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Phil Dobson & Duncan McAfee:
What is Done Cannot be Undone

What Is Done Cannot Be Undone



In March/April 2016, the 12 artists of Warrior Studios entered the warehouse space of OVADA (The Oxford Visual Arts Development Agency) to embark on a month-long experiment in collaboration. The mission was to fill the space with an installation whose reference point was Kurt Schwitters' 'Hannover Merzbau'.

Although this was a collaboration each artist approached the project in a distinctive way - from a very formalist take to one which paid homage to Schwitters' collage style. The installation grew organically over the month, the only rule being that although one could alter or add to existing structure or material, it could not be removed or subtracted, i.e. undone, and hence the title.



The artists were: Jane Campbell, Federica dalla Vecchia, David Degreeef-Mounier, Phil Dobson, Hugh Gilmour, James Alec Hardy, Jez Jacobs, Gary Kempston, Duncan McAfee, Michael Rodgers, Pauline Smith and Mariya Ustymenko.

With particular thanks to Brigitte Stepputtis, the OVADA team members Lucy Phillips and Roger Perkins, and photographers Charlie Milligan and Hugh Pryor.



The following pages show images from various sources, the cameras and phones of the artists and photographers, the 24 hour live feed to Youtube, Canary security camera etc. These are paired with extracts from the blog which continued through the month and contained contributions from the artists.

The 4th Dimension

Thinking of using Jouffret's 'umbrella' diagram of projected polyhedra as a basis for a structure at Ovada.

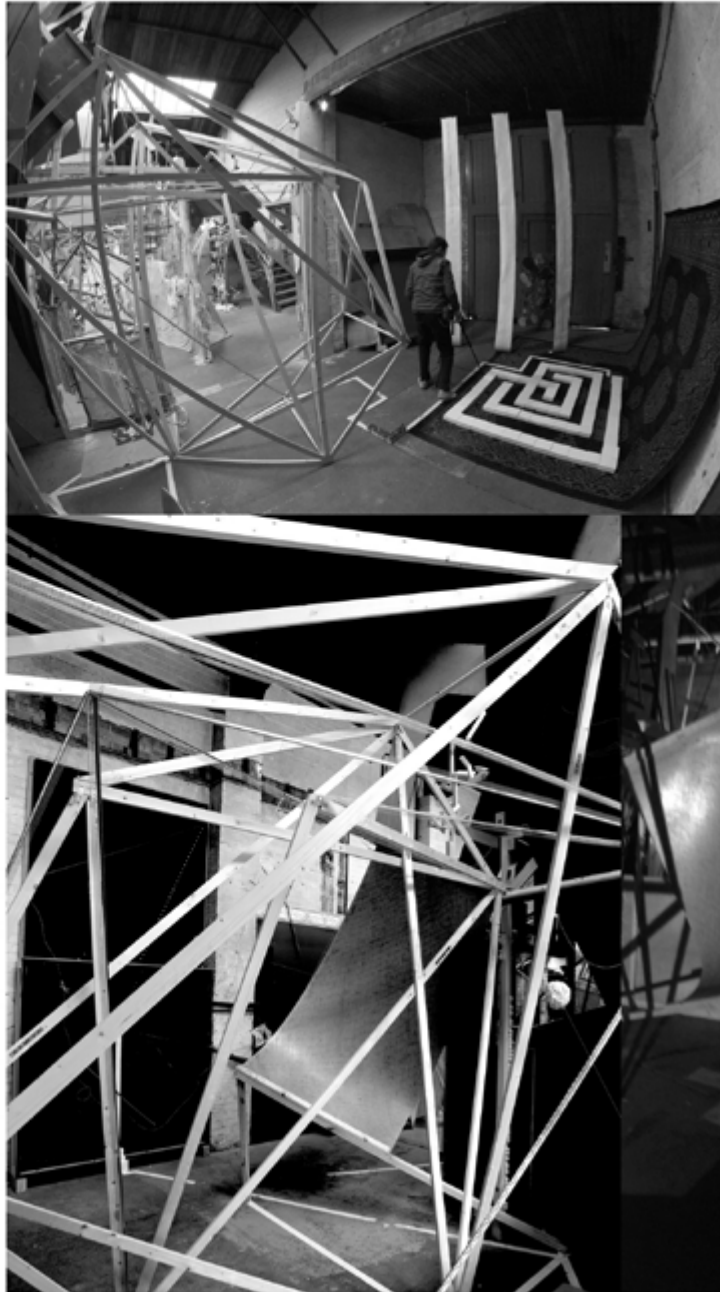
In Arthur I Miller's comparisons between creativity in art and science (in *Space, Time and the Beauty That Causes Havoc*), he developed a model of creativity with an emphasis on visual imagery. How does this model of individual creativity compare to a collaborative project such as this. In some ways creation can come from a kind of messy melting pot – so maybe this is the ideal model (rather than a model of the ideal – since we live in a shadow world, unable to visualise the ideal...)

Kurt Schwitters, quoted by Gary Kempston in our meeting last week:

"Art is a primordial concept, exalted as a godhead, inexplicable as life, indefinable and pointless. The work of art comes into being through the artistic evaluation of its elements. I know only how to do it, I know only my materials, from which I take, I know not to what end.

The material is as unessential as myself. The only essential thing is giving form. Because the material is unessential, I use any material the picture demands. By harmonising different types of materials among themselves, I have and advantage over mere oil painting, for besides playing colour against colour, I also play off line, form against form etc., and even material against material, for example wood against burlap. I call the worldview from which this mode of artistic creation arose 'Merz'.

The word 'Merz' had no meaning when I formed it. Now it has the meaning which I gave it. The meaning of the concept 'Merz' changes as the insight of those who continue to work with it changes".



Intervention

The word 'languid' might connote laziness, but also because it can imply the movement of people who know their body can move in effective ways, maximising the conversion of energy, without the need for overtly physical effort. I am thinking here of the moment in Kung Fu films where the action is slowed down, to emphasise the grace of the martial artist or to maximise the impression of power. I was watching the movement of Warrior artists on the live feed. This imparts an ethereal light to the space, and to the movements of people a dreaminess which is cinematic, not just because I'm looking at it on a screen.

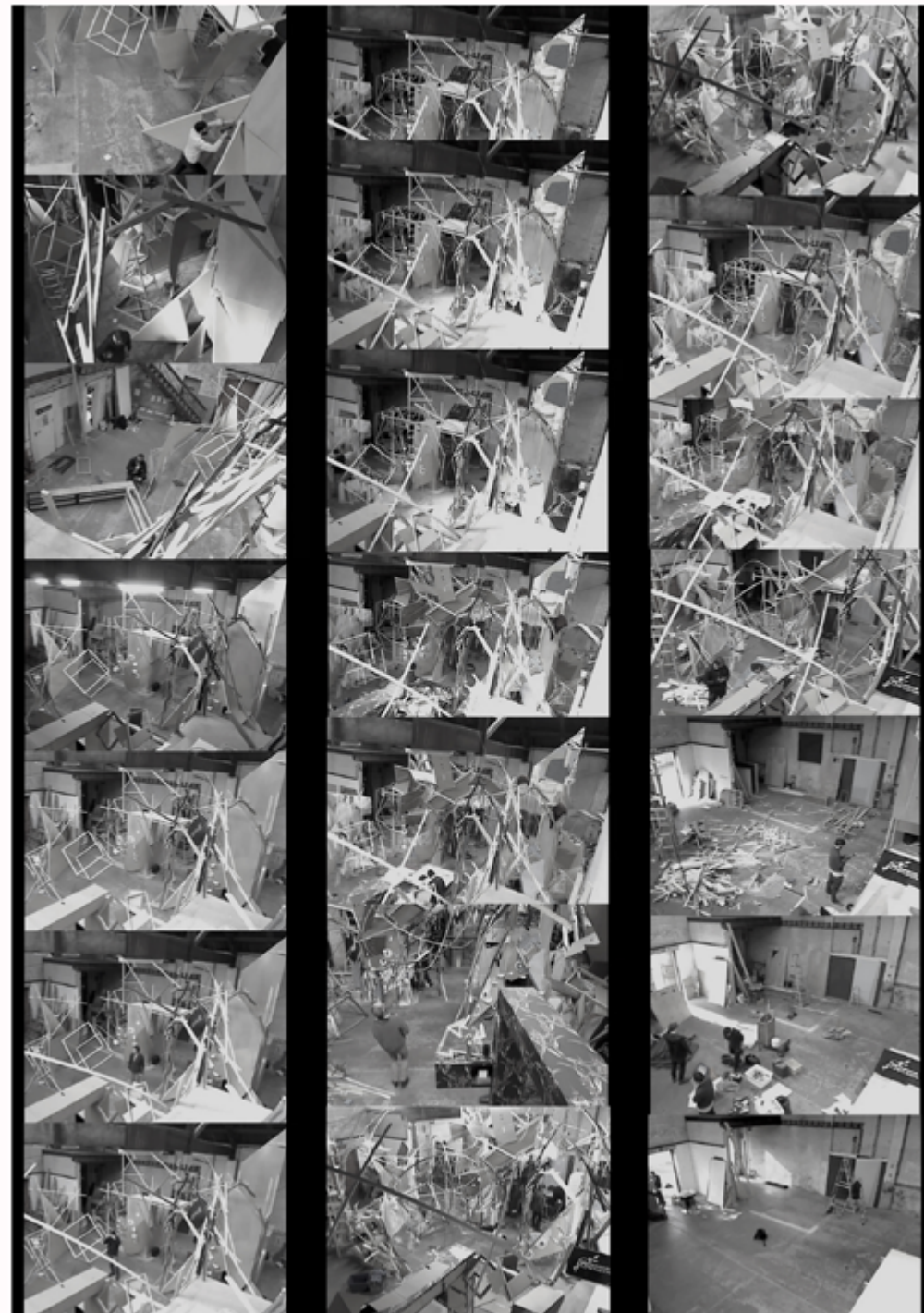
'Intervention': etymologically 'a coming between'. Often used to imply action where something has gone wrong, as in a military intervention, or, in psychology, a kind of therapy.

Interventions in art have a long history. Duchamp's urinal is considered by some to have been an intervention, a protest against bourgeois ideas about art (incidentally one of the few photographs of which was in front of Marsden Hartley's painting *The Warriors*). But it's not my intention to judge, preferring to believe that art has an educative function and is in a way an intervention between the viewer and the world, the education element being that it teaches us to see differently, or see things not seen before. But also in being so becomes integrated in the world, an essential element without which we would fall apart.

So what in the context of this space is an intervention?

Later, we will have a conversation about ego, a Freudian concept, and as such as intervention can mean a mediation, collaboration, a political concept, destruction, change, addition, growth, accretion, that is in art the process, addition, development, reappraisal, resurrection, and in the Merzbau the suffering of self in this Cathedral of Erotic Misery. And so we were supposed to leave our egos at the entrance.

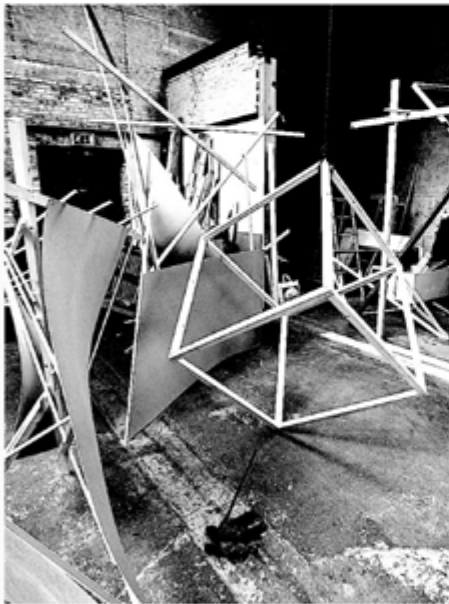
'The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we see the sun set. We know that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight.' (John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*.)



The Dirty Dozen

Well it was a half dozen today. The most we've had at Ovada in one day. Still an air of monastic calm with us moving mostly in silence working in parallel but sometimes meeting, in a zone of concentration working on and around the growing thing which at night takes on appearance of an imminently animated beast developing a reason for living. A thing struggling towards life – and I was reminded of the words from Yeats that Pauline quoted in a meeting – 'A terrible beauty is born'.

Rudi Fuchs called Schwitters an 'impure' artist in his relation to modernism with its insistence on abstraction, 'stripping the medium of its unnecessary or impure elements, resulting in the idea of an artwork as a thing of extreme clarity'. He suggests impurity or the idea of compromise and aesthetic contamination is 'largely absent from Modernist artistic consciousness'.



Jez's intervention played with the purity of the cube, introducing his own cosmology to the solid that Plato associated with Earth, one of the 4 classical elements, while part of the building becomes subterranean with Hugh's roots growing from the wall.

Meanwhile, David reached for the sky with his tower which refers to the original tower at the centre of Schwitters' Merzbau.



I suppose my own entry into Schwitters' work is from a point of view that he is part of modernist history, with a line of descent from Cubism, since I am attracted to this process of abstraction described above. But I certainly acknowledge and appreciate the kind of 'impurity' Fuchs mentions. So my attempt to introduce the precision of the Jouffret diagram could sit awkwardly in the organic growth of this post-internet Merzbau. But from the angle of the webcam there seems to be some logic and flow to the total structure as it sweeps round the central cube.



The cube is one of the 5 Platonic solids, the basis of Plato's cosmology which was in part influenced by the ideas of Pythagoras. The latter's cosmology incorporated a 'metaphysical principle that mathematical relationships express qualities or 'tones of energy' which manifest in numbers, visual angles, shapes and sounds'. He proposed the idea that the Sun, Moon, and planets all emit their own unique hum or orbital resonance based on their orbital revolution and that the quality of life on Earth reflects the tenor of celestial sounds.

This seems appropriate on a day when James began to test his sound equipment which resonated with the structure and building, humming with the 'tones of energy'. Jane started to construct her loom, the warp echoing the strings of the piano which will also resonate.

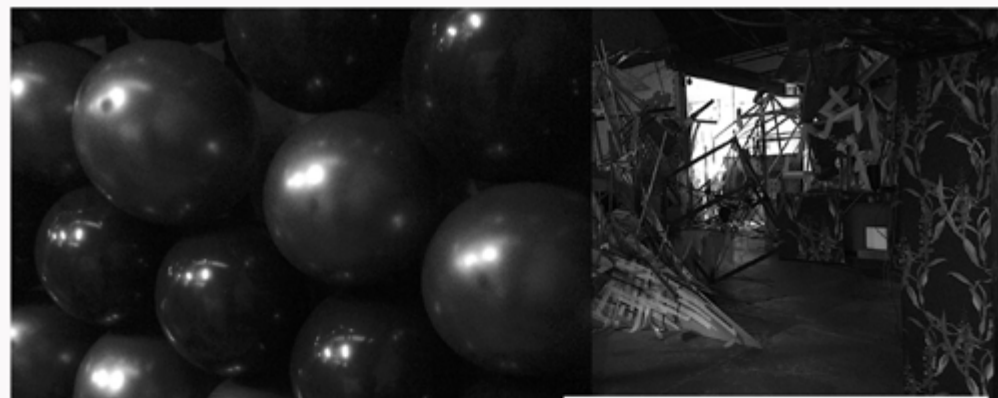


Material, Form, Surface

As the closing/opening looms on Thursday, and today (Tuesday) I feel the physical effect of several hours spent covering a sculpture in foil or covering a wall with balloons, I reflect on some of the themes in my recent work in OVADA:



I was aware of the predominance of wood in the space, which I felt offered a couple of questions: In what ways can the hardness of wood be differentiated from other materials? In what ways can the colour of wood be differentiated? Not being much of a painter (and thinking that the wooden surface could go further than just becoming 'painted wood') I considered wallpaper as a possible solution. What's great about wallpaper is that it's a classic means of disguising material, unifying any disparate elements, and replacing its surface with a visual pattern whilst retaining its overall form. Bearing in mind the original Merzbau's setting in Schwitters's home, I also thought the use of wallpaper would be a playful nod to the domestic within the workshop setting of OVADA. I really enjoyed how these coverings altered the character of the structures and subsequently affected their relationship to surrounding objects.



Maintaining the form while altering its material perception was a key goal for covering the square pillar in wallpaper, as well as covering the 'Thing' sculpture in foil. In retrospect, I suppose the use of aluminium foil is also a reference to the domestic, but my desire to use foil came from a curiosity about how it could offer a very different material presence to that of wood. As a covering, foil transforms things in a manner similar to wallpaper (albeit with much more textural detail) but it also has this unmistakable sort of space-age quality. This prompted me to use the foil on its own in a spatial arrangement.

Balloons add a softness to the environment and highlight areas of containment within the space. They are also another means to introduce new colours and patterns. Between the two balloon pieces there is a great contrast in colour, and I enjoyed observing the effect generated by one set of coloured balloons versus another.

It's unlikely that all the balloons will still have air in them by Thursday evening, and I am interested in their potential for showing the passage of time on this project, much like the dried-up daffodils that have hung in the space since the first weekend. Overall, I hope these additions complement the wooden material in the space and offer food for thought on the relationship between material, form, and surface.



What Is Is

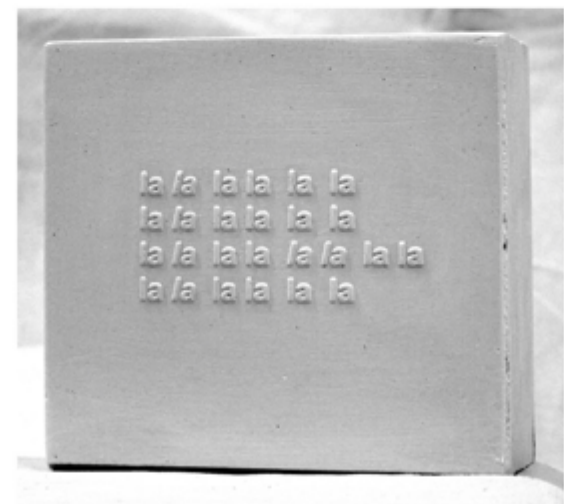
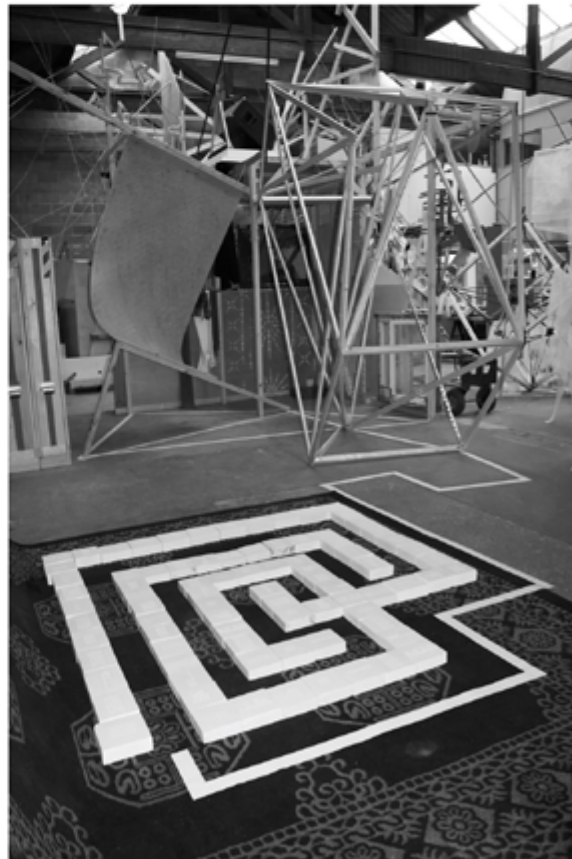
Stayed the night at Ovada. Found the space, or lack of space, initially hard to look at – visual territories feeding back in the creative secretion – en masse – of structures, surfaces, shapes, spaces, materials, colour, questions and problems.

I had brought: a large rug; 86 plaster bricks – photo etched with texts; an obsession with labyrinths; and, a desire to lay out the foundations of one.

The plaster cast bricks with blind suggestions play with boundaries of sense and nonsense, and refer obliquely to Schwitters' work with language, word and sound. Replace the 'i' in 'la la la la la' with a 'd' and you get 'da da!' (said with intonation of presenting an award). This blurring of meaning and intention seems to echo a thought on the collaborative edges being explored and enquired of in *What Is Done Cannot Be Undone*. In my state of sensory overload I was slightly relieved that the only available floor space for my intended architectonic structure was in a far-reaching corner of the constructed space so far. I noticed a contrast between the shifting vagueness of the text and the solidity of the building material used to construct a labyrinth that obeyed laws of harmony, symmetry, balance, and the hidden principle of the centre.

Labyrinth symbolism seemed increasingly relevant. I like the references to journeys into the underworld and out again. These cyclic journeys of death and rebirth could describe aspects of the artistic and collaborative processes being played out at Ovada.

I am amused now by realising that my desire for order and aesthetic balance prompted me to construct something with clear pathways that ironically lead straight to a Minotaur? I'll leave the moon bull symbolism for now, along with some of the psychological analysis that this show has raised, and provide a possible subtitle for *What Is Done Cannot Be Undone*.



The Thing

We are building a thing.

This is not a group show. It is one artwork, one thing constructed by 12 artists.

Each of us participates in its construction and sees what we have made grow into the structure. On returning, the structure has grown back to incorporate part, or sometimes most of what we made before. Elements of other's work seem to spread through the structure like genetic mutations, flashes of coloured tape or particular geometric motifs echoing around the space.

It also seems the fabric of the building is being consumed, grown over, becoming infected and reaching back. In one place a wave of seemingly levitating wooden strips wash over the office cabin, from another what looks like an air duct made of card and plywood grows back from the building to meet it.

John Carpenter's 1982 film, *The Thing*, portrays a parasitic extraterrestrial life-form that assimilates other organisms, moving from body to body. The human protagonists are isolated in an Antarctic research centre and paranoia is pervasive as the dwindling survivors try to ascertain who is infected. Whilst the apocalyptic plot is perhaps endemic to its era of heightened Cold War tensions it can still chime strongly with today's politics of fear. At OVADA there are moments too of tension and paranoia, questions are asked but left unanswered, uncertainty pervades. This is the nature and spirit of the thing.

In Carpenter's kennel scene we are given a graphic depiction of the viral life-form's transition as it infects and inhabits one of the station's sled dogs. In its transitional state we get glimpses of the previous forms it has mimicked, some of this world, some of others: human body parts, tentacles, a prehensile tongue, giant fleshy spider's legs, a sort of toothed flower.

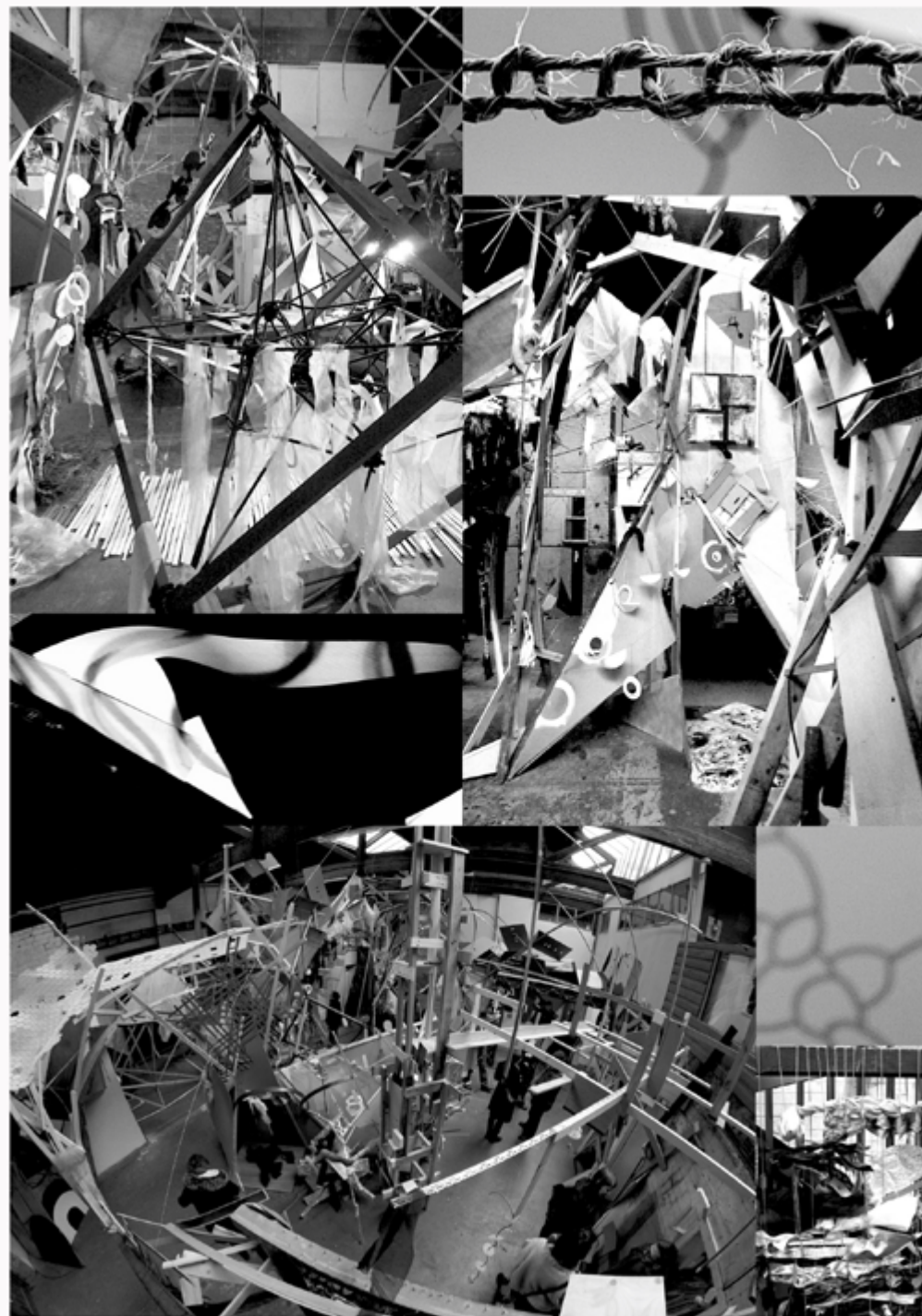
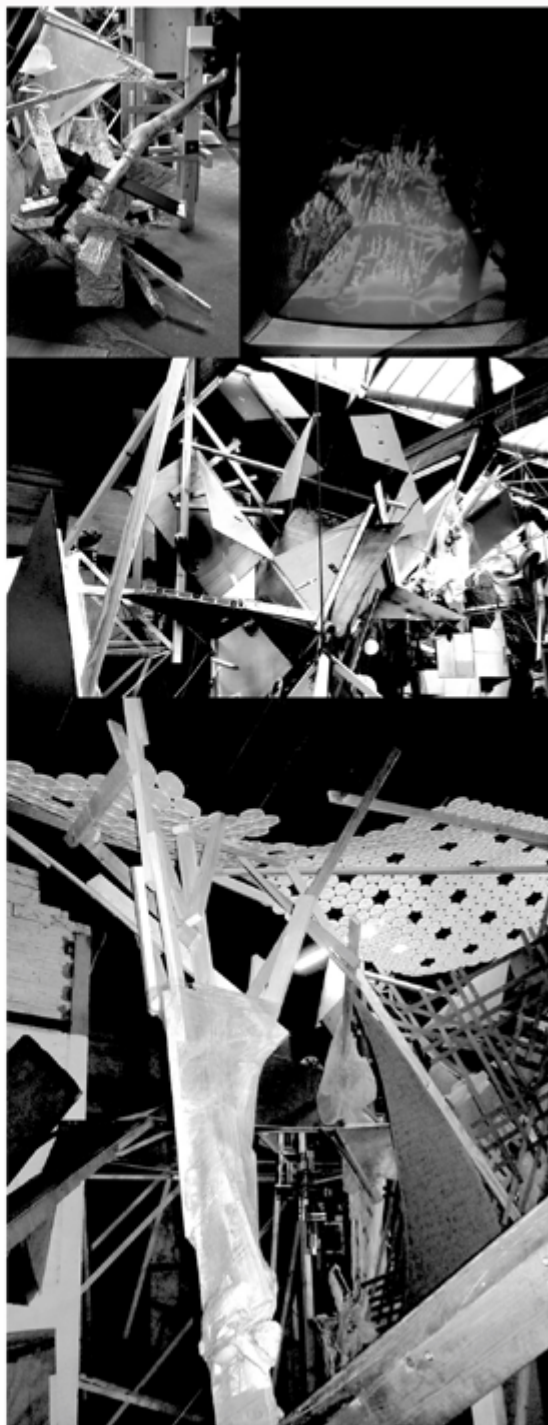
Perhaps this is *The Thing*'s perfect state; a thing between things, a thing of other things, a sort of celebration of the possibility of things in all their wonderful possibilities and foulness.

Our thing is a glorious mess, a riot of ideas and forms, a conflict of colours and materials, a conflation of creative actions, an amalgamation of things within a thing. In order to do this we have had to discard our preciousness and to leave our egos behind.

At the end of the Carpenter's film, MacReady may have destroyed *The Thing* by blowing up the research centre but the suspicion remains that Childs is infected. The two ultimately realise their distrust is futile and share a drink; either way, there is no place left for ego.

In a fortnight's time we will remove all traces of our work from OVADA. Our thing, like *The Thing*, will be destroyed, by drill-driver and skip rather than flame thrower or dynamite.

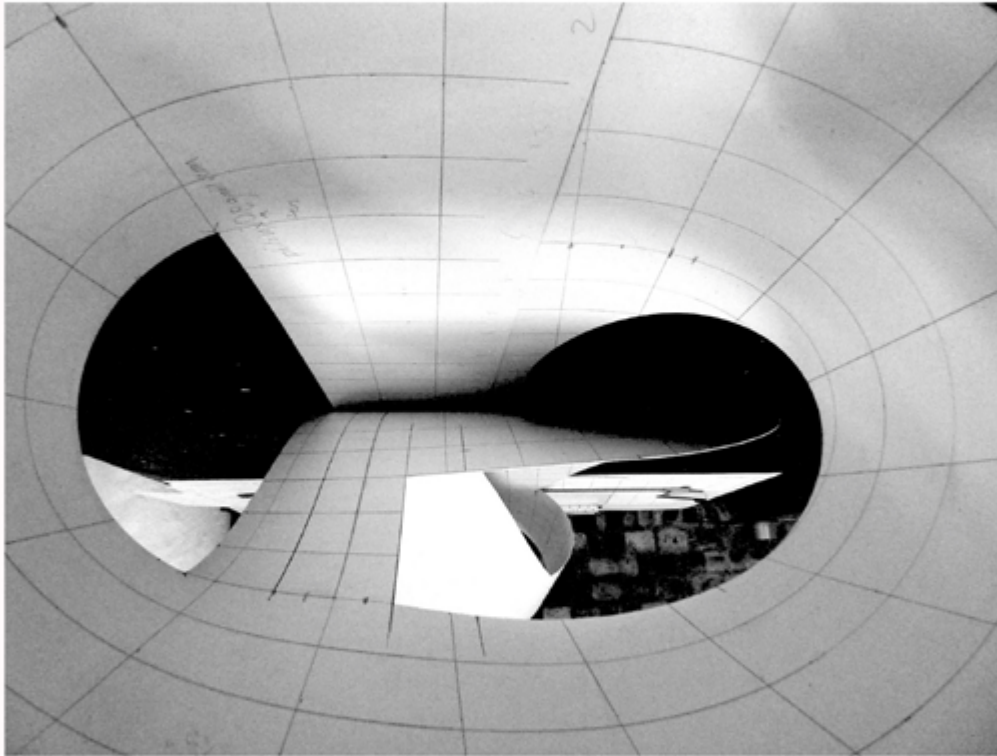
I suspect we will all survive but am certain that we have all been infected



Shape Shifting

There has been much written about Schwitters and his relationship with the modernist/ formalist tradition and the formal qualities of the Merzbau as seen in existing photographs and the reconstruction of it in Hannover, compared to his other work with found items, his ability to use material to hand, his habit of taking an empty suitcase on his travels to fill with material for his art.

In this context, I've been mulling over formal considerations of simplicity and complexity, organic compared to the rigidly geometric, minimalist tendencies opposed to expressionism and so on. Following are a few related notes on geometry:



The groundwork for Einstein's General Theory of Relativity was done in the middle of the 19th century by Riemann with his work on non-Euclidean geometries and higher dimensions. The simplest and most directly visual representation of this was one he borrowed from his teacher Gauss. He asked us to imagine a bookworm on a crumpled piece of paper. The bookworm experiences only 2 dimensions but is prevented from moving in a straight line by the force (i.e. gravity) caused by unseen warping in the 3rd dimension. By analogy, forces in our world might be explained by warping of space in higher dimensions.

Riemann said that 6 numbers are required to describe each point in 3 dimensional space whereas 20 are required for points in 4 dimensions. In describing space numerically like this, we have to go elsewhere for



The Small and the Organic

My first working days at OVADA were over the Easter weekend. Construction started only a few days before, and I was impressed (if not overwhelmed) by the amount of space already occupied by wooden structures. One of the things I am wondering: where are the spaces for considering small things? Ephemeral things? Organic things? Everything so far seemed 'built to last' on a large scale, and highly geometric.



I spent my first evening tracing & colouring the water line from a leak in the roof across the space. The next morning, enjoying the changeable Spring weather, I collected some materials from a park on the outskirts of Oxford: a gorse clipping, branches and a brick covered with lichen and moss, and daffodils. I hoped to place them in such a way that offered a useful (and in the case of the daffodils, humorous) counterpoint to the large, built environment around them.

L' animalo

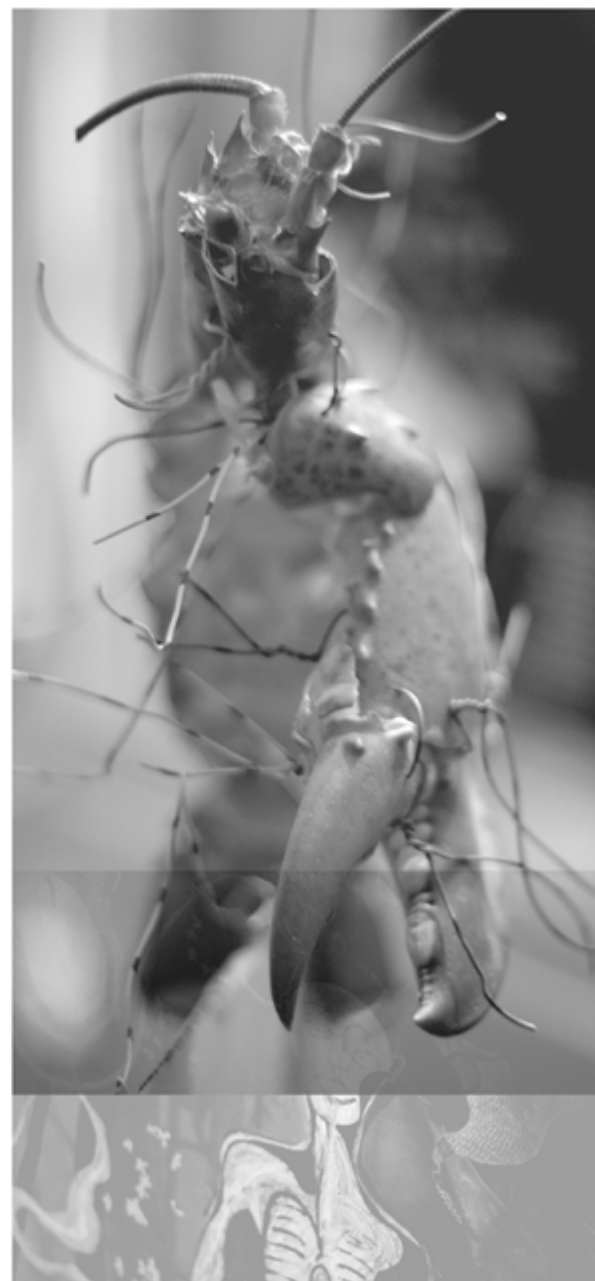
Tuesday evening I went to the Camberwell's Morrison for some food shopping. I'd already chosen my cod fillet when the fishmonger came from behind the counter and placed, in front of my eyes, a cooked Lobster reduced from £8 to £ 1.60.

I never ever bought a lobster before, alive or dead, but being in a period of my life where I need to expose myself to the new, my hesitant hand ditched the cod and placed 'l' animalo' (funky Italian expression to describe 'the beast') in my shopping basket.

Once at home I asked google how to proceed with the consumption as I had no clue from where to start. Carefully following the instruction I removed the meat from the shell discarding the uneatable parts. Looking at the empty shell I became intrigued by its beauty; in a split second the thought of bring it at OVADA was in my mind. "Well" I thought, "Surrealism is not too far away from Dada, I am sure it will fit in somewhere!"

I gave 'l'animalo' a good clean and a soapy bath. I was already starting re-composing it when Arianna, my flat mate, commented on the destiny of 'the beast'. "God, sometime life is so surprising! This lobster was placed on the reduced supermarket shelf next to the soft, expiring, lettuce with the hopeful prospects to be chosen for a nice dinner or the unlucky option to be left behind and binned, when your hand rescued him. He was still unaware of his future destiny, from a discounted shelf at Morrison to OVADA... what a glorious death!"

The following morning I packed 'l' animalo' in my bag and together travelled on the Oxford Tube. Once arrived at OVADA, Warrior artists shared a number of responses and worries 'will it stink?' but generally shared consent to his arrival. Jane offered advices on displaying possibilities, then Hugh, one of the OVADA's artists, joined the picture with a very unthinkable surprise. An Icelandic frozen lobster (we assume a female one) received as a present from a friend who visited the country! Who on earth could think that 'l'animalo' not only could become a work of art but also find a soul mate in his afterlife?



The rusting motorcycle pulled from a local canal may look like a move towards greater entropy, except that the oxidation of metal is a form of stabilising. There would probably be a tipping point when the beauty of the colour, the way the machine appears to be transforming into a marine organism, a kind of growth or metamorphosis (even if in the former's more sinister sense) would go beyond an aesthetic delight. Perhaps art is a way of resisting the laws of physics.

Rust sometimes almost appears to be a form of growth. The metal increasing slightly in weight just as the corrosion begins, before it reaches that point of disintegration. But growth can be seen to be a kind of ordering. You get a sense of order when looking at a time-lapse film of a plant growing. And, thinking of Goethe's dictum *-alles ist Blatt*, all

is leaf, the order of petal, sepal and leaf. And the order of energy, matter and time.

I wondered why Schwitters devoted a grotto to Goethe in his Merzbau. Maybe it was an acknowledgement of his literary achievements, but I'd like to think it was partly for his work on the growth and metamorphosis of plants and the idea of the archetypal plant from which "one will be able to invent plants which are not merely picturesque or poetic visions and illusions but have an inner truth and logic." (Goethe in a letter to Herder, 1787)

Collage

A black and white collage of various images. The top left features the word "Collage" in a large, bold, sans-serif font. Below it, the collage is composed of several distinct images: a sailboat's mast and rigging, a camera lens, a fan with many blades, a person's arm with a tattoo, a rope knot, and a person's face. The images are arranged in a grid-like fashion, with some overlapping. The overall aesthetic is high-contrast and artistic.

Ode to the Cathedral of Erotic Misery

Fuelled by a hearty full-English breakfast, bolstered by the collaborative spirit of the first 3 days of frenetic construction and eager to maintain momentum in the absence of David and James, Phil and I began day 4 in what child psychologists call "parallel play". He began building his model of 4 dimensional space (which I'm sure he'll speak about in a future post) and I began with the vague intention of building an extension to the 4m high tower which stands precariously between the roof beams of the warehouse at OVADA.

Initially I envisaged a "foot" that would function partly as stabilisation and partly as crawl space that could later be enslaved with speakers facing inwards. The idea was to create an installation within an installation; a sonic micro-space; a refuge or hiding place.

As it grew I became still more possessed by the spirit of Schwitters and began quoting his elongated triangular Merzbau forms. Offcuts seemed to naturally slot together creating irregular growth and the volume opened up and out so that I could stand inside. Depending on from which end you approach you can either walk in and be squeezed down the funnel and have to crawl out, or vice versa.

I remembered the destroyed Hannover Merzbau was originally titled "The Cathedral of Erotic Misery" and standing back at six o'clock this evening I suddenly saw a little church; a semi-cubist sculptural chapel had grown quite organically and unintentionally.

This project is absolutely about collaboration and it felt strange to be working alone on this structure. One of the trains of thought behind our title "What Is Done Cannot Be Undone" is that whatever we do now can only follow on from what had already been done, not only in the warehouse space at OVADA but in the context of history. We cannot undo the weight of what has preceded our lifetimes, only make additions, respond, borrow, repeat, adapt, but it has still happened and will always have happened.

I felt a little odd to be working alone on this today but opened myself up the broader notion of collaboration over time in the exquisite corpse method, making my addition to which someone else will make further additions. Now I feel perhaps it was a bit more than that? The little cathedral seemed to come from somewhere else, beyond my slightest intention.

