Alec Shepley
'*Un*-framing: towards *repeated* acts of deferral and fracture in fine art practice, production & consumption'

Stream-Repetition and Embodiment-submission in absence

"Space is pure violence escaping time and geometry to affirm its presence as the expression of the here–now, the instantaneous, the simultaneous and, by extension, the event" (Georges Bataille)

Introduction: In this paper I will consider the repeated blurring of the distinction between artwork and display setting, between the 'pictured space' and that of the spectator in my practice as an artist. Examples of 'visual disturbances' of existing conventions of art production, reception and consumption, through processes of repeated deferral and fracture are discussed. The paper also explores problem finding and delayed closure and reflects on the following issues arising from my practice:

- The temporary suspension or 'short circuit' of conventions of studio methodology and practice.
- The conceptualisation of a 'ruined, pictured space' and repeated deferral of 'outcome'.
- The disembodiment of divisions between: object and space; literal concealment and project fantasy; settled comfort and lurking dread (Melville, H. in Vidler, A. 1999, p.57).
- The problematisation of perceived physical and conceptual boundaries between art & 'life'.
- The production and consumption of a body of work that speaks to notions 'ruin' and catastrophe.

The paper shows various attempts to engage with (*work in)* 'that place' described by Buren and Phillipson; to disturb the conventions of production and consumption; to problematise the notion of the art object as a commodity; to work towards a 'delayed gaze'.

Context: The French artist Dan Buren said that the ideal context of art is its place of making e.g. the studio. According to Buren (1987 pp. 200 – 207) once an artwork has left the studio it is an object 'subject to infinite manipulation'. He claimed: "it may become what even its creator had not anticipated, serving instead, as is usually the case, the greater profit of financial interests and the dominant ideology" (Buren, D. 1987 p. 203).

He claimed it is in the studio that the artwork is closest to its own reality and beyond this place it is prone to endless manipulations to serve various purposes of museum curators etc., in locations foreign to it.

Michael Phillipson has referred to this cumulative process as: art becoming 'art' i.e. it is 'held' by interests or frameworks beyond its original intention. According to Phillipson (1995 pp. 202 – 217), institutional interests, for example museums, operate such an enclosing grip on the representation of cultural production that it is a constant and difficult task for the creative artist to operate outside a culturally institutionalised framework. Phillipson considers whether there might such be a place, :
        "Under the intensity of creative experimentation (the situation and challenge

of artists' practice) each work asks itself (and therefore us, too) whether there might be a 'place' where culture has not yet reached; it hopes to be that 'place' – an elsewhere that is not yet a 'place' on culture's terms" (Phillipson, M. 1995 pp. 202 – 203).

According to Barker, E. (1999 p. 13 – 14) gallery and museum curators have become increasingly involved with the visual effect produced by the display of artworks. She referred to a sense of the display of the artworks achieving the same status as the artworks themselves, saying:
"the artfulness of modern display can produce an intensified aestheticisation: careful spacing and lighting isolate works of art for the sake of more concentrated contemplation" (Barker, E. 1999 p. 14).
She claimed alternative strategies of display seek to recontextualise artworks outside the world of the museum, recreating the material setting in which they might have been originally seen.

Phillipson and others have talked about a space between art and life – gaps between institutional frameworks where 'culture' has not yet reached. It is in these gaps that artists repeatedly produce 'the work' and the *material setting* that serves to deny the enclosing grip of 'culture' in some cases often at the expense of the art as ("commoditisable") outcome – an approach that became know as 'installation art'.

Onorato, R. J. (1997) provided a useful description of installation art;
        "its habitation of a physical site, its connection to real conditions – be they visual, historical, or social – and often, its bridging of traditional art boundaries: public and private, individual and communal, high style and vernacular. The aesthetic power of installation art does not reside in the singular commoditised object but in an ability to become, rather than merely represent, the *continuum* (my italics) of real experience by responding to specific situations."

Installation art's "connection to real conditions", bridging of boundaries and representation of the "continuum of real experience" Onorato, R. J. (1997) makes use of the display space, the space between the viewer and the artwork.

Through *repeated* fracture and deferral an attempt is made in my own practice to *insist* on a return to 'the work' and the inherent processes, relationships between the work, the spectator and the viewing space: 'real experience and responses to specific situations'. In a nut shell – 'the now' (Shepley, A. 2000). The projects I have engaged in over recent years have become increasingly a result of problem-finding of my personal interactions with the site/users and allows in a sense, ruin (verb) to become a fundamental part of practice.

'Sit-e for *un*-building'

These consecutive two-man 'conversations' were exhibited at Wrexham Arts Centre and Oriel Davies 2003-04 sought to demonstrate practice-led research into notions of the 'ruin'. The shows comprised video, sound, photography and construction in a large, 'dispersed' gallery installation by myself and Steve Dutton. The exhibition worked against an historical reading of ruin as a depicted subject associated with abandonment and romanticism and sought to demonstrate practice as ruin – or the nature of ruin, catastrophe and lack, as features of contemporary art practice.

I made and used several 'repeated' models of my studio in the show and these models were empty voids except for some mirrors and lighting. The models

repeatedly referred to one another across the space as kind of 3D repeat motif, and the mirrors inside some of the models echoed this 'conversation' between spaces. The fact that they were void of all furniture save for a few lights, reinforced a fundamental lack of any 'outcome' per se – except of course the empty 'boxes'. The model rooms referred to the gallery space and the urban setting generally, promoting a sense of 'mis-en-abyme'. Steve Dutton showed a video piece of a tower block in the midst of pause in the demolition process together with photographic works of 'upside down' townscapes**.**

'Sit e for *un*-building' referenced urban geography, domesticity and architecture and orchestrated within the gallery space a sense of organised disruption – a kind of dystopia where the building and 'un-building' of something is deliberately blurred. Where the boundaries are not so much 'blurred' as replaced by an abyss if you like, and the repeated encountering of the abyss precipitates a return to a search for something familiar. The work attempted to repeatedly ask when does one medium take over from another? And where are the physical and mental boundaries of what we are looking at?

However, instead of thinking of the ruin as the remains of something long gone, we proposed that the idea of ruin might be that of a site connected to a sense of change and renewal, of something in progress. We were interested in 'ruin' as an on-going mistake or miscalculation which nevertheless reveals new formations.

In our approach to ruin, we did not used traditional imagery, such as crumbling stones, or the smouldering black debris of a world post-carnage. For us, the idea of ruin is interlinked with the possibility of change and renewal – an ongoing process occurring both here and now.

In this sense we endeavoured to sidestep what we felt to be an easy re-reading or reworking of aesthetic nihilism and focus on ruin as something which is signifies failing of some kind, as a kind of acceptance of something 'real'; an on going mistake or miscalculation and in this sense the relationship between the installation and the gallery space offered a further *site* of interest, which introduces questions of spatial relativity. Although seemingly constructed as a site specific piece, these plywood boxes and their lifeless wooden voids were generated outside the exhibition space, with the final space acting as a guideline rather than a blueprint for these seemingly haphazard creations. When teamed with the multitude of 'found' objects which appeared amongst the installation, the whole process and status of the art work was undermined, specifically and repeatedly asking if the model domestic spaces created were depictions of ruin, or merely the base material for the ruination of the space, and the manner in which it is viewed, occupied and 'consumed'.

Seeing Walls
This exhibition, funded jointly by the Arts Council of Wales and North East Wales Institute, displayed a body of wall and floor-based works by John McClenaghen and I. The exhibition was located in the Vanguard Gallery that is situated in the cultural quarter of Shanghai. The exhibition comprised assemblages of models, frames, neon 'trace drawings', wall drawings, digital video installation and wall texts.

I showed neon wall 'drawings'; a video piece; 'fractured' and 'spliced' wall texts; and a collaborative wall drawing which I produced during the exhibition directly onto the gallery wall with the Chinese artist Xiong Qin.

On the walls of the space there are five red neon 'drawings' (each about a metre or so square). The neon wall drawings were simulacra of found and especially constructed 'ruined' assemblages made in the studio in the UK prior to the exhibition. The neon wall pieces seem to be confusing arrangements of lines reminiscent of materials and devices associated with a fine art painting practice – fabric, stretchers; surfaces etc. and yet each one seemed somehow broken, a ruined fragment of another composition elsewhere in the space – one of the other neon pieces perhaps, or the curtain flapping by the window in the gallery office or the curtains or fabric in the video assemblages.

The video installation comprised a seven-minute looped film of an accumulation of dust, debris and detritus set in a model of an artist's studio. The video piece was installed in a 'mock up' hole, seemingly broken into the gallery storeroom wall.

The film 'Domain of Formlessnes' (2006) based on a re-working of an earlier film by Dutton and Peacock ('Plague-Orgy-Time' 1997) comprises a 'model space' – the artist's studio/a stage set/picture frame – and simulates old and crackled looking sepia film. The 'action' of someone repeatedly piling up model junk in a 'doll's house scale' model studio is the film's repeated motif and uses one of the models from 'Site for *un*-building' (2004) as a 'set'. The scaled down material (model furniture, stud-walls and other junk/props from the studio) is thrown through a scaled down doorway 'stage right'; the material piles up and when the pile begins to engulf the room, a curtain swishes in from either side to draw a close to the 'vignette' - only to reopen seconds later to an empty room/stage. This process repeats itself continuously as several 'acts' and is accompanied by a 'Djangoesque' jazz guitar soundtrack. The film was shown on old monitor in what appeared to be a 'cartoon-like' hole in the wall reminiscent of a 'wile e coyote' cartoon; this added to the impression of the monitor having just crashed through the wall. The hole in the wall also 'punctured' the fabric of the gallery and gave the spectator a glimpse into a gallery store – an otherwise unseen space. And all the while the 'leitmotif' emanated from the storeroom. The seemingly futile endeavour in the film was reminiscent of the deadpan absurdity and yet careful and precise staging, lighting and timing of a Buster Keaton sketch. The film referenced a faint index, for example, the process of picture making and 'pictured space' (in painting and in film); the 'frame'; catastrophe; and the deadpan absurdity of early motion pictures.

There was a sense of a practice which was failing to keep a hold on itself; uncannily caught in the moment of an on going slip-up or blunder. Is the film an incomplete project? Is it 'depicting' something that fails to fulfil its potential; a visual articulation of something abandoned?

The wall texts were similarly 'futile' and ruined vinyl graphics of words, all of which were derivations of the word 'ruin'. The words were cut and spliced together to form meaningless and disastrous amalgams of 'crashed' words – signs pointing nowhere and yet to themselves as bungled objects.

The installation sought to demonstrate practice as ruin through the display of a seemingly incomplete project; perhaps a 'work in progress' something falling apart - perhaps a state of 'ruin'. The installation sought to simulate 'pictorial space' and conventional artistic, studio based methodologies through the deployment of a 'degraded aesthetic' (Millard, K. 2005).

The installation had been constructed with the notion of creating 'little visual disturbances' within the field of vision – disturbances that mitigate against an overall

unifying impression of the 'show'. The intention of simulating a *self*-conscious pictorial 'fracture' (hence the reference to Anthony Vidler's 'seeing walls') comes again, out of problem-finding in our conventional artistic, studio based methodologies (Getzels, J. W. and Csikszentmihalyi, M. 1976).

Other pieces in the space included John's pristine models in layered slabs of blue insulation foam core. The stacked blue slabs teetered either on white plinths or else on the floor. Some of the plinths appeared to have been knocked over and the slabs hastily reassembled before a gallery official appears; other 'stacks' appeared to have simply fallen and left in the hope that no one would notice. The stacks looked like architectural models of metropolitan spaces and it immediately brought an odd sense of scale to the proceedings as we imagined ourselves, rather childishly I admit, to be giants looming over a new plaza or shopping concourse. The cut out shapes appeared to have been the result of hours' of painstaking labour; they had a detailed specificity and that contradict their apparent homogeneity.

The apparent objective certainty of the works e.g. texts, neon constructions, stacked sculptures, gave way to an uncertainty of intuition and chance. In the words of Klaus Kertess, they "simultaneously construct and destruct one another" (Kertess, K. 1988).

In the dispersal sculptures of Barry Le Va the spectator will not only examine the traces left by the artist and attempt a reconstruction of the event that was its creation, they will also continue it through their own actions in the space. In the realised urban environment suggested by Boyarsky and Murphy the city dweller would actuate architectural space by following the trace of the architect's process, as realised place. Those who populate this space continue the process both by the choices of where to walk, the routes they take (narratives they construct) and also through the random actions which will later spring up in the spaces that form as a result of the architect's process. As Michel de Certeau observed "space is practiced place" and the carefully choreographed space within the gallery reinforced this notion through repetitive acts or 'little visual disturbances' in order to ruin any notion or expectation of a sensible or unified 'whole'.

Words like scatter, shuffle, shift etc. associated with process art, do however imply movement with a spatial and a temporal direction. Objects and elements in a process based drawing or installation often link or overlap to imply trajectories of movement 'elsewhere'. But we were interested in the question whether the elsewhere could be not *just* a place but a 'time' – here, now?

Viewing can take a variety of forms such as searching or tracing, which within this context encourages the spectator to adopt the role of the detective within a forensic process of viewing. Walking grows in relevance within art practice when artists (and by extension viewers) begin to talk about being in the work. This process conceptually or physically actuates space within the work, as it does in our daily lives, when the process of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place [or artwork].

The cumulative effect of these visual 'disturbances' is that it did not seem point us in a single direction 'out there' – it seems to insist upon a return to our presence within the space – the 'now'. Conscious of this perhaps *unhomely presence* I sensed the approach to be a fundamental calling into question of the status of the 'work of art';

its ability to represent something; the notion of 'passive viewing', and may be specifically asking if the pieces were reflecting back our gaze - 'seeing walls'. The notion of change and renewal, of ruin as verb as well as noun, of something in process and in the act of taking place in the here and now is significant here. There is a strong sense of a *practice* as something which is 'nurturing failure', as a kind of acceptance of something 'real'; caught in the moment of an on going slip-up or blunder –often with hilarious consequences (Loch, J. 2007).

But nevertheless revealing perhaps a glimpse of an 'elsewhere that is not yet a 'place' on culture's terms'.

References:
Bataille, G. 1973 Oeuvres Completes, vol. 1 Premiers Ecrits, 1922-1940, Gallimard, Paris.
Barker, E. (Ed.) 1999 'Contemporary Cultures of Display' Yale University Press, New Haven & London in association with The Open University.
Boyarsky, N. and Murphy, N. 1998 'Action Research: Architecture and Urbanism 1' Black Dog, London.
Buren, D. 1987 'The Function of the Studio' in Krauss, R. 1987.
de Certeau, M. 1984 'The Practice of Everyday Life' Berkeley: University of California Press.
Clark, R. 2004 'Site for *Un*-Building' Review in 'The Guide', November 20-26, p37, Guardian Newspapers.
Davies, L. 2004 'Site for *Un*-building' Review: Buzz Magazine (December p46) Cardiff
Dutton, S. & Peacock, P. 1997 'Plague-Orgy-Time' in Apocatropes, Mappin Gallery, Sheffield 1997
Getzels, J. W. and Csikszentmihalyi, M. 1976 'The Creative Vision' John Wiley & Sons, New York & London.
Kertess, K. 1988 'Between the Lines, The Drawings of Barry Le Va' in 'Barry Le Va 1966-88' exhibition catalogue (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon Art Gallery, Carnegie Mellon University Press.
Loch, J. 2007 'Seeing Walls' exhibition catalogue (Vanguard Gallery, Shanghai).
Melville, H. 'I and My Chimney' in **Vidler, A.** 1999 'The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely' MIT.
Millard, Kenneth 2005 'Rick Moody's Purple America : Gothic Resuscitation in the Nuclear Age'
Texas Studies in Literature and Language - Volume 47, Number 3, Fall 2005, pp. 253-268, University of Texas Press.
Onorato, R. J. 1997 'Blurring the Boundaries: Installation Art' in **Farrell, A.** (Ed.) 1997 'Blurring the Boundaries: Installation Art 1969-1996' Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego/Distributed Art Publishers.
Phillipson, M. 1995 'Managing 'Tradition' The Plight of Aesthetic Practices and their Analysis in a Technoscientific Culture' in **Jenks, C.** (Ed.) 1995 'Visual Culture' Routledge London and New York.
Shepley, A. 2000 'Installation Art Practice and the Fluctuating Frame' PhD These, Manchester Metropolitan University.
Shepley, A. & McClenaghen, J. 2007 in **Loch, J.** 'Seeing Walls' exhibition catalogue (Vanguard Gallery, Shanghai).
Vidler, A. 1992 (p.ix) 'The Architectural Uncanny – Essays on the Modern Unhomely' MIT.