

Deborah Crowe

[Construct] and other pre-occupations



1

**Architectural fabrications:
Deborah Crowe's [Construct]**

Sarah Treadwell

Between drawing, building and weaving, this installation is incessantly concerned with framing. Stepping into the gallery the visitor is immediately within framed space; framed by notions of gallery and installation and framed by timber. The claim of being *within* the space of the gallery may however be suspect as the timber frames that immediately surround the investigating bodies reverse their spatial orientation. The cladding of plasticised mesh, changing from one side of the frame to the other, shifts the visitor from inside to out: a move that is accelerated by the exaggerated diminishing of the entrance corridor.

The installation manipulates the space of the gallery through a process of framing and reframing; the frame as mesh, grid, network and matrix is exploited and explored. Expectations set up by the physical nature of the exhibition are, however, complicated by *mise en abyme*, by internally proliferating details of its own self set within manifold grades of mesh and unexpected colours. The installation works with repetition, a repetition that has always already taken place. Tracing between past exhibitions and future framings [*Construct*] is caught in movement, like *moiré* between nearly aligned grids. The repeatedly framed viewer has to entertain the possibility that they may be within a textile construction.



2

FRAMING

The primary frame of the installation – builder's work, the physical structure for housing – is a system of 100 x 50 mm studs resting on a bottom plate, supporting a top plate with horizontal timbers (nogs) cut between. This is a frame of approximate geometries that depends upon junctions and proximities, that organises everyday life in New Zealand (in houses, schools, shops, libraries...). The installation *[Construct]* is part of the material history with which it plays, making a framework from kiln dried and graded timber with familiar spacings.

The framework, in its appearance, could be the usual,

undeclared support for the textile work that lodges in its structure, or hangs from its support, or projects past its skeleton. *[Construct]*'s framework is evidence of the utilitarian support system that habitually denies its own aesthetic properties to make way for other surfaces, other constructions, that depend upon uprightness.

But the builder's frame is not outside aesthetic consideration and architects often express a wish that the framing stage of building could be

maintained. When framed, structure seems caught between building and drawing with the open pleasures of incompleteness. Infatuation with the timber frame as indeterminate object depends on the fineness of multiple units and the repetition of parallel lines. Spatially complex, the frame is like a worked up axonometric drawing that flips space inside out, reversing habitual spatial understandings. On the floor of the gallery lines of reflective tape extend the frames in trajectories that play between matter and immateriality.

3



STRUCTURE AND PROPRIETY

The frames in *[Construct]*, while they suggest support, also complicate an understanding of the, always concealed, structure of our dwellings. Crowe's framing is both proper and improper: she works with the dryness and straightness of regulated timber but she also lets odd, rough, insect eaten pieces into the installation. Found bits of timber from building sites, offcuts, space apart the upright studs, maintaining the stability of the structure while also underlining the temporary, provisional nature of this way of building.

Crowe's frames, unlike building frames, do not work towards a singularity of form. The frames remain self-contained units – of approximately 1.2 x 3.0 metres – oversized for a painting, undersized for a wall and self declared as exhibition. The frames are linked and fastened together but the frame unit is never lost: you can see how the 'wall' will come to pieces; framing positioned as a registration of insecurity. Architecture is installed as a temporary exhibition of the act of building.

The non-compliance of the framing in terms of building codes (the frames depend on the gallery walls for lateral support), while picturing an act of compliance, suggests that the frame may have agendas other than the structural. Intermittently covered with networks woven into plastic or permeable shade cloth, the rectilinear network of the framework itself is repeated and modified in meshes and fabrics. In some places fine threads vertically striate the air, suggesting more refined ways of subdividing space; the installation presents the possibilities of space lightly contained, intermittently structured.

A system of negotiations is initiated between air and solidity in a representation of permeability; interior space weaves from one side of the frame to the other.

4



TEXTILE WALLS

If architecture traditionally has a history in which structure has been privileged, nineteenth century architectural historian Gottfried Semper's discussion of textiles contemplated an architecture defined by a fabric condition that was both structural and ornamental. For Semper,

even where solid walls became necessary they remain only the inner and unseen structure for the true and legitimate representatives of the spatial idea: namely, the more or less artificially woven and seamed-together textile wall.¹

5



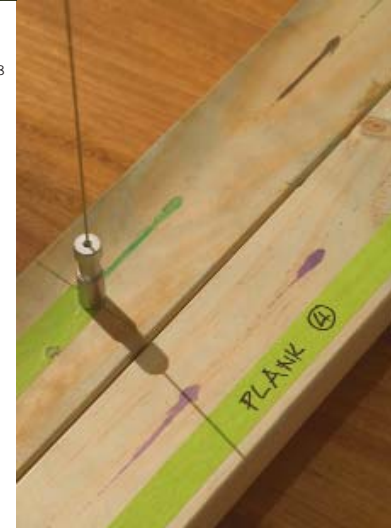
The flat walls of the gallery from this point of view might declare their bareness – their lack of fabrication – concealing an inner weaving that is, however, glimpsed through a small vivid cut into a wall through which flickering threads appear. Across another smooth white gallery wall digital images of textiles are projected in confirmation of its fabricated nature. Hanging on Semper's 'unseen support' is the 'textile wall' – now digital, mobile and cyclical.

Digital images, in their lightness, precision and in their fluctuating colours, allude to another quality that is present in the framework. Moving through the veiled and veiling space the visitor notices an ornamental quality in the green stained, purple dashed timber; the utilitarian timber frame is decoratively coded with colour. Misaligned by intervening material frameworks, the digital projections stain the gallery walls in a conjunction of matter and light even as physical frames cast their immaterial shadows onto the ground of the gallery. Across that surface, registering the possibility of demolition, horizontal timber frames float and fall.

6



8





FILTERS, TRANSLUCENCY AND PERMEABILITY

The vertical framework is concerned with manipulations of passage through and across space and with directing and filtering light that can travel through the non-space of the framework. The visitor looks through the gaps in the framework, past the obstruction of the physical barrier that the framework presents, and into parallel spaces, into denied space or space yet to be encountered. The framework operates the gaps in its system with varying degrees of translucency.

At times vague outlines of other bodies are visible, and in other situations light penetrates with little information. The



framework emerges as a screen, catching and concealing desire, editing and exhibiting bodies in space. Andrew Barrie, writing of contemporary Japanese houses, suggests that they exhibit new codes for architecture; 'ways of representing density or degrees of transparency or the porosity of boundaries.'¹² In *[Construct]* porosity is both present and simulated – you can see through (partially) but not get through with propriety. You could cram yourself through the small units within the frame but they would not allow the uprightness with which architectural space usually works.

The veiled spaces that *[Construct]* sets up, consisting of matter alternating with non-matter, (digital on/off pulse) are concerned with both proximity and distance. Barrie suggests that in a porous condition of enclosure, distance might be

overcome, but it could also be that the awareness of bodies in proximity combined with their inaccessibility might underscore daily separations and effacements. *[Construct]* works with spacing in this way – simultaneously spacing bodies together and apart.

A picture frame creates an interior apart from the surrounding world that therefore becomes external and as art theorist Rosalind Krauss suggests, the frame, bound as it is by laws of exclusion, renders the interior as a terrain of



11



12

self-contained autonomy. The building frame might also be similarly bound by laws of exclusion as in the domestic house which conventionally resists widening definitions of family. The architectural plan could be seen as the document that shapes the topography of social relationships as a mapping of desired exclusions.

PLANS, PERSPECTIVES AND MIRRORED SPACE

The plan of *[Construct]*, the horizontal description of its containment and openness, has labyrinthine qualities. In its complexity the plan of the installation refuses to settle into easy interiority; zones of exclusion fluctuate with the contained. The plan does not directly reveal destination, rather, it hints at what is to be traversed and the body of the visitor is manipulated by corridors that suddenly rush to a vanishing point. Mirrors, hidden in gaps,



13

extend space into the solidity of the gallery and complicate the position of the circulating visitor.

Perspective, as the system that coordinates lines of light and lines of sight, producing identity between viewing point and vanishing point, is both underlined and, in its underlining, no longer can be mistaken for a 'natural' way of seeing. The lattice of closely spaced lines that spins the two-dimensional into a web of virtual three-dimensionality has been built but the visitor is no longer the eye at the privileged viewing point. Instead they become an effect of the meshing geometries, like the moiré that is an uncontrollable but anticipated condition of *[Construct]*.

MOIRÉ AND MOVEMENT

In the lattice construction of the installation, frame against frame, grid against grid, conditions are set for the production of moiré patterns. These can be described as interference patterns formed when two similar, but not quite the same, grid-like patterns are superimposed. A visual effect is created that does not exist in either of the original grids. In order to emerge moiré

needs movement and in the installation the ambulant spectator creates the necessary spatial shifts.

Moiré, in its uncontrollable and curvilinear aspects, might be seen as a reproach to rectilinear space just as mutable and mobile human beings and clouds resist capture by perspective's implacable geometry. Moiré, dependent on movement, makes moves with its own regular geometrical beats, signalling a resistance to the stillness on which pictorial perspective depends. Movement that constructs and activates space is an essential condition of this installation oscillating as it does between physical and digital frameworks.

MISE EN ABYME

If moiré and bodies constitute a resistance to, or a disruption of, geometry's framing then the framework itself, it can be argued, is not a static, singular construction. Not only is it blurred through multiplication and (mis)alignment it is already multiple through *mise en abyme* and effects of scale. At a number of points within the installation, at various heights, it becomes its own detail – frame within frame – small, beautiful condensations occur as internal representations of the whole. Framework has become a device placed inside the work so that it talks about itself.

The inserted devices are framed within glass or framed within the subdivision of the builderly frame and invariably are very finely crafted. The devices or details, that are also the thing itself, are threaded, coloured timbers that turn upon themselves, fine threads of stained nylon that wind around an invisible armature. Reflective structures by means of which the installation mirrors its own actions, displays its own making. And they also refer past the particular space and time of this installation to other framings that have located them; other exhibitions by Crowe, other publications, other crafts. As the detailed threads of nylon and timber are attenuated and closely aligned, they become weft lines and force an understanding of the installation as woven.



14

15



18

PACIFIC LOOM

From the builder's framework hang long stretches of 'cloth' – digital images of textiles, projected and enlarged, turning the framework into a loom. Architectural theorist Indra McEwen argues that the 'vertical, warp-weighted loom is about the simplest example imaginable of post-and-beam or trabeated structure and the builder's frames have a memory of trabeation within.'³ The frames in the exhibition with their recollection of post and beams momentarily become like a loom: a weaving machine producing anticipatory texts of an aerial architecture – lightly attached and covered with sail cloth.

The Greeks, in the archaic period, understood craft as having a special public role and Indra McEwen suggests that '[p]eople wove their cities to make them visible.'⁴ The act of weaving in this installation envelopes the visitor and for a moment we are within the weft and warp of textile – caught in the fine lines that could also be an architectural drawing. Crowe's work is an architectural weaving that makes visible the textile nature of our architecture and the architectural nature of fabrication. She throws stainless steel lines across the space of the gallery and stitches (with wooden packers) her frames to the wall. [*Construct*] is a work that acknowledges the part of the world in which it is situated; the Pacific, in which woven architecture is an originary condition and weaving is an architectural act.

Sarah Treadwell is a Senior lecturer at the School of Architecture, National Centre for Creative Arts & Industries, University of Auckland, teaching in architectural design and drawing and a registered architect.

16



17



- 1 Gottfried Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings*, (trans.) Harry F. Mallgrave & Wolfgang Herrmann, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 254–255.
- 2 Andrew Barrie, *Code*, catalogue to accompany *Code* exhibition by Andrew Barrie at Artspace, Auckland, 1999.
- 3 Indra Kagis McEwen, *Socrates' Ancestor: An Essay on Architectural Beginnings*, London & Camb. Mass: The MIT Press, 1993, p. 71.
- 4 Ibid. 109.