

## Clothing the Grid: Alterations and Alternations

### Inserting the Panel

Maxine Bristow's studio presents an ordered environment, reflecting a methodical manner of working. It is only when the initial encounter moves beyond the carefully stacked piles of completed work, samples, experiments and work in progress that the richness of these methods begins to unfold. What at first sight registers as complicity with the tenets of a measured and reasoned Modernity gives way, little by little, to reveal traces of disruption, displacement and complex encounter. Between the outward manifestation of structured order and the subtle textures of interiority, surfaces are revealed as layers, lines as folds or seams, and function (that bastion of industrial Modernity) is carefully but resolutely turned on its head. Industrious method is turned against the mechanistic intentions of mass-producing industries to reveal the voice of the *subject* that such industries have so insistently displaced.

In this sensitive but profound shift, the mediating agency is the engineering of textile and cloth, and in particular, the possibilities inherent in the considered re-working of the *panel of cloth* by means of which a succession of visual and critical dialogues is constructed, as between clothing and environment, subject voice and (dis)functional object, or between the intricate work of the needle and the (de)construction of the archetypical grid. The panel can be likened to the ground on which text is written, but it is also a text in itself. We are reminded that text denotes weaving, and that weaving lies at the origin of the panel. For all its subtlety of textures and colourings a rectangle of plain-woven cloth is a straightforward geometry of interwoven horizontal and vertical threads. When it is positioned flat against a wall or laid out level on a horizontal surface, the structure displays a further form of geometry as a *plane*. This plane/plain horizontal-vertical mesh or grid of alternating dimensions can also be described as a panel or pane; the English word 'pane' (from which panel is derived) has its origin in the Latin word *pannus*, meaning 'a piece of cloth'.

Even familiar non-textile associations, such as panes of glass and wooden panelling or the panel that serves as a jury or collective body of discussants, refer back to the humble panel of cloth. The different references each have affinity with the plane/plain construction of cloth through the rectangular,

regulating division of or within a surface, a formation of sheets of matter that lend themselves to the formation of compartments added together or laid out side by side. Regular and regulating across a broad stretch of associations, the panel works not only as a phenomenon in its own right but also a material surface or ground for some other activity, such as embroidery, painting, engraving, writing or, as in the work of Bristow, surfacing with gesso or embedding with needle work.<sup>1</sup>

Typically, panels are *insertions*, nestling into a frame or surrounding fixture. With her large panel-bags and hangings Bristow has released the panel from the inevitability of this framing, but she also draws attention to the insert, as in the bound buttonholes of her early work, or, more recently, in the interplay between panels of cloth and the insertions that are to be found in the fixtures and fittings of architecture, such as air vents, light switches and rails. Freeing the panel from familiar contexts, and transposing the insert from one context to another, as from garment to grill or from metal to cloth, an alternation ensues between clothing and grid. Whereas things and objects in the world are typically perceived as cut off from one another, fragmenting perception, in this work, through a succession of *alterations* and *alternations*, objects open into dialogue with one another with the panel as intermediary.

The rectangular panel returns again and again as *leitmotif* in Bristow's work, as an iterative refrain, always moving against the iconic gestures of a singular, closed reading. Readings shift equivocally, from intimations of abstract geometries through details of clothing, engineering and furnishing to matters of embodiment and identity. Frequently interlined and interfaced, these panels suggest a trace of association with the 'counterpane'.<sup>2</sup> Through wadding and padding, held together by the stitching of its outer layers, the counterpane cushions the body from above as it drifts between worlds. Insertion gives way to *incorporation*, a term of embodiment. The panel used in this way may signal an embodiment of the grid, and of modernity.

## **Investing the Everyday**

*Becoming is what enables a trait, a line, an orientation, an event to be released from the system, series, organism or object that may have the effect of transforming the whole, making it no longer function singularly: it is an encounter between bodies that releases something from each and, in the process, releases or makes real a virtuality, a series of enabling and transforming possibilities.*<sup>3</sup>

However abstract, virtual, complex or poetic, in Bristow's art there is invariably something recognizable and ordinary, a reminder of everyday functions, objects that are easily named, or familiar actions of the sort we take for granted. These functional references, displaced or transformed through the artwork as in the sense suggested by Elizabeth Grosz, so that they no longer function 'singularly', often focus our attention on details. This is not a crude 'cutting out' of details from their familiar functions but a subtle crafting of associations, a sustained enquiry that relishes the play of signifiers as they mark the passage from the certain logic of inevitable reality to poetic and critical engagement.

The activity of making is the agency of change, a means for manipulating transformation and/of meaning, an active positioning which is also political. This is prescient. As Grosz concludes, 'what is now in question is the making of things, and that from which things are made. This is what the rigorous process of intuition draws us toward, not things themselves so much as the teeming, suffuse network within which things are formed and outlined, the flux of the real'.<sup>4</sup> Such 'things' as button holes, bags, light switches and air vents are subject to a shuttling from one network in which they are embedded unobtrusively to another in which they are staged within the shared arena of display and discourse.

Cloth and clothing carry phenomenological and psychological resonance through this wresting of the poetic from the functional. 'The thing and the body are correlates' says Grosz. 'The thing is "made" for the body....manipulable for the body's needs'.<sup>5</sup> Thus the relationship between bodies and things is formative and negotiable through the technology of making that ensures 'the deepening investment of the one, the body, in the other, the thing'.<sup>6</sup> The notion of investment is particularly poignant, suggestive as it is of clothing and covering as garment. To borrow a term from tailoring, Bristow's body of work forms an *interface* between the body and the thing, thus taking the in-between of the garment as the panelling which embeds and inserts the disparity of things and their overlooked details into an ordered account.

In one register, Bristow plays on the interface between the 'engineering' of hand and machine, revealing the possibilities of porosity and, at the same time, measured exchange between the two. In a related orchestration of difference, there is a focus on relationships between the one, the several and the many; singularity is pinpointed, but only to be released through multiplication, repetition and series. This detailing in the making, repeated as if to reference the eternal return of the same, compels our

attention to the otherwise overlooked details of the everyday. Caught between fixture and detachment, proximity and distance, measured familiarity and the infinity of the unknown, buttonholes and air vents are revealed not as different 'objects' but as part of a continuum or flux, traversing the boundaries of their singularity.

'Objects', suggests Donna Haraway, are 'boundary projects' which 'shift from within'.<sup>7</sup> Thus a bag may carry intimations of dialogue between the body and objects in the world, or between concealment of a hidden interior and openness to visual scrutiny. For Bristow, the concealment associated with the hidden interior of the bags is latent in the formation and serried presentation of the panels from which they are formed, their deep interiors hidden from view, glimpsed only through the open ends. The weight and sag of the hanging bag carries intimations of the body. In his seminal essay 'The Poetics of Softness' (1967), the critic Max Kosloff said that 'regardless of how abstract a soft sculpture is, it will unavoidably evoke the human'. He describes relationships between bodies and sculptures as always 'revealing', but suggests that whereas the typically solid materials of sculpture tend to effect a formal abstract or aesthetic response, the yielding and somatic surface of 'an object becalmed' through softness is more likely to be interpreted through metaphor.<sup>8</sup> Bristow's object-forms conceal and exceed their functional association in equivocal fashion, allowing the conversation between material and function to carry the metaphorical load.

Against the abstraction and regulation of cloth's formal geometry, and yet always in some kind of alternating play or exchanging dialogue with the grids of its construction, the becalmed and becalming object-forms which have become the hallmark of Bristow's work over the past twenty years both yield to cloth's inherent pliability and yet at the same time evoke a restraint which prevents the yielding from collapse and deformation. Reference to bodily comfort is revealed not through some kind of release from the everyday into the collapsed landscape of a dream or a comic interior, but rather through the quiet contemplation of the boundaries across which the relationship between the everyday and the psyche shuttles to and fro, as if caught in a continuous ribbon of subtle displacements and turns.

The recurring object-world of her attention is characterised by a play of restraint and openness, a negotiating and detailing of entrance and egress, aperture and closure, barrier and vent. There is a reiteration of access, or access denied. Boundaries are potent sites of transformation, transgression and transition, restraining forces or impediments, to be negotiated if they are to be overcome. They not only touch on the functional but also mark the liminal, thresholds not only of the architectural and physical

but also the psychological domain. For Martin Heidegger ‘a boundary is not that at which something stops but ... is that from which something *begins its presencing*’, thus a potent place from which it is possible to reflect on what has gone before and on what is, for Grosz, a ‘becoming’.<sup>9</sup> For Bristow, the activity of *making* is instrumental as a form of becoming, a succession of alterations and alternations that refuse closure.

### **Acuity and Reparation of Habit**

Making is a particular preoccupation of the crafts, and although often identified as anachronistic, Bristow resists the closure that would silence the time-honoured skills and knowledge associated with the activity of the ‘maker’. Paradoxically, this is effected in one register of representation through a focus on the habitual and repetitive skills which presage to a significant extent the loss of status of the artisan. But repetition is not only an anchor of the industrious maker. It is also the work of the subject who makes and in contrast, of the hegemonic propensity of measure and reason. Within visual practice, repetition works against the grain of the iconic to signal difference (that ‘teeming, suffuse network’ of which Grosz speaks, or the richly textured effects of surface in Bristow’s work) as well as similitude.

The tailor (to reference skills from which Bristow draws), who cuts and measures ‘according to the cloth’ in order to fit the body and to fashion transformations and identities, is concerned with *detail* in the relationship between measure and cloth, precisely, as suggested by the French word *détailler*, (from LL. *taliare*, to cut), that is, the cutting of cloth into pieces or ‘details’. For Bristow, tailoring skills are far removed from the rhetoric of fashion, but they are not in consequence to be entirely disregarded. There are parallels to be drawn between the detailing of the tailor or seamstress and that of the architect or engineer who designs and makes a ‘fitting’ for a wall or window. Her medium may be textile but the skills have wider reference.

Materially it is the detailed and repetitive work of the *stitch* (of both hand and machine) which provides the syntax on which the ordering of concepts depends. The stitch draws through the cloth as if puncturing a boundary between past and present, or negotiating a relationship between the invisible and visible. The stitch constructs, but it also repairs that which is worn out through excessive use. It signals dependence upon a repetition inscribed both in necessity and in contemplation, the latter as if marking the rhythms of time and duration while steering a passage between fatigue and dream. Together in the act of sewing, needle and thread are the agents of an intimate conversation between eye and hand and

mind. In this they share something with pen and ink (or their contemporary equivalent), leaving traces of their engagement with every mark, formative of a language to be shared and critically deciphered. To be 'as sharp as a needle' is to have acuity, (L. *acus*, needle) whether of wit or vision or skill. Against the model example of the Victorian child, trained to accomplish mastery in the matter of plain sewing so as to engage dutifully in the needs of household management, the work of Bristow has broken rank and violated convention, needling with acuity the flesh of patriarchy.

The needle is a hard, sharp tool, at times cruel, as in pricking fingers, endangering eyes or painfully breaking skin in the repeated rubbing of the needle into the flesh of the fingertips. Readings of this very small item with its even smaller aperture are coloured by intimations of difficulty and discomfort, as in the futile search for the (proverbial) needle in a haystack, the uncomfortable psychological implications of being irritated, or 'needled' and the unpleasant physical sensations of 'pins and needles'. The *wear* of 'wear and tear' is potent and poignant with meaning. Thus we wear a garment but it becomes worn through use. As a result of incessant sewing the maker of the garment might also be worn out, or, as in the case of a certain tailor of Gloucester, 'worn to a ravelling'. The skills of 'needle work' themselves take their toll on the body and psyche, demanding a concentrated eye, a constantly steady hand, and in the case of Victorian sewing instruction, the probability of tedium.

Inserting a gusset or band, scalloping, binding, piping, tucks, seams, openings, grafting, patching and darning all had their place in the domestic economy. With the passage of a supple thread through the eye of a metallic needle countless generations of infants and young children were initiated into the drill of 'needle work'.<sup>10</sup> It was from her seamstress mother that Bristow learned the skills of this meticulous and intimate engineering, skills without which all manner of stuff (material and social) would fall apart. Such histories pervade the everyday environment, evidence of the legacy of sewing as an act of endurance, obedience, thrift and, in surmounting these, a sense of pleasure.

The work of the needle carries notions of reparation, a making good not only in the thing to be repaired but also in the endless cycle of reparation in a figurative or conceptual sense.<sup>11</sup> For the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, repetition (as in the stitches without end in the incessant making of useful things) and habit inform one another, begetting a 'thousand intertwinings' with which 'difference inhabits repetition'.<sup>12</sup> As with wear and tear, notions of habit suggest a psychological incorporation of ingrained clothing, an article of clothing (a habit) informed by a pattern of being, and of being in or *inhabiting* the world. Deleuze considers that 'in every way, material or bare repetition, so called repetition of the

same, is like a skin which unravels, the external husk of a kernel of difference and more complicated internal repetitions'.<sup>13</sup> It is as if in every doing there is an undoing, in every constructing an unravelling, in every act of cutting-out in preparation for constructing there is a comparable cutting-out of material beneath the threshold of conscious knowledge or visibility.

In Bristow's methodical lines of stitches (or the removal of threads) and measured panels it is as if repetition itself has become porous, or inhabited. As one series (or line) ends, another begins, each repetitive mark opening out into and informing the next, reinforcing the habitual return of the same as a activity of contemplation and security as well as an unravelling of an interior world. The very instability, outwardly, of Bristow's object-things (and the impossibility of giving them a name) masks a security founded on such inhabiting. For Deleuze habit is the foundation of time which depends, through repetition, on memory. Thus stitch, panel and cloth are embedded in and through a reworking of the invisible (histories) which memory enfolds in the act of making.

### **Redressing Modernity**

Within the memories that are revealed and questioned through Bristow's explorations, there is reference to the history of Modernism. I began by suggesting that the panel acts as an agency of modernity, with its horizontal-vertical interpenetrations and planar surfaces likened to a weave. In the ordered and methodical working of Bristow's studio it is possible to glimpse the logic of the discipline which Mark Wrigley, recalling Adolf Loos, might align with the correctness of the well-cut suit.<sup>14</sup> The suit begets the office, and vice versa, as if each has its place on that transparent emblem of modernity, the grid. But the grid itself, as recalled and deconstructed by the critic Rosalind Krauss in the light of the structural analysis of myth, can also be subject to narratives of the psyche.<sup>15</sup> In the intense and private work of the artist Eva Hesse such as *Accretion* and *Augment/Aught* of 1968, rectangular panels of canvas painted with latex are sewn together so that they billow and sag. Latex for Hesse functions as a 'barely something' that brings the sensitivity of touch to the impersonal dryness of optical reason.

In Bristow's recent work there is a reminder of this reclamation of sight through touch in an extensive series of panels hung over rails, framing the bare white walls of a gallery. Each panel of striped fabric is padded and stitched in the manner of a counterpane, drawing attention in the hanging to the pensive weight of construction, in contrast to and at one remove from the dressed white skin of the walls. In a

further accretion of tactility the panels are rubbed and pounded, from edge to edge, with gesso. There is a rawness here that Hesse would have understood but which would have been an anathema to architects of modernity such as Loos. Yet the work is in intimate alternation with the functional architecture against which it is turned and by which it is framed. As consistent with all her previous work Bristow continues here to articulate the crafted intimacy of subject positions against a context of blind authority and uniformity. Whereas the work of Donald Judd (which Bristow admires) could be described as ‘furnishing’ the grid, Bristow’s work clothes it, without losing sight of the details that make all the difference.

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<sup>1</sup> Small panels or pieces of parchment were used in the seventeenth and eighteenth century to enter the names of a jury, hence the panel as the jury itself.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Counterpane’ is more complicated than it seems at first, having links not only with pane through (L.) *pannus* but also with two other derivations: the French *contrepointe* and *cuilte point*, (with the ‘point/e’ deriving from the Latin *punctum*, prick) and the Latin *culcita puncta*, a quilted mattress or cushion. In these cases the *pointe* and *punctum* both refer to the pricks and stitches of sewing rather than the panels that (may) make up the whole. But with links of *contrepointe* to ‘counterpoint’ (as used, for example, in music) there may also be a sense in which matching (opposite, counter) panels are brought together, as is the case in so many quilts and counterpanes. At some stage, the *pannus* and *punctum* derivations fuse into a single (quilted) counterpane.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, The MIT Press), p.70.

<sup>4</sup> Grosz, *op.cit.* p.179.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p.182.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, (London, Free Association of Books), p.201, quoted by Marsha Meskimmon, *Women Making Art*, (London and New York, Routledge), p.85.

<sup>8</sup> Max Kosloff, ‘The Poetics of Softness’, from the catalogue of the exhibition ‘American Sculpture of the Sixties’, LACMA, 1967, reprinted in *Renderings* (London, Studio Vista, 1970), p.224. The essay brilliantly deconstructs Claes Oldenburg’s ‘comatose’ objects.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Heidegger ‘Building, Dwelling, Thinking’ in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter, (New York, Harper and Row, 1975), p.154.

<sup>10</sup> If Agnes Walker, writing in 1897, is to be believed, ‘needle drill’, using a coarse carpet needle and twine, is recommended for ‘Babies or Lower Class of Infants’. Agnes Walker *Manual of Needle Work and Cutting Out*, (London, Blackie and Sons, Third Edition 1902), p.7.

<sup>11</sup> As in the writings of Melanie Klein.

<sup>12</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, translated by Paul Patton, (London and New York, Continuum, 2001), pp76-77.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p.76.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, The MIT Press), p.111.

<sup>15</sup> Rosalind Krauss ‘Grids, You Say’, catalogue essay to accompany *Grids* (New York, Pace Gallery, Dec.1978 – Jan.1979).