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"WHAT'S AT STAKE?"

I felt resolved to address this question by considering my practice in terms of 'Fantasy' or 'Visionary' Architecture. Neil Bingham offers an insight into this terminology:

> Almost all researchers in this field generally agree that the terms 'fantasy' and 'visionary' are questionable and often indefinable labels that have become attached to designs that fall outside commonplace and work-a-day architecture. There is a debate as to whether it is possible to have built fantasy and visionary architecture (Bingham in Hayward 12).

I am motivated to question the difference between fantasy architecture and visionary architecture in order to understand the work of artists and architects whose projects fall within this field. Bingham describes the nuances:

> 'Fantasy' implies an architectural composition that is strange and unfamiliar to the eye, sometimes within the realms of possibility, but usually… fantastic.

> 'Visionary' can be treated as a sub-division of fantasy, usually applied to designs of great scale and imagination, ahead of their time, often within the realms of possibility but, for whatever reason, not built (Bingham in Hayward 12).

Whether to build, or not to build: this is the issue at stake in my practice. It is not the pragmatics of building which concerns me, but whether a concept should be built. I want to access the narrative of architecture at the page, where, in fact, all architecture begins. I have sought to locate my practice in the area of fantasy rather than visionary architecture, where I have contact with the tropes of architecture, but where there is greater scope for exploration beyond the demands of construction. Hence, fantasy architecture is more readily isolated from the notion of a to-be-built utopia. However, while fantasy architecture may only be destined for imaginary spaces, it is never free of ideology. Furthermore, there remains the potential for fantasy architecture to grow to

become visionary architecture as architectural aesthetics change and construction technologies evolve.

The architect John M. Johansen suggests that in the future we might be able to 'grow' new buildings through a combination of biotechnology and nanotechnology. His vision of a 'nanoarchitecture' is conceived as utopian.

> We will look back upon present day structural steel assemblies and connections of milled parts, bolted and welded, as not only grossly inefficient and costly, but ludicrous. Molecular growth process will replace the abrupt joints and edges of contemporary construction with imperceptible transitions from one specialized substance to another, as bone tissue to ligament to muscle to skin (Johansen 157).

There is resonance with my own work in this image of a future architecture where imperceptible transitions between 'specialized' substances create a synergy of humanity and nature (*Ibid.*). But my interest lies in a more discursive narrative in which the utopian is broken down, when entropy takes effect, and the synergy between specialised substances proves less than ideal.

In Neo Rauch I find a model of narrative in which the future has already happened (Cooke in Bonnefantenmuseum 6-7): the visionary has been returned to the fantastic. Rauch does not merely reference the images of Cold War society; he wholly translates it into a future-past:

> It is with respect to the very modernity of the system that the signs of the world seem simultaneously dated and futuristic (Birnbaum in Bonnefantenmuseum 10).

Rauch appropriates propaganda images of Cold War Europe and uses them as visual remnants of a failed utopia. However, his work is not a direct commentary on, or criticism of, Socialist Germany. Instead, his fantastic world-view mediates standard interpretations; the images he employs are recognisable only "in the way that an instance of deja-vu or a sudden revenant half-remembered fragment of a now lost dream may be"

(Cooke in Bonnefantenmuseum 6-7). They echo in a new world of fluctuating scale, strange beasts and globule forms, engaging in unexplained, untranslatable activities.

In contrast there is Paul Noble whose works are clear in their intention to engage in an ideological analysis of civilization. He uses architectural forms to illustrate astute political and social commentary. His work is centred on the importance of communication by literalising architecture through an architectonic font that forms the basis of the buildings he creates in his drawings. Noble compels the viewer to read architecture as a narrative history. In *his* fantasy world the energy between (and within) humanity and nature creates so much contradiction and complexity as to suggest that society is in constant flux:

> Full of glancing references, these compositional bricolages, with found objects from the gamut of high and low culture and across eras and societies, are spliced together with piercing self-parody and a profound social conscience (Spira in Whitechapel 52-53).

What is at stake in Noble's work, as with many of the artists and architects I have looked at, is the desire to communicate a number of ideas that transform or corrupt the everyday. In some instances the messages are overtly political (Lebbeus Woods, Paul Noble), but in others they are ambiguous (Neo Rauch) or even romantic (David Thorpe).

In my practice I recognise the ideological power of the images I use and seek to exploit their potential. I look to amalgamate the forms, taken from historical or contemporary sources, into something new, something fantastical. My main sources for imagery are from schematic diagrams and technical books: house building guides, military design books, engineering manuals and *Gray's Anatomy*. I employ the visual language of these technical books, such as those produced for the military hobbyist, to actively engage with the cultured and gendered responses evinced by such technology. At the same time I am interested in representing these various forms and technologies as being homogeneous: The body, militaria and suburbia all perform in unison to create a dystopic inertia.

My drawings are an investigation into the warping of the diagrammatic into fantasy in order to address the ideologies contained within. Like Rauch and Noble, my works are based on visual bricolage. My sources are generally outdated; the images, like Rauch's Cold War characters, are 'echoes' transposed to a new state of existence. But this transposition does not, and cannot, 'purify' the image of its previous ideological life. In a new setting these ideological allusions may be mediated, altered, but always risk being reaffirmed through nostalgia. Lynne Cooke argues that Neo Rauch's work "cleaves a precarious path between the twin dangers of nostalgia for a lost idyll, an edenic world of social unity and communality, and a blanket condemnation of present conditions…" (6). In order *not* to merely engage in ahistorical fetishisation, my work seeks to force these images of militaria and suburbia into a new set of amalgamations and narratives, to question their nostalgic currency and, more importantly, to compel a discussion of future conditions.

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