

Animals that from a long way off look like flies - Lisa Le Feuvre

In 2005 Radcliffe Metrolink Station —a station on the Bury to Altrincham line in Greater Manchester— heralded the phrase “From the tower falls the shadow”. Beaming blue in a neon-handwritten font underlined by its own shadow, the statement pointed out in a northbound direction from Bury, a town once at the heart of the textile industry that spurred the first wave of the Industrial Revolution. Capital flows initially took place via the canal network; later as technology developed the railways became the link to national and international markets. Unspecific, yet clearly metaphorical, this phrase has been loosened from its referent, awaiting contextualisation by whoever happens to read it. Perhaps it is referring to the Tower of Babel, or to a skyscraper reaching above the skyline, or even to some kind of scaled-up sundial. The somewhat portentous language insinuates that there is a significant meaning intended – but what it might be is open to interpretation.

This statement-poem is a work by the artist-collective Brass Art for the Bury Text Festival. From the Tower falls the Shadow developed from a research project in the town five years earlier where the three-artist group mined the uncatalogued archives of Bury Art Museum in the curatorial initiative Paradise Revisited. For a century local residents had deposited materials in the archive, producing a portrait of a location at the heart of Britain’s trade empire, with the largely unordered items tracing the industrial and colonial past of the town. During the exhibition visitors were invited to bring their own additions, extending the collection with yet more subjectivities. As well as inviting artists to rifle through the deposit, Brass Art presented their own work Icing Lessons 1-6 where they attempted to remake a bone and ivory pagoda from the Museum collection using cake decorating materials. The activities were filmed and played back in six chapters with the activities sped up in a constant loop, as if the architectural reconstruction was a race against the clock to capture the past before it disappeared.

Brass Art is a singular artistic-identity constituted of the artists Chara Lewis, Kristin Mojsiewicz and Anneké Pettican, operating from the dual locations of Manchester and Glasgow. Exploring, adopting and mis-using established systems of ordering, apparatus for seeing and the expertise of specialist craft hobbies, Brass Art conducts an artistic practice that resolutely situates itself just outside of familiar realms. In Paradise Revisited the items highlighted from the collection included lotus slippers for bound feet, toys, texts, lists, and bears’ feet. The project operated rather like the famous Chinese encyclopaedia described by Jorge Luis Borges where animals are “divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.” Led by Brass Art, Paradise Revisited looks as much to the spaces between the objects themselves as it does to the items and the compilation they form. As with Brass Art’s own practice, the classification of Bury Art Museum’s collection is a constellation of ideas that only sit together through a simple act of naming. In his introduction to *The Order of Things* Michel Foucault cites Borges’ list, pointing out that the ordering system has “insinuated itself into the empty space, the interstitial blanks separating all these entities from one another. It is not the fabulous animals that are impossible, since they are designated as such, but the narrowness of the distance separating them from (and juxtaposing them to) the stray dogs, or the animals that from a long way off look like flies. What transgresses the

boundaries of all imagination, of all possible thought, is simply that alphabetical series (a, b, c, d) which links each of those categories together.” In this juxtaposition and separation of animal-varieties, alternative perceptions of the surrounding world are opened in a proposition that questions assumed and taken-for-granted understandings of the world. Language has the power to form associations and once inscribed in words networks become possible and material.

In a later lecture delivered in 1967, *Of Other Spaces*, Foucault expands on a liminal location that he first mentions in his preface to *The Order of Things* – the heterotopia. He describes heterotopias as “disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because [...] they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences”. In *Of Other Spaces* Foucault defines the heterotopia as a space located somewhere between reality and utopia. Unlike the utopia which exists in the realm of desire, heterotopias are “real places —places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society— which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.” These spaces operate with different ordering structures from that of normal operations: their existence provides an alternative social structure exposing different ways of behaving and classifying knowledge, wisdom, experience and ideas. Foucault cites examples of the heterotopia as the funfair, the prison, the vacation or the ships village, and others could include the airport, the museum or the spaces of confinement bordered by ‘no trespassing’ signs. All of these instances point to locations that are defined by conduct, with each firmly located within the everyday in spite of their differentiation from it. This very difference defines both the ‘real’ as well as its counter site.

An investigation of these spaces that are delineated from usual behaviour is at the heart of Brass Art’s practice alongside a fascination for the technological developments that took place within the Industrial Revolution, ushering in modern life as the world began to speed up. As modernity encroached on the world devices such as the panorama or the realisation of flight in hot air balloons became antidotes to the ever-expanding industrialisation that stretched beyond the limits of popular imagination. Only atop a panoramic tower could the new metropolitan sprawl be captured in a single glance, with the gaze giving the impression of mastery over this new landscape-vocabulary cut through with railway routes shrinking distances and shifting temporal relations. Concurrently the precursors of cinema developed, almost as if representations needed to become animated as stillness became replaced with rapidity. Zoetropes, magic lanterns, shadow puppets and mutascopes turned motionless images into moving ones: these devices fascinate Brass Art. They are involved in a long-term research project at the Bill Douglas Centre based in Exeter University, which holds a major collection of pre-cinematic devices. In the work *Phantasmagoria* Brass Art created a panoramic video projection utilising the grammar of these proto-cinematic machines. Revolving mirrors flip shadowy forms across the skyline, filmed from the rooftop of The IDEA Centre in Salford, the location where the work was initially exhibited. Reminiscent of predictive science fiction movies, oversized figures based on Lewis, Mojsiewicz and Pettican are choreographed with paper aeroplanes and balloons, as the representations of the artists dive-bomb into railway tracks and dance across the skyline.

Shadows populate many of Brass Art’s works, operating as stand-ins for the artists themselves. These female figures appear sometimes flat and handmade; at other times as interventions in landscapes or as apparatus for casting shadows within constructed scenes. Brass Art describes these shadows as “entirely us”, yet these representations offer a constant

deferral of the artists' identity that is folded into the collective authorship. In *Above About Below*, hand-cut, powder-coated brass silhouettes cast shadows of an impossible balancing act involving the three artists, with the crafted cut-outs illuminated by a light travelling around a model railway track placed in a cargo carriage pulled by a steam train. In the series of photographs *Trespass* (UK) the artists' bodies become shadows as the three don black clothing head-to-toe and roam around the edges of restricted zones, briefly crossing into controlled sectors, a customised suitcase in hand. Inside a battery-powered pink argon sign stating 'Trespass' describes the very activity the three shadows are engaged in, doubling the separation between realms of behaviour. While nodding throughout their works to archaic technology, Brass Art look to future obsolesces by adopting three-dimensional body scanning technologies to produce morphed, miniature versions of themselves that, perversely, are re-animated using methodologies from earlier technology – a central moving light, throws these moving shadows onto the surrounding walls.

In this occupation of heterotopias and creation of fictional spaces Brass Art propose a view of the world seen from a perspective of perceptual wonder. In a systemic act of suturing, the artists revive structures of understanding that have been deemed obsolete, inserting them in the present to open up perceptions of the world with the optimism of another time, in the process providing a moment to question how we understand our place in the world.

Commissioned by The International 3 on the occasion of *Beside Ourselves*, Brass Art's solo exhibition at The International from 28th October – 25th November 2006.