Gavin Hipkins
The Quarry
18 May – 16 June 2013
The Physics Room

Gavin Hipkins: The Quarry
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A couple of years ago, a student from Ilam School of Fine Arts stencilled onto the exterior of the design department "art cannot be taught", a line taken from Walter Gropius' Bauhaus Manifesto.[1] The weapon of choice was a spray bottle of Exit Mould: blackened layers of lichen and grime that had collected on the Brutalist building's raw concrete surface were bleached and stripped away, leaving the resulting message in pristine grey concrete.

Critic Reyner Banham defined late modern Brutalist architecture (1950s-70s) as exhibiting three major attributes: 'memorability as an image', 'clear exhibition of structure', and 'valuation of materials "as found"'.[2] Brutalism's inherent boldness, direct treatment of materials and use of raw concrete have been celebrated by some and condemned by others. Along with being associated with urban decay due to materials weathering poorly and surfaces attracting graffiti, several critics have claimed that Brutalism projects a certain hostility towards its occupants, or even an atmosphere of totalitarianism.[3]

However when writing on Gavin Hipkin's photo-composite work *The Habitat* (1999-2000), featuring images of the Brutalist architecture of New Zealand university campuses, architectural historian Paul Walker argued that the movement was perhaps not as inimical to daily life as its title suggests. Walker described how Brutalism's 'surfaces for marring and marking' almost invited 'inhabitants to leave traces of themselves, to make Brutalist buildings their own'.[4]

The Brutalist buildings of University of Canterbury's Ilam Campus (built mid-1960s - late 1970s) seem to encourage various interactions with their surfaces; exhibiting traces of age, occupancy and use. Students and lecturers mark their raw concrete exteriors with posters, paint and chalk in ways that are almost unthinkable compared with the campus' later architectural additions. Meanwhile, the Christchurch weather

[1] Walter Gropius, Bauhaus Manifesto and Program, Staatliche Bauhaus, Weimar, April 1919.
[2] Reyner Banham, 'The New Brutalism' *Architectural Review*, December 1955, 354-61.
[3] http://www.jamessrussell.net/James_S._Russell/Blog/Entries/2013/4/21_Paul_Rudolph_and_the_Marathon_Bomber.html, accessed 10 May 2013.
[4] Paul Walker, "Rough Poetry" in *Gavin Hipkins: The Habitat* (exh. Cat), Artspace, Auckland and Adam Art Gallery, Victoria University, Wellington, 2000, 18-19.

leaves damp, mossy stains on the buildings where creepers grow seemingly undisturbed.

Interactions between people, architectural form and unconstructed nature are explored in *The Quarry*, Hipkins' installation at The Physics Room, bringing together two works featuring Christchurch's local architecture and surroundings. The first, a fragmented narrative short film of the same title – juxtaposes spoken excerpts from John Ruskin's 1851 essay *The Stones of Venice,* with footage shot in Hagley Park, Halswell Quarry and expanding outer suburbs. Paired with this work is *The Sector*, a series of 50 black and white images of Brutalist architecture at the University of Canterbury.

Installed in the front gallery space, *The Sector* revisits the built environment of Ilam Campus thirteen years after *The Habitat*, featuring key buildings belonging to this late modern architectural movement, such as the James Hight library, the History Building and the three blocks that comprise the School of Fine Arts.

Hipkins' photographs, printed on expired photographic paper dating from the 50s and 60s, mirror the architectural strategies or "rough poetry" of Brutalism. Many images in the work are over or under exposed, discoloured or blurry, drawing attention to the marring and marking of light and chemical processes in analogue photography. The emphasis is on the boldness and authenticity of raw material processes rather than a refined product.

The Sector is hung in a linear frieze characteristic of Hipkins' photo-composite works. By resembling a filmstrip the photographs encourage us to search for an absent narrative. Here Hipkins presents the banal passages of the everyday: staircases to be climbed, handrails to touch, benches for sitting. Although these details are functional–designed for occupancy and use–Hipkins' images are deathly absent of people. There is a sense of ghostliness in the darkness or haziness obscuring the photographic subjects.

The Sector provides a stark contrast to the way we have become accustomed to seeing the University represented through advertising photography. Buildings are merely backdrops in banners, billboards and bus stop advertisements exhibiting colourful, glossy images of smiling students along with a variety of bad puns and rather desperate catchphrases. The 'University of Canterbury' tells its prospective students, 'UCAN...' or 'UC More, Feel More, Do More'.

William McAloon once wrote of Hipkins that his 'interest in utopian ideas and totalitarian imagery–the one being the antimony of the other–deals in the dream and

nightmare of modernity'.[5] *The Sector* thus revisits the utopian/totalitarian logic of Brutalist architecture in the context of a different institutional reality. More than a decade after *The Habitat* Hipkins' new subject, the University, is currently in the midst of a widely publicised financial crisis spurred on by the effects of Christchurch's recent earthquakes. Aside from conjuring up the atmosphere of sci-fi films like Hipkins' other titles, *The Sector* invokes the evolution of 'public' and 'private' sectors that has seen tertiary education become a saleable commodity.

Recently, Hipkins has begun making short films that bring together 19th Century texts and contemporary settings in order to produce what he has called 'a third meaning'.[6] He describes this as 'a hybridity, technologically woven from two discreet and interconnecting narrative elements, disparate times, conflated social and cultural meanings'.[7]

The Quarry explores two interconnecting narratives. Ruskin's canonical text is presented alongside shots of banal, pre-suburban environments interspersed with images of craggy mountain ranges and fractured rock forms. As Ruskin looks for clues in nature that might shed light on the foundations of architectural form and beauty, Hipkins' film presents indistinguishable brand-spanking new houses in Christchurch's outer suburbs in various stages of construction: wooden-peg markers poking out of heaped earth, hastily sprayed with fluorescent yellow paint; digger tracks in the mud; a readymade street waiting for houses.

In *The Quarry* we become aware of the forms and processes whereby we shape our everyday environment. The steel roofing frame we see resembling metallic shards of rock–, a geometric outline forming its own mountain range will most likely be covered by walls now. Digger tracks will have been smoothed over and grass sewn. Hipkins invites us to reconsider the activities of building and landscaping not as signifiers of progression or development, but as a series of ongoing and repeated temporal structures and performances that share a peculiar logic with our surroundings.

Excerpts from Ruskin's text emphasise the possibilities of viewing nature and architecture from different distances to open up new relations; as 'fine gradations, roundings, and incidents vanish … a totally unexpected arrangement is established between the remainder of the markings'.

In Hipkins's film, nature consists of construction zones and manicured suburban imagery, but it is also raw and volatile, terrifying even. In one shot, clouds thunder over a single giant mountain that appears to pulsate to a dark and foreboding

[5] William McAloon, *Model Worlds: A Decade of Work by Gavin Hipkins*, Art New Zealand: No. 109, Summer 2003-04, 59.
[6] Artist statement taken from Circuit Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand: http://www.circuit.org.nz/artist/gavin-hipkins, accessed 10 May 2013.
[7] Ibid.

soundtrack provided by artist and musician Torben Tilly, invoking a mixture of fear and awe equated by theorists such as Edmund Burke with the sublime. Burke's concept of the sublime centred on experiences that supply a kind of thrill or shudder of perverse pleasure, mixing fear and delight; a feeling provoked by aspects of nature, which due to their vastness or obscurity cannot be considered beautiful, but instead are likely to fill us with a degree of horror.[8]

Hipkins' mountain and rock forms are similarly disturbing (and perhaps thrilling) in their sense of timelessness and remoteness, their enormity. Ruskin describes the crest of an alp as being 'dyed with the depth of heaven and bathed in the calm of eternity'. We feel more at ease in human-scaled suburbs.

Hipkins' uninhabited pre-suburban environments in Waitikiri, Delamain, Belfast, Marshland, and Wigram Park are, again, strangely absent of people. They await the hordes of idealised kiwi families pictured on billboards around Christchurch, promoting such new developments as the ultimate middle-class lifestyle in immaculate, park-like surroundings on the fringes of the city.

Currently, visitors to The Physics Room often end up gazing out of the gallery's windows in the old High Street Post Office building, down onto the former CBD below: in Hipkins' case, another interconnecting narrative for *The Quarry*. We see exposed interiors of buildings, cranes looming over the sky-scape, plants taking over empty lots; traces of age, occupancy and use that are being slowly stripped away and inhabitants trying to establish new ways of making the city their own. Hipkins' echoes the perverse mixture of fear and delight so prevalent in this post-earthquake landscape, unfriendly and foreign.

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[8] Simon Morley, "The Contemporary Sublime" in Simon Morley, ed., *The Sublime*, London, Whitechapel Gallery, 2010, 15.