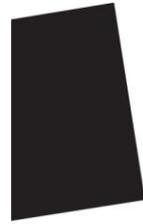


Charlotte Moth: COMMA 18

Essay by Isobel Harbison



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A photograph is often entangled with time and place, by recording a particular event it too becomes dated and fixed. However, if its time and place is unidentifiable, and its purpose no longer to document, perhaps photography becomes a fugitive; subject to its handler's projected provenance.

Charlotte Moth's work is fugitive. Although her photographic installations are clearly visible to the viewer, they appear in flux; they comprise images the sources of which are unclear, in a sequential logic that is obscured, projected from structures that are modifiable and among artificial light and colours that are modulated. We gaze at her photographs but what we are presented with is her photography, we stand in the space around us but what we assimilate is her intervention. What we are looking at seems of lesser importance than what we are looking through. Here, the distance between photographer and subject diminish, time and place are obfuscated; it is the camera's lens that is in focus.

Moth has been creating photographic installations for the past ten years, working from a collection titled *Travelogue*. It comprises images that she has taken of recreational architectural spaces, interior and exterior, from all around Europe but each one is without signage or slogan, chronological or geographical indicator. Slideshows, posters and videos have been sourced from and returned to this vault in different configurations, in a process she calls 'recycling'. Her treatment echoes Susan Sontag's writing about the slippage between understanding and



misunderstanding our surroundings caused by photography's editorial nature. Sontag asserted that, 'such images are indeed able to usurp reality because first of all a photograph is not only an image, an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real'.¹ *Travelogue* images deny us their provenance, each stenciling a particular place but omitting its landmarks. As mute witnesses, they become subject to our own vault of snapshot memories, we are now free to project upon them our common trajectories. As stencils rather than proof of the commonly experienced (usually validated by signpost or landmark evidence of location), these photographs belong to the 'reality' of both artist and handler, slipping in and outside its inverted commas like distant memories. It is at this ambiguous cognitive threshold that Moth's work operates.

Moth graduated from the Slade School of Fine Art in 2002, around which time she was making a series of architectural interventions. One project comprised an entirely new artist's studio built in wood an inch inside her own; the timber walls and ceiling splintered with a constellation of coloured dowels. Another project was by a boating lake where a pale blue cube was submerged, its surface visible at water level. On either side of this, two large mirrors were mounted, reflecting one another, the boating lake, the cube's surface and the refracting light. In both instances, Moth was introducing a membrane between the viewer and their surrounds, subtly underpinning what might otherwise be unconsciously assimilated.

In more recent works, these interventions have developed into more mobile structures reconfigured within the gallery space. *Installation for Dolores* has appeared in the Netherlands, Dublin and Italy, comprising three basic elements, each time modified.² *Travelogue* slides projected at intervals are mounted on top of an assemblage of wooden boxes of varying number and dimensions that are ordered by the artist and then visibly sealed together with plaster.

¹ Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*, 1990, New York: Anchor Books, 1990, p.350.

² # 1 - Dolores project space, Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam, Netherlands. 2006, # 2 The First Antechamber, Project Arts Centre, Dublin, Ireland, 2007, # 3 Lo Sfumato, Sardinia, Italy, 2008.



Accompanying the composition is a single monologue written by the artist contextualizing six of the selected images. Evolving with every re-combination, and the changing nuances with the uniform audio element, *Installation...* becomes an alphabet of potential configurations, an artwork that responds to its surrounds as a form of language in space. This gesture has art historical precedent, perhaps most notably with French artist Daniel Buren who began treating the exhibition space as a space of production in the 1960s by lining particular architectural sections with his trademark fabric of bold vertical stripes to reveal political nuances, boldly conspicuous in some instances, and creepily indistinct in others. Using the familiar fabric of everyday life to highlight the visual peculiarities and political underpinnings of architecture, Moth consistently concentrates on the social mechanism of architecture rather than its decorative features.

Another previous work, *Untitled (a work for Pavillion 7)* is composed of eight images from *Travelogue*, fabricated into 81 slides of varying colours projected from a carousel.³ Three spotlights are also projected on to the same wall from a ceiling rig above, their luminosity and spectrum increasing as the day progresses. It is likely that the viewer will never encounter the same union of colour slide and light twice, Moth's work playing with the temporal through her treatment of the two. In the early Italian renaissance, Giotto's narrative fresco patterns detailing the life of Christ could be identified not only by the familiar milestones of his story, but by the attention Giotto paid to the differing lights between winter and summer, morning and evening. So too do the lights change here, albeit mechanically, but our experience of the work might be subject to our interpretation of its colour in relation to fleeting natural light and this too can play with our intuition of time.

Beyond the influence of Buren, the gestural nature of Moth's practice also summons the traces of an earlier generation of artists working in performance. David Lamelas, the Argentinean conceptual artist, contends that each time he re-presents an older work it becomes a new one. His work *Time*, originally performed in 1970, was composed of a line of 15 people standing in a

³ Exhibited at Pavillion 7, Palais de Tokyo in 2008

row who were asked to pass a clock onwards at one minute intervals, photographed at the point of exchange. Represented live several times since then, *Time* is a work that matures with each performance, benefiting from its own history rather than vulnerable to the physical implications of its dusty passageway. In a similar vein, Moth's *Untitled* is poetic in its mimesis of time, not only with its treatment of light and colour but also in her physical handling of her work. Both the photographic collection and the structural elements take the same approach as Lamelas' earlier work in that they are an ongoing body that can be constantly reconfigured. Indeed, Moth has admitted treating 'the archive, the collection, as a form of structure and device that comes from the polemics of a moment and its relationship to accumulation, states of time.'⁴

An artist of explicit influence is Andre Cadere, a Polish-Romanian conceptual artist. Moth states, 'I discovered Cadere in 1999 and was struck by what it would mean to be part of an endless conceptual activity that made a separation and rupture from ideas of evolution within artistic practices and by how an underlying structure and repetitive action could become a working methodology'.⁵ Cadere was renowned for his *Barres*, cylindrical wooden beams composed of colour blocks arranged in discrete codas, which once fabricated he would carry and place in pubs, stations or art galleries, sometimes several at once, rarely invited. The works themselves were rudimentary, but their configuration and placement were often sophisticated and these actions made a series of interesting gestures in relation to art market economics and art world politics.⁶ Moth's *Two of a kind* was shown in Stuttgart in 2008, and took an installation shot of a Cadere retrospective in Paris as its starting point.⁷ From here Moth's unframed black and white *Travelogue* photographs were hung in a continuous line around the gallery space. Injecting the momentum of Cadere's practice, the installation retained the agility of its predecessor while integrating Moth's *Travelogue* lexicon.

⁴ Moth, Charlotte, Sang Bleu, Issue III/IV, p. 349

⁵ Moth, Charlotte, Sang Bleu, Issue III/IV, p. 348

⁶ According to Moth, 'the[se works] ... dealt with the personal responsibility of the artist, questioning how he might disseminate a practice and at the same time use the framework and context of the art world to react to, and develop an independent work within.' Sang Bleu, Issue III/IV, p. 349

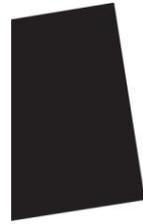
⁷ Hermes und der Pfau, Stuttgart, Germany, 2008.



The new commission for Bloomberg SPACE comprises two elements engaged in what Moth calls 'sculptural dialogue', a long curtain dividing the outer exhibition space from the atrium's inner mezzanine, creating a space in which a slideshow is continuously projected. Although both are designed to work together in response to this particular space, Moth has worked with these formats before and will again, approaching the installation within the continuum of her practice, rather than as an isolated structure shored up for a temporary exhibition. The curtain first appeared in an exhibition of Moth's in Dusseldorf in 2009, inspired by and titled after a quote by Italian Arte Povera artist, Alighiero e Boetti, 'Behind every surface there is a mystery...'⁸. Like the photograph whose source is obstructed, the curtain also isolates the space from the viewer. From the Dusseldorf installation, Moth took a black and white photograph – what she calls a 'counter-work' – which inspired the Bloomberg curtain. From here, a second 'counter-work' will be taken, informing a third exhibition, later this year in Paris.

The curtain commissioned for COMMA is double-sided; green and sky-blue. The green side is visible from the road, blocking the passersby's usual view through the building. The sky-blue side faces the building's interior, its sequined fabric reflecting artificial light back into the space, its colour trespassing on the remaining sky view visible from the glazed inner space. This grandiose mezzanine, usually defined by its impressive vista, is now curtailed and its architectural conceits quietly communicated. The images of balloons have been taken elsewhere, filling an indiscernible enclosed space, their perpetually changing configurations taken from different angles. Projected as analogue slides, they are a weakened imitation, a stencil of an event locked into the past. The curtain and balloons do not relate to a specific narrative but provide a temporary fissure to look through and beyond the mass. The new work reflects delicately, thoughtfully, whispering directly at all implicit in Bloomberg's towering atrium.

⁸ *Behind every surface there is a mystery:
a hand that might emerge,
an image that might be kindled,
or a structure that might reveal its image*, Alighiero e Boetti
Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf, Schaufenster project space, 2009



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Isobel Harbison is a writer and curator based in London.

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