

On and Beyond the Grid (Drew Shiflett and Christoph Radke) **Essay and introductory speech by Mark Gisbourne**

It seems to me what appears a very benign title for an exhibition is on closer inspection extremely challenging and complex, since the ideas related grids and collages dominated much of twentieth century modernism, from Cubism, to De Stijl (Mondrian et al), Suprematism (Malevich) Constructivism, Art Concret, Geometric Abstraction, Op Art (Vasarely et al) and Pop Art (Warhol et al) the grid was ubiquitous. Similarly, from tradition of Cubism's 'papier collé', to Dada, and Surrealism onwards the collage, photocollage, montage, cut outs, papier déchiré (torn paper), assemblage, and bricolage abounded. Indeed American Abstract Expressionist like Barnett Newman, and other post-war American painting has often been argued as a form of either grid or collage painting (Rauschenburg collage, and Johns the grid), through to Agnes Martin and Minimalism. In essence it constituted much of the language of twentieth century art either as an autonomous material formalism or and/or material-psychical displacement.

I must say thinking about this show drove me back to Rosalind Krauss's famous short essay called simply "Grids", and which appeared in her famous series of essays *The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (MIT, 1985).

In the essay she proposed a critique as to the limitation on what she called 'two ways in which the grid functions to declare the modernity of modern art.' She claimed that these were spatial, and temporal.

The grid in modern art states autonomy, grids are self-contained, autonomous and diagrammatic. They are flat geometricized and ordered. And something different to the relief elements realised in Shiflett's works. Grids are anti-natural and anti-mimetic, anti-real. A grid turns its back on nature. In the overall regularity, it is the result not of imitation (the mimetic), but of aesthetic degree. Insofar as its order is that of pure relationship, the grid is a way of abrogating the claims of natural objects to have an order particular to themselves: the relationship in the aesthetic field are shown by the grid to be a world apart, and with respect to natural objects, to be both prior and final. The grid declares the space of art at once to be autonomous and autotelic (an end in itself)

The second observation Krauss evoked was that of the temporal, focusing among other things on its anti-narrative aspects, grid offer no story but a structure (we see box-girder-grid construction, everywhere). In modernity it is a signifying emblem, it is ubiquitous (everywhere) and nowhere. You don't always see grids as such, but you are often inside one.

The use of grids existed in art and practices earlier, in the fifteenth century as the grid or veil ('velo') used in drawing to establish perspective in a painting of an architectural drawing, and this was continuously developed through to the seventeenth century, but not in every case a tool of assistance, an aide memoire, to some greater aim. With the advent of the Enlightenment (Aufklärung), the development of landscape painting, landscape gardening (which certainly had various uses of patterns), pastoralism, and above the movement of Romanticism the simple grid disappeared for two hundred years. Hence it returned again in the urban space that was the twentieth century, but in the autonomous and very different ways that Krauss stated. So now I hope you can see what I mean posed by the complexity of this exhibition title, *On and Beyond the Grid*.

But to return to exhibition at hand and the works of Drew Shiflett and Christoph Radke, in what ways do they utilise the 'grid' and or collage principle and go beyond it? I way say immediately that exhibitions or two persons shows present a specific challenge to the viewer—dangers of comparison. Discuss !!

Taking Shiflett first, in a certain sense she subverts the diagrammatic function of the grid by the relief element and layering of materials, instrumental clarity is displaced by aesthetic opacity. She plays with the grid-like notion of repetition that orders, but through layering and accumulating of material elements forces life allusions into her drawing collages. At the same time the use of handmade paper is antithetical to the use of the grid within the tradition of 'high modernism', or in post-war American art, that in minimalism stressed industrial materials, applications and systems, as opposed to the handmade (handkunstwerk), the gluing together of her accumulated sheets of paper and other elements like cheesecloth, and the extraneous goes beyond the inert and autonomous status of the grid in terms of its spatial function. And the use of layering opens up the re-inserting of the temporal, that is to say the potential of layered and collaged paper and other material elements (crayon, watercolour, present exteriorised association, the idea of weaving, associative improvisations and fanciful architectural association. The general aesthetic for this work responds to the title of the show by suggesting a different way to address the grid in terms of form, space and temporality.

In post-modern parlance (Late capitalism is if you prefer Frederic Jameson's or Juergen Habermas's leftist approaches, *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus* (Legitimacy Problems in Late Capitalism, 1973; *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 1991), it alters the conventional diachronic of linear sense of temporality. In other words the material layering affords several material temporalities to be seen at once, with their temporal boundaries undefined. This is what Jacques Derrida referred to as the palimpsest. Lest you know what a palimpsest is I will explain. In the age before paper entered Western cultural history, vellum or calfskin (sometime sheepskin stomach linings), were used as a writing surface. However, because of the expense the organic materials were recycled, literally the writings were scraped clean and the vellum-palimpsest reused (exceptions of course were the great religious book illuminations). With the advent of modern art technologies these under traces can be seen, but are difficult to separate from one another and create an elastic sense of aesthetic possibility. The analogy to modern ideas is clear in terms of the ubiquitous Internet and the virtual, and how artists today assimilate their knowledge of the world. It is invariably non-linear and challenges or displaces the old diagrammatic fixed idea of the grid. Drew Shiflett's handmade, semi-translucent, inter-planar accumulations, as collage drawings extend the former function of the grid to new pluralist areas of expression.

Conversely, and I mean conversely, comparison is not the question you should ask in the post-modern reality of exhibitions today: the work of Christoph Radke focuses on what images in this instance are a far more organic in their remit of interests. For while there may be geometry in Nature, the spiral of the sunflower, the hidden golden section at work in a head of maize, etc., the drawings of Christoph Radke, are anything but about the grid, so we must take the inference of the title of the exhibition to be the 'beyond' the grid. But although these acrylic drawings are free and handmade expressions there is a connection. But the fact that a grid diagram is a fixed and immutable form, a full stop if you like, the autonomy of itself to itself, in is striking contrast with the state of mutability that appears in the drawings of Radke, images that seem to suggest neo-amoebic phenomena. Executed in acrylic and wash on paper one might think at first that they are those fantastical manifestation you might see in a through a microscope lens in a petri dish. And certainly fantasy plays a part in these drawings. But then you find out that many of his previous images (you may have seen the show exhibited here last years) are derived from found Internet sources, subsequently disfigured or re-directed pictorially (I use the word deliberately in opposition to the configured). In his collage works Radke's forms take on the modern paradox so commonly experienced between nature and the machine, the real and the virtual, the existent source and the imagined outcome. His sources are translated and become collages of the most modern idiom, what visually suggests organic continuities are in fact fictional imaginings. The organic and the technical are what drives Radke's curiosity. His in these particular informal drawings his use of line is antithetical to the grid, in a sense it has more affinity with Paul Klee's 'taking a line for a walk' except that the line is mediated by his own sensibilities and fantasy imagining. What appears organic is in this case freely expressed and not manipulated, as with his collage interventions. If you like they represent a hand made survival an allusive trace of a former expressive reality. And the trace is where one should, perhaps, link these two artists together. Not in comparison and/or contrasting the two, but in a shared commitment to the aesthetic of the trace, something that itself can be understood as at extension understanding of the psychical palimpsest. We walk around every day with living traces in what we see and what we residually retain in our heads, fragments and memories of course are the most powerful traces we carry with us every day.

To speak of the trace is literally to extend and go beyond the grid, to bring forward creative flux and movement against stasis and fixity. Some have argued the complete history of Western art is about the mutable and the immutable, the visible and the invisible, about reality and residue. To speak of traces is to reference the personal practices on the part of these two artists. And to finish with an appropriate quote....."We are dealing not with the story but the story's 'image', its trace in the memory... Furthermore the trace is housed in the mind—in memory. The erosion is therefore brought about not only by time, but brought about by the subjective interpretive frame exercised by the beholder." (G rard Genette). These two beholders of the world (Drew Shiflett and Christoph Radke) have therefore tried quite literally to take on and go beyond the grid into creating new and open territories of imagining.

Thank You !!!

 Mark Gisbourne

Friday, 22 January 2016