

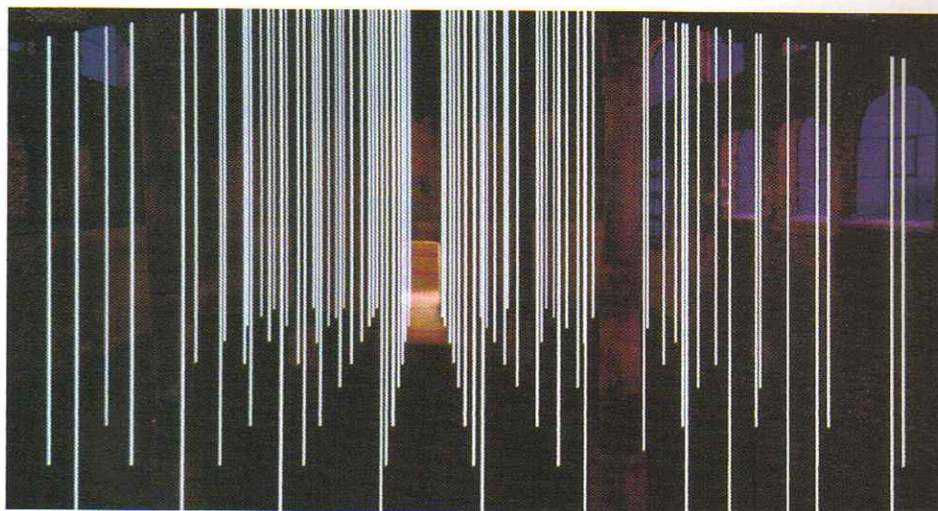
## Jane Prophet's *Conductor*

Edward Winters

Jane Prophet's *Conductor* was created to celebrate the conversion of Wapping Hydraulic Power Station into a new centre for the arts in East London by the Women's Playhouse Trust. For her installation in the former boiler house, Prophet has blacked out the sizeable interior and flooded its floor to a depth of 30 centimetres. From the eight metre ceiling she has suspended a grid of 120 vertical electro-luminescent cables to define the space into which one peers. The spectator enters that space at mezzanine level so that the suspended cables extend both above and below one's point of view. And for a minute or so we are struck by the elegant minimalism of this simple but stunning piece of work. The space recedes because of our perspectival grasp of the grid before us – and the parallax shift as we move our heads this way or that. However, the black between the pale green luminous cables is soft and velvety and forms an amorphous ground against which we see these lines of light; and which tends to flatten the definition of space, thereby setting up a counterpoint to the spatial light grid. The effect is not dissimilar to looking at a work by James Turrell. Then something happens.

The space of the room begins to intrude upon the simple sensations which first greet the viewer. Columns appear between the vertical threads of light but then 'flash' back into the black ground. Thus a peculiar feeling grips us that there is something solid between the lines – but then it shifts into void again, flickering in and out of existence. The spatial effect of the black ground makes it seem as if you can reach out and feel the space between the lines. This strange sensation reminded me of the stone sculptures of Anish Kapoor. Looking at some of Kapoor's recent pieces, we feel able to grasp the space that has been carved out of the solid stone. In this piece, likewise, we feel that the space is made almost touchable. Then something else happens.

First, we had fixed spatial lines of green luminescence against a black nebulous void.



Jane Prophet, *Conductor*, installation view, The Wapping Project

Then the space of the room and its structure intruded upon this effect, bringing to our perception an appreciation of the space which hovers between a something and a nothing. Finally, however, the architectural character of the vast room creeps into our awareness of the space in which we stand. At last we recognise the white ceramic faced brick of the interior; the shadowy opening of a doorway at the far end of the building; the four columns that support the water tank above; and the water plane that floods the floor and which appears to float at the mid-point between the cable and its reflection. This last 'realisation' of an architectural dimension brings a sense of the history of the building with it. We see that this is not just some abstract minimal piece but is situated in *this* building. In this respect the piece announces its connections to the work of other sculptors concerned with the particular circumstances of the buildings in which they create their pieces – such as that of Richard Wilson.

These three stages of grasping the work have brought to mind three very different contemporary sculptors. It is a mark of the beauty and intricacy of Prophet's work that several of its aspects can sustain serious comparison with these other artists. Its individuality lies in the subtle complexity of the particular weave of strands I have sought to identify. Beyond these comparisons

there remains a distinctive feature I have not yet suggested, for it seems difficult to find the right tone of voice to describe it. The work – as it moves from the very abstract formal beauty of our first minimalist impression, onward to a gentle appreciation of the space and its architectural character – has a feminine quality. It provides us with a glimpse of history in the fabric of the building, and a sense of awe as we look outward into the space arranged for us by the artist. Having arrived at this third moment of experience, we come to rest at a subtle awareness of a particular place – its delicacy accentuated by the quietness with which it slips into our experience. It is as if, having first become aware of the 'big sensation', the work of art recedes and allows us to capture a fragment of something very precious, fragile and valuable; as if, having made the introduction, the artist is content to step back and allow the spectator to see the subtle beauty of the space itself. (Rachel Whiteread's *House*, I believe, had something of this unassuming, courteous quality.)

Lastly, I want to express a personal response that depends on the structure of the emergent experiences discussed so far. The feeling of being in this dark void, with its luminous dangling threads, is easily associated with the black room of childhood and its attendant monstrous fears. (Is that blackened half-seen shape some ghoul or ghost? And does it flicker now, re-assuringly, and resolve itself into some familiar object, only to fall away into the empty black space of the room again?) I remember such fears well. It was a comfort to me then to have beside my bed a small plastic luminous statuette of Our Lady. The pale green light with which she glowed was something sure to fix upon in the otherwise amorphous gloom of the void. It was a similar pale green light to that provided by the electro-luminescent cables of *Conductor*. Perhaps we still need metaphors to offer us a sense of comfort in the dark. This work gives us the occasion to explore such a view of ourselves as peering through darkness in search of a something rather than a nothing. It is for this reason I find Prophet's installation thoughtful, gentle and beautiful.

Jane Prophet, *Conductor*, until 21 December, The Wapping Project, Wapping Hydraulic Power Station, Wapping Wall, London.



Wapping Hydraulic Power Station pre-installation