

Message in a Bottle

From Ramsgate to the Chatham Islands

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Exhibition leaflet to accompany exhibition at Droit House Essay by Jeremy Millar

Message in a Bottle From Ramsgate to The Chatham Islands

'The function of art is to imitate nature in her manner of operation, and nature operates from chance. Simple minds cling to the illusion of an orderly, powerful universe because it gives them a sense of security.'

- John Cage, American composer, writer and artist

Layla Curtis' work has often been about the attempts we make to order the world, to chart it and the security that this brings; or rather, the insecurity that results from our inability to do so. This is made particularly evident when Curtis manipulates maps until we become aware that that which we thought familiar is instead strange, as when a map of Britain is constructed from a series of European road maps (The United European Union, 1999) or, perhaps more appropriately, that a world map is made of a collage of American topographical maps (World State, 2001).

This fascination with charting the earth, and the creation of forms of positioning and time-zones which result, have played an important part in the development of this new commission for Turner Contemporary, one in which the local and the global are invited to engage with one another.

Upon first visiting the nearby Ramsgate Maritime Museum, Curtis was struck by the panel above its entrance exclaiming that Ramsgate time was five minutes and forty-one seconds faster than Greenwich Mean Time, a reminder that until the late nineteenth-century, most of the world still operated on local times, based upon astronomical observations and other variations and traditions. It was the rapid development of the railway - and the rapidity of travel that it allowed - which necessitated a change, and in 1847 the first standard national time was introduced in Britain, with other countries with rail travel following shortly afterwards. (However, even in 1870, a passenger travelling from Washington to San Francisco would have had to have reset his/her watch over two hundred times to remain in all the time zones en route.) Curtis was also fascinated by the longitudinal line set within the floor of the museum, which marks a line 1° 25.4' east of the zero meridian at Greenwich. While to some extent determinedly local, such a marking also positions the local within a global system of measurement, and in doing so suggests its relationship to places far away. Indeed, once Curtis had the longitudinal and latitudinal values of the museum, it was a matter of simple arithmetic to determine those of the place antipodal to it, that is, the opposite point on the earth.

The closest inhabited land to this abstract mathematical position was found to be an island about 800 kilometres east of mainland New Zealand which, until 1791, was known as Rehoku. However, in that year Captain Broughton 'rediscovered' the island and, with an arrogance all too familiar in such matters, named this already-inhabited island after his ship, HMS 'Chatham', which had been built in Dover. It seems as though Curtis' mental voyage had not only taken her to the opposite side of the world but had also, upon arrival there, brought her back to Kent.

Over two hundred years after this early - indeed defining - connection between Kent and this remote Pacific island, Curtis decided to instigate another. Of course, it is far easier to communicate between these two places now than was even conceivable in the late eighteenth century. Instead, Curtis decided to employ some of these advanced communications technologies - such as mobile phones and global positioning systems - within a far older, and certainly less-directed, means of communication - a message in a bottle.

Usually one does not send a message in a bottle to a specific place but rather it is left to make its way to any other place, any place other than that from which it was sent, that is. Indeed, it is scarcely a means of communication at all, as we might now understand it, as most often the sender has no means of knowing whether his or her message has been received and by whom. For Curtis to release fifty one bottles off the coast of Ramsgate - forty five containing a message from children at the local Northdown Primary School, and five containing GPS devices which will track and transmit their position - seems an act of the utmost folly, particularly if we consider the wealth of communications technology contained within a number of the bottles. Yet,

if we deem Curtis' attempt in advance as a failure - that the bottles will never reach the Chatham Islands - perhaps it is because we have misunderstood how art, and Curtis' art in particular, might be said to operate. Indeed, let us be clear: art is not a simple communication of information (any more than it is the expression of pure emotion), and so while Curtis may fail to communicate as she had intended, it does not mean that her art has failed likewise. John Cage also remarked, with regard to both art and nature, that 'the highest purpose is to have no purpose at all'.

Indeed, it is through the very lack of direct communication that a space is opened up through which can travel not only the bottles themselves, and our imaginations, but also many new possibilities; the many other people in many other places who may now come across them, noting their position online or within the bottle, before returning them on their way. This is the chance to which Cage referred to at the beginning of this piece - a chance that lies at the very heart of how both art and nature might be

to which Cage referred to at the beginning of this piece, a chance that lies at the very heart of how both art and nature might be said to operate. What is particularly pleasing in this regard is that while Curtis has imitated nature in the manner of her operation, rather than its appearance, leaving the movement of the bottles subject to the forces of wind and wave, the lines which we see projected upon the wall at Droit House, do indeed bear a strong formal relationship to waves themselves, their swirls and folds, eddies and falls. It is a drawing of elegance and fragility that is produced by some of the most powerful forces that act upon our planet, a drawing that is both topographically accurate and yet resolutely abstract, a drawing in which the bottles appear both now-here and nowhere. Standing within a small circular room on the edge of England, we are invited to imagine ourselves drifting through a far greater space. The French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari wrote that 'to think is to voyage', and I would suggest that the complementary statement is also true, that to voyage is to think, and that the voyage of these bottles very much encourages us to do just that.

Jeremy Millar