Whose Form Is It Anyway? A New Media Curator's Notes on Nick Hornby

By Omar Kholeif

Nick Hornby is an artist who proclaims to be excited about form, perhaps more so, than issues, people or ideas. For the sake of being contentious, I am going to disagree with Hornby's proposition. The artist's process-based approach, which involves, producing imaginative digital 3-d video and images, is if anything, driven by Hornby's pre-occupation with human beings – their ideas, their capabilities and the architecture they imbue. Hornby, more than any artist that I have worked with of late, is excited by software and its ability to map out the space of human experience. This can explain why some of his sculptures boast pseudo-cyborgian aesthetics –visual appropriations of fragmented 'forms', most notably, referencing the work of his art historical predecessors. Hornby proposes that these historical associations are 'citations' that can used to articulate and challenge meaning(ful) desires.

The artist's sculptures exist in a variety of scales, and derive beauty from their simultaneous ability to reference abstraction, while still suggesting a figurative reality. Form for Hornby however isn't merely about the configuration of an object's shape and design, but also involves a continual questioning of the tools or building blocks, which produce such physical artifices and facades. One of the most important of these tools for Hornby is software, or the non-tangible material that so many humans treat like 'alien' code. Software is without a doubt, the most humanising constructivist device of the twenty first century. It is produced by humans for humans so that they may continue to develop virtual, physical, spatial, ideological, ephemeral, and tangential possibility.

The fact that the artist chooses to undergo so much of his experimenting digitally is not to suggest a reduction of physical labour on behalf of the sculptor (who I'll have you know, can often be found in dust-drenched overalls or under a white paint-speckled brow), but rather, it implies a different kind of objectivity, as the artist puts it. He sees working with technology as process whereby he can 'explore the contradiction that emerges when there are many layers of objective meanings' produced from a work. As such, Hornby's computer becomes like a pop-up studio, functioning as his playground to experiment with meta-narratives. These augmented storylines seem to suggest two approaches to modernist sculpture – one of salutary adulation, and another, of frustration with its historical inflexibility.

The use of the pre-noun descriptor, Meta, has of course, been endlessly spewed out by post-modernist thinkers and notably, amongst so-called 'new media' artists whose practice has been founded almost solely through the considered act of appropriation. Ryan Trecartin, Mark Amerika, Seth Price, Shana Moulton, Hassan Khan, Marisa Olson, Oliver Laric, and Christian Marclay, are all well-known names within the new media art realm whose work has been arched around this very notion of appropriating, hijacking or sampling existing cultural forms.

But why so much talk of appropriation? Well, it is simple. The mediation and 'distanciation' of cinema and most notably, television has given birth to a different kind of collective consciousness. The populace has now been re-conditioned to be technologically 'social' in the Deleuzian sense – having had relatively easy access to new forms of mass production and dissemination over the last decade. A new kind of 'response' culture has developed, one of perpetual re-articulation (i.e. blogging, 'liking', tweeting/retweeting, instagramming, and so forth). This approach has become so subsumed into the everyday that the discourse of modernity and post-modernity (ironic, self-referential) has become far too simple a means by which to discuss new artistic praxis.

Accordingly, the varying dissonances attributed to cultural meaning have most recently been given a new definition, 'metamodernism'. This term is used by a group of practitioners and theoreticians who believe that as a collective conscience we must continue to stretch the paradigmatic constraints of post-modern theory (the simplistic descriptions of irony and bricolage, to give but two examples).

This Meta approach is what denotes Hornby as a presently evolving and responsive artist. In one of his most recent works, Boolean Architecture, 2012 – an expanded project developed during a residency at art and technology centre Eyebeam in New York, the artist achieves this by making visible the processes of development and production. The work consists of a number of miniature 3-d models of unrealised sculptures proposed by the artist. Look behind the plinths that uphold these objects, however, and one will find a projection of a video that virtually maps a time-based presentation of Hornby's proposed architecture. These occupy a space that 'lies between idea and realisation'.

The video presents a rotating 360-degree carousel of images constructed out of an amalgamation of these various proposals, each image making visible the intersection of at least three different architectural imaginations. Beginning from a static and coherent position, each small shift in the rotation presents a different visual form. A building begins to resemble a mutated relic, its architectural characteristics de-constructed and suspended into thin air. With each 60-degree turn, one of the proposed building 'snaps' dramatically into view, before a continued process of structural disembodiment continues.

Oscillating between geometric abstractions, the animation 'glitches' back into coherent form for mere seconds, before dissolving back into fragments. This process of layering piecemeal components within the moving image, illustrates Hornby's interest in mixing objects. By allowing his 'building blocks' to be both recognisable and ambiguous, the artist plays with the viewer's sense of expectation – of scale, perspective, and of course, objective formation. These tactics, allow Hornby to span a broad emotional register. Referencing folly and failure, Nick Hornby's obsession with form reveals his ambition to play with notions of monumentality, which it can be argued, is a most significant emblem of humanity -- of its issues and its ideas.

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