



Ron Haselden “Louder or quieter”

The new IMAX cinema in London, which opened its doors at the beginning of May, adjoins the existing South Bank complex. The BFI already has its film theatre there (the NFT), as well as the Museum of the Moving Image. But the IMAX is built on a traffic island: all access is through ‘tunnels’ or at least under flyover sections of road. The walkway which must endeavour to unite the IMAX as visibly as possible to the rest of the complex, is therefore important. It is formed by walls which enclose (and seal off from the public) areas under the road system which are to be used for storage. These walls are built from two materials - the lower half is blockwork, the upper is timber sheet. With the South Bank’s bare concrete now so widely derided, it’s symptomatic of current trends that the walkway leading from the NFT to the IMAX has been painted bright blue. The paint serves to unify the walling and has been applied to the concrete above as well.

Artist Ron Haselden was invited to submit a proposal for a work for this long, wide walkway. What he has done is to have many hundreds of small holes drilled through the lower half of the walls (i.e. the blockwork) at intervals matching the size of the blocks and placed along every mortar line between them. Set in each of these holes, with wiring thus concealed behind the wall, is a tiny blue LED. In the upper section, at intervals, there are groups of the same LEDs, also set into drilled holes, but these are not arranged to any pattern: each is a randomised scattering, a constellation. The walkway (passageway and then a sloping path up to newly prettied-up Upper Ground of the South Bank) begins and ends in daylight, but remains quite dark in the middle part, even during the brightest day. The LEDs will remain on continuously.

There are a number of features about this piece which reveal Ron Haselden’s typical approach to making a work. Firstly, his use of light is well known and long established. It’s worth noting too

that the whole area where Haselden’s piece is located is seen as a temporary solution to make sensible use of the space - a life of ten years maximum. Permanence holds no great appeal for him. Indeed, one reason he gives for liking light is that his pieces need to be maintained. If they’re not - they fail, they go. His work has to be wanted, its value to people thus reaffirmed.

Haselden looks for a certain simplicity, preferring his finished pieces to carry technical complexities unobtrusively, and we see this clearly in the IMAX piece. A fourth feature to note is that he was drawn to the idea of highlighting a material / process (i.e. your humble blockwork) which an architect might think better left unseen, let alone made so much of. The piece is neatly finished though: this is not warehouse-chic.

There is an inescapable rhythm to the piece: the fixed rhythm of the lower part set against the freedom of the clustered lights above. Because the LEDs are set into the wall, they’re only seen at their brightest when one’s directly in front of them; indeed, looking along the length of the piece, many of them don’t appear to be working at all. The small irregularities in the laying of the blocks break up the rhythm we expect to see, and Haselden enjoys these kinds of irregularities; in certain circumstances, he’s able to welcome what someone else might think of as a mistake. This piece, therefore, doesn’t reveal itself all at once; it merits exploring. Using the analogy of sound (and Haselden has used sound extensively in his work) the LEDs are “louder or quieter” depending on where you’re standing. If you ran through it, I suppose you’d feel accompanied by a doppelganger of brightening lights. Perhaps the most important element in this piece, though - and of most significance here in illuminating Ron Haselden’s ways of working - is its relationship to the architecture, to the space. In an interview a couple of years ago, he said of a piece “It’s not design, it’s not decoration. It’s a sculpture.” In conversation recently, Haselden returned to the issue of decoration, taking a more ambivalent view of it. He sets aside, as too backward looking, work which is what he would term “added on” - art (or

maybe what he has in mind might better come under the heading of craft) which is too boxed off from the space around it. It can go anywhere and so belongs nowhere. But good work can decorate in a dynamic sense: it engages with the architecture and enables it to speak in a new way. He makes reference to the value of good pattern, and to Islamic art, to cultures untroubled by - or even actively forbidding - the notion of originality, the ego of the artist.

The label "public artist" suggests a specialisation which, if it exists, is unhelpful. Ron Haselden's attitude seems closer to the mark: he argues that there's little difference between working towards a show of work in a gallery and working to achieve a piece somewhere else. In each case, there are conditions - which, as he puts it, "the artist can push around" - but they exist. There are expectations, there are agendas. He attaches great importance to the initial approach, be it by an architect, or by a curator: the invitation is a source of energy. The space becomes the next major component, be it a gallery or a public site. Finally, though, comes the viral ingredient, the yeast: the idea which will form the heart of the final piece.

Ron Haselden isn't, I think, "collaborative" as an artist, but he communicates well with specialists from other areas, those with skills which he wants to tap into. He keeps a wide view as to what should be thought of as sculptural concerns: the person who makes the invitation to him, the space, the budget, the potential for vandalism. All these things are there to be juggled with; they're not extraneous irritations, but potential components. He embraces risk: in fact, it's precious to him. In that spirit, he undertook, at

the invitation of architect Robert Barnes. the first of a trilogy of pieces located at Trellick Tower. This was a light piece: indeed, it aimed to make the whole tower a light piece! It required a lot of planning, an assemblage of equipment; it was weather-dependent, and it needed too the willing participation of many people living there. It exists now as a video (Breathing in, Breathing out.)

Ron Haselden is a sculptor: he trained as one, he remains one. To work in a situation relatively free of constraints and/or competing visual (or aural) elements is inevitably attractive: for these reasons, he remains fond of his recent piece *Echelle*, which was installed for the Salisbury Festival. It's an enormous ladder made from neon tube, attached to a church tower and heading optimistically upwards ... Haselden's propensity for a quiet humour is well shown here, and though this building is now housing an arts organisation, the piece "works" perfectly, particularly at night, with the building's original identity, making a wonderfully unexpected and surreal image. In addition to site-specific projects, he makes work - unbidden, as it were. He refers to these as "background pieces" and admits that, even when asked to exhibit these already-made works, he tends, immediately on seeing the space in which they might be shown, to think rather of creating something new for that space. From a narrow "fine art" perspective, I guess this is a difficult strategy in career terms, but Ron Haselden has always refused to think of himself as sitting on an accumulation of objects; he's refused that valuation. To embrace risk, to strive to keep things open, to bring change and the unexpected to any situation - these things lie at the heart of his work.