

Martin Hamblen: Literacy

By Elaine Speight

Commissioned by Castlefield Gallery and Martin Hamblen to coincide with Hamblen's Launch Pad exhibition Literacy, 5 - 14 September 2014.

For an artist who deals with language, Martin Hamblen is a man of surprisingly few words. At the opening of his solo exhibition, 'Literacy', at Manchester's Castlefield Gallery, a curator asked him to explain the meaning of his work. Instead of grasping the opportunity to elucidate, the artist deflected the question. "Go and have a look", he said, "and then tell me what you think it's all about". Such reticence is characteristic of Hamblen's approach. Rather than employing theoretical sound bites or cultural references to substantiate his work, the artist is generally content to let his objects, installations and performances do the talking. In an age where exhibitions can feel overwhelmed by interpretation, and jargon-soaked artist statements have become a source of parody, Hamblen's reluctance to intellectualise his practice is reassuringly refreshing. Yet, his refusal to justify his art is also a provocative strategy.

At first glance, Hamblen's artwork is disarmingly simplistic. In his own words, his practice is 'divided between collecting objects and performing phrases', the latter being 'pretty straightforward and fairly obvious... I just do the saying'¹. Such sayings have included: two steps forward, one step back (29, 028, 2012), which the artist performed on the external staircase of a civic art gallery over a sixty-eight hour period; a penny for your thoughts (Un sou pour vos pensées) - an ongoing performance in public spaces, where the artist exchanges coins for the thoughts of passers-by; Level headed - a five hour attempt to balance a spirit level on his head; and drawing a line in the sand (From E to K, 2014) - a thirty hour performance for the 'Literacy' exhibition, involving a suitcase of sand and a Staedtler Noris pencil. The whimsical nature of his work, combined with the public context in which it usually occurs, has, however, proved challenging for some viewers, such as the Tax Payers Alliance who predictably described 29, 028 as 'an absurd waste of public cash'². Nevertheless, the clichéd retort of 'I could do that' is precisely what Hamblen seeks to elicit and hold up for discussion.

Inspired by the democratisation of art espoused, in different ways, by artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Beuys, Hamblen eschews traditional notions of craftsmanship and artistic proficiency in favour of simple, repetitive processes. Yet, despite the artist's fascination with the forms and functions of art, his work is far from self-referential. The kitsch collections of jigsaws, tea towels, roadmaps and regional cheeses, taxonomically displayed in the 'Literacy' exhibition, speak about the uneasy relationship between the trinkets of Western Capitalism and the political realities of disputed territories, such as Syria (which was created when Anglo-French diplomats literally drew a line in the sand). Similarly, a much earlier performance installation Education, Education, Education (2008) - a comment on New Labour's education policy - examined the gap between political rhetoric and everyday social experience. Part of Castlefield Gallery's 'Launch Pad' initiative, which provides a 'test bed' for the work of early career artists, 'Literacy' is Hamblen's largest project to date. Conceptually ambitious and sophisticated in design, it marks an important step in his developing career, and provides a valuable platform for an artist who evidently has a lot more left to say.

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1 <http://www.artplayer.tv/video/946/martin-hamblen-literacy>

2 <http://www.lep.co.uk/what-s-on/harris-flights-walking-art-an-absurd-waste-of-public-cash-1-6011305>

Elaine Speight is the *In Certain Places* Curator, based at the Harris Museum and Art Gallery. Elaine has been involved with the project since 2005, and has also worked as a freelance artist and curator for organisations including Liverpool Biennial, Up Projects and Curious Minds. Elaine is a sessional lecturer on the MA Arts Policy and Management course at Birkbeck, University of London, where she is currently completing a practice-based PhD, which explores the relationship between art practice and place.