

Conference Presentation

## **Contouring with a sweeping brush as a catalyst for social engagement and urban renewal**

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## **Contouring with a sweeping brush as a catalyst for social engagement and urban renewal**

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Ruins make for a naturally good metaphor for my circumstance as an artist and a human being, in that they provide me with both a symbol for my uncertainty and supply a kind of creative energy that I can channel and a psychological space I can occupy. They seem paradoxical - pointing in two directions. In one direction, they point towards the past, something lost or fading away and yet they also seem to point simultaneously to something yet to be – something as yet undetermined - something that indicates possibility or hope. They are incomplete, contradictory, ambivalent. They signal doubt and uncertainty. But at the same time, they are embryonic - marching time - *waiting*. To me ruins are dynamic, energizing, *enthraling*.

In this presentation, I reflect on some of the works I have been making in relation to ruin, waiting and the unfinished.

The first work is a film I made in 2014 called '*I am from Leonia*' and located at St Peter's Seminary, Kilmahew which is a ruined Catholic Seminary standing on a hillside overlooking the River Clyde in the West of Scotland. I stumbled across St Peter's whilst walking one rainy afternoon several years ago and I have been drawn back to this place over an extended period again and again. This film is one of seven, six-minute films of a figure steadily and diligently sweeping the interior spaces of this ruined building. Each film has narration from a chapter in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972).

In his essay accompanying a project I did in Taipei, Dean Hughes wrote the following passage about the films I had made:

"The protagonist within the video is intent on moving and remodelling matter rather than making a new construction or order. [The] video presents itself as a tension. What is the nature of this sweeping? What is its purpose? The sweeping is carried through with diligence and attentiveness to the job at hand that seems at odds with the apparent situation at hand. The figure seems to be part archaeologist unsure of the status of what is being dislodged, moved and

uncovered. There is equal reverie being given to dust and dirt as there is to surface.” (Hughes, D. 2015, 7-10).

I am acting and thinking through the persistence of art as a system that uncovers spaces of potential through dispersed and uncertain practices. I am trying to highlight the creative potential of the unnoticed, the everyday, the fragment, the uncertain, doubtful, the ambivalent. I say system but it is probably more of a cluster of maintenance procedures as I mentioned previously – they are like ad hoc or semi-structured tasks or occupations which seem to have one thing in common in that they mark time and inhabit non-spaces such as ruins, or cracks, gaps and openings in vacant or abandoned buildings.

Occupations such as cleaning and repairing, walking and sweeping hitherto *around* practice, have been co-opted into *mainstream* practice. These tasks at the margins of life have become ‘the work’. The drive to remain peripatetic is a function of the desire remain in a kind of pre- *and* post-organizational zone a place called ‘parergon’ (Derrida, 1985). The works I make now are my attempts (*essais*) to bring my art practice outside traditional institutional settings and embed it within the contours of a site - in the mysterious and ontological terrain of the unknown (Thomson).

The procedures somehow conjure a contrast between the theatrical and the banal - an out of the ordinary ordinariness. It’s a kind of anti-choreographed but nonetheless performed procedure steeped in *bathos* (O’Neill, M. 2010) or purposeful purposelessness (Hughes, D. 2015).

Siegfried Kracauer wrote about those seemingly purposeless and empty moments which infiltrate everyday life such as that of the pedestrian, the commuter or the person waiting in the queue (1960, 30-33). In his final and unfinished book, he referred to the *terra incognita* where objectives and modes of being which still lack a name and hence overlooked or misjudged, can be rehabilitated (1995b, 192).

The mundane routine has become a ritual of entry or exit from one world to another – it serves as an interregnum or period of self-imposed waiting - what Stephen Wright calls a form of paradoxical escapology (Wright, S. 2014, 23).

Around about this time I did a residency in Delhi following my inclusion in the Raqs Media Collective’s major project INSERT2014. During the residency, I completed a series of ad hoc ‘sweeping walks’ located around Connaught Place, Delhi. Firstly, there was Connaught Place itself, second there was Skipper Tower and thirdly, Palika Park.

Both the St Peter’s and Delhi projects are symbolic of a ‘contradictory domain’ - two quite different locations geographically and yet in many ways quite similar. Both are architectural

sites, sites originally formed out of an optimistic vision of the future and now in a state of neglect - spaces that offered potential 'escape routes'.<sup>1</sup>

As an artist, playing a part however small, in advocating an imaginative rethinking of unused public spaces and cultural infrastructure through this form of gesture, sweeping and cleaning, is a provocation to rediscover or uncover cultural and artistic potential through imaginative transformations of space through walking and engagement or micro-migrations. Kicking fragments down the path, sweeping particles, dust and contouring cracks, joins and crumbling architectural features and lines, all provide the marginal spaces I need for dispersals – ones that do not stand for anything certain and are in a state of intercession. This is a key point. Through enacting what have become uncertain practices and made up/ad hoc on the spot nomadic routines and games in neglected urban spaces, I'm attempting a kind of 'spontaneous philosophy' – to live in a drawing (Gramsci, A. 1971, 323-77) - literally taking a line for a walk.

Sweeping the line felt *appropriate* as an everyday practice and sweeping around the ruins of St Peter's had a certain 'random logic' – it made sense in that I was curating my own dissolution as an artist into a practitioner of the everyday. Contemplating the notion of indefiniteness as a practice, speculating on the insistence of a procedure that uncovers the spaces of potential, allowed a feral voice a chance to speak.

Meandering and impromptu arts practice is a means of resisting the market, it can surface social issues and serve as a catalyst for change. Most important to me though, is that it foregrounds the notion that art is most alive in the space of its own making – it's a moment, a fleeting and yet profound realization, a sensation an understanding – it may be embodied by an artefact but that is the catalyst. Through my work I aim to demonstrate how the use of both the improvised, the fragmentary and the 'impoverished' signifies a continued turn towards art as exchange over commodity. It is an event or quality.

Through contextual research, I have subsequently found many examples of the act of sweeping depicted in a number of artworks from a number of genres and eras, from images depicting domestic chores and other everyday activities such as maintenance, cleaning and sweeping through to symbolic gestures involving art as an overt and explicitly political movement or action. Through the ages – paintings, drawings and prints provide depictions or representations of occupations which show us engaged in productive labour, purposeful tasks, menial work, routine, daily chores. They have led me to consider how the spaces the actors occupy are gendered and to an extent how artists have found the act of cleaning synonymous with a means of expression around issues-based art such as politics, ecology, waste, climate change and the like. What do I understand from this gesture or situated practice [as opposed to merely depicting] is a process which immerses a public within the art being produced or rather enacted.

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<sup>1</sup> I also think of these escapes as migration routes – paths to an elsewhere yet to be determined.

In many of the historical works the idea of cleaning comes across an ennobling depiction of labour and in more contemporary the detritus forms an art object or has a kind of coherent message about environmental politics - but what of an art that is critical of these perspectives? One that does not provide any neat answers, one that has more nihilistic undertone? has no political content, is indifferent to being deployed as an agent for a specified objective or even product? I just wondered if cleaning, repairing, walking and contouring acts was a way of telling us there seem to be some uncomfortable truths. After all, sweeping stirs up as much dust as it cleans away.

Francis Alÿs, Jo Hanson, Joseph Beuys and in particular Mierle Laderman Ukeles, are probably my nearest reference points. In the words of Ukeles, I am thinking about the 'flushing up to consciousness' of everyday practice - the routine the everyday - flagging the void spaces to approach, address, attend (Laderman Ukeles 1969).

Ephemerality, certain media choices and the presence of the artist, are artistic strategies used by artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Allan Kaprow and Fluxus, Marcel Broodthaers, Francis Alÿs, Stanley Brouwn, Mierle Laderman Ukeles and many others. These artists engage, perform, discuss, perceive, and realize works that occupy the 'parergon' - the boundaries between art and life and even call into question the place and purpose of art.

Artists incorporating their own labour and that of others as the artwork, in relation to traditional forms of object creation for market exchange, intrigue me. Why? Because they foreground complexity of art - process over product.

In 'The Art of Work' Ukeles presents an interesting and challenging provocation, she wrote:

"The sourball of every revolution: after the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?" (Laderman Ukeles, 1969).

Laderman Ukeles, along with many other of her contemporaries promoted the idea of artists as activists challenging the privileged and gendered notion of art practice to form early and important works of institutional critique. She spoke about and performed development and maintenance works. She even joined the New York Department of Sanitation in 1977, as an Artist in Residence and she has been there ever since. I am interested in exploring why the merging of what is commonly seen as something with a high cultural status i.e. art, with something with such a lowly status as routine maintenance and for example, cleaning. I believe this kind of immersive practice creates an entry point into the field of distribution and enables a means of 'listening more closely to the hum of life' (ibid).

We all need something to resist, something against which to test our ideas a precursor or extant model to critique and improve upon. I see that relational aspect as something being

attended to (note I do not say addressed as this may appear to declare closure) within my practice.

“Making a gesture involves confronting the unknowable. A gesture is not simply mechanical like a movement, nor is it fully semantic as a sign might be, nor fundamentally intentional like an action must be. The idea of a “gesture” escapes the classical categories of meaning and is never developed as an independent notion. A trait that often characterizes gesture is its ability to use the body as a means to draw evanescent traces. Because a gesture inadvertently creates relation, a “milieu” institutes itself within the interstices of being and metamorphoses our quotidian lives. The gesture is often a tool towards the transformation of the self and of the world.”  
(Formis, 2018)

The gestures I make are humble interventions into the everyday and my immersion in the field of distribution, the gesture becomes my insertion of practice into void spaces, spaces that culture has forgotten or abandoned - an aesthetic of regular experience, organised dérives inviting participants to join in the sweep-walk are all a part of it. Formis goes on to write:

“Intrinsically inter-corporeal and inter-subjective, the gesture is a “means without end,” in the words of Giorgio Agamben. The gesture is always a form of the intermedial. But when the gesture apprehends its mediality in an honest and noble manner, it becomes an artwork. That is when a gesture “matters.” Whether it emerges in a ritualistic, artistic or technical context, the gesture extends and transmits itself well beyond the duration of its concrete manifestation for both the doer (the actor) or the one doing the observing (the spectator). It is right there that the body draws a simple gesture and aims to show the most rudimentary form, but also the most essential, of that which we call “art.”

“The gesture shows a clear materiality insofar as it does not disappear as it seems, and it leaves permanent changes in the art world and in within society. That is when gestures “matter,” insofar as they both are important for giving a deep meaning to our lives and inscribe durable transformation in the flux of everyday event.” (ibid.)

The protesters and volunteers sweeping Tahrir Square, during the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, a day after Hosni Mubarak's resignation as president, was a gesture of a new beginning. These gestures matter because they are “ethically, politically and aesthetically important. Gestures matter because they do not evaporate but shape our lives on the long term” (ibid).

But how on earth can ambivalence, indifference be deployed as a condition of possibility? Well, from my perspective possibility is revealed by the very disclosure of ambivalence - that which is missing or not ‘being seen’. In a world where an apathetic public seems disinterested

in truths and only spectacle, I am trying to disclose the creative potential of the fragment to reconnect the forgotten place with the world (Ross 2006, 1-49).

This shift in the framing of art has implications for the viewer since the shift from the material (first) frame to the institutional (second) frame would in some way implicate the viewer within the work – even as co-creator (Lebenszteijn, J - C. 1994). The use of an artwork's surroundings as part of the work situates the viewer within the second frame.

According to Helena Reckett, Laderman Ukeles' actions "underscored the institution's contradictory role as champion of artistic expression, cultural gatekeeper and preserver of the past" (Reckett 2013, 133).

My focus on the supplement of cleaning, enables me to contour culture's inscription within architectural surfaces. The elements combine to reference unstable and subjective concepts of space and understanding and offer temptation around seemingly unstructured activities and makeshift actions that ultimately draw attention to the unresolved poetics of the everyday and the indefinable beauty in the ordinary.

Sometimes people don't notice me at all. Or they ignore me. Or they stop and comment. And when they do, they encounter my progressive but uncertain sweeping of a pavement, a gutter, something that was once a concrete space of modernity but which is now an abandoned and ruined husk. These repetitive acts would appear to have no end in sight. Through enacting a kind of self-abasing gesture - that of street-cleaning, I formed a visual language which gives me a form of expression on a *condition of being* (Moran 2005, 25). Benjamin wrote, the bazaar is the last hangout of the *flâneur* and I was set on inserting myself on the street with my sweeping brush, meandering through the spaces and contouring the intersecting lines which divide and subdivide, towards a mobile form of practice (Benjamin, W. 2002, 12).

My work alludes to the artist as a traveller: walking and moulding thought through an existential journey – a journey through imagined sites of the fragment such as those witnessed by readers of *Invisible Cities*. Similar to the Medieval itinerant artists who sought commissions, often following religious pilgrimage routes (Ross 2003, 95), the elements pertinent to my own situation are discursive spaces, linked and alert to architecture and site as metaphors for our psychological states; they all refer to a place of (our) making and unmaking, both real and imagined. Like Price and Broodthaers, my intention is to resist institutional power and however futile this may seem, these works or *acts* are my current form of address. By positioning myself within a fragmented and incomplete space I am able to heighten tensions between the meaningful and the meaningless, between creativity and fall, fiction and reality. In my work, an attempt is made to disclose the disproportion between the repetitious labour and the magnitude of the task on the one hand, and the absurdity of the implements to hand and the meaninglessness other than its own taking place, on the other.

My immersion within a set of visual relationships affects and shapes my consciousness as I tentatively move towards a process of renewal and redefinition. Through foregrounding the idea of the unfinished, the impossibility of art (the gap between the real and represented) and yet the possibility of art, is made apparent. In my work, I am trying to disclose that gap through the disclosure of the ambivalence of representation - the gap between art and life.

I believe the artist reveals this gap, this space of potential, and doesn't fill them in. The value of art today, its condition of possibility, lies in this disclosure (Ross 2006, 49).

Drifting in an uncertain and ambivalent manner, mixing attentiveness and apathy, purposefulness and ennui, create a provisional site of (my) making and *un*making and attempts to open up speculation on the possibility of a place for art and narratives of hope. Precedents include Beuys, Alÿs, Perray, Hanson, Orozco and others.

The elements of the enactments combine to reference unstable and subjective concepts of space and understanding and offer temptation around seemingly unstructured activities and makeshift actions that ultimately draw attention to the unresolved poetics of the everyday and the indefinable beauty in the ordinary. People witness the progressive and yet futile sweeping of the pavement; the never-ending task of cleaning acts of delayed closure (Getzels & Csikszentmihalyi, 1976).



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Figure 1 & 2. Sweeping St. Peter's Seminary Kilmahew, 2014 ©AlecShepley



Figure 3 & 4. Sweeping Connaught Place and Palika Park, Delhi, 2014 ©AlecShepley



Figure 5. Sweeping at Kuandu Museum of Modern Fine Arts, Taipei, 2014 (during *Ibid* Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts, Taipei (December 2014-February 2015) ©AlecShepley

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