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Unfallen Helsinki – text (performed 19 February 2004)

Unfallen title on laptop, Camera on map, close

Introduction

831 kilometres

[photocopy of map under video zoomed in close]

Good evening everyone and welcome.

I want to start this evening's performance with a little warning. I don't speak Swedish. Or Finnish. If you expected to come to a play in either of those languages, I'm sorry but that's not what you're going to get. Don't worry though - It's not you who is in the wrong place, but me.

I can't really tell you where I belong but I started out coming from 1816 km in that direction but I now live 1125 km in that direction.

This isn't a show in the normal sense of the word. Although I call it 'Unfallen' it is never the same twice and that is because I'm never in the same place twice.

I am very happy to stand in front of you this evening. I a little to the North, facing south and you over there to the South, facing north. I'd like to first of all thank you all for making plans to come here this evening and of putting them into practise. I'd also like to thank this ceiling for staying above us.

I understand this ceiling has behaved itself for the last 141 years. Lets hope it continues to do so.

I knew I was going to come to Helsinki to talk to you on Friday 19 December, exactly two months ago. This is how far I've travelled since then:

[Chart]

I finally arrived in Helsinki 4 days ago and since then I have walked 27.5 kilometres of it's streets, looking for my London.

I didn't know who you were then, of course, but I was thinking about you, sitting 1125 km over there, trying to imagine my stories written over Helsinki, said in Helsinki, stories of lampposts, fish fingers and fires, stories of everyday plans and everyday mishaps, of journeys that start out as one thing and turn into another of cities that resist marking and of flesh that marks very easily.

You could say that I started out on my journey here this evening on that afternoon two months ago and that in a way, if that ceiling falls on us tonight, we shall all have been travelling to meet each other all our lives.

I want you to imagine a network of lines tracing the route of the journeys of everyone in this room. This intricate web starts, like family trees, in all sorts of places but all of those lines end now, here, in the Swedish Theatre in Helsinki at 19:30 on 19 February 2004.

I'm going to tell you about some of what happened to me on my route to here and now.

When I first thought about this piece and I was talking to you in Berlin, where I live at the moment and you were far away, and we hadn't arrived yet in this room and I hadn't even finished this lecture, I was wondering what sort of a thing I was coming to here and I know you were too. And I was also wondering why I was being called a vaccinator, since I'm not sure I want to protect you from anything. And I decided that maybe I was a bit like an injection, a bit unpleasant at first but for some a good thing and for others with a very certain sensibility indeed, perhaps even a pleasure.

Since Monday I have been hovering around the fringes of you all, a bit on the outside, not really knowing if I wanted to know too much about you before I talked to you and already knowing too much from your biographies in the pack that I was given on arriving – enough to be nervous,.

And so we have established much already, I'm that strange outsider who only turns up at mealtimes, we have all travelled to get here, and I'm going to talk about some things that happened to me in London but I need to remind you about one last thing before we set out.

[explain earth's rotation]

As all of you know, we are sitting on a spinning rock. If you imagine, we are sitting quite near the pole, so we don't have to spin quite as far as the people at the equator.

In the next hour, to be precise, we are going to spin 831 km nearer morning.

We should congratulate ourselves that we have come so far so quickly but we do have a long way to go, by the time I have finished, we will have travelled about 831 km in that direction (East) We should get going.

[Chapter 1 title accident on laptop]

1 Unfallen

Title Accident

The title of this lecture is an accident. I first called the piece 'Unfall'. This is the German word for Accident. Perhaps I was tempting fate. When I wrote an email with the title to my English-speaking friend she sent me one back saying 'Unfallen' is a marvellous title. My first instinct was to try and claw back the original title from the jaws of the misunderstanding but I remembered that I was being given an opportunity. When I realised this it was clear to me that Unfallen is a much better title: it stands half way between the two languages. You can kind of say un-fallen in English and it even exists in larger dictionaries but it still feels slightly uncomfortable in both English and German, kind of half making sense, whereas Unfall is a proper German word and a nonsensical English word.

[Next slide – Chapter 1, Taxi drivers brains]

Taxi Driver's Brains

I am learning German as I learn my way through a new city. Berlin, for me, is relatively empty of my own personal associations, my 'accidents' if you like, and my head is full of the associations and accidents from London.

This means that I meet streets and words in a way I can never meet English words and London streets. Commonplace words that strike me as similar, a native speaker might never put together because they are met in such different circumstances, with different associations.

I am also struck with how one learns about a city – how, especially in a city with an underground system, you take a trip to a new area, pop up, walk around and return to the tube stop or a neighbouring one. You have these little islands of knowledge. It may be years later that you finally re-visit somewhere you'd long forgotten about and realise in that kaleidoscopic moment, that you've finally 'joined up' this area into your more extensive knowledge of that city and you can 'place' it.

[Illustration of brain on laptop]

I came across some research the other month, conducted by Dr Eleanor Maguire and others at the University of London. In her paper, 'Navigation-related structural change in the hippocampi of taxi drivers', she tells of how she measured this primitive area of the brain which is thought to be connected with spatial navigation in London taxi drivers... explain the knowledge...

It seems, then, that when you learn about a city, your brain grows and I like to think about neurons reaching out across space, joining up and forming new connections as I form them in real time across a city when I finally join up the areas between underground stations.

[Next slide – title]

Dark Matter- as above so below

I think about accidents a lot. You could say they were a kind of obsession. I fear them and I play with them to try to take their power away. I will come back to that later.

I think of accidents in some way being the tip of something much bigger and ultimately imperceptible to us. Something like the dark matter in the universe.

I find a lot of comfort in physics, I like the way it starts out like boring common sense but quickly leads into completely mysterious territory. Dark Matter is one of these places.

There is not enough stuff in the universe to make it work. The way gravity behaves tells those who are able to interpret it, that there should be much more matter than we can see. 95% more.

Everything we know the universe to be made up of, all the stars, the galaxies, the planets, the dust, the matter, is only an impossibly tiny amount of what it must be.

[pan map out]

Neurologists say that we are only using a tiny percentage of our brain capacity. When you walk down a street, even if you have never been there before, a part of your brain is logging every single person,

shop front, object, event. Every word muttered in your audible range, every item of clothing visible to you on everyone, every headline on newspaper stalls, all the text on the advertisement hoardings. Every single word I'm saying, every single person in this room, is being perceived by our brains.

And yet most of this is unavailable to us under normal circumstances.

[pause]

At the dawn of western understanding of the physical world, physicists were called alchemists and they were somewhere between scientists, philosophers, doctors and priests. They would say, as above so below. They thought that this world, the inner world of atoms and the outer world of the swirling galaxies are parallels of each other. An event in one had a counterpart event in the other.

[pause]

When you make plans or think about the future or anticipate something as mundane as a shopping trip, you are mostly unaware of all the potential accidents that wait to derail your plans, perhaps even leading to you never making a shopping trip in the same way again. Turning right instead of left out of your front door may lead you to be over the other side of the city when that thing you watch later on the television happened, or may lead you to it. Perhaps you could say that these accidents are where the dark matter of the universe, in what ever way, is intruding into our lives, that an accident is the meeting place, the co-incidence between a hidden world and our own, that these disruptions have consequences far beyond our perception. As above, so below.

[next slide – title]

Story 1 White Ford Escort (not Cortina) 1974

[Take Helsinki map off, relocate camera to Falconwood area of London map]

My route to Alderwood Primary School in South East London took me alongside a busy A road, the Rochester way. Yards from where I lived and where my Dad was waiting for me to return, the A2 met it's first set of traffic lights since leaving Dover.

[construct the fish finger map over map]

One school day in 1974, I was walking home as usual but feeling particularly hungry. As I turned left alongside the A2, and followed the cemetery wall my hunger had focussed in my mind into a palpable hallucination of fish fingers, which I knew my Dad would make me if I asked. Fish fingers were all I could think about. Step out...

[Come out side]

[strap log cast around waist]

I have to break the narrative here for the moment with me lying in the road and explain something about the car that hit me.

I have told people for about 20 years that it was a white Ford Cortina that ran into me that day but I have recently found out that that's not what I meant at all. I found a picture of a Cortina and it is not the right shape.

[show Cortina catalogue illustration]

I realised that I'd taken the name of my uncle Barry's green car and told everyone that it was that but what actually hit me that day was a Ford Escort mark 1.

[show Escort Mk1]

I think this is the first time the Internet made me reinterpret my own life and correct my own stories.

[pause]

After an embarrassing and emotional trip to the hospital with my Dad beside himself in the back of the ambulance, it stopped outside the part of the hospital that coincidentally enough, my Mum worked in at the time to pick her up. My parents were much more shaken than I was. While waiting for my X-rays, Mum even fainted. I was fine though, Mum later told me "Your main symptom was embarrassment".

The excitement didn't dint my hunger for fish fingers though, and when we finally got back home, my parents asked me what I'd like for tea and I said "Fish fingers, please"

[next slide – title]

2 Correspondences and Co-incidences

In the discipline of psychology it is pointed out that the only way we can imagine the future, or the unknown (the dark matter, if you will), is by projecting what we already know onto it. I can feel this happening to me as I walk around certain parts of Berlin and am reminded of London, and I do this sometimes in parts of Helsinki, remembering other rivers, other buildings.

When I first arrived in Berlin I realised that all the histories I'd accumulated in London were useless to me now but yet formed my idea of what a city is. They were at once useless and crucial.

And so I decided that I would really project one city onto another and see if that sheds light on the unknown.

And that is why it is that I have been in Helsinki since Monday, making kind people direct me or take me out to locations that correspond to locations in London where accidents happened to me and in this section I'd like to talk about how I do this.

[Map of London with Helsinki points slide]

The first thing you have to do if you want to lay one city on top of another is decide what two points in a city should line up and after some thought I decided that I would take ideas of the centre of cities as this axis point.

I say 'ideas of the centre' because as soon as you begin to do this you find out that agreeing about what the centre is in some places is actually quite hard and open to a lot of debate. The problem is that the debate is has to be cut short and a decision made because locating the centre is only the first thing you have to do.

When I wrote to my Helsinki guides, Heli and Emmi, that I was looking for what people think of as the centre of Berlin, they did a wonderful thing for me, they went out onto the streets and really asked people. There seemed to be three popular answers: The three Smiths Statue along this road, The clock outside Stockmans and the Railway station. As Stockmans and the three Smiths are close together and as Trafalgar Square has statues in it I chose the Three Smiths to be my centre.

After this, I lay one city onto another using these centres as the locating point. I do not change the scale of the city so that it fits because I think it is interesting if it doesn't fit. But more of that later.

You can see here that if you lay the points of London onto Helsinki you get these results.

Explain location of Svenska Theatren...

[Helsinki with London points]

Explain...

For those of you who don't know Helsinki or haven't been out to these points,

I'd like to now play you the video of what I have been shooting over the past few days.

[start DV tape of Helsinki recordings]

...explain as they play, where things correspond to. Starting with the fire, then the accident.

Life as a drawing

I often imagine my life as a drawing. The pen first strikes the paper in 1966 in a now-demolished hospital in Woolwich in South East London and for a week it stays there, the pen only moving in time, not in space. From that November night my life is a line and I am dislocating myself from the moment of my birth, the only time I was whole, a complete entity, not separating from myself.

One of the things I have set myself to do is to record wherever I go in a city. But I want to see how I learn about a city and so I have to decide whether I record the track or not. Basically speaking I record the track when I feel that I am making a conscious journey: one in which I am aware of my path. This is always when I am walking and cycling and it is rarely on public transport. As I said, joining a city up finally feels like a process you have to do manually, or with your feet at least!

When I first got to Berlin I scanned city maps into my computer and drew on them where I thought I'd gone that week, that month. But this became a difficult thing to keep up with.

Since last April there has been a technological revolution in my life when I realised that there was a device that would help me in my quest to see and collect my life drawings. That device is this

[show GPS]

This is my constant companion and source of disagreement between me and my partner, Sophia. This device records wherever I go, drawing a line for me on the screen which I can later put onto my computer. Here's the paths I have made as I have been walking around Helsinki.

[GPS Helsinki traces]

...and generate maps such as the one I've animated for you tonight.

[april berlin.exe animation –2m38s]

What you have been seeing developing on the screen is the map of all my journeys through the streets of Berlin in the first month I got the GPS.

This is part of the fulfilment of my impossible dream, to see what my life is like as a drawing.

Unlike London, I am able to tell you that I first walked down Friedrichstrasse, in the middle of Berlin, on the afternoon of Sunday 28 October 2001 and that is because Berlin is offering me the opportunity of recording each new street I come across, and of watching the drawing of this section of my life develop.

It has also lead me to confront my own data mountain because, if you can imagine, everyday or at least every week I have to download the tracks and then do present them and order them and record them. Web site.

City Software

Ok, that's one of the ways I go about charting my course across a city and of trying to observe myself adding to the anterior hippocampus of my brain. But what is a city anyway?

It is very easy, at least I find it easy, perhaps because I'm always looking at maps, to fall into the trap of thinking that a city is the buildings, the street plan, the transportation. All these things are hard. If you are unfortunate enough to fall against them, or get in the way of one of these pieces of City Hardware, you find this out. But this is only a some of what a city is. Imagine a city devoid of anything but its hard surfaces, it's buildings. I think it would cease to be a city anymore. I think that the city is also made up of it's software, that is, not just us, our bodies, but something even more like software: our thoughts and memories.

It's hard to leave one's mark on the city and it's easy for it to leave it's mark on you. Except that in my model of things, you are the city and more than this, your thoughts memories and associations are what makes up the city just as much as the traffic islands and lampposts.

Story 2 Piccadilly Circus 1984

[Blanket maps under camera layered in order 1960's 1990's 1980's]

Piccadilly Circus has been through a number of different configurations as city planners have attempted to cope with the traffic flow and the strange but undeniable wish of tourists to get up close

to the statue of Eros, properly called the Shaftesbury Monument, presumably to have their photo taken in front of it.

Originally the traffic flowed right round the monument, making it a kind of roundabout but by the eighties it had been moved a few feet nearer the pavement outside the Criterion and Lillywhites and had been incorporated into this island with better access. Today, by the way, this piece of pavement is continuous and various other changes have been made to the traffic flow.

Claire, my first girlfriend and I had come up to London to be in the centre of things. I can't remember the real reason now, but I speculate that it was because we wanted to see an exhibition at the Royal Academy, which is in this direction, on Piccadilly itself.

We probably came from the east, from Leicester Square and were walking west until we came to this traffic island and trotted across the last section of Shaftesbury Avenue which is where the tip of my left foot met the vertical side of the kerb, arresting the progress of the bottom half of my body and pitching the top half of my body towards a cast iron lamppost.

I should like to pause the development of the narrative here, with my face inches from the inevitable lamppost while I explain some research I have done on street furniture.

Like the white Ford Escort story, I've been telling this one for many years and a few years into the telling I used to say to people that I'd face-butted a cast-iron dolphin. I thought that the lampposts in Piccadilly were of the type you get along the embankment in London that have two intertwined dolphins or porpoises at about face height. If I was feeling particularly corny, I'd say that the only reason my nose didn't break was because it saw the porpoises coming and miraculously sucked back into my face. This is clearly ludicrous and there is no place for that sort of nonsense in this educational establishment. Two years ago I researched the street furniture of Piccadilly Circus and found out that the lampposts hadn't had their design changed throughout the seventies to the present day. On re-visiting Piccadilly Circus with the honest wish to get to the bottom of it all, I found that the dolphins were no where to be seen and that the lampposts in question are of a rather dull, neo-classical design but with a very important feature. I shall now demonstrate this feature using a template that I have reproduced from measurements taken of the relevant lamppost.

[template on face]

We can clearly see that my nose was saved that day by this accidental aspect of it's design, only to be broken a couple of years later in a theatre safety demonstration of how to take down a scaffolding-type lighting tower. That was in Nottingham and another story.

3 These fragments I have shored against my ruins

As we enter the third and final part of the lecture, I can see that I have left some threads literally and metaphorically dangling. Some of which I shall attempt to tie back in before we have to leave each other but some, I will leave to you.

Sewing & knitting

At various stages in my childhood I was taught to knit by my Grandma and taught to sew by my mother. These skills have always been important to me, even if I don't practise them very much anymore. Their domestic, predictable and repetitive actions strike me as a direct opposite of the scary, accident-frequented streets outside. I think of countless generations of knitters and sewers stitching records of their patient hours into each sampler. Yet even here, the accident is encountered, for who can forget the stabbing of the needle, the painful discovery of the hidden pin?

[Sit down and Pick up needle and thread from blanket]

I remember becoming anxious and a little neurotic about needles as I sewed, fearing the possibility of their accidental prick more perhaps than was sensible. At times like this I tried to diffuse their power by stroking them the wrong way, showing that I could handle that dangerous point without misfortune. I don't think I am alone in acting like this, using this unconscious magic to tame objects that might otherwise harm us. It is in the common practise of testing a sharp knife with a nail or fingertip, or of the absent minded purposeful pricking of a pin into finger.

Prophylactic prostheses

I have already said about how I lay the accidents that have happened to me in one city on another and I've shown you two of the locations in Helsinki corresponding to where I headbutted a lamppost and to where I saw a fire that I shall tell you about very soon.

And I have said that I have done this in Berlin too, where I now live And this is where I have embarked on the construction of a series of objects that embody this desire to tame. It is to these that I should now like to turn.

If you lay London over Berlin you find out that where I grew up in South East London is out of the city. It's actually in Köpenick. Its actually in a wood in Köpenick.

I had my compass with me and I could see that these lines ran in the same direction as the A2 which I had walked along 975 times on my way home from school.

Tell Köpenick story...

What I was also looking for was something to stand in for the Ford Escort bumper, something that I could take a mould of and later cast in plaster and make a kind of stamp that could press into my body in a controlled, premeditated way, to make a mark on my body, however temporarily, that I chose.

It's hard to get a sense of, but it was a freezing day and the mould making material, which is the stuff dentists use to take impressions of your teeth, began to freeze and I was very concerned it wouldn't set.

It did set however and earlier on in the lecture you saw the plaster cast of that section of log from the wood in Köpenick on the outskirts of Berlin being strapped into my side, at about the spot that the car hit when my hip was 29 years younger.

One of Freud's late encounters was with the victims of shell shock from the first world war and he postulated that their neurotic compulsion to re-live the bombardment was a way of trying to accustom themselves to the shock of the sudden event, a kind of after-the-event preparation, a way of putting yourself through that which was forced upon you.

Like stroking the needle the wrong way and testing the knife, this plaster cast try and answer the need to control the accident, to incorporate it into one's life as if it is one's own material and not the dark matter from whence it came.

It is not always one's own accidents however that are the most memorable, and not always one's own accidents that leave the biggest impression.

Story 3 Wall of Smoke

[sit down, line up fish fingers]

Once upon a time I lived in Clerkenwell, before property prices rocketed and the Knights of St John bought my house.

One clear winter day I decided to go for a walk

It was February 26 1994

I walked down my stairs and out of my front door and turned

Left, south, towards the river

I went on a walk around the city, around some of the usual sights that I had come to know since I lived there

Walking around the city is something that I like to do often

If I'm feeling a bit unsure of myself or if I just want some fresh air

There was nothing unusual about that day or so I thought then

I had been out about half an hour and decided to return to my flat

I turned right into the road that led onto my road and was met by a wall of smoke

There wasn't any other clue about what was happening in that road but as I walked through the smoke I noticed that there were people standing, all looking in the same direction.

They were looking slightly up; some with their mouths open and they were staring at a second and third floor window opposite them

I stopped too and looked in the direction they were looking and I saw that this is where the smoke was coming out

The upper stories of a building above a café that's still there today, last I looked

There were I could see several men at the window in the lower of the two stories of the café and they were sheltering from the flames that were arcing above their heads

One man I remember shielded his back with his leather jacket, putting it over his head.

Another man couldn't take it any longer and jumped

I didn't see him land because as he was in mid air I decided that this was too much for me

I decided that I couldn't do anything to help

I decided that it was wrong for me to see anymore

So before he hit the ground I turned and walked through the smoke, into my street and went home

This is from the Times on 21 March 1995:

Man denies murder in sex cinema blaze

A deaf man thrown out of a pornographic cinema club in London after a row with the doorman took his revenge 30 mins later by setting it alight with petrol and killing 11 men, the Old Bailey was told yesterday.

David Lauwers who had been drinking, allegedly set fire to the New City cinema in Smithfield after an argument over the entrance fee. People in the audience leapt out of windows, climbed onto ledges and jumped on to a lorry parked outside.

Mr Lauwers, a pattern cutter in a clothing factory, and of no fixed address, was accompanied by a sign-language interpreter in the dock.

He has pleaded guilty to 3 counts of murder on February 26 1994 and 2 of arson. The case continues.

Epilogue

[light the candles]

In the days after the fire, they put scaffolding up the building and people left bunches of flowers taped to it. Flowers like you get taped to railings or lampposts where some fatal accident has happened and for a while that stretch of road, that lamppost becomes a wayside shrine, a place where people silently, reverently approach to read the cards, if present, or wonder who died there. In a few weeks the flowers wilt, the cards fade and the Sellotape loses its stickiness, the votive objects become rubbish and are cleared away in the early mornings, some of them may even be incinerated in waste disposal plants to provide a millisecond of energy for our traffic lights and kettles.

These sad little tokens attest to a more obscure history, of countless mishaps that have intruded into our lives and for some and briefly, made odd street corners or disused shops, numinous.

These countless sites make up the fabric and texture of cities, just as much as the statues and blue plaques. My own mishaps and accidents have left their mark on me but like all those others, refused to make their mark on the landscape, except to my eyes and those I have told about them.

I have shared some with you tonight, accidents that have hijacked the plans of my life at different points and without my asking, changed me to a greater or lesser extent. Accidents I take with me and

map on to new street corners or the middle of inexplicable woods and Finnish dock sides. Accidents I know I am unable to guard against, accidents that lead to the greatest opportunities of my life.

Just before we leave each other, and our drawings scatter off in different directions, I want to show you one last thing:

You may be wondering where the accident with the white ford escort happened if London was Helsinki. I already said it was far out of the centre.

[Map of Helsinki water under camera]

Explain map... and Heli and Emmis research

And so, now I'd like to play the video of what we did at that site on Suomenlinna this morning, facing out to sea in the direction of my accident in 1974.

[play last video]

In the last hour or so while we've been in this room, all of us here, this theatre, Helsinki and Finland have moved 831 kilometres further east, towards morning. Thank you for coming all that way with me.