

THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



Photo by Anne Hardy and Angus Mill

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COMMENTARIES

Anne Hardy

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Anne Hardy 'TWIN FIELDS'

Cathleen and Colleen Wade are perhaps the best-known twins in twentieth-century art; photographed by Diane Arbus in 1967 they are fixed as the epitome of uncanny repetition, of a weirdness that is at once familiar and utterly other. The Wades' spooky, seven-year-old gazes have stared out from innumerable reproductions over the past half-century, and surely a large part of the photograph's particular strength is precisely that in framing an already double subject it points to photography's own ability to double the visible world and to mechanically reproduce it over and over again. Such self-reflexivity hardly renders the picture of narrowly intellectual (dis)interest, however. In showing photography to be a medium for doubles and doubling, Arbus' picture shows also that the medium exposes a strangeness that is already at work in the world, and for which we have an insatiable, if uneasy, appetite. Anne Hardy's photographic work differs in many regards from Arbus': her pictures show us constructed spaces, not snapshots of the real world, and – while these spaces often imply their occupation by obsessive or marginal subjects – the pictures never represent human figures. Nonetheless, it might be useful to bear the peculiar combination of reflexivity and uncanniness that the photo of the Wade twins conjures when considering *Twin Fields* amid Hardy's practice more generally, for first her photographs, and more recently her installations, seem to make constructed space itself as unsettled and unsettling as Arbus's subjects. *Twin Fields* did so, moreover, by enacting a doubling of its own.

In his essay on the uncanny, Freud noted how readily the meaning of *heimlich* (*homely*) could shade into ambivalence, even into its seeming opposite, the *unheimlich*. The *unheimlich* is itself a strange double of the homely, then, just as the double is a special instance of the uncanny. *Twin Fields* certainly disturbed any feeling of homely habitation amidst The Common Guild, and refused to let the works or their viewers dwell discreetly within its townhouse interior. On the ground floor an assembly of concrete fragments and balloons placed in the entrance hall necessitated the visitor navigate a careful path around it. An intricate, elaborate but roughly handled construction, made primarily of concrete, plywood and fabric, took over the front room and effectively undid its character as habitable room-space. Full of incidental details and offering multiple viewpoints across and through its forms thanks to its open structure, it was in itself highly

photogenic (as the installation images attest) and conveyed a sense of occupying one of Hardy's photographed spaces – another vector of the uncanny here, making good on the artist's stated intention of producing 'illusions that you can enter'.

Upstairs, a many-sided, shed-like structure occupied the space, its footprint a double of that below, but with its sides now closed off. Raised on blocks above the dazzlingly blue carpeting that ran throughout the exhibition, and lit from below by strip lights, the structure emitted sounds that seemed to document its own manufacture, but might equally have been a fabrication of such a document. The effect was of a strange double to Robert Morris' 1961 *Box With the Sound of Its Own Making*, reworked by way of Tom Waits' 'What's He Building?' (1999), with that song's intimations of obsessional, and perhaps malign, tinkering behind closed doors.

Waits' song ends with the narrator insisting that 'we have a right to know' what his sequestered protagonist is up to, but leaves us to imagine for ourselves what this might actually be. Morris' *Box* famously acceded to the supposed right to know what an artwork means by broadcasting its inner content loud and clear: its own making is all that it contains. Hardy's structure, which could be physically entered via doors at its sides, invited viewers to inhabit the work, but didn't thereby dispel the enigma of what it might mean. It functioned less as work about itself than as a portal into fictions and imaginings, to speculations on what was being constructed, why, and by whom. Robert Morris himself, in writing from the later 1960s which addressed the scattered, heterogenous, process-based sculpture he was making by that time, invoked psychologist Anton Ehrenzweig's insistence that processes of 'dedifferentiation' and 'unconscious scanning' were as important to creativity as seemingly more rational, deliberate and ego-led forms of intention. For Ehrenzweig, our learned appreciation of good, gestalt forms (square boxes, for example) is less useful in art making than the unconscious feeling for the undifferentiated field, for what is overlooked by the secondary revisions of the conscious mind, for what seems chaotic but possesses a hidden order of its own. Any reflection on the process of making, any reflexivity of the work about its making, on Ehrenzweig's account, will have to acknowledge that making means, in part, not knowing. 'It's what I've never seen before that I recognise,' Arbus said of her photographs, precisely formulating one definition of the uncanny. To recognize what one has never seen, and to see the familiar estranged; these are the twin fields of the uncanny, as Hardy, I would guess, knows very well.

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