



## Transformation of the 'Depot'

Some thoughts on the art of Dagmar Glausnitzer-Smith

---

**I first met Dagmar Glausnitzer-Smith** when she was a student at Goldsmiths College and I was a tutor there. If we had not remained friends I would have remembered her anyway for a whole array of personal qualities, amongst which generosity to others, good humour and honesty made her company always a pleasure.

More immediately relevant, however, is my recollection of her work and the complex reflections on reality which were generated by it. In an Art School context at least, the persistence and authenticity of her commitment were quite out of the ordinary and, though the philosophical implications of that word 'Reality' may well make her project sound inflated or self-conscious in its ambition, that was never the case. Motivation that is authentic has a way of tacitly acknowledging the seriousness of Art's purpose whilst remaining innocent in its service and Dagmar (D) the artist, has always been for me an intriguing combination of innocence and sophistication. I never knew just what she was looking for. Her practice embraced any number of different forms and she could be both object-maker and performance artist, with occasional recourse to film and video. I did know, however, that stylistic consistency would always have been a false security for her.

We talked a lot and I watched things come and go from her workspace. I especially recall a consignment of railway sleepers having been negotiated and somehow transported from a local rail depot. The heavy wooden slabs brought not just their constructional possibilities (and a storage problem) but a consolidation of the idea that D managed a kind of supply depot on her own behalf. The character of this depot (her word) would alternate between utility – a stockpile of stuff to make things with – and periodic formal climaxes when the raw material would become an image of itself; the 'Depot' took on a metaphoric life.

In art terminology D is basically an installation-maker though more by osmosis than calculated adoption of the genre. For her, the appropriation of space or of a specific place as integral to a constructed metaphor follows naturally from the fact that we are always somewhere in particular – where we live, where we work ( and they are probably much the same for her). We move constantly back and forth between our domestic base and a range of destinations, some of which are local and habitual, others more distant, infrequent or exotic. But the journeys, in both prospect and retrospect, give shape and a veneer of purpose to our lives; they also confer a fragile sense of security. This abstract map of movement within a social/cultural frame of reference is offered as both the extension and the expression of identity; its shapes and characters are her subject matter.

In such an enterprise, I don't know whom D would see as her closest creative counterparts. Artists as diverse as Beuys, Boltanski and even Haim Steinbach all represent precedents for some aspect of her project, though only in Beuys is the human condition or 'fate' metaphorised both so consistently and yet so obliquely. Each of these artists invests heavily in the assembling or juxtaposing of parts, conceivably in the belief that vital knowledge is lost but recoverable in the spaces between things – specifically, the innumerable products of human culture - or that conventional forms of classification actually obscure meaning rather more than they enhance it. In Beuys and Boltanski, that intuition is given a mystical or pseudo-religious expression that would be inappropriate to Steinbach's purpose, but all three and D herself are metaphysical artists and all of them renounce the consumer-economic assumption that meaning resides essentially in utility.



As if to emphasise that renunciation, most of the objects that D accumulates in the cause of Art are the fall-out from consumer economic production. They are also in a metaphoric sense only 'passing through'. The stillness which one contemplates in the installations is to be understood as a moment of coincidence and a conceit of Art. Each of her orchestrations of parts is trying to make palpable the complex network of movements and transactions within which individual objects normally exist and to distil some essence of alternative meaning into a moment of clear perceptual understanding. The problem that the objects, in all their particularity, pose to that ambition is a reflection of the mystery that we are to ourselves. We move from one circumstance to another, as we move from youth to age and from life to death, for the most part seeming to be anchored in an infinite present, but a vehicle for whatever

sensations combine the legacy of past experience, the scope of present context and our hopes or fears for the future. Periodically, we see the effect of passing time, but we either do not see or we cannot afford to see the continuous process of erosion which eventually obliterates all that we would usually call identity. In these terms, security in the moment is always a delusion, but in the moment we can find intervals of self-reflective calm. It is one of Art's functions to provide such occasions and the self-knowledge that is potential there may be the only real security we have.

The title of D's Picker Fellowship installation of 1992 – 'Fate Room' and that proposed for the forthcoming 'Transit Station' confirm both her long term preoccupations and the metaphoric (and metaphysical) nature of her language. Both installations are at one level archives of disinherited, mostly mundane objects reclaimed from a kind of contemporary cultural limbo. The titles straddle the cusp between prosaic and poetic meaning in the sense that whilst we can contemplate our future in



an emotionally neutral state our 'fate' is a much more emotive matter; the very sound of the word presupposes dramatic and life-changing events. Bus depots or railway stations are for the most part unremarkable places, but 'transit stations' are portentous with echoes of displacement, exile, political tyranny. It is not that D's work is about these things as such; it was never overtly political. Its essential concern is with the difficulty of ever seeing the whole picture. That is the source of an anxiety which pervades and energises the fabric of all her installations as surely as it informs the traditional art object. We try by adoptions of poetic licence and the use of technical artifice to 'still' the world's movement so that we might see more clearly, but we know, even as we do this, that what we then see is not 'Reality'. Reality worth the name is synonymous with endless transformation; it can be exciting, but bewildering and its representation seems to require some inbuilt acknowledgment of the impossibility of the task if it is to avoid seeming pompous.

Ultimately, the character of D's installations is tragicomic in the face of imponderables. By their nature and by way of the artist's acquiescence, the 'archives' seem always incomplete, parts never quite seeming to fit the whole and in this they reflect life as we know it – an often perverse experience in which fate or coincidence constantly derails our best made plans. But the promise that all might eventually cohere in 'some clear' instance of meaning or 'enlightenment' is made tangible and that is the foundation for their success. Against that support, the formal structures, the conceptual events and the object relationships which they offer for contemplation beggar a large question: Is

the world as we know it a matter of accident or design? Accident seems unthinkable but possible; the alternative raises questions of authorship and responsibility but it too can seem unthinkable! The recurring form of D's installations - of her originating 'Depot' - takes the sting out of these confrontations whilst holding them in focus. This is managed without undue recourse to the mystical or the religious, without sentiment and without indulgence in the aesthetic – though there is beauty everywhere in the details. The metaphysical and the intellectually intimidating are made amenable to extended reverie in a context richly empowering to the imagination and challenging to the mind. It is a considerable achievement.

Tony Carter  
October 2003

