

Neither here nor there: Peter Welz - Plangent Space - Echoes in Solitude

*To and fro in shadow from inner to
outer shadow*

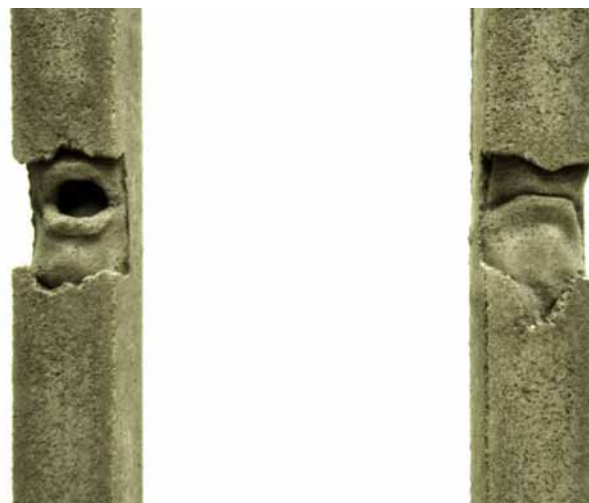
Coincidence is as good a place as any to begin an essay. And, with the existential and psalmodic epigraph of Samuel Beckett I recently discovered, it appears even more appropriate to the task in hand. Written by Beckett in the year after the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's death, it points to the visible and invisible characteristic states of space and being. Indeed, Beckett's writings' have the appeal of encompassing the here and the not there, alongside the there and the not here. They form a point of mediation, an interstices, between the earlier tendency towards idealism within Merleau-Ponty's writings on phenomenology, and the sometime extremist freedom or anguished responsibilities of Sartrean existentialism. It is most often thought that Beckett refers to the 'becoming space' that has not yet become, the here that might never be, the interstitial to and fro of endless possibility. However, this Beckett-ian sense of space (and time) should not be considered simply as a dualistic complimentary or processed-based poetic as might be thought within a sense of definable immediacy, but rather as an advocacy as to the open-ended-ness of human phenomenal experience in general. It is rather, what Blanchot called "...the work of art, the literary work – is neither finished nor unfinished: it is. What it says is exclusively this: that it is – and nothing more. Beyond that it is nothing. Whoever wants to make it express more finds nothing, finds that it expresses nothing."

The works of Peter Welz similarly contest the unresolved state of liminality in relation to space and being, those plangent spaces where the echoes of sensory consciousness can take hold. For it is worth noting that the term 'plangent' means quite literally a space that resounds, not with a completed sense of presence and absence, but with the present that is not absent, and the absent that is made present. Again, we must repeat it just 'is', to restate Blanchot, a conditional possessing of a sense or state of spatiality and being that is neither finished nor unfinished. And, like Estragon and Vladimir, who might 'hang themselves tomorrow' they continue to wait even after they have through words determined they will depart. The end is silence, and of course silence has no beginning or end. From Peter Welz's earliest works like *Ecco Homo* [1997-99], the status of the waiting sentinel has been evident. The sentinel is the man who waits but he does not know what will come, the coming is always an unresolved possibility.



Ecco Homo [1997-99]

Installed as a series cast concrete pillars, oracular mouths have been formed to enunciate its title, and speakers inserted in each pillar resound the variant phonemes. While at one level the work might be read as an ironic take on ‘concrete poetry’, the sounds quite literally re-sound within the plangent space evoking an auditory endlessness. It seems Nietzsche’s ‘I know my fate’, has become the uncertainty of Beckett’s ‘Not I’, the disassociated solitude filled out by the interminable and the incessant, “...the echo of what cannot cease speaking – and since it cannot, in order to become its echo I have, in a way, to silence it. I bring to this incessant speech the decisiveness, the authority of my own silence.”



Ecco Homo | detail [1997-99]

The interstitial contents, which deliberately serve as their own paradox, are an important principle operating in much of Welz’s work. In sculptural installations like *figure (grey) between two spaces – none moving* (2000), and *figure (grey) moving (backward) in a circle (continuously)* (2002), Welz heightens both from a static and motile point-of-view, the ‘in-between-ness’ of the expectant position that the sentinel or waiting watchman occupies. The close relation between the Latin / French verb ‘sentire’ (to feel, to perceive, to be conscious of) and its close affinity to English ‘sentient’ (conscious, capable of sensation, aware) is not lost upon the artist Welz any more than it was on the bi-lingual fluent Beckett.



figure (grey) between two spaces – none moving (2000)

However, putting to one side the semantics of language, Welz’s *figure (grey) between two spaces – none moving* is clearly intended to evoke phenomenal expectancy. The suspended half-figure hanging between two wooden architectural spaces, and with a small degree of motorised movement that does not substantively change the position of the figure, reinforces not just a sense of expectation but the synaptic consciousness that the act of watching and waiting implies. It therefore stresses the interstices of the sensory moment. Conversely, *figure (grey) moving (backward) in a circle (continuously)* operates on a circular carriage suspended from the ceiling, and on which a similar hanging motorised figure moves slowly backwards above the empty space. The introduction of motility opens up the performative aspects of the work, it quite literally moves, though it does



figure (grey) moving (backward) in a circle (continuously) (2002)

so with a minimal of means. The use of the transparent form and minimal means is an essential characteristic of Welz's work. In both cases with Welz's cast figures one obviously thinks about Bruce Nauman's work, something the artist would make no attempt to deny. However, the post-minimal work of Nauman tends most often to stress disequilibria and imbalance, while that of Welz suggests an expectant doubt, the 'perhaps' and at the same time the incommunicable. Another work, in draft form for later potential development, and called *two figures (grey) moving backward (facing-none facing)* also stresses the inability to communicate, a central aspect of Beckett's thought. And, though it might be fanciful, the deliberate use of the 'grey' colour further emphasises a feeling of uncertainty. That is to say grey is inevitably read as a colour of doubt.

Positing the critical and the uncertain - the first aspect of criticism is to doubt and to say no - is taken up again in another work by Welz entitled *seven heads, negating* (1998-2001). In this instance seven busts made from polyethylene with batteries placed inside move their heads from left to right as in a head-shaking negative. The most interesting aspect of the work is the sense of dissonance within similitude, in that though all the cast busts are the same, they work individually and are never at one with one another save in their shared negative propensities. Negation and the origins of negation were, of course, central to Sartrean Existentialism, and Sartre's formed concept of *négativité* was to be constituted by "not obviously involving a negative judgment nevertheless contain negativity as an integral part of their structure." For while affirmation attests to an acceptance and embracing of what is being conceptualised, negation simply denies but does not proffer any alternative position with which to identify - it remains open and the reasoned 'why condition' goes unchallenged. In the case of Sartre, and in some lesser measure Beckett, a position of doubt harkens back to Cartesianism, but

less 'I think therefore I am', rather *cogito ergo sum* as 'I doubt therefore I am'. Philosophical extravagances apart, Welz through his reduction of means is able distil and regenerate these phenomenological questions anew. And, as with all these works, Welz never tries to hide the mechanics of their realisation, that is to say the batteries, motors, wiring, and the industrial-type materials he uses.



figures (grey) moving backward (facing-none facing)



seven heads, negating (1998-2001)

Whereas thus far any performance aspects in Welz's works have hinted at only mechanised motility, he has gone beyond merely the spatial and sculptural into film and video-based concerns. Though it should equally be said that the artist never abandons the spatial and sculptural components within and through which the performance aspects take place. In works like *horizontal tilt* and *horizontal tilt II* (both 1999), two rectangular or lozenge-domino type forms are placed either as an L-Square on top of one another in a space. Both form a ninety-degree angle.

The complete spatial dynamics of a space are incorporated by the means of a projection onto the sculptural elements, where a figure placed in an enclosed walled-construction (normally read in a vertical position) bounces backwards and forwards horizontally incorporating by implication the floor and ceiling. The front and back of the head of the figure strikes the walled elements that have now through turning the camera become the floor and ceiling. The two projections work through the principle of the unpredictable moment, and the head-banging sound that accompanies it are similarly randomly generated.

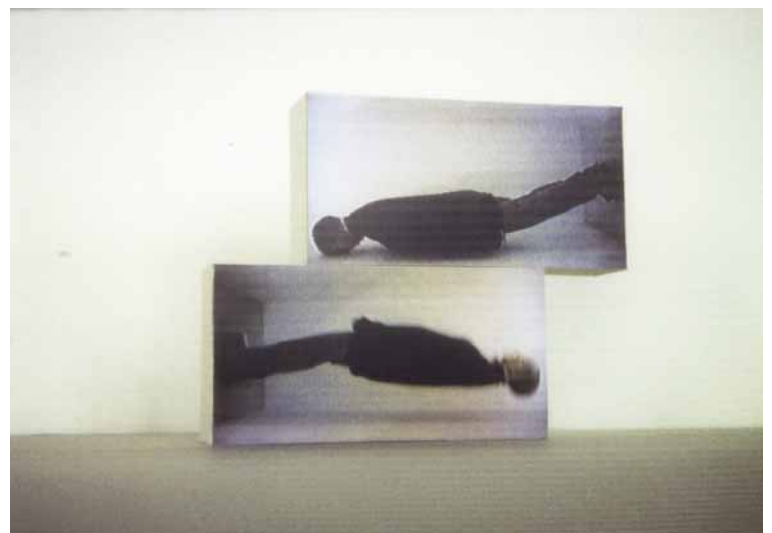
Apart from the unpredictable time-based element that the work intimates, there is also an implied sense of futility and the absurd. Yet another reference, perhaps, to the Sisyphus-like characteristics of phenomenal experience and the existential. In the work *horizontal tilt II*, the experience of futility is more pronounced as the domino-lozenge type sculptural forms are placed asymmetrically on top of one another giving a greater sense of claustrophobic futility and disorientation. Thus sound and the random space

between the sounds plays an important role in these two works, not least because it is the mechanism of aural identity, but also because it intensifies the alienation that the action implies. Any reading of the stage instructions of a Beckett play, always reveal the importance of the role of pauses and silences that shape the comprehension of their temporal human contents. Indeed, in a play like Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, one is never entirely certain whether Vladimir and Estragon are two distinct characters, or merely two sides of the same consciousness enacted as separate human manifestations.

The single doubled, 'the doppelganger', is a formal convention that Welz has frequently used not merely in terms of human performance



horizontal tilt 1999



horizontal tilt II 1999

but also in his use of spatial construction.

In Welz's works like *the laugh laughing at the laugh* (1999), and *double double projection (two times in a space) (from crying to laughing to crying)* (2000), the use of doubling is made even more obvious. By working through a loop, we find in the first example two projections of the same seated male figure are set in formal opposition to one another, and at the same time the same figure on the two screens is in different intermittent states between laughter and tears. For the viewer the effect is one of confused associative feelings, dwelling in the space in-between we are disoriented and compelled to address intellectual as well as emotional issues of confused affective identity. In the second instance the two projections take place superimposed on top of one another and emotional ambiguity becomes further heightened. Whereas in the first instance the formal spatial positioning of the viewer stresses the physical phenomenological experience of being present between the two screens (we are another object between two spatial and illusory realities), in the second the experience is existential. In discussing the juxtaposition and distinction between these two works, we are left to wrestle with the 'impenetrable self' as an object participant, and at the same time an equally 'impenetrable self' as a subject who strives anxiously to identify with the emotional contents projected.



double double projection (two times in a space) (from crying to laughing to crying), detail (2000)

In the work *the fall/ up and down/ double down/ triple projection* (2003), and even more complex spatial configuration and viewpoint is pursued. Two dancers (male and female) are filmed from below through a sheet of glass falling up and falling down. The woman's head faces up and the male head faces down in the instance of the installation, though one imagines the situation could be easily reversed. In certain respects this work recalls Welz's *horizontal tilt* and *horizontal tilt II*, insomuch as the work again incorporates references to ceiling and floor, though in this case it is filmed from the floor (from below) towards the ceiling.



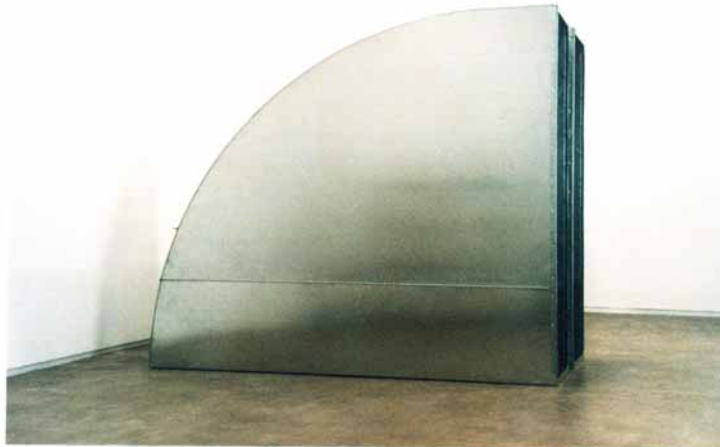
the fall/ up and down/ double down/ triple projection (2003)

However, when projected it plays with ideas of the vertical rather than the horizontal. Hence we are made clearly aware of what must be understood as an axiomatic phenomenological argument "space is not the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the position of things becomes possible." Something that Merleau-Ponty observed, and further elaborated as "either I do not reflect, but live among things and vaguely regard space at one moment as the setting for things, at

another as their common attribute – or else I do reflect: I catch the space at its source, and now think the relationships which underlie this word, realizing then that they live only through the medium of the subject who traces out and sustains them: and pass from spatialized to spatializing space.” In this way Welz’s use of space is not a set of sculptural arrangements, fixed or defining the events that take place in or simply projected on them. Rather space is a dynamic subject in which human perception creates the spatial reality of what is being experienced. Space in this sense becomes an either/or, a Cartesian choice-driven dilemma as in his sculptural installation *two rooms for total silence (bright and dark)* (2001), in which the spectator is given the opportunity as to whether they want to experience silence in either a room of light or darkness. Or, as in *double space for an exact fall (forward)* (2001), which two identical zinc ninety degree-angled quarter hemispheres (or, quarter circles) stand vertically at the average height of a man (185cm) to create a horizontal fall that would seemingly complete the half-hemisphere. The doubled space whence persons might position themselves to fall implies yet another choice. And, choice is of course a central concern of existential being, “man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism.”



two rooms for total silence (bright and dark) (2001)
concrete model



double space for an exact fall (forward) (2001)



double space for an exact fall (forward) (2001)

*Then gently light unfading on that
unheeded neither*

The bringing together of all these spatial and phenomenological issues is perhaps, best understood in Welz's recent project *airdrawing | whenever on on on nohow on* (2004). This was a first collaboration by the artist when he worked with the choreographer William Forsythe. In this work his concerns about structure, space, time, performance, movement and the question of communicability are unified. Based on Beckett's *Worstward Ho*, the famous Irish writer had initiated the project for this short piece of prose with the words "All before. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever Failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better," showing that its intention was to deal with the failures of language, and by using "a few lexical items assembled in a variety of combinations, so that it reaches out to an 'unworsenable worse'." It was the combination of strategies that Beckett frequently adopted, emptying words of their conventional (de-literalising or de-literary-ising) meaning that first attracted Welz, and as a result he approached William Forsythe to transpose the words 'whenever on on on nohow on' into a movement of unending circularity. The performance became a series of movements that had no precisely defined beginning or end (Welz asked Forsythe to continue until he 'crashed' on the floor saying 'stop' whereas the loop continued), and something that strangely mirrored the familiar notion of an unending loop commonly used by artists in their film and video work.



airdrawing | whenever on on on nohow on (2004)

Three cameras were placed in a constructed white space and filmed from above, from the side, and from the front, and in addition two handheld cameras were attached to the choreographer's hands. Hence two distinct levels of image were generated, those of the dancing figure Forsythe were blurred, and the others fixed and clear. In this respect also one was able quite literally to see the inside and outside of

the dance or movement inscribing the phrase/title into the space with his body as it took place. The screens for the fixed cameras operated as either structural or sculptural units, but what was particularly noticeable was that the scene from above revealed how the movements of the dancer (choreographer) created a series of air drawings in space. While on one level it appears to be a part-homage to both Muybridge and Marey's sequences of movement exposures, this installation did far more by revealing the dimensionality of space, of movement, and a multiple sense of several time events condensed into single installation. Hence to refer back to Merleau-Ponty the contents, far from being located in space, were in the continuous state of 'spatializing', creating ever more multiplicities of both sensed and experienced spatial phenomena. What is also evident is that it generates a unique experience that can never be exactly repeated, for though the dance movements may be re-enacted they can never be fully realised again, not least because all dance movements carry some small degree of variation in repetition, but also because the temporal contents of the work have inevitably shifted.

At an aesthetic level we might want to speak of Forsythe's performance as one of essential solitude, which is to say the existential solitary subject enacting a concept, but one that remained confined to itself: the pure status of being as an existential subject. And, it is the sense of essential solitude, a singular 'embodied' aspect that increasingly characterises Welz's work today.

In his work *line | vanishing | disappearing | breath | aspirate* (2004), the artist breathes onto a camera lens while filming a black line drawn onto a card. As condensation takes hold and accumulates the line gradually disappears, only to appear again as the condensation evaporates. Projected onto a concave sculptural unit (or, as he prefers to call it 'a fake wall'), it is by such minimal means Welz is able to achieve his shifts in both visualising and spatializing experience. In these minimal experiments we find Welz increasingly mastering the internal dynamics of space, and given that speakers and sound are also a vital part of his installations he is now able to generate a plangent or 'synaesthetic' content that brings together both the visual and the aural; the two taking on the idea of a simultaneity, a complimentary echo (or estrangement), a dovetailing into one another. I have neglected until now to stress something that is also common to the thinking of Welz, namely the affinity between sculpture and architecture. The architectonic aspects are closely connected to the sculptural contents of his works, for their relation to built structures and functions removes his work from the vagaries of being merely a minimalist 'systemic' object, a *ding-an-sich* (thing-in-itself) as a materialised concept. In his recent work *architectural device/corrugated wall/ curved 90° corner* (2005),



line | vanishing | disappearing | breath | aspirate (2004)

the shift shows a decidedly anthropological turn. Based on a trip to Istanbul in the Spring of 2005, Welz was struck by the strange juxtaposition of architectural styles (to his mind sculptural-architectural forms). While his work has not tended towards what might be called local site-generated sculptures - this remains a singular exception to date – there has always been a propensity towards considering the role played by architectural structure in his sculpture. While filming the rooftops of Istanbul, he incorporated referencing elements from Bertolucci's film made after Paul Bowles novel *The Sheltering Sky*, a film in which Welz saw coloured glass elements had been inserted in a number of windows. An arc-screen built of corrugated plastic became the sculptural-architectural unit (a familiar material used for hoardings) on which Welz's film was projected. While one might argue that it is an attempt to give 'embodied' content to Welz's experience of Istanbul, it rather points to the strange hybridity and manner in which he found forms to have no real sense of a boundary in the city, but were continually in a state of spilling over into one another. And it was the way they created a new spatiality with the accompanying space around them most interested the artist. But again I want to immediately and abruptly return this to considerations of what were essentially phenomenological effects, for it is not, nor was it intended by Welz to be a portrait or documentary record of Istanbul. Rather I feel Welz's use of sculpture, film, performance and installations, suggest something else far more distilled "it speaks, but without any beginning. Its states, but it does not refer back to something which is being stated....." It may be appropriate therefore that the current title of this publication is *'to unsay'*, namely to state something that has already been unsaid. And, it is almost certain that the paradox that this supposes would have given great delight to Samuel Beckett, to gainsay the becoming reality of space and being 'neither here not there'.



architectural device | corrugated wall | curved 90° corner (2005)

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 Sunday, 19 August 2005

ENDNOTES

1. Samuel Beckett's poem, 'Neither', appears first in, Samuel Beckett: *As The Story Was Told*, London, John Calder, 1990, p.108 As Samuel Beckett was completely bi-lingual it is not known whether it was first written in English or French
2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty [1908-1961]'s last great unfinished work, intended to be the complete summation of his ideas was called *The Visible and the Invisible*, Eng. trans., Alphonso Lingis, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1968 (Fr. *Le visible et l'invisible suivi de notes du travail*, Paris, 1964), which was a thoroughgoing revision of the phenomenological idealism implicit to his *Phenomenology of Perception*, London, 1962, and subsequent editions (Fr. *Le Phenomenologie de la Perception*, 1945), and was published posthumously.
3. Namely the rather bleak view of the human condition posed, or at least initiated, by Jean Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, Eng. trans., London 1958, and subsequent editions (Fr. *L'Être et le Néant*, Paris, 1943), and simplified and canonised in *Existentialism and Humanism*, London, 1973, and subsequent editions (Fr. *L'Existentialisme et le humanisme*, Paris, 1948).

4. Maurice Blanchot, 'The Essential Solitude', in, Blanchot: The Space of Literature, Eng. trans., Ann Smock, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 1982, p. 22 (Fr. L'Espace Littéraire, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1955). It may be worth noting that the title of Blanchot's book relocating literature, may be a passing reference and riposte to Jean Paul Sartre's What is Literature?, London, 1950 (Fr. Qu'est-ce que la littérature?, Paris, 1948), since both French editions were published by Gallimard.
5. This expression is the opening line of Friedrich Nietzsche's concluding section, 'Why I am Destiny', in, Ecce Homo, Eng. trans., R.J. Hollingdale, London, Harmondsworth, 1979, pp. 126-134
6. The 'speaking mouth' of Samuel Beckett's 'Not I', written in English, was first performed at the Forum Theater, The Lincoln Center, New York, September 1972, and at London's Royal Court Theatre, 16 January, 1973; see, Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works, London, Faber & Faber, 1986, pp. 373-383
7. Maurice Blanchot, op cit, p 27
8. The word 'sentinelle' in French is taken from the Italian 'sentinella', though both find their origins in the Latin verb 'sentire'. The English usage 'sentinel' is merely derived in turn from the French.
9. 'Human Condition/Human Body: Bruce Nauman and Samuel Beckett', in, Bruce Nauman, ex. cat., Hayward Gallery, London, 1998, pp. 60-75 Nauman has always attested to the deep influence of Beckett on his work.
10. Jean Paul Sartre, 'The Origin of Negation' (The Question), Chapter One, Being and Nothingness, [above] pp. 3-45
11. ibid 'Key to special terminology', p. 362
12. See, Samuel Beckett, Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works, pp. 11-88
13. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, London, 1962, pp.243-44
14. One might immediately think in this instance of Robert Morris's 'Untitled Box for Standing' (1961), and Morris like Welz was also deeply concerned with the phenomenological issues, see, Rosalind Krauss, 'The Mind Body problem: Robert Morris in Series', in, Robert Morris The Mind/Body Problem, ex. cat., Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Soho, 1994, pp. 2-16 However, Welz's work mediates a space between Morris and Judd, being more object-based than Morris on the one hand, though not as a Judd system-object, and by his use of a doubling on the other.
15. Jean Paul Sartre, Existentialism and Humanism, London, 1973, p. 28
16. The work was first shown at the Irish Museum of Art, Dublin, February, 2004.
17. Becket archive mss. 4202 (see following)
18. For Beckett, though it clearly parodies Webster and Dekker's play Westward Hoe, and the similarly well known novel by Charles Kingsley. However, it's actual origins lie in Edgar's speech in Shakespeare's King Lear. See, James Knowlson, Damned to Fame: The Life Of Samuel Beckett, London, Bloomsbury, 1996, pp. 674-77
19. My somewhat artificial conflation and use of the term de-literary-ising, is intended to point to Beckett's life-long concern to rid language of its overtly Romantic literary accents. Hence his intention was undermine the conventional narrative role of language, thus "nouns are used as verbs, verbs as nouns, adverbs as adjectives.....a reduced skeletal language of 'worsening words'." Ibid p. 675
20. The work is currently on exhibition in Berlin. See, urbane Realitäten: Fokus Istanbul (9 Juli- 3 October, 2005), ex. cat., Martin-Gropius Bau, Berlin, 2005
21. Maurice Blanchot, 'The Work and the Errant Word', op cit, p. 51