

# SUBTLE BODY

Stephen Bambury  
Leigh Davis

JAR

**Thursday December 2nd, 2004.**

**“When you first see a new picture you don’t want to miss the boat.  
You have to be very careful. You might be staring at Van Gogh’s ear.”**

*Soundtrack, Basquiat, the movie*



## **Leigh Davis**

You gotta start somewhere. Take the arbitrary fact that *Room for Reflection's* on the corner of Western Springs Road. The work itself forms a spring or a well in major part. There it is. It has that likeness. Or, changing the picture, a reservoir. Or an underworld. *Room for Reflection* hollows-out, and in 4 dimensions, if you take time as a building material. Anyway, I want to know, what kind of representation is it? But visual art types are a bit antsy about representations, so I'll ask instead, what is present here in *Room For Reflection*? What is the work and what fullness does it have? What do you see? What kind of conversation, here, might it support? The project catches-up art and building, and day and night, the sort of thing Giotto did: the metaphysical theatre of *The Last Judgement*, for example. This is what makes your work engage painting's like a clutch. It's the building and your double of it that's a central fact here. We'll talk around this all the time, I suspect, both its look, and how it touches thought.

## **Stephen Bambury**

You've ambushed me. It's such an interesting cluster of ideas, and one that emerges from such an unexpected place for me. It fits my intuition that the audience experience would be diverse. It doesn't seem to have a finite way of unpacking. Spring suggests water, life-giving sustenance, of dropping bores and wells. Then (my work) *Ngamutu*, my first work using oil and water and named after the site of an historic oil well in New Plymouth. *Ngamutu* is/was a series of oil wells, and is a direct link to *RFR* as antecedent. Precedent?

**LD** Either and/or both ...

**SB** Good answer. When do you leave for your trip?

**LD** On Sunday.

**SB** If you get to Washington DC the thing you really have to see is the Phillips Collection. You could do that and other things in a day from NYC.

**LD** Uh-huh. ...

**SB** The Phillips is a private collection in an old house in the centre of Washington and it's special to see master paintings in such an intimate setting, that is, without palace guards hovering over you. It's pretty extraordinary, a rare privilege. And they have a room on the ground floor that has several classic period Rothkos. They have this room to themselves and apart from the paintings there is just this very humble bench where you can sit and contemplate works and the experience of being surrounded by/submerged in Rothko's vision. I usually have this room to myself so you might imagine how special this experience is. It's very hermetic. Rothko designed the installation and it's the first opportunity he had to engage his work so directly with the specifics of a room, exhibiting their reflective qualities, each of the other. It's not much bigger in my recollection of it than Jar is now, this room, modest but so ambitious. The Phillips opportunity became a means for a painter to integrate a group of paintings into a room and a room into a group of paintings. They merge wonderfully. The ambition was for this ensemble not to be altered, sort of like the idea in modern vernacular of the fresco tradition. And there it is... still. A well to draw from.

**LD** A nice parallel.

**SB** Yes, I mean I wasn't thinking about that but it was one of the first rooms that I'd ever been into and experienced as a total, as a complete sort of experience, it was certainly the first time I got to work that idea in contemporary idiom, on, I think, my first trip to North America, back in the late '70's as I recall. My first encounter with this general idea however was in the Islamic room/courtyard in

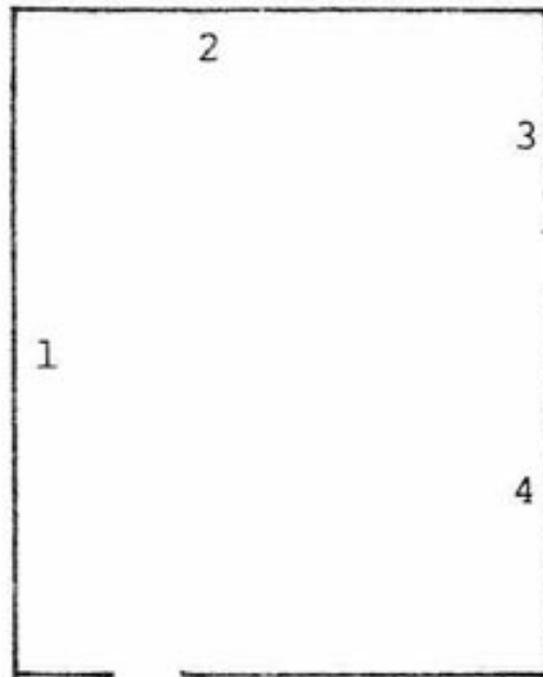
the Metropolitan Museum seen just before the Rothko visit. The Dia also had at that time a long-term installation of Barnett Newman that was very special, in SoHo, New York. You could walk into them straight off the street, no guards. I also saw on that trip the Rothko Chapel in Houston. I was to discover many years later that these experiences were crucial to me and set the agenda for many of my subsequent travels. They set the blueprint up for subsequent work and shows too. It wasn't until the late 80's that I got to Europe and there I discovered for myself the historical precedents for the Rothko work just mentioned. But that first trip to America was a big one. I saw the children of the idea before I saw their ancestors in Europe. They included other Dia projects also: the Walter de Maria *Earth Room*, for example. I think it was on this trip that I had a friend working at the Rothko Foundation, based temporarily in Chelsea. So I was able to view a huge amount of Rothkos here—things I'd never seen reproduced. Mark on good days and bad days. That was very helpful learning that lesson—rejected paintings from the Seagram Group.

**LD** Can we look at the main image of *RFR* as a well?

**SB** Metaphorically, very strongly, but I love your seeing it literally too. But there is a greater sense of absence of image to my mind. It isn't quite straightforward to me which image we are alighting on here. There are obvious and then fugitive images, and they are temporal, and spatial, mainly, each, too. I see these collectively as a way of sinking a bore. Sort of drilling these things through you if you give it the time it asks.

**LD** You look into the well and...

**SB** Yes, into it, and then through it.



1. Anna's Light. (1968).  
Acrylic on canvas, 108  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 240  $\frac{1}{8}$  in.  
275.3 x 690.9 cm.  
Collection Dia Art Foundation
  
2. The Moment I. 1962.  
Oil on unprimed canvas, 101 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 120  $\frac{3}{8}$  in.  
257.8 x 305.4 cm.  
Collection Dia Art Foundation
  
3. Ulysses. 1952.  
Oil on canvas, 132 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 50  $\frac{1}{8}$  in.  
336.6 x 127.2 cm.  
Collection Christophe de Menil, New York
  
4. Now II. (1967).  
Acrylic on canvas, 132 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 50  $\frac{1}{8}$  in.  
335.6 x 127.3 cm.  
Collection Christophe de Menil, New York

**LD** And it falls away, disappears, below you, and...

**SB** I think you not only look into it but you peer into it.

**LD** That's better.

**SB** Yes, you can overlook it and also over-look it. Overlooking is a risk but I know the value of the over-looked as I use it in my painting practice...pushing things back, suppression, deferral. It was very interesting this morning to see the room with the door open. And experience that, and again, it invokes a powerful visceral response and I'm very, very aware of that transparent wall between us and that experience. That we're both inside it and outside it, we're forced into it as another kind of experience.

**LD** I think this is key, and probably has emerged as different from what Pip's animated cartoon model—the "maquette" now on the Jar website - explored, and what was originally uppermost in your mind. It is now like a well-in-the-world-behind-a-curtain. The work has a duplicity. I'm just range-finding here. But, you know, this dancing for the viewer/reader as in Barthes' the text that you write must prove to me that it desires me.

**SB** Hmm, nice take. The journey through concept to fully actualised work has to have these jumps. I'm interested in the still-to-be-born as opposed to the stillborn.

**LD.** The work has turned out to be a beautiful balance of the mirror and the window.

**SB** As I say, I think there's been some real jumps in the way these things have emerged. The visual aspects to quite some extent I was able to envisage but it's the way the audience would feel these things, how soon the experience would come to

work or unfold, what patience was required and the yield on that patience that contained the execution risk. Ironically I thought it had to be a really slow work for such a fast location.

**LD** I have this very present feeling as a viewer of considerable annoyance with the Jar window. Standing in front of it presents you with your image and that of the Kingsland world whizzing by—and seeing, albeit mediated by the first experience, such clarity and purity beyond a veil, so its like that old Negro spiritual song, standin' by de river of Jordan (looking over to the other side). What a fancy.

**SB** Standing at the river is like standing at the edge of something, standing at an abyss, the peering has its relationship to an approach to the sublime, in a way. So I relate to what you're saying, and maybe from a slightly different angle. The well is also where we go to draw water to live. Its sustenance and its mythology is a place to retreat to, to muse and take time in a common Arcadian image. A place for nourishment for mind and body, one of what Rothko once saw as a possible series of such places, highway shrines if you like, for the traveller to stop at and regenerate.

**LD** The extra kick in what I'm saying is the fact of the Kingsland world going by getting activated in the appearance of the work.

**SB** Yes. It's deliberate. It's the opportunity of a space like this. To mediate a passage between the private and the public, not with usual conventions or means. It was so much more, a sort of strategy to excavate a small spot in the middle of an intensely cluttered urban thoroughfare, to set a place for reflection.



**LD** But I feel sandwiched, conscious of what's at my back, I'm conscious of what's at my front. So I'm in this corridor of desire, defined on the outside by noise and on the inside by stillness and purity, its other.

**SB** That's where you are. It is the edge of the work, or rather, the front and back, back and front of it. But purity is a word I don't like. Clarity is better, free fall from objects, just feeling like looking at a piece of ocean...

**LD** ... mediated by a glass wall...

**SB** Well, the material of that veil is also I think of significance. And it doesn't get lifted, here. We have to deal with it. It interrogates us in a way that the model in the studio could not anticipate. I see this work as activating what I have recently honed in on, an atavistic urge in the process of art that I'm reaching for. Part of that atavism is standing on the edge we talked about. There is that veil. Someone spoke to me about the piece, surprised that it was more like a painting than they thought it would be, more like a painting than a sculpture. I don't necessarily see it as one or the other. But I'm quite certain that my conventions of visual thinking as a painter can calmly come into a situation like this, a fully fleshed-out three-dimensional world. So that veiling, its intermediacy, you could read to some extent as being the frustration of the picture plane. I would like to develop this work sometime in a situation where there is a more direct access to the inside of a room or space. There is an unspeakable feeling for me to be had in the moment of getting behind the glass. The Jar context is very different though. It's a hazard zone. As that window brings Kingsland in, it shows you that which isn't Kingsland, that which is like nothing else in Tennessee/Kingsland. It's like the Jar in the poem. I mean that wasn't a deliberate point of traction when this project started but it's a very interesting kind of synchronicity you know, the poem's almost written for the piece. Your thinking-out-loud in this conversation is revealing to me. Coming

from such an unexpected quarter. But we can have mutual recognition, socialised recognition if you like, and this object of attention in common is atavistic, too, in a way. It excites me, this stage.

**LD** We are so used to divorcing discourse from visual art that finding the two intimately intertwined is surprising. That's the slyness in Jar. But you can take the *RFR* idea back into an interior, in another project and place and spiritualise it further, but lose the world. This building was a shop. It is where it is because of high traffic count and the visibility that retail trading needs. It's a salient. It's tough, because it's about sales visibility on a harsh street.

**SB** Thinking about our conversation today: I kept thinking more about recognition than about knowledge. I am reminded that viewing art turns on points of recognition, of objects of sight not yet or not necessarily objects of knowledge. So to me the recognition of the poem in the piece fits with the way I approach making art. And I think that recognition, or correspondence, or even reflection, is probably right at the forefront of how a piece like this was to address the putting of art in a public place.

**LD** What is it that you recognise? I recognise some traditional vantage point of art which is what we've been talking about. As part of this I recognise an old domain it puts you in. It is Wittgenstein's "to feel the world as a limited whole, it is this that is the mystical".

**SB** You are right and that is the sharp sense one has with some of the precedent works I referred to earlier. But we've got to be careful with the mirror, because the mirror at one level gives us a literal quotation and not the magic moment. It is to do with the figurative and the aspect, which Quattrocento painters understood so well. There, figurative was the name one gave to abstracted things. It was not

a mimetic term, simply, then. It is a take that Didi-Huberman has and that I find fascinating. The correspondence—the echo or reflection - I allude to cannot be directly imaged as analogue. The atavistic is something else, I guess, and I don't want it simplified in the usual manner of regarding mirrors. So, reflection yes, mirror no.

**LD** OK. One's porous. But I am referring to those things which double the building, and for whom, and where. It's part of the uncanny presence here, these doubles.

**SB** The recognition is far more fugitive than the mirror, viewed narrowly, can cope with. More peripheral, less frontal.

**LD** The difference is tradition's presence. It is the way we started out this discussion. I'm interested in the circular memory of an artwork, not just in what's ocular, even if that is so engaging, as *RFR* is, and has such rich presence, period.

**SB** You need both the ocular and the memory in visual art. The number of reflections that are coming back at you in *RFR* turn out to be much greater than I ever anticipated. One of the best experiences I had with the work was being absorbed in the trapezoid form watching clouds moving across this blue shape, just when a jet appeared and moved across it. There was McCahon's *Jet Out From Muriwai*, in full motion replay. And another perspective: his *Gates* are there in the space too. Patrick's photos make them vivid. Colin invoked the metaphysics of Suprematism there. This project does too. In a sense we can say that reflections are passed from mirror to mirror, in a code, relayed.

**LD** Right. So there you are, these resemblances seen and remembered. It makes depth. Staying with McCahon, remember his highly tuned anecdote of the shop window being sign-written? I will read it out:

“Once when I was quite young... the hairdresser had his window painted with HAIRDRESSER and TOBACCONIST. Painted in gold and black on a stippled red ground, the lettering large and bold, with shadows, and a feeling of being projected right through the glass and across the pavement. I watched the work being done, and fell in love with signwriting. The grace of the lettering as it arched across the window in gleaming gold, suspended on its dull red field but leaping free from its own black shadow pointed to a new and magnificent world of painting. I watched from outside as the artist working inside slowly separated himself from me (and light from dark) to make his new creation.”

1966, “Beginnings”, *Landfall* 80, p.361, quoted in “COLIN McCAHON Gates and Journeys”, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1988

I have always thought that the loveliest of parables about painting; magic, vernacular, gradual occlusion, work with signs, ambiguous depth, opening. In our case here we have signs but no written ones, on glass; we have this feeling of being projected, not attaching to signs but to us as viewers. And the images lean both out and in. The *Room for Reflection* look covers 270 degrees of arc not 90 as in the above anecdote. But it's in the same space as the anecdote sets out. A space that is certified by its depth, which is certified by transparency and reflection, which is a wily Ludwig idea again, I suppose, when he asks “Why is it that something can be transparent green but not transparent white? Transparency and reflection exist only in the depth of a visual image.” Transparent white? I guess he means we use the word clear to describe that, and clear drops out of being a visual image, in plain language.

**SB** While I did see and plan to release reflection this has ended up being even more of an element in the confusion of what goes on than I anticipated. You put a net to sea and only discover the catch later. This “later” in art can be a long time, something that occurs slowly. Slowness is so underrated.

**LD** From what I have seen of the process I agree with you. I remember when you first pitched the proposal to Wystan and Susan and I, part of that process involved looking at Pip’s maquette and looking at the cardboard model here in the studio. All of us were implicitly looking at the work in a gallery context. As though there was no visual battle between us and the world, and so we were falling into role as the subject of an interiorised painting experience.

**SB** Correct.

**LD** And then you put that work out into the world in that location, the corner of Western Springs Road, and the huge realisation for me was how strongly and with what complexity it got riddled with context. Very, very different from the purity of the model and of what I had in mind when I was imagining how it would be. Suddenly I was in the glare of the actual work. It broke me in quickly, and all this noise and all this grit and the rain coming over and these inconvenient annoyances, or were they part of the engineered tension?

**SB** It’s a well isn’t it, I mean you’re talking about the well, we’re reaching in, we’re going to see what comes out of it. It’s in the McCahon anecdote you told. I’ve always seen the more physical aspect of the piece: the thing that struck me most of all was how that hole in the floor bores itself through the other side of the world. When you see that, you feel that you are overlooking the well from a very high place. Or equally, looking up from a deep place, at a frame of sky above. *RFR* has no artificial light. It exists totally in natural light, which varies continuously.

The work can be awake one minute and slumbering the next. As you said, I think quoting Herzog or de Meuron, that time is a building material.

**LD** I did and was. You have taken a building and perforated it with a skylight and undermined its floor. OK. If you can just pause there. We'll return to that journey of discovery if you like, of what was in the DNA of the original idea, and creeping into the Phillip's room experience you recollect. But, I want to say, sculpture - I don't know what the word should be, of physical things, anyway - has been exerting its pressure on your work for a long time, dragging it out of two dimensions and into real domains. And so *Room For Reflection* is very much a waypoint on a centrifugal path in your work if you like, it's an outer ring. Care to comment on that, on the painting and sculpture fusion we're skirting here?

**SB** I think you're right but I think I look at it from a slightly different point of view. My primary motivation, one that has driven my work off the wall and into other situations, I think, follows from where visual art interest resides for me.

**LD** So this painting and sculpture idea? Even if these terms are odd, as in Dan Flavin's "I feel apart from problems of sculpture and painting".

**SB** Well okay, image and object, contained and container. I mean we're talking about that western canon and I've been very interested for some years now in the separation of the traditional art picture into the way the image and the place co-reside. So the opportunity to bring both back into one space is exciting for me and is consistent with what I see as a kind of key moment in present art. It goes back to recognition again, to the atavistic, in the Western canon, and Eastern too as far as I can see. I see a grafting of place and image at such a profound level that I can't help but feel the loss of it in our more contemporary experience of museum culture. So it grows out of that more than the idea of objects. In nearly

all of those situations I value there is no object there. They're pieces that manifest themselves in three dimensions that seem to dissolve themselves as objects rather than materialise themselves as objects, or at least that is a tendency they have, the direction in which they are pointing. As much as they force themselves towards sculpture, a term we are stretching to fit, and sculpture presses its claims, they also resist the claims. I am thinking too of Judd's notion of the specific object. Now it seems to me as I have grown more familiar with his work over time that what Judd really did was shift sculptural tradition more toward painting than the other way around. And to quite some extent that provides some explanation for my pieces over many years now that have come down off the wall or taken

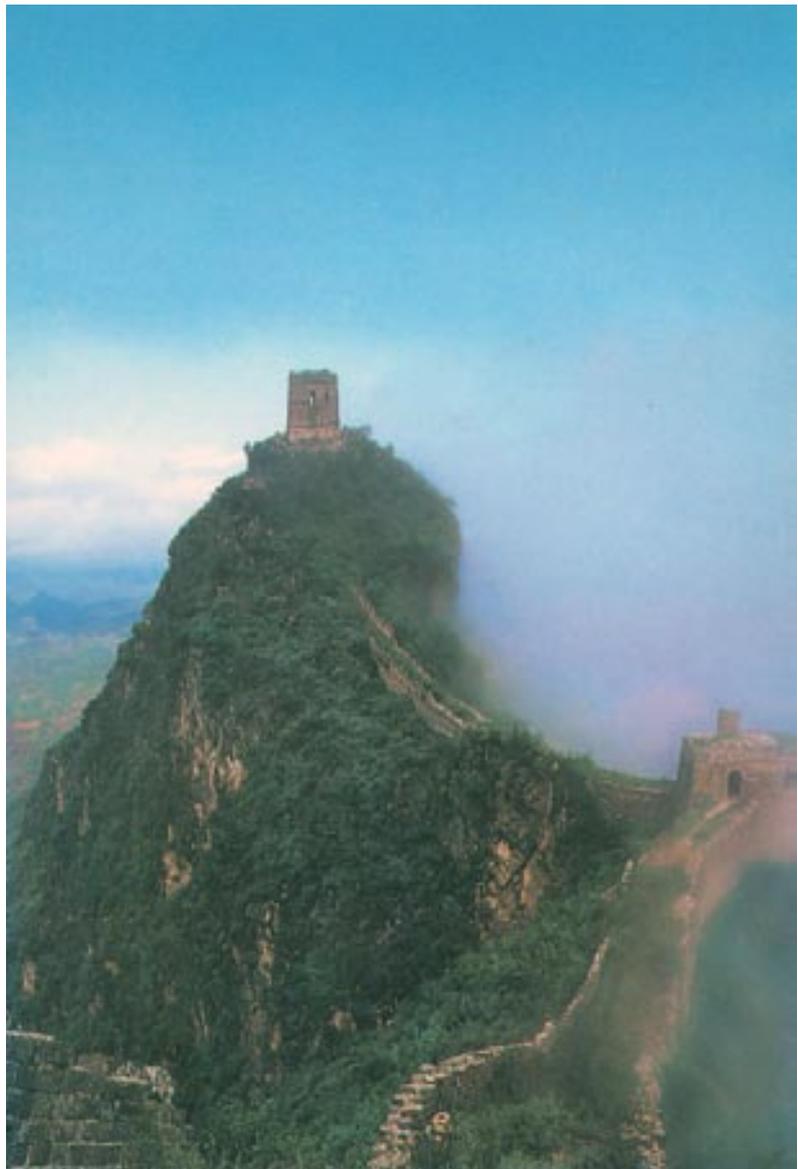


3D form. My preoccupation remains with the image in these shifts, or with what Judd calls “real illusion”.

**LD** Hey, good take. What causes such specific objects—say, the boxes at Marfa in the Artillery sheds - smaller than they seem, to have spatial and temporal extension, and dissolve as objects while asserting themselves as such. Their dissembling?

**SB** Well for one its likely to do with the materiality that has been picked up to work with the reflective qualities, I mean that’s been quite a constant in a lot of the pieces that cause me to leap when I am in their company. I think a lot about how my practice could manifest the quality of the things I love and find so compelling. It is perhaps the greatest consistency in my own work. Maybe that is why I search for it in others’ also.

**LD** Yes. But you can hear this stance in my comments: it’s also about ordinary things—buildings, say—that have a double aspect, that behave also as representations, or that are doubled by their origins in ideas, even if those origins are now not present to mind except in bare outline. A monastery, for example, or a stupa (and there is one of those visible in the Kingsland distance) are clear like this. But a high garden? Or



important architecture which opens itself to the great abstract moments of light, gaps, mass, location, heroic narrative, and place (of economics, materials, weather, and building technique)?

**SB** I am obliged to attempt the next step, which goes even further, at some point in the future. At present I am engaged on another project that folds the image back into the architecture by being both painted image and wall. Not long ago I viewed the Great Wall of China and it was one of the big experiences of my life. Huge. It outran speech, and was pure recognition, again. I think the next step is even further in terms of the building and the image, I can see that. I'm particularly interested at the moment in the 17th century French tradition of utopian, visionary architecture and of what those things express and how you might work with images in specifically built spaces that also play into the kind of rituals that I'm interested in, the kind of rituals that I see played out whether I go to Greece to look at the ruins or Cambodia to Angkor Wat or to a tower in China. I'm highly aware of the meaning that resides within the ritualistically established progressions, entrance, doors, lintel, and access and denied access, and this is a part of my interest in real objects and spaces: the theatre of ritualised space. But, I can't, at this point I still can't see a way of, I don't want to just turn things... I mean what's interesting for me is that on one hand a piece like *Ngamutu* or a piece like *Room for Reflection*, a piece like *Chrysalis*, can look like orphans in the body of my work. Other works, too: my charred wood and gold houses, for example. But all of these are central and part of my practice. And that's the thing I want to try more of. Catching the magic in a real thing. I mean that's the great thing about opportunities like this. I want to do more of these. It's not a transposition from two to three dimensions that I want, it's something else.

**LD** Your intent here is different from some of the classic marriages of image and space one could point to: Rothko's chapel in Houston, even Claude Monet's *Water Lilies*,

in the Orangerie in Paris, or Newman/McCahon's *Stations of the Cross*, and so on. All of these are large works in windowless gallery rooms. And you might remember the ways of talking about these experiences people used at the time: as though these works presented an essence or transcendence, not a rupture of language, to the viewer. Can't develop this thought here. But post *Room for Reflection*: go back in your mind to these precedents, how they can seem worldless, thinner, now. They are not obsolesced of course by the comparison, but different than they seemed at one time, perhaps, waypoints on visualisation's journey off the canvas. So let's follow your use of dimension as a segue. One of the alternative



titles that I have in my mind for my experience of *Room for Reflection* is something like “Emily Dickinson Puts a Poem in Kingsland”.

**SB** I like that.

**LD** Because of just this quality of ambiguity of scale, of how in an Emily Dickinson poem small things give way to big things, or rather big things come in small packages, or you get high art in low objects. So tell me about the experience of scale in the Jar work.

**SB** It grows directly out of what I’ve learnt from painting, that size and scale are two different things and generally speaking people use language like that in a very vague way and confuse the two. They are not mutually exclusive, but are separate; not synonyms.

**LD** Yes. But people don’t reflect on this aspect of their experience, much.

**SB** The scale you can’t measure. Size you can put a tape measure on and quantify by means of some agreed system. So we can measure the room but we can’t measure the scale of it but must experience it. I have a thought that the most important aspect that architecture engages us with is also the least easy to convey. It is this element that defines for me the difference between building and architecture. As Agnes Martin says there is no such thing as modern art, only good art and bad art. I agree with this. So when I first saw the Jar room with you, in its crummy state, to me it had an immense scale, it had a sort of celestial scale, for such a modest space. It had something of a scale, if you will, of the cells I love so much from San Marco’s that are also devices for reflection.

**LD** That’s good.

**SB** They also bring the world into play and hold the world out. In fact they put both side by side. The frescoes in the cells are positioned adjacent to the window, juxtaposing and framing-up two images—the painted and the real. In this manner I see them as diptychs. The real and the imagined are folded into one another. No duality here.

**LD** Well that's my experience of the mirror/window.

**SB** Yes, exactly. It is a part of it, I mean it's different in the sense that it also dove-tails the east with the west...

**LD** Yes. But I am losing you a little here.

**SB** ...and asks for us to take a compass bearing.

**LD** Ah, the compass! There's a small compass on the inside window ledge of *Room for Reflection*. I'd call it metaphysical, in an art history sense, a rupture element, but *RFR* is all rupture element, so that odd spiky aspect doesn't seem to apply to just a part. All of this, layers, it is a Barthes idea, don't you think? That every act of culture is a text, and what we want to call artworks are acts of culture at a point of bliss - not just pleasure - of text, and bliss is a kind of wound, a cross-sectioning. It is the writing in the painting, like the commentary of *Flagellation* which we will discuss soon. What led you to put that compass in the work?

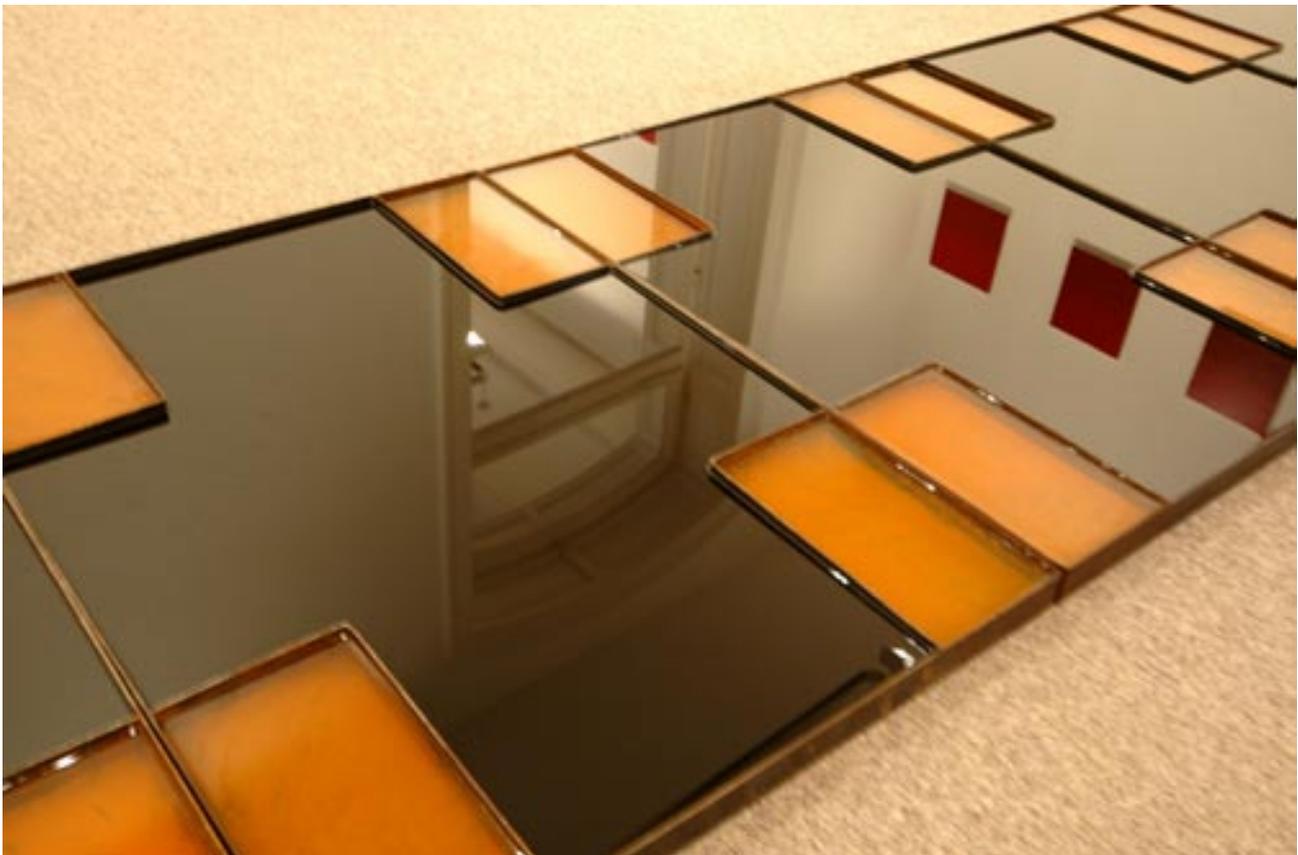
**SB** Not like I chose to put it there—it chose to be there. It grew initially out of the idea driving the piece, coming out of Suprematism, it was coming out of El Lissitzky, Malevich, Walter De Maria's *Earth Room*, you know a number of things I have a great deal of interest in. Ahh, that first trip, so rich in Fortune, of vision, scale, generosity. I thought it would always be like that.



**LD** Some of these antecedents I don't know.

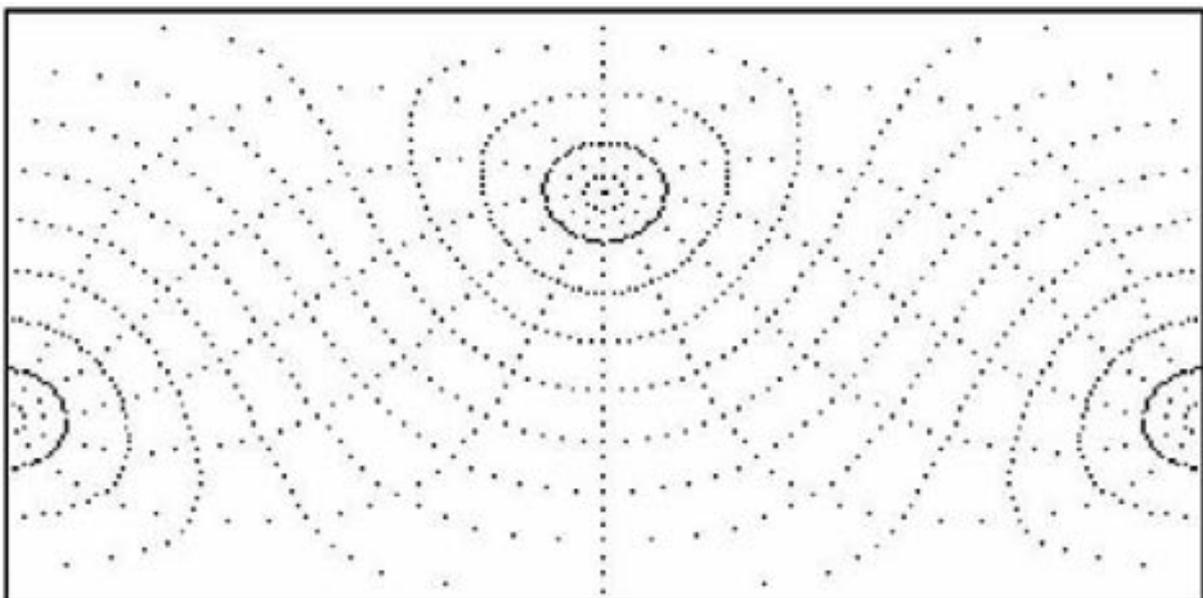
**SB** Even Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion, we could go to some images that I took there some years ago and see some strikingly correct correspondence to what I've done with *Room for Reflection*. All the travel accumulated, to experience these things that find their way into my work in greater or lesser ways. That circular memory again. So what I'm usually looking for at the outset are some specific points within the givens of a project that allow it to be fertilised and grow. In this case it was the idea that was so prevalent again, from another point of view, in *Ngamutu*, of oil. Not just oil as a substance that drives things but as a fossil fuel that the Western world is in crisis over. It's prepared to do anything to "get their oil back". What they can't understand is "how those other people came to have our oil under their desert." (both laughing)

**LD** But the compass?





**SB** Compasses point directions, and this is a spiritual compass. There is so much noise in this thought but one of the directions I now recall was that of Al Kaaba, the Black Cube at the heart of Mecca, the place where devotees have to make, need to make, a pilgrimage at least once in their life. The Jar room is almost cubic so, and then with the idea with the blackness of the oil it started to fit really well with the idea of, well, Where is Mecca? Where is Al Kaaba? And Al Kaaba is, (as you would say), not really a place but a category. It's a drawing, a device, it's not just a normal compass. A compass that does two things, it tells us where Al Kaaba is, but it also tells us where we are relative to it. The compass is bouncing both ways.



So this is a compass I found quite by accident. I was led to try and deepen my knowledge about the Islamic traditions, and I found a shop in, not far from Western Springs, in Sandringham I think, that specialised in things from the Arabic and Islamic world. And I didn't expect to see this shop, I didn't know there was such a big community living here. I had been tracking through some maps and things here to try and



get more specific information about how I direct myself towards Mecca, and then there it is sitting in the shop, the compass, and it's just at that point that when the compass found me it was more like a ruler that I could measure something against. But increasingly it became like a piece of sand under the oyster shell. It became an irritant to me. And I think that's more to do with how I normally cover my tracks a lot more carefully. But this time I chose, in a way, to leave a little more evidence of that presence, but it's a very slight trace, it's a bare imprint, if you will. The more the irritation developed it became clear that it needed to be let in. The compass announced itself. That's the process at work. I still ponder its actions. Small as it may seem it is large in scale to me. As big as any decision in this work.

**LD** Yes. It sets up another reflection: here I am having all these window and mirror experiences and then my eye is caught by this quite conscious device that seems to point somewhere and give coordinates that make me question, Why is that there? So I pull on that piece of string a little bit, as I'm standing on the pavement looking at the work, and it puts a line through the space that seems to lead

through the skylight. It forms a name, Al Kaaba, and links 589 New North Road, on the corner of Western Springs Road, with the centre of Islam. It is the minor figure and commentator to the major; the companion figure, the thin to the thick; like Sancho Panza to Don Quixote. Or is it Don Quixote himself? It is just one big/small element, that stops you reading *RFR* as an oil work, you know, "...oh, it's like the Saatchi roof work in London..."

**SB** It's interesting that some of these things are so ready-at-hand for me that I don't see them, but of course, the skylight was a major point of growth for the piece: it's as if there's this rock coming through the roof.

**LD** Nice! The orientation is trying to change. It's twisting, somewhat.

**SB** And the skylight is skewed in the roof and is skewed more on the floor and has a relationship to the bearings that the compass gives. It faces to Al Kaaba. It is a specific object but also ambiguous.

**LD** Yes. We will talk about the wonky square more in a moment.

**SB** In a way, what's going on here, I think, is a kind of contrasting or a conflating of the micro and the macro. That at one level we have a very precise idea of gathering information about the cosmos from something tiny and intricate. And then, if we look up and start to think about the sky, which is also poured into the floor of the Jar room then you're stretched out over a large spectrum. And they're not contrasting. They're points on some continuum, a dialectical convergence.

**LD** I'm interested that when you pitched the idea for *Room for Reflection* to us you used a little Fra Angelico image that means a lot to you as an illustration and supportive context. The improbable visible column you talked about. That instance of visible

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mystery as you put it to me once. How does that idea come to mind still here?

**SB** Well I see the column in the *Flagellation of Christ* as intensely strange. It's not a column of physical substance to hold a roof up. It has no structural reason to be there, just the opposite in fact. So it's an account of a waterfall: the radiance of light entering a room. The cue is the column's great strangeness.

**LD** Constant fall of light?

**SB** It's a constant fall of light, you know, how does the McCahon go? A constant fall of light through a dark landscape?

**LD** There are a number of these constant falls, I think.

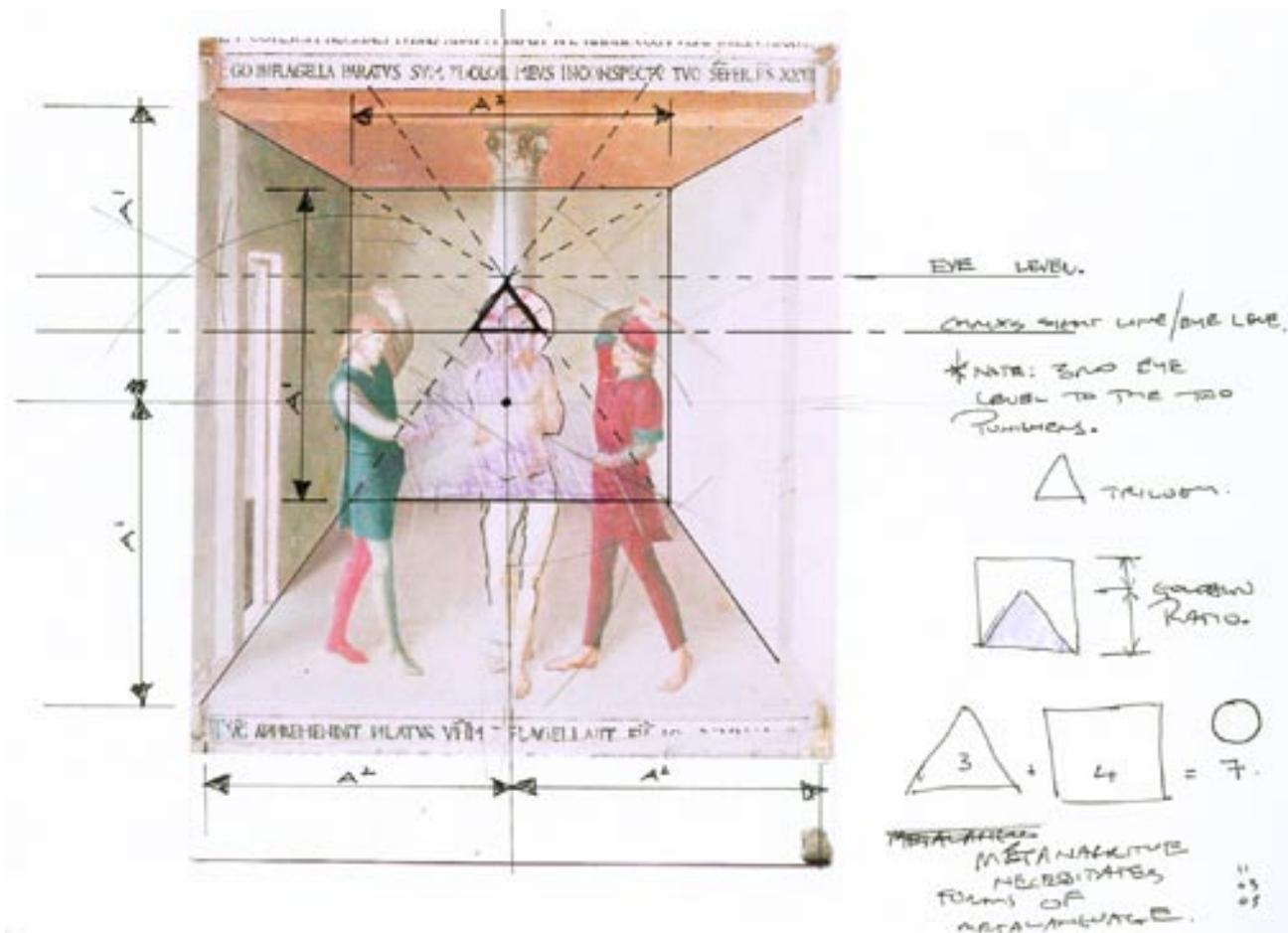
**SB** Yeah. So in a way this is that column, kind of bought into the Jar space.

**LD** And the oil is the dark landscape?

**SB** Wow, great! Could it also be our own shadow over this landscape. And it's such a curious image because it's a room of similar proportions to Jar. Fra Angelico's is a room of odd proportions to the human occupants that are in it, as Jar is, the scale is out of wack and sets up a questioning. The relationship of the actors to the room is off, as Jar is a bit off, being so ambiguous, so standalone but small. And most importantly there is a Corinthian capital on a column that is proportionally huge compared to the small cell-like room that wouldn't require a column at all. So it's clear that, if one wants to engage with that, you then have to start to ask questions about what is it that Fra Angelico is desiring to direct us toward? His works are so like that. There is a very thorough dissimulation at work in them. They were never intended as decorations and this also is something I feel strongly

about. For example, the insertion of a stage into the room somewhat like the notion of creating a false floor in *RFR*. These are the chimes I look for and try to be alert to. The so over-looked, the too-quickly-already-read. There is so much confusion concerning how to read Angelico.

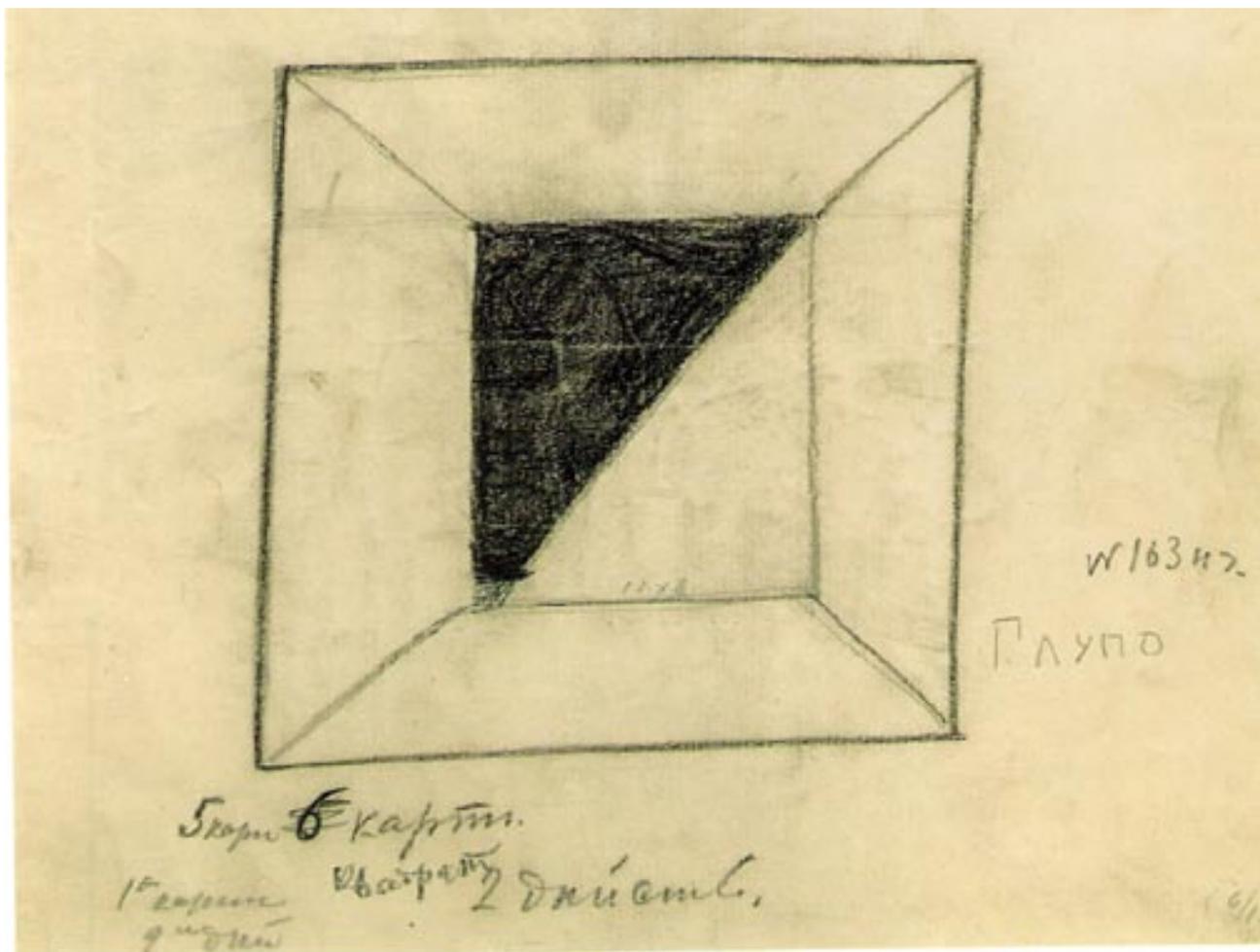
**LD:** So let's drill into the *Flagellation* a bit more. I find our various conversations about



this very interesting. So *Room for Reflection* got developed in some abstracted way from the Fra Angelico image. But then your consideration of the *Flagellation* has continued and yielded further echoes, or reflections, between *Room For Reflection* and the *Flagellation*, as the direction of origin switches and you read one against the other more completely. This has set up an expanding set of interpretive plays, both arbitrary, since it is not special knowledge that you need to have to enjoy *Room For Reflection*, and necessary, in that *Room For Reflection* is a work of visual

art and has an echoing shape that puts it on an edge of resemblance.

**SB:** Interpretive plays that expand and remind me once more of why I am a painter. There is something exciting that happens when powerful images at different corners of the tradition connect up in surprising ways. They are immanent even if unrecognized and here I speak as “audience”. I too am outside, as Mel Bochner



I think observed. Where does the excitement come from? I call it the atavistic. It is where my conversation stops. That which has always excited visual art excites me. That fossil fuel. The sense of closing in on that magic seam in a work of mine: a feeling of awe, I suppose, if you like. Make of that what you will. It is there in the sense of divine geometry that is set up in the perspective lines and subdivisions of both the Fra Angelico and 589 New North Road, the golden ratios that come near in the old shop. There too in the strangeness of the Fra Angelico once more:



how the *Flagellation* is not natural but seems to be. Christ cannot be bound to the column if his elbows are that low down. The walls of the building as represented are separated from the floor by a curious negative detail. The implied viewer floats forward and above the scene, and so is not on the same plane or is in a different space, and so on. Look at the twist in the lintel frame to the left.

**LD:** I understand exactly. Things come alive when the viewer does. The reflections or echoes if you will are multiple. The kinetic action of *Room For Reflection* has a counterpart in *Flagellation*. Dynamism, the beat of blows, lies so close to the surface of the Biblical depiction. Then there is the theatricalised room in common. It concerns the boundaries of *RFR*, again. That bone. Does the artwork start/finish inside the Jar room, excluding the building, or outside it, including it? It is not a foppish question. It is *The Last Judgement* again: how does *Room For Reflection* catch up the building and in that act, world? What type of work are we dealing with here? For instance, I want to say, following something I read in Barthes, that the building is the gesture of an idea and is shown to have been half an artwork even when empty, and completed when floored with the oil that doubles the space, and perforated with the skylight that again cross-sections it. The building is thus latent with visual art's dream.

**SB:** I add another famous incident from art history too, in this context. It's from Suprematism's iconoclasm. The transformation I am about to refer to has been stirring away from the beginning. Malevich's black square is so strongly suggested to me, coming out of the defamiliarisation of the Fra Angelico image. Malevich referred to this square as the Holy Infant, which is El Nino in Spanish, to connect with that figure from your *Earth-Bound Ghosts* gig. A visiting academic from my art school days made the proposition that the black square was a blank cheque made out to the future. The black square has always agitated and excited me. I have drawn this transformation over the *Flagellation* image. Its power is extraordinary

because it shuts down some of the play of interpretation we have been talking about, but derives its power from that play too. It detonates the people-centred attention in the *Flagellation* or rather draws the greater attention to its geometric life; it destroys too the ability to see *Room For Reflection* as just a theatre of light's reflections through the day. It focuses ambiguity upon the rear wall, and puts all of its particular weighted moment on a plane in space, with a gesture that stops perspective, and problematises it, so that the black wall sits in an uncertainty: is it coming forward to the viewer or receding? In art history's timeline, is it first or last? Here too is the sense that real space dances with interpretation.

**LD:** ...in the form of its others. The difference that you make in what you see. The Malevich jump is a terrific one. It's a positive delirium, but let's move on from *Room For Reflection's* intertextual life. I think one of the key features of our art history is ambiguous presence.

**SB** Yes, yes.

**LD** And there's a bit of that going on in *RFR*...

**SB** Well. That's something I desire very much to be the case. I hope there's a sense when you stand and engage and then make the first range of discoveries, and then take it to the next step and see another range of discoveries, and so on. When you feel the depth of the space you suddenly feel as though you're on the precipice that you keep falling into and away from it at the same time.

**LD** Right. What about the experience of the weather? What have you learned since installation about that?

**SB** That the movement that we talked about and that Pip Cheshire modelled for us

at our request, of the light through the space, is in some ways interesting only up to a point. The function of his beautiful animation falsifies the picture in a wonderfully factual way and suggests a kinetic aspect in there but slowly, in real time. It is no longer “our” speed. I don’t control it and that’s the point, much the way I approach painting in fact.

**LD** Ok. I needed that time-lapse perspective to better map the action of the work. But if you watch the work for two or three times, there it all is. *Room For Reflection* is intensely animated.

**SB** In a way it’s about the light within Auckland weather. It’s something like the compass which at some points we can use to measure the time of the day. The skylight is another form of time compass, like a sundial in a garden. We compress the seasons into a very small trace or song. I was aware of the dramatics of that, in a way. But it’s not so central because when we’re there as a viewer you’re there at that moment. We’re not sitting there for six hours. If we were, I mean I see the work a great deal, so I am becoming very attuned both to how the piece changes in terms of the weather, the light and the time of the day, and the season of the year. It also has no artificial light. The piece wakes up, becomes energised and does its thing and then slumbers.

**LD** Good. The Western again, in the concern for world. In like chord, I am struck by Dante’s use of shades in his *Divine Comedy*, as a term for the watery presence of souls that are visible but have no weight or substance in his *Purgatorio*, the intermediate zone between paradise and the *Inferno*.



**SB** It's interesting to me that you've bought it up because at the time, around about the time this piece started to, to, you know, manifest itself in the studio I also began a group of paintings called ghost.

**LD** OK.

**SB** Which are now up to about ten. They are very much about what you call shades from Dante. I haven't heard that, but it interests me a great deal.

**LD** Oh, it's the source of extraordinary imagery in the poem where the weightlessness, the thin trace of shades, people's outlines, follow, lead, pass, Dante and Virgil his unredeemed guide to Paradise.

**SB** So again, sort of micro/macro things going on, you know this universe here, that universe there, these huge stretches that I think are key ingredients in the kind of ritualisation of both architecture and image, those visible mysteries that provoke in me this deepening interest in what I call the atavistic in art.

**LD** It is Pound in his Pisan Cantos:

“nothing matters but the quality

Of the affection –

In the end—that has carved the trace in the mind

*Dova sta memoria*”

The atavistic is what one remembers, the *dova sta memoria*. So a last question

to throw us back into the body of the discussion. It's slightly a curved ball, and it touches on conventions of painting again to see if they fit. What's the ideal viewing distance for *Room for Reflection*?

**SB** There isn't one. It is not a painting, it is a real environment. One could reflect on it from Paris or London. It will have a life that exists at a level besides the piece itself, so it will travel. Those are also viewing distances to look at *Room for Reflection*. And who knows, that could be better than standing there? Reading about it or visiting the web site have real weight but I think however they will evacuate the sensorial in favour of the conceptual. *Room for Reflection's* unannouncability could yet be its real depth charge. It's really interesting, as we talk you keep opening up new avenues for me as well, and I'm trying to think, as you have been talking, of the frustrations if you will, in Duchamp's *Étant Donnés: la chute d'eau; la gaz d'éclairage*, the piece in the Philadelphia Museum where you have to get down and peer through the hole in the door.

**LD** For voyeurs?

**SB** Now most people say there's a hole in the door, but it's not true, there are two holes in the door. The very deliberate frustration of those two words. And the fact that such an important detail is ignored in most people's account of this work is really interesting. In the same manner if you will that Angelico's column interests me. I think, in Duchamp's case, as a whole, there is an unrecognised deferral to the power of auratic presence. He collapses back into it at key points. His rejection of the auratic in favour of the mind was a very useful driver to his work but he gets taken too dumbly and literally.

**LD** I am not familiar with the work other than in photographs. And the viewing distance, again?

**SB** It's whatever enables you to see the specific odd engagements we have discussed here. To take those things as part of what you have seen and thought about.

**LD** One hops in one's car and drives away to wherever else you're going, and the direct experience of the work proves to be over before it begins, because of this, because you think about it as you're driving along. What was that all about? And you realise that what it was all about was some of the things that we've been recognising. And of course that circles back to the ideal viewing distance and your response to that question.

**SB** That could be the answer to the question in a way: driving away.

**LD** A nice answer

**SB** Yep. Driving away from Emily Dickinson in Kingsland and of course de Jordan. But there's such a powerful thing in little rooms. Emily Dickinson locked herself up in one. Duchamp created a room that you couldn't enter. Alan Curnow titled a poem and poetry book, *Small Room with Large Windows*.

**LD** He did.

**SB** Emily Dickinson created a room that you couldn't enter. It's powerful and theatrical. You're invited in only on her terms and those were so totally demanding she was prepared to wait. Amazing.

**LD** Wallace Stevens created a room on a hill in Tennessee.

**SB** Yes.

**LD** That was both small and big.

**SB** Yes, yes.

**LD** Physical and metaphysical. Dante's idea of shades is in Steven's *Anecdote of the Jar* too.

**SB** You can't begin to understand the shade unless you can understand the opposite of it. But you raised a really good point when you first saw the compass about how you related it within the western canon to the Dutch tradition of the still life. And the role of devices in those paintings.

**LD** Right. I think, 17th century... dunno.

**SB** There's a technical term for a still life device, when the fruit is just about at its maximum point of ripeness, made sharper by your sense that it is about to go off, okay? Now I've tried to catch the sunset at Jar a number of times and just missed it. Whether or not it will work, what happens, there's a particular character at that time of day, whether it is very intense sunsets coming out of the west I haven't yet found out, I've always arrived this side or the other of the moment, you know, I've been pretty damn close.

**LD** Glancing light?

**SB** Well you know, anyway, fantastic. It's never the same but always looks as though it is.

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- p37 *Angel of the Fifth Trumpet* detail from *Commentary on the Apocalypse of Beatus of Liebana* 11<sup>th</sup> century, Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid