

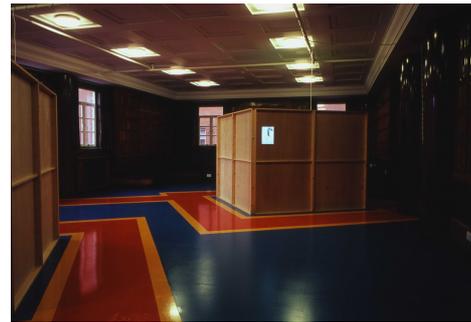
TWO VERSIONS, THE SAME STORY

Pennicott+Fleming, *Working Hard, Doing Nothing*, Toynbee Studios (December 2008)

In a wood panelled room are two silent wooden boxes. They look to be almost identical, twins that face obliquely. At first glance they might be packing cases, but their size and placement are more like 'booths' or provisional rooms. Their walls are constructed from plain wooden sheets, crossed with braces, and suggest a stage-set of some kind or, because of the floor in primary colours, a television game-show, an entertainment.

I wonder if the show has already begun.

We are not inside but backstage, and the bands on the floor are the camera tracks or walkways. However if sets are usually open, these are certainly closed, obstructing any view of their interior and what may or may not be contained. They are a strange sort of height, just tall enough to conceal, but not high enough to feel like a 'real' wall.



2.

This weirdness of scale continues with the floor, that proposes an interesting compression, condensing and truncating the exterior wooden room with bright blue and red. A clever painter's trick perhaps, because somehow the room is halved, and we feel as if we have stepped into a life size pop-up book.

In the same way there is a denial of entry into the boxes, there are frustrations too with the floor, where walls fail to contain the paths that veer off beyond their parameters. The room looks to have been dropped onto the floor rather than it being inserted to follow the existing geometries, a sense reinforced by the disparity of colour between the two elements, and angles that speak of another time and context. Nothing belongs here.

A screen is embedded into a side of each box. Not much larger than a television monitor it flickers a stuttering, poor quality image into life. It becomes a portal or a window into another time or place, somewhere not here, where I am now, but parallel. The picture shows a man sitting at a desk, shuffling papers, stapling, unstapling, rearranging and waiting. He looks bored, perhaps thoughtful, as if waiting for business yet to arrive. Then a woman appears in frame. In one 'window' she's distorted, enormous with a fish-eye head and shrunken body. She returns to life-size on approaching the desk, and there is a brief exchange of sorts with the shuffling man, a silent but necessary conversation as if words are not needed in this place. She takes a file from the desk and replaces it with another, seemingly identical, then leaves the room. She leaves the room? She disappears.

Apart from the occasional disappearance though, there is so little happening here, so much stillness. Any activity is carried out with a sort of slow intent. It is incessant but castrated, repeating and also bifurcating in a split loop. On the next screen, a similar scene unfolds, similar faces, the same faces? The people could be interchangeable, dark hair round face, fair hair thin face, thin face dark hair, like those books with illustrations of characters to be fragmented and swapped around, becoming new, monstrous versions of their paper cousins.



1. The idea for the floor came from a picture in a paint trade catalogue. The source image depicts a warehouse or storeroom floor, with designated areas for safe passage, loading and unloading of goods, where red routes are intended for transporting materials on small pick-up vehicles, and blue passages indicate 'holding' zones.

2. The Courtroom is one of several rehearsal spaces in the middle of Toynbee Studios, a drama school in the Toynbee Hall complex in East London, and was built in 1938 as the first ever juvenile court in the city. The adjacent rooms were originally called the Judge's Room, the Holding Room, and the Family Room. The story is that the wooden walls were in fact used as decor for the library on a ship, each panel intended to depict an open book, although in truth they look to have been set inside out, upturned with the pages face down and spine splayed. At the beginning of their residency P+F set up camp in the Courtroom, and although they spent time in other studios throughout the year, they returned to this room to make the final phase of work. There is something very strange, ambiguous, in the sense of scale and theatre proposed by the Courtroom, that appears to resonate as a quality in P+F's own constructed spaces.

3. In previous works, P+F built and then physically inhabited the installation, appearing in workers' overcoats or suits, shuttling between shelves, desks and work-stations. The viewer could watch them but always at a remove, where the act of looking might only be possible through some form of lens or filter; in *Mitchell and Norman*, shown at the Royal College of Art, London in 2006, they presented a full-scale, domestic hallway, and via live CCTV monitor the viewer could observe the artists working in another, inaccessible space, located in a different building. This time however, P+F are outside the structure looking in. Although they spent a much longer time building and preparing the space, the time spent working with the performers was very brief, 15 minutes or so. This shift to using others within the structure seems to have been an important one; in bringing in a live element from outside their collaboration, they immediately altered their known working dynamic. They suggest it initiated a particular process of learning; knowing how and when to bring someone else into this equation, and how much they should encounter the work beforehand. The performers are treated more as materials, sculptural elements that are 'dropped' into a scene and form part of a physical landscape. Tom and Edwin admit that, to some extent, the performers just needed to be "generic symbols of people", selected for characteristics that demonstrate a "vague" type. They needed to be at a glance people who would fit into a world.

These screens are the only indicator of life here, either pre-recorded or enacted as we watch. It is not entirely clear where these people came from, who they are, and I wonder from time to time if there is anybody inside at all. There is always the possibility that they are performing some form of body ventriloquism, where the image is beamed in from another room. Perhaps the drama is being played out next door, or more likely was played out last week and they are somewhere else now. Maybe they are amongst us as viewers. If you listen hard enough, you might hear a fluttering of paper or faint foot steps, but with an ear pressed to the wall it is virtually impossible to watch the screen at the same time, to synchronise sound with movement.

Is this some kind of closed circuit television trickery, or elaborate practical joke? Despite their uncertain presence, we are haunted by these virtual bodies, the digital indexes of flesh. Even if they are live, they are disembodied, more like holograms or apparitions that float across the surface without being able to puncture it. In slowness and low resolution, they are preserved in their surreal enclosure.

4.



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Finally, at the back of the room, above the stage, is an illuminated box. The image it lights from afar looks like the mouth of a deep-sea monster. It could also be a rorschach ink blot, not a perfect mirror, and everyone sees something different. The mouth vanishes on approaching, and now it depicts the artists standing alone in the room. No floor, no boxes, but figures that have a relationship from across a divide.

Working Hard, Doing Nothing is a puzzle, a maze that we enter but are simultaneously outside. It opens and denies itself, physically obscuring and then allowing from afar. There is a strong sense of two parts that make the same story, that cannot be viewed at the same time. If one is seen, then behind the back the other is changing and morphing, so that returning to it finds it unfamiliar. In this sense the viewer is left suspended between places; one screen and another, the inside and outside of a room. In one hand, something is given - the drama on screen, the promise of an interior space - and in another, it is taken away. The work seems to recall several things, amongst them, Jorge Luis Borges' *Library of Babel* (1941), an infinite quest or search for something that cannot be found. A vast, endless landscape in which all aspects of humanity are held. It proposes a sensation similar to repelling magnets, that brush up against each other but do not touch. But mostly, it brings to mind that philosophical riddle "If a tree falls in a forest, and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?". *Working Hard, Doing Nothing* asks questions about observation and our understanding of reality. Whilst we are denied access to certain parts of the work, we are also responsible for activating it. Through us being there the work exists, and the same actions are suspended once we are no longer around to perceive them.

At this moment, I like to think that the workers pack up their files, turn off the fax and the lights, and leave.

4. One of the first assumptions it seems, is that the performance is a recording and not a live event. Of course, faking it is always an option but not an attractive one to P+F, who assert that without the people there is no real link within the piece. The work cannot be activated without movement, and if the show is open the performance is on too.

5. This sense of the body as an index within some kind of landscape, is explored in Jacques Tati's monumental film, *Playtime*, 1967, cited by P+F as source of inspiration. The film sets up a series of interwoven narratives within an epic, urban metropolis, that are punctuated by the figures inhabiting the various spaces - foyers, offices, an interior design trade-fair, a newly opened restaurant - and the hapless and accident prone Monsieur Hulot, played by the director himself. Tati presents these spaces as hinterlands, terminals where activity is held or thwarted, and in doing so, provides both critique and strange celebration of places that are designed by, and simultaneously restrict the human. A key 'figure' in the film, also in *Working Hard, Doing Nothing*, is the environment of work. In one scene, this is shown to be a gargantuan glass-panelled room, filled with smaller open-top offices and office workers like ants, scurrying between fabricated cubes. Looking down, the sound of incessant typing, loud phone conversations and tinny intercom messages drift upwards. On the ground it is deadly quiet, with the occasional blast from an opened door. The phantom in this particular scene is the telephone operator, suspended in a central glass case and rotating with uncanny fluidity, appearing at every corner. All characters in this place seem to exist in times and spaces that run concurrently, but barely meet, a feeling reinforced by a host of visual gags; using highly polished surfaces to promise a real person but only offering a reflection (or a cardboard cut-out), or encounters that are never intimate because of some blockage - a timely closed exit-barrier that halts a final goodbye. In one conversation, P+F refer to their fascination with how people walk in the film, almost at right angles or by some accidental geometry, and liken these staccato movements to the way they themselves navigated and plotted out space. It's a long way from here to there, from this box to that box.