

Will Duke

"Modernism's alchemistic promise – to transform quantity into quality through abstraction and repetition – has been a failure; a hoax; a magic that didn't work. Its ideas, aesthetics, strategies are finished. Together, all attempts to make a new beginning have only discredited the idea of a new beginning. A collective shame in the wake of this fiasco has left a massive crater in our understanding of modernity and modernisation."

Rem Koolhaas, 'S, M, L, XL', 1995

Will Duke's short animations present virtual architectural spaces that abstractly explore the effects that are created by man-made structures, and question how these dictate our interaction with the natural landscape. The works force us to consider that, just as the physical development of urban society altered the ways in which humans perceive and react to the organic world, also 'abstract' advances in technology have shaped and organized society's time and space.

In a recent work, 'Project 2501', we are initially presented with the image of a derelict warehouse. As the film progresses, the building, a familiar fossil of any urban landscape, becomes increasingly engulfed by a system of metallic ventilation pipes. In the same manner that a climbing plant attaches itself to its surroundings before completely obliterating its surface, these 'alien' objects consume the disused monument, leaving no traces of its previous presence. However it becomes apparent that, unlike a climbing plant, the futuristic invaders in 'Project 2501' are not bound by the physical world, penetrating and dissecting the brickwork as if it were non-existent. The hybrid structure that remains is, paradoxically, as functionless and obsolete as it was originally. It is no coincidence that 'Project 2501' takes the inspiration for its title from the name of an artificial intelligence program that appears in Masamune Shirow's manga classic, 'Ghost in the Shell'. This programme, like Duke's 'viral' structure, is in essence a tool for the stealth-manipulation of politics and intelligence. While traversing various information networks to gather data, 'Project 2501' learns so much that eventually it manages to gain self-awareness and becomes a sentient entity. This same process can be seen in Duke's vision: the metallic pipes serve as indicators of technological networks which transcend the laws of matter. There is a definite sense that this obliteration does not occur by chance; rather it is an ordered, strategic act. What we see unfold in 'Project 2501' removes us from our normal experiences of the physical environment, forcing us to consider the other, less visible technologies that are affecting our everyday lives. The constant interplay between physical and virtual architecture in Duke's work compels us to examine the spaces between the real and the imaginary in our post-industrial society. But Duke's visions, however, can never be fully realised in the physical world. They must remain 'in-between' spaces, as simulacra, existing as he remarks, to "evoke some of the contradictions inherent in the modern human condition".

In 'Theatrum Mundi,' Duke's new work 'Zone' is a three-channel installation that recreates a Glasgow urban park and its play area. Various elements of the landscape including a slide, a see-saw and a park bench, are animated in a continuous cycle of construction and de-construction. Being built and destroyed every five minutes, they present us with civic renewal or 'regeneration' being supplanted by almost immediate decay, as though the business cycle of investment followed by retrenchment had been captured in time-lapse photography. When entering the gallery space, the viewer encounters this scenario in what the artist calls "an inverted panorama". Rather than scanning a horizon stretching outwards as in traditional cinemascope, the spectator is "trapped" in the centre of the installation. They are also rendered immobile by the camera's continual, hypnotic motion around a central point. The screen layout and camera motion are contradictory and dizzying: Duke induces both centrifugal and centripetal sensations simultaneously. This giddy disorientation echoes the demand for continual change – for a new beginning that melts all that was previously solid into air.

The format of the 'inverted panorama' invites us to view Duke's virtual space as both claustrophobic and expansive: the scene is unpeopled, so that the landscape space seems limitless, but the tower blocks looming overhead are conspicuously oppressive. Duke notes that historically one of the primary functions of the panorama has been as propaganda: it has provided monarchies and military regimes with a tool of spectacle to commemorate victorious battles. In his anti-panorama by contrast, defunct playthings become bathetic, as though the fall-out from the conflict between aspirations and realities. The see-saw and slide seem to be "almost pathetic monuments to a kind of failure", the artist notes.

The visual and aural landscapes that he establishes encompass both the utterly prosaic as in 'Zone' and those explored in science fiction as 'Project 2501'. Indeed Duke notes that "writers such as Kurt Vonnegut, Russell Hoban and Philip K. Dick are of particular significance", though 'Project 2501' also recalls JG Ballard's motifs of sentient, 'psychotropic' buildings which respond to the moods of their inhabitants. In both types of works though, Duke's almost monochromatic palette echoes the aesthetic famously outlined at the beginning of William Gibson's 'Neuromancer': "The sky above the port was the colour of television, tuned to a dead channel". Duke makes us aware that, because virtual existence has become such an integral part of our everyday lives, its effect on not only the natural, but also the man-made environment needs greater exploration. As in Gibson's 'matrix', we use 'virtual' systems of communication like the internet with such regularity that it is becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate between the real and the virtual. But, perhaps ironically, due to the immaterial nature of virtual architecture, this remains problematic. For Duke, there is no agenda to present either a utopian or dystopian future society; rather the work serves to illuminate our own current confusion, in a post-industrial world we still proceed to create.

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

