

North Canada – English Electric, 2010

David Jacques

David Jacques is a multi-media artist based in his hometown of Liverpool, United Kingdom. His practice deals with varying forms and approaches to narrative, often underpinned by socio-political issues transpiring from intensive periods of research and fieldwork. His project North Canada – English Electric emerged from a personal and family connection to two former worksites found at the peripheries of Liverpool. His scripting of the subsequent artwork relied on literary and mythological references, academic citations and anecdotes that revolved around the historical aspects of these environments and their present-day reconfigurations.

Stereoscopy

The installation comprises 100 stereoviews, a stereo viewing apparatus and a looped audio narrative (11 minutes). Much of the material that informed the project was collected whilst undertaking fieldwork, inspired by and modelled upon the Situationist practice of 'Militant Research'. This, paired with the optical phenomenon / visual medium of stereoscopy then crystallised into a speculative 'weird' narrative, titled: *North Canada – English Electric*, a preamble to which reads:

A retired worker habitually returns as an amateur photographer to the sites at which he was previously employed: the Port and the Industrial Estate. Both now exist in liminal zones, at the de-regulated, toxic edges of the city. He's been detained at the port, detected by and recorded on CCTV. He's about to be questioned about his activities, at which point a voice from the supernatural intervenes...

North Canada Dock is one of many semi-derelict dockyards located in the Port of Liverpool. The English Electric Co. was a factory situated on an out-lying Industrial Estate to the North of the city. A cursory wander through either the redundant Liverpool Docklands or the ex-Industrial Estates at the edge of town would generally require having to negotiate the regular positioning of surveillance cameras. And apart from the fact that both areas are effectively private concerns situated on cordoned-off land, they operate as open repositories for toxic waste of the ferrous and chemical varieties. This all occurs in plain sight, within a stone's throw of the neighbouring communities. An examination of the environmental concerns hanging over these areas would entail interacting with local residents, campaign groups, independent researchers and academics.

The project emerged in the wake of what was a catastrophic global financial crisis. The year 2009 bizarrely arrived with a big push in the home entertainment market towards 3D technology, so 3D televisions with the requisite viewing apparatus were to be the definitive 'must-have' consumer item. Also prior to the crash many urban regeneration projects boasting grand developments were utilising 3D as part of their promotional material. In Liverpool, a Saudi-backed conglomerate had taken possession of the Mersey Docks & Harbour Company and all it managed, everything. It was pushed as '...one of the largest single-ownership port-city development schemes in Europe'. 3D simulations were deployed in their planning proposals using state of the art 'fly-through' animation. New spatial configurations and built environments were invoked, projecting up to fifty years into the future.

The storyline of *North Canada – English Electric* centres around two protagonists. The first, a 'retired worker', came out of a chance meeting with an ex-seafarer who had served with the Merchant Navy. He was furtively photographing the dismantling of a supply vessel from the Falklands War at a ship-breaking facility located within the South Canada Dock. The second, notionally a female voice (a channelling of the soothsaying spirit 'Awen' from Celtic mythology) expanded the reach of the tale into referencing ancient folklore and the mythopoetic. This interweaving of factual and fictitious content helped posit a series of dualities, of literal 'stereo views' and a playing off of one protagonist against the other – 'vice versa' (hence her role as spirit form and 'all-seeing narrator', his as corporeal and 'distracted interloper', etc.). As their roles become realised, they deem to inhabit a narrative that is shaped by ensuing reflexivity and criticality.

Her intervention and opening pronouncement that we should see stereoscopy as a problematic medium sets the tone for what's to come. She is about to embark upon an unravelling of the disagreeable, 'unhinged' assemblage of his stereoscopic work:

Though it's got its history as part of your optic trajectory here – it sits in a difficult place. It would have arrived out of left-field. After the camera obscura... and the microscope...and the telescope – all monocular, similar in form to the human eye...all-powerful and pervasive. Devices that actually trace right through to the one you located me with...an obliteration of all that went before it. It disrupts the visual cues, presents as a derangement of space. Things don't exist in any unified order, they find their own space to inhabit and it's really not possible to navigate this space. What we'd be presented with is essentially an aggregate plane of disjunct forms...You can't regulate it. The components don't fit. It holds no truck with perspective...

She talks further about the 'seeing body', orientates around uncanny, existential musings and begins to flit through temporal registers, bringing etymologies into play:

...Through this process and its apparatus, the observer and object take on a particular relationship. By a simulation of anatomical positioning...the positioning of the eyes in your head...we engage with a dual or binocular view. Consequently, our gaze will relay two slightly dissimilar views from slightly different angles, they're recorded as such and re-presented – they will ultimately be converged into one image. This will result in a particular type of visual illusion...something akin to depth perception – but not quite. We can also make reference to the 'parallax'...'Parallax' – that'll come from the Greek 'pa-ra-llax-is', meaning 'alteration'...a retinal disparity...a correlative problem...

She speaks in the 'continuous conditional', a dual tense that simultaneously engages with the past and the future by referring to unfulfilled actions. She determines the variety of usages stereoscopy has been put to throughout its history. Its physiological and psychological affects, its theoretic and philosophical significances. Her digressions and ruminations finally find their

focus as she reflects upon a history of distractive banalities – of home entertainment, ‘virtual tourism’ and 3D crazes...

It would have been a craze, a 3D craze. A popular form of mass home-entertainment. But it would have been realised by physiologists involved with studying the human eye, then it finds its place as a toy within bourgeois households. Though its scientific origins would still be played up, it was to belong in the study – a fitting environment, a domestic take on the laboratory... for your new device, your brand new ultra-modern gadget. It would sit with your neatly catalogued archive of views that you’d have begun collecting, all named and painstakingly ordered. I’d venture the term ‘anti-travel travelogue’ – a type of heavily mediated reportage or documentary. They would often come with accompanying texts, knocked together by experts in whatever given field – and maps as well! Where you’d be able to locate the actual coordinates of your disembodied position and your simulated view. They’re almost like pop-ups in a children’s picture book, hard-edged objects trying to isolate themselves in space. As if for the first time, as if to elicit a ‘name,’ to find an ‘order’ so that each thing can be known and expressed in all its parts... Though by my reckoning these images aren’t amenable to that sort of caper – still, they’ll have to be held to account though.

Her final words fix to lead us away from the recollecting, from the digressions and speculations and bring us back to an existential pressure brought to bear by the dilapidated scenarios captured by the photographs. The hard evidence of Late Capitalism’s discarded excesses and festering waste. A reveal of what lurks behind the illusory digital spectacle of the Millennial Smart City.

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Fig. 1 and 2: David Jacques, North Canada – English Electric, 2010, installed at METAL Arts Centre Liverpool



Fig. 3 and 4: David Jacques, Stereoview (one of one hundred) North Canada – English Electric, 2010, digital photographs on archive stereoview card, 18cm X 9cm

