

Alex Frost: Property Guardian

Flat Time House London 5 June to 2 August

For this summer exhibition, thick blackout curtains keep natural light from entering John Latham's former home and studio and capture the gloom of a situation in which public assets are being sold into private hands. Property guardianship usually refers to the practice – thriving in the wake of a housing crisis, the 2012 criminalisation of squatting residential buildings and, since the election of a Conservative majority government, the extension of the right-to-buy scheme – whereby the owners of otherwise empty buildings outsource the care of their properties to companies whose business is in the combined provision of live-in security and temporary housing.

Alex Frost, who is usually based in Glasgow and whose show succeeds his 2015 Phynance Residency at Flat Time House, has considered the term property guardian as a metaphor for the artist in residence. In exchange for an infrastructure that supports the production of new artwork and accommodates the artist in London, Frost asserts the continued relevance of Latham as a kind of touchstone and point of comparison (how impossibly quaint some of his ideas now seem), and of Barry Flanagan, whose foundation contributes to the residency and which has pledged alongside Lisson Gallery to help secure the future of the Flat Time House Institute now that the Latham family wishes to sell the house.

Where Latham believed in the artist as an 'incidental person', capable of reflecting critically upon events, Frost unsettles the notion of distance through an assembly of objects that we are encouraged to view as one work. By spraying his garden sand sculpture of a brick barbecue with a pet deterrent product, Frost seems to imply a state of competition between human and domestic animals for food, or more simply to allude to the prohibited status of pets in most property guardianships and rental properties. Elsewhere, ideas of animal survival (shrunk pet food packaging) and artistic creativity and self-care (graphite pencils and plastic combs left behind by previous residency artists) are congealed together in clear resin blocks hung on the walls of the hallway and 'The Hand' (the back gallery). That two such works also contain houseflies makes the use of resin appear as an attempt to mimic the natural fossilisation of small organisms in amber in order to preserve some of the contents of Flat Time House that might otherwise be thrown away.

Alchemical processes have turned other non-valuable items into things of greater worth: stacks of petty cash coins and keys have been cast in pewter using the functional Flat Time House barbecue that stands next to the sand version. A potato waffle installed in 'The Brain' (the office) has undergone the same state change. For Latham, burning was the preferred, more controversially destructive and irreversible process (second



Alex Frost
Property Guardian
– Mugs (penis and
breasts) 2015

to chewing, as in the 1966 Flanagan-assisted job of turning a copy of Clement Greenberg's *Art and Culture* into bottled pulp) applied to books. Evidence of this is found in Latham's *Book Relief Triad* (1959/2003) in 'The Mind' (the front gallery): one of the books here is charred and collides dynamically with a wooden box to which it has been fixed by plaster.

Back in 'The Hand', Frost has also used plaster to crudely reconfigure smashed-up parts of kitschy teapots, toby jugs, mugs and piggy banks into new fist-sized mutant forms: ceramic combinations of cat/hamster/snail and breasts/penis/red-cheeked character demonstrate a similar technique to that which he had previously adopted for outdoor and gallery-installed mosaic mural works, including *Format Wars* (HDDVD), 2007, which features in the concurrent group show 'Potteries Thinkbelt' (at Rob Tufnell until 18 July). Here, mosaic is grotesque, and set alongside the coin and key stacks on a black chest-height plinth model of Flat Time House that doubles as a human figure, Frost suggests that housing and food are more politicised issues now than they were in Latham's heyday.

The 'conflicted and implicated position' that Frost adopts is, after all, commonly assumed by younger London-based artists, some of whom have attempted to find ways of easing housing difficulties through combined project and living spaces (eg Lima Zulu and until recently Milcote House and Piper Keys), email listings of cheapish lets and sublets (eg Huw Lemmey's 'spitz lets' with its slogan 'Gaylords not landlords'), or 'collaborative living' and publishing (eg the Kitson Road Living Project – now Fernholme – documented in *Kitson Road No 6*, Camberwell Press, 2015). That none of these efforts are located near Bellenden Road suggests that the regeneration project to

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which Latham contributed his window-front book sculpture and Antony Gormley his penis/egg/peg/snowman bollards has mainly served the speculative housing market. Perhaps Frost's call for submissions to a new archive of press releases from projects in Peckham since 2000 has been conceived as a way of accommodating and cherishing more ephemeral activities. ■

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Unannounced Acts of Publicness

Central Saint Martins London 1-31 May

'Unannounced Acts of Publicness' took place during the month of May in Granary Square, a large privately owned 'public' space situated in front of the Central Saint Martins building in King's Cross. Anna Hart and Tilly Fowler, who form the projects studio AIR, worked in partnership with CSM lecturer and artist (and sometime *AM* contributor) Dean Kenning to produce ten unannounced events by ten different artists. Previously based at Byam Shaw School of Art in Archway, AIR is now hosted by CSM, which along with the property developers Argent, supported 'Unannounced Acts'.

Argent is largely responsible for the wholesale transformation of the area behind King's Cross Station, and CSM's place within the redevelopment has frequently been articulated as a catalyst for attracting other businesses (Editorial *AM*375). Yet, since the college moved to Granary Square in 2011, students and lecturers have barely used the vast square as a site for making work. The bureaucracy of dealing with site management, the scale and even the square's corporate blandness, all present significant obstacles. In response, 'Unannounced Acts' sought to present a test-bed for exploring the meaning of public space in an area of London so transformed that walking around these streets with new postcodes often feels disorientating.

Against the hype of Argent's branding strategy (summarised as 'making places for people'), one of the most interesting aspects of the project was in the acts all being entirely unannounced. No names or titles were given until the project was 'published' online, on 1 June, accompanied by texts written by people living or working in the area. This sense of mystery contributed to the aim of exploring social relations, offering an alternative to the normative register of

how we receive culture as spectacle. Tweets on the hashtag #unannouncedacts wondered whether a newly married couple passing through the square constituted an act, demonstrating how the project engendered closer attention to the space of the square.

Many of the acts sought to invoke a subtle rethinking of one's surroundings. Ruth MacLennan's *Slender Human Islands* involved a total of 36 people reading aloud over 12 hours. Because of the sound of the fountains and other ambient noise, one had to move close to hear extracts from a variety of texts that overwhelmingly dealt with dystopian views and the impoverished qualities of urban life, including Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the Working Poor*, Friedrich Engels's *The Condition of the English Working Class* and Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*. The intimacy engineered by this proximity offered a reversal of the space we are generally encouraged to put between ourselves in cities. Similarly, Siobhan Davies and Matthias Sperling's piece presented a quiet engagement with their lone performer who took an hour to navigate across the square, moving his limbs one at a time, balanced on clear plastic pots.

Hart and Hassen Rasool's act, *Five Announcements*, also played on our everyday experience of public space, drawing attention to what we may expect in different parts of the city. At each of the five times when Muslims are called to prayer, a muezzin broadcast live from the roof of the Granary Building. A common sound near major mosques across London, the call to prayer here prodded at the secular values of higher education as well as the UK's widespread racialised Islamophobia. So frequently romanticised in descriptions of Muslim countries for western tourists as 'exotic' or 'haunting', the sound of the muezzin in Granary Square asked what is understood as 'appropriate' in different spaces, troubling the bourgeois ideal of a singular public sphere.

Kenning's work with a group of five students who had been involved with the recent occupation at CSM (Artnotes *AM*386) was entitled *Building the Fetish*. Described as a 'Value Map of the King's Cross Development', *Building the Fetish* estimated the annual revenue or cost of sites including student housing (£11m), the retail units soon to appear in the former Western and Eastern Coal Drops (combined: £150m), the nature park (£0) and the luxury homes set to occupy the gasholders (£80m). Materially, the project visualised these values in the form of a map and piles of earth that looked like shit – a form of base materialism close to the aesthetics of Georges Bataille.

The figures in Kenning's value map made mention of the 'affordable housing' being built, which recently has been reduced to 33% from 43% – well below Camden Council's target of 50%. Such realities return us to the question of how to cultivate a critical concept of the public that is responsive to the foreclosure of people's homes in favour of student accommodation priced at almost £200/week and more high-end boutiques and restaurants. As the project website explains, 'Unannounced Acts' intended to test the possibilities of 'trust, invitation and conversation, in the relations with and between neighbours and square users, with the developer and within our own institution'. For some UAL students, whose own university administration recently

Siobhan Davies &
Matthias Sperling
*To hand in Granary
Square 2015*
performance



