

ADAM DOUGLASS' ALIEN HAPPENING

Francis Plagne

In his project, *...and the Gods made Blue* (2009), peripatetic New Zealand-born artist Adam Douglass has transformed the interior of an abandoned house in Melbourne's inner northern suburbs into a major installation work. From each of the four sides of every one of the house's windows stretched canvases extend into the rooms, evenly and uniformly painted in what has become the artist's signature Malibu Blue. Finding support in the opposite walls, which have been partially destroyed to accommodate them, these canvases radically disrupt the viewer's movement through the house and his or her cognitive map of its layout.

Cautiously navigating one's way to the wreck's back door; taking care to remain hidden from the eyes of the street's inhabitants, one enters the house, torch in hand if night has fallen, only to be immediately confronted with an enormous blue panel. The blue glow of the torchlight through the canvases lends the



Figure 1: Adam Douglass, *...and the Gods made Blue*, Alien Happening/Guerrilla art project 2009. 18 Henty Street, Brunswick, Victoria, Australia.

space an uncanny aspect, an impression strengthened when one realises the rooms are impassable by any method other than crawling. On the floor lies the remaining detritus of the house's last occupants: odd bits of crockery, receipts, photographs, fragments of a credit card, a single cigarette. Having wriggled underneath the canvas, one stands up only to be dazzled by another and, taking to the floor again, the navigation of the house continues in this rhythm, the visitor rising from the floor to be greeted by a canvas either in front of their eyes or beside them, with the spaces between them varying from around 50 centimetres to a couple of metres.

Crawling through the space, one loses any sense of the layout of the room just crossed, and retracing the movements that brought one to the end of the possible pathway through the house (the front door no longer serving as an exit) is a series of actions in no way imbued with a feeling of familiarity. But alongside and in contradiction to this experience of spatial disorientation comes a heightened awareness of the building's design in which, having realised that the blue panels protrude from the house's windows, one comes to see them as concrete results of the house's blueprint, as if the sightlines between window and wall have been solidified. In this respect, Douglass' work performs a similar operation to that of Gordon Matta-Clark's 1974 *Splitting*, in which the artist cut a suburban house in New Jersey in half vertically and then lowered the far end of each half in order to cause the two pieces to come away from each other and display a gap. For Matta-Clark, this work, far from being purely destructive, "reveals information" about the building by making "the space more articulated." Through the physical operation of probing and making visible the structures beneath the surfaces of the

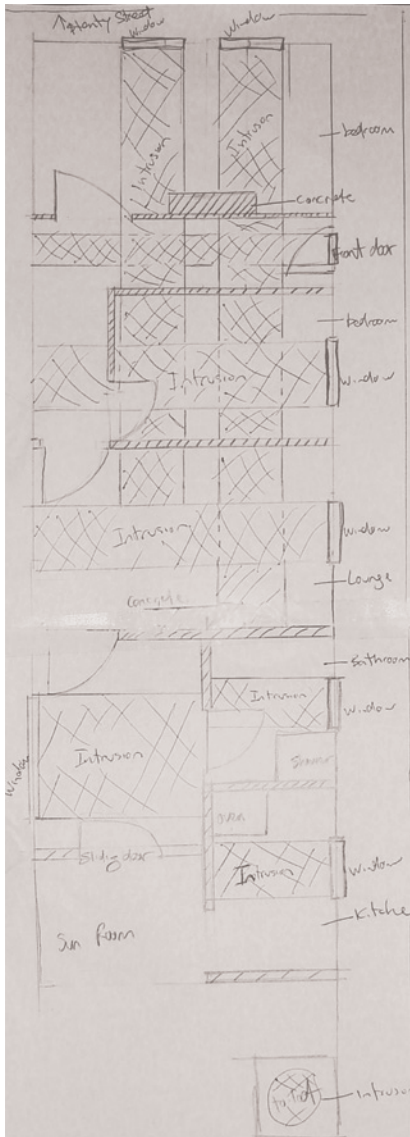


Figure 2: Adam Douglass, Map of the property, including intrusions...and the Gods made Blue, 2009. 18 Henty Street, Brunswick, Victoria, Australia.

house, the connection between its segments become visible, both architecturally and through providing a self-reflective moment in which one glimpses a relationship between the building's physical space and its social use. To use Viktor Shklovsky's terminology, we could see the house has been "enstranged" in that the cutting "changes its form without changing its essence"² and, in so doing, allows a new light to be cast on both its physical structure and use.

Neither Douglass nor Matta-Clark are interested in using their work simply as a springboard to a Situationist-lineage critique of residential architecture as "fortified exploitation," a translation "into spatial terms ... of the fundamental principles of alienation and constraint" which govern late capitalism.³ Matta-Clark stated quite directly that his work was invested in something "more elusive" than demonstrating "an alternate attitude to ... the attitudes that determine containerisation of useable space,"⁴ and Douglass is more likely to relate his blue monochrome invasion to the sublime expanses of sea and sky than to any social project. What interests Douglass is less a critique of architecture and urbanism than the creation of a situation in which the sublime and the quotidian, the metaphysical and the material, can, at least metaphorically, meet directly.

While the histories of religion, mysticism and mythology provide bountiful examples of the way this meeting has been conceptualised in culture, Douglass chooses to place his work in relation to what he sees as a contemporary expression of the same impulse: science fiction. The paintings in his 2007-8 *Tomahawk* series demonstrate one way of coming to grips with the conjunction of metaphysical meaning and material reality. Referring to such iconic sci-fi pop culture as *Star Wars* and *Planet of the Apes*, yet in a manner so vague as to be almost subliminal, these paintings use their fantastical subjects as formal devices – less allusive representations than motivations for a playful oscillation between painted materiality and the signifying potential of mark-making. *Faaaaaa Kaaaaaacctt Flaa* (2007) for example, invites us to read a hole ripped in the canvas as the weapon wielded by a floating white mass, gesturing toward both the relationship between sci-fi's love of concepts such as "antimatter" and the theological quandary over how to conceptualise a God who intervenes in the physical



Figure 3: Adam Douglass, *Legs behind dissecting intrusions, ...and the Gods made Blue*, 2009.



Figure 4: Adam Douglass, *two intrusions, front bedroom. ...and the Gods made Blue*, 2009. Photo credit: Alister Mew.

world, yet whose being is supra-material, and the cut and punctured abstract canvases of Lucio Fontana. In these paintings, Douglass marks the intertwining of the quotidian and the sublime on two levels: first, in his use of motifs taken from popular science fiction which, stripped of any specificity in content or context, float in blue expanses which seem to stress their cosmological resonances; and secondly, through their affirmation of the figurative potential of blunt materiality, as in Francis Bacon's theory of affective yet "non-illustrative" painting,⁵ cited approvingly by Douglass, in which, ideally, the original "subject" of a painting survives in the completed work only as an emotional response in the viewer to what appears to be an essentially abstract work.

...and the Gods made Blue, described by Douglass as a "transcendental/apocalyptic sci-fi happening of sorts," presents a more oblique engagement with science fiction. Early supporters of the scientific romances of HG Wells often pointed out that their success lay

not only in their conformity with existing scientific knowledge, but in the effort expended by Wells to make the everyday background to the fantastical events plausible. In this respect, *The War of the Worlds* of 1898 is his masterpiece: Wells has his Martian invasion begin in the Surrey countryside between Horsell, Ottershaw and Woking, and proceeds to chronicle the many shades of human response to this remarkable happening in the manner of a realist novelist.⁶ A review by John St Loe Strachey in a contemporary edition of the *Spectator* goes to great lengths of praise in explicating this aspect of Wells' talent:

As a rule, those who pass beyond the poles and deal with non-terrestrial matters take their readers to the planets or the moon. Mr Wells does not 'err so greatly' in the art of securing the sympathy of his readers. He brings the awful creatures of another sphere to Woking Junction, and places them with all their abhorred dexterity, in the most homely familiar surroundings. A Martian dropped in the centre of Africa would be completely unendurable. One feels, with the grave-diggers in *Hamlet*, that they are all mad and bad and awful there, or, if not, it is no great matter.⁷

Despite bearing the unmistakable imprint of colonial racism, Strachey's review is instructive in allowing us to see what it is that Douglass' obstructed suburban house and the best science fiction have in common: the shared conviction that a more authentic contact with the sublime or supernatural can be made if these are placed within an everyday context.



Figure 5: Adam Douglass, *dissecting intrusion, projected from door ...and the Gods made Blue*, 2009.



Figure 6: Adam Douglass, *Flaaaaa Kaaacct Flaa*, 2007.

As Giorgio Agamben has argued, the art gallery or museum is an “ideal space” in which an attempt is made to neutralise the creative principle, radically alien to the viewer; that has come to define art in modernity: the art gallery is “like a perfectly self-sufficient world where the canvases resemble the sleeping princess of the fairy tale.”⁸ The impact of Douglass’ work depends on the viewer not encountering it in the space of the art gallery, a space defined by its attempt to neutralise the alien creative principle that has eventuated its construction. The sublime intrusion of Douglass’ canvases (almost appearing, in keeping with the sci-fi imagery he favours, as if the water which runs through suburban pipes had been freed and then solidified into a hitherto unknown substance – both alien and acting as a reminder that pipe water, usually thought of purely instrumentally, eventually flows into the boundless ocean beloved of nineteenth-century painters) would lose all its attraction in a gallery, a space where poetic gestures, albeit neutralised, are the order of the day. Like the Wellsian scientific romance, ...*and the Gods made Blue* can only succeed if it takes quotidian space as its setting.

As we have seen, although Douglass has a preference for a raw visual style, the existence of ...*and the Gods made Blue* outside the gallery system is not motivated simply by aesthetic concerns on the artist’s part, but is chiefly inspired by the desire to create appropriate conditions for the reception of the

work by its viewers. Declining to install his panels in a gallery and refraining from any official promotion of his project, Douglass has ensured that news of his piece will spread by other than the normal channels. In his *When Faith Moves Mountains* of 2004, Francis Alÿs organised 500 Peruvian volunteers to “move” a sand dune by a few inches. Commenting on the work, he wrote that, “in our era of the ceaseless reproduction of images ... the action hopes to ... momentarily reconstitute an oral community”⁹ through its mythical resonances, encouraging gossip and rumour. Alÿs and Douglass’ works are united in a shared aspiration to transcend the artwork and become myth, but while Alÿs hesitates and capitulates to the personality-driven art of modernity when he organises his performance as an auteur might direct a film, the participants merely another material, Douglass’ work allows for the possibility of experiences in which viewers may have no idea about the author behind the work, experiencing it as akin to an alien invasion, which may then be mythologised in terms entirely unconnected to art.

To avoid advertising and the “ceaseless reproduction of images” in favour of rumour and myth is indeed, as Alÿs sees his work, to attempt some sort of restitution of “an oral community,” and it is important to see that this impulse is not necessarily invested in any sort of sham primitivism. As Agamben argues in a commentary on the work of Guy Debord, the ultimate goal of spectacle-capitalism is not simply the exploitation of labour power but also, “and above all,” the “alienation of language itself, of the linguistic and communicative nature of human beings, of that *logos* in which Heraclitus identifies the Common.”¹⁰ In the ceaseless media traffic of the spectacle, modern humanity experiences its own communicative potential as something ungraspable and foreign. In its most profound aspect, Douglass has situated his work outside of the artistic sphere in order to allow for a fleeting communicative network to spring up autonomously around it, a utopian model leaving the discursive frame of the art world behind while retaining an essential link with poetic wonder.

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Figure 7: Adam Douglass, oven and intrusion, ...and the Gods made Blue, 2009.

- 1 Gordon Matta-Clark and Liza Bear, "Splitting the Humphrey Street Building," in *Gordon Matta-Clark*, ed. Corinne Diserens (London: Phaidon, 2003), 165-8.
- 2 See Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (London: Dalkey Press Archive, 1991), 6. While this phrase originally appears in a discussion of Tolstoy's "Shame," the movement of thought here is evidently similar to that in Matta-Clark's work which would move him to state that, while the cutting was done "to make the space more articulated ... the identity of the building as a place, as an object, is strongly preserved, enhanced." Bear and Matta-Clark, "Splitting the Humphrey Street House," 168.
- 3 See the anonymous "Critique of Urbanism," originally published in 1961, reprinted in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 108-13.
- 4 Bear and Matta-Clark, "Splitting the Humphrey House," 164.
- 5 See Walter Heke's catalogue text for Adam Douglass' exhibition *Tomahawk* (Dunedin: Blue Oyster Project Space, 2008), n.p.
- 6 Wells' intention of contrasting the two spheres of an alien invasion incomprehensible to his characters and the everyday life which forms its stage is at times spelled out with remarkable clarity: "But the trouble," his narrator writes, reflecting on a moment of peace during the invasion, "was the blank incongruity of this serenity and the swift death flying yonder; not two miles away." HG Wells, *The War of the Worlds* (London: Penguin, 2005), 32.
- 7 Cited in *HG Wells: the Critical Heritage*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (London: Routledge, 1972), 64.
- 8 Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 31.
- 9 Francis Alÿs, *When Faith Moves Mountains* (Madrid: Turner, 2005), 158.
- 10 Giorgio Agamben, "Marginal Notes on Comments on the Society of the Spectacle," in his *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 82.