THE METROPOLITAN COMPLEX

Romantic Detachment

Sarah Pierce interviews curators Adam Sutherland & Sarah Glennie

In conversation

On Friday 3 September 2004, the following conversation took place between Sarah Glennie's house in Irishtown, Dublin and the Grizedale Arts office in England's Lake District. Sarah Pierce invited Adam Sutherland and Sarah Glennie to have an informal discussion about *Romantic Detachment*, a project based in the studio-wing of PS1 between 4 October and 7 November 2004. Sarah Glennie and Sarah Pierce spoke to Adam Sutherland over the phone.

Sarah Pierce: I want to have a conversation with the two of you about your ideas for this project. Adam are you comfortable?

Adam Sutherland: I am.

Sarah Pierce: What are you wearing?

Adam Sutherland: I'm not wearing anything extreme today. I am wearing some checked trousers and a purple shirt.

Sarah Glennie: Does the purple shirt have any logos on it? Any animals?

Adam Sutherland: No. I could pretend… A cowboy shirt with a scene of American soldiers and American Indians. A battle scene with those soldiers in bluecoats, I can't remember their name.

Sarah Pierce: The Battle of Little Big Horn? Something like that?

Adam Sutherland: Sure. Like you would see in the films.

Sarah Pierce: And are you wearing a hat today?

Adam Sutherland: I'm not wearing a hat. Not indoors. Not indoors or in front of my girlfriend. I can only wear hats when I go away. I smoke and wear hats when I am out of the country.

Sarah Pierce: All very important details for us and for this document. This show involves ideas of *Romantic Detachment*. The two of you are curating the project together. Are there any romantic feelings between you?

Sarah Glennie: I think we can probably say no…

Sarah Pierce: Adam?

Adam Sutherland: Yes?

Sarah Pierce: Do you agree with Sarah's estimation here?

Adam Sutherland: Yep.

Sarah Pierce: So, the two of you are romantically detached… from each other.

Adam Sutherland/Sarah Glennie: Yes.

Sarah Pierce: Where then does 'the romantic' arise from in your project?

Adam Sutherland: Having to focus on the romantic over the project has been interesting. I don't for a moment imagine that I am not a completely clichéd romantic myself. I have always been driven by romantic ideas, which are drawn out of my own background. The idea of Romanticism, as in the Lake District in England where Grizedale is located, is again a very clichéd version of Romanticism instigated by Wordsworth and the original Romantics—the invention of the individual and the replacement of the priest and religion with art and the artist. Those ideas are very strong in the Lake District's culture. The project itself as it is happening in America mirrors what happens in the central Lake District. It's a place where a lot of tourists come and also where there are these very intense bodies of cultures and special interest groups. This is English Romanticism. Then all along the western seaboard and the periphery of the Lake District there is a fixation with American Romanticism, or a romanticization of America. So 25 miles from Grizedale the culture is all about line dancing, world-wide wrestling, demolition derbies, wearing cowboy boots, listening to country music, and driving cars that aren't actually American cars, but that are trying to look like American cars. It's something a lot of artists have worked with over the last few years—the dialogue between two extreme places. The idea of extending that to New York was a way of fulfilling a lot of British and European artists' naïve vision of America, and I include myself in that. There is a fantasy built around going to New York and experiencing a 'real' America, world-wide wrestling, fundamentalist religion, people that say 'sheeeat' and 'you looking at me' and then we arrive and find a culture that is fixated with Europe, that knows more about Wordsworth, Caspar David, Huysman than we do.

Sarah Pierce: So British people are naïve about New York and don't know a lot about Romanticism?

Adam Sutherland: Well, for example, the Huysman inspired 'Feast Against Nature' (Emily Wardill) is happening here this weekend and in New York in two weeks. I can pretty much guarantee that everyone involved in Britain speaking at this dinner party has not read the book. Perhaps there are about four who have read it out of twenty.

Sarah Pierce: What book?

Adam Sutherland: *Against Nature*.

Sarah Pierce: What is it? Who wrote it?

Sarah Glennie: Neither of us have read it.

Adam Sutherland: It was written by J.K. Huysmans. It's a decadent but romantic text. For the American party, all the speakers and all the guests have read it and know it really well.

Sarah Glennie: It's a kind of classic 19th Century French Romantic novel.

Sarah Pierce: Are people invited to the dinner party because of their knowledge or relationship to this book?

Adam Sutherland: Yes…

Sarah Glennie: Well, more because of their relationship to the artist, Emily Wardill, who invited them because of relationships she found to them out of the book, rather than because of their relationship to the book itself.

Adam Sutherland: Lots of people, like Sebastian Horsley for example, are living out a Huysman generated idea of the decadent romantic. He almost lives an aesthetic that is laid out in the book.

Sarah Glennie: Which is all about the Parisian *flaneur*, isn't it? Or am I wrong?

Adam Sutherland: Sorry?

Sarah Glennie: The book, isn't it all about Parisian dandyism? The decadent dandy?

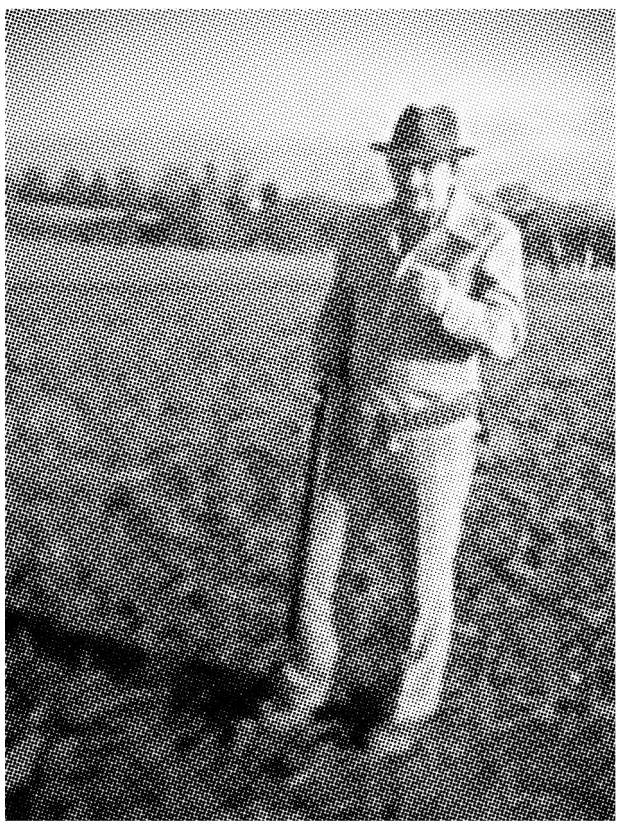
Adam Sutherland: Yes, it's dandyism so it's decadence and it's anti-nature. It's a reaction against Romanticism, but it actually fuels that whole idea of the romantic as an individual, and an artist.

Sarah Glennie: This Sebastian Horsley is an aristocratic lay-about really isn't he? He just gets stoned.

Adam Sutherland: If he's an aristocratic then I'm…

Sarah Glennie: Are you going to pull rank on him?

Adam Sutherland: He's written a speech that's all about going to Amsterdam to this brothel where you can have sex with people with disabilities. He brought a photograph of him actually having sex with somebody, just to prove it's not farcical or untrue. There is another part in the speech about the *malaise* of life, where he says when life is shit "just go to the lavatory." He actually uses the word 'lavatory' in a speech about sitting in your own shit.



Sarah Pierce: Right, the word 'lavatory' kind of blows his cover.

Sarah Glennie: 'Lavatory' is very subtle English word, it is more middle-class than 'toilet'. Nice people say *lavatory*; nasty people say *toilet*.

Sarah Pierce: What do you say Adam?

Adam Sutherland: I try hard to say toilet but I can't really get it out. I just avoid using any word at all.

Sarah Glennie: I say 'loo'.

Adam Sutherland: Yes, loo is alright if you're a woman. It works on occasion if your looking for directions. I usually just piss outside on the excuse of having a look at the stars, my father always liked to do that, but as he always pissed all over the dogs it rather gave the game away on his return, we as children became very cautious about patting dogs.

Sarah Glennie: My grandmother said 'lavatory', very definitely. You weren't allowed to say 'toilet'.

Sarah Pierce: To Americans 'toilet' is an object not a place. 'No smoking in the toilet' sounds overly literal, more akin perhaps to Sebastian's take on sitting in your own shit—Adam, what do you say in New York when you have to go?

Adam Sutherland: I have occasionally got down to the word 'john'.

Sarah Glennie: I can't imagine you asking for the 'john'.

Adam Sutherland: It is impossible in New York. There is absolutely no where in Manhattan to go to the…there is no public…if you need to use the…

Sarah Pierce: The bathroom. Americans seem to prefer this euphemism. Have you tried Barnes & Noble?

Adam Sutherland: But that's a shop. Isn't it a bit rude to use it and not shop?

Sarah Pierce: No, it's fine. Barnes & Noble is well integrated as the public toilet for New York. Notice how many of them there are around the city? So, *Romantic Detachment* starts with a dinner party?

Adam Sutherland: Yes, the Black Dinner Party tomorrow night. All black dinner party, all black food, everyone dressed in black, etc. And then next Friday, there is something happening called *Satterthwaite Night Live*, which is a comedy event in a pub in a tiny village of about 12 houses. It is a stand-up open-mic event. We were going to do it on Saturday night, but nobody noticed when we were planning it that it was the 11th of September. So we are doing it on Friday night. It is webcast into a club in New York, so there is a mix of material from comics in New York and the local village people—not to be confused with the 'Village People'.

Sarah Glennie: But probably not all that dissimilar…

Adam Sutherland: No, very similar it's so not real. So people from the village do their stand up and then people from New York do their stand up. It will be filmed and the film incarnation will be presented in New York.

Sarah Pierce: What have the reactions been so far from American artists to this invitation? Not in terms of their ideas, but more in terms of how they have reacted to this idea of the romantic. Do they read it as bound up to notions of the countryside or the individual artist as in Romanticism?

Sarah Glennie: I think initially it was hard to get passed the historic idea of romanticism, its seemed difficult for people to take on the idea of the romantic as the basis for the artist and for artists to accept that they are working in the romantic tradition and that tradition is the international art style.

Adam Sutherland: In a way that dialogue is with PS1 as an institution. PS1 represents the institution focused on the international art style, with its Eurocentric orientation, which also serves as a kind of fortress against the immediate local culture, in PS1's case in a very literal way. Our dealings with them have somewhat reinforced that essence or impression.

Sarah Pierce: How do you think PS1 imagines its role in this international or European art world?

Adam Sutherland: Through very romantic notions about bringing European culture into America.

Sarah Glennie: I don't think it is just about a European culture, more an international contemporary art style that still adheres to European romantic notions of the artist.

Sarah Pierce: So what you describe as 'the international art style' perpetuates European Romanticism through its relationships with artists and through what you describe as a need to propagate a role for artists that is actually very out-of-place? Is it a notion that art and culture are *good* fundamentally, and so they make people and places *better*?

Adam Sutherland: Well, we are taking a sort of naïve outsider stance to confront that. A lot of what we have been trying to do here rubs against the idea of the romantic artist, and to say that kind of practice has had its time, that there is no role for that heroic visionary dysfunctional artist figure in contemporary society. Quite a few projects form a quite blatant attack on that idea.

Sarah Pierce: Has it occurred to you that this project takes place right as the PS1 international studio program comes to an end? On the one hand, this abandoning of the studio corresponds with what you are saying about ridding the museum of the romantic notion of the artist. On the other hand, I think that the studios never *really* mattered to PS1, they mattered to the artists from other countries who used them. So, Great Britain, who never had an international studio at PS1, is now infiltrating the space with artists who probably always wanted to be here, only now everyone else has gone. Why use the studios?

Sarah Glennie: The decision to use the studio wing was informed by a series of circumstances but once the decision was made it has worked well for us—it has given us the freedom to work beyond the standard exhibition model and encourage the artists to work produce socially engaged works in New York and through out America, using the studio wing at PS1 as a production base.

Sarah Pierce: PS1 liked the idea of artists working in the museum, it fulfilled an institutional self-image, but romance relies on a certain distance. Perhaps now that the studio program is gone PS1 can idealise the artist without having to experience any of the annoying turn-offs.

Adam Sutherland: I think it is a very interesting idea curatorially for PS1 to use this project as a punctuation mark to the ongoing use of the studio wing space.

Sarah Glennie: Yes, I think other institutions could usefully re-evaluate their support of artists' practice and whether studio programmes are now the most relevant way to do this, looking at the artists on the Romantic Detachment project there are very few if any that actually use a studio.

Adam Sutherland: The project is very much about defining the divisions between cultures at the same time as incorporating them. Not like that's a new idea because it's been around for yonks. It's just about how you do it, and how it's been done in the past. It's not about assimilating folk culture or pop culture into the contemporary art mainstream. What we try to do here is not simply assimilate it, but give it its own space. It reflects how a lot of younger artists we are working with want to work. The hand of the artist in a lot of the projects is virtually absent.

Sarah Pierce: It's fine to conjecture that different ideas and reference points feed into the project; that artists here are exploring their ideas publicly outside of an exhibition. Really though, is that the case? I'm inclined to be suspicious; what does my output represent here? The curators? Grizedale? PS1?

Adam Sutherland: It's trying to make people think about contemporary art culture as one minority special interest that sits alongside many others. I think cultures are most interesting when they are active, in progress, rather than thinking about what 'doing it' might result in. There is that similar approach to all the people we work with to tease out a thinking process, both from the non-art mainstream and within the art world.

Sarah Glennie: When people start to work with Grizedale they begin to wonder about what it means to be an artist, how they can function, what it means to them to create work, how they can control that, how it's seen, their ownership of it and its relation to other people. I think that is quite tough for some people.

Adam Sutherland: Another challenge that some artists are completely comfortable with and others are very uncomfortable with, is that work they are generating is given up to the whole, and being subsumed and changed and altered in the process.

Sarah Glennie: Right, the Gary Phelan response, " I must be the end of the line and keep control!"

Adam Sutherland: But someone else is always going to be at the other end of the line, and they can assimilate all that material and regurgitate it. It's what Damon Packard is doing with all the film, cutting it all up to disperse it with other material and then to present a piece that is ultimately his piece really, just made out of everyone else's work. But we haven't actually asked him that yet.

Sarah Pierce: How does that 'give work up to the whole' thing work?

Adam Sutherland: Within this project there are a myriad of exchanges between artists and works, the 'whole' is a complex web drawn from the group and its many interaction with the participating audience. Ideally, it's ever-changing and developing and there is no full-stop. There are points where you offer a view, an access point, but it's not the end. That is how I see the project and how Grizedale works. It's a slice in time. A presentation of what's going on and the ideas that are around at the moment. And next year again there will be another one, another snapshot.

Sarah Glennie: With other tie-ins to this.

Adam Sutherland: It will be a direct evolution out of this project.

Sarah Pierce: The Americana surrounding Grizedale, in this moment in time, intersects with all the people walking around Manhattan in cowboy boots.

But it's a rather flat observation though isn't it, that American culture is everywhere, even in the romantically withdrawn Lake District?

Adam Sutherland: Certainly that would be a rather flat observation, but of course what is interesting is how American culture sits alongside other cultures in every different place it means something very different, it's a changing relationship, and its frightenly complex, the evolution of the love hate syndrome. Art people in cowboy boots in London or New York it's the same deal, irony, a wish to complexify, reference, critique but boots in the Lake District say is a whole different deal, its actually seen as a confrontation a challenge to the dominant culture, impractical, pretentious, you'd get laughed outta town, the boots are a kick in the face for the 'appropriate' culture. It may seem absurd but you know its true, the finest detail that marks a person out as different is highly provactive particularly in the non urban environment – how many people have been brutally murdered for having an inch to wide flair - more than there are stars in the sky. One of the ideas that fed into this whole project was to do with Music, an Artist at Grizedale, Nat Mellors did an LP and installation called Prince Lightening a fusion of white disaffected UK country boy and tough urban American hip hop. If you look at music, there is this UK northern soul phenomena which is basically an romantiziation and lionisation of 60's black American music. It is now big back in the States. Rare groove, which was a slightly later eighties phenomenon in Britain, is a completely romantic, obsessive non-understanding of black American music. And again, now it's becoming really big in America.

Sarah Glennie: So a misunderstanding has been sold back.

Adam Sutherland: Well, a romanticization has been exchanged. That is a natural evolution. At an early stage in this project I was thinking about the relationship between the development of porcelain and the development of music culture, If that sounds a bit far fetched I can explain a bit. In the 17th century porcelain was first seen in Europe as a waste product imported from the east as a ballast for tea. Tea was the valuable import the porcelain was just along for the ride. So this amazing white porcelain which you couldn't produce in Europe showed what must be possible so they started trying to copy it. You end up with this to-and-fro between Europe and Asia which culminated in the *Willow* pattern blue-and-white wear, Delft and so on. It is a combination of two cultures. Europeans were doing drawings and designs and sending them out to China, and they were being copied and 'Chinesified' and then coming back, and then the Chinese version was copied in Europe and so on. This also knocked on in more oblique ways into the wider culture. Well, the same thing happened with records between American and Britain in the fifties and sixties. The old 78s and 45's largely black music was used as ballast for light but more valued cargos. The records were regarded as waste product, very heavy and easy to move around, so that is how music travelled. That it should have been black music is interesting I guess there was a kind of suppression, bad distribution and the dominance of the major label more interested in breaking white artist versions of the waste material, anyway you end up with this unbelievable body of work lost in warehouses across America. So anyway it's not strange that R&B music was coming out of Liverpool, it's were all this music was landed. In addition to this music's influence on the mainstream there were also the minority cult interests like northern soul and rare groove drawn originally from the same source, this ballast cargo. These interpretations of black American culture then fed very directly into Electro and Dance music and the history of those exchanges between Europe and the US are relatively well known culminating in house, hip hop and all, and really contemporary R&B a the massively dominant music culture, arguably the world dominant culture and set of aesthetics.

Sarah Pierce: How would this project happen if it was in a small town in Indiana? None of this irony would apply.

Adam Sutherland: That is how it is here in regional Britain as well. There is nothing ironic about the interest in Americana outside of a knowing minority.

Sarah Glennie: But if someone in Hoxton does it, it is knowingly ironic.

Sarah Pierce: Right. When artists wear trucker hats, or for that matter when curators wear cowboy shirts, the irony lies in identifying with individuals who are *not* artists, who are not the 'art world'. Bruce Nauman is a real cowboy. He is a cowboy who lives in New Mexico.

Adam Sutherland: I'm not trying to look like a cowboy though. I always thought that cowboy shirt thing with loud trousers was more a 70's black look, like Blaxploitation style.

Sarah Pierce: Have you been mistaken for a cowboy?

Adam Sutherland: A couple of guys were laughing at me in New York the other day saying Rhinstone cowboy and so on, I explained that I was English and consequently an unreal cowboy, they seemed to like that and we had a bit of a

chat about style, they were wearing huge plain t shirts and their mother's tights on their heads, but they looked pretty good if a little washerwoman like.

Sarah Glennie: Two of the artists in the project, Graeme Roger and Kevin Reid are taking a road trip to Memphis, Tennessee to try to see places outside of New York.

Adam Sutherland: They have used their parents and grandparents relationships with America to key into America, there are lot of Scottish immigrants in the states, most people in Scotland have relatives over there, they would most likely be stalwarts of the extreme right wing American.

Sarah Pierce: Wow, will anyone understand them?

Sarah Glennie: *Sex in the City* was on the other night and Samantha shagged a Scottish guy and couldn't understand a word he said. I was thinking of Kevin and Graeme because the guy's accent was very like theirs.

Adam Sutherland: We have done presentations, which are almost like having a number of artists speaking in tongues. At the Ikon, which is an art space in Bimingham, UK, Kevin gave a talk that no one could understand, followed by a Welsh artist Bedwyr Williams who no one could understand, followed by someone else just taking nonsense, actually that may have been me. I loved it and the comment it made about the exotic, the way the institutions cherry pick exotica, missing what is right there under their noses.

Sarah Glennie: If you look at our list of artists, they are very un-East End of London aren't they? There are a few, but it is not like they are all coming from the centre. In New York people might just think we are all from London.

Adam Sutherland: Interestingly people insist even locally that Grizedale only works is London artists and it is so far from the truth. We don't exclude London but we work with a real cross section of the country, which in Britain is incredibly hard to do since the focus of so much activity is in London.

Sarah Glennie: And in Scotland there are people, like Kevin and Graeme, who aren't from Glasgow...

Adam Sutherland: Well, Glasgow is just an aping of London really isn't it? In the provinces there is virtually no contemporary international art. There are quite a few contemporary artists who live out in the sticks. They just don't do anything there. They do everything outside of Britain or in London. It almost validates them if they don't do something regional. To do something locally, provincially doesn't fit with the contemporary international art superstar model.

Sarah Pierce: Is that partly what you are trying to complicate by having this show, this project sorry, occur at PS1? It might be read through binaries of country-city, British-American, hi-lo, but it is actually about overlaps that exist already between cultures because people move around, and imitate each other, and adapt.

Adam Sutherland: We tried not to get people whose work or thinking is polarised, but in fact the project can be categorised by the extremely polarised. There is a relationship played out between England and America sure, but there is a big emphasis on black-white, good-evil, and it is never introduced though a middle-ground, it is all extremes. Which has kind of evolved. It was not an ambition for the project.

Sarah Glennie: The initial starting point though, which has shifted enormously, was this set of extremes between New York City and the Lake District.

Adam Sutherland: That's true or actually its not as it turns out the similarities are extraordinary, the small village feel and the relationship to the global, the myriad cultures and special interest groups I could go on, no the same but not so different, just the taps, the light switches, the locks turning different directions.

Sarah Pierce: Which are you Adam, good or evil?

Adam Sutherland: I'm just about in the middle. I wish I was more good.

Sarah Glennie: I'm good.

Adam Sutherland: I see other people and I think, god they're so good.

Sarah Glennie: I think we're both pretty good. We could do with a bit more evil.

Adam Sutherland: You mean curatorial evil. Where does curatorial evil lie?

Romantic Detachment

Matt Bakkom, Beagles and Ramsay, Mark Beasley, John Russell, Damon Packard, Jesse Bercowetz, Matt Bua with Carrie Dashow and Jovi Schnell, David Blandy, Simon and Tom Bloor, Olaf Breuning, Adam Chodzko, Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane, Brian Dewan and Nina Katchadourian, eteam, Ryan Gander, Jonathan Griffin, Henry VIII's Wives, juneau/projects, Nathaniel Mellors, David Osbaldeston, Sarah Pierce, Garrett Phelan, Oliva Plender, Marianne Walker, Giorgio Sadotti, William Pope L, Kevin Reid, Graeme Roger, Abby Loveland, Amy Marletta, Cindy Smith, Kerry Stewart, Emily Wardill, Bedwyr Williams, Matt Stokes, Karen Guthrie and Nina Pope, Nick Crowe and Ian Rawlinson, Anita di Bianco, Eric Ward and Cathy Wright.

The Metropolitan Complex is a Dublin-based project by Sarah Pierce. It organizes a social practice around a range of activities such as exhibitions, talks and publications. These structures often open up to the personal and the incidental.

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