

# LONDON CITY NIGHTS

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## 'LUPA Fete' behind James Campbell House, 15th of June 2013

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From my first visit, one thing that always impressed me about LUPA is the willingness to engage with the local community. It's arguable that they don't have much of a choice; running a monthly (and occasionally pretty noisy) performance art event out of a garage surrounded by people's flats is the kind of thing that gets the council cracking down on you in a hurry. But I've never sensed that LUPA's community ties are an obligation; this engagement both a source of pride and something that strengthens the work on display. The world of performance art can seem impossibly insular at times; the same hundred or so artists performing almost exclusively to each other in a mutually congratulatory circlejerk.

This isn't an intrinsically bad thing, but it leaves the performances in danger of disappearing up their own arses; commenting upon their own rarefied social circle about the most obscure concerns, the whole thing impregnably alien to an outsider. I think LUPA is designed to break away from this. The simple act of holding these performances in a communal, public space sets up an accessibility that you just don't get when you're working in a gallery or warehouse somewhere.

This Saturday was both the final LUPA event and the most overt merging of the community and art world. While a regular LUPA is an hour long and features maybe 4 or 5 artists, there were about fifty here, the event taking place over 7 hours over multiple locations around the car park. There were cakes. There was a recycling information point. There were t-shirts on sale. A few people were selling arts and crafts. Jo Brand was cutting the ribbon and making a speech. It felt like kind of a big deal.

But no matter how much planning you throw into something, you can't plan for the weather. After a sunny morning I was optimistic about the day, wondering whether I'd even need a jacket or not. By 2pm I was shivering under a tree trying my best not to get soaked through. The rain was viciously beating down and though everyone was putting a brave face on, it was clearly not the summer extravaganza that the LUPA organisers had imagined. Then again, if you're being pragmatic, if you're holding an outdoor event in London, whatever month of the year it is, expect rain.

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Jo Brand opening the fete.

I tried to put the best face on it I could, and Jo Brand's appearance brightened up the day. She gave a great speech, as did Sonia Begum, Deputy Youth Mayor for Tower Hamlets. Even though the crowd as getting a bit shivery and wet, and even though the ribbon was slightly wet there was a definite sense of occasion when she cut it.

After that the artists began their performances. The first on the bill was Matthew Hawthorn, performing inside the LUPA garage. He began his performance by laying out 8 sheets of paper and writing something on them in pen. After he'd done this he started folding them into paper boats. It was at this point I moved off for a look at some of the other stuff going on. Perhaps judging the piece this soon into it was a little unfair, but as I couldn't see what he'd written down and as the construction of each paper boat took a minute or two, I couldn't be bothered to wait around to find out what was going to happen. The piece also demonstrated one of the dangers of performing in a public space: hecklers.



Matthew Hawthorn

If you do a performance like this in a gallery, the weight of the institution pressing down on the audience tends to suppress any heckling. Not here. As Hawthorn methodically folded his boats, theatrical moans came from within the crowd. "*You're sending us to sleep mate!*", "*Is this your first day on the job?*" and (possibly the most dismissive) loud yawning. I felt a little bad for Hawthorn, getting heckled while doing something that I assume is personally significant can't be much fun. But to be honest the heckler was pretty accurate in his critique, it *was* pretty dull. Intrusions onto performances like this go a long way to puncturing the sense of self-importance that builds up around these things, it's useful to have people around who aren't afraid to call a spade a shovel - it adds a nice frisson of danger.

After I'd wandered away from this I went for a look around, eventually finding myself chatting with SPV Ltd, who were running a shoe cleaning service. This was a fantastic piece of working satire, poking fun at contracts written in legalese, corporate jargon and the language of business. Essentially it was taking one of the simplest possible businesses; shoe shining,

- Last Vegas ★★
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  - Nebraska ★★★★★
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  - Paranormal Activity: The Marked Ones ★★
  - The Railway Man ★★★
  - Saving Mr Banks ★
  - The Secret Life of Walter Mitty ★★★
  - Vendetta No Stars
- 
-



and tangling it up in the most Byzantine contractual arrangements that they could. So, to start you have to sign a lengthy disclaimer that states things like:

*"I, in my own behalf, acknowledge and agree that such participation subjects Visitor/Client to the possibility of damage to shoes or garments (minimal, serious, catastrophic and/or written off) and that I, in my own behalf release and hold harmless Releasees in the exercises of this authority. I further acknowledge and understand that I will be responsible for any and all laundry and related bills that may be incurred and for any and all accidental stains, mishaps or damage to shoes and clothing that Visitor/Client may sustain during the even and while travelling to and from the Tax Haven for the Event whether the Visitor/Client participates in the shoe cleaning activity or not."*

After popping your signature in numerous places on this 3 page form you're given a ticket and invited to peruse their business plan for franchising. This thick document went into impossibly complex detail about exactly how to set up your own shoeshining operation, down to the equipment, training, legal issues and so on.



SPV Ltd

After this I was ushered into a gazebo clad in thick black plastic. It was dark and warm inside and smelt strongly of parsnips. Three women were inside with a huge variety of shoe-cleaning tools, all stuck to the end of broom handles to prevent them having to bend down too much. The three peppered me with questions about my shoes; what were they made of; where did I get them; what kind of buffing would I like; what kind of polish; would I like a freshening? The experience felt a little like an interrogation, though the questions were delivered in such a perfunctory way so as to depersonalise them. It's the same kind of feeling you sometimes sense when going for a haircut, the barber talking just to fill the empty space. Adding to this was all the jargon they'd use, a bundle of torches tied together was a 'multilight' and so on.

It's extremely satisfying to experience something that functions both practically and satirically. I walked out of that tent happy, intrigued, amused and, perhaps most importantly, with impeccably buffed, shiny and spotless shoes. Could a person ask for more?

With my mood buoyed and my shoes clean, I was feeling pretty good, although the intermittent rain continued to be a worry. Moving over the garage I realised that Ipek Köprülü had started her piece. She was wearing a full body flesh-toned body stocking, with numerous bald Barbie doll heads attached to her face. I have no idea what it was intended to signify, but she looked cool as all hell and that's probably the most important thing.





Ipek Köprülü

Standing within the garage she was handed helium balloons that gently bounced off the roof as she stood there impassively. The fleshy bodystocking and dolls heads nicely erased any sense of personal identity and the many eyes staring out from her head reminding me of some of the bonkers biblical descriptions of angels with multiple heads and eyes that were so intensely screwed up that they burn out the eyes of anyone that sees them.

No-one's eyes were in danger of getting fried, but Ipek cut an impressive figure nonetheless. She left the garage, handing the balloons to happy children, and posing around the area. There was a brilliant contrast between the traditional, parochial village fete and the bizarro, provocatively religious deity making her way through the crowd. Interestingly the children seemed to dig it with no problems, once again proving that children are capable of dealing with some pretty far-out shit. Their parents on the other hand did the occasional double-take, and I overheard the occasional grumble about the unexpected injection of weirdness into this June Saturday. This grumbling is the cream on my croissant, quite frankly I get off on the friction when people get confronted by something too odd to easily categorise.



Cluster Bomb Collective's car

After a brief bit of sun the sky began to bruise once more and it was around then that Cluster Bomb Collective invited me into their chicken-wire car. This piece echoed their earlier LUPA performance: an exploration of the totemic significance of the car. I sat in the rear seat, and soon, around me people began contortions and movements of various kinds. To my left a



bearded man smeared himself with mud, to my left a girl rolled about on top of a tyre, moving around was someone struggling with a map of London, in front was someone standing on their head supported by tyres, behind me was a woman wrapped up in a fence struggling futilely while a high-priestess character in a wig and camouflage jacket propped her foot upon her.



Sebastian Hau-Walker of Cluster Bomb Collective hurling a map into the air.

Sitting in the centre of all this was myself and four others, watching from inside this fragile construction. I was told beforehand that the car they'd made was a quick inspiration as they couldn't get a real car in time. I don't think this piece would have been half as good if they'd used a real car. There was a vulnerability to what they'd made; you'd feel safe and secure inside a real car, watching everything muffled through the protective windows. Also, we wouldn't have gotten the acrid fumes drifting through the performance space.



A man smeared with mud.

This was a happy bit of serendipity. Next to this performance a man was selling hot wraps, his equipment powered by a beaten-up and stuttering 2-stroke engine. The thing was pumping out hot noxious gas into the air, filling the performance space with exhaust fumes. I felt my stomach turn a little bit, my head eventually beginning to throb from the carbon monoxide in the air. In most circumstances this would be deeply unpleasant, but here, surrounded by what I quickly began to think of as a car worshipping feral tribe, it became an industrial incense. The lightheadedness caused by the slight oxygen deprivation made the woman wrapped up in a fence reciting J.G. Ballard's *Concrete Island* seem that much more surreal.





Admittedly this would probably have pretty surreal without the fumes.

The whole thing felt like a **cargo cult**. A remote group of post-apocalyptic survivors that had read about the fetishistic *idea* of a car in a charred Ballard book and tried to translate the concept to reality. Everything was skewed, decontextualised, a society with all of the ingredients of what a car symbolically means, but zero technical knowledge as to how it might work. As I sat in an anoxic daze with two lungs full of poison I reflected how satisfying it was. Then I thought I might puke a little, so I staggered away.

As I cleared my head of exhaust fumes the heavens opened. It was one of those furious showers that it's impossible to ignore, the water furiously chucking down from the heavens. I saw performance artists scuttling left and right into shelter. I decided to call it quits for a bit and head up to the dance music festival Found up in Haggerston Park where I figured they'd have giant marquees where I could shelter for a bit.

A few hours later, my ears ringing with pounding techno music, I returned. Thankfully, in the meantime the sun had come out and the evening was shaping up to look a lot more pleasant than the rest of the day. The first person I saw when I got back was Aaron Williamson. He opened a suitcase that initially seemed full of junk of both the literal and food varieties. To the delight of some (apparently hungry) children he began to perform pieces involving these.





His performance consisted of the juxtaposition between DIY and gardening apparatus and food. It looked a bit like a warped magic act, or perhaps if a hobo was trying to fake it as a science teacher. Interestingly, very few of the demonstrations he tried to do actually worked right. For example, he'd pick up a caulking gun and try to explode a packet of crisps. You expect there to be a sudden kaboom with bits of crisp flying everywhere. This didn't happen, either packets of crisps are made of stern stuff these days or the caulking gun wasn't being designed for this function. This carried on throughout the act, things resolutely refusing to behave as it was supposed to.

Williamson stayed silent throughout and this eventually felt a bit clowny and farcical. He kept up a perfect Buster Keaton deadpan throughout, even as stuff didn't work. That he was so ready to involve the children in the performance meant that he came across as a pretty affable and friendly guy, someone able to laugh at himself even as things go wrong. The only thing is, funny as the performance was, I found it difficult to decipher any clear message. Transforming trashy, junk food into a piece of art is interesting, but was slightly undermined by the fact that the food refused to co-operate. Despite all that it was fun to watch, at times tense, unpretentious and charmingly performed.



I think this is Simon Raven.

I took five after this, but returned to the sounds of screaming from the garage. A man was trapped under the door, yelling over and over again in pain as the door squeezed his body against the ground. As performances go it was a pretty good one, the image of an artist swallowed up and spat out by the garage is pretty potent, especially considering it was the last but one thing that was ever going to come out of there.

But the last performance, appropriately enough performed by one of the main brains behind LUPA, Kate Mahony, was the perfect end to the day. We were all staring at the garage, wondering what was going to come out when we heard a commotion from around the corner. A car dragging a trailer appeared, full of balloons, colourful windmills and big letter with fairy lights on top of them. Wonder Woman was sat regally on top. As it got closer we could tell they were yelling "*GO HOME!*" loudly at us. Then came the water balloons.



Bye bye!

As the capper to the fete, getting soaked seemed slightly cruel - especially as the sun had just about dried me out. Fortunately I managed to avoid getting hit, and as the occasional balloon failed to burst people began throwing them back. I picked up and as my arm arced through the air everything suddenly felt right. I released it at exactly the right moment, and the balloon flew in a perfect parabola, beaming someone right on their helmeted head. Bam! Not exactly the most altruistic bit of pleasure I've ever experienced, but certainly satisfying.

With some effort the trailer was wheeled into the garage and the door closed, I guess officially marking the end of LUPA. I'm going to miss it like hell. It's brightened up my days ever since I started going just over a year ago and it's going to leave a cultural hole in my life that has to be filled pretty quickly or I'm going to suffer withdrawal symptoms.

As I said at the start of this article (which is getting perhaps a bit too lengthy as it), perhaps the best part of LUPA is that it drags a kind of art that's in real danger of becoming bourgeois, insular and utterly po-faced into the light, putting a subtle pressure on the artists to stay relevant and accessible. It's taught me a hell of lot and given my brain one hell of a work out. So LUPA is dead. But I know its next reincarnation will be as vibrant, dynamic and daring as what came before.

*Thanks to all those that contributed to the LUPA fete, and apologies to those whose performances I missed, specifically Spike Mclarrity, Joey Ryken, No Collective, Annabelle Stapleton-Crittenden and especially Silvia Ziraneek.*





I just like this photo.

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