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Intimate Immensities

18 May - 18 June 2010

SASA
GALLERY

Intimate Immensities

Karen Burns

“Space” became a subject for architecture in the fin-de-siècle years of the nineteenth century.ⁱ Co-incident with the founding of psychoanalysis, architectural interest in space understood interiors as the expression of people’s psychic worlds and cultural theorists and doctors documented the new spatial pathologies of crowded city life. However this expanded internal life of architecture could equally be recuperated to tightly organise people’s bodies and rooms. The material organisation of sunlight, transparency and the minute directions of user instructions dormant in built-in furniture could also enact regimes of health, exercise, and gender and class segregation. Perhaps history was not the great discovery of the nineteenth century but bureaucracy as Franz Kafka observed. We are still living through the long slow analysis of these discoveries, as this exhibition testifies, since its two founding ideas emerge from later twentieth-century attempts to refute the bureaucratisation of life undertaken by mainstream architectural modernism.

In novels such as *The Castle* (1926), Kafka’s bureaucracies were sinister, shadowy and unknowable security agencies but they could also be dully efficient and rule bound, a kind of traffic engineering reorganisation of the world. Both Gaston Bachelard and Michel de Certeau, whose writings been drawn upon by the curators, contested the drear reductions and policing functions of late modernist urban space and buildings. Bachelard’s proposition “intimate immensity” flaunted a poetic logic in its pairing. His juxtaposition of two apparently oppositional or unlikely terms spurned intense desires for order and efficiency.

Both Bachelard and De Certeau returned to earlier traditions within modern culture, notably those of psychoanalysis in the former case, and writings on the ephemeral and fleeting delight of the city in the latter case. Bachelard observed that his phrase “intimate immensity” was a “philosophical category of daydream”. He made philosophical what might have been dismissed as subjective or beyond the boundaries of philosophy’s enumeration of logic. Although Bachelard’s attempts at explanation seem somewhat laboured (“The coexistence of things in a space to which we add consciousness of our own existence, is a very concrete thing)ⁱⁱ he appears to be describing what psychoanalysts call “object-relations” and their “impact on the inner object world.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In his book *The Evocative Object World* Christopher Bollas captures this constellation of external and internal worlds well. Bollas writes:

You are riding in a train, absorbed by the sights flying by. It passes an airport, crosses a canal, traverses a meadow, climbs a long, low hill graced by rows of vineyards, descends into a valley choked with industrial parks . . . Each location evokes a set of associations . . . Crossing the canal you think of a longed-for trip on a canal boat, yet to be accomplished, signifying the potential remainders of a life . . . you think of your mother and father-in-law’s former house which was alongside a small canal. You might also think of the dentist and a root canal. And so it goes.^{iv}

A passage of writing from Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* would equally serve such a demonstration since modernist literature’s stream of consciousness mode slipped and swam over exterior and interior boundaries. It is surely no accident that Bachelard quotes extensively from poetry and fiction. In so doing he presents an archive of high culture readings but ones exemplary in the expanded imaginative reception of places by those not involved in their initial making. Buildings and environments have after lives. Each room, place or building has a long, often complex, biography. After the builders have finished and the architects have left a place persists. Housing estates, city squares, country roads, airports etc are places of inhabitation, occupation, imagining, interpreting and re-use by the people who live in and cross these places.

Bachelard and the psychoanalysts attend to a particular form of reception and re-use. In their focus a person’s passage through place strikes an internal expansion; both conscious and at the borderline of consciousness. Because literature is a medium that can organise words in narrative sequence and roam this way and that, writing can magnificently produce a stream of consciousness mode of being. Of course the way in which meditation on the external object world provokes internal ruminations was an older idea, classically shaped in Keats’ *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1820). But in Woolf, Joyce and Freud’s texts, value was discovered in more familiar objects and experiences than a late antique red figure vase painting. As Bollas notes, Freud insisted that the “most valued material is to be found in the seemingly irrelevant” and he cherished “the quotidian as a valued source of human truth.” Michel de Certeau, the second writer referenced by the curators of this exhibition was in part concerned with elaborating Freud’s key insight.^v

In the Anglophone world de Certeau has become famous for his resistance theory of “everyday life”. Unfortunately things are always lost in translation. The book’s original French title *L’invention de La Vie Quotidienne*, sharpened the point of de Certeau’s argument. The “Everyday” is both an invented category and a place in which inhabitants creatively (and often subversively) remake the restrictions of their built world and imprint new meanings on the surfaces they traverse and occupy. In nineteenth-century Paris “le quotidien” was the name of a well-known newspaper and the word means “the daily paper”. Sadly the English phrase the “everyday” is sometimes a poor substitute for the implications of daily as one definition of the quotidian, if we imagine the diversity of experience and spaces encompassed in a twenty-four hour cycle.

Moreover de Certeau politicised Freud’s insight clutching the everyday as a source of value and creativity and then transforming it into the site of a new politics. He wrote from a particular local context. Not only was he concerned to contest the highly ordered French post-war new towns and housing estates he was surrounded by contemporary accounts of radically new histories of daily life: of miracles, inquisitions and healing hands in the life of ordinary people.^{vi} The French *Annales* historians worked in this period, refusing to survey and scale the traditional peaks of history writing (great men, wars, nations) and inventing ways of writing of history and cultural practices from the bottom up. In tandem de Certeau identified the agency of people routinely denigrated by intellectuals as passive consumers. In his analyses, everyday operations such as walking in the city might be interpreted as appropriations of given, official spaces, remade in ways unforeseen by their makers. Everyday tactics are counter-official. “Poaching” was one term used by de Certeau to describe such practices. Along with other descriptive nouns for creative subversion circulating in the 1980s when de Certeau was translated into English, (piracy was another), these terms tended to transfer the value of transgression onto counter-occupation, but increasingly the complex conditions of existing sites are analysed by architects, artists and others attending to the local with an eye on interdependency. A rewriting of the official and the everyday has been undertaken by the architect Teddy Cruz, in his new distinctions between the formal and the informal, between those officially organised practices and those outside those boundaries. He undertakes remarkable work, analysing the interdependency of the formal economies and spaces of San Diego and the informal strategies found in the re-use of San Diego’s building and car waste and excess housing stock in Tijuana, just over the border.

The alchemical possibilities emerging from a consideration of intimate immensities along with the everyday provide the ground for this exhibition. Increasingly the everyday condition of our lives presents changing, complex interdependencies - of social and environmental sustainability, of tensions around vested interests and social equity - what social planners once called wicked problems. New alliances of interdisciplinary skills offer analysis of existing conditions as a basis for new solutions. The curators’ choice of partnerships acknowledges this understanding.

Producing complex analyses as the basis for interventions into existing spaces does not automatically position the gallery space as somehow other to the everyday. The gallery is a workplace for some and a place of exhibition in a culture that thrives on exhibiting the real in television reality shows and exhibiting the everyday dramas of celebrity lives. The gallery can offer a space to exhibit works made out of labour and reflection. Reflecting and making and the particular modes of analysis offered by drawing, film and installation is one form of slowed down looking; analysing, noticing patterns, significances. We can see this technique at work in Davis and Davis’ layered drawing, text and installation. Pedisic and Chwalisz’ s installation probes changing perception, a multiplicity that offers diversity as a site of transformation. The curators have asked exhibitors to work in white, thus analysing and remaking the conventional painted, plasterboard wall codes of the gallery; inhabiting its interior and making something unforeseen of its habitual constraints and protocols. Analysis and new work present a re-ordering and intensification of experience, not its transcendence.

ⁱ See Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 256-275, and Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2000).

ⁱⁱ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994; French original, 1958), 203.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jonathan Bolas, *The Evocative Object World* (East Sussex: Routledge, 2009), 6.

^{iv} Jonathan Lear, “Sharing Secrets”, *London Review of Books*, 11 March 2010: 34

^v De Certeau was a psychoanalyst and ethno-historian as well as theorist. Some of his essays on Freud and Lacan are published in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (1996).

^{vi} See Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929-89* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

Acknowledgements

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Images:

Front: Sean Humphries and Sasha Radjenovich, *Blueprint*, 28.4.10

Centre: Hurst and Lawrence, *Intimate Immensities*, 02 (detail) 2010

Back: Katica Pedisic, *carroll/green 01* (detail), 2010

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