

## Objects of Curiosity: on the work of Junebum Park

Early in 1836 Edgar Allan Poe went to see an exhibition game of chess in Richmond, Virginia. The draw for the novelist and the rest of the audience was that the player in question was presented as a machine. The *Automaton Chess-Player*, also known as *The Turk*, was invented in 1769 by Baron Kempelen, later to be toured around the United States by Johann Maelzel. Over the many years of exhibition the automaton had been declared by many to be an example of a 'pure machine', it was also the subject of many more accusations that it was a blatant piece of fakery. Despite the seriousness with which it was presented, it was in effect, a piece of theatre. Using the same format each time it was shown, the automaton was seated at a cabinet with an integrated chessboard. At the beginning of every game the cabinet was wheeled to the front of the stage or platform and the doors were opened to show the audience the mechanical workings inside. Once witnessed, the doors of the cabinet would be closed, it would be returned to the centre of the stage and then the game would begin. The essay 'Maelzel's Chess-Player' appeared in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in April 1836. In the course of the essay, Poe produces seventeen observations as proof the automaton could not be a machine, all of them generated from the perspective of the audience. Poe was keen to write an essay where proof is demonstrated through the direct circumstance and framework set by Maelzel, care was taken to only use observation and not supposition. For the approach to work it needed to avoid the surface spectacle of the event and focus on the more everyday aspects of its operation. The actual function of the automaton was only of secondary interest to Poe, his argument is more of a challenge to the nature of belief in relation to reason. The visual excess was a distraction away from logic.

In the process of looking it is difficult to escape from the surface of things. This is what the eye passes over and where it sometimes rests. Looking and thinking, even reading and thinking do not always go together, despite their seeming compatibility. Questioning the very basic elements of how we look is fine in the abstract, or as a basic equation; looking plus processing equals concluding. Yet, this simplicity does not exist in the everyday world in which most people live. Each image, object and event cannot be subjected to a detailed level of analysis - if it were, then this would be a speedy route towards madness (a path a number of writers and artists have taken, not that obsession followed by madness is the preserve of the cultural producer).

Often it is only a matter of seeing everyday things from a slightly different perspective which can then open up more dramatic changes. In the work of Junebum Park, aspects of a largely

urban environment are used as the raw materials, the world becomes another kind of object presented for the viewer to contemplate, for things to be seen in a different light. Materials, objects, buildings, streets are all manipulated to take on an adjusted form, to become something else. This is not unusual, a sense of transformation is often part of the change from object to artwork. What is seen less often is the actual process, the details of exactly how something is altered. In a number of works hands appear in the frame, busily adjusting, adding and moving a whole series of different elements. Sometimes they are shown in the midst of construction, at others the hands are only acting out a role, playing the part of the controller of cars, people, streets and buildings - things that are already on a pre-determined path. The hand is seen as a device to stand in for the artist, writer or narrator (with the additional question of whether they may be reliable or not - something to be decided by the viewer). In exhibition, the materials used to make the film are sometimes shown alongside the finished piece. What might be seen and what might be understood are two separate things - the work seems to dwell on this division. This sense of difference, an indication that there is always considerably more happening beneath the surface seems to permeate much of the work.

Although many of the works in Junebum Park's output make use of the fabric of the city, this is not always the case. There are a series of 'Puzzle' works (2005-2008). Filmed from above, they each involve a group of participants, sometimes with desks sometimes not, laid out on a squared grid. As each of the films progress the participants manoeuvre around and within the space, from square to square without breaking the frame until an end-point is reached. In some of the puzzles there is a task or 'scenario' to complete, in others the end is reached only as a matter of mutual consent. A central element of the 'Puzzle' works is the lack of purpose. It is this lack which makes the viewer think, posing questions of whether the participants are responding to a grand plan which is not revealed, or whether they are just making things up as they go along. It is a simple device and the simplicity is part of what generates the search for meaning. Seeing the work from above provides a greater sense of order or structure. Though, without the underlying sense of purpose, the perspective only suggest the illusion of understanding.

In the series of works produced whilst the artist was resident in Manchester, the city extends beyond being a backdrop to becoming a participant. The work only happens because the city is experienced, it is felt. Yet, experience is not enough on its own, the contemporary city will always betray issues and conditions of both the local and the global, often merging in a rather awkward mix - one that mirrors the messiness of the city itself.

The films use specific details of the city to address matters of both the personal and the generic.

In the two works 'To Let' and 'Sideless Buildings', the street forms the subject-matter. Although frequently setting the scene for fiction and film, the street as a subject is not always given the level of attention it requires. In the book *Species of Spaces*, Georges Perec devotes a section to 'The Street'. It begins in something of a deliberately banal fashion, commenting that the 'parallel alignment of two series of buildings defines what is known as a street'. Perec's writing made use of stylistic shifts, after the pragmatic opening and a very short section on the effect of seeing two blind people on the street he moves on to set a task for the reader, a practical exercise which might be carried out on any street. He asks the reader to choose a street and then to note down what they see, arguing that if there is nothing which 'strikes' the viewer then this can only be because they do not know how to see. Perec suggests the following,

You must set about it more slowly, almost stupidly. Force yourself to write down what is of no interest, what is most obvious, most common, most colourless.

For Perec, being able to see the ordinary is something of an art, one which requires much practice and deliberation. In the work of Junebun Park, the street is made more noticeable because of the changes that are made. Although the structure of the buildings stays the same, the additions and adjustments completely alter the view. They are a trigger to force the viewer to pick out the genuine everyday elements, to try and work out where the threshold of ordinariness lies. In any city signs offering buildings for rent are to be found on most streets. It is often thought they work as an indicator of the commercial health of the city; too few and property is at a premium. With 'To Let' it is the opposite, there is an excess of space available. It could be read as a symptom, warning of international commercial decline and the fickle nature of supply and demand. Alternatively, it also acts as a reminder of what lies beneath the surface of the building. Of the kinds of building depicted in the work, there are always hundreds of offices and businesses whose existence has no significant public presence, yet they are a central part of the life of the city. For the most part, the facades of buildings remain impassive, unless we really force ourselves to look. If we are able to look 'almost stupidly' then much is revealed. It also requires that we spend more time looking up. Walking in the street encourages looking straight ahead, whilst also glancing quickly to left and right to see what might surround us (in addition to looking down for avoidance when

required). There is often an absence of 'up' though, whilst the street level contains most of those things deemed necessary, there is much else that has a less visible presence, but is more indicative of the diversity of life in the city.

The intervention in 'Sideless Buildings' is of a more radical kind, a row of buildings take on the symbol of potential dereliction. The bricked up window and doorway is something of a full-stop, no further look is necessary. It is used as a holding measure, where things have not just been abandoned and left to a gradual decline, instead the building is sealed almost as a form of preservation, or at least precaution. This could be as a temporary measure until some kind of transformation occurs, or it might just be a death sentence which has been put off to a future date yet to be set. The blocking out of windows and doors is the creation of a blank, it may be the mark of emptiness or a page on which a narrative has still to be written.

As the memory of a city is often fragmented and static, its experience is more of a continuous, though uneven, flow. Walking can provide the useful linking of diverse elements; lines, threads, paths - all of which generate a more comprehensive vision. For the most part, when we walk we know where we are going, the purpose has already been set. Still, there is more freedom, more options over which route might be taken. A way of seeing things differently is to relinquish control, rather than lead, follow. It is not always the most appropriate way to negotiate a city - there are quite clear dangers - yet, as soon as we are under the control of the movement of another then the landscape changes. 'Friday' is not a random following, but it does have the sense of handing over some of the responsibility. The path is set, the fluency of the walking and the lack of looking indicates the walker is on a familiar route. For the viewer it is a matter of deduction as to what might be read. The protagonist and the route through the city give little away; clothes, bags, buildings all say something, but not enough. That is the way most places and people are experienced, we are given a glimpse of something and nothing more. Paths can make unexpected connections. In Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Man of the Crowd', the narrator who is sat in the window of a London coffee-house is so startled and fascinated by a stranger that he feels compelled to follow. The appeal that is felt, it is discovered, is based on the fact that the figure is unreadable. This could in essence be the same for the city.

Through the series of works, themes start to emerge, things which might encourage the city to be seen from a different perspective. The model form of the city - whether that be object or image - allows the urban structure to be altered and adjusted. The artist as a manipulator of space only mirrors the sense of controlled space in which we live, but in this case the

process is made visible. The works provide the viewer with an alternative position, one which might extend interest beyond curiosity into a questioning of the mechanisms and structures which lie behind everyday life.