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cultural geographies in practice

Linked: a landmark in sound, a public walk of art

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In 2003 a new permanent public art installation, *Linked*, by Graeme Miller, was established along a four-mile motorway in East London.[1] This is a discussion of *Linked* by Toby Butler, followed by Graeme Miller's account of his work in their conversation about the project.

I am getting off the tube at Leyton. It is nearly four o'clock on a cold autumn day. Soon the narrow platform will be filling with schoolchildren. I hurry up the steps to the exit. I put the battery that I took out of the smoke alarm this morning into the tiny radio receiver. I put the spongy headphones on. No sound, but the sponge helps warm up my ears. I walk through the ticket office, and out on to the street. Mostly I can see traffic – cars, buses, taxis. I take a few steps along the pavement. Suddenly I hear music, a voice in my head. I am startled – of course, the headphones. They are working already! A violin is softly playing two notes repetitively. A male voice is talking about a plan for a supermarket – he says it will obliterate the local economy. He says his house will be made into a motorway. I am looking down on an enormous Asda. It looks like it has just opened. I realise I am standing on a big road bridge. It passes over the Central line and a busy motorway. The traffic is barely moving on one side of the carriageway.

I walk back to the tube station, which is on the highest point of the bridge, to get better reception. The violin is still playing, and a brass hand bell rings occasionally, gentle, powerful music. A Cockney voice asks: 'Where's London? Where's London?'

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He goes on to say: 'The only time my dad ever got somewhat emotional was when he thought of the war. And he was a fire warden. He went and stood on the bridge at Leyton tube station. And the whole of London was on fire.'

I look over to the tower blocks and sky scrapers on the horizon. It is a view of London I haven't seen before. The sun is ready to start its descent behind the city. The voice says: 'And it was burning from stem to stern. And you could smell the burning flesh. And you could feel the heat.'

I start to feel slightly choked up. A strange wave of emotion passes through my body. '"Where's London? Where's London?" These people were from Blackpool and then the fire engine had come down from Glasgow. And this bloke said to him, "Where is London mate?" And my dad said to him, "There it is mate. There it is mate". I look. There it is.'

The voice continues: 'We are finished. No, we are not finished. We are not finished. And my dad said no. They can bomb us, they can burn us, but they will never break us. And that was my dad's attitude. And my mum's attitude. My old mum said they will never break us. No. We will pick ourselves up and sort ourselves out.'[2]

I pace up and down the bridge. It is cold; I dig my hands into my coat pockets. I listen, I look. I stare in at the people slowly driving their cars. They don't know what is going on, what I am experiencing. They haven't got a clue. They don't realise that they are walk-on parts in the play today. They are driving over the ruins of a community. A part of London that was flattened. Not by bombs – the 350 homes were predominantly

FIGURE 1. 'Where's London?' View of the city from Leyton Underground station. (Photograph by Toby Butler.)

Victorian terrace houses that survived the Blitz. They were flattened slowly by earth-movers, cherry-pickers, bulldozers. The homes were flattened for a road-building scheme designed to provide a faster route for traffic to get into London and remove traffic from local roads. I am standing above the M11 link road which, by the time it opened on 6 October 1999, had displaced a thousand people.[3]

As I stare at the new road four years later, another voice speaks to me from my earphones. 'I know that if my house was still there, it would be hanging in space above the inside northbound lane. I can still feel myself in that place, that bit of air, the place where I lay down to go to bed, the place where I had showers, I feel a bit naked suspended in the air there.'[4]

Linked, by Graeme Miller, is subtitled 'a landmark in sound, an invisible artwork, a walk.'[5] It is also an outdoor exhibition, a journey into the past and present and an extraordinary use of oral history recordings. It consists of 20 transmitters, mounted on lamp-posts along the borders of a six-lane motorway in east London. The transmitters continuously broadcast recorded testimonies from people who once lived and worked where the motorway now runs. The broadcasts can be heard with the aid of a small receiver which is available free of charge from local libraries. The range of the transmitters varies according to the terrain, but can generally be heard within 50 metres of the lamp-posts. A map of the walking trail is handed out with the receivers; it follows neighbouring roads along the route, frequently passing next to or over bridges across the motorway which give dramatic views of the road and the surrounding landscape.

Linked is funded by, amongst others, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Museum of London. The involvement of bodies devoted principally to history in a contemporary arts project might be surprising to some. But several aspects of the project were extremely attractive to the Museum. First, *Linked* involved the gathering of 120 hours of in-depth oral history interviews that will be added to the Museum's important collection of recorded interviews with Londoners. The museum had already been given a large collection of photographs and documents by the 'No M11 Link' campaign in 1999. Secondly the installation, which spans nearly four miles of Leyton, Leytonstone and Wanstead in east London, provided the opportunity to display history away from the museum, and a series of related exhibitions were prepared by the museum for display in four libraries along the route. Finally, *Linked* was not the first site-specific artwork to enter the museum's collection – for around 15 years the museum has actively collected works of urban art.[6]

Linked also fitted in nicely with the Museum's 'Voices' programme of lottery funded activities designed to reach new audiences and experiment with the presentation of oral history. Yet there are also interesting differences between the cultures of museum display and contemporary art. Miller was keen not to have the transmitters marked on the map that walkers will follow. He wanted the public to happen upon the recordings, like an Easter egg hunt. The museum staff, perhaps more used to making things as accessible as possible, were keen to make the route easier and more user-friendly. Miller interestingly identifies this as a cultural difference in approach:

> [We are] torn between my desire to allow people to get a bit lost, because I think it is good to get a bit lost, and the consumer's desire to have everything cut and dried and expecting to hear continuous sound from

FIGURE 2. 'I know that if my house was still there, it would be hanging in space above the inside northbound lane.' View of the M11 link road from the Linked route. (Photograph by Toby Butler.)

> one end to the other without any interference or problems isn't necessarily the point. So there is a slight difference of culture between the slickness of a modern exhibit in a museum that is all very cut and dried and crisp and well tailored, and my desire, my elements are more kind of interventionist, about say enticing people to get lost in a Tesco's car park in Leyton but to discover something wonderful en route; to drift; but that involves making that investment of their own time.

I became involved in the *Linked* project through my involvement with the Museum as co-sponsor of my research. My minor (but interesting) role was to attend a series of meetings held throughout the process of gathering testimony from people who had once lived or worked at the road site. Bi-weekly meetings were attended by the five-strong interviewing team, the artist Graeme Miller and Mark Godber from Arts Admin (the organization administering the project). My role was to liaise between the *Linked* team and the museum, and come up with some guidelines for collecting and documenting interviews that would make sure that the resulting recordings could be successfully (and legally) archived by the museum.

Some sound alternatives

Linked is an adventurous experiment in mounting an exhibition outdoors. Of course, museums are no strangers to self-guided walks and history trails; for example, the Museum of London has previously worked on a 'wall walk' along the site of the old walls of London. Walkers can follow a circular trail following the wall foundations and signs have been placed at points of interest around the city with historical information. Using earphones to hear narration of an outside area is also a well-established technique: for example, English Heritage principally narrate the history of Stonehenge using audio guides which visitors carry with them on their walk around the stones. Companies such as Acoustiguide are developing ever more advanced headsets. In exhibition halls all over the country visitors can tap numbers into compact disc players – or even palm sized computers – to instantly hear information about an artwork or an exhibit.

Six years ago, when *Linked* was first planned, the use of transmitters to play recordings was very unusual; now it is becoming more widespread in exhibitions. So it is fair to say that the technology that *Linked* uses is not particularly remarkable, or at least not as remarkable as it once was. However, in some respects the use of the *Linked* technology does push the boundaries of public oral history. With the cooperation of the local authority, transmitters have been mounted high on lamp-posts over a large area, making the urban street a long Tarmac stage for exhibiting oral history. This has some very exciting possibilities for presenting and interpreting urban landscape, city culture and architecture.

The transmitters, which were custom made and cost £1 000 each, are built to last: the recordings are broadcast from particularly stable, non-volatile computer chips and the transmitters are solid-state – they have no moving parts to wear out. The company that constructed them, Integrated Circles, have even guaranteed them to work for 100 years. All they need to keep going is electricity, so it seems entirely possible that *Linked* could

run for many years, even decades – an unusual span of time for an exhibition, particularly for the art world, which is more used to exhibitions running for weeks or months rather than years. The changing landscape of Leyton, Leytonstone and Wanstead will also play a big, unchartable role in the future artwork which spans several miles and many years. Miller says that *Linked* has been designed with this in mind:

> The context will change beyond what was intended, in a sense what was intended was to embrace that change; I don't have any particular expectations. [The broadcasts are] not memories that you can write in stone anyway, they are almost deliberately sabotaged not to be a version of the truth because they are too incomplete to tell any coherent version, but they can arouse a lot of curiosity. . .[in the future] people will come and have another look at it, people change generation, outlook, landscapes change, it will be interesting how audio hieroglyphs stand up to test of time.

I have already noticed this change in context at work, just three months after the launch. Leyton's landscape is mutating already; next to the new Asda, the route passes by the new plate glass of a Fitness First gym. Walking through the acres of cars in the supermarket car park, where I have learnt from the transmitter there were once cows grazing, I can now ponder the link between driving to a shop instead of walking, and the soon-to-open mirrored room of treadmills next door. This, I now realise, is a linked moment; I have been linked.

The consciousness of listening

Miller's approach to editing memories from oral history interviews might shock those purists amongst us who like their oral history straight, and preferably with a transcript to hand. At times it is as though all meaning has been pulled out completely; interviews are cut up, mixed and diced; excerpts are repeated; bells, chords and sounds are added. For the most part stories are coherent; some touching and funny anecdotes survive intact, but periods of the broadcast initially seem anarchic and even unfathomable.

The opaqueness of *Linked* has much in common with Janet Cardiff's *The missing voice*, a Walkman-guided walk around the streets of Whitechapel, which presents a series of observations, unanswered questions, bursts of music and elusive fragmentary stories.[7] As David Pinder notes, the overall effect is to heighten your senses. The stories mix with your own thoughts and memories as you wander the streets; ambiences are created, affecting the senses of self through what Pinder terms urban space-times. He notes that the 'melding' between the artwork and the consciousness of the participant also means that the walk is a highly specific experience that will differ according to the mood and circumstances of each listener on a particular day; 'it will clearly not be experienced by people in the same way.'[8]

Miller uses several methods to encourage the listener to become sensitive to their present, unique surroundings and thus develop a unique experience: musicality (including rhythm and repetition); building in space for thought, both in the broadcasts themselves and between the receivers; and finally the occasional use of the present tense by the broadcast voices.

The overwhelming effect of the musicality and repetition in the broadcast is to slow listening down. Verging on hypnotism, they encourage the listener to concentrate and really pay attention to what is being said. Miller describes these background musical textures such as tolling bells and violin strings as an 'audio Oxo cube' which thickens the atmosphere and creates a sense of suspension. He also allows room in his compositions for the listener to think for themselves, as there are frequent periods of time without words, or word repetitions that are musical rather than meaningful. He deliberately leaves musical spaces, 'a lulling moment', between fragments of stories to allow the listener time to participate with their own thoughts; 'a kind of mutual surface for where your voice meets other peoples... for that reason slowing things down is very desirable, because it filters out, it creates a kind of architecture of space that is the equivalent of silence actually, it is like a little church, you are creating a little church on a street corner that filters out the background.'

I found that these textures had a large part to play in an effect that I would describe as a hyper-aware meditative state. It is hyper-aware because, through the words and emotions of the speakers, you are receiving vivid experiences from the past. Meanwhile you are visually and, next to busy roads, aurally confronted by the present.

Miller actively uses the present in his work in several interesting ways. The streets of Hackney deliver new details that might seem unrelated to the *Linked* experience but, in a state of creative awareness of your surroundings, can soon be integrated into the journey in some meaningful way; a piece of graffiti perhaps, a new building or a poster that you would usually pass by and ignore. Making connections between the past and the listening present can become playful, surprising and rewarding. Conversely, at its most disorientating and at times frustrating, *Linked* offers no visual clues or reference points to what you are hearing. You might as well close your eyes. I did exactly that when I heard deeply personal descriptions of homes that have been replaced by the motorway trench before me. There just seemed to be no point of reference to hang the descriptions onto – just acres of Tarmac. The houses have to be entirely constructed in the imagination and it isn't easy.

Yet it is the geographical present that can give an audio story immense power. I began with the description of London in the Blitz from Leyton bridge. Looking at London's skyscrapers and tower blocks, built on the bomb craters and ashes of a burning city which I could sense once again, gave me a new awareness of urban space-time, a lurching feeling of time travel. At times this effect was heightened considerably by the way interviewees speak. The interviewing team were asked to encourage people to talk in the present tense, viewing the past in their mind's eye as if it is happening in front of them. Being interviewed in this way can feel like a session with a psychiatrist, and many participants found it difficult or impossible to keep up for long, drifting back to the comfort zone of the past tense. Yet some interviewees clearly enjoyed the challenge, and Miller used several of these accounts in *Linked*. The effect can be quite startling, because the interviewee sounds strangely present in an almost ghostlike way. The idea is that the voice is present alongside the listener in a temporal as well as a geographical sense, so two people's present tenses are meeting in the same place.

Although Miller's own voice barely features on the walk, it is not difficult to appreciate that *Linked* is also a deeply personal work. The artist lived for ten years in Grove Green Road and for several years he brought up his handicapped son there. He lived, along with many other artists, in houses that were condemned for the road building programme. He never considered his neighbourhood as material for an art project; he just lived there, finding that he was making closer links with his local community as he connected to support networks in bringing up his son. He also lived through the biggest road protest that Britain had ever encountered. Experiencing the trauma of watching his neighbourhood, and finally his own house, get torn down by the Highways Agency led to a desire to somehow rebuild what had been destroyed. To get a better idea of the artist's thinking and feeling behind the project, I asked Graeme to explain in his own words how he came to create *Linked*, his extraordinary sonic artwork.

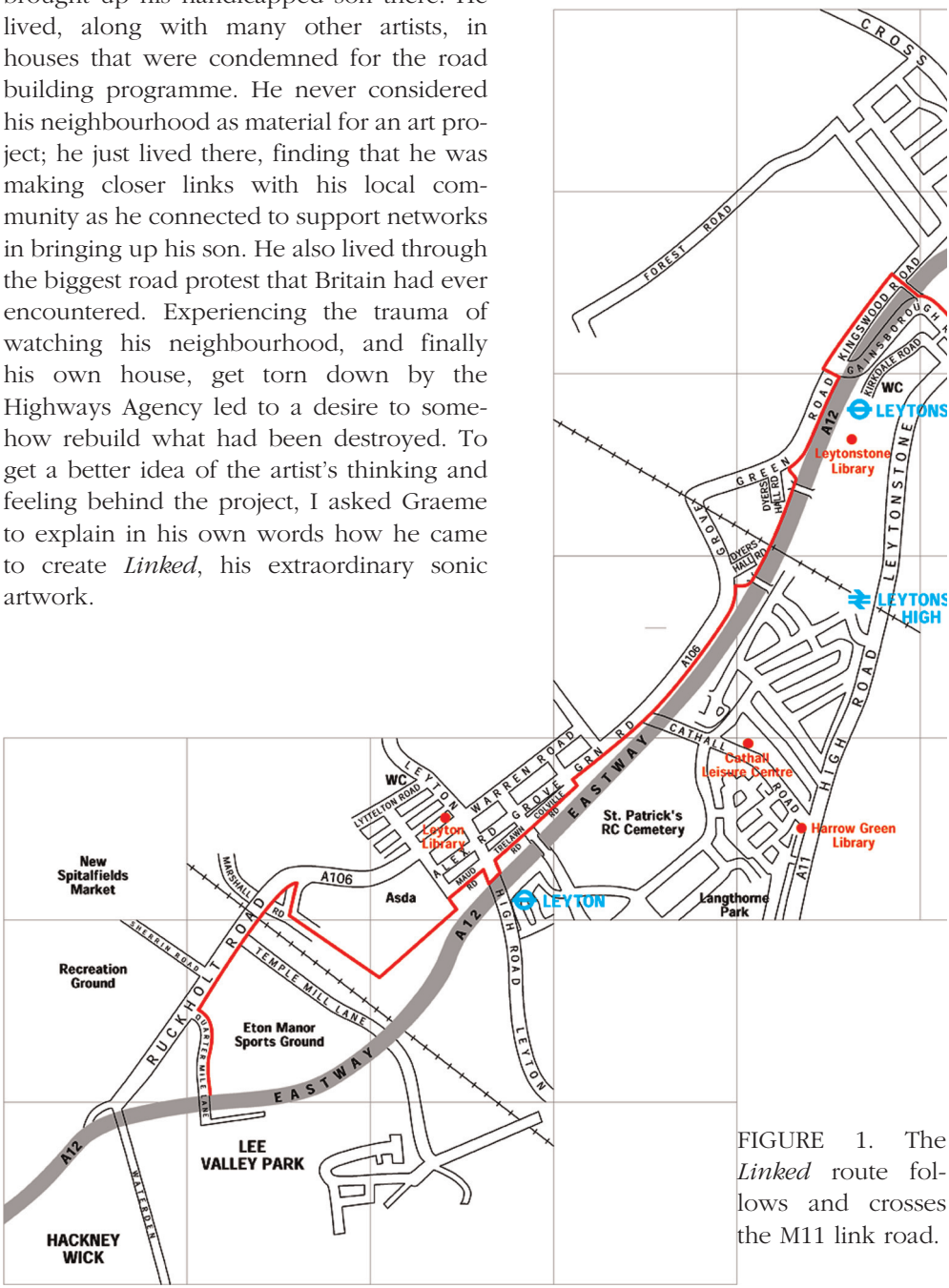
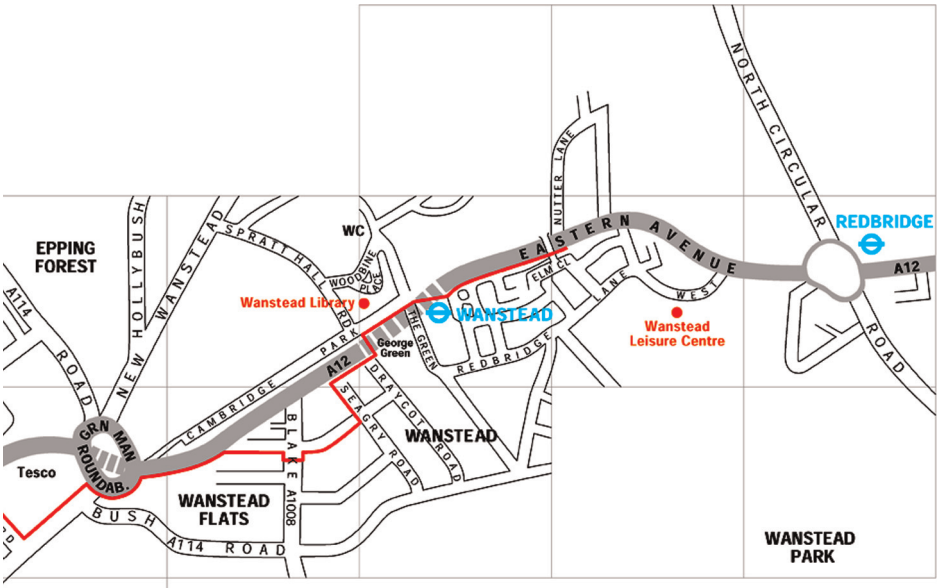


FIGURE 1. The *Linked* route follows and crosses the M11 link road.



In the last year [of living in the house] I was working on the only other transmitter piece that I have done, in Salisbury, and became very involved in the meaning of the land and what it is to walk there and what the memories of that place were. But even then I wasn't particularly thinking about where I was. But it was beginning to disturb me and more and more to the point that it caused me to make an extremely dark bit of theatre called *The desire path*, which was about walking, about being in a city and that city swallowing you up.

And the experience of blight, of watching houses disappear when you are there … one day you would walk past a house the next day there would be a gap. And the sense of a power that was bigger than you that could just wipe away buildings. The paranoia of familiar things being removed – it is like someone sneaking into your house and removing the fireplace overnight. You develop those bonds with the exterior. I didn't have a lot of time to think about what it meant at the time other than that I didn't like it. It causes a sense of deep disturbance in me and sense of foreboding. Almost a sense of what was to happen.

One morning after the protest had finished by a day, everything seemed to be settled, finally out of this place in two months' time and rehoused. At 8.30 am the front door smashed down and police and bailiffs stormed into our house in riot gear, Robocop style,

kept us all separated, completely freaked my son out, went through all our files, all our folders, just did a full sort of military police job on us, then told us that we had a few minutes to get all our stuff out. We finally negotiated for 24 hours and people came from all over London to get our stuff out. And the moment we brought the last box of stuff out, this huge bulldozer came down and tore the house down behind us. You could physically see, it was like closing the latch and having the keys in my hand, I had the keys in my hand but the whole house was gone, the front door was left standing. It led to nothing. It was very, very, very traumatic.

It probably took me about two years for the noise to stop really, I was so unprepared for that, although people go through things like that in Palestine on a routine basis – but I am sure it takes them that long for them to recover as well, and worse.

But it was strange – again hard to explain to people who lived only a mile away what it was to be in this war zone or to have been an accidental victim of something . . . one of the protestors who was our friend, Paul Morazo, who was a sort of eco-activist, asked if he could spend the night with us and I think that may have been [the reason for the raid]. So in a sense we experienced what collaborators may have done sheltering people from the Resistance, and then the state coming down on you like a ton of bricks. But it didn't make any sense – there were two things, one that I had for myself to find some kind of revenge. Revenge was the first word that came to me -– but I thought I can't make this into a revenge piece, but an answer, a response, I have to respond to this and I didn't have the strength to respond to it, but I kept thinking well, what I have got is my voice – don't muck around with a writer or an artist, you are able to bite back in some way.

Also what I later thought about was this idea that there is memory within the landscape. That had been with me a long time and I was working with that idea. And then my direct experience of what was wrong, what was happening during the blight years was that memory was being erased, there was a sterilization process going on, both I think for accidental reasons, that would happen through any major reconstruction of an area, so it becomes unrecognizable, but also through the political desire to expunge the places of resistance if you like. I can really see that happening now – the Israeli army, for example, seem to be using the bulldozer as a political mop, as if that will get rid of the actual political opposition that lies behind. I'm sure it won't succeed, but time and again people use it; like areas of London like the Jago, which became such a problem of poverty and crime they just obliterated it and rebuilt in a 'let's start again', way.

The denial of history seems to be something that I feel I need to respond to as an artist. Years before, I did a workshop in Denmark, where I was told a story about a road that was built in Bratislavia. A military highway was built by the Soviet authority right the way through the city and it went across the front door of the cathedral. It couldn't open against the rail of the highway and you had to go in through the side door. The road also demolished what was then one of the oldest synagogues in Europe and the whole Jewish quarter around it; it was an act of political road-building. But the brilliant bit about the story, in the space underneath this elevated section of road, people started chalking the ground plan of the synagogue on the ground. And then people would come and scrub it away. And the next morning it would get re-drawn, not by any

one person but by a group of people. Then they started extending it to include the baker shop next door to the synagogue and eventually this whole Jewish quarter would reappear in chalk. They said that when you talked to people, it was as if the road didn't exist and as if the synagogue did exist, and I thought, that's it, that is more or less what I can do, just as an intervention – I became interested. Not all art you do will necessarily have that aim, but I think every now and again there might be an opportunity, uncool as it is, to make a difference. I felt there was this possibility of really intervening in a real area and to sort of do something that would make those houses reappear.

The fourth element that triggered *Linked* is going back not long after to where my house was, this building site, and I couldn't put my ten years back. That compounded that thought about a sort of, I would now call it, an ecology of human memory and landscape that you both read and write into the landscape, and you can even sense narratives. You may not know what they are, but you know that they are there, you sense them inhabiting, they seem to like nooks and crannies, they seem to have certain requirements. They don't like big, flat uninhabited spaces and in the same way birds won't nest – they will hunt on the edge of the motorway, but they won't nest within a certain distance of big highways.

I think stories, history are instances of it. If you stop on the hard shoulder, you have broken down – you are stuck with some shredded tyres and bits of cassette tape in the bushes – and there is no sense of time whatsoever, even though real, horrible major events happen there, people lose their lives and you can't get a grip on what those might have been. It is just forgetting – I don't know why, it is the traffic, the concrete – it feels timeless, time doesn't seem to flow there.

So at the simplest level and motivation I was going to put the houses back, I was going to put them back and do them in a way that would just project them back literally with radio waves, radio waves would fill up that space, so literally, that volume . . . because the road is a trench as well, it is going to be even more clear that it is an empty space rather than a flat plane, because it is carved down – it seems to occupy a certain volume, and that seems like the empty volume that you can pump full of radio waves and rebuild those houses.

And so the trick was – and still is – to get as many people to experience that as possible – to somehow reach that same critical mass you might reach, say, in the Bratislava instance, where somehow you could argue that the houses exist at least as much as the road does – they just exist at a different level – but it tips the balance. So this idea that you put something in place that would tip the balance came out of living there, having already had that sort of distanced view of landscape and space and memory as an artist, but then fuelled by this direct experience about what it is to have your own memoryscape removed by external forces – not just by your own forgetting.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

[1] Linked receivers and a map of the route can be borrowed free from public libraries at Leyton, Harrow Green, Leytonstone and Wanstead (on the Central Line). See www.LINKEDM11.net

[2] Track 2, Graeme Miller, *Linked* (London, 2003).

[3] Leyton MP Harry Cohen gave these figures in a speech to Parliament. House of Commons debate, 11 Mar 1994 (London, Hansard, 1994), col. 593.

[4] Track 5, Graeme Miller, *Linked*.

[5] Graeme Miller, *Linked* (catalogue) (London, Arts Admin and the Museum of London 2003).

[6] Cathy Ross (Head of Later London History Department, Museum of London), 'Forward', in *Linked* (2003) p. 3.

[7] Janet Cardiff, *The missing voice (case study B)* (London, 1999).

[8] David Pinder, 'Ghostly footsteps: voices, memories and walks in the city', *Ecumene* **8** (2001), p. 15.