Laying the Bounds

Emma Cocker explores how 'preoccupation' can function as a mode of site-specificity, in relation to *Laying the Bounds*, Helen de Main's recent commission for *northcabin*.

Laying the Bounds by Helen de Main is the fourth artists' project commissioned by *northcabin* curator Katherine Daley-Yates, in response to the paradoxically *inoperative* operating cabin located on Redcliffe Bridge in Bristol. *northcabin* extends Daley-Yates' interest in the use of alternative public spaces for the production, exhibition and reception of contemporary art. It is a timely project that sensitively addresses both the possibility and problematic of site-specific work in the public realm. At first glance perhaps, de Main's response to the *northcabin* commission seemed to stubbornly resist the terms of recent debates around 'new genre public art' and the increasingly slippery concept of site-specificity, which have focused on the socially discursive or relational potential of artists working outside the confines of a gallery context. De Main's work appeared willfully *anti*-social, unwilling to open up or enter into dialogue. Within the redundant north cabin of Redcliffe Bridge, de Main had created a structure inside the existing structure; within the shell of the original building she had made another. Constructed of intricately embellished steel panels, de Main's intervention operated as a makeshift barricade, blocking the possibility of seeing in, out or through the original building. Against other more collaborative, community or communication driven models of site-related art-practice, de Main's gesture appeared as one of blunt resistance or protest: she had effectively put up a wall.

Built in 1939, Redcliffe Bridge is of a 'bascule' design having the capacity to lift open like a drawbridge. It is straddled by two semi-circular operating cabins, which together provide a viewing platform or watchtower enabling panoramic, even panoptical, survey of their waterside surroundings. The bridge is a liminal or interstitial zone, simultaneously separating and connecting Redcliffe and the city, whilst differentiating – notionally if not actually – between two designated sections of Bristol's waterway. The bridge is a space of transit and transition, conceived for passage *through* rather than permanent inhabitation. However, the bridge's cabins were designed for a certain kind of occupation, for the specific purposes of supervision and control, for facilitating – or indeed for prohibiting – the flow of movement across or beneath the bridge. With the dual possibilities of liminality and surveillance brought into play, it is easy to see why north cabin has been selected as potent provocation for site-specific commissions. For de Main, the commission presented a new context through which to explore her ongoing concerns around how public space and the urban environment are occupied and controlled. De Main's work often explores how specific forms of human intervention shape and determine how an environment is inhabited or *lived*, drawing its reference from various political strategies of separation and division, or the perpetual cycle of regeneration initiatives intent on endlessly re-imagining, restructuring or rebranding urban space.

De Main's occupation of the old north cabin, echoed and perhaps critiqued the approach of innumerable architectural interventions and redevelopments along Bristol's waterside (and beyond), where the shell of an historical building has often been retained as a veneer or façade within which a new – often insensitive or incongruous – new build takes roost. De Main's 'new build' seemed absurdly intent on occupying as much of the interior space of its host as possible; its paneled walls stretched from floor to ceiling leaving only the slightest breathing space between them and the windows of the cabin itself. Like the cuckoo, de Main's structure appeared to be in danger of outgrowing the hospitality of its host. It seemed almost too big for the space in which it had been accommodated so kindly. Brood parasite, the cuckoo produces eggs that resemble or mimic the appearance of those of another species in order that it might infiltrate their nest. Similarly, the steel panels of de Main's fledgling structure had been worked into or modified, mimicking or copying the appearance of their immediate

environment. A flash of pastel colour – faded sage, pale salmon, rusted umber – appeared borrowed from the row of terraced houses along Redcliffe's tops; grazed indentations echoed the urban scrawl of graffiti; fragmented photographic representations of corroding corrugated metal, industrial dereliction and solitary air-vents were worn along the structure's surface like a second skin. On approaching the cabin, the panels seemed at first like fly-posters attached to the windows; the tattered residue of events long since passed, of calls to action and assemblies rallied and already disbanded, of public announcements rendered mute or faded through the passage of time. This surface resemblance operated as camouflage enabling de Main's structure to shimmer or tremble at the edges of visibility, for in spite of its imposing size it had been made to almost disappear, to blend into its surroundings. In this sense, the panels performed like the industrial hoardings designed to replicate the buildings that they cover, offering the illusion that nothing has changed whilst concealing the possibility of unknown activity taking place behind the scenes.

Camouflage is an inherently ambivalent practice that can operate as a form of both attack and defense – a stealth tactic or smokescreen for making things difficult to determine as one thing or another. Performed as a gesture of veiling that renders invisible or opaque, camouflage has the capacity to conceal both form and function. The cuckoo's subterfuge masks a hidden threat. Having passed itself off as a different species, the uninvited fledging cuckoo is reputed to push its unborn siblings from their nest before enjoying the doting attention of its surrogate parents. However, this merciless act can also be understood as one of resilience or resourcefulness, for the cuckoo is now an increasingly endangered species of bird. Here then, the mimicry of another has been developed over time as a way of survival. Alternatively, the adoption of another's appearance or actions is symptomatic of an enamored fixation or preoccupation, where it has become increasingly difficult to conceptualize oneself as separate from the focus of one's attention. Preoccupation is a dysfunctional state of absorption or immersion, of being wholly wrapped up in something or someone to the exclusion of all else. Curiously, *pre*occupation does not designate a time prior to or in advance of the act of occupation as such nor the state of being *unoccupied*, but rather points to a specific and even illicit 'type' of occupation that insinuates itself before more legitimate or productive forms have taken hold. Preoccupation is the act of occupying oneself or one's time – more often non-productively – in a way that is heightened or transformed to the level of a haunting or obsession. It is an improper, all consuming form of occupation that distracts from or prevents other seemingly more useful or permissible kinds of activity from taking place. Herein perhaps, lies its radical or dissident potential.

Whilst some site-specific projects emerge from a particular artist or curator's preoccupation with a specific site or space, de Main's approach to north cabin inverted this relation by attempting to preoccupy the site instead. For de Main then, preoccupation emerges as a specific critical and political form of site-specificity. Whilst preoccupation describes a state of mental absorption, it can also mean the physical act of occupying or taking possession of something before someone else. The cuckoo harnesses the potential of this double meaning, attempting to preoccupy both their host's attention *and* the physical space within their nest. Like the cuckoo, de Main's inhabitation of north cabin excluded the possibility of other forms of occupation. Akin to the dissenting squatter, the artist's attempt to preoccupy the site is a resistant tactic for preventing it from other uses. To preoccupy a site is to distract it from its designated or intended purpose or function; it is to divert its attention or set it to a different tack. For de Main, to inhabit north cabin with a structure that precluded other usage was a way of preventing the site from the insensitive regeneration that so many of its neighbouring buildings had been subjected to. The cabin is suspended between times. It is no longer required to perform the utilitarian function for which it was originally designed, but has not yet been designated a new role or purpose. Here, redundancy produces a creative hiatus or pause, a space in which to conceive things otherwise before a new use or function has been fully determined. De Main's intervention and indeed the *northcabin* project more broadly can be understood as an attempt to extend or maintain this state of suspension (if only

temporarily); transforming a curiously disused utilitarian structure into a space of latent possibility or potentiality, a space for imagining things contrary to habitual expectation or convention.

Emma Cocker, 2009