

Power In / Power Out

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I remember well that we played in Paris on 110 volts and all the tempos were out of tune. At 8.00pm the big factories that plug into the network were making the voltage fluctuate. That's the reality. Peugeot were making our tempos change.

- Ralf Huetter

The anecdote from Kraftwerk's Ralf Huetter, referring to their Autobahn tour of 1975, could be considered as a further synthesis of Kraftwerk's music and the civil infrastructure that much of their music referenced in title, lyric and aesthetic. With album tracks such as *Regeneration*, *Sellafield 2*, and *Trans-Europe Express*, their back catalogue reads like an index to a grim instruction manual for twentieth century modernity. Yet, Kraftwerk's referentiality wasn't so simple; 'with their haircuts reminiscent of those favoured by bank clerks in the 1930s, and suits cut in a retro, but by no means flamboyant style', they operated a two-way traffic with modernity, forcing-to-stage those aspects that seemed more resistant to retrospective charm from the perspective of the late twentieth century,

Their music not only inferred (and made use of) the bleeps and squeaks of modern working world, but as Huetter's anecdote puts forward, their music was entirely symptomatic with it, affected by the business of car manufacturing, drawing competitively on the same energy sources.

The anecdote might seem an unlikely entry point to considering the work of Dennis McNulty, but in fact it provides a number of possible thoroughfares. In McNulty's work, we find similar references to the civil infrastructures of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: to watered-down utopic realities of roadways, social housing projects, and public transportation systems. And, in McNulty's practice also, we find an approach that complicates these references in becoming works of sculpture, audio, video work and installation; works that shift the operation and perceptual realm of these references in a current context.

Yet, the mention of Kraftwerk also owes something to McNulty's background in producing and performing electronic music, beginning in the early 1990s with *Decal*, a collaboration with Alan O'Boyle. Later in that decade, *Decal*'s abstract spatiality, both sonic and performative served as an empirical basis for his studies in psychoacoustics, a field of research which deals with the psychological and physiological responses associated with sound. Psychoacoustics, as a discipline which operates at the interface between the rational and the experienced, has particular import in considering the audio aspects of McNulty's work, and in fact, his wider practice.

Since the early 2000s, McNulty has produced artworks that use audio as sculptural material, constructing and manipulating space; altering relationships to it. In various works, this has translated to gallery installations in use of multiple speaker placements that give emphasis to the dimensions and proportions of a given space, whilst also demanding that the work is activated through a traversal of space, as viewers / listeners move through it. In other works, this extends to the apparently prosaic but critical issue of the body's proximity to the gallery walls due to the length of a headphone cable. Allowing that the listening body is also a viewing one, the conditions of spectatorship are significant in the conceptual design of McNulty's works, connecting him as much to Robert Morris's ideas of coextensive perception in sculpture that 'made extricable... the body and what it perceives', as it does to the discourses and histories of music and audio arts.

As with audio, there is time and duration. A start and end, the typical limits. Yet, time seems to be an expandable and collapsible condition in McNulty's works. In *Approaching Breezewood*, for instance, produced whilst travelling at speed on a stretch of highway, time is drawn out of the technological contingencies of the car and the road. Or similarly in *Factory prices guaranteed* and *Sun Writing*, works that also borrow their syntax from the time-space of automotive transport.

In *Approaching Breezewood* we hear a voice dictate, while driving, the signs and advertisements that exist on the highway approach to the town of Breezewood, Pennsylvania. We listen to things that might orientate us: the junction numbers, the place names, the safety signs that remind us to slow down, the familiar drone of car noise. There are also, typically, those things that might orientate us differently toward our hungers and desires: food, sleep, and distractions from the monotony of road travel. Orientation is a zero sum game on the road to Breezewood, however. The New York Times commissioned an article on the town several years ago, describing it as a 'one-industry town. Almost all who live here make their living catering to the stream of cars and trucks that at times turn the main street into a jam worthy of a major city ... The thousands of truckers and other travelers who turn off daily to make the town home for a night, are welcomed by 10 motels, 14 fast-food restaurants and 7 fuel and service stations, including two sprawling truck stops. It is all concentrated on a half-mile strip of road that connects the Turnpike exit and Interstate 70'. All in a town that counts only several hundred permanent residents. Each of the signs and advertisements we hear in *Approaching Breezewood* are spoken listlessly, with no special emphasis given to any. All perceptions on the road to Breezewood seem condensed, nullified and withdrawn; the language, appropriately flat. Time in the car on the way to Breezewood seems to spin, unanchored, as we proceed to a place that is really no place at all.

Time takes a different emphasis in works such as *Box with the sound of our unmaking*; a work that draws reference to Robert Morris's seminal work of similar name. Whereas Morris's *Box with the sound of its own making* operates a tautology between an audio component that documents the construction and the box that contains it, McNulty's *Box...* also contains the elements of an audio component concealed in an albeit larger and more abstract sculptural form. Installed at Green on Red, Dublin, in October 2010, the work assumed an ambivalent status – somewhere between sculpture, architecture and curatorial device that served to both fracture the broad assimilating view of the gallery space, and narrativise the encounter of other works in the exhibition.

Compared to Morris's original, the sculptural status of McNulty's *Box* is less of an edifice, however. Its large scale and its awkward placement near the gallery entrance means that the encounter of the work is not so much swallowed in view, like a discreet object that can be walked around and stooped over. Instead, the work seems to resist the embeddedness of neat perceptual and conceptual circuitry, seeming to prefer deferred encounters and looser ends.

In audio terms, McNulty's *Box...* inverts Morris's original. The audio takes us outside of pure sculptural dialectics, into a world of minor civil unrest. We hear the sounds of a traffic protest, a congregation of truckers and their horns contesting the hikes in oil prices. Here, the legacies of Conceptualism (and Morris's work in particular) are met with the local and perceptual registers of global economy and international logistics. The slight, but significant appropriation of title in McNulty's work, to 'unmaking', becoming a further suggestion of art's recessionary implications and collective responsibilities.

Box with the sound of our unmaking owes something to *We built this city (don't you remember?)*, another sculptural work produced earlier in 2010. This work consists of a configuration of large mirrored modules that more explicitly reference the design of 'bass bin' speaker cabinets commonly used in concert venues and large clubs. The modules are arranged together to create an enclosure of interior reflections and refractions, both spatially disorientating and expansive. The enclosure is a space of induced self-consciousness also, as reflected images of ourselves repeat and multiply. Some re-orientation occurs when one of the mirrored surfaces reveals itself to be a two-way mirror, screening a video that cuts in and out intermittently, oscillating between mirror and moving image. Showing carefully edited and closely-framed footage of musicians in a rehearsal space, we see details of equipment, the trails of cable, and moments of motion and tactility: hands holding drumsticks or tightening a cymbal bracket. *We built this city (don't you remember?)* represents something of the complex social projections and spatial relationships that exist in the processes of rehearsal, performance, and audience reception. The tentative actions of play that play back on screen, these are anticipative moments that await an audience that, unwittingly, comes later at a point of remove, and in the context of a gallery space.

The title of the work is also significant. Borrowed from a song by the pop rock band Starship, which carries the famous lyric 'we built this city on rock and roll', McNulty's sculptural work pays a subtle reference to the relationships that exist between music, city culture, and urban regeneration. One of the two rehearsal spaces where McNulty recorded the video component of the work, is typical in that it exists close to Dublin city centre, (literally) on the wrong side of the tracks, near to the old port. While these circumstances make it vulnerable to the effects of economic boom and bust, as a space for new ideas, necessary experimentation, but also of anticipated return, the rehearsal space is a space appropriate for the anxieties of our current predicament.

As we've seen in works such as *Approaching Breezewood*, *Box with the sound of our unmaking*, and *We built this city (don't you remember?)*, time in McNulty's work, exists in multiple registers. This is true of both the encounter of the work, and also in the work's embedded referentiality. McNulty's work operates with references that seem to dream, that hunger for something outlying in the future, that carry speculations of their own.

Alternative proposal for Collingwood (Moffett #1) and *Alternative proposal for Collingwood (Moffett #2)* are works that reference a formally experimental social housing project, designed by Irish architect Noel Moffett and constructed by the GLC in East London in the early 1970s. Collingwood's distinct design initially employed hexagonal structures 'inspired' by the Giant's Causeway (a World Heritage Site in County Antrim, Ireland); a design that strangely coincides with JG Ballard's geo-futurist fictions produced in the same period. Researching this architecture, McNulty visited the site and discovered the remains of a play area that was once integral to Moffett's housing complex. A ground surface of hexagonal blocks still carries the memory of Moffett's design plan, but the functionality of the space and the apparatus itself – the swings, climbing frame et al – has long since disappeared.

Moffett's hexagonal modularity serves as the formal and referential basis for a series of sculptural works that can be considered as model for his architectural vision and its latent redundancy. The simple floor standing stack of cast concrete hexagonal units in *Alternative proposal for Collingwood (Moffett #2)* or the more complex arrangement in *Alternative proposal for Collingwood (Moffett #1)* both carry the scale of architectural modelling and medium-sized gallery sculpture. This has to be understood as a deliberate ambivalence in proposing alternative architecture through the status of sculpture; something that unsettles the differences between speculation and spectatorship, aesthetic emancipation and social consequence.

How we're to look at his *Alternative proposal for Collingwood* works also depends on how we locate time within the work. Time unfolds through the geological-time of the hexagonal motif, through the moment of Moffett's original design plans, through Collingwood's continued existence and mutation, through the time of the sculpture's materiality and encounter. Each of these 'times' composite the work and affect our perceptual relationships to it: McNulty's work sustaining all these multiple registers at once, without dictation.

Similarly referencing a specific, but iconic architecture, is the video work *1949*. The work consists of a looped video of a scene shot through the panes of Philip Johnson's Glass House, built in New Canaan, Connecticut in 1949. The organising principle of the scene is less the architecture, and more the sun, which centrally framed, bursts through the foliage beyond. Movement in the scene comes in the form of the camera struggling to hold steady; also in the reflections of the distant passers by, visitors to this National Trust site. *1949* is a work that both sympathetically performs Johnson's architecture of transparency and immediacy of nature, and yet symbiotically strips its modernity with the social and technological contingency of the hand-held camera.

We might also consider how time is encrypted in the ongoing maintenance of the Glass House. The notions of transparency fundamental to much modernist architecture enter into a contradiction of sorts, as 60 or so years after its construction, there is little detectable ageing or neglect. As the building's effective transparency continues, it also discontinues in the sense that its servicing and upkeep remains hidden. Those familiar with Johnson's New Canaan campus might recognise the red-brick building caught in the glass reflection of McNulty's video. With no front-facing windows, the 'Brick House' serves as both the counterpart and companion piece to Johnson's Glass House, while also functioning as a depository for much of the infrastructure that was seemingly too 'apparent' for the Glass House itself. In *1949*, the Brick House is reflected on the surface of the same transparent material that transmits the sunlight bursting through the building, drawing a circuit of affects and effects that inform each other in turn, perpetually bound in temporal loop.