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 engaging 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?’ The many soundbite examples of public engagement that we undertook within our annual reports or website news are one thing, but what really makes a difference to a town’s cultural identity is how the offices people in their daily lives. 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 exhibits. With a desire to demonstrate our commitment to research and the School’s portfolio, while presenting work in an accessible way, ROTOЯ inevitably became eclectic in its programming. Greasha Pollock’s essay, included in this review, touches out some of these issues when it asked: ‘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 the critical review of all these claims.

One of the main challenges we found was in aligning our research objectives with those of a municipal gallery. A lack of public engagement that have to be publicly-aware and accessible to all. Through ROTOЯ we perceived these challenges as a positive friction which 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 tutors’ work. Exhibitions also featured a related film night held in the gallery, as well as research talks and workshops, and a public presentation by each exhibitor during the preview night.

One 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 audiences that valued, and expected our exhibitions to be publicly-aware and accessible to all. Through ROTOЯ we sought to be consistently consistent. By means of the jumps that can be made through combination, juxtaposition and transition, 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. As Kimiyo Rickett, Assistant Director of Kirklees Community and Leisure has stated: ‘I think that the partnership has been successful in demonstrating that there’s a potential for really doing something; it’s definitely got me feeling; very positive; in terms of thinking “we need to do more of this”’. Herbert Marcuse argued that the role and knowledge of the artist is a complex problem in contemporary society. The more alienated 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 reject 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 Burrin 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.’ Providing an inclusive opportunity for conversation was central to ROTOЯ’s rationale. Pollock notes in her essay: ‘Artistic practice as research takes us through the specifities of a singular practice as a means of thinking the world. By means of the jumps that can be made through combination, juxtaposition and transition, 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. As Kimiyo Rickett, Assistant Director of Kirklees Community and Leisure has stated: ‘I think that the partnership has been successful in demonstrating that there’s a potential for really doing something; it’s definitely got me feeling; very positive; in terms of thinking “we need to do more of this”’.

One of the challenges we continue to encounter with ROTOЯ is finding a balance in the programme that enables accessibility as well as artistic freedom and contestation, which is fundamental to both education, creative practice and the cultural virility of a region. The pedagogical practices and legacies adopted within PGD’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, Kim McGuigan proposed the role of the avant-garde in professional practice and teaching was not just about visual, how could it be? – but visual (ideologically). Similarly, art critic J.J. Charlesworth writes: ‘One thing we have to make of all the moment, both in art and society, is a forced sense that collaboration, participation and engagement are in themselves critical in their own right, a sense we don’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 seeing less ideological and less radicalised as current pedagogy orientates itself towards the relational and corporate-regulating a common curriculum that normally adopts transferable employability skills; academic research, manual skills and affective experiences. The revolution of what constitutes the pedagogical concept of the art and design school today, and the critical and physical requirement for educating the next generation of creative practitioners in relation to preserving democratic society.

ROTOЯ reflects the multifaceted nature of our intentions, its title at once a palindrome and a metaphor.
Is it possible for artists to “work on” contemporary, public, and socially engaged art? Are the possibilities for innovative practices that are socially engaged and educate us about the social, cultural, and political aspects of our daily lives merely limited to academic research and public engagement with art? How can we define a context for the artist that is not only institutional but also connected to the process of life? And how can we ensure that the socially engaged art and design research projects are not simply focused on academic research and public engagement with art, but rather contribute to the public and society in a meaningful way?

One of the most important aspects of contemporary art education is the recognition of the artist’s role in society. The artist is not only a creator of art but also a social activist and a critical thinker who can influence public opinion and social change. The ROTOЯ programme at the RUTA University of Contemporary Arts in London is an example of this approach. The programme is based on the concept of “Relational Aesthetics” as developed by Nicolas Bourriaud, which asserts that art can be a tool for social and political change. The programme focuses on the relationship between art, society, and the public, and aims to create a space for critical dialogue and creative collaboration.

The ROTOЯ programme is structured to encourage a dialogue between artists and the public, and to promote social engagement. It provides a platform for artists, designers, and researchers to work together to create works that are relevant to the public and society. The programme is also designed to enable artists to work in different contexts, such as municipal galleries, cultural institutions, and community centres.

The ROTOЯ programme is an example of how art education can be used to promote social and political change. It demonstrates that art can be a powerful tool for social engagement and that artists have the ability to create works that are relevant to the public and society. The programme also shows how art education can be used to promote the development of new ideas and theories that are relevant to the public and society.

In conclusion, the ROTOЯ programme at the RUTA University of Contemporary Arts in London is an example of how art education can be used to promote social and political change. The programme is structured to encourage a dialogue between artists and the public, and to promote social engagement. It provides a platform for artists, designers, and researchers to work together to create works that are relevant to the public and society. The programme is also designed to enable artists to work in different contexts, such as municipal galleries, cultural institutions, and community centres. The ROTOЯ programme is an example of how art education can be used to promote social and political change. It demonstrates that art can be a powerful tool for social engagement and that artists have the ability to create works that are relevant to the public and society. The programme also shows how art education can be used to promote the development of new ideas and theories that are relevant to the public and society.
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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 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, prefer 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: ‘

‘[...] 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 laws, all the set and its structure, could not possibly be derived from discrete knowledge of the elements that comprise 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 it were, to be realised and recognised. The ambiguity inherent in Flight’s title is to be taken from different kits, but all the various parts of Flight might be regarded as pieces of the broader ‘puzzle’, so that in a sense the work is in fact comprised of puzzles within puzzles, the whole of the installation being akin to an archaeological dig in which some of the found materials (may) have been restored in a questionable or uncertain manner. The viewer is asked to imagine the act of taking apart the ‘vessel’ as much as merely arranging it into a meaningful order.

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 Doblhofer, E. (1973), Voices in Stone, Paladin. 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. Used 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 rules 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, eclectic, weird, dramatic and sculptural. 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 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 T Roh’s dramatic and whimsical second skin, from Emilio Pucci’s surreal geometric dresses 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
novities 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 primacy 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; Pasi Palanne; Gianfranco Ferri; Gianni Versace; Tom Ford – and their happy prescience 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, boundary-stretching and rule-breaking.

All of these have, however been supported in their work by an overlooked cohort of craftsmen and craftswomen whose training and tradition is not that of the fashion designer. Embedded in the atelier system of apprenticeships that paralleled very closely that of other trades and guilds, they were ever part of the infantry marching to the construction of clothing in mankind’s creative struggle for shelter. A housewife, he suggested, should study sewing. ‘This is the correct and logical path to be followed in fashion. It was in this sequence that mankind learned how to dress. 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.

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

The dual approach demonstrated by Kevin Almond in the work of the exhibition and the forthcoming Creative Cut Symposium is a substantial and existing step forward in the work in the show very much gives the gene away. It is both creative and technically accomplished. The dual approach 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 Martins: 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.

It could be taken as a long overdue beginning. Commercial enterprises that transfer star designers in the way of football teams but with less civility may not be about to hand out public accolades and vast salaries to the pattern cutter but a system where there is a greater understanding – not least and initially among the fashion press and bloggerati – of the input of the skilled and creative supporting cast is an excellent goal to be set for. Understandably, the young, ambitious and fashion-bezzled will not long for a career as a pattern-cutter until that profession’s status is raised from ankle-length to somewhere, more finitely, above the knee.
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, dressing 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 sidelines 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 notice-board 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.’

Then there are the enigmatic central exhibits. One to Twenty reproduces the design of a fireman’s leather glove (properly named a Firemaster) on a gigantic scale as a deflated inflatable playground sculpture. Ventilation Dress is a full-scale reproduction of an auxiliary fan (also known as a booster fan) used to boost the air supply to new coal mine seams. This sculptural fan however appears to breathe rhythmically and is clothed in a blue floral dress which is apparently an exact copy of the pattern of a dress once proudly worn by Miss Margaret Dominiak, the National Coal Queen for 1972. The wall-mounted texts draw my attention to the resemblance between the fan’s form and a human lung and mention conceptual clues of interconnection such as ‘seams’ and ‘fresh air’, but this could well mystify me even further.

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 darkened mine shaft. 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
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 recognized 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 blighted by alcoholism and loneliness). Here 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 reclining 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 impact 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 Elvis (1985), in which metallic paint is used to conjure up the searing heat haze of the mountains reflected in the waters, whose colours run to deeper lacquered 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 (1980), 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 wire-enmeshed spiral staircases descending to the immediately polished, gleaming prison cells below. Two indistinct yet somehow dignified appearing female inmates stand on the two ascending 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 transcendental allusion 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
The systemic sublime: autonomy and reference in Jill Townsley’s Sisyphus.

It set up a system and the system can catch part of what is happening – what is going on in the world – in appearance in the world, and suspend that appearance itself from being important. ‘The work is about the system.’

David Hockney (2003)

Artists in the 1960s and 1970s who attracted the label ‘conceptual’ created works that, for varying reasons, seemed to want to erase their own physicality. This was both a matter of these works’ ‘objectlessness’ (to use critic Michael Fried terms, coined at the time) and the realisation that this was, in fact, the matter of their being able. But only in quite limited cases – two examples being Douglas Huebler and Joseph Kosuth – did conceptualist attempts actively and systematically to eradicate these dual characteristics altogether from the works they produced. Huebler for instance, produced ‘works’ consisting of only a few lines of text, setting out an instruction or plan for an ‘artwork’. But this text, typed onto a lot of paper, was not the ‘work’. The ‘work’ was the instruction or plan, which was, in essence, physically and visually intangible. Kosuth took this idea a stage further and produced whole essays as ‘works’, and in so doing attempted to erase the difference between an ‘artwork’ and a philosophical ‘mapping’.

The legacy of these experiments for all artists, since the 1970s has been the creation of a repeated and ineluctable oscillation – both conscious in the artwork and in readings of the artwork – between focus on its physically/visually and its conceptual meaning/mapping. Jill Townsley’s works in her exhibition Sisyphus at Haleswood Art Gallery exemplify the oscillation, or tension, and explore its diverse effects.

Townsley’s Till Rolls (2011) for example consists of 10,000 cash till rolls partly and differentially unrolled towards the sky, secured by a process of structuring and structuring itself constructs structure – a totality, as it were. The ‘system’ is, of course, one of the eternal and inescapable antinomies of humanly produced structures, with complexly combined architectural and symbolic meaning. But the work’s ‘composition’ lies, ultimately, at least, in its planned visual destruction. Townsley played God. In the task of establishing conditions enabling a physical process and then setting the process into action – but the process, once active, is fully self-reflexive, meaning that it is self-fulfilled or self-controlled.

The overall effect of Townsley’s works in Sisyphus is to point toward the enigma (or what the Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci called the ‘antinomy’) of an artwork’s referential capacity set against its intrinsic formal autonomy. Thus to say the works may always be said to refer to things in the world and yet always also remain self-sufficient unto themselves. The engine of course, is one of what the radical philosopher Michael Heim called ‘not knowing’ of how to bring into commensurateness these two poles of the oscillation. An antinomy is a ‘mutual incomparability, incomparable and inevitable. Both believed four such antinomies were central to the character of existence. Two of these are particularly relevant here: firstly the interplay between space and time and, secondly, the fact of human freedom in an existence governed by several causalities.

Townsley’s Sita 840 dramatizes these two antinomies. In this installation we see a video lasting over twenty hours, where the artist writes and then erases all the numbers between one and 840 with chalk on a blackboard. Based on a music score produced by Erik Satie, though never performed in his lifetime, Sita 840 most evidently brings Townsley herself into the work. Perhaps the antinomy or ‘antinomy’ has a rhetorical resolution of sorts with this work – the oscillation between reference and autonomy is transcended (or superposed to use a category of dialectics) in the figure of gramsci that Townsley herself here assumes. Structure is enabled, necessarily, by a process of structuring and structuring itself constructs structure (the central concept and insight of poststructuralist philosophy). But Gramsci’s antinomies were rooted in an analysis of twentieth century industrial capitalism and we should not miss the industrial-commercial materials that Townsley manipulates, plastic spoons and the paper upon which till receipts are printed. Hunted by Italian fascists in 1930, Gramsci’s akin to the antinomy of nationalism and its power to institutionalize the working masses who should have been won over by communism.

All the works in Sisyphus allude to this question of society seen as a system – its principles of ordering and re-ordering. As a totality, however society’s system is ultimate, it cannot be visualised, only imagined or partially figured. Townsley, following in the footsteps of Huebler continues an abstracted yet salient investigation into orders that are as once visual, artistic, social, and institutional. Her works point toward the system’s totality, and towards the realities of its generative deme.

Notes


3 See, for example, Koeth, J. (1997), Art After Philosophy and After, MIT Press.

4 The ancient myth of Sisyphus is that of the King of Corinth perpetually set to roll a boulder up a mountain only to have it roll down again.

5 See, for example, Podro, M. (1982), The Critical Historians of Art, Yale University Press.

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, turmeric yellow, 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 false, 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.
Closer inspection down the formal queue of hanging backdrops, waving their turn in the light show us that these are the also carefully constructed images in which there is already a subject. These backdrops are already portraits, as it were. Their subjects are plants. Not any old plants; these plants represent for the Northern European setting of this show; the exotic, the hot, the dry, the South, and the Middle East, over there, elsewhere.

The first backdrop in the main grouping 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 Saba. It is the term adopted by the emerging Israeli state for those born within its territory. Home-born, native, indigenous. Pollock explores with all the sharpness of the prickly pear’s needles the land where the prickly pear now grows has been not 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 bonded to a national territory. Former co-inhabitants and new settlers, unwanted in other lands of a deadly Europe, colluded 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; Saba is synonymous with Zionist and Zionism with colonizer. For the Zionist, Saba is the vision of the New Man and the New Woman in the age of return from millennia of exile and stagnation in Europe and the Mediterranean worlds. Like these diggled, 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. Yet having come many centuries ago, these plants have also functioned in Palestinian agrarianism 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 into a zone of conflict and contestation, using the nationalising ideologies that seek to root themselves in soil by calling our attention to these plants that have come to constitute exotic places without belonging to the place. His photographs also make visible yet the irrigation tubes which these plants need as a life-support system to survive in this transplanted life in the Eastern Mediterranean. It was transplanted in the sixteenth century from Latin America under another moment of violent colonisation. Yet having come many centuries ago, these plants have also functioned in Palestinian agrarianism 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.

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 an official or national history marked monumentally illuminated by intense 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 ephemeralism 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.W. Brook, who photographed exotic plants in situ or in the home spaces to which he transported them. Pasternak found Brook’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, ethnobotanical-oriented research work into the political lives of plants in photography and its histories. There is a shared grammar at work. The Victorian photographer does not present his plants as specimens in the manner of a botanist. Rather using plinth, table and carpet as props, Brook produces portraits of these exotic flowers. It is at this point that the final element of the exhibition comes back into view. On the wall of the main gallery are digital drawings of a standing figure that adopts the pose of one person in a now invisible family photograph. If the backdrop reminds us of the formally posed, officially created, ideological aspect of photography, the portrait and throwaway camera apparently registers the informal, the spontaneous and the everyday; making of images. Yet since writers such as Julia Hirsch (1980) and artists such as Jo Spence (1979) first drew attention to the content, meaning and effect of ‘family photographs’ or the family album, the complexity of the family photograph has been analysed from many points of view. What do these images disclose about the lived politics of everyday relations 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 does the body unconsciously perform before the camera the gestures that signal the cultural fusions of masculinity and femininity, of ethnicity and otherness, of parent and child, of rationalism and (un)belonging?
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 photographer 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 extracted and rendered strange from a photograph. Thus the conversations cross-crus 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-woven across the varied points of anchorage that the 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 incite me to work, to bring forth the provocations to thinking that are perfecting composition of a photographic exhibition through a montage of elements, new connections are forged. Here the combination, juxtaposition and transition, the creation of images and thinking the world. By means of the jumps that can be made through fragile lines of communication and connection, we 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 and does not rest simply as art. Artistic practice as 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 combination, juxtaposition and transition, the creation of images and the montage of elements, new connections are forged. Here the undoing of the camera, the severing of the figure from the backdrop, the elevation of backdrop to subject, recombines as an installation that foregrounds what his academic research seeks to pierce through the specification of a singular practice as a means of thinking the world. Each of the jumps that can be made through combination, juxtaposition and transition, the creation of images and the montage of elements, new connections are forged. Here the lifting of the camera, the severing of the figure from the backdrop, the elevation of backdrop to subject, recombines as an 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. Only by understanding the special mix of geography generally and landscape in particular with historical memory and, as I said, an arresting form of inventions 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.

Notes

5 Ibid. p. 83.
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 2.6 million 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, strives to shed some 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 some he has designed himself, within a strong historical context projected mainly via large-scale black-and-white photographs.

These evocative images depict one hundred years of healthcare in the community and the home. Indeed, Mobilising Healthcare is effectively prefaced by Florence Nightingale’s assertion in 1861 that: ‘everyone will agree with me that every sick man (or woman) is better at home, if he (or she) could have the same medical treatment from the home visit by the district nurse to the emergency ambulance on our streets – and every sick man (or woman) is better at home, if he (or she) could have the same medical treatment whether this is related to controlling infection or avoiding medical error.

Against this background, it is all too easy to forget that more than 2.6 million 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.

Swann’s design vision for enhanced care outside the hospital...

Mobilising Healthcare

20 July – 28 September 2013

Reviewed by Jeremy Myserson

David Swann

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David Swann
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 older 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 reuse 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 1-3,000,000 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, immaculate reassurance of the Queen’s Nursing Institute isn’t going to be easy.

Notes

Image © David Swann
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 Mieczkowska, 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
Alistair MacDonald using field recordings and the artists’ voices. As suggested are mirrored by a soundscape created by the composer cross-hatching seen in the drawings of Mervyn Peake or Honoré remnants of distinctly older artworks, recalling the intricate, velvety the use of cutting-edge technology, the images carry with them the pixellated forms within the video work are made visible through which appear only when the work has been completed. Although many of the invisible details, traces and fragments of the artists’ bodies as they whirled around and about the artefacts Mr Brontë’s bedroom) were revealed only later – the shadows cast by 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 Angie Carter. Glimpsed only fleetingly, these human-animal forms are avatars of the artists’ bodies as described by the technology of Microsoft Kinect, a motion sensor 3D scanner used in gaming.

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 Bronte’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 scene itself and a ‘shadow realm’, a product of subjective projection and introjection as opposed to a stable container of objects and bodies.1 In The Imagining of Things Brass Art recurrently deploy ‘the vocabularies of displacement and distortion, fracture, torquing and twisting, pressure and release, void and block, 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 artworks, recalling the intricate, velvety cross-hatching seen in the drawings of Mervyn Peake or Honoré Daumier. The enigmatic, unhelmed figures and forms – both seen and suggested – are mirrored by a soundscape created by the composer Alister 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 delat 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 Brontë 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. Rose Bratich has written of the ‘acute awareness of the non-fixture of boundaries’ and the intense desire to go on trespassing, transgressing’, a statement which seems to enunciate the critical intentions in Brass Art’s practice. To return to (and appropriate) the words of Anthony Vidler’s (‘space […] has been increasingly defined as a product of subjective projection and introjection as opposed to a stable container of objects and bodies’).2 In The Imagining of Things Brass Art recurrently deploy ‘the vocabularies of displacement and distortion, fracture, torquing and twisting, pressure and release, void and block, informe and hyperform’ in work that seeks to reveal, if not critique, the conditions of a less than settled everyday life.3

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 specialising 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 Puts Us, Gallery Harth, Newcastle, UK (2012), Elevage de Poussière, Oliva Arts Centre, S. João Da Madeira, Portugal (2012), The Who of the U-Site Specific Commission, Sheffield (2010), That Faraway Look, Lanchester Gallery, Coventry (2009).

Philip Vann has written monographs on the artists Dora Holzhandler, Greg Tidins, Tessa Newcomb, William Crozier, Joash Woodrow and Keith Vaughan, and is author of Face to Face: 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.

Grażyna 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 After-images/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 emerging 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.