

**A SECRET SERVICE: Art, Compulsion, Concealment.** A Hayward Gallery Touring Exhibition in collaboration with the Hatton Gallery, 17 September – 11 November 2006: Hatton Gallery, Newcastle, 27 January – 15 April 2007: De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill on Sea, 5 May – 29 July 2007: Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester

**A SECRET SERVICE: Art, Compulsion, Concealment** by Richard Grayson, Claire Carolyn and Roger Cardinal. Published by Hayward Gallery Publishing, London, 2006, 96pp., 50 colour illus., £14.99, ISBN 9781853322563

The Hayward's latest touring exhibition contains a huge, heterogeneous array of secrets. From the mystical to the bizarre to the downright sinister each work suggests a new twist of the word 'secret'. In fact, the show is so fragmented and disparate that it is very difficult to write about. While there is a clear rationale for each piece, in that arguably it reflects some aspect of the title, there is no easy relationship between the works on display. In many ways this makes *A Secret Service* very appealing and forms quite a challenging experience; partly in terms of figuring out the underlying principle behind some of the curatorial decisions, and partly in terms of the diverse range of viewing experiences it offers.

The answer to the challenge of the logic of curatorial choice may be found in the particular reference made to the work of Kurt Schwitters within this exhibition. Indeed Schwitters' projects offered a rich point of departure for the show's curator, Richard Grayson, who used their repeated tropes of secrecy, removal from view, and their qualities of insider and outsider practice as a thematic pegs from which to hang his choices.<sup>1</sup>

The last remaining evidence of Schwitters' activities is displayed in the form of the photographs of the giant construction inside his Hanover home taken by his son before they fled Germany for Norway. These provide a primary locus for almost all of the themes listed in the show's catalogue: magic, alchemy, sexuality, dreams, religion, political conspiracy, assumed identity and the covert workings of the State. The images provide tantalising glimpses of the monumental project which grew like a great Constructivist fungus to fill his three storey house. Nothing of the Hanover *Merzbau*, or the later versions Schwitters built in Norway, survives apart from these photographs, and very few people had access to what they show. Schwitters kept his work a secret, fearing the condemnation of people who did not



understand what it was or why he needed to make it. Not least of all, as an epileptic avant-garde artist, he feared the Nazis.



Figure 1: Kurt Schwitters, *Merzbarn Wall Relief*, 1947-48.  
Image courtesy of Hatton Gallery, University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK /  
The Bridgeman Art Library © DACS 2006

It will be interesting, incidentally, to see how the show travels without Schwitters' *Merzbarn* which is permanently installed at the Hatton Gallery (Fig. 1). The *Merzbarn*, for me, provides an important tool in the process of extrapolating an understanding of Schwitters' processes from the photographs of the Hanover and Hjertøya *Merzbauten*. It also offers a compelling counterpoint for Mike Nelson's specially commissioned installation, a piece which is a direct descendant of Schwitters' *Merzbau*, but which has significantly different aims: Schwitters' work was created to provide a reassuring, protective environment in which he could escape from whatever pressures he was facing, and in which he could explore his personal concerns and current fascinations away from prying eyes. Nelson's installation offers no such comfort. It is an unsettling reflection of the circumstances in which the artist, and indeed all of us, find ourselves, in which conflict and violence transform the world around us.

Nelson's piece is an extension of the *Amnesiac Shrine*, which appeared earlier this year at Matt's Gallery. It consists of a number of steel temporary fence panels, interlocked together and hung with the remnants of its fictional visitors, The Amnesiacs. Trophy heads, old trainers, desert storm camouflage clothing, a scattering of 'Iraq's Most Wanted' playing cards,



rifles, Persian rugs, bottles and horseshoes are amongst the detritus left for us. The Amnesiacs are a mythical biker gang who last appeared in Nelson's work in the mid-nineties, and whose purpose at the time was to help him come to terms with loss.<sup>2</sup> The *Amnesiac Shrine* functions formally in a similar manner to Schwitters' *Merzcolumns*, many of which were later integrated into the *Merzbau* and which included incredibly personal items such as his son's death mask as well as more mundane content. This new installation incorporates, as Schwitters' grottoes did, elements of the everyday; found objects and detritus which reflect the world around, but they reference the fictional world that Nelson has created, rather than representing a connection to the real world as they did for Schwitters. Nelson even references the bottle of urine, suspended as per Schwitters' Hanover production. Nelson's bottle, however, has no 'immortelles' - everlasting flowers - floating in it to offer any reassurance.<sup>3</sup> The *Merzbarn*, in contrast to the somewhat threatening, bleak aesthetic of *Amnesiac Shrine*, is a manifestation of the last hopes of a dying man whose life had been spent dodging trouble, escaping by the skin of his teeth, and having to constantly start again. Schwitters' was certain he could preserve himself within the *Merzbarn* and it now stands as something of a monument to his tenacity in the face of nigh insurmountable difficulties.<sup>4</sup> Both pieces invoke a sense of the partial, of something abandoned. We are left with only traces of the people who created them and the stories behind them.

Nelson's work is probably one of the most disturbing exhibits in the show. (It is also a secret in itself: it doesn't appear in the catalogue; there are no photographs of it and even that most scholarly of research tools, Google, yields no result.) One of the most interesting aspects of the exhibition as a whole is the way that one is thrown between an unnerving piece such as this and the almost pure comedy value of, say, Jeffrey Vallance, whose subversion of the Freedom of Information Act, *My FBI File* (1981), is downright hilarious. Vallance opens up his own secret file, obliging the FBI to hand over the information that they were keeping about him – it's very funny and we must be grateful to him for this self-sacrifice.

Such machinations of the 'state' loom large within the exhibition and are quite often sincerely scary as in Mark Lombardi's exquisitely executed diagrams of high-level corruption and covert



relationships. One thing that is striking about so much of the work on show is the sheer intricacy of it. Lombardi's work is incredibly meticulous, and pretty much all of the other artists featured demonstrate a similar level of methodical complexity within their productions. There is a marked emphasis on the processes used, which seem often to verge upon, or even plummet right into, the obsessive. Kataryzna Józefowicz's thousands of tiny cubes, diligently and painstakingly folded from unsolicited mail, form a sprawling expanse in *Games* (2001-2003), a piece which took two years to create. Paul Etienne Lincoln's alchemical process, *Passage to Purification* (2001) (Fig. 2) is the most elaborate, convoluted and painstaking performance, and is an involved enough experience to watch, never mind to create.



Figure 2. Paul Etienne Lincoln  
*Passage to Purification* (detail), 2001  
Courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York  
© Paul Etienne Lincoln

Similarly, Henry Darger's drawings are evidence of his complete immersion in his creation. A room full of Darger's massive drawings, in all their pre-oedipal, Enid Blyton-on-acid glory, is a sight to behold (Fig. 3). Fastidious attention to detail and an obsessively constructed universe make Darger's work completely compelling: the world inside his head was evidently much



more exciting than the world outside it. It's fascinating to visit but I don't think I'd like to live there.



Figure 3: Henry Darger, *Then true character was discovered, but when the Glandelinians were taking them from the camps in an auto, the machine got troublesome and this enabled the little girls to so easily get away*, 500 A (date unknown). Watercolour, pencil and carbon tracing on paper. 48.3 x 61  
Courtesy Kiyoko Lerner © Kiyoko Lerner 2006

There is, it must be said, something faintly disconcerting about looking at something you know you were never intended to see. Some of the work exhibited was created in secret and some was intended to remain secret. Either way, it puts one in an uncomfortable, yet slightly thrilling, position. Take for example Sophie Calle's *Hotel* series (1981), in which the artist took a job as a chamber maid in order to rifle through and photograph guests' possessions. Can art legitimate such intrusions, we are asked? Clearly, the exhibition answers, it can, and it will happily implicate us in the process.

Intrusion, then, is the principal foil to secrecy in much of what is displayed here. Not necessarily in a sense of infringement, such as in Calle's series, but rather in a sense of



interruption. The strategies of concealment or suppression deployed by various parties – be that the artist or the subject matter – have been interrupted not only by their presence in a gallery and my presence as viewer, but by the relationships that are created within this field, and as I remarked at the start of this review, these relationships are not easy. For example, the relationship between Sophie Calle's work and Jeffrey Vallance's: how would we react if it were the FBI taking pictures of people's hotel rooms? Or the relationship between Oskar Voll's pencil drawings: straight out of the Werneck asylum and full of soldiers and swords, and the very real images of war utilised by *The Speculative Archive*; both refer to the effects of violence and conflict but with very different results. To then juxtapose these with Mark Lombardi's work creates another interruption, as Lombardi combines Voll's obsessive pathology with *The Speculative Archive's* expositional ethos.

It is, the catalogue admits, a paradox to stage an exhibition with secrecy as its main theme.<sup>5</sup> It is also easy to take such a theme at face value. The secret is such a universally understood concept that it has obviously been a challenge to exploit and subvert this, and to come up with interpretations and uses of the theme that go beyond any simple definition. In the current climate, in which information is a commodity and secrecy is so intrinsically linked to scandal, power struggles and violence, an exhibition which engages with the dynamics of the secret is a timely one indeed.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Grayson et al, *A Secret Service: Art, Compulsion, Concealment*, London, 2006, 12-13.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.mattsgallery.org/artists/nelson/exhibition-4.php> for a brief overview.

<sup>3</sup> Schwitters' lengthy description of the Merzbau and its contents is reprinted in John Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, London, 1985, throughout pages 154-169 and in full in *Kurt Schwitters Merz: a total vision of the world*, Museum Tinguely exhibition catalogue, Bern, 2005, 58.

<sup>4</sup> The story of Schwitters' time in Ambleside and the beginning of the *Merzbarn* is recounted in William Feaver's article 'Alien in Ambleside,' *Sunday Times Magazine*, August 18<sup>th</sup> 1974, pp. 27-34.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Grayson et al, *A Secret Service: Art, Compulsion, Concealment*, London, 2006, 7.

