



## making a beautiful thing - the work of Nicola Atkinson-Griffith

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*Atkinson-Griffith (aka Atkinson.Davidson) works within the community she inhabits, but her work avoids the do-gooder connotations that come with the "community art" territory. Instead, it displays a bizarre humour and a fine aesthetic quality. Her previous exhibitions include Lost and Found, which involved her knocking on the door of every house along a six-mile route across Glasgow from Springburn to Govan, and asking for a teaspoon. Far from chasing her away, most people were happy to donate their cutlery. She collected 1,314 spoons which she labelled with the donor's name and then used to construct a 15-foot diameter chandelier.*

Lawrence Donegan, The Guardian. 1996

Nicola Atkinson-Griffith is a hugely energetic and demanding artist who has been working, across three continents, as a successful practitioner and curator in the field of visual art for nearly 20 years. Atkinson-Griffith's practice is particularly concerned with presenting her work, and that of other artists, in unusual public spaces; continually interrogating and pushing the boundaries of making art in public. To the eye, her work is carefully crafted and exquisitely presented, aesthetically underpinned by her training in Fine Art. Yet this is to simplify work of great complexity, evolved from scintillating ideas and the painstaking processes involved.

In essence, Atkinson-Griffith works to question people's perception of their environment through producing frameworks of ideas which enable the public to contemplate alternative views of the world. The work intriguingly warps the everyday to disturb the status quo and to alert audiences to remarkable aspects of life around them. Atkinson-Griffith presents thoughts, questions and concepts

to gently challenge the safe and familiar cocoon in which we tend to embed ourselves. This approach is based upon the idea of art as a form of communication through which the artist can influence (and be influenced by) as wide a range of people as possible. Through working in the public domain, Atkinson-Griffith is not confined to touching people who visit galleries or who participate in, say, photography workshops and this has led to the development of her particular artistic practice.

In much public art, the concept of collaboration often involves little input from the community where the work is sited. The traditional approach to making public art often tries to gentrify an area by imposing an aesthetic, usually in a singular form, which has little to do with the identity or concerns of the local population. On the other hand, community art has its tradition firmly rooted in working to empower local people in transforming their environment. With an emphasis on providing the chance for people to be creative at any level, the processes of community art are intrinsically democratic in their approach to artistic practice. Although community art may be challenging for the participants, the results rarely have much impact and are largely uncritical in terms of contemporary art practice. Atkinson-Griffith does not practise either approach.

Throughout her career, Atkinson-Griffith has initiated projects which use participation as a process to release her work, but this approach is not community art. Nor does the work impose itself on the community in which Atkinson-Griffith is working, but evolves from the participatory process. The common thread running through all her projects is the creation of temporary communities, existing or fabricated, in order to pursue links that bind established, or disparate, worlds together. Atkinson-Griffith develops a framework to explore a particular idea within a community and then works intimately with its people to elicit contributions to the project; perhaps an object, a likeness or a memory. It is important this involvement is not coerced and that the participation is entirely voluntary. This process of gathering is itself an artwork and is fundamental to

Atkinson-Griffith's practice. While the actual donation is likely to be invested with great significance by the donor, the contribution itself may not be of particular interest on its own. Rather it is the act of participation itself which is crucial to underpin each project, to add meaning to the work and to create a shared, unified experience. In exchange for this involvement, Atkinson-Griffith clearly outlines her role and what contributors can expect to gain from the project. A key part of the process is that anyone involved does not feel they have been either misrepresented or used in any way. This contract is vital for the artist to build up trust with the participants and has permitted Atkinson-Griffith easy access to a wide range of communities.

While Atkinson-Griffith's practice has remained constant over her whole career, each project demonstrates a development of this approach. The year 2000 however appeared to mark a turning point in her work, as the meaning of location and transience increasingly intrigued Atkinson-Griffith in making art in the public domain. This progression can be demonstrated by two projects ten years apart. *Connected* (2000), a Year of the Artist commission, was a personal work which explored a closed community in transit - passengers on a return flight between Glasgow and Los Angeles demonstrating the true temporariness of collective activity. The work was significant in querying the nature of location and focusing on a strictly transitory community. The passengers were invited to engage in the production of a series of artworks exploring the departure from one state to another through a journey, both physical and metaphysical. A dialogue was created between the artist and the subjects within the shared experience of flight. Atkinson-Griffith was a visible and identifiable part of the airline staff, challenging notions of the role of both art and artist within a working environment and in the public arena. Photographs were taken and published in the in-flight magazine, placing a public artwork back into the context in which it was made.

*Connected* was also significant by marking a return for Atkinson-Griffith to Los Angeles. Early work in Los Angeles during the 1980s was mainly about object

and pattern making, but in a number of projects, the Activity series (1989-1990), Atkinson-Griffith began to engage with the public through the exploration of architectural space. These works magnified the scale of ordinary objects (a set of steps in Perfect Activity, shop fittings in Intimate Activity, the gallery building as display cases in Monumental Activity) and forced the audience to interact with each installation and to consider their presence in comparison to the distorted scale of the object. In a telling development, Atkinson-Griffith placed herself in Intimate Activity which occupied a shop unit in a mall, to engage the audience in dialogue and to challenge common notions of consumerism. The largest work, Monumental Activity, a proposal to adorn the outside wall of the gallery building, was not realised, but implied using the architectural language of the blueprint as a map for the imagination. At first glance, these works appear anomalous to Atkinson-Griffith's practice and yet each appears to hint at what is to develop: forcing people to interact with her work, engaging directly with the public, using maps and drawing on her fine art background to produce delicately decorative work.

The turning point in Atkinson-Griffith's career. alluded to earlier, appears to be Gentle Breezes Blowing (1990) which began the artist's exploration of ideas how to collaborate with people. Ten years before Connected, Atkinson-Griffith took a city block in Los Angeles and engaged with all the occupants of the neighbourhood wondering how this disparate community could be linked together. The final work superimposed a fantasy landscape over the block to bring an imaginary place and a little bit of beauty into their everyday lives. The occupants of this shared realm, both real and imaginary, were all connected by being given a map of the fantasy island and an abstract detail of the landscape, painted by the artist, relating to their particular location. The work aligned the community for a moment, creating a fragmentary link through the common ownership of the artist's work. This gift was also crucial to the project as an exchange for letting an outsider in.

Atkinson-Griffith continued to develop her practice and the process of linking communities together through a series of projects during the 1990s, in both Los Angeles and Scotland. A number of patterns appear to emerge through this development and two works during 1992 investigate this approach from different angles to form the foundation of Atkinson-Griffith's practice. *Charted, Collected and Carefully Counted* (1992) explored the presentation of people's private experience in the public domain by asking for written memories to "Locate your thoughts in Costa Mesa". While there was not necessarily any direct contact with the contributors, Atkinson-Griffith transcribed each recollection by hand onto small cottonseed sacks which were filled with wheatberries and hung across the gallery like washing. The exhibition grew over 5 months, as more contributions were received, to create a many layered exhibition filled with the diverse, pregnant thoughts of the participants. Plaques on the wall recorded who had donated memories. The plan of a suburb was painted onto the glass of the gallery window, filled with quotations from city documents. Personal lives were placed in the context of the revealed city structure to create complex comment on everyday life in a beautiful, still, thoughtful space.

In *A Pair of Shoes/ Un Par de Zapatos* (1992), Atkinson-Griffith worked within the community of a shopping mall and engaged directly with 25 workers to contrast the impersonal consumerism of the shopping mall with a community of employees. Each worker received a pair of new shoes in exchange for a pair of used shoes and the time taken to record their working life. This focus on the individual gave the workers dignity and the trade of shoes was fundamental to the project - to give a pair of shoes - raising the notion of the useful artwork. The old shoes were pristinely exhibited, on top of a transcript of their story, throughout the mall in display cases of the kind usually used for displaying new consumer items. The cases were also reminiscent of a museum. The artist identified a number of otherwise anonymous workers and provoked the transient shopper to reflect on their lives.

Having established an approach to engage with her surroundings through these projects, Atkinson-Griffith initiated four projects which explored a concern with the cityscape, boundaries and communities: *Lost and Found* (Glasgow, 1993), *My View* (Long Beach, 1994), *Captured* (Strathclyde, 1995) and *My Home is Dublin* (Dublin, 1995). In each different location, Atkinson-Griffith found herself in an urban area which she was unfamiliar with, wondering how to make connections between the places she found herself in and the people that inhabited them. In each project Atkinson-Griffith took a route to ground herself in the place and to offer a way to engage with its people. The process of identifying a site was the result of a subjective impression of the place and Atkinson-Griffith then penetrated each location through involvement with its inhabitants. In each project, memories and aspirations of the people formed a collective history to map the underside of imagination – aspects of the place that do not yield to casual observation. Atkinson-Griffith aimed to reframe the view in the manner of a landscape artist, but in a number of different forms, in that the emotion of landscape is not confined to an environmental reality, but is more related to people's perceptions.

Arriving as a stranger in Glasgow, Atkinson-Griffith pondered how to locate herself in the city and reflected on the changing identity of its neighbourhoods. Through *Lost & Found* the artist found her way around, and connected with people, by tracing a six-mile route across the city linking two similar, yet distinct, districts. The artist sought the involvement of everyone along the route by asking to borrow an everyday item: a button or a teaspoon. Collecting these items Atkinson-Griffith touched people's lives. Although in daily use, and also easily lost, these objects have meaning, some even special significance. The artist, as an alchemist, transformed the collected objects into a powerful, symbolic work. Atkinson-Griffith collected 1314 teaspoons and 480 button collections and formed two sculptures, one at each end of her route. The spoons were transformed into an elegant 16ft diameter chandelier, a beautiful circle hanging in the vast space of the Pearce Institute, embracing the lives of the people along the route. At

North Glasgow College the buttons were put into jars stacked up to suggest part of an iron water tower, reflecting the historical locus of settlement. Placed in front of memorial window, the tower was flooded with, and refracted, light to become a memorial itself. The return of the objects was one of the most important parts of the work, leaving only a powerful memory of the collective activity, the people and lost identities of the city.

In Long Beach, Atkinson-Griffith challenged her audience to leave the gallery and engage with reality through *My View*. Through framing a sequence of seven views across Long Beach, the artist created a route across nine miles of the city, each viewpoint looking out to the next. Of the seven locations only two were acknowledge points of interest, the others were important nodes for people who live and work in each area. Each view could be contemplated in the gallery through a formal, sparse photograph, but the artist attempted to force people out of the gallery to experience the intensity of the identified locations for themselves. The views were distributed on postcards, showing a detail from each location and including a map on the back. An audio tape of sounds and interviews, recorded at each site, captured the chaos of the city to give each some reality and transcribed the artist's account of the process – her view. Atkinson-Griffith contrasted the beautiful, rarefied, protected art environment with these extreme urban spaces. The artist raised the notion of being a tourist in your own city and that points of interest are often narrowly defined.

Captured created a web across the former Strathclyde Region of Scotland, in order to question the public presentation of art. Atkinson-Griffith talked to 300 people from the edges of the local authority and asked: “what did you do yesterday?” and “what is your perfect day?” The stories were recorded and the texts returned to each participant for approval. This private, personal engagement was fundamental to the project. To present the work in public, Atkinson-Griffith transcribed the texts by hand into books which were held by the spine on a steel frame structure around the walls of a wood-paneled room in a

Glasgow gallery. Every five minutes the pages became alive, reflecting the chaos of life. The installation created a beautiful, powerful place reminiscent of a library, but also like a cage. People's experiences were captured and yet, through the manner of their exhibition, were invested with great reverence.

In the same year, Atkinson-Griffith arrived to take up residence in Dublin wondering how to portray the city and link its people together. In *My Home is Dublin* the artist engaged with households across the city through photographing objects (a table, a sofa, an ironing board, food cupboards, a sink etc.) to create one whole house of Dublin. In dialogue with the participants, the objects were chosen through a process of elimination to identify what is essential to everyday living. A framed photograph of each object was returned to each household to hang alongside the real thing. Atkinson-Griffith became a thread through the city, linking its people together with the understanding that their sink was connected to a cooker across town. The people retained their own identities, beliefs and status, but were brought together through the project to reveal the diversity of the city's population.

The practice of the artist engaging with a select group of people was explored more formally through the appointment of Atkinson-Griffith as Artist in Residence on two projects: *where are you going?* (1996) and *on the 34* (1996). Over a period of seven months, Atkinson-Griffith established relationships with seven strangers for *where are you going?* by going to live with them and questioning how far everyday life can be framed. Atkinson-Griffith spent one week with each individual, as Artist in Residence in their homes, at work, with their families and in other social situations, distilling the interior of their lives, their traditions and thoughts through observation, interviews and a series of questionnaires. To present this process in public, the participants' stories were carefully given physical form; a single kitchen cabinet hanging in space represented a house, a wall mounted text entwined the participants' stories together, black boxes

contained poetical fragments of their daily lives, memories and dreams. While trying to just be, the artist recognised the whole process was totally performed.

on the 34 developed the idea of Artist in Residence further by placing the residency in a moving environment: Glasgow's buses. Taking the route of the number 34 bus to access an audience, Atkinson-Griffith questioned the role of the artist – a role most commonly thought of as a painter. Atkinson-Griffith became a painter and provoked people to think about their appearance, by asking for volunteers to have their portrait painted. The artist portrayed each sitter realistically, but in black and white. The classical portrait, the focus of attention, contradicted the anonymity of sitting on the bus. An exhibition of the collected portraits brought the people together, alongside photographs of the bus route and a text piece around the wall of the Pearce Institute. Atkinson-Griffith also placed questions and everyday thoughts onto the ceiling of the buses. The three parts of this work were placed firmly in the public domain, transforming everyday activities.

Atkinson-Griffith's engagement with local populations was tested through keys to the city (1999), an extraordinary project which tackled the political structures of a city. Atkinson-Griffith asked what is needed to engage people in thinking about contemporary art. How do you get people to talk about abstract ideas? How does the artist create a structure to inform the development of a local authority arts policy? How can a Council be truly accountable to its tax payers? Following an invitation to the city, Atkinson-Griffith was commissioned by Dundee Contemporary Arts and the local authority's Arts and Heritage department to address these issues. Working in all of the city's 36 local wards to identify a 'keyholder' from each, the artist became involved in a political process itself through engagement with the city, its structures, representatives and citizens developing an audience along the way. Gathering these 36 people from all sorts of backgrounds formed the work itself. Each keyholder was a conduit to report back on arts activity in the city. A questionnaire was devised to make people

think about ideas and became a key piece of the work, as it caused controversy in the questions asked. The work was about ideas and imagination, having fun and subverting city structures, and was truly radical in that the processes were not controlled. The key holders, in a truly creative act free of institutional control, set up and continued on their own to keep the project alive.

Apart from these very public works, Atkinson-Griffith continues a key, more personal project – secrets of the world (1996 and ongoing) – in which the artist asks people to write down personal, private and public secrets. These are kept in the possession of the artist until her death. The work is participatory on a global scale and begins to explore the notion that an artwork does not need to be based in any particular location. It is not the secret which is of interest, but the act of participation itself to create a shared, unified community which underpins the project. Crucial to this process is the trust invested in the artist that the secret will not be disclosed. Collecting secrets, or reminiscences, is not however the end itself, but an attempt to inject humanity into people's lives. Collective spirit underpins the work, but the participants do not interact, or necessarily know anything about each other. The artist is not conducting social experiments, but acts as a catalyst or mechanism for people to invest in the work.

Throughout her work, Atkinson-Griffith is a generous artist and the principle underlining her humanity is that of gifting herself to the communities involved. A prime example of this generosity is her work at the Pearce Institute and Bulkhead (1998-2001). Anyone needs stamina to interact with large numbers of people while simultaneously making work and Atkinson-Griffith committed a huge amount of energy to both these projects. Atkinson-Griffith promoted the Exhibition Space at the Pearce Institute, working with over 20 artists to curate exhibitions within the building, culminating in her own work on the 34. The success of this project, taking the passengers of a bus route across Glasgow as its generator, led to the founding of Bulkhead, an organisation committed to bringing creative ideas to the greater public. As Creative Director of Bulkhead,

Atkinson-Griffith initially curated a series of 11 exhibitions on 1,200 buses bringing artwork to 40,000,000 travellers. Bulkhead continued to develop and existed as an organisation in its own right, promoting the Bulkhead Prize, developing the Junior Bulkhead Prize and exhibiting artists' work in the 24hr window, a shopfront in Glasgow's High Street, and the Add Hawk Gallery.

Atkinson-Griffith however appeared to reclaim herself and shift the focus of her work during this period at the end of the 1990s. A particular project seemed to herald this shift: vanishing point (1999) which depicts a quiet day in Chesterfield - Wednesday half-day closing. Atkinson-Griffith documented a trip through its streets, charting her journey and capturing on film the normally unobserved everyday activities of people going about their business between two different points - within their own vanishing point. Were the people going home, to work, or engaged in other business which was not so mundane? This work enabled the populace of Chesterfield to focus on a hitherto unnoticed time in their town's history, establishing an indelible image of a moment which would be naturally forgotten. From the large scale work in Dundee and curatorial work of Bulkhead, vanishing point was a more reflective, personal piece which reintroduced the exploration of journeys from the mid-90s. The project also marked a return for Atkinson-Griffith to film making which continued through choice takes (2001) and sleep (2001).

choice takes gently exposed what makes the heart of a city beat. A small scale, but public commission, Atkinson-Griffith documented 11 Glaswegians' thoughts - a series of interconnected characters. Each participant told stories about themselves, about each other and about other people in their lives; inviting us to share the seemingly fragmented, yet fundamental, support networks of a modern city, between family, friends, workmates, magicians, academics and bakers. This connectedness was illustrated with details from the contributors' lives and through a blurred, abstract journey. The documentary encapsulated Atkinson-

Griffith's practice on film, not capturing individual experience so much as commenting on the way we know each other in different ways.

sleep presented in the 24HR Window at Bulkhead presented the ritual of a journey, but in the context that perhaps walking has become unnecessary in the urban landscape, perhaps even alienating and unreal. A single screen showed a hooded figure pacing back and forth, going through the motions of walking within the confines of a white room (the gallery space). The duration of an actual journey remains in the illusion of the imagination, mirroring the activity outside on the street, like walking in your sleep. The work was about not being conscious, about the inside and the outside, public and private works of art. A further personal and private manifestation of the artist's practice and perhaps the result of alienation from making work in the public domain.

And so full circle to the most ambitious work yet: a piece of sky (2001). In crude chronological terms, a piece of sky seems an anomaly, but the project pulled together all the artist's previous work in the public domain and returned to the beginning: Los Angeles. It is the film work of 2001 which disrupts the timeline. Atkinson-Griffith devised an ambitious project across the city of Los Angeles to engage 35,000 people in a dialogue about the creative process and individual expression. Encompassing the whole city - freeways, streets, homes, shops, parking lots - the artist focused on how Angelenos express themselves through the ornamentation of their cars with rear-view mirror "dangles". These totems are imbued with individual significance in a city where personal interaction is mediated by the isolation of the automobile, or by the great physical and psychological distances imposed by the scale of the city. Such personal expression contradicts the perception that people increasingly identify with corporate symbols, such as the Nike 'swish'. Atkinson-Griffith celebrated the individuality of this symbolic language which helps Angelenos identify themselves with one another in an increasingly diverse community by producing "pieces of sky" in nine varieties (Dawn, Morning, Midday, Day, Afternoon, Sunset, Night,

Midnight and Early Hours) to display from a car's rear-view mirror, a kitchen window, a workplace, a storefront, or even from a handbag. To obtain a sky ornament Angelenos were encouraged to temporarily lend to an exhibition their own personal ornaments which were returned at the end of the show. The act of lending conferred on each participant an additional experience of shared community. An interactive web site was also crucial to the work by drawing the audience in through an online questionnaire providing an active dialogue. The questionnaire was designed to explore the ways people think about their own public ornaments and to stimulate creative thinking about the artwork. The questionnaire also provided an ongoing opportunity to discuss the relationship between individual and community and the efforts people make (or don't make) to shape their personal identity within their community. Atkinson-Griffith provided this initial framework for Angelenos to acknowledge their interconnections in a new, creative way and ultimately anticipated a living process, continually reformed and expanded by its participants as they spread and mutated its "messages" of linkage and inclusion among their respective communities.

The description of a piece of sky reflects so closely many aspects of the artist's previous work and the project looks like the closure of a decade's work. Or is it a leap in a new direction? The return to film appeared to indicate a more personal, introspective and solitary approach. Indeed Atkinson-Griffith has always been interested in image making and has taken to painting again, producing more abstract and impressionistic work. Atkinson-Griffith is driven to make work, lending her inventiveness and huge amounts of energy to her practice which is underpinned by a torrent of ideas, flowing from curiosity and delight. Atkinson-Griffith is a generous artist, gifting her self, skills and reputation to other artists, and to the communities, with whom she is involved. Who knows what direction this hugely creative, energetic artist will take. There aren't any answers just yet, but another turning point as Atkinson-Griffith accepts a NESTA Fellowship for the next four years (2002-2005). Being an artist is powerful enough in itself to provoke ideas.