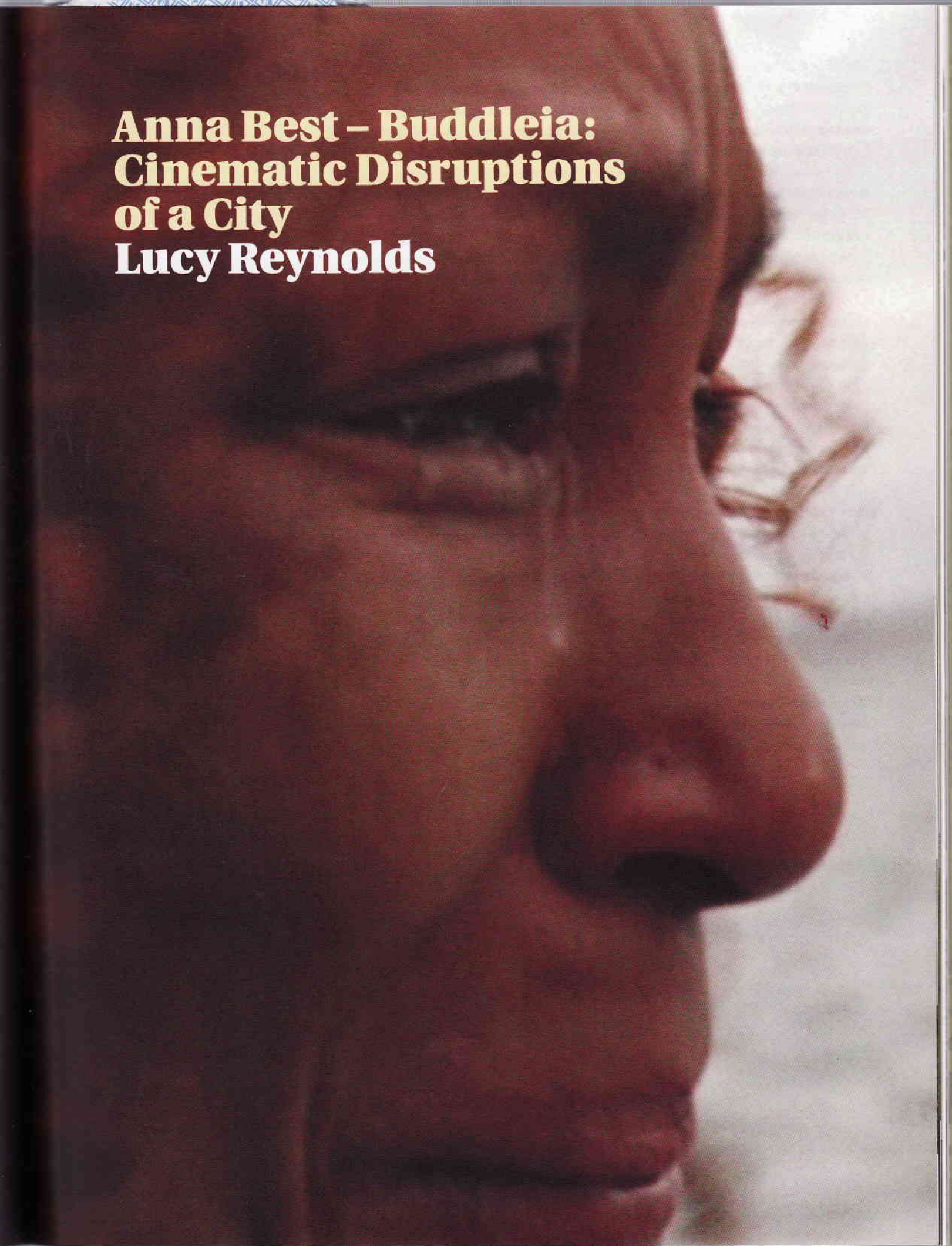
Anna Best – Buddleia: Cinematic Disruptions of a City

Lucy Reynolds



Buddleia is Anna Best's first film, the result of a series of prolonged visits to Plymouth in 2007. It is a film that opens up to the viewer a range of possible readings of the city where Best found herself, and also marks a departure from an art practice that has always been in essence 'dematerialised', to use Lucy Lippard's term. Resisting the object, product and gallery context in favour of an event-based art that generates ephemera in its research and execution, Best shares the conceptual sensibility pinpointed in Lippard's indexical anthology *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*[1], and seen in the work of artists such as Sol le Witt, Dan Graham or Adrian Piper. Like this earlier generation, Best's art has depended on other people, the setting up of situations or questions that call for an engagement from diverse sectors of the community, whose unforeseen activities and thoughts then become translated into writings, performances, events, images. She refers to the people and situations that she encounters through her projects as found material, ready-mades: 'why create a piece of art when it is already going on?'

In *A Real Pony Race For A Bridle* (1997), for instance, a nineteenth-century poster for a pony race on Burgess Park, South East London, becomes the catalyst for a twentieth-century pony-racing event, which involved the local equestrian community, its multiple manifestations including an event, video, installation and series of photographs. Like the work of Lippard's Conceptualists, the shape and structure of projects such as this are dependent on the involvement of others, the project's success and failure weighed outside the controlling hand of the artist.

How, then, can the practice of film-making be assimilated with this dispersed and responsive art practice, where authorial control is firmly relinquished to group opinion, decision and chance itself? Firstly, the production methods usually associated with filmmaking do not tolerate doubt. Film-making calls for a decisive and singular directorial focus, the loss of spontaneity to multiple takes and the self-awareness that comes with performance in front of the camera – the interposition of acting, and therefore fiction. Paradoxically, the aspects of encounter or situation common to Best's earlier dispersed and responsive practice finds in *Buddleia* an overarching coherence, now issuing from a singular position where Best's approach had once been pluralistic or

1. Lucy R. Lippard (ed). *Six Years: The Dematerialization Of The Art Object From 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973)

Buddleia, Anna Best, 2007.
Film photography: Jaime Feliu-Torres

collective. The collective working processes of past projects remain, but they are now implicitly encoded in the performance of the on-screen participants and the hidden hand of the cameraman and editor. Working with this unfamiliar medium has proved a liberating experience for the artist, as the apparently rigid systems of production and process has allowed Best to enfold an unprecedented personal experience of Plymouth into the film. 'I brought myself into the work,' says Best, suggesting that *Buddleia* emphasised her own experience rather than monitoring and interpreting the response of other people as seen in earlier works such as *A Real Pony Race for a Bridle* or *Vauxhall Pleasure* (2004).

Buddleia should primarily be understood as Best's encounter with Plymouth rather than with its citizens. The city's tangle of post-war buildings and urban renewal becomes the mise-en-scène for a series of performed set pieces which have the quality of climatic, cinematic moments that have somehow become unmoored from their accompanying narrative. The allusions to cinema's imaginary narratives provoke suggestive, subtle, and often critical, re-readings of Plymouth's maritime past and military present, embedded in its streets and urban infrastructure. The film begins as a small crowd gathers inexplicably on a patch of grass, looking towards a wall, which divides them from a mountain of gravel and demolition rubble. This same wall later becomes the backdrop for a fencing duel, and the film culminates with the lamentations of a group of women, marooned out on Plymouth Sound on a partly submerged structure known as *The Breakwater*. There is no dialogue or narrative agency, only the performance of these gestures, which appear to exist in a cinematic time at odds to the present-day setting of Plymouth. The lamenting women transcend their contemporary dress to recall an earlier century's wait for the return of the fishing boats, for example, just as the fencers evoke the gentlemanly combat far removed from current modes of warfare.

These performances might be seen as confrontations with Plymouth's accepted civic histories, uneasy juxtapositions that play on film's ability to transcend real time, and the event-based nature of Best's earlier works, jolting the viewer into a series of out-of-time associations: filmic, historic and political. It introduces into Best's work the expectation of narrative and imaginary fictions, and plays on cinema's power to evoke not only narrative but also more profound

and allegorical readings – of Plymouth as a divided space, and of the distance and disempowerment of its citizens from civic decisions. It is important to stress the political nature of Best's work, particularly with regard to the relationship between the citizen and their environment. Indeed, *Buddleia*'s incongruous clash of place and performance does retain a semblance of earlier works such as *Vauxhall Pleasure*, where singers perform rearrangements of eighteenth-century songs in time with the changing traffic lights at traffic islands on the Vauxhall gyratory system in South London, once the site of verdant pleasure gardens. But where *Vauxhall Pleasure* was a clearly signalled refrain to the historical resonances of an area of London, and a riposte to its current traffic choked reality, Best's reasons for placing the duellers in front of the wall or the weeping women on *The Breakwater* remain suggestive rather than literal. Like *Vauxhall Pleasure*, *Buddleia*'s juxtapositions reflect a political commitment, except here it is implicit in the codes of cinema rather than overtly stated. Out of time and out of context, the aesthetic and obsolete combat performed by *Buddleia*'s fencers is suggestive in its marked contrast to the contemporary conditions of war that is signified by the wall against which they fight, built by the Ministry of Defence to enclose its operations centre and cutting through a community in the process.

During her visits, Best paced Plymouth, navigating it alternatively on foot, by bike, car, taxi and bus. One is reminded of the artist Ian Breakwell's witty observations of urban encounter in his *The Walking Man Diary* (1975–8), which records the minutiae of his travels around the city. Best shares Breakwell's Dadaist curiosity for the unexpected and overlooked juxtapositions of street life and culture, a recurring theme of past projects. In her 2002 project and publication *Occasional Sights*, she maps the ephemeral landscapes of London through personal observation and the photographs and drawings of other Londoners, exploring and testing the boundaries of her own art-making process. *Occasional Sights* also conjures Patrick Keiller's film *London* (1994) in its off beat narrative of random encounters and impressions, and has a personal tone which anticipates *Buddleia*. 'A walk mirrors a journey into one's own head

in many ways. You go out to walk and be isolated, to feel the outside of your being measured up against the outside world.'[2]

However, whereas Breakwell, or Robinson, *London*'s imaginary narrator, might be seen as *flâneur* figures, exploring the city at a distance through its crowds, there is a sense of urgency to Best's traversals of Plymouth, a commitment to understand the contradictions and ruptures of its city space, which manifests as a sense of disquiet throughout the film and a shift in focus from the inhabitants towards the landscape itself. It becomes clear that the main character of *Buddleia* is not the huddle of people in front of the wall, but the wall itself and the architecture and infrastructure of Plymouth. The performances of watcher, fencer and lamenter are disrupted by close-up shots of brick surfaces, their crumbling textures and seeping moss evoking the recurring metaphor of the wall, Plymouth's ever present agent of separation and obfuscation.

Buddleia also marks a change of emphasis in Best's relationship to her subjects. Here they are 'performers in my film rather than [me] making a film of them doing something I have orchestrated'. In keeping with earlier works, the performers themselves might be called participants rather than actors. They were all drawn from the local community: residents of the housing estates where Best filmed, contacted through local advertisements and Yellow Pages, friends of the Plymouth Arts Centre or a local drama network. There is an echo here of an earlier European cinema tradition, of the Italian Neo-realist demand for a new cinematic authenticity and realism by the use of non-professional actors. Indeed, the final part of Buddleia is reminiscent of a famous scene from Luchino Visconti's *La Terra Trema* (1948), one of Neo-realism's most uncompromising films, in which a ragged group of women wait on the rocks for the return of their men from a fishing trip.

Visconti drew his cast almost entirely from the local fishing community of a remote part of Sicily where the drama takes place and thus the characters possess a measure of ambiguity for the viewer, being simultaneously themselves, working fishermen, as well as the fictional fishermen that they are asked to portray on screen. Their real lives and their dramatic personae occupy a parallel course, which becomes at times indiscernibly tangled in the perception of the viewer.

2. Anna Best. *Occasional Sights* (London: The Photographers' Gallery Publications, 2002) p 114

The women that weep on the Plymouth Sound in *Buddleia* were predominantly non-professional actors, so it could be argued that they also occupy an ambiguous space between fact and fiction, affecting the state of grief which is associated with overt melodrama in cinema and yet is perhaps truly located within the context of their own lived reality. Like Visconti's film, the seascape is presented as unrelentingly barren and inhospitable, against which the weeping has an added futility; as Best herself says, 'you can make a lot of noise by the sea and no-one can hear you.'

But whereas the grief of Visconti's fishwives is still framed within cinema's narrative cycles of cause and effect, the laments of the Plymouth women are open to interpretation. Untethered from the conventions of cinematic narrative, their actions are for the viewer to select, decipher and draw their own conclusions. Their tears may signify the hardships of the fishing trade at the same time that they reference Neo-realist melodrama or, at a more profound level, personal loss. Exploring the language and address of cinematic codes for the first time, Best finds in its contradictions and disjuncture's a strategy for navigating and understanding Plymouth, as *Buddleia*'s close-ups and establishing shots elicit, and then finally withhold, the promise of narrative. Many possible stories exist but they remain both allusive and elusive, whispered fragments of historical fact, cinematic fiction or the contemporary experience that make up Best's imaginary of the city.