

An Area of Outstanding Unnatural Beauty

Richard Wentworth

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York Way. Stemming from King's Cross station, it cuts through a desolated landscape of industrial depots and railways grids. Its sparse façades, dirtied by years of neglect, and its narrow pavements, flanked by high walls, threaten the lone nightwalker. I head off north with my eyes fixed on the pavement, certain that nothing will interrupt my moving meditation; York Way has no attractive shop windows. I catch a quick glimpse of my silhouette in the corner of my right eye; it's enough to bring me back to King's Cross's forbidding reality. I stop dead and go back a few steps to find a standing mirror, which reads 'An Area of Outstanding Unnatural Beauty', the name of Artangel's latest commission, an art installation by Richard Wentworth. Bizarrely familiar sounds emanate from the Old General Plumbing Supplies.

“ping.....
ping,
ping.....ping”

The iron gate is slightly ajar. At first glance I spot a table covered with leaflets and mini A to Z's. A strange ritual is taking place next to it: newcomers have gathered around a map of London and are arming themselves with a red map pin and piercing the paper surface at the point of their dwelling. The 'disease' has spread so quickly that the red plastic heads are already small clusters.

Further in a battle is raging: Ping-Pong tables have colonised the vast warehouse space. The most serious opponents are training for 'Ping', the tournament which takes place throughout the duration of the project. As I get closer, I notice that surrounding street names are screen-printed on the tables. The scale of the city

is reversed: the players are giants while London streets have been flattened and reduced to a width of a few centimetres.

Behind me stands an imposing tower. I climb its staircase and reach a small platform equipped with a home-made periscope. From here, I can embrace all the marked tables in one glance and observe the changes inflicted on the footprint of King's Cross: the tables are reconfigured to adapt to the influx of visitors. Each time, they form new patterns parodying the games played by urban planners. With my eye to the periscope's viewer, I turn around: 360 degrees of grey roofs and one British flag planted on top of King's Cross. Has the artist placed it there to mark his 'Area of Outstanding Unnatural Beauty'?

Richard Wentworth masterminds a series of narratives, which he knits together through the use of cartographic mapping systems. These evolving maps mimic the complexity of the urban space – its numerous layers being shown here – whether in an anecdotal and reflexive way as with the red pins' map, or in a less self-conscious manner with the changing streetscape of ping-pong tables. Wentworth blurs the boundaries between players and visitors by choosing a sport accessible to most. As visitors become living sculptures, osmosis between exhibition, recreational, and political space is taking place: through the game, visitors are encouraged to regain control of the local urban territory. The flux and flow of balls imitate the fluid exchange of ideas which are changing the face of the city: with the construction of the Channel Tunnel Link, most of King's Cross is being levelled and utterly redesigned. Wentworth declares that the regeneration of King's Cross is the result of "a face transplant mentality"¹. Like situationist Guy Debord's critique of the sanitising of *Les Halles* in Paris, Wentworth doesn't believe that a radical change, oblivious of the "complex personality" of the area, is appropriate. This complexity is reflected by the Ping finalists' diverse background: the British Library team will play against a crew of local cabbies.

¹ Richard Wentworth. Personal Communication. September 2001

Despite the fact the ‘Ping’ finalists are local to the area, Wentworth doesn’t see his work as ‘community art’. His intention is to recreate the dramatic dimension of “being a participant in a city”². His installation tackles important issues about the future of our urban society and demonstrates that artworks can be experienced and interpreted at several levels. Moreover, it shows that contextualisation and site-specificity can successfully address both the local constituencies and transient art audiences.

As I step back in to the turbulent York Way, the sound of bouncing balls is overwhelmed by those of machines ploughing the polluted soil of King’s Cross in the preparation of a new city.

Stéphanie Delcroix ©

² Idem