



Open Arts Objects

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/open-arts-objects>

Teaching Support Sheet

Presenter: Gill Perry

Work: Roger Hiorns, copper sulphate crystals from *Seizure*, 2008

Professor Gill Perry explores an installation in an abandoned flat in Harper Road (SE1) South London, 2008, commissioned by the Arts Charity Artangel. An abandoned ground floor flat was filled with liquid copper sulphate crystals. The building itself, and the estate around Harper Road have now been demolished for as part of a major redevelopment of Southwark, including the flat that hosted *Seizure*. The installation was finally removed in January, 2010.

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/resource/open-arts-object-roger-hiorns-seizure-2008>

Before watching the film

You may find it helpful to check out the information on the Artangel (the arts charity that commissioned the original work in 2008) site about ***Seizure***: <https://www.artangel.org.uk/project/seizure/>

A partial reconstruction is now housed in **Yorkshire Sculpture Park**:

<http://www.ysp.co.uk/exhibitions/roger-hiorns-seizure>

You may also want to introduce some information about installation art – a genre which is now ubiquitous in contemporary art (see discussion below).

Questions to ask your students before watching the film.

1. What do you know about **installation art**?

We suggest that you give students some basic information/definitions of installation art and its importance within contemporary art. Some key points might include:

- Installations are often made up of an assemblage of objects, structures and media and can be displayed within museums or be site specific; they can interact with indoor or outdoor sites; they can be mobile or fixed; they can be permanent or temporary.
- While installations may include paintings or sculptures they typically assemble ordinary industrial, found and recycled objects, and may be combined with film or video.
- Origins of installation art can be traced to the post war period, especially the 1950s and 60s in America and Europe; they are related to environments or assemblages of found commercial debris in the work of earlier artists such as Schwitters or Duchamp, and to the environments and 'happenings' of artists such as Alan Kaprow. It is often argued that during the 1960s many artists developed installations that were more closely tied to a radical agenda, in dialogue with social contexts (Matta Clark, Vito Acconci, Yayou Kusama etc.). Inatallation art can be seen as a versatile and potentially subversive medium that can interact in different ways with its immediate environment.
- Installation art does away with the frame, and encourages the viewer to move around the work and experience it through time, changing viewing positions. This involves what is sometimes called a more 'embodied' form of looking.

There are some useful sources that can support your teaching here, including publications by Claire Bishop, *Installation Art*, Tate Publishing; G. Perry and P. Wood (eds), *Themes in Contemporary Art*, Yale UP, 2004; see especially chapters 5 and 6 by Kristine Stiles and Gill Perry.

2. How would you describe this work? Is it a building, installation, sculpture, space etc? Describe what you see on the screen, and say how you might view this work.

The work is quite difficult to describe as it is within a building that has somehow been ‘sculpted’ or reshaped by the crystals. It is an installation that the viewer is invited to walk around and experience, and it would be difficult to get a sense of its shape, structure and details without that experience. The phantasmagoria of brilliant blue crystals you see on the screen is rather different to the experience of walking into the space and the various rooms, all carpeted with blue.

3. What do you know (from your science/chemistry lessons?) about the formation of copper sulphate crystals? How are crystals formed?

You could use this podcast to develop some inter-disciplinary teaching with your science/chemistry department. The processes of crystallisation involved were fascinating, and you might want to provide some background information on copper sulphate. The Wikipedia link is a starting point:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Copper\(II\)_sulfate](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Copper(II)_sulfate)

The Artangel site documents the process:

‘Copper sulphate powder was mixed with boiling water to make 75,000 litres of highly saturated solution. The solution was pumped into the sealed-off flat until each room was filled right up to the ceiling. After a month of cooling down, the liquid was siphoned off to reveal a startling transformation. Hidden from the human eye and without any human intervention, an extraordinary sculpture had formed’

4. The flat that hosted *Seizure* in Harper Road has now been demolished as part of a major redevelopment plan for this part of Southwark. Find Harper Road on a recent map of London and look at its relationship to large estates and areas of social housing in this area. Note that the nearby Heygate Estate, Southwark, was demolished between 2011 and 2014 as part of the urban regeneration of the Elephant and Castle area.

The neighbouring Heygate Estate, its history and demolition is featured in a Wikipedia entry: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heygate_Estate, which details the history and changing fortunes of this social housing project which borders Harper Road.

After watching the film

1. In what ways does *Seizure* belong in the category ‘installation art’? To what extent would you identify it as an art work?
5. How does the carpet of blue crystals relate to the objects and spaces that it covers (i.e. the interior spaces of the bedsit)?
6. How does this crystallised flat relate to the environment of estate around it, and some of the social issues associated with the area?
7. What effects (artistic and social) do you think the artist was trying to achieve in this work?

8. Can you think of any other art works (modern or contemporary) that have used crystals? What can these chemicals, and the processes of crystallisation involved, contribute to art. Is it science, or art, or both?

There are no right or wrong answers to these final questions. They are rather designed to test the student's ability to absorb and think about information provided in the podcast. The relationship with the original social housing around *Seizure* is clearly an important one, and some students will probably want to explore the relevance of the drugs culture (and use of other crystals!) that surrounded this area. In an interview Hiorns recalled working as a postman when a student in the 90s in this area, when he observed what he described as 'daily transgressions'...'Meth users, CJD patients and immigrants were on my walk, and this social mix lead to interesting patterns of behaviour...' (Gill Perry, *Playing at Home: The House in Contemporary Art* Reaktion Books, 2013, p.162).

Other contemporary British artists who make extensive use of crystals are the partnership of Ackroyd and Harvey (<http://www.ackroydandharvey.com/>). Some of their work is reviewed in the podcast www.openartsarchive.org/archive/crystal-world/ based on an exhibition titled 'Crystal World' held at the Royal Society in 2011.

Comparative analysis

Choose another example of **installation** art produced within the last 20 years that you are familiar with, and compare the two works:

1. How would you list the materials used in each?
2. Do they both invite a similar physical engagement from the viewer?
3. What kinds of meanings are suggested or evoked by both?
4. What associations or references can find in each? Are there any similarities and significant differences?
5. These are both works of recent art. Do either have anything to say about contemporary experience or social life?

Obviously answers to this analysis will depend on the comparative work/s chosen. Possible well-known examples might include Tracey Emin *My Bed*, 1999, or Mona Hatoum *Homebound*, 2000, which might provoke some interesting comparative points. For example, all three use domestic objects or spaces which they transform dramatically. While the former explores the personal and sleazy aspects of the iconography of the bedroom, Hatoum's gives kitchen equipment an ominous and threatening inflection. In contrast, Hiorns seems to have given an abandoned ground floor bedsit a quasi-poetic quality as it is enveloped in. All three also invite the viewer to move around the work; there is no single viewing point.

Online Activity

1. Search the databases of **Artangel**, the arts charity that commissioned the original work in 2008, and **Yorkshire Sculpture Park**, <http://www.yssp.co.uk/exhibitions/roger-hiorns-seizure>, where a partial reconstruction is now housed.

What kind of observations you can make from your searches?

How would you compare the original installation with the partial reconstruction in Yorkshire Sculpture Park?

Does the very different later setting in a sculpture park change the effects of the work?

Hopefully this comparison will encourage students to visit the reconstruction in YSP. Clearly, the very different setting of an extended art space, sculpture park and gallery gives the work a rather different status as an installation concerned with the poetic and transformative potential of copper sulphate crystals to carpet a pre-constructed space. While it gives a powerful sense of the strangely faceted, blue crystals that cover and transform the space, we do not experience the vivid contrast provided by the original so-called sink estate with its boarded up windows and surroundings awaiting demolition. The social environment of the original *Seizure* was heavy with memories of late modernist housing estates, its local gang culture and social problems.

Further Info:

RELEVANT FILMS

If students are interested in exploring these themes further, especially the gang culture of South London housing estates, you can recommend:

HARRY BROWN 2009, partly filmed on a mobile phone and starring Michael Caine; it features a terrifying picture of the gang culture of the local Heygate Estate;

ATTACK THE BLOCK 2011, a more mischievous sci-fi comedy based in a south London housing estate https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attack_the_Block An extract is available on Youtube.