

## The Meeting

Stifling air blasts from a number 21 bus dragging itself noisily southwards along Magdalen Street towards the city centre. A group of people hurry over the zebra crossing, and a few others saunter just beyond the zigzag. The summer sun is lighting all of Anglia Square with a sharp cleansing light, illuminating every object, every edge, every dust particle. Out of a bustling choreography of walk-on parts emerges a man in a different time. The sun shaded from his face by a wide-brimmed hat. He is wearing light clothing, trekking shoes, has a small backpack, and a stick. He contrasts with his milieu in a manner akin to a David Lean film, exquisite focus-pulling picking out the man who is purposeful and aware. I reach out my hand and joke "Bonjour Monsieur Courbet". He smiles, laughs that laugh and we exit the bustling stage and find a table in the Sahara Café.

My first meeting with Steve Baker was brokered by the artist Simon Granger, whom I worked with at Norwich University of the Arts. Simon was excited to tell me that "Steve Baker, author of *The Postmodern Animal* lives near you north of the city". I subsequently discovered that Steve lived just three doors away from me on the same road. Our friendship established itself through an accretion of short conversations exchanged through chance meetings in prosaic contexts, often en route to or from the shops. Or I would see him set off on his bicycle, appropriately kitted for a circulation of the Norfolk countryside.

There has always been that acute sense of purpose associated with Steve. His eyes are always attuned to the details of the landscape, the overlooked or out of place. He notices contrasts between textures. He highlights the natural against the synthetic, the mineral with the vegetable with the animal. He has hunter gatherer's vision.

The windows of Sahara Café rattle gently as another bus grinds up the street. Steve arranges his backpack, jacket, and stick, a little timorously, I think. We order. Just drinks because it's hot and we are thirsty not hungry. We update each other on the quotidian, matters concerning our gardens, the allotment, the changes made to the house that I no longer live in. There is discussion about academia and research and contracts and emails and frameworks. We reminisce about the review and panel discussion that we organised around the time of *Artist I Animal* being published in 2013. And then Steve tells me more about his latest project *Plaques and Tangles*.

Duality has been present in Steve's visual work for as long as I have known him. In *Scapeland* (2013 – present) he explores simple arrangements of split space, presenting visual juxtapositions within a two-dimensional picture plane. The works *Roadside* (2011-2012) document those cycle rides that I mentioned, a collection of happenchance shots showing roadkill from the vantage point of his bicycle seat. A few years ago, I remember him shooting a series of photographs capturing trees and fields reflected in the gloss paint of a construction site fence, a sort of plein air Plato's cave. *Plaques and Tangles* continues this analysis of comparisons, but in this work, there is symbiosis rather than variance. Jean Cocteau's 'Opium' luxuriates in the heady scent of wildflowers. The lectures and writings of John Cage dallies with the minimal score of a cast-iron drain cover. Krauss's 'Perpetual Inventory' (complete with bookmark) is angled defiantly across a grid system, the same grid that *The Rough Guide Map to New York* has found itself rested upon. Deleuze & Guattari rise

above a plateau of stony ground. Hannah Weitemeir's chronology of Yves Klein tilts on nodules of dry mud that Klein himself may have painted blue. Jenny Holzer's 'Laments' is laid like a gravestone, shaded and with minimal floral tribute.

There is the poetry, and there is the science. Steve knows both. He explains to me the rogue physiology that brings about fragmented messages. There is the duplexity of the labels, those unwelcomed in diagnosis but strangely serendipitous in art. The plaques and the tangles play out in the images of favoured books photographed in temporary resting places. This system is far from the Dewey Decimal Classification. It is an ordering of knowledge and enlightenment that follows the methodology of the flaneur. It is Courbet seeking realism.

We finish our drinks and argue playfully about who should pay. Over the hour or so, our retinas have become accustomed to the low light in the café and on leaving, the sunlight outside bleaches all around us. The traffic is frantic. The walk-on extras have picked up pace. The dust forms sparkling murmuration over our heads. We shake hands and reverse our enactment of Bonjour Monsieur Courbet.