File Note 155

Richard Wright

Essay by
Martin Clark

Camden Art Centre
Arkwright Road
London NW3

16 Apr/22 Jun 2025

Martin Clark

Process and Reality

> Consciousness flickers; and even at its brightest, there is a small focal region of clear illumination, and a large penumbral region of experience which tells of intense experience in dim apprehension. The simplicity of clear consciousness is no measure of the complexity of complete experience.[1]

In 2017 Richard Wright opened an exhibition in the Aird's Lane Bricks Space at The Modern Institute in Glasgow. Anyone familiar with the artist's work knows that for the last thirty or so years he has made wall drawings, of varying scale and complexity, in very direct and sensitive response to the space in which they are produced. In this show though, there were no wall drawings. At least not in the sense that one usually thinks of them.

The first work you encountered was installed on the outside of the building—a long, low, light-industrial-looking unit that might once have been a workshop or factory. Pasted directly onto the exterior walls —as well as partially covering windows, sills, ledges and mouldings —were hundreds of paper posters of the kind that usually advertise nightclubs, gigs, magazines or album releases. The posters were uniform in size and shape, and each was divided diagonally to create a simple design in one of four variations: white/black; black/white; white/red; and red/white.

From these basic elements (basic in terms of both design and materiality), Wright created a complex geometric composition across the building's façade. It was remarkable for the degree of variation and novelty achievable from such an apparently limited set of forms, the intricacies of the pattern produced by a simple process of adding, rotating and layering the sheets one on top of the other. It called to mind the modernist languages of Futurist painting but operated more like the camouflage livery on a dazzle ship, breaking up and disrupting the surface to reveal a more complex, kinetic architecture behind or beneath.

As you entered the building, the everyday fabric of the space reasserted itself. A number of small works on paper were arranged around the walls, hung directly onto the crumbling brick and plaster. One depicted a mountain, set against an empty sky, a semi-naturalistic scene painted in watercolour; another appeared more schematic, a simple conduit and cell form, like a blueprint or plan; a third described a cryptic architectural elevation, the planes of the structure rendered in brick pattern, folding and bending through brick-patterned space.

In the centre of the room stood a long, low table on which were arranged further drawings on paper, as well as a number of books including I*slamic Art and Decoration; Examples of English Handwriting (1150–1750)*, *Spiritual Disciplines* and *A Manual of Poster-Craft*. Some lay open, some closed, some were stacked one on top of the other. A few had motifs, symbols and designs painted across their pages. The plays of the Russian poet and artist Vladimir Mayakovsky became a ground for a sketchy Constructivist composition, while a passage from Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* was obscured behind a painting of disembodied hands fixed in a gesture of blessing or prayer, reminiscent of a Renaissance fresco.

It was only if you glanced upwards, or if the day was a sunny one, that you noticed the skylight in the roof of the space. The ordinary, industrial rooflight had been replaced with an intricate leaded glass, constructed to hold an array of tiny hand-cut panes, arranged in a

rippling isomorphic pattern. When the conditions outside were right, the panes acted like lenses, focusing, shaping and projecting the sunlight into a craze of shimmering patterns that slipped and slid around the walls and floor, as bright and hard as crystal, and as soft and subtle as spray.

*

> The relationship of each moment in the whole to all the others is implied by its total content: the way in which it 'holds' all the others enfolded within it.[2]

For the physicist and theorist David Bohm, the universe isn't composed of discrete chunks of stuff—of matter that can be broken down into unchanging and ever smaller fragments—it is composed of 'moments'. Everything that we can see and sense and measure and touch is caught in a process of constant change, and what we encounter at our scale of 'reality', Bohm understood as an abstraction or projection of a deeper, more fundamental plane or dimension.

Ever since the fifth century BC, when Democritus first proposed the atom as the elementary building block for everything in the universe, scientists have attempted to break matter down into smaller and smaller parts. First came the atom, until that was subsequently divided into electrons, protons and neutrons, which in turn were found to consist of hundreds of different, smaller particles including quarks and gluons. And while we still tend to think of all matter as being composed of these tiny, indivisible 'building blocks', scientists now know that particles are much less like discrete, stable bodies of 'stuff' and much more like excitable bundles of energy.

At this scale of reality, the laws of classical physics no longer apply. Quantum mechanics has demonstrated how particles *can* behave like bits of matter, but can also manifest as waves or fields. What is more, what we think of as empty space is in fact full of energy —energy that we know is there, but which still cannot properly be accounted for. Roughly 68 percent of the universe is made up of this 'dark energy',

with 'dark matter' making up a further 27 percent. The rest—everything on earth, everything ever observed with all of our instruments, all normal matter—adds up to less than 5 percent of the universe.

In his book *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, Bohm used his lifelong work on quantum physics to set out his vision of the implicate and explicate order: a theory of reality in which what we experience (the explicate order) is a kind of dynamic and temporal unfolding of a deeper dimension (the implicate order)—an energetic, holistic force or field that connects everything, everywhere, across space and time. For Bohm, 'objects' in our universe—all matter, all particles, everything from photons to kettles to footballs to cats—are best thought of not as 'things' but as 'processes' emerging out of this field, characterised not by their autonomy, permanence and immutability, but by a state of immanent, ceaseless 'becoming':

> What is implied by this proposal is that what we call empty space contains an immense background of energy, and that matter as we know it is a small, 'quantized', wavelike excitation on top of this background,rather like a tiny ripple on a vast sea.[3]

*

Perhaps it was the way in which the skylight, the table, the drawings and the books created a kind of collapsing of scales, a cluster of elements held in constellation within the interior of the space, each simultaneously closing in and opening out like a Russian doll or a fractal, nested one in the other, that suggested the exhibition itself as a kind of object (or process) now. It brought to mind the drawings Wright made a number of years ago of neoclassical, medieval and Renaissance buildings. Isolated against a flat ground and rendered isometrically as pure exteriority, they were like models of themselves, or models of thought maybe? In Wright's work, there is a sense of him reading buildings as clusters of ideas, systems, beliefs and mythologies: material aggregates of mathematics, engineering,

mysticism, aesthetics, power and ideology. And where a building might be read or thought of almost like a book, so books take on a kind of equivalence to a building for Wright, another object or architecture with which to engage and intervene.

On the tabletop, among the books, lay five drawings on paper. One showed the moon, traced in negative against a copperplate sky. Another was based on a botanical illustration, the branches, roots and flowers mirrored in vertical symmetry. The others though, composed of flat washes of colour and fine flowing lines, pictured a more amorphous, enigmatic space; a field of indeterminate shapes and matter, drifting, coalescing, accreting and dissipating, like the curl of vapour in an alchemist's alembic.

Wright has made these kinds of drawings for many years, in contrast to his more geometric and graphic works. Sometimes he borrows the languages of antiquarian engravings—their florid depictions of storms, tempests, the heavens and hell—sometimes the more contemporary, stylised graphics of clouds or flames found on hot-rod paint jobs or prog-rock album covers. Occasionally he mirrors or repeats these passages, structuring them into mandala-like forms, portals to other planes of perception and insight.

These noumenal realms have been described across countless cultures and centuries, glimpsed through the various gateways of religion, ritual, meditation, music, psychedelics, philosophy, science and art; an aspect of, or equivalent to, Bohm's vast and capacious 'implicate order'. Wright's drawings seem to both describe and enact this restless expanse of brooding metaphysical energies, but for Bohm, this space or state was exemplified not in the turbulent vortex of an etheric void, but in the structure and operation of the hologram, a phenomenon in which he discerned the model for a new order of reality.

*

A hologram works by capturing a three-dimensional image of an object using interference patterns, created when light waves bounce off it and intersect. Unlike a traditional photographic process, these patterns are not a visual representation of the object but a complex and enigmatic abstraction. To the naked eye they look like a set of intersecting, concentric circles—like ripples on a pool of water—but when a light is shone through them, a three-dimensional image is produced from the information encoded in the waveforms and fixed on the film.

What is remarkable about the hologram is that if you cut the film in half and shine a light separately through each piece, you don't get two halves of the picture, you get two intact images of the object. And if you cut the film up again, into smaller and smaller fragments, each fragment still produces a complete image (albeit a little hazier). In a hologram, knowledge, memory and information of the whole are distributed and contained within each and every part.

*

> I'm very interested in material and how it is transformed through action. I've spoken about seeing works as quantities of things: for instance, the piece in the Rijksmuseum has 47,000 stars painted on a ceiling. You know, each star was painted by hand and seems to contain some memory of being made, of being delivered, and there was a sense in which I could talk about the work in this quite performative and concrete way. That being said, I can also see this work as something I can reverse, can remove, and it becomes a jar of paint about this size … And then that jar of paint could be transformed into something else.[4]

In 2013, Wright was invited to make a large-scale wall painting at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. After various site visits and time spent exploring the building, he picked out a single star motif that he found within the painted ceiling decoration of the chapel. The simplicity, clarity and modesty of the form are perhaps what drew him to it initially, but as he began to isolate and focus in on it, it appeared to him like a diagram or

plan of the grand architectural cupola in which it was located.

Repeated more than 40,000 times in geometric array, across another ceiling in another part of the building, each tiny, near-identical star is arranged in sequence: an infinity of points tracing a simple perspectival projection of orthogonal lines, shifting gently in size and scale to create the appearance of a smooth, curving field—like magnetism, gravity or space. As with so many of Wright's wall drawings, the overall effect is one of simultaneously disappearing into the fabric of the room, while combining to produce a defiantly material, or object, quality.

Despite being two-dimensional designs, applied to the flat surface of a ceiling, wall or floor, Wright's wall drawings have an almost sculptural presence: a delicate but persistent weight, intensity and duration. There's a sense in which they seem to be measuring, mapping and describing the apparently indelible materiality of the structure, while at the same time opening it up to reveal the emptiness in between, the flux and flow at the heart of all matter. But there is a kind of knowledge and memory encoded in these patterns, too, a sense of the whole being held in every part, expressed and produced through their incremental complexity and infinite, generative process. After all, what is a pattern but a kind of cumulative intelligence, compulsively and irresistibly describing itself?

*

> Each instance of concrescence *is itself* the novel individual 'thing' in question. There are not 'the concrescence' *and* 'the novel thing': when we analyse the novel thing we find nothing but the concrescence.'Actuality' means nothing else than this ultimate entry into the concrete.[5]

In 1920 the philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead published his seminal work, *Process and Reality*. In it, he put forward his theory of 'process relational thought', in which he described the basic nature of the world as made up of events and the process of their creation and extinction, as well as the idea that all objects are only

real for themselves or each other through their relations. I am quoting here from Wikipedia—another vast and distributed field of information (and another exemplary process-object)—because I cannot say it better than this:

> Whitehead describes any entity as in some sense nothing more and nothing less than the sum of its relations to other entities—its *synthesis of* and *reaction* to the world around it. A real thing is just that which forces the rest of the universe to in some way conform to it; that is to say, if theoretically a thing made strictly no difference to any other entity, it could not be said to really exist. Relations are not secondary to what a thing is, they are what the thing is.[6]

'All things flow',[7] and for Whitehead, matter is nothing more than an abstraction or 'concrescence' from these relational events or 'occasions', which are the final, real things that make up the world. But if matter is in one sense a relation or interaction, it is also a kind of experience, and this experience goes all the way down.

Both Whitehead and Bohm understood particles not just as quanta or energy, but as interconnected bundles of experience or 'awareness', elementary vectors of atavistic intuition. In this way, mind and matter become aspects of the same totality, the same fundamental stuff out of which everything unfolds. Otherwise, where does it come from? From where do sensation and experience and emotion and knowing emerge into the world? And as these primitive particles of spatio-temporal sensation arrange themselves into successively more complex forms—into molecules, enzymes, cells, plants, rocks, nervous systems, brains and planets—so the complexity of 'feeling' correspondingly increases, until a kind of threshold is crossed into what we understand or experience as consciousness.

*

> What, then, is the meaning of the appearance of the apparently independent and self-existent 'manifest world' …?

> The answer to this question is indicated by the root of the word ‘manifest’, which comes from the Latin ‘manus’, meaning ‘hand’. Essentially, what is manifest is what can be held with the hand—something solid, tangible and visibly stable.[8]

Shapes and lines and thoughts and materials are organised and assembled, fluorescing briefly into novel forms and patterns before disappearing again, collapsing back into a pot of paint or a stack of posters. Works cluster into new constellations and relation. Edges agitate. The hand holds within it a kind of knowledge or intellect, quite as much as the ‘mind’ or the head. ‘Consciousness flickers’ and I’m back in that space on Aird’s Lane, the delicate leaded skylight opening out of the building’s interior like an opaque and fractured aperture to an impossibly rich and inaccessible ‘outside’, another plane or dimension. In here we only experience a mediated, simplified, but still beautiful projection. It hardens then dissipates—intangible, diaphanous, but somehow solid, real—appearing and fading with the invisible passage of clouds and sun; imminent for us now as nothing more nor less than a dazzling matrix of light, moving gently across the walls of the room.

Martin Clark is Director of Camden Art Centre, London. This is an edited and amended version of a text first published in *Richard Wright*, Gagosian, 2023.

1 Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (1920) (New York: The Free Press, 1985), p. 267.
2 David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 263.
3 Ibid., p. 242.
4 Richard Wright, Interview with Will Bradley in *Richard Wright*, (London: Gagosian, 2024). p. 93.
5 Whitehead p. 211.
6 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_North_Whitehead (accessed 10 July 2021).
7 Whitehead (cit Heraclitus), p. 208.
8 Bohm, p. 235.

Biography

Richard Wright (b. 1960, London) lives and works in Glasgow and Norfolk. Wright has exhibited internationally since 1994 and was awarded the Turner prize in 2009. He has produced several major commissions including those at: Tottenham Court Road Station, London (2022); Queen’s House, Greenwich (2016); Tate Britain, London (2013); Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (2013); and Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh (2010). Selected solo exhibitions include: Kunshistorisches Museum, Thesus Temple, Vienna (2013); *Works on Paper*, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow (2012); 55th Carnegie International, Pittsburgh (2008); Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, San Diego (2007); Centre d’Art Contemporain, Le Domaine de Kerguéhennec, Bignan (2005); DCA, Dundee (2004); and Tate Liverpool, Liverpool (2001). Selected group exhibitions include: *25 Years of Contemporary Art in Scotland*, Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh (2014); *Kunst und Philosophie*, NBK Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin (2011); *Draw A Straight Line and Follow It*, Tate Modern, London (2008); *Intelligence*, Tate Britain, London (2000); *Drawing Now: Eight Propositions*, Museum of Modern Art, New York (2002); *My Head is on Fire but my Heart is Full of Love*, Charlottenborg Museum, Copenhagen; and *Painting at the Edge of the World*, Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis (2001).

Reading List

Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Sense* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1947)

Viewing List

Andrei Tarkovsky, *Andrei Rublev* (Soviet Union, 1966), film
Pietro Lorenzetti

Listening List

Duke Ellington, *The Single Petal of a Rose (solo piano)* (1959)

‘If I were to speak in the Baptistery of Florence I would be led by the walls around me to say what I never said before.’
Louis Kahn

Edited by: Arese Uwuoruya,
Gina Buenfeld-Murley and Martin Clark
Printed by: Duplikat, London

Published on the occasion of the
exhibition, Richard Wright at
Camden Art Centre, 16 April/22 June 2025.

This exhibition was made possible through
the generous support of:
Gagosian
The Modern Institute
The Richard Wright Exhibition Circle:
Emma Goltz
Jigsaw Art Foundation
Donald Porteous

With special thanks to our transport partner
TFA London.

ISBN 978-1-915058-19-5
Charity no: 1065829

Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

Camden Art Centre
Arkwright Road
London NW3

ISBN 978-1-9150581-9-5