

Short Cuts

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About three years ago, with time to kill, I climbed an unlit staircase behind a fire door at the back of the Barbican Centre. There was no one around. With its forty acres of 1960s Brutalist concrete and notorious labyrinth of tower blocks and overhead walkways, the Barbican is one of the most undervisited places in London. I love it as I love hospitals and airports, for the way they allow you to occupy public space without being seen, without being public. Ignore the signs and they ignore you. At the top of the staircase, on the seventh floor, another door opened onto a corridor leading to a network of empty rooms. Or nearly empty: on the scuffed carpet was a bundle of cables, a telephone directory, a cluster of obsolete computer monitors, an industrial-size stainless steel catering trolley, a year-old copy of the *Daily Mail*. A blank whiteboard was the only item in what must have been a seminar room; an A4 printout minuted a 2003 meeting with a visiting dignitary. An ordinary vacant office or apartment is just another rental opportunity. An empty institutional space, on the other hand, is full of messages and cryptic signals.

Running underneath the Barbican, it is said, are three miles of subterranean tunnels, containing communications equipment and supply systems. I'd explore them if I could find a way in. But I'd rather have an invitation to the underground government facility newly photographed in large-format full colour by David Moore. *The Last Things* (Dewi Lewis, £25) opens with an anonymous quote – 'Ministry of Defence official, London 2007' – that reads: 'I don't understand how you've got this far.' What follows is a series of shots of unpeopled hallways and decontamination chambers, a pot-plant here, a lectern there. Moore's collaborator Angela Weight, who is currently curating a show of his work at the University of Hertfordshire, explains in an afterword that had they 'approached the MoD through journalistic channels', they 'would have got nowhere, since our motives would have

been suspect'. Artists are given a licence to wander, and some – like Jane and Louise Wilson, who have produced eerie video installations by filming the American military base at Greenham Common and the Stasi headquarters in Berlin – use every chance they have.

But Moore's pictures are more unsettlingly close to home: this is “a secure crisis management environment” whose name is in the public domain but to which we may not refer'. The only clues: it 'lies below ground to a depth of five floors, somewhere in Central London'. I'm only guessing, but that ought to make it the facility known as PINDAR, which lurks beneath the MoD itself and was built between 1987 and 1994 at a cost of £126 million. It sprang into life after the 7/7 London bombings and who knows at what other times. Moore's captions, which have been vetted by the MoD and the Cabinet Office, tell you something about what you're looking at – 'firewall, electromagnetic pulse protected area' (a beige filing cabinet and a mahogany-effect door) – but not enough: is that a glimpse of riverside greenery through the slit above the 'secure communications room'? Does the cardboard crown stuffed behind a purple office chair have a royal purpose?

Some details have been digitally obfuscated, at the insistence of the MoD, such as the faces on the ID cards at the security checkpoint. But the weird mix of Ikea-style furniture and 1980s fittings and ultra-high-tech displays is disturbingly evident. This is a facility that is in use right now – the crisis control screen shows the time in Tokyo and Baghdad and the news on CNN; a map of Iran is projected onto a conference-room wall – but its forgotten corners, policed only by the ghosts who make sure the place is habitable, are stuck in a Cold War time-warp. There's a dorm-room poster of F-16s in flight in the 'changing room'; a Tom Clancy novel decorates the duty officer's quarters. The wire coathangers are standard-issue but the gas masks lying on the bedside table in the principal bedroom are clothed in tartan fabric. Come the apocalypse, or the global financial meltdown, this is where the leaders of one small part of the free world will gather. It will reassure them to know that they have suitably British stuff around them.

Looking at these photographs makes you realise that the things you put

in your bunker – the soft furnishings, the alabaster statuettes – will come to matter a great deal when global catastrophe strikes. Imagine being the quartermaster of your own *Dr Strangelove* lair: the responsibility! What if you're forced underground by hordes of marauding Muslims and find your cushions are the wrong shade of teal? This is where another new artist's book comes in handy: Suzanne Treister's *Nato: The Military Codification System for the Ordering of Everything in the World* (Black Dog, £35). It's a long series of cute watercolours that attempt to illustrate a few of the limitlessly diverse items categorisable under the Nato Supply Classification system (NSC), which applies a four-digit number to any type of object an army could possibly have a use for. This means *everything*, from 1105 – Nuclear Bombs – to 9910: Jewellery, excluding Watches, Clocks, Tableware, Scientific Instruments, Toilet Articles, Smokers' Articles and Industrial Diamonds.

There's a pleasingly Borgesian comprehensiveness about the categories: 8530, Personal Toiletry Articles, excluding Dental Floss; 6520, Dental Instruments, Equipment and Supplies, including Teeth; 9999, Only Those Items Which Cannot Conceivably Be Classified in Any Existing Classes. It's what the Dewey Decimal system would be if it had been designed by a mad scientist. It has, in fact, been designed by whole legions of mad scientists: as Marek Kohn explains in an excellent introduction to Treister's book, there are 56 NSC codification bureaus around the world and the Nato system is the envy of taxonomists everywhere. Even the Russians have copied it. An annual symposium is attended by such luminaries of the classification industry as the beautifully moustached Colonel S. Kunin, director of the Bulgarian Codification Bureau, and the avuncular Captain Jan De Vos, who recently gave a talk on 'Integrated Material Management in the Belgian Armed Forces'. In a worrying sign that our own poor Ministry of Defence is missing a trick, Moore's book includes a damning photograph of the toiletries store in the Whitehall citadel. Instead of typing in the proper NSC code and ordering up regulation dental equipment, some fool of a procurement officer has gone out and bought five bottles of Tesco Value mouthwash.