

The Imaginary Museum

David Cross *David Clegg's Imaginary, Real and Symbolic Museum*

It's difficult to gauge what to expect when you ask a curator or contemporary art administrator to talk on the record about the staircase in their gallery. We might assume that they would talk about its formal elegance or the way it seamlessly links exhibition spaces. They may on the other hand choose to discuss its materiality or the viewpoint it provides for particular art works. What you may not expect to hear is that the best thing about the staircase in their gallery is that it helps you to identify people you want to talk to at openings. This lovely intellectual nugget courtesy of a staff member at the Frankfurt Museum für Modern Kunst was one of many that David Clegg garnered from interviewing an assortment of European directors, curators and exhibition staff about the spaces in which they work. Clegg, like a highbrow antipodean Parkinson, weaved his way across the continent asking stock questions of an architecturally enigmatic nature. With Sony Mini Disc in hand he wanted these arts workers to describe the walls, seats, entrances, cafes and windows that they had to professionally navigate in their working lives. From Leipzig to Helsinki, Clegg set about building a taxonomy of seemingly prosaic responses to art gallery architecture. We get to hear for instance that Rolf Quaghebeur from SMAK Ghent has real difficulty coming to terms with the poor acoustics in the foyer that makes telling screaming children to get off the art work nearly impossible. Andreas Schalhorn from ZKM Karlsruhe likewise let slip that the director so loves the 'antique' staircase of the converted 1915 munitions factory he never takes the elevator.

Clegg's carefully self-curated responses to these interviews were shown in the multi-venue exhibition *The Imaginary Museum* seen in 2003-04 at the Adam Art Gallery, The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery and Christchurch Art Gallery. Working with a variety of materials including photographs, sound recordings and published transcripts, the artist continually re-mixed this same archive for each different venue. At the Govett-Brewster Clegg curated eight exhibition stations around a different component of the gallery architecture. The audience member was able to

listen for example to the 20 different responses to gallery seating on the Discman provided while at the same time viewing documentary photographs mounted on the wall of the actual seats. At Christchurch, Clegg employed a more informal approach using the same sound recordings, yet also leaving a published newspaper entitled *The Imaginary Museum* on seating throughout the gallery for the audience to pick up and read. Common to all three showings was an interest in opening up the art audience to a reflexive engagement with the museum and the minutiae of its inner workings.

Clegg focuses on what could be called gallery non-sites, architectural features that mostly have nothing to do with the actual exhibition spaces. Features such as walkways, cul de sacs, stairwells, twee landings from which you can observe nothing but bare walls, are all of interest to Clegg as they often function as architectural annoyances that interfere in some way with the art work. These non-sites, his work highlights, confound curators whose solution is either to pretend that they are not there or to hide them discreetly. By clever double entendre Clegg actually uses these non-sites as exhibition spaces in the Govett-Brewster and Christchurch showings. We thus get to engage with meditations on gallery cafes while actually sitting in one. We ponder the vagaries of the foyer while sitting on a curious landing that leads somewhere we have never been. These junk spaces fascinate Clegg and he takes pleasure in revealing them to us. Like the kid who finds the Playboy mags stuffed under the couch, he brings to light those little blind spots that we weren't supposed to see. All those potplants, Mies van Der Rohe day beds, and courtesy water fountains are camouflage fodder to deflect attention from the non-site. These ruses however clearly do not erase the non-site from the gallery visitors art experience and Clegg is determined to show us the dust under the rug.

The non-site functions both spatially and metaphorically in Clegg's project as he examines the museum as a dynamic system of production and exchange. While its meanings are

mostly understood through the showcasing of art works, Clegg digs deeper in the search for a more complete and revealing picture. He goes beyond the actual gallery spaces to examine what we don't see or more accurately what we do not see as significant. For Clegg, the museum can be understood as a rhizomatic structure with the art work operating in a similar way to the small flowering component that is visible above ground. However beneath the surface there lies an extensive network, to quote Deleuze, "of connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, and social struggles". A key characteristic of the rhizome is that it connects any point to any other point in the system in a non-hierarchical way and Clegg employs a similar model to make both sense and non-sense of some of the more obscure connections that operate in the European art museum.

For Clegg, the starting point in this investigation is architectural. He identifies the building in all its complexity as the key mechanism by which particular cultural and political meanings are revealed and concealed. Clegg seeks to develop an understanding of museum buildings in part through photographing their varied details but also through capturing the effect these architectural details have on the lives of those working in these spaces. Using both still and timebased mediums, he seeks to frame the building both as a static and at the same time dynamic entity. The sound recorded interviews play carefully off the photographs and flavour our understanding of each museum in very particular ways depending on the speaker. Like fictional writing, there is a lot of information provided in these conversations but also a good deal left to the imagination. The accents of the speakers, the way they inflect their answers and even the acoustics of each space combine to enlighten the listener in a strangely disembodied way. We do not know the specific gallery spaces they are talking about and are forced therefore to imagine and to try and construct them mentally via the interplay of image and oral information. Because of this there is considerable

space for slippage and for the spectator to prioritise what is important in the curator/administrators pronouncements. Is it what they say, what they do not say, or how they say it that matters? Clegg loves this slippery slope and keeps his authorial voice lurking at the margins ever fearful of closing potential readings down.

It is interesting that the most expansive answers in Clegg's conversations can be found at the station/ component concerned with gallery problems. Where the answers to questions regarding seating and café's were marked with circumspection, responses to what was wrong with the building revealed a candid openness. The chance to bag the architect led to an astounding litany of grievances pouring out from each curator/administrator. These included an annoyance at the distance between the car park and the entrance to the 3 different tones of white paint on the walls. The whole functionalist rhetoric of form following function comes crashing down amid a litany of bitchy dissent. We are left with the overwhelming sense that buildings that house art actively seek to hinder our experience of viewing the work.

Clegg allows us to marvel at the intensity of the spats while keeping the whole enterprise cool and cerebral. Indeed there is something in the tone of his project that smacks of the British comedy/tragedy *The Office*. Like Ricky Gervais' satire on the ubiquity of white collar hysteria, Clegg employs a similar deadpan dissection of his particular social milieu. Yet unlike Gervais, Clegg does not inflect the whole enterprise with a self-conscious- albeit brilliant- form of caricature. He does not need to as his interview subjects play it out naturally. The cleverness of Clegg's project however is that the satire is not contrived or even implicit. It is simply one potential reading that those of us who favour an ironic methodology might wish to employ. Yet it sits in a delicate alignment with a number of other dialogues that reveal broader social and political meanings. Clegg is able to shuffle the postmodern two step

by multi-coding the globalised contemporary art gallery as an irrevocably contested and conflicted site of meaning. Importantly however this complexity is conveyed with a deliberate and arresting economy.

Out of the discussion that emanated from the Adam Art Gallery showing of the work, a key issue raised was the works relationship to the history of institutional critique. One critic in conversation mentioned that the work appeared to be locked in a 60s time-warp and that it merely served to re-play a conventionalised critique of art institutional politics. In other words, Clegg was wading into terrain that had been long ago validated by Hans Haacke and Daniel Buren surrounding the galleries direct role as a mechanism that constructed the meaning of an art work. On one level Clegg is involved with this dialogue as the complex permutations of the contemporary art gallery/ museum have formed the basis of much of his work in the last decade. Yet there are layers to his project that move beyond Haacke's overtly political attempts to frame the art institution as a functionary of nascent capitalist power. Haacke's interest was often in tracing connections between the political and corporate biases of museum trustees and the reflection of these biases in museum policy. Clegg on the other hand is not interested in the boardroom or saving us from the Rockefellers of this world but in what goes on beyond the museum door that says 'staff only'. His interest is in the curator of contemporary art, the installer, the intern staffing the front desk and how they make sense of the art spaces they work in. He seeks to locate political and cultural meanings in the myriad of operations in which art workers and the public alike actually 'perform' the museum.

Against the grand narratives of first and second generation conceptual art that sought to critique the underlying ideological, racial and sexual imperatives of art museums, Clegg offers a litany of little narratives that are inflected with a far broader understanding of politics. The artist for one is interested in how notions of individual taste inform

the shaping and exercising of institutional power. He suggests to us that cultural capital is a primary currency of exchange that fundamentally determines the ways in which we experience and understand art. In other words decisions about gallery colour schemes, the desired militancy of security staff, even the standard of the cafe's panini are all in their small ways political decisions with specific consequences. They are significant parts of the rich tapestry that encompasses 'the art experience'.

Clegg's political project is to get those who spend their working lives in such spaces to reflexively and honestly mine the museum. Out of this process he seeks to surreptitiously establish a big picture out of tiny seemingly innocuous observations. He knows that direct questions about art museum politics will not get direct answers as the PR spin kicks into action. It is only by carefully lulling his interviewees into blissful complacency with his geniality, foreignness and weird questions that something real and unprocessed comes out. Those raw moments seem beautiful in their honesty and genuinely inform us about the agendas, tastes and obsessions that underpin the workings of art galleries. Alongside these encounters with the real however he also leaves plenty of space for us to imagine and project our own thoughts and prejudices onto a deliberately foreign-European- art world. Clegg's Imaginary Museum oscillates wildly between fact and fiction and adds new layers to the conceptual project of making sense of how art is displayed.

Deleuze, G and Guattari, F, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Scizophrenia*, trans. B Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis, Press, 1987, p7.

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