

'Theatrum Mundi: performance architecture'

8 December 2006 - 03 February 2007
Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art

INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION

The metaphor of the 'theatrum mundi' is best known through the phrasing in Shakespeare's 'As You Like It': "All the world's a stage / And all the men and women merely players..." It has a currency stretching back 2,500 years, deriving from Plato and here carries dual meanings. On the one hand, it characterises the way artists re-imagine the built environment as a stage-set that choreographs our actions and in which we become 'performers'. Several of the artists for example, create performative works or require the audience to undertake actions in response to their interventions. On the other hand, the term also expresses how buildings, rather than individuals, are the principle 'actors' in the world. A number of the artists create essays in the 'architectural uncanny' where institutional buildings become animate or sentient, as though they were competing elements in a Darwinian struggle for survival.

James Carrigan's 'Machine 3.1' can be read as a maquette for a monumental sculpture, or as a proposal for an adventurous architectural intervention. 'Machine 3.1' fills the cavernous space of the former Wapping Power Station with a structure which repeatedly lowers and raises a cast of the entire floor from ceiling to ground.



'Machine 3.1', 2005, mixed media. Supported by Arts Council England and Complete Fabrications.

Will Duke's three-screen installation 'Zone' is a computer-generated animation recreating a childrens' play area surrounded by tower blocks, in which a slide , bench and see-saw build then dismantle themselves repeatedly, in a cycle of decay and regeneration.



Still from "Zone", 2006, Three-channel 3D computer animation, 10 minutes

Sam Griffin's drawings, esoteric belief systems including folklore and magic are intertwined with architecture, language, and memory. Griffin's drawings function as "points of confluence" between ideas, locations and devices loaded with mystical and historical resonances.



'Ankh-f-n-Khonsu', pencil and gold leaf on paper, 2006, from the series 'Oranur'

Rory Macbeth's video 'Utopia' documents a temporary work created in the public realm - spraypainting the entire 44,000 word text of Thomas More's 'Utopia' over every interior surface of a disused hotel imminent prior to its demolition.



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

Emily Richardson's three-screen video installation 'Petrolia', made using timelapse photography, creates an uncanny poetry from the construction of oil-rigs off the northern coast of Scotland.



Stills from 'Petrolia', 2005, three-screen video projection, 7 minutes. Soundtrack by Benedict Drew. Commissioned by The Lighthouse, Glasgow.

Tim Simpson's installation 'Subversive Sightseeing' transforms a tourist's telescope overlooking Hungerford Bridge into a virtual space where our fears and anxieties seem to be rendered uncannily real.



From 'Subversive Sightseeing', 2006, single-channel video installation. Thanks to Henry Hobson and Chris Hand.

Stephen Turner's 'Seafort Project' documents the artist's six-week long residency in the Shivering Sands Seafort - a disused WWII fortress eight miles off the English coast. Turner's images and texts detail his "exploration of isolation, investigating how one's experience of time changes" in almost monastic solitary confinement.



Images from 'Seafort Project', 2005
Supported by Arts Council England: South East, Kent County Council, Canterbury City Council, Creative Partnerships, Mowlem

DISCUSSION TOPICS

Stephen Turner lived in a derelict army fort for 6 weeks as part of the 'Seafort Project'. Living in isolation and documenting his experience of this can be seen as a more unconventional way of making art. Can you think of any other artists that work in a similar way? Historically, which art materials and processes are considered to be more traditional?

Make a list of words that describe your response to the exhibition and discuss these with your peers.

How would you describe the exhibition to someone who hasn't seen it?

What do you understand by 'Utopia'? What would be your personal Utopian vision?

Different buildings can evoke different feelings, such as strangeness and familiarity. Think about buildings you have visited, then write down and compare the different responses you had to each of these places.

KEY WORDS

Alienation
Architecture
Built Environment
Documentation
Environment
Installation
Maquette
Monument
Performance
Regeneration
Site-specific
Space
Sublime
Time-lapse
Urban
Uncanny
Utopia

ACTIVITIES

Photograph a room in your house or school and using Photoshop change how it looks by creating a different atmosphere. Think about how you would prefer the room to be. Or think about ways in which you could turn the room into a site-specific installation. Alternatively, print out the image and work over the top using painting, drawing, writing and collage.

Choose a building that interests you and, from memory or using a photograph, make a detailed pencil drawing of this. Think about scale, perspective, shape and composition.

Will Duke's film 'Zone' uses revolving cameras to capture a children's play area and tower blocks in Glasgow. Using a mobile phone or digital camcorder, hold the camera at shoulder level as you walk through your school corridors or playground. Experiment by slowing down and speeding up the film to see what different effects you can create.

Consider the meaning of the theme 'Architectural Uncanny'. Collect together images from newspapers, magazines or the internet and put them in a sketchbook. Also take photographs of your own that you feel express this idea.

Using a webcam make a time-lapse recording of the view from a window at home or school. Watch the film and write a description of the changes that occur over time.

Stephen Turner made a detailed diary of his living environment for 'Seaport Project'. Look for the architectural details in your home or school, such as walls, floors, ceilings, door handles and window frames. Focus on details that you may not often notice are there. Photograph these and make sketches.

CITIZENSHIP

Sam Griffin's work examines historical belief systems, such as magic, mythology and folklore. Do you think that these ancient rituals have any relevance today? What do you think could be called a modern day ritual?

Think about buildings in your local area that are no longer used. How do you think they could be improved? What benefits would this have for the local community?

Emily Richardson's film 'Petrolia' highlights the destructive power of oil rigs depleting the earth's natural resources. Do you think that artists should make work about environmental issues? Could the work be interpreted as a political statement?

OTHER ARTISTS TO RESEARCH

Archigram
Gordon Matta-Clark
Gregor Schneider
Jane & Louise Wilson
Matthias Weischer
Mike Nelson
Paul Noble
Rachel Whiteread
Richard Wilson