ArtAngel 2014

The Towers of Babel

Summary

Displaying electronically illuminated shapes and text on cranes that tower above London. Displays will appear and disappear as the cranes are taken down and new ones are installed. Told through an evolving language, 'The Towers of Babel' skyline joins up parts of the capital whilst considering the dangers of an overly connected world. Text displayed will be based on a quote from Chaucer's 'The Canterbury Tales' using the original middle English.

Detailed Proposal

An estimated three hundred cranes are in operation in London at any given time, one for every square kilometer. London accounts for more cranes than the rest of the entire country put together. This ubiquity makes them a permanent feature of the London's skyline but unlike other sky-scraping structures, their short-lived nature bestows on them an otherwise unique quality.

Aesthetically they are a sore thumb of brutal design, narrow towers of welded unyielding steel. Engineered to perform the most simple of functions - climb high and move objects. One of the first to arrive on site, they build up the layers from isolated objects to unified structures. They also reach out as a bold statements for the health and influence of a city and nation - strong, visible symbols reflecting the economic dynamism of the time, showing off progress or signaling its decline. This is no more true than in Chinese mega-cities where collections of giant cranes form communities of dystopian industrial forests.

However, the crane's outward appearance as a resilient Nietzchean behemoth is offset by a distinct mayfly quality. Its lifespan for a particular project will never go beyond what is absolutely necessary before being dismantled. Unlike the permanency of the buildings they create, as one comes down, others spring up.

'The Towers of Babel' will draw parallels with the crane's role whilst referencing the Genesis story which also connects language with monuments. During the project's course, the content and meaning of the text will incrementally come together. Shapes, letters and words will appear, disappear and re-appear somewhere else. They will transform from disjointed fragments and evolve into a more cohesive unity. Ever present in the background will be the threshold of recognition. At which moment can it be deemed, the display on the Towers have merged from unrecognisable background noise to a familiar and more identifiable whole. These are the same threshold principles that compose the world around us as well as the worlds within us.

The phrase to be used as the basis for the displayed text is a quote from Chaucer's classic 'Canterbury Tales'. Chaucer exemplifies a sense of Englishness that is firmly embedded in national literature, history and culture. The tales, invaluable and colourful snapshots of medieval life, were written for the first time in a vernacular, popular language appealing far beyond the ruling elite. Categorised as 'Middle English' the language is itself a threshold between Old English and the modern English we currently use. Many of the words and meanings seem familiar but equally as many are ambiguous and misleading and carry a strong sense of construction and process of a language in the making.

<u>Trajectory of the Project</u>

Each crane will display one or two words contained in the phrase. The number of cranes required will therefore be determined by the number of words contained in the phrase.

The project will be treated in four main stages. Each new stage slowly phases out the previous one when cranes are dismantled and new cranes installed. In the first stage, the cranes should be located fairly wide apart from each other. They will display a number of lines and shapes referencing the criss-cross lines that make up the crane's form and the skeleton of the buildings. They are also the building blocks of the individual letters contained within the words as they appear in the phrase. For example the diagonal ' \ ' line of the letter 'V' or the bottom ' _ ' line of 'E' and so on creating a very abstract display like \ _ - O ¬ \| > l .

In the second phase only the cranes will display only vowels, spaced out as they would appear in the word. Vowels are at the the genesis of any language, the first and only capable sounds made by a newborn child or fundamental notes for vocalists. This series will also appear at random on cranes in spaced apart locations.

In the third series of cranes the consonants will be gradually phased in to complete the words. Consonants add the flesh to the vowels' bone and start to provide a degree of identity. However, it will be ambiguous at this stage precisely how many words there are as some will be coming down whilst new ones pop up. They can appear on a mix of isolated individual cranes or clusters of cranes closer together. Some words will read back to front depending which way the crane is facing. Despite an overall sense of distortion, a cohesive idea will have started to emerge.

For the final stage, all of the words contained in the phrase will be apparent on erected cranes. The cranes will ideally be located so that they are visible within the same eye line from a given vantage point. The texts on each crane will flash on and off in the order of the phrase's original sequence. This will also create a continuous loop comparable to Steve Reich's sound pattern phasing. Through extreme repetition of the same sound Reich is able to conflate an entirely different perspective. The familiar whole becomes a distorted act of deception similar to 'The Tower of Babel'. The story warns of the dangers of a overly singular and connected world, a message which particularly resonates today. The project comes to a close as each crane is subsequently dismantled.

<u>Execution</u>

The cranes used should be those that are being erected anyway on building sites. HSE requires information on every planned crane installation. This allows greater availability of information regarding each crane's location and timescale to determine in advance which cranes can be used and when. This will also help determine a vantage point to inform the public where the next installment can be viewed.

The text could be mounted before the crane has been assembled. The exact method to display and illuminate the text will be guided by what is most visible (day and night) and feasible. This could be neon or LED display panels.

THE TOWERS OF BABEL

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