

## Notes towards an invasion - Michael Bowdidge

In *The World as Sculpture*, James Hall suggests that 'modern artworks have few qualms about invading the viewer's own space'.<sup>1</sup> This may well be the case, but how do such expansionist tendencies play themselves out when what's at stake is not just the integrity of the viewer's space, but that of other artworks and objects that may be present in the situation?

Perhaps such questions are best answered in places which do not conform so readily to the strictures of the public institution or the commercial gallery, where such transgressions often have a tendency to be commoditised to serve either one agenda or another.

'Mik's Front Room' at 'Primary' in Nottingham is just such a hybrid space. Part artist's studio and part gallery, it is a largish room into which artist Mik Godley invites other practitioners to exhibit on a regular basis. Given the specific concerns of his practice (and in particular, his interest in using Nazi flying saucers as vehicles for exploring a complex cultural and geographic hinterland) I thought it might be interesting and amusing to adopt and extend Hall's notion for this project, and build a series of 'Space Invaders' that could attempt to annex this territory.

As is often the case, the roots of my thinking in relation to this task spring from a number of different locations but they converge in the body of work that I have produced for this project. This encompasses sculptures, a temporary large-scale structure built with materials found on site, digital prints and a sound piece.

The idea of working and exhibiting at 'Mik's Front Room' appealed to me because I have become increasingly interested in undertaking projects which revisit notions of site-specificity in slightly unusual and intriguing ways. In this case there are echoes of the work that I made with Mirja Koponen in x-church in Gainsborough as part of Bendintheriver's Regrouping exhibition.

The two of us had worked independently in the space over the course of week, but also loosely in parallel, as each of us was creating work in relation to what the other was producing and also with an eye on the other artworks that were being installed in the space. All of this activity inevitably involved some discussion and negotiation, and it was this aspect of the project that I found particularly fascinating, and which I hoped to build upon here.

The first sculptures that I made for this show I thought of initially as 'homeworks', as they were built at the living room table from domestic detritus (rather than in my studio in Leith) during a period of time when family medical issues necessitated me being somewhat closer to home than usual.

These sculptures were something of a departure for me, as I was working with a somewhat different palette of materials. What was 'to hand' in the house differs significantly from what is in my studio. Having embraced this change, I also decided to set myself the challenge of adding at least one self-adhesive 'googly eye' to each artwork, largely because I was curious to work with a material which could confer 'life' so readily and unequivocally on a sculpture.

Over the past twenty five years a substantial proportion of my work has hovered in the territory between representation, non-representation and the thing as itself, as experience had taught me that this is the most interesting and fruitful territory for my sculpture to inhabit. This being the case, for once I wanted to 'force my hand' a little and deny myself the luxury of ambiguity. Working with googly eyes seemed likely to ensure that this would happen. I have also long been interested in notions of character in relation to assemblage – what is it that brings an arrangement of objects to the point of it feeling like an entity, even if it is not overtly representational?

Some of my earliest works dealt with exactly this question, and I am tempted to argue by extension that the ghost of the figure lurks not far beneath much modern and contemporary sculpture, even if only as an absence or echo. I suspect that this is the case perhaps because we have as a species spent much more of our history relating to other human bodies in space and their sculptural placeholders than we have to non (or perhaps less) representational sculpture.

If sculpture can arguably be seen as (one of) humanity's others, or at the very least an opportunity for us to safely re-stage some kind of Levinasian confrontation with otherness (as the work of Lisa Osborn does) then perhaps it is appropriate for some of the proximal othernesses that surround us and help us to define ourselves to be equally valid as sculptural subject matter and/or materials. Here I am thinking particularly of animals and furniture, both of whom have differing yet in some ways complimentary relationships with humanity – at least in part they help us to provide a working understanding of ourselves through what they are or are not, either physically, mentally or in terms of their abilities, forms or attributes.

Into this category I would also place more fantastic entities, such as monsters and alien creatures, though as Derrida suggests, “monsters cannot be announced. One cannot say: 'here are our monsters', without immediately turning the monsters into pets".<sup>ii</sup> This may well be true, but if the monster has the appearance of a pet, if it is cute and friendly looking, then that may well render its monstrosity all the more insidious, and its ability to propagate (as a meme) all the more effective.

I should add here that I have worked with the idea of space invaders previously, in particular in my 2007 large-scale sculptural group *The Visitors*, which sought to create a set of analogue ancestors for the tiny digital space invaders who inhabited the eponymous eighties console game. These sculptures were built predominantly from discarded items of mid-twentieth century furniture. I had aimed for them to have character (they were initially conceived as a nuclear family of sorts) but for the most part their appearance was not particularly endearing.

What I have found since I begun to work with the googly eyes is that their origins are far more mysterious than I had hitherto supposed – it's very difficult to find any clear references online to their invention, or their provenance, although there is some consensus that they came to prominence around the middle of the twentieth century (around the time of the Flying Saucer phenomenon) and have undergone something of a renaissance in recent years as a result of the surge in the popularity of crafting and the accompanying rise of websites such as Etsy.

One might argue then that what has happened at 'Mik's Front Room' is a real invasion – if this is the case then all of my thoughts on this matter may be of little relevance – I'm just a particularly suitable host for the spreading of the viral googly-eyed meme.

Many thanks to Mik Godley for being a perfect host – in both senses of the word. Also special thanks to my family for their patience, good humour and support during the completion of this project,

Michael Bowdidge, June 2014

<sup>i</sup> Hall, J. (1999) *The World as Sculpture*. London, Chatto and Windus, p.1.

<sup>ii</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Some Statements and Truisms about Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and other small Seismisms", *The States of Theory*, ed. David Carroll, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989. pp.63-94, here: p.80