

Short Circuits

## Between the Long Roll of Thunder and the Long Fine Flash

A Brief History of a Little Pamphlet Bought from a  
Pop-up Shop on Redchurch Street in December  
2010 on the Shortest Day of the Year

Henderson Downing



---

In the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only in lightning flashes. The text is the long roll of thunder that follows.  
– Walter Benjamin<sup>1</sup>

History is hard to know, because of all the hired bullshit, but even without being sure of “history” it seems entirely reasonable to think that every now and then the energy of a whole generation comes to a head in a long fine flash, for reasons that nobody really understands at the time – and which never explain, in retrospect, what actually happened.  
– Hunter S. Thompson<sup>2</sup>

FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1928, Walter Benjamin’s *One-Way Street* is a compendium of aphorisms, dreams, childhood memories, vertiginous literary asides, capsule commentaries on political aesthetics and urbanism, and practical theses on the techniques and technology of writing. From a twenty-

first century perspective, the short fragments that form *One-Way Street* resemble a captivating academic blog. Emphasizing the urban framework, each 'post' is preceded by a caption referencing random texts glimpsed in the city streets. Filed under the caption 'Filling Station', the single paragraph opening section outlines the critical strategy that will fuel Benjamin's attempt to find a publication format capable of matching the pulsating dynamism of the urban zeitgeist:

Significant literary work can only come into being in a strict alternation between action and writing; it must nurture the inconspicuous forms that better fit its influence in active communities than does the pretentious, universal gesture of the book – in leaflets, brochures, articles, and placards. Only this prompt language shows itself actively equal to the moment.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than the stultifying formalities of the academic treatise or the congenital tardiness of the weighty tome, Benjamin argues that an active approach to publication requires a reciprocal immediacy: a language *prompted* into action by the moment, *prompt* enough to respond to the moment, and *prompting* others into an active response.<sup>4</sup>

In December 2010, the filmmaker and writer Chris Petit published a pamphlet through his Museum of Loneliness imprint. The pamphlet reproduced a series of email exchanges – mostly between Petit and his occasional collaborator Iain Sinclair – on the artwork *The Clock* (a 24 hour film by Christian Marclay that occupied the Mason's Yard branch of the White Cube Gallery from mid-October to mid-November 2010). *The Clock* features thousands of movie clips that reference a particular time of day. These clips are edited together to flow in real time so that the film functions as an actual clock synchronized to the local time zone of the gallery (the White Cube remained permanently open during the screening). As Petit notes in an email, the film's duration collides a 'gnat's attention span' with a 'marathon event, proving the two need not be mutually exclusive, inviting lots of cultural hot air'.<sup>5</sup> The pamphlet includes the time and date of each email so that we can track the speed at which Petit and Sinclair are prompted to send each other updates after various separate visits to the gallery. On 5 December, Sinclair posted a message on his 'Official Unofficial Website' explaining that Petit 'is now producing and issuing a number of these invisible pamphlets, as a way of getting work out, instantly, immediately, when it suits him'. Two days later, responding to comments on the website, Sinclair posted another message that copies of *The Clock* pamphlet were now available from theworldthewayiwantit, a pop-up shop masquerading as an art installation (or possibly the other way around) run by the artist Keggie Carew on Redchurch Street.<sup>6</sup>

Pop-up spaces have become familiar phenomena in both the art of consumption and the consumption of art. A brief history would have to unravel the splicing together of seemingly incompatible strands of profit and protest, corporate commerce and counter-culture carnival, gnat's attention spans and marathon events. According to theworldthewayiwantit website, this particular pop-up shop was going to be open for three weeks.<sup>7</sup> On December 21<sup>st</sup>, the shortest day of the year, I made my way through the snow and ice to Redchurch Street. Considering the deliberately low profile of Petit's invisible pamphlets on

the cultural radar (and the arctic conditions that had settled upon that part of Shoreditch), Carew told me that she was surprised by how well these objects had sold. Her remark prompted a series of questions. Did Petit's desire to erase his own cultural traces (to be degoogled) reproduce the same kind of branded exclusivity built into the matrix of flash retailing? By negotiating between the instantaneous delivery technologies of new media and the 'pretentious, universal gesture' of the book, could the relatively prompt language of Petit's decommissioned pamphlet be a knowingly retro refunctioning of Benjamin's author as producer? Where did this specific example of a short form fit amongst the long history of broadsides and chapbooks? Is the Museum of Loneliness just a vanity project for blowing yet more cultural hot air? And when and where would I be able to buy the next issue?

Birkbeck College, University of London

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1999), p. 456.

<sup>2</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (New York: Random House, 1998), p. 67.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'One-Way Street', in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1997 [1926]), pp. 45-104 (p. 45).

<sup>4</sup> For a fuller account of Benjamin's 'prompt language' see Henderson Downing, 'Prompt Language: On Architectural Criticism and its Substitutes', *AA Files* 61 (2010), 112-15.

<sup>5</sup> Chris Petit, *The Clock* (London: The Museum of Loneliness, 2010), n.p.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.iainsinclair.org.uk/2010/12/05/chris-petit-and-the-invisible-pamphlets> [accessed 10 December 2010].

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.keggiecarew.com/theworldthewayiwantit/home.html> [accessed 10 December 2010].