Behind Closed Doors

Monica Bonvicini, Dan Graham, Hans Haacke, Candida Höfer, Hiraki Sawa, Sean Snyder, Vangelis Vlahos, Amelie von Wulffen, Jane and Louise Wilson

12 March – 1 May 2005

'Behind Closed Doors' is an exhibition that brings together a diverse selection of works to explore the hidden or secret histories of buildings. By looking at emotional, social and political factors, rather than focusing on architecture, the works variously emphasise the built environment as a place of potential conflict, power, and beauty. The artists included in the exhibition all seek to challenge, undermine or subvert the view of buildings we know, visit, live or work in, presenting them as sites of complex meaning and resonance.

The works in this exhibition range from the documentary to the fantastical, each challenging our understanding of authority and ownership, purpose and use in the buildings they refer to. Using varied materials, including collage, architectural models, photomontage, video installation and sculpture, they draw attention to the undiscovered worlds Behind Closed Doors.

Many of the ideas running through the exhibition are rooted in two seminal works of Conceptual Art, produced in the 1960's and 70's by Dan Graham and Hans Haacke. These artists have gone on to influence a generation of contemporary artists, both in the forms they adopted (text and image) and their critical standpoints. Both Graham and Haacke identify real situations in order to demystify economic, social and political systems. In *Behind Closed Doors* there is the opportunity to consider how these ideas have been resumed and reconfigured by artists working today.

Gallery 2 is dominated by a ground-breaking work by **Hans Haacke**. *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1,1971,* (1971) reveals a hidden and corrupt system of ownership, that of the Shapolsky real estate group made up of seventy different corporations and headed by one wealthy individual, Harry Shapolsky. This work, consisting of 144 black and white photographs, data sheets and charts, depicts the façades of all the buildings bought and sold by the group. Haacke discovered that they were all located in two of the major slum areas in New York at the time, the Lower East Side and Harlem.

When it was made in 1971, the controversial nature of this work led the Guggenheim Museum in New York to cancel its solo show with Haacke planned for that year, leading to protests that helped establish Haacke's reputation as one of the most political artists of his generation.

This re-use of existent, archive material to reveal hidden systems and realities continues to be a fruitful approach for artists, exemplary of art's capacity to

allow us to see the world differently. Vangelis Vlahos and Sean Snyder, following in the footsteps of Haacke, both co-opt found material, footage and data to offer different perspectives, alternative histories of buildings, hidden by political manipulation or media bias.

Born in 1971, the year in which Haacke produced his now seminal work, **Vangelis Vlahos** produces hand-crafted architectural models of buildings. These models, fabricated from cool grey card, recreate and dissect buildings with significant and intriguing histories. *Buildings that proclaim a nation's identity to the world should not be misunderstood* (2003) comprises a cardboard model of the United States Embassy building in Athens, designed by Walter Gropius, along with representation and documentation of a terrorist missile attack on the building in 1996.

Working with photography, text and video, **Sean Snyder** explores different aspects of urban space and architecture. He uses both new and existent material to examine symbolic sites, economic and political structures. Part of an ongoing project - Temporary Occupation (2003-2004) - *Gate Two Street* (2004) investigates an area of Japan utilised by the US military. Kadena Air Base, located in Okinawa City is the largest military base in the Far East. The street extending from Kadena Air Base's Gate 2 is commonly referred to as 'Gate 2 Street'. This area, once alive with bars, clubs and brothels, is now in decline as the military has moved entertainment facilities into its compound. Snyder's infra-red video footage and photographs explore the impact this has had on the local cultural and economic community as well as the mark left on the environment.

A number of works ask us to consider the design and construction of buildings to suggest alternative meanings and effects. With an emphasis on archetypal Modernist architecture, these works seek to challenge the past fixation on repetitive, rectilinear buildings. Using different media and perspectives, these works nonetheless share preoccupations with the language, desire and beauty of the architectural landscape.

Homes for America, (1966-1967) **Dan Graham**'s influential photo-essay, challenges the traditional idea of an autonomous art object. Originally produced as a magazine layout to be published in Arts Magazine it uses images and text. The photographs depict generic, pre-fabricated, post-war suburban housing in New Jersey and Canada. With no individuality, these box-like homes extend in repetitive rows, illustrating the throw-away nature of buildings originally meant to protect and shelter. Graham describes his process as a desire *'to show that Minimalism was related to a real social situation that could be documented.'*

Also working with photography **Jane and Louise Wilson** explore buildings that present themselves as authoritative, sterile, controlled. They use these bold architectural statements as their subject, interweaving fantasy and reality through their atmospheric films and photographs. Twisting our expectations of spaces, they de-familiarise them through the use of colour, light and movement. The series of photographs entitled *Safe Light* (2004) presents the de-populated interior of a chemical factory suffused with an eerie yellow glow,

while *A Free and Anonymous Monument (Apollo Pavilion, Peterlee)* (2003) is a four-screen video installation recording the contemporary reality of a visionary structure designed by Victor Pasmore for a housing estate in Peterlee, near Durham.

Using familiar building materials and processes **Monica Bonvicini** creates sculptural installations that highlight desire and gender in architecture. *Stonewall 3* (2002) a vast free-standing construction made of galvanised steel, chains and broken security glass, alludes to contemporary buildings and imposes an architectural barrier in Gallery 1. Aggressive, forceful and dominant this work stems from the artist's challenge to the inequalities in the male-dominated discipline of architecture.

Throughout the exhibition the emphasis on analysing exterior views of buildings is counterbalanced by a curiosity to look inside:
'What happens behind the flats' heavy doors can most often be perceived only through fragmented echoes, those splinters, remnants, shadows, those first moves or incidents or accidents that happen in what are called the common areas, soft little sounds damped by the red woollen carpet, embryos of communal life which never go further than the landing.'
Georges Perec, '*Life: A User's Manual'*

Candida Höfer photographs the interiors of public or semi-public spaces. Her large scale, vivid images of rooms are without people, focussing instead on the architecture, function, and ornamentation of interiors. Her observations imbue the images with a sense of history and time. In her recent photographs of *Schloss Sankt Emmeram, Regensburg* (2003) Höfer presents an extraordinary vision of the contemporary reality of a baroque castle in Germany. From this series, *Schloss Sankt Emmeram, Regensburg I* and *XXXI,* depict private rooms in the castle which are clearly in use by their inhabitants. In the images there is a stark contrast between modern, designer furnishings and the historical interior, which emphasises the individuality of the ecstatic surroundings.

Starting with photographs of 'real' buildings, which are fused with drawing and painting, **Amelie von Wulffen** creates open-ended, impossible fantasies. Her work encapsulates the '*story of the spaces'* she has encountered and aims to inscribe this narrative into drawing. The two *Untitled* works reconstruct interior spaces from Wulffen's personal memory, in which the photograph acts as trigger while the blurred and frayed edges of the paint illustrate the gaps in our ability to remember. Colour and form allow these collages to illustrate a transitional place somewhere between the real and imagined.

In the video works *Dwelling* (2002) and *Elsewhere* (2003), **Hiraki Sawa** uses private, domestic space to create fantastical flights of the imagination: aeroplanes fly across bedroom floors; kitchen utensils move around purposefully. The only boundaries in his animated video works are the walls, ceilings and closed doors of the buildings they inhabit. The use of the aeroplanes in *Dwelling* conjures up the potential threat of the outside world entering into our private lives, a poignant fear after the terrorist attack of 9/11.

'Architects are in the threat management business …But the only architecture that might resist the threat of the terrorist is one that already captures the fragility and strangeness of our bodies and identities, an architecture of vulnerability, sensitivity and perversity.'
Mark Wigley, 'Insecurity by Design', 2002

Behind Closed Doors offers many different perspectives on the buildings we know, live or work in, places that stand as potent symbols of politics, wealth, power or failed utopian projects, or that accommodate personal retreats for the imagination. Highlighting provocative and interesting ways of thinking and looking, this exhibition seeks to open up the way we think about buildings and asks us to consider how the structures we create to provide shelter come to signify so much more in the course of our lived experience.