

THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



Photo by Anne Hardy

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COMMENTARIES

Anne Hardy

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'TWIN FIELDS'

What follows is a compressed version of a section of an hour-long talk. Apologies for the gallop, but some serious compression was necessary to cover the same ground.

I am starting from Anne's appreciation of J.G. Ballard and my own preoccupation with the phenomenon of ambiguity. Ballard's subject matter is modernity in its essential form: a surveillance society rooted in capitalism, structured to the rafters by hierarchical institutions, fuelled by eros and thanatos and taunted and tempted by mass media and technological accelerationism. My own subject matter is the role ambiguity has played in modernity, and how artists might use it as a tool that is more particularly affecting than simple vagueness, with which it is often confused.

There are several ambiguities that I can identify in *TWIN FIELDS*:

The cyan blue of the carpet, recalling the early computer screen or the blue screen (now the green screen) used in film-making. It connotes a holding non-space for the projection of content, figures, background or details. It is a cipher of potential, which is a fundamental characteristic of ambiguity.

Found or lost objects have been plucked from an archival world, their backstory unavailable and their provenance ambiguous. Known objects become leavings of unknown events, demonstrating how the historian's practice involves not the retrieval of a lost whole, but the performance of her relationship with a fragmented past. Are these objects and materials universals or specifics? Are they 'the balloon' or 'a balloon'? 'Some wood' or 'this wood'? Their ambiguous status generates a shimmering effect, between the banal and the unknowable.

By prioritising the formal, the utilitarian aspects of an object or material become reconfigurable. Its material affordances (the carpetiness of a carpet, the solidity of a support structure, the coloured, rounded buoyancy of a balloon) are diverted from their usual function. The sensible use is not made nonsensical, but new-sensical. Stuff is

differently correlated in ambiguous ways.

There is extensive use of extensivity. Audio extends presence into other spaces, electric light is an active energy that falls across surfaces and lines. The carpet supplants the plinth with a field, implying a landscape rather than a monument, a site of activity. And the recognisability of objects extends a sculpture into our own lives as memories of encounters.

The landscape connotation renders the role of the gallery ambiguous. It does not comply with modernist conventions of the container, since the various extensivities absorb us. We are implicated in it physically and semantically. Indeed, architecture and psychology might become reflexively related for the especially sensitive.

The 'Field' in the title is symptomatic of a delight in linguistic systems and their scope for slippage – puns and metaphors are both types of ambiguities. The twin fields might be any one of, or all of these common bifurcations of reality:

the actual and the imagined;
the physical and the psychological;
the space of the here and now and the there and then;
the experienced and the remembered;
the intended and the interpreted.

That which is ambiguous holds two or more ideas within it at once. These ideas may be in tension, or one could be smuggled within the other, making itself known later on. Such sustained tension or sudden revelation is the stuff of conventional popular narratives, and yet ambiguity is more readily associated with 'literary' endeavour or the 'fine' arts. Historically it has been used to prolong engagement: in mystical texts, like the Kabbalah and Upanishad riddles, where hard-won understanding moves us to a higher order of awareness; but also in advertising, which must observe the boundary between ambiguity and nonsense; and in art, which cares less for such distinctions.

Sally O'Reilly is a writer, publishing and distributing text in conventional and expanded forms, from art magazines to performance lectures to opera.