

Conor McFeely

If I don't know I don't know
I think I know
If I don't know I know
I think I don't know'

The encounter with art is most often rife with ironies. One such irony is the increased tendency to seek meaning from materials perceived as incidental and arbitrary. Naturally enough, for by definition art requires validation to be classified as such. This validation is traced in a willed transformation - craft - so the relative absence of crafted material within the artwork provokes the expectation of increased emphasis on crafted meaning (bearing in mind that the pure readymade is meaningful as a political gesture, rather than an artistic strategy).

What would the abandonment of craft within the creative act then mean? An existential affirmation, dissolving habitual and mesmeric practices and opening up less obfuscated paths of rigour and joy? Or an existential disavowal, a retreat from commitment and a delusional wallowing in mediocrity?

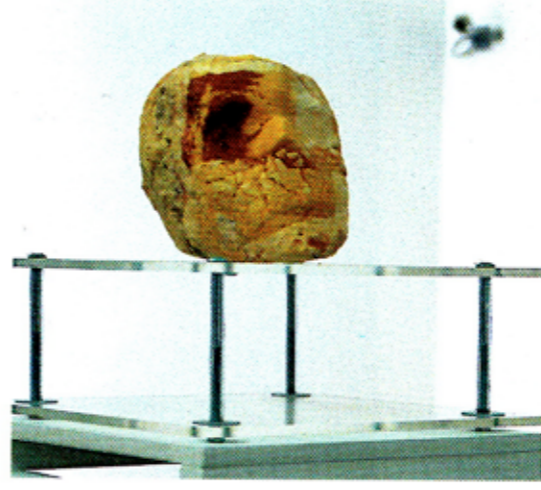
Approaching these questions around Conor McFeely's *Headfirst* must be done wilfully. Firstly the work is notable for the craft of its composition, the juxtapositions and relationships of space and material are measured and considered, establishing an environmental order in the parries, flow and pauses within the gallery space. Secondly the materials employed are consciously meaningful, these include firelighter blocks, paper, UV lights, road paint, strightlights, cake, broken glass and copper pipes. The meaning of these selected materials derives from their intended social function, which is inflected with their overarching contextual meaning as manufactured detritus. Configurations of material elements also have specific associative meaning, such as a double row of prints evoking the fractured and abject pathology of memory, and vertical pipes reaching upwards from the mass of composed elements on the floor suggesting striking bolts of inspiration. Furthermore the work includes specific cultural references, including the musicians of Auschwitz and Francisco de Goya's *Auto-da-fé*. An object

that operates intriguingly as both material element and cultural reference point is the book *Mad to be Normal*; conversations with R.D. Laing by Bob Mullian, sandwiched between two sheets of perspex and held in place by two bolts driven through the text. Laing's pierced head on the cover creates an appropriately obtuse crucifixion scene for a latter-day heretic.

The above may be central points to note in the operation of the work, but the reading is overstandard - it is the orthodoxy of divining the meaning of creative strategies and their nuances from their disposition in a carefully mapped context. The work may well be strategically methodical, but it is also ambivalent and even self-negating in its motivation. A more superficial glance at the imagery and depiction of wreckage, conflagration and disintegration cuts a deeper view into the nature of the artist's activity and the artifacts that construct it. The dystopian scenery is a familiar metaphor for the shattered psychic life of *Homo modernus* resulting from increasing specialisation of social activity, separation from biological phenomena, and the consequent disparity between physical and mental life. The shift of industry perfectly illustrates both the grim antithesis of the modernist re-imagining of essential selfhood and its consummation in the postmodern playground of cultural vacancy where nothing is left but commodity and contentless transaction.

Ambivalence and self-negation are understandable positions to adopt when working in relation to institutional structures that subsume all activity into streamlined forms and methods. Thus the work occupies a limited and relative position that is conditional on these streams of classification, the continually asserted prevailing orthodoxy.

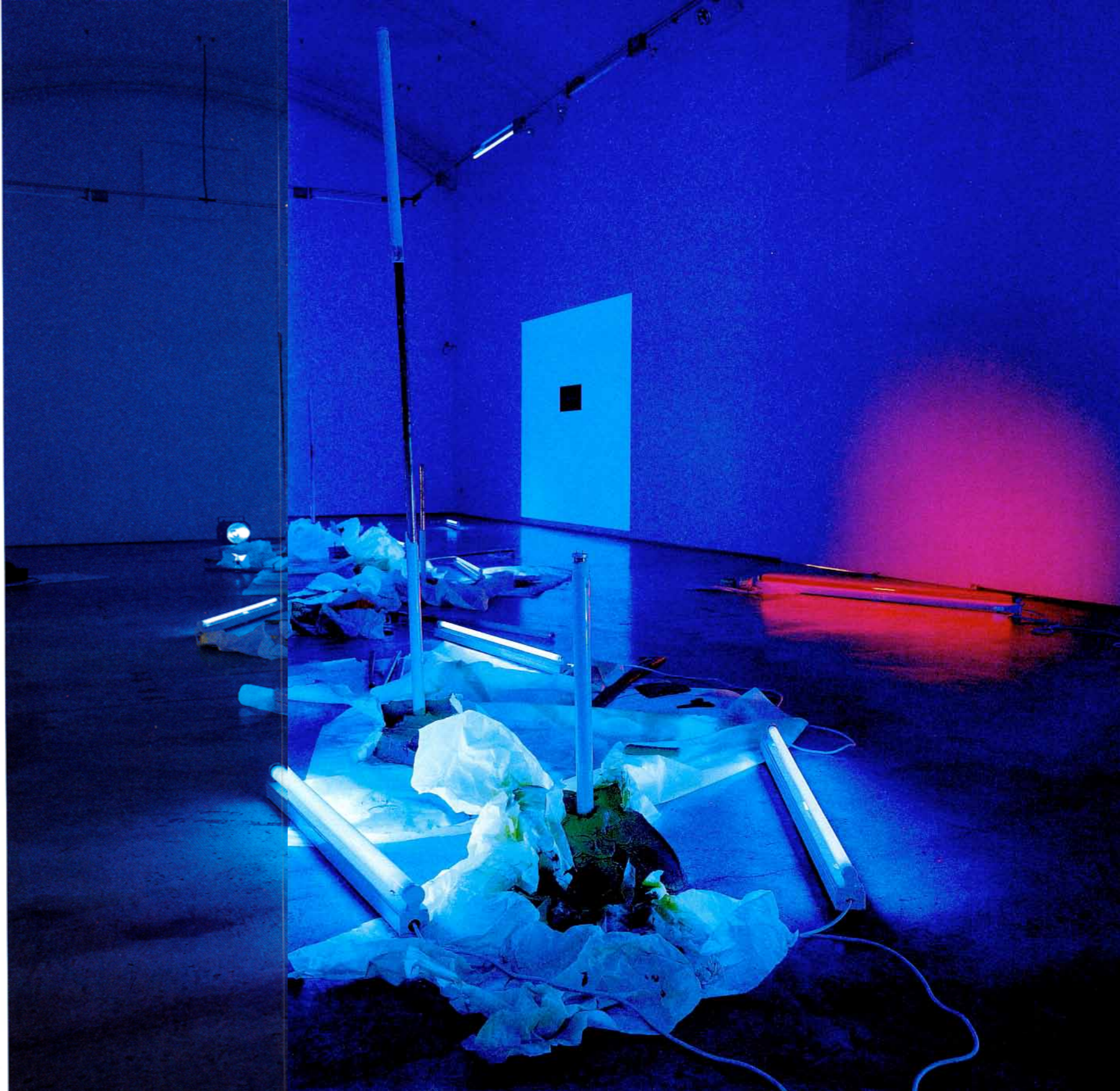
Without this relative function a more fundamental paradox in the artwork opens up. This is its complete negation by removal of its privileged context. *Headfirst* is underpinned by the ideological conceit that perception is the true dynamic arena of creative activity. The notable emergence of this conceit in contemporary art is in the playfully subversive experimentation of Dada,



WHICH HAS BEEN INTERMITTENTLY IN VOGUE EVER SINCE. It becomes radical though when experienced actively in consciousness, instead of being merely conceptualised. This is not a comforting position, the trails of navigating unmapped terrain cannot be claimed to establish dominion, and therefore security, if freedom of manoeuvre is to be maintained.

So the intent of the work can only be actively realised by a rejection of the work as anything other than incidentally useful, rather than valuable because of its privileged status; the full meaning of the materials employed and the context contrived unfolds as an experience of the continuum of materials and contrived context of the world in which it is. The disintegration of the privileged context of the institution of art (analogous to one's place in the world, the unquestioned space of home) echoes the fractured mindset resulting from the alienated industrial modern world previously referred to, which is also characterised by a discrepancy between context and action. When the echoes die away however there comes the revelation that finding meaning where one may rather than where one should does not indicate the absence of value, but a different perception of value. The use of cake within the work collides

THE SMALL INTERIORITY OF THE INSTITUTION REVEALS THE supposed normality of how the material is usually read, an ironic allegory of perceptual bias; the unnatural, nutritionally poor and unappetising foodstuff is used as a sculptural material precisely because it makes more sense as a sculptural material than as food. So too with the various materials in the work, which are decontextualised with deadpan humour to point out the oddity and disjuncture of the human relationship with its plastic environment. Behind the work and woven in its logic is the evocation of the moment where this oddity and disjuncture becomes apparent, where what one is conditioned to think of as normal and real becomes alien and unreal. This slippage of perception may occur when undergoing sleep deprivation, in times of stress, or in extreme states of mind and at other times with no identifiable cause. It is commonly ignored simply because it seems meaningless and incidental from the vantage point of ordered knowledge, but when regarded in its own terms it dissolves that ordered knowledge into its own meaninglessness and incidentality. This is not the rational mind conceptualising the absurdities of life in a mad world, it is the organic assertion of subjective experience that overflows abundantly, drowning the twin worlds of sanity and madness



as theoretical projections on the actual. This perception of alienness may be no less immediate than passion, grief or fear – states where the entire environment becomes infused with the reality of one's experience.

This mythic/existential juncture is pertinent to the work of R.D. Laing, whose work as a psychiatrist and writer challenged the hierarchical logic of the psychiatric discipline due to its founding on scientific principles. The absurdist position of maintaining a therapeutic purpose with an inhuman premise was attacked by Laing, who likewise undermined his own credentials as scientific authority. This non-scientific approach reemphasised the fundamental purpose of psychiatry, to integrate human experience, and consequently questioned the social function of psychiatry as a means to police behaviour and manage people. The sublime ambition of this endeavour is commented on by Jan B. Gordon, who references the quotation of religious mystical text in Laing's book *The Bird of Paradise*:

This territory, like most Edens, is unfamiliar except as an act of consciousness, and the double-removal that obtains when that act of consciousness is mythified, means, in one sense, that Laing is writing a history of self-consciousness disguised as an account of man's Fall. The kingdom which existed prior to this Fall was a realm where behaviour and experience were identities – every man did what he was.²

The curious and faintly comic notion of a democracy of subjective agency that Gordon characterises in Laing's work parallels the previously discussed ideological conceit of locating creativity in perception. It could be argued that the emergence of this agenda within art history is itself a response to the power of Freud's theories and the now commonplace belief that reality is largely constituted by the submerged dynamics of psychological life.

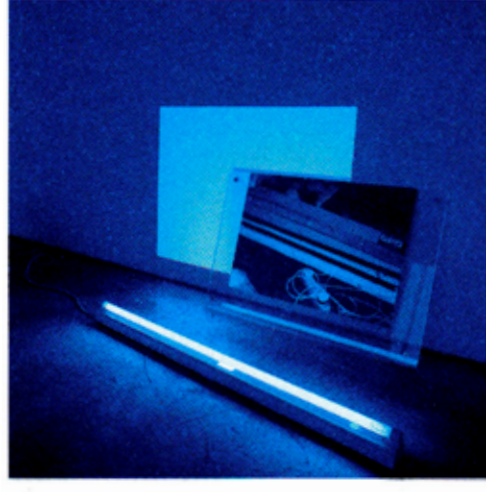
The treachery of this ground is proportional to the extent of its ambition and the intricacies of its mapping, as if a single clear moment of freedom

were congruent with the imprisonment of the entire world. Laing was well aware of the subtle power of concepts and language to bind and entangle clear thought and action, as he states in the preface to *The Divided Self*:

Psychiatry could be, and some psychiatrists are, on the side of transcendence, of genuine freedom, and of true human growth. But psychiatry can so easily be a technique of brainwashing, of inducing behaviour that is adjusted, by (preferably) non-injurious torture. In the best places, where straitjackets are abolished, doors are unlocked, leucotomies largely forgone, these can be replaced by more subtle lobotomies and tranquilizers that place the bars of Bedlam and the locked doors inside the patient. Thus I would wish to emphasize that our 'normal' 'adjusted' state is too often the abdication of ecstasy, the betrayal of our true potentialities, that many of us are only too successful in acquiring a false self to adapt to false realities.³

At any given moment the age of exploration becomes the age of empire according to the paradigmatic point of view that is in force. The pressure to consolidate apparent gains and shore up defences becomes inexorable when one is seized by that spasm of social consciousness, 'something is at stake'. The loftier the flight into the domain of human potential the more insidiously inculcated into the nature of things will be the bars of Bedlam resulting from this seizure.

Nothing is more dangerous than a double agent, even more so a double agent that does not consider themselves as such. The lust for result to reclaim and renew human relations that is integral to the therapeutic model necessitates the internalising of this double agency, as paradoxically one acts systematically in an endeavour to evolve creative and expansive interaction. The description of this endeavour as 'helping us build new Paradises out of our old infernoes' illustrates this internal contradiction whereby a notional process of building reduces both paradise and inferno to instrumental building blocks; it is complimentary to this of course that the equation is couched in the



2. Jan B. Gordon, *The Meta-journey of R.D. Laing in Laing and Anti-Psychiatry*, Robert Boyers and Robert Orrill (editors), Penguin, England, 1972, p.49
3. R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self*, Penguin, London, 1990, p.12
4. Benjamin Nelson, *Afterword: a medium with a message*, R.D. Laing in *Laing and Anti-Psychiatry*, p.224

materialistic metaphor of construction. Metaphoric language of this kind is common within art and the discussion of art, as are the overall patterns described above, of self-defeating and contradictory internal dynamics. The insidious self-binding of liberation aesthetics is advanced usually in response to the crude coinage of social power groups (most importantly funders/patrons) that the activity be demonstrably socially useful, if not as capital investment then as a way to distract and reform the drinking classes. Similarly to psychiatry art is often claimed as a process of reclamation and renewal where humanity emerges and acts in tangible and meaningful ways, although it is creativity rather than understanding that is placed on the high altar of art.

It is unwise to be blasé about the instrumentalising of one's activities, precisely because the power of these self-limiting impulses is anchored in their being passed over or ignored, which results from exercising a wilfully partial view. Likewise hard-nosed dismissal of the original premise, the drive to integration, is often a retreat from the reality of one's desires or at least an equivocation based on fear of exposure. Returning to the suggestion that the motivation of *Headfirst* is that its completion can only be realised by a negation of the work as the product of a system of privilege, we find this undermined by established ideological strands or phases that ostensibly justify and claim status for art and in so doing instrumentalise it. The initial strand suggests that the systematising of individual experience is fundamental to artistic activity and that the ability to develop what would otherwise be unintelligible idiosyncrasy into systematic communication is a significant and possibly primary way in which interaction amounts to more than brutal functionalism (it should be noted that psychoanalysis is the foremost discipline in which the idiosyncratic reality of human consciousness is theoretically systematised).

The second strand expands and refines the first, extending to the previously discussed postulation that the true ground of artistic activity is in perception. This is an even more seductive proposal, reiterating the evoked moment of awareness where the alienness of the world

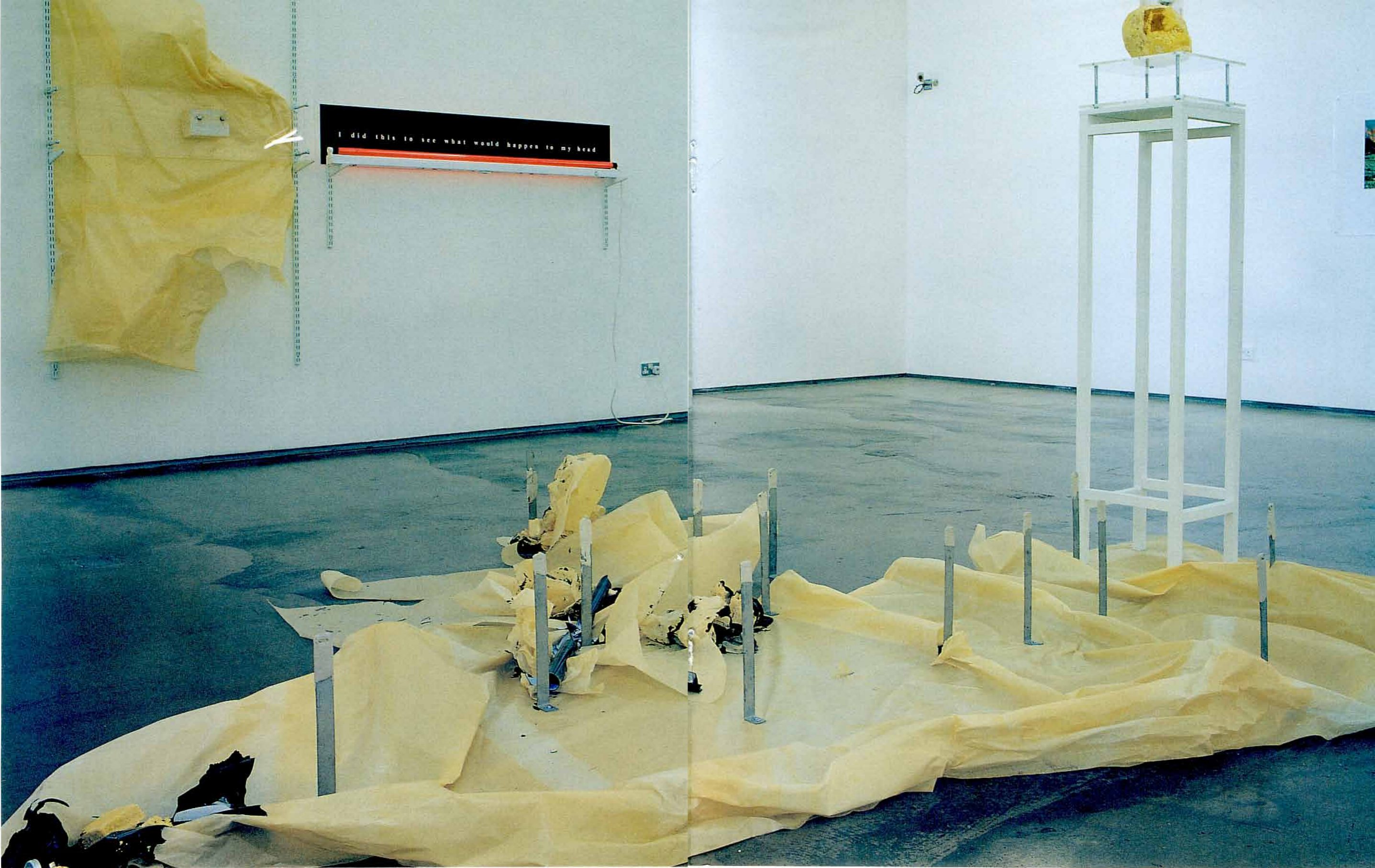




becomes apparent and subjective realities such as literary and poetic modes of thought escape their suppression in the habitual and mundane. Comparison with the anti-psychiatry school is instructive in revealing the potential slippage of this proposal; the critique of psychiatry as a modern day inquisition, serving to defend the powerful through unfounded, self-justifying hyperbole posits freethinking as a fissure in this control. Insanity as a social space is then constructed as both the manifestation of a human experience dis-integrated from its environment which is characteristic of the industrial modern world (and thus why contemporary thoughtcrime is cast in this clinical mechanistic mould, superseding other thoughtcrimes such as heresy and treason), and the reclamation of a psychic life that remains uncolonised by social expectations

and requirements. In the shadow of these social and historical forces unruly and unprecedented awarenesses can be instrumentalised as devices to deprogram the socialised self, clearing the ground as a precursor to the re-integration of experience and the generation of new meanings, connections and values.

The third strand follows a different metaphorical line, suggesting that the creative intervention of art can act as a critical juncture whereby profane reality is momentarily held to account and made subject to a higher, or at least more encompassing scheme or vision. This is amusingly akin to the same self-justifying posture struck by the inquisitors themselves, posed as humble servants of purer and higher ideals while also deputised to intervene, slicing through the confused and



I did this to see what would happen to my head



impoverished human condition imperious blade-thrusts of asserted meaning. The application of power is always accompanied by the assumption of authority, as comparing the contemporary psychiatrist in their institution with the courts of the Inquisitions reveals:

The legal procedure of the Spanish Inquisition was marked by the fact that the tribunals combined two functions, judicial and police. They were no ordinary courts of law, because they also had powers of investigation, and in addition to the punishment of offenders they also wanted their confession and renunciation in order to save their souls. This dual purpose was reflected in the actual procedure they used. The procedure of the medieval Inquisition was pure inquisitio, that is to say the inquisitor acted as both prosecutor and judge.⁵

The instrumentalising of art to the purpose of saving human souls would at least have the good manners to be ostentatiously ambitious; bringing to bear the searing heat of a more ultimate dimension of humanity to burn out and cauterise the already corrupting wound of profane functionalism. Like the mock thunderbolts of Headfirst, the first two strands link the earth with the heavens, the third links the heavens with the earth. So is the choice then to be a humanity sealed from contamination in culture's envelope of scar tissue, or an eternal open wound livid with meaning that commences degradation upon coming into being?

There are invisible currencies that annul these dour and hysterical formulae. These are the criminal and deviant motivations that comprise the undeclared account of any supposedly progressive scheme.

'There is the story of the patient in a lie-detector who was asked if he was Napoleon. He replied, "No". The lie-detector recorded that he was lying.'⁶

All proposed totalities are fictions passing themselves off as ultimate or objective, art no less than others. Heresy in all its guises may be more



5. John Lynch and John Elliott, 'Recent Scholarship and Secular Views' in *The Spanish Inquisition*, Paul J. Hauber (ed/itrn), John Wiley, New York, p. 13.
See also Thomas Szasz, *The Manufacture of Madness* (note 9)
6. R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self*, p. 35 (footnote)



than a crude hammer for cracking nuts, it is a play with the voluptuous fear of seduction by one's own hidden motivations that connive to destroy our world by transforming it into that which is utterly alien and which we know ourselves already to be. This is a dialectic between knowledge and action, for it is the nature of reason and theory to seek stability, to enclose and define, but no act or object is containable within an ideological or theoretical formula. Material is thus a heretical fact of being in that it is the constant negation of meaning, it is the annihilator of meaning because it provides the ineluctable contingency of meaning in the fact of the materiality of existence. Likewise action does not define reality, it negates reality, because reality is a construction (that paradise, inferno or purgatory), that is 'reality' marks the limits of where we are at or have reached, and action is the first move beyond those limits – it destroys the basis on which reality is founded, that there is a single point where stability is established and the world can be considered as fundamentally knowable. The navigation of these paradoxical dialectics in *Headfirst* is comparable to Jean Genet's ontological navigation of space while housebreaking, as described in D G Cooper's scintillating *Sartre on Genet*:

Certain thieves of whom Genet writes sit down and eat in the kitchen of the house they are robbing, or they defecate or vomit over the money they take from a drawer. After this destruction another destructive act follows in the conversion of the value of an object from a use value to a value of exchange. Theft results, thus, in the radical destruction of the stolen object, the disorganization of the values of usefulness and sentimental association, an impoverishment of the world. Our acts sketch our form on being, the created object presents its creator to himself in an objective dimension. In creation I am really exteriorized amongst beings in the world: in destruction the universe is reabsorbed into me.⁷

Headfirst is the work of a thief who violates a space, robbing it of value, secretly revealing and paying homage to the totality of value of which that space is a part. The artist claims the authority

of both judge and prosecutor, performing the ritual inquisitorial duty required. This activity, like Genet's tragic-heroic ballet

falls readily into place in a psycho-analytic conceptual framework within which mechanisms such as introjective and projective identification, idealization of the object, denial and splitting operate⁸

if, as Thomas Szasz states, 'the inquisitorial process did not really come into its own until the twentieth century'⁹, its efficient operation is surely due to its specialisation, as it need not break bodies now, only souls. Ubiquitous and finely tuned, carrying out an eternal campaign against those theologically equivalencies, paradox and dirt. Our proportionally increasing destruction of things and cultivation of theory geared to destruction (whether explicitly in content or in net human effect) are strategies towards the dismantling of these inquisitorial workings within ourselves. But these strategies are ineffectual, for as Laing says

the proposition

'All forms point to the formless'¹⁰ is itself a formal proposition¹⁰

It is the alienness of matter touching us through our actions that delivers the violence and violation of our selves, the dissolution of maya, the eternal auto-da-fé. *Headfirst* is ripe with these destructive modulations; they are inherent to the material, not the work of the artist.

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7. D G Cooper, 'Sartre on Genet' in *Reason and Violence: a decade of Sartre's philosophy 1950-1960*, R D Laing and D G Cooper, Tavistock, London, p.89

8. *Ibid.*

9. Thomas Szasz, *The Manufacture of Madness: a comparative study of the inquisition and the mental health movement*, Syracuse University Press, 1997, p. 47

10. R D Laing, *Knots*, p.87





Headfirst was made from ultraviolet blacklight, infrared light, invisible ink, thermoplastic resin, copper pipe, sculpted lemon-cake, paper, liquid rubber, firelighters, perspex, photographs, slide projection, text panels and other matter.

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