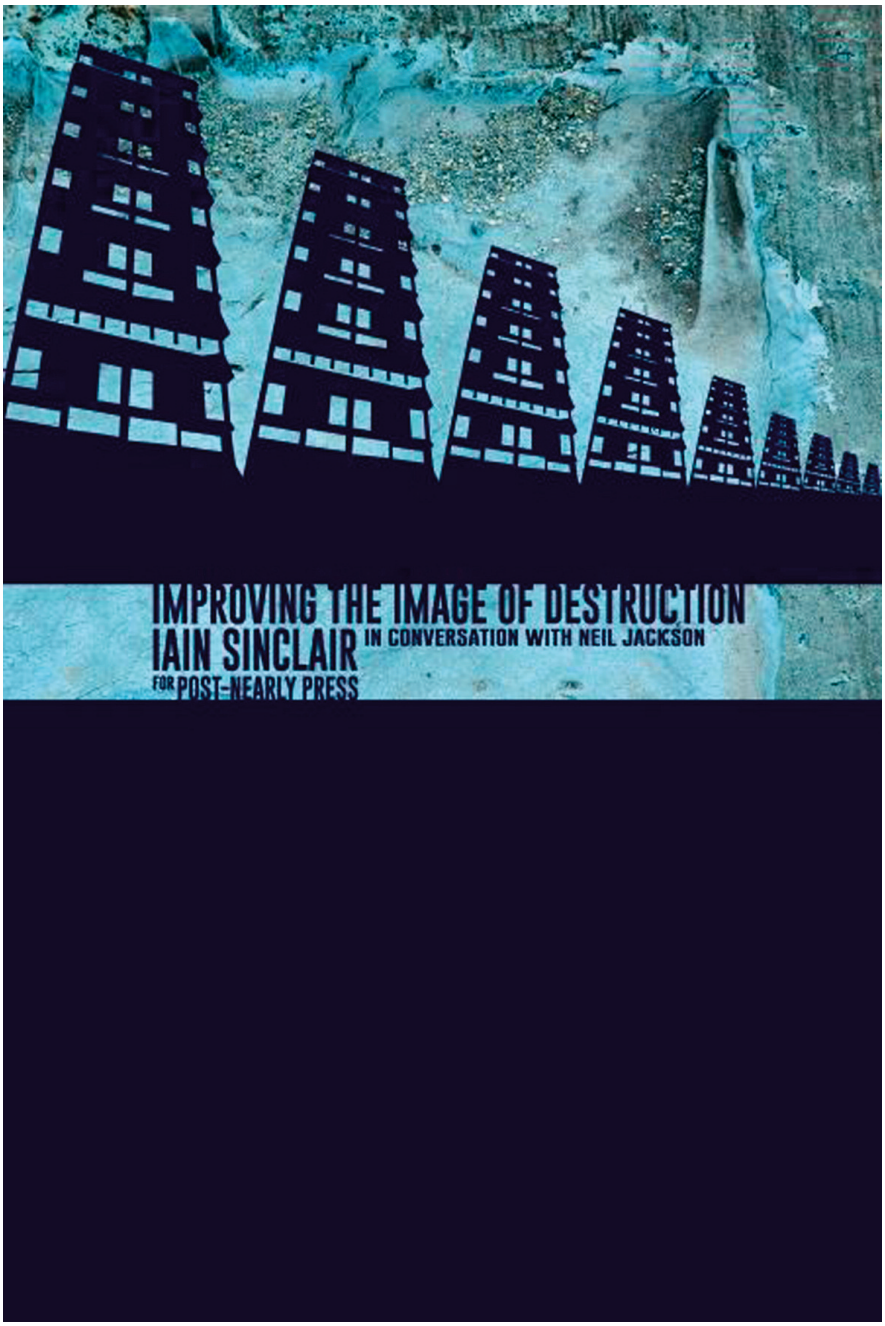
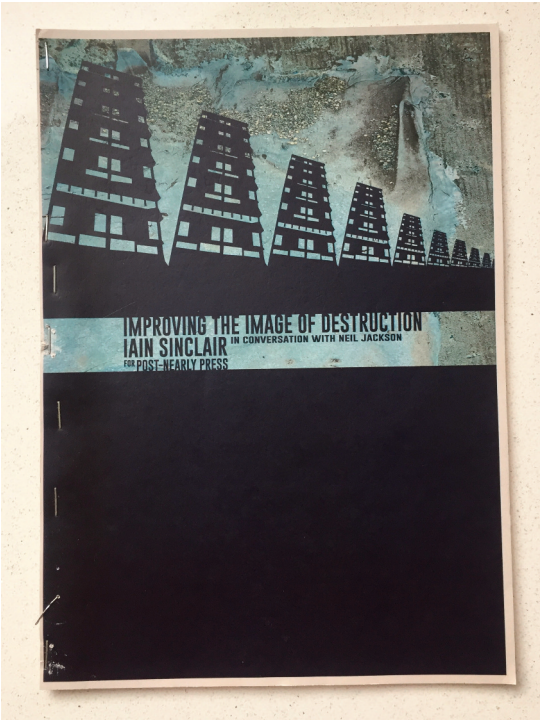

IMPROVING THE IMAGE OF DESTRUCTION
IAIN SINCLAIR
IN CONVERSATION WITH NEIL JACKSON
FOR POST-NEARLY PRESS

the watchers
are falling asleep



Iain Sinclair
London, 2014

Neil Jackson: Throughout your work you seem to draw magic out of superficially ordinary things, unearthing energies – is there some method to achieving this?

Iain Sinclair: There's a process whereby the navigation of territory carries within it a fictional germ. By whatever strange combination of circumstances, I ended up in a particular part of East London - which was never part of any plan or design. My way of making sense of it was to undertake journeys, often on foot, and to try to invent strategies that would provide me with narratives. I would meet people by accident, listen to their tales, tease out the history of buildings. It's like being a detective – a kind of memory detective – with the understanding that London is a gigantic corpus of stories, a network of broken radio connections. You're never going to get to the end of it, but different modes seem applicable to different periods of a life. It might be making a film with Chris Petit, accessing an alternative history from a reforgotten text - or composing a diary report on doing a particular job in the ullage cellar of a brewery. It might be listening to people yarning in the pub about the true and false myths of their manufactured biographies.

NJ: Buildings in themselves, how you view them, this is a significant part of it?

IS: Absolutely. Buildings are autobiographies. Particularly buildings like the Hawksmoor churches, a big thing for me. At the time of *Lud Heat* I was working as a gardener in the area, just looking at these structures, trying to make some

sense of their power. They seemed to be confirming a dominant presence, and yet, at the time, in the early '70s, nobody was taking much interest in Hawksmoor as an architect. With Christopher Wren's lighter churches punctuating the wards of the City, I felt a connection to the political establishment and to established financial power. They may be very elegant in design, but they're giving the City what it wanted. They are re-enforcing the image it chooses to manufacture for itself. The Hawksmoor churches were *outside* the City. They were renegade. Strange frontier po sts for something else, imposed on a bandit landscape.

NJ: Central to what you do is the act of walking – in fact you've alluded to it bringing about a particular state.

IS: Walking itself, if you have the time to walk for a period of hours, does engender a fugue-like state, which is an interesting thing to achieve. You get into a natural rhythm, establish a dialogue with the landscape, and it brings with it a receptive state of mind for creating fiction or gathering documentary evidence, whatever you might be doing. So in that sense it's a useful tactic. In another sense it has almost become a radical political act just to walk. The whole political bias in London is moving towards getting people onto bicycles; so you have these rows of blue Barclays-sponsored cycles, and you're supposed to ride about advertising a disgraced bank that isn't even putting money into the scheme anymore. Bicycles are taking over the pavements, the canal banks, everything – and of course walking, as a life style, goes to the bottom of the pile, because there's no way you can exploit the

walker. There's nothing to buy into, nothing can be done with pedestrianism, unless you can get walkers dressed up in sponsored T-shirts advertising some conspicuous charity. Making a designer boast about ecological credentials. The walker is the last anarchist of the city.

NJ: There's a sense that everything, particularly with London, is now scoped out as a branding opportunity.

IS: There's always a slogan. *Improving the image of construction. Working for a better Hackney.* People come with their own advert. Even myself: to carry on being published, it only works if I have a brand - and that brand is to do with walking. I find that a little bit depressing. I'm stuck with it, but really that's only an element of what I'm interested in. One development with city walking is the way so many people are wired in to electronic devices. Physically they're moving; mentally they're not. At Liverpool Street station you can be swept aside by them, coming at you, heads down. Gabbling. Shouting. Jabbing at screens. So all those benefits I've been mentioning are no longer part of it. You're logged in to the supernova digital cloud, speeding away from the sense of a physical locality. It's eroding the *present tense* of the act of walking. When you do that, you're taking everything away.

NJ: Devices are powerful in the way they end up changing mass behaviour.

IS: I feel that what I do is already redundant. It's from another age. There are still a lot of people doing exactly what I

do, but it's not the way the world is configured. The ability to navigate a passage through a large book, or to negotiate a complex structure, is vanishing fast. You want what you want before you know what that is. You want it *now*. Students who might be looking into the things I do, for an essay or a doctorate, wouldn't dream of reading the books. They send an email and ask if they can come round, so that I can tell them what I'm on about. Bullet points. Make a recording. Transcribe. Print. Edit.

Just like this, our conversation. I think JG Ballard was the person for whom the interview form, or the transatlantic phone conversation, became as visible as the books. The publication of the *Re/Search* collection of interviews in 1984 was a significant moment in Ballard's career. Personality, attitude, archive were as important now as text.

NJ: There's a published interview, where you talk more broadly on this topic.

IS: Yes, it was by a guy called Jarett Kobek, a recorded telephone interview from America. It's a booklet he published in San Francisco called *Walking is a Radical Act*.

NJ: Did you use recording devices for the *Hackney* book? It contains a number of interviews.

IS: For *Hackney,* and the books around that period, I started to use recordings of voices but shaped them as monologues. I edited out my questions – which of course slanted the way the conversation would go.

So even what appears to be an innocent piece of recorded evidence is actually a gently manipulated fiction. I tried this technique in my first book, *The Kodak Mantra Diaries*, way back in 1972. So I haven't evolved very far. The voices serve something of the function of the photographs in a Sebald book. They play with balance, punctuation, the flow of attention.

NJ: It brought about some illuminating sections: the solicitor Bill Parry-Davies, talking about corruption – and Rob Petit's account of Hackney's surveillance nerve centre, this anonymous room constantly accessed by the Metropolitan Police.

IS: I was astonished by all that. At the surveillance-monitoring centre in the old council buildings in Stoke Newington, there is a remit, which is not to *intervene*. The watchers might see something going on, but it's very much a case of *get the image*. Get the image and we'll see if we want to do something later on. The watchers are falling asleep in front of the screens. It did remind me, when I was doing *The Falconer* with Chris Petit, of the period when this kind of technology was only just coming in. They gave Chris a free hand to go up to the City of London surveillance centre and just play with the cameras. They didn't know, at that point, how to use them. He was free to pan and zoom as he fancied. Then they let him take the tapes away. We edited some of them, with paranoid overlay, into the finished Channel 4 film. Techniques of surveillance and control are now much more sophisticated. You hardly need this clunky stuff. You can't move without being in the movie. London is a surveillance labyrinth, with the City at the heart of the maze. Banks, money. Bad art.

Eyes in the sky. Imported military technologies, originally from Northern Ireland. Checkpoints. Snatch squads. Number plate recognition. Denser here than anywhere on the planet.

NJ: You'd imagine the watchers to be highly trained agents.

IS: And they're car park attendants. It's such a dull job. The whole mentality struck me as being very East German, the whole idea of this vast clerical class just watching. But a more alarming aspect of Rob Petit's research was carried out around a new housing project, a square near here in Hackney, bristling with cameras. The people who are normally outside, drug dealing, doing things on the street which basically affects their own peer group, they broke into one of the buildings, used that space to get away from the cameras that are supposed to be protecting the incomers in the flats against crime. A man comes down from one of the flats to complain about all this noise going on, when he's trying to study, and he's killed. Literally, the protective devices led to the death of this man. Paranoia turns itself on its head. All very Orwellian.

NJ: In the documentary writing such as *Hackney,* or going back to *Lights Out*, there's a sense of determination; you feel that the words had to get onto the page. Where did that energy come from?

IS: It's always been there. It's an aspect of how I look at life - and a compulsion to negotiate my passage through it by writing. It's taken years to understand the process and to describe

it, going from something like a neurotic instinct to simply get the words down, to a fugue-like state of writing as my only way of being in the world. But the 'self' in the written material is a 'formed self'. It's an exaggeration, it's not an entire portrait, and of course there are some things I wouldn't go into – but I've created a persona which allows me to write about certain things, certain experiences somewhere between documentary and fiction. And those lines get very, very blurred.

NJ: At certain points readers might ask themselves how fictional or factual things are.

IS: My wife is reading *American Smoke*, the book I've just done, at the moment. There's an episode in Berlin that occurs in a strange hotel in the Mitte district, where I go up to a room and there's this couple already there. In the bed. It's all very odd, and she identified it as a passage I'd obviously made up for some kind of effect. And it was completely true. But alternatively quite banal things can be manipulated to sit better in a narrative that is shaped by the grammar of a novel.

NJ: You saved up and started the Albion Village Press, in order to get your writing printed and out there. Was it a reaction against the literary industry?

IS: Through the 60s I'd had minor dealings with mainstream publishers and published in magazines like *The Transatlantic Review*, but I never felt that the kind of writing that I wanted to do belonged there. I didn't want to manipulate the form of the work to make it acceptable to anybody.

Rather than wasting a lot of energy and time sending in submissions and so on, I didn't even go there. It was never on. So why not do that older, traditional thing of publishing yourself, taking responsibility for every stage of production, and see what happens? It was economically feasible to operate in a small way. I think the first book, Back Garden Poems, cost fifty quid. But I didn't expect to get any money out of it. I knew a printer on Balls Pond Road who had an interest in making nice looking things. It was an era when some functional, independent, well-designed chapbooks and pamphlets had come out. Bill Griffiths, Allen Fisher, Barry MacSweeney, Tom Raworth: those people were producing their own work. It would never have occurred to them to waste time going to Faber or OUP. They just did it: hit and run. There was a community, an optimum potential readership of about four hundred people, and that was enough to sustain it. By the advent of the Thatcher era, it had become too expensive. Everything went quiet for quite a while, until the desktop revolution allowed the scene to start again. Online blizzards: infinite material and no time to sift and register. It now requires beachcomber skills to identify the active ingredients.

NJ: How did you get these artefacts into people's hands? Bookshops are fairly closed off to this.

IS: They are now. There was a shop back then, Compendium, in Camden Town, which at one point expanded to include a whole shop just for poetry. They were good people who worked there too, knowledgeable and engaged: a guy called Nick Kimberley who now teaches and is an opera critic,

and later a Scotsman called Mike Hart who'd been in the Camden markets selling books on the street. They were very sympathetic to experimental, unsponsored, guerrilla writing. They would not only stock it. They let interested parties know that they were stocking it. They built up a nexus: shop, market, railway connection. Healthy social geography. Everybody who was interested in the genres they promoted – poetry, US fiction, hardboiled crime, sf, politics, Situationism - would gravitate to the shop. Mike Hart would ring me up and tell me if, say, a fresh American import had arrived: the latest Ed Dorn or a consignment of rare Douglas Woolf titles. I would jump on the North London line. I would pick up stuff from Bill Griffiths or Allen Fisher or Kathy Acker, and I would leave my own Albion Village Press books by Chris Torrance, B.Catling or Jeremy Prynne. A cultural/social network evolved from that shop. There were magazines that circulated information. Operating by post, I might have sold thirty or forty copies. Compendium allowed me to get sales up into the hundreds. That was the entire local culture really. Also important, at that time, was the support of Eric Mottram, an American Studies lecturer at Kings College. He organised regular readings, events and conferences, where the poets tended to meet each other, get involved, and acquire each other's books. And go drinking after the events, form alliances, arrange to travel across the city.

NJ: People must still be interested in putting out printed material independently.

IS: There are people who operate locally, Will Shutes and Jess

Chandler, based here in Hackney, calling themselves the Test Centre. They are very active, very bright. They've done things like pop-up curations, vinyl LPs, book catalogues, stapled publications and some handsome books by people like Derek Jarman. They are interrogating the past in a proper way. They've done a book of mine called *Red Eye*, something that I didn't do through Albion Village Press in the 1970s. It was set aside and then lost for years. Test Centre resurrected the project with great tact. It looks much better than it would have done, if I'd let it out in 1973. Will seems to be attempting a form of time travel. He's addicted to qualities he identifies in the older poetry scene. He sits up all night re-typing perfectly smooth laptop scripts on a manual typewriter, going back to faded grunge. An affectionate pastiche of what was being done, back when that was the only way to do it. People are very interested in the idea of cultural archaeology, often connected to place: retro, cool thing, like vinyl LPs and mimeo poetry.

NJ: There is a decent level of interest in these things. In Newcastle you see the odd independently printed magazine, and there are still poetry readings in pubs.

IS: In Newcastle you have Morden Tower created by Connie Pickard and Tom Pickard in the 1960s. Tom got in touch with Basil Bunting and initiated a scene that brought poets like Allen Ginsberg and Ed Dorn to read there. I went to Durham and read a few times in a pub called Colpitts. The to-ing and fro-ing between Newcastle, Durham, Liverpool and London, was constant.

I was up in Newcastle more recently with a promoter called Paul Smith. Paul is the presiding spirit behind Blast First and King Mob. He was presenting a travelling show, with Alan Moore and musicians like Susan Stenger, loosely based on Priestley's *English Journey*. Tom Pickard made a return with a spectacular reading. We showed archive film of Basil Bunting and the young Tom. Some of the people there were quite moved because they hadn't seen this footage for quite some time. Old hands were revisiting their youth, younger folk were getting the first exposure to a particular kind of energy.

NJ: You keep the memory of lost London writers alive, referring to them a great deal. Does this hark back to the bookselling days?

IS: Yes, a lot of it comes out of the bookselling days. The discovery of a category of writers I call the 'Reforgotten'. They were constantly talked about, people saying: 'You must read Alexander Baron's *The Lowlife*. You must read Gerald Kersh, Maclaren-Ross, Patrick Hamilton.' Round and round it went. A significant cadre of interesting writers who were just not part of the canon at all. By being in the second-hand book trade, I'd be finding the books and reading them. *Hangover Square*. *Night and the City*. Arthur Machen. John Cowper Powys. *They Drive By Night*. *Wide Boys Never Work*. Robin Cook. *The Crust on its Uppers*. Jim Thompson. David Goodis. *The Pillar of Cloud* by Francis Stuart. Céline's *London Bridge*.

NJ: You must have some good first editions of those writers.