

Journal Article

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Camping in a Mud House: Ruins and Fragments as Tropes of Reflexivity

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Abstract: This paper contextualizes three iterations of contemporary art practice performed in Delhi, September 2014, and explores the notion that artistic activity occurs first of all in the field of distribution. In this paper, I speculate on the insistence of a procedure that uncovers the spaces of potential and allows new voices to emerge through a dispersed practice. These new works are part of a broader practice highlighting the creative potential of the fragment to restore an embodied relationship with the world. These new works are a direct result of my speculative proposal included in the exhibition curated by Raqs Media Collective as part of INSERT2014, titled “New Models on Common Ground,” held at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts in Delhi, February 2014. The paper explores creative work that attempts, as Marcel Duchamp once put it, to be not of art, but outside the usual parameters of art and which sidesteps or at least delays being co-opted by the institutions that define art as “art” and that have traditionally distributed it.

Keywords: Artistic Research, Creative Practice, Uncertain Practices

This paper contextualizes three iterations of practice performed in New Delhi, September 2014. In my creative practice I contemplate the notion of fragmentation as a trope of reflexivity. In this paper, I speculate on the insistence of a procedure that uncovers the spaces of potential and allows them voice through a dispersed practice. These new works are part of a broader practice, where I am trying to highlight the creative potential of the fragment to restore an embodied relationship to the world. In my practice as an artist, I use photography, found and made objects, video, sound, neon, fabric, and construction materials often associated with set or stage design or temporary buildings. There is a performative aspect to my work as an artist—to open up art as a practice, as a process—as a *social space*. Often working in neglected urban spaces, the creative energy found in such

settings offers a useful metaphor for our state of being. Working with fragments and ruins provide the marginal spaces I need for dispersing ideas—ones that do not stand for anything certain but that are renegotiating a relationship with audience; testing out work that perhaps is not “of art.” According to Daniel Kunitz (2011, 50–51) the lesson of the earlier efforts in 1960s where art challenged context, is that if you want to disrupt the understanding of what art is you need to alter how it gets to its audience. He quoted the Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers who wrote: “The definition of artistic activity occurs, first of all, in the field of distribution” (Crow 1996, 177). That sentence serves as the epigraph to Seth Price’s “Dispersion,” in which he imagines a way to escape institutions, he wrote:

Suppose an artist were to release the work directly into a system that depends on reproduction and distribution for its sustenance, a model that encourages contamination, borrowing, stealing, and horizontal blur. The art system usually corrals errant works, but how could it recoup thousands of freely circulating paperbacks? (Price 2002, 7)

In other words, if you want to free yourself from what some have said are the strangulating forces of the market-driven establishment, then perhaps artists should try unleashing some kind of artistic scheme against the system by flooding it with confusing work.

The intention to problematize and to re-introduce complexity into the system is clear, like

Marcel Broodthaers before him, Price imagines a way for art to escape institutions. This paper

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C O M M O N

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speaks to one such project in which I *enact* works that are, as Duchamp once put it, not of art— but outside the usual parameters of art which side-step or at least delay being co-opted by the institutions that define art and that have traditionally distributed it.

For many years now, I have been working with the fragment, occupying the space of the ruin, trying to realize what I have always felt to be its creative potential—sometimes it has worked and sometimes it has failed. I realized from the start the idea of failure and working intuitively with fragments within in a world of fragments would become an important feature of my practice (see figure 1). This is an example from an early work that *worked*—it was made on the spot in a row of derelict terraced houses just outside Manchester, England in 1983 and the reason it worked I came to realize, but in a sense always knew, was because over many days the fragments were allowed to speak for themselves over the period of time I was *in situ*. This period of time I refer to delays closure and is led by emergent problem finding as part of the creative process (Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi 1976, 174–78). As Donald Schön (1995, 272–75) wrote, the development of an appreciative system involves a reflective conversation between the situation and those within it.

For the visual language to emerge, I needed to work with the fragment over time in order for a system to grow—to be what it needed to be rather than what I wanted it to become. To be close to it, to occupy its space, I needed to “camp” out with it in the shelter of that row of derelict houses: doing/undoing and the potential of failure were accepted as procedural components of the practice of discovery and of the reflexive conversation between artist, place and material. Significantly, failings were in some way closely synonymous with that elusive space of potential not of art as they revealed to me the gap or break I was searching for in the production line of art’s commodification.

In the autumn of 2013, there was an open call for speculations from artists, curators, writers, architects, cultural practitioners, and activists for the re-imagination of spaces and cultural infrastructure in Delhi. Raqs Media Collective, the Delhi-based artistic and curatorial collective, invited proposals for the imaginative rethinking of unused public spaces and cultural infrastructure in Delhi. The call was a provocation for artists and cultural practitioners to rediscover the city’s cultural and artistic potential through imaginative transformations and the result was a series of conversations

initiated by artists from all over the world congregating in Delhi.

My project, *A Place of Impossibility*, was among the twenty-five submissions invited to exhibit their full proposals in the exhibition in *New Models for Common Ground* at Mati Ghar (Mud House), at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), February 2014, as part of *INSERT2014*, curated by Raqs Media Collective. *INSERT2014* was an international contemporary art exhibition presented by the INLAKS Shivdasani Foundation, and supported by the Goethe Institute, New Delhi, and also by the India Foundation for the Arts, Bangalore. The trigger for the series was an invitation that Raqs received from INLAKS Shivdasani Foundation. At that time, they had just inaugurated the *Sarai Reader '09*, a nine-month-long exhibition organised in collaboration with the Devi Art Foundation that dealt with what the future art scene in Delhi could be.

The Raqs Media Collective, selected Delhi as the site for *INSERT2014* for both conceptual and logistical reasons. Delhi is where the collective was founded in 1992 and has been based ever since. Earlier, Raqs had co-founded the Sarai Programme at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, where they led interdisciplinary research and discussions between artists and researchers for more than a decade. For Azad Shivdasani, chairman of INLAKS Shivdasani Foundation and the sponsor for this event, the idea was to see how an international show of contemporary art would fare in Delhi, after he came across one in Los Angeles. The main concern for Shivdasani, however, was that the event should be socially relevant. This is reflected in the kind of artists who were invited to be a part of it, such as the Taiwanese artist Yao Jui- Chung, from Taipei who presented *Energies of Derelict Buildings* as part of *INSERT2014* and

has for the last two decades been fascinated by abandoned buildings, and those that have been built but never used (Meher 2014). Referring to one such recent work at Meliwan Resort on Shanyuan Bay, Taitung County where construction work started on the project in 2004, then ceased in 2007, and finally resumed in 2011, Yao (2010) said:

Derelict buildings can naturally make for a good metaphor, a symbol for a certain state of mind, as our circumstances and our background can be seen in a similar way—as derelict buildings pending redevelopment or reconstruction. Derelict buildings provide a kind of creative energy that can be harnessed by artists. (Yao 2010).

My own project in *New Models for Common Ground* as part of *INSERT2014* speculated on a conceptual reimagining of two sites selected from the list put forward by Raqs Media Collective, namely Palika Bazaar Park on Connaught Place, and the abandoned office building known locally as Skipper Tower in Delhi. Speculative street encounters, walks or happenings were proposed as a way for the artist to directly experience the selected sites, encounter those people who lived and worked there and document the process using photography and video. Skipper Tower, located outside the metro station of Barakhamba Road, is a disputed property and has come to symbolize for many, the image of modernity in the form of a “ruin from the future.” This empty tower block currently stands alone and silent amongst many busy office spaces. The possession of this fourteen floor abandoned building currently rests under the Claims Commissioner, by the order of the Supreme Court of India. Although there was no further information found about this building at the time of writing this paper, the site in its present state of ruins and abandonment was seen by the project curators Raqs, as definitely one that could fuel micro engagements, as major events might be problematic due to the restrictions over ownership.

The second site chosen for the project was Palika Bazaar Park on Connaught Place, Delhi. This park (and if you include the underground market) is one of the most popular public places of Delhi. This park attracts people from all walks of life: from homeless vagabonds to office workers, from college students to compulsive loners and many others besides. Connaught Place, popularly known as CP is known not only for its nostalgic historicity and impressive built heritage, but also for the sheer vitality of changing urban life

with all its fullness and diversity. I was particularly interested in experiencing the contrasting effects of a large, modern office block void of people, the popular park busy with people from all walks of life and possibilities of micro-engagements with local people and groups of tourists milling around in the mix.

Although a very lively place, with large numbers of people present at any given time of the day the area is in decline and the infrastructure is in a state of decay. One of the curatorial aims of *INSERT2014* was to “inaugurate a rethinking of “place” in contemporary art as an active presence, and the foregrounding of the poetics of usage as a vital axis of art’s inhabitation with life and its potential.” (Bagchi, Narula, and Sengupta 2014, 10)

The project that I proposed for these sites was situated therefore within this broader context and included a kind of nomadic and fragmented practice, with an aim to occupy the as spaces seemingly void of artistic activity and, by including myself with an encountered audience to both subvert and affect rhetorical frameworks and structures, reimagine these spaces—or at least their potential to be re-imagined through artistic engagement. This is important, as the idea behind *INSERT2014* was that of acting as a “provocation for artists and cultural practitioners to discover and propose ideas that can be leveraged, adapted and transformed to lay the foundations for a distinct and dynamic art and culture scene” (Bagchi, Narula, and Sengupta 2014, 10). The point of departure for this event, therefore, is not the artwork but the artist. However, given the history and context of the location, its current condition and the potential for my status as an artist to be perceived as an unwanted intrusion i.e. being “parachuted” in to an area to engage in some kind of development activity, I decided to adopt “a point of departure” as my main focus of activity and to introduce into a public setting for the first time a studio procedure I have been practicing for many years—that of sweeping the floor.

Through the series of performed (planned and un-planned) encounters with users and visitors of the proposed sites in Delhi, my proposal was to observe current conditions, exploring and documenting any apparent dilapidations and deteriorating institutional frameworks. The intention was “to invert the notion of ruin and reveal its positive and creative potential [to] pave the way for renewal and change” (Shepley 2014, 90–91). Through enacting this process of street cleaning I would be able to encounter physical manifestations of the incomplete, unfinished maintenance and failings in the institutional fabric and form a visual language remarking on the present *condition*. Using a research grant awarded for the project, I travelled to Delhi in September 2014 and over a period of several days enacted three street cleaning *dérives* at three co-located sites in New Delhi: Palika Park; Skipper Tower; and Connaught Place (see figures 2-5).

In *Enactments #1, #2 and #3* (Figures 6, 7 & 8) I am engaged in the act of sweeping the selected sites Connaught, Palika Park and Skipper Tower. At first glance these may seem like pointless acts, however I am exploring what Gordon Matta-Clarke has referred to as metaphoric voids, gaps, left-over spaces, undeveloped spaces where where you stop to tie your shoelaces. In other words, these are the places that are just interruptions in your own daily movements (Matta- Clarke 1974, 34). *Enactments #1, #2 and #3* were acts of contouring where I walked the contours of these evocative cultural sites, following the psycho-geographic lines and shapes in my path, sensually sweeping the brush along the grooves, gutters and pavements of the selected sites.

In taking “a line for a walk” (or in this case a brush) I am drawing an analogy with painting—but in this scenario the street is the canvas and other than the documentation, there is no representation—only the immediate experience and shared witnessing experience of the live act. It is an example of doing and undoing and this interplay becomes the maxim of the process. Given the reaction of the people I encountered in taking my practice to the street, this situated work served as a temporary sign transmitting a joyous presence in and amongst the proposed sites. It also meant encountering new audiences and creating art not about art but to empower the viewer to apply an aesthetic of regular experience to other encounters in a wider field of action— a key aim of my creative work.

This project focuses on architecture and site as metaphors for our own mental

states, confronting the viewer with fragmentation and an incomplete project that perhaps is within our nature to shy away from. In this new work however, an attempt was made to put into reverse the negative stereotypes of the neglect—to invert it and create the potential for a more positive metaphor by *cleaning*. The viewer is immersed in a set of visual relationships that subconsciously he or she is aware of, to create allegories, new meanings and to foreground the creative potential of the fragment in a process of renewal and redefinition.

This work is influenced by Italo Calvino's book *Invisible Cities*, and in particular the sections about the cities of Leonia and Sophronia. The accidental viewer on the street of Delhi would witness a figure steadily and progressively sweeping his way around a district attempting to fulfill a seemingly impossible blueprint referred to by the inhabitants of *Invisible Cities*. The visual narrative conjures the street cleaners who are welcomed like angels to the city, and who "engage in their task of removing the residue of yesterday's existence in a respectfully silent ritual that inspires devotion" (Calvino 1979, 91). This is perhaps because once things have been discarded nobody really wants to have to think about them anymore:

Nobody wonders where, each day, they carry their load of refuse. Outside the city, surely; but each year the city expands, and the street cleaners have to fall farther back. The bulk of the outflow increases and the piles rise higher, become stratified, extend over a wider perimeter. Besides, the more Leonia's talent for making new materials excels, the more the rubbish improves in quality, resists time, the elements, fermentations, combustions. A fortress of indestructible leftovers surrounds Leonia, dominating it on every side, like a chain of mountains. (Calvino 1979, 91)

In the book, as in this project, the reader/viewer is compelled to reflect on the ultimate outcomes of such accumulations of debris as an outcome of daily progress and thus question a wider logic around production and unbridled modernity. This question about what to do with our worldly possessions, once we no longer have a use for them, is as poignant today as it ever was and my *Enactments #1, 2 & 3* pause, visualize and reflect on the status of the fragment within a potentially restored embodied relationship with the world. For me as an artist, I felt I had created precisely the kind of dispersed encampment around the place of possibility referred to by Michael Phillipson when he wrote:

Under the intensity of creative experimentation (the situation and challenge of artists' practice) each work asks itself (and therefore us, too) whether there might be a "place" where culture has not yet reached; it hopes to be that "place—an elsewhere that is not yet a "place" on culture's terms. (Phillipson 1995, 202–03)

Palika Park and Skipper Tower have such a strong resonance with me (even more so now having "touched" them) as they are spaces that were once part of a Utopian master plan—institutionally cared for but perhaps now more feral spaces, slipping through the now worn municipal order and re-occupied by chance.

The projects within *INSERT2014* inhabit these places—the elsewhere, referred to by Phillipson (1995, 202–02), moving beyond being places "on culture's terms"—in other words, outside our normal parameters of understanding culture. The project is ongoing as there is a further iteration of practice planned for 2016, this time as a solo exhibition in Delhi, referencing the place of fragments and removals from the sites, exploring notions of entropy and places of dis-assembly. The project aims to rethink expectations about the artwork, opening up the space to problematise assumptions of what may constitute a work of art or in other words an unsitely aesthetic (Miranda 2013, 22–48). By exploring the psycho-geography of the area, the desired seamlessness of a city's self image, I was able to observe actual seams opening up or failings in the infrastructure, use/non-use/misuse but without the often obligatory practice of documentary photography. I was able to occupy the spaces relatively unburdened by the need to make or produce an outcome other than the practice of being there. I was able to unmake and blur

—acts I found liberating and engendered ad hoc encounters and dialogue with passersby. In the words of Michel De Certeau I was able to link “acts and footsteps, opening meanings and directions” emptying them out of their primary role and historical order of movement, as a means of articulating a second, poetic geography on top of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning (1984, 105).

Paradoxically, and as perhaps a cautionary endnote to myself if no other, in resisting or circumventing the problem of the art object’s commodification Miwon Kwon argues that it is now the performative aspect of the artist’s mode of operation that is circulated as an art commodity—artists have adopted managerial functions of art institutions (Kwon 2000, 38–63) in an “aesthetics of administration” (Buchloh 1997, 140). Nevertheless Kwon argues, despite a proliferation of “artist/nomad/aesthetic administrator” and the loosening of relations around exhibition and reception the phantom of a site as an actual place remains—perhaps as a “compensatory fantasy in response to the intensification and alienation wrought by a mobilized market economy following the dictates of capital” (Kwon 2000, 57).

Through an insinuation into the visual language of these places, I was able to explore what Kwon has referred to as a place where our fictional selves could be in the space of unmaking and retrieve for myself some form of ownership and control for the idea of an art that is not of art—a form of occupation as a performative process (Shepley 2014, 90–91). In this ongoing artistic research project I am enacting, documenting and reflecting on improvised sites in various urban settings to explore the sense of hovering. I bring a kind of nomadic studio and hover in a state of unresolved poetics, ambivalence, mutability and itinerancy. These enactments are dialectically linked replies to one another, and are a means of creating a transactional creative practice which

is questioning the commodification of art—or at least delaying its approach. Detailing viewer engagement and empowerment is the subject of further research.

Illustrations

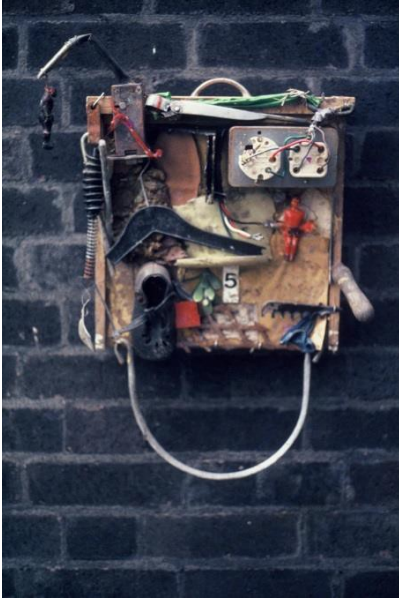


Figure 1. Alec Shepley 1983 (Untitled) Assemblage, Various Materials
Source: Alec Shepley



Figure 2. Palika Park, New Delhi

Source: Image Courtesy of Raqs Media Collective, 2014

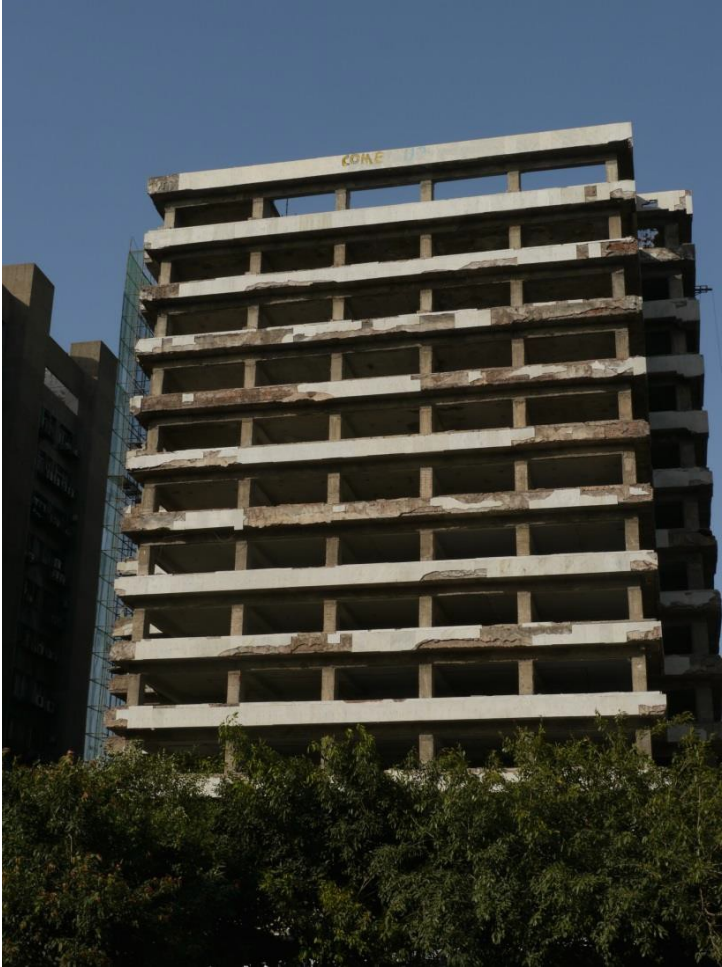


Figure 3. Skipper Tower, New Delhi
Source: Alec Shepley



Figure 4. Connaught Place, New Delhi
Source: Alec Shepley



Figure 5. Alec Shepley 2014 *Enactment #1* Connaught Place, New Delhi
Source: Alec Shepley



Figure 6. Alec Shepley 2014 *Enactment #2* Skipper Tower, New Delhi
Source: Alec Shepley



Figure 7. Alec Shepley 2014 *Enactment #3* Palika Park, New Delhi
Source: Alec Shepley

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