

Gordon McHarg: 'I think if art is going to survive it has got to go down different routes'



Tunnel visionary

If commuters don't visit art shows, the only thing to do is bring the art shows to them. Alannah Weston interviews Gordon McHarg, the man behind art on the Piccadilly Line. Portrait by Robert Allen

If you are one of the 16.6 million people travelling on the Piccadilly Line this month, each time you step on to a train you have a one in 76 chance of boarding ART-TUBE 01. Small stickers on the windows announce the show. This means that you could find yourself mesmerised by a Damien Hirst spot painting or drifting into a thoughtful reverie before a photograph of heart-shaped clouds by fashion photographer Juergen Teller, and missing your stop. Or, on your way home after a few too many, you might find yourself perplexed by a white space provided by Yoko Ono under which is written simply, 'Add Colour'.

For this month, artist Gordon McHarg has replaced the advertising space in all six carriages of a train running between Cockfosters and Heathrow with the specially commissioned work of 42 artists. 'I think the youngest artist is

22 and the oldest is 74,' McHarg says about his selection. 'And you've got a range from the super-famous to the unknown.' Canadian-born McHarg, 37, is the first to admit that he falls into the second category. 'I've got no art training, no college whatsoever. I'm not in the art world. If you ask anyone they won't know who I am, I'm pretty sure about that.' Sure enough, there was little to be found on McHarg on the internet, but a tiny clipping in a Vancouver newspaper about his most recent show was to prove fruitful.

The show, entitled *Je me souviens Gordon*, was a retrospective of his 'early work' – painting and drawings his mother had kept since he was in kindergarten – which McHarg displayed on a Vancouver bus. 'It was pretty fun to see my bus go,' he says. 'I liked it. I rode on it.' He explained that the idea



Jamie Reid Fiona Banner Dick Jewell Tarka Kings Richard Niman Beatrice Dillon GT
 MissFX Juergen Teller Lucy Jones Gavin Turk Peggy Atherton Richard Muiywa Chris Landoni
 Alessandra Travaglati Joe Rush Paul Simonon Vinca Petersen Colin Self Charlie Baird Vivienne Westwood
 John Chris Jones Aidan Hughes Zineb Sedra Pam Hogg John Dunbar Yoko Ono John Spencer
 Faisal Abdu' Allah Natasha Laffin Tracey Sanderswood Damien Hirst Mekons Barry Kamen Raksha Patel
 Tossanna Hoare John Cooper Clarke Shez 360 Hanan Magou Corinne Day Duggie Fields Gordon McHarg

Advertising poster for ART-TUBE 01



'Bus and Rig', by Vinca Petersen

TO-CON-VEY ONE'S MOOD
 IN SEV-EN-TEEN SYLL-ABLE-S
 IS VE-RY DIF-FIC



'Haiku', by John Cooper Clarke

'I just said I was taking over a train and filling it with art: everyone who participated completely loved the idea'

for taking over a Tube train had sprung from his bus experience. 'I wanted to do something bigger – and I couldn't get the whole Tube myself.'

Gordon McHarg is what movie critics describe as 'watchable'. When he takes off his enormous sunglasses, his narrow, dark-brown eyes are wide set and compelling. There is something unaffectedly retro about him – the black skull and crossbones T-shirt, the brown denim jacket (bought in the Dartmoor Prison shop), the tousled hair, and his use of the word 'groovy' perhaps. But if he's got a little bit of the ageing rock star in him, he's also got quite a touch of the polite, slightly naive Canadian too, and the whole combination is quite powerful. (Later I learn that his friend Juergen Teller has shot him for two Katharine Hamnett campaigns as well as for the French magazine *Vogue Homme*.) He also has what one of his friends described as 'a very sweet stutter'. After a while you don't notice it, and then it jumps up at you again when he's discussing something he's passionate about.

Home for McHarg has been London for the last 17 years. The third of five children, he was brought up in Montreal in an English-speaking family of Irish descent. He left Canada to go backpacking when he was 18. 'I was a stuttering English Quebecer.' After travelling around Europe and spending several months in Morocco, he found himself in London. 'I kind of stumbled in, and I haven't stumbled out yet.' He is married to Alessandra Travaglati, an Italian artist also featured in the show, and has a teenage son – from a previous relationship, who lives in Canada. He and his wife live in west London.

Because of his stutter, McHarg found it difficult to communicate in English, let alone French, in his native Canada. 'Travelling was always important to me,' he explains, 'because I learnt how people communicate without speaking the same language.'

He describes himself as 'curator/instigator', yet at first glance there is little evidence of a curatorial process. The selection of artists seems to have occurred almost at random. 'First off it was about personal contacts. I called up as many friends as I had.' McHarg is clear that his intentions were not about making a show about the latest wave of YBAs. 'That didn't interest me at all. I put a concerted effort into thinking about who was around in the living past. I think that's what's fun about Yoko being in there, John Dunbar, Colin Self – all of these people.'

He was also interested in including artists from a variety of disciplines from photography (Corinne Day, Juergen Teller, Vinca Petersen) to painting

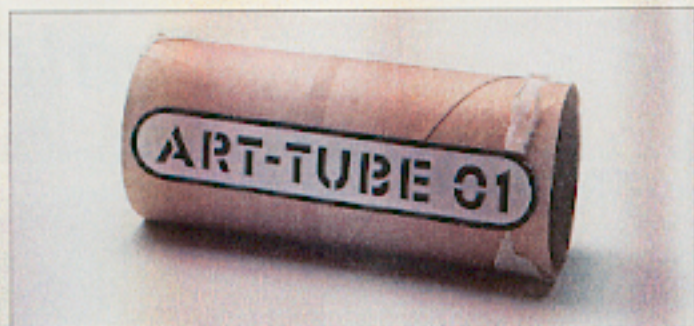
(Tarka Kings, Lucy Jones) and from conceptual art (Gavin Turk, Fiona Banner) to poetry (Tracey Sanderswood, John Cooper Clarke). Although all of the works included were made especially for the show, aside from the dimensions of the poster cases – 28cm high, 60cm in length – the artists weren't given any kind of brief. 'I just said that I was taking over a train, kicking out all the advertisers, and filling it with art, and I think everybody who participated completely loved the idea,' says McHarg.

According to the artists involved, it was McHarg's straightforward enthusiasm that gave the project its appeal. 'If it had been someone else organising the exhibition I would have been more cautious,' says Teller.

Painter and sculptor Colin Self heard about the show from his long-time friend John Dunbar, the gallery owner. 'When John told me he was doing this show I said, "You lucky so and so – what wouldn't I give to do that!" So he put a word in for me and a few weeks later I got a letter from Gord.' Self, whose work is in the Tate collection, took the opportunity with ART-TUBE to present some of his unpublished poetry, and compares the democratising effects of McHarg's project with what John Peel has done for independent music. He says, 'For so long now, art has been controlled by minorities. The people who pay for it make their artists famous...'

In addition to art, fashion and poetry, the music scene threads its way into McHarg's exhibition. In the Sixties, John Dunbar's India Gallery was backed by Paul McCartney, and it was Dunbar who suggested the ART-TUBE project to Yoko Ono. There is also a tidy little Sex Pistols connection: the poet John Cooper Clarke used to open for them; another contributor, fashion designer Vivienne Westwood, was married to their manager, Malcolm McLaren, and Jamie Reid, the artist responsible for designing their infamous album covers, has reworked an image from their 'Pretty Vacant' promotional poster for the show. Another punk hero, Clash bassist Paul Simonon, has included two paintings. 'I loved the format and was originally going to submit two nudes, but one of them was refused because there was a nipple showing.' Simonon wasn't the only artist whose work was rejected by the London Underground. Damien Hirst's first effort was also thrown out for containing profanities.

McHarg attributes his rather impressive address book to being a long-time resident of west London. Simonon and Teller say they know him from the Portobello pub scene, while Dunbar and Self met him



'Mind the Rap' by Gordon McHarg

through Jason Mayall, son of music producer John. Others, such as Fiona Banner, found out about the project through McHarg's friend and assistant curator John Spencer.

It is one thing to persuade a group of fellow artists to come and play on his train, but McHarg also managed to convince two major institutions – Bloomberg and London Underground – that they should join in the game. McHarg says that Bloomberg was the obvious choice because it already had such a high profile in arts sponsorship. In addition, the Piccadilly Line is the route to many of the arts institutions it already sponsored, including the Serpentine Gallery and the Royal Academy. 'How could you not be excited about it?' says Liz O'Sullivan, arts and events manager for London Underground. 'In our view, the London Underground is not just a conduit.' But there were logistical challenges. 'The Underground is a completely different world. There are severe fire and safety regulations, and figuring out how to keep a train together for that length of time was not easy,' she says. 'There are also very strict guidelines about what we can and cannot show.'

McHarg admits that some of the work was censored, but he accepts that as part of the nature of this particular venue. He also acknowledges that the affiliation with a sponsor can be 'controversial', but feels that this support has allowed him to escape the economic tyranny of commercial galleries. He explains, 'I think if art is going to survive it

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has got to go down different routes. Usually for a show to be successful it's all about the selling of artwork, so this was about finding a way to do a successful show without the selling angle.'

None of the artwork in ART-TUBE is available to buy, but McHarg has produced a limited edition of 2001 catalogues that are being sold for £20 each. For every catalogue printed, each artist will receive 10p. Neither McHarg nor Bloomberg will reveal how much the show cost, but considering that the number of people who will see the exhibition will be around the same number that visit Tate Modern each month, from a sponsorship point of view, it's a pretty good deal.

So aside from taking a break from the ads, what does the British public have to gain from McHarg's vision? As well as seeing new work by the well-known contributors, they will have a chance to catch up on some talented newcomers: Shez 360's slick ironic photographs, for example, or Beatrice Dillon's writings that explain the point of contemporary art. But whether you wait for the train or find yourself aboard by accident it is worth remembering that it is the first exhibition of its kind in the capital – the first time that the average commuter has been sealed up and whisked off down a dark tunnel surrounded by art.

In fact, a forerunner of the idea appeared on moving public transport in post-revolutionary Russia, when trains and riverboats were fitted out with Soviet Realist art as a form of agitprop. So it's tempting to see ART-TUBE 01 as some kind of propaganda for art, as opposed to art used for propaganda. But as McHarg says, 'We're not getting into anything deep... it's really just a bit of fun.'

Damien Hirst may have come close to describing the real point of ART-TUBE 01 when he said of the exhibition, 'It's not about transport. It's about transportation.' For Juergen Teller this might mean a skyscape, for Colin Self a poem about a swallow, for Fiona Banner it might be a piece of text describing a moment of seduction.

For McHarg, the answer is simple. 'It's a gift. It's saying to people – here, have this. That's all it's about.' ■