Noughts and Crosses

Jane Rendell

Two players, two pencils and a piece of paper: all the ingredients necessary for a game of noughts and crosses. Except, of course, for the noughts and crosses – the signs – themselves. To play the game, one must construct a grid by drawing four lines, two vertical crossed by two horizontal. This nine-squared composition creates the space for play.

***

On approaching London Bridge Station ticket barrier on Sunday 8 July 2007, the day that the Tour de France cycled from central London to Canterbury, we were confronted by an unexpected sign – a white symbol of a bicycle on a sky-blue square on which was superimposed a large red cross. The visual message was clear and the ticket inspector at the barrier confirmed it verbally – no bicycles today due to the large number expected! Emerging from the station at Ashford, to watch the logo-clad peloton of the Tour de France speed round the town's ring road, we noticed a trio of men dressed in not-quite recognizable green uniforms with bicycles whose handles appeared to be antlers. Heading for the traffic lights to cross the road in order to scrutinize the trio more closely, we found the button at the zebra crossing too high to reach.

Something in Ashford was not quite right.

Lost O is an exhibition of site-specific art curated by Michael Pinsky. The show was created in response to a very specific condition, the removal of the circular ring road around Ashford. This is part of the decision, taken by town planners and traffic engineers, to continue the Shared Space Scheme, an experiment carried out in seven cities across Europe to produce a new kind of urban place where there is no separation between pedestrians, cars and bicycles, and no road signs giving instructions which distinguish between those different modes of transport. In this scheme, the relation of one road user to another is not determined in advance but established through live interaction. With this context in mind, Pinsky commissioned 11 international artists to make works in Ashford, temporary site-specific installations in response to the loss of the ring road and in anticipation of the new social space.

Several artists made works, which related to the flow of movement along the ring road. Roadsworth created Universal Synchronicity, where new markings, a flock of yellow bird-like icons, were stencilled along the road, referencing the peloton or 'flock' of cyclists in the Tour de France, who, as the artist describes, must co-operate while simultaneously and paradoxically being in competition with one another. Pinsky discusses the interests of the kind of 'activist' artists he invited to participate as 'a point of convergence' with the experimental spirit of this new urban project which also goes against the grain of convention, questioning the logic of dividing different kinds of vehicle and movement from one another.[1]

The role of the ring road as a dividing line, a boundary as well as a space of flow, was investigated by number of artists. Brad Downey's work, for example, confronted the pedestrian with these issues each time s/he failed to reach the button to stop the traffic and cross the road. Bryony Graham, through the period of her artist's residency in Ashford, crossed the divide created by the ring road daily, learning from the experience of those involved in physical production of roads – tarmac-ers, slot-cutters, white-liners, yard-men – to make hybrid objects, domestic items fashioned from tarmac and roses sculpted from clay, materials added and subtracted in road fabrication.

In St Mary's churchyard, located in the centre of the town, at the empty heart of the ring road, we rediscovered the 'brigade' of three men we had spotted earlier. Initially envisaged by French artist Olivier Leroi to guard the Castle of Chambord in France, the trio passed enigmatically through the streets of Ashford with their deer–cycles and uniforms that 'crossed' hunting and military outfits, making notes on the activities of the local population, including the local wild-life in the churchyard. In between the headstones, on the grassy turf, we came across another unexpected set of project participants – a flock of sheep – Diminished Seventh by artists Thomson + Craighead. This scene of visual tranquillity typical of traditional English village life was interrupted each time the sheep moved – the bells they wore around their necks struck a 'following chord', one that anticipates and waits to be resolved. As we loitered in the churchyard, another unusual group, this time of people, approached, their speed and mass building in momentum; they engulfed us and then melted away. For Flock artist Gary Stevens trained 30 Ashford residents to follow a simple set of rules: no single person was to lead the

others, instead they were to copy one another. Individually each action appeared quite human, yet taken together, Flock suggested an animal motion, an extraordinary form of street life, pointing to the as-yet-unknowable urban interactions to come.

In the church itself, on the ceiling, at the crossing point of the nave and its transept, Pinsky located a work composed of three concentric rings. Placed at the 'epicentre' of Ashford, or as Pinksy describes it, at 'the hub' that the 'wheel' of the ring road makes around the town, is Orbital by Simon Faithfull. This 'movie mandela', according to Pinsky, which replays three circular journeys around London, references 'the concentric circles of Dante's heaven and hell'.

Following the High Street from the centre of town back out onto the ring road, we discovered the final circle of the day, a sacred grove, a new double ring of signs, set back and obscured from the busy highway. For his own Lost O, Michael Pinsky took the road signs discarded due to the new traffic policy generated through the Shared Space Scheme and gathered them together to make a new ring. The reconfiguring of these signs in a transformed set of relations, as a symbol, and their relocation in alternative physical sites and semantic contexts as an art work, addresses different viewers, producing a more complex space of interpretation and interaction.

The removal of each sign from the stability and specificity of its original context, its roadside location and simple role of ordering a single traffic direction resulted in the loss of one form of meaning. The reconfiguration of the signs in a circle produced another, an apparently simple geometry with all the highly-loaded symbolic meaning that circles suggest: the coming together of the ring of the camp fire, the sun of life-giving potential, the place of origin – the circle that is not only full but also empty – the zero or 'nought'. Their relocation in a circle in a new site, albeit a roadside one, created an unexpected twist. This site, suggested by road traffic engineers, followed all the health and safety guidelines, yet maintaining a kerbside position, while also arranging the signs as a multiple rather than a single direction-giving entity, produced a situation where the signs continued, all at once, to communicate their original signifieds, in multiple voices both confusing and disorientating. This semantic cacophony was believed to dangerously distract drivers and so the unruly Lost O, a veritable forest of signs, had to be moved out of sight of the road users.

Deprived of their intended audience, these signs – typical of the kind we know as the index, that 'point out' their signifieds to their receiver, as well as the icon, that visually resemble their signifieds – were rendered functionless, with no-one to command. If the function of a traffic sign is to communicate directions, then to remove this role by reconfiguring the signs in a circle and relocating them away from the road is to defunction the traffic sign. In this configuration and in this location the new signified of these signs is their lack of functionality. To think of these signs as an art work, is to reposition the signified or lack of function as a cultural signifier, and to point to art's lack of function as its communicative form. As the cultural theorist Roland Barthes has commented with respect to urban semiology, 'the signifieds are like mythical creatures, extremely imprecise, and at a certain point they always become the signifiers of something else; the signifieds are transient, the signifiers remain'.[2] For Barthes, it is the city which activates an infinite chain of metaphors, bringing alive the erotic dimension of meaning, in 'the place of our meeting with the other'.[3] The final location of the Lost O produced an interesting interaction with the user. In discovering this gathering of discarded traffic signs tucked-away rather than presented upfront, instead of being dictated to from afar, it was possible to wander among them and meet the other.

Dislocated from the anchor offered by the road and its users this particular set of signs were seemingly set adrift, but not entirely free. By remaking them into a double circle, Pinsky ensured that the signs referenced the loss of the town, not once but twice – the loss of the ring road, Ashford's O, but also its 0, its zero, its nought – Ashford has lost nothing. Barthes, in discussing how 'we attribute an ever-growing importance to the empty signified, to the empty place of the signified' refers to the empty centre of Toyko as a place which produces semantic meaning, arguing that this 'empty "focal point"' is necessary for the organisation of the rest of the city, and suggesting that 'elements are understood as signifying rather by their correlative position than by their contents'.'[4]

Facing not inwards but outwards, these once abandoned, now reclaimed, signs circle the empty space at the heart of the sacred grove, announcing the town's loss and their own lack. They address their new viewers together at once, a cloud of floating signifiers free at last of the grasp of the signifier, they call out in joyful chorus, expressing Barthes' understanding that the poem

of the city 'unfolds the signifier', and his desire for the semiology of the city to 'grasp' this unfolding and make it 'sing'.'[5]

***

Cycling into Mas D'Azil, a small French town north of the Pyrenees, the site of a famous cave and its prehistoric paintings, are a series of crosses, fourteen in number, that lead to a church. Travelling at bike-speed along the valley, the hillside is experienced as an abstract pattern of signs, yet to walk the Stations of the Cross is a very different experience. For a non-catholic, even for someone with no religious affiliations, it is difficult not to consider the act of carrying a crucifix, an object that will shortly display your dying carcass, up a dusty hill in the heat of the sun. However much one knows of the fourteen stations, and their symbolic meaning in Christian faith, it is enough to know that the path creates a ritual, a significant sequence of what otherwise might be understood as sporadic points on a hillside. The believer traces a line of connection between the crosses, links their locations as part of a journey, which draws ever closer to the final destination – the main cross of the church.

The town of Mas D'Azil has a loosely gridded plan, two main streets frame a central square, where a large café terrace fronts a car park, with a petanque plaza tucked in just behind under some plane trees, and next to that, the art centre where Pinsky spent a summer residency in 2006. On a hot midday in August, except for the tourists cooling off under the café's awning, the streets are empty, there is nothing to do; the rhythmic pulsing of the town's other cross is the only sign of life. On remembering this vibrant green cross represents the pharmacy, my recognition turns to excitement, these white interiors are always full of unusual bottles to smell, but quite quickly, this turns to irritation, I am in France, and the pharmacy will not open for another four hours.

Michael Pinsky's Healing Wall (2006) consists of nine crosses, constructed out of green neon tubes, organised in a square three by three. All the crosses are of equal size, and each one stands vertical. Yet they are not all made of the same combination of neon tubes. Five look alike and are positioned at the centre and the four corners making a diagonal cross; the remaining four are of a different type, occupying the middle square of each edge. The grid flashes endlessly

in two separate and disorientating sets of rhythms. The radiant green of the single pharmacy light glows with hope, but its reworking, through repetition, into a jarring pattern of pulses, casts the viewer with a sickly and nauseating pallor.

Along with the afore-mentioned circle, the cross is one of the most common, if not the most laden, cultural symbols. In western society, as icon it refers directly to the cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified, as symbol it references his death and resurrection (the sacrifice he enacted in order to relieve human suffering). As a geometrical figure there are multiple versions of the cross, only in some are there four arms, each of equal length, in several the centre or the crossing point of the arms becomes the key focus, generating a mandela-like pattern enclosed by a square or circle, like the sun cross which incorporates a four-armed cross within a circle. Turn the cross 45 degrees and you have the saltire, also known as the boundary cross, since the Romans used this sign as a barrier. This is also the 'x' marks the spot of the treasure hunt, the sign of failure in the schoolbook, the mark of the voter in the general election, and the 'cross' of noughts and crosses. Line the crosses up in a row, and then again another row, and a grid is produced. A sign not of the one, but of the many, not of religious deity, salvation and moral codes of conduct, but of democracy and rational planning, the key form of land division in both communism and capitalism.

The origin of the modern grid has arguably been located as the crossing of two lines in ancient Egyptian architecture and planning, the sun's arc from east to west and the flow of the river Nile from south to north. The grid was also used in ancient Rome to plan urban layout, and for the design of Renaissance cities, but it is through industrial capitalism that the grid has emerged fully fledged as the corner stone of urban design, allowing for clarity in land ownership and division, and order in the naming of streets and physical orientation.

Healing Wall was originally produced for Panacea, a collaboration between Michael Pinsky, Zoë Walker and Neil Bromwich, conceived of as a vehicle for producing and showing new work. Panacea has been discussed in relation to the French notion of 'bien-etre' and the distinction between treating illness and maintaining health, as well as with respect to the often quite military approach taken by the medical profession to invasions of the body by cancer, explored so bravely in the works of Jo Spence. Panacea, meaning cure or remedy, aims to investigate the

cultural links between medicine and art, which both figure as part of a modernist-inspired social desire for progress, curing 'illness' through drugs on the one hand, and fighting social ills through aesthetic objects on the other, resulting in more enlightened new world.

All these are interesting and relevant observations, but in relation to the development of Pinsky's own practice, there is also a link to be made to his interest in pattern. His activation of the sign – the icon, the index and the symbol – through relocation and repetition generate spaces that suggest a potential infinity. The interplay between figure and ground are resonant in his individual works, but also present as a recurring feature of the development of his practice over the past ten years: one work might spawn or reappear in another, a concept or form might move from the foreground for one project, only to recede into the background for another. These patterns also run through the making and remaking of the Panacea show where the display and redisplay of different combinations of works over a network of sites replays the interest in pattern at the scale and through the specific themes of this particular vehicle, demonstrating how repetition can be a mode of reproduction which does not always act to make more of the same.

Pinsky's Viral Planting, composed of hundreds of tiny coloured plastic flowers repeats or perhaps more accurately replicates the avian flu virus. If replication means to make a copy of oneself, then the work has not only copied the dominant image of the virus circulated in the press, but has also copied itself. Originally made for the split-level gallery at Le Parvis, the work was positioned so that viewer could gain a view from above; it was later remade as a wall piece for Cornerhouse. In copying or reproducing the image, it was transformed from painting to field. Viral Planting can also be understood as a design or prototype for the planting of an outdoor landscape, indeed the artist intends it as such, indicating that this is an expansive vision, or that there is an extended version of this work, one which in multiplying breaks the frame, suggesting the replication of the virus this image depicts and the horror of non-contained contamination it inspires. The media view of this virus, which generated such public panic, is for now captured in the frame as an icon. Pinsky intends to remake this work in the future in response to the sight of another potentially epidemic virus which could threaten, like the fear it engenders, to spread like wild fire.

Like Viral Planting, another Panacea work, this one called Crawl also uses the form of a strong geometry to contain the spread of its pattern-making. Originally a video work projected onto the water at the Victoria Baths in Manchester, Crawl was shown in a circular frame when Panacea was at the Cornerhouse. It comprises documentation taken by Pinksy of different swimmers and groups of swimmers in the public baths. The footage is repeated, layered and edited to produce a patterning reminiscent of the movement of shoals of fish and families of bugs. Think of the fast repetitive motion of multiple water boatmen over the surface of a pond, while in the muddy shadows beneath you can see the glint of slow-moving goldfish. The smaller scale brought to mind by the circular framing of the work in the gallery positions us behind the microscope, examining up close the beautiful modulations of those very bacteria we shirk from at the public swimming pool, the germs released in the toddler's warm pee, the verocas lurking underfoot in the discoloured grout of the crosses between the tiles on the changing-room floor.

***

Pinsky set up an exhaustive database of all the tiles used for external decoration over 500 years of history in Torres Verda, Portugal, for Horror Vacui. Strangely enough each tile, regardless of its historical origin, was the same size, 140mm by 140mm. Pinksy then generated a pattern – we might call it a meta or an ur-tile – that incorporated all the others, starting with the pattern of one and merging this into another until he had included all the town's tiled variations.

100 people were each sent a tile and invited to the gallery at a specific time and day to recompose the ur-tile. One might imagine, as I did, that this task would take a long time, and would ensue in chaos, with a hundred people each trying to find those whose tile edges matched their own. But this turned out to be an entirely orderly affair, where the entire work was reconstructed in 23 minutes. Completed the tiled grid was intact – it had no gaps.

The work will move on to six more sites in Europe, The production of the ur-tile at Torres Verda was recorded and Pinsky intends to do this again at the next six venues. When the work returns to Torres Verda after its European tour it will include the seven films, and so chart the repeated reconstruction of the work in each site. Pinsky has asked that those who are not able to add

their tile to the whole send an excuse that will be located in place of the tile itself. So at some future time it might be that the ur-tile will consist of a grid of excuses not tiles, where one kind of sign takes the place of another.

The work is titled Horror Vacui, a term which refers to a fear of emptiness, and the desire to avoid empty spaces by filling surfaces with patterns. But the production of pattern as well as emptiness is connected to psychic conditions. The work of Sigmund Freud has showed how in response to the repression of child hood trauma, repetition is linked to compulsion in the actions of the neurotic, but also how the repeating of an action may also be one of liberation. In the analytic process, for example, the working-through of repressed material during the course of an analysis can lead to a release from traumatic memories.[6] The making of patterns, an action that involves the repetition of motifs, might avoid leaving surfaces blank, but this does not necessarily circumvent fear. Freud also understood repetition in terms of doubling, as an uncanny effect.[7] Immersion in the visual pattern of wallpaper for example can produce of feeling of falling out of the world and into an abyss or alternatively of being trapped by a florid and enchanting screen, both strange spaces akin to the experiences of vertigo, agoraphobia and claustrophobia.[8] Jacques Derrida talks of how 'the operation of the mise en abyme always occupies itself (activity, busy positing, mastery of the subject) with somewhere filling up, full of abyss, filling up the abyss'.[9] This brings to mind the kind of pattern that is self-referential, where an image contains a smaller copy of itself, creating an infinite repetition, a form of reproduction, which horrifyingly contains no difference. As feminist critic Diane Elam has noted, 'Derrida's remark calls attention to the paradox of the mise en abyme: the more you try to fill it up with representations, the emptier it becomes.'[10]

Pinsky is clearly interested in the patterns that repetition produces, both in the subject matter he observes such as the movement of people caught on camera, as in Crawl, as well as the remaking of a work of his own like Viral Planting. Through his documentation of repetitive forms of movement, and his manipulation and representation of them over time, Pinsky makes patterns that combine spatial configurations with temporal rhythms. Elevation, for Lewisham Hospital, shows activities of the people in the next-door park projected behind the glass wall of the hospital façade allowing patients to discover what he calls a 'parallel universe behind the walls'. For the Race in Doncaster, Pinsky filmed everyday life in a town he associates with

drinking, racing and shopping. He recorded people walking down shopping streets, and then edited their movement, slowing it down and speeding it up to create a different scenario, one where each figure becomes a character in a race.

The act of recording removes those whose movement is documented from their original settings. When combined with the edit, repetition produces difference, repositioning the figures as new signs in contexts composed by the artist but also informed by their cultural location. The replication of certain gestures hints at infinite expansion, but the geometry of the frame marks one kind of limit and the time you spend watching the work makes another. How long does it take to find out if the pattern will be repeated? The choice of duration from the point of view of the spectator adds an important way of distinguishing between repetitions of the same and those that contain difference. These patterns fabricated by Pinsky are choreographies, rhythms as well as configurations, which fascinate because although one knows that the combination of moves played out through the changing positions of signs will be repeated, one is never sure what will remain the same and what will differ.

***

To win Noughts and Crosses it is not important whether you are a nought or a cross, but how you play the game. You try to take up the middle square at the start, to occupy the position of the most possible options, or if not, then a corner, that way you can construct a line on the diagonal, as well as the horizontal or vertical. Like a super-simplified version of chess, within a few games you start to recognize the set of patterns created. This is the real pleasure of the game, not the desire to win, but the obsession with whether you will ever repeat a game you have played before, and if you do, whether you will remember it.

Biography
Professor Jane Rendell BA (Hons), Dip Arch, MSc, PhD, is Director of Architectural Research at the Bartlett, UCL. An architectural designer and historian, art critic and writer, she is author of Art and Architecture, (2006), The Pursuit of Pleasure, (2002) and co-editor of Pattern (2007), Critical Architecture (2007), Spatial Imagination, (2005), The Unknown City, (2001),

Intersections, (2000), Gender Space Architecture, (1999), Strangely Familiar, (1995). She is on the Editorial Board for ARQ (Architectural Research Quarterly) and the Journal of Visual Culture in Britain, a member of the AHRC Peer Review College and chair of the RIBA President's Awards for Research. In 2006 she was a research fellow at CRASSH (Centre for Research in Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities) at the University of Cambridge and received an honorary degree from the University College of the Creative Arts.

Michael Pinsky
A comprehensive survey of projects
from 1998 – 2008.

Hard Cover, 17 x 24 cm, 128 pages, full colour.
Published by the John Hansard Gallery.
Funded by the Wellcome Trust and Arts Council England.
Designed by CHK Design.
Essays by JJ Charlesworth and Jane Rendell.
Available from the John Hansard Gallery and Cornerhouse. £9.95 + P&P

---

[1] All quotes and references to the views of the artists in *Lost O* are taken from the video on the website. See http://www.losto.org/film.html (accessed 14 January 2008).

[22] Roland Barthes, 'Semiology and the Urban' [1967] in Neil Leach (ed) *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 166–72, p. 169.

[33] Roland Barthes, 'Semiology and the Urban' [1967] in Neil Leach (ed) *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 166–72, p. 171.

[4] Roland Barthes, 'Semiology and the Urban' [1967] in Neil Leach (ed) *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 166–72, p. 1769

[5] Roland Barthes, 'Semiology and the Urban' [1967] in Neil Leach (ed) *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 166–72, p. 172.

[6] For a discussion of the relationship of the 'compulsion to repeat' to transference and resistance, see Sigmund Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis II)' [1914] in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* v. 12 (1911–1913) trans. James Strachey, (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 145–56, p. 151**.** Freud also notes how the analyst 'employs the art of interpretation mainly for the purposes of recognizing the resistances' which appear on the surface of the patient's mind, see p. 147. I have looked elsewhere at the relationship between critic and work in terms of the analytic process and the acts of analysis and free association. See Jane Rendell, 'Site–Writing: Enigma and Embellishment', in Jane Rendell, Jonathan Hill, Murray Fraser and Mark Dorrian (eds) *Critical Architecture*, (London:

Routledge, 2007). See also Sigmund Freud, 'The Dynamics of Transference' [1912] in *The Standard Edition*, v. 12 (1911–1913) pp. 97–108 and Sigmund Freud, 'Observations on Transference-Love (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis III)' [1915] in *The Standard Edition*, v. 12, pp. 157–71.

[7] See also Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"' [1919] *The Penguin Freud Library*, v. 14, (translated under the editorship of James Strachey), Albert Dickson (ed.), (London: Penguin Books, 1985), pp. 335-76, especially pp. 356-61.

[8] See Ana Araujo, 'Orna(mental): Thoughts on the Relationship between Pattern and Hysteria', in Ana Araujo, Jane Rendell and Jonathan Hill (eds), *Pattern*, special issue of *Haecceity Papers*, v. 3, n. 1 (2007).

[9] Derrida quoted by Diane Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms. En Abyme* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 29.

[10] Diane Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms. En Abyme* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 29.