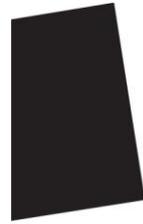


Martin Westwood: COMMA 12

Essay by Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith



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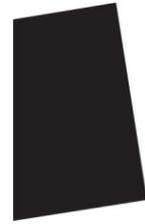
COMMA 12 **Martin Westwood**

THE MATERIALITY OF MARTIN WESTWOOD

'If human beings form a social network it is not simply because they interact with other human beings but with endless other materials too.' John Law

Even a partial inventory of the constituent materials of Martin Westwood's work in various media over the past decade should be enough to indicate its considerable formal heterogeneity. Such a list might include push pins and paper-clips; mousemats, card-files and penholders; cufflinks, coasters, carpet-tiles and credit card-holders; as well as a variety of other fixtures and fittings. His larger-scale installations often involve sundry interventions into the architecture of the gallery space. Generally calculated to effect a mild degree of physical disorientation, these include ramps and screens, raised floors, dropped ceilings and shallow, blocked-off stairwells leading nowhere. The work has also consistently featured a selection of found images scrupulously gleaned from commercial catalogues of stock photography and focussing on anonymous men and women dressed in the slightly anachronistic attire of office workers from the 1980s. These images are typically subjected to any one of a number of processes of reproduction involving a significant degree of distortion and debasement. They include various forms of printmaking, photocopying, stencilling, data-base inputting, three-dimensional extrusion, and even paper-shredding and pulping. The human figure is depicted either as a well-dressed but type-cast clone from a recently bygone age or, even more elusively, it is represented *in absentio* in the displaced form of various prosthetic enhancements or accoutrements such as wrist rests, shoulder pads, necklaces, tooth-picks or eyemasks. The human body is thus treated, in effect, as just so much more, or mere *stuff*.

In light of this characterisation it is, perhaps, unsurprising that Westwood's work has been commonly misread as primarily providing a critique of the dehumanising regimes of organised capital. This, however, is to assume that the attitude that informs it is fundamentally humanist, whereas all evidence suggests that the work is, on the contrary, grounded in the radical antihumanism – or, better, ahumanism – common to certain strains of political thought of recent vintage. While the variety most frequently invoked by commentators on contemporary art has been that associated with the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Westwood's work might be more usefully considered in relation to the writings of sociologists such as Bruno



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Latour and John Law, which are generally subsumed under the somewhat awkward rubric of Actor-Network Theory (ANT). This school of thought, also sometimes described as 'the sociology of translation', holds that, as Law puts it, 'society, organisations, agents and machines are all effects, which are generated in patterned networks of diverse (not simply human) materials.' Such patterning generates all sorts of institutional and organisational effects, including hierarchy, power, knowledge and, indeed, society itself. (Though fundamentally opposed in political outlook to Conservative thinking, ANT would be in rough agreement with Margaret Thatcher's infamous 1987 pronouncement that 'there is no such thing as society'.) Rather than deprive human beings of agency, such thinking simply extends the notion of agency to include, not just people but machines, animals, clothes, texts, money, architectures, and so forth, in such a manner that it becomes possible to conceive that, in the words of Langdon Winner, 'artefacts may, indeed, have politics'. It should not be too difficult to see how such a semiotics of materiality, in which no underlying distinction is made between human and non-human actors and agents, resonates strongly in the context of Westwood's work.

Westwood's installations often suggest the obscure architectonics of complex systems of an indeterminate nature. The title of this latest installation, specially designed for the Bloomberg SPACE, is '*Hysteresis*', a term defined by the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* as 'the phenomenon whereby changes in some property of a physical system lag behind changes in the phenomenon causing it.' The most physically substantial component of the three-part sculptural ensemble is site-responsive, if not strictly speaking site-specific. Its basic dimensions derive from the architecture of the gallery space, in particular an interstitial space between the gallery room encountered just inside the building's entrance and the large atrium situated at the building's core. The artist himself describes this sculptural element as a 'decommissioned ceiling', which is presented as if it had been carefully lowered to the floor thereby allowing for its behind-the-scenes workings, which would ordinarily be hidden from view, to be inspected by the viewer. Accompanying the exposed metal suspension system, fluorescent light fittings and ventilation units we might ordinarily expect to see is a further series of elements whose presence is considerably more incongruous. The most bemusing of these is an intermittent array of artificial stones and pebbles cast in dark grey and red oxide pigmented plaster. These fake rocks rest on a selection of transparent plastic dust-covers fringed in red fabric. These, in turn, rest on a grid of grey ceiling tiles covering the entire surface of what resembles a weird kind of geometrically undulating artificial beach. The sides of the structure itself are covered in a dark grey cheap suit fabric, apart from three panels which are exposed. In one of these we can glimpse a mirrored image of a woman's head upside down, while to the left of this is a mirrored base-panel reflecting a stained ceiling tile towards which she appears to be looking. The third space is an empty volume whose surfaces are made of aluminium.

Of the two other elements in the installation one is a film. In keeping with Westwood's characteristic working method, this was sourced from stock footage purchased over the internet, and shows a young couple in what appears to be a generic hotel or corporate interior. This anodyne interior features a modestly scaled swimming pool with several rocks prominently placed



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at its edge, whose form is broadly echoed by the artificial rocks in the sculpture already described. The last element comprises a bi-part sculpture, each of which consists in two 'spill mats' on which are placed a dented water-cooler container as well as the water-cooler's base, both of which are cast in concrete. The concrete surfaces have been polished to a degree that suggests, however improbably, the effects of natural weathering. Whereas the ersatz water-cooler components inevitably recall the office environment that is the signature milieu invoked in much of Westwood's work, the rocks allude, in spite of their artificial nature, to a very different type of landscape, the wide-open spaces of the sea-shore. They are not, however, without precedent or parallel in Westwood's work. They function as ambiguous emblems of untrammelled Nature, which have unaccountably colonised the inhospitable environs of late capitalist Culture. As such, they recall, for example, such antecedent motifs as the heavy, oversized leaves cast in stainless steel that were strewn about Westwood's installation, *fade held*, at Tate Britain in 2005. They can also be related to the fragile motifs of the dandelion-head and the hummingbird, which appear in certain of his works on paper, the mere notion of whose delicate, windborne movements contrasts notably with the airless interiors in which they are depicted. While rocks are by nature inert they are not, in the long run, unchanging. The fact is that exposure to the elements will, over time, eventually sculpt each generic geological fragment into an individually unique object. This paradox is merely compounded by Westwood's decision to reproduce these rocks artificially in such a manner as to annul this hard-won individuality.

Martin Westwood has stated that he views all of his art works, be they works on paper, individual sculptures or entire installations, as 'operating in a manner most akin to film or fiction writing... (where) the unraveling of a particular conceit or theoretical consideration is formally and iconographically allegorised'. How then, for instance, might we read the ongoing interaction between reproduction and repetition, which is as evident in this latest work as it has been in all of his works to date, as an allegory? Perhaps we should simply read the work as a whole as a sustained, if perverse eulogy to the myriad mechanisms of contemporary image and object production, as well to the work ethic required to sustain such production. As the artist himself has put it, 'within an increasingly aestheticised world, my work has focused its attention towards representations of people entirely mediated by the system of exchange value... [in] an attempt to formulate psychology solely in the language of political economy.' The apparent devaluation of received notions of personal autonomy and individual freedom in his work is therefore best seen as consistent with an expanded notion of agency in which every one of us is an agent because, as Actor-Network theorists would argue, we inhabit a complex set of elements (including, of course, a body) that stretches out into a vast network of materials, corporeal and otherwise, all of which can also be viewed as having their own distinct form of agency.

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