

Alan Johnston

This is it.

Charles Esche

There's something very beautiful about the idea of the cube. It must have something to do with its irresistible correctness and logic. When you come across one in a broken, overgrown landscape it appears as inescapably human, a product of a willed desire to bring order to what appears (though often is precisely not) disordered chaos. Such a mark on a landscape, like a human mark on a wall, gives us pause to think – and the thoughts that follow are likely to be at least as much about the surrounding context in which it is placed as about the object that prompted the consideration in the first place. Why, you may think on seeing the geometry in its location, does the landscape hereabouts appear in this way? What plan, or lack of plan, caused it to be just so and not otherwise? And once the word 'plan' is let out of your head, you start a long journey into the night of the orderly mind, and what it has produced or forced itself upon in our imperfect, human world.

Looking at pictures of Alan Johnston's work in Radcliffe, a place I know well from childhood, makes me think such naughty thoughts about planners, urban plans and small architectural models devoid of humans. I start remembering all the plans that have been visited on this small southern corner of what was once Lancashire. How often have places like Radcliffe been remodelled and reshaped by humans who had little or no desire to be the kind of humans that actually lived there? And how often the only real response of the residents is to be found in the tiny gestures of defiance that a vulgar graffito or a carelessly thrown beer can represent? How sad too that such a singular response seems to keep happening in such places, no matter how much community consultation is requested or housing associations engaged.

Johnston's work for Radcliffe had to take account of such alienation from a natural habitat in order both to survive and to ask questions. He built in security fencing as a core part of the work, partly of course to overcome the inevitable vandals but also to make the sculpture itself a silent witness to the aggression of the society around. In doing so, the pure form of the cube and its internal mirror is distorted and even made ugly in order to become an entry (for some) into a way of thinking themselves out of their current conditions - a way to question why and how and if this is the only way nature and suburb, city and people have to meet? It is the greenness of the landscape and its potential beauty that almost overwhelms the work, while only being made visible by the existence of the work itself.

Johnston's art, while often adopting the relentless of the cube as its basis, is always searching or deliberately placing the small indication of human possibility into the straight lined thinking of the plan; just as the plan itself is a necessary part of an endlessly inventive human aspiration to make things better. This is why the small nervous scrawls on his well known wall drawings must be done repeatedly by hand, and why this work also includes the human in a very literal sense through the mirroring of the natural and human environment in the central space of the sculpture.

The mirror of course is simply a reproductive tool, it picks up all existing imperfections, without plan and without edit. It is the means by which we can somehow enter into a world beyond our reach, but one that only consists of what is already around us. In this sense, Johnston's work is saying with elaborate, spatially poetic care that 'This IS it'. The place where we are and the things that we have around us now, ARE what we need when we want to aspire to something here. New forms of heightened awareness replace the planning instinct at this moment of discovery, when we realise in a

substantial way our own responsibility for our perception. This is a magical moment for a viewer, yet it is delivered in a way that is profoundly materialist and of its site. Being right here and right now, surrounded by the vague anonymity of disused or barely used land and celebrating the fact that it could suddenly become the site of an event, makes perfect sense. Especially as the awaited event is not planned at all but spontaneously arises out of the circumstances that exist - undermining and the same time confirming the significance of the cuboid shape and reflective material that attracted us here in the first place.

Charles Esche 2007