

Seeing Time/Writing Place

As Janet Hodgson and I walked through her new work in the centre of Canterbury, we shared a delight in the precise way the lines of the drawings met across paving junctions, and at how the words beneath our feet seemed at times to be somehow out of place:

Animal Burrow

Area not e.c. further as within 3m of edge of site/pile

Truncated by

Pile cap cannot dig beneath obviously

Very quickly it became clear that Hodgson was entranced by archaeological drawings. She described to me the scene of the site as working dig, divided by a grid of ropes, each archaeologist excavating their own small square plot, revealing objects and spaces through the removal of earth.¹ To her, an artist, this inversion of the traditional sculptural act seemed strange, and for me, with my architectural training, this process reversed the other activities of a building site, where architecture is produced through the accumulation of material components, rather than their removal.

Hodgson's fascination was not so much with the archaeological practice of removal, since this is not so different from the work of a conceptual artist like

¹ The dig at Whitefriar's in Canterbury is referred to as 'The Big Dig' on the website. See <http://www.canterburytrust.co.uk/archive/bigdig01.html>.

Michael Asher who removed architectural elements of the gallery or a more contemporary artist such as Rachel Whiteread whose practice has become one of making absence present, but with how archaeologists draw time² Hodgson described to me another scene, this one in the archaeologists' office, where the small drawings produced by individuals on site were placed next to one in order to establish chronological sequence.

The patterning of the drawings inscribed in Hodgson's memory, which she then described to me, I in turn discussed with some archaeologists. They responded: 'Ah! Yes! That sounds like a stratigraphic matrix'. A matrixial stratigraph, I immediately misremembered the phrase. To a non-archaeologist, but someone interested in images and marks that are both spatial and temporal, this was magic, caught up with excitement, I started research, to discover that the inventor of the matrix, Edward Harris, describes it in terms of 'seeing time':

In the simplest of terms, but dealing with that most complicated of ideas, namely, *time*, the Matrix is a new type of calendar, which allowed

² For Michael Asher see for example, 'September 13 – October 8, 1973, Galleria Toselli, Milan, Italy', and 'March 20 – April 10, 1976, The Clock Tower, Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Inc., New York', in Michael Asher, *Writings 1973-1983 on Work 1969-1979*, written in collaboration with Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, (Halifax: Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, 1983), p. 125 and p. 88. For Rachel Whiteread, see for example, 'Water Tower', New York, (1998) and 'Holocaust Memorial', Judenplatz, Vienna, (1995). See Louise Neri, (ed.), *Looking Up: Rachel Whiteread's Water Tower*, (New York: Public Art Fund, 2000) and *Rachel Whiteread*, British Pavilion, XLVII Venice Biennale, (1997), (Venice, 1997), p. 31.

archaeologists for the first time, to see the stratigraphic sequences of complex sites. Calendars and clock faces are two of the few ways in which we can 'see' absolute time, for since it has no physical reality, but is inherent in most things, it must be translated to a diagrammatic form to be understood as a schedule or sequence [...].³

For archaeologists the purpose of stratigraphy is to establish time.⁴ In the Harris Matrix each layer is drawn as a box, the boxes are then positioned next to each other to correspond with the 'superpositional relationship of their deposition'; this allows a temporal relationship to be made between all the strata in a site. This process is not uncontroversial in archaeological practice it appears, as Michael Shanks explains, the Harris Matrix questions the logic of understanding a site through geological layers, and instead suggests a form of diagram that maps the interface between deposits:

There are different ways to map the archaeological site. There is the obvious planned survey. But also the stratigraphic matrix, a type of diagram invented by Edward Harris, and in its modifications a cornerstone of British field excavation. This form of diagram does not represent the layers of deposits of a site but deals with their volumes by reduction to the concept of interface – the dividing line between

³ <http://www.harrismatrix.com/history.htm>

⁴ Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn (eds), *Archaeology: The Key Concepts*, (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 244-5.

deposits, or conversely their surfaces. The task of excavation is one of establishing these interfaces.⁵

The conventions of the architectural drawing in professional practice – plans, elevations and sections – tend to show space as a horizontal or vertical slice in one moment in time. Three-dimensional drawings, such as the axonometric and isometric, produce an artificial view of a building, from a standpoint impossible to achieve in ‘real’ life, while the perspective may be drawn from one, or perhaps two, fixed positions. As part of the architectural specification package, drawings are made with the intention of allowing the competing contractors to cost a project and later provide the instructions for what needs to be built. These drawings are representations of space rather than time, but there are of course more conceptual architectural drawings rooted in a more critical tradition, which attempt to draw time, such as ‘event’ in the work of Bernard Tschumi, or story-telling and narrative in the projects of cj lim.⁶ Recent explorations of the diagram in architecture argue for visual practices which are temporal as well as spatial, and a number of practitioners have investigated through images and words the gradual

⁵ Michael Shanks, See <http://traumwerk.stanford.edu/~mshanks/traumwerk/index.php/stratigraphic%20matrix>

⁶ See for example Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*, (Cambridge Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996) and <http://www.cjlim-studio8.com/>.

changes to space over time through the design process and possible future occupations of a building.⁷

Despite the fact that in the architectural office drawings are produced by more than one person and altered over time, they tend to be presented as the work of a single architect, with careful attention paid to the removal of all but the final layer of lines. (Preceding the advent of computer the roughened patches on pieces of tracing paper provided material evidence of the reworking of a drawing over time.) The archaeological drawing process sounded to me rather more collaborative, part of a collective investigation into a site, rather than instructions for the production of a complex artefact. It is interesting to note then, that while archaeology is currently excited about the creative potential of its own modes of investigation, with fieldwork described as a 'mis en scene' examined in terms of performance and theatre; architecture is working the other way and investigating how the drawing can be a site of theoretical exploration as well as a codification for the production of space.⁸

⁷ See *This is what we do: a muf manual*, (London: Ellipsis, 2001) and Jeremy Till and Sarah Wigglesworth, *9/10 Stock Orchard Street: A Guidebook*, (London: 2001).

⁸ See Michael Shanks, 'Towards an archaeology of performance', Paper introducing and discussing the session 'Creating an archaeology of performance', SAA Meetings, Denver CO March 2002, see <http://traumwerk.stanford.edu/~mshanks/writing/indexPDF.html>. See Jonathan Hill, *Actions of Architecture: Architects and Creative Users*, (London: Routledge, 2003).

Hodgson choose to inscribe the archaeologists' drawings into the York stone slabs set as a landscaped element in the new shopping complex designed by Chapman Taylor and built by Land Securities in Whitefriar's, Canterbury. Since each drawing is composed of lines that travel across several slabs, to produce such an inscription, demanded an amazing degree of precision, and careful collaboration between the artist and M S S of Leeds. This is kind of slow and pain-staking task does not necessarily sit comfortably with prioritisation of speed on many fast track building sites. It is important therefore to acknowledge the key role that the invisible web of conversations plays in producing the relationships of trust and mutual respect required to make a work of such finesse.

Hodgson has an ongoing interest in time and history. Her 1999 installation 'History Lesson' for the Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool, involved simultaneous projections in different parts of the space of 17 hours of video recording the fictional restaging of the everyday life of the building in its previous incarnation as a Victorian school. The work does not attempt a re-staging of history 'as it really was', but rather explores historical knowledge as an ongoing reconstruction in the present, located somewhere between fact and fiction. The life-size video recordings of the building being decorated to look like a typical Victorian school are projected back into their original position at the same scale. At each site of projection you see the time it took to construct another time – the past – one possible version of history. It is not physically possible to view all these times together, and even if you could see

all the images, the result would not simply be simultaneous – a moment in time – or sequential – time passing. As characters in Victorian costume move from one scene to another intermingling with decorators and painters, the time depicted is complex and layered, what you see slips in and out of making sense, more like memory.

A more recent work, 'Time Machine', has, through a number of incarnations in different sites, continued to develop Hodgson's interest in time and space, deepening and complexifying her understanding of how their interconnections in relation to a number of sites. In 2002, 'Time Machine' was shown in a number of locations in Canterbury. The works were composed of video projections on the inside and/or outside of various shop windows and a construction based on the time machine in George Pal's 1960 film version of H G Wells' *Time Machine* (1895) fabricated from cardboard boxes which once contained digital commodities. The video projection makes temporal play of the fashion sequence from the film slowing down and speeding up the sequence in which a mannequin is dressed in outfits from different eras.

When the 'Time Machine' travelled to the Oakville Galleries in Ontario in 2004 it transformed into a new work, 'Here and There, Then and Now', a response, in part, to Hodgson's fascination with the architecture of the gallery. She discovered that Oakville Galleries, constructed in 1922, was a copy of another building in Toronto and that both these architectural structures were influenced by the work of British architect C F A Voysey, in particular Spade

House in Kent, England, designed as a commission for H G Wells. Voysey's design work could be described as 'Arts and Crafts', and his architecture connected to William Morris's aspiration for a new society paradoxically influenced by looking backwards to a romantic view of medieval England. 'Here and There, Then and Now' consisted of installations in three rooms, including the time machine and two new video compositions. In one room, we see through the window a man dressed in an upper-class Edwardian costume wandering at leisure through an idyllic garden setting, and in another room, images of architectural settings from these other sites are projected back into the gallery at the same scale. At first the view from the window seems to suggest a romantic escape, but finally the character viewed 'out there' in the garden appears 'in here', on our side of the window, in front of us in the same room. As in 'History Lessons', we are asked to consider aspects of the distant in the near, but where the earlier work made us conscious of the past in the present, in this more recent work, the emphasis is less on time and more on space. Hodgson's exploration of time in terms of history has evolved into an investigation of relationships that are as much about location and dislocation, as they are about what was, what is and what might be. Wells' utopian visions are historically sited and brought into relation with the Arts and Crafts' tendency to project the past into the future, but at the same time, we asked to think about locations that are absent, but which form the model for those that are physically present.

The archaeological processes at work in Whitefriar's seem to coincide with Hodgson's desire to see many times at once, perhaps informing her decision to reinscribe the site with drawings of the holes the excavations revealed, bringing the past into the present, as an ongoing creative construction, alongside the on-site production of future architectures. The specifics of process as well as disciplinary attitude are key here. Following my understanding of the Harris Matrix, it is the very act of drawing – the representation of spatial relationships – that allows one to see time. For the archaeologists at work in Whitefriar's this drawing involves first recording parts of the site and then repositioning these drawings spatially in order to respond to a question particular to archaeology: 'how is time spatially ordered in this particular place'? For Hodgson, in line with her approach to making an art that is critical as well as site-specific, she draws time, in this case (as in the works involving video projections described earlier), an indexical representation of a location is inscribed back into that site, in order to raise questions about how the decisions we make in the here and now in the construction of architectural spaces.

Writing Place

The Mystic Writing Pad is a slab of dark brown resin or wax with a paper edging; over the slab is laid a thin transparent sheet, the top end of which is firmly secured to the slab while its bottom end rests on it without being fixed to it. This transparent sheet [...] consists of two layers, which can be detached from each other except at their two ends.

The upper layer is a transparent piece of celluloid; the lower layer is made of thin translucent waxed paper. To make use of the Mystic Pad, one writes upon the celluloid portion of the covering-sheet which rests on the wax slab. [...] a pointed stylus scratches the surface, the depressions upon which constitute the 'writing'. [...] If one wishes to destroy what has been written, all that is necessary is to raise the double covering-sheet from the wax slab by a light pull [...] The close contact between the waxed paper and the wax slab at the places which have been scratched (upon which the visibility of the writing depended) is thus brought to an end and it does not recur when the two surfaces come together once more. [...] The surface of the Mystic Pad is clear of writing and once more capable of receiving impressions. But it is easy to discover that the permanent trace of what was written is retained upon the wax slab itself and is legible in suitable light. Thus the Pad provides not only a receptive surface that can be used over and over again, like a slate, but also permanent traces of what has been written, like an ordinary paper pad: it solves the problem of combining two functions by dividing them between two separate but interrelated component parts or systems. But this is precisely the way in which [...] our mental apparatus performs its perceptual function.⁹

⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'A note upon the "Mystic writing-pad"', [1925], *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, v. XIX, (1923-1925), translated from the German under the General Editorship of James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud, (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 227-232, pp. 229-30.

How do sites get marked through time? How do archaeologists decide what to remember and what to forget? If we were to make an analogy between a subject and a site, then we might imagine a place to hold traces in a way similar to the mystic writing pad. We would expect then to be able to see and touch the remains of only some past actions. How do archaeologists know what to look for and choose what to keep and what to reject? I was told, for example, that it is not necessarily a matter of age or of material worth in today's terms that makes an archaeologist value one object, notice one process, rather than another, but rather whether this object or that process allows something new to be known about how we understand the past. Archaeologists are trained to seek out what passes as invisible to the rest of us, to know the difference, for example, between seemingly identical clumps of earth, to discern those that have been disturbed by human action and those that have not.

As I discovered at a recent conference on archaeology and architecture, debates are ongoing concerning the items that are found in pits and what they might tell us about human habitation.¹⁰ Are pits places where precious items are stored, perhaps over time in nomadic periods, or locations where rejected things were thrown – pots and flints as well as organic refuse? The use of pits for rubbish or waste certainly does not appear to be constant, but rather depends on historical period. There seems to be some agreement that

¹⁰ Emma Beadsmoore, Duncan Garrow, Mark Knight, 'Neolithic Spaces and the Material Temporality of Occupation', paper at *Connected Space*, McDonald Institute, Cambridge, 14-5 May 2005.

in the middle ages the pits in peoples' back gardens were used for unwanted objects, but in times further away, in the Neolithic period, for example, interpretations are less certain. Some research has shown that fragments of the same pot may be found in several pits, indicating a type of action that in today's terms is not easy to explain. Anthropologist Mary Douglas' much quoted phrase 'dirt is matter out of place' comes to mind here, as I realise that the decisions made about what to treasure and what to discard depends on location.

A brief browse in the windows of the new shops in the Whitefriar's redevelopment reveals a glittering array of clothing, jewellery and shoes, whose life span from purchase through use to the landfill site will be staggeringly brief. What would a Neolithic person make of an archaeological dig that revealed the depths of a land fill site or of Hodgson's work? Of all the drawings the archaeologists made in and of this place, including those of a rare and ancient street, here in this new pleasure house of commodity consumption, Hodgson chose to inscribe only the drawings of the rubbish pits back into the site.

What does this say as a cultural comment? At this point it is worth referring to another artwork that has used the insertion of text into site as a way to critiquing past actions, present processes and future occupations. For the redevelopment of Federation Square in Melbourne, artist Paul Carter was commissioned to make a work for the main plaza. 'Nearthnew' (2001) is a

text-based piece developed in collaboration with Lab architecture studio. American political scientist, Morton Grodzin's comparison of the organisation of federal systems of government with the layers of marble cake provided the starting point for the work. The project consists of three elements: a whorl pattern manifest throughout the plaza, eight surface figures located along the force lines of the swirl and eight federal texts engraved into the surface figures. Carter likens these to the three layers of federal government – global, regional and local.

The word 'nearthnew' is derived from a local word, 'narr-m' in pidgin, meaning 'the place where Melbourne now stands'. Pidgin is a language, which has been described as a 'contact zone', the kind of place that would operate as an un-fixed site in James Clifford's terms and for Homi Bhabha as a contested hybrid space. Carter's interests lie in the writing of place, between site-identification and self-identification and between place-naming and name-placing. His aim for the project was 'to rename, and thereby to bring into being, a new place'.¹¹

This renaming occurs not by simply positioning a word in a site, but also through the various ways in which each reader produces a space through their own embodied reading of the place. Through the use of various fonts, scales and spacings, differences are constructed, for example, between the

¹¹ See Paul Carter, 'Arcadian Writing: two text into landscape proposals', *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*, v. 21, n. 2, (April-June 2001), pp. 137-47, p. 138.

federal text written in a cramped 'generic bureau grotesque font' and the 'ur-letters' of the larger scale surface figures that appear more like images.¹² At each of the three scales, the reader is offered a different reading experience and alternative understanding of the site raising questions concerning the ownership of land in the political history of Australian government.¹³

Hodgson chose to title her work, 'The Pits', so marking Whitefriar's with information the site already contained concerning its own lost past and buried topography. Numerical figures indicate the depths and dates of historical layers, lines gesture to the holes beneath the surface, and there are also the asides, the notes the archaeologists made perhaps only to themselves, which are now writ large upon the site. This renaming of a place operates to bring the hidden indentations of the site, Freud's marks on the resin of the mystic writing pad, into visibility. While one can easily pass through the work and experience it as visual pleasure, it is possible to look more closely, to read it as an image and at closer quarters as a text. Such forms of embodied reading allow different negotiations with the past of Whitefriar's and with the selection of rubbish as a historical act. Hodgson's decision to name the work 'The Pits' draws attention to insignificant past actions and asks us to remember the objects those who have come before

¹² See Paul Carter, 'Arcadian Writing: two text into landscape proposals', *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*, v. 21, n. 2, (April-June 2001), pp. 137-47, p. 144.

¹³ See Paul Carter, 'Arcadian Writing: two text into landscape proposals', *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*, v. 21, n. 2, (April-June 2001), pp. 137-47, p. 137.

chose to throw-away: actions and objects not usually recognised as the stuff of history.

It is possible for words and drawings inserted into a site to construct meaning in a number of ways, as just discussed to point to what is no longer there, but also to question what is there, using the ambiguity of language to contradict as well as overemphasise. One reading of 'The Pits' then, takes the term to describe directly what was present but is now hidden beneath the surface, another reading, taking 'The Pits' as a colloquialism (the rubbish of language?), operates in a more complex manner, suggesting that the brand new items for sale in the shops surrounding the work can be understood as both 'the pits' and *not* 'the pits'. As contradiction we understand that the commodities are *not* rubbish, as reinforcement we hear that the commodities *are* rubbish. It is not clear, nor is it meant to be, which of these interpretations Hodgson intends, rather she is asking us to think about the ways in which we assign value to matter.

Connections have been made by many between the dream work of psychoanalysis, the role of the Freud's talking cure in the excavation of the unconscious, and the processes of archaeology, a discipline involved in a physical as well as conceptual and analytic uncovering of the past. So it was interesting for me to find the archaeologist Michael Shanks using the term 'traum werk' (translated into English as dream work) as 'something of a

(tongue-in-cheek) reference to Freud's notion of dream-work - How disparate (and often fragmentary) components get linked in the cultural imaginary'.¹⁴

By inscribing archaeological drawings into the paving, Hodgson reinscribes the past back into Whitefriar's - 'The Pits' provides a way of 'seeing time'. Akin to the dream-work that also excavates aspects of history that have lain repressed, Hodgson's actions visibly trace an unwanted memory of the site - 'The Pits' provides a way of 'writing place'.

Jane Rendell, June 2005.

This essay was commissioned by Samantha Harding and published as 'Seeing Time/Writing Place', in Janet Hodgson, *'The Pits'*, (Canterbury, Whitefriars Art Programme, 2005).

¹⁴ See <http://traumwerk.stanford.edu/~mshanks/traumwerk/index.php>