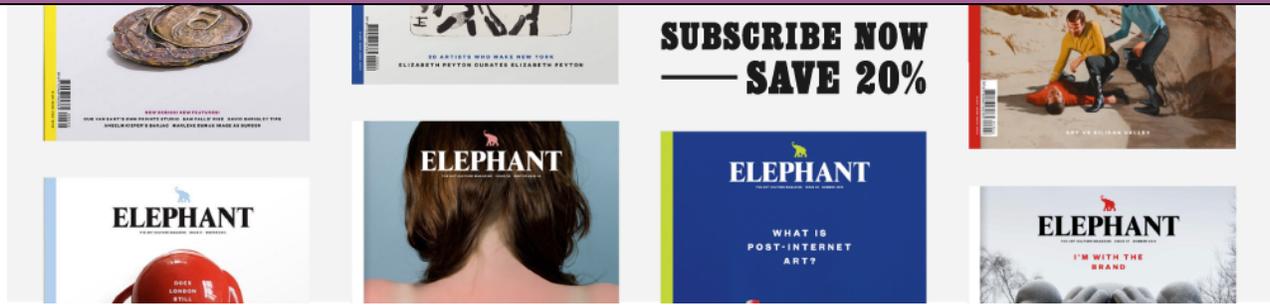


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ELEPHANT
 THE ART CULTURE MAGAZINE



5 Questions with Becca Pelly-Fry

Text by Emily Steer

“The built environment is something that can easily be taken for granted, in daily life as much as within contemporary art.” Becca Pelly-Fry has co-curated a show with Steve Johnson, which brings together thirty-three artists—including Michael Craig-Martin, Dieter Roth and Rachel Whiteread—to consider architecture as the subject, rather than the backdrop. *Architecture as Metaphor* opens next week at Griffin Gallery, London.

Can you tell me about *Architecture as Metaphor*?

The idea for the exhibition originally came from Steve Johnson, who has been delivering lectures on the subject for several years as a way of connecting artists through the ages, via a mutual concern with depictions of the built environment; as he terms it, “a bridge in time”.

We are showing the work of thirty-three artists in the exhibition, covering a wide range of concerns and media, as a way of exploring contemporary art practice that is concerned with the role of architecture as a central motif or expression.

Although the exhibition has architecture as a central concern, there are many different art forms and a diverse range of practices included. What was the starting point and how did you decide the parameters?

We wanted to keep the definitions fairly fluid; from the outset, we both agreed we didn’t want to try and do any kind of survey or summary of the curatorial concept. It is a useful umbrella, under which we can group a number of interesting artists and through which a range of sub-themes have appeared. The only real parameter we set was size, for logistical reasons, and beyond that, it was up to the invited artists to offer work that fit with the idea. This is very much a collaboration between us (the two curators) and the many artists involved—their decisions were as important as ours.

Your thirty-three artists come from the UK, Germany and Holland. Was this a chance occurrence or do you feel there is a way of looking at architecture which is individually European that you wanted to explore?

The cultural background of the invited artists is mainly due to the networks that Steve and I have established over the course of our working lives. However, it has become apparent that there are interesting differences to be discerned—for example, Germany’s architectural landscape is heavily imbued with its violent political and social history, meaning the metaphorical nature of the work speaks to these issues quite directly, whereas the British work is often more diverse in its references.

Amongst the exhibiting artists, there are also quite a few cross-cultural experiences at play, which add another layer to the complex metaphorical references; for example, Alzbeta Jaresova is from the Czech Republic but now lives in London, and Miyuki Okuyama is from Japan but now lives in Arnhem.

There has been a mention of this show avoiding the typical use of architecture within visual art as a “backdrop” or “setting”. How do these artists treat it differently?

The built environment is something that can easily be taken for granted, in daily life as much as within contemporary art. We walk past it, we live in and around it—it is the setting for the narratives of our personal and communal social histories, but rarely the subject of our

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The artworks in this exhibition represent the built environment with enough ambiguity to allow the viewer to project their subjectivity onto what they are looking at—they view the work through the lens of their own experience, and thus each viewer will see the work slightly differently. Both Steve and I are of the opinion that great art is not a puzzle to be decoded but will evoke a visceral response from the audience that connects to the truth of life in some way.

This is obviously a keen area of interest for yourself and Steve Johnson. Are there any pieces in the show which really took you by surprise or offered a new vision of this area for you?

What often surprises me when putting a show together is the myriad of sub-themes and connections that you find between artists and artworks as the content of the exhibition starts to assemble. The synergies are always surprising, in that they appear where you least expect. For example, when putting the catalogue together we decided to place the images in alphabetical order, by artist name, and suddenly all these lovely patterns and conversations have started taking place between the pages that I could never have envisaged. There are references to public and private space, and how we behave in each (Richard Deacon & Mrdjan Bajic / Arturo di Stefano); ideas about social behavior and cultural norms (Alzbeta Jaresova / Steve Johnson); ideological frameworks (Peter Newell-Price / Miyuki Okuyama); fragility and collapse (Fabian Peake / Martin Pfahler) and post-apocalypse (Rob Voerman / Prue Waller). I feel sure many more will appear when we hang the show, and that's what makes the whole process of curating so exciting.

'Architecture as Metaphor' runs from 9 March – 21 April at Griffin Gallery, London. All images courtesy the artist unless otherwise stated.



#1290615 by Jemma Appleby, 2013, graphite on paper

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Heidi Sill, Collage 3, 2013

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