

Susan Brind

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# bad air [mal'aria]



New Art Commission at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine

# Infected Information

Francis McKee

In **bad air [mal'aria]**, Susan Brind entwines language and architecture in a complex work touching on the history of the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, the disease of malaria itself and the doctors and patients who wrote about it or suffered from it. It is oddly fitting that the text is situated in the entrance to the Keppel Street building as it immediately recalls the architectural allusions that peppered Ronald Ross' account of his discovery of pigmented egg cells of the malaria parasite in the stomach of a mosquito. In his 'dark, hot little office in the hospital at Begumpett', Ross was examining one last batch of mosquitoes after several days of fruitless research:

'The dissection was excellent and I went carefully through the tissues, now so familiar to me, searching every micron with the same passion and care as one would search some vast ruined palace for a little hidden treasure. Nothing. No, these new mosquitoes also were going to be a failure: there was something wrong with the theory. But the stomach tissue still remained to be examined - lying there empty and flaccid before me on the glass slide, a great white

expanse of cells like a large courtyard of flagstones, each one of which must be scrutinized - half an hour's labour at least. I was tired and what was the use? I must have examined the stomachs of a thousand mosquitoes by this time. But the Angel of Fate fortunately laid his hand on my head and I had scarcely commenced the search again when I saw a clear and almost perfectly circular outline before me of about 12µm in diameter. The outline was much too sharp, the cell too small to be an ordinary stomach cell of a mosquito, I looked a little further. Here was another, and another exactly similar cell...'

It is the body of the mosquito which - dissected before him - is the 'vast ruined palace' and its cells the 'courtyard of flagstones'. The metaphor reveals something of the imaginative process of scientific research - the transformations and the invented narratives that help a scientist to stay alert and interested through thousands of repetitive, painstaking dissections.

Such use of metaphor can be found throughout the history of medicine and with **bad air [mal'aria]** Brind taps into this practice, recasting the foyer

as the interior of the human brain. This is an image with a long pedigree in medical writing, particularly in the work of doctors interested in the workings of fevers or distortions of reason. In the early eighteenth century, for instance, the physician Bernard Mandeville wrote a treatise in dialogue on the subject of hypochondria and hysteria in which he outlined his vision of the human brain - a particularly architectural model that reflected a wider belief in the body as a microcosmic economy:

'And reflecting on what is transacted within us, it seems to me a very diverting Scene to think, when we strive to recollect something that does not then occur; how nimbly those volatill Messengers of ours will beat through all the Paths, and hunt every Enclosure of the Organ set aside for thinking, in quest of the Images we want, and when we have forgot a word or Sentence, which yet we are sure the great Treasury of Images received our Memory has once been charged with, we may almost feel how some of the Spirits flying through all the Mazes and Meanders rommage the whole substance of the Brain; whilst others ferret themselves into the inmost recesses of it with so much eagerness and labour, that the difficulty they meet with some times makes us uneasie, and they often bewilder themselves in their search, till at last they light by chance on the Image



that contains what they look'd for, or else dragging it, as it were, by piece-meals from the dark Caverns of oblivion, represent what they can find of it to our Imagination.<sup>2</sup>

In Mandeville's model of the brain it is the 'animal spirits' (the nano-beings believed to exist in our nerves in the eighteenth century) which race around the Piranesi-like interior of our skulls, finding old memories and dragging them back to present to our imaginations. Susan Brind's model is, on the surface, a calmer structure. The gold leaf lettering on marble has a quiet monumental quality - recording in fragments the symptoms of malaria and proposed cures for the illness. The texts are drawn from W.H.S. Jones' *Malaria and Greek History* (1909), Richard F. Burton's *The Lake Regions of Central Africa* (1860), Thomas Palmer's *Admirable Secrets of Physick & Chyrurgery* (1696), Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, Thomas Sydenham's *Epistle I: On the Epidemic Diseases up to 1679* and Alan Moorehead's *The White Nile* (1960). This admirable list appears to promise a rational treatise on malaria, suitable in every way for a bastion of medical reason.

As visitors or staff walk around the foyer, however, moving from the lighter marble of the entrance to the darker stone of the back offices and back again, they undertake a much stranger journey. The text is primarily driven by Richard F. Burton's account of his malarial fevers, contracted while exploring eastern and central Africa in search of the source of the Nile. As the text progresses, Burton's language becomes more intense and hallucinatory as he succumbs to the fever and to the opium in the Warburg's Drops he was taking as a cure. As his mood darkens the text begins to fall on the darker marble and the path leads downwards to the basement. By the time he experiences the sensation of being two separate people at war with one another and then encounters 'hag-like women and men with heads protruding from their breasts' we are in the stairwell leading from the basement back up to the ground floor. Returning finally to the entrance the text ends with a comment from Moorehead on Burton's use of opium, 'and in this he made an error' - as much a reminder in this context that the achievements of medical reason are often reached through experiment and repeated failure.

In Brind's model of the vestibule as brain, it is the staff and visitors who take on the role of the 'volatil messengers' described earlier by Bernard Mandeville - 'rommaging' through the halls and summoning images from their readings of the wall text. The success of **bad air [mal'aria]** lies in this very process - the ability of text to stimulate our imaginations and to communicate images and meanings to each of us. In its own way, Brind's fragmented text is infectious even as it describes the symptoms of a transmitted disease. As readers, we fill in the gaps of her text and imagine far more than she ever documents in the work, carrying our own interpretation of the lines just as the mosquito carries the eggs of the parasite. In this way, the work not only alludes to the work of the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine but to the process of art, Brind's own specialism.

In a wider context **bad air [mal'aria]** also points to a deeper anxiety about infection that can be traced back through the history of the British Empire and the earliest encounters with tropical disease by British soldiers, explorers and settlers. Medical historian Mark Harrison points out that as the empire grew and became an established entity, so attitudes to tropical diseases such as malaria changed:

Concepts of racial immunity varied considerably over time and between contemporaries, and reflected the contradictions arising from colonial domination. Shifting power relationships in the colonies, together with new intellectual currents emanating from the metropole, wrought a profound change in the way Europeans came to see their bodies in relation to their subjects and the tropical environment. Anxieties created by the abolition of the slave trade, together with the hubris generated by the British conquest of India, focused medical attention more closely on apparent differences between races. The guarded optimism about acclimatization that was characteristic of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment diminished as the perceived boundaries between races began to harden. Europeans came to regard themselves as exotica in foreign soil: feelings of superiority and vulnerability were two sides of the same imperial coin.<sup>3</sup>

Richard F. Burton typified this image of the mid-nineteenth century Victorian explorer, battling bravely against the travails of malaria to open new worlds to the Empire - superior yet vulnerable. On his return from his African travels, his future wife, Isabel, records that:

'Richard was looking so lank and thin. He was sadly altered; his youth, health, spirits, and beauty were all gone for the time. He fully justified his fevers, his paralysis and blindness, and any amount of anxiety, peril, hardship, and privation in unhealthy latitudes. Never did I feel the strength of my love as then. He returned poorer, and dispirited by official rows and every species of annoyance; but he was still - had he been ever so unsuccessful, and had every man's hand against him - my earthly god and king, and I could have knelt at his feet and worshipped him. I used to feel so proud of him; I used to like to sit and look at him, and think, "You are mine, and there is no man on earth the least like you".'<sup>4</sup>

Clearly medical science has moved on today just as women's role in the world has altered significantly, yet Brind's texts allow us an archaeological glimpse through several layers of medical thought over many centuries. What is implicit in her work is an awareness of the broader cultural context of scientific thought - the contingencies and worldly pressures that help to frame any definition or description of a disease. In that respect, too, the foyer offers an ideal metaphor for a threshold space where the ivory tower of medical theory encounters the world outside.

*Francis McKee is a curator and writer. He works as a Research Fellow for Glasgow School of Art and is Head of New Media and Digital Arts at CCA.*



#### Notes

1. Ronald Ross, *Memoirs*, London: John Murray (1923), quoted in *The Faber Book of Science*, ed. by John Carey, London, Faber and Faber (1995) pp. 206-08. Ross was directly influenced in his work by Patrick Manson's theory that malaria was carried by the mosquito. The two men corresponded from 1895 to 1898 and some of Ross' material now resides in the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine Library.
2. Bernard Mandeville, *A Treatise on the Hypochondriack and Hysterick Passions*, London (1711), pp. 129-30.
3. Mark Harrison, "The Tender Frame of Man": Disease, Climate, and Racial Difference in India and the West Indies, 1760-1860, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 1996: 70,(1) 68-93. As cited on <http://muse.jhu.edu/demo/bhm/70.1harrison.html>
4. Lady Isabel Burton, *The Romance of Isabel, Lady Burton Vol. I*, New York: Dodd Mead & Company (1897), ed. by W. H. Wilkins, pp. 150-01.

## About the artist

Using photography, video and text, Susan Brind's art is concerned with the impact of architectural space upon the individual and the body as a site of understanding, subject to external influences and internal experiences. Implicit in her work lies a tension between representations of rational forms of knowledge and emotional thought. Examples include, *The mind betrays the body*, shown at Cambridge Darkroom in 1990 and *Mysteries of the heart*, a collaboration with Jim Harold, commissioned by Book Works and shown at Camden Arts Centre, London in 1994. These works addressed Medicine and its definitions directly, examining the complex and ambivalent relationship between the individual and the hospital, and the point at which the feeling subject becomes the object of the medical gaze.

More recent works have considered both the body and the mind in extreme states. In *Out of your body – Out of your mind*, shown at the Art Museum of Estonia, Tallinn in 1998 and *Dancing for St. Vitus*, exhibited in Mönchengladbach, Germany in 2000, physical 'symptoms', described through language or the body itself, allow the unconscious to be revealed.

In **bad air [mal'aria]**, funded from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine's Contemporary Art Fund, the artist brings these concerns directly to the architectural space and context of the School and focuses on its research into malaria. Referencing writings from the Classical Period to the 20th Century, **bad air [mal'aria]** distributes a text around the walls of the quadrant of the ground floor of the School's Keppel Street building. Hand rendered in gold leaf, ideas created by a delirious mind and fevered body, factual information and beliefs now known to be inaccuracies, merge as a cycle of thoughts.

Susan Brind studied at Reading University and the Slade School of Art, London. Her video and photographic installations have been exhibited widely in the UK and Europe, and she has received a number of major awards and commissions for her work. She currently lives and works in Glasgow, lecturing part-time in the Department of Sculpture & Environmental Art at Glasgow School of Art.



## LSHTM Commissions Programme



The London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine's decision to introduce new contemporary art works into its buildings has led to two major commissions by artists Susan Brind and Gary Perkins. Installed in June 2001, both works encompass large areas of the Keppel Street building and subtly resonate with a major component of our mission: being a leading centre of scientific research in public health and tropical disease. For further information contact Tony Fletcher at the School (email [tonyfletcher@lshtm.ac.uk](mailto:tonyfletcher@lshtm.ac.uk)).

Access Monday - Friday, 9 - 5, via reception in the Keppel Street building  
London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, Keppel Street, London WC1E 7HT  
[www.lshtm.ac.uk/art](http://www.lshtm.ac.uk/art)

Design Andrea Darlow, AVPS Unit, LSHTM  
Photography Dan Salaman, AVPS Unit, LSHTM and Gary Kirkham

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**Bad air** [*mal'aria*] includes a quotation from p26 of *THE WHITE NILE* by Alan Moorehead (Hamish Hamilton 1960, revised edition 1971) copyright 1960, 1971 by Alan Moorehead, which is reproduced by permission of Penguin Books Ltd.

