



Joanne Tatham & Tom O’Sullivan Hearing from Artists

Joanne Tatham and Tom O’Sullivan’s collaborative practice examines identity and representations of place through large scale sculptural installations and associated research. In 2018 they worked with MIMA to develop a new commission. They are in conversation with Helen Welford, Assistant Curator, in July 2020.

HW: How do you use humour and play in your practice?

JT: This has always been central to our collaborative processes. Our ideas for the sculptural constructions are often – initially at least – quick and playful. There is a lot of work after that to ensure they keep that quality. We know we’ve done that well when there is a sense these things “just arrive” or are “dropped in” somehow. They belie their labour.

This matters. Their lightness and absurdity offer a point of connection, or ownership even. We love how frequently these constructions invite those who see them to reimagine and reconstruct a future life for them.

This absurdity is the pivot upon which the success of our work balances; it’s the gateway for more satirical or unsettling interpretations. Nothing that insists it’s just as simple as it looks, could ever be as simple as it looks.

HW: Your practice deals with particular contexts and situations, such as art spaces,



A Proposal To Ask Where Does A Threshold Begin & End 2018. Installation view at MIMA detail. Photography by Hynes Photography

festivals and historic sites. What techniques and strategies do you adopt when approaching a particular space and their communities?

JT: We start from the position that, as artists, we are invited *into* a situation to work. Although many of our projects are long term, we are wary of imagining, or claiming, that we will acquire a level of knowledge in excess of what is possible given the temporary, often intermittent, nature of an art commission.

A Proposal To Ask Where Does A Threshold Begin & End reflects this admission in a very direct way: we chose to develop a work based on Middlesbrough’s best known landmark, the Tees Transporter Bridge. We looked at the ways in which it had been used and overused as a motif which is an approach we’ve used elsewhere. Rather than digging deeper “into” the context we are working within, we make artwork through and in relation to pre-existing representations of a place or a site.

Our bridge construction outside MIMA functioned through its very direct and identifiable relationship with its visual precursors, but we also consider representations of place or community that



A Proposal To Ask Where Does A Threshold Begin & End 2018. Installation view at MIMA. Photography by Hynes Photography

are less tangible and various. As such, we often use images and other visual forms, but we also work with language and text, and this offers another way to draw on narratives, both factual and fictional that relate to the site of a commission.

A lot of this material is, by its nature, already circulating out there. We're also interested in what we find out through working with a commissioning organisation – and through this what their understanding of the context is, and what they think or hope an artwork might achieve. There are lots of interesting examples of this from our MIMA commission. I'm thinking in particular here about how MIMA involved its staff in a series of conversations around our work, and this revealed complex, often contradictory expectations for our commission.

As Tom grew up in Cleveland in a village close to Middlesbrough, working with MIMA brought such complexities further into focus. This granted an affordance to incorporate more subjective or autobiographical elements into the work, and allowed us to offer a more idiosyncratic and intimate encounter. All of these processes are a way to cast a wide

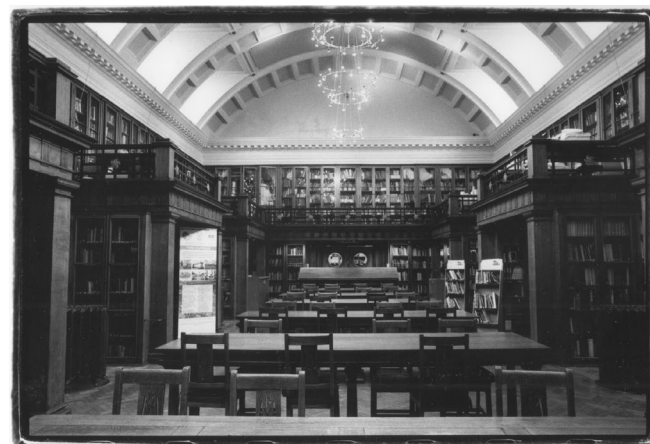
gaze across the complex entanglements that an artwork both emerges through and then hopefully reflects.

HW: In 2018 you made the multi-part artwork *A Proposal To Ask Where Does A Threshold Begin & End* commissioned by MIMA. The work looks at representations of the Tees Valley, its histories and myths as well as perceptions of place. Can you describe this work and the relationship between the different elements?

TO: A Proposal To Ask Where Does A Threshold Begin & End consists of four elements presented in and around Centre Square which is the public space outside MIMA. These four elements taken together, and their relationship to each other, comprise the artwork. In terms of a chronology, the first element was a maquette which was presented in MIMA's atrium space. This was a proposition for a large painted structure that would connect the atrium with Centre Square. The second element is ten-framed photographs, which were positioned within MIMA and other private and civic buildings in the vicinity of Centre Square. The third element was a publication, *A Cleveland*



Untitled (Upleatham) 2018. Photography by Joanne Tatham and Tom O'Sullivan



Untitled (Middlesbrough Central Library) 2018. Photography by Joanne Tatham and Tom O'Sullivan

Oddity, which contains a number of texts that circulate around the photographs. The fourth element was the large painted outdoor structure (developed from the maquette), which stood in Centre Square abutting the façade of MIMA.

The outdoor structure and the positioning of the photographs allowed us to designate both MIMA and the wider space of Centre Square as the site for the artwork. We hoped that a viewer would experience, and then consider, these elements in relation to this site and in particular to on-going regeneration activities.

The photographs depict objects, spaces and places within the wider Cleveland area. The choice of subject matter was purposefully both general and subjective. So, for example, both the Transporter Bridge and the *Bottle of Notes* sculpture by Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen were included, albeit in compositions that might suggest a particular way of looking. Such established symbols of the area were positioned against more idiosyncratic choices such as the moorland cross *Fat Betty* or St Andrews Old Church, Upleatham. Other images depicted interior spaces, which might be described as repositories or archives, such as MIMA's Collection Storage room and the reference room in Middlesbrough Central Library. We were also interested in how the objects and places depicted might themselves be used as thresholds, in the sense that a certain kind of looking, or investment, might open up imaginative space.

The texts in *A Cleveland Oddity* circulate around these photographs. Each text is a 'construction' in the sense that it combines found information with storytelling and fictional voices. Together with the photographs, we hope this invokes a particular 'Cleveland Imaginary'; a space that enables an elaboration of the complexity of context, together with the acknowledgement of partiality, that the title suggests.

The large outdoor structure was also an intervention into the circulating imagery of Teesside, but from a very different direction. Here the iconography of the Transporter Bridge was exaggerated in the sculptural form of the structure, and then repeated in the development of the painted motif. This approach, together with the particular patterning, hopefully allowed for an effect that could be both celebratory and satirical.

Taken together, it is intended that meanings bounce around these different elements, allowing for active reflection and engagement. It is very important to us that the work is not prescriptive about where this might lead.

HW: Where did the artwork title come from?

JT: The quick answer is that it came out of a collaborative text with Gavin Wade who is Curator and Director of Eastside Projects, Digbeth, Birmingham. The text was a series of questions – something we'd all worked with a lot before. We like the propositional nature of a question, and that it quite literally asks



Untitled (The Former Cleveland Gallery) 2018. Installation view at Holiday Inn Express, Middlesbrough. Photography by Hynes Photography

something of its audience. This reflects what we want an artwork to do, and making the title take the form of a question offers a clue as to how to approach the work.

When MIMA first approached us, the commission brief focused on the redesign of the atrium, and specifically the doors into the building from Centre Square and our thoughts returned to the phrase “Where does a threshold begin and end?”. It felt like an amusingly literal minded take on the task of designing some doors! Our discussions with Elinor Morgan at MIMA focused on the role of art in public, and how an art institution might be imagined or constructed as a piece of public art.

HW: What is the importance of repetition and the reuse of certain motifs and geometric forms across your work?

TO: We have always been interested in the different ways in which a contemporary art practice can behave. In particular we are concerned with maintaining a practice that has an on-going dialogue with itself, as much as with the various contexts and situations it finds itself in.

So, for example, a particular motif might be used in a certain context, and then re-used or re-configured in a very different context. The recognisable repetition of the motif allows the practice to explicitly foreground the relationship between these contexts as part of its enquiry. Sometimes this repetition involves a radical change in ‘object status’ so a sculpture might become an image, or even a performance. This allows us to explore the relationships between such states, and the implications of such transformations, in a way that is also explicit.

Working with certain geometric forms allows us to explore other on-going interests. This includes producing large temporary structures that foreground the effects of figuration. Sometimes some of these forms become motifs that we can re-use in the ways indicated above. However, this is not always the case and we would not want to always conflate the two. For example, this procedure is most explicit in *A Cleveland Oddity* texts where certain characters and situations from previous texts are re-used and so speak back into the writing aspect of the practice.