



Art

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Ed Atkins

Interviewed by Martin Herbert

Outside the Box

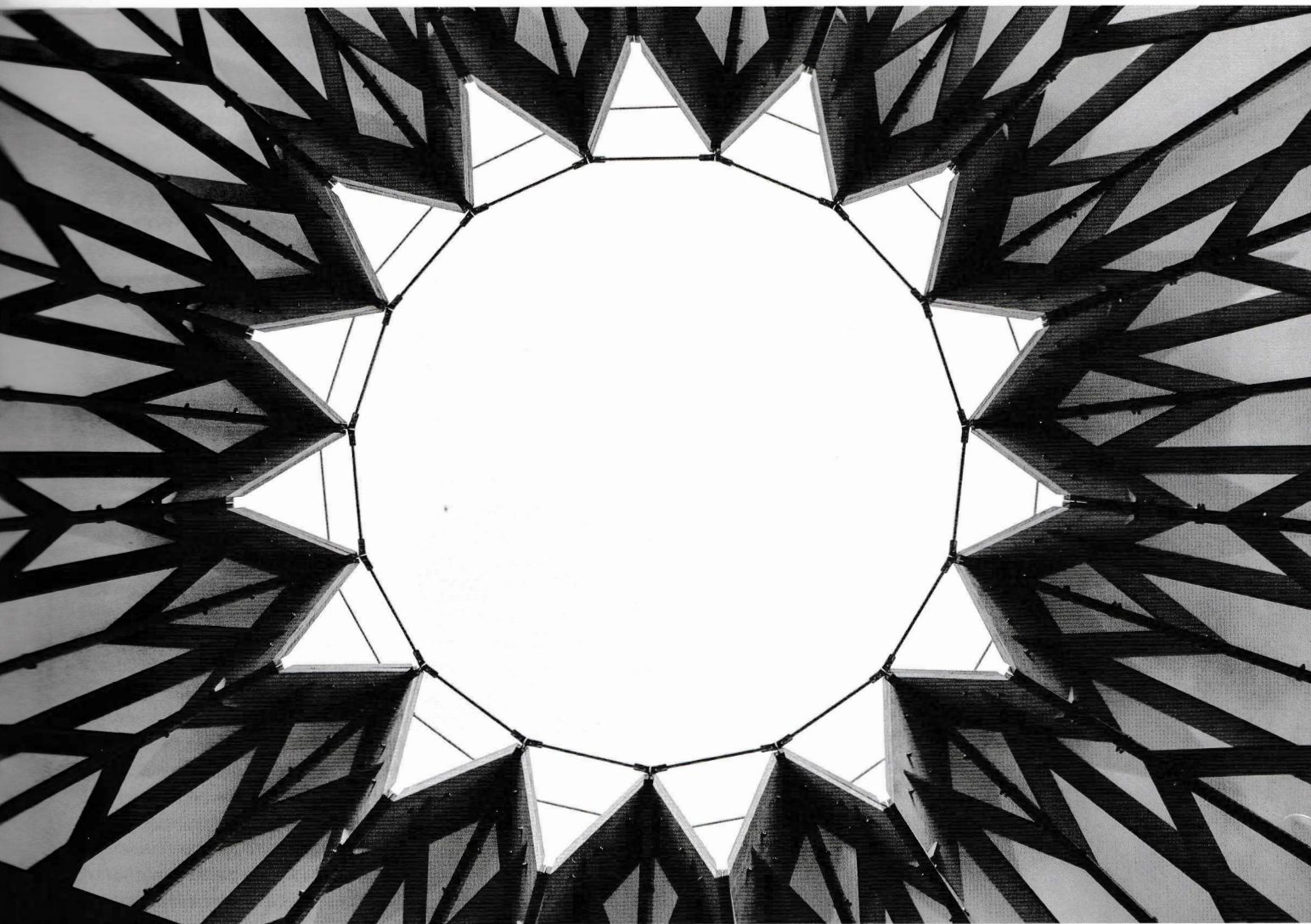
Mark Prince

Follies

Lara Eggleton

They Are Here

Profile by Chris Fite-Wassilak



FOLLIES

FROM PYRAMIDS TO PAGODAS AND PAVILIONS TO PALACES, THE FOLLY IS BACK AND LARA EGGLETON ASKS WHY

Artists as different as Kuntlé Adeyemi, Phyllida Barlow, Fiona Curran and Ai Weiwei have addressed the concept of the folly for the 21st century, perhaps no surprise in our age of austerity.

Heather & Ivan Morison

Look! Look! Look! 2017 installation detail, Berrington Hall, Herefordshire

Architectural follies flourished in Britain throughout the 18th and 19th centuries and on an imaginative scale unmatched anywhere. From sham castles and ruins to pyramids and pagodas, it is an eclectic tradition that defies utility and good sense. Not entirely without purpose, follies functioned as settings for afternoon tea and evening drinks, or to draw attention to a view of the landscape. In the case of hermitages, imaginary or paid hermits allowed patrons to vicariously live a humble, austere life, offsetting their indulgences. Their picturesque placement (they are ubiquitous once you start looking: from Castle Howard in Yorkshire to Kew Gardens in London) became the backdrop for owners to satiate their appetite for nostalgia and melancholy, whether of the Antique, Gothic or Orientalist variety. Others lay below ground in mysterious labyrinthine passages, like the Shell Grotto in Margate whose origins are unknown. Sometimes justified as philanthropic ventures (Sir Francis Dashwood paid impoverished local villagers a shilling a day to mine chalk for the Hellfire Caves in West Wycombe), their ultimate purpose was to decorate, amuse and delight. Ranging wildly in form and use, these superfluous, enigmatic objects were undeniably the products of privilege.

Perhaps it is not surprising, at a time when the gap between the super rich and everyone else has widened dramatically, that the folly appears to be having a resurgence. A feature this February in the *Guardian* described Dubai's world-shaped artificial archipelago as 'the ultimate folly', a buyer-funded project that was halted after the 2008 crash and only recently resumed with hubristic aplomb (Editorial AM305). Conceived by property developer Nakheel as an



offshore playground for celebrities and tycoons, original plans for 'The World' included seahorse-shaped golf courses, underwater hotels, and scaled-down versions of the Giant's Causeway and Shanghai's skyline. Like its prototype, the chain-island suburb Palm Jumeirah, it displaced tonnes of sand and rocks, destroying turtle nesting sites and Dubai's only coral reef, and turning its turquoise waters cloudy with silt. If the historical folly was conceived under private patronage, then 'The World' is its monstrous descendent, nurtured by global capitalism under the gathering storm cloud of the Anthropocene ('Art and the Anthropocene' AM389).

In contemporary art, a less sinister kind of folly has emerged, albeit with its own forms of privilege and patronage. Roger Hiorns's 2008 Turner Prize-nominated *Seizure*, the interior of a condemned council flat coated in blue copper sulphate, is strongly reminiscent of the crystal grotto (the removal and relocation of the 31-tonne flat to Yorkshire Sculpture Park in 2012 at a cost of £40,000 is itself a folly-like endeavour). Characteristically lewd, Paul McCarthy's *Tree* caused much offence in Paris as part of the Fiac art fair in 2014 with its comic resemblance to a giant green butt plug. Grayson Perry's *A House for Essex* (produced with FAT Architecture as part of Alain de Botton's Living Architecture project) opened in 2015 on the banks of the Stour as a memorial to the fictional spirit of Julie Cope, richly ornamented inside and out (reflecting Perry's view that 'minimalism has become kitsch'). More literally, Gwangju's 2011 Design Biennale saw a series



Lucy & Jorge Orta
The Gazing Ball 2018

Phyllida Barlow
folly 2017 British pavilion, Venice

of contemporary follies installed throughout the city, including a 25m-high periscope and a concrete mound in the shape of an ancient Korean tomb. Serpentine's Pavilion programme, launched in 2000 with a design by Zaha Hadid, has since featured temporary structures by the likes of Ai Weiwei, Olafur Eliasson and Frank Gehry, and in 2016 was expanded to include four summer houses alongside the main pavilion.

The reason why folly projects continue to attract large sums of private and public funding, even as the austerity belt is tightened further, may have something to do with their fundamental uselessness. Institutions and sponsors benefit from creating new public spaces designed by notable artists and architects. But

contemporary follies offer more than entertainment and notoriety – they are symbols of the complex impulses that are both repressed and indulged in western democratic societies. This gives them a secret power, for while ‘useful’ art proposes direct attacks on systemic corruption and social injustice, an aesthetics of useless art can alert us to the mechanics of trickery and subterfuge that often facilitate them. Even further, the frivolity and foolishness afforded by artistic practice can be said to have radical potential. As Sally O’Reilly and Cathy Haynes observed in their 2004 Folly issue of *Implacosphere*, ‘folly is inhabited by the Janus of idiocy and wisdom: by aping, it holds up a mirror to our vanity; by japing, it pokes fun at the sanctity of rules’. Far from useless, follies prompt a thinking through of themes and tendencies that predominate in our historical moment: deceit, artificiality, waste and excess. With deepening distrust in politicians and media platforms alike, and phrases ‘post-truth’ and ‘fake news’ entering the vernacular as fast as US President Trump can misspell a tweet, art needs to speak the language of the enemy if it is to challenge it effectively.

For her British pavilion commission at last year’s Venice Biennale, Phyllida Barlow (Interview AM355) took the analogy deeper. Her *Folly* was a sculptural meditation on ruin and collapse, with large-scale, unwieldy structures as superfluous as they are unavoidable. Barlow’s sculptural environments are designed to trigger the imagination and evoke memories or fantasies. As she worked and reworked the large-scale baubles, columns, awnings, false walls and balconies for the pavilion’s interiors and grounds, she wrote in her diary – published in the accompanying catalogue – that the project was a folly ‘in both name and deed’. As she struggled with logistics and lengthy consultations, she lamented the luxury of working without restraints, ‘the extravagance and unequivocal indulgence of flaunting an unabashed desire to just get on and do what you want to do’. For many artists, creative license is the only safeguard against governments and institutions that see footfall and ticket sales as sole measures of success. Barlow, despairing of this culture of accountability, writes: ‘There is such a powerful need to institutionalise every nuance of creativity, to give approval to the slightest whim ... and if there is no approval, then what? Is there a feral art?’

While the success of public commissions is measured by visitor attendance and satisfaction levels, artists working in the public realm are increasingly expected to change society for the better. In either scenario, art has little room to be feral. If artists are pressured to think about their art only in terms of utility, to partake only in what O’Reilly and Haynes call ‘the drudgery of usefulness’, the space for transgression and subversion, for the ‘illogical, the profane and the bizarre’, might be lost. To imagine any art as separable from the social and political conditions of its making is simplistic, and negates a more nuanced reading of utility. Barlow argues, for example, that sculptures are uncertain objects that have a psychological function, which might also be understood in terms of ‘use’. As a sculptor who works on a monumental scale, she is also invested in the possibilities of failure and losing control, thereby stretching the boundaries of sculpture. In this way, Barlow’s *Folly* pays tribute to a longer tradition of experimentation and risk taking, of freely combining materials, categories and forms.

Playful and immersive, follies offer audiences an alternative to the dry, forensic documentary modes of

Possessing their own kind of double ontology, follies symbolise both the escape from reality and the impossibility of such an escape. As Theodor Adorno asserts: art pleases but does not gratify, it breaks its promises.

address that increasingly dominate the art world. Hybrids of art, architecture and theatre, they are portals into imaginative realms and kaleidoscopes through which the banality of the outside world becomes extraordinary. Their ability to delight the eye and tickle the senses is markedly out of step with the view that art should be ‘useful’ in a direct social and political sense. Tania Bruguera, activist, artist and founder of the Useful Art movement, claims that there is a difference between artists who ‘want to do art as a social “magical” act and artists who understand all the work that change requires’ (Interview AM400). Follies may be anathema to supporters of the social turn – useless by definition – but while there is urgent need to bring about change in the world, critics are perhaps too quick to equate enjoyment with apathy.

In her 1997 book *A Hut of One’s Own: Life Outside the Circle of Architecture*, Ann Cline asks whether the small dwellings that have proliferated in recent years (including shacks, teahouses, follies, casitas and diners) represent escapist architectural fantasy or signify deeper cultural impulses – to return to ritual, solitude and simplicity. Yet follies are not the sanctuaries they appear to be; they are more often facades or impoverished imitations of the real thing. As one draws closer to the picturesque castle on the hill, it is revealed to be a scaled-down stage set. On closer inspection, the pagoda is made from crumbling stucco, its ‘Chinese’ characters lazily approximated by an Orientalist, long dead. Enigmatic and illusory, they ultimately send the pleasure seeker down a trapdoor to reality, where they land with a bump. Possessing their own kind of double ontology, follies symbolise both the escape from reality and the impossibility of such an escape. As Theodor Adorno asserts: art pleases but does not gratify, it breaks its promises.

For all their jocularity, historical follies were usually architectural afterthoughts, tucked away from main houses and grounds. Many were built using cheap leftover materials, such that only a small proportion have survived ruin and demolition over the centuries. To address this, a selection of extant and lost follies feature in the National Trust’s Trust New Art programme, funded by Arts Council England since 2009 and Arts Council of Wales since 2015. Contemporary art commissions are developed in consultation with individual properties, museums, galleries, universities and other commissioning bodies such as Arts & Heritage. In some cases, contemporary art is put in the service of a heritage agenda that promises to ‘surprise and inspire’. One such programme, titled ‘folly!’, opened in 2016 at Fountains Abbey and Studley Royal with Mat Collishaw’s *Fountains Relief*, sited in the Banqueting House and Temple of Piety follies. Most spectacular was the Banqueting House’s chandelier zoetrope with its tiers of Dionysian revelry – a wine guzzling cherub, a nude candle (pole) dancer, a swinging monkey and a man



Fiona Curran

Your Sweetest Empire is to Please 2018
Gibside, Tyne and Wear

Heather & Ivan Morison

Look! Look! Look! 2017 installation
detail, Berrington Hall, Herefordshire

Pavilion, the pleasure palace *par excellence* (and a folly of sorts), Ford subtly proposed a twinning of the Prince Regent and Donald Trump, both decadent and self-centred ‘man-babies’.

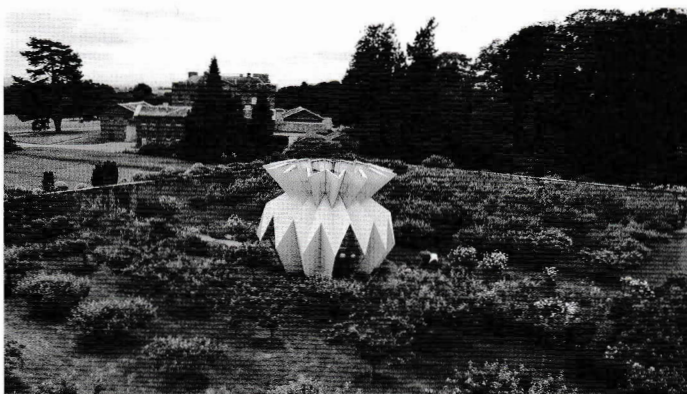
‘Mapping Contemporary Art in Historical Experiences’ is a three-year research project (2017-19) co-delivered by Newcastle University, the National Trust and the Churches Conservation Trust, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. It includes

four new commissions and will culminate in an international conference on ‘contemporary art in heritage practice’ and an exhibition at the Hatton Gallery in Newcastle in 2019. The aim of the project is to gain a broader understanding of commissioning practices in the heritage field and to measure the impact of commissions on audiences which may be less familiar with contemporary art. It has yet to be seen what the study will find or what approach each of the commissioned artists will take. An architectural folly by Fiona Curran opened at Gibside in Tyne and Wear this May, designed after the ‘Wardian case’ that was used to transport artificial exotic plants in the 18th and 19th centuries. The work is a reference to the botanical activities of Georgian heiress Mary Eleanor Bowes (1749-1800), and its launch coincides with the centenary of the UK’s suffrage movement. The link between these disparate historical moments is unclear, and it will be interesting to see if Curran’s folly commemorates or interrogates the legacy of Bowes, known as ‘The Unhappy Countess’, whose exorbitant wealth and licentious habits are the stuff of dubious legend.

The paradox of the folly is that in its very uselessness it serves an important social function. It is both the embodiment and the critique of excess; through self-parody the contemporary folly can remind us of the hollowness of pleasure-seeking and indulgence. But does the folly also preserve a space for unfettered creativity as a form of rebellion? Could it be conceived without pressure to celebrate heritage or bolster cultural tourism? More Trust New Art commissions are to follow (in addition to independent commissions such as Max Eastley’s *Aeolian Harp and Sculptures for Perrott’s Folly* in Birmingham, on until 10 June), and rather than simply commemorating, artists might productively complicate our relationship to heritage, challenging assumptions and drawing attention to the uncomfortable and frightening ways that history repeats itself.

Why, in a time of austerity, are we so compelled by the notion of excess? Do we share with the Victorians a fascination with the ruins of fallen civilisations because we fear the collapse of our own? This is the sort of questioning that will give follies contemporary relevance, allowing critical reflection in our current climate of austerity and conservatism. ■

Lara Eggleton is an art writer and historian based in Leeds.



devouring a ham joint whilst urinating – all 3D-printed and set into motion with a high-powered motor and strobe lights. Now in its third incarnation, ‘folly!’ 2018 erects four new structures on former folly sites: a bird-shaped tower with a camera obscura by architect Charles Holland; a reflective gazing ball by Lucy & Jorge Orta; a listening tower by Fleafolly architects; and 11-year-old Foster Carter’s design for a ‘Raining Cloud’, realised with Yorkshire-based fabricators Stage One (who, incidentally, also collaborated on Kunlé Adeyemi’s summer house at Serpentine).

Another Trust New Art commission places Heather & Ivan Morison’s modern take on the pineapple folly in the grounds of Berrington Hall in Herefordshire (it has a historical prototype at Dunmore in Airth, built in 1761 and believed to be designed by William Chambers). A revisiting of Georgian decadence within a walled garden designed by Capability Brown, the duo’s spiky pink pavilion *Look! Look! Look!* is inspired by apparent attempts to grow pineapples in the grounds. It also harks back to the 18th-century practice of erecting temporary wood and canvas structures, or pavilions, for entertaining and other leisure activities. Far from offering a critique of the extravagances of the Georgian aristocracy, the Morisons appear to mainly celebrate and aggrandise them. What’s missing from this and other interventions is a subversive edge, where provocative parallels might have been drawn with the present, or the insidious sides of wealth and privilege exposed. Without this critical dimension, follies risk merely repeating and trivialising the indulgences of the past. In contrast, for Brighton’s inaugural House Biennial in 2017 (themed ‘Excess’), Laura Ford’s sculptural installation clearly mocked King George IV, her satirical bloated portraits based on political cartoons of the era. Exhibited at Brighton



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Ed Atkins

Untitled 2018 detail

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Interviewed by
Martin Herbert

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