

situations

Published articles and essays

Claire Doherty
The Event of Sculpture

Claire Doherty, "The Event of Sculpture", Claire Barclay, Edinburgh: Fruitmarket Gallery, 2009

Claire Barclay's dispersed accumulations and reiterations of sculptural forms have been described variously as "a chain of encounters", "an encampment" and "a carefully balanced eco-system".¹ The challenge Barclay presents us with as viewers is to sew these disparate fabricated components together conceptually, to find our way out of the labyrinth of her installations or to allow ourselves to be immersed within.

There is no doubt that Barclay's assemblages share the phenomenological qualities of the art historical genre of installation as environment, as Ilya Kabakov has expressed, "the main actor in the total installation, the main centre toward which everything is addressed, for which everything is intended, is the viewer."² Her individual objects are not titled but rather accrue together or are reconfigured for specific contexts as total installations. Unlike artists for whom the constructed environment acts as a site of potential performativity (e.g. Carsten Höller, Pierre Huyghe etc.), Barclay invites a very different process of engagement – that of an ethno-archaeological gaze through which we might locate and make sense of the materials she presents to us. This, however, is not the archaeological mode of accumulation favoured by her contemporaries, such as British artists Cathy Wilkes or Mike Nelson, for whom the *mise-en-scène* clearly relates to a set of distinct and culturally-specific histories. On the contrary, Barclay's materials are frequently abstracted and divorced from the everyday – always made rather than found and bearing little sign of use. So whilst the artist is certainly interested in inviting archaeological curiosity, the overriding effect of her work is being caught between something which has happened (things which invoke particular associations or memories) and something which is about to happen (things which appear to be positioned in such a way as to suggest potentiality or to put it simply, things which have not yet found their purpose). Her sculptures can indeed be read as remnants or abstractions of familiar forms, but in their new configurations, they can also be viewed as models for some imminent activity – as yet undefined. This is the facet of Barclay's work identified by Fiona Bradley as, "the whole exhibition gathering the conceptual momentum of a gun about to go off".³

Owing to the precision with which each of Barclay's works appears to be composed for a particular context, it is tempting to use the specifics of site as a prism through which to solve her sculptural conundrums. Yet, what I will propose here, is that such readings run the risk of closing down the contemporaneity of Barclay's practice, that moment of being caught between the past and the future in which Barclay configures what we might call

the 'event of sculpture', rather than a static *mise-en-scène* or sculptural referent for a single historical moment in the past.

Looking closely at one particular work – *Ill Gotten Gains* – where the specifics of site can be seen to be politically charged and consequently highly seductive, we can begin to see how a more complex reading of Barclay's work beyond a conventional notion of site-specificity can be developed. *Ill Gotten Gains* presents an example of how Barclay adapts and reconfigures the components of a work for entirely different context, producing not simply a re-contextualisation of her work, but producing a remaking of the sculpture through new convergences of time and place, in essence producing an entirely new event.

For the Bristol staging of the national touring survey exhibition *The British Art Show 6* in summer 2006, Barclay was commissioned by artist-curator Louise Short to produce a new work for Station, a former fireboat station and railway lodge located dockside in the centre of the city. Originally constructed in the mid 1890s, the two-roomed Station is located on Phoenix Wharf; one of a series of quays along Bristol's floating harbour which ceased to be a freight dock in the early 1970s.

Station is reached either via one of two dockside bridges or down a vertiginous path over the Redcliffe caves. Originally mined for sandstone, the man-made caves were subsequently used for the storage of traders' goods in the early 19th century and consequently have become associated with Bristol's role in the Slave Trade, accumulating apocryphal tales of slave imprisonment. With the foreboding cliff-face rising behind the small, redbrick building and the water lapping just feet from the front door, Station's diminutive scale is heightened; further still, as regeneration encroaches on the docks from either side, its position as a space for contemplation seems all the more precarious. These are the conditions under which I first encountered Claire Barclay's *Ill Gotten Gains* that summer.

From the open doorway, a low-lying oak beam is visible, intersected at one end by four oval, metal bars; two of the bars appear to connect through the beam, whilst the other has overshot in length, extending up and over the top. The effect is that one of these interconnecting links appears locked, whilst the other is 'open' or broken. In 2006, Bristol is celebrating the 200th anniversary of the birth of engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel, and so the associations of these heavy, metal links with Bristol's industrial past is

intensified through the ubiquity of Robert Howlett's photograph of Brunel standing proudly against the launching chains of the *Great Eastern* in 1857.

But there is also something more foreboding in this object – something to do with its precision and its heaviness as it sits uncomfortably at an angle as one enters this cosy, domestic interior. This dissection of the beam is made all the more cumbersome by the fragile draping of a piece of screen-printed cloth over the other end of the beam which rests against the skirting board. The beam juts out from the corner of the room at an angle, raised slightly off the ground at one end and where it abuts the wall, a dark red shadow motif of a hand making an unidentifiable gesture is visible on the cloth. From a distance this appears like a dark blood-red stain seeping down through the fabric.

Jutting through the interconnecting door between the two rooms is the end of a heavy wooden, cruciform structure, shrouded at both ends in a somewhat repellent black cow hide. Cascades of the leather hang forlornly down between one end and the other, as if ripped off the centre of the structure, making it almost impossible to squeeze past into the next room without touching or treading on the fabric. One critic later interprets this material as torn sails, as if the entire construction were “a gigantic version of a bottled ship”⁴, but I do not register the maritime associations to such an extent in this first encounter, rather something far more sinister is emerging as I ease myself through to the next room.

Along one slanted end of this gantry or cruciform structure are balanced two small silver rods intersected by pieces of silver ribbon bent to form a manacle-like object. I turn back and see the giant links intersecting the beam no longer as Brunel's launching chains, but as a series of gigantic manacles wrapped around and through a bodily form.

The shaft of the heavy, wooden structure mirrors that of the flue of the wood-burning stove in the interconnecting room, where another wooden structure has been placed. This is formed by two parallel horizontal lengths of planed oak which are held aloft by two perpendicular wooden shafts. A series of brass metal objects in the form of domes, spires and cuboids are positioned on a length of brown suede which is draped over the structure's surface. The soft surface is indented with a few marks from the base of the

objects. It is these instances of human intervention – the ripped fabric, the traces of the objects having been moved from one place to another – that encourages that ethno-

archaeological gaze, that study of this *mise-en-scène* for the material traces of some past ritual activity.

Convened in this small building under the cliffs, *III Gotten Gains* is insecure – every surface, every object, every plane is precariously balanced. Facing the open door (the front back door of Station one might say), the bench-like, wooden structure appears as if about to launch into the water, with the objects on the brown suede assuming the role of weights. It is a dizzying experience, as if with one jolt, the objects and materials would crash to the floor, the structures collapse, the skins be torn from the surfaces and the links unbolted.

III Gotten Gains clearly refers to Bristol's historic role in the triangular Slave Trade of the 18th and early 19th centuries. The weights and measures set out on the bench-structure in one room are balanced against the chains in the next, with the cruciform structure assuming the form of a violated and manacled body. As soon as the viewer begins to gather these associations, the rooms become claustrophobic, uneasy, with even the flue of the stove beginning to assume the funereal associations of a crematorium. Clearly the title of the work alludes to Bristol's past, but is Barclay's intention here to produce a commemorative representation, a contemporary monument to the abolition of slavery perhaps, whose bicentenary was marked the following year (Bristol being a city of anniversary festivals!)? Speaking of the historical bounded category of sculpture, Rosalind Krauss wrote in 1979, that "the logic of sculpture, it would seem, is inseparable from the logic of the monument. By virtue of this logic a sculpture is a commemorative representation. It sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolical tongue about the meaning or use of that place."

Barclay's abstraction of identifiable materials and forms and her expansion of scale and explosion of architectural or maritime structures within the space fractures the commemorative representation of the history of the site, proving Barclay's capability to allow a series of more open-ended readings to develop.

So how do we understand *III Gotten Gains* to operate when it is reconfigured for another place – an entirely different context? In the second iteration of this work, *III Gotten Gains ii* for the Kunstverein Braunschweig in Germany, the constituent parts appear less resonant of socio-political contexts than their art historical associations. Here amongst the grand high ceiled-rooms of the Kunstverein, a 200-year old neo-classical building

which was heavily damaged in the bombing raids of 1944, the components form one of a series of isolated propositions, rather than at Station, where the elements seem to encroach on two small rooms. Along with other works such as the baroque *Fault on the Right Side*, 2007 and *Let Loose*, 2007, the wooden gantry and bench-like structures of *III Gotten Gains ii* appear more architecturally eccentric than sinister – encountered through a series of interconnecting ‘state rooms’ – as if detritus of a former existence rather than occupying the space of Station.

What we experience in Bristol then is not a site-specific work or a contemporary monument, but rather a temporary situation or event, which gains a particular resonance from the associations of the past, but where that past is ushered into a new and unexpected present. This is not ‘event as narrative component’ or rupture with the past as philosopher Alain Badiou would have us believe,⁵ but rather a notion of event advanced by Alfred North Whitehead, and subsequently, Gilles Deleuze, as a moment of becoming.

Whitehead writes: “events are lived through, they extend around us. They are the medium within which our physical experience develops, or, rather, they are themselves the development of that experience.”⁶ for Deleuze, the event “is always that which has just happened and that which is about to happen, but never that which is happening.”⁷ Can we understand *III Gotten Gains* as a Deleuzian event – a synthesis of past and future – and what does this mean in terms of Barclay’s treatment of the particular historical context of Bristol?

Slavoj Žižek’s reading of Deleuze’s essay ‘What is an Event?’ is particularly useful here.⁸ Žižek suggests that, “the proper Deleuzian paradox is that something truly new can only emerge through repetition. What repetition repeats is not the way the past ‘effectively was,’ but the virtuality inherent to the past... In this precise sense, the emergence of the new changes the past itself, that is, it retroactively changes (not the actual past—we are not in science fiction—but) the balance between actuality and virtuality in the past.”⁹ So for example, how we might view a child changes as they grow older, their past selves becoming smaller in relation to their present size.

In this sense, *III Gotten Gains* does not occur simply as a representation of the past, nor as a rupture from that past, but rather it gathers a confluence of repetitions – links,

chains, manacles, weights, balances, trading tables, work tables, masts, crucifixes, sails, leather and skins – to ‘retroactively change the balance’ between Bristol’s actual and virtual past. The past is changed in relation to the present. That uneasy, claustrophobic sensation felt in this installation is caused by the recognition that this is not a contemporary monument, but rather is an environment in which our precarious present, in which slave labour persists, at one remove in our globalised economy, is palpable.

At any given instant, our encounter with Barclay’s work is an event which, as Deleuze suggests, is not something that happens to us as pre-constituted subjects; but rather something that constitutes us as new subjects. As a newly commissioned work for *The British Art Show*, a survey which challenged preconceived ideas about the identity of British artists, Barclay could not have chosen a more urgent or vital consideration of the convergence of place and time.

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References

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² Ilya Kabakov, *On the "Total" Installation* (Bonn: Cantz Verlag, 1995) p. 244.

³ Fiona Bradley, 'Claire Barclay', *MAP*, Issue 5, Spring 2006, p.31

⁴ Laura Cumming, 'Bristol Fashion', *The Observer*, 27 August 2006, Review section.

⁵ See Alain Badiou,, 'The Event in Deleuze', *Parrhesia*, No. 2,2007, pp. 37–44.

⁶ Alfred North Whitehead, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge* (Cambridge: University Press, 1955), p. 62.

⁷ Alain Badiou, "The Event in Deleuze," *Parrhesia* (Number 2, 2007), p. 38.

⁸ See Gilles Deleuze, 'What is an Event?' in *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

⁹ Slavoj Žižek, "On Alain Badiou and *Logiques des Mondes*," accessed at <http://www.lacan.com/zizbadman.htm>.

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