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**THE DOUBLE BODY:
BEING IN SPACE
REVIEW BY BRENDEN GRAY**



VISUAL IDENTITIES IN ART AND DESIGN RESEARCH CENTRE

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In curating *The Double Body*, an exhibition comprising mostly site-specific artworks, Anthea Buys asked the invited artists (Nina Barnett, Phillip Raiford Johnson, Johan Thom, David Andrew, Alex Oppen, Lerato Shadi, Marcus Neustetter, Rodan Kane Hart, Bronwyn Lace and Murray Kruger) to take the architecture of the FADA Gallery as their central point of departure. The online catalogue cites Ralph Rugoff's curated show at the Hayward Gallery, *Psycho Buildings: Artists Take on Architecture* (2008), stating that the "exhibition treats the notion of architectural space broadly, and suggests that non-functional spatial interventions and artistic gestures that respond to a formally architectural environment are themselves architectural works", and that the exhibition "proposes through constructing a physically immersive network of installation environments, that the very notion of architectural space is derived directly in relation to the bodies that would inhabit, look at, move through or construct it" (Buys 2009:9).

The point that the curator is making through the exhibition is that artists can disrupt expectations and experiences of architectural space, and in doing so, make one recognise the extent to which these spaces shape and encode everyday human relationships. Architecture and interior design are powerful because they are practices that regulate human movement and, as Michel Foucault argues, in doing so constitute discourses that discipline the body. To borrow Michel de Certeau's (1984:29, 30) ideas, artists can disrupt the totalisations of architecture by directing one's attention to how people "make do" within structures that are designed for them by those who supposedly know better, such as experts, administrators, town planners, architects, managers and so forth. The FADA Gallery, given its interstitial position between the massive body of the educational institution and the world of lived experience "out there" is perfectly positioned for curatorial interventions that might prompt users of the building to think critically about the potentials that exist in in-between spaces. These spaces exist between the formal and informal, knowledge and experience, tacit, embodied knowing and explicit, discursive knowledge. The gallery, in many ways an in-between space and a potential machine for the construction of subjectivities, sits between a double body of the world of the student and the educational field. In this way, this exhibition sets a new agenda for the FADA Gallery as a space to activate potential relationalities.

The artists invited to participate in *The Double Body* make up an interesting cohort of senior visual arts students and emerging and established artists offering a diversity of approaches; from architecture to installation, cyber art, sculpture, video and performance art. It is clear from the configurations of work and material presented in the gallery and its environs, that the

artists were briefed by Buys to respond creatively to the gallery as a space. According to her, the curatorial process unfolded as a conversation between the artists, with Buys playing a facilitating role in the development of the final exhibition. Clearly the artists accepted and agreed to work in a dialogical mode with the space, the curator and each other. As such, the body of work proceeded generatively and organically, rather than under the strategic direction of an overseeing curator. In the vein of this generative methodology, the exhibition was also 'designed' to be animated by an audience and by time, so in the case of *The Double Body*, viewers were invited to enjoy the work at night as a kind of ludic nocturnal event/situation where 'residues' of the performative would be left behind in the space to be seen later on during the day.

On the ground level of the gallery the viewer encountered Alex Oppen's *Auseinandersetzung*. The piece, an installation produced by this architect and Senior Lecturer in the Architecture Dept. of the University of Johannesburg's Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture (FADA), attempts to disarticulate the main gallery space and amphitheatre area. Here was perhaps the most direct engagement with the gallery as an architectural space and according to Buys (2009), Oppen's contribution provided the generative catalyst for some of the spatial networking that took place between artists creating work for the show. A cube/grid made from lengths of whitened pine, over which a mesh was stretched, caged the stairwell of the gallery, preventing access to its lower level, compelling visitors to walk over the walkway to what Oppen characterises as the dead space of the amphitheatre, a potentially communal and politicised space which he contends is underused by the FADA student community because the building is poorly designed. The subtle disruptions afforded by *Auseinandersetzung* prompt viewers to be critically aware of the coded-ness of their pedestrian ambulations. Oppen also emptied the wire cages containing river stones at the entrance to the building, recontextualising these in the gallery as a floor piece where the stones were organised at the intersections of lines of tape radiating from the central cage structure, creating perspectival shadows for the central cube structure. Oppen thus sets up implied lines connecting the grid structure over the stairwell (inside), the façade of the gallery (skin/membrane), and the empty wire cage above the amphitheatre (outside). Space is recognised through the disarticulation, disruption and frustration of existing architectural markers, ironically disrupting vision through the grid, that archetypal emblem of modernist rationality. Ironically, the German title of the work suggests 'critical engagement' which draws attention to how space itself is a discursive structure to be interrogated through practice.

Below Oppen's piece, on the lower level gallery, David Andrews presented *Classroom (Recovery Room)*, an installation piece representing a reconfigured classroom. From its initial showing at the Standard Bank Gallery earlier this year, Andrews has reworked the piece for the FADA Gallery. The aesthetic and conceptual contrast between the severity indexed by Oppen's use of the grid, and the more human-level investigations of Andrews and Bronwyn Lace's *Verticality, Height and Mass*, installed on the lower level, reads very effectively within the context of the overall exhibition. These contrasts seem to reinforce the central investigation of the exhibition, namely, to explore the space between the strategic and the tactical. Andrews's installation breaks the Cartesian rationality often associated with educational spaces, manifest in rows of desks and chairs, timetables, the design of school buildings and so on. The installation is made up of orange school chairs and wooden desks, collected from PJ Simelane, a High School Andrews and Marcus Neustetter collaborated with as part of their *C30* project (the name of the art classroom in which they worked with learners). *C30* was a site specific, community-based project which took place from 2008 to 2009. Here Andrews arranges the desks and chairs, and other pedagogical paraphernalia (bundled up screens and maps, blackboards and so on) in non-normative configurations that suggest an exploded classroom, a place re-imagined as a kind of fractal space of play. The furniture and objects in the installation are lit so that they project shadows onto the walls of the gallery upon which charcoal drawings were made by the artist. For Andrews, the installation is a visual response to Felix Guattari's (1995:133) question, "how do you make a class operate like a work of art? What are the possible paths to its singularisation, the source of a 'purchase on existence' for the children who compose it?". The work offers a critique of the classroom as a site of passive reception, by imagining it as a place of productive chaos and radical possibility. Both Oppen and Andrews's works illustrate de Certeau's understanding of modernity as a dialectic between the tactical, a form of everyday resistance against the strategic and totalising practices of institutions. For him, interestingly, the practice of 'making do' takes place within the failures of planning and institutional bureaucracy.

Many of the performative pieces on the exhibition seem to take this dialectic as their starting point, and thus tend to assume that the building needs to be resisted in the curatorial intervention. For example, Lerato Shadi's *Hema* parodies the cult of the artist (made possible through gallery spaces and associated rituals) as the producer of objects as presences, through the banal and repetitive action of capturing her breath (indexing nothingness) in balloons and bestowing her works, muse-like, upon the bewildered audience below. Philip Riaford Johnson's manufacturing of a FADA-like institutional structure titled *Nightscape (Thoughts About a Machine)*, from black corrugated plastic, looks at the ordinary and commonplace human-level action of cutting and slotting as a sculptural device to produce,

what ironically becomes a manufactured-looking, industrial-institutional architectonic form. Incidentally, this form bears a strong resemblance to the functionalist, brutish and exposed, hi-mo aesthetic of the FADA building, and the ominous presence of the gasworks adjacent to the building.

Lace's performance, like Johnson's piece, metaphorises everyday concepts such as human mass, height, and spatiality to interrogate the fragility of the human body in relation to architectural space. In this piece, Lace ritualistically ensnares herself in the corner of the gallery, by pulling polished, brass weights consecutively (adding up to her body weight) connected to the wall with fishing line, leveraged by a spine of hooks (vertically identical to her body height). The work plays against the three spatial directions inherent to the corner (becoming a cage of sorts, as in the case of Oppen's work), the diagonal (staircase indicating human mobility), the vertical (spine, wall, authority, assertion) and horizontal (foot, floor, ceiling, passivity and limitation). Lace positions her body at the interstices between these forces. The final installation is but a residue of the performance itself, activated by her body, leaving the viewer not with the expected entropic state but with tension, shown here in the fishing weights suspended from the defunct stairwell.

Relational aesthetics often looks empty, as it marks out absences and nodes of activation in temporal space rather than populating spaces for longer periods of time. It is noteworthy that many of the works on *The Double Body* tended to degrade over the course of the exhibition after the opening event. Rodan Kane Hart's *Direction (O)* splintered due to rain, wind and pedestrian movement and Murray Kruger's *Route (B)* blew away after a few days. The primacy of the production of absence in art practices of this nature is due to the fact that, as Nicolas Bourriaud (2006) suggests, relational aesthetics stresses the indeterminacy and interstitial in the attempt to create "new modes of sociability". He contends that contemporary aesthetics, broadly speaking, is relational because, as a practice, it favors dematerialisation as its *modus operandi*: contemporary art practice he argues, is not limited by notions of disciplinary purity or style and thus has a capacity to produce the "state of encounter" or a space in which to "inhabit new social possibilities"; "moments of sociability and objects producing sociability" (Bourriaud 2006: 18, 13, 33).

The artists operate in much the same way as a designer or in Bourriaud's (2006:15) words, the "artwork is presented as a social interstice within which ... experiments and ... new life possibilities ... appear to be possible". Given the exhibition's emphasis on space, the connections between things (artefacts, objects, sound, and bodies of work) are stressed, rather than the things in themselves, thus making space apparent. The artists did not "exhibit"

their work in a conventional sense – there was nothing on the walls; in other words there was no presence, but rather configurations of materials in space, which, as Buys suggested at the walkabout, made the works porous and multivalent. In this vein, Johan Thom, in *Incantation*, constructs his piece as an interactive relation between his work in London and Johannesburg, establishing a ‘corporeo-psychogeography’. Murray’s bubble-wrapped, virtual amphitheatre – *Route (B)* – was ironically drawn onto the stairs, as a possible and perhaps imminent and necessary, social formation. Neustetter’s *The Observatory 1*, a maquette constructed for an artists-in-residence platform proposed for the Sutherland Observatory, represents a primitive technology for looking which remediates the artist looking at the sky. It is a potential structure designed to activate potentialities (the enactment of deciphering the sky), rather existing in the gallery as a static, sculptural encapsulation of encrypted meanings. In this way, the spectator addressed is one who has been ‘emancipated’ from an art based on representation and truth (Ranciere 2009).

Famously, Michael Fried (1998) denigrated the theatricality of minimalism as being dependent on the viewer to complete the work. For him, powerful art was self-absorbed, autonomous and alive in its own right, offering the viewer a critical disinterestedness. Artists on the exhibition working in the mode of self-absorption revealed in their working practices the kind of self-reflexivity which Fried valorised as the primary function of art production and reception. As JWT Mitchell (2005:222-244) suggests, although it is clear from semiotics and discourse analysis that all experiences, objects and spaces are dependent on their contexts for meaning, there remains something compelling and paradoxically intimate about dealing as a viewer with an autonomous presence. The power of relational aesthetics, as attested to in the body of this exhibition, is that art-making imagined as a tactical and situated endeavour can disrupt the normative, making particular everyday regimes of power legible to viewers. Thus, as a practice, relational aesthetics holds the potential to democratise what is otherwise an elitist and exclusive art world institution. Similarly, as Guattari (1995:116) suggests, the relational, as an inherent attribute of aesthetics itself, allows for the construction of new, radical subjectivities (what he terms “mutant assemblages of enunciation”). The flipside of relational-type art projects is that they can descend into mere play and theatricality for its own sake, subverting any kind of radical democratic practice in the nullity of its sheer open-endedness. The danger exists that the interactive and immersive can become, to some contemporary art practices, what flatness was to Greenbergian modernism – an end in itself. Here, art in the interests of sociability can become just that – flat. A sole focus on play sometimes leads curators and creative practitioners to the assumption that ‘older’ more ‘static’ modes of art-making such as painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking are less open to encounters of sociability than, for example, installation and performance.

The point is that production and reception are always constrained by genre, and institutional technologies are always at play in the interpretations of objects and spaces. The question of modality in the reception and production of art leads one to issues of audience and context. In some instances, the experiences of interactive installations, performances, and videos, can be as alienating as 'reading' James Joyce; 'seeing' Willem Boshoff's concrete poetry *KykAfrikaans* (1981), or decoding a urinal – it often depends on who is being addressed, where, when and by whom. Different modes of production and the social situations in which they are received tend to create their own unique modes of sociability. In the exhibition's tactical orientation and situated responsiveness to the architecture of the FADA building and its environs, Buys opened up new possibilities in terms of how the gallery can function as an interstitial space. In so doing, she begins to ask the broader creative community about the social function, and possibilities of art-making in a contemporary context. The show, in its process and final form posited a relational methodology which is long overdue in local contemporary art discourse.

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