

## **'Alternative Worlds' 26/01/11 Seminar Series at IGRS**

Marjolaine Ryley - Growing up in the New Age

Notes from a talk given as part of the 'Alternative Worlds' seminar series at the Institute for Germanic and Romance Studies, University of London School of Advanced Study –

<http://igrs.sas.ac.uk/>

<http://w01.igrscms.wf.ulcc.ac.uk/index.php?id=524>

### **Introduction – background to the project**

***Growing up in the New Age* is an artist initiated research project and forms part of my practice as an artist, which explores ideas of memory, history, familial relationships and archival narratives.**

I use autobiography as a tool for investigating my subjects, the work moving between the personal album and the social document.

- Growing up in the new age draws on my own life growing up in the 1970s and 80s and my parents experiences, from their initial meeting in a commune in the south of France, to the early formulation of their ideologies, set against the backdrop of political and cultural happenings of the 1960s and early 1970s.
- This journey has led me to touch upon philosophies of the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s including pacifism, anarchism, counter-culture, left wing politics, women's rights and 'new age' ideas.
- The project also explores alternative education and the belief systems that led to the founding of Kirkdale Free School by a group of alternative thinking parents in the 1960s. The school is a place I attended from 1976 – 1987 and is one of several free schools in the UK the most famous of which is Summerhill (founded by A.S. Neill).
- The project also reaches out to explore the wider community of legal squats and communes that thrived in South East London in the 1960s and 1970s.

-GUITNA was Initially funded through an ACE research and development grant

-I was able to commission some new writing from my mother whom I have collaborated

with in the past and who has recently completed an MA in creative writing

-The work uses a range of approaches including photography, film, writing, collecting, re-using archival materials and the web

This talk is roughly chronological however the nature of the work is anything but linear, forming rather a fragmentary, disrupted and dreamlike, narrative

The imagery I'm going to show is a mixture of

- Selected photographs from the archive of photographer Dave Walkling of squatting and Kirkdale school
- A variety of materials including pictures from our family album and images from the 1980s
- My new photographic work which tries to piece together a new 'Utopia' an imaginary place akin to the childlike, psychedelic experiences of *Alice in Wonderland*, a magical but uncertain place fluctuating between a beautiful dream and a chilling nightmare.

I'll also be reading some writing by Brigitte Ryley / Peter Ryley (from an autobiography) and my own text works hoping that you will get some sense of the different voices who are all apart of this story...

### **The Letter**

"Come mothers and Fathers throughout the land and don't criticize what you cant understand, your sons and your daughters are beyond your command, your old road is rapidly aging, please get out the way if you cant lend a hand for the times they are a changing"

It had been 10 years since Bob Dylan had written the following verses but in 1974 when my paternal grandfather John Ryley wrote the following letter to my maternal grandparents in Belgium, their children it seemed were more beyond their command than ever – its worth hearing the letter in full as it sets the context for his extraordinary comments:

**"Like yourselves we are sorry that Peter and Brigitte have chosen to "drop out" of society. I respect their views but believe that society is best helped and improved from within. We must however be grateful that they have not turned to drugs, dishonesty or violence. We shall all have fewer material belongings in the future so perhaps they are preparing themselves for the world of the future"**

-The thing about finding this letter – discovered by myself and my mother during the traumatic aftermath of a fire in my grandmothers apartment (a subject forming part of a previous project) – was that you could really sense the worry for them of not knowing where their children were - ‘they’ were always the ‘despised figures of bourgeois authority to my parents, but they were also, of course parents themselves –and their children had a six month old baby with them when they ‘dropped out’...

### **Family and the truth – on ‘dropping out’**

We all seem to go through a phase of rebellion, a period in which we must throw out the ideas, ideologies, beliefs of our parents – this seems a necessary rite of passage

In **Into the wild** the film based on the true story of Christopher McCandless who dropped out in the search of his own ‘alternative world’ in the depths of Alaska there is a scene where he forms a friendship with a travelling couple.

-The character Jan Burres, asks about his folks “you look like a loved kid – be fair’ – she says – to which he replies:

“to paraphrase Thoreau here: rather than love, than money, than fame, than fairness, give me truth”

*(In the film Into the Wild is a 2007 American drama film by Sean Penn based on the 1996 non-fiction book of the same name by Jon Krakauer) / Henry David Thoreau*

Chris’s decision to drop out was largely a response to the discovery of a lie at the very heart of his family

My parents were both searching for their own truths, and yet as so many of us discover the family ties are stronger than we think,

- and in fact so many alternative communities offer a way of life that in some ways is very childlike and regressed– a new set of rules and values begin to replace the old familial system

But in these pictures I’m already here - we must go further back

### **The Beginning / The Ark / Their Voices / Intertwining Strands**

Read extracts from my Father’s Autobiography “Wandering Fool”

“On a glorious may morning in the year of our lord nineteen hundred and seventy, fate tapped me on a shoulder in a monastery.

Two years previously, the events of may ’68 had rocked France like a hurricane whose

turbulence was felt all over Europe and beyond. That same year was a revolutionary one in the regime of my own life. I am standing gazing into the black water of the half-countrified park-estate not far from my parent's home. I am going to move on and I say to myself: all these years you've talked about living in the country and you've only been there as a tourist. In January I'm established as the sole resident of a seaside cottage on the hebridean island of Jura."

He goes on to describe a meeting with a writer Paul wainright

" With hindsight Paul was my first spiritual father – an expression he would have detested. Paul made his own rules, lived his life in his own way. No matter what it cost him - and the cost was often high. Who he was made this statement to me: a man can make a world, a life, as he wants it. He does not have to let the world dictate the rules of his life. Paul I hope I have remained faithful to this great precept, which I learned from you"

You begin to know my dad from these shorts paragraphs..

Brigitte and Peter met at L'arche (community of the Ark) in 1969 Let me tell you a little about the ark.....

*Mark Shepard describes the ark – "Tucked away in the windswept mountains of Languedoc in southern France is a small island of peace known as the Community of the Ark. Founded and formed by Lanza del Vasto—often called Mahatma Gandhi's "first disciple in the West"—the Ark is a model of a nonviolent social order, an alternative to the overt and hidden violence of our times."*

"The community was the inspiration of Lanza del vasto, a Sicilian reputedly of princely antecedents, who had spent time with Ghandi in India in the thirties. He was a tall white haired and bearded, fiercely blue-eyed patriarch, more given to poetry, theo-philosophy ad virile piety than to gentle warmth, humour or the common touch. ....

..The bread was baked on the premises, carpentry and building being other crafts, whilst the women were active in sewing and weaving. All the companions had their own hand-woven cloaks, many of the men had sleeveless jerkins and trousers: the woman long skirts or dresses. These were undyed, the predominant colours being brown and cream."

The story of my parents time spent in southern France is fascinating but we don't have time for all of it tonight instead let me read the beginning of a beautiful text written for the project by Brigitte – the rest can be read on-line and while I read let me show you a selection of the images by Dave Walkling of the era of squatting in countercultural south London

### ***The Meandering River – Memoir of an alternative life by Brigitte Ryley***

"South London is where I live. I was born in Brussels and came to England in the early Seventies. Wherever I happen to wander, there seem to be traces from the life lived during those years. It is as if fragments were left for me to pick up. I often take journeys

across those homelands to reminisce, remember, make something real come alive from across the veil of absence, wrapped around me, making an orphan out of me. Now I try to cultivate a sense of voluntarily exile. From that space filled with absence, memories, voices from the past speak to me. They shout, we are part of you, take us back into yourself. Let those stories you thought were better forgotten, come alive and reveal their secrets.

### **Crystal Palace Park**

I take bus number 176, the bus linking Oxford Street with Penge. Interestingly that bus route passes by all the homes I occupied since moving to England; Lordship Lane, Laurie Park Road, finally 81 Thicket Road where it all began. I stroll around the lake past the dinosaurs; despite small improvements added over the years it seems nothing much has changed. It's hard to believe that number 81, at the edge of the park, now an elegant Victorian house divided into flats was once a legal squat. It was run by a group of architectural students with the agreement of the local council.

81 Thicket Road was no ordinary squat. For a few years it housed a group of eccentric talented individuals whose intention was to create an urban "commune". The group consisted of around ten adults and four children. They lived communally sharing resources, childcare, cooking, and chores. They wanted to support each other's growth, experiment with pushing the boundaries taken for granted within conventional relationships, deal with conflicts creatively.

How I came to live with my partner in that environment is a long story. I was 23 years old, very shy and did not speak English. I had dropped out of reading psychology at Louvain University in Belgium. I had met my husband Peter during my travels in the South of France in search for rural alternative communities. When we came to live in the London commune, I was pregnant with my daughter. I felt estranged from my partner and the members of the commune most of the time. I remember the dominant feeling as one of quiet isolation. Yet underneath the emotional distress, there was a growing sense of self.

It was that "Self" responsible for pushing me out, away from the familiar confines of my Belgian student life in order to be exposed to new ways of living. I lived in the community, remaining separate, on the edge, safely protected in the role of the observer.

Studying psychology in Europe in 1968 had been the beginning of a journey of emotional intellectual and spiritual exploration. Our readings included, Marcuse, Lacan, Wilhelm Reich, Ronnie Lang, Allan Watts, Simone de Beauvoir and many other ground breaking thinkers.

There was amongst a certain group an atmosphere of questioning old grounds and a desire to create new forms of cultures. I was desperate to break away from restrictions and repressions brought about by closed communication systems encouraged by Catholicism and white middle class dominate ideologies. I had felt cut off from my instincts and lacking personal power and confidence. My sense of self remained very dependant on other people's approval. I was very alienated from my parents and the rift seemed to get bigger as time went on.

Louvain University could be likened to a big cauldron in which new intellectual, artistic, and spiritual theories were brewing. They reached many areas of society. Amongst them, ideas around the nature of madness named as anti-psychiatry, ideas on organic farming, and experimental ideas on education had reach us, all the way from an alternative school, Summerhill, in England. Eastern philosophies and exotic esoteric texts by the likes of Carlos Castaneda were impregnating our brains. Vegetarian, macrobiotic cafes, new age shops and esoteric bookshops were sprouting like mushrooms. There was a genuine longing for knowledge and other ways of doing things, fuelled by a sense of dissatisfaction around our parent's way of life.

Taking into account the cultural climate of the late sixties it is no wonder that my official studies in psychology felt irrelevant compared to the new theories that seemed to point towards the possibilities of a counterculture. These years were filled with hope and possibilities. I often frequented alternative groups and when given the opportunity to join a group of students to visit the community of L'Arche in France, I was delighted.

It was there, sitting in a rustic kitchen, peeling carrots that I met my husband to be. He had a long beard falling right down onto his chest and wore exotic Turkish baggy trousers. We started a conversation that continued throughout my week's visit. To the shy student that I was, he seemed full of wisdom. After a discussion on education as practiced in Summerhill alternative free school, I remember thinking he would be the ideal father to a child."

### **On Counterculture – what is counterculture?**

-Looking back my parents seem extraordinarily brave, courageous, 'hip even' -they were part of "the counterculture" a now almost magical term that I'm trying to absorb understand, having access to these extraordinary pictures has helped fill in a visual gap, a hole left by a childhood with very few photographs taken, I'm in awe of that time – I was there if only I could remember more of it....

In his book *Counterculture through the Ages, from Abraham to Acid House*, Ken Goffman, Villard, books, 2005,

In chapter two ' a different type of human excellence – defining counterculture' he goes on to describe

#### **"Nearly universal features of countercultures**

- **Breakthroughs and radical innovations in art science, spirituality, philosophy and living.**
- **Diversity.**
- **Authentic, open communication and profound interpersonal contact. Also generosity and the democratic sharing of tools.**
- **Persecution by mainstream culture of contemporaneous subcultures.**

**Exile or dropping out"**

He also writes that:

**“Counterculture cannot be crafted or produced: it must be lived. Where counterculture prizes pushing the boundaries of art, it prizes even more approaching life as one artistic experiment. Where counterculture values novel thinking, it strives most to express that ideation in the action of the moment. Where counterculture embraces spirit, it does not settle for periodic acknowledgement of divinity through the repetition of some arbitrary gesture, but instead attempts to live each day as a constant dynamic expression of spirit itself. The artifacts of a particular counterculture are by-products not end –products of countercultural living”**

Counterculture through the Ages, from Abraham to Acid House, Ken Goffman, Villard, books, 2005

### **Kirkdale – a living alternative**

This extraordinary school and the camps that were satellites of the school was for many the lived experience of a countercultural way of living – there is not enough time to fully explore the many aspects of Kirkdale – but the experience of education free from coercion was fairly unique.

Days were spent, as you liked, climbing trees. Playing games, rolling in the mud, painting, fighting, and forming bonds with people of all ages. Learning happened once you were bored of playing.....

Like all ‘perfect worlds’ however when you are expelled from the Garden of Eden you realize that the ‘other’ world is not quite so forgiving

The Kirkdale chapter in this story is just beginning and I’m exploring this through film, conversations, excavations, old friendships re-kindled and many other means..

***The next part of this journey takes us on a foray into the ‘New Age’ I call this part***

### **The Dark Age of the New Age**

**In his book Utopia, Merlin Coverly writes, (Harpenden 2010)**

**“..as historical fashions change, so one generations utopia may, and almost always does, become the following generations nightmare”**

-So what happened?

Kirkdale closed, squatting and communal living came to an end, though my parents

incredibly lived together in communally hoses until I was about 9 despite being separated people got jobs and dispersed, some tried 'to drop back in', others remained, true to their values, on the margins

-In some ways it is this period that holds the most fascination for me and that I'm still attempting to investigate...

"I hate the compromises life forces us to make, we must all bend a little if we are not to break" – Bill Bragg from Red/Blue

During the 1980s – my father 'dropped out' for the second time – this becoming involved with primal therapy, travelling first to Paris then on to the primal therapy commune in Los Angeles.

My mother trained to be a psychotherapist, and my life in south London became a bizarre mixture of the misery of 'normal school' and weekends and evenings spent as an observer, witness and sometimes participant in a variety of my mothers weird and wonderful 'new age' activities.

On his return from LA my father's interest in all things New Age continued leading him to develop his own version of the Taro called "Rainring."

When I first conceived the title for this project – I googled the name GUITNA and a second hand copy of best autobiography I've ever read in my life fell into my lap (one of those synchronistic moments you might say!)

The book was - Paradise Fever: Growing up in the shadow of the New Age, by Ptolemy Tompkins son of Peter Tompkins author of 'The Secret Life of Plants'

He perfectly sums up the child view of adult 'goings on'

Children are usually open minded enough to 'give things a go' but ultimately see through anything suspect with razor sharp vision...

"The romance with things occult and miraculous that gripped America in the 1970s - a romance which was eventually to evolve into the New Age phenomenon as it exists today - created a great gulf between the believer and the non believers, between those who became heavily invested in these new ways of seeing the world and those who thought them nothing more than an exercise in self-indulgent and wilful credulity. Emotions ran very high on both sides of this divide, and no one was more adept than my father at stirring up indignant opposition in the tents of scientific orthodoxy. When he told the news media that apples experienced the equivalent of an orgasm when eaten with a loving and respectful attitude, or that invisible, humanlike nature spirits swarmed within the greenery of a well tended garden-and worse, when these pronouncements were greeted with enthusiasm by journalists and readers alike-botany professors around the world felt their throats constrict and their scalps grow hot with rage." P.8

"With all these innumerable hidden intrigues, secret histories, and shadowy, occult goings on, the basic argument was the same. Nothing was ever what it seemed on the surface, openings in the small and all-too-normal world would appear: openings that would turn into roads leading into a vast dimension where all kinds of things un-dreamed of were made gloriously manifest.



Of course, I was already well aware that the world possessed a secret life. The message had been instilled in me by every comic and horror film I had ever seen, and **night of the living dead** had driven it home once and for all. The problem lay in the nature of this secret world. Was it as I suspected, a place of cacophony and terror? Or was it as my father so vociferously maintained a place of happiness and love and communion?..and how did my father, especially given the chaos that filled his own life so constantly, know it was so good out there in the dark!"

Ptolemy and Marjolaine – names surely sprouted from the seeds of new age thinking – and both of us after our own rebellions – found we were after all our parents children and returned to continue our own investigations.

### **The 90s / noughties and the new work**

My work (see works section) and new text pieces

Crazy particles and bluebells

You went to visit him, another rupture in time and space opened and you entered the bed-sit. You felt the strange expanse of his mind, rolling waves, turbulent seas, psychic distortion, tinged with moments of lucidity. You ate mashed potato and frankfurters with ketchup and mustard. He rolled many cigarettes, his eyes glazed as he talked and read to you. He had been typing his life story, tap, tap, drop by drop of ink on the old typewriter. Then he told you about many things. A woman who had channeled the word of god and the mother, imbalance, how the world was so out of synch, how the earth changes would soon be upon us. You walked together through a sea of bluebells a carpet of purple all around you and over and over you tried to quantify his state of mind. Crazy. Not Crazy. Crazy. Not Crazy. Who knew? Perhaps just like in the Mevlana poem you were both just crazy particles floating through the woods around Tunbridge Wells.

### **Shooting Stars**

As you lay, belly down, the sun feeling its way between the stems of long grass, wasps buzzing dangerously nearby, camera before you, you felt yourself remember in some deep recess of your soul, yes that was the word that came to mind; your soul was being revived, stirred, called. You were remembering the person you had chosen to ignore. A wise man, shaved head, doc marten boots, beautiful eyes, once told you as you picked nervously at the frayed edge of the armchair, how people spend a lifetime without realizing that we all have multiple personalities. Embracing the different parts of you is the hardest thing. So how could that spirited, anarchistic child full of self-assurance, joy, energy and a dictionary of swear words no child should know, have turned into a conformist member of society with a nine to five job and a mortgage. You are living the wrong life. There it was as clear as the shooting stars that you had watched the night before as you lay on the grass staring up at the clear skies with two other momentary kindred spirits. And just as the alternative personality of the gypsy fortune teller that you had dressed as that night of 'come as your alternative profession' seemed eerily to have the gift of sight as she read peoples cards, so you now had the gift of insight, the gift that so may had sought through these very same means.

I could tell so many stories about listening to gurus, visiting tee pee people trying to astral travel, trying to experience shamanic journeys...The project is in full swing, I'm in

the centre of it, looking outwards and inwards still not sure what it all means.

“The past is always knocking incessant trying to break through into the present”

‘I used to want to plant bombs at the last night of the proms, now you find me with the baby in the bathroom, with a big shell listening to the sounds of the sea”

Billy Bragg (from William Bloke)