

The London Consortium
Static. Issue 05 – Metamorphosis

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Nicola Dale

A Secret Heliotropism

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Static is the web resource of the London Consortium, a unique collaboration between the Architectural Association, Birkbeck College (University of London), the Institute of Contemporary Arts, and Tate.

Aiming to initiate interdisciplinary intellectual debate about paradoxes of contemporary culture, Static presents contributions from an international team of academics, artists and cultural practitioners.

The materials, assembled for each issue around a theme, include analytical essays and articles, interviews, art projects, photographic images, etc. Static will welcome feedback, argument and commentary from scholars, artists, and other readers, and will be regularly updated in order to communicate the most recent and relevant ideas and interpretations on the chosen topic.

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Nicola Dale, *A Secret Heliotropism*, hand cut found book (320 pages), measuring 23.5 x 30 cm closed and 123 x 30 cm open (approx).

As flowers turn toward the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism
the past strives to turn toward that sun which is rising in the sky of
history.

Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', Part IV

Inspired by Benjamin's argument, I created "A Secret Heliotropism" in order to get across my understanding of the philosopher's idea: namely, that our view of history changes depending on our position, be it temporal, geographical, political, moral or philosophical. Just as a flower follows the sun round the sky, so we too change the meaning of historical events to suit ourselves.

Benjamin's analogy appealed to me as a starting point both because of the succinctness with which it conveys a complex idea and because of the visual nature of the imagery used. I decided to use "The People's Century" - a populist 20th century history book - as the basis of my piece. This was not only because it covers the period during which Benjamin was active; but also because of the relatively simplistic summation of history it conveys. Such appropriation is part of my practice - I use it in order to explore ideas of originality and authorship in the production of artwork. Each of the 320 full-colour pages of the book were therefore transformed into long leaf strands, thus shifting the book's status from mass produced text to unique object.

The process of making the book was a vital aspect of the piece, in that the pages cut became a physical record of the passing of time (12 months to be precise). This labour intensive approach to the creation of art is again a common feature in a lot of my work and in this case it gave me ample time to consider the implications of Benjamin's words.

An unforeseen outcome of the painstaking cutting process was that the more I worked on the book, the lighter it became, shedding its old leaves to grow new ones. This alteration in the weight of the book appeared as a melancholy reminder of all the knowledge - including Benjamin's - which will surely be lost to us in the passage of time. Despite this however, I also found it pleasing to consider the material's own past. The leaves I had created were a reminder of the book's historical origins: trees turned to paper and symbolically back again. The work also has its own secret mechanism, as I created a pattern which allows the pages to be folded down flat and put back into their cover to transform once more into an ordinary looking book.

The work is displayed so that the leaves are drawn out towards the nearest source of sunlight. This means that the book's appearance changes depending on its context, thus underlining the idea of change inherent in Benjamin's argument. 'A Secret Heliotropism' is therefore never the same book twice and this, I believe, is the essence of Benjamin's idea: past events are not rigid and fixed, but rather, as malleable and mutable as a delicate paper structure.

'A Secret Heliotropism' will next be seen in a group exhibition, "Memories, Moments and Other Curiosities", curated by Lauren Healey at SALTBURNARTISTS' PROJECTS, 30-32 Marske Road, Saltburn-by-the-Sea, TS12 1QG. www.saltburnartistsprojects.org.uk