Artificial Realities

Dates //

30.01.16
30.05.17

THE
COURTAULD
Institute of Art

east
wing
biennial

Curation Introduction

Words //
Jonathan Chapplow-Hansen

'Imagination is not to avoid reality, nor is it description or an evocation of objects or situations, it is to say that poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it [...] it creates a new object, a play, a dance which is not a mirror up to nature but - '

[Spring & All, William Carlos Williams]

In this passage by William Carlos Williams, the notion of solid reality is placed against imagination, and poetry is given an uncertain location somewhere between these two realms. The twelfth edition to the East Wing Biennial aims to explore this zone of uncertainty, in an attempt to materialise what Williams chose not to articulate when he left his phrase unfinished and suspended. It intends to investigate movement and mobility in outwardly flat definitions, to find fluctuating possibilities in established truths. Its title, *Artificial Realities*, draws upon these inherent paradoxes, assuming the existence of both the organic and the counterfeit, the real and the imagined.

The exhibition, conditioned by the convoluted space which shelters it, takes the viewer through the pocket rooms and transitional spaces of the Courtauld Institute, where the works of art thematically gesture towards the transition from real to illusion and truth to fiction. Each space, from confined corridors to spacious seminar rooms, is allocated a compartmentalised sub-theme, effectively

resulting in five thematic lenses including *Traces of Memory, Alterations in Light, Falsehood & Fiction, Selected Paths* and *Transitional Spaces*. The variety of ideational content is met with a heterogeneity in media as the fifty or so works take shape in sculpture, painting, site-specific installation, video and sound formats as well as in scent.

A notable aspect of *Artificial Realities* is its use of non-purpose built exhibition spaces, including halls, staircases, and niches. Herein we can see space as a signifier of movement, flux, and liminality. Martin Buber and D.W Winnicot explored this notion of the 'in-between' as a 'meeting ground of potentiality and authenticity',[1] which one can understand as the layering of expectation and reality - the continual vibrating threshold of subject and object. Along these lines, *Artificial Realities* questions the historical, perceptual and spatial constructs of the Courtauld. The five thematic lenses dispatched across the Courtauld's inhabited spaces are meant to encourage the viewer to slow down, observe critically, and to interact with the accretions of his surroundings. In contrast to the static nature of exhibition spaces such as the seminar rooms, the inherently fluid character of hallways and staircases strive to re-contextualise the viewer's reality and disrupt the typically automatic nature of movement and passage.

As a means of linking the disparate, maze-

like character of the Courtauld, Alan Chandler has, through an intricate process of stratigraphy, created a number of site-specific mini artificial excavations directly into the physical fabric of the walls, seemingly excavating layers of paint, mortar, and memory. This architectural installation of sorts will act as means of linking the spaces, continually reminding the viewer of the mutability of the material world. This phenomenological interplay of real and imaginative will be expressed through various media: amongst over sixty artworks will appear the large scale installations of Marco Maggi and Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva, the sculptures of Gabriel Kuri, Edmund de Waal and Ignacio Valdes, a video by Sam Gough Yates as well as a novel site-specific smell installation by Anastasia Brozler. In this way, objects and their relationship to space are re-contextualised alongside the everyday flow of crowds; by addressing the functional consideration of exhibiting in a non-purpose built milieu we can explore the inherent vibrancy of problems and solutions.

[1]   Praglin, Laura, The Nature of the In-Between, p.1

Transitional Spaces

Words //
Giulia Fassone

Transitional Spaces draws together different artworks that try to engage the viewer in a discussion about both the perception and the concept of space, highlighting the ambiguity and complexity of both mental and physical space.

Approached through this concept, the mini-excavations undertaken at the Courtauld Institute by the architect Alan Chandler seek to expose not only the peculiar complexity of the building but also its history of change and evolution. The 'stratigraphies' located around the Courtauld reveal the different stories and events that have taken place within the exhibition space, made visible through the layers of exposed paint. Similarly, the network structure of the installation by Gilles Retsin in the café seeks to reproduce the weave of human transit that happens below it on a daily basis. *Reoccurring Undulation*, the work of Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva, positioned between the exhibition rooms exploring *Traces of Memory* and *Falsehood & Fiction* also engages with the locality, its landscape and its history. The repetitive pattern of fish membranes on the wall creates a second skin whilst providing a new landscape that celebrates and constantly recalls its origins.

Further reflections on the evolution of space through time can be powerfully stimulated by the sense of smell, which more than anything else can suddenly furnish an empty space with memories and emotions. *Utopia*, devised by Anastasia Brozler, creates a progressive scent trail through the exhibition spaces, reproducing the smell of humidity and foundations typical of old buildings before morphing into the smell of new, fresh paint. These fragrances evoke the memory of different places and sensations, producing in the visitor a mental abstraction; a non-physical displacement that works in parallel with the visual changes of moving around the building.

Yet space can be difficult to decipher. One may get confused and take a route for granted before realising it leads somewhere unexpected. This is perhaps one of the effects of the work by Yonatan Vinitsky titled *The Introduction [Yoo-Hoo]*, which playfully indicates a door that is not there, but could be. How is the visitor supposed to react? Vinitsky leaves it to the viewer to chose: either take it as a bad joke or as an invitation to imagine new solutions and ways to escape from an apparently enclosed space.

In this sense, *Language Descending a Staircase*, constructed in the back staircase of the Institute by Marco Maggi, is also enigmatic. We don't know if what it represents is logical or illogical, a trustworthy map or a tidy confusion of signs. Moreover, what are these signs for? What type of movement do they describe? Again mental space and physical space are presented as inextricably intertwined.

The idea is that subjective perceptions can manipulate space. These works therefore represent different stages of a conscious yet ludic psychogeography, revealing how subjective and personal the perception of space can be. Space is transitional in many ways: it changes with time, it can be actively manipulated, but through art it can in turn manipulate, confuse – even deceive – evoke, and inspire. The installation by Megan Geckler establishes an interesting relationship with space, as it at once fills and exalts the vacuum of the staircase. Its vast dimensions, its colours and its intricate structure all converge to create an environment that can indeed both hallucinate and tranquilize, as the title declares.

This group of artworks thus stimulates a number of different approaches to and ideas about space, with many pieces critically evaluating the active role of both the viewer and the artist in the process of creating reality. Indeed, a number of these works present a continuous denial of reference points, and this almost disturbing sense of movement and elusiveness is particularly perceivable in Pau Marinello's painting, *Virtual*. The canvas explores space at its strongest level of rarefaction: the Internet. The figures in the composition move fast, almost frenetically, following the rhythms of online information exchange, whilst the space they occupy almost disappears. The ubiquity of the web creates a new

reality that multiplies the individual.

But not all art is concerned with the creation of space, and the enclosure of space can generate an equally potent effect. In this sense, the work by Edmund de Waal, *In Berggasse*, plays with the concept of longing and its origin, suggesting that spatial distance feeds desire. His porcelains, enclosed within inaccessible vitrines, highlight how the position of an object, even more than the object itself, can entice the viewer and make him or her want to reach out, to suppress the unexpected distance.

Megan Geckler

Flagging tape, Dimensions N/A
© Megan Geckler
[megangeckler.com]
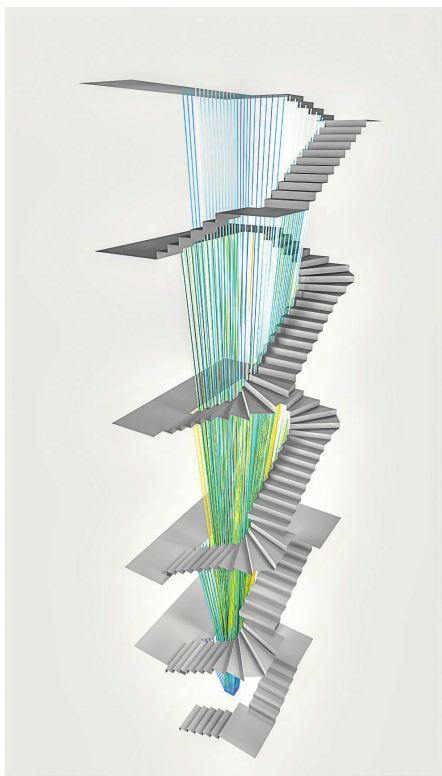

Lay it down and start up, 2011

Megan Geckler was born in 1975 and grew up in Philadelphia and Bucks County, Pennsylvania, and now lives and works in Los Angeles. She graduated with a BFA in 1998 from the Tyler School of Art, Temple University, and received an MFA in Sculpture from Claremont Graduate University in 2001. Geckler's large scale, site-specific installations rely on the unique and vibrant material of construction flagging tape and her work incorporates colour theory and mathematical calculations into experimentations with light and space. Geckler's works are extremely playful and this is emphasised by their kinetic quality. The artist's work has been exhibited internationally, including the Utah Museum of Contemporary Art, Torrance Art Museum, and the Wexner Center for Art and awards include the Visual Artists Network [VAN] Artist in Residence at Women & Their Work, in Austin, Texas [2009], The Durfee Artists'

Resource Completion [ARC] Grant [2008] and most recently, the City of Los Angeles Mid-Career Master Artist Fellowship [2015-16].

Megan Geckler will be creating a site-specific installation at the Courtauld using construction flagging tape to form a completely immersive experience for the viewer. The explorative nature of the installation can be viewed from multiple vantage points, allowing the audience to be completely engaged in the work and this means that the experience of movement and light is constantly shifting. The title, like Geckler's past work, comes from song lyrics, in this case *Electric Barbarella* by Duran Duran. The song is about a man who starts a sexual relationship with a robot that he has dressed up in fur and polyester, and to Geckler this strange relationship perfectly emulates the concept of artificial realities.

CAD render drawing
© Megan Geckler

What was your immediate personal response to the notion of *Artificial Realities*? How have you translated this into your work?

I was immediately excited about the name and concept of this exhibition. My installations begin as an image in my mind, then are planned in digital space via an architectural drawing program before being constructed by hand, on site, using hyper-saturated plastics to create immersive experiences. So, it seemed like a perfect match.

Could you please elaborate on the title of your work, *Hallucinate and Tranquilize* and how it relates to this theme?

All of my artwork titles are lyrics from songs. "Hallucinate and tranquilize" was taken from the Duran Duran song, *Electric Barbarella*. It is about a man who falls in love with a robot in the store, takes her home, dresses her in polyester, fake furs, fake pearls, and though he tries to resist, has a sexual relationship with her because she is "emotionless and cold as ice". I can't think of a situation that is more in line with the concept of an artificial reality than that.

Looking at your artistic process, to what degree do you pre-mediate your installations?

I pre-plan to an extreme. We build an accurate 3D model of the space and attempt to overcome all challenges in this stage so that the majority of our time during installation is spent executing the work. The installation process takes a long time and an extreme attention to detail, but is also very meditative in the repetition of the gesture.

Sketch for Hallucinate and Tranquilize

Megan Geckler cont.

No chance to look backwards and see, 2012

In utilising flagging tape as the material in your work, you have removed it from its innate purpose. In making the familiar unfamiliar how does your work challenge audience perception?

The decision to repurpose flagging tape, which is primarily used in the male-dominated field of building construction to create large-scale, mathematically-based artworks was deliberate, as women were commonly excluded from art historical documentation and continue to be underrepresented even today.

The colouring, scale and form of *Hallucinate and Tranquillize* captivates the audience and prompts closer inspection. How important is audience interaction in your work?

The bright colours and patterns seduce the viewer, and reward exploration throughout the space, offering different experiences from multiple vantage points and perspectives, all unique to each person's self-guided discovery.

N.B. All artwork dimensions are in
centimetres (cm)

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