

New Art Commission at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine

Gary Perkins



Something is Being Scrutinised

Gary Perkins interviewed by Ian Hunt

The work you have made for the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine is untitled. In the past titles have been an important part of how viewers encounter your works and think about their meanings. Presumably this felt too big, too dispersed for a title?

It's difficult to think of how a work that is so much incorporated into the building, or parasitic on it, could be titled. The reliefs and friezes on the outside of the Keppel Street building are how the School describes itself, and what these reliefs represent to the lay person about what goes on inside perfectly does the job of a title. Titles of other works have been intended as a stimulus to the construction of possible narratives that could explain what you see. But here, working with this building as a given, the status of the work is an intervention. I wanted it to fall in line with other systems that exist in the building, to almost disappear amongst them. I didn't want to make it too overtly an artwork.

You have mentioned the mythologies that buildings acquire for the people who work in them.

Every building has things that people like to point out, quirks of history that come to define it. People use them to take ownership of the spaces. On one site visit a painting of a distinguished person from the 1920s or the 1930s was shown to me and it was explained that the cigarette he was smoking had been subsequently painted out as inappropriate. And the colonies of mosquitoes that have been bred here for 70 years now – their existence was introduced to me almost as an anecdote. These unseen ducts and spaces, which have been essential for the installation of cabling to the cameras, they too are part of the mythology of the School.

What will the cameras be looking at, and how will people encounter the work?

Most of the cameras are focused on tiny areas, in a close view of various surfaces: plaster, wood, glass, paint. There are sixteen of them, distributed through the Keppel Street building from the basement to the third floor, all connecting to the monitor in the entrance lobby. The monitor is sited amongst the fire alarm system, the pigeonholes for internal mail and so on, and it shows four images at any one time. There are one or two 'establishing shots'. These aren't closely focused and convey an architectural sense – the sense of looking down another corridor. It's a way to show these hidden ducts on which the building's functioning depends, these airless places that are not always so clean. But most of the images will be of surfaces.

What kind of textures are you looking for? Some appear almost geological, or like views of clouds. But I know there is some idea of an almost physiological study of the building, of considering it as though it were an organism. But the images themselves are distorted in ways quite unlike those made through microscopes.

Because each camera will be so finely focused, with not more than 3 to 4 mms between it and the surface, the fields of view are very narrow. Security cameras are designed with wide-angle lenses to show as much of a room as possible. That contrast between areas in and out of focus, exaggerates the sharpness in the central area. It will be very much a forensic view of the building's history. I'm looking for the scars, the blemishes, the blisters and grazes – all these words inevitably refer us back to skin – on paint finishes and walls. One camera is focused on a bubble in glass. Things like snowflakes or stings from the tails of bees can look perfect in close-up, whereas something that is intended to be uniform and perfect, when seen up close shows the dirt and the imperfections.

There's another physiological analogy that is hard to get away from: camera as eye. I know you are keen that people don't think of your work only in relation to the issue of security, but these views are inevitably like those of surrogate eyes. And the distortion of the wide-angle lenses that focus on a centrally distinct area does approximate to the selectiveness of human vision, more so than an image in equal focus across a wide depth of field and area of view.

There is something quite important about this central focus to the images. It's a sense of active seeking and scrutiny. This is in some ways an emblem of the kinds of close scrutiny that go on in the work of the researchers here. The subject of the scrutiny – these minute areas – may appear to be a peculiar one, but much of my work in the past has touched on hygiene and controlled environments and there are some works I've made with models resembling research institutions and hospitals. To actually have such a building to work in, rather than a model, has necessitated a quite different use of the cameras. I have sited one camera rebated into a door frame, so that it is focused on the top edge of a door. Doors are opened and touched and felt every day, but that top edge is never cleaned. Everyone has had that experience of climbing a stepladder or standing

on a chair and seeing the dust collected in places that the eye doesn't see. The other point of focusing on a door is that it moves of course. As it opens the image disappears without warning.

Will people be visible passing through it?

Only as a change of the screen from dark to light, as a visual event of some kind. No one can be distinguished. It's also important to say that the cameras are all sited in the corridors, the common spaces of the buildings. It's the most bland parts of the building, that supply the measure of how its surfaces are ageing and abrading.

I worked in the library for an afternoon once, researching an article for schools on a basic idea in health policy, of assessing the burden of disease. It was the only time I'd been to the place. I couldn't tell you anything about the corridors.

The School has its grand areas, the library and the entrance in particular. But it was very much the point of the work to focus on these homogeneous shared spaces, and see what they reveal. I should say also that right from the start I knew that unlike any other work I'd made, this was going to be a permanent installation. The live images have a different relationship to time.

There will be no recording?

Absolutely not. They are live images, digital views of present actuality, and they will continue as long as they are maintained to do so and are switched on.

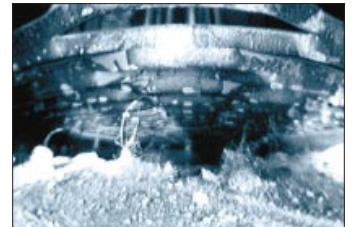
That is something that I find potentially scary about this work, its sense of time stretching into the future. You said that the colonies of mosquitoes tend to get referred to as 'the seventy-year old mosquitoes', though of course they're are being reared all the time. There's something maybe related to that temporal absurdity in our incomprehension of cameras that are never switched off. Cameras are just not like other machines; we are always more apt to impute to them the ability to see, rather than remember it is us that do the seeing.

There is maybe a sense of other times in this work, within the present tense transmitted to the screen. In the hidden spaces we never think about, these spaces surrounding those that we clean and cherish, the dust is as old as the building itself. There is an archaeology of the building and of people who work in it, if it's true that dust is composed so much of human skin.

But there is still something inhuman about this work, I mean in a good

way. The changes that are theoretically visible over time will never be registered by the eye. They are too slight. And – I know you don't want to insist on the work's connections with research here too obviously – that strikes me as quite similar to what some hard science or hard statistical labour is like. Often researchers need to devise measurements, indices and experiments that counter their human assumptions, in order to become aware of unsuspected patterns and correlations in data. These may then in turn have serious relevance to human needs and the formulation of policies.

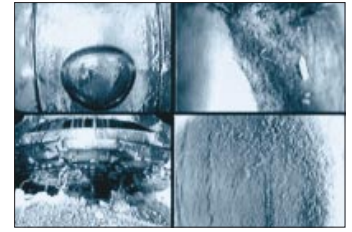
The work does result from an awareness of the kinds of activity that goes on here: the many ways of collecting, analysing and sharing data, and all the while the possibility that the results of the research could have impact across the globe. And that prominence of the word hygiene here does give it all a slightly comical aspect, I hope. Just being in this place changes anyone's awareness. I found myself very carefully washing my hands in the toilets. It turns out that the toilets have been used as places of research on one course here, that people have posed as cleaners to see just how many people do wash their hands.



*'Untitled', 2001, Gary Perkins
Details of installations and images of sixteen cameras, fixed throughout four floors of the Keppel Street building*

Biography

Gary Perkins was born in Manchester in 1967, studied at Liverpool School of Art 1985-88, and later at Chelsea College of Art in 1995-96. He has shown his work in numerous shows in Britain and abroad, including in the New Contemporaries 96, 'Material Culture' at the Hayward Gallery and at Victoria Miro, the Henry Moore Institute and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. He has been commissioned to create new works for the Barbican Centre and the Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art, and has works in the collections of the Arts Council of England, South London Gallery, ARCO Foundation, Madrid and the Royal Armouries Museum, Leeds. As the MOMART artist in residence at the Tate Gallery Liverpool, he curated the show 'Diving for Pearls' onboard the decommissioned submarine *HMS Onyx*. He lives and works in London and teaches at Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design and Wimbledon School of Art.



*'Untitled', 2001, Gary Perkins
Details of video images*

LSHTM Commissions programme

The London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine's decision to introduce new contemporary art works into its buildings has led to two major commissions by artists Gary Perkins and Susan Brind. Installed in June 2001, both works encompass large areas of the Keppel Street building and subtly resonate with a major component of our mission: being a leading centre of scientific research in public health and tropical disease. For further information contact Tony Fletcher (email tonyfletcher@lshtm.ac.uk).



*'Untitled', 2001, Gary Perkins
Monitor positioned in Keppel Street foyer*

Access Monday - Friday 9 - 5, via reception in Keppel Street building
London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, Keppel Street, London WC1E 7HT
www.lshtm.ac.uk/art

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