

Simon & Tom Bloor interviewed by Andrew Hardman, 2011

Since 2003, brothers Simon & Tom Bloor have collaborated professionally, building an impressive body of compelling works such as their series of reconstructed 1930s Kiosks (2006-9 with Gavin Wade) and a floating library, *Hey for Lubberland!* (2009). More recently, they have had a solo exhibition, *As long as it lasts* (2009 at Eastside Projects and Leeds Met Gallery), and were commissioned by Modern Art Oxford, producing *Hit and Miss* (2010). The duo's work defies easy categorisation: part sculpture, part installation involving elements of appropriation and collecting, distilling an affectively familiar modernist aesthetic. Employing architectural reconstruction, graphic appropriation, drawing and printing, the Bloors' work assembles forms that seem to challenge 'myths of progress' (to paraphrase Walter Benjamin), presenting relics of a future that never happened. Talking to the artists, I wanted to know how memory is articulated through this practice and how the Bloors' relationship – professional and personal – affects these structures.

AH: Can we firstly talk about your practice? How would you describe it?

S&T: Our practice can be a bit hard for us to pin down, we wouldn't describe ourselves solely as sculptors or installation artists for example. It's important for us that we can do an installation or other larger scale project in a public space but can also produce a drawing or small scale sculpture. There are things that reoccur and weave through our practice, what for want of a better phrase might be called a 'design aesthetic': the use of certain colours, an interest in the (problematic) idea of utopia and appropriation, amongst others. The variety of our practice is also reflected in the variety of subject matter we engage with and use as a source for works. We're avid collectors of material: articles and images from the internet, bits of information gathered from here and there. It's invariably disjointed, so our practice is an attempt to forge links between what we find and the things we are interested in.

AH: What work will you be bringing to Cooper Gallery?

S&T: The work we'll be showing at Cooper Gallery will be continuing a thread of ideas based on the notion of (children's) play as a utopian pursuit. One of the works, *Resistance Through Rituals*, is a group of posters of children playing on climbing frames and monkey bars, but the images have been inverted so where the children are hanging upside down they appear the right way up but stilted. The work relates to the (romantic) idea of the innocence of play but also to the idea of the 'world turned upside down,' which has been used as a positive (as with groups like the Diggers in the eighteenth century calling for a fairer society) and negative (the excesses of the 'Land of Cockaigne'). Other works are proposals for monuments to play – small sculptures in cardboard and gold leaf based on old playground designs. These works share the title of the exhibition, *The Fascination of Islands*, which is taken from a children's book about utopia. We were thinking about the link between how children play on climbing frames as make-believe islands, and the idea of escape, as well as the island of More's Utopia.

AH: There is a discernible nostalgic eye for modernist architectural (and graphic) forms in your work. Perhaps one of the problems of utopia you mention is a temporal problem (personal and cultural) – a paradoxical remembrance of past dreams for a utopic future that never came?

S&T: We have been thinking about how nostalgia is a sort of utopia in reverse; but where utopias tend to look to a future that can't really exist, nostalgia looks to an overly idyllic past that never was. We're also interested in short moments where there has been a dedicated strive toward a utopian vision, which is where an interest in modernism and play comes in, as well as an interest in historic events that have changed society in some way. Whether it's the events and thinking surrounding sixties counter-culture or the Lunar Society in the eighteenth century, they all share a desire to create a better world which is, perhaps, as close to a utopia as we can get. But equally it's the flaws as well as the success in these events that appeals to us. We're also conscious that to talk about idealised visions as 'utopias' is a little too easy and simplistic; it's a word that often gets bandied around a little too readily. Of course there are other problems with utopia, not least that there can never be a consensus on what makes the ideal society.

AH: How does memory inflect your practice? How is the sense of memory in your collaborative work affected by your shared childhood?

S&T: In some instances our own memories filter into works; for example, the *Hit & Miss* show we did for Modern Art Oxford (2010) was based in part on a shared memory of playing on and peeking through similar fencing as kids. Like all good nostalgia, our memories of our childhood have probably been heavily influenced by external forces: stories we've been told reinforcing or replacing memories, things we've read or seen that relate to things we did, photographs depicting events we might have otherwise forgotten. But really we're more interested in a sort of collective, social idea of nostalgia as a sort of flipped utopian vision, rather than it being a way to make work about our own nostalgic memories in a woolly, self-reflective way. We're not trying to make work that's too personal or sentimental. Our thoughts on nostalgia come from looking to the past for source material and our personal interest in certain aesthetics. We're as interested in the form of a section of 1960s concrete wall or some street furniture, for example, as we are in their relationship to a certain period and what that period might mean to us now.

AH: As one of you has recently moved to London, how has that distance affected (or not) your collaborative practice?

S&T: Simon moved to London about 18 months ago. The distance hasn't been a major issue for us, because our working practice is quite flexible and we know each other well enough to trust each other if we're working on something separately. Our working practice varies in that for some works we'll discuss things and develop them together, and other times we'll do things individually but still consider them part of our collaborative output. Often larger works will be made in the space where they're being shown, but we continue to have our studio based in Birmingham, which we only really use when making large scale work or things that make a lot of mess. We both have work space at home to do smaller works, drawings etc. Really there are advantages and disadvantages, sharing ideas is more of a problem when working separately but there's an obvious benefit to being able to be in two places at once.

AH: Regarding your last answer where you said "there's an obvious benefit to being able to be in two places at once": Would you extend that to a mental space, i.e., there is a benefit to the dialogic space that collaboration can create?

This relates to something we've thought about recently - whether when two people work closely together they bring different views and get to a better endpoint or if actually working together means you end up mostly thinking in a similar way, so don't always have such a rigorous critical dialogue. Really we think the latter is true. Of course we don't always agree or know about or discover the same things, and there are obvious benefits to being able to share skills and information and it's good to have someone to discuss things with, but we'd suggest that it isn't necessarily the case that collaborators have a more intense critical dialogue than other artists.

Andrew Hardman is currently researching a doctoral thesis on the materiality of studio practice at the University of Manchester.