

'When I Lived in Modern Times': Archive, artefact, album.

Exhibition dates: 16 Sep – 12 Nov 2005

Preview: Thursday 15 Sep 6:00 – 8:00pm

James Carrigan

"It is all the more important that when an avalanche of memory discourses seems to have overwhelmed an earlier activist imagination of the future, that we remember the future and try to envision alternatives to the current status quo."

Andreas Huyssen, 'Present Pasts'

James Carrigan's 'Machine #1.4' comes out of an interdisciplinary practice that draws upon both fine art and radical design. The Machine is at once a sculpture and an installation, a pavilion, and a form of temporary architecture. Interpreted as a response to the history of sculpture, it can be viewed as extending the idea of the mobile by transforming it into architecture. The mobile, which has had little currency since Alexander Calder's time, has had a recent revival of interest and is a form used by such artists as Eva Rothschild. Seen as a form of architecture, the Machine is a counter-intuitive, radical mode of building. Read as part of the history of artists' pavilions, the Machine continues Dan Graham's concern with modernist ideals of transparency and translucency, and intersubjectivity. Like Graham's pavilions, it is monumental, of sorts. But the Machine is not solid, permanent, or static: it is immaterial, luminous and dynamic in form. The Machine can also be read as redirecting Buckminster Fuller's utopian ethos into other areas of investigation – Carrigan's geodesic dome has poetic rather than pragmatic intent. For Carrigan, experimental art and architecture are about creating 'liminal' spaces that are able to inspire new types of thought. 'Machine #1.4' does not sit in any existing typology of artwork or design.

The Machine is a complete spatial environment designed to transform its 'container' and provoke a multi-sensory, emotive response. The Machine is built from 40 ceramic foam triangles which initially sit parallel to the ceiling. Over time, the triangles are gently lowered into a floating hemi-sphere over 8-foot in diameter at its base. When the dome raises it becomes an explosion of shards before returning to the ceiling. In its lower position, the dome contains one viewer at a time, becoming an immersive environment. As only one individual can 'enter' the Machine at a time, others view it 'in the round'. Seen from the

outside, as a dome, the space provides associations of shelter and comfort, as a counterpoint to the disorder of urban environments. It resembles Mario Merz's shattered glass igloos, which provide primal associations of protection. As Merz has noted, the igloo or dome is a kind of ur-building, the most basic form of habitable environment with which we can all identify. Unlike Merz's domes which are sculptures, but like Dan Graham's pavilions, participation is essential to experiencing the Machine. However, as the Machine runs ad infinitum both with and without an audience, it lends itself to multiple interpretations. Its cyclical motion – an endless life of opening and closing, enclosing and revealing, imploding and exploding – can be seen as representing either the emancipatory potential of technology or man's pointless investment in machines. On opening, it reveals nothing; like the fictional rooms and spaces created by fellow artist Thomas Demand, for example, Carrigan's space captures a sense of both vacancy and futility, albeit using what he calls "the aspirational language of the man made object or invention". Rather than simply 'occupying' space, the Machine is about defining a separate domain for individuals to meditate and entertain new thought. Carrigan is deeply interested in the possibilities of producing new space, but wrong-foots our expectations. Whilst 20th century artists and designers perceived space in relation to new technologies and future psychological needs, Carrigan's work is like a ghost reanimating the modernist machine, utilizing its language to unexpected ends.

Carrigan's ability to create a genuinely new experience is a philosophical-poetic quest with technical innovation as its means. The Machine is a unique, bespoke environment which is, in this sense, a kind of prototype for the future. In fact, every aspect of the work is both bespoke and a prototype: it requires over 1,000 custom designed and built components. Carrigan's use of ceramic foam panels lends the Machine an exceptional delicacy and translucency – the structure itself appears and indeed is almost weightless. The material is ordinarily used in the aerospace industry for its unique combination of solidity, strength and lightness. Here, it offers viewers the sense of being contained within a concrete structure whilst being permeable to light. The artist also notes that it appeals to touch and hearing as much as sight. Ceramic foam is both highly tactile yet strangely immaterial. During transformation, it also reveals its acoustic properties, creating soft echoes and 'protecting' its user from sound outside. Such technical requirements, however, merely reflect the fact that the Machine is an unprecedented experiment in the production of space. In motion, the Machine articulates space at 180 points as its guided white panels move from a flat plane into a dome, via an explosion of shards. Solid matter seems to become ghostly; geometrically pure forms become

fractured and angular; the room as a container becomes an entirely different contemplative environment within seconds. By offering us contrasting states, Carrigan invites us to meditate on how the design and the conditions of thought are inseparable, and what a unity of art and architecture might still be.