

## Labirynths and Islands. An interview with Mike Nelson.

When I visited the artist Mike Nelson's large sprawling installation (*Psychic Vacuum*, 2007), which he built in downtown New York for Creative Time, I found a confusing funhouse experience. Claustrophobic and exhilarating at the same time, it was possible to marvel at the enormous waste of discarded material one finds in a large city, especially if it has been put to good use in creating an alternative universe. The sheer magnitude of effort and attention to detail allowed the work to oscillate between real and imagined space. This type of three-dimensional *trompe l'oeil* speaks of our society's need to constantly negotiate between actual experience and that which is mediated or simulated, and, indeed, those situations which can accommodate the two. While his installation was built on an epic scale, the experience of moving through his site far surpasses the mere replication or mimesis of the urban environment.

**BE:** I first want to begin this conversation with talking about the exhibition in the Douglas Hyde Gallery...

**MN:** Yours or mine?

**BE:** Well let's start with your one as I remember having a conversation about melodrama while you were building it.

**MN:** Well I suppose the work (*Trip-tych*, 2009) is like a stage in its construction and certainly there was a lot of drama with the chain on the floor but what do you mean by melodrama?

**BE:** Well I was thinking about the installation you built in Essex St., New York, and how it had almost a musical quality – in a dramatic sort of way. It almost had its own theme music as you walked around it but it was up to you (the viewer) to write the music almost, one had to fill in the score.

**MN:** Yeah, I suppose it was a strange objective in the end, in terms of how you structure subjectivity and I suppose, with *A Psychic Vacuum*, was quite melodramatic in its use of objects which probably has to do with how I saw America at that point. *Psychic Vacuum* was almost the opposite to an earlier work of mine called *Coral Reef* which was a warren of corridors and dodge rooms – a squat, a minicab office and such places. So I suppose the installations are more a means to storytelling but the kind of story is not narrative driven, it's more a series of moments – an atmosphere. There was a gloominess

which you wanted to get away from, to the point that it drove you out of the space.

**BE:** Yes, I remember it, even the guest book in the entrance to the gallery was part of the fiction.

**MN:** Right. It was used rather like a contract, one in which you were making a deal with a fictional world to get into it, like the one you would make with the author when reading a book. But with *Psychic Vacuum* the work was based very much on the streets around it – psychic booths and tattoo parlors which are prevalent in that area. And it was the abandoned Chinese restaurant, which was full of the grime of the real world, that played the crucial role of being the portal letting you into the fiction of *A Psychic Vacuum*. In the work, there were lots of details from the detritus of the 60s and 70s which I wanted to overlap with the present context in America. So if *Coral Reef* was a socio political reflection on its time *A Psychic Vacuum* was more of an ideological one. Especially in the use of sand which drew on all the different connotations of sand – you know like all the images of the desert during the gulf war.

**BE:** Yes I remember the JFK portrait on the wall which used to hang on the wall in my granny's house. I want to get back to the work I made in the Douglas Hyde gallery, do you remember the one I built with the Ikea flat packs?

**MN:** Yeah I thought it worked better in Void Gallery in Derry. It was very tame in the DHg, more of a

formal object and far more in your face in Void.

**BE:** Perhaps it was too neat in the DHg - it stood politely in the far corner.

**MN:** Yes, I think so and also it should have been a lot bigger to take on that space.

**BE:** Yeah, I had wanted to use material that hadn't been used before, you know, as opposed to the grubbiness of second hand objects which have memory ingrained in them like a patina. But by using new chipboard I wanted to make something that still had the potential to be something else, something other than what it was destined for.

**MN:** Or condemned to.

**BE:** Exactly. It was still pristine- no story had been written on it if you like. The object was still a blank page. No past, no memory.

**MN:** A bit like what you seem to be referencing – minimalism or Schwitters' *Merzbau*. But in the end it...

**BE:** Of course, the work still had an element of the consumer culture, although I was approaching it in reverse as Schwitters built his environments with the detritus of the bourgeois culture he saw all around him – the object at the end of its existence. But with *A Large Complex* there is a complicated dynamic at work as it uses elements which you know are destined for the dump anyway.

**MN:** And what about the minimalist reference?

**BE:** Well, I was taught by Robert Morris in New York. But it is important to note that I am not trying to represent minimalism as a style, which would be seen as empty posturing. However, it is still a fact that objects, that are plain and unadorned, tend to be universal and accommodating as Morris used to tell me. I suppose he was the one who sent me on my current path, when, after a tutorial I asked him a question as he was going out the door. It had been on my mind all semester after some lengthy debates concerning the health of post-modernism, now that it seemed to be going the way of modernism. "Bob, what's next?" I asked. After a brief consideration he replied "Emmm, I think this is it." Needless to say, I was very disappointed with this answer. I think he was commenting on the fact that there is so much retro stuff going on.

**MN:** Well, I think that when we were teenagers there just was very little in the way of accessing information but now there is so much of it. It's much easier to make an artifice – as people assume that things aren't real they represent something else. I think that's why I am more influenced by writers than artists, like HP Lovecraft or Stanislaw Lem and of course Borges. He has a lot to say about architecture – there's a bit in his *Universal History of Infamy* where he defines baroque as a style which deliberately exhausts all its possibilities and borders on parody. Maybe that's where the melodrama comes in.

**BE:** That reminds me, are you watching the American series *Lost* at the moment?

**MN:** Not really. I saw a few of the early episodes but very little seems to happen.

**BE:** Well yes, it's true. They seem to make so much out of so little – but I thought you would be interested in the labyrinthine aspect of the island.

**MN:** Yeah I suppose the island itself is in reality only architecture. No one seems to know its location on a map or where any of the cardinal points are and the characters' wandering takes place mostly among built sites.

**BE:** What I like is that the natural landscape seems so indifferent to the people, creating no real obstacles. Instead, it's the architectural elements that establish the rules of the game, channeling the dynamics of power among the groups and reiterating the status quo of fear and paranoia which underpins the story. Which, I have to admit, reminds me of your installations. And of course there are the precarious shelters, clusters of pre fabricated constructions, bunkers hidden under ground or hidden by the landscape that act like shared spaces in JG Ballard's *High Rise*. In both *Lost* and Ballard's *High Rise*, the island and the tower block are the only sources of anxiety and restlessness on the part of their users because, in so far as they are architectural devices, they are strategically predisposed to control. Are you reading any Science Fiction at the moment?

**MN:** To be honest I really don't have much time to read anymore, I mean books like *High Rise* and *Solaris* are now so ingrained in my thinking that I feel I have enough now.

**BE:** What about Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*?

**MN:** Yes, that's a good one. It was a real page turner but at the same time I thought there was something opportunistic about it whereas the other novels I read of his were more interesting – like the *Border Trilogy*. But I remember, last time we were talking, you were asking me about Robert Smithson.

**BE:** Yes. About *Partially Buried Woodshed* and why you used it in your work. But also if it had any relevance to his ideas about place/non place. Is it an issue for you?

**MN:** Well I am comfortable working in galleries but I think I prefer working off site – Venice, Istanbul, Margate. But I really don't mind, it's not an issue for me, it's not a stance. And for the recent New York show (303 Gallery) I brought my own place with me in the form of these old trailers I picked up in Indiana.

**BE:** What about the Situationists, were you ever influenced by them? I am thinking of the Margate installation where there was a dark room full of developed photos of the sea and local architecture.

**MN:** I think with our generation, who were brought up with punk

and Malcolm McLaren, were touched by that scene – you know making theater on the street and so forth.

**BE:** What about Constant and his *New Babylon*?

**MN:** I remember being shocked when I found an early catalog – the illusionistic quality of its photomontages, as though the future had actually happened and its relationship to other architectural modern cities; its ambition and its hint of menace.

**BE:** Very much in the vein of Ballard.

**MN:** Yes. I am not sure, either, what it was supposed to solve. Constant presented it as though it was a solution, whereas I felt it worked better as a provocation. I mean who was going to pay for all of this. In other words, was this a prelude to revolution or the production of it? And where was nature in all of this?

**BE:** I suppose what we are really doing, decade after decade, is going over again and again a more fully lived culture from within its perpetually disappointing realization! I must confess that my interest in *New Babylon* is not as a thesis of the architecture of information technology, but its antithesis. It always looked to me that it depended on real space, shaped communally through physical switches, not something in virtual space. Speaking of which, what is it like building *Coral Reef* again?

**MN:** Really messy. There almost seems like an insecurity about my decisions now in relation to my

decisions then. It's all about trying to make sense of what to do as opposed to my decisions back then. I guess I don't have the motivation of the moment. I do believe that objects and environments have a sensibility given by the way they have been executed – built touched and felt. It all seems so different now.

**BE:** Also the times it was built in – 1999 – were very different.

**MN:** Yes, and in terms of how it was read. It means it has to be read now as an artifact, you know, from another era. I am also trying to negotiate its clumsiness – it was purposely badly built but also badly built. I couldn't build back then as well as I can now. So it's quite difficult trying to keep that feel. There is a danger at the moment in which it becomes really slick.

**BE:** You mean it could almost become real....

March 2010