

David Cotterrell: WVR : Monsters of the Id

WVR

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The current exhibition in the Hansard Gallery shows work by David Cotterrell, and it is described in the exhibition flyer as derived from the artists journeys to Afghanistan, Monsters of the Id tests our expectations of cinematic and media representation, presenting a series of new works that experiment with advanced display technologies. The exhibition captures the disorientation of a civilian observer within a militarised environment.

In my case, as a visitor to the gallery, I did not expect to see the usual war zone imagery. Those images I see on YouTube, or other internet sites, and in the general media. My expectation and curiosity was heightened by the fact that in all the publicity about the exhibition, I did not see one photograph of what was actually exhibited. All I have seen before entering the exhibition where either Computer visualisation or Photograph, Afghanistan, Courtesy the artist. While I was immersed in the simulated landscapes the exhibition provides, I considered the question, am I playing a part in the simulation? These artworks place me as the central observer within the installation. The curved walls (in Observer Effect and Apparent Horizon) and bird eye view (in Searchlight 2 and also Apparent Horizon) made me think of Foucaults description of the panopticon, where the viewing eye stands in the center of the world that is to be perceived. Within the exhibition the world, not just Afghanistan, and its inhabitants are seen through the eyes of computer visualisation. Each installation seems to show the same landscape but from a different angle, but each time the installations reconstruct a central viewing position, which left me as visitor looking for some form or some link to reality. Not the interaction of the simulations with the number of visitors, which is an unnecessary complication, but a point within the exhibition where for me simulation and real life meet.

Standing in the doorway of the amazing seductive Apparent Horizon I had a feeling of an underlying creepiness induced by the perfect abandoned landscape complete with moving clouds and shadows and a few strange walking figures. This creepy landscape, generated by the 6 channel HD collimated display, made me realise that what I am looking at might be a reconstruction of a view on the world from an institutional-military-commercial perspective. This is the view that only shows what needs to be seen, but shows it perfectly. A mediated world, where the sensing, selection and distribution of the visible itself reflects a certain ideological world. The politics of aesthetics, to quote Ranciere, visualised. Decisions are made based on this world view. Decisions of immediate life and death, and also decisions of long-term strategies I think here of the remote controlled drones, remote sensing by satellites, and I think of the computer modelling by the scientists working on climate change. With these ideas in mind I continued to walk through the exhibition and arrived at the back of the gallery where Cotterrell installed an unnamed part of the exhibition. Unnamed like a military site, but marked on the gallery map. A temporary control center for remote sensing, and who knows firing the drones, or are there computer games played? Complete with tent, desk, computer and single lamp lighting. Here I found a confirmation of the reality that the simulations are hiding so seductively. This room might relate to the control center of the (military) observer, but equally to the control center of the maker of the imagery by computer visualisation, or, and this is the point, to the exhibition spectator who might observe the exhibition as a whole from a distance. In this last perspective the instances of art and their spectators become one world, one simulated world that falls back onto itself like a feedback loop. I adopt this view point often in my own artwork so it is not that surprising that I find it or focus on it.

The importance of this last room is also shown in the catalogue of the exhibition. It shows on page 14 again a computer visualisation of a similar control room but in a more permanent situation, and it has the same title as the exhibition Monsters of the Id. Helen Sloans article The

Simulated and the Profane explains that the title is taken from the science fiction film Forbidden Planet from 1956. The connection between the film and exhibition might be the failure of correspondance between the ideal and our human condition. Sloan also mentions that David Cotterrell references Ray Bradburys book The Illustrated Man. In one of the short stories a playroom becomes a hybrid world where the virtual and the real are starting to merge, or worse the virtual becomes real and devoures it. I would say our fear that aliens or futuristic technology will destroy us is never far away. However, what we should never underestimate is the power of the real (In Bradburys story the children take revenge on the parents by making the virtual lions real and attacking the parents). And that is exactly the notion I find so well expressed in this exhibition. Reality whatever that is is messy and complex, and it goes a lot further than fiction, fantasy or narratives.

During the conference Art Image Politics (organised by the Hansard Gallery and SCAN) David Cotterrell showed clips of the film The Illustrated Man by Jack Smight, and some images of the advanced simulation rooms used for training pilots which also use curved projection screens. Cotterrell discussed his choice of not using his photographs or the usual war imagery. He didnt want to add to or sustain a linear collective narrative nor salacious media coverage, and he highlighted his personal experiences. Intense experiences of waiting for something to happen, alternated by frantic activity. And the unreality of simulations which are all about action and do not allow the mundain to surface in periods of waiting (Cotterrell describes this with more context in his catalogue text Photographys False Promise).

One paper during the conference made me question how I would see the relation between the exhibition and my working practice in terms of simulation (Roger Kneebone & Gunther Kress Surgical simulation as display: changing sites, changing meanings). Kneebone started with a disturbing video of an emergency operation and revealed afterwards that this was a simulation. He explored one of the reasons for doing simulations, which was to give the public access in some form to the practice of surgants, who work in operating theatres. He showed a diagram with three contexts: the professional context (closed to the general public); the embodied practice (site of simulation, open to public); and the public sphere. Under the heading the embodied practice he included art, design and performance. A very interesting perspective, but what if we take a similar look at the practice of artists? The question for me is if we presume the exhibition as a space for simulation there has to be an equivalent in real life. One option is to create an exhibition within an exhibition, and I could argue an installation might be just that.

I realised I have always assumed that for me an exhibition is a reality, not a simulation of a reality. A reality in the sense of as I see it which might include references to other places, events and ideas. Not a simulation as Kneebone described it, an ongoing experience of another event, another process. The Monsters of the Id exhibition and conference have made me think again

[...] VVVR

[... Art, dispersion, symbols...]

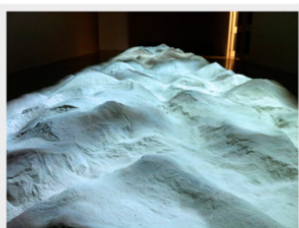
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— David Cotterrell, Searchlight 2 (2002) Installation view, Monsters of the Id, Hansard Gallery. Photo: Walter van Rijn.

WVR Website Credit: Walter Van Rijn (2012)