

On Alan Johnston's Wall Drawing

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Alan Johnston's work is, at times, almost invisible – but almost is not invisible at all. At a time when our lives are saturated by commodified images, looking at a simple drawing that relies so much on what we, as viewers bring to it, becomes a test not just of our perception but of our whole system of value. What we see how we see it and even whether we register it all are consciously determined a mirror of our private self in a way and a measure of our understanding of order, space and structure. It is the economical way in which this act of self – awareness is achieved that make Johnston's work so extraordinary and effective.

Johnston's wall drawings take the form of short irregular pencil marks, closely interwoven to form recognisable geometric shapes. The shapes take their lead from the walls and spaces around them, heightening our awareness of the architecture and surroundings more than the presence of the work itself. Held with the independent existence that is no longer part of the wall from which it came. This is a creative, almost magical act of mundane transformation. What is more, these negative untouched areas of the work not only come into a sense of themselves but equally serve as screens for our own projections. The emptiness of the plane of white permits an immediate consciousness of the ambient quality of vision. Like John Cages famous 4 minutes 33 seconds (1963) of silence when the ear becomes painfully aware of all the ambient noise in the concert hall, so with Johnston's voids; the eye betrays itself as full of its own created images. Unstoppable twisted shapes, not dissimilar to Johnston's own pencil marks, float across the retina; detailing of surfaces, fixtures and incidental events take on a new significance. Much of that was previously apparent. This physiological interpretation of the work as a betrayer of the viewer does not confine the meaning. The screen defined by the drawing can also be looked at cinematically, as its surface made ready for projection. The source however, is not the mechanical apparatus of the film projector but the thoughts and images of the viewer, already held in the mind but perhaps not mad external until given the opportunity to be visualised by Johnston's drawings. The work might then be conceived of in terms of latency, the potential inherent in the viewer but only released under certain specific circumstances.

Johnston's recent works on board take this cinematic analogue even further.

The painted image is again geometric, this time created from gesso and charcoal on wood; the void is again delineated by the painting, but here a Perspex frame in front of and around the work reflects (or projects) an image of the surrounding space and the features of the viewer onto the surface. The significance of the reflection draws its inspiration from the philosopher David Hume's *A Treatise on Human Nature* (1739) where he describes the nature of human relationships: 'The minds of men are mirrors to one another only in so far as they are accompanied by reflection, of which custom renders us insensible'. It is this insensibility, both in terms of the body and the mind, that Johnston's work seeks to transform into awareness. To do so requires that the material of the work and its presence should be at the edge of perception. It is only in that state of alert, questioning concentration – senses alive to the slightest change – that this transformation may take place.

A further series of window drawings completed in Basel in 1998 focuses the attention wider, the window becoming not only an empty field, but a way of reframing the world beyond and around its transparent surface. The photographs of these works include the mundane detail of life in office or an apartment block stairway, recognising the every day alongside the space for utopian projection.

Johnston's work is undoubtedly demanding on the viewer, requiring a self analysis of the clarity of our individual perception and rigorous testing of our visual intellect. It makes explicit the complex connection between mind and eye, sight being the sense that triggers the most widespread response in different areas of the brain and hence arguably our primary faculty for comprehending the world. A careful sense of dualism in the drawings and paintings – between light and dark or form and void – relates to a similar accounting in the work of fellow Scots, Douglas Gordon and Martin Creed, This reflects a shared concern for an economy of production and for a desire to retain a certain ambivalence towards their subject matter – an approach that mirrors other aspects of Scottish culture. To this extent also Johnston's austere images serve as a guide to the types of inquiry that might be demanded by other works in *Intelligence*. It is not an ideological certainty that guides the artists here, but a sense of deeper inquiry into human conditions, without clear solutions and without end, except in a temporary form of resolution that each viewer may find within themselves.