

**Mike Nelson: Triple Bluff Canyon, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford,  
8 May – 4 July 2004**

Mike Nelson's installations are travelling shows. Not that they shift venues – they don't, since each one tends to be purpose-built (elaborately so) to fit a single chosen site. Nor are they mobile in the carnivalesque sense – although many die-hard fans have certainly commented on their 'funhouse,' chamber-of-horrors feel. Rather, Nelson's installations require one to travel *through* them, to use ambulatory, bipedal, humanoid instincts – to walk. This might sound like a rather pedestrian (every pun intended) comment to make, but a significant characteristic of Nelson's projects is, quite simply, that they make you move.

This blunt fact struck me with more force recently as I travelled through the artist's latest construction, *Triple Bluff Canyon*, at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford. This multi-part installation assumes a shape that is somewhat unusual within Nelson's extensive list of projects, although his two recent pieces in San Francisco and Istanbul (both 2003) were a heads-up that things were changing. His converted GMC bus at the California College of Arts and Crafts and his Biennial caravanserai outpost (reached only after a long wander through one of Istanbul's busiest market areas) seemed to mark subtle but substantial departures and new directions for the artist. The work in Istanbul, in particular, was at its heart a piece about walking, searching, and finding, and I think that *Triple Bluff*, in a protracted sense, is as well. I wish to look briefly here at Nelson's embrace of the ambient-ambulatory mode in conjunction with a very particular post-surrealist 'philosophy' of walking: that of the situationists.

Nelson, to my knowledge, has claimed allegiance neither to Guy Debord nor his predecessors/followers, although the artist's knack for obscure and provocative referencing might well have them turn up one day. One never knows where Nelson's mind might turn. For instance (and I'm walking away from walking for a moment), as part of the accompanying catalogue for *Triple Bluff Canyon* Nelson has published some of his working notes and sketches associated with the show. On one page we are offered up this loosely connected list of terms, ideas, works, and persons that, in some way, informed the making of *Triple Bluff Canyon*:



Geometry  
Land Art  
Magic  
Illusion  
Crystal World  
Ballard  
Smithson  
Voodoo  
Cinema  
Reception  
War Film  
Set  
Walter de Maria  
Earth room  
Partially buried woodshed  
Desert  
Alchemy  
Islam

Nelson's accompanying construction doodles link these words with the built structures in Oxford's space as he first envisioned them. In looking at his projected thematics we are prompted to consider how the artist finally chose to 'walk us through' such a conceptual labyrinth within the physical realm of *Triple Bluff Canyon*. Because of my particular interests I have been further prompted to speculate on the qualities of Nelson's perambulations: do they lean towards the surrealist (with a list like that) or the situationist (with a plan like that)? And finally, if Nelson's works are not exactly a 'legacy' of either of these traditions, what are they exactly?

### **Walking Along**

Entering through the sliding doors of the Museum of Modern Art from a small side street we are liberated from the throngs of tourists and students that jam the pavements outside. Such a transition is one over which the artist has no direct control, but which nevertheless has the desirable Nelsonian effect of heightening the other-worldly character of the gallery and its laid back, slow paced interior. It is precisely these kinds of natural shifts in register that Nelson purposefully hones in on, assiduously studies, and then artificially re-theatricalises in the fabrication of all his works. For *Triple Bluff Canyon* he does it again, this time – you guessed it – thrice.





But Nelson's ambient triumvirate isn't concerned on this occasion to meld with our recent experience of street culture; rather he eventually moves us through his signature set of double doors into a series of worlds that, contrary to his usual way of working, make no attempt to morph seamlessly into one another (as with *Coral Reef*). In fact, Nelson purposefully reveals his artifice in *Triple Bluff* (calling his own bluff, perhaps?) by allowing us to see the 'backside' of each component in the installation. He orchestrates an almost rhythmic pattern of observation and review that mimics other reflexive couplings such as the close-up and the pan, the event and the flashback, the reality and the memory. Within this installation we walk through an environment, then step outside it, look back at it, and move on. We exist first within the illusion and then the illusion (its 2x4's, plywood, screws and nails) is shown to us. Importantly, the three segments of *Triple Bluff* are physically separated and we are purposefully immersed and then released as we walk toward the next scene, grounded by the sight of Modern Art Oxford's own architecture (although, admittedly, with Nelson you can never be sure).





From our initial encounter with a small-scale octagonal cinema foyer (nostalgically vacant), we are taken up some back stairs to peer into and around the front room of a Victorian London terraced house (doubling as a conspiratorial, alchemical, artist studio that is, in fact, a replica of Nelson's own former conspiratorial, alchemical, artist studio). From here, we move again to confront one of Nelson's most magnificent corridor/tunnel/shafts that I have yet seen. We then find ourselves, at the end of the journey, both inside and outside a kind of desert bunker, Robert Smithson style. With Nelson's arid version of the *Partially Buried Woodshed* re-constructed at nearly full scale within the confines of the Oxford gallery, there are enormous amounts of sand involved. It's stunning. (The catalogue is your one chance to see how Nelson's illusion has been created.)





### Surrealist or Situationist?

In literary terms *Triple Bluff* reads more like a collection of independent short stories than a novel in chapters. The inclination to force a link between the installation's discreet segments is thwarted by Nelson's punctuated, tripartite design which resists the imposition of any flowing narrative line. This strategy, if you will, is what allows Nelson's 'chaotic space' to express its own wonderfully warped version of order that resists unification under a single thematic banner. As the show's commentator, Jeremy Millar writes in the catalogue, 'art,' especially Nelson's art, 'is a form of closure that most often attempts to engage with openness, to encourage openness.'<sup>1</sup>

If I can carry on from Millar's comments and shift Nelson's work away from the literary and science fiction analogies it most often attracts, I find myself moving toward other vocabularies that are equally capable of addressing *Triple Bluff's* procreative 'chaos.' While forensic language has often been deployed in critiques of Nelson's work (most proficiently by Ralph Rugoff, among others<sup>2</sup>), the clue-tracking detective weaving together threads of evidence, while appropriate, is perhaps too specific a figure for our purposes here. Shifting to the more broadly based urban explorations of 'detective-like' figures, I suggest that Nelson's audiences move through the kind of kaleidoscopic, Nadja-like wanderings of the Surrealists into territories that are more closely allied to the psychogeographic practice of the Situationist International (SI). In fact, what is so compelling about the many metres that Nelson's shows have made us walk over the years is that, together, they make up a choreographed *dérive* of interiors that we might think of as part of a second generation of 'situations' constructed by artists operating some fifty years after initial SI activity.

To the situationists, the kind of chaos that Millar describes – 'of emerging order, an opening' – was to be found in the teeming urban sphere. By entering into this sphere in a decisive, provocative, playful, research-driven manner, one could create numerous 'situations' that the SI felt were encounters 'deliberately constructed and passionately lived.'<sup>3</sup> The oft-cited situationist methods of the *dérive* (the technique of transient passage through changing ambiances) and *détournement* (a method of integrating aesthetic fragments into a renovated, 'superior construction') were important parts of their programme of unitary urbanism, as was



the embrace of 'the ludic' – one of Constant's pet notions. Constant, especially, loved the image of the labyrinth while Debord spoke of the 'zones of distinct psychic atmospheres,' and Henri Lefebvre of 'the moment.' Each of these original strategies has a second life in Nelson's hands. In a sense, the artist has 'detoured' (reappropriated) situationist tropes and brought them into service within his constructed, artificial environments. Not only do Nelson's interiors mimic the haphazard, random environments that exist within a city's unseen inner fabric, their 'discovery' by Nelson's audiences also harkens back to the situationist 'discovery' of the city's hidden corridors of activity.

Reviewing these terms, it is not hard to see how Nelson's own programme of re-appropriated iconic imagery and pop cultural borrowings allow his labyrinthine, ambient, immersive installation-making to represent a concentrated psychogeography of its own (he would probably enjoy Asger Jorn's definition of psychogeography as 'the science fiction of urbanism'). Within the contemporary sphere Nelson's works act as 'theoretical objects' that, according to theorists such as Mieke Bal, do not simply illustrate or follow the tenets of an aesthetic tradition but, in their reworking of material, actually change the way we look back on those traditions.<sup>4</sup> While *Triple Bluff* does not incorporate or directly reference its host city (as Nelson did in Venice, San Francisco, and Istanbul), nor bring the inner workings of the city into the gallery (there are no minicab headquarters, crack dens, seedy waiting rooms, or vagrant hideouts in this show), it reconfigures a strategy of *détournement* and embraces what in Yve-Alain Bois's terms is 'the poetic principle of the situationist *dérive*.'<sup>5</sup>

### **From Situationist to Situational**

In the catalogue for *Triple Bluff Canyon*, Millar writes:

In order that we might fully engage in such a situation, a situation such as that presented by Nelson, we must find ourselves in a space that is dominated by neither world – neither external reality nor interior fantasy – but in the third space which opens out onto both. To find ourselves too closely aligned to either would suggest that we have been denied the opportunity for creativity, of *play* ... and in doing so lessens our engagement with both.<sup>6</sup>

Nelson's 'third space' – a ludic space according to Millar – opens out onto both external reality and interior fantasy, never tidily bridging that gap, but lubricating a passageway between



them. For the classic situationist, Nelson's transitional third space created within the installation is not unlike the physical and psychic 'space' reached and breached whilst traversing a city on foot. This is a type of *passage à pied* where choreography and chance intermingle, where one's present condition need not anchor one's meandering thoughts, and where the most miniscule detail can set off a cascade of associations. Walking *between* the trio of elements that make up Nelson's piece I suggest, is as important as encountering its main components. It is here, in the gaps, in the hiatus spent walking, that we let go and let the elements of the situation – 'perishable instants, ephemeral and unique' – take over. As with the *dérive*, Nelson's kind of wandering 'is systematic, with restrained leeway for coincidence; it moves around the psychogeographic relief of a predisposed apparatus.'<sup>7</sup>

The '*dérive*' that Nelson sets us on is highly choreographed (you can be sure that every bit of rubbish and dust and each speck of sand was meticulously accounted for by the obsessive Nelson). At the same time, walking *Triple Bluff* feels as if we are wandering into a series of accidental landscapes. It is no mistake that Nelson sets up his three 'bluffs' – the cinema, the artist's studio, the abandoned shed – to make us progress from the entity most closely associated with the shaping and maintenance of aesthetic control, to a space whose liberated, enigmatic, 'alchemical' associations are legendary, to a final destination that is altogether disappearing – dissolving into a fine-grained landscape whose shape needs to be constantly maintained by the Gallery's attendants. And there are other dynamics to notice: our walk moves decisively from a world of tight interiors (our entrance into the dark and womb-like foyer) toward an ever-expanding view of exteriors (concluded by our look back upon the half-buried shed separated from us by improbable dunes of sand). From another perspective, Nelson transports us from the symbolically metropolitan experience of going to the pictures to a more peripheral voyeurism: peering into the artist's studio on the city's fringes. He then leads us into, and then out of, and then finally back to what is perhaps the ultimate in non-urban encounters: the desert. As Nelson builds each of these 'moments' (the physical presence of each one begins to open out more and more in a cinematic sense) we might be reminded of the 1960 pronouncement, that 'the situationist considers his environment and himself as plastic entities.'<sup>8</sup>



All of this, I suggest, is Nelson at his shape shifting best – working out a personal cartography that protracts, essentialises, and reworks the core of a situationist psychogeography within Oxford's interior spaces. In *Triple Bluff Canyon*, he performs an extraordinary feat by not only directing our 'micro-dérive' but first conceptualising and constructing the three 'landscapes' through which it will pass. Where Nelson himself walks in pursuing this endeavour is, in situationist terms, 'on the path towards a unity of the structural and the conjunctural ... a constructed situation [that] could also be defined 'as an attempt at structuring the conjunction.'<sup>9</sup>

Rebecca Duclos  
University of Manchester

All images are views of Mike Nelson, *Triple Bluff Canyon*, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 2004. Courtesy Museum of Modern Art, Oxford.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Millar, 'Ordo ab Chao,' in *Mike Nelson: Triple Bluff Canyon*, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, n.p.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph Rugoff, *Scene of the Crime*, Cambridge, MA and London, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Libero Andreotti and Xavier Costa, *Theory of the Derive and other Situationist Writings on the City*, Museu d'Art Contemporani, Barcelona 1996, 68.

<sup>4</sup> Mieke Bal, *Traveling Concepts in the Humanities*, Toronto, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, 'Character Study,' *Artforum*, 38: 8, April 2002, 131.

<sup>6</sup> Millar, 'Ordo ab Chao,' n. p.

<sup>7</sup> Mirella Bandini, 'Surrealist References in the Notions of the Dérive and Psychogeography of the Situationist Urban Environment,' in Andreotti and Costa, *Theory of the Derive*, 40.

<sup>8</sup> Andreotti and Costa, *Theory of the Derive*, 107.

<sup>9</sup> Andreotti and Costa, *Theory of the Derive*, 101.

