

## Window / Wall

### Catalogue essay for Inscape Wales 4

Already one senses - as an immediate yet immemorial reflex of imagination, with no need to think very logically - what is implied in these familiar terms: window, wall. They figure enclosure, an interior periphery of possible movement, gesture, inhabitation, interrupted by an interval of light, and perhaps a view, of sky, changing weather, movement outside. Already - a room, a threshold between spaces, a potential gaze or gazes, looking out, looking in.

A room, then. How big, how much room? Room enough to do what one wants, to be, to grow, to change? For whom, and for what? How would one decide? The boundaries of possibility would shift with each inhabitant, or rather with each imagination of inhabitation that this room might be filled with. Its observed boundaries, its mathematical measures could not entirely 'fix' its space, which might be altered, endlessly, in individual perception.

Yet perception is often lazy, its imaginative dimension dulled to a humdrum sense of place and circumstance. But if the space itself could change, realise its presence differently, could this also alter, alert perception, de-habituate its assumptions of inhabitation?

It is this 'territory', between place and perception, an imagination of space and a space of imagining, that two young Cardiff-based artists - Emma Lawton and Reiko Aoyagi- explore through a series of alterations to architectural interiors. These alterations may range from surprising, even dramatic interventions in Emma Lawton's work, to almost invisible ones in Reiko Aoyagi's. But for both artists, the changes are evolved in accordance with selected givens of the space's 'structure', its physical proportions, materials, colours, and also its siting and function. The encounter of the artist with the space produces a drawing out, or conjuring into heightened presence, of some potential expressivity of the space. Yet any 'intrinsic' property of the space provides but one aspect of a transformation that the artist puts in play.

**A double interior: surface and re-surfacing.** In a context of activities spanning (and often combining) installation, performance and collecting, Emma Lawton's recent practice has emphasised tactics of displacement. Particularly relevant here is her unearthing of the cement floor of her ground-level studio and the incising of its walls, both these operations being carried out within a pattern expressed as a drawing of the proportion of the side wall.

As if, in this internal mirroring, the room's structure was suddenly 'voiced', provoked to speak the disclosure of its own buried past. This suggests several areas of reference (archaeological, psychoanalytic, socio-historical), but perhaps most immediately significant is the discovery of the wall's surface as the point, or edge, of a double interior. For the surface marks at once the architectural delineation of an internal space of human activity, and thus a kind of second protective covering, and the covering over of its own interior fabric (of brick, mortar, stone, etc). This usually unseen interior, made to re-surface, gives evidence not only of materials but also of making, as the relation between materials and intentioned gesture which becomes inscribed as structure.

Freshly revealed, the wall's inner structure may appear strong yet curiously vulnerable - mortal rather than monumental, a witness to temporality and process, an undoing of the fiction of permanence often associated with the architectural. This aspect of re-surfacing calls forth another: covering over. A process of layering, smoothing, grafting, sealing, healing. Allusions to the body are implicit, passively as the metaphorical object of possible operations/repairs, and actively in the gestures of making that leave their trace as the deposit of form. Time, too, is implied, not only as the history, or age, of the structure but as the body-in-time, specifically the duration of its agency in making. That the spectator may or may not be able to establish any precise duration is less important than the apprehension of a passage (of time, and of the body), a 'ghosting' detectable in/as the residue of building - building, in this case, as the visible transpositions and new constructions the artist leaves behind in the gallery space.

**A double stage: the theatre of mirrors.** A preoccupation with the space of the window in Reiko Aoyagi's work indicates her ongoing concern with dramatising an active relation between inside and outside. Sometimes this has entailed the complete removal of the window surface, to create a feeling of passage and exchange in the free circulation of air. More recently, some form of partial 'screening'

activates the window space, emphasising its function as a receptive relay, interpolating exterior phenomena into an inner space. As the artist herself conceives it, the outside, by means of this filtering, is allowed “to come into the ‘inside’ of the space and of oneself”. At the heart of the work, then, is a questioning of static identities, in favour of a deep intuition of fluidity and interchange as primary conditions of being.

The sense of the meditative in Reiko Aoyagi’s pared-down environments takes on at once a social and spiritual dimension. In the transformation of her first floor studio space, painted palest grey (the colour almost of air) and scrimmed with the translucent material of projection screening, images from the outside appeared as shadowy colour and movement rather than clearly distinct forms. These images changed with the fluctuations of natural light and one’s changing position within the room. The room provided a space of imaging and imagining that seemed like a kind of exterior mental space, inviting individual inhabitation, yet also obliging the recognition of others as parties to the experience.

Bringing this floating space more down to earth, within the below ground level space of Oriel, the artist acknowledges the expansive view of the street adjacent to the gallery’s quiet interior. Through the use of a reflective material on the window, the dynamics of passage at the edge will become a central focus. Passers-by may peer into the lower, interior space as if looking down from a privileged position onto a stage below; for viewers inside, the street will provide a raised platform where all the world goes by. Within the sheltered interior, each viewer exploring the space may recognise and approach his or her reflected self-image, in a very particular way: as one image among others, mirrored amidst and merging with, the figures flowing past outside. A self-image, then, which appears in relation to the images of others, and which changes with every passage or gesture. Gathering these images together on a common surface, the window supports a mobile, cinematic play of looking and imaging, where no single vision, or viewpoint, can be the only one, yet where each is at once unique and shared.

**A gallery of possibilities: of and beyond the space.** That the chosen locus of transformation for each artist on this occasion is in fact the gallery produces implications particular to its context - its social status as a space of legitimised looking, looking presumably at art objects. Except that any such ‘object’

becomes elusive here, dispersed into a haunting play about, and within, the very edges of the space, a play which suspends its usual terms and boundaries.

In Emma Lawton's intervention, the walls no longer provide an anonymous backdrop for the display of painting or sculpture; rather her exploration of surface confounds most traditional distinctions between painting and sculpture. Likewise Reiko Aoyagi undoes the anonymity of the spectator's role in looking, bringing that role centre-stage, relocating the centre at the periphery, and foregrounding the social dimension in looking. Both artists clearly challenge a division between the 'work' of art and its architectural 'setting'. Individually, they effect radical, but quite different, redefinitions of the space: re-inventing it as suddenly new and other to itself, on the basis of elements discoverable within.

**Susan Butler 1996**