



Tatiana Trouvé, *The Residents*, 2021, installation view, Orford Ness, Suffolk

Afterness

Artangel, Orford Ness, 1 July to 30 October

Spearheaded by Artangel, 'Afterness' is a group exhibition scattered across Orford Ness, a spit on the Suffolk coast reachable only by ferry. Nowadays it is under the care of the National Trust but the site was a secret for much of the 20th century, when it served as the base for experiments into radar, bombs and atomic weaponry. Local folklore of mermen, and UFO sightings in nearby Rendelsham Forest, further augment the idiosyncratic character of Orford Ness.

At first, 'Afterness' is an audio-based exhibition. Equipped with headphones, and proceeding from the Ballistics Building, the visitor listens to a recording of Ilya Kaminsky's poems which accompany different stages of the walk. The poems are bolstered by field recordings of Orford Ness itself: the noise of the wind, birds squawking, waves on the shoreline, all presaging works elsewhere. The relationship between the recorded poetry and the locations it ostensibly complements is discordant, however; although some lines resonate with the atmosphere of Orford Ness, the poems are too removed from the specificity of place to make listening to them as one perambulates truly worthwhile. Kaminsky states in the booklet version of the poems that he hasn't actually visited Orford Ness, that the poems are attempts to go there, which partly accounts for why they are more effective from a distance, and in written form.

The audio element is continued in a tall wood-clad building called the Black Beacon. Formerly housing a radio system to aid navigation, for 'Afterness' it is now home to numerous audio recordings from around Orford Ness made by Iain Chambers, Brian d'Souza and Chris Watson titled *The Library of Sound*. While the work is intriguing, it also reveals some of the issues affecting the 'Afterness' experience as a whole. Though the field recordings collated in the Black

Beacon are indexically connected to their site, this doesn't guarantee site-specificity. The captions refer to particular spots around Orford Ness, but the overall result is one of locational generalisation. That sounds like a criticism; however, that loss of place seems unusually appropriate, as if Orford Ness is in itself a non-place.

Alice Channer's *Lethality and Vulnerability* is the first visual work one comes across. Inhabiting the Shelter, the aluminium thorns weave around its interior space and, as if searching for light as well as refusing to be constrained by architecture, they stretch out through the windows. Not only is the limited space used very successfully but the work also gestures towards both Orford Ness's history and its topography. The thorns are redolent of the unforeseen aftermath of military experiments, as if flora and fauna have become semi-mechanical and begun harbouring aggressive designs.

The two most ambitious contributions to 'Afterness' are those reached towards the end of the route and which have to reckon with the largest spaces. In her first commission in the UK, Tatiana Trouvé's *The Residents* occupies a building that is designated Lab 1. Curiously resembling a vastly enlarged West Kennet Long Barrow crossed with brutalist architecture, Lab 1 was built in 1956 for testing the effects of vibration on an atomic bomb prior to detonation; such were the potential dangers inherent in those experiments that the reinforced concrete walls were buttressed by high shingle embankments and the control room was housed 130 metres away. Trouvé has strewn the space with suitcases, bags, clothing, books, chairs and a portable radio. These items are not readymades; they are bronze and marble sculptural duplicates. Iconographically, this paraphernalia is found throughout Trouvé's oeuvre, but in this particular context the objects become the discarded remains of a suddenly vanished community of refugees, or possibly scientists. It's as if the potential disaster conceived by the scientists and engineers has actually happened and this is all that remains.

Emma McNally's *The River that Flows Nowhere, Like the Sea* is found in the Armoury. Situated in dramatic semi-darkness, viewers, aided with torches, inspect a large crumpled drawing that has been presented on a plinth. As such, the paper resembles a three-dimensional cartographic representation of a mountainous landscape, a resemblance further suggested by the concentric rings amassed all over. Those diagrammatic rings further suggest ripples issuing from a detonation, once again connecting the artwork to the particularities of its location. In some respects, the sculptural qualities of McNally's work make it resemble the decommissioned bomb seen in a nearby building.

Generally, though, the works somewhat struggle with the distinctiveness of their geographical situa-

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tion and are almost overwhelmed by it insofar as they don't quite accede to the condition of site-specificity or what Miwon Kwon has aptly designated 'locational identity'. The visual pieces manage better than the audio ones, though. It might be said that Orford Ness retains a certain secrecy and mystery, thus rendering site-specific practices difficult; but its history is better known today and merits examination. For example, artists Susan Barnet and Jane Watt have suggested that the historical particularity of this site necessitates re-describing it as a 'blast radius' rather than a place as such. Central to the experiments conducted in this landscape, after all, was the optimisation of mass destruction's efficacy. That scientific endeavour is palpable in some of the works in 'Afterness', especially in McNally's haunting piece, but predominantly they remain somewhat detached from that historical background.

It would be an error to argue that any deeper practice of site-specificity is entirely absent from the on-site works. On the contrary, site-specific effects can be generated indirectly in a productive fashion, and traces of these are visible in 'Afterness'. For instance, while imposing physical barriers blocking access to sculptural works is a recurrent facet of Trouvé's work, in this particular context the barrier takes on a further significance: it becomes a metaphor for the veil of secrecy characterising Orford Ness, a testament to the classified military experiments undertaken there. The barrier also transforms Lab 1 into a distinctly Cold War update of Plato's famous allegory of the cave in which enchained prisoners view shadows cast by an unseen fire. Prevented by the barrier from inspecting the sculptural objects up close, we are liable to mistake them as real items rather than mimetic representations. Plato's account of our customary distance from truth converts into a meditation on state secrecy.

Although there is still more to be released on the exhibition's web platform, the online works perhaps better manage to convey a sense of place, possibly because they might have had more development time than the on-site ones. Paul Maheke's *Mauve, Jim and John* uses site-specific choreography in Rendlesham Forest and at Orford Ness's military sites to reimagine the 1980 UFO 'sighting' by the US military in an eerie manner. And d'Souza's two-channel *Beacon*. *Black* uses surveillance-like video that nicely dovetails with the site's military history while also highlighting the interplay between the built remains of that history and various animals.

This is not to profess that diligently engaging in site-specificity ought to be mandatory for exhibitions of this type. The fact that 'Afterness' bills itself as an exhibition 'inspired' by Orford Ness creates some wriggle room in that regard. Ultimately, the works generally achieve a level of *responsiveness* which forestalls any intimation of them having been plopped down from afar into semi-exotic locations. Yet the distinctive history of Orford Ness, plus the sense that this is a landscape on the cusp of eroding into the North Sea, inevitably poses a test or challenge for any artwork exhibited here. On balance, 'Afterness' just about meets that challenge and makes for a fascinating, though fascinatingly problematic, exhibition.

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Performance

Grada Kilomba: O Barco/The Boat

Grada Kilomba invites spectators, by way of performance, to inaugurate her large-scale sculptural installation *O Barco/The Boat*, a work in which history, ritual and trauma collide outside MAAT's space in Lisbon. The installation and set for Kilomba's performance comprises 140 burnt blocks of wood hewn by the artist that form the silhouette of the bottom of a ship (in the context here, it is clear that this is a slave ship). The artist has sliced and engraved a cryptic poem across 18 of these blocks with cries that commemorate past torments, such as 'one memory one oblivion', 'one soul one memory', 'one cargo one hold' and so on. Translated into African languages, such as Yoruba, Kibundu and Setswana, as well as into Creole, Portuguese, English and Arabic, the poem narrates the lives and deaths of black mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers of disparate generations: each block of wood becoming an existential locus for the remembrance of the millions of African's who were enslaved, forcibly transported on boats and died. Bringing mourning and meaning to inanimate forms, this assemblage of burnt black wood is activated by Kilomba to resemble those who were enslaved and taken to their deaths in boats - and migrants today who fall victim to the same deadly tradition.

Close to a religious order or a sect of mourners, the performance begins with a band of drummers, garbed in black, beating out rhythms in syncopation while performers of African descent march in line. At first, this all-black cast skirts their way around the expanse of an imagined ship before coming to a halt and stomping the ground, their heads facing down and their hands clasped as if in alliance with one another. While repeated hums and wails evoke a *séance* or sermon. At one moment, two protagonists leap out from what might be likened to a choir, extending their legs and arms to accept and pass between them the burnt timbers: the dying and dead.

Kilomba locates this work on the Tagus River in Portugal, which winds its way to the Atlantic Ocean. By portraying the sea and waterways as areas of isolation and imprisonment (rather than a horizon of freedom), the performance seeks to reckon with a silenced African past - as Saint Lucian poet and playwright Derek Walcott once wrote, 'the sea is history'. This is particularly resonant in Portugal, which continues to obscure its history of colonial violence. Kilomba's work reasserts the overlooked past of the transatlantic slave trade which began in Portugal in 1444, and which initially captured and controlled people from the west



Grada Kilomba, *O Barco/The Boat*, 2021, performance