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Kevin Kelly Mountain Madness. 2000.

One day, we joked, we would not be too surprised if we struggled to the summit of a mountain only to be greeted by the classic words from the streets of Glasgow, "Big Issue pal?" Well no, really we would be a little surprised.

There is a photo, taken by Neal, of me sitting on a mountainside reading Variant (1) which puts me in mind of one of the central themes of his work; the crossover between adventure activities and art. I have seen many of Neal's works in the making and we have also worked together on a group exhibition called Mountain Madness. This show was held at the Glasgow Project Room in 1998. Earlier we occupied neighbouring studios at the Glasgow School of Art and we often talked about the idea of using our other interests as material for art works. We discussed the work of artists like Dan Shippides and Roddy Buchanan which dealt with the inclusion of sport in an art context. A long plank of wood lay on its edge on my studio floor, for fun we would take turns trying to walk along its upturned edge. We talked of the merits and demerits of making art directly referencing the structures of play, sport and ideas of formal sculpture in relation to the activity of hill walking and climbing.

At that time Neal was involved in making large grey paintings/structures which I could hear him repeatedly sanding and re-polishing in his studio next door. This obsessive reworking, painting and re-sanding of the same surface echo similar activities such as the trying and retrying of climbs on walls and cliff faces present in his later video work.

Neal began to refer directly to mountain adventures in his work. He produced a small wall-mounted piece called Tent on a Ledge; it consisted of a grey painted balsa wood wedge upon which sat a tiny red tent. It was a beautiful piece that had a tight formal feel, whilst expressing a lot of theatricality and narrative content; drawing on feelings of adventure, exposure and vulnerability. From this piece he went on to explore these themes in a series of well crafted white metal light boxes with bold black lettering spelling out single words such as Ledge and Error.

The apparel of climbing is now more clearly visible in the work, it is used directly in pieces like Dead Flat Vertical (2) which features a climbing wall, and the sequined Sleeping Bag (3), The decorative nature of the materials and equipment of climbing are drawn in and transformed in the making of art pieces: the use of orange Formica in the creation of a traditional A-frame tent transforms this simple object into a formal sculpture and a shift in meaning occurs when a high altitude sleeping bag is covered with sequins. The origins of these constructed 28 objects locate themselves in Neal's interest in mountaineering and climbing as well as his interest in the writings on and dreamings of adventurers (4). He is also concerned with ideas involving the measurement of space and time, in particular the application of physical contours, more associated with mountainous terrain, to cityscapes. His interest extends to a more immediate experience of time, referenced but often hidden in his work, by the counting of paces in city streets and the steps of the stairways in high-rise buildings.

Neal's art practice has a logical thread running throughout. Without being overtly fashionable he is trying to create a place of his own within an art context, in effect working and reworking to stake a claim for his own pitch. This is somewhere near the identification of sport and adventure pursuits with an artistic stance based on one of endurance and endeavour - the laying bare of the emotional rift between one's own expectation of oneself and the ability to survive in an exposed artistic environment. These concerns have a direct relationship to mountaineering and climbing as well as the containment of the self within a matrix of urban versus rural adventures. His art references the condition of being in fear as one's lot in the city and on the mountains and explores a relationship between the pushing of oneself in a sport and in an artistic environment. The inherent desire to achieve a goal in art has a direct and compelling counterpart in the world of sport. The need for

recognition is on going but with the knowledge of being only as good as the last work or result. The forever-ever land of the drive to create new work, the always depending on the next opportunity, has an uncanny relation to the phenomenon of the false horizon encountered in mountain climbing whereby the top always appears to be closer than it really is. There is a sad heroism in this process which elegises the look-at-me existence which, even for the most retiring, is still present as one of the necessary conditions of living and working as an artist.

Notes

1. Variant: cross-currents in culture, a free magazine based in Glasgow.
2. Installation, Dead Flat Vertical, Transmission Gallery, Glasgow, 1999.
3. Sleeping Bag, Red Marauder, Tramway, 2000.
4. I'm thinking here of the style of writing on mountaineering typified by the Scottish writer W H Murray and films such as Cliff Hanger and The Eiger Sanction.

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