

For a Monumentality of Desire

Susan Giles' *Interiors*

The Burren Annual, June 2017.



Architecture is the expression of the very being of societies, in the same way that human physiognomy is the expression of the being of individuals... In practice, only the ideal being of society, that which orders and prohibits with authority, expresses itself in what are architectural compositions in the strict sense of the term. Thus, the great monuments are raised up like dams, pitting the logic of majesty and authority against all the shady elements: it is in the form of cathedrals and palaces that Church and State speak and impose silence on the multitudes.

Georges Bataille, 'Architecture', 1929

For the Burren Annual, Susan Giles presents *Interiors*, an exhibition that brings together two bodies of work engaging with buildings and gestures. This work has developed over the past couple of years through a residency at the Burren College of Art, a participation in the International Society of Gesture Studies at the Sorbonne Nouvelle and an evolving project on the historic libraries of Chicago. Buildings and gestures have long been part of Giles' practice – it was actually the title of a show in 2010 – but they are being brought closer together in this exhibition. The initial focus on gestures in her video works emerged from an interest in non-verbal moments of communication as well as what she sees as the sculptural aspect of language. For the videos of the Chicago project, Giles asked her participants to describe from memory the architecture of the grand public libraries. The gestures of the participants inscribe themselves on the screen through a digital animation technique used in gesture studies conjuring up fleeting architectural elements. The videos are accompanied by photographic prints showing the same participants viewed from above with their gestures trailing through a multiple exposure composite image suggesting three-dimensional shapes.

The series of videos and sculptures (three of each) Giles developed during her residency takes Newtown Castle, the 16th century tower house on the college's ground, as its monumental site. The artist asked three international visitors to answer the question: "How does your body move through the tower?" The single gesture they made in answer was traced onto the screen, revealing how different each individual experience was. The trajectories of these gestures were then modeled into three-dimensional forms and scaled up as autonomous sculptures exhibited alongside the

videos. The sculptures are made of aluminum tubes and dispersed in the main gallery space so that visitors can walk around and even into them in one instance.

These artworks represent both a convergence and a further shift in Giles practice: a convergence as it integrates gestures, architecture, bodies and sculpture closer than in previous work. A shift as for the first time her participants are moving inside the building. Giles discussed before her interest for the 'outside' and the symbolism of the monuments for the visitors, to 'what they signified at a distance'. Here she decisively focuses on the way visitors move into and experience the interior of the architectural structure. They are not asked to describe the inside of the monument either but the way they move through it. This shift is then compounded by the further translation of these gestures into 'monumental' sculptures: transforming a bodily perception of the interior into an external structure that can be experienced in turn. Something might be said about the choice of material here, throughout her work and as a sculptor, Giles shows a particular attention to what materials convey and how to contrast their innate properties. Here she chooses to use aluminum tubes, which may partly reflect practical issues, but also imposes a distance between the organic body moving through the tower and the non organic metallic material, thus further disembodying the gesture.

With this project, Giles also pursues her interest in touristic monuments or 'cliché buildings'. She talks about her wish 'to make them interesting again' and 'to challenge the monument as a static form'. In previous work she created models of iconic buildings juxtaposing unexpected materials such as paper and concrete, thus undermining their claim to durability, or placing her models in situation where the

monument lost its dominance such as this paper model of St Peter's basilica whose platform is raised at a 25 degree angle, placing it on a slippery slope. This concern also resonates in the work she did editing tourists' video of famous sites using only their zoom-in function for instance to quite destabilizing effects. Here it is the individual's cognitive experience of architectural space that is drawn upon, teasing the question of how these touristic experiences can contribute to a collective identity beyond clichés.

It is tempting to follow a more subversive thread through Giles' work: after all as Georges Bataille reminds us architecture and monuments are always an expression of power. It is an unlikely coincidence, for instance, that the participants in these works are either female, foreign or from an ethnic minority, all groups who would have conflicting relationships with established authorities be they Church, State or what Leslie Sklair calls the Transnational Capitalist Class. In challenging the staticity, the position and scale of monuments in her work, the artist also necessarily subverts the authority of these sites.

The desire to bring back some life into the way we experience monumentality is not incompatible with the desire to subvert its authority either. In *Towards An Architecture of Enjoyment*, Henri Lefebvre distinguishes between buildings and monuments, buildings have traded meaning for signification, 'the signification of the building is its functionality. Period. Shapes become fixed: boxes that are stacked and assembled.' By contrast, in *The Production of Space* he described monumentality as taking in 'the perceived, the conceived, and the lived; representations of space and representational spaces; the spaces proper to each faculty, from the sense of smell to

speech; the gestural and the symbolic. Monumental space offered each member of a society an image of that membership, an image of his or her social visage.’

He suggests that this loss of meaning in our relationship with the monuments of modernity may be why we have such a desire to experience those of the past: ‘space, monuments, homes (peasant or aristocratic) reveal the sense of something lost. The dream, utopia, the imaginary, the consumption of symbols and works, and finally tourism reinforce one another.’

In the process, beyond nostalgia, we may reinvent our relationship to both the past and authority through our participation and experience of monumentality. The playful and thoughtful approach that Giles brings to the exploration of this relationship gives the multitude a voice and perhaps may show the way towards the architecture of enjoyment sought for by Lefebvre.

Michaële Cutaya 2017

Reference: Henri Lefebvre, *Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment*, University of Minnesota Press, 2014, and *The Production of Space*, Blackwell, 1991.