

Sandarbh Workshop 2009  
Belper, Derbysire.

## **No Nature in the Rural**

*Review by Laura White*

In the first two weeks of May this year a group of international artists landed in the rural town of Belper in Derbyshire for a two-week residency. As one of the invited artists to participate I found myself in the company of artists from all over the world, from Taiwan to India. The idea for this residency is to bring artists together to respond to a rural location. Titled the Sandarbh workshop originating in India, this year was being hosted by artist Ivan Smith, who lives and works in Belper.

Initially when I was invited I was a little skeptical – as I feared a group of artists trying to get back in touch with their ‘organic’ selves as they roamed around fields and woods looking to *respond* to nature, and making Andy Goldsworthy type sculptures! However, after doing some research and seeing the range of interesting artists involved with previous and current workshops, my views quickly shifted. Well, this residency **IS** about responding to a rural location, but **NOT** with polite site-specific sculptures in the landscape, but to challenge the location and invest in a community interaction. It was important for all the artists to try to understand Belper and its location in the short timescale of the workshop, which was to be interesting depending from where the artist had come from. I am sure Belper is a very different place for a Taiwanese artist than it is for me from the UK. Belper is a small town in the heart of Derbyshire, a basic and unimpressive place in relation to its architecture and town planning, yet it is located within spectacular countryside. It was important to engage with the town and those in it, which was attempted through various means other than through individual artists projects, such as artist presentations and an exhibition of works in the house where we were staying. We were encouraged to come onto the workshop with no pre-conceived ideas of what we might do, to avoid imposing work on the location, and giving us the freedom to use the two weeks to experiment and challenge our own ways of working.

As an artist based in London, I draw from the local area of Hackney and the bargain shops for my materials, so in Belper I found myself seeking out retail outlets unique to the specific setting such as the farmers stores, where anything from pigs ears to electric fencing is sold. Usually locating my work in spaces designated for artist's work, such as galleries or project spaces, I wondered if my work could enter a non gallery location, to extend my ongoing interest for combining the readymade with the 'art' object, in challenging the viewers' perception and understanding of the *things* and *stuff* we see, buy and accumulate. So I decided to approach the Red Cross Charity shop to see if I could use their shop window to make a work. Met with a little trepidation from the manager she eventually allowed me to use the space for a couple of days.

I embedded manipulated and purchased objects in the window display alongside the items currently placed. For example, there were two mannequins in the window, one dressed in a tuxedo and the other a woman's summer suite. The suite was subjected to the attachment of clothes pegs, nipping in the waist and lifting the hem line in a playful excessive manner, while the male mannequin had accessories added - a plastic hula-hula skirt made from heavy duty green plastic bin liners, and a multicoloured plastic hair extension. Other more subtle arrangements guided the viewers' eyes around the window, such as the disorientation and clustering of unfamiliar and familiar objects, Such as glass bowls filled with lollipops and other Red Cross items displayed on strange crafted plinths. It became a playful arrangement of object collisions, which aimed to engage the viewer in a different experience to that of the usual window display. The viewer scrutinized unrecognizable items alongside the familiar, while others just laughed, saying 'Are those pig ears?'

There was one problem though! Rose, the manger who on returning to the premises a day later and seeing what I had done to her window; even thought she had agreed for me to be there; threw my work out in a rage, saying, 'this was not art!' Unfortunately she had missed the local's interest the day before while I was setting up, and clearly felt threatened by the presence of something so unfamiliar as contemporary art!

This, I have to say, was the only project that was so refutably rejected during the workshop by an individual in Belper, and in some ways highlighted the importance for workshops like these to happen for better or for worse. I can't help thinking that perhaps the next time Rose from

the Red Cross sees some contemporary art, she might ask why it makes her so angry – or maybe not?

It seems to me that these kinds of residencies/workshops are amazing and successful at the very same time as being disappointing and fail. What I mean by this is that the artists are engaged with each other, their work and the location, with levels of both success and failure, and the outcomes of individual projects are met with both support and disregard within the community. Probably a very good indication that this workshop is critically engaged, and in my opinion the only way a workshop like this can operate.

Artist projects included, Francis Gomila's video exploring a disused building, home for pigeons both dead and alive, Chintan Upadhyay abandoned car, which he set fire to and then planned to plant a garden within the burnt out shell, Dong-hun Sung's portable house costume which he took on walks around Belper and Anke Mellin's wishing box. For more information on other artist projects go to the website [www.sandarbhart.com/](http://www.sandarbhart.com/)

Participating artists included:

**Ivan Smith** UK, **Laura White** UK, **Francis Gomila** UK/GER, **Lata Upadhyaya** UK/IND, **Istvan Eross** HUN, **Chintan Upadhyay** IND, **Liu Po-Chun** TW, **Tsai Kung-Lin** TW, **Dong-Hun Sung** KR, **Alvaro Verduzcos** MEX, **Abby Manock** US, **Anke Mellin**, GER.

Images:

**Laura White** - *Red Cross Collision*. Mixed media.

**Chintan Upadhyay** - *A memorial - In memory of a dead car*