

# PAUL CULLEN

EXPLAINING THE RESULTS OF OBSERVATION

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CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART  
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# AN ART OF POSSIBILITIES

*"I think that the edges of subjects are interesting: Where sculpture meets drawing, where sculpture meets architecture- these are borderlines which invite exploration."*

*"Imagine designing a building starting from a joint or a staircase and working outwards; or turning a building upside down and making the site fit the work instead of the work the site."*

Anthony Caro.

*"The site determines how I think about what I am going to build, whether it be an urban or landscape site, a room or other architectural enclosure."*

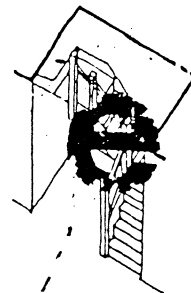
*"I never make sketches or drawings for sculptures. I don't work from an a priori concept or image."*

Richard Serra.

*"How is it possible, for instance, to develop a new inventive faculty that would allow the architect to use the possibilities of the new technology without aspiring to uniformity, without developing models for the whole world? An inventive faculty of the architectural difference which would bring out a new type of diversity with different limitations, other heterogeneities than the existing ones and which would not be reduced to the technique of planning?... There is a formless desire for another form. The desire for a new location, new arcades, new corridors, new ways of living and of thinking."*

Jacques Derrida.

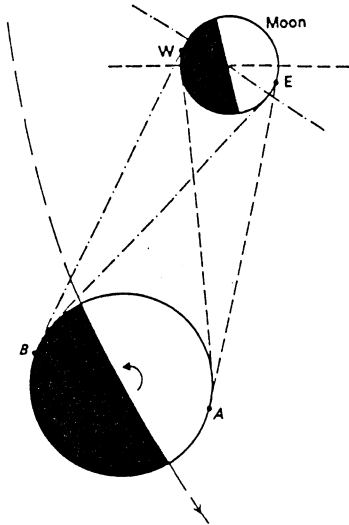
These clusters of unassuming objects are models in the conceptual as well as the concrete sense. They open up questions about how they might be regarded as paradigms for architecture, for thought, and for space. Our first impression, however, could be that they resemble very simple constructions from a hobbyist's workbench. In different combinations we find sections of straight and curved railway track, tiny pine trees, chicken wire and papier mache land formations, paper simulated brickwork, elementary boat shapes, generic buildings, balsa aeroplanes, and even a miniature planet.



Disarmingly simple, these works seem almost artless, as if assembled from whatever materials lay close at hand when they were made. Perhaps they are unadorned and lack finish because they have been pressed into service for a task in which their sign-value, their stand-in potential is all that matters- "Let this block of wood with a brass rod be a ship and this narrow strip a dockyard." A number of the component pieces have the look of off-cuts, retaining areas of paint, saw-cuts and pencil lines that could be read as remainders of other projects. However, even if we decide these leftovers have obviously been 'doctored', their chalky white and grey paint, their sprinklings of letraset, and their modest graphic marks, indifferent to assertive gesture, all contribute to a decidedly low-key aesthetic.

Each work usually comprises a loose grouping of five or six separate pieces. The pieces are not arranged in defensive formations, they do not form 'strong' compositional patterns. At first glance they even look random in placement. So if they are arbitrarily placed does this mean that they could easily be rearranged without loss to the work?

Rather than seeing these works as chance distributions would it not be better to think of them as intelligently deployed pieces in a board game whose rules we are not yet familiar with? Perhaps they are counters in some tabletop scenario, each one allotted its own points and placed with care. If we were to move these pieces it would have to be with deliberation and slow thoughtfulness. With this in mind I can imagine that if I were to shift one of these pieces it would have an effect somewhere else in the world. Though I cannot say exactly what the result would be, the move would be crucial.



Cullen's economy of means has a double effect. It could signal indirection, the off-hand, the artless, but it could also signal a clarity and precision of intent that needs no dramatizing.

The works have a carefully governed indeterminacy approaching the condition of 'weakness' that deconstructionist architect Peter Eisenman proposes as a working principle for transforming architecture from a history of triumphant 'overcomings' into an on-going process of negotiations, uncertainties, and questions: "The loss of the idea of architecture as a strong image undercuts the traditional categories of architecture associated with man overcoming nature; place, route, enclosure, presence, and the vertebrate, upright building- symbolic of overcoming gravity."<sup>1</sup>

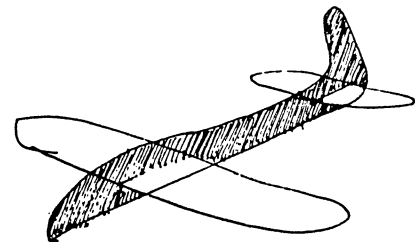
Cullen does suggest a certain liberation from gravity though, but not an overcoming through monumental means. Perhaps the balsa aeroplanes connote an early modernist regard for the artist as aviator freewheeling through space in creative freedom. Malevich, for whom Suprematism was "aeronautical", elected himself "President of space". Marinetti called for an artistic "take-off". Robert Delaunay celebrated Bleriot's cross channel flight. Later in the century Yves Klein launched himself out a window.

Most of the works in this show are on the wall yet read as if seen from above, so we do lose our orientation a little as we lift clear of our habitual gravity bound viewpoint. The reorientation we undergo plays havoc with the 'horizon' of the gallery space but compensates by suggesting a whole new range of viewpoints. The benefits and implications of unconventional vantage-points were recognized early on in modernist practice. Rodchenko

demanded the alternative gaze made possible when ordinary things are seen from unexpected angles. Moholy-Nagy believed that "one sees' truer" from above as "the original shapes are seen with greater clarity than in the central-perspective-vistas and vanishing point renderings which distort the real proportions."<sup>2</sup> But Cullen's rationale is probably closer to that of Lissitzky who wished to destroy the spectator's certainty of position in relation to the work that a monocular perspective system had guaranteed.

Speaking of his *Prouns*,<sup>3</sup> which were to be "interchange station<s> between painting and architecture", Lissitzky explains: "We see that the surface of the *Prouns* ceases to be a picture and turns into a structure round which we must circle, looking at it from all sides, peering down from above, investigating from below. The result is that one axis of the picture which stood at right-angles to the horizontal was destroyed. Circling round it we screw ourselves into the space .... We have set the *Proun* in motion so we obtain a number of axes of projection."<sup>4</sup>

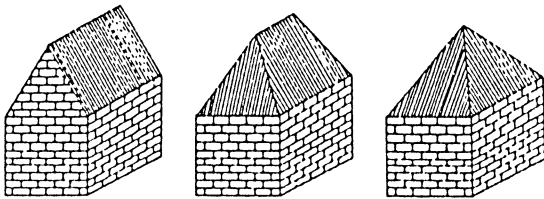
Lissitzky pushed this idea of spatial disorientation even further by declaring that his *Prouns* could be regarded as *documents* which are read on tables and stored horizontally. Cullen's inversion works in the opposite direction as he takes his floor and table pieces to the wall.



For Lissitzky the generation of multiple viewpoints was an analogue for the opening up of new possibilities by a revolutionary, utopian practice. They were models for actual societal changes. Although the context is different and the hopes modified, Cullen's work also has a socio-political import. It assumes the possibility of still making art that has an interventionist potential. Cullen recognizes this potential in the 'cuts' Gordon Matta-Clark made through empty buildings. These cuts

carried metaphoric force and acted out the "imaginative disruption of convention as an essential liberation force".<sup>5</sup>

In his own way Cullen works with cuts, displacements, and openings in the architectural model and, by implication, in all self-contained forms of social order. By undermining the situation of architecture as something static or predetermined, his projects covertly critique social, political, and philosophic formations that take their structures for granted. Both urban and landscape architectural structures are thrown into crisis here as architecture for Cullen involves the whole constructed landscape. It is in such terms that Derrida has understood the deconstructive task: "To deconstruct traditional sanctions - theoretical, philosophical, cultural - effectively, you have to displace ...I would say 'solid' structures, not only in the sense of material structures, but 'solid' in the sense of cultural, pedagogic, political, economic, structures."<sup>6</sup>



Cullen's sculpture invites reflection not only on architecture as a spatial and social phenomenon but also on the very nature of 'the model' itself. His models question the notion of a project or plan as something that can be laid out in advance and then applied to practice as if one were using an instruction manual. They reject the role of the model as a mere means to an end. It is not just that one of these models becomes important in its own right or an end in itself but that it refuses to support a clear separation between plan and reality, between the idea and its material embodiment. One implication of this is that thinking and making must always be regarded as in process, as undergoing continual adjustment in a reciprocal relationship. Another is that general schemes must always be modified by the local, by the specifics of a given site. Could we say then that, in their refusal to ever fully play their hand according to an idealist or functionalist programme, Cullen's models are utopian fragments

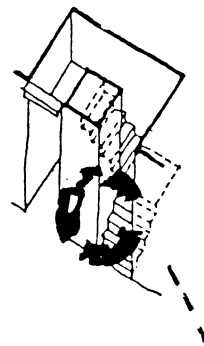
whose primary significance lies in their unbuildable nature?

Referring to the way that the model can negotiate this space between the real and the imaginary, Germano Celant suggests: "If the model functions as a 'prediction' and utopia, according to an imaginary topography not yet locatable, it is thus a privileged significant which summarises a whole series of unstable and uncertain meanings, premonitory signs of concrete sensibility and thought. This area of suspension is a real and proper territory where form is given to configurations and assemblages, halfway between sculpture and architecture, which will form the real landscape."<sup>7</sup>

If these models are a proposal for a constructed landscape they do not propose a space that serves a geometric plan. They are not about the harmonizing of spatial experience with an a priori design. The territories of Cullen's projects would have no privileged sites from which the layout could be grasped as a whole.

What is assumed here is the mobile viewer who experiences an environment as a complex of elements, always susceptible to new combinations.

Although much of his practice may have contradicted the fact, Le Corbusier was a modernist architect who extolled the virtues and primacy of 'the plan': The plan is what determines everything; it is the decisive moment ...an austere abstraction ... Unity of law is the law of a good plan."<sup>8</sup> It is this understanding of the plan and its outworking in the architectural project that Cullen departs from.



Construction for Cullen has to do with recognizing a heterogeneity of givens and making the necessary adaptations and alterations to the preconceived. The project becomes "a conflict between that which reveals itself autonomously and that which is brought about by a process of decision."The openness of relation that exists between the individual units of these works, together with the manipulative freedom

that determines their letraset, pseudo classification systems, offer the prospect of quiet semiotic insurrection within the architectural landscape. The dislocation of architectural syntax and the disruption of a sequence of parts, preserves the possibility of imagining how *else* the world might be put together.<sup>10</sup> But just as these models acknowledge different scales of movement and measurement - the orbit of a planet contrasts to the passage of a ship, the distance between two trees compares to the width of a house but contrasts to the length of a railway track - so they point to more than the frictionless space of infinite possibility. They imply the need for judgements, discriminations, and slow adjustments; constraints as well as free possibilities.

Allan Smith July 1991

ALLAN SMITH has a BFA in painting, BA in English, and is at present completing an MA in Art History. He has written a number of articles on contemporary New Zealand art.

PAUL CULLEN was born in Te Awamutu, New Zealand in 1949. He has a BSc from Auckland University and a Dip FA (honours) in sculpture from Canterbury University. He has exhibited regularly in group and solo exhibitions since 1975.

#### NOTES

- 1 Peter Eisenman in "En Terror Firma : In Trails of Grotexes," **Architectural Design**, (vol 58, nos 1/2, 1989), pp40-43.
- 2 L. Maholy-Nagy quoted in **The Utopian Vision of Moholy-Nagy** Joseph Harris Cotton,(UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1984), p.76.
- 3 **Proun** is an acronym of the Russian for "Project for the Affirmation of the New"
- 4 El Lissitzky quoted in "El Lissitzky: Radical Reversibility", Yve-Alain Bois, **Art In America**,(April 1988), pp 160-181.
- 5 Gordon Matta-Clark quoted in "Non-uments", Judith Russi Kirshner,**Artforum**, (October 1985),pp102108.
- 6 Jacques Derrida in "Jacques Derrida in Discussion with Christopher Norris", **Architectural Design**, (vol 58, no 1/2 1989) pp 7-11.
- 7 Germano Celant, "The Design is an Object", **Art and Design**, (vol 5 11/12 ,1989), pp.34-31.
- 8 Le Courbusier, **Towards a New Architecture**, trans F. Etchells, (The London Architectural Press, 1948), pp 45-48.
- 9 Francesco Dal Co, **Figures of Architecture and Thought**, trans. Stephen Sartorelli, (Rizzoli: New York, 1990) p. 94.
- 10 Referring to Tatlin's counterrelief, Martyn Chalk has said that its structure "is neither Art nor Engineering, but the result of some intuitive grasp of how the world might be put together." Chalk is quoted in **The Futurist Movement**, Majorie Perloff, (The University of Chicago Press, 1986.)

