

Sculpture Shock: Historic—Richard Cork

Today, the whole notion of making a site-specific work in a historic building is regarded as an extraordinary challenge. Most artists are displayed in galleries or museums, which continue to proliferate across the world. The usual exhibition spaces for contemporary art are white and minimal, allowing our attention to be focused entirely on the work rather than its surroundings. So the willingness of these three Sculpture Shock participants to make temporary interventions in historic contexts seems courageous indeed. Nika Neelova, Joanna Sands and Hanna Haaslahti all felt immensely stimulated by the opportunities they were given to install their three-dimensional art in locations as diverse as a church, an asylum and a temple. Moreover, they proved that the outcome of such experiments can invigorate viewers and prompt us all to enlarge our ideas about the unexpected possibilities which might well become available to artists in the future.

Working in historic buildings also links up with the ambitious and memorable projects undertaken by masters of the past; anyone exploring Renaissance art in Italy quickly realises that it was installed in a whole variety of settings. These historic places emphasise the uniqueness of artworks not simply by enhancing them, but also by showing how many images seem to spring from their particular locations. In most galleries nowadays, art appears to exist in a curatorial- or dealer-manipulated context, cut off from nourishing connections with the life that initially brought it into being. In Renaissance Italy, by contrast, the place and the image housed inside were often parts of an indissoluble whole. We cannot possibly remain oblivious of the connections between them. Walking into the Milanese refectory where *The Last Supper* is housed, we appreciate how well the damaged fresco was attuned to the dimensions of the immense wall at Leonardo da Vinci's disposal. The architecture within his painting appears to be an uncannily plausible extension of the room surrounding it, while the monks eating and drinking there must have provided an appropriate context for the rather more exalted biblical meal depicted on the wall above them.

Renaissance artists refused to be overwhelmed by the buildings they enhanced and Nika Neelova summoned a similar amount of courage to tackle the opportunity provided by Sculpture Shock in Holy Trinity, Sloane Square, an outstanding Chelsea church hailed by Sir John Betjeman, who worshipped there regularly, as the "Cathedral of the Arts and Crafts Movement". Both its architects, John Dando Sedding and Henry Wilson, wanted Holy Trinity to be embellished with the finest artworks they could commission, so they persuaded William Morris and Sir Edward Burne-Jones to design stained-glass windows. But Neelova, who was born in Russia before studying in The Hague and London, approached this historic interior with an independent vision, far removed from the figurative carving of the Crucifixion above the main altar at Holy Trinity.

Her work is uncompromising in its use of abstraction. At the same time, however, Neelova was subtle enough to make something discreet rather than dominant and exclamatory; her sculpture could not be seen from a distance by people entering Holy Trinity, so nobody was able to accuse her of violation. Instead, she took her cue from Plato's theory that the universe should be seen through an interpretation of the five Platonic solids, polyhedral forms which enabled her to explore a more geometric approach in sculpture. The main part of her installation, called *North Taurids. Following the Meteor Shower*, consisted of elemental pieces made of cast concrete and cast wax. Inspired in particular by the formation of crystals, they also evoked pyramidal forms found above all in Egypt.



Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper*, 1495–1498. Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan, tempera on gesso, pitch and mastic, 460 x 880 cm.



Nika Neelova, *North Taurids. Following the Meteor Shower* (detail), 2013.

Restrained in colour, ranging from white through warm wood to mottled grey and deep black, they suggested an elemental and primordial world, far older than the Arts and Crafts images produced by artists for Holy Trinity's interior when it was built. The more I looked at Neelova's forms, the more calm and architectural they seemed. At first glance, they had looked like the fragmented results of a cataclysm; in tune with the aftermath of the meteor shower mentioned in the work's title. After a while, however, I realised that they seemed surprisingly ordered. And expectant, too, as if waiting for humans and animals to invade their privacy. While I was there, nobody in the church wandered among them: everyone either stopped and gazed, or sat down on the chairs ranged at the side for a longer look at *North Taurids*.

Nothing like this had ever been seen in Holy Trinity before, and so Neelova's bold intervention could in this respect be regarded as a 'shock'. All the same, people in the church were quietly contemplating its significance rather than reeling backwards with anger or dismay. They appeared to be responding in a meditative mood, and their reaction clearly delighted the artist herself. She explained that "I wanted to do something quiet and contemplative, which is quite new in my work. I aimed at getting rid of the aggressive spectacular: it hits the viewer too much. I wanted the geometry of nature, [to be] placed in a kind of excavation site where archaeological research is conducted. It lets my forms spread into the space and engage with the architecture." Neelova's *North Taurids* could hardly be more different in style from the bronze angels flying in Holy Trinity, or the Virgin and Child who seemed to be staring down sadly at her work. Yet she succeeded in making me look at the church's familiar art in a new and refreshing way, discovering primal shapes even within the most detailed and highly decorative religious images on display there.

In dramatic contrast with the Holy Trinity project, Joanna Sands was offered derelict buildings for her Sculpture Shock intervention. At first, she received an invitation to make a work for the Museum of Immigration and Diversity at 19 Princelet Street, formerly a Huguenot house in the East End of London. Immigrants once lived there, and regarded it as their home. But Sands was also fascinated by the abandoned synagogue behind the house. In her eyes, this melancholy structure revealed a great deal about the anxiety felt by successive waves of people who found themselves struggling to create new lives in a foreign country. So she set to work on an undulating floor made of birch plywood, which would link the house and the synagogue by stressing their occupants' sense of insecurity.

Suddenly, however, Sands herself was obliged to experience a change of venue which might have unsettled her in a negative way. The Crossrail enterprise, invading and disrupting so many areas of London today, made it impossible for her to proceed at Princelet Street. Sands retained her composure and succeeded in adapting her plans without undue alarm to the alternative location in Peckham, which would prove just as stimulating as its predecessor. And besides, her willingness to be involved with Sculpture Shock in the first place meant that she was an artist energised by the advent of an unexpected challenge.

The Asylum became the most elaborate almshouse complex built in nineteenth-century London. Covering no less than 6 acres, it was intended by the Licensed Victuallers' Benevolent Institution to house and look after so-called 'decayed' members of the trade, as well as pub landlords in their retirement years. Its ambition was summed up by the grandeur of the chapel in the middle of the site, containing stained-glass windows which heightened

the significance of the funerary monuments erected inside to honour the worthies. But during the Second World War a Nazi bomb wrecked its roof and severely damaged a great deal of the interior. Sands was confronted here by a melancholy space, far larger and more dilapidated than its predecessor in Princelet Street.

Rather than forcing herself to produce an alternative installation, she adapted the wooden floor piece and gave it a radically different meaning in the Asylum Chapel. No longer filling most of a modest-sized room with its presence, this undulating work now stretched across the centre of an ample interior where visitors had far more space to walk on either side of it. Yet its significance was not lessened. On the contrary: proceeding from an entrance door towards the altar, it managed to heighten the meaning of the Asylum Chapel as a place offering spiritual consolation while at the same time reminding us of the Second World War's destructive impact.

Moreover, the fact that the wood looked like recycled building material emphasised our awareness of the amount of damage inflicted by the German bomb. These raised floorboards accentuated the building's plight, not to mention the suffering experienced by the 'decayed' victuallers who needed help to cope with their own ordeals in old age. Although Sands was influenced as a young artist by the simplicity and geometric repetition of the Minimalist aesthetic, it became in the Asylum Chapel a means of enabling her to express an almost ghostly feeling, filled with insights into the sadness of a derelict Asylum Chapel now covered by a corrugated iron roof.

No such patch-up material was ever applied to the neo-Palladian Ionic Temple erected so proudly in its own self-contained garden at Chiswick House. Located very near the Thames in West London, the House and Temple were designed by their original owner Lord Burlington. Working with William Kent, he aimed to create an eighteenth-century English residence which would pay homage to the classical tradition. Lord Burlington succeeded in achieving his goal, and a recent £12.1 million restoration has returned both garden and buildings to their former geometrical precision. No wonder Hanna Haaslahti was fascinated by Sculpture Shock's ability to offer her an installation there. She is a Finnish media artist, far removed from creating sculpture in the traditional sense. Having studied photography, set design, and arts and technology in various countries before entering the Medialab at Helsinki's University of the Arts, she became well-acquainted with the ever-expanding possibilities inherent in digital technology. But that does not mean she felt uninterested in exploring the history of the Ionic Temple. Far from it: Haaslahti immersed herself in the multilayered meanings of this extraordinary location, and counted herself lucky that a building normally closed to the public became a place she could investigate and transform with an audacious intervention.

Especially intrigued by the niches inside the Temple, Haaslahti discovered that copies of classical sculpture were formerly installed there. Although they are now in the main house, replicas stand in the gardens where she pondered the loss of their arms and hands. These naked figures, who once personified muscular and fully formed prowess, now look deprived of their anatomical grandeur. More akin to victims than heroes, they chime with our acute contemporary awareness of human vulnerability. Haaslahti decided to recreate them floating like helpless fragments on the surface of the pond outside the Temple, where they gestured in different directions as though determined to bewilder visitors entering this once-serene locale. An obelisk, part of the original self-contained garden designed for the Temple, still stands proud and erect near the water's edge. But



Lord Burlington and William Kent, Chiswick House, completed 1729 (interior). Courtesy of English Heritage.



Hanna Haaslahti's work in progress during the Sculpture Shock residency: "muscle architecture from classics to more recent mutations".

Haaslahti's white fragments contradicted the obelisk's single-minded vertical stillness, pointing everywhere as if to make us feel disorientated or even lost.

Moving into the Temple itself did not provide visitors with any reassurance. Haaslahti used her knowledge of digital technology to subtly undermine the harmonious certainty that once reigned throughout this classical interior. Because the prominent niches in the Temple's walls are empty now, she could not resist making visitors an integral part of the installation conceived for the building's interior. Moving through this space, we found ourselves becoming triggers for the action of light. It constantly changed everything, so that the grand solidity and permanence originally celebrated by Lord Burlington grew elusive. The instability so often dominating our perception of present-day existence was evident wherever we looked. Haaslahti transformed the Temple, not least by giving its interior a PVC covering that was frankly artificial. Because this material was non-precious, it implicitly challenged the gilded surfaces lending the rooms within Chiswick House their air of desirable richness. Haaslahti presented a radical vision which made us question everything we encountered in the Temple, replacing the calm order of the classical style with a ceaselessly unsettling alternative.

Taken together, all three of these projects in the Sculpture Shock enterprise prove that the 'historic' dimension can turn out to be immensely rewarding. Whether the context is well preserved, like Holy Trinity in Chelsea, or as derelict as the Asylum Chapel in Peckham, artists can find plentiful inspiration for the work they install there. The sense of adventure generated by these experiments is compelling indeed, and it suggests that a whole stimulating new world of alternative locations lies waiting to be discovered and transformed in the future by everyone who thrives on the challenge of risk-taking innovation.