

wild blue yonder

One of my earliest encounters with Nicky Hirst's work was an installation she created for the artists' studio complex at CSKX in King's Cross in the early nineties. This was a Victorian building falling into disrepair but Hirst's contribution to the project was as if to deny its encroaching



CSKX Studios, London 1992

dilapidation. She set out to draw the space using many metres of plastic-coated electrical cabling, fixing it in neat tight rows, emphasising each bend and turn of the architecture. Daubed in lashings of thick cream paint on cream walls, the cable began to transpose the linear drawing into sculptural installation. Cable lengths amassed at corners and intersections, and then disappeared behind the tongue and groove panelling, only to emerge in tracks of two and three until the space herded them into orderly proximity once again. This is an artist who understands the potential of the space in which she is working, drawing on its defining features in subtle and understated ways, meticulously etching its contours using material with keen associations with the site – cables were looping and dangling throughout the building. As with much of Hirst's work she chose to focus on elements associated with the ordinary and everyday, humble characteristics of the site, and yet with deft, labour-intensive application she instilled a lyrical quality into these mundane features, creating a new narrative for the space, reminding the visitor of the building's former function as an office and reflecting the decorative ironwork of the gas cylinders outside the window.

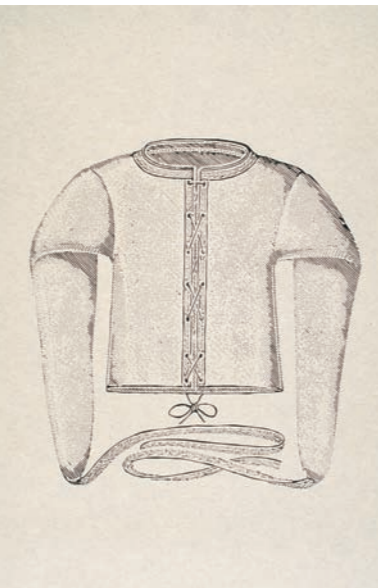
This attention to regular and repeated activity using commonplace materials re-appears in a radically different context in Hirst's pin prick drawings. Dressmaking pins are used to puncture the surface of rich smooth paper creating barely visible forms which emerge and fade as the light catches the tiny ruptures in the paper's surface. Giotto's angels and kitchen sieves are amongst the disparate subjects tackled in this way, selected for their resistance to fixed form or to completeness. The most poignant in this

series of works is the image of a straitjacket. Violent restraint associated with the subject is immediately undermined by the delicate and minutely precise action of its production. It is as if the artist sets out with an interest in making something restrained, quiet, almost not there, and yet, quite unwittingly, the final image takes over, acquiring impact, becoming more forceful than it ever intended to be.

It is this working method, unpicking and unravelling what is often already there, that distinguishes Hirst's practice. These are characteristics not usually associated with public art where bold interventions with immediacy of impact are commonplace and yet in recent years Hirst has completed many successful projects for the public realm. One of her earliest contributions to the sector was for the programme *To Be Continued...* established between 1998 and 2000 as a means of introducing contemporary art to Walsall during the two years prior to the opening of the town's New Art Gallery. English streets are renowned for their clutter of street furniture and for



Lampposts from St Matthew's Church through the High Street and into Park Street, Walsall 1999



Drawing for Hold Me 2002

the sprawling spread of signs of all kinds instructing us what to do and what not to do. Hirst decided to capitalise on this and produce a work that could be slipped into an already busy urban landscape. She created twenty street signs carrying selected extracts from local actor and comedian Meera Syal's book *Anita and Me*. Exactly following the format and the font of the book page, these texts described growing up in the West Midlands as the daughter of a second generation Asian family. In physical terms they become way markers for pedestrians circulating around the town, but as well they performed an emotional role - a public poetry project connecting the townspeople to their cultural heritage and to shared experiences of place.

For *Wild Blue Yonder* Hirst has similarly referenced existing texts and charts, and as always her research followed a path that was particular to the College and its context. Early on in the project the curtain wall at the entrance to the building was identified as the site for an artist's commission. This extensive length of glazing 25 metres long and eight metres high comprises 89 rectangular glass panels. The wall as a symbolic and literal division between public and private space soon became a trigger for the development of ideas – its outward face as a conventional frame for public art signalling the entrance to the building within the landscape of the town, and its internal view ready for closer personal inspection by individuals who make up the college community. The work turns on this threshold – on the outside the visitors are challenged by the text which is reversed and upside down, and once inside all is revealed.

Hirst's first thoughts were to make a work that celebrated the value of education, inspired by the writings of Sydney J Harris who proposed that “the whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows”. In describing her early research she felt her proposal needed to capture the attention of the community, engage the imagination and be read on multiple levels. The work also needed to sit comfortably within the building and be ambitious. She had been thinking of the work having an outward face that could be read as one approached the college. Then, having experienced a full tour of the Church Road site and meeting more staff and students she planned to make a piece that made sense from within the new building. After an intensive period of research, (during which she explored various areas such as people/faces, language/signing/text, trees/forests and eyes/optical/perception) she kept returning to the metaphor of mirrors into windows and to abstract notions of choice, selection and options - a palette. We all wonder at some point whether other people experience their surroundings in the same way we do. Do they hear the same things and see the same colours?¹

Artist and writer David Batchelor has talked about the democratic nature of colour: “Colour belongs to the arts and the sciences, both to high culture and popular culture, both to theory and to story telling. Colour is truly fluid: it spills over subjects and seeps



between disciplines as no one area can claim a privileged or proprietorial relationship with the subject. *Wild Blue Yonder* uses a colour palette, but Hirst has not made the selection. If colour has appeared in her previous work at all it is because it is carried in the material she has selected. The decisions about colour have always been taken by someone else. The same is true here. Hirst has

adopted the RAL colour chart, much used by architects for buildings of this sort, and she has imprinted it onto the building exactly following its sequencing across the glazed panels. Each section is divided vertically, with one half covered in a different RAL colour, the other containing an unrelated Crayola crayon colour name creating the equivalent of an illustrated haiku poem – tickle me pink, atomic tangerine, bitter sweet, wild blue yonder.

Although the entrance to the College building carries the largest element of this project, there are two further connected and integral strands that make up *Wild Blue Yonder*. Five different panels from the glazed screen have been turned into a series of posters distributed around the town centre in shop windows and poster sites in the weeks prior to the opening of the building. With only the college website indicating the source of these subliminal works, the bold colours and unrelated text generate intrigue in the build up to the larger manifestation of the piece, creating a physical link between the College and the town centre. In a further initiative intended to introduce the project to the community of staff and students within the College, a postcard notebook has been produced. Five tear-off postcards take elements from the development of the artist's proposal – quotes from artists and thinkers, a stream of Crayola crayon names, texts

and images which underline the ambiguous relationship between perception and meaning – all of which highlight the complexity of the overall project and whilst hinting at influences upon it, resist the temptation to explain it in any literal way. By contrast these postcards encourage students to take on the project for themselves and use its elements in ways which might be more personal to them.

Wild Blue Yonder is remarkable in its scale and reach, and in many ways echoes the impact of the pinprick drawings. What began life on an A4 piece of paper as a colourful drawing with meticulous attention to the geometry of the building span is now functioning as a stained glass window for the twenty first century projecting coloured light into the pathways of students as they take their coffee breaks and beaming out towards the town at night, signalling the College's place within the local community and inviting participation in its multifarious offerings.

Jeni Walwin
September 2009

¹ Taken from writings by the artist



Nicky Hirst was born in Nottingham in 1963 and now lives and works in London. After a BA in Fine Art and an MA in Art and Architecture, she has pursued a parallel practice within her own studio and working collaboratively with architects. Her many successful projects for the public realm include the new biochemistry building for the University of Oxford, where she was consultant artist working with architects Hawkins\Brown. As well as overseeing the commissioning of works by a number of other artists, she also completed two large commissions for the entrance and cafeteria. She has undertaken a commission for the Sustrans National Cycle route and a collaboration with the Stillman Eastwick-Field Partnership on the refurbishment of the HIV Unit for the Royal Free Hospital, London. In 2008 she was co-curator of the annual ARTfutures show for the Contemporary Art Society. She has contributed sculptures, drawings and installations to many group and solo exhibitions in galleries around the UK and her work has been acquired by a number of public and private collections including the Saatchi Collection, Clifford Chance, Arthur Andersen, Huddersfield Art Gallery, and Sheffield City Art Galleries. She has recently been commissioned to work with Allies and Morrison on a public art project for The Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter, and in collaboration with the architects Jestico+Whiles she is creating new works for the Passmores Secondary School in Essex.

Text by Jeni Walwin

Photographs by Stephen White, FXP and the artist

© Nicky Hirst

Designed and Printed by Omni

Many thanks to Howard O Keeffe and Jane Chapman at Bracknell & Wokingham College, Jeni Walwin and Laura Eldret, Martin Clark at Active Installs and Bob Pain and the team at Omni.

Bracknell & Wokingham College
Church Road
Bracknell
Berkshire
RG12 1DJ
01344 766200
www.bracknell.ac.uk

