

# The poetics of the fragment

Clive Cazeaux

One of the defining features claimed for installation art is that it requires the experience of the viewer or visitor for its completion.<sup>1</sup> This is on the understanding that what is offered in an installation is distributed in space, and therefore time, and it is the experience of the visitor that binds the elements together as they move in and around the installation's various spaces. The conventional art object acts as a focal point, informing the viewer that, if they wish to digest what the work has to offer, then they need to remain within its orbit. Installation art operates without this gravitational pull. This is a second defining feature that is claimed for installation art: in the absence of a single object that draws the eye's attention, the viewer becomes 'decentred'.<sup>2</sup> They no longer have the security of knowing that, in this moment, they have direct and complete engagement with the work that stands before them. Any hierarchies from art history that might have guided the viewer in their approach to a painting or sculpture do not apply here. The installation invites or requires the visitor to move about the work, with more often than not little guidance on how and in what order they should encounter its components.

The paths traced by the visitor through an installation are of particular interest to Sean Edwards. Of even greater interest to him is how the paths might be bound together. These are paths in the literal sense, i.e. the course taken through the spaces, as well as paths of meaning, the associations and leaps between thoughts that occur for the visitor as they take their course through the work. For Edwards, the guiding interest here is poetry. For him, each artwork that forms part of his installation for the *Cymru yn Fenis Wales in Venice* exhibition sits in the installation like a poem in a poetry collection.

The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available here: details of Sean Edwards' *Cymru yn Fenis Wales in Venice* catalogue to be supplied.

While it might be anticipated that some of the connections in the visitor's experience that join the work together might be poetic, little attention has been paid in the literature on installation art to the poetic potential of the form. If anything, the tendency has been to regard the installation as providing the viewer with a literal, fuller experience, an experience that is closer to life. As Mark Rosenthal suggests, as a result of installation 'sharing the space of the viewer and being as authentic as any other space in the viewer's experience, we have reached a pinnacle in art's evolution toward the accurate depiction of space, time and the world'.<sup>3</sup> Because installation shares the time and space of lived experience, Rosenthal interprets its gift to us as being a more accurate, more substantial experience. RoseLee Goldberg continues the theme of substance and declares that an installation is 'a place to experience *experience*', that is to say, an installation does not just offer the experience of a space but rather has us confront the spatial and physical conditions that enable us to be in the world in the first place.<sup>4</sup> Thus, a prominent understanding of installation positions the form as a practice that works with life directly and supplies experiences that are fuller or more intense.

But this is not Edwards' understanding of installation. For various works to stand side-by-side with one another like poems in a collection is not to work towards a full, substantial affirmation of a single situation or slice of life, but rather is to invite allusion, association, and poetic leaps between the works that themselves might be poetic. Edwards is interested in one poetic form in particular: the fragment or, more specifically, the autobiographical fragment. Many of the elements that make up the exhibition are taken from his family life: photographs; hands playing dominoes; the logo of the newspaper that 'was never allowed in the family home'; traditional, hand-made quilts; and spatial arrangements that reflect the layout of the housing estate where he grew up. Except none of these are present whole: they have been edited, sliced or reworked so that they are only present in part. Early on, visitors are greeted by clusters of tall, thin strips of MDF (medium-density fibreboard), arranged in groups, with each group held together loosely within the squares of a steel frame, like flowers in a square-section vase. Straight, slightly curved, or strongly curved, the strips tower above the visitor.

Each one carries on its surface printed images from Edwards' upbringing, except that the image on each strip of MDF is just that, a thin strip, so the identity of the original content of each photograph is either lost or is presented out of context. A waistcoat, shirt and fingers become abstract marks and tones. The mouth of a male whose face suggests concentration or concern becomes a mouth and lower lip on their own, with an emotion that is now hard to read in the absence of other facial cues. The stripped collage extends into bands of colour: ochre orange, grey and then a brighter orange. But the uplift in mood suggested by the brighter orange does not fit the isolated, concentrated mouth.

The fragment is a poetic form in the sense that it contains details that once belonged to a whole, but the condition of belonging has been lost and it now finds itself thrown into an entirely alien environment with facets and edges that do not fit the new location. The original details remain and may recall some aspects of their origin but, instead of belonging, they are now in a state of new and unguided interaction with the objects they find in their new environment, with the friction that is generated by their incompatible edges sparking meanings that neither element on its own could have anticipated. In one respect, the fragment behaves like metaphor: two terms that do not normally belong together are combined with the result that each term finds new meaning in the other. Except, with metaphor, the gesture begins with the anticipation that one term will apply to and stimulate the other. The fragment lacks this anticipation of success. It is the result of a rupture, a slice, a being wrenched from a habitat without the assurance that where it ends up will be a place that can accommodate its needs. The collage on each strip of MDF is a thin strip, meaning the identity of the original content of each photograph is often lost.

Another approach to the poetics of collage and, in particular, the collage as autobiography, is given by Rona Cran. The fact that a collage has 'been literally crafted out of elements that make up [an artist's] life, his tastes, and his passions', she declares, means that it refers us directly (in the words of David Antin) to 'the chaotic collage landscape of human experience'.<sup>5</sup> But this does not ring true, for it

assumes that being ‘crafted out of elements that make up [an artist’s] life’ somehow gives us a direct and literal ‘window’ into their life, albeit a life that is made up of ‘the chaotic collage landscape of human experience’. The problem is that Cran overlooks the power of the collage: it may be ‘literally crafted out of elements that make up [an artist’s] life’, but that does not mean ‘the chaotic collage landscape of experience’ is the landscape experienced by the artist. The fragments are going to intersect and cross-refer in ways that go beyond the artist’s life, because they have been extracted, cut up and arranged to create tensions and conjunctions that are their own, rather than copies or recreations of a former ‘collage landscape of human experience’.

There is a further fragmentary dimension to the exhibition: the sounds that fill the space, including the lapping water, passing vessels and other noises from outside; the sound of visitors, especially their footsteps; and most significantly of all, the sound of the voice of a woman telling her story. While sound cannot strictly be regarded as a fragment, it is fragment-like in that it does not belong. If I tap a mug with the end of a finger, striking it with my fingernail, the ringing sound that results belongs neither to the mug nor to my finger, but instead is a relation between the two. This property of not belonging, or being in between, means it is difficult to refer to the sound of something, because the sound is in fact a brand new thing, a product of at least two entities – a voice and an environment – interacting.

The woman telling her story is the artist’s mother, and she performs live each day at 2.00 p.m. Venice-time, the same text each day, relayed from her council flat in Cardiff to loudspeakers in five of the rooms that make up the installation. Her story is not a simple, linear narrative but another sequence of fragments: reflections from a life intermingled with observations from recent days; a woman born in Northern Ireland, raised in a Nazareth Children’s home, pondering horse racing tips. Surely the idea of a sound not belonging to an object or a person does not apply to a voice? Surely a person’s voice is theirs? Not strictly speaking. A voice goes beyond ownership. It is a manifestation of the ways in which a person

conducts themselves in the world. The qualities of sound in a voice – its lightness or heaviness, its strength or hesitancy, its vitality or sadness – express not just a person but a person in a situation. The qualities of sound will not just be in the voice, but will also be an index of the environment in which they occur and, in particular, of the surfaces that sound bounces off. The emotions and observations that began in a Cardiff council flat will now ring with the stone and the ceramic of a former Venetian church. Furthermore, the life that is described, through lightness or heaviness, strength or hesitancy, vitality or sadness, does not remain confined to the walls and ceilings of the Santa Maria Ausiliatrice, but starts to mingle with perceptions of the other fragments in the space.

As indicated above, one of the defining features claimed for installation art is that it requires the experience of the visitor for its completion. If the installation is completed by the visitor, then it is completed by the fact that they themselves bring their own capacity for poetry. This is a capacity located within the poetics of the body or, to borrow a title from a work of French phenomenology, the poetics of space.<sup>6</sup> Both body and space, or rather space as it is explored by a body, are understood to offer opportunities for poetic meaning on the grounds that the body is an articulated structure that through its senses, joints and placing of one thing in relation to another – for example, through a turn of the head, or a simultaneous hearing and seeing – is the continuous generation of new correspondences. The meanings and associations that are formed in the sequence will vary according to how one component appears alongside another, with the ‘appearing alongside another’ decided by the relationships between components that are formed by the senses, joints and orientation of the embodied visitor. Once one is liberated from any sense of duty as regards having to recover or reconstitute what might be the ‘authentic’ or ‘true’ stories behind the fragments and spoken words, the visitor can enjoy the novel and surprising contrasts and correspondences that occur, for example, between a silent film sequence of shuffled domino pieces and the humour in a mother’s voice as happy memories raise the tone and speed of her words, icing them with a chuckle.

However, I think that ‘completion’ is the wrong word for the action. It implies that poetry is a process with a clear finishing line, or a quantity in the room that possesses a certain mass or volume, to which the visitor adds the remaining, let’s say, twenty per cent. This is not the case with poetry. The interaction of meanings that arise from one component appearing alongside another through the relationships formed by the bodily orientation of the visitor occurs as a subjective state of play, as an aesthetic experience. As such, it will feed back into the visitor’s perception of the room and stimulate further poetic meanings, and thus be the complete opposite of a content that can be isolated and quantified. The interplay of ideas around game-playing, routine and laughter that is stimulated by the lack of correspondence between the chuckle in a mother’s voice and shifting dominoes is not the completion of a work but its sustenance, articulation, extension, and any number of synonyms that indicate that the life of the work is continued and elaborated.

Not all installations are so fragmentary. Hiroshi Teshigahara’s 1990 *Monumental Ikebana* invited the visitor to walk through a curved tunnel of bamboo. The tunnel was complete as a structure.<sup>7</sup> Twenty-one polished kettles positioned in the chimney at the Old Pumping Station, Wapping, London, produced a continuous ‘cacophony of whistles’ thanks to a constant water supply in Anya Gallacio’s 1990 *In Spite of It All*.<sup>8</sup> The kettles, the whistles and the chimney gave no sense of needing supplementation. Damian Ortega’s 2002 *Cosmic Thing* filled a room with the disassembled parts of a Volkswagen Beetle, with the parts suspended in the manner of a three-dimensional diagram.<sup>9</sup> All parts were present.

What is distinctive about Edwards’ exhibition is that it pushes to the extreme the idea of an installation made up of fragments. Even the text performed by the artist’s mother is composed of passages from different sources and times, and occupies the space as words and sounds that, as a result of sound being a form that can never belong to an object, only serve to multiply the meanings sparked by other fragments’ rough edges. The potential for poetic exchange is immense, and this potential is – I won’t say ‘fulfilled’ because that’s another nod to the idea of

completion, but rather is... – extended and elaborated by visitor experiences that are coordinated through the visitors' own embodied capacity for correspondence and connection. The experience that results is a deepening of the idea that embodiment, including the embodied exploration of space, can open on to a poetic state, and that environments can be constructed that offer an intensification of this state. It is the recognition that experience is not just something we have or receive, but something that can be created. It is also the realization that there are possibilities to explore in creating spaces that disclose the potential for generating different kinds of experience, and especially those that find new connections between objects, the senses and the embodied nature of human being.

The idea that we might appreciate our embodied, spatial being and its capacity to affect the way in which the sensory, physical world occurs for us is rarely acknowledged, largely because of an uncritical commitment to the world being the way it is (therefore, there's no room for playful, poetic meaning), and the pressures of a goal-driven existence that leave little room for disinterested, aesthetic speculation. This also means that, while it is arguably one of the jobs of art – if not the primary job of art – to create spaces for speculation, there is often unease within art audiences as to how installations should be interpreted, especially as the distributed nature of the installation puts out of use the favoured 'expression of the inner life of the artist' line of interpretation. The objects installed by Edwards are so fragmentary that to forge any identification with the inner life of the artist would be to overlook the power of the fragment. Instead: listen to your footsteps on the church floor; dwell on the melancholy of a mother's voice amplified by stone; consider the pattern made by the silhouettes of curved MDF sticks against the crucifix that stands behind them.

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Clive Cazeaux is Professor of Aesthetics in the School of Art and Design at Cardiff Metropolitan University, Wales, UK. He is the author of *Art, Research, Philosophy* (Routledge 2017) and *Metaphor and Continental Philosophy: From Kant to Derrida* (Routledge 2007), and the editor of *The Continental Aesthetics Reader* (Routledge 2011, 2nd edition). His research interests are: the philosophies of



metaphor and artistic research, the relation between art theory and practice, phenomenological aesthetics, and the concept of belonging in ecology and ontology.

## References

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- <sup>1</sup> Claire Bishop presents this as one of the two ideas that underpin the history of installation art in her study, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, p. 11. The second idea is in the next footnote.
- <sup>2</sup> The ‘decentring’ of the viewer is the second of the two ideas that Bishop claims underpin the history of installation art. This is in response to Panofsky’s argument that Renaissance perspective ‘placed the viewer at the centre of the hypothetical “world” depicted in the painting’ (Bishop’s words), p. 11.
- <sup>3</sup> Rosenthal, *Understanding Installation Art*, p. 27.
- <sup>4</sup> Goldberg, ‘Space as praxis’, p. 134; emphasis added.
- <sup>5</sup> Cran, *Collage in Twentieth-Century Art, Literature and Culture*, pp. 32–3. The quoted phrase ‘the chaotic collage landscape of human experience’ is Cran’s quotation from David Antin, ‘Modernism and postmodernism’, p. 106.
- <sup>6</sup> Bachelard, G. (1964) *The Poetics of Space*, trans. M. Jolas. New York: Orion Press, 1964. Original work published 1957.
- <sup>7</sup> De Oliveira et al., *Installation Art*, pp. 58–9. ‘*Ikebana*’ is the name of an avant-garde form of Japanese flower arranging.
- <sup>8</sup> De Oliveira et al., *Installation Art*, pp. 72–3.
- <sup>9</sup> De Oliveira et al., *Installation Art in the New Millennium*, pp. 40–1.