Rivers of **light**

Artists are re-imagining the city of Sunderland. Four exciting new commissions draw on collective histories and personal memories for source material, but use new media technology to transform the past into the future. These projects, which use light, sound and film have been commissioned by /sLab, a digital media laboratory in Sunderland University's department of fine art.

/sLab has been awarded funds by Sunderland arc to develop a series of artworks as part of the Cultural Masterplan for the city. Working closely with Sunderland City Council, the commissions will bring new life to a specific building project or area that will be transformed during the regeneration programme.

The first project, Undercurrent, is an audio-visual extravaganza, co-produced with the AV Festival. Undercurrent will be projected onto the walls of the National Glass Centre during the opening night gala of AV in Sunderland.

Made by British VJ collective D-Fuse, working with Chinese artists, Undercurrent is a multi-screen film exploring the changing nature of urban life in the UK and Britain. Filming took place in the river-based cities of Sunderland, London, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Chongqing.

/sLab director Keith Whittle says: "There are interesting parallels between reinvention of cities in China and in Britain. D-Fuse's lines of enquiry follow the river as a medium for travel, transport, trade and communication and detect the change of economic models in post-industrial cities."

The première will be at a party on March 7 at the National Glass Centre with audio and visual elements mixed live by D-Fuse.

In the run-up to the AV Festival, you may notice an abandoned shipping container on Farringdon Row. This is the location for screenings by fine art students and staff including Eric Bainbridge,

Sunderland's new digital media research centre is delivering its first series of public installations this month, as director Keith Whittle tells **Clare Clayton**.

Tim Brennan, James Hutchinson, Ray Masters and Graham Mitchinson.

Entitled Cargo, this will be a series of multi-media projections on the themes of trade, transport and the exchange of commodities, presented inside the container. Screenings are March 3-5 from 8pm to 9.30pm.

Lothar Goetz, senior lecturer in painting, will experiment with high-power lights in his project Capri, designed to transform the regeneration site at Galleys Gill on the evening of March 11.

Keith says: "This site-specific artwork aims to subtly transform an area through the use of projected light that will illuminate an otherwise overlooked area on the historic River Wear.

"Working with a specialist lighting company, Lothar will spotlight and illuminate an area of the site, painting with light to create a dazzling work of different colours and form. This will be striking and beautiful for passers-by, rather than an invited audience."

A fourth project by British sound artist Robin Rimbaud, aka Scanner, is available online from March 12. In Passing Beneath the Surface, Scanner, who has worked with Radiohead and Laurie Anderson, mixes the oral archive from Living History North East with new interviews. This can be seen by visiting the website www.passingbeneaththesurface.net
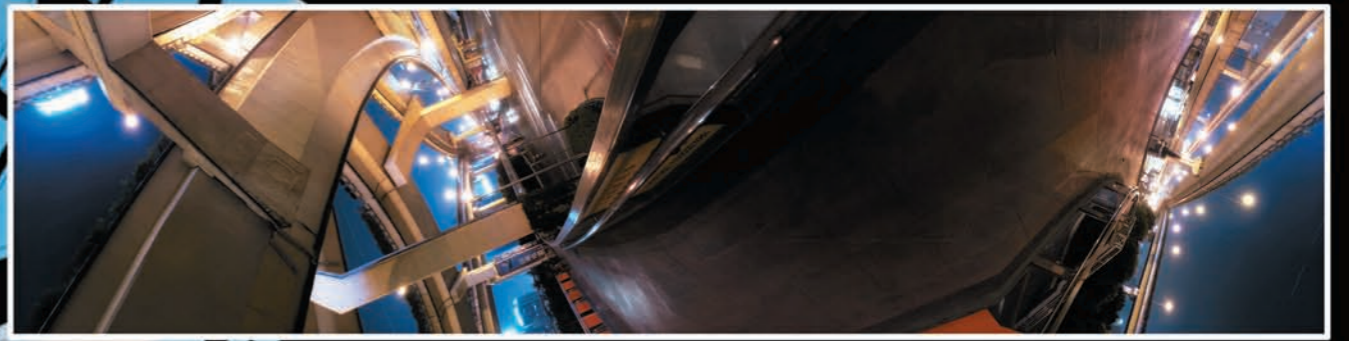
Smoke and mirrors

The practice of giving weapons of war uses for peace has a powerful artistic heritage. Two artists are entering into this ideal by transforming a US military reconnaissance balloon into the source of a surprising multimedia performance piece.

Sunderland's cultural master planner Dan Dubowitz, who is overseeing a three-year programme of temporal artworks, is collaborating with David Cotterrell on Searchlight.

This is the first of a series of projects within Hobo, produced on behalf of Sunderland arc and Sunderland Council.

On March 7,8 and 9, a helium-filled balloon will float 200ft above Sunderland. Suspended from it will be a giant searchlight, projecting shadow-like images onto the ground.

This follows a test-run at the end of February when the balloon was seen above Galley's Gill, an area on the bank of the River Wear which cuts between two dramatic cliff gorges.

It is the same type of unmanned aerodynamic balloon system which is used by the US military in war zones, reportedly in Afghanistan and Iraq. Helium balloons have been brought to the frontline of modern warfare for cost-effective surveillance.

David, senior lecturer in fine art at Sheffield Hallam University, says: "The reason they are so useful is because in winds up to 100mph they remain stable in the atmosphere. They actually

Illusions and trickery lie at the heart of a stunning debut by Sunderland's Cultural Masterplan, as **Tamzin Lewis** reveals.

get more stable the harder the wind blows. These balloons are used by the military to look over the horizon.

"We are giving them an unusual application: encouraging people to rethink under-used areas of Sunderland. The balloons will migrate around the Wear through the lifespan of this project."

In preparation, Dan and David filmed drama groups, school children and adults who were dressed in black, moving around the derelict Groves Cranes factory. In a new take on the 19th Century magician's use of smoke and mirrors, the artists used specially created technology to film the figures with a computer-controlled mirror.

David says: "The movement of the mirror is recorded as well as the footage, so when we play it back you see the imagery and the location where the imagery came from. Optically, the projected image looks the same as a shadow. It is quite eerie as it looks like there

is a moving presence on the ground, but there is no-one there."

There is a ghostly element to Searchlight as footage of moving individuals or groups of people are projected as shadows.

David says: "If you go around old industrial sites in Sunderland, you can almost hear the noise of people leaving at the end of a shift."

Dan says: "This project is a fantastic opportunity to explore an urban landscape which is on the cusp of being transformed."

Searchlight coincides with the AV Festival and the work being done by /sLab.