

Mies Houston Draw

Alan Johnston

Being asked to make a wall drawing in the Mies van der Rohe designed Caroline Wiess Law building of the Museum of Fine Art, in Houston was both a continuity and a culmination of a series of engagements and dialogues in my work, and a challenge fitting the nature of the creation of a much admired definer of architectural clarity. The delivered form was a large drawing in pencil consistent with recent developments in other situations, among these are a series of works made at the Colnagi Haus, Riehen, Basel, and other companion museum pieces in for example, The Centre of Contemporary Art Osaka, The Tate, and Safn, Reykjavik. The drawing was formed within the full perimeter of the wall itself, it has an almost central division creating a focal tension where finding the slight ambivalence is heightened in a seeking for a symmetry in Mies's classical structure.

It was Joseph Masheck in his essay on the installations at Haus Wittgenstein in Vienna, and Inverleith House, Edinburghⁱ, who focussed my thoughts on the nature and origins of the use of a 'window/mirror analogy'ⁱⁱ. A form I have used as a connective visual metaphor in all the wall drawings made in the last 20 years. This, as before provided the internal design idea for Houston. As in other drawings, a suppressed, perhaps ambivalent, quotation has been developed as a 'shadow without object'ⁱⁱⁱ. This is a way of composing a passive neutrality, or non-composed stillness. Within this, there is a philosophical dimension as well as an observation on its use in the making of the wall works. It was clear as a way in which I had developed an engagement from the earliest point in my work, with architecture and drawing, as an endemic condition to making. Endemic as space is its self, is the genesis of the form itself. From the first exhibited wall piece, (Bei Konrad Fischer, Düsseldorf, 1973), the work, (which is in all senses, drawing), has been engaged in realising the spatial confines of the architectural context as a structural essential in defining the physical form of the work. Joseph Masheck further to this point asserts that it may be more than a symbolic Leitmotif. In forming the design of the work, it may link certain continuities and patterns. For example in the essay^{iv} he alludes to two traditions of fenestration, The 'box', the form represented in the architecture of Inverleith House, (through Adam, and Rome), and the elongated 'European' window as in Haus Wittgenstein. The form of the wall works have naturally lost 'the box' window perhaps as a choice wherein the continuity of Humean – Wittgensteinian association is presumed to be within the influence from Hume, to, Wittgenstein. The MFA in Houston is part of that distinction, not directly through the 'Haus', but part of 'the modern'. From this various classical architectural forms are shared, for example that has led on my behalf to a Miesean influence and 'continuity'. This has brought the drawing in Houston, a station on the way, a part of the continuous flow of the inessential, the non decorative to,

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home but a temple of art, a hermetic, ideal world permeated by a mortuary hush'.^v

This relates very closely to what I felt in Vienna working in 'The Haus'. In Houston one was also experiencing another 'Temple' though its austerity is of a different more tempered 'hush'. A public 'hush' one might note. Yet still of the temple. The sought for distant autonomy of response, was close to that inevitable delivery. The desired ambivalence followed, creating the void. Asserting this fundamental observation as of considerable import to the formation of the work, Charles Esche has further generated in an interesting contribution to this feature of the making of the work. He brings in the very philosophical, the notion of perception itself, and visibility. The drawing provides an ambivalence yet, a fixedness in and its duplicity as form and as a void^{vi}. This anterior quality of being the least in terms of means. The form of the work is of a very simple geometric nature where,

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Another and parallel context for this and other architectural collaborations, rather than the passive dialogue with the already made, is Shinichi Ogawa's setting for our joint activities, in 'Building Art'^{vii}

'Architecture must be freed from all styles or concepts and be neutral. Existing styles or concepts alone are not enough to produce architectural space. By reassembling architecture on an abstract level liberated from architectural concepts or vocabularies, space becomes all things yet nothing, thereby acquiring greater freedom. Malevich's Suprematism suggested an absolute non-representationality that transcended even abstract painting. It did not recreate anything; at the same time, it presented an unlimited space and universe. It provided a place where space in a liberated condition was generated. Architecture did not assert itself as a thing. Space itself was neutral, and the diverse flows of things and information were unimpeded. The convertibility of functions and forms permits the simultaneous development and parallel coexistence of all things and a high degree of choice. A neutral space becomes the foundation promoting the exchange of human thoughts, emotions and actions and a horizon generating diverse interpretations, view points and functions'.^{viii}

¹ Joseph Masheck Haus Wittgenstein-Inverleith House. Vienna. (Publication ISBN 1 872 291 32 5). 1994.
'Hume had already published the Treatise when he went to stay in Vienna, as secretary to Lieutenant-General James St.Clair. Remarks on contemporary Viennese architecture in a letter of the 25th April 1748 are less important as critical commentary than as showing him taking an active, if rather social, interest: Hume describes Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach's vast Schönbrunn palace (design begun 1692), which the empress had sold her crown jewels to pay for, as 'a handsome house; but not very great (!), nor richly furnished', Prince Eugen's Palace in the Suburbs' i.e. Johann Lucas von Hildebrandt's ('upper') Belvedere palace (1700-23), which departs in a creative late-baroque manner from classical convention, as 'an expensive stately building; but of a very barbarous Gothic Taste'.⁷ Soon after Vienna An Enquiry Concerning The Principals of Morals (1751) includes under 'Why Utility Pleases' (sect.v) an architectural reflection of some interest in view of the spare, crisp fenestration of Haus Wittgenstein: 'What praise, even of an inanimate form, if the regularity and elegance of its parts destroy not its fitness for any useful purpose! ...A building, whose doors and windows were exact squares, would hurt the eye by that very proportion; as ill adapted to the figure of a human creature, for whose service the fabric was intended.'⁸ The abundance of 'modern' i.e. post-Renaissance, architectural sights in Vienna (and soon after Turin) had surely made Hume more aware of the basically academic-Roman classical discourse of architecture. In an appendix to the Enquiry, 'Concerning Moral Sentiment', Palladio and Perrault are named, casually if haltingly, as authorities on ornamental terminology, but also for learned testimony that beauty of such is only manifest (subjectively) to an observing intelligence.⁹Here the architectural imagery serves Hume, however ironically, as so much rhetorical embellishment, 'classical' (basically Aristotelian), at that; but it at least and at last it shows Hume at home with such material.....Cool, uncluttered, airy rooms in muted monochrome. Everything tends to white or black. Ornament is sparse. Most of the walls are bare. The drawing - room is simply space punctuated by objects. Everything tends to extremes, but the unity of style is absolute. Not a single detail has escaped the designer's attention. (His) style is despotic and imperious. The house, in fact, is a private vision of eternity, in which the spirit freed at last from practical constraints, communes narcissistically with itself as mirrored in its own creations. It is not a house, still less a home but a temple of art, a hermetic, ideal world permeated by a mortuary hush'.

¹ 'George Elder Davie. The Mirror Theory: Hume and Smith Against Derrida. 'A Passion for Ideas'. 1994.

The Humeian theory may illumine the type of abstraction made by scientists but just for that reason it is powerless to explain the birth of language among early men. Summing up its difficulty in a marvellous sentence, Rousseau tells us that 'the language of the first men is represented to us as the language of geometry, but we see that it was the language of the poets'.

¹ 'Shadow without Object'. Selected Art Models. Curated by Anne-Marie Bonnet). Kunsthistorische Arbeitsblätter 6/03. ISSN 1438-

8995. Köln. Germany. 2003-04. Title a description of the AJ wall drawing made by Sean Shanahan, See. Victor Stoichita, 'A Short History of the Shadow'. Reaktion Books. ISBN 1-86189-000-1

¹ Joseph Masheck Haus Wittgenstein-Inverleith House. Vienna. (Publication ISBN 1 872 291 32 5). 1994.

¹ David Hume. 'Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion. 1779.

¹ Charles Esche. 'Intelligence', New British Art 2000. Tate Gallery. London. 2000. (Publication). (ISBN 1 85437 327 7).

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.

¹ See Joseph Masheck. 'Building Art'. Cambridge University Press. ISBN-13: 9780521447850

¹ Shinichi Ogawa. Space Design. Tokyo. Number 6.1999.
