

FROM *THE GREATEST DISTANCE* TO *COLLECTIVE BREATH*:

A Conversation with Neville Gabie

NEVILLE GABIE AND KEREN ZAIONTZ

Keren Zaiontz: Between 2010–2012, you were artist-in-residence during the construction of the Olympic Park in east London. This arts council funded residency resulted in *Great Lengths 2012*—a series of medium-specific works linked to the history of the Park and the workforce hired to redevelop the site into a venue for the London 2012 Games. Many works such as *Freeze Frame* (2012), published as a feature in *Metro*, which circulates 1.3 million copies across the UK daily, attempted to reach as wide an audience as possible. In other cases, the works resembled something much closer to experiments that attempted to make sense of the sheer size and scale of the build. Can you talk about the nature of some of these works and what led you to use your body as a site of artistic production in the Olympic Park?

Neville Gabie: When I reflect back on the residency, the Arts and Culture Strategy Team—the group that brought public art and artists like myself to the Park—prioritized visibility. The Park surrounds a huge part of East London, so the residency was an attempt to try and give visibility to the construction happening inside to a wider audience. For me, that meant creating a conversation about what had happened in the Park—its history, how it functioned, who the people were currently at work on the construction site, and what their relationship was to that place and that context. The building of the venues in the Park was a collective effort. With 10,000 staff on site, that collectivity often translated into a mass invisibility of hi-visibility jackets and hard hats. And yet, individually, each worker had quite interesting stories. That dualism continues to interest me—how the work of a collective can reveal something of the individual. As it transpired, it seemed to make more sense to do a number of works, to approach the site through a number of different projects, rather than create one specific piece. That’s why there are multiple approaches to the work.

KZ: Among those projects is your documentary film *Twelve Seventy* about Semra Yusuf.

NG: *Twelve Seventy* film came out of my time on the bus in the Olympic Park. The first time I went into the Park, and found that there were 30 bus drivers working full time, I was quite surprised. In a way, when you think about the sheer size of the Park and the number of construction workers who were there everyday, it’s obvious that you would need bus drivers, but I never made that leap. Because I didn’t know the site at all, I just sat on the bus and went on the different routes. I sat there and looked out the window to give myself a sense of what was inside those blue hoardings.



FIG. 1 *Metro* newspaper feature (25 January 2012) of Neville Gabie’s *Freeze Frame*. The photo is an adaptation of Georges Seurat’s *Bathers at Asnières* (1884) with workers from the Olympic Park.



FIG. 2 and FIG. 3 Film stills of East London resident Semra Yusuf swimming 1,270 metres in the Olympic Pool one year before the 2012 Summer Games. (Today, the pool is called the London Aquatics Centre). Gabie used the footage to make the documentary films *Twelve Seventy* (2011) and *Semra* (2015).

KZ: I see how the bus would have allowed for a chance to socialize with different workers on the site.

NG: Yes, it became a place where I gradually started speaking to people, and would chat to a bus driver or talk to other staff going to different venues. The bus was the very beginning of my experience in the Olympic park, and it was there that I first spoke to Sam, Semra Yusuf. Semra was trained to be a bus driver through an apprenticeship scheme at the Olympic Park. In a way, the placement gave her independence, freedom, a job. To learn that she lived in the East End, was from a migrant community, she seemed to encapsulate so many of the stories that I eventually wanted to share with audiences about the bus drivers. The more we spoke, the more I thought of the drivers in the Olympic Park as a cohort. My first thoughts were to do something about all the bus drivers, rather than specifically Sam. But the more I spoke to Sam, the more I got to know her, the more I wanted to build *Twelve Seventy* around her. In the end, I focused on Sam's stories and then widened it out to include some of the other bus drivers and activities going on in the Park.

KZ: *Twelve Seventy* shows that Sam's desire to live a self-determined life is indivisible from her love of swimming.

NG: To discover that Sam was so obsessed with swimming, had such a passion for it—under different circumstances she could have been an elite athlete in her own right. I had this idea to see if Sam could swim the length of her bus route in the Olympic Park Aquatics Centre. We measured the distance that she drove every day from the south entrance of the Olympic Park to the construction site and the Aquatics Centre. We used that measurement, and the time it took her to swim that length as the duration and defining principle of *Twelve Seventy*. I've said to you before, it was never a film I was particularly happy with when I finished it. In many ways, I felt it was compromised by the necessity of having it to be delivered when the Olympic Park was still being built, when it was still an active site. There simply was not much time to allow the whole idea and material to mature. I tried to do too much in it. I also worked with a filmmaker and a director,



FIG. 4 and FIG. 5 Film stills from Gabie's documentary of Semra Yusuf, *Semra* (2015).

who although very good, never quite saw what we were doing in the same light. *Twelve Seventy* tells a story of a particular moment in time, but it doesn't tell the story that I thought was there.

KZ: Your new film, *Semra* (2015), is a real departure from *Twelve Seventy* even as it uses the same stock footage from the Aquatics Centre. Why did you want to return to Yusuf's story after your residency?

NG: During my residency in the Olympic Park, I got to know Semra quite well. There was something about the way she talked about swimming, the way swimming had been a kind of regenerative process for her, a source of strength to liberate her from being trapped in a very difficult marriage. Swimming helped drive her on, gave her a sense of who she was as an individual. When she had come to the UK as a thirteen-year old girl, she didn't speak English, she did not know the culture, and the family that had raised her was now far away in Cypress. That whole sense of being taken from one place and put into another, and trying to work out your own relationship with this different landscape and environment, resonated with me in terms of my own past. Without wanting to do anything explicitly autobiographical, I was quite keen to document her story. The Olympics was now three years behind me. I didn't need to justify the work, or Semra, or anything in relation to the Games. There was no one I needed to answer to. It could just be a film about Semra. That was really liberating. I think when you have an expectation of a product that has to come out very quickly, and there's an expectation of a client, it is much harder to free yourself of those chains. Now that that was gone it felt like an appropriate moment to make the film.

KZ: With the exception of a handful of family photos, the visual language of *Semra* is almost entirely composed of Yusuf's laps in the Aquatics Centre.

NG: It is a much harder film to watch in some ways than *Twelve Seventy*. Her story is quite difficult and intense. And there's a kind of loneliness about it too. It's just Semra swimming like a

metronome backwards and forwards in this vast space. There was something really determined about the way in which she jumped in the pool and just swam. I wanted to make a film in which you felt you were doing all those strokes with her, you felt the distance of that swim. I wanted the focus to be about her swim, what she might be thinking, going through, imagining, while she was doing it.

KZ: *Semra* was made three years after the London Summer Games, which by mega-event standards, feels like the distant past when one considers how quickly global attention shifts to next Olympic cycle. Much closer of the actual time of London 2012, and your Olympic Park residency, *Great Lengths 2012*, was your self-funded residency, *The Greatest Distance*. Can you discuss why you needed to embark on “the greatest distance” from the Olympic Park and Olympic Games?

NG: The heavy handedness of Olympic organizations like the Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA) was jarring. The residency was itself a highly politicized moment, so in some ways you could say it was, well, if not compromised, than certainly tested by the political environment in which I was working. As I said earlier, the commission was meant to give visibility to what was happening inside the Park to audiences outside. However, within the context of the Olympics, it was almost impossible to ignore the wider feedback that was happening in and around the Olympics at that time. I think in part because we were in a deep economic recession—and for all the complex reasons that the build of the Park had on communities in East London—I encountered a cross section of opinion about the Olympics which spread from highly enthusiastic to incredibly skeptical. I felt that if I was going to do something that had some integrity in terms of being an artist-in-residence that I couldn’t ignore all these ideas and emotions that were washing around the Games.

I was also very well aware that being commissioned by the ODA, I had put myself in a position where I was incredibly vulnerable and criticized by a lot of other artists who were seen as outside of that system. I was seen as part of this machine, and to some extent, I was, inevitably. But once I finished that residency, it became increasingly important for me to reflect that wider set of critical opinions about the Games. That’s why I wanted to do the project and why I wanted to do it in a way that was entirely self-funded. It needed to be something that wasn’t indebted to any organization. I also didn’t want to set an agenda in advance about what the work was going to be. I simply wanted to open a space for critical debate around the London Olympic Games. And that’s why I invited anybody to respond to my request for “the greatest distance.”

KZ: Can you discuss your rationale for establishing an arms-length jury for *The Greatest Distance*?

NG: I wanted to remove myself from the process of defining what the greatest possible distance was by setting up a panel that could reflect a diversity of opinions around the one hundred plus proposals. I invited critic and writer David Lillington; writer Sarah Butler; artist and former musician Bill Drummond; gallery owner Danielle Arnaud who hosted the project and subsequent exhibition in London (2013); Jason Wood who works quite a lot with English Heritage in the National trust, really looking at sports; and curator Sam Wilkinson who was also the curator of my Olympic Park residency. I was quite careful about choosing a panel that crossed a spectrum



FIG. 6 and FIG. 7 Neville Gabie, *The Greatest Possible Distance* (2012). The photos show Gabie en route from Stratford, in East London, to Paris, where he observed the activities in Parc Martin Luther King. Photo Credits: Tobias Gabie.

of opinion and I left them to debate and choose the final proposal. I was an observer, recording their discussions, and willing to take up the challenge of whichever proposal they selected. At that point, I wanted to place myself outside the equation. They shortlisted four initially; from that four it went down to the one final choice.

KZ: What sorts of proposals and debates surfaced in the selection process of *The Greatest Possible Distance*?

NG: The debates and proposals varied and, of course, included the greatest physical distance from the Games—one proposal put me somewhere in the Southern ocean, while another had me observing the world from space using a kind of NASA link. A lot, or quite a number, I seem to remember, were actually much more mindful of socio-economic distances. Some people discussed living beside the Olympic Park but feeling economically or culturally cut off from what was happening as part of the Olympics. A number of people talked about workers producing sports kits in Malaysia or other parts of Southeast Asia—their “distant” working lives supplied the local merchandise that allowed us to appropriately cheer on the athletes. Other people talked about staff working on the Olympic Park, whether in a McDonald’s canteen or elsewhere, simply serving out food—there physically but in many ways removed. The range of proposals stretched from being within the Park, physically, but removed from all modes of participation and belonging, to being at the opposite ends of the world. And that was really the basis for a lot of the discussion.

KZ: Were you concerned about leaving the decision of what constituted the “greatest distance” in the hands of other people?

NG: I saw my role as being a conduit for other people to investigate someone else’s thoughts. I didn’t want to be much more than, literally, a conduit for that. Obviously, ultimately it becomes an artwork. It’s a decision making that I took on board once the proposal was there, but I wanted to simply be a vehicle to explore someone else’s issue or concern. I think that there is an interesting place for an artist as a kind of conduit for exploring wider issues. Engaging in that process with an audience is something that really appeals to me.

KZ: What proposal did the committee select and where did that take you?

NG: The selected proposal was for me to go to Batignolles in the 17th arrondissement of Paris, which would have hosted the Olympic Games had Paris won the bid. It was quite specific. I had to walk from the Olympic Park in Stratford to St. Pancras, catch the Eurostar to Gare du Nord, walk from Gare du Nord to Batignolles, and speak to people en route. What was really interesting about the proposal was that the physical distance wasn’t huge—London to Paris. The author of the proposal, Martin Lewis, wrote that the decision to award the Olympics to London rather than Paris hung on a mere three votes. The result, in terms of what happened to those two cities, and the fabric of those urban environments, was huge. He was really curious about how Paris had dealt with not winning the Olympic bid. It’s also worth mentioning that the two locations, both Batignolles and East London, historically followed almost identical trajectories. Both were very

central to the cities, both were ex-industrial sites, both found themselves in economically disenfranchised locations within their cities. There were lots of parallels between these two host city sites, and yet those three votes meant vastly different things. We don’t even know who those three people were that voted differently. Or even, indeed, who that panel of the Olympic committee was that voted. But, it’s on such fine margins that cities can form in different trajectories.

KZ: By plying open a discussion around what constitutes the “greatest distance,” here determined by a handful of votes, your project revealed the arbitrary nature of mega-events. And then you yourself embarked on that “greatest distance,” taking it from a space of selection and discussion to marking out the journey with your own body.

NG: Absolutely, it was important to do that. I certainly would never have thought of going to Paris myself and it showed two very different approaches to reinventing our urban landscapes. In London, the Olympics were a top down experience of the Park being boarded off, and huge venues built at enormous expense. Motivated in part to justify the billions of pounds in infrastructure costs, Olympic and government bodies produced endless rhetoric about how the Games were built for the people of East London. It was pitched as the “people’s Park,” when actually, the real experience of the Olympics was exclusivity, not inclusivity. Today, more than half of the Park buildings have been sold to foreign investors, not local people, and the majority of local people cannot afford to live there. Politically there is something very troubling about the Olympics, which still upsets me. Paris, by comparison, did almost the opposite. They built Martin Luther Park, a vibrant public park full of people and around the edges of the park they built low cost and affordable housing. Theirs was almost a bottom-up approach to reinventing an urban landscape. In my three hours in Paris, which coincided with the London Opening Ceremony, I watched people engaging in all sorts of sports, playing football, skateboarding, table tennis, and tai chi. It was a park full of activity, the kind of activity we talked all about in London, but the reality of it was in Batignolles.

KZ: Following *The Greatest Distance*, you shifted to the cross-disciplinary surroundings of the Cabot Institute at Bristol University and produced *Experiments in Black and White* (2012-2013). This was a series focused around four core materials: ice, chalk, oil, and air. Can you discuss what drew you to these specific materials and how you chose to work with them?

NG: It was a curious time for me because I had not spent a great deal of time within the context of a university, and certainly not amongst scientists and academics. For quite awhile, I struggled to find a place within that environment. Lots of the research was focused on climate change, energy, and energy production, and inevitably, the use of fossil fuels. When I began I started by asking a number of people what constituted the gravitational centre of their practice or research. Based on that, I spent quite a bit of time in conversation with a number of different researchers. I asked each of them to give me an image, a book, something that they felt represented their practice. The conversations and materials led me to begin working with crude oil and chalk, and even with ice to some extent. I worked quite a lot with scientists researching fossil fuels. I became fascinated by chalk because it is an organic material that is millions of years old. We had four



FIG. 8. FIG. 9 FIG 10. Film stills from *Experiments in Black and White*. Gabie is pictured here in Karoo, South Africa (2014), performing a durational experiment with a block of ice.

discussion groups around earth, air, fire, and water. It was in the discussions around air that I began to work with some scientists who were looking into air quality, and air pollution. Interestingly, just as scientists worked in their labs, I found myself working back in the studio for the first time in years. I was back in a very private space, working with these materials. It was a return to a space which I had not occupied in a long time.

KZ: What kind of things were you doing in the studio in connection to the *Experiments* project?

NG: A lot of pouring of oil. Crude oil, I mean. We talked about it an awful lot at Bristol University, but when I wanted to get to see any, or feel it, or smell it, it was an almost impossible to do. We fill our cars with petrol, but I don't think I had seen any crude oil. I went to the labs to see if I could find some, but they work with tiny amounts in test tubes. It was a slightly frustrating experience. I really wanted to feel it, to touch it, to get a visceral sense of what it was like as an actual material. That's why I wanted to get a large quantity of it, and literally play with it in the context of my studio. I did that with most of the materials with which I worked. Even with the ice, I began trying something out in the studio, though ultimately the work was made in South Africa.

KZ: You have published a foldout for this special issue of *PUBLIC*. Can you describe what it is viewers are looking at and how it is connected the *Experiments* series?

NG: That poster is part of my commission as visual artist for the 2014 WOMAD Festival—a four day music festival in Charlton Park, Wiltshire, with over 30,000 people in attendance. In addition to screening the experiments I had undertaken with crude oil, chalk, and ice (and recruiting participants in daily performance works with large pieces of chalk), I wanted to do a piece of work which engaged with that audience—a very short period of time, very intense, so much of it—the whole festival—was around sound, and music, and breath, effectively. I turned to those conversations during my residency in Bristol at the Cabot Institute about air and breath. One time, an academic from the History department had brought her flute, and talked about playing this musical instrument as being part of her body. She described a column of air that started in the pit of her stomach, rising through her body, ending at the tip of the instrument. I thought that was a very beautiful visual metaphor. It was that combination of conversations about breath and sound,



FIG. 11 *Experiments in Black and White* (2014). The *Collective Breath* tent at the WOMAD Festival, Charlton Par, UK. Gabie and his team collected and transferred the breath of 1,111 festivalgoers into a pressurized container.

something that starts within your body and is externalized, and conversations about air quality and air pollution that led me to want to do *Collective Breath*. We had 1,111 specially made three metre sealable bags and we collected the breath of 1,111 people to release a breath in each of these bags. That collective breath was then transferred to a single high-pressure gas cylinder.

KZ: How did you undertake the task of collection?

NG: It was quite a process. I had a team of about twelve young art enthusiasts that were all under 18, an arts collective called MOULD, helping me. When we collected the breath we asked participants to write down where they would like to see their air released. So, in addition to having their oxygen, we had a list, which forms that foldout of 1,111 suggestions of collective breath release. We also collected people's addresses so when the work was completed and online, every contributor received a postcard with an image of the breath being released and a link to the project website. Effectively, it served as a mini private artwork. We posted that to all 1,111 individuals who contributed something.

KZ: Once everything was collected, how did you assess the location proposals?

NG: The curators for the project, Tammy Bedford and Jeni Walwin, and I went through all the suggestions and shortlisted three, which we were very keen to explore. Reading through the list,

you are made aware of how the suggestions become a document of a particular moment in time. In 2014, there was an intense air and ground offensive by Israeli Defense Forces in the Gaza Strip, a lot of the references in the list are about the Gaza war. A lot of other references are to Syria. It's interesting how even within a year it becomes quite tied to a specific moment in time. In the end our first choice became impossible to deliver because the governmental authorities in the UK first granted and then withdrew their permission without providing a reason. Having done all the workshops at the Cabot Institute, and given my history of having worked with those scientists at Bristol University, we chose to go with contributor Anita's suggestion of the Mace Head Atmospheric Research Station in Ireland.

KZ: Can you talk more about your experience at Mace Head and why it was significant to release the breath at this observatory?

NG: It's one of the six key air quality monitoring stations in the world. It's been monitoring air for about thirty years. Originally, they took a world map and placed the key locations for monitoring air quality and Carna, County Galway was picked because it's on the west coast of Ireland, almost the most westerly edge of Europe. Researchers can monitor air quality as the air comes in across the Atlantic from America. More importantly, if the air shifts and is coming from Europe going out across the Atlantic they can measure the amount of pollution that's moving from Europe into that space. It's been a really important station for looking at pollutants in the atmosphere. Given that context, it seemed an interesting place to go and do something which drew attention to our breath, to the thing that gives us life, effectively. That was why it was also one of the places we were keen to think about as a release location.

KZ: On the day you released the breath at Mace Head, you ascended to the top of a ladder activated what looks like a homemade instrument, which lets out this really peculiar sound.

NG: I built this very, very strange instrument which connected to this tank of breath. The idea was that this collective breath was going to be played through this instrument and play a sound at a suggested location. When we were doing it, I imagined the breath of 1,111 people released through this instrument to last for about ten or 15 minutes. I opened the tank, released the breath, and it played for about 50 minutes. It was much longer than I anticipated, but it was really interesting standing at that location with that sound for that period of time, imagining all those individuals who had given me their breath over those four days, and that breath now being released over this seascape. It was quite a powerful experience to be there and to do it. To contemplate those suggestions people had made and to imagine the faces and the names of the people who participated in this event.

KZ: What does the collective breath of over 1,111 people sound like?

NG: Well, it sounds very much like a kind of a foghorn. A single note played over the ocean. It's quite a deep note; it sounds very plaintive.

KZ: For me, the *Collective Breath* project (including the poster for *PUBLIC*) shares priorities with the *Freeze Frame* photo distributed to *Metro* readers. Sites like the Olympic Park and WOMAD are platforms to capture and record collective action, but also repurpose that action into meditations on changing urban landscapes or the air we breathe.

NG: I'm interested in finding ways to make work which can be disseminated widely, to a diverse audience, where the value is in the work rather than in the art object. For me, making art—it's about dialogue, it's about exchange, it's about thinking through new ways of dealing with our lives. I really struggle with the idea of the art object—that value attached to it as a thing—I don't respect that. I don't respect it as a way of making art because it risks negating the world around us. I like making work where, in a sense, you can share it, you can give it away, you can pass it on, it can become part of (I hope) a debate or a dialogue. Creating a record of *Collective Breath* that can be disseminated far from WOMAD or Mace Head suits my ethos as an artist.



FIG. 12 *Experiments in Black and White* (2014). The *Collective Breath* instrument at Mace Head Atmospheric Research Station, Ireland.