

File 2
Critical text

Written by: Arron Santry

**In response to the
exhibition: Andrew
Kennedy, Blaine Western
*a hollow action, a room
held together by letters*
at Artspace, November
2013–February 2014**

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Andrew Kennedy, Blaine Western
a hollow action, a room held together by letters

It's been almost two months since I visited Artspace and saw Blaine Western and Andrew Kennedy's show, and in that time, I've thought a lot about the twin premises of its title, *a hollow action, a room held together by letters*. The play between these phrases tells a lot about the exhibition; the question of their relation, the question of subordinacy. It's telling that the only verb is to hold, and that both the objects refer to containers rather than contents. More telling still is that it's not a sentence at all but a kind of suspension, it reveals and describes but it doesn't do. A gesture, a hollow action. Letters to hold a room together.

The paired concepts of the show's title handily divide the work in the gallery, and the tension between the phrases is mirrored by the tensions between each of the exhibited parts. Andrew Kennedy's photographs, a numbered series of *Components* that share the name of the show, hang in the main gallery. With a single exception, they are suspended on a temporary structure of aluminium rails, each framed in oak, hanging in space. Visitors entering the gallery come in facing the exposed backs of two of the photographs. The linearity of the display structures suggests a path through the gallery, but standing here or there and looking around, it becomes clear that this is a more a gesture towards the idea of exhibition design: carefully planned not with optimal viewing in mind but an attempt to reconsider

the space, to call attention to the experience of being and looking in space.

The photographs themselves function in a similar way, their subjects acting as gestures towards or away from particular ways of seeing. The one picture hung directly on the gallery wall is split in two, showing a hand on a window crank next to a partially opened window. The form is borrowed from narrative art—cinema or comics—and only invites the assertion of action, in much the same way that the arrangement of the space only suggests a conventionally designed exhibition. Above the photo, Artspace’s windows are open.

An unfinished Rietveld chair, and two pictures of intersecting sections of wood, seem to pull in the same direction. They gesture towards an absent whole, something beyond the frame against which they can be judged. But other photographs, one showing a small detail of the wooden frame of a mostly unseen piece of furniture, and another a fibrous drop sheet thrown over something unseen, suggest an alternative interpretation. These pictures are more formal, even if they borrow less from modernism. They point to surfaces, to frames, and so to themselves, and the pictures they’re hung alongside. Taken as a series, each part redirects interpretation; the plan of the space isn’t arbitrary, but

ambivalent. Connections span the space and new paths emerge. The larger photographs hang on movable frames as if to emphasise this connection-forging property of the layout.

The other pictures show, in series, a craftsman working on a sheet of grey paper with a blade. Photograph by photograph, parts are cut away and a geometric pattern emerges. The works are thematically similar, gesturing towards narrative, towards action. Questions of purposefulness, of form, and of formalism emerge. The reflexivity of these images—the care to consider the arbitrary nature of artistic creation while at the same time contextualising it within a meaningful framework—turns the other pictures inside out too. The series, along with its support structures, becomes a kind of meta-exhibition: the artist produces the viewer looking at the artist produce the viewer.

So what is the hollow action of the title? Is it the act of creation itself, the transformation of one thing into some other thing? This is suggested by the deadpan cause-and-effect of several of the photographs; the only photographs with hands show either something emblematic of art-making or something automatic and mechanical, a kind of joke maybe. But on the other hand, many of the photos don't share this quality, and instead make this or that reference, gesture in this or

that direction. What does an image do when it gestures? Well, nothing. Or almost nothing. *You* do something: you think of an action, you make a connection, you do the heavy lifting under the instruction of the image, or of the artist who produced it. So this gesture, this almost-nothing, maybe that's the hollow action, the conduit between two points.

In the main room of the gallery, along with Kennedy's photographs and structures, is a small glass-topped table. Displayed on it is a collection of archival material relating to the practice of New Zealand architect Maurice Smith compiled by Blaine Western relating to the practice of New Zealand architect Maurice K. Smith. Just as the metal bars that organise the gallery space only gesture to conventional exhibition design, this table of articles, photographs, drawings and documents only gestures to the idea of an archive. In a talk given in the gallery, Western was adamant about this, that it not be interpreted as an attempt to fully archive and document the architect's practice. I think it's closer to an archive than he thinks it is, especially given that its function in the exhibition seems to contextualise for visitors Maurice K. Smith's other works, which take this material as a starting point. But by stripping away any archival prosthetics, he makes the table act as a record of his own process, his own practice, as much as he makes

it about Smith. Western links the two bodies of work through a gestural quality way that seems to resist the linear narratives of influences, which the artist seems keen to reject.

Across the room, a section of the wall has been removed and filled in with a kind of impressionistic formwork. It's an openly absurd gesture, but executed with the kind of deadpan tone that Kennedy also employs, and toys in the same way with the viewer's self-awareness in/of space. Like the archive table, it's something that might have been functional, but it's been altered to redirect interpretation. The formwork relief plays more loosely with Smith's history; it's a rendering of the formwork for a wall Smith was to create, which may or may not have been completed. Western collapses this historical possibility in on itself by exaggerating its tenuousness. Now it exists as a permanently-temporary structure, architectural taxidermy. Taking cues from Smith's practice like this, the idea of *a room held together by letters* comes into focus. The blueprint as a metaphor for an approach to history and historiography, to interpretation and reinterpretation. A diagrammatic approach that imagines form as a vessel for content, and a recreation that privileges this relationship. A respect for its form, but a greater affinity with its spirit.

On the other side of the formwork, in the most domestically-sized room of the gallery, are two reproductions of excerpts of murals Smith designed for a home. In the context of this exhibition, where only two small fragments are reproduced and the larger scheme lost, and where there's nothing but white paint and concrete to interact with, the murals behave like paintings. They're so far removed from their original context that there's no choice but to take the artist's explanation as fact, which leaves the question of what to do with them in this exhibition context. It's a question I don't think I can answer, but I do think that it's an action that contrasts sharply with the table and wooden relief. Where those works used a gestural touch to link Smith's practice with Western's, and in doing so resisted the standard linearity of research and reproduction, the murals aggressively repurpose historical work and resituate it. There's nothing hollow about this action, but it does provide an alternative way to process the second idea of the show's title. The arbitrariness of being held together at all is rejected in these two murals. They are suspended, like the photographs, but suspended out of place, out of time. There's no making sense of them, they are simply held together by the fact of their form. A cynical turn-around, maybe, but useful as a foil.

The other point of connection between Kennedy's and Western's work is a literal one; an aluminium beam projects through a wall into a long narrow room, where it supports a screen. The screen is framed and divided into five sections by the same wood that frames the photographs in the other room. The divisions seem to reproduce a window though, rather than act as a formal device. The video projected onto the screen shows several views of a house designed by Harry Turbott.

In long takes, the camera captures the house and its garden. There's no sentimentality towards the subject of the film, although as some of the long, empty shots roll on, there's a sense that you should acknowledge *something*. The film is paired, though not exactly, with an audio track composed and recited by Western. It runs forty minutes long; the film runs just over ten minutes. The audio is derived from conversations with people who have worked with and known Smith, and those who have lived in his houses, as well as from Western's own research. It ranges in tone: journalistic, poetic, droll, deferential. Paired in this way, how you interpret the video is very much dependent on how you respond to the audio work. If you stay for the full forty minute runtime, you'll tour the house and its grounds with four different guides; if you stay for a shorter time, you're left to make a best guess

of the relationship between Western and his subject, between the film and the audio, between this work and the rest of the exhibition. This set up acknowledges the asynchronicity that characterises architecture, the gulf that divides lived experience of space and the materiality of it. The video gestures to one aspect while the audio gestures to another.

Western's other video employs the same camera technique, filming along a mosaic wall, close enough to see every individual piece of tile. If the first video is concerned with the experience of architecture, this video is more interested in its form. A continuous seven minute shot, the video objectively records the wall, which remains richly coloured and intact, except for a few chips and stains. It's as unsentimental as the other film, but the intense closeness of the camera to the subject, at the expense of any kind of context, seems to indicate admiration. Either way, the restrained camerawork of both videos has a gestural quality that produces if not an appreciation then an awareness of architecture and the spaces it creates. The emphatic addition of a plywood wall makes the space totally immersive; the sound of the two audio tracks in particular overlap, and the rich colour of the mosaic video bleeds into the space.

It's from the longer audio track that the second part of the title of the show is derived, a reference to Smith's architecture among many other references that meld into a cohesive literary reinterpretation of his work. The doubling of the ideas of language with space can't be coincidental, and so it makes sense that it's this meandering recitation that ultimately unites Western's attempts to reinterpret and engage with the legacy of Smith's work. Like Smith himself, it's with letters that he manages to contain this atemporal space.

While Kennedy and Western pull in different directions, make different references, they are united by this gestural approach the experience of space in time. Their negotiation of the space is both reflexive and referential; their collaboration reconfigures even the notions of linearity and historicity and, through these hollow actions, create a network of associations beyond experience itself.

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*Arron Santry is an independent curator and writer.
He lives in Taipei, Taiwan. He was the 2011–12
Curatorial Intern at Artspace, where he curated
alienate/demonstrate/edit.*