**‘Writing in relation to …’: Means what, exactly?**

I have described this small project as ‘writing in relation to’ the Metropolis exhibition and myself as ‘writer in relation to’ the exhibition. Did I mean the more usual term Writer in Residence? No, there are a number of differences.

A number of diverse organisations have recently had a Writer in Residence. These have included art galleries, schools, national/civic trusts, voluntary agencies, local councils/library services, national public bodies, hospitals, prisons, museums and an airport. The organisation, itself or via an intermediary, decides to host a Writer (usually capitalised thus); advertises the post, setting out what the terms and conditions are and what qualities are looked for in the appointee; and attaches the writer to itself for a certain length of time to undertake various duties.

In contrast:

I attached myself, uninvited and not necessarily wanted

to do some writing of my choosing

at a scale and of a type decided by me

stimulated by the anticipation of visiting an on-going event (The art exhibition ‘Metropolis: reflections on the modern city’

working to a job specification, such as it is, to which I hold myself accountable.

The commitment I made to myself, and announced to friends and family as well as via a few tweets on Twitter and a couple of postings on Facebook, was along the following lines:

**Writer in relation to Metropolis; reflections on the modern city**

"Metropolis: reflections on the modern city" is an exhibition due to be held at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery from 23rd March 2013 to 23rd June 2013.

This brings together two areas of interest to me: contemporary art and cities. Adding the third interest of writing creates the opportunity for me to act (in relation to this mix of urban issues and themes in contemporary art) as a self-appointed ‘writer in relation to …’ .

The aims will be:

* To test out the notion of ‘writer in relation to ..’
* To produce, by the end of July 2013, an output of up to 8 pieces of fiction (each at least 2000 words) and 3 or 4 pieces of nonfiction (each at least 1000 words), and to make these available electronically via my website and via email as appropriate

Support:

Financial support, via grant funding or sponsorship, is not actively being sought (but will not necessarily be refused if offered). Time spent on this project will be regarded as a form of volunteering – a contribution to taking creativity forward, in a modest way, within the city. If any person or organisation wants to explore support in kind that would be an interesting idea to pursue.

That was the intent. What happened in practice?

Before the exhibition opened I collected the usual publicity leaflets, information from the Museum & Art Gallery website and thought how much time I might commit (around 2 hours per week visiting the exhibition and making notes, with a further half-day per week writing and editing – somewhere in the region of 50 hours in total, maybe).

Once the exhibition opened I signed up for a couple of guided tours where staff talked about putting the collection together, curating the exhibition, what various pictures meant to them and so on. I visited (with a special, new, spiral bound notebook to show how serious I was) and made my own notes on the impacts that the varied artworks had on me. I made notes from the short pieces of text mounted alongside each work and generally felt that there was enough substance to the ‘writing in relation to ..’ idea to give it some serious attention.

Some of the fiction writings were a result of detail across a number of artworks being used to fill out my own ideas; some used the titles of the work or the idea behind the work as a leaping-off point; some took the characters portrayed and gave them a different, fictional, life.

The pieces were written with a degree of care and some first-draft editing done. The writings were then put on [www.thewordsthething.org.uk](http://www.thewordsthething.org.uk) website as they were completed. The whole was regarded as work in progress and I may simply leave it there or I may decide to make more of it.

What were the outputs?

Fiction

* A sequence of three dreamlike accounts of approaching and being in a city .. the familiarity/unfamiliarity of that ..the way that being in large cities after a long journey can have a dreamy quality .. where there are certainties and uncertainties.
* A tale told by a long-service detective – written slightly in the ‘old American cop story’ style. He recounts his views on life and throws in anecdotes from his work solving crime.
* A young Soviet research assistant drafts a report and thinks about the best ways of writing it. Blends fiction with non-fiction.
* A magazine reporter is sent to get a different slant on the riots that are happening on estates at the periphery of a city.
* One boy’s dream of moving to the city and his reflections, as an adult, on how city life worked out for him.
* A woman discovers a Manifesto in an old book. This changes her perspective on the city and influences how she behaves.

Non Fiction

* An exploration of the language used in, and bout, the Metropolis exhibition. How this reflects understandings of the modern city, and how it indicates the ways that artists might think about the modern city.
* An exploration of the extent to which the modern city (whatever that means) might be a source of social ills or might be the cure.
* This current exploration of the idea (and the practicalities) of ‘writing in relation to .’

What were any outcomes?

A personal outcome has been the pleasure in taking the idea and working it through; in fine-tuning down to completed products and in putting them out in public for others to consider. In this sense I see the whole ‘Writing in relation to Metropolis; reflections on the modern city’ project as itself a work of art, if that is not too grandiose or presumptuous.

There may be other outcomes in the future. We will just have to wait and see.