

*Overseas [Delirious New Wick 360 Video Edition]* by the artist Lawrence Lek takes us along the flight path of a small drone, through a world that is both familiar and alien to anyone who has ever visited the 2012 Olympic Park or Hackney Wick in east London. We find these areas drowned and ruined, confined to an island devoid of people. From the abandoned cars and fires, we can surmise troublesome events that have driven inhabitants away. Abandoned buildings in various states of disrepair are beginning to merge with the landscape, an unexpectedly tropical environment with velvety green mountains spilling over the sharp corners of the steel and glass shopping centre. It's unclear where the drone is from, why its frame and propellers are proudly adorned with an immersion-printed image of the Union Jack: was it applied out of solidarity, commiseration or nationalism? The quadcopter explores local landmarks, including the White Building, where Lek has had a studio since 2012. This art, technology and sustainability centre was developed in partnership with the London Legacy Development Corporation, whose remit has been the ongoing management and development of the Olympic Park and its local area after the London 2012 Games. The drone moves past an opening, through which we can see one of Lek's 'Prosthetic' sculptures, a bent plywood pavilion arching over a multi-coloured floor. As though powered by our own curiosity, the drone flies into the space and through the pavilion. In an uncanny move, it glides through the White Building into a second room, housing a matching pavilion.

To build the dystopian world we fly through, Lek used software developed for video game design, producing an artwork/game hybrid punctuated by imagery and structures sampled from the real world. The 360° video version of *Overseas* lets the player click and drag to look around and decide which way to proceed. This kind of 'open world' video game produces what Lek, referencing writer William Gibson, calls a 'consensual hallucination': players agree to join in the speculative journey and to believe their eyes when they encounter aspects of the new world through which they travel. In addition to aesthetic decisions, the power to build worlds also brings with it questions about responsibility: if you are going to play god, what kind of god are you going to be? And, what kind of logic will you operate in your new world? As Lek asks: 'how do you build a world that is specific enough to have embodied meaning, but open enough to allow freedom?'

In a short voiceover dialogue at the beginning of the video, a subtly accented female voice asks why a young American 'wants to play tourist in these sad surroundings'. There is a poignant futility to her question, because tourists, ever since their invention during the era of the Grand Tour in the 17th and 18th centuries, have always enjoyed playing among the ruins. The young American replies: 'I just had to come. It's time someone showed this country a little kindness.'

The drone overflies a devastated landscape that was once the site of a glorious moment in London's history: the 2012 Olympic Games. The Olympic Park, built for the occasion, is a place whose story is also bound up with the local creative community; its construction was watched through studio windows by countless

artists based in Hackney Wick, outside the Park construction site's perimeter fence. I imagine them in 2010 or 2011, looking up from their work – a notebook, canvas, or computer screen – and gazing at bulldozers pushing about mounds of London clay; or keeping up with the tally of cranes visible on the horizon. Of course the site-specificity of *Overseas* is not just about Hackney Wick and its surroundings. In an immediate sense, it's about the laptop or smart phone on which it plays and on which we also play it. The 360° rendering of the video version means that the *Overseas* world can be viewed in the round: I can drag my cursor or rotate my phone to look out at the horizon, check behind me, or stare at the sky and watch the endless rain, streaks of water slicing through a murky sky.

Hackney Wick was once an active industrial area, with factories manufacturing textiles and dyes as well as synthetic plastics. It was also a sweet place, home to Clarnico, once the largest confectioner in Britain. After London was announced as the host city for the 2012 games, Hackney Wick and neighbouring Stratford were confirmed as the blank canvas on which to build the infrastructure needed for the event: it was a somewhat rucked canvas but nothing that couldn't be levelled out by a wrecking ball or, apparently, by a fire. As soon as the announcement was made in early July 2005, spaces left vacant by defunct industry were once again open for business, suddenly available as playgrounds for the imagination of planners and architects. Since then, Hackney Wick has become a different kind of world; dedicated to what the French sociologist Luc Boltanski and management scientist Eve Chiapello call the 'new spirit of capitalism', powered by networked individuals, designer laptops and artisan coffee. The area was regenerated with a rash of new apartments and creative start-ups in addition to the masterplanned Olympic Park and Village. In Hackney Wick, Lek sees 'a generic condition: a post-industrial site, property development, art instrumentalised for social and political ends. It's a model place.' Local resistance to gentrification, expressed through the painted murals and collages created by neighbourhood graffiti and cut-up artists, eventually tipped over into a self-branding exercise: since 2012, visitors to Hackney Wick have been greeted by a monumental HW monogram, several storeys high, visible from the platform of the Overground station – and also from the *Overseas* drone's camera. The painting covers most of a vast Coca-Cola advertisement that had been commissioned for the Olympics, leaving just the letters HW unpainted, droplets of condensation on a Coke red background still visible through the letters' forms.

As the drone moves through the air over Hackney Wick, it takes us past a trio of floating islands, on which three of the Olympic Park's most iconic structures seem to be making their ascent into the heavens. There is the stadium designed by the architecture firm Populous; the velodrome known colloquially as the 'Pringle' and designed by Hopkins Architects; and the AcelorMittal Orbit, designed by the artist Anish Kapoor and Cecil Balmond of the engineering firm Arup. This hovering atoll conjures up the fictional urban masterplans of 1960s radical architecture practices, such as Archigram, Archizoom, and Superstudio. They modelled a series of highly detailed speculative cities, fantastical solutions for urban living, some of which have

proved to be astonishingly prescient of contemporary inner-city environments. Archigram's description of its 1968 project, 'Plug-In City', for instance, reads like a mission statement for contemporary urban regeneration: they describe it as 'a package that comes to a community, giving it a taste of the metropolitan dynamic - which is temporarily grafted on to the local centre - and whilst the community is still recovering from the shock, uses this catalyst as the first stage of a national hook-up.'<sup>1</sup>

For many people, the Orbit was - and continues to be - the most puzzling of all the new structures in the Olympic Park. Its convoluted red thread can be seen as symbolizing the tortuous lead-up to the Olympic Games of 2012, with scandals surrounding spiralling costs, security threats and the explicit militarisation of the city. Today, the Orbit's red scrawl also reads like a premonition of the bloody confusion and the endless twists and turns of the politics and pragmatics surrounding the EU referendum.

If Hackney Wick is the physical setting for the world Lek has built in *Overseas*, the Post-Brexit moment is its temporal context. The vote that took place on 23 June 2016 was a step in the process of building a world, although as I write in August 2016, it is still unclear what that world might be, and who is going to build it. It transpired, the morning after the referendum result came in, that there had been no advance planning for the likelihood of either outcome: only slivers of delirium hurled at the crowds by baying politicians. I remember, in the wake of the vote, going around with my forehead knotted with confusion, and a constant lump in my throat. The wife of a friend, a psychiatrist, once told me that this sensation is known medically as the *globus hystericus*. I imagined a tiny hysterical world in my throat, a bodily compensation for the political disarray beyond.

I also thought about what politicians might have done in order to better prepare for the days after the vote; I wondered what might have helped them speculate more successfully and more responsibly. They could have partaken in the ritual of chewing qat leaf, a mild stimulant that is used daily in the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, and also in cosmopolitan cities like London. In addition to its regular use, Qat is also used in special social envisioning ceremonies during which male community leaders sit together for hours, chewing and discussing problems and issues, and envisioning solutions. They convene, they chew and they speculate on how to transform their current world into a new world. I wonder whether things might have turned out differently if the opposing Brexit camps had sat together and chewed qat. They could have bought bunches of the leaf at any number of east London greengrocer's, taken it to the top of the Orbit and sat together, looking over the capital. In another world, perhaps they did.

---

1 <http://archigram.westminster.ac.uk/project.php?id=119>