

OUT OF TIME, OUT OF SPACE: LEE HOLDEN'S UNIVERSAL BRIDGE

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'The furniture seems to be dreaming'

- Charles Baudelaire

Lee Holden's Universal Bridge is a site-specific installation focusing upon the "mindset", technology and infrastructure of governance, as well as the potential consequences of resistance to enforced technological change. The piece sets up a complex dialogue between, on the one hand, authority, progress, and control and, on the other, sabotage, disruption, and critique. Using a vast array of found, collected and reconfigured materials alongside specifically-sourced instruments and tools, Holden has transformed Standpoint's unique display spaces so as to suggest a military or government research station devoted to clandestine activities of dubious intent. Something very disturbing has happened here: an irreversible accident or transgressive intrusion has already taken place.

Whatever exactly it was that has occurred remains, however, mysterious, possibly beyond complete explanation. This laboratory, testing chamber or operations room has undergone a breakdown of control, with whatever its occupants were trying to achieve being totally derailed, either through the incompetence of the "experts" themselves, or by the intrusion of an outside force. The situation may in fact have been a concatenation of several factors, an "overdetermined" moment in which some kind of breakthrough was achieved just as the rebels stormed the citadel, the terrorists smashed the door and torched the base. Holden's installation appears to suggest a clandestine but "official" workshop or testing space, but such a reading could be reversed: the "bunker" we find ourselves exploring may be those of an anarchist cell or latter-day Dr Frankenstein, a back room of the TARDIS, or merely just what

happens when “the kids” are let loose in daddy’s lab. It could even be a modern-day magician’s splendid den, now deposed, with portions of what might be scavenged following an explosion at B & Q. The sonic investigations carried out in Nigel Kneale’s spooky tale *The Stone Tape* come to mind, as do numerous Hammer Horror depictions of scientists who just don’t know when it’s time to stop. The ambivalence of the Standpoint set-up proffers a rich vein for the imagination, for mental play and speculation, as opposed to moralistic illustration or a neat, complete understanding of how things are. ‘The very term “Standpoint” refers to a clear position or assertive conceit, but here the artist has consciously operated against the grain of the name, merging the background “neutrality” of what is already an unusual and interesting array of display areas with an overload of objects and effects. Several “standpoints” are inferred, yet the geometry of the gallery has been carefully utilised in the construction, form and content of the show – if one may use such purported anachronisms today.

Looking closely at how Holden has assembled this concentration of electronic equipment, industrial and building materials and a multitude of other difficult-to-identify devices, we can see that his eclectic sources have been finely honed down so as to engender a series of superficially-comprehensible engines and generators, sundry mechanical tools of amplification and restraint. Some kind of “processing” (the artist’s own word) is taking place, but what exactly this is, what the function and manner of operation precisely entails, is never revealed. More exactly, at the moment when the audience enters the spectacle, the procedure has already been aborted, either by accident or design, and we are therefore present at the aftermath, caught in the confines of a practically-stopped clock. The scene is half-recognisable, partly because among its closest neighbours are mass media depictions of would-be “Sci-Fi” futures, the stereotype of “progress” interrupted or constrained, but also because the formal constituents of the installation are themselves half-familiar. Holden’s materials are both found by chance and deliberately sourced, a combination of abandoned or outdated technologies and rearranged utilitarian objects. Some of the things he employs may still be encountered in living rooms and kitchens, though present in bulk form in the exhibition as the component parts of the display. There is a lot of plastic, which is, according to Roland Barthes, “in essence the stuff

of alchemy”, bargain basement cake tins, scuffed instruction manuals, concrete garden figurines, glass handkerchief ornaments, and much other indeterminate stuff, now repurposed to suggest a fantasy-future technology assembled to engage in unknown but intelligent actions or “research”. Here the increasingly-essential commitment to recycling is taken to a new level, the ruined and abandoned becoming, allegorically, the latest version of what used to be known as “state of the art”.

Positioned in and around the clutch of recycled artefacts are a number of electronic and mechanical components sourced from now-defunct telephone systems, notably from when the General Post Office was the sole legitimate provider of audio communication devices in the UK. Dialling machines and voltage controllers exemplify a time when analogue technology was the current cutting edge, the mysterious nomenclature of the “Null Detector” and the “Decade Bridge” being part of the unnoticed beauty of what were of course tools and methodologies of practice, not “the poetic” as such. Technical labels and found, inadvertently comical signage has an important place in Universal Bridge. Holden’s use of “competition kettlebells”, part of which phrase might well be the name of a flower, is surely not determined by their visual or artistic relevance alone.

One segment of the installation forms a focal point within the broader presentation, a raised platform on which a landscape or swamp of cables, tubes and machine parts reveal signs of a dramatic interruption. This area is brightly lit and is obviously the place of studied attention, the zone in which whatever was being tested was housed. It is exactly where the contamination began, the spot where the forcefield was breached, the point where the alien invaders’ portal broke through. Who knows exactly what was opened up or brought into play by this secret operation? A means of teleportation or another manner of encoded transmission may have been what the protagonists were after – the necessary details evade us. Whatever did happen here affected the rest of the compound, necessitating an emergency evacuation – the ambulance cots in the elevator escape unit have obviously been deployed. Data storage devices are strewn about as though dropped in the frenzy of escape, replaying the computer tapes being perhaps the only way to reconstruct what took place. It is on this stage, theatre or pinnacle of operations that we find the only potential human remains to be seen, with several skeleton arms emerging from

the mire, still clutching into eternity their stripped-down mobiles, the essential vade mecum of the present age.

Pointing toward possible future disasters as well as to ones that have already occurred, Holden's work draws on several prominent literary and philosophical positions and ideas of alignment and exchange. Taking his title from an actual electronic device, and with the implication that the work of art, as well as the gallery containing it, may be regarded as a way of connecting disparate elements so as to communicate across time and space, the artist's personal research also involves examining the notion of a bridge between disconnected points, the connecting of individuals located at distances far apart. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's motif, recorded in one of his notebooks, of a flower picked during a dream yet retained and found in his hand upon waking, echoes the bringing back to the present from the future a withered esoteric flower by the traveller in H G Wells' *The Time Machine*. A further correspondence may be noted in a line from Stephane Mallarme's *Sonnet (For Your Dear Dead One, Her Friend)* 2 November 1877, with the fluid line "Too great a freight of flowers on stone my hand". Mallarme also provides, in his essay "Action Restricted", a typically ocular projection, as, again, the artist himself is aware: "No more arrogant denial of the moment, even on the celebrations: it is to be noticed that some chance forbids to dreams the materials to fight with, or favors a certain attitude." The theme of the (dis)connections between what happens inside and outside the dream state is also present in Holden's practice. Is the incident and the interior comprising *Universal Bridge* a materialised dream-image? Is entering the gallery analogous to drifting into the perverse "artificial paradise" of a dream (to borrow Baudelaire's expression)? The process of transformation is one of Holden's recurring themes, a further literary reference being the eerie account, in Wells' *The Invisible Man*, of the narrator's optical dissolution. This sublime change of state is both comical and disturbing, at the same time.

If the half-mad laboratorial convulsion of *Universal Bridge* is read as a potential nightmare, this would at least give us a rich departure point for further speculation. In private conversation Holden has drawn attention to a relevant remark from Jean-Paul Sartre:

"the horrible is not possible in the deterministic world of the usable

The horrible can appear only in a world which is such that all the things in it are magical by nature, and the only defences against them are magical. This is what we experience often enough in the universe of dreams, where doors, locks and walls are no protection against the threats of robbers or wild animals for they are all grasped in one and the same act of horror...In a word, to experience any object as horrible, is to see it against the background of a world which reveals itself as already horrible”.

With Sartre’s account in mind, Universal Bridge can be perceived as something set apart from the conventions – the physics even – of ordinary experience, a dream-space in which “anything” can happen. But it is an ambitious and complicated work, something not reducible to a single conspicuous model of tragedy, comedy, Sci-Fi, or “the real”. While the work consciously invokes traditions of installation, assemblage, sculpture and theatre in a manner contrived from cartloads of Kitsch, its intrinsic disposition asserts ambivalence, connectivity, contradiction, and play.

References

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