

An essay on the occasion of the 5th anniversary exhibition of the m2 gallery by Ken Taylor; Scaffolding.
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Reflections on Scaffolding

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All the photographs in the show have been taken since August last year when I bought a digital camera that is small enough to always have with me. This essentially replaces the equally compact analogue camera I used to use all the time. However I'd rather fallen out of the habit of taking pictures as I began to feel that the mountain of "capturing and collecting" was growing to be not only burdensome, but also rather unhealthy in a "trainpottery" kind of way. Armed with this new all seeing eye and the ability to store my prey in the ether of computer memory, I found myself, as someone with "previous form" in photographing scaffolds, being drawn to them again. Why is that? Maybe these notes can provide some clues?

Scaffolding I see as an interesting vernacular architecture of the contemporary city. It keeps popping up all over the place; these massive structures akin to medieval buildings. They are not designed by "design professionals" but are "crafted" by people that do "stuff". This week I saw a scaffold where the zebra crossings orange beacon had been carefully exposed by some unknown scaffolding "craftsman" in the most amazing manner. In this sense scaffoldings directness is as refreshing as the qualities of vernacular architecture that I enjoy. These are borne out of the way that people have responded to the specifics of their time, place, topography, gravity, weather, material, use requirements, light, safety, social hierarchies etc. The beauty of scaffolding is that it responds to the same things but without the big weight of cultural meaning on its shoulders. Although it is very much "there" in our cities we don't tend to notice it. It's a "supporting" structure that facilitates other events

That scaffolding goes up really quickly is great, as a certain quality appears in its "doneness"; its implicit structural qualities can be improvised on "in the moment" as indeed is the case with many other art forms; its not precious. George Russell the great

jazz composer and arranger of big bands talks of his enjoyment when the soloists in his bands become "on the spot composers" when they improvise within his compositions. As an Architect I delight in the way that the structures we make have the ability to be adapted by the users or builders in a genuinely "vernacular" fashion. This is sometimes dismissed as "agricultural" or just crude, but there is often a delightful quirkiness that could never be designed. Indeed another strain of photos I take are known as my "Wentworthisms" inspired by the sculptor Richard Wentworth's ongoing series of photos "Making Do and Getting By". These can have shoes opening windows or buckets doing odd jobs in bizarre circumstances; everyday things but transformed to be exceptional.

There is definitely a fascination in the conversation between something all assuring; the "structure" of the scaffold, and its temporariness. The fact that it will disappear, is perhaps its abiding allure. Maybe its simply a medium to find a visual language to look at all the old dualisms of the world; Male/Female, Earth/Heaven, Rationalism/Romanticism, Science/Art, Structure/Improvisation etc etc. Whatever, its an ordinary language that is fairly universal wherever you go but with interesting nuances in various places; its neater in Switzerland, essentially timber and ramshackelled in pre 1989 Prague and more systemised in the States. Crucially its always different depending on the light, the time of day, the movement of the sheeting in the wind and of course its ability to disappear almost overnight or to be adapted for a new phase of the construction process. Im always aware looking at scaffolding that its ripe for impending removal. "You better make that click now as it maybe gone tomorrow". It certainly adheres to the idea that the Irish curator and critic Declan McGonagle puts forward that "Art is a verb not a noun".

Roland Barthes in his wonderful book on photography, Camera Lucida pointed out that similarly the photograph itself has an elusiveness, or pictures a "death" in itself. Once that fraction of a second has elapsed and the image is "captured", it is a document of the world that will never be the same again. The photograph becomes a kind of grave stone or souvenir of the event in that particular moment in time. It will fade and wear like a tombstone but it will still be there as a fairly lasting momento, whatever its condition. Photographing scaffolding recognizes its elusiveness but wants to encapsulate

its beauty in a frame; a slightly odd contrivance when of course scaffolding itself is a multitude of frames.

Its interesting that "the scaffold" as opposed to "scaffolding" is immediately associated with another kind of death; the place of executions. Implicit in the notion of "doneness" for all its abiding attractions of instantaneous creativity there is also an ending; a death, a closure, an ending. As an Architect that gets involved in the "long haul" of subjectivity, negotiation and beauracracy that is the lot of someone trying to make society's most explicit and public recognition of itself, ie buildings and the spaces around them, it is a liberation to take a photograph as quickly of something with the quality of immediacy that is so difficult to achieve in the design of a building. Conversely the more morbid reflection could be that the photographs become like an archive of the departed in a similar manner to those very matter of fact pictures of the deceased in Italian cemeteries, which do have an extraordinary power.

This chameleon quality that scaffolding presents of being both the ending and the beginning of something is mirrored in the accompanying essay to the recent show by the painter Ian Mckeever when he says "As the material world of today has become more and more "what matters" the need to form it, give it shape and make it visible has necessitated that we withhold more and more light. As if paradoxically the more we know and have, the less light there is to illuminate anything". Scaffolding tends to be a necessary adjunct to this ceaseless desire to make "what matters". As such it is part of a kind of "inbetween" place; part of the journey rather than object itself weighed down by intentions. Interestingly scaffolding tends to emanate light, which most definitely makes it a beacon of attraction to capture in another sort of light; the photograph.

Scaffolding is now almost universally wrapped to give more protection and for a variety of no doubt worthy health and safety reasons. Equally though its like walking round the city and seeing a big Christo every five minutes. Its wrapping both conceals and reveals the elegance of its repeating structure and reminds me of the artists Mary Miss, Donald Judd, Carl Andre and Eva Hesse. Similarly if I see scaffolding in a big expanse the canvases of the abstract expressionists come to mind. Its interesting that its American artists that invade my memory looking at the vastness of scaffolding in the landscapes

of the more constrained European environment. There is something about the freedom that scaffolding gets to be big and unruly that is appealing and rings with that idea of America being the land of opportunity and potential. In particular the paintings of Robert Motherwell come to mind. His Open Series and The Elegy's to the Spanish Republic are often resonant for me in looking at scaffolding. Perhaps that's taking us back to those chameleon qualities again and McKeever's reflections on dark and light; the Open Series lets light in and meditates on the possibilities of the "open" society while the Elegy series are black and white meditations on how vulnerable and contingent that ideal can become.

Staying with McKeever a bit longer he goes on to make another interesting point; "The writer William Burrows envisaged a world where the ceaseless taking of photographs – that quick click of the camera – is stealing each time a piece of light: in the end, all natural light will have gone. We will have consumed it all and be living in perpetual darkness. Our only means of illumination, what artificial light we can conjure, will be thrown back on the millions and millions of photographs which congest our lives and have become the only means by which we can know the world". He concludes "To see something, anything, as itself for the first time will have ceased to be possible and we will be forever trapped in one another's images, never knowing who they are or who we are ourselves. For we will all be just someone else's photograph"

With the proliferation of digital images and advertising his polemic in favour of a contemplative and meditative process in trying to make paintings about light is understandable and one which I am sympathetic towards. However the poetic potentials that a photograph can bring and its ability to give light back to the world is surely a plus; isn't McKeever being too dismissive? Photography for me can be "Art" depending on whose hands the camera is in. For someone that goes through the endless process of trying to bring light to the structure of buildings (in the words of the architect Louis Kahn this is "Architecture") I don't have McKeever's hang ups with taking pictures. They are a liberation, a satisfying "capture" and a useful aspirational archive to making other light with other materials and trying to find another Architecture.

Further in defiance of Mckeevers view the profusion of images that you can produce digitally is a liberation; there is no significant economic limitation, you can look at the images as soon as you take them, you can delete them, they can easily be looked at by you and others "in the moment" of taking them and of course they can be printed and shared with other participants in the world of computers. Of course that is far from everyone, but that creative potential is boundless. However I suppose I still have an abiding sympathy with Mckeever's dilemma; the idea that all the specific productions made by the wonders of all those old analogue processes being lost is a concern. In one way dropping the barriers between the old creative "disciplines" is good in the multi media platform the computer world offers. However if all our thinking has to be done through these incredibly complex things, (with few of us understanding how they actually work), there is a real danger. If all our creative outputs have to go through the sieve that is the computer everything becomes a kind of "digital soup"; plenty of flavours, easy to consume but nothing to get your teeth into becomes a worry.

Another great thing about Scaffolding is that it has brilliant theatrical pretensions. All at once it is a mask, a curtain, a backdrop, a trickster, a light show, a performer or indeed it often makes the stage itself. The ambiguity of concealing and revealing is also interesting. Scaffolding is often erected to demolish a structure so that the scaffolding and its sheeting becomes like a curtain around the deathbed of a building, remaining beyond the final throws of its ending. Here the scaffold maintains its own structure and dignity masking the void within. Of course when it's the other way round the scaffold becomes the costume of a fabulous striptease artist at the urban scale. The problem is that very often that which is revealed is a huge let down. It's the elephant in the room that the scaffold has created. The bare nakedness is often not that beautiful and hasn't the dignity and elegance our Architecture deserves; the skin is too manicured, it has been seduced by "bling", it ages badly, its structure is inelegant, its had too many beauty treatments and more often than not is rather bloated for maximum commercial gain.

One can't help feeling bereft of something when the scaffolding has been struck. One wishes for the movement of its sheeting in the wind, its lightness and elegance, its sturdynees in grouping together and supporting bigger things, its ability to constantly

recycle itself, the revealing glimpses it gives through the scars of its life, its jack the ladness; here today gone tomorrowness, the way it illuminates itself, its odd colourations, its happiness to reveal its previous signatures and tattoos, its ordinariness and extrordinariness; Sounds like a good Architecture to me !