Offshore Worlds
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In a conference on the ethics of plastic surgery at the Royal Society, Baroness Mary Warnock delivered a paper on the philosophical implications of face transplant technology. At one point she asked whether, if the idea were taken to extremes and a whole head were replaced, this would constitute a head transplant for the recipient or a body transplant for the donor.

This sort of ontological conundrum goes to show how, even in the 21st century, Cartesian dualism is still the dominant model of selfhood, with the causal relationship between the physical and the intellectual perceived to hinge, or maybe unhinge, at the head. Consequently, this anatomy of identity has distinct relevance to the politics of the body, and also inflects on the mechanisms of a certain genre of humour: someone with a bag over their head is funny when we know it is voluntary, but ethically troubling if we suspect it is not. In Baudelaire's essay *The Essence of Laughter* (1855) he explains how even this puerile brand of humour is political. The slapstick figure, he claims, makes us laugh due to an ambivalent position within a perceived power structure, where, by falling victim to the laws of physics we realise we are lower than the gods, while our consciousness of this places us above the incognisant beasts. Against this backdrop, then, masking can be constructed and interpreted in a number of ways. A comedic bag over the head seems to articulate temporary dumbness, while a Mexican wrestlers' mask might be thought of as a voluntary reversion to brawn and a hubristic attitude to the laws of physics. The coquette's feathered eye mask, on the other hand, suggests a body more malleable than one chastened by cool rationalism, its morality surrendered to the vagaries of anonymity.

Ruth Claxton's adapted figurines, their heads reworked with sequins, beads, ruffs and other froufrou, are like exotic specimens further denuded of self-determination. An archetypal dandy in knickerbockers, for instance, posing with a pile of red fruity polyps rising from his shoulders like an acute dermatological condition, might be a character devised by Voltaire to demonstrate the futility of fashion or the subjective nature of otherness. It is the figurines' idealised form that imbues their beautification or affliction – see it as you will – with otherworldly, allegorical resonance. And yet their apparent state of abject blindness or magical insight makes it difficult to avoid casting them as empathetic protagonists. In *Lands End*, however, the relationship between figure and ground has been readdressed so that the plinths read as sculpture rather than secondary support structure. The welded struts and hoops, which hold aloft glass and mirror roundels, of which only a handful serve as platforms for figurines, have proliferated like an expansive settlement, yet to attract residents or perhaps already evacuated. Their eeriness lies in repetition, the echoing fugue of straight and curved lines implying possible extension to infinity. For each venue of the touring show this open-faced architecture will be reconfigured to suit each space, so that the floor plans riff on a choreographic score for the eyes. In László Moholy-Nagy's stage directions for his 'mechanised eccentrics', as he called his syntheses of form, motion, sound, light and odour, the left-hand columns

represent dancers' actions and interactions through shape, colour and texture. In Claxton's installations the performer is, after a fashion, the viewers' eye and the sculpture the score, with vertical struts commanding a passage upwards or downwards, the metal hoops and glass roundels suggesting a point of rest, or reversal if supporting a mirrored surface, and the conglomerations of arcs generating areas of unsettled attention.

In its adaptability to each gallery setting, *Lands End* might be thought of as modular, in the vein of mid-20th century design, when the need for permutations of furniture in a living space or dwellings in a landscape was indicative of a growing sense of cultural fluidity and relativism. Claxton's installations imply just such an adjustable landscape, with the vertical structures standing in for buildings, the wall-mounted flurries of curves as clouds, or perhaps traces of an entity or technology that can pass through walls, and the occasional stick-like intrusions as freestanding shrubbery or growing on the architectural surfaces like irreverent ivy. Ultimately flexible, the panorama, like a mantelpiece of figurines, might be rearranged to reflect memories, fulfil volumetric expectations or take up the most geometrically pleasing configuration.

The capacity for reinterpretation by the individuated dreamer is a key characteristic of utopian and mythical architecture. For Italo Calvino it is the ability of Venice to shift in each visitor's perception, and from one moment to the next, that makes it exceptional. One of the many reinterpretations of Venice in *Invisible Cities* (1972) – which Calvino presents as a series of travelogues delivered by a fictitious Marco Polo to an equally invented Kubla Khan – has an eerie resemblance to *Lands End*:

The slender stilts that rise from the ground at a great distance from one another and are lost above the clouds support the city. You climb them with ladders. On the ground the inhabitants rarely show themselves: having already everything they need up there, they prefer not to come down. Nothing of the city touches the earth except those long flamingo legs on which it rests and, when the days are sunny, a pierced angular shadow that falls on the foliage.

There are three hypotheses about the inhabitants of Baucis: that they hate the earth; that they respect it so much they avoid all contact; that they love it as it was before they existed and with spyglasses and telescopes aimed downwards they never tire of examining it, leaf by leaf, stone by stone, ant by ant, contemplating with fascination their own absence...

The similarity between Claxton's installations and Calvino's meta-fictional city is entirely coincidental, which itself speaks volumes about the architecture of the imagination. It seems that partial, ruined or vacated spaces engender far more mystery, horror or yearning than the overpopulated vistas of reality. Venice is the epitome of the living ruin, with memories barely submerged in its architectural and watery structures, while its maze of streets, squares and bridges endures as an allegory for desire – the impetus of many a utopia summoned by writers, from Plato to Milton to JG Ballard.

Although fewer figures feature in *Lands End* than previous installations, their scarcity paradoxically prompts a more pronounced double-take. Whereas in *I Thought I was the Audience and then I Looked at You* (2004) the psychotic profusion of coloured tassels, beads, hoods, blindfolds, sequins and ruches encouraged a consideration of families and evolution of embellishments as well as individual characteristics, *Lands End* re-establishes the preciousness associated with ornaments through restraint, particularising each alteration. The often-dismissed kitsch of these mantelpiece mundanities – which we may consider extraneous fripperies or accoutrements of clay-footed aspiration – is disguised through exaggeration and their static idealisation transformed into the singular existentialism of the stranded somnambulist in an alien landscape. This urge to provoke fresh insight, not by an overhaul of the physical structures of a society, but of the perceptual faculties of its subjects, recalls the utopian model of Aldous Huxley's *Island* (1962), where the narrator, an inhabitant of the island of Pala, takes the drug moshka for the first time:

The fountain of forms, the coloured orbs in their conscious arrays and purposefully changing lattices gave place to a static composition of uprights and diagonals, of flat planes and curving cylinder, all carved out of some material that looked like living agate, and all emerging from a matrix of living and pulsating mother-of-pearl. Like a blind man newly healed and confronted for the first time by the mystery of light and colour, he started in uncomprehending astonishment. And then, at the end of another twenty timeless bars of the Fourth Brandeburg, a bubble of explanation rose into consciousness. He was looking, Will suddenly perceived, at a small square table, and beyond the table at a rocking-chair, and beyond the rocking-chair at a blank wall of whitewashed plaster. The explanation was reassuring; for in the eternity that he had experienced between the opening of his eyes and the emergent knowledge of what he was looking at, the mystery confronting him had deepened from inexplicable beauty to a consummation of shining alienness that filled him, as he looked, with a kind of metaphysical terror. Well, this terrifying mystery consisted of nothing but two pieces of furniture and an expanse of wall. The fear was allayed, but his wonder only increased. How was it possible that things so familiar and commonplace could be this? Obviously it wasn't possible; and yet there it was, there it was.

In *Island* the transformation of everyday objects into jewels or miracles hails from Huxley's mescaline experience, but the notorious liberation of perception by drug-taking finds a marginally less contentious expression in 20th century art which, from Duchampian Readymades and Pop iconography to contemporary bricolage, has demanded we pause to consider the everyday as a source of wonder. Similarly, Claxton's project is like a Situationist's dérive of the conservative sitting room, with psycho-geographic ciphers inserted where received sentimentalism would usually reside. There is also a process by which the figurines, being cast out into a landscape beyond the tick of the clock and the tinkle of teacups, demand we take them more literally as theatrical representations. Next time you catch a glimpse from the street of ornaments on a windowsill, pause to consider it as a staged scene, where a spaniel comes up to the shoulders of a rustic farmer's boy perhaps, or a

parrot of mythical proportions dwarfs a couple embracing in the shadow of a monolithic timepiece. Claxton speaks of Rome as a city that, like a spinster's mantelpiece, arranges its past as a collage, abutting architecture built centuries apart, or perhaps even hundreds of miles apart, as in the case of the Santa Scala, or holy stairs, which it is alleged Jesus climbed on his way to trial before Pontius Pilate and were brought to Rome from Jerusalem in the fourth century AD.

 Rome automatically instils awe at the unrelenting passage of time and the diminutive scale of the point at which we encounter it, and this humbling effect of collage is scarcely anomalous. Bringing together elements of differing scales, whether spatial or temporal, often has a disruptive, even traumatic effect. There is a perhaps not wholly imaginary place described by Will Self in his short story *Scale* (1997), where the narrator dreams:

I found myself leaving the bungalow and entering the precincts of the model village. I wandered around the forty-foot-long village green, admiring the precision and attention to detail that the model makers have lavished on their creation. I peeked first into the model butcher's shop, Lilliputian rashers of bacon were laid out in plastic trays, together with sausages, perfect in every respect, but the size of mouse droppings. Then I sauntered over to the post office. On the eight-inch-high counter sat an envelope the size of a postage stamp. Wonder of wonders, I could even read the address on the envelope. It was a poll-tax demand, destined for me.

Straightening up abruptly I caught sight of two model buildings that I was unfamiliar with. The first of these was a small, but perfectly formed, art gallery. Looking through the tall windows I could see, inside, on the polished wooden floor, a selection of my netsuke. The Caros rather than the Moores. Preposterous, I thought to myself, with one of those leaps of dream logic; a real village of this size would ever have an art gallery. Let alone one exhibiting the work of an internationally renowned sculptor.

 The leakage between Self's real and dream worlds builds into a distressing torrent of contradictions and implausibility – a notorious bad trip. André Breton, on the other hand, considered objects and images that merge the visual vocabulary of dreams and waking worlds, the logical and irrational, the human and the inanimate, as productive and even a political imperative. What was understood as the arbitrariness of fixed disciplinary boundaries was continuously embattled by the surrealists' interleaving of improbable images and ideas. We might think of *Lands End*, then, in the lineage of Max Ernst's *La Femme 100 Têtes* (1929), albeit with the darker and often misogynistic accents tempered by slapstick and glitz. In *Compulsive Beauty* (1993) Hal Foster reclaims surrealist imagery from its popularised representation as libertarian or sublime, re-diagnosing it as a symptom of a century characterised by trauma and brutal fragmentation, a rereading that is partially informed by digital technology, virtual space and proliferating information networks that stretch, breach or entirely circumnavigate the human body:

Breton presents in the "Manifesto" two cryptic examples of this marvellous confusion of the animate and the inanimate: the modern mannequin and the romantic ruin, the first a crossing of the human and the nonhuman, the second a mixing of the historical and the natural. ... On the one hand, the mannequin evokes the remaking of the body (especially the female body) as commodity, just as the automaton, its complement in the surrealist image repertoire, evokes the reconfiguring of the body (especially the male body) as machine. ... But the very nature of the machine and the commodity is also demonic, for both evoke an uncanny confusion between life and death. It is precisely this confusion that fascinated the surrealists, obsessed as they were by the strange (non)human character of the mannequin, the automaton, the wax figure, the doll — all avatars of the uncanny and all players in the surrealist image repertoire.

We could take Foster's use of the word avatar here as a pointer to contemporary technological effigies of the human form, in virtual reality and on-line networking, which also unearths one of Claxton's less obvious preoccupations, but nonetheless informs her work. While her adjusted figurines might partly substantiate Foster's reading of the surrealist impulse as an expression of the traumatically reconfigured body, her welded landscapes belie a real fascination with on-line representations of the self and the virtual economic and social structures they inhabit; and *Lands End's* vista of interlocking circles might be likened to an unwieldy Venn diagram of social groups and the branching stick-like growths to three-dimensional drawings of networks. Claxton is particularly interested in the phenomenon of Second Life, where internet users represent themselves via avatars – screen manifestations of human figures that can be customised to adjust skin tone, fashion, build or sex, or perhaps to add a pet butterfly that follows them around.

Financial and social opportunities in Second Life mirror and extend those of the 'real' world, with residents buying virtual land and starting up businesses as architects or wedding planners, bodyguards or pet manufacturers, the use of avatars supposedly barring discrimination between sex, class, gender, race and so on. These virtual cultural and economic environments are often described as disembedded or abstracted capitalism, existing 'offshore' which, as Ronen Palan describes in *The Offshore World: Sovereign Markets, Virtual Places, and Nomad Millionaires* (2003), seem to operate beyond the power of the state. Due to their apparent freedom from orthodox patriarchies they are often considered a democratising space in which any anonymous user can publish opinion or ferment exchange with others. But this over-abundant access has recently generated a substantial backlash, as Silicon Valley pioneer turned high-profile detractor Andrew Keen laments in *The Cult of the Amateur: How Blogs, Wikis, Social Networking, and the Digital World are Assaulting our Economy, Culture and Values* (2007):

... democratization, despite its lofty idealization, is undermining truth, souring civic discourse, and belittling expertise, experience and talent.

What the Web 2.0 revolution is really delivering is superficial observations of the world around us

rather than considered judgment. The information business is being transformed by the Internet into the sheer noise of a hundred million bloggers all simultaneously talking about themselves.

 Keen's insistence on such ideas as truth, quality and expertise has, in the visual arts, long been relegated to the waste bin of metaphysics and replaced with post-structuralist watchwords such as 'relativism' and 'contingency'. Similarly although perhaps with more sinister undertones, the online economy, Ronen explains, promotes a liberal process of 'individuality', whereby the subject is individuated through his or her consumption habits, while celebrating his or her own auto-subjectification. This process of subjectively inflected appropriation is what artists often refer to as 'cherry picking': contingent realities enable the artist to pick and choose motifs from history, conflate styles, methods and ideologies, appropriate images and import objects from other realms of cultural production. As US satirist Stephen Colbert countered in an interview with Keen on *The Colbert Report*:

What's wrong with cherry picking facts, because then you can make the perfect truth pie ... your truth. I cherry pick all the time, and I'm proud of it, because then I get to create the reality I want. Isn't reality what we decide?

 These debates, currently being played out in mainstream and digital media, are essentially forking over the episodic collapse of cultural hierarchies and empirical truth already evident elsewhere in cultural production of the 20th century. What one suspects, though, is that this apparent subsidence will reveal itself not as a flattening process, whereby the whole idea of hierarchies is eradicated, but as a reconfiguration, with the emergence of new dominant powers controlling comparative structures. Indeed, despite inferences of utopia and universal empowerment, Claxton demonstrates an aesthetic sensibility and expertise of facture that undeniably locates the work in traditional categories of quality. What her stratifications of idealised and singular forms can remind us of, though, is that perhaps the flattening of hierarchies is not what is required, but the fluid ability to constantly reconfigure them. The modular approach to ideology might be the only harmonious solution.

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