

# A Grand Day Out

Sally O'Reilly enjoys a good failure

It may seem a derogatory comment, but the Navigating History event in Folkestone was suffused with failure. Navigating History is a project inspired by the local history collections of two libraries and one archive in the southeast, comprising artists' commissions, publications and live events that explore and expand on the content of the resources. As the substance of these archives is made up of the histories and people of the area, it would seem inevitable that the gamut of human endeavours is reflected—from the heroic to the banal, the jubilant to the embarrassing.

Bob & Roberta Smith's Grand Day Out was specifically designed by the artist to accentuate the inevitable failure of such public events. In art terms, these social activities never rise above the level of, at best, puerile fun, more often disintegrating

into self-conscious futility. That the artist Patrick Brill (Bob & Roberta Smith is some sort of schizophrenia-inducing pseudonym) builds this into his artwork, however, rescues it from the over-liberal fate of much community-based work or the impenetrable theory of a new genre of artwork that takes society as its medium. Brill, although wry and ever-so knowing, has an air of authenticity that coaxes others to join in wholeheartedly; and perhaps this authenticity comes from a true belief in failure as a valuable tool.

The afternoon workshop on the beach began with a sculpture session. The central conceit was that some conceptual artists had travelled from London to compete against the locals, using found materials on the beach to create three-dimensional work. Although the distinction was more of art school training versus no art school training, the results were nonetheless contentious: the Londoners made 'conceptual' work that might easily have been labelled pretentious an 'invisible world' that was not there, someone walking along a plank for no reason—while locals made figurative objects that might be considered vacuous or merely representational. Brill was stoking the long-standing antagonism between the capital city and regional towns, the

art school savvy and the 'I know what I like and I like what I know' school of thought.

Other activities included dressing up as a politician—with the briefcase of bureaucracy, the coat of corruption and the hat of self interest—and taking a running jump; digging as big a hole as possible in 15 minutes and making a hill with the displaced sand; and making portraits of Michael Howard, Churchill and Mozart out of potatoes and skewers. The forlorn vegetable busts, small-scale sand moving and bogus jumping politicians (all well below voting age) were, of course, carefully poised by Brill between pathos and absurdity. There is a theory of slapstick that suggests that the fall makes us feel superior to the person who fell, while at the same time reminding us that we too are ultimately controlled by nature. Laughter comes from the knowledge that others have failed and we are lucky that our inferiority was passed over this time round. The activities on the beach were

just such an exercise in humility on one hand, and outright competitiveness on the other.

At the bottom of the cliff lift Steve Connolly erected a Blue Peter version of a camera obscura that used to stand on the same site, built in 1886 by Edward Longford Davis, who came to Folkestone, it is widely thought, for the Art Treasures Exhibition, itself a resounding failure. Connolly's pared-down reconstruction of Davis's room was more of a small, portable wigwam, which projected a sickly image of nearby parking meters onto the ground. The imagery was so spectral and the contraption so cobbled together, that it was as far a cry from current imaging technology as could be imagined—like a rocket made out of a toilet roll tube.

It is said that today we need high-tech distractions, as we are fickle and fidgety, but give us a few bits of organic matter and fifteen minutes in which to compete for the ironic praise of a sardonic artist and

we are captivated all day. The Grand Day Out was capped by a performance of wilfully rubbish songs played badly by Brill on the piano in the conservatory of The Grand. *I Love My Art World Friends, My Husband Thinks He's a Musician* and many more titles reminded us, once more, of the importance of the gap between expectation and reality.



Coastguard officers try out the camera obscura

