

GATTI, The London Canal Museum. A group show curated by Brooke Lynn McGowan
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Catalogue Essay:

Lick it
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Most of us have seen a glass microscope slide, even if only on one of the many CSI television episodes, usually covered in blood, mucus, sperm or hair. Imagine licking it. Our recent ancestors did, or at least they licked similar *licks* of glass that carried on them the smallest taste of the precious substance that was ice cream. Imagine a hot day, and the cool sweet flavour on your tongue. You might be hanging from a strap in the over crowded, smelly and terribly hot London Underground, with your eyes closed thinking of refreshment, of exit, of cool. We still can't afford a civilized mass transport system, so imagine only being able to afford a lick of ice cream, off a glass slide. Well that was your lot until the mass shipment of ice from places like Norway in the mid 1800's allowed the general populace to have what only the upper classes and previously only the aristocracy was able to afford. It is said that the Chinese invented the idea of ice cream over a thousand years ago, and it took the Italians to make the leap to the addition of milk, but it took Agnes Marshall's (the Heston Blumenthal of her day) edible ice cream cones in 1894 to make it an integral part of summer. Many flavours and styles have seen the population as a whole become addicted to it, and even Blumenthal's *bacon and eggs* ice cream hasn't stopped our desire to lick it.

Before the invention of freezers, huge quantities of ice had to be stored underground or in ice houses. It was Carlo Gatti, a Swiss businessman who brought 400 tons of ice to the current home of the London Canal Museum in 1857. The frozen treasure was cut into blocks from the surface of mountain lakes and slid along wooden railways to waiting ships which sailed to London where they were unloaded to horse drawn barges that were taken along Regent's Canal and then delivered by the Ice Man to the homes of ordinary people. Gatti could have been an all American success story, having arrived in London in 1847 with only enough money to set up a street stall. But his hard work, business acumen, and the help of the local Italian community (and his many relatives) saw his empire expand. Gatti was one of the first to let the public lick it. Soon he needed huge ice houses, and a virtual army of sellers. At one time or another, most of Gatti's ice floated on the canal engineered by James Morgan.

Today the building in the London Borough of Camden, hosts a permanent collection of related materials and can be hired for all sorts of functions including weddings and civil partnerships. But Lillian Ladele, a registrar in Camdem, still continues her religious bigotry and in a most unchristian way, won't perform same sex ceremonies, even in the ice house. She has wrongly translated her private views into her public duties just as the term *Hokey Pokey* is a mistranslation of the Italian ice cream sellers call: *provi un piccolo* (try a little). No hokey pokey for Lilian, she certainly won't want to lick it.

We might call that slippage. When one thing leads to another and accidental outcomes come out. Others call that complexity, the self-emergence of complicated relationships from very simple starting points. You take a job, you are supposed to do it, you don't, and you get paid even more, slippage. You can't beat that,

lick it! You enter an ice house and find a museum to ice, to canals, to local mosaic makers and to an odd group of young London artists. Layers upon layers of history slip by each other in a complex dance. Do they relate, is there a relationship, or do they just occupy the same space over time? Are they like people all trying to cross Trafalger Square at the same time from different starting points? Each with their own objective, their own direction of motion, and with no one there to tell them how to cross each other's paths without running into each other; very complex slippage. They move, they exist, and mostly, they do not crash into each other. Its a bit like art history.

It is a bit like all histories. There is always a particular in the arbitrary. In Hertzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), a crazy Irishman, Brian Fitzgerald (played by the German actor Klaus Kinski with a fantastically awry accent) drags a 320 ton ship through the Amazonian jungle in order to make a fortune so he can build an opera house. In the movie he uses indigenous people to pull the ship up an incredibly steep 40-degree hill. In the first historical version (real life), Carlos Fitzcarrald actually did manage such a feat but with a much smaller ship (only 30 tons) in the 1890s, and he did become a Peruvian rubber trader. Yet in the second historical version (the real life of the filming) Hertzog actually made the locals pull a real 320 ton ship over the hill (twice) injuring many along they way for the sake of his art. The original Fitzgerald, actor Jason Robards, became ill in the arduous surroundings, and had to be replaced by Kinski, so Hertzog re-filmed the whole thing. It seems strange to talk of any one of the many histories as being the history of such a project, but it is a project where art and life have slipped into each other. In the construction of Gatti's second ice well at the Canal Museum's site, John Parker, a workman, fell to his death. There were no Health and Safety rules during the building of the canal, and the many deaths involved in its build are long forgotten, and even today workers die for the vanity of architects, and the foolishness of their clients who cut corners. I doubt if anyone will die while installing or visiting *GATTI*, but I do hope visitors will find it exciting and challenging.

What do artists think about when it comes to the relationship of their work to the site it is shown in or even the manner of its production? What happens when they get a worker to make the objects they show? How are they responsible to that worker, to the viewer, to their own histories and to the site? An empty white room is still full of history, even if it is not full of stuff, there is always the stuff of other histories. I would ask, does it really matter that much for these young artists? Do they owe a debt to the past or only one to the future? Is it their duty to drag 500 tons of art history across the ages and up an academic hill or can they just enjoy the world they inhabit, the waters they ride? Don't they get to lick it?

Michael Petry
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