

Alchemy and Perception: The Practice of Chris Fox

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In open parkland, you approach a staircase that seemingly spirals into a point beyond the visible world. Next, you are walking through the second story of an aging warehouse and notice an abundance of electrical chords cascading from the ceiling. You are now in another building much older again. You enter a large open interior to find an entire motor vehicle vertically suspended via a heavy steel cradle. Finally, you enter the sanitised white cube of a modern gallery space and notice that one of the pristine walls is bulging into a dramatic horizontal ridge.

The above 'perceptual surprises' is an immediate, and key feature of projects by Chris Fox, a visual artist manipulating and extending the territory of contemporary sculpture, installation and architecture. Since 1994, the artist has engaged the hydra-headed issues of perceiving spatial/structural relationships through a commitment to multiple processes and site specificity. The various projects devised by this artist not only draw to their own physical manifestation (as sculptures or installations); they also directly confront the viewer with an experience of art that is a challenge to its own frame, environment and context. Below is an analysis of five key works that generate acute spatial and volumetric ruptures in perception. Any effective analysis of these 'ruptures' will need to identify, at the outset, several philosophies that are called upon and welded together in Fox's work, namely conceptual, land and installation art. These categories are, in themselves, not enough to describe the perceptual surprises in store for us. Each experience of Fox's work is forever relative to the technical and conceptual grammar of architecture and construction. Even the languages of cinematic tension and surrealistic distortion are implicated within this discursive practice.

The land work entitled *Vortex* 1995 exemplifies the complex histories and playful distortions within many later works. The title *Vortex* is descriptive as viewers are confronted with a visual anomaly: a staircase that spirals into its own mathematically measured vanishing point. It is as if *Vortex* were a result of Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty being heaved onto land, given domestic scale, a sail and tighter geometry. The visual drama of *Vortex* occurs, significantly, within open parkland, which sets up a palpable tension: the expansive surrounds of the park are dramatically focused into an infinite progression, suggested by the spiralling staircase. The viewer is given cues as to the usability and also the dysfunction of this sculptural form. The staircase actually commences its spiral as a functional, architectural standard which is then subtracted until the spiral quickly closes in on itself, quickly becoming impossible to physically step down. Through the extrapolation of imagination we are able to continue our spiral decent, from the first practical steps and ideal landscape then quickly into to a subterranean introverse.



A sense of movement is inherent within this staircase into the *Vortex* and perhaps the movement is generated for the realm of the possible to impossible, from the realm of utility to that of the symbolic vortex as a final, ever receding and differed destination. The spine of the spiralling staircase extends out to function as a mast complete with sail. This sail complements the notion of movement as well as enveloping the entire concaved excavation of the stairs into mystery. The sails harness the wind to carry out this walk from the world of recognisable scale to that of infinite mathematical regress.

The notion of extension and continuation from one world or form to another is displayed in works such as *Contact* 1998. Cables pour from the wooden ceiling. This network of tangled cabling is back dropped with the industrial atmosphere of the Gallery space, which is situated within a semi- dilapidated inner city warehouse. In similarity to the practical stairs of *Vortex* to those steps of illusion and concept, the apprehension of *Contact* is one of oscillation between the believable and exaggerated. The warehouse roof is one of rhizomatic wiring and piping, therefore, the added cabling that constitutes the artwork is both camouflaged and, magically implicates all existing ceiling details (as well as a nearby wall power box) into the realm of the artwork. As the choice of cablings is standard and believable, it is fair to state *Contact* is a work that almost seamlessly leads the eye from manipulated material into the surrounding architectural features as ready-made artwork. It is this transition between work and environment that is pivotal. The use of transitions as a concept and visual device is key to these installations of Fox. The work is placed and the place becomes work.



The visual and material dimensions within this work host a series of narratives: why so much cabling and where is it all leading from? Furthermore, why is it cut and swinging so precariously in the middle of a gallery space ready to electrocute an unsuspecting viewer? The response to *Contact* can range from cool speculation to apprehension or even fear (in a pun on its own title, viewers may fear contact with the artwork). A system of belief is perhaps what is being rewired here.



Are the cables actually live and dangerous, do they present real bodily risk, consequently, do all other cables with the room and building present a similar risk or do they symbolically /poetically refer to broken communication or energy? The details of this piece add further to the potential readings. For instance, a process of denuding takes place in the exposing of the contents of these cables, the coloured sheathing and copper. This stripping is also a form of alchemy, transmuting base metals into gold (or copper in this case). This same alchemical process transmutes the entire architectural environ of the gallery/ warehouse into the artwork.

A variation on the alchemical logic of *Contact* is *Splint* 2001, a work that replaces the dishevelled cables of *Contact* with rigid wooden beams extending directly from the galleries herringbone roof. Not only is the

exaggerated cabling of *Contact* mirrored through the extended beams that taper to spikes in *Splint*. Both *Contact* and *Splint* are modelled to the aesthetic atmosphere of their immediate architecture. The rough and rhizomatic roof that locates contact is reflected in the loose and casual composition of cables. Consequently, it is a more ordered roof that inspires the parallel protrusions of *Splint*. In this sense, each roof piece, *Contact* and *Splint*, is a needle within a stylistic barometer that the entire design principal of an environment into its final measurement. The key concept of transition is clearly central to *Splint*, as the artwork is a continuation or prosthetic to the form of the institution. The functional roof of herringbone bracing that supports the weight of an overhead ceiling is extended into the *Splint* artworks that function to support the historical weight of concepts relating to the mechanisms of art and its value. For instance, the smooth transition of art-object to its supporting architectural environment quickly leads to speculation over the object within institutional habitats. These works come as poetic additions to a discourse initiated with Duchamp's ready-made and the shift from artwork to its context and various support criteria.

Speculation, and even mediation on an object does not occur more clearly and succinctly than with *Charlotte* 1996. Here the work's title acts to affectionately personify a 4wd vehicle that has been vertically suspended through a steel swing support structure. The experience of this work is a 'perceptual surprise' characteristic of Fox's work and also an invitation to think through issues of commodity, function and volition. But firstly, The thrill of witnessing the total displacement of such a readily recognisable object is immediate. The function of the vehicle is quite literally turned around and re-offered with the symbolic concentration and intensity of a totem. To continue with Duchamp's legacy, *Charlotte* is indeed a ready-made artwork, yet, unlike Duchamp, the nomination of this vehicle as 'Art' does not come from simply relocating it within an institution but through the construction of the substantial steel that enables this object to defy the gravity of its former function and commodity status. The steel harness is both metaphoric of the enabling structures of institutions and their proscribed values. It is also a pertinent figure for the harnesses we have within our own belief and judgement systems.

Charlotte uses the poetic force of a grand gesture within the logic of minimalism. Yet certain elements allow this work to become much more generous as a viewing experience than the severe characteristics of much first phase minimalism. Through very concrete and accessible relationships offered between the work and viewer we launch beyond disembodied theory and into a direct bodily play. A car's form is assessed sculpturally via its new position and in doing so, returns to the plasticity of a Tonka truck in a sand pit an association supported through the excitement of being able to physically swing the vehicle with ease in its new hanging system. The car is also subjected to extraordinary visibility and interactivity- one can spin the wheels and observe the differential and undercarriage in action.



Stepping back from *Charlotte* again, we notice that the car appears to elevate itself into a light source; the nose of the car is positioned under a skylight and appears to drive towards this source. The car is elevated to the status of art as Manzoni's plinths. The car also appears to be a platonic showroom model. It is the model of a pure car (or 4wd convertible that descends to us forms Plato's cosmology of pure forms. It is innocent and not yet taken hold of by the earth and its many forms of traffic. Through the simplest of gestures, or, from the clearest of transitions: horizontal to vertical, a form and its associated meanings and values is once again, thrown into a poetic crisis and consequent fertility.

The visual and conceptual generosity of radical elements at work in *Charlotte* is also achieved within the subtleties of recent projects such as *Horizon* 2003, A work that leads us back to the questioning of art to its institutional frameworks. This work also leads to a conversation between minimal sculptural and architectural forms. *Horizon* quietly overcomes the viewer as it emerges from the wall in another variation of aesthetic stylistic camouflage explored previously with *Contact* and *Splint*. *Horizon* is perhaps more imbedded within the local ambience of design, to the point where many viewers are excused for thinking that the artwork is a feature of the air conditioning unit than an autonomous art object on display. The work achieves its camouflage not only through the mimicry of design but through materiality, the gyprock and plaster surface seamlessly dissolves into the wall surface of the Gallery and makes it impossible to discern the work from its wall support (or the entire gallery for that matter) Again, the work is a brilliant simulation of its surrounding design atmosphere which is now the stark apollonian symmetry and order of the commercial gallery.

Horizon presents a structural tumour within the gallery, it is more malignant than benign and like many cancers, and its true volume is unknown. Speculating on what the transition might contain leads to questions of functionality, which it threatens to have. Aluminium door profiles placed horizontally along the protrusion tease us with offering a look through at what could potentially be some form of window, or even a docking system. The material form of horizon does not give too much away as to its role within the space. Rather, it acts as a landscape of architectural materials that have polysemious potential, as Sci Fi film sets or the latest air conditioning unit. In this latest major work by Fox, the aesthetic concerns governing the work are moving closer to their environment. The work as a new and camouflaged landscape connects the idea of a seamlessness with materials and form to the endlessness of meaning. Of directly plugging the status and value and ultimately the power of *Horizon* straight back into the aesthetics of the institution. There is something startling and beautiful about this new landscape. The open and sparse plains, a striking contrast across the horizontal divide, a feeling as though we are stepping into this world, or even about to be teleported into it, There is also the mystery of potentially being observed, if not by the artwork, then at least by the institution it effortlessly flows from and then back into again.



The work of Fox presents material such as cabling and cars, as well as various building material with a parafunction. Through the process of minimal and more elaborate sculptural manipulations, we are surprised and caught off guard with the transition of architectural environment to the art object. The art is a limb of its surrounds, a branch that develops its own critical relationship to the trunk. Lastly, it is the 'poetry of alchemy' that displaces the materials of the built environment into compositions that not only question the new relationship of those material- cables, plasters, wood beams, entire vehicles, but the position of all other examples of these materials in the world.