

## The playground of bureaucracy

One, two, three, four, five, six, eight, ten, fifteen: good, solid numbers. Yellow, blue, red; and pink and purple and then, black, the source of authority. Cryptic descriptions and emptied words. Lists. Graphics. Reasoning beyond reason, clarity beyond understanding. Rigour, both of action and thought, in actions that confuse thought, and thoughts followed by obtuse actions. And then a voice: calm, sharp, unavoidable.

These elements, amongst others, form a core around which Holly McCulloch's practice develops, creating crossovers and encounters, synergies and coincidences. Hers is a universe in expansion, where each piece plays a part in a large frame of ideas and events, all converging in the same direction: the creation, the exploration of a parallel world, partially reminiscent of ours but kept at distance by its cryptic rules, its self-assured values. Colours forming hierarchies and archetypal social systems, selected numbers providing rules for the work's construction, relationships of power crystallised over time - all seem to designate a stalled bureaucratic space, where the routines of obedience long ago replaced the freedom of action and speech. As an invited guest I will attempt an incursion into this regulated land, having as an entrance another regulated land: the space where the work now resides.

It is an obvious fact that to be seen the work has to travel from the openness of the artist's studio to the museum or the gallery. Here, as in any other institution, it is subjected to a set of rules and procedures, activated by the encounter of the viewer with the art work. Through time, vanishing away, and through attention, eroded by time, a particular understanding of the work takes shape; this understanding may well continue to develop, based on memory or rumour, but it is in the gallery space that its starting point is found, its initial premises established. In Holly's practice, such premises are inevitably linked to boredom and tiredness. Some of her video work seems intent on keeping the viewer away, either by the endless repetition of dry, long words, or by the slowing down of time and experience. The drawings, where cryptic shapes are carefully organised, the sculptures, imbued with mysterious functions, all seem to inhabit a space just past the reach of our understanding. It is as if the work makes no effort to approach the viewer, asking him instead to expend all the effort: I am here, immobile, and to reach me you shall walk a lifetime.

If no generosity can be expected from the work, I believe that is linked to the nature of the power it portrays. A recent video piece, "Hierarchy", described in a monotonous, cold voice, the way the source of authority became established and unavoidable, subjugating all within reach. What the patient viewer slowly realised was that, in spite of each character's particular relationship with the colour black, all were in the end compliant with the establishment. Holly's characters are at the same time agents and subjects of a rule beyond questioning, from which emanates a set of procedures they are left to endlessly re-enact. The fact such procedures are as arbitrary to us as to them reinforces their totalitarian nature: however obscure, the reasonings are here, their actions will remain in place, and however illogical, all orders shall be followed. This is the nature of mindless bureaucracy. It needs no reasoning, since its existence is its reason to exist, its action purely deployed in its own name. Assured by a logic that feeds itself, the work echoes its own voice: I am because I am.

And yet all this is delivered in a playful tone, as if the voice of authority could be part of a child's play; or its subtle cruelty deployed with a light-hearted joy. Watching some of Holly's video work is to move very fast between different regions of the mind. The land might still be the same, the bureaucratic stillness, but the landscape does change while we travel: here a meeting room witnesses objects being exchanged from hand to hand, suggesting a ritual or a mysterious game; over there props around heads and bodies make us laugh while we wonder how laughable it all really is; further afield a sense of stillness returns, of stopped time, poisoned by an institution that forgot its purpose. And then suddenly, the remembrance of Oskar Schlemmer's 'Triadic Ballet', where dancers enveloped in geometric costumes created a radical visual experience, in line with the Bauhaus revolutionary project. It is not by chance Schlemmer comes to mind: his orchestration of disparate elements seems to find an echo in Holly's practice, as well as the use of geometric clarity, paradoxically producing doubt and uncertainty.

However, beyond such formal references, Holly's work is naturally distant from the early twentieth century vanguards. Their renewal of society through art, their belief in progress and the bold march of history, would be hard to defend today. After all, we know what happened to many of those utopias: corrupted, mislead, the bright bird of the future rented a flat in a tower block. This is not to say Holly's work is disillusioned or hopeless, but that it keeps a distance from such active engagement with the world – a distance filled with irony, with suspicion towards any form of purpose. Her banners are too abstract for any revolution, her manifesto written in a language yet to be known. Bold and proud the work addresses the crowds, leaving them silent, and undone.

I, too, feel certainty vanishing all the time. I am left to play hide and seek with the work. How ironic is it, in fact? Could it just be a genuine act of joy? After all, pleasure can be found in the creation of a parallel world, as a child with an imaginary friend might tell us. Could the regulated space be a danger to the creative mind? Or a beneficial protection from chaos and dissolution? The work gives me no answer. Critical? Joyous? Whimsical? I hear only the echo of my words. Maybe understanding is to be found in this: in the asking of questions that will not be answered. And so in silence, muttering questions to myself, I leave this land with the uncanny feeling of not knowing where I have been.

Pedro Faria, August 2007

Written to accompany Holly McCulloch's exhibition, part of New Work Scotland Programme, at Collective Gallery, Edinburgh, held from 29 September to 27 October 2007