



Three Introductions to:

Critical Care

A new work by Clive Parkinson

Critical Care offers a counter-blast to the prevailing cult of standardisation, econometrics and scientism within arts and health. Written by Clive Parkinson and designed by Sarah McEwan it will be published in September 2017.

#1 - A Woman

The train to Bangor takes a few hours, and a few connections from my home town of Lancaster, but today the first connection is late and the inevitable knock-on consequences, mean I'm texting a woman I only vaguely know, making excuses about train times, when in truth, I'd been on target to get there a good hour ahead of our arranged time.

As it is, she is very understanding, and we arrange to meet at the cafe on Bangor Train Station. The train slowly moves along the peninsular - mountains to the left - the sea, flat, still and grey - to the right.

This is Emma.
I've met her just twice before, fleetingly, intensely.
I like her.

Although we have met before, I'm still worried that she might not recognise me - should I have described myself - tall - stooped - balding - mid-50's? But isn't that the description of a million middle aged men, searching for some kind of meaning, beyond their day to day existence?

I notice a beached ship, rusting and dry-docked.
I notice the closeness of the sea to the train tracks.
I notice that my heart rate has increased.
I notice great, uprooted trees.

At the station, I'm off the train in a flash and running towards the cafe.
I see her through the window.
She has a cappuccino - half finished.
She's on her phone, texting.

I steal myself, open the door and walk up to her.

She smiles, a big, generous smile.

#2 - A Place

Nurses and doctors, patients and artists - all these are just words - names, the labels we give to people to neatly categorise them, make sense of their role and understand our own place in a social structure or hierarchy. Hospitals are heady places, communities of people working for the good of the whole. Perhaps that whole is the individual - the patient - or perhaps it's the system itself: the hospital.

This is Alder Hey Children's NHS Foundation Trust, or Alder Hey as people know it.

From the porters who move people from ward, to clinic, to theatre - to those who wash and clean, deliver and cook, a hospital is a community, and in the UK, one that is highly cherished, its services free at the point of delivery. Into this place of functional care, architects and designers have been joined by artists, some charged with humanising often austere and intimidating spaces, others in the role of therapist exploring the troubled terrain of fractured emotional psyches'.

This is an exploration of the place of art and artists within this realm, not in terms of clinical impact, but of expression, pleasure and curiosity. This story could so

easily unfold in any of the places and spaces set aside for specific ailments. There are a myriad of conditions where specialist teams care for a range of acute crises and chronic disease, but this account, begins in an area of extreme uncertainty, that of critical care, and arguably one of the rawest places - the paediatric intensive care unit.

#3 - An Artist

In a small room, on this new, state-of-the-art unit, I sit quietly in a corner, quite outside all of the action, watching an artist, in turn, watching the raw emotion of life, as parents cling to each other, and the tiniest of babies is resuscitated by a team of clinical staff.

The machinery, the sounds and the movements, are beautifully choreographed, the actions of these unknown actors (alien to us) are well rehearsed, but it's an adrenaline fuelled performance.

The artist keeps back.

Stood in the doorway, he has no place at all in this fight for life, as an observer I have even less, but he silently watches, quietly listening to the unfolding scene. In his hand, he holds the tiniest microphone, flesh coloured and more like a pendulous ear bud.

This is the most difficult of situations to be in. The life and death business of intensive care is unfolding before us and we are invisible to its cast, impotent to offer anything remotely useful.

Worse still, we could be a distraction.

We watch in complete silence.

An hour or so later, we are debriefing at lunch in the busy hospital cafeteria. We'd had several conversations with nurses and families on intensive care and we were in high spirits; relieved, I think, to be back in the bustle and noise at the public heart of the hospital. This was one of many such lunches after the event, where we offered each other, (unknowingly perhaps) an informal off-loading, or peer support.

But at this point, perhaps, I should introduce the artist. The man standing so silently on intensive care is Australian artist, Vic McEwan.

This is the story of people and places - of crisis, cure and human frailty - a gentle exploration of art and artists that takes us from the intimacy of the individual, to the belly of a Scottish mountain to help us understand another kind of critical care.

A kind of care, which makes sense of the fragile condition of being mortal.