

Micro Museum Potential

In a continuous search for the contemporary relevance of sculpture, artist collective **Lewis & Taggart** (Andrew Taggart & Chloe Lewis) explore the poetic spaces between the historical narratives and the physical matter of place. The current residents of AIR Laboratory at the Contemporary Art Center, Warsaw discuss their practice with **Paulina Jeziorek**.

You are young artists that have already initiated three museums. One of them was temporal, another is permanent, the third is a mobile museum in which you show temporary exhibitions. Why are you so interested in creating such spaces?

A: We're interested in the museum and its potential to manifest in alternative forms. In our travels, we're always on the lookout for small, obscure museums – the ones you're likely to stumble upon by accident. Places like *The Ramones Museum* in Berlin, which is made up of someone's personal collection of band paraphernalia installed in the back of a coffee shop. One of our favourite museums is a place in Bergen called *The Theta Museum*, which is dedicated to the local civil resistance movement during World War II. It's hidden at the end of a labyrinth of rooms and corridors in an old building, and it's only open two hours a week. Once you arrive, you're invited to sit on the sofa while an old man tells you stories. We found it completely by accident, and it's so well hidden that hardly anyone in Bergen even knows about it.

C: The first museum we made was definitely inspired by that experience. In 2010, we were invited to make a public work in response to a river in Calgary, Canada, called the Bow River, and we created a project called *The Museum of Bow*. We spent several weeks researching the river and collecting material along its banks to use in the work. We found a lot of different things – bottles, cigarette packages, clothing, sticks, parking tickets, and water, of course, which we used to create a collection of about fifty artifacts. We wanted to weave a portrait of the river using its own physical substance, and speak to the discrepancy between its historical narrative and its physical reality. When the collection was ready, we created a small museum inside a caravan that we parked close to the river. The museum was only open for one week, and we led guided tours through the space. Shortly after we finished that project we launched *The Museum of Longing and Failure* in Bergen.

What kind of works do you exhibit in the Museum of Longing and Failure?

C: We invite artists and collectives to make sculptures for the museum's collection. The artists are free to interpret the theme of "longing and failure" however they choose. The only limitation is the size – the works are always 20x20x20cm or smaller – since the museum itself is very small. For the first year, the museum lived in a street-level window in Bergen, but since we've traveled so much over the last six months, we decided to take the museum on the road with us.

Does it always appear in a shop window?

A: In Bergen, it was located in a residential window, and in New York we installed it in the air conditioner window cage of a private apartment. The apartment used to be the studio of Claes Oldenburg, and it's where he staged *The Store* in the 1960's, so we picked the location for very specific reasons. When we showed the museum in Copenhagen we used a storefront window, but the shop was empty.

Why did you choose the subject of longing and failure?

C: For us, longing and failure is a broad, poetic space that embodies the human condition at large. It can be a beautiful space, but also heartbreaking and deeply ironic. We see incidences of longing and failure everywhere – in everyday objects, in stories that we read in the newspaper, and it's our impression that most artists connect to the idea of longing and failure in some way, either through their work or simply through their day-to-day life. A great example of longing and failure can be found in Balzac's short story *The Unknown Masterpiece* from 1831, which tells the story of a painter who's so obsessed with capturing real life that he works his painting to nothingness. The goal of *The Museum of Longing and Failure* is to give physical shape to an abstract concept. In a sense, we're trying to map the visual terrain of longing and failure, and the project generates a growing collection of sculptural interpretations.

Do you present your work as well?

C: No, we only create the frame. For each location we build a cabinet to hold the work of other artists.

Can you tell me about your third museum project, *Museum of the Golden Nail*?

A: Last fall, we were invited to create a work in a very remote part of Norway. We were staying at an old farmhouse and the setting was incredibly beautiful and isolated. This presented a real challenge for us, since we usually work through a process of collecting, and all we could find were trees and rocks and grass. Our work tends to deal with the tension between the idea of a place and its physical composition, but there was no obvious tension in this environment. We managed to find two things that felt meaningful – an empty hut and a nail. The nail felt relevant because it represented something important within the art world and also within the world of farming, so we decided to convert the empty hut into a museum dedicated entirely to this one nail. It's a permanent work, and it's possible to visit. But it's quite difficult to reach – you need to climb straight up the side of a mountain to get there.

The nail is also an important religious symbol for Catholics. You may expect some pilgrims from Poland at your museum...

C: That would be great. It's on private land, but there's a law in Norway that allows everyone to hike and camp on anyone's property, so a pilgrimage to the Museum of the Golden Nail is certainly possible...

How do you understand sculpture?

A: Our process is a constant investigation of that question: What is it to make sculpture? What constitutes something being a sculpture? Historically speaking, sculpture explored form and the human body using materials such as marble and so on. We work in a time of mass production, so it's important to always question what it means to make something new.

C: We like to think of sculpture as a kind of language. We work as translators – translating the language of real-world material into a language of sculpture. Like with the golden nail for instance – an object from the real world is re-contextualized in sculptural terms. We see a lot of potential for this translation to release different layers of meaning – meaning that's poetic, existential or even political.

Your work is based on observation and also collaboration, since you always work together. You also often use found material. What draws you to these specific things?

A: We're interested in the gap between the preconceptions of a place and the reality of its physical makeup. Before we visit a place, we investigate its cultural underpinnings and how it's described through literature. There are always a thousand assumptions and clichés. Our research becomes an examination of the space between this kind of knowledge and the physical material we're confronted with once we actually arrive at our destination.

C: And we see it as a very poetic space. So our research can be summed up as an investigation of the poetic space between knowledge and matter. And when we talk about matter we talk about the very physical things that constitute an environment – whether the environment is the city of Warsaw or a mountaintop or an airplane. We're interested in the experience of place, and how this experience can be expressed and translated through the very physical things that compose it.

A: We're often provoked by cultural stereotypes and historical grand narratives. We like to put them all in a bottle and shake it up and see what comes out. (laughter)

C: Our work is not often perceived as political, but we often find that our process reveals certain nuances that speak to political systems and structures.

A: We find and combine things that normally have no connection in the physical world, and that sometimes leads to an unfamiliar place. Our work often evokes very different interpretations, and we like that kind of openness.

By working on the border of historical assumptions and physical material, are you trying to reveal the present?

C: Absolutely. We're interested in a very present condition.

A: Our work often reflects the contemporary state of consumption and mass production. There's so much disposable material that can be sourced through a direct engagement with a given place – it's limitless.

C: We've traveled quite a lot in the last few years, and it's both comforting and disconcerting to be reminded that many of the things you find in specific environments could be found almost anywhere. There is always a fine line between understanding the condition of a specific place and also understanding how the place exists in the context of universality. Sometimes what we think is specific to our own culture is actually quite common.

You are both Canadians. Have you ever considered how being Canadian affects the work you do?

C: We try to stay away from defining ourselves through nationality. We're not interested in making work that ties us to set of specific political ideologies. Perhaps the most important thing about being from Canada is that it has liberated us from a sense of nationhood. Canada is a country built on immigration, and a large percentage of the population is comprised of people born elsewhere, like myself.

A: There is a history of painting in Canada that explores the landscape and nature, these kinds of romantic ideas...

C: Maybe our ideas are romantic too.

A: I wouldn't say we have romantic ideas.

C: You don't think our work is romantic?

A: In a dirty way... (laughter)

What makes you so interested in making tributes to people in your work?

C: We're interested in all the elements that form cultural narratives, and iconic figures always play an important role in the equation. They set the tone of specific places and moments in time. While visiting New York City, you might visit the spot where Bob Dylan played "Blowin' in the Wind" for the first time. These personas contribute to our understanding of place – they are often what make a certain place important. When we travel, we always make a point to see the monuments and visit the cemeteries. We are very influenced by these kinds of nostalgic places, so it feels natural to incorporate them into the work and to explore what it means to confront that nostalgia.

There is an interesting work/sculpture of yours called *Deathcloud for Dennis and Louise* that is a tribute to Dennis Hopper and Louise Bourgeois.

A: *Deathcloud for Dennis and Louise* is a conflated tribute to Dennis Hopper and Louise Bourgeois, who both passed away during the same weekend in May of 2010. Both artists have been influential in our lives – we actually got married under *Maman*, one of Louise Bourgeois' spider sculptures. When we learned of their deaths, we wanted to create an artwork as a tribute to them both. The "deathcloud" became a mental space we put our heads into to meditate on their lives and works, and also on their passing. We see the work as an expanded collage.

Looking through your archive, I found a very disturbing project entitled *Black Holes*. What are these black holes that appear in your photographs from around the world?

C: The black holes are a pair of sculptures we made in 2008 – two wooden discs painted black. We always travel with them and use them as replacements for ourselves in the photographs we take. There is no specific logic to the project – it's just something we do.

A: We like how the work displaces the body and replaces it with a representation of absence or nothingness. And two black holes can't ever exist together, so the project presents a paradox.

Can you tell me how it happened that you are here in Warsaw taking part in a residency program in Zamek Ujazdowski Castle?

C: We were invited by the A.I.R. Laboratory curators to take part in a residency program under the theme of "images as endangered species." The concept is taken from Susan Sontag's text *On Photography*, in which she very accurately predicted a future in which images would lose all sense of preciousness and become disposable commodities. Sontag was writing about photography – specifically documentary photography – so as object makers, we're interested in how her concept can be applied

in a more general sense. There's definitely a connection between the idea of "images as endangered species" and some of the strategies at work in our sculptures. Our work often focuses on objects and things that have been discarded or overlooked, and elevates the banal into something meaningful.

What are you planning to do here in Warsaw?

A: We're going to be working with a single image as a point of departure. When we first arrived in Warsaw last week, we found a few thousand identical postcards in a storage room at the CCA, which show an image of Ujazdowski Castle from the 1980's. It was a great discovery – the postcards. They really represent the kind of material we like to work with. They're a bi-product of culture and a result of over production. And they speak to the specific setting in which we're immersed (the castle), both in terms of its physical structure and its historical significance.

C: We knew the castle was destroyed in World War II and rebuilt in the 1970's, but as we started to do more research, we learned that it had been rebuilt and modified many times before that as well. And it's still not finished – we see men working on it every day. So working with the postcards has become a way to reflect on this idea of a space in constant flux. Our goal is to use every single postcard, transforming the image again and again into a new collection of collages and sculptural works.

Where exactly do you collect the material for the work?

C: The material is collected through our direct experience in the city of Warsaw, and it can really come from anywhere. So far we've made collages using parts of food packaging, matchsticks, a ticket from the Warsaw zoo... For us, the castle embodies a cultural idea, so any culturally generated material is fair game.

Andrew Taggart and Chloe Lewis are a Canadian artist duo based in Bergen, Norway. They have been collaborating since 2006, and in 2010 they received a collaborative MFA from the Bergen National Academy of the Arts. Their work has most recently been exhibited at the Kuntsi Museum of Modern Art, Finland; Rogaland Contemporary Art Centre, Norway; Tag Team Studio, Norway; the ODD Gallery, Canada; and SIM, Iceland. They have participated in numerous artist residencies including FAIR at the Factory for Art and Design, Copenhagen and Platform in Vaasa, Finland, and they are currently guest artists at the Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw. In parallel to their studio practice, Lewis & Taggart operate The Museum of Longing and Failure, a small museum primarily based in Bergen that manifests from time to time in faraway places.