

The Weirdness of Walls (London, 8 Jun 18)

Gordon Square Cinema, School of Arts, Birkbeck, Gordon Square 43, London, WC1H 0PD, Jun 08, 2018

Michael Diers

Ha, Ha.

The Weirdness of Walls

One Day Symposium

The Ha-ha wall, a classic feature of the English park, is said to derive its name from the surprised reaction and amusement of passers-by when confronted with the barrier previously concealed in the landscape. Unseen from one side and obvious from the other, a visual tool for uninterrupted views and a physical barrier at the same time, the Ha-ha wall seems to almost caricature the dichotomies inherent in the wall: both a dividing and a linking element, a condition of both segregation and co-existence, a carefully concealed obstacle and a deterrent visible from far away. It is the wall's Janus-faced character, which, paradoxically, allows it to occupy a space beyond the division it engenders. This raises questions about the nature of this most traditional building element as well as its contemporary embodiment as a high-tech tool of control. What is it made of? How can a linear element that is a wall be inhabited? What does it mean to occupy the wall itself instead of one or the other side? And finally, how is it possible to breach the wall? Trump's wall on the Mexican border, the wall on the West Bank as well as barriers, fences and walls in Europe, erected during the refugee crisis in 2015, all point to a dystopian resurgence of the wall in all its political relevance and aesthetic and symbolic complications.

There have been a number of symposia and academic discussions about the recent return of the wall as a spatial manifestation of politics. The organizers of the proposed conference are, however, convinced that focusing merely on the most recent manifestations of spatial divisions without addressing and rethinking intrinsic architectural and aesthetic properties of the wall misses an important opportunity to locate the political not only in the actual historical events but also in the material and spatial make-up of the events themselves. The wall both as a political tool of division and as a material and aesthetic phenomenon frames our ways of perceiving and experiencing historical events. This is why an interdisciplinary discussion, focusing not only the imminent effects of newly-erected spatial divisions, but also questioning the all too self-evident properties of the wall as an architectural element, is vital at this historical moment.

The conference is organised by Christina Parte (Birkbeck) and Miloš Kosec (Birkbeck).

PROGRAMME

9:30 Coffee

10:00 – 12:15 Panel 1: Constructing Walls

10:00 Leslie Topp: Boundaries lightened, naturalized and reinforced

10:25 Alistair Cartwright: Partitioning Practices in Postwar London Multiple Occupancy Homes, c. 1960

10:50 Miloš Kosec: Absent Walls: Entrepreneurial Voids in Elemental's Social Housing Projects

11:15 Michael Diers: 'Build it big, build it beautiful': Donald Trump's US-Mexico border wall prototypes and the artistic intervention by Christoph Büchel

11:40 Discussion

12:15 – 13:00 Lunch Break

13:00 – 14:45 Panel 2: Inhabiting Walls

13:00 Mark Crinson: Colin Rowe's lurid wall – violence, anxiety, and the art-architecture nexus in formalist analysis

13:25 Christina Parte: Loving and living with the Berlin Wall – fetish and its subversion

13:50 James O'Leary: Milk, Confetti, Erratics—A Stratigraphy of 'The Interface'

14:15 Discussion

14:45 – 15:00 Coffee Break

15:00 – 16:45 Panel 3: Controlling Walls

15:00 Janet Ward

15:25 Kasia Murawska-Muthesius: Berlin Wall and techniques of the Cold-War observer

15:50 Wendy Pullan: In the shadow of the wall: the iconicity of Jerusalem's Separation Barrier

16:15 Discussion

16:45 – 17:30 Drinks and informal discussion

Free entry; booking required:

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/ha-ha-the-weirdness-of-walls-a-one-day-symposium-tickets-45968830008>

Reference:

CONF: The Weirdness of Walls (London, 8 Jun 18). In: ArtHist.net, May 23, 2018 (accessed Jul 10, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/18212>>.