



Wendy Bornholdt

Installation VI
conversation with a grid

Who runs this place? Have you never wondered?
Have you never tried to find out?

(Patrick McGoohan in *The prisoner*)

Wendy Bornholdt recounts the experience of watching visitors to an installation she'd made in an Auckland dealer gallery a few years ago.¹ A line of grey tape on the floor distinguished the installation space from the rest of the gallery. According to Bornholdt, almost every visitor walked up to the tape, stopped, then made a decision as to whether or not they would, or should, cross the line. Many didn't. Some who did appeared to feel so uncomfortable about their (presumed) transgression that they retreated almost immediately to the less obviously regulated area of the gallery.

A similar scenario is being played out in relation to Bornholdt's new work, *Installation VI – conversation with a grid*, which she's made in the fire egress stairs at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. These stairs are a remnant of the building's early life as a cinema, when they gave access to the circle and projection booth; they've been retained for reasons of public safety. At times they've provided public access to and from the upper areas of the Gallery but in

recent years entry to the stairwell has been restricted except in emergencies. Controls, in the form of an additional door at the foot of the stairs, panic bars, alarm buzzers and warning signs², have been installed to dissuade the public from using the stairs and to alert staff when they do. Obviously these have been removed or deactivated to allow Bornholdt's *Installation VI* to take place and new, temporary signage directs and encourages visitors to use the staircase.

Despite this invitation, despite the fact that this formerly "invisible" area is now overtly made public and accessible, most visitors manifest doubt or trepidation about pushing open the door and walking into the installation. Clearly, the fact that the rules have been changed creates a degree of distrust, even disbelief, in the visitor that's hard to dispel. Then, once inside the work, many are confused as to how they'll get out again. By the very nature of the space, you're "funnelled" downwards to the exit door at ground floor level, and to backtrack or try to exit part of the way down is to go, conspicuously, against the flow.

Yet, disorientated by the unaccustomed qualities of the environment Bornholdt's constructed, many find the straightforward act of walking from the top to the bottom of a flight of stairs problematic, chancy, perplexing. For them this escape route has become a dead end.

In fact, the physical changes made to the space are few. The walls and floor are overlaid with a grid of black gaffer tape laid at one metre intervals. Mounted high, well out of reach, are potentially deadly ultraviolet insect control devices which wash every surface with an eerie blue light and give a fluorescent glow to white clothes or objects. The barely audible sound of a siren can be detected and, intermittently, an enigmatic beating noise that might be a distant helicopter or machine gun fire but is, in fact, the fluttering of a moth's wings. These sounds suggest an undefined situation of threat – but they are so elusive that it's hard to tell whether they emanate within (and are therefore of) the space or are percolating through the concrete walls from the outside world.

Installation VI is less intimidating, more subtle in its implied sense of menace, than either of Bornholdt's previous grid-based works. In *The Politics of Order* (George Fraser Gallery, 1993) she installed colonnades of floor to ceiling telegraph poles along a tape grid on the floor. One corner of the space was dimly lit by a single bulb, the rest was in total blackness. Only by feeling one's way blind in the dark could one tell whether the system that seemed to be in place did in fact operate throughout. The regulation implied by the grid was underlined by the monotonous tick of a metronome, while the occasional sound of dripping water hinted at the potential for chaos.



The Politics of Order

Installation V [know your place] (Artspace, 1995) continued Bornholdt's uneasy fascination with the grid and her urgent need to find ways of resisting the order it imposes. This ambitious project saw the walls, floor and



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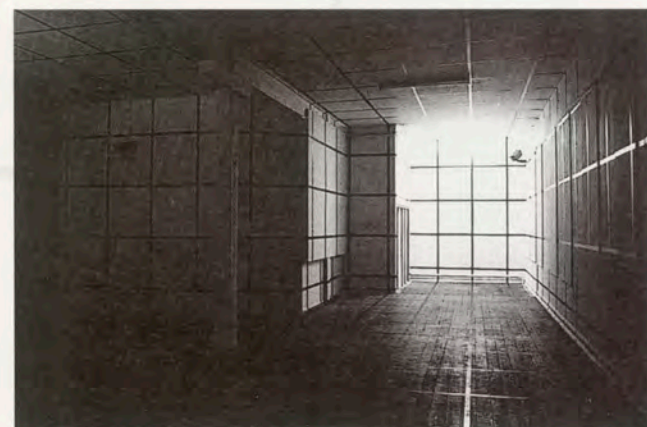
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The Politics of Order

Installation V [know your place] (Artspace, 1995) continued Bornholdt's uneasy fascination with the grid and her urgent need to find ways of resisting the order it imposes. This ambitious project saw the walls, floor and

ceiling of the huge space marked out in a grid of black tape. The many windows were blocked up and the only "relief" from this rigid regime came from a series of disruptions activated, in part, by the visitor. Motion sensors triggered alarms and glaring spotlights; while a small army of video surveillance cameras scanned the space. Various sounds (an electrical hum from under the floorboards, a man clearing his throat intermittently, and the occasional noise of a camera lens focusing) added more seemingly haphazard elements to a disturbing, even frightening, experience.



Installation V (know your place)

Each of these environments had its own particular beauty, a poetic intensity born of simplicity and of the highly charged interplay between the various meticulously considered visual, spatial and aural elements. In *Installation VI*, the illumination of the soaring architecture (hitherto obscured by darkness), the alluring blue lambency of the insect "zappers", the poignant evocation of the natural world in an environment that otherwise specifically references the metropolitan – all these work powerfully upon us at the level of instinct and emotion. At the same time, these spaces seem designed, not to accommodate or delight us, but to alienate. Who could feel comfortable here? Yet the grid Bornholdt imposes can be seen as a model of the city which, we often assume, is created to suit human needs. The city, like the urban grid on which it is frequently based (including the vertical grid of high-rise office and apartment blocks), has often been read as symbolic of the democratic system. A cynical view of democracy would, however, suggest that the individual within it is as anonymous and as much hedged about with constraints as in any more overtly totalitarian system. (Urbanisation, of course, extends beyond the physical confines of city blocks. Social control, surveillance and manipulation exist for rural sites, individuals and communities too. In the face of the increasing reach of government controls into our lives, electronic systems for

handling financial and other transactions, information gathering systems which apply to every one of us, satellite tracking and so on, "the countryside" offers merely an illusion of escape.)

Bornholdt's spaces provide, very obviously, a metaphor for social control. Her conscious manoeuvring of the visitor (triggered by her realisation, watching those hesitant gallerygoers years ago, that people's behaviour in a given environment can be very simply and economically governed) seeks to replicate, in a peculiarly concentrated experience, the ways in which we are tyrannised and manipulated, often with great subtlety, in our everyday lives. The intention, clearly, is to draw our attention to this tyranny. Yet there is a tension between the ideology that informs the work and the means that are used to convey it, a very real contradiction between Bornholdt's critiquing of the mechanisms of power and control and her necessary engagement with these as she deliberately manipulates the spectator (a manipulation which designedly coverts him or her into a "participant" in some degree, willing or not). In a sense, the artist's complicity in the very stratagems she seeks to resist mirrors our own acquiescence in those situations which most circumscribe and confine us.

There were nine doors in this cellar; eight led to a labyrinth that treacherously returned to the same chamber; the ninth (through another labyrinth) led to a second circular chamber equal to the first.... Horribly, I became habituated to this doubtful world; I found it incredible that there could be anything but cellars with nine doors and long branched-out cellars

(Jorge Luis Borges *The immortal*)

Of course, such ideas aren't new. Writers, filmmakers and visual artists aplenty have constructed works around the notion that certain invasions of our private worlds, far from being accidental or incidental, are programmatic, designed to control us physically, socially and psychologically. So why do artists such as Bornholdt keep working with these already familiar concepts?

There's a scene in Orson Welles' film of Kafka's *The trial*, a scene in which all the vague misgivings and incomprehensible events to which the story's protagonist is subjected coalesce in a moment of terror. Suddenly the cool, if ominous, logic of the metropolitan grid that pervades the film – the chequerboard of paved streets and city facades, the legislated space and metronomic thrum of the typing pool – dissolves into the nightmare of the starkly latticed and tessellated corridors down which Joseph K flees (from



Installation VI (detail)

or to what is never made clear). It's an extraordinary rendition of fear and entrapment, yet it's perhaps the one point in the film in which we, the viewer, sense the real possibility of deliverance from stultifying rationality into liberating unreason.

This, it seems to me, is what Bornholdt, in her own way, is seeking to discover and convey – that point within terror, confusion or unease that will reveal the chink in the wall, the gap in the perimeter fence, the blind spot in the radar scan – in short, a sense of possibility within unfreedom and constraint. In our responses to *Installation VI*, possibility may lie in experiencing – or resisting – its spare and unfamiliar beauty; in registering – or not – its visual particulars, its sounds; in finding a way out; or in choosing an alternative exit. Within each or any of these multiple and intricate impulses, within doubt, refusal or acquiescence, exists the potential for escape and salvation. Maybe.

I've resigned. I will not be filed, stamped, indexed, briefed, debriefed or numbered.... I am a free man.

[Laughter]

(Patrick McGoohan in *The prisoner*)

Priscilla Pitts

- ¹ *Installation II* at Lazelle Gallery, Auckland, 1991.
- ² All of these have been attended, in their turn, by a succession of checks and controls imposed by New Plymouth District Council's building inspectors and the New Zealand Fire Service.

WENDY BORNHOLDT

Solo exhibitions

- 1990 *Life of a line* Lazelle Gallery, Auckland
- 1991 *Installation II* Lazelle Gallery, Auckland
- 1992 *The Politics of Order – an installation* George Fraser Gallery, Auckland
- 1995 *Installation V [know your place]* Artspace, Auckland

Artist's books

Wendy Bornholdt *WALK THAT ROPE: 3 unsung installations* by Wendy Bornholdt 1992

Bibliography

- Mark Amery "Fear the key as space is altered" *Sunday Star Times* 19 February 1995
- Richard Dale "An era of installation" *New Zealand Herald* 4 October 1990
- Giovanni Intra "Wendy Bornholdt, Artspace, Auckland" *Art and text* 51 May 1995, pp 72-3
- T.J. McNamara "Perspective on Art" *New Zealand Herald* 24 October 1991
- "Hunt these ones out" *New Zealand Herald* 1 October 1992
- "Lost opportunities" *New Zealand Herald* 9 February 1995

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