

Brainwashed - Nigel Ayers: Viral Emissions

Written by Justin Patrick

Saturday, 26 March 2011 21:00 - Last Updated Sunday, 27 March 2011 21:57



Nigel Ayers has long been an agent provocateur in the realm of experimental music. In the late 1970s he formed a group called The Pump with his brother Daniel Ayers and the late Caroline K. After a string of cassette releases a new project was formed by Nigel. Since 1981 Nocturnal Emissions has been releasing a steady stream of deconstructed music. The broad range of styles he has delved into can be bewildering. There are those made from abrasive noise, to an album made up of entirely remixed bagpipes, to another utilizing recordings made with vocal sounds from children under the age of 18 months, to another that samples cell phone conversations picked up on a police scanner, and a whole slew of titles which could be considered drone music before that kind of thing was as popular. He has also delved into electro and teeth-gnashing techno, and recently a dub album. And those are just the musical expressions of his curiosity. Nigel is a writer, poet, creator of viral art and digital ritual. He was kind enough to take the time and do an email interview with me to talk about his various explorations.

Justin Patrick: The phrases "Duty Experiment," "Guerilla Ontology," "Boycott Consensus Reality," and "Neo-Tantric" turn up frequently in association with your artistic work. What do these tag lines mean to you and how do they relate to what you do as an artist?

Nigel: For quite a few years, although I had a degree in visual art, I tried to avoid calling myself an artist. That's because I found the term to be very politically loaded, as the development of the idea of the artist had implications that were central to a class-based society. For a few years I preferred to call myself something like a "cultural worker." I felt I always benefited from my fine art background as the British art schools were, at the time I went through them in the mid-'70s, very good at sharpening your critical perception, especially self-criticism which can for some be creatively crippling. They made you creative, very tolerant of uncertainty, and very flexible. I think that nowadays they retain many of these qualities, but since the "Brit Art"

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phenomenon of the '90s, art has become more of a "career option" when you have aspirations of being a Damien Hirst, and a head full of corporate X-Factor bullshit.

Anyway, I think actually it was before the rise of Hirst, I thought it might be an idea to reclaim the craft of "the artist." And anyway I don't think what I do is anything else. And there are positive sides to the idea of being an artist, it's a small piece of freedom in a repressive culture. So as an artist, I feel that I am working with the field of information. About how we see and experience our exterior and interior "realities." I have a tendency to seeing art more as a hammer-like more than a mirror-like tool, that is in using art, you are changing reality ..and society.. just a little bit.

Using memorable bite-sized phrases, slogans and tag lines in my work is a form of poetry I've explored. As an artist you create the frame around your work and this includes the labels that might be stuck on the wall around it. Critical writing, interviews, and other published texts are opportunities for word play, in creating personas, they are part of the work and help create its social meaning. I use a variant form of "Guerrilla Ontology" which is "Guerrilla Sign Ontology." Cryptic crossword lovers will notice this phrase contains the words "Sign- On," which is what you have to do to get Unemployment Benefit in the UK. Developing my art in Thatcher's Britain, Unemployment Benefit was very very useful. "Duty Experiment" is a phrase borrowed from a bundle of photocopied documents I salvaged from the skip/dumpster when I worked as a cleaner in the India High Commission. (I could say it was something I found when I worked in India, as India House, being the embassy, is legally part of India although it's in London).

This was a piece of "outsider art" sent in by an apparently psychotic member of the public. I recycled parts of the text in early NE work "Tissue of Lies," as well as in The Pump project. "Boycott Consensus Reality" is an appropriate, precise, and polite response to the colonization of our everyday dream worlds by totalitarian corporations and their pernicious advertising. "Neo-tantric," that's one I've sort of dropped a bit, because it got taken up by a well-known religious cult. What I was looking at was integrating rational humanism within animism, the idea is an ecological thing developed from surrealism, and nothing whatever to do with how Sting has sex.

JP: You are perhaps best known for your musical activities under the moniker of Nocturnal Emissions, yet you continue to remain active in other media. Your "War Criminal" images of Tony Blair and George W. Bush have spread around the globe. You have released a book of spam poetry, *The Control You Gain, The Power You Use*, and a book documenting your psychogeographic explorations of the Bodmin Moor in your home of Cornwall, along with a few other books. You work with video, put together installations, and have been making electronic

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gadgets. How do all of these different modes of operation relate to each other?

Nigel: I think they all address the idea of being a multi-dimensional person, and that multi-dimensional personality being shaped by social forces, as well as helping to shape those forces back, as a tool-maker. I like to get away from the bourgeois idea of being an author, and become more of a medium for exploring, focusing and sharing existing memes. Maybe I can put a new twist on them or distort and degrade and mutate information, and subject it to critical inspection but the pleasure is in bouncing that material back and forth into the world. It's a kind of information-dance.

JP: Is there an area of focus you'd like to spend more time exploring?

Nigel: I prefer to be a non-specialist.

JP: You've made a number of books available through Print-On-Demand services. One is a roundup of the Network News, featuring many authors, which you distributed between 1990 and 1999. Another that you edited is *A Dictionary of Space Cornish*. This came out in conjunction with the Cornwall Community Space Program to document the language for space that they developed. How did you become involved in this project that took the Cornish language and adjusted it to make it more suitable for space travel?

Nigel: *A Dictionary of Space Cornish* came about through my involvement with the Association of Autonomous Astronauts, which was an international network of activists committed to resisting gravity, and evolved from group discussions.

JP: Much of your work has been inspired by the landscapes of your home in Cornwall. You've created a body of work that I see as being a reciprocal feedback loop with the environment. Now you are colonizing Google maps by [embedding your videos and music into the application](#). Science fiction author Rudy Rucker has been using the street view on Google maps as a way to go to a place without actually visiting it, so he can then write about that location. Do you have any other creative uses for Google maps or similar programs planned? What can you envisage other artists using these interactive map spaces for in the future?

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Nigel: That thing about feedback loops is interesting on my mind. I think our memories are shaped by media systems, it's the way we share our inner landscape. I think it's important to tap into these global systems, which somehow form our collective memory. It seems, from what I've read about mnemonics, that location-based systems are particularly memorable.

Also, apparently a larger percentage of people believe in astrology than any of the major world religions. I'm not sure that my art practice colonizes these mnemonic spaces, rather that it takes up a kind of viral residence in shared public space. My art practice has something to do with recapturing the imagination. I think the imagination is colonized by meanings attached to flags and logos. Mass murder isn't mass murder if it's wrapped in a flag—if we don't take charge of symbols, then symbols and the emotions attached to them will take charge of us. By the way, if anyone is colonizing public space, it's not me, it's Google. Google extends private property into public space, each screen shot has this corporate image encoded within in. I'm trying to do something very personal and basic, reclaim my own personal space. But also I'm encoding in the videos a scrambling of memory—modern urban planners are latter-day druids, reshaping the landscape in the shape of their own gods and goddesses. I think these kind of viral art campaigns are a way of reclaiming space for the imagination, and to restore a bit of sanity and sense of community. I think there is a basic anger in my work, an anger at the human race and the natural world being plundered by corporate greed. You have to wonder what the concept of “freedom” means, is it the psychotic response of the supporters of huge armies in the world, protecting the interests of the super-rich against the super-poor. One thing I've been very interested in is the retelling of recent myths and using magical practice similar to that used by alchemists like Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, turning worthless trash into valuable cash. Except that I'm not impressed by the way they were such suckers for class-based society, and the way they re-enforced the status quo.

I think that Google's street view is a wonderful technology and one that is too good to be left in the hands of a capitalist corporation. I'd like to see the evolution of open source, Wiki-versions of street view. There is the Open Street Map project, I met a couple of the people who got that going and that's where I first got the idea of using GPS in a magical ritual. I find Google Street view fascinating, I like the bits that don't join together properly, the shifts in time between when different parts of a street have been scanned.

When I was walking the lines I plotted on the Bodmin Moor Zodiac, I used large scale (UK military Government) Ordnance Survey Maps as well as photos taken from airplanes and satellites from Microsoft's mapping project. The Google views weren't detailed enough for my use in 2006. There are many discrepancies between official maps and the publicly available aerial photos, which is odd because the OS maps were partly based on aerial photos, and there

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is a small airport actually within the zodiac. While I was walking the Bodmin Moor zodiac there were major road works underway in the southern section, where the Virgo image lies. I have photos of the surveying equipment used to mark out the road when they were building it, painted wooden artifacts not dissimilar to items used in ritual magic by the OTO. What I found later was that rather than breaking up the landscape giant overlay, the new road builders had in fact made new marks where marks weren't so visible previously. I can't say I've read much Rudy Rucker, but yes, Google Maps is good a way of viewing places for research purposes if you want to hack out a novel. I used Street View when I made [My Own Stonehenge](#) , to correct some the inaccuracies of the plastic model kit it was based on. But street view isn't all that accurate either, I had to use some archeological plans that I found elsewhere. There is a time element in Google maps, and overlaying the Google views on other mapping systems, say Microsoft' views, gets interesting. Also integrating this into a form of magical realism.

JP: I have heard from a reputable source that one of your favorite writers is the Irish novelist Flann O'Brien. What is it that attracts you to his work? Have his writings influenced your own work? If so, in what ways?

Nigel: I like Flann O'Brien a lot. (which reminds me, the guy I lent *At Swim* to didn't like it and hasn't returned it, I'll have to buy myself another copy!). He was writing in Ireland in the 1930s. It's the deep absurdity in the way he mashes up the tropes of various genres with shaggy dog stories and unreliable narrators. He deconstructs the novel in the way a postmodern writer is supposed to—you've got Joyce and Beckett in there—and Flann is a lot funnier. Yes Flann O'Brien has definitely influenced my work, especially books like the *Bodmin Moor Zodiac* , and the fictional sections of *Network News*

JP: You recently told me that a local radio station contacted you about a motor accident on the highway near the Virgins Nipple in Cornwall. On your blog you wrote that " [The Virgin's Nipple is a ritual motor vehicle trackway designed to stimulate an erogenous zone within the Giant Effigy of Virgo in the Bodmin Moor Terrestrial Zodiac](#) ." Did they ask you to comment on the event? Do you feel there is a corresponding connection between events in the area, your ritual walks and your other artistic engagements with the landscape?

Nigel: The reporter is coming round to see me tomorrow, I'll let you know. [Link to audio file of Nigel speaking on the radio show can be found [here](#)]. I think our understanding of

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landscape is a bunch of (often media-fueled) ideas about place, private and public property and belonging-to-a-place, from which we get the construction of personal identity. Locality, ethnicity, nationality, family, tribe, gender, age, subculture, and species are all negotiable when you get into the zeroes and ones of informational-based systems. Reality is, in this sense, a social construction and informational based artworks are part of that construction. Human consciousness doesn't stand aside and look at reality, it is part of reality. There is no such thing as art, apart from within a negotiated social construction. And one of the things I like to use art to do, is to make it not look like art a lot of the time, so that you are forced to think about it a bit more. Although it's nice to imagine that my ritual walks have activated some sort of magical current in the landscape, I am perhaps too rationally-minded to be totally convinced. I'm more closely inclined to Dawkins' theory of the spread of memes. That is, the information generated mutates as it gets into the public domain, attaching itself to various hosts. My artworks have now been in the public domain for an amount of time sufficient for them to start to interfere with the social construction of place, in that they are beginning to be used by public services like traffic services, in this example.

The Twelve Woods roundabout would otherwise be a particularly meaningless public space, the highways agencies have resisted attempts by the local community to give it visual meaning with Christmas trees. It was ripe for eroticizing with multiple levels of meaning, if only via virtual and digital media. The new cheeky name for the roundabout seems to have done the trick.

JP: On one of your websites you have a page devoted to "[Desiring Machines](#)" you have built. They are very beautiful pieces of psychotronic craftsmanship. Can you tell me about your intentions behind building them, their use in your installations, and what recordings, if any, they turn up on?

Nigel: They are healing machines for hands-on use. They are based on some of the principles of radionics, except where radionic devices tend to use pseudo-electronics, I have used real electronics. They are packed with sensors, and because my approach to electronic engineering is improvisatory and intuitive, they tend to be short-circuited, over-sensitive and chaotic to the extent that that they respond to the extra sensory perception of their users. I haven't as yet used them on any of my recordings.

JP: You often use the language of magick to describe what you're doing and yet you are a skeptic of magick. How do you view such belief systems and how do you play with belief systems—your own and other peoples?

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Nigel: Yes. This may have derived from my attempts to talk about art to art teachers. I remain even more profoundly skeptical of artspeak! Zappa said something like writing about music is like dancing about architecture. I guess that in using the snake oil terminologies of magick, I'm using a language which is partially understood by a lot of people who might partially understand the language of art, but respond better to subcultural references. Modernist art (including post-modern art) is a project of developing new languages, to describe new experiences, and is very much built on misunderstanding, and re-interpreting the past. Traditional societies don't need traditional art being explained to them. And to paraphrase Cage, you don't have to call it art if the term bothers you.

So, although I am hyper rational in my daily life, and really have to say I don't share the superstitions that the industrial music world is riddled with (which I put down to its prime movers attending English private schools that were a bit like Hogwarts). What I'm doing in my practice is exploring dream worlds, which could be the positive side of voluntarily induced psychosis, while keeping both feet firmly in the clouds. Where what I'm working with is a magical reality, the one which the mass media and politicians mess with in their satanic way. Having said that, I think my hyper rationality is close to animism where everything is holy and close to paganism, because it's to do with a reverence and integration with the natural world—though I do use soap and genetically modified ingredients. Philosophically, this may be close to existentialism but different from individualistic magic.

JP: "Nocturnal Emissions" is a provocative name for your music project. How did you decide on it?

Nigel: It just came to me one night ;-)

JP: Have any of your works been inspired by dreams?

Nigel: Yes, quite a few of them. Mostly they are inspired by bees in my bonnet.

JP: What are your thoughts on Beuys and Duchamp?

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Nigel: So when I mentioned using dreams, Freud claimed that dreams were to do with the subconscious urges that were unacceptable and otherwise inaccessible to the conscious mind and that these unfulfilled wishes were expressed symbolically in a personal language that was meaningless to anyone but a trained psychoanalyst. My own tendency is towards a more Cognitive explanation of dreams, which is less mysterious and suggest that dreams are the brain's way of processing and filing data, imposing some sort of order on the chaos of cognitive stimuli experienced during the day, preparing it for storage in long-term memory systems. That is, dreams are very much to do with the dreamer's current conscious needs and preoccupations. They are not considered to be mysterious or secret symbols from a hidden impulse-driven and inaccessible realm. Some therapists argue that when a waking person relates the content of a dream he or she will necessarily impose a structure onto the dream that will include the same cognitive distortions that he or she may use to interpret other aspects of experience. So this can be a way of understanding in greater depth the cognitive distortions a client experiences. So in the respect that I'm using my music and art as a "righter of wrongs," I'm not dealing with mysterious realms, I'm using dreams as raw material to process the very real cognitive distortions of the real world.

On to Duchamp and Beuys—apart from their life work in creating a personal mythology and celebrity for themselves, one of the things they did was point out, in Duchamp's case—that art was anything that art professionals said was art and in Beuys' case that everyone is an artist. That is, artists don't necessarily have to be professionals and that other social interactions can be seen as art. This poses the question of not whether something is art or not, but whether what the art produced is good or bad, in a social sense.

I got into a debate recently with a record distributor, who I know has progressive attitudes in his personal life, but who chooses to distribute records by various "mysterious" pro-fascist bands on the goth scene. The argument he gave me was "freedom of speech," also he wasn't convinced that the bands in question were pro-fascist even though what they produced looked and sounded like fascist propaganda and had members who had actively raised funds for at least one racist organization, etc etc. Now, as I understand it the argument for "freedom of speech" is that you allow others to speak, not that you actively encourage them and spread their poison. And that you oppose their arguments with better ones. (I understand that pro-democratic publishers in the 1930 and '40s published Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in English, with a view to exposing it to ridicule and criticism). This doesn't seem to be what is happening in this case. So, despite this distributor's "liberal" attitudes, what this guy is doing is exploitative, and he is contributing to a particular social problem by circulating fascist propaganda. He is happy to cash in on the fools who buy this material and this argument makes sense in free market capitalism, where if you weren't selling hi-tech weapons and instruments of torture to certain tin pot dictators, someone else would.

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Incidentally, when I mentioned psychosis before, I was referring to psychosis as a metaphor, rather than extolling the “raw primitive urges of the psycho-killer,” which I think was, and continues to be, a problem with much of the Industrial scene. The author Colin Wilson—especially in his take on Freudian psychology and Nietzsche—is one of the worst culprits in creating this mythology of the “outsider” figure being somehow purer in his “extremism” than an ordinary person. Of course this kind of serial killer nonsense was taken up by P-Orridge and those silly power electronics and *England’s Secret Reverse* people, which produced various hyper-conformist cults of fan-boys in awe of their wonderful role models, who in turn showered them with overpriced, samey, shoddily produced, ill-thought out, crap. P-Orridge was lucky in finding a collaborator like “Sleazy” Christopherson who was skilled in creating cultish prog rock packaging, and a few decent collaborators, but Throbbing Gristle and PTV didn’t half release some crap. Hours and hours of tedious rubbish. I think there is the same problem with Merzbow, obviously as an artist (in the abstract expressionist tradition) he has to produce an amount of material to create a market, which will sustain him professionally. But the product is, at best, not very good, at worst, exploitative crap. It only makes sense if you see Merzbow as a celebrity and buy into the micro-celebrity culture that these guys depend upon.

JP: How do you feel about having been frequently lumped in (perhaps through associations from your early label Sterile Records and some of Nocturnal Emissions earliest releases) to the milieu surrounding what is sometimes called Industrial? I don't think of your music as Industrial at all, but rather partaking of the multiple avenues available in the vast landscape that pertains to recorded electronic music.

Nigel: I don't really like it, so thanks for not thinking that way!

JP: I've never felt you were someone who was trying to pass themselves off as a micro-celebrity, only as someone who is doing interesting and important work. So how do you personally sustain yourself in this late-capitalist, or as some would say too-late capitalist market?

Nigel: At the moment I have another job that allows me flexible time and doesn't drain my brain too much. The work I'm producing, which I publish myself, is closer to my intentions.

JP: From your perspective, what strategies exist for those who wish to make a living from their music, art, writings etc. without compromising their values, or a political stance that is at odds

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with the free market?

Nigel: I've found that when you're making a living from music, art, writings there's always an element of compromise and you're always operating with one eye on the market. I've found that not being dependent on my music, art etc for an income helps.

JP: Earlier when we were talking about magick, you mentioned that you are "even more profoundly skeptical about art speak." What is it about the language employed by artists, art teachers, and critics that arouses your already healthy skepticism?

Nigel: To clarify, it's necessary to use a certain amount of technical language to talk about the craft side of art, movement in art and art history. But I've found a lot of the "theory" attached to art is only used because it sounds "cool" and educated. When a lot of the time, to be fair, it's people who have a high visual awareness who are incapable of using written language. But also within art education there is a tendency to impose an agenda of class-divisions within the appreciation of visual and other culture. That is middle class standards are operating as a sub-text..and deference to celebrity culture.The value of an arts education is in sharpening up critical thinking..

JP: So Nigel, are there any new releases, performances, from you people should be looking out for or any other activities people should be aware of?

Nigel: There's the [band camp releases](#) . & re-issue of *The Quickening* CD out now.

ciao