

GW

The floor drawing that you are making for Eastside Projects relates to a work that you originally made in Peter Nadin's New York gallery space for the exhibition *The Works In This Space Are A Response To The Existing Conditions and/or Works Previously Shown Within The Space* back in 1979. Was that work painted by hand?

PF

Yeah, I do a grid. Actually it's very easy, once you have the grid, you just lay it out, and put the lines in there with chalk, remove the grid tracing and it's done. You can get a little machine that does that actually, but I'd rather do it by hand with a brush.

GW

It's about whether you want it to have the perfection of the lines on a sports court, or whether it should read more like a drawing?

PF

To me, some gesture is also needed, some other graphic character on the floor, or the evidence of an action. But, in any case, I might modify the European image I use at Eastside Projects to incorporate Syria, where you have these two Russian navy bases, and they are like a spaceship basically, you know? BRR BRR BRR BRR!

[laughter]

GW

Let's talk about your involvement in that 1979 show, which is one of the exhibitions that Eastside Projects' opening show makes explicit

reference to. How did you approach the idea of 'Existing Conditions' during that process.

PF

First, the initiator and the protagonist in all of this was Peter Nadin himself. I was pretty much doing what he asked me to do. I had a body of thinking, so to speak, that I'd already told him about, and he knew, and he saw. So, Nadin has always been very keen on seeing that what I do be made public. Which means that he had already this whole notion of a space where there'd be a succession of events by artists, and he definitely wanted to have me there to bring out two points: the first is the iron lung idea, and second the maps. It wasn't like I was particularly advancing an idea, or proposing something. I was rather modest, and would wait for someone to propose me something.

I endorsed, and liked the whole philosophy very much – certainly the idea of recognised conditions. I think I even showed him my translations from a German art magazine, of the art scene in Milan, where the phrase was, among the Milanese in the 1970s, 'art is the appropriate response to recognise conditions.'

GW

Who is that quoted from?

PF

It was just a phrase that was banded about in Milan in the 1970s, when Milan was the centre of arte povera. There was a great deal of turmoil, and activity in the art scene, and the political scene, with people like Nevero, and so on. In Italy,

what came out as 'autonomy and movement' and, shall we say, an awareness of Red Brigades, and a lot of thinking about the potential for art to have real power, and to really influence the political economy, and to actually deal with the means of production in a kind of Marxist sense.

GW

Had you already recognised that as something that you wanted to do in your work?

PF

I was aware at that time in the mid-1970s that Italy was a real hot bed, and I was very excited by it, I was thinking about living there. Even now, even though it has now quietened down these ideas have been there, and could be brought back, especially at this stage.

GW

I understand Nadin was also collaborating with two other people at that time ...

PF

That would be Nick Lawson and Chris D'Arcangelo. And they were working, as far as I understand, in some kind of relation with Daniel Buren, basically as exhibition construction workers. They got to know some other artists who were friends with Buren. In that building on Lispenard Street in Manhattan, just below Canal Street, were also Louise Lawler, and a man named Harold Rivkin – a future supporter of mine. He was also at the *Earth Art* show in 1968 or 1969, in Cornell, alongside Gordon Matta-Clark, and Dennis Oppenheim, and all

the other artists that were in that landmark show. And he was at Cornell then, and he went on to be with Max Protetch, bringing down to Washington D.C., artists such as Lawrence Weiner ... Dan Graham, Dennis Oppenheim, Vito Acconci ... that whole crowd of artists from that era. The thing is, that this social circle, was somehow the work circle, the employment source for Peter Nadin, and building sheet rock walls was a standard procedure.

So they were actually building sheet rock walls in this space, as part of what Nadin called the 'functional construction.' And they were somehow given aesthetic value. The notion was, that instead of having a gallery, Peter wanted to build, if you will, an identity, and a position in the art world. There was a feeling that nobody wanted to go to galleries. We all wanted to do something else, more collaborative projects. Hence the various TV shows and film being produced by artists. Nadin, in his own way, was saying, 'well, I have a space that we're going to make into a showing space; we're not going to make it into a white wall showing space. We're going to make it into a progression space.' Jenny Holzer and he seemed to kick it off. They were working together a lot, producing books together.

GW

Do you remember any other reference points being talked about, or did you think that this was just a completely new idea that they'd come across? This idea of progression, and accumulating over time being a philosophy for an exhibition space?

PF

I had never heard them refer to anybody as an antecedent. I actually think it was very novel. I don't think they mentioned El Lissitzky, or whomever, I know that.

GW

Lissitzky or Kurt Schwitters: the *Merzbau* ...

PF

That's very funny that you mention that. Gordon Matta-Clark was hiring me at the same time – well, he asked me to work for him for no money, basically! He had some diagrams of the economy that I'd made, based on Sol LeWitt. So, he liked my architectural thinking, so to speak, or my urbanist thinking. And he'd heard about me through the Magoo circuit. So then word had come by, and he said, 'can you come and work with me as my researcher?' I was the guy that did all the work on his balloon buildings and so on.

The thing is, Matta-Clark had come up with a title. He was more-or-less pretending it was his title, but it wasn't his at all, it was coming from the Russian Constructivists. Very precisely, El Lissitzky and some of the architects of that time. And there was this idea of the low-suspended building, and something that had a loft, and various forms of area architecture; things to do with gas and atmosphere, and all that was called 'Sky Hook'. And Gordon wanted to call his project 'Sky Hook'. In fact, the whole energy was Russian Constructivist.

I was rather surprised by your reference to El Lissitzky, meaning

that, many art activities of today that are sort of breaking new ground, are anchored back to Schwitters, El Lissitzky, leading to Malevich ... all that sort of late-teens, early twenties, art energy. And that is seen as a real bubble of new thinking, like a little volcano that has yet to be really worked with.

And you could say, in effect, that the art terrain has certain peaks, and then many valleys. The peaks might be El Lissitzky, Russian Constructivism; then Italian Futurism might be a valley. We go to another peak with, say, Beuys and conceptual art, and the earth art movement. Then there's been a valley since then, since about 1979. Which is what we see in our history, we see in books. And now we might be having a new peak.

So to anchor something, and to refer to something happening in the 1920s in Russia, well that was a revolutionary time, so you got an opportunity. And then to go to the 1970s, it was again a revolutionary time, because you had the Vietnam war and the oil crisis. As I may have mentioned to you there's a show at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal, about the way people tried to respond to the oil crisis of 1973; and you see Buckminster Fuller, and you see all these sorts of hippies ... actually, all the things that are happening now, in terms of renewable energy, and alternatives, were happening very much then, in the 1970s. And animating a lot of these ideas to do with land art, ecology art, art and the terrain, and artists' lifestyle, or whatever.

GW

Wasn't the peak more like 1968 and 1973, or something like that. The end of the 1970s seems a little bit late almost ...

PF

Yeah, but in 1977, and so on, you have these collaborative projects. In 1978 you have Peter Nadin and so on. I would actually place the dates as 1979, 1980. You have Fitzgibbon, Holzer, Nadin, Prince, and Winters coming out at that time.

GW

In your first contribution to *The Works In This Space Are A Response To The Existing Conditions and/or Works Previously Shown Within The Space*, you did the individual project using an iron lung, which then was taken out of the space. But the second time you came in it was a very different set of relationships. Nadin inviting you to do one thing, and then Jenny Holzer using a text that links to your work. So already you've got a kind of office structure, between different job roles, in making that exhibition.

PF

Well I think it would be useful to discuss with them, because quite frankly, I felt a little bit out of it. That is to say, there were meetings going on, with Dan Graham, Lawrence Weiner, Louise Lawler, Jenny Holzer, Peter Nadin, maybe one or two other people and I was not invited. It's not that I was being 'left out' per se, but I guess I was treated somehow as, 'there he is, that's Peter Fend'. I was not seen as someone party to the discussions.

I'm the only person that showed twice in the process. In both cases I was brought in to do something which was a bit strange. I mean, iron lungs in any space are strange, but also it didn't stay there. It was just brought in to make a point that Nadin wanted to make this idea of a room defined not by its walls, but by a pump. And the way sounds and words, staggered on the way, would imitate the way you breathe it, if you were in an iron lung: AROOM ... DEFIN ... EDNOT ... BYITS ... WALLS ... BUTBY ... APUMP" [makes heavy breathing sounds].

And you have all these ideas of space as *stuff*, and all the things I'd written about that. It was more or less an aesthetic exercise in how we think about space. Where space in this case is a solid, is a gas, is elastic; it can be inflated, it can be contracted; it's in your body, you're inside the space; all that kind of argument, as Simon Starling has also done a bit when referencing my iron lung piece (in the remake of *The Works In This Space Are A Response To The Existing Conditions and/or Works Previously Shown Within The Space* in 2000 at Neugerimshneider, Berlin). But it's not as a part of a continuing evolution into space. It was a gesture that I could have made anywhere, with or without Daniel Buren, Sean Scully, or anybody else. It's not like I was particularly contributing to their discourse. I didn't add anything to what they were doing necessarily. It was put in a space, and stayed there for about a month, and then left.

GW

I don't know how wild the other artists' responses were, or how

involved the next step of each person's artwork was. Wasn't there still quite a distinctive voice, from each piece to the next?

PF

Well there was another piece, I think by Jane Reynolds that consisted of little pinholes put in the wall that you could look into and through. And so you could say that all of these had to do somehow with the room, and I think what's going on is this: I think that Nadin was thinking about the *space qua space*, and Jenny, as they were working together and living together, was thinking about *message qua message*. So they're trying to figure out how to do a message in a space at the same time. Well of course they wanted Daniel Buren there because they already knew him and he was doing things about space. But they presented Daniel Buren in a very different way than he would normally be presented. Whereas now he is essentially a frieze or something like that; a decor, decoration.

GW

But, that's quite interesting, because Buren would be normally tackling 'existing conditions' which aren't expecting his artwork. And so in this case, he's dealing with existing conditions which are expecting somebody to respond to them. Did that mean that he couldn't approach it in his normal way? Is that what you mean? So it became more like decoration than an artwork?

PF

Well, I hear that. If you think about his thing at the Palais Royale in Paris, he's certainly working with the

site there, in a very powerful way. It's really an architectural kind of event, and it's quite nice ...

GW

But that again has an unexpectedness to it. Like the space isn't anticipating that somehow.

PF

Well I think that he's responding to the space. I think that he's solving issues of classicism very well; proportion, and the idea of the grid. It's only a discourse or dialectical response to the condition of the space, it's not like putting a sculpture in the middle of a plot, in the middle of a plaza. He really is I think dealing with the architectural hubris ...

GW

But for you, how would that differ? If you locate a space, and then propose a work, and make a work, within a space that you've chosen and decided, and the parameters weren't there for an artwork to exist really... or it wasn't an invitation; how does that differ if you go into the space and that space is conceived for an invitation? Or there is an invitation to produce something there and already the space has a heightened sense of the way that things can operate in there. Is that just the difference between you doing a show in a gallery and you making a work in the landscape? Is that the same anyway?

PF

OK, let's try to deal with the word 'gallery' for a moment. There was no gallery in New York at that time – maybe now – but none at that time at all, that would have said, 'let's

put an iron lung in a gallery'. Also, you could not really put an iron lung in a gallery just plain, because it would be kind of empty. It was actually quite important that there would be this Buren, and this Scully, where something had happened to the walls, something was happening to the space in terms of being almost turned into another kind of greeting room. You saw the vertical stripes of Buren, and you saw the horizontal stripes of Scully. And so the space had already been somehow 'occupied'. In which case then, the iron lung becomes an additional occupation practice. So the timing there was actually very good, and I was happy to have it brought in at that point in the transmutation of the space, or the activation of the space. That was another word they used, 'activation'. Where something is there that somehow means that it's psychologically animated.

GW

Well that's what I mean. Because the space is almost demanding that kind of psychological activation. Does that actually make it a stronger scenario for you to be able to animate the space?

PF

Well of course, oh yeah. Sure.

GW

You just encompass that, as a springboard in a way?

PF

Well as energy you, when you go into any space, if there's artwork there – or, if there's artwork in this case ... Buren doing something consciously, and Scully doing

something consciously, then you do something consciously. You want to 'step up to the plate' so to speak, and do something that is somehow responsive to the way the space has almost been turned into an animal. You know you're not just in an empty thing. And you are also aware that there would be more people coming along. So, for example, the Jane Reynolds was very subtle – the little holes – that's just another kind of adventure in the overall space, and the experience of being in the space as some kind of chamber. I think that the only real drawback was that for a lot of reasons, we had to take it all back.

The next pieces were Lawrence, Peter, Louise, and Dan. They put their names in white paint on the floor, in a kind of 2x2 grid of names. I don't know why they did that. I was never part of any of the discussions.

GW

Do you think that was because because they wanted to alter the geography of the space in relation to the names on the floor?

PF

I think so, yeah. I think it was an attempt to have the 'occupation' on the floor, with their names furthered, with the occupation or reconstruction of North America, which is what I painted.

GW

You were happy to have them do that?

PF

Oh I was happy, it was great. I never imagined doing that on my

own. And I think very much that somebody needs to stress, much of the reason why I credit other artists, and make it very clear, is that many things that I am doing could never have been done by me alone. I would never have ... well, maybe some day, down the road, maybe if I'd met you I might've painted something on the floor, but I was not thinking of it as a way of manifesting my ideas. It was Nadin who was thinking of that. It's not you, usually, it's somebody else. And, in this case, it was Nadin taking the concrete step in deciding that his space that he was leasing on 84 West Broadway, will now be, somehow a space for presentation in this succession format. And you see him then trying to pull some philosophical points together about responding to existing conditions and all that, and functional structures. And he was conversing with Jenny. And then Jenny, writing that quite brazen two sentences to kind of frame my map project, like, 'We have come to a time when we are changing the way we deal with territory' or whatever, you know, I forget ... But it sounds like revolution, you know!

[laughter]

And I wouldn't have said that; if I said that I'd be seen as a war-monger, but she said it. It wasn't me; I just used the phrase 'political economies after oil', which is also provocative, but ...

GW

Can we talk more about the map on the floor. Was the map of North America?

PF

As I recall it was North America.

GW

And why did you pick that?

PF

Because that's where we were.

GW

So just to identify the space ...

PF

Well, it was a presence issue. I'm not going to do a North American map here in Birmingham – I'm going to do Europe. Because you, in England ... well not England because that's too small, but Europe, because there is this ongoing history ... we have the Crimean War, the great gang, Adolf Hitler, whatever, Napoleon, this ongoing question of east versus west, Russia, where do you go, how far east is Europe?

GW

But then how did you want the idea of economy after oil to link with the map?

PF

Well that was on the poster, it was not in this show per se. With the poster, I was just trying to identify what I had done in relationship to the 1973 oil crisis, and the general problem that many people had with what we are going to do after oil. Something that Buckminster Fuller latched onto – that's covered in the show I mentioned in Montreal at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, and he actually really got into that. And Jennifer Brown was into that, along with various scientists at CalTech, and people at the New York

Times were writing about it. I mean it was not a great mystery. It wasn't like that was a beam of genius, I just found that this was an interesting idea and it seemed to make a whole lot of sense, and actually there was a lot of, shall we say, popular science support for it.

GW
For alternative energy sources?

PF
For algae in particular. Marine algae; ocean algae being a primary source of hydrocarbons. This was as opposed to ethanol from cornfields, ok? I suppose you really need to have marine algae to be your main source of hydrocarbons. This was something I latched on to in 1976, based on articles appearing in the press, and then thinking it through a little bit. Understanding how gravity works, and everything goes down to the sea, and its going to be down in the sea – it's like I said before, the poop goes where the ocean collects it. If you want to get nutrients you collect them, get them from the ocean and bring them back to the land, in terms of fish, or gas, or whatever, and it's a very simple up-and-down cycle, and it's very much connected to the idea of earth art, and very much connected with ideas you see in Robert Smithson, and Marcel Duchamp's urinal, and Jack Burnham's book, *Beyond Modern Sculpture* ... and so you understand there's a gravity flow, and I collect where the gravity has flowed. So it's all pretty simple geographic logic, and pretty simple gravitational logic, and pretty simple energy logic.

GW
But you defined space through that as well? How to locate yourself within space?

PF
Well, what's important too is that people like Dennis Oppenheim were really working with the notion of 'how does a body stand?' and 'how does a body accede gravity performances and endurance performances?' And I then extrapolated that with some pretty adventitious writing which is in my book *Ocean Earth*. It's to the effect that, our relationship to space is really a relationship to gravity, and we are constantly fighting gravity. The mere act of living, of breathing, of standing, of counter-weighting, all these are in gravity's field. We are always under pressure to eventually collapse, and we do eventually collapse. And this explains all kinds of aspects of just human behavior; of walking, erotica, and so on, that we are constantly resisting the force of gravity. And we're doing so in various ways. By the act of exercise we're trying to resist it.

Now, the iron lung is an assistance in this because it allows you to inflate and to essentially defy gravity, which is a muscular function; about 70% of your muscular function at night, by the way: you do a lot of work with your muscles, your lungs, that is not relieved. Therefore I had thought that this would be somehow like a sleep machine, the same way that a car is like a walking machine. And you could actually just get more done. But more importantly, it was all about the notion that we understand that space is in fact full

of stuff; it is full of gas, you are living in the gas. And how is the gas – how healthy is that? How are you respiring? How are you counter-weighting? How are you moving?

GW
This was your take on function as well, so it was a proposal. The function was to minimise the time required for sleep.

PF
Yeah, there was the idea that this could be a function. There was a pleasure-function. I mean, it's kind of scary to think about this, but at the same time, especially if you're healthy and just want to jump into one, maybe you could be functional, I mean I don't know? The point is that why not try that out? Or at least be aware of it? And Nadin didn't like that; he didn't like the idea of trying that out at all. He just wanted to have it be there in the room as a statement about space. And I think in a way, maybe the reason why I was not included in any of the discussions that were going on with Jenny or Peter, whatever, is that they were seeing me as a bit of an – I don't want to say anomaly – but as a "well, what do we do with this guy?" you know. "He has these ideas, we like them ... we want to show them! But we have to figure out how to show them in a way that we're not becoming overwhelmed by them! Because he wants there to be the iron lung, we don't want that, we just want to have the idea of elastic space."

[laughter]

Now, we in the art world have many great ideas, but we're blocked by our – I wouldn't call it religion exactly – by our theological practice, our world mechanism, from doing anything about the ideas. So, we have this bizarre inability to, and in fact, vengeful desire not to do anything about earth art, or structuralist film-making, or any number of other innovations by artists, as it was a very real no-no to do anything like you feel, or anything else. And this is a very real kind of self-paralysis – as China had before of having many, many great ideas, but being blocked by its religion from following through on the ideas.

GW
This is to do with being aware of evolution within ideas, and evolution of the space in which we're existing in a way.

PF
Existing conditions and all that, too.

GW
What I'm thinking for the gallery here, is whether it can be part of developing research, by the strategy of accumulating, and having sequence, and having a succession of things going on. Because you've revealed that in a way.

PF
Well, that's why you have a business corporation. Let's say you're the Ford motor company, or Daimler Benz – they incorporate and integrate intellectual property all the time. They're obviously always getting more and more advanced in their work at producing cars, and

they have spin-offs, and producing other kinds of engines, or whatever. The corporation is in a dynamic accumulation of intellectual property, and that makes them live or die.

Now, artists are very different. What happens is that all the intellectual property is confined to the artist. When the artist declines or dies, that's it. You are not encouraged to work with that material as living material. You might want to appropriate it, and you can say that you make it, but you can't actually do anything with it, so that there's a very real, as I say, truncation and disruption with all the new ideas. And I found that problem even with Collaborative Projects. Because when I came into Collaborative Projects and joined them, I was coming in with all my ideas about wild animals, and landscape, and *Spiral Jetty*, and the whole aesthetic, and everything that Vincent Scully had talked about, the implication of earth art, and they didn't want to hear about that. "We like your maps, Peter, because they're kind of political. But we don't like your earth art ideas." There was this inference that "Hey, they already did it! We're not them anymore; we were taught that in school! We're gonna go on, and we're gonna go on in a way that has nothing to do with them."

So that there's a very real forbidding of anything that might be seen as a follow-through on the previous, say, five years of work. In a corporation it's to the contrary. In a company if someone developed a new kind of jet engine five years ago, you work with that. And you go forward.

GW

You take the strengths and build the next version.

PF

And you don't necessarily put it into an art show, either, you might want to keep it secret for a while.

[laughter]