

Déjà vu: real and imagined space in the work of Cristina Iglesias

Cristina Iglesias, Whitechapel Gallery, London, April 2003.

Cristina Iglesias is an artist who plays with our relationship to space, challenging the ways in which we perceive material objects, with the insertion of moments of illusion and places of imagination. Iglesias turns us upside-down while we are still standing, offers new worlds to enter yet holds them away, presents us with materials that appear to be one thing yet we discover are quite another. Iglesias locates us within the distinctions traditionally held between real and imagined, objective and subjective, intimate and distant, natural and artificial in the manner of surrealist writings and art works but following tendencies in post minimalist sculpture.

My discussion of Iglesias draws on the theoretical work of Walter Benjamin and Luce Irigaray, in particular their discussions of transitional places, relational spaces and transformational actions. When Iglesias introduced her recent show at the Whitechapel, London, (April 2003) she described her work in terms of 'déjà vu' – 'some things you see will remind you of others'. My talk navigates these spaces of déjà vu produced by the work – real and imagined, material and illusionary. I aim to create a number of inter-connected and juxtaposed scenes, which pay attention to the particular positions that a critic adopts in relation to an art work and the aesthetic qualities of relationships in motion.

The work is about space and place, inside and outside, intimacy and distance, real and imagined, natural and artificial. The work plays with our relationship to space, challenging the ways we perceive space – ground and sky relationships, spaces that are offered for us to enter yet held away, materials that appear to be one thing but we discover are quite another.

It is important that you experience the work as a journey through the gallery, a journey through space. As you walk through the works some things you see will remind you of others, juxtaposition and sequence are important, so is repetition. Sometimes you will see the same motif, or think you see the same motif, at other times the reference alters slightly. Iglesias' work aims to transform the way we understand this gallery, and the ways in which the works themselves relate to one another, to their past lives.

Tilted Hanging Ceiling 1997

I used to spend a lot of time as kid upsidedown. I would lie on the sofa flinging my head backwards, looking up at the ceiling wishing it was the floor. It was so clean and white. there was no mess. It was unmarked by the past.

If we look up at the plane suspended above us, it is not a light canopy, it is heavy, heavy and thick. It is the kind of terrain one normally looks down onto. Is it the bottom of the sea? Or is it a field of mushrooms? Yet normally one would look down onto the top of a mushrooms, yet here we are looking at the underside of a field of mushrooms.. Where would we need to be in order to look up at the underside of a field of mushrooms? This is a place that will not reconcile the physical and the mental. Iglesias offers a place which can be entered in one way, but not in another. I wonder whether this is spatial dialectics – a contradiction held in one moment?

One the walls around the upside down mushroom field there are also the spaces in the wall images to occupy. Iglesias says these are models, 'models to think about spaces', 'models I work and play with', for her models offer 'a way of thinking', 'a way of drawing'. The images are photographs of cut up cardboard boxes assembled to form a labyrinth or is it a town.

The images are as tall as you are. To enter them at this scale is easy, but to enter them when they are understood as the cardboard boxes they clearly reference is more difficult, you will have to shrink. Where will you be then? In some imaginative land or magic place? Iglesias work reminds me of the worlds inhabited by Alice in Wonderland, The Borrowers, Flat Stanley, all figures whose size or flatness allows them a different experience of the relationship between body and space. Iglesias asks us to be in many different places at once, to be impossible spaces, we can only do this through the embodied imagination.

That's prepositions for you. They don't change in themselves, but they change everything around them: words, things and people [...]
prepositions transform words and syntax, while pré-posés transform men.¹

Michel Serres has commented on the transformative role of prepositions, that they possess a strong suggestive role, that they are capable of changing everything around them. Some prepositions emphasise position, the relation of an object or a subject to place, such as on, in, between, through. Others focus on relationships between subjects and objects, for example, among, with, and the directional for or to, yet others contain elements of time, as in beyond. Can art works operate in this way by offering positions to occupy, that mediate between real and imaginary. These works invite you to make relationships with them, and the places they suggest.

Jealousies

¹ Michel Serres, *Angels: a Modern Myth*, Paris, Flammarion, 1995, pp. 140-7.

The word 'jealousy' has two meanings in Spanish and French, the emotion, but also window blinds or screens. Jealousy has been described as a blind emotion – one that can't look outside itself, a trap of a sort. Can all emotions be described in terms of their spatial qualities? Certainly in psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan have explored different spatial or topological models in order to understand psychic processes. Freud's ego, superego and id, describes a structural system, while Lacan's mirror stage involves reflection, surface and depth. Freud understood the relationship of perception and psychic processes through the metaphors of screen and telescope, while Lacan's mobius strip was a way of describing a continuous relationship between inside and outside.

What about architectural spaces, are different kinds of architectural space associated with different emotional states? Bachelard has spoken of topo-analysis, the space of the poetic imagination and the importance of particular kinds of spaces to reverie and day dreaming, such as stairs, shells, cabinets. Most obviously we have the cave, a place of security and shelter which we can enter and be protected by. But places of refuge can also be prisons if you can't get out and castles if you can't get in. And then there are threshold spaces – windows, walls, doors, screens – architectures of the boundary between inside and outside, between inner and outer world.

In 'Jealousies' we have two spaces – one you can enter and one you cannot. This relationship between the open and closed structures placed side by side, start to resonate as you enter one and look back out at the other. From a distance the screens look like metal lattice, but up close, it appears to be wood, perhaps it is wood, but it is not clear, the artist describes it as wood 'veiled in copper'.

The screens are embedded with language, they incorporate Rousell's 'Voyage Afrique' and Huysman's 'Against Nature' both works that deal with imaginative space. The incorporation of text is crucial to the construction of the piece, the difference between 'what is visible and what is not', what can be read and what cannot. 'Jealousies' brings into play the relationships between different kinds of spaces, the spaces connected with emotions, and the places evoked in writing.

In 'Jealousies', there is an intertwining of the spatial relationship between artist and viewer, author and reader. Here we have a space created through the reading of writing, inviting a reading position that is in motion, rather than static.

Maybe the critical analysis I am looking for is one that does not aim directly at the 'out-of-doors' but, by exploring the 'indoors' of the text and going deeper and deeper in its centripetal movement, succeeds in opening up some unexpected

glimpses of that 'out-of-doors' – a result that depends less on the method itself than on the way one uses the method.²

AS Byatt examines her fascination with 'topological fictions' as fictions where the term topological means 'both mathematical game-playing, and narratives constructed with spatial rather with temporal images'.³ Byatt names certain works by Primo Levi, Italo Calvino and George Perec as the most interesting examples of this kind of writing.⁴

For me, these authors have different ways of making topological fictions, or, spatial writing. In discussing his own interest in 'topological fictions', Calvino refers to a review of labyrinthine narratives in the work of Jorge Luis Borges and Robbe Grillet, which describes how, by placing narratives inside one another, these authors make places where it is easy to get lost.⁵ These topologies are not just about space but also about time, some things occur in different spaces at the same time, or sometimes there is repetition of the same over time.

The explanation is obvious: *The Garden of Forking Paths* is an incomplete, but not false, image of the universe as Ts'ui Pên conceived it. In contrast to Newton and Schopenhauer, your ancestor did not believe in a uniform, absolute time. He believed in an infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times. This network of times which approached one another, forked, broke off, or were unaware of each other for centuries, embraces all possibilities of time. We do not exist in the majority of these times; in some you exist, and not I; in others I, and not you; in others, both of us. In the present one, which a favourable fate has granted me, you have arrived at my house; in another, while crossing the garden, you found me dead; in still another, I utter these same words, but I am a mistake, a ghost.⁶

Guided Tour 1999-2002

This ten minute video is a work produced with XXXX, but also a 'guide' to the work. Iglesias has said the guide is not only about the work, it is also 'from the work'. The work is a starting point.

² Italo Calvino, 'Literature as Projection of Desire', *The Literature Machine*, (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 58.

³ A S Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 139-141.

⁴ See Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, (London: Penguin Books, 2000); Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, (London: Vintage Classics, 1998) and Georges Perec, *Life: A User's Manual*, London: Collins Harvell, 1992).

⁵ Hans Magnus Enzensberger, 'Topological Structures in Modern Literature', *Sur.* (May-June 1966).

Placed in the city, the work is positioned within a different context. The city provides a guide for viewing the work; but the work is also a guide to an experience of the city.

A guide of a city or museum takes you on a specific journey, a choreographed sequence where you are asked to pause at various points in order to focus on specific spaces, objects and events. These might be details in the urban fabric, sites of past and future interventions, important moments and stories in the making of a place.

As we experience the guided walk as a journey unfolding over time through a space, a relationship evolves between inner reflection and outer reality, between knowing and walking.

Vegetation Rooms

These spaces are in between in a number of ways, the repeated motifs of vegetal and floral matter are located somewhere between natural and artificial, real and imagined. Iglesias has suggested that these works are about the construction of echoes, repetitions that can be found in other spaces, at other times. The repetition operates through the repeated form of the cast, but also through the repeated pattern of the ornamental surface. Up close and staring into a wall, we imagine whole worlds, from the origin of the objects that the materials are casts of, the lilies and the octopus, to the places we imagine they have come from. The physical environments they create are quite claustrophobic. What lies behind these walls of artifice. And with our backs turned, how do we know what lies behind us?

The walls invite us to look hard but also to touch. Looking is simply not enough:

The caress is an awakening to intersubjectivity, to a touching between us which is neither passive or active; it is an awakening of gestures, of perceptions which are at the same time acts, intentions, emotions. This does not mean that they are ambiguous, but rather, that they are attentive to the person who touches and the one who is touched, to the two subjects who touch each other.⁷

What kind of distance is there between a viewer and an artwork? Does our actual position affect how we understand a work? Is there such a position as critical distance? Does it require keeping a distance, looking from afar? If the critical viewpoint is meant to be one of 'judgement', how are judgements made? Can we judge through looking or touching? Is one more engaged than the other, more distanced or intimate? Being objective seems to imply that I perceive a distinction between myself and the thing I am critiquing – this requires that

⁶ Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*, (London: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 53.

⁷ Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two*, London, Athlone Press, 2000, p. 25.

I use my rational thoughts and not my emotions. Does this also suggest that I should look rather than touch? But what if I am looking at something that is not there? Or is there too much at stake in touching? That I become so engaged in the other that I lose my distance?

For me, the vegetation rooms demand that I come close enough to lose myself.

Alabaster Corner

In the corner of the gallery is a shelter, a place that asks you to come under it. Alabaster is used here not as a floor or wall covering, but as a canopy, as a translucent material. With Iglesias work you enter a physical relationship, but also an emotional one, sheltering is about caring as well as covering. Iglesias also challenges perceptions of how a material might be used, in her own words, she uses the 'Light to trespass the stone'.

In 'Notes on Sculpture, Parts 1 and 2', (1966) Robert Morris argues that unlike pictorial work, sculpture is not illusionist, that it has a 'literal nature'. Drawing connections between Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1961) and minimalism, Michael Archer argues that the advantage of Morris's notion of the work of sculpture as a gestalt object is that such a simplicity of form allows the viewer to apprehend the object at once. The viewer is then free to then consider other aspects of the work and the space around it, rather than losing oneself in the work itself. With minimalist gestalts 'one sees and immediately 'believes' that the pattern of one's mind corresponds to the existential fact of the 'object'.

Iglesias work does something very different – she creates a situation where it is possible to lose oneself in the world seemingly created by an object, if only for a moment. She destabilises the certainty of the fact of the object, for one does not only see what is there, but what is not there. The encounter with the work takes place in a space that is real but also illusionary, or perhaps imaginary.

Venice (1993) 1993-7.

The pieces in this room reveal themselves as you pass them. They invite you to enter them only from a particular angle and only when you are near.

Feminist critical theory asks me to imagine the world from a different perspective, the perspective of the as-yet-unrealised female subject, who questions the very notion of all knowing and once and for ever bounded subjectivity. It requires that I enter a reflective and rigorous engagement with the world directly around me, but it also provides an emancipatory moment, a glimpse of a world beyond.

Iglesias secret 'pockets' of tapestry, hidden from view on the underside of the concrete, appear at first generous, surprising us by offering up an unexpected space to occupy, intimate, full of colour, delicacy, texture. They reveal a sensual underside to the concrete that one wouldn't have imagined possible. These gaps open up further as you look in closer, providing a rich reflection, a whole other world to gaze upon. But these are only moments. Soon as I try to get in closer, I am disappointed. These are spaces one's body cannot enter, and they swiftly dissolve. These are illusionary rather than imaginary spaces.

Over a period of time writing 'confessional constructions', texts that reveal something previously kept private to a public audience, I have begun to realise that what I thought was a process of revelation, was in fact a construction, a manipulation of the surface, and illusory opening.

Passage I (2002)

Irigaray notes that when her mother goes away, the little girl does not do the same things as the little boy. [...] She dances, 'this dance is also a way for the girl to create a territory of her own in relation to her mother'. In her dance she spins around de-stabilising existing connections between herself and her place, making new ones between herself and her (m)other. She creates 'a vital subjective space open to the cosmic maternal world, to the gods, to the present other'.⁸

Irigaray's notion of the daughter spinning to make room between her and her mother, resonates strongly for me. I imagine being five again spinning round and around in the middle of a room. Only stopping when the furniture, walls and floor begin to revolve around me, when everything around me slips out of place.

Iglesias has discussed 'Passages' in terms of creating a certain dizziness – when one looks up at the work and also tries to read the writing. Passage is the French word for arcade. Walter Benjamin's major uncompleted work was a study of arcades, arcades as places of collective dreaming. Arcades are both interior and exterior spaces. As skylit spaces, arcades allow access to the interior of blocks, provide semi-public routes through private property. The spatial layout of the arcades provided not only a space of static consumption, but also a place for a promenade, a space of transition. To consider the passage as a place of transition is to consider the passage as a place where we might pass from one state to another. Passages are defined 'places of transformation from one state to another'.

⁸ Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous: Towards a Culture of Difference*, London: Routledge, 1993, p.59.

As soon as he set foot in the arcade, he felt a strong tingle of anticipation. [...] Then he slipped into the passage and climbed the dark, narrow staircase, pressing against the damp, sticky walls. Every time he stumbled on one of the stone steps, the noise gave him a burning sensation in the chest. A door opened, and there on the threshold, dazzling in the white glow of the lamp, he saw Thérèse in her camisole and petticoat, her hair tied up tight in a bun. She shut the door and flung her arms round his neck; she had a warm scent of white linen and newly washed flesh.

The territories, boundaries and thresholds, the physical morphology of architectural space often also describes a sexual topographies in fiction and non-fiction alike. Passages feature as sites of dangerous sexualities in the city – of prostitution and adultery, of desire and fantasy. In Emile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, it is a room above a haberdasher's shop in the Passage du Pont Neuf in 1850's Paris which allows the narrative of a dangerous love affair to unfold.