

KEITH ARNATT: Rubbish and Recollections

Rubbish and Recollections, co-organised by a renascent Oriel Mostyn and the Photographers' Gallery, London, is a greatly overdue tribute to Keith Arnatt, an artist whose status has fluctuated considerably over the last twenty years for reasons which have had nothing to do with the quality of his work. Though the bulk of the exhibition is made up of new and unfamiliar images produced during the last three years, it includes work dating as far back as 1967. Arnatt's career could almost stand as a cautionary tale about the perils of bucking the system as it is also, of course, a comment on the British art establishment's innate conservatism and distrust of the unclassifiable. Back in the late sixties and early seventies, Arnatt was an up-and-coming conceptualist, a certified member of the international avant garde who exhibited with Lisson, New York's MOMA, the Tate and the Hayward. He is probably best known for *Self Burial* (1969), a sequence of nine photographs showing the artist slowly vanishing into a hole in the ground with a wonderfully woebegone expression on his face; as *Television Interference Project*, each image was broadcast by German television for two seconds on successive days in the middle of otherwise conventional programming.

For Arnatt, as for many of his contemporaries, the camera was at first an adjunct to his work, a method of recording ephemeral or inaccessible pieces. Over the course of time, the medium itself acquired an increasing significance: "Eventually I realised, through showing my work as photographs, that the photograph was of prime importance... it led me to the idea that whatever I did, I had to do with a photograph in mind. The photograph became a primary object". *An Institutional Fact*, Arnatt's last conceptual piece, was entirely photographic: his contribution to the Hayward's "New Art" exhibition in 1972 consisted of sixteen formal, full-length portraits of the gallery's security guards.

From 1972 onwards, as Ian Walker recounts in his catalogue essay, Arnatt turned exclusively to photography. This meant not merely using a camera, but actually working within the context of established photographic discourse: at first with three series of gently ironic portraits, *Tintern Visitors* (1975-76), *Walking the Dog* (1976-79), and *Gardeners* (1978-79), then with a more edgy series of black & white landscapes taken near his home in the Wye Valley. Influenced by the American New Topographics school, *Abandoned Sites* (1980), *A.O.N.B.* (1982-84) and *The Forest* (1985-86) are also commentaries on the concept of the sublime in British landscape – but a landscape marked by detritus, rubbish, and the banal or incongruous signs of commonplace human presence. For Arnatt, however, these signs are not seen as intrusions, nor are they introduced with subversive intent; they are simply remarked upon, like that old armchair sitting foursquare and comfortable on the fringes of the Forest of Dean. This new departure clearly discomfited some of Arnatt's audience – small, monochrome photos of people with their dogs, from the man responsible for *Earth Plug* and *Trouser Word Piece?* – but their discomfort was as nothing to that of the institutions.

Between 1979 and 1986 Arnatt had only two one-man shows (though *Walking the Dog* made it to five venues), and the Tate stopped collecting his work; after

all, in a by now notorious statement, Alan Bowness had declared that "you have to be an artist and not only a photographer to have your work in the Tate". Arnatt was fully aware of the insecurities and contradictions the false artist/photographer dichotomy seemed to provoke, and mocked the Tate's elephantine hair splitting in his 1982 article *Sausages and Food*: "Making a distinction between, or opposing, artists and photographers is, it strikes me, like making a distinction between, or opposing, food and sausages – surely odd. In the way that sausages may be given as an example of food, photography may be given as an example of artists' practice. The notions of distinction and opposition simply do not and *cannot* apply to these differing category terms".

If the Arnolfini Gallery's Forest of Dean commission seemed to confirm Arnatt's role as a sophisticated purveyor of thoughtful topographical ironies, in 1986 he shifted ground once again, launching into what is arguably his strongest work to date; the change was marked by two series of small colour prints, *The Open Door* and *Miss Grace's Lane*. *The Open Door* is a *jeu d'esprit*, an homage to a seminal icon in photographic history, Fox Talbot's calotype of an open doorway at Lacock Abbey. Exploiting the lurid tones of Fuji film, Arnatt produced a series of paraphrases, images of doors and false doors seemingly leading nowhere: doors in a huge concrete shoes, in a sagging plastic playhouses, in swimming pool covers and dilapidated potting sheds. In a reference to Samuel Palmer, Arnatt has called the small, brilliantly coloured images of *Miss Grace's Lane* his "polythene Palmers", and the debris he depicts, strewn across the Arcadian landscape of the Wye Valley, do indeed take on an almost elegiac quality, spotlighted and gilded by the late afternoon sun. With one or two exceptions, the subjects are introduced almost bashfully into the natural environment: a single green watering can on a bank, a tyre stranded on an island of dry sedge, a plastic kite caught among brambles are all so many small yet significant epiphanies, validated by that peculiarly English light which seems to well out from things rather than fall upon them

Miss Grace's Lane was the trigger for a series of closely related works made over the last two years at Howler's Hill, a landfill site in the Forest of Dean. After the delicate, almost perversely poetic approach of the earlier sequence, Arnatt now seems to dive straight into the thick of things; in large, aggressive colour prints of brutal directness, landscape is annihilated in favour of direct confrontation with the accumulated rubbish. The images in *Howler's Hill* (and here, once again, Arnatt seems remarkably fortunate in his place names) communicate a palpable sense of menace: black polythene bags, filled to bursting, are covered in washes of nameless liquids and excretions, films of chemical mud. Their contents are decently obscured, but it is made clear that to stumble here would be dangerous. Vulnerabilities are underlined: sharp objects lurk beneath the taught plastic, corrosive poisons seem to glisten, infections bubble in oozing red liquids. And yet these are not polemical images; whatever Arnatt is trying to communicate in his apparently total absorption, it is neither outrage nor disgust. He shares the studied moral neutrality of Frederick Sommer and Lewis Baltz, but unlike that of his American predecessors and colleagues, his

work also carries a powerful charge of enthusiastic, arm gripping engagement: "Look!", he seems to be saying, "isn't this stunning – and this – and this!".

Nor can he shake an sense of mockery which at times slyly undercuts the sombre dramatics of *Howler's Hill*; discarded mattresses, gaping through rents in their confining sackcloth, rear like great heraldic beasts, and soft toys of nightmarishly cute design stalk the debris, covered in drifts of sawdust. With his latest sequence, *Pictures from a Rubbish Tip*, Arnatt moves in even closer, and suddenly the whole edifice collapses and reforms; through an extreme emphasis on reality, reality itself implodes. In a foam of white and translucent plastic sheeting, mysterious organic protagonists take stage centre: strands of spaghetti, a pig's ear, rotting fruit, bacon rinds and eggshells. Just as it takes the viewer time to identify their true nature, so all sense of true scale is swept away and we find ourselves back in landscape once again – a dream landscape, perhaps, or the stage set of a magic opera in which a battered but valiant peach sings a duet with a teabag under a vertiginous wall of ice. Once again, Keith Arnatt has pulled off a transformation scene, confounded expectations, flown the pigeonhole...

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