



'we don't know when it's coming in' a film in two parts (Tyszcuk and Guy Greaves, dv, 11 mins, 2006)

## Renata Tyszcuk

### Foreword

'we don't know when it's coming in' is the title of a digital video in two parts made by Renata Tyszcuk in collaboration with Rosanna Guy Greaves, (dv, 11 mins, sound, 2006).

The film was screened at the Interdependence Day launch event, Royal Geographical Society, Exhibition Road, London, on July 1<sup>st</sup> 2006. It is part of an ongoing project, by Renata Tyszcuk to document a particular locality and at the same time explore the stories that can be told in any place or city around the theme of interdependence.

The story of the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) and the sale of its post expedition equipment at Sally Ann's, the charity shop in Cambridge came about from conversations at the first Interdependence Day seminar at BAS and also from the history and stories relating to a local well used shop.

The Salvation Army shop on Mill road has had a number of previous incarnations as a cinema and supermarket and is now a charity sales room. The clothing and equipment handed over to the shop several times a year by BAS is sorted, washed and given a new price. Some jackets are given to the homeless, other items are sold and re-used in farming, sailing and adventure sports.

From the dressing of the mannequins in the window display with seasonal outfits that are 'good in all weathers' to the careful consideration of value and usefulness, the handling of these items calls up questions about scales of economies and a re-imagined sense of community.

The film consists of two parts. Part one uses footage from a roving camera that recorded interviews and explorations within the shop. Part two is a static shot of the dressing of the window display. The framing of the window recalls previous incarnations of the shop as cinema and supermarket, reflecting, mimicking and enticing the world of the street. The window setting gradually comes into focus as it is filled with expedition garments and artefacts that absorb the light and the attention of the viewer.

The film evokes interconnections between continents, from a British high street to a contested ice cap -40 below on the other side of the world. The attention to an everyday setting is coupled with the ambiguous nature of contemplating an object's trajectory.

## The story

In March 2006 I attended the first of the seminars organised by the Interdependence Day project. It took place at the British Antarctic Survey in Cambridge. The conversations between journalists, geographers, scientists and artists revolved around stories: the common ground for news, research, experiments and inspiration. Before the coffee break we were taken on a tour – out of the seminar room where we had been seated in square-donut formation to the labyrinthine inner workings of the institution.

We were taken to the 'fridge room' down corridors, airlock doors, (would I find my way back without Mark the excellent guide? Antarctic Albatrosses were tagged at least). There we listened to 20,000 year old ice – no really– the bubbles simmering and simpering. I thought of Rice Crispies (Snap, Crackle, Pop) and the sensation of Space Dust (can you still buy that?) ... It made my senses tingle with miniscule bundles of imaginary ancient air... We could hear it. Another age – placeless, unknown, uncharted –was speaking to us. ...Wow! But my mind wandered with the burden back to thoughts of a missed breakfast. The cold brought us back to earth. Right – I thought –, that was enough, I've heard enough now, Yep – ice – it speaks. Great. Tell me another one...

But it did get me thinking... (that was after all the point of the journey). It was difficult to record that particular set of sensations, extreme cold, sweet-tasting, fairy language suspended in my ears... Could it be broadcast? Radio Four could perhaps do the spiel. After all it had managed with the crayfish story.

But there was also another story – the clothes. The dusty brown waxed and oiled linens and tennis racket shoes of yesteryear in glass museum cabinets that we had passed on the way in to BAS, in the special entry zone. And then all that amazing government funded new stuff in the glossy photos – much better equipped these days. Because I'd seen these outfits somewhere else– conspicuously orange and out of place: extreme weather gear in sunny March, down Mill Road...

It started to add up. BAS's post expedition equipment is sent to Les at the Salvation Army shop, Mill Road, Cambridge – what was the connection ? He used to know someone at Scott Polar – They ran sailing courses together and so-on – The stuff comes in handy– 'good in all weathers'. But the exact link is forgotten now – it doesn't matter though – it all gets to him somehow, and then into the shop... Bags and bags of it. Kitbags, expedition bags, plastic bags, unopened thermal underwear bags... 'we never know when its coming in...'

I got in touch with my friend Rosie, a sound artist – we had done a film course together. I told her the stories... Could we work together? Could we hear the ice? Could we story it in some way? I was interested in blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality. The fiction could be used to explain and enhance the real that was elsewhere and inaccessible. We weren't going to the Antarctic, obviously, but it was difficult to get back to BAS too. They were busy with Polar year stuff and unavailable for the time being to visitors.



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So we set up some 'controlled' experiments in Rosie's mum's kitchen, (who lives off Mill Road down the street from the Salvation Army shop – very handy). Ingredients: tap water, fizzy water (bottled at source) freshly boiled water and ice – plenty of it – fizzy ice, made from the bottled water and Cambridge tap ice; big metal pan, recording equipment, notepad. Block by block the ice was added to the water at various temperatures... and we took careful notes recording observations and sounds... The result ?... It was a pretty good approximation of what I'd heard – the occasional cracking of white goods ice was a bit 'Titanic' though. We discovered that we could avoid the big thaw by using room temperature water in the pan and that fizzy water ice was great at sounding like the ancient stuff – I had visions of all those millennia ago the surface water being fizzy mineral stuff, very pure, very expensive...worth bottling. But in the end it wasn't that interesting listening to it again on our recording –the experiments were more fun. Perhaps it could have worked in an installation or workshop, but we lost interest, and after lunch went down the road to the Salvation Army shop.

The orange clothes I had seen only last week in the window had gone. Oh dear. The weather was warming up. Les the window dresser and holder of the keys, had filled the window with a selection of biker leathers – he knew the seasons and his customers. I glanced around the racks of nearly and not so new. A veritable wonderland for prospective Mr Benns, I thought. We got talking to Les the volunteer and shopkeeper. How does he select the clothes for the window? What's the story with BAS? Who buys the extreme weather gear? When does the stuff come in? 'we don't know when its coming in...' That was how it had started. We arranged to come back. We brought along two handheld cameras, sound recording equipment, and Tom, a friend of Rosie's who had offered to hold another camera. We soon felt at home. In turn, rummaging for bargains (I came home with some thermals and a rucksack), chatting about past incarnations of the charity shop as cinema and supermarket, and using our camera eyes to locate the vivid tagged and multicoloured BAS stock. The sound recording equipment failed so we dragged the sound of the conversations off the camera and worked with what we could make out. The other volunteers had been sorting the crockery that day We didn't mind the occasional crashing sounds and chatter, but it meant it was hard to hear what Les was saying. So we worked by extracting key phrases and sentences. The ones that spoke to us and travelled elsewhere – to the farm, to the sea, to the Alps to the ice – the ones that had their own trajectories. The 'nearly new' stuff at Sally Anns easily found new homes and generated a big income for the shop. It was given to the homeless, bought by sixth formers and fashion students, re-used in adventure sports and sailing, in the sea, on farm or in town, 'in all weathers'.



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And then Les agreed to dress the window again – brilliant stroke of luck! He said he would do it 'specially for us', but that, 'you never know who might be passing by and needing gaiters and waterproofs' – fit to withstand an Antarctic winter that is. We filmed the window dressing from within the shop and from outside on the street. The old cinema seemed to come back to life with the performance. The shop cases now resonated with the museified outfits left behind in BAS's pristine entrance display.

Telling stories about these clothes revealed that the Antarctic is much closer than we might think. It touches on our daily lives in vivid and unexpected ways. We are all part of the story. While we acknowledge that what we know about climate change is down to those expert and intrepid scientists working in difficult conditions with incredible focus on the intangible, the story doesn't stop there. There is always another story to tell. The story is ongoing and ordinary. The tangled web of global connections, precarious living conditions and environmental survival can be revealed down any local high street. The fraught relationships between available resources, scientific endeavour and alternative and capitalist economies are brought to life in a simple tale of reuse and display. Thinking about ice opens up a whole new set of relations and economies. Our global trade trajectory has melted from spice route to ice route. It has replaced careful provision of goods with speculation for untold wealth. The contested polar cap –40 below, on the other side of the word now seems trapped in a high street window, while the nomadic subjects and objects convey a tale of exchange: of production, consumption, waste, thrift and charity. This story calls up issues of poverty and homelessness in the UK, amidst territorial claims of nations, confused notions of global trade, the vagaries of climate change science, as well as the fact that things simply sell better if you put a cuddly (geographically displaced) Polar bear in the shop window.



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## Films and stories

The film **'we don't know when it's coming in'** (2006) is part of a developing body of work that explores two new categories of experimental filmmaking, termed by me the 'Aphodoc' – the aphoristic documentary; and the 'Expovie' – the experimental home movie. Aphodocs are documentaries 'in brief', exploring the notion of the aphorism and its contradictory and fruitful claims to making sense of a situation. They work on the premise that you don't need to travel far nor do you need to extend the dialogue to explore and expose the systemic contradictions of contemporary culture. They focus on the particularity, and sometimes absurdity of people caught within processes and systems that have global significance. These experimental films incorporate not only those aspects of life that are coerced skilfully into the filmic medium and go 'according to plan' but also those unexpected elements that often reveal different possibilities. This approach acknowledges indeterminacy – the unrevealed, the suggested and the potential that remains more powerful than anything shown.

The film of the Salvation Army shop emerged through conversations and in the open-ended process of making and storytelling. I had to find a way of working that suited me and the various limitations and constraints financial or otherwise of the project. So I decided eventually not only to show concrete explicit defined images of saleroom goods and stockpiled stores, but also to incorporate the circumstances of filming: the questions, the conversations with charity shop volunteers, the spontaneity, and the mistakes. The images not shown, the lost footage, or the things we couldn't film, as well as the things said and the things left unsaid or those things we couldn't record because the equipment failed, were as important as those things incorporated into the video work. I was interested in those aspects of the story that didn't make it into the edited film and yet still had a tangible presence, as well as those unexpected and funny elements that actually made sense of the story.



**'we don't know when it's coming in'** tells the story of the sale of the British Antarctic Survey's post expedition equipment at the Salvation Army shop in Cambridge. It evokes interconnections between continents, from a British high street to a contested ice cap –40 below on the other side of the world. © Renata Tyszczyk 2006.