

Shaping the Imagination

Background to the exhibition

The exhibition *Interior View: artists explore the language of architecture* was designed for De Zonnehof, the idiosyncratic building that Gerrit Rietveld created in the late fifties as a place for showing art, architecture and design. Rietveld undoubtedly regarded De Zonnehof as a work of art as much as a functional building, calling for exhibitions that would create a fruitful synergy with the challenges presented by its materials, structure and dimensions. *Interior View* is about art that investigates architecture as a set of forces that the occupant interacts with. The exhibition aims to make physical and emotional connections between the constructed gallery space that houses it and the artworks chosen for what they say about both the experience of architecture when translated into another medium and how this medium is in turn affected by this appropriation.

Interior View involves a select group of artists who explore architectural modes of perception and projection through a two-dimensional surface (Silke Schatz, Pascal Danz, Clare Goodwin, Jane & Louise Wilson, Catherine Yass), the time-based medium of video (Riccardo Previdi, Jonas Dahlberg) or the plasticity of sculpture (Thomas Schütte, Langlands & Bell, Toby Paterson, Monique Kwist) to express the relationship between buildings and people, spatial construction and identity. Some are concerned with evoking the memory of specific places, either personally experienced or part of our collective history, while others question the medium of architecture, its idioms and conventions. It should be said that this exhibition is not premised on an opposition between art and architecture, or indeed on the fruitful borrowings and collaboration between architects and artists. Appropriating the language of architecture – plans, models and photographs of buildings – the artists abstract both its formal qualities and its concepts, transforming these into rich emotional or psychological metaphors. Appropriation is a different relationship between art and architecture, always with a certain Faustian moment when it is clear one must pay a price for taking another's language and change through the process.

In Gilles Deleuze's book, *The Logic of Sensation*, his homage to Francis Bacon, he noted that '*Painting has neither a model to represent nor a story to narrate. It thus has two possible ways of escaping the figurative: toward pure form, through abstraction; or toward the purely figural through extraction or isolation.*' (1) In stealing, copying or quoting from the familiar forms of representing a building these artists are using a third way of escaping the representational while resonating still on a social, political and emotional level. According to Deleuze, Bacon used the figure to depict the invisible

forces that produce sensations – pressure, weight, inertia, gravitation; artists use the language of architecture in a similar way, making visible the fundamental forces – control, enclosure, claustrophobia, security, confusion – of the architectural environment. Just as Bacon rendered the figure insubstantial, dissolving it in paint, so they make the ordinary strange, the familiar uncanny.

From Renaissance perspective to psychic plans

'The ability of art to construct a critical model for architectural practice has been evident since the Renaissance reinvention of perspectival space.' (2)

Since Renaissance painters began to depict interior space in which the figures represented have room to move, artists have increasingly employed architectural analogy – structure, form, landscape – to explore the special characteristics of architecture as a spatial art experienced in time. In the early twentieth century architecture provided the starting point for the sculptural experimentation of the Russian constructivists; its basis in the third dimension inspired the spatial devices of Cubist painting; and modern urban planning was the focus of the psycho-geographical explorations of the Situationists in the 1950s. Minimalism, installation art, performance art, land art and Gordon Matta-Clark's performative incisions into abandoned buildings are just a few of the artistic tendencies that since the development of an 'expanded field' of sculpture in the 1960s have engaged spatial concerns both literally and metaphorically. Whilst artists have continued to be inspired by architecture – its forms, structures, codes, social and emotional meaning, potential for fantasy and narrative, and its relation to time and memory – architects have increasingly sought to convey the tangible attribute of abstract thought that is usually associated with art. One need think only of Coop Himmelblau's replacement of a physical with a 'psychic plan', Frank Gehry's acknowledged debt to the Surrealist and Fluxus movements, and Rem Koolhaas' evocation of Superman-type cities.

Politics, technology, time and space

Their independence allows artists not only aesthetic but also political freedom. The themes of democracy and control are a leitmotiv running through much of the work in the exhibition. The structures of power and authority are the focus of both Jane & Louise Wilson's and Catherine Yass' photographic work and of Langlands & Bell's architectural models. Riccardo Previdi's performances subsume the individual within the collective, presenting the communicative potential of the construction process as more important than the permanence of the final structure; Toby Paterson's work often looks at the relationship between ideology and aesthetics as manifested in the built environment; while some of Thomas Schütte's early models of museums and collectors' houses resembled a combination of factory and cathedral, places of authority that devour the art delivered to them.

One of the very tangible connections between architecture and art is the ways in which they have both been transformed by the possibilities of technology. Many of the recent designs for buildings would have been unrealisable without digital production techniques that are allowing architects to, themselves, appropriate – software from aerospace, car and medical usage, for example – to create curved, folded and warped forms.

Technology has also expanded the sources available to artists, the internet giving access to unlimited virtual exploration of subjects and ideas, whilst providing more sophisticated technology for producing art. Riccardo Previdi's remodelling of Buckminster Fuller's structures for his video 'Lab', Jane & Louise Wilson's post-production work on their filming and Pascal Danz's 'copy and paste' collaging of internet sources are some of the examples of how new technology has enabled the work in this exhibition to be made.

Technology, particularly the generation of virtual environments, has also changed our understanding of time and space. Whereas an architectural environment is experienced as a space in which perspective changes as the body moves through it, the visual arts express a three-dimensional space to the immobile viewer of a flat surface or through an object to be walked around. This relationship between space and time became the leitmotiv of modernism for both architects and artists, each medium inspired by and envious of what the other was capable of achieving. Sergei Eisenstein compared architectural composition to cinematic montage, an implicit 'flux of form' while the art historian Elie Faure commented that '*the cinema incorporates time to space. Better, time, through this, really becomes a dimension of space...unrolling under our eyes its successive volumes ceaselessly returned to us in dimensions that allow us to grasp their extent in surface and depth*'. (3)

In this exhibition the moving image is frozen in time in Jane & Louise Wilson's still images, selected from their video explorations of buildings, and in Catherine Yass' lightbox transparencies that combine photographs of the same subject taken moments apart. Toby Paterson's assemblages that depict architectural perspective through painting and sculpture and a combination of scales confirm Bataille's assertion that space can escape time and geometry to affirm its presence as the expression of the instantaneous and simultaneous. Riccardo Previdi's videos record in real time the collaborative construction of architectural space as a means of communication, while the scale and plasticity of Thomas Schütte's and Monique Kwist's architectural models and Langlands & Bell's floor-based sculptures can, like the built environment, be experienced from various perspectives. Silke Schatz's vertiginous drawings, Pascal Danz's paintings that shift as they are approached from being depictions of modernist interiors to abstract intimations of space, and Clare Goodwin's attempts to cancel the passing of time by

retrieving personal memories of environments all emphasise the transitions possible in art from real to imaginary movement in both space and time.

The artists

In 1974 the philosopher Henri Lefebvre remarked that '*Any definition of architecture itself requires a prior analysis and exposition of the concept of space*'. (4) Both conceived by the mind and 'lived' by the body, space epitomises the greatest challenge to both architects, whose material enclosures are also psychological experiences, and artists, whose visual interpretations of the world around them are simultaneously physical encounters. **Silke Schatz's** contribution to the exhibition, 'recreation for heike' 1999, is her only drawing to date that, shown on three walls of a purpose-built chamber, literally encompasses the viewer in the image of another interior. Like all Schatz's work, this drawing re-creates buildings from the artist's past, executed from memory and operating as a transaction between first experience, remembered experience, and reconstructed experience. Similar to Clare Goodwin's paintings, her work recalls theories concerning the intersection of memory and space, where in the imagination space acts as a positioning device for locating a desired recollection.

For certain architects, such as Frank Gehry, the role of drawing in their work has shifted from being a graphic translation of their ideas to patrons to a highly expressive public presentation of the intended emotional effect of completed buildings. Whereas conventional architectural drawing techniques created a separation between the viewing subject and the object represented, Daniel Libeskind's drawings approach the work of Conceptual artists in the way they make the art of perception integral with the object perceived. Schatz's precise hand-drawn images appear closer to the traditional blueprints that begin the life of a building than Greg Lynn's computer-generated bird's-eye view of the 'insect carcass' construction for Cardiff Bay Opera House. Yet this seemingly fantastical drawing is rationally founded on both the idiosyncrasies of the site and the activities of the Opera House, while the layers of lines in Schatz's totally unfunctional drawing suck the viewer into their vertiginous perspective.

Although **Clare Goodwin's** paintings of 1970s kitchens are based on magazine images and photographs of interiors that she has never seen, they were originally inspired by a highly personal attempt as a new student at art school to recreate the security and comfort of the home she was missing. Her manipulated depictions in paint of a kitchen's dominant features are as unfunctional and stylised as Silke Schatz's drawings, focusing on the surfaces of worktops, ovens, cupboards and tiled walls. Starkly reductive, the paintings comment on the relationship between knowledge and perception, the disjuncture between what we know about the world theoretically and how we actually experience it.

The kitchen paintings are created with a finely tuned choice of colours that immediately convey the 1970s taste in design. Miniature versions, projected from the tracings of the original photographs, depict the complete kitchen interior, while the larger paintings recreate a section of the same room. Inviting us to be enveloped by their immediately identifiable forms and functions, they also keep us at bay with their geometric toughness and intimation of hygiene and order. The disjuncture between this controlled rhythm of lines that guides one around the surfaces and projections of a kitchen and the recently introduced free-hand detail of flower pattern is Goodwin's attempt to extract the essential qualities of place, as well as an interpretation of how our environment affects our identity.

Toby Paterson's work is stylistically close to Clare Goodwin's in its geometric precision, the *'absence of painterly gesture (forcing) us to concentrate on the abstract angles, direction of light, subject matter'*. (5) In contrast with her anonymous domestic environments, Paterson bases his work on well-known buildings, in his case using models, drawings, plans, photographs or experiences of places he has visited. Through his paintings, objects and installations he investigates the details under the surface of international Modernist architecture that led to the failure of their ideals. Much of his work focuses on the relationship between ideology and aesthetics, for example in the Constructivists' ideals of integrated art and architecture.

Unlike Silke Schatz's appropriation of the architectural environment as an active bodily perception, Paterson's assemblages combine the graphic flatness of the wall painting with the shallow or miniature plasticity of the objects inserted within it to create a kind of *'intuited form'* that draws on sight, our experience of space and our spatial imagination. Like all Paterson's work, *Random Rules* is a transposition of architectural ideals from their own time and place to ours. It recreates an abstract painting - a mural by Victor Pasmore at Rates Hall Civic Centre, Newcastle - as a framework for an assemblage of sculptures and architectural models. Designed by Paterson to resemble a topographic view of an urban development, the models include a version of the Tecton flats facade by Bertold Lubetkin, a school by the Glasgow firm Gillespie, Kidd and Coia from a town development in Cumbernald and a sculpture of an imagined governmental art headquarters. It appears to corroborate Walter Benjamin's concern that space as a Renaissance humanist construction was in the modern period gradually flattened out, closed in or exhausted. This is experienced in Paterson's work like a computer game, a virtual journey that shifts the gaze between different perspectives, proportions and sensations; or it could be compared to a *'skateboarder who, Situationist-style, performs*

a continual re-living of the city: cities and buildings seen not as grand schemes and hierarchical structures but as a series of micro-spaces to navigate'. (6)

Each of the artists in the exhibition is involved in translating the experience of architecture into another medium. Two of them, Riccardo Previdi and Jonas Dahlberg, studied architectural practice before approaching it from the perspective of art, but make no distinction between the two in their work. Central to the three videos that **Riccardo Previdi** is showing in the exhibition is the notion of architecture as communication. Each documents the 'performance' of creating an architectural structure in which the artist directs proceedings without having control over the group dynamics. The implicit conception of space as being reciprocally interdependent with society, comparable to the social sculpture developed by Beuys, links Previdi's videos with his permanent projects for urban public spaces.

'Four' is an interpretation of architecture in its broadest sense as an enclosure for the human body. The co-operation of three friends in wrapping the artist in brown paper and tape recalls the experiments of the influential Brazilian artist, Lygia Clark who referred simultaneously to architectural structures as a body, a kind of sensory shelter, and to the human body as a house in which the senses play out their complex relationships. 'Four' also pushes to the limits the theory of enclosure developed by German architect and theorist Gottfried Semper who was responsible in the 1890s for the introduction of 'space' as the principal theme of modern architecture. Semper's understanding of the material components of architecture as secondary to the idea of enclosure, so 'the wall is that architectural element that formally represents and makes visible the enclosed space as such' (7) could be a description of Previdi's cocoon.

In **Jonas Dahlberg's** video *Weightless Space 1*, the work that comes closest of any in the exhibition to expressing pure abstract space, the walls are the only feature of which one can be certain. Projected onto a false wall, creating the illusion of an extension of the box made to house it, the video shows a conventional, empty 1970s room, with a door slightly open to a brightly lit outside. The only object is a pot with a green plant that floats slowly around the room as if unaffected by gravity. The process of watching this endless film that focuses solely on weightlessness changes the viewer's perception of their own body, bound by gravity, as unusually heavy. Having been seduced by the mesmeric movement of the pot, the viewer's reactions shift to physical discomfort and loneliness, caught between his being and empty space. Although the room presented is the kind of neutral environment that we pass through on a daily basis, because the room itself is stripped back to the fundamentals of floor, walls and ceiling, our normal experiences of time and space become disorientated, the familiar uncanny.

Weightless Space 1 appears to be digitally manipulated, but is in fact created by a camera movement through an artificially constructed space. A model of the room, placed in an aquarium filled with glycerol, was connected to a camera and the entire structure attached to a gyroscope which rotated the model in front of the camera. Dahlberg's comment that '*as an artist I can command a space perhaps even more fully than an architect who always has to hand over his creation*' (8) affects one's reading of Weightless Space 1. Although the model is an autonomous environment, not dissimilar from an architect's model, it is designed purely to produce an illusory image of a timeless, science-fiction type environment.

Thomas Schütte's buildings are also fictional, an ongoing series of architectural models begun in 1980 that allow the artist to go beyond what he terms a 'motif', the connection with built reality, to express ideas about the associations we make with certain types of building and their impact on social interchange. The models for museums, collectors' houses, artists' studios and houses, allude to various historical styles - neo-Classicism, early Modernism or the 1950s design taste - to present architectural metaphors for an artist's life in the late 20th/early 21st century. They are prototypes, similar to those made by architects for real buildings, exaggerating the sense of something not present and still in formation. In revealing only the spatial organisation of the artist's conditions of production - the shapes, assembly and proportions of individual rooms suggesting different attitudes - they refuse any character analysis. Like the work of Monique Kwist and Langlands & Bell, Schütte's models avoid the representational quality of straightforward narrative. Although their scale and plasticity brings them closest to the special conditions of architecture, the art that while perceived visually, is experienced in space, they remain ambiguous '*spaces full of meaning*', linking the concept of '*built images*' with '*the mind's images*' (9).

The architectural model as a sculptural form lies at the heart of **Langlands & Bell's** work. Their immaculate wall or floor-based models constructed from white-painted cardboard are more pristine than Thomas Schütte's rougher-hewn sculptures. The artists examine the manner in which '*we shape our buildings and they shape us*' (10), particularly structures that convey, overtly or in more subtly concealed ways, notions of power and of human activity and interaction. In most cases they experience the sites second hand through architectural plans, photographs and descriptions before presenting them as scale models, axometric projections or illusionistic renderings of interiors seen in shallow relief.

The diptych *New York Mecca*, 1996 juxtaposes a shallow white relief of the synagogue in Port Chester, absent of worshippers and uncannily calm, with a screenprint depicting a dense crowd praying round the closed square structure of K'Abā in Mecca. Contrasting internal and external space, the work suggests the physical and psychological journey entailed in the activity of human worship. At the same time, the ritual use of places of worship is juxtaposed with the coded behaviour determined by architects. The model *Nakagin Capsule (Prototype)*, 1998 presents an overview in relief of the highly influential tower block designed by the Japanese architect Kisho Kurakawa in Tokyo in 1972, constructed from a series of interlocking cells. Both *Adjoining Rooms* and the *Interlocking Chairs* blur the distinctions between sculpture, architecture and furniture, referring to the points where architecture is 'lived' by individual experience and human exchange.

Monique Kwist's preoccupation with architectural shapes and principals is expressed by the architectural models she makes that, through their miniature scale and unusual positions in an exhibition, demand an immediate response from the audience. The rectangular shape of the models suggests an interior space that draws in the viewer's gaze. The stark, empty spaces, hallways, extensions and steep staircases are made visible by the limited light that enters narrow gaps or semi-opaque windows. Not a single type of practical use can be derived from these mysterious spaces. In appropriating the architectural model as her prime source of inspiration, Kwist is able to play with our expectations of scale and concept of space in a scaled-down version of reality whilst refusing the functional process that is intrinsic to architecture.

Kwist refers in this respect to the fresco by Giotto in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, where the patron is depicted offering a model of the chapel to the Virgin Mary. On another occasion she has referred to the construction of the Assoean dam which required the move of the ancient temple of Taffeh. The temple as a whole was transported and donated to an archaeological museum in the Netherlands; having lost its practical use and context, it was turned into a model of itself.

Monique Kwist's inspiration derives from journeys she makes, memories and pictures of unusual buildings abroad or close to home. Afterwards she draws sketches based on these images that ultimately lead to her fictional three dimensional interiors. The small interiors and architectural elements of her models are the result of a painstakingly precise and labour intensive process. With the original construction plan as a starting point, she creates a mould from small strips of plywood that in the end will act as a 'negative' and 'expresses' (makes visible) the empty space of the building to be. The mould is then placed in a crate and filled with a fluid – such as fluid concrete, resin,

aluminium composite or rubber - that, once dried out, forms the final 'positive' shape. In some instances the artist considers the artistic value of the wooden moulds to be at least as interesting as the sculpture they were originally intended to create.

Jane & Louise Wilson's work is also about the architectural environments of political organisations or regimes. All notorious for a certain kind of thought, the austere forms of the Stasi Headquarters (Stasi City), the heavily ornamented and intimidating spaces of the Houses of Parliament (Parliament) and the industrial architecture of Greenham Common (Gamma) are endowed in the artists' video installations and photographs with an elegantly minimal composition that reveals the 'slippage between spaces', what they conceal and reveal, as a metaphor for the architecture as synonymous with the thought permitted within it.

Jane & Louise Wilson continue the twentieth century's legacy of the role of '*the architecture of film...as a laboratory, so to speak, for the exploration of the built world – of architecture and the city*' (11). Expressionist utopias from *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* to *Metropolis* even anticipated the urban environment by building the future in the present. Just as the architectural metaphor, if not its material reality, is essential to the filmic imagination that informs Jane & Louise Wilson's work, architects working on the interpenetration of space and time (for example Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio) must surely envy the artists' spatial experimentation, unfettered by the material constraints of gravity and everyday life. Exhibited as a series of projections on screens set at angles, Jane & Louise Wilson's videos exploit the medium's potential to track real time to confront the viewer with sensations of being enveloped in these places. Just as the montage techniques of German expressionist film allowed architecture to participate in the very emotions of the film, in Jane & Louise Wilson's videos and photographs the architecture *is* the emotional content of the work. Like the paintings of Pascal Danz, even when narrative is suggested the absence of any human presence strips the work back to its essential components – surface, materials, lighting, the details of furniture – rendering the familiar strange or uncanny.

Pascal Danz's paintings of modernist buildings use architecture as a pretext for an investigation of how a three dimensional structure can be transformed into a flat surface. Taking his sources from the internet – that reinforce the buildings of classic modernism as immediately recognisable 'logos' for their time – the artist is already working with a two dimensional version of the original. He is also replacing contemporary virtual reality with the virtuality of psychological projection or introjection that was investigated in early modernism as part of artists' thinking about vision and spatiality.

The buildings that Danz has chosen to investigate – the Tugendhat House and Barcelona Pavilion by Mies van der Rohe, and the Bailey House by Pierre König – have always been treated as works of art themselves, illustrated without paintings, sculptures or even occupants. Where Danz inserts signs of human presence – the rubber plants, for example - it is to create a tension with what has come to be regarded as the purity of international modernism. As Le Corbusier remarked, space is not neutral but reverberates with the '*plastic acoustics*' (12) set up by the objects that inhabit it.

Danz's paintings ignore both correct proportion and actual colours, emphasising the reflective surfaces, transparent materials and vistas of the original, creating interlocking planes that replace our initial familiarity with the image with uncertainty. Like the fluid results of Catherine Yass' photographic method, Danz's painted forms are suspended between formation and dissolution. Space is condensed by the objects and forms occupying it, approaching Benjamins's scepticism towards the modernist ideal of transparency and 'fullness' and his own conception of the space of modern identity as being conveyed through a sense of 'flattening' and distortion.

Catherine Yass makes vividly coloured lightboxes from manipulated photographs of atmospheric spaces. Connecting her earlier work which focused on the dreamlike spaces that exist between people and architecture and the more recent lightboxes that depict uninhabited sites of human activity is her ability to literally and metaphorically convey real places as transparent.

Yass is interested in the psychology of these spaces – their atmosphere of dislocation, alienation and the architecturally uncanny – and how she can convey the corrosive slip of the fixed structure. Like the work of Jane & Louise Wilson, her photographs suggest that space is never a passive or neutral container of objects and bodies but a dynamic projection of the viewing subject. Taken from a series of eight made in a police station, the four images from Cell function as frozen representations of an institutional environment. Yass' technique of literally capturing the moment in between photographic states suspends the viewer between conflicting psychological readings of the image as both a threatening form of enclosure and a seductively beautiful composition of colour and light. The transparency at the front of the lightboxes is a composite of two photographs of the same subject taken moments apart, one processed as a negative and the other as a positive.

Conclusion

The individual works in *Shaping the Imagination*, the connections they form as well as the dialogue they create with Rietveld's idiosyncratic design combine to produce a network of spatial perspectives, both two and three dimensional, that provoke a variety of emotional and physical responses. As the modernists knew only too well, these responses to space are also informed by our own psychological make-up: since the conditions of perception are not fixed, space itself cannot be stabilised, echoing Wilhelm Worringer's understanding at the beginning of the 20th century of the '*great shifting of emphasis in investigation from the objects of perception to perception itself.*' (13)

This exploration of the condition of perception is one of the forces that is explored through the appropriation of architectural forms and concepts. Rather than constructing the concrete forms of the built environment, these artists are shaping the imagination, using the non-functional architectonics of the purely textual spaces they have created.

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1. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: the logic of sensation*, quoted from the English translation by Daniel W. Smith, Coninuum, London and New York, 2003, p.2
2. Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2000, p.159.
3. *ibid*, quoted from Elie Faure, p.102.
4. Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2000, quoted from Henri Lefebvre, p.256.
5. Lars Bang Larsen, 'Platon and the Skateboard: Toby Paterson's Style' in the exh. cat. *Toby Paterson*, CCA Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow, 2003, p.58.
6. *ibid*, quoted from Rob Tufnell, p.57-58.
7. Adrian Forty, quoted from Gottfried Sempter, p.257.
8. Mats Stjernstedt, *Under Surveillance: In Conversation with Jonas Dahlberg*, Nordic Centre for Contemporary Art Info 1, 2002, n.p.
9. Julian Heynen, 'Our World' in the exh. cat. *Thomas Schütte*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, Phaidon Press, London, 1998, p.45-46.
10. artists quoted from the press release to the exhibition *New Artists House and Langlands & Bell*, The New Art Centre Sculpture Park & Gallery, Roche Court, nr. Salisbury, UK, 2001.
11. Anthony Vidler, p.99.
12. *ibid*, p.54.
13. *ibid*, quoted from Wilhelm Worringer, p.44.