The ROTOЯ partnership between Huddersfield Art Gallery and the University of Huddersfield was established in 2011. ROTOЯ I and II was a programme of eight exhibitions and accompanying events that commenced in 2012 and was completed in 2013. ROTOЯ continues into 2014 and the programme for 2015 and 2016 is already firmly underway. In brief, the aim of ROTOЯ is to improve the cultural vitality of Kirklees, expand audiences, and provide new ways for people to engage with and understand academic research in contemporary art and design.

Why ROTOЯ, Why Now?

As Vice Chancellors position their institutions’ identities and future trajectories in context to national and international league tables, Professor John Goddard proposes the notion of the ‘civic’ university as a ‘place embedded’ institution; one that is committed to ‘place making’ and which recognises its responsibility to engage with the public. The civic university has deep institutional connections to different social, cultural and economic spheres within its locality and beyond.

A fundamental question for both the university sector and cultural organisations alike, including local authority, is how the many different articulations of public engagement and cultural leadership which exist can be brought together to form one coherent, common language. It is critical that we reach out and engage the community so we can participate in local issues, impact upon society, help to forge well-being and maintain a robust cultural economy.

Within the lexicon of public centered objectives sits the Arts Council England’s strategic goals, and those of the Arts and Humanities Research Council – in particular its current Cultural Value initiative.

What these developments reveal is that art and design education and professional practice, its projected oeuvre as well as its relationship to cultural life and public funding, is now challenged with having to comprehensively audit its usefulness in financially austere times. It was in the wake of these concerns, coming to light, and of the 2010 Government Spending Review, that ROTOЯ was conceived.

These issues and the discussions surrounding them are not completely new. Research into the social benefits of the arts, for both the individual and the community, was championed by the Community Arts Movement in the 1960s. During the 1980s and ‘90s, John Myerscough and Janet Wolff, amongst others, provided significant debate on the role and value of the arts in the public domain. What these discussions demonstrated was a growing concern that the cultural sector could not, and should not, be understood in terms of economic benefit alone. Thankfully, the value of the relationships between art, education, culture and society is now recognised as being far more complex than the reductive quantification of their market and GDP benefits. Writing in ‘Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)’, Ernesto Pujol proposes:

‘...it is absolutely crucial that art schools consider their institutional role in support of democracy. The history of creative expression is linked to the history of freedom. There is a link between the state of artistic expression and the state of democracy.’

When we were approached by Huddersfield Art Gallery to work collaboratively on an exhibition programme that could showcase academic staff research, one of our first concerns was to ask the
question, ‘how can we really contribute to cultural leadership within the town? ’ And also another question, which was why we might undertake within our annual reports or website news are one thing, but what really makes a difference to a town’s cultural identity, bringing in new people, bringing in new offices people in their daily life? With these questions in mind we sought a distinctive programme within the municipal gallery space that would introduce academic research in art design and architecture beyond the university in innovative ways. It was important for ROTOЯ to be consistent with the composition of the school and our academic profession, which resulted in the exhibition of design and architecture, along the more familiar contemporary art exhibitions. With a desire to demonstrate our commitment to research and the School’s portfolio, while presenting work in an accessible environment, ROTOЯ inevitably became selective in its programming.2 Graziela Polito’s essay, included in the review, teases out some of these issues when it asks: ‘Can artists as researchers use the [public] exhibition space as a laboratory for research?’

So what do we mean by research in the context of a public-centred exhibition programme? ROTOЯ brings together a breadth of research cultures, characterised by epistemological debate on what constitutes knowledge, in addition to creative practices that focus upon the making, designing and studying of new artefacts and aesthetic experiences. In epistemological terms, ROTOЯ can be described as generating a live tension between explicit, propositional knowledge and tacit intelligence, as well as promoting experiential knowledge and the critical review of all these claims. There is an ongoing perception in the UK that STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects have greater research focus than non-STEM subjects. A functional definition of a good university education is all too readily linked to employment statistics: we are often asked if our graduates take on the university sector in the economy, and across society more broadly. It was within this context that we wanted to stimulate a discussion around the idea that design and architecture might directly contribute to societal needs, a question which incorporates an understanding of the cultural value of our work across these subject areas. In addition, we have a prerequisite to make academic research more transparent.

One of the main challenges we found was in aligning our research objectives with those of a municipal gallery. In the light of the experience that our work will have to be publicly-aware and accessible to all. Through ROTOЯ we perceived these challenges as a positive friction that brought different sensibilities and expectations together towards a joint aim. Therefore, from the outset, the partnership introduced a model for interpreting and accessing each exhibition. These included Gallery staff and University staff working together on an exhibition interpretation a public presentation by each exhibitor during the preview night, reading groups which were formed around each exhibition; and a student ambassador programme – to enable students to be trained, briefed and timetabled to give public tours about their tutor’s work. Exhibitions also featured a related film night held in the gallery, as well as educational workshops and bespoke visitor feedback channels.

A key objective for ROTOЯ was to create dialogue and debate with the Gallery’s existing audience, and at the same time develop a new audience, perhaps one from further afield. In the spirit of ROTOЯ, we especially welcomed the audience that valued what is underpinned by academic research. In this respect we wanted the programme to have enough of is a sense that the freedom to disagree and conflict – on how to make new connections so that creative and conceptual work, which is underpinned by academic research, can be accessible and affect a public and their locale.

We related the idea of bringing colleagues’ work to Huddersfield. Much of the art and design work has already been shown in a variety of international arenas or in other national venues within the UK, but it had never been shown collectively in Huddersfield, which is where our practice is carried out. In this respect we wanted the programme to be seen as a critical investment to our students, to show them in a sense we are bringing the work home. We imagined ROTOЯ as a dynamic propeller blade refreshing and responding to the culture around it, like a lung it both inhales and exhales. Our mandate became: ROTOЯ is both inward and outward facing; aiming specialist research practices; it is both a laboratory for research and architecture moving between the concerns of the academic community towards the Huddersfield town locale and broader public.

Herbert Marcuse argued that the role and knowledge of the artist is a complex problem in contemporary society. The more advanced people are from their inner needs, he suggested, the more fragmented they are in relation to the society in which they live and work. Likewise, the more society becomes alienated from the experience of art, the more people may resist it on the grounds of it being too obscure to benefit daily life. This is the artist’s dilemma, and a dilemma that still faces art and design education today. Daniel Buren points out: ‘[…] anyone who has the courage and the foolishness to show what they have done to others, and in public on top of that, opens the door to analyses, to commentaries, to criticisms and to praise.’

Including private opportunity for conversation was central to ROTOЯ’s rationale: Polito notes in her essay: ‘Artistic practice as research takes us through the specificities of a singular practice as a means of thinking the world. By means of the jumps that can be made through juxtaposition and comparison, the translation, the creation of images and the montage of elements, new connections are forged.’

ROTOЯ reflects the multifaceted nature of our intentions, its title at once a palindrome and a metaphor. ‘A well-established gallery with a varied, cosmopolitan, exhibition programme? ROTOЯ brings together a breadth of research cultures, characterised by epistemological debate on what constitutes knowledge, in addition to creative practices that focus upon the making, designing and studying of new artefacts and aesthetic experiences. In epistemological terms, ROTOЯ can be understood very positively in terms of thinking “we need to do more of this”.’

Can artists as researchers use the [public] exhibition space as a laboratory for research?

Art and design education and research, by itself, will not resolve local issues, and it probably does not have the capability of change society in a direct way. However, in its broad contribution to cultural leadership, and the impact this creates upon civil society, we believe ROTOЯ has the capacity to stimulate debate and the imageration of the women and men who can influence and respond to local needs. In this respect we began to think of ROTOЯ in the context of ‘place making’, and a programme that shares the aspirations of citizenship education to stimulate the cognitive experience that promotes the growth of individuals with respect to their creative, communal and civic capacities. The title of ROTOЯ thus encapsulates how the two institutions (the University of Huddersfield and Kirklees local authority) might effectively work together or involve around each other through collaboration and cooperation.

Continuity and Change

One of the challenges we continue to encounter with ROTOЯ is finding a balance in the programme that enables the development of expertise and knowledge as well as artistic freedom and contestation, which is fundamental to both education, creative practice and the cultural vitality of a region. The pedagogical practices and logics adopted within ROTOЯ’s art schools naturally aligned themselves to the notion of the ‘radical’, someone who is prepared to challenge institutional norms to find alternative ways of thinking and stand in support of difference. From this perspective Jim McGuigan proposed the role of the avant-garde in professional practice and teaching was not purely visual, how could it be? – but visual (ideology).3 Similarly, art critic J. Charlesworth writes: ‘One thing we have to much of at the moment is that both in art and society is a forced sense that collaboration; participation and engagement are in themselves laudable. There is, however, there doesn’t have enough of a sense that the freedom to disagree and conflict with one another in public, is fundamental to any democratic society.’

Today, art and design education is seemingly less ideological and less radicalised as current pedagogy orientates itself towards the relational and corporate negotiating a common curriculum that normally adopts transferable employability skills, academic research, manual skills and learning. This remains in the representation of what constitutes the pedagogical concept of the art and design school today, and the critical and physical requirements for educating the next generation of creative practitioners in relation to preserving democratic society.
Back in 2004 Charlesworth also proposed the most important aspect in the debate between art education and society is identifying the critical rating points around which a younger generation of practitioners might form themselves as a constituency.8

Nicholas Bourriaud’s Relational Aesthetics theory, now so prevalent in the art school curriculum, suggests connectivity and community engagement is now the mark of the publicly engaged artist, where artists’ ‘good deeds’ or community events, are aesthetised into a relational culture. In 2002 Bourriaud writes:

...Social utopias and revolutionary hopes have given way to everyday micro-utopias and initiative strategies, an ‘art’ that is ‘directly’ critical of society is futile, if based on the illusion of a marginality that is nowadays impossible, not to say regressionary.9

Bourriaud’s point is that actively being ‘local’ is crucially important, that the artist needs to be placed in a micro-politics of difference and to participate in the organisation of communal needs. Perhaps best sums up the relational turn art education has taken over the last twenty years when he writes:

‘Although art education is a site-specific process and cultural product, I share my field, which I have organised into three specific categories: the curricular, the faculty, and the community.’10

In his writing Bourriaud brings subjectivity into play to define the strategy of ‘Relational Aesthetics’ as a protector of difference in society,2

‘...as a full-blown dialogue with students engaged in critical thinking around contemporary practice, notions of informal learning, as well as formulating new ideas and theories.’11

To conclude, universities are perceived as key economic and cultural drivers and are increasingly significant shakers of cultural experiences to the public. Many of the UK’s leading artists and designers, which include our colleagues, are employed by the university sector while being engaged in public-centred professional practice.

RTOY has now established its own identity and presence in the Kirklees community: Responses from visitors have been very positive – which he suggests is a key component of civil society. He argues that the artist needs to be placed in a micro-politics of difference and working locally with others in different systems of knowledge exchange.

In addition to our partnership with Huddersfield Art Gallery, in 2012 we also formed a partnership with the ICA (Institute of Contemporary Art) London. The ICA has since worked collaboratively with the University in developing joint projects and research designed to engage and promote greater fluidity and collaborative opportunities between university students, teaching staff and the ICA’s public programme. In May 2013 we hosted a symposium at the ICA that addressed the ways in which recognisable impact, beyond academia, could be achieved through the effective delivery, measurement and dissemination of public engagement activity across art and design practices. The ICA partnership is of interest to the RTOY programme because of its innovative and challenging programme of visual arts, contemporary music, international cinema, performance live arts, talks and debates, all of which provide models to extend our research in and practices of public engagement. Of particular interest is the ICA’s Student Forum which encourages long-term engagement between the organisation and emerging practitioners. One of its key aims is to...

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CONTENTS

ROTOЯ part I 2012

9 Lisa Stansbie: Flight — Reviewed by Peter Suchin
13 Kevin Almond and Kathryn Brennand: Insufficient Allure; The Art of Creative Pattern Cutting — Reviewed by Brenda Polan
17 Barber Swindells: Mining Couture — Reviewed by Robert Clark
21 Ian Mason: Patrick Procktor: Art and Life — Reviewed by Philip Vann

ROTOЯ part II 2013

27 Jill Townley: Sisyphus — Reviewed by Jonathan Harris
31 Gil Pasternak: Future Backgrounds — Reviewed by Griselda Pollock
37 David Swann: Mobilising Healthcare — Reviewed by Jeremy Myerson
41 Brass Art: The Imagining of Things — Reviewed by Susannah Thompson
Fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another." - Walter Benjamin

Lisa Stansbie’s Flight brings to mind either a complex jigsaw puzzle or detective novel – both forms of representation where the image, structure or story requires the commitment and sensitivity of the reader-participant for its completion. Whilst such an active collaborator is necessary with respect to any and all works of art, one’s consciousness of the participatory requirements of Stansbie’s work is an implicit feature of its construction. This is both an attractive aspect of her practice giving the viewer a heightened role in the work’s fabrication, and, arguably, a frightening or disturbing one. The viewer may ask, if indeed they are capable of making the work work of setting the machine in motion so as to generate a comprehensible assemblage of interlocking parts. Stansbie’s multipart installations require not so much a reader or viewer as a performer or interpreter. In The Open Work, Umberto Eco makes reference to works of art involving processes which, instead of relying on a univocal, necessary sequence of events, offer to disclose a field of possibilities, to create ambiguous situations open to all sorts of operative choices and interpretations.

Stansbie’s playful but precise staging of multiple elements seem most aptly described by Eco’s remark. A few lines from Georges Perec’s disquisition on jigsaw puzzles may also be helpful here: with such puzzles the individual:

‘...each element’s existence does not precede the existence of the whole, it comes neither before nor after it, for the parts do not determine the pattern, but the pattern determines the parts. Knowledge of the pattern and of its law, of the set and its structure, could not possibly be derived from discrete knowledge of the elements that compose it.’

To apply these observations to Stansbie’s Flight is to suggest that decipherment of the broader picture is what one should aim for – each individual component being simultaneously a kind of mystery or puzzle within itself and a clue to a higher or more extensive...
fabrication. This is not however to claim that Flight embodies a single, simple or true meaning waiting in the wings, as is were, to be realised and recognised. The ambiguity inherent in Flight’s title is to be taken seriously: a flight or journey towards a specific place or position, but also a zigzagging or shifting about, a path or staircase, as the act of a displacement or escape.

The jigsaw analogy becomes considerably more complicated when one begins to classify the individual elements the artist employs. For example, Airfix models of aircraft are clearly a central signifier in the projected chain of meanings triggered by the work. They are microscopically rendered, representing the飞机man’s utilitarian arrangement of the parts intact. One might regard them as three-dimensional jigsaws, indispensable as the order in which they are to be assembled is determined by what they represent. Yet Stansbie undermines their representational function in a number of ways, notably by connecting together the components in a deliberately disorderly way, perhaps combining pieces from several individual kits into a single representational (though “abstract”) field. Additionally the kit’s parts are employed as “headmate” elements by being wall-mounted as complete kits. To place the pristine kit upon the wall in this fashion, giving an equal status to both the projected craft and the supporting structure in which individual components are held, is, in fact, to refuse the hierarchy of the model and its attached packaging. Instead drawing the viewer’s attention to what is literally the frame of the plane through keeping the manufacturer’s utilitarian arrangement of the parts intact having noted that Stansbie gives the audience some considerable work to do in asking them to gather together and productively order the diverse components into a single representational (though “abstract”) field. Additionally the parts are employed as “headmate” elements by being wall-mounted as complete kits.

As Brian Spiller observes: ‘the trade of public houses is peculiarly sensitive to environmental disturbance’, an epithet one may also apply, certainly in a positive and critically supportive sense, to Lisa Stansbie’s Flight.8

Notes
5. The jigsaw puzzle was invented by Spilsbury, J. (1739-1769) in 1767. The jigsaw puzzle was invented by Spilsbury, J. (1739-1769) in 1767.
7. Jean-Francois Champollion (1790-1832) decoded in 1822, the hieroglyphs on the Rosetta Stone, now in the British Museum. Michael Ventris (1922-1956) was responsible, in 1952, for the decoding of the Cretan script known as Linear B. For an account of both these major acts of decipherment see Ditchley, E. (1972). Inside the Stone. Basingstoke: Arthur Conan Doyle’s fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes, first appeared in print in 1887.
Perhaps the most arresting aspect of this stimulating exhibition is the feedback from the public, the consumers of fashion rather than the makers. There’s a sense of revelation and wonder to the comments they leave behind. These outsiders are being let into a fashion-insiders’ secret: the alchemy at the heart of one of the most glamorous industries in the world. Led to believe that the journey from designer’s sketch pad to model’s back is a short and easy one, they are suddenly introduced to the engineering, to the technical skill, to the disciplined mastery of line and volume, to the measuring and pinning, to the problem-solving, rule-breaking and innovation that turns concepts into clothes. They are meeting the pattern-cutter.

Along with some fairly repetitive superlatives – fantastic, amazing, stunning, breathtaking – gallery-goers use the words, insight, illuminating, inspired and inspiring, intricate, whimsical, subtle, complex, challenging, subversive, engaging, witty, clever, beautiful, enchanting, engrossing – the small collection of archive black dresses demonstrates how cut is fashion is historical moment. And then the calico toiles by final-year students that are the heart of exhibition reveal with great clarity the structure of the garments they have designed, a structure that out in the world, on a catwalk or in a shop window, is usually obscured by the texture, colour and pattern of the fabric, by the decorations, trims and notions used for the finished garment. Of course, the magically complex garments in the exhibition reveal with great clarity the structure of the garments they have designed, a structure that out in the world, on a catwalk or in a shop window, is usually obscured by the texture, colour and pattern of the fabric, by the decorations, trims and notions used for the finished garment. Of course, the magically complex garments in the exhibition are not in the normal run of clothing. They are bravura displays of the lyrical possibilities of the pattern-cutter’s art. Many are simply beautiful but others have wit and mischief, putting one in mind of those great experimental pattern-cutters, the Japanese. It is no accident that one of the strongest influences on young pattern-cutters is Prof Tomoko Nakamichi of Bunka Fashion College in Tokyo whose Pattern Magic and Pattern Magic 2 books (Laurence King Publishing) are required reading for all students of fashion for here are many, many ways to create flattery, illusion and mischief.

From Issey Miyake’s independent-life, bouncy dancing dresses and ‘transformer’ garments – now one thing now with the shrug of the shoulders, quite another – to Rei Kawakubo’s deconstructed, reconstructed interventions in space and Hiro Yamamoto’s spherical body cages and beyond to the next generation of Japanese designers, these are designers who understand pattern-cutting and work hip to hip with their pattern-cutters developing endlessly enchanting...
novelties which use the human body as an armature just as a sculptor does – or as a frame just as an architect would.

In his book exploring the close relationship between architecture and fashion, The Fashion of Architecture, Bradley Quinn quotes the architect and theorist of the Modern Movement, Adolf Loos’ 1898 essay, ‘The Principle of Dressing’ in which he asserts the primary of the construction of clothing in mankind’s creative struggle for shelter: ‘Young architects, he suggested, should study textiles and clothing. ‘This is the correct and logical path to be followed in architecture. It was in this sequence that mankind learned how to build. In the beginning was dressing.’ Quinn comments, ‘Irrespective of their modern permutations and respective roles as micro- and macro-structures, both disciplines remain rooted to the basic task of enclosing space around the human form.’

There was a time back in the twentieth century when the most interesting fashion designers seemed to have studied for a degree in architecture. – Pierre Cardin, Roberto Capucci, Paco Rabanne, Gianfranco Ferré, Gianni Versace, Tom Ford – and their happy preoccupation with structure was very clear. But even those with a more conventional fashion education or with none, have acknowledged the pre-eminence of structure, for without it, where is shape, silhouette and volume? Where is eye-catching difference? Where is innovation? Where is fashion? The great innovators have not been sketchpad men or women; they have got down and dirty with seams and tucks, darts and interfaces. Look closely at the work of Paul Poiret, Madeleine Vionnet, Cristobal Balenciaga, Charles James, Christian Dior, John Galliano, Hussein Chalayan, Alexander McQueen and you will find the same intensity of attention to spatial experimentation, to boundary-stretching and rule-breaking.

The finale gives the game away. It is both creative and technically accomplished. It could be taken as a long overdue beginning. Commercial enterprises that transfer star designers in the way of football teams but with less civilly may not be able to00 to out public accolades and vast salaries to the pattern cutter but a system where there is a greater support team. I remember an event at Central Saint Martin’s a couple of years ago when the journalist, Sarah Mower, was.slated to conduct a conversation with Marc Jacobs before an auditorium packed with design students. Waiting for it to start we were surprised when two extra chairs were suddenly thrust on to the stage. Jacobs had invited his shoe designer and his handbag designer accompanied him into the spotlight, giving credit where it is so rarely given, and enchanting the students who so desperately want to go work for him.

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The dual approach demonstrated by Kevin Almond in the work of the exhibition and the forthcoming Creative Cut Symposium is a substantial and exciting step forward: the work in the show very much gives the gene away. It is both creative and technically accomplished. These finalists will make great designers or brilliant pattern-cutters. The Symposium will set itself to solve many of the problems surrounding this issue where the credit for creativity is publicly vested in one star ‘designer name’ and denied to all the members of the support team. I remember an event at Central Saint Martin’s a couple of years ago when the journalist, Sarah Mower, was slated to conduct a conversation with Marc Jacobs before an auditorium packed with design students. Waiting for it to start we were surprised when two extra chairs were suddenly thrust on to the stage. Jacobs had invited his shoe designer and his handbag designer accompanied him into the spotlight, giving credit where it is so rarely given, and enchanting the students who so desperately want to go work for him.

Notes
1 Quinn, B. (2003), The Fashion of Architecture, Berg.
2 Almond, K. In conversation with Brenda Polan.
3 Tyrrell, A. (29th May 1999), British Fashion Council, Drapers Record.

There were two possible routes for the educators to take. Make pattern-cutting the bedrock upon which their fashion degrees are built – or as Anne Tyrrell, Chair of the British Fashion Council’s Student Forum, suggested in 1999: ‘We must try to glamorise the field.’ Or maybe both.
Mining Couture is neither one thing nor another. It is neither here nor there. On entering the installation an appropriate response might be bemusement. It is not clear what kind of exhibition this is. Despite the obligatory wall-mounted introductory texts, the visitor is left uncertain as to where the artist Barber Swindells (in fact the collaborative duo Claire Barber and Steve Swindells) is coming from, what she/he is getting at, what the point of the show is.

On closer inspection and reflection one can identify a mix-up of all kinds of disparate disciplines. There are elements of clothes design, drawing, documentary video, photography, sculpture, nature studies, bouncy castle construction, social anthropology. There are references to the posh finesse of haute couture and to the nitty-gritty grind of the mining industry. It’s staged in a gallery so it must be art, but it’s far from evident what kind of art we are dealing with here.

A video monitor features a collage of fragments ranging through The Pitman Poets, National Coal Queen poses, dressmaking sessions and colliery closures. In an adjacent room a video is projected in blurred focus like an animated Gerhard Richter. On the sidewalk there’s an ink and crayon sketch of 24 Hours at the Coalface by Malcolm East and, for some reason, a framed snap of a bull. A glass topped museum vitrine contains an assortment of leather glove exhibits including an exquisite miniature pair no larger than a fingernail or two. A caption informs us that in 1865 the Yeovil area was producing 421,000 dozen pairs of gloves a year and that fifteen to twenty women, mostly working from home, would be involved in sewing each pair. A noticeboard wall is a mass of scraps: dressmaking patterns, sketchbook pages, iconic publicity shots of Marilyn Monroe and Marlon Brando, notes from a countryside trek: ‘12th October 2011 2oz of acorns picked from a single oak tree by the road to fishing pond.’

And of course the puzzle gradually emerges, as the whole point. Barber Swindells’ art isn’t meant to mean one thing to argue an issue, to illustrate a thesis. Its shifting focus and slipping form is a deliberate attempt to open up connections, to ask questions that are at times as imaginatively and even irreverently played as they are academically seriously and soberly researched. Just fancy coming across that breathing Ventilation Dress spot lit only by a helmet-mounted torch in an otherwise pitch dark mine shaft. Or try to draw a narrative trajectory between Ventilation Dress and a photograph of Marilyn Monroe with her dress lifted around her thighs by the updraft from a New York subway grill. Then connect these to those petite kidskin gloves and a jotting that reads ‘Blackberries picked from Snibston “spoil.”’ Then again realize that this developing scenario is factually informed by the information that Pit Brow Lass dresses were traditionally dyed from natural sources collected at Snibston spoil heap, thus offering the local women a very particular look. Something resembling poetry starts to resonate.

Barber Swindells

Mining Couture
16 June - 11 August 2012
Reviewed by Robert Clark

Image © Steve Swindells
The most clearly clashing elements of Barber Swindells’ works lie in the traditionally mutually exclusive genres of craft design and fine art. One is supposed to deal with practicalities and aesthetic pleasantries, the other with wayward flights of utterly non-utilitarian reverie. Then there’s the clash between the clear-cut responsibilities of sociological research and the open-ended improvisations of creative experiment. A further series of dislocations result from the fact that much of the Barber Swindells’ work was originally created as part of site-specific commissions and residencies at Snibston Discovery Museum and Yeovil Glove Factory before being installed within the culturally hallowed confines of Huddersfield Art Gallery. It’s almost as if the artists are attempting to creatively curate their own past work within this very different context. So, if the work looks somewhat out of place, it’s perhaps because in fact it is.

Intrepidly, Barber Swindells put differing things together to see what happens, what thoughts and interesting quandaries might be catalyzed. This is an art of ‘what if?’ The art of collage and assemblage has of course a long history stretching back through the twentieth century and beyond. When the surrealists championed Count de Lautréamont’s chance meeting on an operating table of a sewing machine and an umbrella they recognised an utterly new kind of marvelous beauty. The willed hybrids of surrealism might look somewhat predictable by now, but the aesthetics and thematic implications of collage remain one of the most potent trends of twenty-first century art. The centre no longer holds. Specialisms are only validated by a broader focus. Our universities are increasingly informed by multi-cultural and cross-associational studies. Mixed and multi-media artists proliferate and often blur the boundaries between documentary fact and fictional make-believe. On a daily basis perception is bombarded by more images and text fragments than at any time during the whole of human history. Artists put this next to that and the other to see what imaginative spark might link the space between them.

If the visitor to Mining Couture initially finds the show bewildering, maybe it’s because we live in a state of bewildering cultural multiplicities. The health of our cultural ecology depends on drawing imaginative interrelationships. It’s a matter of disorientation and reorientation, of thinking things through anew. Barber Swindells, like any artists worthy of the name, mirror aspects of the world in which we live. Today.
The Patrick Procktor retrospective exhibition at Huddersfield Art Gallery in 2012 gave an overall impression of an artist of profound distinction and achievement rooted in an integrity sustained over several decades (paradoxically evident even during his final years which were lighted by alcoholism and loneliness). There was a probing portraitist of compassionate acuity, an authentic chronicler of his radically changing times, and a colourist of rare originality, audacity and grace. He possessed a quality which the painter John Craxton described as ‘the chic of facility’ – an uncanny ability to evoke a person, a place, a creature, still-life or a milieu with a gliding freshness; a disciplined spontaneity revealed in, say, a fluctuating watercolour wash impeccably expressing the languorous figure of a young man resting in sensual repose.

The art world reputation that had gathered around him over the years condensed in a kind of flamboyant frivolity and flippancy, a veneer of dilettante dilatoriness caused his true artistic standing to be gradually obscured and occluded, even at times critically undermined. (However, he did retain many faithful appreciative collectors and supporters, not least London’s Redfern Gallery which successfully exhibited his work throughout his career). The Huddersfield exhibition, along with Ian Massey’s 2010 monograph on the artist enabled us to realise – or at least to recall – that Procktor is an artist who we can, and should, take seriously, capable of awakening subtly pleasurable insights.

Procktor’s first exhibition at the Redfern Gallery in 1963 as a Slade graduate was a critical and commercial triumph; the critic Edwin Ian Massey

Patrick Procktor: Art and Life
25 August - 10 November 2012
Reviewed by Philip Vann

Mullins then noted, ‘When I first saw his work some two months ago I was immediately struck that here was an artist of real stature.’ Fifty or so years on encountering this lifetime survey, our responses can now be as refreshingly open and vivid as Mullins’ were then, unhindered by decades of relative critical neglect and misunderstandings, and the kinds of snidely homophobic prejudices that too frequently marred the reception of his work over the years. I for one now happily concur with Mullins’ original evaluation.

His early ‘60s paintings have many sparkling, inventive intimations of an innately graceful sensibility in their depiction of balletic male nudes. These qualities may seem submerged under a weight of sombre impasto and the heavy existential seriousness and convoluted compositional complexities of a young ‘very tall, gangling, firework-display’ of an artist (as the renowned writer and curator Bryan Robertson characterised him) finding his way. A delightful wing of the Huddersfield exhibition – though a centrally revealing one – was a wall of paintings (from the Kirklees Collection) by modern British artists who had inspired Procktor: an enchanting still-life by Christopher Wood; a vibrant mountainscape by David Bomberg; a fiercely tender assembly of male nudes in a Keith Vaughan gouache; and a tersely magisterial overview of The Antique Room at the Slade (1953) by Robert Medley. Bomberg’s example as a neglected visionary genius permeated Procktor’s experience at the Slade. Keith Vaughan never taught Procktor there but they became close friends. Procktor wrote: ‘I was very, very excited by his painting. I thought it was beautiful [...] He was the best painter of the male nude.’

Procktor’s meticulously pared-down though sometimes ecstatically diaphanous portraits from the mid-’60s onwards were rooted in the sense of joyous liberation embraced in the period. In one portrait of a psychedelic green-and-yellow scarved Jimi Hendrix, the musician’s Afro hair is miraculously conjured up in a wild black watercolour wash. In a 1969 portrait in which Procktor’s handsome, pop star aspirant boyfriend Gervase Griffiths is seen absorbed in music on his headphones, the vibrant though miniscule detail of a single Moroccan Slipper (the picture’s title) perhaps hints at the phantasmagoric inner world Gervase has access to. The tactile and empathetic fluency, ‘the chic of facility’ of such pictures is surely equal to that achieved in Hockney’s more renowned portraits from the same period – as in Hockney’s own large acrylic portrait of Procktor himself standing in profile, cigarette in upraised hand, at home in The Room, Manchester Street (1967). The degree of evocative realistic clarity is astonishing in Procktor’s 1991 oil portrait of an introspective-looking young man, Richard Salley (a painter himself and Redfern Gallery director).

Procktor’s imagination was kindled by his long painting trips abroad. He wrote, ‘The light in Egypt is violet, in China daffodil, in Venice opalescent.’ The violet Egyptian light can be seen to permeate his exquisitely layered water/land/skyscape painting of The Nile Near Edfu (1985), in which metallic paint is used to conjure up the sparkling heat haze of the mountains reflected in the water whose colours run to deeper lilac-infused tones than those of the sky they mirror. The aquatints that Procktor made following a trip to China in 1980 are masterpieces of dispassionate intimacy: in his distilled view of Peking’s Forbidden City (1989), architectural shapes and colours appear both theatrically monumental and elegantly sparse and pristine in composition. A similar kind of spatial and colourist economy as well as an (understated) compassion for anyone immersed in such an apparently clinical environment is also evident in Procktor’s remarkable large-scale oil painting Inside Old Holloway (1974). It depicts the vine-enmeshed spiral staircases descending to the immediately palpable, glowering ‘hospital hospital’ below. Two indistinct yet somehow dignified-appearing female inmates stand on the two twisting twin prison landings. Far above, a muted expanse of blue is glimpsed through a hexagonal skylight, where grey metal bars, curiously branch-like in form, seem to reach beyond the confines of the prison. Perhaps they offer a transcendent alusion to the nature of freedom existing beyond the prison confines. The artist discerns a poignant, immanent beauty even in such a stark setting.

Notes
Jill Townsley
Sisyphus
26 January - 13 April 2013
Reviewed by Jonathan Harris

Image © Jill Townsley
Arts in the late 1960s and 1970s who attributed the label ‘conceptual’ to created work that, for varying reasons, seemed to work to ‘establish’ their own physicality. This was both a matter of these works’ \( \text{objective} \) (to use art critic Michael Fried’s term, coined at the time) and their \( \text{subjective} \) – that is, the matter of their being able. But only in quite limited cases – two examples being Douglas Huebler and Joseph Kosuth – did correferences, attempts actively and systematically to eradicate these dual characteristics altogether from the artworks they produced. Huebler, for instance, produced works consisting of only a few lines of text, setting out, as it were, an ‘artwork’ but then typed onto a list of paper. This was, in the ‘double’ of the artwork. Huebler’s work ‘began to take hold’ and then produced whole essays as ‘works,’ and in so doing attempted to evade the difference between an ‘artwork’ and a \( \text{subjective} \)\( \text{realm of personal reasoning.} \)

The ‘work’ was the instruction or plan, which, in essence, both physically and visually intangible. Kosuth took this idea a stage further and produced whole essays as ‘works,’ and in so doing attempted to evade the difference between an ‘artwork’ and a \( \text{subjective} \)\( \text{realm of personal reasoning.} \)

The overall effect of Towlady’s work in Spoons is to point toward the \( \text{antinomy} \) of an artwork’s referential capacity set against its intrinsic formal autonomy. This is to say the works may always be said to refer to things in the world and yet always remain self-sufficient unto themselves. The engine of course, is one which seems to Kosuth an \( \text{antinomy} \) of an artwork’s referential capacity set against its intrinsic formal autonomy. This is to say the works may always be said to refer to things in the world and yet always remain self-sufficient unto themselves. The engine of course, is one which seems to Kosuth an \( \text{antinomy} \) of an artwork’s referential capacity set against its intrinsic formal autonomy. This is to say the works may always be said to refer to things in the world and yet always remain self-sufficient unto themselves. 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You enter the white space of the gallery. A well-placed cluster of plain white plinths house sculptural objects under protective Perspex boxes. These small objects are in fact throw-away cameras in tutti-fruity colours—orange, toffs egg blue, lime green... Rather remarkably, they have been smashed. Useless and disembowelled, these objects are fascinating. Their crushing has exposed their mechanical innards reminding us that behind the whole tradition of photography—made-easy lies a history of miniaturisation, mechanics, and optics. I found myself peering into the boxed-in camera to discover what mechanisms for the flash and so forth looked like. There was also the revelation of the film. These pre-digital cameras have rolls of film within them and as the light broke in when they were battered and exposed to light, the celluloid has been chemically altered; there will forever be a raw image, held in the fractured camera, the invisible moment of its destruction. But that is the wrong word—the cameras are not destroyed. They remain. As broken cameras they still speak, even more eloquently, with their insides made visible, of the machinery necessary to the making of indexical images, images that once held a momentary and luminous relation to a real world before them.

Making the ‘dead’ cameras, the sculptural objects that solicit our art gallery gaze they tell us something about the tenor of this exhibition by Gil Pasternak titled Future Backgrounds. It is not a show of photography; it is an installation about photography, which, therefore, opens on its uses, its rhetorics, its support for fantasies and ideologies. The gallery is not space of display but of investigation. The relations between its several elements and two key spaces ask the viewer to become a thinking participant rather than a dispassionate tourist. Yet the space of the gallery is knowingly ‘worked’ because the anticipation of being shown something—the expectation of the gallery goer—has to be invoked in order to be re-routed into reflecting on processes, politics, places and issues that cannot be shown yet are everywhere part of our visual culture. Hence the least and most unprecious of cameras are offered up as the exhibited ‘object’ in a wry parody of the white-cube gallery exhibition of modernist sculpture.

Aligned in three groupings in the main gallery space are other sculptural forms. These are uniformly black metal structures that stand firmly on the floor. They are, however, supports typically used in photographic studios for the hanging of backdrop paper against which the photographer’s subjects are usually posed. Backdrops are fake, or rather they are imagined or fabricated scenarios into which a figure will be inserted while in fact standing in the photographer’s studio. The backdrop is about the artifice with which the apparent ‘real’ of photography is staged. Making it the subject of the exhibition tells us that we need to pay attention to the backdrops of real situations to the landscapes in which we live our lives, the human geographies we populate and make.
Mock-ups of the grand style of portraiture. But on the plinth is a carpet, and a plaster Classical plinth—the stock in trade of the nineteenth century photographic studio for the carte-de-visite series. Not any old plants, these plants represent for the Northern European setting of the show; the exotic, the hot, the dry the South, and the Middle East, over there, elsewhere.

The first backdrop in the main group shows a vast prickly pear, a cactus whose leaves are pricking with sharp protective needles while also sprouting their distinctive fruits. The Hebrew name for this plant is Sabra. It is the term adopted by the emerging Israeli state for those born within its territory. Home-born, native, indigenous. Pollocks explores with all the sharpness of the prickly pear’s needles. The land where the prickly pear now grows has been both just the backdrop but is the inhabited geography of many peoples and cultures over its millennia. By the early twentieth century nationalism swept up formerly dispersed or imperilled subjects into a longing for a national identity. This could only exist when bordered to a national territory. Former co-inhabitants and new settlers, unwanted in other lands of a deadly Europe, collided to form one of the most tragic and intractable legacies of modernity, and its colonialism, imperialism and nationalism. For the Palestinian people claiming their own indigeneity to these lands, Sabra is synonymous with Zion and Zionism with colonist. For the Zionist, Sabra is the vision of the New Man and the New Woman in the age of return from millenia of exile and degradation in Europe and the Mediterranean worlds. Like these rugged, well-armed and fruitful plants, the new Israelis want to be identified with being rooted in the soil and being well prepared in self-defence. Ironically, the prickly pear is not an indigenous plant to the eastern Mediterranean. It was transplanted in the sixteenth century from Latin America under another moment of violent colonisation.

Many centuries ago, these plants have also functioned in Palestinian agriculture as boundary markers for their groves and villages. Thus the plant that is portrayed begins to unfold its many stories, its conflicting histories, and its competing uses: the deep difficulty of this place now.

The Victorians created a cultural language of flowers linking each flower to a specific, often sentimental, meaning. Pasternak has transposed this sentimental legacy to a zone of conflict and contestation, undoing the nationalist ideologies that seek to root the body unconsciously performs before the camera the gestures of class, race, gender, and sexuality? How has the ubiquity of an image of the family shaped what the family is and how it is experienced? How has the ubiquitousness of a family photograph or the family album, the complexity of the family, the family photograph. If the backdrop reminds us of the formally posed, officially created, ideological aspect of photography, the point and purpose of photography, the photograph, and the slide were until so recently our primary tools, making the machine moves on, slide by slide. For an art historian, the carousel and the slide are what has been so recently our primary tools, making the translation of physical photographs and objects into transparencies, illuminated by internal light in necessarily darkened rooms. Physical and material things, photographs or photographed things (paintings, plates, objects, sculptures, etc.) were cast as immaterial shadows on the walls. Their ephemeral and spectral power to bring the distant and unseen close begins a dialogue with the second gallery’s refusal of images and insistence on our attention being given to the machines and technologies of photography itself. This opening encounter with an archival technology of projection from the recent but almost forgotten past underlines the intention to ask us to think about the invisible and often very noisy mechanisms that make the spectacle of the image possible.

The slides that circulate on the carousel were discovered at Kirklees Image Archive. They are photographs made by a Victorian traveller and plant collector Captain H.Y. Brookes, who photographed exotic plants in situ or in the homes to which he transported them. Pasternak found Brookes’s portfolio as part of his visual research for the exhibition and it is one of the sites that he is exploring in his current academic project.

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Pasternak researches the point of intersection between two sites of photographic practice that are deeply embedded in the cultural formation of subjects and of nations: the family photograph and landscape. Pasternak has long been engaged in making sense of a relation between the informal and sentimental aspect of the family photograph and the official or national history marked monumentally into the landscape. In several publications he has looked into a wide range of interactions between family photography and landscape
and the political domain at large, most often in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, linking this specific site to the historical and theoretical discourses about family photography and family photographs. Landscape’s role in the production of ideologies of power, domination and possession has been well-documented as indeed has the family photograph as register and influence on our very sense of the most intimate of social units. Pasternak, however, brings the focus onto their intersection in order to create a new kind of dialogue between background and foreground, people and setting. Land is something other than a borrowed or occupied backdrop; living and shaping itself in performances before imagined cameras, and writing over a landscape that has other meanings for families whose installation as the subjects of their own history do not yet have a known political grammar or a recognised photographic image. This may be why the digital drawings have no background, just the outline of a re-posed figure assuming a posture constructed and rendered strange from a photograph. Thus the conversations cross-over within the photo-mechanically populated landscape of the exhibition. Can artists as researchers use the exhibition space as a laboratory for research? Can the site of the presentation of suggestive findings when the knowledge that is being produced is at once being excavated from conventions of representation and mundane realities so commonplace as to become invisible backdrops - be re-sewn across the varied points of anchorage that this installation constructs through fragile lines of communication and connection? The answer from this installation is yes. I am asked to read the elements of a perfectly constituted exhibition whose purpose is not to show but to invite me to work, to bring forth the provocations to thinking that are generated in the movement between the assembled elements, at once discrete and awaiting their chance to play a part in a larger statement.

One of the major areas of Pasternak’s research lies in provoking the ‘problem’, to name the problem, as one of space, ground and the figure, and the real and fabricated relations of the two in both time and space and in fantasies sustained by images made on site and in the studio against borrowed backdrops. This show is not an exhibition of photography it demonstrates a way to think through a set of relating issues with photography. It belongs in the field Edward Said outlined in his essay, Invention, Memory and Place (2000). There Said identifies the overlap of memory and geography that produces what he calls human space; ‘Memory is at once personal and familial, and historical and often national(s). If memory appears to be inert, aching simply because the past has happened, we are now all too aware of a politics of memory; the invention of tradition itself. Where geography enters, we also encounter histories of domination, invasion, transformation and occupation. But as Said points out there are also imaginative geographies, imposed maps and mental fantasies of space and place. The Middle East is an extreme, fragmented and significant theatre for the playing out of contested memories, effaced presences, new inscriptions on the land and erased traces. As Said suggests [behind the] media accounts [… of the conflict]… we can discern a much more interesting and subtle conflict. Only by understanding the special mix of geography generally and landscape in particular with historical memory and, as I said, an erasing form of invention can begin to grasp the persistence of conflict and the difficulty of resolving it, a difficulty that is far too complex and grand that the current peace process could possibly envisage, let alone resolve.

The point is that we need creative thinking that comes through art but does not rest simply as art. Artistic research takes us through the specification of a singular practice as a means of thinking the world. By means of the jumps that can be made through conflation, juxtaposition and transition, the creation of images and the montage of elements, new connections are forged. Here the undoing of the camera, the searing of the figure from the backdrop, and the elevation of backdrop to subject, recombines the installation that foregrounds what his academic research seeks to pierce through visual analysis.

The show’s location in Huddersfield, the use of a photographic archive of a British colonial traveller and the transplantation of botanical specimens reminds us of a deep British involvement in the land and peoples of the adopted prickly pear through the colonial Mandate (1918-1948). It acknowledges the need to de-exoticise, to move outside the garden and stirred parts of fostered plants and see more clearly the lives and their living spaces, free from the distracting metrics of imaginative invention of national tradition and its concurrent obliteration of its companion people’s sense of lived histories in Palestine/Israel. So, we have to imagine future backgrounds that might encompass all the histories, memories and dreams of this complex human space that Gil Pasternak’s subtle work involves through such a telling image as the prickly pear

Notes


5 Ibid. p. 183.
Think about design for healthcare and the spotlight inevitably falls on the systems, spaces and services of the hospital environment. Hospitals are where the real action is found in patient care – and where design innovation can make the biggest difference in terms of patient safety, whether this is related to controlling infection or avoiding medical error.

Against this background, it is all too easy to forget that more than a billion people around the globe now receive care in non-hospital settings according to the World Health Organisation; in UK alone, around 2.6,000,000 people receive care from district nurses each year. Indeed the design story in healthcare extends far beyond the confines of the hospital, even if it commands less attention outside its walls.

It is to David Swann’s credit that his pioneering exhibition, Mobilising Healthcare, part of the ROTOЯ programme at Huddersfield Art Gallery, makes a comprehensive and engaging job of redressing the balance in design for healthcare by showing how innovation also flourishes in homes and communities away from the large nursing wards, operating theatres and intensive treatment units of the modern hospital.

Swann, who leads Product Design and Interior Design at the University of Huddersfield, shines a light on some relatively neglected corners of our healthcare system – from the home visit by the district nurse to the emergency ambulance on our streets – and demonstrates how design can make a difference there too. His primary tactic is to set contemporary innovations in the field, including clinical efficiency but also enhances patient safety. The interior is designed to be easier to clean. Equipment packs containing specific treatment consumables aid clinical performance, infection control and stock control. A new digital diagnostics and communications system was mocked up in cardboard and foam, resulting in a full-size ‘looks like, feels like’ mobile demonstrator.

Pride of place among these new projects is Swann’s own award-winning redesign of the traditional black nursing bag carried by community nurses on home visits – a case which has been largely unchanged for the past 100 years. Swan’s total rethink, which formed the heart of his PhD research at the Royal College of Art, creates a portable product fit for twenty-first century purpose in terms of modularity and materials.

The new design aims to enhance patient safety by making sure that hands are decontaminated and generally improving the productivity of the health visitor. It also looks the part, clinical and efficient; indeed a key aspect of Swann’s thesis on healthcare is about projecting a professional image to build patient confidence outside the hospital.

The nursing bag innovation came about as part of a larger EPSRC-funded study at the RCA on designing the future of the ambulance. This research, and a futuristic prototype interior that emerged from a subsequent collaboration between the RCA, the London Ambulance Service, Imperial College Healthcare Trust and other partners, also features in Mobilising Healthcare.

Developed by bringing together frontline paramedics, clinicians, patients, academic researchers, engineers and designers in a co-design process, the prototype interior project began with the designers joining ambulance crews on callouts during twelve hour shifts. Key insights were translated into sketch designs, a full-scale test rig was mocked up in cardboard and foam, resulting in a full-size ‘looks like, feels like’ mobile demonstrator.

The new ambulance reconfigures the layout of the patient treatment space. There is 360° access to the patient, which not only improves clinical efficiency but also enhances patient safety. The interior is designed to be easier to clean. Equipment packs containing specific treatment consumables aid clinical performance, infection control and stock control. A new digital diagnostics and communications system anticipates a time when electronic patient records can be called up inside any ambulance racing to the scene of an emergency.

The new ambulance project is in some ways the ‘poster boy’ for Swann’s design vision for enhanced care outside the hospital. The new ambulance project is in some ways the ‘poster boy’ for Swann’s design vision for enhanced care outside the hospital.
Its ergonomic and digital innovation points to a future in which ambulances do not simply scoop up patients and ferry them back to primary care hospitals but treat them on the spot or at walk-in clinics in the community, thus easing pressure on the system.

Politically, as UK governments try to rationalise care into fewer specialist super-hospitals and close some local hospitals, such design debates are right on the money. Recent Department of Health/Design Council demonstration projects to kick-start innovation in the NHS are also given an airing in this exhibition, such as the Design Bugs Out initiative, which aimed to sit alongside a ‘deep clean’ of infection-riddled UK hospitals.

Design Bugs Out is represented in Mobilising Healthcare by Pearson Lloyd’s smart, simple and robust commode, which is made by NHS supplier Bristol Maid. The alliance of a leading British design firm with a prominent British manufacturer under the auspices of a publicly-funded initiative to improve UK health services, deserves commendation. But other parts of the world, where people have far less access to hospital care, perhaps provide the most inspiring examples of what design thinking can achieve.

My favourite case study in Swann’s compendium is the ColaLife pilot in Zambia, which takes spaces in refrigerated Coca-Cola crates to transport pods containing essential drugs around the country. This is community-based healthcare innovation at its most basic and ingenious. Indeed faced with the accelerating demands of an ageing and slimmer population, there is now growing interest in the NHS in such frugal techniques and in ‘reverse innovation’ of low-cost, high-impact ideas back into our increasingly expensive healthcare system.

Swann’s own ABC Lifesaver syringe, a brilliant innovation designed to deter non-sterile syringe re-use in the developing world by turning bright red sixty seconds after use, points the way to better, more sustainable community healthcare. It addresses the estimated 1.5m,000,000 early deaths caused by unsafe needle injections worldwide through the clever combination of a nitrogen-filled pack and a special ink that colours the barrel of the syringe when exposed to air.

By curating a show of his own and other design innovations of this kind, David Swann brings a novel and important angle to the critical debate about the future of healthcare in the UK and around the world. We may want to provide more care outside the expensive hospital setting. However, we need to design the right systems and services with the highest standards of patient safety to make it work. Recapturing the calm, immediate reassurance of the Queen’s Nursing Institute isn’t going to be easy.

Notes

For the architectural theorist Anthony Vidler, ‘the house has provided an especially favored site for “uncanny” disturbances: its apparent domesticity, its residue of family history and nostalgia, its role as the last and most intimate shelter of private comfort sharpened by the terror of invasion by alien spirits.’ In The Imagining of Things, Chara Lewis, Anneké Pettican and Kristin Majewitz, the three artists working collectively as Brass Art, act as those “alien spirits,” invading the once-private, now very public interiors of the Parsonage, a large, stone-built Georgian house standing on the very edge of Yorkshire moorland, once home to the Brontë sisters.

Inhabiting the creative spaces of the house on nocturnal visits, the improvised performances and resulting shadow-play which form the basis of video and photographic works in The Imagining of Things echo the scampering and game-playing of the Brontë children as they acted out the imaginary worlds of Angria and Gondal. The tiny books, maps and drawings of these fictional lands – the juvenilia of Charlotte, Emily, Anne and Branwell – allowed the children to invent and project narratives they could write and perform. In turn, Brass Art have used the domestic spaces of the Parsonage itself as an entry point for their own creative processes, employing the site as an expanded theatrical tableau, part transgressive homage, part performative return to the recurrent themes of their practice: doubling, mutability, liminality, the uncanny, thresholds and the spectral nature of technology in the manifestation of these themes.

Brass Art
The Imagining of Things
October 2013 – January 2014
Reviewed by Susannah Thompson
The Imagining of Things is one element of a larger, ongoing research project, Shadow Monstd/Un/Real Rooms. The multi- and interdisciplinary methods and practices employed by the artists, together with their commitment to collaborative and collective ways of working combine in this work to reveal a biomorphic approach to toposanalysis. In the exhibition held at Huddersfield Art Gallery rather than attempting a literal or illustrative re-telling or interpretation of the preoccupations of the Brontë’s lives and works, the artists’ approach to space and subject attempts to reflect or parallel the affinities which exist between themselves and the literary figures which inform their practice, living past and present. The concentric circles of narration4 woven throughout the novels of the Brontë sisters, Proust doll-like stories within stories and rooms within rooms, are formally reflected in the immersive mise-en-abyme of Brass Art’s installation. Standing within the gallery, the effect of the flickering forms and morphing, shifting shadows projected and reflected across the walls and ceiling of the space are disorientating. Half-captured images sweep and shift before the viewer, swiftly emerging and fading. Spinning, oscillating figures revolve within and beyond their projected spaces, appearing disconcertingly in front of, above and behind the viewer simultaneously. Using costume and handmade masks and props, the artists, although seen only as ethereal, spectral forms, are already in disguise. It’s as though Francesca Woodman had been cast in the film adaptation of a novel by Angela Carter. Glimpsed only fleetingly, these human-animal forms are avatars of the artists’ bodies as described by photographer Simon Pantling and programmer Spencer Roberts, ‘by the artists’ bodies as they whirled around and about the artefacts appearing disconcertingly in front of, above and behind the viewer simultaneously.’ Using costume and handmade masks and props, the artists, although seen only as ethereal, spectral forms, are already in disguise. It’s as though Francesca Woodman had been cast in the film adaptation of a novel by Angela Carter. Glimpsed only fleetingly, these human-animal forms are avatars of the artists’ bodies as described by photographer Simon Pantling and programmer Spencer Roberts, ‘by the artists’ bodies as they whirled around and about the artefacts appearing disconcertingly in front of, above and behind the viewer simultaneously.’

Many of the invisible details, traces and fragments of the artists’ improved performances in the ‘real’, yet psychologically loaded spaces of the Bronte Parsonage (specifically the Hallway, Dining Room and Mr Brontë’s bedroom) were revealed only later – the shadows cast by the artists’ bodies as they whirled around and about the artefacts and relics remained unseen by them during the performance itself. With photographer Simon Pantling and programmer Spencer Roberts, Brass Art recorded both the same space itself and a ‘Shadow realm’ sounds and images beyond the threshold of the real, ghostly, figures which appear only when the work has been completed. Although the pixelated forms within the video work are made visible through the use of cutting-edge technology, the images carry with them the remnants of distinctly older, analog forms: recalling the intrusive, salesy cross-hatching seen in the drawings of Mervyn Peake or Honoré Daumier. The enigmatic, unheimlich figures and forms – both seen and suggested – are mirrored by a soundscape created by the composer Alistair MacDonald using field recordings and the artists’ voices. As light and shadow flicker and fade, so too fragmented voices whisper, giggle, murmur and collide. Both image and sound combine to unsettle and detach any attempt at single-point perspective or ‘fixing’ on the part of the audience. Both real and virtual spaces, concrete, sonic and psychological are thus warped, playing out as an endless feedback loop in a hall of mirrors.

Like many of the architectural motifs in the novels of the Bronte sisters themselves, the artists evoke the sense of moving through spaces only half-illuminated, corridors echoing with voices half-heard. Candles, draughts, firelight, the sweep of skirts and curtains, laughter from the attic, corridors, windows - the spaces and bodies in these works are often scarred, haunted, burnt or broken yet they remain resolutely powerful. In both the novels and in Brass Art’s work for this exhibition, gendered ideologies are questioned; thresholds are transgressed, rooms stormed and images, spaces and bodies are in flux, permeable. Rosa Bratichio has written of the ‘acute awareness of the non-fixity of boundaries’ and the intense desire to go on trespassing, transgressing...4 a statement which seems to enunciate the critical intentions in Brass Art’s practice. To return to (and appropriate) the words of Anthony Vidler ‘space...has been increasingly defined as a product of subjective projection and introspection as opposed to a stable container of objects and bodies’5. In “The Imagining of Things” Brass Art recurrently deploy the vocabularies of displacement and fracture, torquing and twisting, pressure and release, void and block, informe and hyperform...4 in work that seeks to reveal, if not critique, the conditions of a less than settled everyday life.”

Notes

5 Ibid.
Contributor Biographies

Peter Suchin is an artist and critic, contributing to Art Monthly, Frieze, The Guardian, Mute, and many other publications. His visual work is discussed in Paul Crowther's The Phenomenology of Modern Art, Continuum, 2012.

Brenda Polan FRSA was Director of Programmes (Media) at London College of Fashion in the University of the Arts London until 2012, and also works as a freelance journalist specializing in fashion, design and architecture, media issues and women’s topics. She is the co-author of The Great Fashion Designers with Roger Tredre, Berg 2009.

Robert Clark is an arts writer (The Guardian), Reader in Fine Art at the University of Derby and, under the name Robert Casselton Clark, an artist. Recent solo shows have included A Silence That Has No Name, Gallery Harth, Newcastle, UK (2012), Elevage de Poussière, Oliva Arts Centre, S João Da Madeira, Portugal (2012), Th eWho of the I: Site Specific Commission, Sheffield (2010), That Faraway Look, Lancaster Gallery, Coventry (2009).

Philip Vann has written monographs on the artists Dora Holzhandler, Greg Tricker, Tessa Newcomb, William Crozier, Joash Woodrow and Keith Vaughan, and is author of Faux to Faux: British Self Portraits in the Twentieth Century.

Jonathan Harris is Professor in Global Art & Design Studies and Director of Research at WSA. He is one of the inaugural professors in the Winchester Centre for Global Futures in Art Design and Media. He is author and editor of sixteen books and over a hundred journal essays. Recent publications include The Utopian Globalists: Artists of Worldwide Revolution, 1919-2009 (Wiley Blackwell in 2012). He is also editing a book on Pablo Picasso.

Graziella Pollock is Professor of Social and Critical Histories of Art and Director Centre CATH (Cultural Analysis, Theory and History) at the University of Leeds. Her current interests focus on the image and time, on trauma and aesthetic inscriptions, and feminist interventions in psychoanalytical aesthetics as well as cultural memory and the Holocaust. She has just completed Afterimages/After-Effects: Trauma and Aesthetic Transformation in the Virtual Feminist Museum (2013).

Jeremy Myerson is a writer, academic and activist in design. He holds the Helen Hamlyn Chair of Design at the Royal College of Art, London, where he is Director of the College’s Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design, addressing people-centred design to improve life.

Susannah Thompson is an art historian, writer and critic. She is Lecturer in Visual Culture at Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh. Her academic research focuses largely on writing and alternative modes of criticism, specifically writing by visual artists and the role of writing in contemporary art practice. She has contributed as a critic to magazines and journals including Art Review,Flash Art, Contemporary, Modern Painters, Circa, Variant, A-N and MAP and has written catalogue essays and gallery texts for a number of artists and organisations.