

Interview with Anna Pike

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Anna Pike: For your forthcoming exhibition in Toronto later this month you will be showing *Shelter*-how did you come to make this piece?

Helen de Main: Some of my work seems to come out of an idea that has developed over a long time. This was something that came to me quite suddenly; I wanted to do something that had a cavern inside it. I think the idea of the tunnel into a hill is where the original idea came from. I decided to make hills, rather than caves, to create something more living; two separate entities in opposition to one another with the different forms on top; the hut and the trees.

AP: I'm intrigued that you describe them as living things, because they do embody very human characteristics?

HdM: That is very true. And there is a definite conflict between them, the track alluding to lines of communication, something that has parted into two separate things.

AP: This version of *Shelter* has developed out of a piece that was already shown in Nottingham earlier this year. Is this true of the way that you work? That you might make a piece for exhibition, and afterwards re-work it? That sense of unfinished-ness or incompleteness.

HdM: Yeh, it is definitely something that has happened with pieces of my work, where I've completed things in time for a show, and then reflected on them and thought 'is that its' total conclusion?' And with the first version, because I made it quite quickly, when I showed it I was really unhappy that the trees weren't resolved; they weren't giving all the right characteristics. I hadn't had enough time to digest exactly what I wanted to do with them, and to know what I wanted their shape to be saying. For their manifestation in Toronto, they've developed quite a bit. The trees are a lot fuller, and there is the idea of them meeting together, their branches forming this protective canopy. But also, there is going to be a third hill, a similar shape to those

ones, but with metal scaffolding around it, and then some of that safety mesh. So it kind of shrouds it-you can only partially see through. You could read that it's being built, or that it's being altered, or protected. I wanted it to be quite ambiguous what this relationship was between the scaffolding and this more organic mound underneath.

AP: This idea of development, and the conflicting images of the rural and the urban. You live and work in Sheffield, an aspirational city swamped by scaffolding and cranes, and the constant threat, or promise of redevelopment...

HdM: I don't think I can get away from the issue of development. They've just built four hundred student flats probably within three metres of my studio window, so... as for the combination of city and country, I suppose I do see myself now as a kind of urban dweller 'cause I've lived here for seven years and before I lived in Manchester for a year. But I did grow up in the country-side, on the moors. I think I do see something sinister about it; that the landscape is out of our control. There's all this town-planning happening around us that's perceived to be of benefit to the city, but I don't necessarily know that I believe that. And if that is the place that you want to be living? Your architecture, your space, it's the place that you inhabit, there's something safe about that, and something comforting...

AP: Last summer you were reading books on huts, bird boxes...intimate, safe dwelling spaces, somewhat naively created. And you were discussing ideas for *Someone to Watch Over*. To begin with, this structure sounded like a nurturing space, almost like a potting shed, but soon became something quite sinister.

HdM: Well I initially saw two separate entities, the forest and the shed, linked by the surveillance camera. The shed is very much a combination of a garden shed and a... I was looking at lots of control boxes, things that control fair ground rides or at train stations. It's dark and ambiguous, but by making it in cardboard, it is playfully rendered non-functional-its power is undermined.

AP: I wanted to ask you about the cardboard aesthetic. I think it was in *The Thing Between Us* that you went from video to something very sculptural, and objects very

humanly crafted and out cardboard. This departure, in your choice of throwaway materials seems to lend the work a certain accessibility not granted by video.

HdM: In hindsight, I think it allows the viewer to get much closer to the work, when it is object based, and it has very much got my hand, my touch on it. I think it becomes a lot more intimate. I was still exploring similar ideas in my video work, but it wasn't working so well, because video does serve to remove the viewer whereas these things in everyday materials, people feel a familiarity with them.

AP: In 2004, you were involved in *rabble collaboration*, in which you, with two other artists from Sheffield curated a project that was very much based around themes of collaboration and dialogue, could you say a bit about that?

HdM: We wanted to develop a project that looked more specifically at dialogue between artists in developing new work, and what that can do for your practice, and create an exhibition that revealed something of the creative process.

AP: It referred to the continual state of unfinished-ness in the creative process, in which the dialogue that begins in an exchange between artists, leading to production can evolve. This was illustrated in the work that you showed as part of the project- your collaboration with Camilla Lyon?

HdM: Well I thought of this idea that someone would send me a piece of work, and I would either make modifications to it, or a new response. And so Camilla sent me a piece of work in the post that I started to make things in reaction to. I started to do things, and they just felt really trite-the idea that I could look at her work for a day, and then better it seemed bonkers. I started by adding things to it, and it seemed really disrespectful to her work. This initial aim became the thing that I wasn't so interested in. The three subsequent pieces did speak to her work in some ways, but they spoke more about my relationship with her, that came through quite unconsciously. In one of the pieces, well I'm covering up her work, questioning my role to her, and the power to alter a piece initiated by another artist.

AP: A lot of the work that you presented here, in photography and objects document a staged meeting between yourself and Camilla, in which you took tea together. I was very interested in the photograph of the table and chairs that you sat at, with the chairs at different heights. Was this a very conscious thing, to explore the politic of power between you?

HdM: Well it came out the confines of the projector stand that her work sat on, which became the table, and did have these different levels. But this became very interesting; it suggested a dialogue in which there could be two people sitting at the stand, but they would be at distinctly different heights. And I think that Camilla was a bit over faced when I suggested 'right, we're going to have tea now', and she's in my studio. And she was like 'oh where do you want me to sit?' and I was like, 'You're on the big one and I'm on the little one'. But we did in fact swap half way through cause it made her feel a bit uncomfortable I think.

AP: The documentation did serve to quietly suggest a certain line of enquiry without highlighting your aims. In its ghostliness as the uninhabited after-event, it retained an enjoyable sense of ambiguity, which also left a strong contribution to the debate on dialogue and collaboration.

HdM: We did video part of us having tea together and I took some photographs of us sat on the chairs but it became too conscious of what it was. It was interesting, 'cause I was really just taking test shots of the projector stand set up with the two chairs, but when I looked at them, I was like 'you don't need to *say* any more than that'. It says things about my relationship with Camilla and also lots of wider kind of things to do with power sharing. It's always something that I'm aware of in my work-I don't want to say too much, to put too much on it so it becomes very instructional. I just want to leave a bit of space.

AP: Tell me about your involvement in the *BEACON Project*, which took place at sites around rural Lincolnshire last year. This was group exhibition combining emerging and established artists, in which you made *Façade*?

HdM: Yes, showed my work in a converted chapel and decided to make something which responded to the site itself. I ended up making a small cardboard model of the façade of the chapel, and then projected this as a video when you walked in. I was wanted to question peoples' vision and memory- when people walked in, they then re-encountered the same image again. But it was a model. I made it quite exact, but again it was quite ambiguous as to what had changed about it and why it looked a bit strange. And I had added this scaffolding to ask viewers to question was that scaffolding there when we walked in?

AP: You also made a multiple and that, as well as being on sale actually worked directly with the projection?

HdM: Well the projection was on one wall, and then at a right angle was this kind of shop fitters hook, with this pack: 'construct your own, complete with extra parts for modification.' From the pack, you could literally cut it out, and make exactly the same model as the one I'd made, or you could continue to make alterations to it with other parts. There was a skip and a porter-loo and some cones, and various other bits of scaffolding that you could add to it. And I suppose I was quite interested in bringing something that was quite urban in terms of re-development, into something very rural, because it was in this tiny village in the middle of nowhere. I was interested in the tension between the two states.

AP: Now, a piece of work that you did quite recently, *'Fit like?'* *'Aye, Pecking'* shows a lot of humour and was quite a sidestep from themes explored previously. To walk into the gallery, look up and see two little birds on a perch looking down on everyone with a seeming chortle, it had a real lightness of touch. How did you come to make this piece?

HdM: Well strangely enough it came from something I saw when I was a student having a drink somewhere, and two birds landed on a telegraph wire. As one went down, the other went up and they were kind of bobbing to keep each other on there. There was this interplay between them-they were working as a pair, and I thought it was really beautiful, and was like, 'damn, where's that video camera when you need it?' It's an image that stuck with me. I wanted to recreate it, cause I guess it picks up

on this idea of relationships, and a connection between two separate bodies. So I started to make clay birds, chicken wire birds... but then I was just on the market one day, and I saw these electronic birds that were doing almost exactly what I wanted them to do. And so I bought them, and I rewired them... It was kind of interesting as it brought something a lot different to the work; changed what it originally was. They became very much a pair together, but rather than supporting each other as I had imagined, they were being quite mischievous up there. I tried to get them to go at the same speed, but their motors were just slightly different, I couldn't get them to keep in time. But in the end, I kind of liked that; how they were together and then they were apart. And I think the materials brought a lot of humour to the piece-they were just these plastic birds, I think they were called 'Funny Happy Birds', made in China, it was a real departure from having made everything in cardboard and then to go and buy these readymade objects...

AP: And did that sit comfortably? To show something that was so instant?

HdM: You start to think things about your practice. You think 'my practice is about making things and the process of ideas coming out through that making.' So then to go and buy something off the market...eight pounds and you've got a new piece of work. Marvellous. For a moment it felt a bit fraudulent, but then I don't see my practice as being that static, and it was like, 'no, it can be this.' I think that it stands up as a piece of work on its own. It doesn't have to be this idea of slaving for your art. I guess from working in *Corrableation*, where I had to think of a different way of working, change my working methods, I think that opened up a lot of possibility.