
Anya Gallaccio

The Poetics of Place

at ArtPace

by John Ewing

Sometimes, installations wear out their welcome. Some gallery spaces resist an artist's presence and assert their own natural powers. The self-satisfied stasis of an empty gallery, Brian O'Doherty's "White Cube," is contemporary art's ground zero. It can vigorously oppose the clutter of disorganized thought or simply vanish in the wake of a strong idea. When artists conquer the gallery, succeeding beyond merely occupying space, they harness the expressive potential of the void and transform space into place. Anya Gallaccio's installation "They Said There Was a Paradise Way Out West," included in *New Works: 97.1* at ArtPace, makes the leap from the physical reality of space to places in the heart and mind.

Like the gerberas daisy chains of "Head Over Heals" (1995), Gallaccio's current piece is also "rich in metaphor."¹ The installation fuses temporal and metaphysical elements with the raw materials of barbed wire and salt. Suspended from lighting battens, short sections of barbed wire are fashioned into continuous, flexible loops which crisscross the gallery in a network of inverted arcs. The gallery floor has been replaced by heaping drifts of white table salt. This irregular, non-architectural surface captures and holds the footprints of visitors, blending seamlessly into walls of the same spotless white.

The arcs, both graceful and spiky-sharp, hang at varying heights. Some have a shallow trough and span the gallery over the heads of viewers. Others are slack and get caught in the salt dunes before rising again to the opposite batten. Although there is no apparent beginning or end to the looping strands, two clusters hang vertically, one in a corner at the front and the other on the diagonal at the back of the gallery under a narrow skylight.

Of course, it is these materials which form the basis for any reading of the piece. Unlike conceptual works, the experience of walking on the salt among the barbed wire arcs is critical. Christo writes of his large-scale manifestations that "The most important part is really the driving energy for the physical objects. If the physical object is not the ultimate end, we never arrive at this fantastic power of the project...."²

And the power of Gallaccio's work is one of suggestion. Like Molissa Fenley's dance compositions for the theater designs of Robert Wilson, creative suggestion pulls the viewer into the piece with fascinating textures and cryptic language. Much is suggested and hinted at, but nothing is revealed until associations coalesce into a new thing, a new place, in the mind of the viewer.

The short sections of barbed wire which form the arcs suggest assorted networks. About

eight inches long and connected and looped ends, the sections articulate the strands much like the bones in a skeleton hand or the neurons of a nervous system. Traveling these unceasing journeys up and down the arcs, one imagines an ant colony or a busy human network. Some of the forces are harmonious, others countervailing. Some trips are unfettered and short; others plummet and are mired for a time in salt-stung confusion. But where these journeys start and end is a mystery. A Mobius strip, the loops of wire seem to chase themselves in timeless circularity with only footprints to keep a record of time passing.

As busy as that seems, the piece is focused and unified, and it finds closure, if not actual redemption, under the skylight. This dense "grove" of vertical strands is the work's natural terminus. From anywhere in the room, it seems to be the point to which all arcs tend and finally relax, falling into the salt in disarray. The natural illumination from the frosted skylight softly bathes the vertical strands and glints off sharp points. Like the stylized beams of light in William Blake's metaphysical engravings, the natural illumination is an element outside the network but one that wields an extraordinary and mysterious power over it.

Art's greatest suggestive power is its ability to link strong works together in an underground spring of associations. The textures and space-transforming elements in Gallaccio's piece work

on the senses and on the spirit like theatrical tropes. They recall Felix Gonzalez Torres' magically-hopeful strings of light. They recall the busy, backstage networking of Truffaut's Le Dernier Metro, a triumph of the imagination in which "Occupied" spaces are transformed by art. Les Enfants du Paradis is another example of a transformation in which the actual film

production thwarted the Nazis and transcended the realities of war. The result is a "place" of unmatched poignancy where art is both the expression of love and its escape.

Cynical and silent, space is the guardian of the irreducible nothing. Place,

on the other hand, is what we bring with us. Places are points on a map and pieces of memory. They are inside picture frames, inside our heads, and as Carl André describes them, "pedestal(s) for the rest of the world."³ As the title of Anya Gallaccio's piece suggests, places can be hard to find or never found, but her strong, imaginative vision values the journey nevertheless.

Notes:

1. Tony Godfrey, *Art in America*, December 1, 1995
2. Christo Jaracheff, *Inside New York's Art World*, Rizzoli, 1979.
3. Carl André, *Twentieth-Century Artists on Art*, Pantheon, 1985.



"They said there was a paradise way out west" by Anya Gallaccio

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