

# Nottingham Contemporary

*Tony Simpson*

High Pavement forms one end of the main axis of medieval Nottingham; Nottingham Castle rises on Castle Rock, at the other end. Part way along, at Weekday Cross, Nottingham Contemporary now spreads across the incline. It clings to the cliff, part of what is now the Lace Market ‘creative quarter’.

Caruso’s ‘arrogant’ design for the Contemporary, one of the finest exhibition spaces in England according to the *Financial Times*, comprises three public floors, hewn into the sandstone bluff. Down below is The Space, a versatile auditorium with an excellent acoustic. Into these congenial rooms pour more and more visitors, as word spreads about this happening place.

‘International Art, For Everyone, For Free’; the Contemporary’s statement of intent displays on trams gliding up Middle Hill, outside the gallery. And the gallery has been true to its word, in the three or so years since the doors opened. In 2009, David Hockney visited Nottingham for the first time, for ‘1960-68: *A Marriage of Styles*’, the launch exhibition devoted to his early years in London and Los Angeles, curated by Alex Farquharson, founding Director of the Contemporary since 2007, with Jim Waters. This set a high standard, and attracted much attention in addition to Hockney himself.

Farquharson set out his vision for the Contemporary in *Histories of the Present*, published in 2010, although it is a kind of pre-history assembly of shows and events in Nottingham and the surrounding shire during 2008, prior to the opening of the gallery itself, in 2009. ‘Now and Then’, as he entitled his perky introduction to

◀ *Entering the gallery from High Pavement.*

Photo: Richard Bryant

*Histories*, anticipated *Kafou*, 2012's much acclaimed show of Haitian art (see p.82), but also engagement with the geography of colonialism and occupation of Palestine, manifested in *Common Assembly*, shown alongside Thomas Demand's fashionable photographs of architectural models, in Spring 2012. *Common Assembly's* light, airy and elegant presentation of Palestinians' aspirations, while not shrinking from their protracted suffering, set alongside some startling Palestinian art, revealed new aspects of the gallery's architecture. The shades on the ceiling windows were removed so that natural light shone down on the black staircase, representing a notional dividing line which runs through the middle of the unused Palestinian Parliament building in Jerusalem. This formed one part of *Decolonizing Architecture/Art Residency* (DAAR), which also included a substantial model of Oush Grab, an evacuated Israeli military fortress in the Occupied West Bank, that has become a resting place for migrating birds who recognise no national boundaries. Palestinian ornithologists record their passage.

Spring 2013 saw the arrival of John Newling's young *Miracle Trees* (*Moringa oleifera*), growing in a large window which looks out onto Weekday Cross, site of a daily produce market in earlier centuries. Richer in vitamin C than tomatoes, and as rich in Vitamin A as carrots, *Moringa* leaves contain more protein than milk and more potassium than bananas. This seasonal show reflects the Contemporary's conscious role as a growing space, which goes out of its way to encourage children and families to romp on a regular basis. Every weekend, there are sessions for toddlers and young children; during school holidays the place is thronged with children, parents and grandparents. As *Ecologies of Value* closes, as Newling's show is called, the tender young *Moringa* trees will be transferred to Kew Gardens, their use values intact.

Piero Gilardi's *Collaborative Effects* accompanied *Ecologies of Value*. Gilardi's work has been described as *Arte Povera* or 'poor art'. His wheeled octopus (*Finanza Globale*) dangles puppets of Berlusconi, Merkel, and Obama. 'Where's Cameron?' asked my ten-year-old son. This is very accessible work, brought indoors, but built for the streets, as the multiple videos demonstrate. A big rubber rock, stamped '*Crisi*' (crisis), gently deflates, as the days pass. The albatross, suspended above a small blue wheelchair, awaits the tsunami, which rarely comes. A young woman sways through the show, clad in Gilardi's 'stone dress' and wellies. It really is international art, for everyone, for free.

But for those with some money in their pockets, there are the Nottingham Contemporary catalogues and publications, some of which are

listed at the end. Printed on good paper and to a high standard, though not locally, these display an emerging house style which reflects the gallery's graphic yet playful atmosphere. At the same time, they help nurture the 'informal intellectual community' which Alex Farquharson and his team encourage through the Contemporary's community and learning programmes. This extends to lively self-organised gigs for National Refugee Week, a stunning fiftieth birthday weekend for the Framework homeless charity, regular jazz, and much exuberant salsa. Open seminars, usually involving the artists who are exhibiting, are streamed live. Later, the same day, an Alternative 'Pharma's Market' might bring massage, dance and Wing Chun.

Since the Contemporary came to dwell among us, there is always somewhere to go to lift the spirits in this Midlands city, except on Mondays!

*Alex Farquharson, Jim Waters, Abi Spinks and Fiona Parry (editors), David Hockney 1960-1968: A Marriage of Styles, Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham, 2009, 88 pages, paperback ISBN 9781907421006*

*Alex Farquharson, Jim Waters, Abi Spinks and Fiona Parry (editors), But what of Frances Stark, standing by itself, a naked name, bare as a ghost to whom one would like to lend a sheet?, Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham, 2009, 64 pages, paperback ISBN 9781907421013, £ 10.00*

*Lukasz Ronduda, Alex Farquharson, Barbara Piwowska (editors), Star City: The Future Under Communism, MAMMAL Foundation Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham, 2011, 304 pages, paperback ISBN 9788362128044*

*Alex Farquharson (editor), Francis Upritchard: A Hand of Cards, Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham, 2012, hard cover ISBN 9781907421044, £ 18.00*

*Alex Farquharson, Fiona Parry, Abi Spinks (editors), Histories of the Present, Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham, 2010, paperback ISBN 9781907421020, £ 20.00*

*Alex Farquharson, Leah Gordon (editor), Kafou: Haiti, Art and Vodou, Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham, 2013, 248 pages, hard back ISBN 9781907421051, £25.00 (cover illustration overleaf: Frantz Zéphirin, Gede Wedding, Collection of Galerie Macondo, Pittsburg, USA).*