



ROTHB

REVIEW

ROTOR

Review: Transdisciplinary Dialogue and Debate

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The ROTOR partnership between Huddersfield Art Gallery and the University of Huddersfield was established in 2011. ROTOR I and II was a programme of eight exhibitions and accompanying events that commenced in 2012 and was completed in 2013. ROTOR continues into 2014 and the programme for 2015 and 2016 is already firmly underway. In brief, the aim of ROTOR 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 ROTOR, Why Now?

As Vice Chancellors position their institutions' identities and future trajectories in context to national and international league tables, Professor John Goddard¹ 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.² 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 ROTOR 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 Myerscough³ and Janet Wolff,⁴ 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.'⁵

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



Image © Brass Art

Brass Art

The Imagining of Things
October 2013 – January 2014
Reviewed by Susannah Thompson

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'.¹ In *The Imagining of Things*, Chara Lewis, Anneké Pettican and Kristin Mojsiewicz, 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.

The Imagining of Things is one element of a larger, ongoing research project, *Shadow Worlds: Writer's 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 biomythographic approach to topoanalysis. 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, fusing past and present. The 'concentric circles of narration'² woven throughout the novels of the Brontë sisters, Russian 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 flit 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 through the technology of Microsoft Kinect, a motion sensor 3D scanner used in gaming.

Many of the invisible details, traces and fragments of the artists' improvised performances in the 'real', yet psychologically loaded spaces of the Brontë 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 scene itself and a 'shadow realm', sounds and images beyond the threshold of 'the real', ghostly forms which appear only when the work has been completed. Although the pixellated 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, 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 distort 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 trampled, rooms stormed and images, spaces and bodies are in flux, permeable. Rosi Braidotti has written of the 'acute awareness of the non-fixity of boundaries' and 'the intense desire to go on trespassing, transgressing',³ a statement which seems to encapsulate 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 introjection as opposed to a stable container of objects and bodies'.⁴ In *The Imagining of Things* Brass Art recurrently deploy 'the vocabularies of displacement and fracture, torquing and twisting, pressure and release, void and block, in-forme and hyperform [...] in work that seeks to reveal, if not critique, the conditions of a less than settled everyday life'.⁵

Notes

1 Vidler, A. (1987). *The Architecture of the Uncanny: The Unhomely Houses of the Romantic Sublime*, *Assemblage*, No.3, July. MIT Press, p. 7

2 Gilbert, S. M. & Gubar, S. (2000; 2nd ed). 'Looking Oppositely: Emily Brontë's Bible of Hell', Chapter 8 of *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, Yale University Press: New Haven and London, p. 249

3 Braidotti, R. (2011/2nd ed). 'Introduction: By Way of Nomadism', *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, Columbia University Press, p. 36

4 Vidler, A. (2002). 'Introduction', *Warped Space: Art, Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture*, MIT Press.

5 Ibid.

