

Tim Simpson

"The 'uncanny' is not a property of a space itself; it is a representation of a mental state of projection that precisely elides the boundaries of the real and the unreal in order to provoke a disturbing ambiguity, a slippage between waking and dreaming. Jentsch attributed the feeling of uncanniness to a fundamental insecurity brought about by 'a lack of orientation', a sense of something new, foreign, and hostile invading an old, familiar, customary world... he ascribes the central factor in the production of the feeling of uncanniness to intellectual uncertainty; so that the uncanny would always be something one does not know one's way about in. The better oriented in his environment a person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects and events in it."

Anthony Vidler, 'The Architectural Uncanny', 1992

Tim Simpson's work 'Subversive Sightseeing' is, as he describes, "a device to acknowledge what is already present in our imagination". For Simpson, two of the most novel factors affecting our psychology and relationship to the world in the 21st century are the exponential growth in both global travel and tourism and our accommodation of virtual space and simulacra into our collective imagination. 'Subversive Sightseeing' takes these as both its subjects, and as determinants of how we now experience urban space.

Though shown alongside documentation of its public use, 'Subversive Sightseeing' was originally a site-specific work made to be viewed on Hungerford Bridge towards the South Bank Centre in London. In this context, it took the form of a coin-operated telescope almost identical to those provided for tourists to perceive cityscapes as framed, picturesque compositions. Facing the Houses of Parliament to the north and the London Eye to the south, the telescope scans across a sequence of monuments that symbolize London to the world, and that create a space of spectacle for tourists' consumption. Placing our money in the slot and looking through the viewfinder, we encounter an image almost exactly, but not quite that which an ordinary telescope would show. The telescope shows an LCD screen with footage recorded from the very spot that the work is located. Moreover, being able to rotate the telescope through 120°, we discover that as we move, the image scans across the panorama. This, in particular, compounds the confusion between real time and recorded image. Having already instilled a sense of the uncanny, we notice various inexplicable and horrifying incidents seamlessly woven into the urban vista. Over the course of a two-minute loop, six such moments spread across the different parts of the scene. As we cannot see every part of the scene at any given time, it is impossible to register them all in one viewing.

Simpson's is a carnivalesque cityscape where the established architectural order becomes unhinged, and the stability and familiarity of iconic structures are undercut. Smoke plumes rise over the House of Commons; explosions occur over the South Bank; a capsule on the London Eye swings perilously off its hinges and dangles precariously over the Thames; a crane collapses slowly. The artist's objectives in 'Subversive Sightseeing' are to re-wire both the tourist's gaze, and to reveal to us that our landmarks and urban spaces are more 'screens' onto which we project our aspirations and anxieties than accumulations of brick and stone. In this latter respect 'Subversive Sightseeing' echoes novelist Jonathan Raban's formulation that "the city as we imagine it, the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration and nightmare, is as real – maybe more real – than the hard city one can locate in maps and statistics". Simpson recognises this, and his work initially presents the 'hard' city prior to transforming it into a 'soft' space, where myths are made concrete. His simulacrum of London fuses the virtual and actual worlds so convincingly that, though reminiscent of Hollywood disaster films, we accept his scenario as real and are made to feel like witnesses more than spectators. The tourist, seeking delight in the ways that a vista is choreographed, becomes party to its dissolution into ruins.

The site-specificity of Simpson's work renders it especially problematic to classify. As a film, it is a cinematic meditation on urban space; as an installation it is an unscheduled intervention into the public realm. Both elements, though, are part of Simpson's wider investigation into how notions of the architectural uncanny have been transformed in our own time, through changes in technology and representation, and in geopolitics. The ubiquity of computer-generated or virtual urban space in cinema, television and gaming is unavoidable: our apprehension of civic space is as TJ Clark has argued, comprehensively mediated through 'screen capitalism'. Since the publication of Vidler's text, western cities have become the targets of spectacular and indeed cinematic attacks designed to be consumed through media transmissions. As innumerable commentators have noted, it is as though the fictional trope of epic catastrophe

has begun to be re-enacted in real space. Simpson's contention is that new images of the city have colonised our imagination, both as tourists and inhabitants: we read cities as both playground and as battleground. Subconsciously, he suggests, we anticipate that urban spaces are the stage sets for photogenic drama to be enacted. His work renders concrete Freud's first formulation of the uncanny, where the "over-accentuation of psychical reality, in comparison with material reality" over-rides the evidence of our senses.

Ranjani Mazumdar has observed in his essay 'Ruin and the Uncanny City' that there is a dialectic between "the panoramic vision of tourist photography" and the apocalyptic, hallucinatory optic of Walter Benjamin. The former "establishes monuments and display sites as beautiful and spectacular markers of the city" whereas the latter outlines an "allegorical evocation of the city as the site of ruin and the uncanny". But the latter is latent in the former, for Simpson, just as for his predecessors. Despite its use of high-tech media, 'Subversive Sightseeing' recalls traditional history painting in the age of the Grand Tour: Simpson's subject, which is similarly that of John Martin and JMW Turner in their canvases of epic disasters, is the catastrophe wrought upon the metropolis in the last days of Empire.

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