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# Vertical. Nature. Base.

A collaborative project by Echo Echo's Steve Batts and artist Dan Shippides. Based at a Donegal coastal climbing location and a city exhibition base, V.N.B. is a residential experimental climbing / art / dance project that investigates the contrasting and comparable notions of climbing as sport and climbing as creative engagement. Interested people can join the camp in September (details tba) for various activities and camping. This blog is an insight into V.N.B.'s creative development.

Tuesday, 20 September 2011

TOPOPHOBE REFLECTIONS - SEP 2011

## Reflection on a reflection; Topophobe - Dan



Thanks Steve,

That's a really interesting look at the events from below.

I'm not sure how to process your reflection around your stated lack of competitiveness – or lack of a need to climb it or not feeling failure for backing off. My comments about commitment were actually meant sincerely (tho with some light humour too)– marriage and a child on the way are two big things which I think put you "out there" exposed when faced with something grotty and ugly – or having seen an ugly event. I didn't feel competition was in the air or part of what happened – perhaps you felt that because of the camera, or Gary? I tried not to egg you on to do the climb. And I didn't have any expectations of what you might do.

It's good to hear those thoughts and reflections, although some sound like the assumed clichés of climbing motivation – I'm not sure "competition", "conquering" and "pride" were ever part of our reality of climbing – maybe it's a reflection on that weird place of backing of a climb feeling defensive or the need to justify. Personally I think it was significant that you backed off the climb – that's a key moment - strong in it's own way. Taking responsibility and the emotional consequences of deemed "failure" – surely that's success of a kind?

Not sure if "success" is a relevant term for my efforts though (your

Update Aug 2011

VNB project flyer

Background info

Background info

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question of in what sense is this a success?)– other than I got up it successfully – in that I didn't fall or resort to using the rope. Yes it was successful in that sense – but is that the point? Really? Success suggests a value system which probably has failure at the other end. What is failure in climbing? what is success? I can't live with this value system – I've fallen off climbs, I've had injuries I've had bad days – but none of these I would class as failure. It's all part of the full textures of doing it.

I guess the reason for climbing for some might be achievement based – maybe this to varying degrees is true for all who climb– the sense of achievement. But this surely runs thin after a while?– if you're not "enjoying" the doing experience then you are wasting your time. "The best climbers are the ones having most fun...."

"Fun" is a broad spectrum of the experiential....

I "enjoyed" the route – that's to say the experience with all it's "bad" and ugliness, uncertainties and worries and pain.

I don't feel I conquered anything, really - I did not beat the rock or any competitors, it wasn't a show of strength or bravado – was it?. If it was I didn't feel that. The experience really was strong partly because of the injury – but even with that I enjoyed it. I know it could have been worse – there could have been more serious consequences – had the climb been longer – but then the "what if's" are pointless to think about beyond adding to the experience log – if the climb had been longer then maybe there would have been perfect gear somewhere to lower off – a happier "what if". In the end I found an accommodation with the route and the injury and the pain and got up and safe.

Things I remembered and enjoyed – finding quite exposed positions to brace myself while I figured out my injury and gear placements. I was very calm at that moment.

The gear below wasn't great but one piece I was fairly confident would hold in that placement where it was pretty solid hard rock – a kind of ironised crystal rock – the the stretch factor of the rope was my risk in relation to my height and that goodish piece of gear. The three bits nearer the top were ok but I also felt fine with the moves from there being ok even with a bad arm.

I enjoyed the three higher gear placements – they gave me succor that a fall might be ok. Made me feel safe/r.

I didn't enjoy the sound of the fin but enjoyed using it later – kind of knowing that it was ok it would hold me if I didn't over exert on it – kind of suck it and see – or at least knowing I had to gauge and monitor it – watch myself.

I enjoyed being in that moment. I never wished I wasn't there during the climb. Conversely I wished I wasn't there when I pulled over the top and then later coiling the rope after the abseil – knowing I wouldn't climb for a while and fearing the next 5 days at the cove would be difficult (but they weren't).

I enjoyed the belay I set at the top – two great sling anchors back on the stack and a nice seat above the corner.

I enjoyed the abseil to clear the gear.

Things I didn't enjoy – not finding decent gear low down to make the first steep moves – and wasting energy and nerves looking. That started a little creep of anxiety that things were not as straight forward as predicted. I didn't enjoy finding out the flakes and fins were not as solid as I hoped and then confirming the rock on the right wall was friable but would need to be

► 2009 (5)

## Further Links & Funders

Echo Echo Dance Theatre Company

Dan Shippies

Legacy Trust UK

Arts Council of Northern Ireland

## Dan's related projects

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used. This brought a sense of seriousness that I didn't have at the start. This certainly focused my mind a good bit and made the sequence planning and decision making more intense.

At the time of the injury it hurt but it wasn't scary. I thought 'oh I might fall here – what's that gear like again?...' Once I regained a toe hold and made a move to a brace position I knew I wasn't going to fall – there was just one move ahead which was committing but finding the brace positions allowed me to feel ok there. I was in no rush to move quickly - the brace positions allowed me to get over the slight pump of the first steep section (which was tiring because of uncertainties of gear placements – hanging around too much). I felt ok there. The top move with a bad arm was just about being composed and strategically using the bad arm so it didn't take too much more strain.

I pretty sure Steve's observations of the ugliness of the climb and my climbing are spot on. But then I can't find a reason why this is better or worse than if the movements were graceful and beautiful. This is the broad spectrum of aesthetics of climbing movement. Ugly v Beautiful? – I'm not sure I would wish to apply a value system like that to this – it would seem to privilege something and degrade something else without a basis for doing so.

My moves probably became less committing in places as I found the lack of gear low down – more conservative movement, risking less – I guess that's less "beautiful" in a way(?)

Some of them I felt were exciting – at least from my memory – there was one airy pull up and thrutch, then some fun bridging and bracing. Then restricted movement when I injured my arm – that I'm sure was ugly! But effective.

I think and feel that it's a beautiful route – from the experience which was brutal but a powerful experience but also from the visual shape and situation of the route. The rock certainly has it's own entity as a route. It's quite contained, quite specific. I'm actually very surprised it doesn't seem to have been climbed before. I'm happy to have climbed it. I'm buzzing with the thought it probably is a new route too – that's ego bound surely – but also there's a desire to contribute to climbing culture, making, sharing – adding. We name artworks, we a credit authorship. That's important to me – I don't think that's the same as conquering or dominating or colonization. It's an imaginary line on a rock face. People might now know it's there and partake of its history. There's a responsibility to give that rock an entity and identity – so it can be shared with other people – brought into culture and consent.

### **Reflections on Topophobia - Steve**



Necessity... an extreme form of practical demand.

Necessity provides a psychological comfort. A clear focus of attention. Solving problems. You know what you have to do. There is something military about this.

Fear arises from the attention moving to the consequences of failing to be able to meet the necessity.

or

Awareness of the possibility that one may not have the ability to meet the necessity leads to fear.

The first can arise in situations that are very straightforward but with a serious level of exposure. Even going up a ladder or even the stairs... Dealing with this involves a simple self-discipline of focusing on the details of the necessities of the task

The second is far more uncontrollable because the more you focus on the practicalities of the task the more you become aware of the possibility that you don't have the strength or skill to deal with them..

I don't fear failure on the first few moves of a climb because I don't consider it that important to achieve something and to be as good as or better than someone else... to conquer the rock... For other people pride is probably a bigger motivator.

I do, however fear dying... so higher up...

The level of fear is related to the exposure.... what degree or kind of "necessity" are you embedded in?

Focusing on practicality and necessity can open the attention, expand the senses, brighten the perception, widen the horizons as it creates a frame for the inessential, the location of choices, of variation, of interpretation, of value statements, when fear takes over the expanded attention shuts down, down, only the immediate moment and the immediate future are present.

Dans voice changed as he climbed.

The first few metres of the climb were more challenging than predicted. At

the first little ledge it didn't look to me as though it was as possible to rest as it had seemed from just looking. The degree of the overhang became much more clear. He spent a lot of time trying to get some gear in while being in a quite awkward body position. He slid a chunky piece of gear in but it didn't "stick"... tried again... but the angle of the crack didn't really allow the thing to grip. It just sort of sat there gently balancing. There was probably an angle of pull that would have locked it in, but that angle wasn't one that bore any relation to the pull arising from any possible fall from above it. He wasn't high up... but the fall would have been onto some nasty rocks. He found another spot for a little nut... but not better really. More secure but it didn't look to me like the rock around it would hold if there was a fall... maybe slow it down a bit but not more. It looked like he was getting tired already. The feeling of belaying being a pointless job rose in me... looked like this was really becoming a solo climb...

He continued. With some less than elegant "scrobbling" he found a half-reasonable hand hold directly above and smearing his shoes on the plate to the right of the crack heaved up... the small ridges on the rock just crumbled away under his feet... it didn't look good... a moment of just hanging... seemed to last a long long time from where I was... as I involuntarily measured the length of rope above what protection there was and compared it with the length below. Then... again inelegantly... he somehow hauled himself up with an "arghghgh!" as the big piece of gear several metres below him slipped down the rope bashing my knuckles as it arrived with me.

It wasn't a good safe spot. Again precarious... no real rest and the only gear a tiny nut in thin rock way below him giving zero protection and the rocks a few metres below that. I tried to turn off the looping flashback of the woman falling from the same height at the indoor wall in Arnheim. That was the reason I stopped really enjoying climbing for several years. The blood spreading across the floor she moaned "het doet mir pijn"... "it hurts me". She survived, just about, but she hit only a flat floor, didn't bang her head, and didn't seriously damage her spine as her legs and pelvis had provided a crush zone... one really really deep plie.

He called down that he'd done something serious to his shoulder. No choice from there though. The search for some where to put some gear in looked a bit desperate from my position. Nothing calm or elegant there. Just practicality. He got several bits in but the tone of his voice when he said they were ok didn't really convince. He was obviously in pain. The last couple of metres up and the haul over the lip of the cliff were as ugly as the rest of the ascent... but it was relief...

I tried to second it but I didn't have the guts. I reckon I could have got up it... later I felt a bit frustrated that I had given up too easily at the first moment where commitment was needed. He teased me that I had enough commitment issues and that I probably had enough commitments in my life already being freshly married and with a baby on the way in a few weeks.

An ugly, ugly climb.

Maybe it could have been done more beautifully a second time. But his busted armpit prevented that.

It what sense is this a success? Genuine question.....

Posted by Dan at 10:21 

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