

Sensuous Knowledge, National Institute for the Arts, Bergen

My Road to Ruin: The Studio Without Walls

Alec Shepley, University of Lincoln, UK

This paper is about a strand of current research. The aims of the main research project are as follows:

Aims

1. To identify examples of 'ruin' in contemporary visual art
2. To examine the prevalence of fracture, fragmentation and provisionality in contemporary installation art practice
3. To demonstrate areas of commonality and difference and to provide a critical framework of concepts
4. To establish a taxonomy of potential source material
5. To contribute to the understanding of the reflective practitioner
6. To increase understanding about fragmentation and ruin within contemporary visual art

Introduction

Someone once said that when the floor of your studio is becoming more interesting than what is going on in your work then you really need to think about what it is you are doing. I myself noticed this problem, and to cut a long story short, did a PhD *to explore the problem that I'd found*.

In this presentation I wish to tell you about my research and practice and afterwards explore with you some of the issues and tensions surrounding artistic practice and academic research and hopefully gain some useful perspectives about current thinking. I will also reflect on the work of Gordon Matta-Clark.

When I completed my PhD in Fine Art in 2000, my supervisor asked me what I was going to do next - to which I responded 'make art!' It occurred to me

sometime later on that although an honest answer, my response seemed to imply that in some way I might not have been making art over the past four years of my research programme – and yet I had. I was anxious for my practice to be included as a part of the PhD (I wouldn't have done it if I couldn't include practice) and I tend to think that doing it refreshed my appetite for more creative work and enabled me to engage with my practice more reflectively and on a different level. Anxiety can be detected, especially among new research students in Art & Design about the need to make a contribution to new knowledge and in addition worries often surface at some point about the possible distorting effects the academic research process can have on art practice. I am also aware that my own relatively positive experience does not always seem to be collectively shared by peers who have also done PhD's in Art & Design. And yet can the same level of unease with the relationship between art practice and knowledge be detected amongst students who have just completed their bachelors or masters degrees? I often wonder why this should be so? Now working as a supervisor I frequently spend time with research students negotiating the often-tense relationship between the sensuousness of their creative production and artistic research, and the perceived restrictions of the framework of academic knowledge and need to 'produce new knowledge'.

In my own artistic practice I am involved in exploring the 'sensuality' of the ruin; I am pre-occupied with the acts of cutting, rejoining, inverting and reflecting, to reveal a 'potential space' (perhaps within the 'joins' themselves) and I often find myself deliberately relating this experience to 'academic' research processes through the notion of the reflective practitioner.

The 'semi-calculated' acts of ruination which befall any intended 'outcome' in my creative practice alter the genetic structure of 'the thing' forming a new combination which at once opens a door to new knowledge and in this way is analogous to my 'semi-structured' (and often totally *unstructured!*) approach to the research process.

Background

Firstly, a useful quote – useful in that it had a particular resonance for me and the way things were going in my own practice at the time:

“9/11 represented a watershed in world history in more ways than are obvious. The destruction of an architectural and symbolic icon of modernity has brought to a catastrophic climax a debate about the ways in which modernity, broadly conceived, seems to have invented, framed, and even produced ruins..... The beholder is the one who defines the ruin, and the ruin could not exist without such creative appropriation. The ruin, in many ways, is a trope of reflexivity, the reflexivity of a culture that interrogates its own becoming. As a result, the ruin is often the playground of strategies that tell us more about the identity of the beholder than that of the ruin or its original environment” (author unknown, ‘Ruins of Modernity’ - An International Conference at the University of Michigan, March 17-19, 2005).

The ‘creative appropriation’ of the spectator precipitated by ruin and the debate about what a fitting memorial should be, its signification and to whom, is in many ways analogous to fracture and fragmentation of the material and conceptual frame in modern visual art forms and the implications for the spectator – and possibly could include the researcher and his/her supervisor!

This quote was a particularly useful ‘find’ to me personally – especially the notion of the ruin as a ‘trope of reflexivity – the reflexivity of a culture interrogating its own becoming’ – or in other words a reflexivity of an art practice interrogating its own becoming. It has resonance for me as a visual arts practitioner as the ruin (of and within practice) has become ‘my playground’ - one in which I invite the spectator to join in my game play – to cross over the perceived boundary between art and life.

This process of unframing has implications for me, for the spectator and for the notion of the artwork as a commoditised object because in essence the frame is what makes the art apparent to the viewer, according to Christopher Norris (1988) it is “a marker of limits, that which establishes – or so we might suppose – an impermeable boundary between the artwork and everything that belongs to its background, context, space of exhibition”.

On the other hand, according to Jacques Derrida (1987) the frame has also been described as: “essentially constructed and therefore fragile: such would be the essence or truth of the frame” and that it forms another piece of art or a ‘by-work’ or ‘Parergon’.

Maybe I should say something more about all these frames in play – a little background to my thinking.

Christopher Norris has outlined what Paul Duro (1996) has also described as: “the frame in its material, conceptual, ideological, gendered and post structural aspects”. The suggestion that there is more than one frame in operation around a work of art is reinforced in Joseph Kosuth’s ‘Comments on the Second Frame’ (1977). Joseph Kosuth argued that in breaking out of the ‘first’ frame of painting and sculpture, there was a fundamental liberating gesture achieved by the conceptualists and that this was later extended into an awareness of the ‘second’ or institutional frame surrounding cultural activity.

According to John Welchman (1996): “The layering of the horizons of the enframement and transgression of art suggested by Kosuth, and the consequences of the shift of the ‘second frame’ suggests that this redirection of production activity subtends one of the most convincing explanations of the emergences of a post-modern condition in visual practice”.

Some twenty-six years earlier the French artist Dan Buren (1970) claimed the location - where a work of art is seen is its frame – is its boundary. Dan Buren also claimed the definitive place of the work must be the work itself and suggested the studio as initially the definitive place. However, Buren also claimed art that remains in the studio is a non-entity and once the artwork leaves the studio it is subject to a range of manipulations, for example, by museum and gallery curators.

In this sense once art leaves the ‘jurisdiction’ of the artist it is prone to the distorting effects of the gallery or museum – institutional interests create further ‘layers of meaning or significance’ or frames around the artwork. Perhaps the academic research agenda is also having similar effects on artistic production?

In my own practice I have made various attempts to reveal the ‘dismantling’ or unbuilding processes precipitated by problem finding and delayed closure as opposed to merely depicting ruin. The disturbances in the material and conceptual boundaries of artwork and studio that I try to create reveal the art work in its most ‘honest’ situation: as fragments within a wider universe of fragments – a ‘studio without walls’. Some are successful and see the light of day – some less so and never see the light of day – unless in another manifestation (Shepley, A. 2007).

The rupture of the frame or the ‘unframing’ associated with installation art marks a shift in the ‘fixity’ of the relationship between artwork, location and viewer and has led to ambiguity about whether the unframing is providing new territory to be explored by the installation artist (Shepley, A. 2000). This is my ‘road to ruin’ and it is within this territory that I find myself most of the time! Joyfully I might add – playing in the ruins of my own practice.

Writing in the exhibition catalogue for ‘Blurring the Boundaries: Installation Art 1969-1996’ held at Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego in 1997, R. J. Onorato suggested that installation art began during the 1950’s when artists such as Jackson Pollock (1912 – 1956) shifted the emphasis in their artwork from production of paintings to the physical process of painting; Pollock “choreographically recorded his locomotion through space on canvas” (Onorato, R. J. 1997 p. 13).

Onorato said the fundamental aspects of installation art are:

“its habitation of a physical site, its connection to real conditions – be they visual, historical, or social – and often, its bridging of traditional art boundaries: public and private, individual and communal, high style and vernacular. The aesthetic power of installation art does not reside in the singular commodified object but in an ability to become, rather than merely represent, the continuum of real experience by responding to specific situations.”

It may be worth how it all began for me by briefly describing at this point the origins of installation art and the 'early signs' of the fractured frame. Georges Braque 1883 – 1963 and Pablo Picasso 1881 – 1973 questioned the conventions within their practices and explored their accepted boundaries of the artworks. Braque and Picasso extended the range of the media, materials and processes and constructed assemblages that included real objects that they found in their surroundings. They developed a technique called collage; objects, materials and, occasionally, the surroundings that these assemblages were displayed in, were included in their artworks. Collage is a term used to describe artworks where extrinsic material such as scraps of paper, fabric, sheet music, newspaper, and bus tickets, are incorporated onto a flat surface. Assemblage is a term also used to describe artworks that are constructed out of everyday objects that are often 3-dimensional. Cubist collages often have a 3-dimensional effect due to, for example, the build-up of materials. The incorporation of real objects and materials into the picture plane disturbed the traditional single-point perspective of the image.

The boundary between pictorial space and real space was made ambiguous via the use of real objects and more than one viewpoint; collage provides an illustration of an artwork that makes links between the first and second frame. The introduction into the artwork of more than one perspective and viewpoint, and the narrow picture plane, served both to compress and fracture the subject matter.

According to Mick Finch (2000 p.48) the placement and manipulation of materials such as paper, wood etc. in the realm of the pictorial (i.e. in collage) is analogous to the physical placement of objects in real space (i.e. in installational art) operating as it does in terms of a procedure of collage. Michael Rush (1999) claimed the endeavour to extend the content of the canvas beyond paint brought into question the perceived boundaries of the artwork. The collages of Braque and Picasso rendered the frame permeable by the introduction of materials from the real world. The real and pictorial elements within a collage were at once a part of the artwork and part of the surroundings. These elements were both pictorial and 'real' because they crossed-over between the first and second frame. Michael Archer claimed:

“Collage interacts with the real space of the gallery by pulling material from the surrounding world and building it up on the painting’s surface out into the spectator’s viewing space” (Archer, M. 1994 p. 12).

According to Edward Lucie-Smith (1995 p. 115) in the latter half of the 20th century, collage was increasingly a means of creating artworks totally out of pre-existing objects and became known as the ‘art of assemblage’.

The technique of collage had a lasting effect on painting in the 20th century and assemblage had a lasting effect on installation art. Installation art’s “connection to real conditions”, bridging of boundaries and representation of the “continuum of real experience” makes use of the display space, the space between the viewer and the artwork (Onorato, R. J. 1997). The gap that installation would appear to ‘prise open’, between art, viewer and location is significant territory currently being explored by contemporary visual artists; this gap or ‘abyss’ involves fragmentation, dismantling and ruination processes. Hence my preoccupation with cutting, slicing, splicing, joining and undoing.

The shift in the framing of art from ‘whole’ to ‘fragmented’ (or from ‘framed’ to ‘unframed’) has its implications for the viewer (and the researcher) since the shift from material (first) frame to (second) institutional frame would implicate or enframe the beholder (Lebensteijn, J-C. 1993). The relationship between the viewer, the artwork and the location would now be unfixed – an event in time (Kwon, M. 2002). Any perceived expectation of engagement with a fixed notion of art or a one-for-one interpretation of the artefact would be fragmented, in a sense, ‘ruined’. Or at least ‘disrupted’. Walter Benjamin (1999) drew a parallel between the ruin in the realm of things and the allegory in the realm of thoughts, for both ruin and allegory speak of a disruption in the relationship between form and meaning and an analogy can be drawn between the ‘gaps’ mentioned above and the gaps being prised open by Art & Design practice and research.

The presentation of the damaged work and the threat of abandonment is tangible in the work of much contemporary art however the ‘trope of reflexivity’

here tends to focus not on depictions of ruin but on the artwork as ruin; how the artwork-viewer-location relationship is disrupted through a provisionalised engagement; and how 'disturbances' are created in the meaning and function. For example Gordon Matta-Clarke (1945-1978) in the 1970's was one of a group of artists who proposed the notion of 'Anarchitecture'. He said: "Our thinking about architecture was more elusive than pieces that would demonstrate an alternative to buildings, or, rather to the attitudes that determine containerisation of usable space. We were thinking more about metaphoric voids, gaps, left-over spaces, places that were not developed.... For example, the places where you stop to tie your shoelaces, places that are just interruptions in your own daily movements" (Matta-Clarke, G. 1974).

From 1971 until his death in 1978 Matta-Clarke made series of works that involved cutting into buildings - sometimes in half! According to Lisa Le Feuvre (2002) "in 1974 he cut a suburban New Jersey house in half ('Splitting', 1974, New Jersey) and photographed the space between the twin towers of the 'World Trade Centre'. The next year he cut a hole in a building in Les Halles, Paris, near the Pompidou Centre. In 1977 he cut a spiral through an office block in Antwerp, dug a hole into the floor of a gallery for the duration of an exhibition and explored underground New York and Paris. Matta-Clark proclaimed that he inscribed himself into architecture: by drawing a line through buildings he revealed and celebrated the negative spaces of the city. He mined a location impossible to articulate — the spaces between architecture, language, time and ideas".

It is paradoxical that the thing that is 'not there' (the space between the twin towers of the World Trade Center) is the thing that remains – the absent (void or gap) is present but 'unframed'.

The desire to articulate the impossible location - the 'space between', which is also analogous to Kosuth's 'first' and 'second' frame, is exemplified in 'Threshole' 1973. Here where Matta-Clark "designed a number of cut-outs resulting in the removal of the thresholds of apartments in abandoned buildings in the Bronx, often on several floors, opening the gloomy spaces to light" (Bois, Y-A. 1997, p.190).

By physically cutting and inscribing 'voids' in the urban setting Matta-Clark was prising open the territory of the frame and creating fragments within a world of fragments; he "actively looked to place the viewer in a space between modes of representation" and disrupted accepted habits of consumption and engagement (Le Feuvre, L. 2002). This has particular resonance here.

There are many artists obviously influenced by Gordon Matta-Clark, for example Richard Wilson's (b.1953) 'Jamming Gears' at the Serpentine, 1996 was the last show at the Serpentine prior to its renovation. According to Peyton-Jones, J. (2005) 'Jamming Gears': "played with the concept of the Gallery as a building site, and incorporated much of the equipment that would be later used in the construction, including forklift trucks, building site huts, bore holes as well as the digging of a large rectangular pit. The project punctured the fabric of the Gallery, exposing hidden spaces and the fragility of the Serpentine" and seems to indicate a sense of ruination and immanent collapse. Rachel Whiteread, however, uses existing architectural spaces or fragments as moulds and would appear to turn them into their negatives silenced in plaster (Pallasmaa, J. 2005).

However, Matta-Clark's work was so closely tied to time and place, and given our partial viewpoint through various reproductions and representations, photographs, films, remakes etc, it is impossible to experience 'the work' (and its meaning) first hand. The answer to the key question 'what is the work?', Lisa Le Feuvre (2002) argued is that the work is all of those items mentioned but most importantly the voids or gaps between, which brings "the slippage between modes of representation to the fore, highlighting time as one of his media" (ibid).

Matta-Clark, by making his 'removals' "something like the spectacle of a demolition for casual pedestrians, the work could function as a kind of urban 'agit-prop'..... cuts into the urban fabric" (Graham, D. 1975).

Another strand to the research project involves the contextual review of historical and contemporary practice and there are many examples of a romance with the motif of ruin and its repeated melancholic depiction that can be cited in art history (Woodward, C. 2001). A small selection of examples of the depiction of ruins includes: Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) 'Ulrich von Hutten's Tomb' 1823; Richard Wilson (1714-1782) 'Morning: An Italianate River Landscape with Cattle in the Foreground, a Ruin Beyond'; Claude Lorraine

(c.1600-1682) 'Pastoral Landscape' 1677; Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665) 'Landscape with St Matthew and the Angel' 1640; Jacob van Ruisdael (1628-1682) 'The Jewish cemetery at Ouderkerk' 1653-1655; Giovanni Piranesi (1720-1778) 'Prima Parte di Architetture e Prospettive' of 1743; Hubert Robert (1733-1808) 'Imaginary View of the Grand Galerie of the Louvre in Ruins' 1796; & John Constable (1776-1837) 'Hadleigh Castle' 1829.

There are of course many more examples, too numerous to list here, however the underlying theme of abandonment, the incomplete project or work in progress, provisionality or contingency, is analogous to much of contemporary art's pre-occupation with ruin and abandonment and in particular through recurrent motifs of site and architecture. However, relatively little research seems to have been carried out to examine the examples of ruin in contemporary visual art.

There are many examples of images of the ruin *depicted* in literature and art history. A recent review of PhD theses revealed several studies concerned with philosophical and literary examinations of aspects of the ruin and fragmentation which often parallel the research proposed here but do not however, deal with visual art practice.

For example, Muir, T.R.J. (2006) focuses on an analysis of the writing on ruins and oblivion in sixteenth century England. Selby, N. (1993) explores the poetics of loss in 'The Cantos' of Ezra Pound and his attempts to avert the ruin of history by turning its fragmented documents into poetry. Regier, A. (2004) explores fracture and fragmentation in British Romanticism and examines how the mythical image of the Tower of Babel 'becomes a marker for the fundamental fragmentation of language' and considers the connection between fragmentation and the sublime through readings Burke and Kant.

Johnson, D.I. (1996) examines and critiques the postmodernists' misreading of hedonistic texts as a celebration of the destructive nature of pleasure. The thesis also examines postmodernist interpretations of Georges Bataille's equation of pleasure and ruin.

Switek, G.B. (1999) examines 'fragment' as a paradigm of modernity especially in early modern art. The thesis contains an examination of 'artificial ruins',

fabriques, the picturesque and the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century preoccupation with a 'cult of ruins'. The thesis suggests the identification of the fragment is impossible without the identification of the sense of the 'wholeness' of which the fragment is part. The implications of the 'completeness' of a work of art are considered. The 'emancipatory' mode of representation offered to modern art by fragmentation is explored in relation to a change in worldview.

Mountford, D. (2003) provides an examination of ruins with reference to museums and installation art in his investigation into 'the museum as a site of control, memory and loss'. Loss and the melancholic implication of the ruin are considered alongside notions of fragmentation, uncertainty and dislocation often conjured up, however unwittingly, by museums.

Watt, D.P. (2003) explores the fragment's 'recasting' into an event in which all literature is the fragment through the work of Maurice Blanchot and Samuel Beckett (amongst others). The thesis considers how writing allows "the presentation of a damaged work, one the under threat of abandonment, as work in progress; being neither finished of continued".

In terms of the ruin as depiction and more lately, of ruination as a practice and art form: of unframing, rupture and ruin as processes of renewal, the recent past contains examples of 'the work' as ruin or *in* ruin, associated with notions of disruption but as a creative act in itself – a process of renewal in the work of artists such as: Tadashi Kawamata (b. 1953) who works in the midst of demolition and construction; Charles Simonds (b. 1945) who prompts the viewer, through models of archaeological remains, to consider creativity, destruction, value, belief, and what is left behind as ruins; Gordon Matta-Clark; and Robert Smithson's 'Partially Buried Woodshed' 1970 where he illustrated geological time consuming human history.

At the time of writing this proposal there seems to have been few attempts at evidence-based research into installation art practice with particular reference to notions of the ruin. Many discussions of ruin seem to have been retrospective, focussing on literature and art criticism. This on-going practice-based research project examines the functions of ruin and slippage, provisionality and fragmentation, disruption and disturbance in selected examples of contemporary installation art practice. There is an examination of the ruin as depiction and

more lately, of ruination as a practice and art form: of unframing, rupture and ruin as processes of renewal.

For me working with the ruin offers a real opportunity for new perspectives and discourse both reflexive and with others precisely because of its provisional nature, in other words:

“The ruin is a ruin precisely because it has lost the presence of meaning, while retaining its suggestiveness. It bespeaks a loss of something, while denying complete irretrievability of the absent object. It evokes an ambivalent break from, and nostalgia for, the past. More pointedly, it signals the imminent breakdown of meaning, and therefore fosters dizzying compensatory discursive activity”
(Author Unknown, ‘Ruins of Modernity’ - An International Conference at the University of Michigan, March 17-19, 2005).

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