

interview

Edited from a conversation between Liz Kent and Helen Sear
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Liz: In your previous work, particularly the *Animal Landscapes* series, you talk about constructing spaces that you refer to as 'spaces of desire'. In *The Whole Story* you have taken a very different starting point, referring to yourself as a mediator. Could you talk about the differences in these two approaches to making work?

Helen: The animal landscapes are constructed within the frame of the image and are about desire and loss. They do not exist as real places but become metaphors for an ongoing enquiry in my work, specifically: what does "nature" mean, particularly in its primitive state outside the constraints of culture; what is it to be both human and an animal in the material world? In this sense they are a more personal enquiry. With *The Whole Story* the role of mediator seemed more appropriate as I was coming in to two sites, the library and the museum, from an outsiders point of view. The work was attempting to articulate ideas of personal choice and individual journeys in the face of what is presented to the public by the two institutions: to make the private act of reading public and to make visible a glimpse into the storeroom of the museum, normally off bounds to the public. The work made in the museum was to be re-presented in the library and visa versa. The participants of the video defined the content of the piece, they chose which passages from the books they selected to read aloud. In the case of the museum, collecting the raw material was in some ways defined by the possibilities that were there and was a different experience from the idiosyncratic construction of my more personal projects.

With the video piece for the museum, the installation is very clearly a way of locating the audience firmly within a specific space. They become a mirror image of the participants in the video.

Yes. The structure of the video installation is such that there will be a random collision of read texts where the audience completes the work, mirroring the participants by sitting on the same benches as in the video, facing one of two projections. I wanted to work with people who use the library on a regular basis, I wanted them to be able to express their own intervention into that space and to articulate the private activity of reading and transport it into a public arena. The action of reading aloud and the personal selections made by the participants will stand alongside the "given", to be "received", nature of the artefacts on display at the museum, while the images from the museum, presented in the library, explore the nature of categorisation itself.



Once you had advertised for people to participate in the video, and they had come along to read for you, how much do you think they were aware of the performative aspect of reading aloud? Also, those that came back to read again, did you feel that they had practised in the intervening weeks?

I think, by and large, there was very little preparation, because we were approaching people on the spot, as they came out of the library, and the first choice they had was whether they were going to participate in this project or not. Because we did two shoots some of the same people came back and I sensed that maybe one or two people felt they wanted to present themselves as good readers.

I think that one of the most interesting aspects of your work from the Museum is that it is so totally located in the 'real' world of the museum space. It's almost as if you've gone into some kind of sacred space to photograph because it's a space no-one really gets to see. They get to see the construction of history, they don't get to see the confusion of objects that's in the store rooms.

In this project the museum is already its own construction of history, so I've chosen to go behind the scenes to the clutter of the storeroom and focus on the objects as they are on the shelves, as it were not yet presented for our gaze. The nature of both pieces is difficult to define but I feel that alongside my own voice are others. In an obvious way there are the voices of the

readers but there is also the voice of the institution, the museum as the Victorian parent perhaps, telling us what is right and good for us to experience and what is not. I have taken the photographs in the store room but the text messages are talking to me, telling me certain things from someone else's view. Everyone is familiar with the activity of going through cardboard boxes and labelling items for storage. Stuff for forgetting about or things waiting to be moved. But for me the excitement was in being in a space you weren't really supposed to be in, to find what's been left behind or undiscovered. It was the notes written on the boxes by the curators which began to tell another story, and became, for me, as evocative as the artefacts themselves. In museums I think there is currently a move away from valuing the mystery of an object in its own right in favour of its interpretation and explanation for the public. And there lies the dilemma for the museum curator, made ever more accountable to the public, and also for the artist. In my own case I am often more interested in the things I don't understand about my work, the part where the "magic" lies. The pleasure of a mummy located outside the gents toilet and a sculpture of Lady Godiva facing some heads of state. How does one negotiate these?



So you're almost curating the curators? They've already selected these objects, deciding that they are not what they want to show, and then you've gone through the boxes again and decided what you're interested in is this curator's labelling narrative. In the photographs of the painted portraits you have digitally altered them by blurring their surfaces, so that they appear as if they had moved when photographed. You speak of these figures as being observers. By this do you mean observers of what you were doing, or observers of the curator's process?

The blurred photographs of the painted portraits stand as observers to the curator's notes, perhaps re-animated from obscurity to the role of commentator. I wanted them to have a pro-active role so that we're not just scrutinising them, they refuse to be seen in the crystal clarity of the sharp focused image.

It could be said that you have embarked on a process of archaeology with this commission; revealing, over two sites, the 'given' structures of the two cultural institutions within Maidstone. You were working within a particular site and location and across two adjacent institutions that perhaps don't have so much of a dialogue with each other: one that houses historic objects and one that deals very specifically with contemporary visual arts. By introducing each into the other you are beginning to build a bridge between them.

Yes, and in one instance an image of a room from the Museum is literally pasted onto the wall of an adjacent building, so it almost becomes a strange view into another space. In the library the materiality of the work is as important as what's represented in the images. The way they are glued onto the wall in hundreds of numbered sections: there is an obvious allusion to labour in this process, the endless labour of collating and categorising information and artefacts, the jobs of the curators and librarians at both sites. I embarked on the process of archiving my own photographs so an image which took a fraction of a second to take was then reconstructed in hundreds of labelled sections in the computer and printed out in sections from a small inkjet printer. The whole piece is about the impossibility of ever telling the whole story, that there are many stories evolving as we speak and that as humans we can only make sense of the world up to a point.

So you are saying that people will bring to the work their own history, and they'll see it in their own way? So there are millions of whole stories.

Yes.