

NOTES ON PROCESS

A conversation between Charlotte Drayton and Jamie Hanton 15 February 2017

Jamie Hanton: On your first visit down, after I approached you to work on this project, I told you about the spatial elements in the gallery that I thought could work better: the library / entrance area felt like it was trying to do many things poorly, rather than one thing well; I also expressed frustration at the fact that people would often come up to the gallery to use it as a kind of viewing / photography platform. I also talked about some of the things I wanted to be present in the gallery space – values like hospitality, generosity, and accessibility, more than physical elements – can you tell me how you addressed these two sets of parameters in your work?

Charlotte Drayton: Yes, so one of the things that I always start with when making work is to examine all of the architectural features in the space that I will make the work in and think about how the space is used – what the lines of sight are, what the unconscious paths that visitors take through the space might be, how it is used in a practical sense. One of the things that struck me about the gallery previously, was the manner in which you would walk almost directly into the exhibition creating a very static viewpoint that ran the entire length of the building. There was a separate room around the corner to the left which was used predominantly for video, but apart from that there were very finite ways in which the space could be used, and the line of windows was constantly drawing your attention outside.

I wanted to use the space as economically as possible, as I was aware of how huge the build was going to be, so I started to think about how I could shift the space as much as possible using quite simple architectural gestures. The corridor became the central connecting point for the rest of the space for this reason – I was interested in shifting the viewer's encounter into the gallery completely, and the corridor became a means of complicating the entrance to the gallery, making it more intentional on the viewer's part. I was interested in trying to find a way to make the galleries as flexible as possible, to have both large open spaces and smaller more intimate spaces. Additionally, I wanted to keep all of the windows without sacrificing wall space, which is the logic behind reorienting the gallery at the south end of the building, with windows that allowed both morning and evening sun, rather than just light from the east.

The minding booth is a similar response to a very practical problem, I found that when I walked into the space, the volunteer sitting in front of the shelves in the

library made the library virtually unusable for anyone except perhaps friends or the boldest of visitors. I also felt that the placement of the gallery minder in the library made that role quite ambiguous, easy to bypass. I wanted to make a dedicated space for the people minding the space that was immediately visible when walking into the space, so that the role of the minder was clear and the library was a more inviting space in which to stop and read.

JH: Did the duration of this project, the fact that it was going to be permanent or semi-permanent, have a bearing on your decision making?

CD: Yes absolutely, I think as I mentioned earlier the practical aspects in terms of the re-arrangement of the space were hugely influenced by the gallery being re-configured in a semi-permanent manner. I was interested in the challenge of this work, in how I could make a functional gallery space whilst still maintaining integral aspects of my practice. I think the corridor was really central to this, and the arched opening between spaces. As a result, the transitional space became a means of embedding the interior decor tropes common to my practice beyond this exhibition – the carpet, the dimmable lights, the melamine countertop on the minding both, the paint colour. The result is this quite weird domestic entrance to the gallery, something that perhaps sits between a hotel or a waiting room and a suburban domestic hallway.

JH: I'm curious to know how you would frame your work in an art historical sense. How should *Like stepping from concrete to carpet* be described in this roomsheet? What is its final form?

CD: I don't know if or how I would really situate it art historically, however in generalised terms my work has been referred to (by myself and others) as 'site specific', 'architectural / spatial intervention' etc. I haven't ever found any of these categorisations as helpful or explanatory of the work. I think that its final form after this show is simply architectural, or as built space – this show is a kind of suspension of that – a way of framing and contextualising these changes before they become background to other work.

My interest in built space stemmed from an examination early in my practice of how built space becomes invisible over time and through familiarity, it becomes a commonly accepted container for the fluctuations of everyday life. For the show I want to re-focus attention on what architecture does, how it reveals particular aspirations and desires. After the show I think the work just becomes a (somewhat idiosyncratic) gallery space, perhaps in that way it can be viewed as a readymade-in-waiting.

JH: We were looking out the window the other day at the buildings going up around us, the buildings that are already there, the leftovers, the ones that haven't been demolished or destroyed and we kept coming back to the ubiquity of the arch as an

architectural feature. It's also an integral motif in your current practice – why the arch, how did you come to it, and what do you think it does in the space?

CD: I think the arch is a particularly potent architectural motif, it is loaded with historical references dating back to Ancient Rome and Greece and has had quite a functional purpose. However, in NZ it is an odd flourish, it has no practical function and is instead employed as a nod to European design; it has an aspirational quality and betrays very colonial desires and yet it is used so casually to produce a particular aesthetic ideal. There is something very self-conscious in that gesture. In this particular work, I think it serves to render the space as slightly more domestic, but it also locates it in a particular time period – one that I think is just out of date now. This dated-ness serves as a kind of pressure point in terms of catalysing subjective responses to the work. I am drawn to materials or motifs that act as a litmus test for taste, that are commonly recognisable and relatable.

JH: It seems to me that *Like stepping from concrete to carpet* has two major strands to it; firstly the design or footprint of the space, which you've already talked about, and secondly, the very specific choices you've made in relation to materials. I'm particularly interested in the shift of paint colour and the effect that has had on the space. The Double Alabaster feels a lot more fresh – both in its crispness and in a temporal sense, that it feels more contemporary than the Half-Bianca that was previously in the gallery. Could you perhaps go through some of these decisions and discuss your thinking behind them and how they relate to ideas of time and taste?

CD: For me, the new design of the galleries was predominantly about thinking about how the gallery functioned and how that might be shifted and / or improved. However, I think the specific choices in decor that I have made were very much intertwined with this, in the use of the transitional spaces and choices in things like lighting and paint colour. I was really surprised to learn that the gallery white used by The Physics Room was Half-Bianca, as I have used it before in my work. Half-Bianca is one of Resene's most popular colours, perhaps like an updated version of Quarter-Spanish White and is a very warm-toned white. According to my research, it is used often in south facing rooms in order to make them seem warmer. Double Alabaster is an updated version of this, it is similarly at the top of the charts in terms of popularity, but it is a grey-toned white – slightly fresher and more crisp. I wouldn't say it is a gallery white, but I liked the idea of having an ongoing covert influence over the gallery as a whole, and the Double Alabaster does that for me – it isn't quite institutional, but given the Half-Bianca perhaps it is just an update on a similar theme.