



Matt's Gallery

Matt's Gallery Q6

Q is a series of interviews, conducted to coincide with the programme

Phil Coy interviewed by Tim Dixon

Tim Dixon: *Swete Brethe* continues a line of your work that you've developed involving collaboration with musicians. I wondered if you could say a little bit about that and about how the collaboration with Byron Wallen came about.

Phil Coy: I was thinking about this in terms of making films really, as I don't usually work with synced sound, I tend to separate the sound and work with it as a distinct element.

The first musician I worked with on a film score was Alexander Tucker for *Wordland*, which was shot on the coast of Norfolk, and was set around the idea of land and property falling into the sea. We kind of knew each other already – both of our Dads had lived by the coast, his in Dungeness, mine in Norfolk, so we somehow immediately understood the territory, even before we started working together.

That made it quite an intuitive conversation. Alex's music, especially at the time, was involved with the doom folk scene working with Stephen O'Malley and Sun O))), people like that, so he brought this quite beautiful dark drone score to the piece. He played the score live to the film at the LUX premiere and at Outpost in Norwich. Those performances were a real treat, a bit like early silent film musical accompaniments.

Could you say a little bit about the decision to work with Byron on this piece and the particular interest in jazz music in the context of this work?

Yes with Byron, in a way it's similar, in as much as I was thinking of a solo trumpet as a score for Nine Elms, but because it's modulated by the local wind speed, the music becomes intrinsically linked to the site. I started looking to wind instruments, and then the jazz trumpet felt like a way in. On the one hand it can be read as quite anodyne, but when you think to the roots of jazz and what it's led to, it's massive. Because of the context, I became interested that the trumpet had originally been developed for military purposes, it was used to rally troops, and raise flags, but through jazz had been transformed into this emancipatory call, a sort of shorthand to this extraordinary sonic force that America has given to the world.

Byron's name came up through World Heartbeat, a local music academy. When we spoke, he immediately got it, and understood at a fundamental level what's at stake with the horn and that musical conversation between America and the UK. That whole process has been quite something, and his composition has really pushed the work somewhere else – added a different urgency to it, it has been great to work with him.

You touched a little bit there on the specificities of the site that you've been working with and I'm aware that this work has developed over quite a long period of time. How has your thinking about Nine Elms and the surrounding area developed through that process and how has that fed into the work?

Yes, that time has allowed for an aggregation of different elements – particularly the sculptural elements that define this square of land, and occupy it, with what are essentially scientific instruments, albeit repurposed to play Byron's score. Then because you only hear the work if you go to the internet, then the work is completely silent on site, so there's this strange disconnect, that makes it a sort of silent protest. The effect is slightly theatrical, it looks almost like a film set, but also very purposeful, particularly with the anemometer that reads clearly as something to do with monitoring the wind.

From the perspective of the site itself, it has always been the symbolic power of the American Embassy that loomed large – the cultural force of that is so weighty that it became impossible to ignore. I knew already, just from living in London, that from the moment the Embassy got permission to build on the site the whole area had started developing quite rapidly. It feels like everything that has happened since then, has been as a consequence of that. It's a kind of model example really, almost like a miniature version of the political and economic power America wields around the world taking place in this single postcode in London.

That was amplified by visiting during the pandemic because I witnessed the whole place develop so rapidly, compared to the rest of London, which was sort of in stasis. I saw buildings literally coming out of the ground. That's been a big part of it, watching a construction in process and the power ascribed to property in full swing, nothing holding it back, not even a global pandemic.

Initially I shot a lot around the embassy gardens, fascinated by how the plantings had been designed to reflect American landscapes, but were also physically formed a hidden fortress with its own moat. Just like Versailles, it is a castle, and the gardens have been designed as a public display of an empire's power over landscape, albeit a condensed miniature version.

You drew the title of the work from a Chaucer quote. I wondered if you could say a little bit about your interest in the West Wind as a concept? The piece grew from the *Eleven Windssocks for Brunel* project, perhaps you could say a little bit about that project too?

Yes looking at ways to represent the wind started during my residency at Brunel University and thinking of ways to work with that campus. I began to see the wind as an invisible force that cuts through and ignores the architecture, and ultimately erodes it, I wanted to somehow find ways to describe that ambivalent power. That felt more prescient in Nine Elms, as an area that's heavily indebted to the value ascribed to a square meter of land - to be describing something which is invisible and ignored, and yet is also so firmly a part of our existence on this planet, that approach might allow the work to pass through unscathed. On a formal level, I liked that a windssock has a sculptural quality but also creates a moving image.

Yes, the title *Swete Brethe* references a poetic tradition, or at least I was aware of several of the romantic poets having picked up on this idea of the West Wind, alluding to the coming of spring and the first bit of warmth from the west. I think for Chaucer, he used it as a sort of portent of the odyssey that was about to be embarked upon. But in the here and now, and for this work, that romance has really departed – perhaps the wind is colder and more driven by data, its the idea of a West Wind as a stand in for American influence, or the global hot air of advanced capitalism.

There is also a relation to the climate – my fascination was sparked when I was caught and holed up for a few days during a hurricane in Trinidad, that's when I started to think a lot more about the global weather patterns, and particularly east coast America's storm season and its influence on our own weather systems.

Could we talk a little bit about the physical structure as well? It would be interesting to hear a bit about the materials that you're using here – basic building materials. I'm thinking also of *Stereo Pair* at Brunel University, which is cast in concrete.

Yes, that's true, I've been fascinated for years by the aesthetics of utilitarian objects and architectures. Recently we installed *Stereo Pair* at Brunel University, which is

made up of six precast concrete elements, that create two listening devices. I chose that form of fabrication, steel reinforced formwork, to emulate the aesthetic of civil engineering projects, partly because Brunel University is named after one of the world's most famous civil engineers, but also because it's next to the M25, M4 and Heathrow Airport and is a classic 1960s brutalist architectural campus. Amazingly, I was able to include, within the structure of *Stereo Pair*, aggregate that I had salvaged from a brutalist building that was demolished whilst I was doing the residency. What seemed particularly poignant was the buildings foyer had been used as a location for Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, which played such a big part in shifting the country's collective consciousness with regard to brutalism.

Like *Swete Brethe*, their structure is based on scientific instruments, those pre-radar sound mirrors strung around the south coast of England from Hythe to Dover, that were built to listen for incoming enemy aircraft. Close to Brunel campus was the RAF's central command, where they received the signals.

Swete Brethe is on a plot of land right next to the border of the American Embassy, other than that it looks like any other brownfield city site, apart from that there's a lot of building works going on all around it – most of the time – so it feels like the work is almost an extension of the huge construction site that is Nine Elms - that made it feel important to use materials that would talk to that.

So the materials and equipment are pretty much the same materials that you would use if you were building a wind monitoring station anywhere. Because there's no electricity on the site, it needed to be autonomous in order fulfil its function, but that has also really influenced the look and feel of the piece. We're using the generic Heras type of fencing that you normally associate with squaring off a piece of land for building and development. Within that sit two, six meter tower installations which have an anemometer and a windssock atop, together with a turbine, solar panel and control box to power them. Together those elements make a scientific instrument which transmits the wind speed data online. So, it's really a utilitarian instrument for sending and showing wind speed data from this very particular area.

The windssock was the starting point in the process here before it evolved to incorporate these other elements and the collaboration with Byron. Do you have any reflections on that process?

I think the need to somehow find and create an autonomous space within the Nine Elms development began to become the priority, in order that the work could exist within it but also speak to it in the same formal material language of land, building and its associated materials. Over time it also became clear that it was going to be hard to genuinely collaborate with developers in a meaningful way that wasn't going to be a simple art washing exercise, unless we found a way of creating an autonomous site.

That's one aspect of it. I think for the windssocks, I felt like once we'd understood that we were trying to create a kind of wind monitoring station, which was giving us a very specific reading of the wind data in a very specific place, the need for more than one windssock seemed unnecessary.

Something that should be mentioned, is that the windssock element of *Swete Brethe* is installed about five meters away from the US stars and stripes flag, something we have been keenly aware of when negotiating the use of this site. So visually we have a relatively diminutive single windssock that takes on a very clear relationship to the huge American flag.

On the one hand it is completely ambiguous, but because of this proximity, and that it is planted within this autonomous square, the windssock can easily be mistaken or read as another flag, and in our case, because this is a black non-flag, it speaks to me of the anarchist tradition, which is primarily against the notion of property, and symbolises the negation of all flags. A black flag basically indicates a rejection of nationhood all together. Also, because it has been planted in this very specific context, and at this particular time, it has several other possible readings - for example, the Black Lives Matter protests gathered along this same road, Nine Elms Lane, when we first started working on this project, and it's hard not to associate a black flag with the mourning that the country and the world is going through following the global Pandemic and environmental crisis. Black might well be the colour we would choose to represent the inconsolable grief of this situation, but it could also represent the seeds of determination and resolve we will need to overcome it.

October 2021

Published to coincide with Phil Coy, *Swete Brethe* Offsite at Nine Elms: United States Embassy (Bus Stop D), Nine Elms Lane, London SW8 5DF and online at mattsgallery.org

21 October – 28 November 2021

Designed by Phil Baines

Matt's Gallery is a registered charity, number 1169683

The commission was funded by Bellway, in agreement with Wandsworth Council as part of their Section 106 commitments. It was presented in partnership with London-based property developer and site owner, Dominvs Group, who specially adapted the area in order to facilitate the installation. Matt's Gallery is supported by Arts Council England.



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

DE
DOMINVS
GROUP

