

FIONA GRADY
Connection Points

*'I sense Light as the giver of all presences, and material as spent Light.
What is made by Light casts a shadow, and the shadow belongs to Light.'*

Louis Kahn

Fiona Grady's large-scale, site-specific installation *Connection Points*, was commissioned by The Art Station for their building in Saxmundham in 2021. It is a work that exemplifies in its origination and effects a statement made by the late artist Malcolm Hughes, who spoke of an approach to making art through a system of rules that could produce, through *order* – 'an endless variety'.

To some extent all artists create their own rules, but Systems art was a very particular reaction in the 1960s to practices that were based on subjective or expressive experience and traditions which focussed primarily on the art object itself. Born out of the cross currents of minimalism, geometric abstraction and conceptual thought – and driven by pre-determined constructs that could be found within systems including maths, cybernetics and algorithms – it was a conscious attempt to make art less in response to the individual artist's touch, than to the wider world.

Grady does not particularly align herself to an approach derived from mathematical or geometric precepts alone, though there are elements of both involved in her practice. Her work is focussed and led by pre-defined parameters she thinks carefully about before initiating an installation such as this. Her initial drawings are developed as plans on a computer that are scaled up to produce templates for shapes cut from coloured transparent vinyl, which at The Art Station are attached onto the internal surfaces of the building's windows, along an L-shaped stretch that faces the street.

An artist who was bound by rules alone would not have been able to think so successfully around anomalies in the brutalist architecture of The Art Station – a former postal sorting office and BT telephone exchange (built in 1954) – that sits somewhat like a monolith in the high street of the historic market town. The fourteen windows that provide the support for Grady's vinyl schema are interrupted by necessities put there in order to enable the human activities within: ventilation boxes that pierce the regular grids of window frames, UV solar film applied to areas of glass in order to deflect the sun's glare, a length of moveable, double-glazed units which runs down the side of a large room that is now used for projects, exhibitions and workshops.

The Art Station was founded in 2017 as a non-profit arts organisation in order to establish a multi-use centre for the creative industries in Suffolk. Following a fire in its original building, it took over the telephone exchange in 2020. The project was conceived by artists working in collaboration with a network of local and national funders, to offer the community a place from which exhibitions and an all-ages arts education programme could take place, as well as providing studios and shared work-space. The decision to commission Grady came about after her work was included in a group exhibition *The Waiting Place* (May, 2021), for which she made a site-specific vinyl work, which is still situated on The Art Station's front door. 'Post box' red, yellow and orange, it alludes in its colours to the original function of the building – a reference that she picks up on again in *Connection Points*, in a far more lyrical way.

Taking as her starting point the wires used in analogue telephone connection, Grady has created a system of arc-like shapes that subtly shift within a colour palette of greens, blues and yellows. Mindful of the architecture that provides her support and of the function of the building itself she has produced a work that vividly illustrates how important art can be in its ability to alert the viewer to the present moment, and of its power as a form of transformation. She has thought about context – taking a simple reference to wiring as the remit for the shapes that play over the windows, married with a formal construct derived from a geometric grid provided by the architecture – and has mediated that thought by decisions about colour and about how internal and external light sources will effect the forms she has imposed.

The decision to use transparent, rather than opaque, vinyl was made in response to the working nature of the building and a sense of how disruptive highly coloured patterns might be, if their palette was too strong. The scale and arrangement of the shapes were established in relation to the measurements of The Art Station's front windows (which are divided into regular grids of glass panel in eleven rooms that lead towards the project space). Half-circular when seen on plan, the arcs are hand-cut into different lengths to fit within the window frames where they form a cohesive yet changing pattern, where different sections of the coloured bands meet, or are laid over each other. The arrangement of the vinyls on the first stretch of windows all follow the same format but their various colour modulations, within a palette of nine colours (that reference the building's original 1950s wall paint), results in a shifting spectrum of reflected forms.

Following an initial site visit, Grady was aware that the UV solar film that had been applied to the windows creates a mirror-like effect when seen in daylight from the street. As a result she conceived the installation as a 24-hour project. At night, when *Connection Points* is lit up from within the building, it projects an extended, concrete image that is largely invisible during the day, except for moments when random glimpses of coloured detail are revealed quite suddenly and intriguingly, in different light conditions.

As we walk through The Art Station, a constantly changing flux of hued shadows plays over the walls and across the surfaces of tables, floors and desks. Their shimmering forms alert one in turn to the material and fabric of the building itself, leading to the discovery of incidental detail such as the patina of concrete, or the soft, buttery tones of ageing brick. As the midday sun floods into the building, on an almost horizontal axis, the projected shadows echo the windows' imposed vinyl forms, while dramatically altering their scale and dynamics. The colours of the vinyl shapes are calibrated, room to room, dependent upon what takes place inside each. In the studios and shared workspace they are kept to calm, tranquil tones of blue and green, heightening in the project area with a pronounced use of yellow which brings warmth and drama into the space. Here, Grady has made very good use of a long length of windows where her shaped elements break free of their previously repeating formats and expand along the entire buildings frontage. Closed, the double-glazed units present a free flowing image that provokes thoughts of waves or waterways, and about the wider countryside in which this building stands, close to the Suffolk coastline and to the River Fromus running adjacent to Saxmundham High Street. As the window units are moved back and forth, their changing arrangements of overlaid shapes give rise to further, multiple, abstract dynamics.

Connections Points is not intended to be fixed within its formal parameters, rather it lifts off from these, to powerfully remind of the effects an artwork can have on the *received* intelligence. My experience and perception of the installation will be different from someone else's, dependent upon the time of day, the weather, or the constantly fluctuating movement of external light, which is the active yet intangible element on which this work, so successfully, relies.

Emma Hill

March 2022