

DAZED

The wordsmith artist gifting his poetry to the public

Punk artist and Dazed publisher Robert Montgomery releases his first monograph – a rich oeuvre of poetry in public spaces



Artwork by Robert Montgomery

It's hard to miss Robert Montgomery's work. The Scottish-born artist, who took a strong interest in situationism and Marxism at university, spreads his simple and provoking poetry across the world through installations and (often illegally placed) posters. Whether it's in the form of a 12ft-tall billboard, a dazzling neon sign, or words set ablaze in the gardens of the Louvre, the artist's haunting poetry stays in the mind long after the physical artwork is gone. Messages like "TO BE LIKE THE WEATHER TO BE NO LONGER THE BROKEN

HEARTED SERVANTS OF MAD KINGS" and "ALL PALACES ARE TEMPORARY PALACES" have been displayed in C24 in New York, Tempelhof airport in Berlin, and under bridges in east London.

His first monograph, a self-titled ruby red tome, has just been published by Distanz. Providing a treasure-trove of his work, the book sets his rich oeuvre down alongside essays by Henrik Wobbe, Barbara Polla and more. We spoke to the creative about his Scottish heritage, turning Edinburgh into an artwork, and straddling the gap between his personal and public lives.

Would you say your work is an attack on multinational corporations and capitalism itself?

Robert Montgomery: I'm not sure if my work could be an effective attack against that. I'm not sure how helpful I can be – I think Jeremy Corbyn running for the Labour leadership is probably of much more practical political use. But I think if you see economic and social injustice and ecological danger in your time, it's hard not to make art about that. I think it's almost irresponsible to not make that at least a part of the art you make. Artists can do our bit for a more enlightened future, and just try our hardest like everyone else.

You take something quite personal (poetry) and blow it up into something very public (a billboard) – what made you want to straddle those extremes?

Robert Montgomery: Well, I think the limited discourse (or limited “type of speech”, as Roland Barthes would have called it) in contemporary life is massively oppressive. And the dominant types of speech that surround us are the locked and limited hegemonies of a certain political-type-of-speech and advertising-type-of-speech (in German they could both be compound nouns), and those two types of speech are psychologically oppressive. I think (those) two types of speech injure and hurt our basic childlike instincts towards kindness and magic.

So with my work I wanted to break that dominant type of language with a more interior and vulnerable voice, and do that on billboards where that dominant language normally lives. I wanted a kind of therapy against the dominant language, and I wanted to see what you could do if you bring a kind of speech that comes from poetry into that arena. I’m interested in poetry because, for me, it’s the most private type of speech, the most private and personal literary form. I was just reminded this morning by Paris gallerist Jenny Mannerheim of something I said about poetry recently, which is: “Poetry seems less about language than a defence against language. Poetry chases and threatens language. It is the last line of defence against language consuming the actual magic of the world.” I think that relates quite well to this question.

Who or what inspires you?

Robert Montgomery: People I know who dedicate their lives to working for peace inspire me. People like Chris Nineham. Chris founded the Stop The War Coalition and brought disparate groups of the anti-war movement together to create the three-million person march against the war in Iraq, including many home-counties, middle-class couples from Lewes and Barnet who came out of their demonstration retirement for the first time since the 70s. I’m humbled by the constant work Chris does for the peace movement, it’s much less selfish than what I do. Also I love the quiet and insistent work for peace and pacifism that the Quakers have done for centuries. The Green Party inspires me, too. I like people who can see alternative visions of the future, because God knows we need them more than ever.

How do you feel about the legal issues that surround ‘street art’?

Robert Montgomery: I think perhaps English Heritage aren’t doing enough to record the intellectual history of our streets and the graffiti artists have had to take over, with our own money, in neighbourhoods where the public funding of blue plaques just can’t stretch. This is certainly true in my own neighborhood of Shoreditch where in the last six months it’s been left to us to record William Blake’s grave at Bunhill Fields and the site of the original Globe Theatre. This is important for the tourism my Shoreditch neighbourhood now depends on, and without the graffiti signposts, the American tour groups would get lost. I have no complaints about legality – recording the intellectual history of our streets will always be legal, I hope, even in Cameron’s Britain. We’re only exhibiting a bit of national pride, aren’t we? I would like some government funding for the public service the graffiti artists of Shoreditch are providing with these spray-painted blue plaques, as it’s a big boom to the tourist trade in my area.

How has your Scottish heritage informed your work?

Robert Montgomery: I think I feel connected to a general tradition of British or Albion mysticism, more than to anything explicitly Scottish in its modern sense. I feel connected to the idea of a mystical land you get in W.B. Yeats and William Blake – these are British-Celtic traditions, really. Though I did grow up in the next town to Robert Burns (Burns was from Ayr and I’m from Prestwick, which is the next town along the Ayrshire coast). His grandparents were farmers and my

grandparents were Scottish miners, so there might be some shared concerns with Burns.

What was the first art project that you worked on?

Robert Montgomery: When I was at Edinburgh College of Art I did a project called Aerial '94, which I started with another artist, John Ayscough. We were still postgraduate students and we sent a grant application to the Scottish Arts Council for an idea we had for an artist-curated exhibition that would take over billboard spaces and empty shops and empty offices in Edinburgh. I think Andrew Nairne, who was the director of the Scottish Arts Council then, was very forward-thinking because he gave us a grant of, I think, £30,000, even though we were still at college.

We did twenty two artists' projects weaved into the streets of the city. We showed Ross Sinclair's "Museum of Despair" in an empty shop and billboards by Paul Carter and Chad McCail. John and I did pieces on ad spaces on the sides of buses. I think I was the only one who went on to make working on billboards my main thing. I think I was maybe subconsciously curating my medium at that very early stage. Aerial is written about in the book on the history of the Collective Gallery in Edinburgh, in an essay by Neil Mulholland, available in most good Art School libraries. Its ISBN number is 3868950338 for anyone who's interested to read more.

Any close calls with the police when you've been putting up your work?

Robert Montgomery: No, I never had any trouble with the police, they've always been nice. Contrary to what you read in the popular press, all street art is legal really. Enlightened policemen know this in their heart of hearts, so they're usually nice about it.

What's your proudest moment?

Robert Montgomery: I think the publication of this Distanz book is probably my proudest moment to date. It's the first time all my work from the last ten years or so has been in one place, and something happens when you put it in a book – you see what you've done in a way, and art books were always really important to me. I was the kind of student who learned as much in the library as I did in the studio, so it's nice to have the first monograph of my work published.

This book was a very Berlin enterprise and my Berlin gallerist, Anna Lüpertz, and the German collector, Henrik Wobbe, were vital in making it happen. From a project point of view, I think the installations at Tempelhof I did with Neue Berliner Räume in 2012 were really important, and the Louvre Fire Poem I did with Galerie Nuke and Each X Other and Colette in the Louvre gardens last year was important. The LA Billboard series I did last year, too, I think is important work, and that series is published for the first time in this book.

Robert Montgomery is available from Distanz now. You can visit his [Facebook here](#) and his [Instagram here](#)