Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Volume 10, 2018

Edited by Connell Vaughan and Iris Vidmar

Published by the European Society for Aesthetics

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Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Founded in 2009 by Fabian Dorsch

Internet: http://proceedings.eurosa.org
Email: proceedings@eurosa.org
ISSN: 1664 – 5278

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The European Society for Aesthetics

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Rosalind Krauss: From ‘Sculpture in the Expanded Field’ to the ‘Spectacle’ of Installation Art

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ABSTRACT. In her recent writing, the prominent art critic Rosalind Krauss dismisses installation art as a ‘spectacle of meretricious art’. By contrast, her earlier canonical writing on sculpture, particularly ‘Sculpture in the Expanded Field’ (1979), had sought to encompass site-specific works within an expanded field of sculptural practice. Krauss, once more, seeks refuge in medium; she now champions ‘knights of the medium’ – artists that, in ‘inventing’ a medium, seek to counter the ‘post-medium condition’, here conceived as the collective amnesia of contemporary art. This begs the question of whether individual artists can, indeed, invent their own medium, while many of her ‘knights’, such as Harun Farocki, are widely known *as* installation artists. I propose that installation art’s intrinsic hybridity makes it a *transmedia* rather than a *post-medium* practice. By arguing artists must invent *entirely new media*, rather than develop novel positions or juxtapositions of existing media, Krauss misrepresents a dynamic evident in the work of someone like Farocki. Indeed, what appears to be at stake for Krauss is *not* the notion of spatial assemblages per se, but rather the need to ‘lay bare the device’ – the technical support – in an act of self-reflexive criticality. However, Krauss’s notion of critical self-reflexivity, now tethered to medium, is manifest only within the internal arc of the work’s production, omitting an account of the situated beholder’s share. In an attempt to rescue installation art from the critical mire into which it is being dragged, the paper

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– which concludes with one of my own installations – proposes an alternative account of installation art as an art form that foregrounds configurational properties of the artwork's production (revealing material processes, rules, instructions or appropriations), but also its staging (its situated reception and apparatus of display).

1.

In the first sentence of her 2011 book *Under Blue Cup*, the art historian and critic Rosalind Krauss confesses her 'disgust at the spectacle of meretricious art called installation' (Krauss, 2011, p. ix). This aversion, which had been seething for over a decade, predated the near-fatal aneurysm that had led to Krauss's critical silence during an extended period of rehabilitation. It manifested itself in an intense reaction to the 1997 *documenta X* in Kassel, Germany. The work that rankled most was Carsten Höller and Rosemarie Trockel's project *Ein Haus für Schweine und Menschen*, where real pigs — living readymades — are, in Krauss's words, 'invested with the condition of "art" by the mere fact of occupying its domain' (Krauss, 2011, p. 55). Having literally constructed a concrete pig house, Höller and Trockel's work allowed spectators to observe the animals through a one-way looking glass, such that the artists claimed: 'Watching pigs alive must remind the gaze that it is always life which is at stake' (Höller and Trockel, 1997, p. 50).

But rather than confront *this* particular work, with its strong associations with relational aesthetics (which Krauss unjustifiably fuses with installation art), Krauss rejects installation art as an entire art form, despite (or perhaps because of) its prevalence in contemporary art practice. With echoes of Michael Fried's notorious critique of so-called 'literalist' art in his 1967 'Art and Objecthood' (Fried, 1998 [1967]), the aesthetic status of installation art is called into question, condemned as mere spectacle — what Fried would call 'theatricality'. In this paper I want to argue that Krauss's attack on installation art is flawed in its designation of installation art as a 'post-medium' rather than a *transmedia* art practice; thus construed, Krauss constructs a false divide between those artists that 'invent' their own medium (which she champions as her 'knights of the medium') and those that might be said to inventively explore the intrinsic hybridity transmedia practices afford.

2.

Krauss's writing from the late 1990s was already fully suggestive of the direction in which she had been travelling (Krauss, 1999a; 1999b). Nonetheless, this rage against installation art might be surprising for those primarily familiar with her earlier work, which has taken on canonical status in art history: such as *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Krauss, 1977) and the essay 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field' (Krauss, 1979), the latter which — with its famous structuralist use of the Greimas Square — had sought to encompass minimalist and site-specific works within an expanded field of sculptural practices. While Krauss's relation with minimalism remains complex—now casting it as a break with modernism — 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', in the words of Hal Foster, projected 'a minimalist recognition back onto modernism so that she can read minimalism as a modernist epitome' (Foster, 1996, p. 42). Krauss defended minimalist artists such as Robert Morris and Richard Serra against the likes of her one-time mentor Clement Greenberg and colleague Fried, both of whom saw minimalism — with its opening up of a 'situational' art — as a threat to the autonomy and medium-specificity of high modernism, exemplified by Anthony Caro. Indeed, Krauss's earlier works—with their phenomenological emphasis on notions of passage — are still routinely invoked by those attempting a definition of the very thing she now professes to hate: installation art.[2] Indeed, in 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field' Krauss states 'it is obvious that the logic of the space of postmodernist practice is no longer organized around the definition of a given medium on the grounds of material, or, for that matter, the perception of material' (Krauss, 1979, p. 43). Here, talk of medium is banished, at least in Greenbergian terms of defining its essence; rather, postmodern practice operates within an expanded field developed (though this is another story) from the binary of not-landscape, not-architecture.

So what has changed? Has Krauss simply repudiated her earlier position? Or might we find in 'Expanded Field' seeds of her future discontent with the mutable term installation art? After all, for some years prior to its publication Krauss had been on a self-confessed 'rampage against the notion of *pluralism*' (Krauss, 2014, p. 2) — a fallback position for many of her coeditors at *Artforum* when faced with the ‘post-medium’ proliferation of art practices characterising emergent art in the 1960s and 70s. Krauss had attempted to organise, and delimit, the ‘field’ into which such a diverse range of different sculptural practices were operating. So in many ways Krauss is merely replicating her earlier critique of pluralism. But perhaps, in confronting confusions in the terminology which Krauss uses to conduct the debate, we might rescue an aesthetics of installation art from the critical mire into which it is being dragged.

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[2] See, for instance, Anne Ring Petersen, who argues that 'installations can best be understood as passage works' (Petersen, 2015, p. 27).

3.

The situation is made more complex by Krauss’s choice of artists bucking this apparent trend toward spectacle. Krauss champions her ‘knights of the medium’ — artists that, in ‘inventing’ a medium, seek to counter the ‘post-medium condition’, conceived as the collective amnesia of contemporary art — an amnesia which has, as its object of loss, the engagement of a medium (Krauss, 2011). And yet these very knights are more generally regarded *as* installation artists. Yve-Alain Bois, co-author with Krauss of *Formless: A User’s Guide* (Bois & Krauss, 1997), when interviewing Krauss makes just this point: ‘some of the artists that you call the “White Knights” — the knights who are coming to save the medium formerly made possible by the white cube — do installations. Harun Farocki, Sophie Calle, or Christian Marclay, they do work in this “thing” — if it’s a medium, I don’t know — called installation’ (Bois, 2102).

Krauss responds by neither clarifying Bois's confusion about the difference between an art form and a medium, nor by denying that such works are, indeed, installations, but rather by stating that these are works that are not 'merely' installations — in other words, they do something else. Here she uses the analogy of the swimming pool to argue that these works 'bounce' against the sides of the pool — a metaphor for our relation to the wall of the museum or white cube gallery (Bois, 2012). Krauss thus defends the white cube against Catherine David, who in curating a succession of choreographed installations at *documenta X* immerses us in 'a narrative about the obsolescence of the white cube' (Krauss, 2011, p. 12). Krauss compares Farocki's work favourably with immersive 'installations by artists such as Bill Viola, in which the viewer is embraced by the video surround'; with Farocki 'the distance from bench to [video] monitor here objectifies the work, allowing the critical reflection essential to aesthetic experience' (Krauss, 2011, p. 113).

Now I am also sympathetic to this critique of uncritical immersive video art. But this suggests that what appears to be at stake for Krauss is *not* installation art per se, as seems to be demonstrated by her endorsement of numerous spatial assemblages, such as those by Farocki, but installations that neglect to lay bare their devices or to establish aesthetic distance — in other words, those works that fail to establish a reflectively uncertain relation characteristic of the aesthetic stance.

4.

I want to draw out some of the underlying theoretical problems with Krauss's position: firstly, around the viability of artists 'inventing' their own medium, where she draws upon Stanley Cavell, an issue that Dairmuid Costello has comprehensively addressed in *Critical Inquiry* (Costello, 2012); secondly, around her neglect of the role of the beholder in, to use a phrase Krauss takes directly from the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky, 'laying bare the device' (Shklovsky, 2005). Crucially, I want to argue that these problems are closely interlinked; it is the intrinsic hybridity of installation art that makes it, quintessentially, a *transmedia* rather than a post-medium art form, where different media can be combined in new and inventive ways that reflect upon their own conventions. The resulting spatial and durational dynamic, which typically introduces something of the real — the extra-aesthetic — is crucial to the defamiliarisation that Shklovsky identifies as the function of art: in other words, to shift us out of the automatic or habitual perception (or acts of ideation) associated with literal objects. Installation art, in juxtaposing the real and virtual in ways that draw attention to its situatedness, might be said to construct a dialectic relation between theatrical and antitheatrical modes, literality and autonomy — a dynamic evidenced by the work of the very artists Krauss cites as her knights.

5.

Krauss takes her recurring image of the knight's move directly from Shklovsky: 'the best writer on the conventions of art' (Krauss, 2011, p.

101). The chess analogy refers to how the knight is restrained by the board (its technical support) and the conventions of permitted moves. For Krauss, a medium is just such a technical support, articulated through conventions, and thus 'technical support' is used as a substitution for the traditional idea of a physical medium. Krauss claims that '[t]he device is the recursive formal ruse that "points" to the work's source of aesthetic pleasure', and is discovered through a reflective criticality emerging from the engagement with such a support (Krauss, 2011, p. 101). For Krauss, contemporary technical supports are typically 'borrowed from available mass-cultural forms, like animated films, automobiles, investigative journalism, or movies', a list that correlates with works by her knights: William Kentridge, Ed Ruscha, Sophie Calle, and Christian Marclay. This need for substitutions arises 'from the "discursive unity" of postmodernism, which decrees the very idea of a medium obsolete' (Krauss, 2011, p. 16).

Krauss here draws upon Cavell, and his notion of an *automatism* — an invocation of the deeply ingrained conventions of a medium. Cavell argues that traditional art bequeaths these automatisms, so that they appear both necessary and natural (not even noticed), whereas the modernist artist 'has to explore the fact of automatism itself' (Cavell, 1971, p. 107). Indeed, both Cavell and Krauss associate the 'modernist' laying bare of the conditions of an artwork's own existence with the development of a medium. Cavell writes:

> Modernism signifies not that the powers of the arts are exhausted, but on the contrary that it has become the immediate task of the artist to

> achieve in his art the muse of the art itself — to declare, from itself, the art as a whole for which it speaks, to become a present of that art. One might say the task is no longer to produce another instance of an art but a new medium within it. […] It follows that in such a predicament, media are not given *a priori*. The failure to establish a medium is a new depth, an absoluteness, of artistic failure. (Cavell, 1971, p. 103)

However, as Costello has pointed out, we need to disentangle Cavell's terminology (Costello, 2012, p. 822). Cavell develops his account in relation to contemporary music, and the reinvention of its conventions. As Costello notes, Cavell's 'account operates at the level of genre or what Cavell calls the "media of the medium" of music — the aria or sonata form, for example — and not at the level of whatever psychological mechanisms or empirical processes might be posited as *enabling* a particular artist to reconfigure the conventional forms they inherit' (Costello, 2012, p. 840). Thus Cavell's position might be reconfigured as 'outlining something like the (defeasible) criteria of competence in a given field' (Costello, 2012, p. 840).

Cavell does not therefore provide the credible support Krauss craves; Krauss's contention that individual artists must invent *entirely new media* is untenable, negating the intrinsically public, shared nature of a medium. To remove it from its cultural practice is to slip, as Costello suggests, into 'a form of artistic solipsism analogous to fantasies of a private language' (Costello, 2012, p. 847).

Juliane Rebentisch has likewise picked up on Krauss's confusion between the invention of *media* and *genres.* In noting the proliferation of the latter in contemporary art, she states:

> But I think it is characteristic of these new works of art, which simultaneously constitute new genres, that their means of (re)presentation are explicit about and even exhibit the fact that they precisely do not constitute a distinct domain separate from other arts or from the extra-aesthetic. In most cases, these are intermedial phenomena that, moreover, often also employ means of (re)presentation that are also in use outside the aesthetic. (Rebentisch, 2012 [2003], n. 15, p. 85)

Krauss concurs with the last point with regards the extra-aesthetic, acknowledging that contemporary technical supports are 'borrowed from available mass-cultural forms' while incongruously insisting that they establish a distinct domain within art. As Costello concludes, 'redescribing what such artists are doing as modifying and thereby extending or transforming — even beyond recognition — existing media remains an open and compelling option. But it is not an option available to Krauss' (Costello, 2012, p. 844).

By contrast, I want to claim that this modifying or transforming media is something that not only *characterises* installation art, but is integral to the laying bare of the device in a process of the becoming-unfamiliar of the object. In rejecting the defensible claim of novel juxtapositions, Krauss negates a defining feature of installation art (namely its trans- or intermediality) — a feature, moreover, that might feasibly do some work for Krauss in distinguishing the self-reflective practices she celebrates from those that degenerate into spectacle.

6.

Krauss's use of Shklovsky is also partial. Shklovsky saw the 'device' as a means to dehabitualise perception. For Shklovsky, perception — when associated with ordinary practical language becomes automatic or habitual, and it is therefore the function of art to defamiliarise such ordinary engagement with objects. This is clearly something Krauss's knights do; there is, however, a vital distinction between Krauss's production-oriented model (an emphasis on medium, with all its attendant problems) and Shklovsky's reader- or beholder-oriented approach, which is precisely why he is widely cited as a precursor to reception theory as it developed in Germany, shifting the emphasis from the work and its production to the relationship between text and reader (or work and beholder). As Robert Holub notes defamiliarisation 'refers to a particular relationship between reader and text that removes the object from its normal perceptive field' (Holub, 1984, pp. 17-18). In terms of installation art, that uncertainty characterises the aesthetic encounter afforded. Crucially this involves an extended duration. Shklovsky states:

> The device of art is the device of ‘defamiliarization’ of objects and the device of the form made difficult, a device that increases the difficulty and length of perception; for the process of perception is in art an end in itself and must be prolonged. (Cited in Holub, 1984, p. 18)

From a positive, rather than negative, perspective this is remarkably close to Fried’s characterisation of literal art as a durational art. As Krauss herself notes in *Passages in Modern Sculpture*:

> With regard to sculpture, the point on which the distinction between itself and theater turns is, for Fried, the concept of time. It is an extended temporality, a merging of the temporal experience of sculpture with real time, that pushes the plastic arts into the modality of theater. While it is through the concepts of ‘presentness and instantaneousness that modernist painting and sculpture defeat theater’. (Krauss, 1977, p. 202-4)

This extended temporality is an even more prevalent feature of installation art that it is with the minimalist object Fried critiques. Nevertheless, even with her knights, Krauss’s notion of critical self-reflectivity is cast within the internal arc of the work’s production, omitting an account of the situated beholder’s share. While she discusses aesthetic distance, she underplays the beholder’s embodied durational engagement that is necessary to complete the work — to enact its uncertainties or indeterminacies (its blanks or gaps). By contrast, I would claim that the beholder’s orientation — spatially, temporally, and ideologically — is brought into play, whereby the virtual space of the installation and the actual space of the situation are brought into a complex juxtaposition.

Drawing upon the literary scholar Wolfgang Iser, I have argued elsewhere (Wilder, 2018) that installation art facilitates the *configurational encounter* — an encounter which not only foregrounds configurational properties of the artwork's production (that is, explicitly revealing material processes, rules, instructions or appropriations), but also its staging (in other words its situated reception and apparatus of display). The configurational encounter compels beholder to find connections and relations for what is intentionally disconnected, through acts of ideation which are constrained by the work. For Iser, representation opens up a liminal space which oscillates between the real and imaginary, as we are forced to confront both that which is said (or shown) and that which is not said (the situation the text, or artwork, seeks to negate). This 'doubling' conditions our responses, providing an unformulated background against which what is presented transcends its literality.

7.

Installation art therefore encompasses a spectrum of possibilities as to how the juncture between real and virtual is negotiated, from the highly theatrical immersion of one of Ilya Kabakov's 'total' installations (like walking into an abandoned film set) to the self-reflective acknowledgment of the museum's limits of an assemblage by Farocki, to the architectural interventions of Gordon Matta-Clark (interventions into an ordinary domestic situation made extra-ordinary by a process, literally, of removal). This juncture must be acknowledged for the necessary aesthetic distance to transform this into an aesthetic encounter; but even Höller and Trockel's pig house involves the framing of the two-way mirror — whether one thinks this is interesting or not is another matter. But the white cube is, in itself, not the only context available to lay bare the device.

I want to end with an example, one that I know well — one of my own installations. *Skylights* (2016) was a temporary site-specific installation, commissioned by the children's charity Coram, within the former London Foundling Hospital mortuary (fig. 1). As a charity, Coram is a direct continuation of the London Foundling Hospital, founded in 1742 by Thomas Coram, and is still located on part of the original site in Bloomsbury. As well as its historic connections with patrons such as the painter Hogarth and composer Handel, the Foundling Hospital is perhaps best known for its extraordinary historic collection of tokens, or bits of fabrics, left by the mothers of the 'abandoned' children to identify the anonymised child if the mother's circumstances changed (which, sadly, they very rarely did).

The mortuary, and adjacent swimming pool, survived the demolition of the original eighteenth-century buildings in 1926, when the Hospital was relocated outside of an increasingly polluted London, eventually occupying a new site in Berkhamsted. 90 years later, both mortuary and swimming pool have been removed to make way for The Queen Elizabeth II Centre, a new national centre of excellence for children. The installation was commissioned to mark a poignant moment immediately prior to the mortuary's demolition.

For many years the mortuary functioned as a general purpose store, neglected and filled up with anything from paint to garden equipment. As an artist, I felt it was important that people experience its spaces once again without this clutter, in such a way as to reflect upon its original function. Timed to coincide with the summer solstice, the light and water installation flooded the boys' and girls' rooms, visually doubling the space through the reflections (fig. 2). The spaces were stripped back to their bare minimum, the outer roof covering removed, and two new skylights inserted into openings that had been covered up for at least 90 years: one, in the girls' mortuary (fig. 3), oriented towards the evening sun, and one in the boys' mortuary (fig. 1), to the midday sun. (It is a sad fact that boys and girls were separated as foundlings not only in life, but even in death.) These skylights were reflected in the flooded interiors (fig. 4).

The installation functioned at two levels: children — who needed no encouragement to enter the space — were invited to splash in the puddle rooms (fig. 5), while the installation prompted adults to reflect on the deeper significance of the historic spaces. The installation was thus both a space for play and a space for quiet reflection — an attempt to reanimate a space inexorably linked to the death of children prior to the building's demolition. Indeed, the need for the on-site mortuary was prompted by the high rates of nineteenth century infant mortality, its commission following an outbreak of 35 cases of typhoid fever at the Foundling Hospital in 1891. Yet it took this defamiliarisation of the space to allow people to 'see', as it were, the space for the first time. In opening up the voids that once included skylights, thus opening the flooded interior directly to the sky, the installation functioned as a prop for associational imagery. Responding to the patterns of reflected light, where, weather permitting, at particular times of the day shafts of sunlight hit the water that fills the two spaces, *Skylights* was interpreted by many as allowing the 'spirits' of children who passed through its spaces to rise up out of the building, prior to its demolition. Others spoke of a malign presence, as though the space was somehow possessed. More importantly for me was that the work's indeterminacies facilitated such conflicting associations. More importantly, the light patterns were only triggered by the movement of the water — requiring participation (or agency) to activate the wave forms. The ambient sounds of the site were also amplified inside. In the film (conceived, from the beginning, as integral to the project, in that it would be all that remained of the spaces) one can hear shouts from the nearby football pitches, children playing on Coram Fields, the constant passage of planes, and poignantly birdsong and the rustle of leaves, emanating from trees that were planted at the time of the original Foundling Hospital. The latter are in some senses the enduring legacy of the original site. Onto this sound track is overlaid György Ligeti's 1966 *Lux Aeterna, a Requiem Mass for 16 voices*, which ends with the words: Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine: et lux perpetua luceat eis (Grant them eternal rest, O Lord, and may perpetual light shine upon them).

While the 'immersive' installation might be said to function as a temporary memorial to the lives of the children it once housed, it nonetheless exploited a number of characteristics of installation art, and crucially was transparent about its configurational properties — laying bare its devices. It required the active participation of the literal beholder in order to trigger its light effects; this was a real space, defamiliarised through a minimal intervention into a ‘found’ space; the installation blurred the boundaries between architecture and art, drawing the real situation (and its distinct history and social role) into the imaginative encounter; and the installation was durational, such that time was manifest in different way. With regard to the latter, not only was this a temporary intervention, but the opening was timed to coincide with the summer solstice, the longest day of the year, and thus exploited aspects of the site’s orientation. Moreover, the space was responsive to both time of day and weather conditions, rain occasionally entering the structure through the open skylights, while engaging the constantly changing patterns of light on cloudy day. And, most importantly, the *in situ* installation engaged the history of the site, and its poignant function, through ambient sounds that we normally edit out. I hope such an installation is not to be dismissed as mere spectacle.

The film of the installation can be viewed at: https://vimeo.com/222335889

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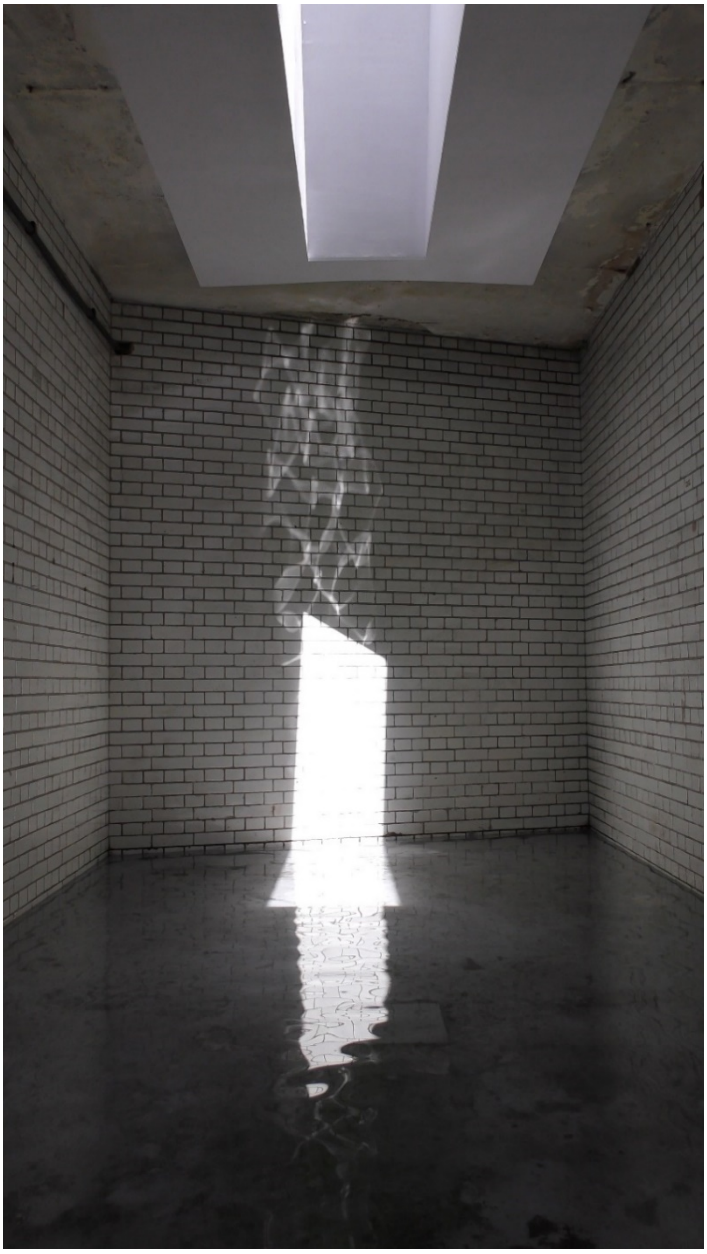

Figure 1. Ken Wilder, *Skylights* (2016), film still of installation, boys' mortuary (photo: author)

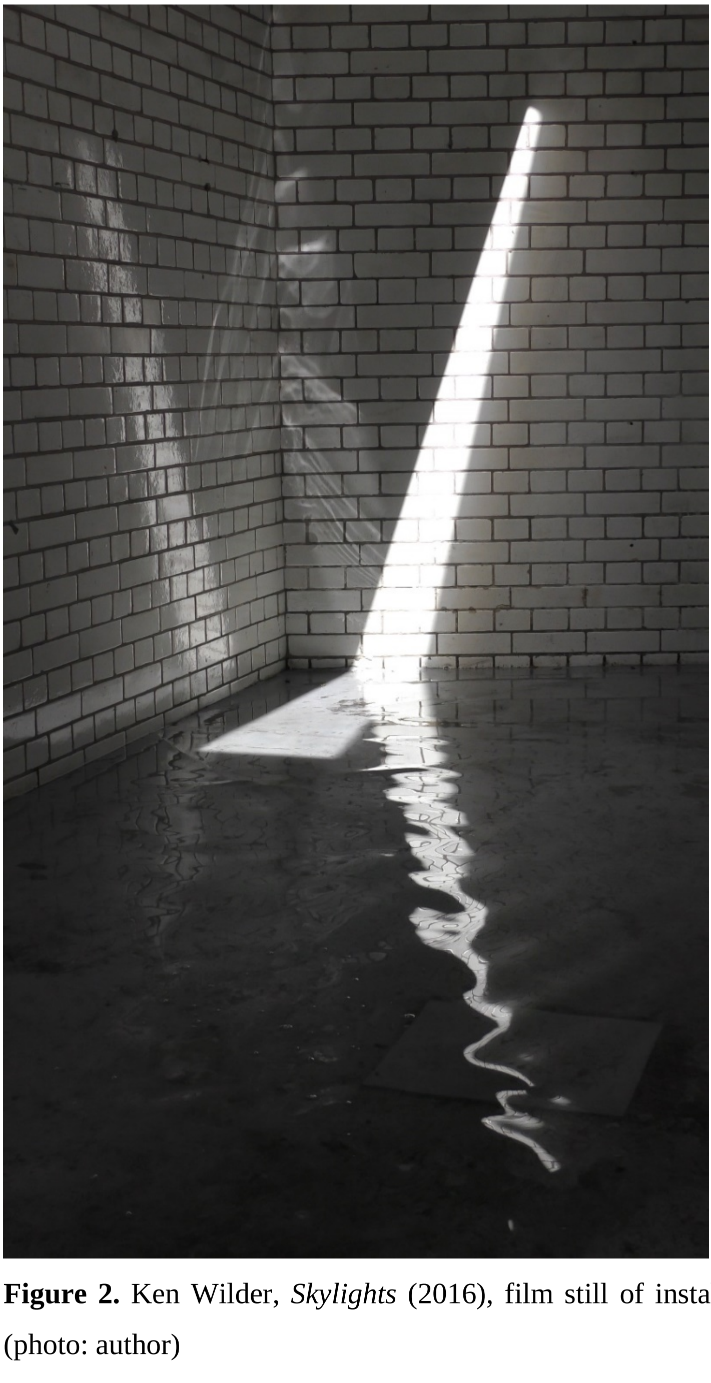

Figure 2. Ken Wilder, *Skylights* (2016), film still of installation, boys’ mortuary (photo: author)

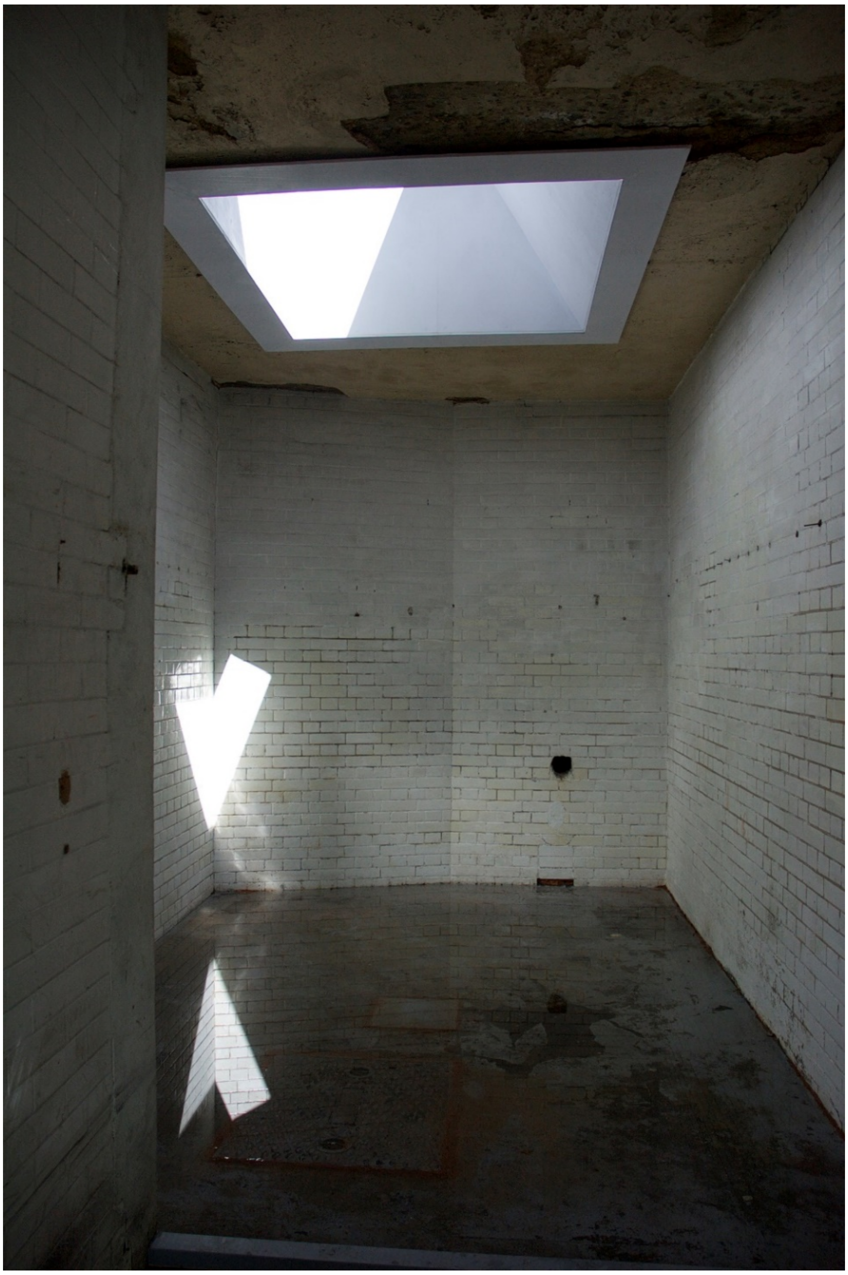

Figure 3. Ken Wilder, *Skylights* (2016), installation shot, girls' mortuary (photo: author)

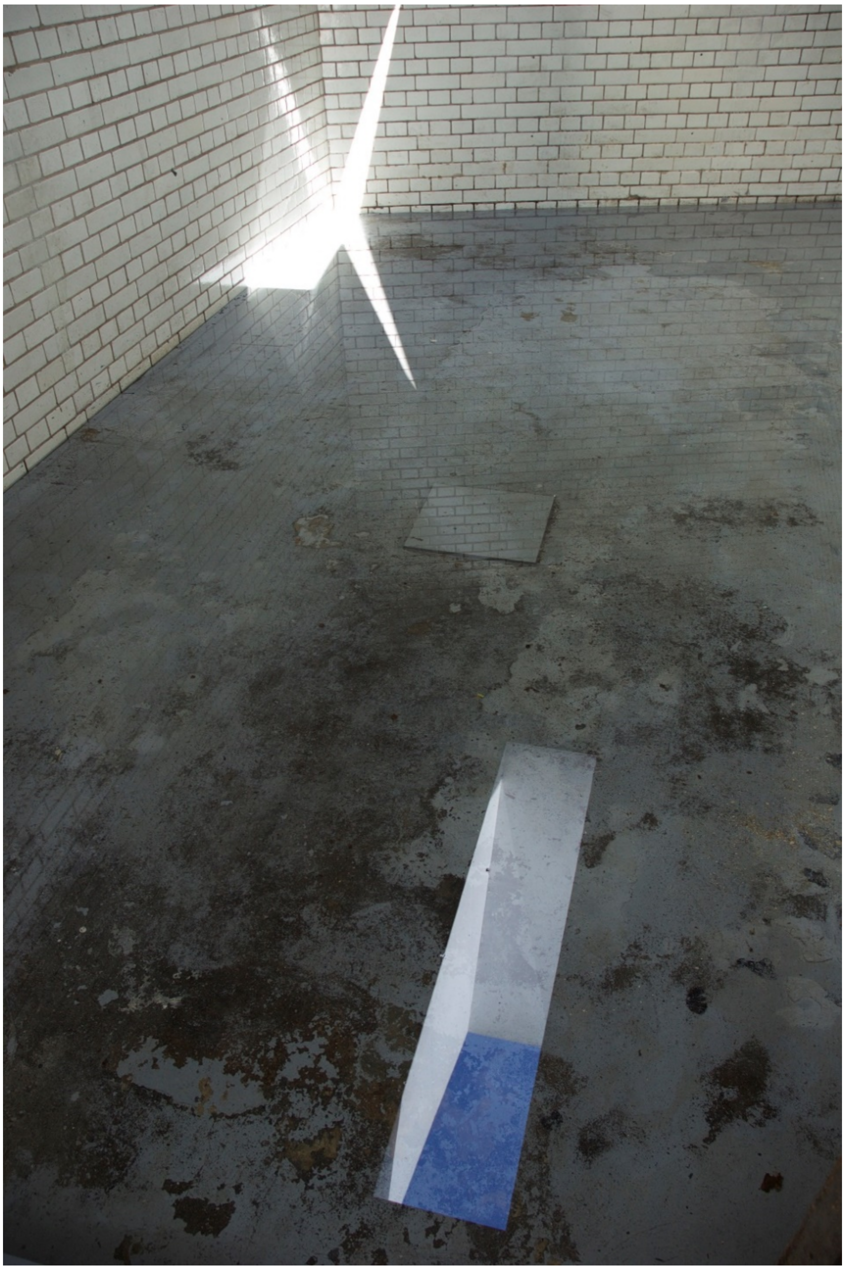

Figure 4. Ken Wilder, *Skylights* (2016), installation shot, boys' mortuary (photo: author)

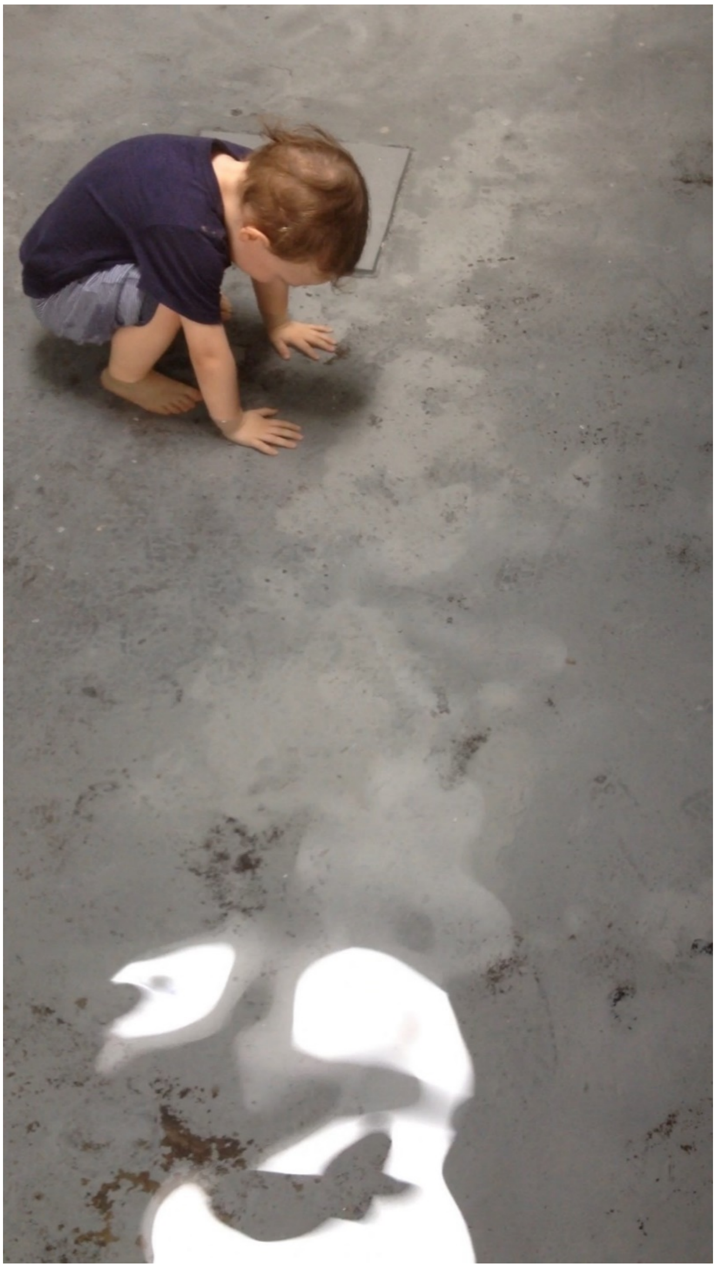

Figure 5. Ken Wilder, *Skylights* (2016), child playing in installation (photo: Colin Priest)