

Recall

We seek to make sense of something new or unfamiliar by making associations with what we already know and understand. This essay seeks to make links between disparate cultural references in an attempt to make a response of one year's worth of contemporary art exhibitions in a medieval friary in Lincoln. The first time I visited The Greyfriars I immediately recalled the paintings of church interiors created by the Dutch seventeenth century painter, Pieter Jansz Saenredam. Going beyond aesthetic similarities, there is a kinship across the centuries between *Mistaken Presence's* tenure in The Greyfriars and readings of Saenredam's paintings. Roland Barthes has talked of how the Dutch painter "is a paradox: he articulates by antithesis the natures of classical Dutch painting, which has washed away religion only to replace it with man and his empire of things."¹ This could be correlated to the changing uses of The Greyfriars building over the centuries that have taken it further away from a site of religious worship. The present vogue for curating contemporary art in historic sites creates an unusual possibility for time-travel. We concurrently see, in one space and moment, the past, present and possibly even the future, through juxtaposition of art and site.

In Chris Marker's *La Jetee*, a story unfolds concerning loss, hope and above all, memory. The film's main protagonist is sent back in time, where he falls in love with a woman, whose image is etched on his mind from a childhood memory. His penultimate return to the past (before his (second) death) occurs in a museum filled with taxidermied animals. An archive image of The Greyfriars from when it was used as the County's museum immediately made me think of this scene from *La Jetee*. A space loaded with the historical significant can inspire present and future potential responses and be a particularly rich terrain for artists.

¹ Roland Barthes, "The World as Object": in *A Roland Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag, (London, Vintage Classics, 2000), 62.

Susan Hiller has talked (in relation to her Freud Museum residency) of how a space resonant with history can inject “layers and layers and layers of meaning in the present, as well as a very significant past”². Hiller has talked of how most buildings³ that artists use temporarily for either display or production of work are neutral spaces. The Freud Museum or The Greyfriars are historically rich rather than neutral spaces, offering potential inspirations for new artistic and curatorial responses.

In David Macaulay’s book ‘Motel of Mysteries’, an archaeologist uncovers an ancient temple in the year 4022. The pages are peppered with accurate drawings of the discoveries, alongside descriptions of the archaeologist’s informed conclusions of the previous use of the artefacts. Examples include a *Sacred Collar*, which was made of “the highest quality *plasticus*, and the workmanship was unequalled”⁴ or *The Great Altar*, a “magnificent structure, toward which everything in the outer chamber was directed, represents the essence of religious communication as practiced by the ancient Americans”⁵. However to our knowing eyes each description is folly, we know (from the drawings) that the sacred collar is a toilet seat and the great altar is, in fact, a television. We rely upon our knowledge to interpret and make sense of what is unknown.

Pierre Nova has talked of how we are increasingly having shared memories, rather than unique personal ones. He has written that, “No previous epoch ever stocked archives at such a prodigious rate. As traditional memory has vanished, we have felt called upon to accumulate fragments, reports, documents, images and speeches as if this expanding dossier might some day be subject to subpoena as evidence before

² Susan Hiller, “Working through Objects”: in *The Archive*, ed. Charles Merewether, (London, Whitechapel Ventures Limited, 2006), 41.

³ For example the white cube for display to the ex-industrial space for the studio.

⁴ David Macaulay, *Motel of Mysteries*, (New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979), 76.

⁵ *Ibid*, 56.

who knows what tribunal of history”⁶. Are we collating all this information from the past in an attempt to understand and make sense of the present, to confirm our validity or to envisage the future? Some artists are active in this process, attempting to make sense of this ever-increasing archive of ‘memory’ within their practice.

Janet Harbord has talked of parallels between the narrative of the *La Jetee* and the signified location of the museum; and of how cinema and the museum have an important relationship (within modernism) to “contradictory understandings of time”⁷. She argues that cinema rationalises time through the use of a narrative structure leading to a conclusion, whilst the museum arranges objects through the conventions of display. She goes on to say; “both cinema and the museum threaten to hollow out the purposefulness of time. Cinema is also empty time, time used up, just as the museum is a dead store-house for the past. The energy of accumulation and rationalisation folds over to reveal its opposite, the potential meaninglessness of images that escape purpose, and the abstract structure of collecting, in which classification appears a ridiculous imposition”⁸.

Harbord also argues that *La Jetee* operates between these two polemic readings of cinema, and I would argue that *Mistaken Presence* also sits uneasily within a conventional reading of a gallery/museum programme. We have had one year’s worth of memories, in the form of the programme of exhibitions and events in this particular space, which have questioned an established approach to exhibition curation. I wonder how time and circumstance will further shift and change significance of the site and how the memory of *Mistaken Presence*’s programme will fit into the history of The Greyfriars as a whole.

© Andrew Bracey, 2012

⁶ Pierre Nova , “Realms of Memory”: in *Memory*, ed. Ian Farr, (London, Whitechapel Ventures Limited, 2012), 63.

⁷ Janet Harbord, *La Jetee*, (London, Afterall, 2009), 82.

⁸ *Ibid*, 82.