

Reviewing the Situation... a short history of the Museum of Optography (ghosts of the grey area)

As with most acts of creative endeavour that take years to evolve to completion, it is necessary to stand a distance back from the result and take a good objective look at what has just consumed all those years of toil. What is it that you have actually produced?

Sometimes this is near impossible to assess in full as the mental distance needed can stretch into years with the creative act still feeling like it was produced the week before and therefore a degree of detachment cannot be truly gained. Perhaps to die and then float above your self or suffer a loss of memory and therefore have an altered perception towards what has gone before or in the light of a drastic change of circumstances would allow insight. True objectivity is difficult.

Mindful of the above consideration and of my very recent return to London following *The Purple Chamber*, my 6th incarnation of the *Museum of Optography*, I then assess from a physical distance without sensorial intimacy and therefore reduced mental attachment. In truth however my attachment has been for a number of years.

For some while now I have been contemplating the endgame of the MoO. This has become increasingly difficult because the MoO from the very beginning was an endgame. I write to rationalise this endgame, goading it to stall, testing it, testing myself. Do I add one more brick to my tower or build another?

The MoO is a model of the mind grappling with life, Death, creativity and legacy. I have gotten used to defining MoO with many dichotomies, truth and falsehood, light and dark, real and unreal, polarities that perhaps make us aware of uncertainties in the mind. Maybe to define is to fix the end to the endgame. Here I go ... Perhaps it is all in the grey area, that is the mean, the cleavage between things, the empty space that exists between particles or just an imaginative English understatement, neither on or off, yes or no.

Galerie Brigitte Schenk

The first MoO took place at Galerie Brigitte Schenk, Cologne, Germany in the summer of 2007. I had previously travelled to Heidelberg to research the subject. The show contained the diversity of content seen in later MoO's. It was to be the model or template for future shows, (quite literally for my museum that came next). Brigitte

allowed me to create the show I wanted, we produced the crude version of the later more polished *Encyclopedia of Optography* entitled The Museum of Optography, the Shutter of Death, I seem to have a fondness for subtitled, titles. This show did not overtly play with deception, apart for the inclusion of the Dali tape.

The British Optical Association Museum

I was hunting for an opportunity to show the MoO in London. I visited The British Optical Association Museum and got on very well with Neil Handley the curator. This was to be a very different MoO, In it I emphasised the small obscure nature of the subject, new items were created like the human optogram documentary, the human optogram device and of course the micromuseum model. Here we have the idea of the museum within the museum, the nesting of worlds that appear later expanded in Sharjah. Also the library and archive begins to form from here with the publication of the *Encyclopedia of Optography*, by Muswell Press. The second half of the opening event was the book launch with a reading by both Susana Medina and Olly Beck.

Ali Hossaini's visit to the show was highlighted by a sighting of the ghost of Craven Street, seen only by Ali above the video of my grandmother.

Hackney Empire

Show number three was a single night, sort of pop up show at the Hackney Empire with objects from the MoO, including the draw from the Micromuseum show and the large abstract painting that has appeared in the Sharjah show. I gave a multimedia illustrated talk, Susana Medina and Olly Beck gave readings of their text pieces drawn from the *Encyclopedia of Optography*, back-dropped with video projections. It was the first time I had shown Ali Hossaini's documentary Divine Machine's. The event was second opportunity to make people aware of the the *Encyclopedia of Optography*. The talk was a kind of story so far, another recap.

Commercial Gallery

Small Intimate ophthalmic museum

A lecture and objects from MoO in a theatre

A historical museum

A small non-commercial art gallery

A tomb like white cube art museum space

Kurpfälzisches Museum

For the next venue we return to Germany 2010 and to the historical, birthplace of Optography, Heidelberg. The show was my largest show thus far. It took place in the Kurpfälzisches Museum, a museum of art and archaeology with exhibits from prehistory up until the middle of the 20th Century. My museum was housed in the last room adjoining the Kunstverien Heidelberg, occupying a space somewhere conceptually between an art and museum space.

The show was curated by two gallerists, Stefanie Boos and Dr Kristina Hoge. I had not anticipated the amount of curatorial control Stefanie and Kristina would exert on layout of the show. I had to learn to release from my hands the control I desired, certain works were left out that I would have put in, but the show did not suffer altogether because of this, it became something unexpected, not my mind map, but the product of the interpretation of two others, which conformed to a degree to my idea of letting go of the artwork and letting it live its own life.

The show *Der letzte Blick (The Last Image)* was housed in the emotional heartland of where optography was born, where the ghosts of the past and memories of a few of the living surround the show. The scientist responsible for the optograms hanging in my show, Dr. Evangelos Alexandridis lived barely a hundred metres from the museum and perhaps double this distance was the physiology building where all the first key experiments were performed in the 1870's and 80's by Kühne and Ewald.

In retrospect the historical fabrication that I had started to mess around with was most effective in the context of Heidelberg, something in playfully inventing history when I had run out of the facts to recount, where my imagination came to the fore to enhance and add another dimension to our perception of historical knowledge. If identity can be seen as being a construct of all our pasts (see my performance *What make me, what makes you*, at The South London Gallery, 1996), then I was constructing a revised identity, 'Is it alright to lie' was the translation of an article by art historians in Heidelberg, I sensed there was an ever so slight annoyance at a British artist dabbling in manipulation of German history. In a way I don't blame them, after all my emotional attachment was with a thump to the eye in London and not, lets say, a link to a great grandfather who was a colleague of Kühne or something.

I felt that the show had been somewhat taken over by the German media in that the historical was emphasised, as novelty and the art secondary, there were a few reviews that not only did not identify the MoO as an art show nor mention the artist. Again there always was a side of me and therefore inherent in my work that has wanted art and

life to merge, for the two to be indistinguishable from each other. Maybe I deceived too well? I don't think so. This goes back to my opening statement and my re-assessment.

Serbia

At the opening of my show in The British Optical Association Museum I met Nick Suica, an art professor from Belgrade. I was in constant communication with him for 3 years with view to show the MoO in Galerie Flu Belgrade and at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Novi Sad. Well to cut a long story short, 2-3 months before my show was to be shipped to Novi Sad the director of the museum resigned and informed me that the new director would carry on with the programming he had planed. This was not honoured by the new director and in the end the smaller Independent Gallery Flu did put my show on. My disappointment led to my formation of the *Museum of Optography* website.

The Purple Chamber

Two years since the last big MoO. *The Purple Chamber*, another subtitle to the MoO is here and I feel, the biggest and most layered show thus far. It is, 'almost complete' I stress the 'almost', this is the grey area again. Is this the perfectionist in me, or somebody with a habit, or as a few have suggested, the work of an obsessive? 'Almost' here, is inherently obsessive like a collector that always needs one more object to make a set. Almost is the drive to continue creating art, a trait that most artists have and for that matter scientists at the pinnacle of their game as well. Complete as is the show, I always wanted to have, 'almost'.

Lets see how I see it working in Sharjah and get back to the reason for me writing this was to review....

Firstly from the viewpoint of someone coming from largely an atheistic country, the sensorial visual and auditory presence of belief in Sharjah is overwhelming, this is obvious. While I was in Sharjah I went to a restaurant run by an English guy, he asked me about my show, I told him it was about the last image cast on the retina, he seemed a little troubled with the notion and seem to suggest that the idea of the last image was at odds with Islam, he was unclear to me what he meant by that and the restaurant was busy so we got no further with the subject. Nobody had brought up the final moment and what happens from a religious standpoint. I replied to him that an

optogram wasn't at odds with the notion of ascension to heaven or the afterlife. The image was in flesh, evidence of the imprint of the living world much like if the body is for example wrapped round the bonnet of a car in an accident, reproducing its form in flesh, or when we sit down we form the shape of the seat. A suntan, like an optogram is created with light. It is the image that is cast on the retina that causes it to change its character to us, the perceivers. What we see goes on in the brain as thought and not something earthly as flesh.

I can understand through imagination why Duchamp may have stopped making art. And in imagining, picture the endgame he played. The endgame is that old game of the end of art, but also the end of life. The direction *The Purple Chamber* follows is thus: a young man stands next to his creation, a painting in the style of Edvard Munch, a painting of a man without features, white as a ghost. The man is pointing out of the picture but also to the younger me, proudly sitting next to my painting, the direction one is to move through the exhibition.

The entrance also houses *The Library and Archive of Optography*, this section nearest to the entrance and nearest to the brightness of day is emotionally cold and impersonally detached, maybe not seen as art. This is the opposite to the direction the finger points, where we see objects and photographs subtitled as *The Loss of Innocence*. The trauma begins here with whiteness dotted with blood, the inside, outside, the punch to the eye and the beginning of the dual narrative of the borderline between life and death, extreme physicality/ violence and the still, imprints in flesh. It is tempting to end up talking about every work in *The Purple Chamber*. I want to keep to broad ideas and observations in this review, of sorts. I have talked about the entrance to the tomb like building where the show is housed. Now I move to the last room. The whole show moves from light to dark but also towards a greater theatricality, the low key lighting does this, it is apt that the last piece feels like a film set. The chamber, not to be confused with the purple chamber which is the title of a few pieces in the show, but seminally the name of a chapter from the *Mechanics of Vision* by Edward G. Weis from 1909 illustrated with pictures of the Optographic Lab, seen on a plinth at the entrance of the first floor of the show.

The chamber is a laboratory and a room designed for optical experiments. We catch it trapped in time. The dust still uniformly covers everything. It is a fiction based on a real chamber described in the contents of *Photochemistry of the retina and Visual Purple* by Willy Kühne, here pasted on to the removed wall.

The end for Willy Kühne was the corner of the chamber where he fell. We do not know how he died but the evidence of the actuality is within the flies that litter the floor and broken glass chemical bottles. Kühnes decomposing body had lain up against the removed wall, the imprint remains of his matter, and his process of purification made visible on his own script. His last activity, as the script tells us, is a series of experiments to observe the dead retina, a skeletal frog lies on the slab, flies also are nearby, we try and read his mind. A miniature replica model of the chamber is sitting on a shelf, perhaps signaling the importance of the chamber and also as a world within a world again. The scene is a creative partnership between a dead man and a younger man, ghosts of youth and old age, the ghost of acts past, the creative act dies the moment it is deemed complete, apart from in our memory or as evidence. One is in danger of setting up such a complex set of relationships that definition becomes impossible, a body made up of complex systems and interactions and body encased by the familiar, the bit we see, as we stand on the outside looking in... I suppose you have created art.

To sum up, now this is in my head and therefore an abstract mass of neural connections that can only be expressed in the next move I make. We shall see....

Ghosts, grey areas, Machines, Gravity...etc, etc