

Embodying the Built World: Drawing Boundaries, Walking Lines

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Proposal

Title: Embodying the Built World: Drawing Boundaries, Walking Lines

Introduction

In this practice-led research project I investigate relations between structures of coercion in the built world and sculptural language. The aim of my project is to present a series of exhibitions and situations that examine architectures of bodily discipline as practices of form/space composition and spatial manipulation. Such architectures range from the delineation of public space to the choreography of bodies by urban design. The project engages the viewer in a dialogue around art and the spatio-visual codes that embody what Michel Foucault regarded as the coercive powers of modern 'carceral culture'.

Foucault refers to a culture in which models of surveillance and the internalisation of rules and regulation has been diffused as a principle of social organization. Panopticism, Foucault states, 'constituted the technique, universally widespread, of coercion' (Foucault, 1977, p. 222).

He describes this Panopticon model as:

Polyvalent in its applications; it serves to reform prisoner, but also to treat patients, to instruct schoolchildren, to confine the insane, to supervise workers, to put beggars and idlers to work. It is a type of location of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals in relation to one another... (Foucault, 1977, p. 205).

I research a range of studio and workshop, site and gallery based processes contextualised by contemporary notions of sculpture, materiality and art practice. I work from a position derived from the writings on art by the minimalist sculptor Robert Morris (Morris, 1966, 1970), Rosalind Krauss (1977, 1979) and Hal Foster (1996), which stress the experience of the viewer as an integral part of the art work and emphasise the nature of art work in 'real' spaces.

Background

In her essays '*Passages in Modern Sculpture*' (1977) and '*Sculpture in the Expanded Field*' (1979) Rosalind Krauss defined 'sculpture' as a term that characterises a type of spatial practice, encompassing activities that can no longer be defined by medium or institutional position. The contemporary development of her conception has seen an increased focus upon the processes of making in sculpture, key aspects of which were outlined earlier by Robert Morris. My work engages not so much Morris'

minimalist legacy but his emphasis on the notion of the ‘extended situation’ of the work and its surrounds, which require the viewer’s ‘physical participation’ (Morris, 1966, p. 237). My concerns are with object, process and body. Krauss’ theses are that (since Rodin) sculpture turns object into process, emphasises the perception of the addressed viewers and the idea of ‘passage through time and space’ (Krauss 1977, p. 282). Later these ideas are re-examined as the relations between sculpture and its non-sculptural environment (Krauss, 1979).

An imperative for this research is the articulation of a reinvigorated engagement between subject and society. Hal Foster has described this as a return to the figure of the public *engagé*. These tendencies, Foster continues, mark a ‘turn to the bodily and the social’ (Foster, 1996, p. 124). As we move through urban space, we encounter many spatial devices that could be said to act upon the body from the obvious aural and visual signs of pedestrian crossings, for example, to safety and crowd control barriers and even lines painted on the road.

Foucault in ‘*Discipline and Punish*’ (1977) contends spatial devices developed for use within overtly disciplinary environments (such as prisons), can be seen to have penetrated beyond the walls of those sites to be employed as common devices within everyday public space. Foucault further argues that such power ‘technologies’ appear unobtrusive and benign in contemporary societies yet ultimately seek to dominate the mind of the modern subject much as pre-eighteenth century society sought to discipline the body directly through various brutalities. In Foucault’s interpretation freedom from the pervasive influence of ‘power’ is impossible because such power exists in people’s thought systems, creating the ‘carceral city’ of the future. In this carceral city the technologies of control will emanate from all parts of society, ‘...walls, space, institution, rules, and discourse.’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 307).

In this project, I explore how these barely registered spatial strategies have become physically, psychologically and socially disciplining to the extent that even the frailest sign or device can denote serious physical and/or legal barriers. Something as apparently innocuous as red and white striped plastic, a painted line, or a piece of orange string can act as a physically coercive device that compels us to move in a particular way: walk, stop, step around, cross to the other side of the road, wait, sit or queue. Important background to my research is the play between a semiotics of the city and its material and spatial form (Norman, 2001; Danesi 2004). This embraces those concerns within my practice that encode meaning within sculptural objects, drawing, sound and video.

Extending research in relation to the body, I explore alternative possibilities to what is ‘produced’ by engaging with these coercive social or physical structures. By production I refer to what Michel De Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) terms ‘ways of operating’. De Certeau acknowledges Foucault but asserts the individual as having agency and being, ‘unrecognised producers, poets of their own acts, silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality...’ (de Certeau, 1985, p. 18)

I explore the physical negotiation of urban forms and disciplinary structures, where the permeation of these ‘rules of engagement’ intersects with a notion of ‘play’ – for example within sports that use equipment and ground markers to test the body’s ability to negotiate these spatial devices.

Contextual Review of Literature Sources and Current Practice

Foucault proposes a notion of ‘heterotopia’ – a site that undoes the usual order of space. This, he argues, puts in place ‘counter-sites’ in which existing social and spatial arrangements are ‘represented, contested and inverted’ (Foucault, 1967, p. 24).

Miwon Kwon in his discussion of site and identity suggests the implications of working with ‘alternative’ sites can become a way of resisting spatial and social homogenisation (Kwon, 2002, p. 8). My project does not engage with a politicised ‘oppositional’ practice in Foster’s sense per se, nor in the culturally ‘homeopathic’/‘poisonous’ sense suggested by Frederic Jameson’s writings on Hans Haacke (1986, p. 43). However, I have sought to produce outcomes in and against particular spatial and contextual backgrounds. Such instances include a shop front in Vietnam that integrates and re sites the local sound and rhythm of pedestrian crossings, and a group performance work at Federation Square, Melbourne. These are sites that, often close to the ‘street’ itself, not unlike many Artist Run Initiatives, (ARIs), close the space and associations between street space and the space of art. Recent writing on the role and functions of artists’ use of space/s (Doherty, 2004) as well as specific ARI histories, in Melbourne (Delaney, 2005) have informed my specific choice of ARI spaces to exhibit in (Westspace, Melbourne; Bus, Melbourne) as well as my roles as both exhibitor and administrator at Conical Inc. (Melbourne).

Collaboration figures as an important issue. Charles Green’s (2001) study of collaborative practice in contemporary art identifies issues such as negotiated identity, the collapse of space and distance, collective memory and malleable concepts of the self. Green posits the generation of a third persona through collaboration. The ‘Third Hand’, he suggests alters the status of artistic identity, even to the point of effacing the individual artist entirely. He also states collaboration manifests

identity through production, not signature. The research examines how collaboration potentially destabilises the subject of 'coercion'.

Disciplining Bodies in the Gymnasium: Memory, Monument, Modernism (Vertinsky et al, 2004) discusses the way that architecture and design have controlled the body using the case study of a memorial gymnasium made in a Canadian school in the 1950s. 'Modernism reified a passion for large geometric space and perspectives, for uniformity and the power of the straight line that in some respects magnified the oppressive dimensions of the post war belief in linear progress, absolute truth and technical rationality which informed attitudes toward education and the body.' (Vertinsky et al, 2004, p. 8).

Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) seeks to re-vision and re-state the power of 'the consumer', using urban examples of the pedestrian as 'consumer'. Rather than the focus remaining on the producer (for example the urban planner) or the product (the coercive devices; the barriers, the road) de Certeau reasserts that the 'consumer' (that is, the pedestrian) and their 'everyday ways of operating...reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production.' (de Certeau, 1984, p. 14).

'De Certeau was concerned with how subjects make room for themselves in urban spaces which are over determined by maps, plans, rules, codes and schemes...the artful manoeuvres of everyday users are always slipping between the lines, vanishing out of sight.' (Tonkiss, 2005, p. 114).

In broader terms the project is informed by how we experience types of social space from 'natural' space to that whose significance is socially produced. Based upon Henri Lefebvre's (1991) discussions on how we experience types of social space the Situationist International movement devised concepts such as 'derive' and 'psychogeography' –framing an alternative methodology and logic to the negotiation of 'produced' space.

Other areas I have looked at include notions of gesture and inhabitation of the city (Bloomer et al. 1977; Dorothea van Hantelmann, 2007, on 'performativity'; Butler, 1997, on the politics of performativity), the semiotics of the city (Danesi, 2004; Tonkiss, 2005), the politics of constructed urban space (Bickford, 2000) and artists' oppositional strategies and contested spaces (Richard, 1985, on Chilean artists in the 1970s).

The Chilean artists known as the 'Avanzada' used mimicry of official forms, the play of official signs and street art, collectivity and the body as strategies employed during the period of the Pinochet military government. The use of the body, 'as a material for performance art, or in the city and its human movements in street art was a response

to the transference of critical values to all zones of experience in everyday social practice' (Richard, 1986, p. 18). Lotty Rosenfeld's *Una milla de cruces sobre el pavimento* (which translates into English as 'A mile of crosses on the pavement') art action in front of the Presidential Palace (La Moneda, September, 1984) shifted the authoritative nature of the dividing lines on the road with the simple addition of a perpendicular piece of white tape.

In my practice I develop and interrogate a sculptural vocabulary of forms and materials through object making, drawing, photographic research and theoretical research. The studio is a place of fabrication, play, rehearsal and documentation, each of which has a correlate in the public display of work (respectively: installation; engagement of the viewer/audience; performance; documentation).

UK artist Nils Norman archives images of contemporary street furniture under the conception of the *Contemporary Picturesque* (2001) as well as collaborative projects (*Kiosk 5: Kite Kiosk, Folkestone Triennial*, 2008). His practice concerns the 'outward signs of the training, regulation and correction of behaviour to be found on a new island in the "carceral Archipelago": the modern city' (Norman, 2001, p. 9).

Collaboration with other artists occurs within my practice, whereby individuals encompass the processes of production of my works (*Intersection I* and *Intersection II* with Dean Linguey) as well the conditions in exhibition (*Guidelines*, Jason Maling, Harriet Turnbull, David Simpkin; and *Making Sense*, Bridie Lunney and Harriet Turnbull).

I consider collaboration as a way to generate a self-reflexivity in the viewer about both their own and the artist's/artists' bodily and spatial manipulations. *Making Sense* (2008) at Bus Gallery, Melbourne, considers the idea of spatial references by collaborative partners Bridie Lunney and Harriet Turnbull intercepting and overlapping concerns within my own work. The same work is later configured to stand alone in *Drawing Boundaries, Walking Lines* (2009) as a sequence of ordinary objects evoking a bodily association and response.

Mona Hatoum's work, in which she transforms 'the ordinary' into something far more threatening has also informed my research. For example, *Doormat* (1996) shows how Hatoum shifts the language of the domestic, to that of the hostile by creating a 'welcome' mat entirely from upturned pins. Similarly her use of bed frames, lockers, and institutional furniture contribute to this critique.

British artist Gillian Wearing explores ideas of agency and emotional suppression within the context of social and geographical space.

In her performative video work *Dancing in Peckham* (1994) the artist pictures herself dancing wildly to an invisible soundtrack in a south London shopping centre. The contravention of the behaviour and the displacement of the emotion depicted highlight the extent of the normative and standardising environment of the shopping mall.

American photographer Francesca Woodman captures emotional qualities within performed physical gestures in her photographic work, revealing a struggle or tension between the body and inanimate objects or domestic space.

I have looked at the works of Tacita Dean, Rebecca Horn, and Candida Hofer and Tatiana Trouve. In particular Rebecca Horn's use of body extensions to explore and exaggerate gestures of the body in space, as well as the use of used furniture or sites (such as hotels or school environments), is reminiscent of institutional or modernist practices.

In addition, the 1960s artists stemming from the minimalist, post-minimalist and Arte Povera movements (such as Richard Serra, Robert Smithson, Robert Morris, Ilya Kabakov, and in particular Jannis Kounellis) have provided fundamental and enduring background to my practice.

Proposed Project

To investigate relations between 'structures of coercion' in the built world and sculptural language through a series of exhibitions and situations (installations at ARIs, public collaborative works, studio documentations) that examine architectures of bodily discipline as practices of form/space composition and spatial manipulation. The proposed artworks will engage the viewer in a dialogue around art and the spatio-visual codes that exist in urban space.

Main objective

The main objective of this research project is to:

- Identify new ways of understanding spatio-visual codes of discipline in the city through sculpture practice.

Aims

The aims of this project are to:

- Develop and research a sculptural vocabulary and strategy to intervene in space based upon spatio-visual codes of urban control.
- Generate an output of studio works and a cycle of gallery exhibitions and site specific performance works. This production will include material tests, drawings, photography and video.
- Document and present an archive of the processes and findings of the project through studio-based and exhibition practice, as well as an Appropriate Durable Record (ADR).

Research Questions

1. In what ways can sculpture practice reveal spatio-visual codes and structures of coercion in the built world?
2. How can I use strategies of production and installation to engage the viewer bodily or physically to create understanding of these codes?

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