

CASTING SHADOWS IN AN APOCRYPHAL DIALOGUE: SOME NOTES FOR SEAN DOWER

Sean Dower's work is grounded in sculptural practice, a natural extension of our three-dimensional experience of the world. Sound, light, film, performance, happenings and duration are all components in the production of his work and as much a part of his vocabulary as artefacts. Dower is steeped in the cultural milieu of recent critical discourse, but not bound by it, and although many of his artworks pay direct or indirect homage to other artists, he treats the exchange as one might when holding a conversation; where the ideas expressed are mobile, open to change and subjective interpretation. Indeed, the term 'notes' in the title of this essay aims to emphasise the provisional and discursive nature of an on-going discussion¹. Topics

¹ Sean Dower and I have had a number of discussions about the context for his work. We approached the situation of his practice discursively, drawing on an extended range of references from art and the relationship of art to architecture, film, philosophy, music and performance.

we addressed led in numerous directions and included: Palaeolithic art; non-linear time (as theorised by JW Dunne); the film-maker Donald Cammell's concept of performance; permutation systems and Jamaican Dub sound-system culture. Dower also spoke of the possibility of unmediated experience as one of the driving forces in his approach. This ideal goal is combined with an awareness of the instability of cultural exchange via art and an attention to the means of art's production. The functionality of objects and how they operate is intrinsic to his work, as well as a persistent questioning of how things are made and what they are made from. The acoustic properties of materials can be a part of this, for instance, the materiality and density of an object can often be ascertained by the sound it makes when struck or tapped. The interior space of objects and the spaces in between them are considerations shared by both sculpture and acoustics. Dower

often draws our attention to an object's symbiotic properties and its connectedness to the world of other objects, things which otherwise might be overlooked. Linking objects to perform together also becomes central to their status as art objects. For instance in *Enochian Reflectors* (2012) (p. *), the visual appearance of the work echoes Constructivism, whilst its functionality as a diffuser of air-borne sound references the architecturally driven dictum of modernist iconography, 'form follows function'.

Dower's bodily presence in performance and film brings the object of experience in real time as close to immediacy as it is possible to achieve for the viewer - or one might say the voyeur - watching an event's unfolding. I use the word 'voyeur' advisedly: it named Dower's solo exhibition at the De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea in 2012, where *Enochian Reflectors* was installed as part of a totally immersive experience combining sculpture and sound. *Shaking cabinet* (2012) (p. *), also included in 'The Voyeur', comprised a locked, grey metal office cupboard with a bass speaker inside it. The speaker is tuned to trigger the cabinet's resonate frequencies, simultaneously using and repurposing its functionality. Periodically the low frequency sound makes the cupboard rattle and roar at quite a volume.

It catches the viewer off guard and is both unsettling and humorous. The duality of this object's qualities, which Dower simply draws our attention to, undermines the notion of a fixed function for objects.

This essay outlines the context of Dower's practice for the solo exhibition 'A conversation along the Highway of Brotherhood and Unity' held at Dom Omladine, Belgrade in 2017. My non-chronological narrative weaves direct and indirect reference to the underlying themes in his practice of the journey and the cave and how these act as ciphers of experience through cultural production. In this exhibition, as in 'The Voyeur', the viewer is immersed in the three-dimensionality of sound and sculpture and the underlying implication of the journey as a literal and metaphorical transaction threads its way through both exhibitions.

At the threshold to 'A conversation along the Highway of Brotherhood and Unity', we encounter a flat-screen TV monitor displaying small abstract circles, flickering with fluorescent, saturated colour on an otherwise dark screen. These vivid but fleeting figures of light and colour suggest glimpses of planetary systems and the reflective shadows of Plato's cave. The enigmatic source of this work is only revealed later in the exhibi-

tion. Inside the gallery, all the works resonate with sound or its reflected association. Using the technology of audio transducers, electrostatic speakers, piezoelectric elements and parabolic reflectors, mysterious acoustic signals travel in every direction across the gallery. It creates a peculiar cacophony of interrelated sensation. The aural and visual in the exhibition are experienced simultaneously. A slim wall-mounted panel near the entrance is subsumed by sound: *Cicadas*, ball bearings and *Synthesizer* (2017) (p. *) superficially resembles a formalist painting of repeated gold circles on a light grey ground. However, the visual impact is complicated by sound. It combines what the eye sees with what the ear hears. The experience is all enveloping. The piezoelectric speakers embedded in this cement panel project otherworldly sounds down the apex of the gallery towards a shallow podium at the other end. The podium is covered with functional grey carpet. Atop the carpet and in marked contrast to it are three rustic, wooden milking stools. Fragments of sounds, words and voices are heard, discernible but fleeting as the mental allusion forms and dissolves. The sound of these muffled, subdued voices resonates from the podium and when sitting on a stool the sensation of sound coming from below combines discon-

certingly with the vibrations. Dower made this soundscape by combining the audio from speeches given by Josep Tito, Slobodan Milošević and Zoran Đinđić. The sound is tuned in such a way that no comprehensible meaning can be understood from the fragments of what the speeches once stood for. Orations become residual murmurs and create haptic vibrations.

Hovering over the stools and platform is a saturated and blurred aerobics video from the 1980s craze of exercise culture. The highly charged colour and slowed down repetitious dance movements of *Aerobics 2* (2017) (p. *) suggests a diversion from the weight of politics. Its silence adds an ambiguity to the encounter because we are so accustomed to the sounds associated with this type of exercise video that their absence is notable. It is a reflective partner to the dark monitor at the entrance and gradually we realise that the moving fragments of colours seen through the circles in the first work are made using a masked screen placed over the same source video. Between these two poles the audience encounters more uncanny sounds: *Parabolic Reflector* (2017) (p. *), a one-metre diameter, grey, wall-mounted parabolic dish has a disorientating effect as it focuses and redirects sound from what appears to be

a framed picture of red dots, diagonally opposite. Upon investigation, this 'picture', UVB-76 (2017) (p. *) is angled toward the parabolic dish and projects a narrow directional beam of sounds taken from the Russian shortwave radio station apocryphally known as UVB-76, or 'The Buzzer' on account of the sounds it transmits. The station has been broadcasting since the 1970s and, in between long periods of static and buzzing, at very irregular intervals, voices interrupt to relay what seem to be coded messages. Despite attracting widespread attention amongst radio enthusiasts and conspiracy theorists, the coding remains undecipherable. Dower's rendering of it brings a real instance of elusive speculation into the domain of art.

The remaining two works in the gallery appear to be silent. Noises (быка) (2017) (p. *), is a series of six engraved, blue Traffolyte panels. This standard material is often used for informational signs in factories and public spaces and the work suggests a double role. The repetition of form and colour in Noises mimics minimalist painting, whilst looking like the information signage that it is. The onomatopoeic words allude to the sounds contained in the exhibition and to the general sounds of technology, war and cartoon sound effects. The other seemingly silent work, Vibrating rod (2017) (p. *) is a

slender steel rod that drops from a hole in the ceiling to a height of about 60cm above the floor. Its verticality draws attention to the architecture of the space. Against the white wall, this thin dark line appears like a drawing in space. However when the rod is touched or held, vibrations can be felt. The vibrations are the manifestation of inaudible sound and immediately underneath the rod a light but distinct cold draught is caused by them. The movement which we don't see affects how we perceive the space. The unlikely components of 'A conversation along the Highway of Brotherhood and Unity' can be thought of as a 'sound-system', combining different elements of a holistic soundtrack. Conversely the individual works may be thought of as a series of indexical references, which invite the viewer to explore the singularity of audio, sensory and visual experience in an immersive way.

The title of this exhibition proposes an impossible exchange between Josep Tito, Slobodan Milošević and Zoran Đinđić. These ideologically contrasting politicians were born at different locations (and at different times) linked roughly by the European E70 highway. Tito's and Milošević's birthplaces were just beyond either end of the road and Đinđić's birthplace was roughly midway between the two. This hypothetical con-

versation invites a mental performance; a reflection of how we may re-think the specifics of place, space, region and history. The idea of journeying while conversing is a familiar theme in philosophy, from Plato's book 'The Phaedrus', to Heidegger's text 'Conversation on a Country Path'. Walking while talking enables a discursive exchange that is sustained by the motion. Talking while driving is similar because the movement lends itself to how ideas may form in a state of becoming, rather like voicing something before writing it. 'The Highway of Brotherhood and Unity' links Belgrade to Zagreb and extends to become part of the Inter-European road network that connects Spain to Georgia spanning from west to east.

During the 1980s and 1990s Dower made many journeys across Europe, frequently by hitching lifts. Such journeys became the material for work, including films made whilst on the road. His first visit to Belgrade was in 1990 when he was working with the Bow Gamelan Ensemble², who

² The Bow Gamelan Ensemble was formed in 1983 in London, by artists Paul Burwell, Richard Wilson and Anne Bean. The ensemble toured internationally and created live performances, fusing sound, pyrotechnics, sculpture and mechanical instruments into large-scale audio-visual spectacles. Dower worked with the group from 1988 to 1992

were invited by the Belgrade International Theatre Festival (BITEF) to perform in the city's derelict Dorcol power station (p. *). Belgrade's architecture, art and history remain as oblique referents in Dower's practice. Equally important as the trans-cultural exchange is Dower's relationship with the traditions of live performance and the milieu of the Bow Gamelan.

The visceral quality of performance in Dower's work relates to the plastic elasticity of uncertainty and ambiguity. Whilst it is entirely situated within a territory of cultural transaction and exchange, it has not yet 'entered the culture and become art history.' Here I am borrowing the phrase from Lawrence Weiner, who said in an interview with Willoughby Sharp, that 'when art enters the culture it stops being art, it becomes art history'.³ The thing that is specific about 'art' is that it is happening in an unmediated way and is in the process of becoming. This makes it vulnerable, open to doubt and the aforementioned uncertainty and ambiguity.

Sharp was attenuated to the interconnections, exchanges and relationships between Constructivism and notions of de-

³ Lawrence Weiner interviewed by Liza Bear and Willoughby Sharp, *Avalanche* magazine, Spring 1972

materialisation. He saw Naum Gabo's work as paramount in the exchange between artists as a cross-generation dialogue. Gabo's practice resonates in kinetic and performance art and in the extension of the sculptural frame, where 'the work' elides objects and their surroundings. Sharp prefaced the catalogue essay for the exhibition 'Air Art' with Gabo's statement of art's performativity '... Art Acts...'⁴. This brevity encapsulates the notion of art as an active happening, an event which, when encountered affects its viewer pragmatically and mysteriously. Gabo's assertion is that 'art' is always going on, it is not static or fixed in place. Furthermore there is the strong implication of art's invitation to the viewer/holder to participate and join the exchange.

I am connecting Weiner's distinction between art and history with Gabo's proposition 'art acts' in order to situate and draw parallels to the role of interlocution, mediation and performance in Dower's practice, where kinaesthetic experience is coupled with an existential reflection. Here I would like to digress with some thoughts on the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard in order to show the structures of Dower's

⁴ Willoughby Sharp, 'Air Art', exhibition catalogue, Arts Council USA, 1968

strategy in dealing with the problems of making art. These concern questions of identity, authorship and the close connections between the comic, the absurd and the real. Kierkegaard's writing from the early middle part of the nineteenth century is for me the most significant interlocutor of the complex problems faced by the artist engaged in creative production of work. The titles of his books demonstrate what it is being addressed, for instance, 'The Concept of Anxiety', 'The Concept of Doubt', 'The Concept of Dread', 'The Concept of Irony', 'Either/Or', 'Repetition' and 'Stages on Life's Way'. Kierkegaard's authorial project continues to force his reader to entertain an existential dilemma. These are the problems of authorship, ownership and the origin of ideas; such as who has the right to tell, or repeat by re-telling a story and to whom does the story belong? The reader must consider whether this is the 'first author', or the subsequent authors, or indeed its reader, that is me, now the author of this text. Kierkegaard's method of coercing and directing his reader into this active, interpretative and open possibility is via the use of pseudonymous authors who variously write and edit the texts. Kierkegaard's characters discuss ideas in darkened cavernous rooms filled with mirrors where candlelight animates the reflections and

shadows. Although not obviously, it references Plato's story of the cave, where the shadows that the cave's prisoners see on the wall are the extent of their experience of the world, until one of them escapes and sees daylight and the sun outside. When the escapee returns to disabuse his comrades of their version of reality, they respond with horror and murderous disbelief. Sometimes what is 'true' appears to be less real because it seems to be astonishing and therefore unbelievable.

In one of Kierkegaard's fragments a clown rushes on stage shouting, 'the theatre's on fire'. The audience remains seated, thinking it is part of the act and is burned to death. Such absurdities, compressing the real and the implausible, are witnessed in Dower's ongoing encounters with Zou Zou the clown. In 1993 Dower bought a second hand U-Matic videotape in a market in Amsterdam, intending to record over it. He glimpsed the tape's contents when cueing it up to erase it in the edit suite and became intrigued by the video, which was a 1985 live-recording of 'Zou Zou's Circus Cabaret'. The performance engages with a range of socio-political issues of the time, including space travel and the dangers of the nuclear arms race. In one sequence the clown makes a journey into space, using mime to describe the spacecraft and

his journey. Dower meticulously studied and then recreated the space described in the mime as a three-dimensional, ergonomic environment. The sculpture, Zou Zou's Mime Reconstructed (1993) (pp *) incorporates the video of the mime into a window, which was uncannily delineated by Zou Zou in his performance. At the time, Dower also made a series of photographs where he impersonated Zou Zou. After exhibiting the sculpture Zou Zou's Mime Reconstructed several times, Dower attempted to trace Zou Zou by placing a number of advertisements in theatrical magazines and by making appeals when the video was screened. Zou Zou was finally tracked down through his participation in a German theatre festival and Dower invited him to see the sculpture in an exhibition in Antwerp in 1999.⁵ Zou Zou arrived at the exhibition's opening night with his stage manager and the guitarist who played live on stage during the mime. As well as performing at the opening Zou Zou loaned one of the original props from his performance for the duration of the exhibition (a suitcase containing a pop-up Nuclear power station). The coincidences of circumstances and meetings are yet more intriguing and verge on the

⁵ 'Other Spaces' (1999). A solo exhibition by Sean Dower at Lokaal 01, Antwerp Belgium

pathos of slapstick when we discover that in 1993 Dower and Zou Zou had had a close friend in common, who shared a studio building with Dower. Zou Zou had visited the Open Ateliers exhibition where Zou Zou's Mime Reconstructed was first shown, but had failed to see the work. The mercurial meaning of the copy and the original, of identity, authorship and repetition and the cornerstones of creative endeavor are brought to the fore with this work that circles back to Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard's narratives are steeped in iconography from literature and philosophy: the stories of Don Juan, the quest for revelation and the itinerant wanderer jostle with re-articulations from Classical philosophy, such as the symbolism of 'the cave' in Plato's Republic. These themes and stories are ciphered into a new context. For instance, Plato's cave becomes a mirrored banquet hall where the guests, who are his pseudonymous authors, present after-dinner speeches on the nature of love. A form of conjuring takes place. Orchestration and invocation of personae and character is present or implied in much of Dower's work. In Clothes Recycling Video (1996) (pp *) it is humorous and literal. In this work, the artist climbs into and out of a series of clothes recycling bins in the London bor-

ough of Southwark. Each time he emerges, he is dressed in a different outfit. The filming is low-key and at times it seems as if nothing is really 'going on'. We are presented with a subtle reflection on differences and relationships between documentation, story telling and fiction in a performance of identity and authorship. It is naturally funny to watch a man disappearing into a bin, before re-appearing transformed to walk away. At the end of the video Dower is dressed in the clothes he sets out in, but the looped film renders the beginning and end ambiguous. Dower used the street as a studio in a number of works made around this time - he did not have one on his return from several years spent living in Amsterdam.

Kierkegaard's authorial schema interacts with narratives and recasts these to create new stories. Underlying this process is the movement and mobility of ideas and their exchange through materialisation. The cave and its shadows mutate across continents and epochs. Dower speaks of the wonder he experienced in his early 20's whilst visiting a number of caves in Northern Spain that contained Palaeolithic art. The relationship of the paintings to the topography of the enclosed spaces immediately threw up suggestions of how our ancestors might have similarly used the

acoustics of these spaces when singing or using tools to make sound. These thoughts resonate with echoes that include Plato's cave and Kierkegaard's transformation of it. Flickering shadows also abounded in the redundant, cavernous, cylindrical steel plated silos near Newcastle upon Tyne, where Dower and collaborators made The Curfew Recordings (1984) (p. *). I heard stories about The Curfew Recordings at different times over a number of years and they had entered a legendary counter culture, like a mythology. I was unsure of the recordings' existence and whether they were ideal, imaginary, or real. These stories nonetheless worked their magic and remained lodged in my mind. In 2013 the record label Harbinger Sound remastered the original tapes and released them on CD. Their existence was clarified. 1984 was a shadowy time in the UK. The Thatcher government, the miners' strike, political unrest and a collapsing economy shifted cultural production to marginal sites. The Curfew Recordings is a clear example of inventive repurposing that shows the potential of an archaeological approach to recent culture. Cultural incidents and stories become apocryphal shadows of connections between circumstances and things. This revelatory drawing together of what might have been is in part an investigation into the nature of

coincidence and that complex assertion implied by the idea of 'the truth.'

What is often potent about Dower's work is that the scene, or the scenario, is unfolding as it is happening. There is minimal mediation and the viewer is thus drawn - sometimes thrust - into the immediacy of the moment. This experience is central to many of Dower's films, including Automaton (2006) (pp *), a single-take tracking shot of a drum solo by improvising percussionist Steve Noble. The film begins with a small circle of light reflected on what is then revealed to be the surface of a black drum kit. Here, Dower is not filming a ready-made performance, rather filming a performance as it happens and the automated camera rig is a part of this performance. The mode of production and the 'performance' are intertwined and revealed simultaneously. It is pertinent to remark on a couple of precedents of artworks that operate using this strategy: Robert Morris's Box with the Sound of Its Own Making (1961) and Barry Flanagan's Line on Holywell Beach (1970). The titles of both reference the processes involved in their production. Morris's box brings the viewer into simultaneous proximity with the portion of time Morris took making it. Flanagan filmed the line his camera's tripod made as he dragged

it back up the beach. It took him three minutes. The line on Holywell beach is a film, but also a drawing in the sand that no longer exists. The activity of its making draws attention to an ungraspable threshold between a 'not yet', and a 'no more'. This mode of sculptural thinking is central to Dower's practice.

The process of making an exhibition from specifically sculptural components that form part of a totality emerges in earnest during the 1960s. Flanagan's and Morris's practice at this time was to make work on site, in order that these structures respond to the space and interact with each other. We should not overlook the parallels between this activity and the re-articulations of the cave as a total three-dimensional experience in the Palaeolithic era, or indeed the 19th Century concept of the 'Gesamtkunstwerk'. The situation of variables within the parameters of a specific location is a way of thinking about how Dower responds to history. This is combined with a cross generational dialogue that reaches deep into an archaeological sense of culture. For Dower the smallest incident has sculptural potential and is part of a continuum of indexical reference that is always present, and imminent. Dower's work often incorporates coincidence and the extraordinary occa-

sions that identify these moments. He has talked about the importance of improvisation in relation to his practice, but also its impossibility. Improvisation relies on language systems and previous learning to manifest, but the 'moments' that improvisation produce continue to resonate in our heads with their immateriality long after the noise has subsided.

BIOGRAPHY