

Stephen Turner

"Architecture is more than an array of technologies designed to shelter us from the storm. It is an instrument of measure, a sum total of knowledge that, contending with the natural environment, becomes capable of organizing society's time and space."

Paul Virilio, 'The Lost Dimension', 1991

Stephen Turner's works are concerned with our experience of time and duration, and the dialectics of transience and permanence. Each of Turner's works emerges out of a research process into a particular site and the effect of time upon it. Each involves the artist intervening to explore or articulate its state. Though some of his projects result in objects, others are temporary public installations; others, like his work in 'Theatrum Mundi' are performative or action-based. Most, however, have involved the artist spending concentrated periods of time in uninhabited or abandoned locations, enabling him to observe changes in how the man-made world and the natural world co-exist. Turner's works are, at root, concerned with how experience of time is affected by site, perception, and ritual.

Over the last decade, one of Turner's principal areas of exploration has been the landscape and architecture of the Thames Gateway. The 'Seafort Project' links his interests in duration and performative practice, in coastal architecture, and the environment of south-east England. For six weeks between July and September 2005, Turner became an unorthodox artist-in-residence in the Shivering Sands fort complex in the Thames Estuary, eight miles off the coast of eastern England. Built in 1942 as anti-aircraft and observation platforms, the forts have been derelict and unoccupied for nearly fifty years. Each fort is composed of seven connected buildings which originally housed nearly 300 men; Turner however, based in the searchlight tower, spent the 40-day project entirely alone. This extended period of enforced isolation became an experiment in the effects of solitude and space upon consciousness, and in how we experience changes in the flow of time under such conditions. The forts, unlike almost any location on dry land, are by definition inaccessible and therefore a true wilderness. The monastic conditions the artist endured – taking only basic supplies of food and water along with a communications kit to ensure survival – recall the solitary pilgrimages and retreats of St Francis or other religious figures.

The period of duration Turner chose to undertake this engagement – six weeks echoing a standard tour of duty during WWII – was sufficient for him to lose sense of all ordinary routines and rituals. Being removed from every element of the modern world forced the artist to adopt different habits of being. Over the course of the work, as the artist notes, he became fully immersed in a different mode of existence based upon observation and meditation rather than activity. Indeed the artist's texts record the daily responses to his environment, pieced together through accumulated evidence: "the experience of being here is a jigsaw of mental, physical and emotional responses to a new environment." In the gallery, Turner pieces these together through a 'jigsaw' of images, texts and fragments of found objects from the fort. The presence of artefacts, images of the coastal atmospheric conditions and the building's textures and materials, and the artist's series of texts vividly convey a sense of place.

Without electricity or artificial light, Turner found himself entirely dependent upon the contingencies of climate and season, having to alter the basic rituals of living to accommodate this. The lack of power provided him with the opportunity to enter a state of absolute isolation where the clock-time of industrial society was absent and only the natural rhythms established by sunlight remain. And at the same time, the fort was designed as a dwelling of sorts, with basic accommodation, rather than an escape from it. Having no light pollution also underlines the difference between seasons even over a short timescale as well as clarifying the beginning and ends of days: "the rhythm of a day [here] has to follow the cycle of the sun: it feels good to be so tuned in to the turning of the year."

We might say that the Seafort demands three distinct types of attention and embodies three different time-frames. For Turner, it instilled an acute awareness of the changing length of daylight hours, of being in contact with the earth's diurnal rhythms. Secondly, the fort contains remnants from its history – photographs, clothes, letters, remaining immovable furnishings from two generations earlier. It is akin to a half-century old time capsule. Turner's diaries document the oddness of finding faded black-and-white cut-outs of film stars past still pasted to walls, intact but surrounded by pockmarks of rust. Thirdly the building as a whole is in a slow state of dissolution, the decay on its surfaces recording its own entropy. The marks of decomposition

are the structure's most prominent feature: Turner describes it as "a world of iron oxide now". However, his own brief inhabitation left more marks and he notes that "traces of my own brief journey here, will lodge in the flaking and peeling, patina of place [even while] bearings, casings, radiators and fans are melding into single homogenous form." The artist's descriptions of the Seafort mix poetic and archaeological diction; the building is a monumental space which is both akin to a tomb and a chapel. In his words, "the environment is one of steel and concrete being beaten into rust and dust... When people leave, or stop caring, nature soon takes over again." Turner's experiment in the effects of space and time upon consciousness, and his own resulting personal experience paradoxically allows us to share in a public history. In drawing attention to an extraordinary corner of the built environment which remains largely unseen, and to part of our collective history which has been submerged, we are made aware of quite how much of our 'heritage' is just outside of our immediate field of vision. And made aware of the contingency of the ways in which we order the world through routine and repetition.

Images from '**Seafort Project**', 2005

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