALWAYSYES, 2016, and his slightly oddball, somaesthetic sign GO TINGLY, 2018 (still situated at the exit to

Peckham Rye railway station to the bemusement of travellers who spot it), both of which relied, albeit obliquely, upon an instructional element, yet one spiked with playfulness. The brand new piece WARMZY though, is pure street argot, phatic communication that requires no decoding, inclusive friendliness requiring no user. WARMZY bursts with outgoing non-directional energy, an antidote to a society negatively gripped by its childish infatuation with the selfie photograph, for warmth has no self boundary, it is passed on generously as a heat signature.

Here the sign bends nicely into London's ambience, the morpheme 'y' ending, informalising the word, as in 'cabbie', 'tinnie' (Aus) or even Banksy, a diminutive suffix which first appeared in the Middle English period, now doing a roaring trade again. But in an age where class conscious formal codes and registers of written English have been forced to adapt to a post-imperial backwash of rich immigrant patois and the slangy phonetic waywardness of text messaging, WARMZY as a species of iterative, home-made 'Globish' (ie global English), manages to evoke the sentimental decorum of letter writing, a way of closing alongside 'all the best', and 'yours' etc, Hadfield's roadside greeting addressed to Lewisham's denizens and the megacity he inhabits.

WARMZY WARMZY in its double-sided, 160cm x 60cm repeat format is Hadfield's latest demonstration of both a more decisive nod to publicly accessible semantics -rather than borderline private language games- plus greater sensitivity to the symbolic meaning of colour (bubblegum pink for females, cool blue for males à la Superdrug's store bags!), skilfully avoiding the temptation to fetishize graphic design elements, but still using them to support and disseminate messages. Having said

that, WARMZY subliminally evokes the poetic rhythm of Lewis Carroll's poem 'Jabberwocky', which first appeared in its entirety in *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, 1871, and perhaps this is unavoidable, for the nonsense tradition is alive and well, if somewhat marginalised by the diktats of politically correct, safe speech.

Evidently there is a marked psychological propensity, and a technological incidence towards linguistic nonsense in Ed Hadfield's work, an unusual trait in the art world, dada aside, and though at first glance he has more in common with Gallic agitprop, represented by Alfred Jarry's fictional surrogate Père Ubu, the anti-clerical Lettristes and Antonin Artaud's disturbed incantations, rather than the sometimes airless, and comfortable middle-class Victorian wit of Carroll and Edward Lear, it is the latter's epileptic bi-sexuality and his unforgettable, wacky inventions such as the Dong and the Pobble, which have greater relevance, since Lear's eccentric bestiaries linked the child to the man, the human back to the animal in an age made deeply anxious in its brain and blood by Darwinian theory.

Yet it is Ed Ruscha -multidisciplinary artist and Los Angeles hipster- to whom Hadfield possibly owes the greatest aesthetic debt, especially his use of the witty billboard catchphrase. Contentwise Ruscha's inscriptions radiate out and tease the viewer, often deadpan in tone and loaded with cool irony, his Word Art transforming the picture surface into floating signage, fathering post-painterly tropes which fuel Hadfield's practice. As a covert social activist meanwhile, Hadfield belongs to a lineage of guerrilla artists: Cildo Mereiles' conceptual small-ad insertions in Brazilian newspapers, Inventory

journal's street flyposter 'Smash this Puny Existence', 1999, and the intermittent public performances of nihilist taxi driver and tabloid bogeyman Mark McGowan.

According to Hadfield, his "studio practice is based round the capturing of somaesthetic experience" (email 15 August 2018), an interdisciplinary field of enquiry shaped by fluid sexuality and an ability to make quick annotations on the back of an envelope about significant moments in his daily life as a barista etc, and to then convert these impressions into Word Art. His offbeatness is a charming addition to London's ever-changing street flora, yet mercifully free of deterministic arrows and dumbed down icons, each aluminium sign a possible meeting place, or somewhere to loiter and plot your next move, for as Nicholas Bourriaud has remarked "Art is a state of encounter".

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