

## Rory Macbeth

"The unheimlich or 'unhomely', as the 'uncanny', is perceived wherever we are reminded of our inner tendency to yield to obsessive patterns of action. Overruling the pleasure principle, the daemonic in oneself yields to a 'repetition compulsion'... Emptiness is here the purported familiar, and your house is endlessly familiar, endlessly repetitive. Hallways, corridors, rooms, over and over again... A lifeless, objectless, soulless place. Godless too."

Mark Z Danielewski, 'House of Leaves', 2000

Rory Macbeth's interests converge in the relationship between ideals and the reality that they try, or claim to represent, and the divergences between ideals and their realisation. Several of his diverse works establish a gap between the purity and clarity of ideas and intentions, and the messy contingencies, contradictions, and conflicts of the social realm. His work 'Utopia' uniquely extends these interests into the public arena. In July 2006, the artist recreated the entire 44,000 word text of Sir Thomas More's work onto every interior surface of a condemned building – a former hostel for the homeless, the Manor Hotel in Sunderland. In the gallery, the work is seen through a video which documents the creation of the work as well as walking us through every corner and corridor of the building on its completion.

'Utopia' combines three disparate elements – a classic of Western literature; protest writing; and a structure scheduled for demolition – to highlight their common concerns. Recreating More's text in the style of protest slogans upon an incongruous site transforms it into a kind of concrete poetry. Rather than being encouraged to read the entire text in linear fashion, certain phrases and clusters of words jump out from the mass of text and take on an unexpected significance. Certain passages acquire unintentional ironies, where words become wrapped around corners and between surfaces: a stainless steel oven bears two half-words 'kingly digs'. But the impact of the work is cumulative rather than in individual details: over every floor, wall, ceiling and fixture of the 40 bedrooms, across bathrooms, staircases, offices, service rooms, and corridors, we encounter an alarming flow of text. Disconcertingly, More's text begins at the very lowest point of the building, and the 100 pages can be followed up the five floors into the loft as though we were ascending to a place of grace. Engulfing us into a field red paint removes our normal points of spatial orientation: we lose sense of how the planes of floor, wall and ceiling relate. And as the text is not four-square, but begins in one corner and spirals down from the ceiling to floor, even our horizon lines are off-kilter, further transforming our sense of space. Though we are aware that the site was a home for 40 individuals, Macbeth's transforms it, through a simple action and a labour-intensive, repetitive process, into an extraordinarily 'unhomely' space.

The artist's choice of site brings several sets of connotations to the work. On the one hand, the hotel had in its latter years become a hostel providing emergency accommodation for those at the very bottom of the social spectrum – the homeless. Underneath the work, the hotel's advanced dilapidation is clear: a less ideal or idyllic set of living conditions would be hard to imagine. Accordingly one way of viewing 'Utopia' is to see it as a contrary act of civic-spirited generosity, enabling us to have free access to a literary masterpiece and an artwork. The artist's medium in this enterprise, as outlined, is protest writing, or at least its appropriated style. As he has noted, the medium is "associated with political protest, the desire for radical change, and both idealism and nihilism". It is, in other words, an expression of the desire to improve the world, or remake it to one's own dreams. Such writing is a form of address aimed at transforming society, yet whose medium is (to the majority) 'anti-social'. The most memorable instances of such writing encapsulate a utopian wish into desecration of the built environment, such as the revolutionary slogan from May 1968 in Paris, "under the paving stones the beach". As Macbeth remarks, "Protest graffiti is a particular form of political comment that has remained unaltered for as long as there has been writing: it is sandwiched awkwardly between free-speech and vandalism, and its content caught between idealism and pragmatism. It communicates with urgency, and is anti-aesthetic. It states its case by desecrating the fabric of the society that it has issue with." 'Utopia' appropriates this tradition to alternative ends, transforming a wreck of a building into a 'house of ideals' – a philosophical treatise in physical form – where ideas envelop and engulf us. More's 'Utopia' is, famously, the extreme example of a perfect place – literally a no-place, though in Macbeth's hands takes on the sense of being painfully concrete and tangible. Again, what might be described as 'form' and 'content' are in a paradoxical relationship here.

Logically, any improvement requires an end-goal or ideal that we can imagine or indeed visualise before taking action to proceed towards. Macbeth asks us to perceive parallels between the process of imaginatively re-shaping the world at the 'macro' level of social organisation, and the 'micro' of an individual building. More's text asks us to envision another universe in its entirety, in which all conflicts and political problems have been eliminated. The urban 'improvements' that include the regeneration of the area surrounding the Manor Hotel similarly requires developers, architects and planners to think of the site as a world-in-miniature which is to be improved.

Macbeth's work, however, exploits the fact that More's text is famously double-edged: and as the artist notes "More's work is not really proposing a better world, but is rather a measured and systematic critique of society, and highlights the problems of change, power-struggle, and political ethics that is as relevant today as it was then." The artist's intention is that we might read condemned buildings as sites where power is to be exerted. 'Utopia' marks a turning point in the life of an area, from under-use into a cultural quarter, and its destruction precedes a new civic enterprise that will house not only businesses, but artists' studios and a gallery. Macbeth remains optimistic and sanguine about the effects of redevelopment, noting "condemned buildings are symptomatic of change: even their billboard advertisements that are used to promote new developments are in almost 'utopian' language. And the language that legitimises the new development is frequently as utopian as the language that legitimised the old building when it was constructed."

From '**Utopia**', 2006, spray paint. Generously supported by Arts Council England and Sunnyside Partnership.