

## The Electric Return

Sean Ashton, 2011

When a building is renovated, its surfaces are often stripped back to obtain what architects call a 'shell'. That word implies the reduction of architecture to its very essence: a membrane separating inside from outside. 'Shell' also suggests rebirth, an egg reconstituted to incubate new projects. But renovation is not just generative; it's archaeological. As they prep the space, as they go to work with sledgehammer and wrecking-bar, tradesmen get a chance to appraise the work of their predecessors: 19th Century plumbing, cables hastily installed during post-war rebuilding programmes, cowboy botch-jobs – it all constitutes an historical profile.

When, in June 2010, the builders moved in to renovate LoBe's gallery space on Scherestrasse, Berlin, they would have found that someone had already set the archaeological ball rolling. Antonia Low had spent the previous month excavating the entire electrics, exposing every cable and switchbox, as part of a residency. This excavation, *The Electric Return*, revisited the strategy of an earlier piece, *Grund I* (2006), at Münster's Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte. For that work, Low made three holes in the wall, revealing 'different layers of materials, including a cable from the hidden alarm system', with its 'cut casing and multitude of core wires' (1). Where the Landesmuseum's pristine environment threw these electrical innards into relief, LoBe's scruffier shell provided no such backdrop; although Low whitewashed the walls, *The Electric Return* was more embedded than *Grund I*, appearing as an existing attribute of the space rather than an imposition on it. Indeed, it was a fully functioning attribute – for the entire circuit was *live*. Low's excavation went so far as to expose, at selected points, the actual copper wires, which were protected by glass sheets. These sheets had a dual purpose, pictorially framing the bare wires while preventing the electrocution of overcurious viewers, who had to be content to 'watch' the volts flowing towards the building's various electrical appliances. Most of those 'appliances' were kinetic sculptures made by Ben Woodeson, the artist with whom Low had shared the LoBe residency. Initially dominant, these homespun – and occasionally malfunctioning – assemblages took on a different character when one traced the source of their power into the wall and came up against Low's less conspicuous work.

As Hilde Teerlink has remarked, Low has 'a special interest in sites under mutation... Apparently placed on [*sic*] a wrong location or abandoned as some leftover of a former action, [her installations] function as intriguing remains of activities that have taken place.' (2) Some installations are carried out in these 'sites under mutation' (of which LoBe was an example), while others import the provisional character of such sites into the spotlight of gallery and museum: extension leads, scaffolding and bubble wrap are all mainstays of Low's material lexicon, peripheral things brought centre stage. These lend her work an indigenous materiality; even her interventions in white cube-style spaces appear to grow directly out of the context.

This preoccupation with the material reciprocity of context and artwork – epitomised in *The Electric Return* – recalls Robert Smithson's idea of a 'museum of emptiness'. In a conversation with Allan Kaprow, Smithson said that

I'm interested in that area that could be called the gap. This gap exists in all the blank and void regions or settings we never look at. A museum devoted to different kinds of emptiness could be developed. The emptiness could be defined by the actual installation of art. Installations should empty rooms, not fill them. (3)

Smithson was famously hostile to the idea of the museum as a repository of passive cultural artefacts: hence his desire to 'empty rooms' of those artefacts. *The Electric Return*, at first sight a shoo-in for Smithson's (unrealised) museum, actually challenges this 'dematerialist' rubric.

Though concerned with the excoriation of the gallery space, with the stripping back of 'the void regions or settings we never look at', *The Electric Return* also functions as a host for other artworks, consciously choosing a 'filled' room over an 'empty' one, thereby focusing our attention on the relationship between container and contents – rather than assuming (à la Smithson) that the removal of its contents should be the first stage in the examination of the container.

There is probably no such thing as an empty room. Or, to put it another way: the emptying of rooms reveals their character. As Smithson suggests, different rooms are differently empty, and this diversity, though spectral, though intimated, hinted at by such things as trace, vestige – and by more functional criteria such as the location of a room in a given building – seems to negate their emptiness. You can empty a room, but you can't stop it being itself. Even rooms that are completely devoid of surface character enclose space in a certain way. All rooms, then, have character at the basic, axiomatic level of enclosure. Low's wall excavations, in challenging enclosure, challenge the axiomatic character of the room as container: where, prior to the excavation, the room is a container of things, Low's exposure of hidden features qualifies it as a thing.

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(1) *Low Deluxe* (Berlin: Argobooks, 2008), p. 62.

(2) Hilde Teerlink, *ibid.*, p. 60.

(3) Robert Smithson, 'What is a Museum: a Dialogue', *Robert Smithson: Collected Writings* (University of California Press, 1996), p. 44.