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Making work and turning your back on it:

Bethan Huws

It's all very well thinking hard about certain art in certain situations. The desire to communicate a clear portion of any artist's activity beyond the physical presence of their work in a gallery has diverse implications. So let us make clear from the beginning that there exists work by Bethan Huws that can be moved from place to place, viewed in vitrines, transported, and possessed. Short lengths of reed-grass curled inwards with one end of that length tucked up through the resulting spiral to form a mast make passable boatlets. They are always similar, they remain efficient, more or less loaded up with potential, and they need to be mentioned in case anyone was under the misapprehension that only some things are permitted. Like many people, Huws has a constant, an activity, almost a habit, a thing she returns to when it is inappropriate to make grander moves. The application of a constant complicates the arguments as the grander gestures, however discreet they may

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appear, are so full and so specific that to make any one piece without due care could be messy.

Bethan Huws' work acknowledges that every place is altered by every move. Each new situation demands a certain degree of attention and while that has varying consequences for the outward appearance of a piece, the work is never just applied to a place—it is inextricably linked to that place and, most importantly, to others elsewhere. The familiar manifestations of installation art all lay claim to a specific, special, transformative quality. Yet there is a sense in which even attempting to approach making a place for thinking about a place¹⁾ will be irrevocably stunted by the change and further change that is effected as soon as an object, or group of objects, comes under scrutiny. Stunted by the inevitable sense of transformation one experiences when walking into an altered art gallery—in other words, an art gallery with work in it. Huws remains aware of the fundamental contradictions that lurk close to her projects, contradictions that are brought to the surface when an artist attempts to pursue a clear-handed route in a

time of some doubt. Yet rather than back off behind a front of familiarising style or consistency, ludic humour, irony, or parody she attempts to start afresh with each new piece while often, paradoxically, using the same or near-same materials and sources.

Each application is the most appropriate for a particular place and time. There is an attempt made to avoid a particular line of formal presentation to be applied to every place; rather, things are reassessed with each move. Huws' work appears to be a genuine attempt to avoid certain loose actions in order to approach a clarity of intent and analysis devoid of misleading trace. Attempt to apply an unquestionable sense of the appropriate to a situation and to make the correct move, then a certain uncertainty flourishes. Just as the desire to make a clear statement is overwhelmed by the possibilities for misinterpretation.

Fortunately, Bethan Huws has written descriptions of each major piece to date. These texts appear close to a conceptual run-through. A responsible—that is, acceptable—group of possibilities is presented, yet they always appear devoid of any dry dogmatic haze—no dumb or leaden reiteration is being exposed. While Huws is not apparently driven by an assertive desire to undermine via trivial revelations, she does not forget that supposedly trivial feelings are worth consideration. No universal truth is being expounded here, more a personal truth honed and moulded with degrees of humour and pedantry interlaced. Certain pieces bear recognisable formal qualities that have lasted from one situation to the next while others seem more impermanent and veiled. From these texts it is possible to abstract a number of intentions and motivating sets. There is an attempt not only to get something across without resorting to representation, imagery, or illusion, but also to make work that avoids overbearing metaphorical content. So Huws makes a floor for a gallery, a new floor to be installed over the existing concrete one.²⁾ Her wooden floor acts as a formal device, changing the place totally while also intending to function as a trace of the artist's meditations on a particular and 'actual' tree.³⁾ The viewer may divine some connection between the finished piece and trees—after all, we are suddenly confronted with a

wooden floor where before there was only concrete—yet it is unlikely that we will think of the particular tree. Huws possibly believes in the artist's potential for effecting transubstantiation, yet it is more interesting to consider her desire to avoid an artistic identity where formal or stylistic traits overwhelm the work. In other, earlier, times it may have been sufficient for Huws to write descriptions and leave things at that. Yet that would inject an element of the insubstantial, of projection and stated intention rather than necessary action. Certainly against the idea of avoiding conceptual art.⁴⁾

This avoidance permeates most pieces. The scraped floor piece made at the Royal College of Art, for example, added to a place something which may already have been there. By removing layers of old paint, glue, and dirt from a studio floor, Huws added something—the original wooden floorboards that had always been there; she had marked time and rejigged the place. Sometimes the obvious is being stated, yet without resort to the objectifying possibilities of mathematics or geometry and without acting out the role of the sociologist with all the disinterested surveys of 'feelings' that might be attached.

The idea of the real and experienced⁵⁾ permeates the work of Bethan Huws, yet it is twisted so that her output appears closer to the recent work of Lawrence Weiner than to many others. Certain recent Weiner pieces, although restating a set of relationships between various objects, trail a whole set of potentials. The work always has. Yet the set of possibilities appears to be opening out, shifting and entering new territories—consider the difference, in terms of the potential level of engagement, between *TWO MINUTES OF SPRAY PAINT DIRECTLY UPON THE FLOOR FROM A STANDARD AEROSOL SPRAY CAN* (1969) and *STARS DON'T STAND STILL IN THE SKY FOR ANYBODY* (1991). By leaving much open to question and (re)interpretation, Huws acts on a similar level of possibility. There is always an external referent in the work. In a similar way, when questioned about the actual source of work, Weiner has indicated the active possibility of realising all the relationships he exposes. Yet, with Huws and Weiner, it is never particularly necessary to tease out the source of each work; each piece can exist without prior