

A photograph of a modern interior space. On the left, a staircase with a glass railing is visible. The background features a wall with a grid pattern and a glass partition. The lighting is warm and ambient.

Deborah Crowe  
[Construct] and other pre-occupations

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## Architectural fabrications: Deborah Cowart's *(Construct)*

Sarah Troobell

Between doing, building and wearing, this installation is necessarily concerned with framing. Stepping into the gallery the visitor is immediately within framed space: framed by rails of gallery and installation and framed by timber. The crisis of being within the space of the gallery may however be disrupted as the timber frames that immediately surround the installing bodies create their spatial orientation. The cladding of paneled walls, changing from one side of the frame to the other, shifts the visitor from inside to just a corner that is accelerated by the exaggerated dimming 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 updated 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-as-often investigated grids of mesh and unexpected colours. The installation meets with repetition, a repetition that has always already taken place: being between non-exhibitions and future framings *(Construct)* is caught in movement, the more between nearly aligned grids. The especially framed viewer has to entertain the possibility that they may be within a both a construction.



## 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 (beams) laid between. This is a frame of approximate geometry that depends upon junctions and geometries, that originates over the life in New Zealand (in houses, schools, shops, libraries...), The installation (Construct) is a part of the material history with which it plays, making a framework from timber dried and ground timber with timber joinings.

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

unadorned support for the little work that lodges in its structure, or a suggestion of support, or perhaps just its isolation, Construct's framework is evidence of the utilitarian support system that nobody thinks its own aesthetic properties is a way for other surfaces, other constructions, that depend upon uprights.

But the builder's frame is not outside aesthetic consideration and architects also express a wish that the framing stage of building could be maintained. When framed, structure seems rough between building and showing with the open pleasure of incompleteness. Installation with the timber frame as indeterminate object depends on the frames of multiple units and the position of gabled lines. Spatially complex, the frame is like a worked-up assemblage of drawing that fits space inside out, revealing habitual spatial understandings. On the floor of the gallery lines of effective-type extend the frames in topologies that play between matter and immateriality.

## STRUCTURE AND PROPERTY

The frames in Construct, while they suggest support, also conceals an understanding of the always concealed structure of our dwellings. Construct's framing is both proper and improper: it works with the physics and strengths of regulated timber but also lets it wobble, bleed water (down into the installation), found bits of timber from building sites, offices, space and the upright itself, maintaining the stability of the structure while also underlining the temporary, provisional nature of the way of BUILDING.

Construct's frames, unlike building frames, do not work towards a regularity of form. The frames remain self-contained units – of approximately 1.2 x 3.0 metres – conceived for a painting, understood to be a wall and self-declared as exhibition. The frames are linked and fastened together but the framework is non-linear: you can see how the 'leaf' attachment pieces, framing positioned in a negotiation of immaturity. 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 including an act of compliance, suggests that the frame may have agency other than the structural. Intentionally covered with networks woven into plastic or permeable shade cloth, the red-tinted network of the framework itself is repeated and modified in meshes and fabrics. In some places fine threads vertically draw the air, suggesting more refined ways of subdividing space. The installation presents the possibilities of space lightly combined, intermittently structured.

A system of regulations is initiated between air and visibility in a representation of permeability: intense space weaves from one side of the frame to the other.





## FABRIC WALL

If architecture traditionally has a history in which structure has been privileged, twentieth 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 when used walls become necessary they remain only the least and weakest structure for the true and lightness representatives of the spatial idea: namely, the cover or less effectively woven and ornamented fabric walls.<sup>1</sup>

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

Digital images, in their lightness, precision and in their fluctuating colours, slide in another quality that is present in the framework. Moving through the void and telling space the visitor notices an

ornamental quality in the green stained, purple-bleached bricks; the utilitarian timber frame is occasionally coated with colour. Blurred by intervening material frameworks, the digital projections stain the gallery walls in a conjunction of matter and light even as physical frames cast their ornamental shadows onto the ground of the gallery. Across that surface, registering the possibility of demolition, horizontal timber frames that anchor





#### FIGURE, TRANSLUCENCY AND POROSITY?

The vertical framework is conceived with negotiations of passage through and across space and with directing and filtering light that can filter through the non-spaces of the framework. The visitor looks through the gaps in the framework, and the obstruction of the physical barrier that the framework presents, and into parallel spaces, into distant spaces or spaces yet to be encountered. The framework (controls the gaze in its system with varying degrees of translucency.

- All lines appear surface of other bodies are visible, and in other situations light penetrates with little information. The

framework emerges as a screen, catching and returning details, writing and exhibiting bodies in space. Andrew Davis, writing of contemporary Japanese houses, suggests that they exhibit new codes for architecture, "less of representing details or degrees of transparency in the porosity of boundaries." In *(Construct)* porosity is both present and simulated – you can see through (partly) but not get through with propriety. You could even pass through the small units within the frame but they would not allow the sightlines with which architectural space usually works.

The voided spaces that *(Construct)* sets up, consisting of matter alternating with non-matter, lighter stuff pulled are concerned with both proximity and distance. Davis suggests that in a sense condition of enclosure, distance might be overcome, but it could also be that the awareness of bodies in proximity combined with their inaccessibility might understandably separate and affect them. *(Construct)* works with spacing in this way – simultaneously spacing bodies together and apart.

A picture frame creates an object apart from the surrounding world that therefore becomes external and as an external (visual) Krauss suggests, the frame, bound as it is by lines of distinction, renders the interior as a terrain of



self-contained autonomy. The building frame might also be similarly bound by laws of exclusion as in the domestic house which conventionally exists without detours of entry. The architectural plan could be seen as the document that shapes the topography of social relationships as a mapping of shared exteriority.

#### PLANS, PERSPECTIVES AND SHARED SPACE

The plan of *(Construct)* the horizontal description of its containment and openness, has algorithmic qualities. In its complexity the plan of the inscription refuses to settle into easy interiority. Zones of exclusion negotiate with the contained. The plan does not already reveal destination, rather, it hints at what is to be traversed and the body of the visitor is manipulated by conditions that suddenly rush to a meeting point. Shows, hidden in gaps,



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

Perspective, as the system that coordinates lines of sight and lines of sight, producing identity between viewing point and watched point, is both understood and, in its understanding, no longer can be followed for a "natural" way of seeing. The relation of closely spaced lines that give the two-dimensional into a copy of visual three-dimensionality has been built but the visitor is no longer the spot of the portrayed viewing point, instead they become an effect of the working geometries, like the mirror that is an uncontrollable but anticipated condition of construct.

#### FORM AND BEHAVIOR

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

mood movement and in the installation the ambient spectacle creates the necessary spatial shifts.

Form, in its uncontrollable and curvilinear aspects, might be seen as a approach to nonlinear space just as fluidity and easily human forms and clouds most capture by perspective's imprecise geometry. Matter, dependent on movement, makes sense with its pentagonal geometrical form, signifying a resistance to the distance on which potential perspective depends. Movement that constructs and articulates space is an essential condition of the installation consisting as it does between physical and digital frameworks.

#### SIZE OR ARTIST

If mood and behavior constitute a resistance to, or a subversion of, geometry's framing from the framework that it can be argued, is not a static, regular construction. Not only is it blurred through multiplication and misalignment it is already multiple through size on objects and effects of scale. At a number of points within the installation, at various heights, it becomes human-scale – human-within-frame – small, beautiful contemplations occur in virtual representations of the artist. 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 substance of the building frame and inevitably are very finely crafted. The devices or details, that are also the thing built, are threaded, colored timbers that turn upon themselves, the threads of stained nylon that wind around an invisible structure. Reflective structures by means of which the installation enters its own actions, displays its own making. And they also refer past the particular space and time of the installation to other buildings that have looked there, other conditions, by Cross, other publications, other crafts. As the detailed threads of nylon and timber are articulated and closely aligned, they become well lines and form an understanding of the installation as woven.





## PACIFIC LOBBY

From the building's framework long long stretches of 'COFF' - digital images of facades, unzipped and enlarged, turning the framework into a form. Architectural theorist Indra McEwan argues that the vertical, wire-weighted form is about the simplest example imaginable of post-and-beam (a tubulated structure and the building's frames have a memory of tubulation sites).<sup>1</sup> The frames in the exhibition with their recollection of post and beams independently become like a form, a weaving machine producing anticipatory webs-of-an aerial architecture - lightly attached and covered with wet silk.

The *Beams*, in the urban panel, unzipped walls as having a special public role and Indra McEwan suggests that "perhaps work their sites to make them visible." The act of weaving in this installation analyzes the visitor and for a moment we are within the wall and web of *COFF* - caught in the fine lines that could also be an architectural drawing. *COFF*'s work is an architectural weaving that makes visible the tacit values of our architecture and the architectural nature of fabrication. She shows staircases steel beams across the space of the gallery and stitches built-wooden pediments for frames to the wall. *COFF*'s work that acknowledges the past of the world in which it is situated, the Pacific, in which urban architecture is an original condition and weaving is an architectural act.

**Next Thread** is a critical cartoon of the Internationalism, Modernism to be woven into a fabric, geometry of Architecture, weaving in architectural design and drawing and a regional architect.

<sup>1</sup> *COFF* (Series) *The First Elements of Architecture and Other Drawings*, Indra McEwan © McEwan & Waddingham, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 158-160.

<sup>2</sup> *Indira McEwan, COFF*, catalogue for temporary COFF exhibition by Indra McEwan at Museum, Auckland, 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Indra McEwan, *COFF*, *Journal of Architecture*, London & Cork, Mass: The MIT Press, 1993, p. 71.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.



## Unfitted Construction

Mark Kirby

Deborah Cowie's exhibition (iConstrukt) is a large installation made primarily of wood framed/finished in white that investigates the relationship between textile construction and architecture. This is not an unusual conjunction, as the ideas of architecture have been subject to Cowie's work for some time, and there is also a well-documented history of overlaps between textiles and architecture.<sup>1</sup> What is of more interest to me is how many disciplines Cowie has visited or made in this past. These have included film, painting, sculpture, print, photography, jewellery, and fashion design—most of which play together, in one form or other, within the wooden frameworks of (iConstrukt). In the past, I have described Cowie's work as an enquiry, and suggested that it has an identity crisis, in that I had never certain how to categorise it.<sup>2</sup> With (iConstrukt) my uncertainty is more extreme, in that, as well as the questions of creative forms that confront me, there is also a labyrinth-like construction, created by a series of overlapping and spaces that go no where in particular, that have no definite experience to offer. I am now wondering if the enquiry of Cowie's work, and its identity crisis, has developed into a form of psychosis.

My apparent psychosis is of course simulated; a conscious strategy of Cowie's to avoid, and comment on, the ideological spaces of nonconscious. This has been a feature of her work for some time, and part of a general interest with the ideological spaces that contain and mould our communal and personal identities. Nevertheless, the suggestion of psychosis being represented in Cowie's work is pertinent, in light of the potential consequences of failing to meet communal expectations, in its



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for example, the preferred body form. Australian writer Elizabeth Skea, in reference to social pressures on body shape, has discussed the de-centering capacity of culture, the aggressive pressure it places on biological form, particularly of the female, to the point where she decries its actual existence, writing on the trans-spatial distortions of the psychotic, she suggests:

*The magnetic reality reflects individual, female and social body-ideals/body-idea forms in awareness of its biological 'nature' - systems the phrenic line, epicondyles, and breast, usually itself ready to be plastic or fluid, at what it usually considered the neck, head, spine, and shoulders. If it ends at an end that no longer exists as natural it does, the biological body exists through the mediation of a series of images or representations of the body and its capacities for movement and action.<sup>1</sup>*

If there is an approaching psychosis represented in Crowe's distention-to-present hair-work within dense/geometric forms, from the particular mental dysfunction would probably be what Franz Janz (1850-1947) has termed 'legendary psychasthenia'. This is a condition characterized by a loss or confusion of personal identity and individuality, which includes confusion of spatial distinctions and perceptions.<sup>2</sup> In 1998 social theorist Roger Callois (1903-1978) adopted Janz's ideas into the arts in the infamous essay 'Mimicry and legendary Psychasthenia', published in the Surrealist magazine *Minotaur*, a work that remains of interest to contemporary writers and artists. In it Callois outlined what the symptoms of an episode of 'legendary psychasthenia' might be:

*Some where I am, but identified although on infinite road where I feel myself. To these disoriented souls, solid space is like a dissolving form, space goes away from, vanishes from, slips from...it ends by replacing them. Then the body dissolves itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and crosses the other side of his skin as he has broken at himself from any point whatever in space, the face himself becoming space, dark space where things cannot be put. He is aware, not prone to anything, but just aware, about it, aware space of which he is the complete possession.*



The body in space has been an issue in Crowe's work formerly in her career. For her, as for Callois, space is a relational entity that has almost as well as physical formalities. This point of view is shared by writer Stephen Bader, who suggests: "Conventional apparatuses to space are already linked to the nature of the physical object, as if space were generic; however space is not"...[Condition of process and knowing - a complex space for young relationships within distortions.] And, according to Foster, figure to understand the complexity of space on a scale beyond multi-city centers (especially in an inadequate in appreciating the distortions created in such concepts as society and culture).<sup>3</sup>

The body's relation to space, both literal and abstract, was evident in Crowe's first solo exhibition in 1995. *Closed Structural Bodies*, the exhibition included a number of large-scale combinations and drawings of structures, which extended into space in a manner approaching the enclosed architectural environments of 'Controlled' from the early 1990s. The figure was more obviously present in a number of works that integrated the body's containment within literal and abstract environments. This occurred in the *Beneath the Surface* series, which included sculptures and drawings. In the sculptures from this series a cylindrical form enclosed contained figures made from folded wire, implying an anxiety caused by containment. The disorient suggested here became overtly apparent in the drawings, in which enclosing figures were either behind 'walls' of drawn marks. Around this time Crowe also produced a number of works

that related between sculpture and fashion. These 'garments' constructed nineteenth century corsets, and emphasized the extreme physical distortions created by that genre of clothing. The series culminated in an exhibition of the same name at the jewelry specialist gallery Phipps in 1998, called *Under Frames*. It consisted of 'holders' made from folded metallic mesh and other wires that spin and wire. Many





like paintings or displayed as objects of art, one or two of these sculptures (or items of jewelry) rest and connect the neck, providing a post-breastful lead for the fashion-conscious (or artist). At other times Cross made marks that protected the body, as in a number of woven straw-like objects made in the mid 1990s. Around the same time she began to engage actual clothing in a brief but successful partnership with fashion designer Ken Fosse, with whom she formed the fashion label PROTECT ORNAMENT. Their work Dual Culture (2007), which won the internationally recognized Smolderfree Supreme Fashion Award in 2007, consisted of transparent hoodies, woven from nylon



and copper wire, that covered the head and upper body like a protective veil. In garments such as this she maintained her core conceptual concerns, and shifted fashion from being an oppressive activity to an expressive one, by combining clothing's utilitarian function of providing a physical enclosure for the body with its potential as a conceptual space. That is, a site from which to express and interpret the identity of the wearer.

The implied or absent body was an element in the 2000 installation *Shift* at The Fisher Gallery, where Cross responded from the ceiling objects woven from nylon filament and wire. During installation of this work the objects were moved into a number of configurations, some of which were documented via subtle graphic drawings in the walls. These forms were hard to locate as any specific species of garment, and were too light to be worn practically. Nevertheless, their connection to clothing suggested a human element, or rather its absence. This sense of absence was taken further by the fact the objects were displayed as if they were being carried by a body and by a sense of lightness created by the transparency of the forms, and the fact that they would "fall" when people disturbed the air in the







moved through the room. This would help to cause their shadows to gently dance over the walls, and alter their surface reflections, which at times made it difficult to perceptually "map" their surfaces. As each wall presented an uncertain environment, one inhabited only by the suspicion of a presence, or someone or something beyond and beyond.

Cress often presents space as being ambiguous and perceptually unstable. She did this in the work *Walls* (2002), which she made by installing a wedged shaped area under the stairs in Lightbox Gallery with a translucent white screen, purposefully making it difficult to see what was inside. She placed a fluorescent light inside the recessed off

space, effectively turning it into a projector that emitted a diffused glow into the walls and floor and passed ceiling, and consequently changed a usually empty and inert space into an active environment that extended out from and beyond its physical confines. Cress adopted the idea of the *Walls* in space in the series wall (2001-2002), which began with a small work built into a window-casing at *Concept*. "These layers of glass and thread implied the structural maintenance in the walls in order to draw obvious lines between bottles and architecture. This was continued in the exhibition wall (2002), which consisted of a number of box like structures placed on the wall in the manner of framed abstract paintings or relief sculptures. Inside each frame were layers of glass and many colored threads that were wrapped or "twined" around each layer to form a complex array of real and implied spatial planes, which were confused by the reflectivity of the mirrors and the transparency of the glass."

In 1999 (2002-2002) the abstract-covered spatial planes of wall were enlarged and removed from their frames to be attached directly onto the wall or suspended between the floor and ceiling. As is often done of these objects and shadows by being fixed a few centimeters out from the wall, which made them appear both painterly and sculptural. In their abstraction



and simplicity they recalled the repetitive geometric form of minimalist objects, such as Donald Judd's object, also set between painting and sculpture (and I would suggest, architecture too).<sup>14</sup> This is most obvious in the biggest piece, *Wing 40*, which consisted of a group of six large planes that were suspended in a perpendicular format. This created a number of physical projections that if seen from above would form the experimental grid structure of a toilet stall, and mimic the architectural plan for a modernist building. In such a sense, a viewer could relate to the work a number of ways, although most obviously by moving around and within it as if it were a collection of empty rooms or demarcated spaces.

The one consistent formal element in Coles's work is the grid, which comes from her grounding in textile practices. In constructed textiles the perpendicular arrangement of materials form grids that provide the structural base of fabrics, as well as the framing of architecture, as seen in *Groundwork*. In other works Coles made the grid an iconographic feature, as in *Art and Wing*. In the latter's series some of the grids came out of traditional textile structures. The grid is of course a system for organization in the visual arts, and is equally the most frequently exploited piece of iconography since the nineteenth century. The grid is also architectural, a visual system that supports an unstable conceptual structure. It has, for example, been presented as a symbol of the spiritually harmonizing forces of the universe (as in the work of Piet Mondrian), and used as a neutral, non-hierarchical and democratic symbol for mid-century abstraction and architecture (as outlined by Rosalind Krauss).<sup>15</sup> However, as painter Felipe Thompson has shown, the grid can also speak of slavery. As a formal descendant of black American slaves, Thompson uses the grid to represent both of an oppressive regime: the architectural diagrams for slave transport, the beams and riggers of attention



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blocks, the gaps and lines of transparency, the entries and spaces of entry."<sup>10</sup> In fact, as Weiss has pointed out, the grid is not about freedom at all:

... what is striking about the grid is that while it is more effective as a bridge of freedom (in extremely restricted in the actual spaces of freedom, without doubt the real freedom construction that could possibly be supported in a given surface, the grid is surprisingly inflexible... the grid is commonly difficult to enter in the sense of freedom.<sup>11</sup>

In "Construct the viewer in the 'body in space', a contained object, filtered through a framework of window grids that have been woven into the gallery space through concepts, "White visitors are able to see through these structures they are unable to pass through from physically. Rather, various passages direct them into a number of open spaces differentiated by size, shape and light. In these other spaces, some of which they can directly reach with their eyes and imagination. In such the viewer is confronted with various levels of accessibility and contrast, as well as a designed mix of semi-enclosed experiences. While these are elements of interactivity that allow some physical choice outside of the containing structures, these visitors a sense of vision, a discomfort caused by the restraint. This is carried through in the way some components of *Structure* have been exactly constructed, to the point where it still appears to be under construction, suggesting the 'psychoid' is yet to be defined.

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