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Black Maria, Central Saint Martins, London

By Edwin Heathcote

Richard Wentworth's installation asks questions about public space amid the ceaseless human flux of King's Cross



'Black Maria' at King's Cross, London

A little over a decade ago Artangel, the UK arts commissioning body, asked the sculptor Richard Wentworth to create something around his home neighbourhood, King's Cross in London. The result was "An Area of Outstanding Unnatural Beauty", a haunting installation in an abandoned plumbing store. A series of open-ended activities, maps and texts, it was typical Wentworth, an eccentric mix of the accidental and the deliberate, an appreciation of the ad hoc filtered through a sense of specific place.

It happened at a moment when King's Cross was undergoing a jarring transition from red-light zone to revived transport interchange, as the Eurostar terminal relocated from Waterloo and the area began to undergo the biggest phase of development since the arrival of its beautiful station in the 1850s. Now Wentworth has been asked to work here again, this time creating an installation entitled "Black Maria". Reflecting the changing nature of the area, this installation is in the grand, top-lit lobby of the new Central Saint Martins art school, an institution based in a converted Victorian granary.

Wentworth was approached by Relay, the art component of the King's Cross regeneration, to revisit his earlier work but instead settled on this very different installation. A timber theatre structure, a platform for events and gatherings, it builds on all the particularities of this strange and new place: the constant human flux of King's Cross; the contrastingly settled (if intense and time-limited) focus of student life; the odd confluence of the grand Victorian granary and the clean glass and concrete of Stanton Williams' new interior. The old and the new structures seem to be settling down together, while the central spine that acts as a student "street" brings vibrant everyday life to the space. The installation intensifies that activity at a particular point – between the private, gated world of the school and the open public lobby.

The piece is called "Black Maria" in a tribute to Thomas Edison's 1893 timber building in New Jersey, the world's first cinema and film production studio (rather than the black police vans once familiar to British protestors and prisoners). When I met Wentworth on site, he told me that, in designing the piece, he wondered whether it would be possible to create a structure as a "gatherer". "Humans are good at making spaces for themselves," he said. "It's what we do. Whether it's on the pavement, in a café or on a train, we create space around us" – he gestured to the bag and coat I'd put on a chair, my notebook on the table and the way we'd established ourselves at the table. "This lobby is a concourse, like [that of] the station. It is an 'unplace'. And this is about the space between property and ownership, something we tried to make immediate and legible."

"Black Maria"'s theatrical structure, with broad steps that function as terraced seating and a screen wall/proscenium arch, is being built (literally – some of them are carpenters) by young Swiss practice Gruppe. Like some other young designers at the moment, they see the process – the construction and the making – as being an integral part of the final product, an end in itself and not just a means. Wentworth too is interested in architecture more as process than as finished product; "Black Maria"'s audience will be a crucial part of the installation. It is, he says with obvious anticipation, "a place where anything could happen".

At Central St Martins until March 12, www.kingscross.co.uk/blackmaria

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