

The Arts Catalyst: Press coverage links

Dark Places exhibition - John Hansard Gallery, Nov 2009-Jan 2010, Overt Research Project, *Blueprint* magazine, March 2010

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OFFICE OF EXPERIMENTS

TEST SITES FOR BIOLOGICAL WARFARE AND SECRET LOCATIONS OF SENSITIVE TECHNOLOGICAL RESEARCH ARE THE FOCUS FOR THIS LONDON-BASED ARTS GROUP. **PETER KELLY** REPORTS ON ITS OVERT APPROACH TO RECORDING SOME OF THE UK'S LEAST DOCUMENTED SITES



This month the Overt Research Project (ORP), an online database of scientific, technological and military sites in the UK, will become publicly accessible for the first time. With extensive photography and observational notes on what are often deeply secretive or sensitive locations, it will be a remarkable and ever-expanding resource of some of the least documented examples of Britain's built environment.

Despite its talk of 'field research' and a simple but rigorous system of mapping and cataloguing, the database is not the work of a government agency, campaigning organisation or conspiracy-fuelled paranoiac: it has been built and developed by art group Office of Experiments (OOE), led by Neal White and Steve Rowell.

Trawling through the site, one can find efficiently described and beautifully »

The Berkeley Centre was one of the UK's first nuclear power stations and has a total site area of 27 hectares covered by the nuclear site licence. It has been decommissioned, and awaits demolition



//DOTTED WITH FENCED-OFF, THICKSET CONCRETE BUILDINGS AND OVERSIZED, MYSTERIOUS SATELLITE DISHES, THE FAMILIAR LANDSCAPE OF THE BRITISH ISLES BEGINS TO TAKE ON THE CHARACTER OF AN ALIEN TERRITORY//

photographed examples of science and technology as it is manifested in the landscape. Power stations, weapons-testing sites and high-security telecommunication centres are depicted in their isolated settings in the British countryside. The photographs, taken by both White and Rowell, are frequently atmospheric, yet more often the perspective appears neutral, neither emphasising the ominous scale nor brutally utilitarian design of the buildings. Some, such as the Berkeley Nuclear Power Station, which has been decommissioned and will be flattened once the radioactive material inside has sufficiently decayed, are carefully framed. Other, more sensitive or secretive sites,

such as the various facilities in southern England run by the defence technology and security company QinetiQ, are snapped by either Rowell or White from a moving car. These latter locations formed the basis for OOE's contribution to the Dark Places exhibition, recently mounted at the John Hansard Gallery in Southampton by Arts Catalyst, which frequently collaborates with White.

Given Rowell's pedigree of working with the Californian-based Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI), for which he has documented some of America's most extraordinary examples of infrastructure, it is no surprise that the photography featured on OOE's site is always interesting, and often acutely

This site in Defford, Worcestershire, was formerly run by QinetiQ and removed from maps until 2005. The site is now home to a powerful radio telescope – part of the Jodrell Bank Observatory's international network – and is also leased by Mercia Police



perceptive. Dotted with fenced-off, thickset concrete buildings and oversized, mysterious satellite dishes, the familiar landscape of the British Isles begins to take on the character of an alien territory. Yet, as Rowell notes, the method of photographing them in the wider landscape also highlights their vulnerability – instead of appearing dominant and brutal, they seem isolated and diminutive. Neither artist would claim that these buildings are architectural in the conventional sense, ‘there is always a movement to claim the ground of an uber discipline, to say that “everything is architecture,”’ says Rowell. Yet the way that, often

invisible, forms of modern technology – including telecommunications, energy and surveillance – are given a visual presence by these buildings is a central concern of the project.

Inevitably, this research skirts around the grey area of conspiracy theories. In some ways the artists exploit this: a recent tour of secret military sites in the south of England, organised by OOE, included conspiracy videos screened on the tour bus to establish the requisite atmosphere of ambiguous fascination among the passengers. Yet they are also careful to emphasise the neutrality of their intentions when cataloguing the buildings »





NEAL WHITE



NEAL WHITE



STEVE ROWELL

Top left: The Swinggate Transmitting Station is the only radar tower from the Battle of Britain in the Second World War still in use today. It now includes microwave link dishes and mobile telephone antennas

Above left: The Corsham Computer Centre has ground facilities and installations giving access to subterranean spaces used for defense, communications, media and, most recently, data storage for UK defence operations.

Above right: Parton Down is one of the most sensitive and secret experimental sites in the UK. The site is based around a technology park conducting scientific and military research, including forensic DNA

themselves, and never photograph details or highlight physical weaknesses. Rowell explicitly distinguishes the work from projects initiated by anti-secrecy campaigners, citing in particular American architect John Young who has built a website specifically to place classified documents into the public domain. The inclusion of the word 'overt' in its title signals the importance of taking the photographs while fully visible by authorities, and they have even produced a guide to conducting overt research, so that other members of the public can engage in similar, entirely legal, activities.

This mix of research-based practice, documentary photography, and openly accessible digital material, is a blend of White and Rowell's past work. White, who established OOE in 2004, began his artistic career in the late-Nineties working on digital art projects, creating open-source software that involved complex programming skills. More recently, he has been working on an architectural scale, using mobile structures that encourage public engagement with social or political ideas. Particularly notable was his work with Danish art and architecture collective N55, with whom he designed and built a space station consisting of a set of modular dwelling pods, which were

shown as part of an exhibition at London's Roundhouse in 2006. The structure was the result of two years' work, but was exhibited for only six days. OOE grew from White's increasing interest in 'marginal institutions', such as N55, that are able to expand or contract in response to any given circumstance and are not explicitly attached to a particular individual.

White's association with CLUI stems, unexpectedly, from his artistic residency at the Henry Moore Institute in Yorkshire. Following his creation of a spurious campaign to reconstruct a set of Jacob Epstein statues outside what was the Rhodesian Embassy on The Strand in London – White's interest was in building a new historical archive about the statues, rather than reconstruction – the Institute funded a trip to Utah, where White was to create an artwork on a site once earmarked for Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty. As it turned out, there was a delay delivering the construction materials for White's small-scale mobile pavilion, and so he spent two weeks almost entirely alone in the flat, arid landscape, exploring the nearby military weapon-testing sites.

This experience not only piqued his interest sites of military infrastructure, but began the association with the CLUI, and Rowell in particular, who was also »

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STEVE ROWELL

//ALTHOUGH AN IMPORTANT MEANS OF COMMUNICATION, PHOTOGRAPHY IS ONLY ONE COMPONENT IN A PROJECT THAT ALSO EXPLORES THE CULTURAL EFFECT OF CREATING OPEN-ACCESS ARCHIVES AND ALLOWING MATERIAL TO BE WIDELY DISSEMINATED//

working on projects in the same area. When the American artist moved temporarily to Berlin in 2009, and with White searching for a core activity that would ground OOE in some form of in-depth fieldwork, they chose to collaborate on documenting some of the UK's most fascinating technological sites.

For Rowell, the experience of photographing British landscapes was different in every way. The complexity of getting to any remote site, due to, Rowell says, the density of British topography changed both the experience of conducting the field research and the form that his photography took – instead of the endlessly flat landscapes favoured in his American output, with the ORP Rowell uses the rolling hills of the British countryside to frame the buildings, and the nearby, innocuous farm structures and animals to undercut their brooding presence. The Ordnance Survey maps, with their rich vocabulary and detailed place names also fascinated Rowell: 'you can almost decide whether to wear boots or shoes based on the place name,' he says.

Although an important means of communication, the photography is only one component in a project that, like much of White's previous work, also explores the cultural effect of creating

open-access archives and allowing material to be widely disseminated. In working on the first stage of the database, White and Rowell have already collaborated extensively with local researchers and activists who, in some cases, have been compiling extensive information on sensitive sites. Porton Down, a government and military science park in Wiltshire, where chemical and biological experiments were conducted on around 18,000 unwitting volunteers between 1941 and 1989, has been the focus of a campaign by local retired engineer Mike Kenner for about 30 years. His enormous archive of material has been a significant resource to OOE, and a display of the material he has gathered was incorporated into the Dark Places exhibition.

It is this local knowledge, and the mediation of White and Rowell in setting the ground rules for the project, that gives ORP its purpose in an age of ubiquitous satellite photography and Google maps. 'We've become so accustomed to satellite images that we've come to think that it's all we need,' says Rowell. 'Yet time and time again, we've found that the perception you get of these structures is totally different when you visit them on the ground' ■

Above: RAF Croughton is a United States Air Force communications base in Northamptonshire. It operates one of Europe's largest military switchboards and processes approximately a third of all US military communications in Europe.