

St Paul's, Bow Common (C of E) Bow, East London
ANGEL – 80 sq. m External Mural in shimmer discs, by late Rose Finn-Kelcey
18 February – 22 July 2004

INTRODUCTION: This church is now formally recognised as the most significant post-War Church in Britain. The work of Robert Maguire (architect) and Keith Murray (designer) and built from 1958-1960, it embodied the liturgical, theological and political outlook of a remarkable priest, Fr. Reginald Gresham Kirkby (Vicar from 1951-1994). By the end of his incumbency the church was very short both of material and human resources, but those who remained were determined and spirited and great advocates of the 'little people' who had no-one to speak up for them! There was an understandably strong sense of protection of the one resource which they did have, which was their remarkable building. For all the radicalism of Fr. Kirkby and those he left behind, the building was fiercely guarded against any and all kinds of innovation, alteration or decoration.

BUILDING: It is a remarkably spare building of brick and concrete, a huge cubic volume of space surmounted with a glazed lantern. Perhaps the largest contemporary mosaic work in Britain (by Charles Lutyens) circles the base of the inner upper level above a line of columns. Apart from external lettering around the perimeter of the square-faced octagonal narthex/porch in the north-west corner of the square plan building and a very few decorative features internally by Ralph Beyer, the building is otherwise unadorned internally or externally. The radical feature when the building was consecrated in 1960 was the central canopied altar and integral central planning of the whole liturgical space – the first such expression in Britain in such a concerted way.

The seating is entirely made up of moveable benches but, from 1960 until more recent times, there was very little use made of this inbuilt flexibility of the ordering of seating and flexibility of space. Two square chapels project from the perimeter walls, to north and to east. The integral modest church hall connected to the south side was wholly renovated and re-equipped in 2012.

The building sits in a very urban landscape in Bow in the East End of London with a great deal of road and rail traffic around it. Extensive bombing in World War II destroyed the previous parish church as well as much of the parish which was subsequently rebuilt and for decades this was one of the poorest parishes in the Diocese of London.

INITIATION AND PLANNING or TIMELINE

Fr. Kirkby's successor was Prebendary Duncan Ross (1995-2013). He found a small but radical and spirited core of a congregation who guarded what they had been left with, both materially and liturgically. In 1998 he visited an exhibition at the V&A of Asian women's textile art which had begun as a project exactly in his area of East London and had then become a wonderful global project for women's textile art and celebration. Mindful that very few people in the East End ever go to places like the V&A he held up the possibility to his congregation that if our people won't go to see their own work on show in the West End then the West End should come to the East End! They readily understood the principle and with enormous anxiety at somehow 'violating' their pure expanses of brick, nevertheless they invited the V&A to bring those works of 'people's art' to be displayed in the church, in a locality not only of poverty but of high Bengali/Asian population, for their culture to be celebrated. With enormous courage and generosity the V&A transferred the exhibition 'Shamiana, the Mughal Tent' to St. Paul's, Bow Common from 7-31 May 1998 with twice as many textile panels on display as had been at the V&A. Hundreds of people attended, with textile workshops also running so that visitors could discover their own artistic ability. This changed the culture of the church to one of openness and several such exhibitions continued to be run in the church up to at least 2012.

ANGEL

In 2003 there was by now a well-established series of wall displays mostly by local artists and the church was found to be ideal for such use. The Trust, 'Art in Sacred Places' (ASP) since 1998 had been commissioning site-specific art works in churches and cathedrals outside London. In 2004 for the first time a London venue was chosen (Southwark Cathedral) for two external works by artist Rose Finn-Kelcey (curator, Rachel Steward of Artwise). Before they were actually constructed or installed, however, the project fell through and Finn-Kelcey had to find a new venue entirely which would lend itself to a suitable external site-specific installation.

St. Paul's, Bow Common had by now developed a profile for public art and so she and Rachel Steward came to meet with Fr. Ross and then to meet the Church Council. Even though no concrete ideas had emerged, from an early stage a relationship of trust and mutual respect was born and the church invited Finn-Kelcey to develop a work for display.

DAC/AUTHORITIES

The church is listed Grade II* and is highly regarded and so there were a lot of DAC considerations, licensing and permissions to be obtained, also with the London Borough of Tower Hamlets Planning Authorities and Transport for London as any externally mounted work could impact on the attention of the many thousand drivers who passed the church by day and by night.

There were natural cautions about possible impact on the fabric of the building of installation methods and also that if the work were to distract any drivers to the extent of an accident occurring it would have to be removed immediately.

SHIMMER DISC INSTALLATION

Rose Finn-Kelcey embedded herself for a long period in the local community, the church, the schools, community activities, developing a strong sense of the demography and, in particular, the large presence of young people many of whom were Asian in origin, though born locally. She had always been interested in even passing modes of modern communication and was struck by the use of Emoticons in text messaging which every young person now used extensively. What message might the church proclaim in her work? All that rather bleak brick could be a wonderful counterpoint for a rich, exotic, dynamic medium such as metalised shimmer discs which hung closely together on boards but yet were able to shimmer in the changing wind and light conditions. These had been used in advertising but never yet in art or to proclaim a 'spiritual' message of any kind.

Out of all her observations and researches she evolved a gigantic text-message emoticon for 'Angel'. How very traditional at one level – another angel on a church – and yet how innovative for the symbol to be part of an 80 sq. m field of 85,000 shimmer discs, against a dazzling red and gold background as of the dawning of a new day with an Angel being present above that church to guard and watch over and give messages of hope to all who passed by – and not just to those who worshipped within.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Finn-Kelcey had the greatest possible respect for the fabric and integrity of such a noteworthy building and devised a method of hanging a vast wooden frame from the upper roof level parapet of the church, counterweighted by $\frac{3}{4}$ ton of weights on the flat church lantern roof and tied off at either side with just two holes being needed in the whole fabric of the building to secure the work. In February 2004, having assembled all 85,000 discs in her studio on 20 x 2 m high wooden boards these were transported to the church and firmly attached to the hanging, tied-off wooden frame by a team of abseilers!

The work was done to a high standard and for the next 5 months a huge expanse was on display, of glittering discs which all merged at a distance into a single rippling, dazzling surface which changed by the second and amazed all who saw it.

AUDIENCE

All the previous exhibitions in the church had only been visible during church or exhibition opening hours but Angel was visible night and day for 5 months – it proved so popular that the initial 3 month display was extended by the DAC and other authorities for a further 3 months minimum. Everyone who passed by could see the installation and hugely positive comments were made even though perhaps the majority of people (above youth age!) had much idea what it was! It was the most exciting thing to be seen for miles around and was hugely enjoyed. There was modest floodlighting at night when the work took on a very different mood and aspect and could be enjoyed 24/7. Even a violent gale in March 2004 did no damage, though some boarding on which counterweights and floodlights sat went flying.

DEINSTALLATION

Rose said that had we know this was going to be such a hugely popular work marine ply boards could have been used. In the event however, by late July rain had begun to soak the boards and loosen the shimmer disc attachments and the work was deemed not to be sufficiently stable & so was dismantled.

WHAT WAS THE LEGACY OF ANGEL?

Almost certainly not a single extra person came to church as a result of that amazing installation. However, that was not its purpose nor, indeed, the purpose of any art displayed in that church. It was most definitely part of that church's 'no-strings' ministry to all who passed by, to inspire and lift spirits and create a sense of awe and of something greater than the daily grind. We believed that God was more than capable of touching and lifting and opening and entering the spirits and hearts of any or all who were inspired and amazed by Angel.

The website continues at www.smsangel.org.uk . Sadly Rose Finn-Kelcey died in February 2014 and her funeral was held in that church and conducted by Fr. Ross. Also see www.rosefinkelcey.com