

The image features a complex marbled paper pattern. A prominent, dark purple, almost black, cross-shaped element is centered on the page, with its arms extending towards the corners. The background is a dense, intricate pattern of swirling, organic shapes in shades of cream, light blue, and dark blue. The overall effect is one of rich texture and color contrast.

text + work

Here Lies

Here Lies is a large scale, multi-disciplinary art installation, incorporating; painting, photography, text, music, sound and behavioral rules. Staged in a modular nature, the event-form, it manifests in various formulas.

The heart of Here Lies is a series of abstract paintings, referred to by the artist as wall sculptures. Elaborate, complex surfaces, aim to draw the viewer into a relation with the architectural space that the paintings establish.

Here Lies is governed by a perception of the relationship between art and people, its public. The artist's principal themes aspire to be both intimate and universal; history, memory and desire – the lived experience of time itself. The work does not aim to be 'about' these concepts, but attempts to manifest them in the real world, with form and function as one, objectifying themes in a dynamic, emotional and physical relationship with the audience.

Here Lies proposes that this mode of contact is the profoundest and most complete form of audience participation, achievable. Not only does it encourage a mixture of wonderment and uncertainty, the goal of Here lies is to transform, by recalling the vision of life which is felt by the individual to be precious and transcendent.

Malcolm Quinn + Kieran O'neill

White Trash

White

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'Truth in Art; the end of Negative Dialectics', was written by Kieran Crowder in 1990 as part of his formal study of philosophy, following Crowder's discharge from the Royal Air Force due to his opposition to the Falklands conflict. The introduction to 'Truth in Art' sets up a distinction between an art preceding the French revolution, which 'appeared to its public less a product of this life than plenipotentiary of the next', and the apotheosis of middle-class taste that has succeeded it. The exposition of Adorno's thought that follows, ends with a reference to the philosopher's constellation of dialectic of enlightenment, negative dialectics and aesthetic theory around 'the impulse toward identity with oneself'. Following Adorno, Crowder concludes that the true identity of the self and the human within a properly collective form of the subject, is blocked, inter alia, by the 'congealed subjectivity' of technology and capitalism. True identity thus exists as a negative moment, that is called forth as an objectified absence in the work of art. 'Truth in Art' supports the thesis that an artist should not represent the world as it is, but as it fails to be and is not.

Crowder's thesis on Adorno, with its opposition of a utopian collective field for subjective identification, against the incoherent, disjointed mass of alienated subjectivity in capitalism, provides us with an important clue to the core logic of his 'Here Lies' project, which is the founding resource for this exhibition at the Arts Institute at Bournemouth. The central element of 'Here Lies' is a set of paintings of various sizes, some incorporating a mélange of animal, human and technological remnants, that are then

layers are then shaped, split or 'cracked' in various ways, and may also be built up into geometric figures such as circles and spirals. For those occasions when he is unable to show these paintings, Crowder has substituted high-quality, close-up photographs, that isolate elements of textural relief and the imbrication of paint, bone and diverse materials to form hard, opaque and resistant surfaces. He has compiled these photographs into albums and catalogues, along with other images grouped into a number of themes, including childhood memories, pornography, recreational drugs, idols, body parts, rural and urban landscapes, wasteland and derelict sites, crematoria and tombs, mementos of sexual conquest, and holiday photographs.

On various occasions, both the paintings and the catalogues have been displayed as part of 'Here Lies' public events, which use sound, live performance and the subtle modification of audience behaviour. The reason for the extension of painting into performance is clear – the surfaces of the paintings do not simply illustrate or represent a failed collective utopia, they are intended to articulate or express that failure by gathering an 'undead' audience around them, the sort of audience who are drawn to the promise of art like zombies to a shopping mall. The key to understanding Crowder's work is that it simultaneously brings about its utopian mission and its 'negative moment', by addressing you as a dead individual who would like to be collectively alive, and not, as it might at first appear, as a living person who is interested in developing some spurious personal philosophy of death. This also goes some way to account for the essential tastelessness of the 'Here Lies' project; it shrivels the complex personality, the little aesthetic nosegay, that we bring to it. In this

collective, confronts the forms of indiscriminate, chaotic commonality that provide him with his greatest desire and his most deep-seated fears. For this reason, 'Here Lies' does not offer a contribution to our personal portfolios of self-knowledge, although it may be a contribution to the shame and guilt of the person who confronts it and who fails to receive a satisfactory answer to the question 'Does this work hold a place for me?' This question is misguided, since the need for art simultaneously indicates a need for an impossible place that none of us, taken individually, is able to assume or to occupy. The more that we look to art for the confirmation of our taste and judgement, the more we encounter frustration and the fading of art's seductive promise. This is nothing new; the hope of modern art has always been produced out of the disappointment of its spectators.

If we cannot satisfactorily praise, condescend to or dismiss 'Here Lies' according to current standards of taste and fashion, how can we apprehend it? I would argue that Kieran Crowder's work calls for some kind of economic account. Not a tally of the demand for novelties and the supply of banalities within contemporary art, but the sub-economy of bad faith and false bargains that links the negative promise of art to the positive affirmations of the wider culture. The most telling instance of the bad faith of contemporary art, occurs in those moments when it offers us the false triumph of culture over death. The fashionable art of the past decade asserts that death is a matter of taste, and that, through the medium of art, we can all cultivate our own individual 'angle' on death. On the one hand, a steady flow of gory contents and morbid subjects keeps contemporary art in business. On the other side, art's role in turning death into culture wards off a second, more culturally pervasive kind of death,

in which individual status and symbolic distinction is lost to indiscriminate matter. In this latter case, the opposite of death is not life, but status. Death anxiety and status anxiety are now exactly the same thing. As the population of the West gradually stops breeding, and those of us that do reproduce train our children to value personal achievement over generative capacity, the elimination of bad genes begins to take precedence over the preservation of inherited ones. At the same time, we are told that old age will be abolished – we work for wealth, status and self-cultivation until the very end, while the young wait in limbo for their lives to begin. In this situation, death is the ultimate loss of status – when filmmakers imagine it, it is as a welfare office or a low-budget terminal, where individuals that have passed over go to be collectively ignored. Stripped of its sacred aura, death is revealed to be a class distinction, a symbolic marker that pitches the conscious individual into an anonymous, material collective. 'Here Lies' has been Crowder's way of keeping faith with this mass of fallen, unformed, déclassé material, without succumbing to the temptation to employ it as a contribution to the death culture of contemporary art.

If I offer an economic explanation for Crowder's practice, however, the specific question of economic form becomes crucial. This is because much of what passes as socially responsible or socially progressive art, naively associates the economic with the material, setting the collectively evil product against the individual good intentions of the artist. An already canonical example of this approach is Michael Landy's 'Breakdown' (2000) an Artangel sponsored event in which a team of workers disassembled and shredded Landy's worldly goods, including a Saab 900 and a painting by

Gary Hume. The thoroughness of Landy's purge was a parable of the transition from consumerism to personal agency, the overcoming of gross materialism through subtle self-creation. In fact, 'Breakdown' revealed the essence of the false bargain between the artist and the general culture, because it showed the contiguity between 'the birth of the artist' and 'the rebirth of the consumer'. Consumption is now a discourse of control and mastery, a means of producing subjective truth over and above material things; this is very different from the slavish and 'feminine' fetish worship ascribed to an earlier generation of consumers. The moment of coming to consciousness as a consumer and 'culturepreneur', is now achieved by a symbolic victory over those material things that are part of an older ideological paring of family consciousness and shopping. In Landy's event, an individual *Aufhebung* was prized above the cohesion of the family unit or a social bond – Landy felt bad about destroying his dad's coat, but it had to go: he'd promised Karsten Schubert some bags of 'Breakdown' waste as payment for a loan, but the drama of the subject demanded that they ended up in a landfill.

There is another way of looking at 'Breakdown' that brings us closer to the economic form of Crowder's 'Here Lies' project. Michael Landy's partner, Gillian Wearing, remarked in a BBC4 documentary that Landy was thirty-seven when the project was conceived, and that this was the perfect time for a 'Breakdown' a male mid-life crisis, a failure of self-potency and self-production. This alerts us to the possibility of a tragic drama of a failed communication, the inability to find an adequate way with which to tell the story of a trauma. The trauma is that the victorious subject of art, culture or consumption, can only confront their own thirty-seven year old

notion that capitalist or consumerist materialism alienates you from your true self – it is the much more devastating conclusion that this same self, precisely because it insists so vehemently on its selfhood, is alienated from the necessary or lived alienation of matter in time. Necessary alienation is the knowledge of oneself as a temporalised creature, existing irreversibly within the time of material things. In denying death by turning it into culture, we produce the material body as a dead, meaningless object. For this reason, Michael Landy's mid-life crisis isn't simply about getting older, it is about the point where an ideology of perpetual youth, of 'Young British Artists', confronts the corpse it has produced.

We can thus say that for contemporary art, death exists as a problem of the collective, a problem for which the art audience seeks an answer, only to be fobbed off with the spurious victory of individual cultivation over common material dissolution. This is a false solution to a real problem, one that Kieran Crowder addresses by locating unformed, accumulated matter itself as the site of a utopian possibility. To use the Adornian framework with which I began this essay, contemporary art shows us the world as it is, in the alienation of the subject and the collective, but only rarely as it is not. This impossible duty of representation is at the core of Crowder's thinking on art and his practice as an artist. This may seem an absurd task for any artist to assume, yet the nature of its impossibility and the precise character of its absurdity, can be adequately defined. This has been shown by Sigmund Freud, to whom we can turn for a brilliant example of the conceptualisation of the world as it is not, as well as a note on the difficulty of its pictorial representation. This vision of an impossible world can be found in his discussion of a subjectless 'republic of the dead' in Freud's *Civilisation and*

Now let us, by a flight of the imagination, suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychical entity. . .

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 70.

Freud employs his famous 'archaeological metaphor' in order to imagine a Rome in which all time periods exist simultaneously, and where nothing has passed away. This recasting of the city-state in the image of the unconscious, voids Rome of its population and its inter-subjective qualities, and fuses it into a single artifact, 'a psychical entity': 'In mental life nothing which has been once formed can perish—that everything is preserved and that in suitable circumstances (when, for instance, regression goes back far enough) it can once more be brought to light . . . an entity in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one' (Ibid.:70). In pursuing this idea, Freud is brought up against an inherent limitation: neither the object world, nor its associated systems of representation, can adequately encompass this psychical object: 'There is clearly no point in spinning our phantasy any further, for it leads to things that are unimaginable and even absurd. If we want to represent historical sequence in spatial terms we can only do it by juxtaposition in space: the same space cannot have two different contents. Our attempt seems to be an idle game. It has only one justification. It shows us how far we are from mastering the characteristics of mental life by representing them in pictorial terms' (Ibid.:70-71). Freud is quite open here about his use of metaphor as a way of demonstrating lacunae, rather than parallels. The unconscious is compared to the city in order to demonstrate the limitations of this comparison, just as the possibility of its pictorial representation is raised,

only to run up against the inadequacy of the spectator's comprehension. What we are left with in this 'unreal city' is the unconscious, a primary thought process without an inter-subjective dimension. We are now faced with two routes or options. The first option takes us back to the 'real city', the site of human interaction and the accumulation of goods. The second path directs us towards the republic of the dead, an eternal city without inhabitants, but which embodies a utopian notion of the collective – the community of all things, at all times, continuous and imperishable.

This impossible, utopian collective is what is sought by the dissatisfied audiences of contemporary art, as they wander amidst the distractions of a culture hell-bent on displaying its cultural victories over death. It is at this point, between deferred desire and the commodity which stands in its place, that Kieran Crowder's art intervenes. At the beginning of this essay, I claimed that the key to Crowder's art is that it you as a dead person who would like to be collectively alive. It does this by confronting the spectator with its own version of Freud's 'impossible Rome'. In Crowder's work, this is an accumulation of frozen material jouissance, a trans-temporal orgy of white trash to which ourselves, its present and undead spectators, have been denied access. We will therefore understand this art more fully when we realize that the positive moment of these paintings strictly corresponds to the negative moment of their spectators. Crowder's utopias of paint and bone are built on the foundations of our dystopic consciousness, and the mutual suspicion that our culture proliferates.

Dr Malcolm Quinn
October 2004

Dr Malcolm Quinn

Dr Malcolm Quinn is Senior Lecturer and Research Co-ordinator at Wimbledon School of Art. His first degree was in fine art, followed by postgraduate work at the Royal College of Art, which formed the basis of his first book *The Swastika: Constructing the Symbol* (Routledge 1994). This text, which was concerned with ideology in the field of vision and the symbolic transformation of national identity, has been described as 'among the most important books about design history and design's role in political and social persuasion that has been published to date' (Steven Heller *Design Issues* 11.03.1995). Following this study of the cultural logic of fascism, Malcolm Quinn's recent work has examined the ideological formations of democracy and the assumptions that inform progressive ideals of knowledge and culture. A recent chapter in *The Philistine Controversy* (Verso 2002) offered 'a lucid, trenchant analysis of the aftermath of the Sokal Affair in the journal *Social Text* in 1996' (Tom Huhn 'The Pleasures of the Philistine' *Oxford Art Journal* 27.02.2004) – a case-study of how affirmative epistemological liberalism is put to the test. Quinn's work on the manner in which knowledge is assumed to affirm ideas of 'the good' in contemporary culture and society, has culminated in the book *Knowing Nothing, Staying Stupid: Elements of a Psychoanalytic Epistemology*, co-authored with Dr Dany Nobus of Brunel University, which will be published by Routledge in 2005. This book advocates an approach to epistemology that is governed by the possibility of a traumatic 'fall' of knowledge. Dr Quinn is also an associate editor of the *Journal for Lacanian Studies* (Karnac Books).

Kieran Crowder

Kieran Crowder was born in Lancashire of mixed English and Irish parentage. Since 1991 he has lived and worked in Brixton, South London, where he writes, makes paintings and photographs. He read philosophy at the University of York 1988-91, and doctoral research at the Royal College of Art 1994-2000. Beginning with work on meaning in art, research topics included anthropology, politics, history and psychoanalysis.

Much of Kieran's work is brought together under the project banner *HERE LIES*, which is the founding resource for this exhibition. His work features in private collections worldwide and he has shown at Fresh Art, Karen Taylor Contemporary Art and Crescent Arts, North Yorkshire.

After text + work his next projects will include a solo exhibition at St. Luke's, Clapham, London and at 58 Great Eastern Street EC1 in March 2005.

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Dr. Malcolm Quinn + Kieran Crowder

29 November 2004 – 21 January 2005

The Gallery at the Arts Institute at Bournemouth

Opening Hours

9.00am – 8.00pm Monday – Thursday (Term Time)

9.00am – 6.00pm Monday – Thursday (Summer Time)

9.00am – 4.00pm Friday

9.00am – 1.00pm Saturday (Term Time)

Closed Bank Holidays

text + work

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