

Catalogue essay : ‘... through dry places...’

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### “...through dry places...”

**B**efore we even approach the things in this exhibition, its setting and title provoke (this is perhaps their point) disquieting, pointed questions. For our expectations about what art's things might offer to - and want from - us are undoubtedly shaped by our taken-for-granted assumptions about the intimate relation between its placing and its value. We tend to set our standards by and develop our tastes through our relation to a 'tradition' (the collected 'masterpieces') which has been pinned down, protected and made comfortable in prestigious institutions by professionals responsible for every aspect of its future 'life'.

And our expectations, perceptions and feelings are reinforced by this expanding tradition's continuous representation (its instant availability should we want to sample it) across all contemporary media. Not only do we know what to expect of it, we are also taught how to respond by the texts surrounding and penetrating art's things. Through this tradition, the place of art in contemporary culture seems unequivocal, unquestionable and assured.

But what confronts us here? What might art have to do with and in an abandoned, abject building, already itself a desolate memorial to the unpredictable effects of economic change on local lives? In spite of the protection it now provides for a flourishing market, this down-and-out seems to promise nothing more than its own disappearance. Surely there could not be a more inhospitable, inappropriate site for offering art's things?

And what of the title? In its New Testament context, it refers to a man who, having been released from possession by a malign spirit, has walked “through dry places, seeking rest”. Finding none, he returns to his house to find it “empty, swept, and garnished”. Here, then, it seems to hint that art might be the ornament (garnish) that could fill the hole left by the banished malignity - art as some kind of healing 'good' replacing the 'bad'. Yet things may be more complicated than this.

“Empty...”? Perhaps. But only in the most literal sense, for the building surely bursts with signs of dead labour, of micro power struggles, of remaindered values. The art things here are added to an almost full space. “Swept...”? Well, some alien whirlwind may have swept all the accoutrements of work away, but we can see that the exhibitors have disdained any radical clean-up or transformation of the space. They have taken it on its own present declining terms. And then there is that curious “garnished...” - a homophone bearing very different meanings. For the more familiar one of a garnish as a decoration, ornament, or other quality added to something to beautify it, is challenged by its other meaning: that of precautionary measures undertaken as a self-defence or protection (such as might be provided by a guard or garrison). To be garnished is to have one's defences in place, at the ready...

Are the art things here ornamenting the building or are they defending it (and/or themselves)? Perhaps they are paradoxical objects that seek to be attractive defences, defensive ornaments. In which case, they are things that in the very moment of revealing something are also holding something back, withdrawing something from us, protecting themselves, on guard. And maybe this is one of the challenges they would like us to take up, one of the questions they may be putting to us in the very ways they appear to and before us here. For they seek to be things 'in-between', echoing the space

within which they are placed, without a clear identity, neither one thing nor another. Indeed, they may be trying to guide us through this very ambiguity towards what they take to be art's, and thus their own, contemporary fate.

What might they be doing here, so far away from the securities and guarantees of the already affirmed and seemingly prized 'tradition'? Could they, in the very ways they site themselves here, be proposing something(s) about both art's 'place' in and artists' relation to 'place' in our culture?

Each would-be art thing has already grappled with the question of where it might see itself coming into its own, being 'at its best'.

Whilst artists want each thing they offer to be responded to in its absolute particularity (what differentiates it from everything else), they also know, that how this difference is recognised and experienced depends crucially on the context in which it appears.

Undoubtedly, in choosing a place fallen out of function, whose identity has all but disappeared, a place far-removed from the circuits of cultural and aesthetic exchange, the artists here are proposing that their things might best come into their own as

edgy outsiders. Indeed they may be going further and suggesting that, for them, art's things now are effectively homeless, cannot occupy any place as their own. Condemned to wander in the marches of an awesomely complex and skilfully manipulated 'culture-machine', artists are soon forced to recognise that all resting places are temporary and precarious. Thus, lacking a destination, having nowhere in particular to go, art's things may find their needs best complemented by places sharing their plight. Such sites, being neutral and possibly even hostile in relation to the values of current aesthetic management, may suit them down to the only ground they can, temporarily and contingently, hold on to.

Having gone out of their way to be 'out of the way' (disaffiliated from the museum context), while remaining very close to the bustle of everyday activities (market/street/work), the artists' choice of media (photo/paint/video/film/computer/performance) performs a similar function. For their things take on the very media used en masse to represent us to ourselves and generate our routine realities. Yet the very point of art's way with these media is to move them and us elsewhere, to turn us aside from our 'life' within the conventions, the normal languages, of mass media representation. Taking on the conventions, the hidden common 'languages', of each medium - how they frame and guide our felt understandings of ourselves and our world(s) - the exhibits invite us to join them in slipping out of the frame. For them, the point of art-making is to offer something that, in the very process of attracting and holding all our attention, simultaneously shakes our confidence and trust in the 'givens' of everyday felt-perception.

It is this, perhaps imperceptible, trembling movement that releases us from the closures of commonsense into the difference of art's zone. Once here, immersing ourselves in and in collusion with the things, we might just catch glimpses of ways of becoming-other, of a necessarily vague openness within which we and language might, together, turn into something ever so slightly different.

Of course, we can never anticipate or set the terms for the turn away from, the fall out of, culture's binding securities. But perhaps this officeless office block, in its very infirmity, offers to take the things, restless and errant in "dry places", and us to the very brink.

**Michael Phillipson June 2005**