

Gail Pickering

BRUTALIST PREMOLITION

A film and live performance

Tuesday 4 November 2008, 20.00hrs

Included in a solo exhibition as part of *Nought to Sixty* – 13-20 October 2008, The Institute of Contemporary Art, The Mall, London.

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Text by Bridget Crone

Gail Pickering's work is known for its performative capacity – that is, a layering of performed fictions, constructed and sourced through specific sites and historical or political events. Her new work for Media Art Bath, *BRUTALIST PREMOLITION* takes the Robin Hood Gardens Estate as its starting point. Designed by Alison and Peter Smithson, Robin Hood Gardens is a key example of post-war New Brutalist architecture intended as a utopian form of large scale social housing. Pickering works from the interior of the architecture, producing a film from within one of the flats on the Estate. The film shows a resident family casting professional actors to play themselves. Embedding familiar faces from British television and film, we see the actors repeating well-rehearsed scenes from their inventory of past roles. In this way, Pickering's work operates at a junction of highly articulated structures – the housing estate, particular social tropes and stereotypes – and through the layering and accumulation of the performance of these histories and fictions something else, known but unknown, emerges.

For Pickering, the establishment of a clear methodology is of key importance in the work, and this becomes the structure around which a series of performances occur and the work unfolds. In the case of *BRUTALIST PREMOLITION*, this method involves establishing a collaborative relationship with the resident family. Sidestepping the (often overly earnest) conventions of what's termed social engaged practice in which an artist will engage with a participant community in order to communicate the "truth" of the situation, Pickering instead engineers a scenario in which multiple truths and fictions can be played out by a series of interchanging protagonists. Within this melding of fact and fiction what emerges is partly a meditation on the pleasures and the fantasies of memory but also a gentle reminder of the structures that govern these possible realities. As Pickering herself has stated, she "devises scenarios or situations in which the discrepancy between individual and 'role' is emphasised and questioned". (1) This is particularly evident in the scenes with the professional actors whose faces recognisable from film and prime time TV conspire with their repeated performances of familiar roles.

The complex play between multiple truths and fictions in Pickering's work is heightened through her use of highly authored or choreographed scenarios alongside improvisations devised with the actor-participants themselves. This strategy is especially evident in past

work such as, *Hungary and Other Economies* (2006), in which particular histories of the site (in this case, the ruined château owned by the Marquis de Sade now owned by Pierre Cardin) are enacted (or produced) through a series of cultural and social referents that Pickering unlocks through her approach to casting, her choices of costume and of text. For *Hungary!*, Pickering worked with a group of porn actors to devise a series of scenarios based on pieces of text taken from Peter Weiss's seminal play, *Marat Sade* (1963). Situating themselves at different points across the ruined buildings and grounds of the château and dressed in Cardin-inspired sci-fi-futurist costumes, the actors repeatedly read and re-read sections of the text interchanging roles as they do so; this quiet repetition of roles and scenes subtly echoes some kind of material 'truth' of the actor's lives. This sense of emergence from within the cracks and around the edges of the highly constructed scenarios is further strengthened through the way that Pickering allows us to see the teasing and playful interactions between the actors as they travel to the shoot. This juxtaposition of highly staged *tableaux vivants* (literally 'living pictures') with what seems like an open film set serves to articulate the negotiation of agency so that not only does the contract struck between Pickering and the actors become visible but it becomes visible in such a way as to problematise the rules and machinations of representation itself.

Pickering's working method, based as it is around an unfolding process of collaboration rather than acting out a pre-established narrative structure, has clear parallels with the ideas of Alison and Peter Smithson, architects of the Robin Hood Gardens Estate within which *BRUTALIST PREMOLITION* was filmed. The Smithsons were proponents of socially utopian ideas in architecture and were well known for their architectural style termed, New Brutalism, and for their pop art associations particularly with the artist, Eduardo Paolozzi. The Smithsons desired to build spaces that were a kind of contingent structure for the sociality that unfolded within them. They wrote that they considered the role of the architect as one who "builds for, and towards the cohesion and convenience of the collective structure to which they belong". (3) This then demands a careful observation of the minutiae of the daily rituals and habits of the intended inhabitants, evidenced for example in the Smithson's detailed research on the working practices of *The Economist* journalists for whom they designed a new headquarters in St James, London (1959). But the result rather than being a slavish container to the demands of the inhabitants is instead a space in which the potential possibilities of their behaviour may be extended. This can be seen more obviously in the case of the Robin Hood Gardens Estate characterised as it is by the Smithson's trade mark "streets in the sky" – literally a reversal of Courbusier's *rue interieur*. The Smithsons intended the "streets in the sky" – widened balcony walkways on every third floor – as communal spaces where the interiors of the flats would be exteriorised so that socialising between neighbours might take place, children might play for example. In this way, the "streets in the sky" offer themselves up as a kind of platform within which chance encounters and undefined possibilities occur. This building of a structure of possibility can find an echo in Pickering's work which creates a structure that is a kind of junction where different realities, histories, fictions meet. The Smithson's wrote that they desired to build "meaningful groupings of buildings... where each building is a live thing and a natural



extension of the others. Together they will make places where a man can realise what he wishes to be.” (4)

The Smithson’s evocation of a building as a “live thing” connects with contemporary discourses of space as being “always under construction” and as a product of the interrelationship with which it coexists and similarly it is important to recognise that space is not something that is fixed, constant within Pickering’s work. (5) Instead, we find space to be a continuing negotiation between differing realities, fictions and histories. Pickering has said of her work: “I’m interested in social rituals, collecting photographic material from various sources, including books, archives, newspapers, alongside direct observations of people and places. I use these as starting points to develop choreographed gestures and tableaux, for example: body-building competitions in *PraDAL* (2004), an ecstatic alcoholic woman in *No Cancan* (2006) and *Push-Ups* (2007), a collaboration with porn actors which reduced the melodrama of contemporary porn films to a series of abstract gestures and interactions with objects.” (6) In the case of Robin Hood Gardens, the site is almost pre-established in our minds through its historical notoriety and present malaise. Yet through the scenarios that are played out within Pickering’s *BRUTALIST PREMOLITION*, we become aware of Robin Hood Gardens’ contingency and the fragile nature of its identity in a manner that’s similar to the negotiation played out between individual and role by the residents of the flat itself. There is something quite poignant about the precariousness of Robin Hood Gardens – initially imbued with the socially utopian ideals of the Smithsons and of the creation of the welfare state only to fall into disrepair and disdain, finally condemned at a moment in which the British Government announces a reinvestment in social housing, the very foundations upon which the Estate was built. It’s too trite to say that this is only one story of many; Peter Smithson is reported to have often used an ideogram to illustrate the ideas that formed their work (itself a “complex web of overlapping stories”) – “a collection of points in time and space without any obvious hierarchy, connected by a multitude of intersecting lines”. (7)

Bridget Crone, September 2008

- (1). Email correspondence with the artist, September 2008.
- (2). Harman, Graham, “Networks and Assemblages: The Rebirth of Things in Latour and Delanda”, American University in Cairo © 2007, p.2.
- (3). Smithson, Alison, *Team X Primer* accessed through www.open2.net/modernity/4_7.htm, 3 September 2008.
- (4). www.open2.net/modernity/4_7.htm, accessed 3 September 2008.
- (5). Massey, Doreen, *for space*, London: Sage, 2005. p. 12
- (6). Interview with Vanessa Desclaux, *Untitled*, October 2007
- (7). van den Heuvel, Dirk and Rissolada, Max writing on www.team10.org, accessed 25 September 2008.

