

Nuha Saad + Mimi Tong: Intersecting Geometries

Richard Dunn

"Architecture should challenge art. We must overcome our idea of architecture as a service profession. (...) Art critics and curators alike detest my building. Why? Because it forces them to rethink the relation between painting and space. When it comes to museums, even the most radical artists demand that architecture play second fiddle, functioning as base or easel." Peter Eisenmanⁱ

Nuha Saad and Mimi Tong's collaborative work *Intersecting Geometries* has a degree of complexity that invites, in the gallery, the kind of close looking that requires one to connect visual and material clues across the space it inhabits. In writing, the work invites a curiosity to unravel a challenging puzzle, with forays outside the piece itself.

The single, overriding quality of the galleries at Artspace Sydney is the building's architectural character. Rather, its structure cannot be ignored. The rectangular hardwood frame inside the brick exterior of a typical early twentieth-century industrial building or dockside warehouse is as insistent as Sol LeWitt's three-dimensional grid structures of the 1960's. Artspace is in a vernacular building that retains its inherent qualities as industrial architecture. However the concrete-like hardness of its tallowood frame is unrelentingly dark and heavy, lacking the matrix relationships, vertical as well as the obvious horizontal connections, that are apparent in LeWitt's early work. Gordon Matta-Clark created these desired vertical relationships so emphatically in his interventions in existing buildings in the 1970s. Any artist making a spatial work at Artspace, or indeed installing work of any kind, has to negotiate the nature of the space itself; the four-and-a-half metre grid of timber columns leading to the same dark-coloured beams and joists three-and-a-half metres above. Putting aside an architectural response to the building's reuse, *anything placed in this space*, apart from the goods it was designed to store, is in one sense superfluous or at least an imposition. This includes the white gallery walls that establish not so much the fragmented neutrality of the 'white cube' but an argument with the building itself and a new form of dilapidation. In such an argument, this building usually wins. In its way it is a beautiful building, but with its claustrophobic darkness and the raw grid marking its space it is a tough environment for art.

Nuha Saad and Mimi Tong are artists who normally work independently, and are here working together for the first time. They share an interest in architecture or building details, or at least what can happen *in* or be made to happen *to* spaces. However, they use this arguably shared zone of interest in very different ways. While Tong's work usually plays off the planes and junctions of rooms, Saad may work with a given space or, more often, make portable pieces that resemble aberrant furniture. Saad uses readymade interior moldings and architrave sections to make new structures in the gallery space that dislocate the familiar Victorian timber moldings from their function of covering the meeting of different materials. Dense combinations and repetitions combined with complex colour relations further the process of distinguishing familiar materials readily available in timber yards from their new gallery location free from any requirement to mediate between walls and windows, or doorframes, or floors. Saad's palette tends towards combinations and progressions of strong intermediate colours. That is, colours that derive from the primary colours, perhaps sit between them, and where white plays a modifying role. In this sense, and by use of baroquely shaped surfaces, Saad is not a modernist. She instead draws on an elaboration of modernism where the development of colour, as one colour becomes another, plays a key motivating role. This and the disruption caused by the irregular undulations of surface of the readymade moldings are central components of her work. Yet site specificity and the possible alteration of the idea of a particular space are implied in this kind of practice. Saad's piece at RMIT Gallery (*Victory Ace*, 2001) as part of the *Glacier* exhibition of extended painting filled an archway left relatively unaltered by architects Ashton Raggatt McDougal in their 'postmodern' renovation of Storey Hall, Melbourne. Her work both improved the space and played with the architects' use of colour to challenge the art gallery function in the building. Her work cleverly altered the gallery reception area as a reverse challenge to the architect's interior as an apparently integral part of the building. It should still be there.

Nuha Saad has previously made a piece for the same gallery space as *Intersecting Geometries* at Artspace. This earlier piece, *Pegasus Ace*, 2000 (3.5 m x 4.6 m x 4.6 m) inserted something between

building and sculpture; a right-angle corner formed by joining the spaces between three columns, the juncture of two 'walls', that completed the interior of the building more adequately than the white gallery walls, yet was clearly a foreign addition to the space. The titles of these pieces refer to other large-scale painted works that are continually visible in Sydney on the flat-sided container ships whose towering planes of painted steel have eradicated any romantic notion of the sea and shipping.

Mimi Tong has also made a piece in the same Artspace gallery, in 2004 (*Enfolding: reconfigured for Artspace*, 2m x 4m x 0.6m); a provisional freestanding wall structure set back from its location between two columns, too high to look over and large enough to interrupt the space. It too imposed itself on the gallery space. At Artspace, the open-framed construction of *Enfolding* reconfigured its earlier manifestation at SCA Gallery where it utilized a free-standing wall so that folded sheets of Tyvek™ created levels of uncertainty by their elected visibility. As Peter Eisenman has said "Folding changes the traditional space of vision"ⁱⁱ. However, unlike Saad, Mimi Tong seems to deny colour, preferring neutrality, although she uses restricted colour variations on white. Even though subdued, colour, texture and the effects of light and shadow, so evident in this restricted range, are consciously organized imaginative elements. Commencing with the inherent colour of materials, initially the textile basis of painting – cotton duck canvas – Tong uses characteristics of this material, white and taupe paint and the relationship between canvas, stretched and folded over wood frames, and the white expanse of the wall. Tong's starting point is theoretically in Derridean deconstruction/dismantling and can be particularly traced to the idea in, and aesthetics of, deconstruction in architecture; the fractured geometry of Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind's complex systems and the "betweenness" of Peter Eisenman's more intellectual practice. In any case, these are architects whose approach to the making of bounded or defined spaces is dependent upon the thinking eye and all started their 'practice' as 'theoretical' architects. As a painter, Tong focuses on space and what affects it – the way that the distorted surfaces and painting-structures change the nature of the space that they are in, subtly deflecting the wall surface and shifting our perception of the space that we inhabit and the way we can locate ourselves within it. This is clear in *Geometric Folding Experiment*, 2003, at MOP Projects, Sydney, where it is our perception of the wall that is adjusted. Our perception of the position of the surfaces of two adjoining walls is distorted and consequentially we can respond to, sense or adjust our position in relation to them. Tong's installations seek a refined response in our viewing and our body perception as they provide us with markers for our own self-awareness.

Peter Eisenman's Wexner Center for the Visual Arts at Ohio State University, 1989, redefines its site as a representation of other sites by the grids that are the essential and diminishing paradigm of their mapping: the state of Ohio, the city of Columbus, and the plan of the university campus. Curiously, the Wexner Centre's central corridor resembles a sixties LeWitt white aluminium space frame, yet with disruptions of incomplete columns and secondary or tertiary systems derived from the three parent grids. Grids are rotated against each other forming a sense of displacement or "disturbance", rather than of contemplation. The intersecting grids also make a relationship between things that are not otherwise visible. For Eisenman the ideas of Jacques Derrida have provided a useful means of reconceptualising the built environment, using the concept of 'betweenness' to create uncertainty in relationships, displacing the idea of 'two-ness'. In Derrida's idea of 'différance', even within a single point or a single work, 'spacing' is a crucial component: "...whether it is a question of dissimilar otherness or of allergic and polemical otherness, an interval, a distance, spacing, must be produced between the elements other, and be produced with a certain perseverance in repetition."ⁱⁱⁱ

Intersecting Geometries is the result of a curated collaboration and as such offers a potentially new relationship between artists, and sometimes with their world. This is reflected also in the growth of artist-initiated galleries and artist group identities over the past two-or-more decades. Putting aside the question of a curated relationship, the nature of artists' collective work with which we are dealing here, goes back to artist 'groups' such as Art & Language and General Idea where collaboration is not limited to the process of making, but is primarily in the dialogue of a commonality of attitudes; the interaction between people. The degree of communication enjoyed in many other pursuits to achieve an agreed outcome, the challenge of a community of like-minds, or the creative manifestation of a sympathy of purpose have been traditionally excluded from Western art, which is assumed to be the singular expression of a singular authorial voice. The behaviour of artists is thus expected to be unlike that of others; as if artists act alone if not outside social history. Yet collaboration offers an opportunity for artists to function in more socially

connected ways, to speculate on and to realize work (and have their thinking challenged), that would not have been possible in the solitary environment of the studio.

Before examining the artwork, the question of the position(s) from which we can 'approach' Saad + Tong's work awaits this question: How do these two artists whose practice to date has been individual and personal work together for the first time? The single work to be made will ultimately reflect the character of each artist's work, but the work of neither. As is said in India, they will 'adjust', make space for the other. But first it is necessary to discover something of the other. Not, however, by planning. In a collaboration, the process of working is as much in the chat about *not* the work as about some intended or hoped-for outcome. That this is finally work about process is evident in what is seen in the gallery. Saad and Tong discover what they share with each other as first generation Australians with similarities in family, education, in their growing up. Their similarity in their difference is striking. All of their discussion about 'the Artspace piece' and other things takes place over a period of one year, away from the gallery that is its motivating force and apparent subject. Indeed, the discussion of the dark colonnaded space can only take place somewhere else. The gallery space is something to be negotiated from a distance and strategies have to be devised for this.

Each of these artists uses materials made for other purposes. They are importers of goods from other use-zones. Consequently an important part of their work was to shop. Not in art stores, but home decorating and hardware stores. They shopped for wallpapers, shade and awning fabrics, outdoor furniture materials, DIY timber, decorators' paints and tools. They were fake DIYers house-dressing a secret project at Artspace for one month in March 2005 to later suffer, as in so many other's homes, the quick demolition of the result of all the negotiations, considerations, personal and financial investments that have brought it about. In their outings they mislead sales-people about their purpose and collected incommensurable goods.

The generating idea for *Intersecting Geometries* is what was evident to each artist in their first encounter with Artspace even if this was not specifically articulated - the grid of dark timber columns that gives a particular mood to these gallery spaces and for which the artists will provide a foil. First, they acknowledge the columns as the overriding catalyst for their project in their "scale, weight, gravity, colour and texture" for a "dynamic relationship between the installation and site". Saad and Tong have taken the originating grid in plan, perceived in space, and rotated it 30° to locate a new grid in their intervention. They have then inserted architectural 'furniture', including framed ersatz versions of the columns, cut, laid down, prop-supporting, and so on. Rather than making us aware of the obvious, the artists have provided a complicating mechanism for the space. They seek to cure it, to make it better but also to confound us and provide a secondary dis-ease by creating a dense network of transparent and translucent 'columns' and columnar fragments. Their method is that of Rietveld and of Mondrian's furniture. In the use of square-sectioned pinewood, translucent materials, open frames and painted planes, Saad and Tong have created a language that deviates from simple questions of opposition.

In starting from the premise of the columnar structure of the building, Saad and Tong have made a work that acknowledges and avoids the actualities of the space. If the first impulse was to simply accept the columns and to counteract or, perhaps, 'work with' them at their location, the final response has been to do this in a way that denies them their power. The columns are acknowledged and ignored / acknowledged and compensated. By creating a second grid at 30° and a third intermediate grid, they have made a compensatory structure that is open to other relationships. How does one find freedom in a rigidly structured space? By ignoring the structure? Or by creating another system? Saad and Tong have taken the second course. Their system is a replication of the first but without its logic. It lacks structural purpose, it lacks certainty; it has no compelling reason in the building other than to be *something else*. The purpose of the work is to be unreasonable.

It is also possible to 'understand' *Intersecting Geometries* within a Derridean framework and certainly to put aside singular equivalences of meaning, oppositions, logics, to discover something that is more permeable, to be viewed from many positions and is relative. But this is not a piece of theory made actual but a way of thinking in space; thinking carried out between two people who negotiate their own difference as much as all the possible arrangements of things that can question the space. And increasingly a viewer

is drawn to the parts, to the details, to engaging relationships of things. Small areas of deep red paint, of various neutral and grey areas of paint connect across space, drawing our eyes from this to that. These colours are always applied in small areas on surfaces of the 50 cm x 50 cm pine structure. One is consequently lead down other paths, examining the details closely. And, contrary to a lawyer's injunction, the *angel* is in the details. As one can look through the framed structures, one is also drawn to the rectangles of fabric, of wallpaper, with readymade complex textures or subtly coloured stripes. Stripes that are arranged vertically or horizontally, with transitions from pink to grey or brown to black through which other parts of the structure and fabrics can be seen; all of it lightweight and often translucent.

There is a point in the process of looking where new connections and relationships are formed in the mind that ignore the immediately obvious coagulations of structure and space. The link between like-colours or other minor similarities of texture, colour or surface dissolve the spaces between the parts to make a more complex web to be seen in close-up. Contrary to the first impulse to see the piece as a fragmented whole; as something large, a more developed looking encourages one to take a closer position to each part and to mentally connect local experience to what is seen across a larger space, or to what is remembered in the close observation of other parts, perceived at other points of time. Further, there is the subtle but necessary marker of the relationship between these inserted structures and the walls and floors of the gallery; the *shadows* cast by the gallery spotlighting of the several components of the piece give a new understanding of the three-dimensional structures. Grey distorted isometric projections now vie with the three-dimensional forms that have generated them and also with each other as conflicting projections. The inconsistency of shadows originating from multiple light sources contributes to a sense of instability and multiplicity, indeed of 'betweenness' in the viewing experience. Yet the shadows are also a sign of specificity that brings us back to the actual fabric of the building and the gallery with which we have physical contact.

The impression that is conveyed by *Intersecting Geometries* is of something provisional in the sense that the arrangement of the components was frozen for the time of public exhibition, reflected in the installations photos here, and which could transmute, over further time, into some variant of itself. The freedom inherent in this proposition of perceiving or of imagining the space of Artspace differently and provisionally is the hidden content of this work and is its procedure.

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ⁱ This well-known quote in reference to the Wexner Center for the Visual Arts at Ohio State University is taken from an unidentified source in www.archiquotes.com. Eisenman makes a crucial point for art and for architecture that is a useful way of introducing this discussion.

ⁱⁱ Peter Eisenman, 'Vision Unfolding' in Papadakis, Andreas and Toy, Maggie, eds, *Free Spirit in Architecture*, London, Academy Editions, 1992

ⁱⁱⁱ Jacques Derrida, 'Différance' in Alan Bass, *Margins of Philosophy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1982