

DOMOBAAL

A conversation between Karl Baker and Steve Johnson

KB. Are you trying to describe very specific places with your sculpture?

SJ. Yes and no. They are hybrids of real places and agglomerations of experience.

KB. An agglomeration perhaps, yet your sites, if I may call them that, are reformed and re-ordered, very precisely to look like real places once more. Are you saying that these places don't really exist?

SJ. They are sites but I think of them as miniaturised viewing platforms. Obviously you never experience a real place in this way. Generally speaking, we experience the surface and not the subterranean world. The works picture a mental landscape much more than a physical one. I'm trying to expose nature's indifference underfoot.

KB. How much then does our experience of these sculptures depend upon our everyday interaction with the pedestrian sites that you are referring to and how far are we to understand their civic role?

SJ. Of course it is important that their function in the real world is recognised. They are all pedestrian islands in one way or another, I don't disguise that. The only exception is the U-Bahn at Hermannplatz. At this specific site in Berlin you often see a market with stalls but the rest of the time it's just a grey, cobbled crossing point; a departure point. Hermannplatz is however a pedestrian island of sorts because it's surrounded by traffic on all four sides. All the islands I refer to perform an essential function in that they stop us being killed by cars but that's where their civic function ends.

KB. I am trying to suggest that you might consider these places to have a socio-political significance for the urban dweller beyond mere appearances. As for Althusser's famous 'interpolation' or 'hailing' that he saw embedded in state architecture, do the new works suggest the presence of authority?

SJ. That reading suggests control which seems mildly paranoid to me. I wouldn't say control. This is your projection, your state of mind.

KB. Ok then, if not authority, how do these sculptures relate to other civic spaces, such as squares or parks?

SJ. With the possible exception of Hermannplatz, where people walk onto the island to join the tube network, the sculptures do not represent anything like meeting places. You don't hold rallies, have picnics or keep deer on pedestrian islands (laughs). They are transitional spaces where people are flowing through the city on their daily journeys. I'm drawn to them because we tend not to notice these places. They're almost as invisible as the earth they are built on. I have a need to make work that has some route into my physical experience often in a very obvious way, like realism does.

KB. Interesting. When I think of realism I think of a politically motivated, socially responsible art, one that in the West in any case used allegorical means to avoid banal ideological representations. Realism is a form of representation always locked in the social, no matter how disguised, don't you think?

SJ. I don't think of my work as being socially responsible. I make an analogy.

KB. If not a political realism, your analogy suggests critical parallels with the aesthetic concerns and the social imperatives highlighted by Okwui Enwezor at the recent Documenta 11; which we visited together.

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SJ. There were many interesting works at Documenta but the dominant documentary forms felt as though they could have been experienced in another setting or context like for example the National Geographic Magazine or Discovery Channel. The poetics of 'art' was being squeezed out in favour of information.

KB. Yes, I recognise that. Although it is positive to see realism recast regarding contemporary global dramas, the dialectic between different positions of experience appears contrived when the art is staged as secondary to the political. I am reminded of Adorno's critique of overly political commentary in art and the prevalence of social realism at Documenta suggests that those dangers are present today in art that positions itself directly towards the centre of political conflict. What is interesting however is the way that any move towards an aestheticisation of the socio/political is framed in the language of Utopias. I have in mind here Thomas Hirschhorn. Am I to understand your floating platforms as Utopian?

(long pause)

SJ. Hardly Utopian. Nature's indifference is alarming and isolating. Experience is not entirely particular, I think there are common experiences. These new works are not based in theory and neither are they emotional. These works are emphatic; something that nature can never be.

KB. Your works are empathic, yes. I think people agree with that but there are perhaps other more joyous types of environment where you can witness 'the flow of people', places where people might spend their Sunday afternoons for example. Would an art of parks not signify empathy?

SJ. Let me explain. This is anecdotal but the first day I arrived in south east London from the north east coast of England, I thought 'What the hell am I doing in this god awful place?' I am, of course, intensely connected to the metropolis now but sitting in my studio thirty years later, I wanted to revisit that thought. So I drew some pedestrian islands emphasising their disconnectedness.

KB. I have always thought that drawing is important to you; as though it represents not just the evolution of an idea, but the history and topology of a work

SJ. Yes, but the sculpture deals with real space ... so I sculpted the double pedestrian island which is to be found in Deptford, London and clearly the island is cut off from the rest of the world. And yet my opinion of what these pieces represent is not that the islands have been cut off but that the rest of the world has vanished. That's what they are for me, they are places where people would normally be in movement or waiting to move, but if you took the rest of the world away the implication is, that you would be stood there for ever.

KB. Does the hanging of the work have any bearing on this reading? It feels frustrating to me that I can't see the details from above.

SJ. I have so far only allowed one piece in this series to be seen from above and that was made specifically for a staircase in the Shell-Haus, Berlin. Clearly I am choreographing the viewer's movement around the work. If as a viewer you projected yourself up there onto what I perceive as the viewing platform, there would be no way off. In that sense the islands represent locations with the rest of the world deleted. You can't escape them. If you consider installation and eye levels, the scale of these pieces, the height of the work on the wall effectively means that the viewer is situated far below ground level in what archaeologists refer to as 'deep time'. In my work the viewer is actually positioned close to 100 metres down, in this ancestral position. The frustration that you say you experience is exclusion.

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KB. Please explain this and the idea of 'deep time'.

SJ. Deep time is where the passing of time is visible through the physical stratification of compressed civilisations. From this ancestral eye level you have to imagine what is going on up there. There are two ways of reading these works from the perspective of the onlooker. You can either project yourself onto the surface in which case you're cut off from a deleted world, or you can imagine yourself from the ancestral viewpoint which in this case would mean that you can't ever get back.

KB. Boris Groys once suggested that citizens of the former Eastern Europe have come back from the future; in that they had experienced a Utopia no matter how dystopian the reality. In this respect does your casting of the contemporary viewer back in the ancestral position suggest that our societies are somehow historical?

SJ. I think that human kind is still at a fairly embryonic stage, Modernism clearly enabled us to think about our existential status without any redemption. But the modern period is only a blip. In the longer view of human time, our western conception of society is still in close proximity to religious doctrine; our lives are still on the edge of Modernity, nostalgic for redemption. In my work, the detail is seen in the edges, the edge is where the information is. The edge represents the meeting point between the earth and the cultural layer.

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