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Disclosing ambivalence: contouring, uncertainty and the paradox of escapology

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Disclosing ambivalence: contouring, uncertainty and the paradox of escapology

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Abstract: This paper contextualizes two iterations of art practice performed in 2014 by Shepley (i) in the ruined catholic seminary St Peters, Kilmahew, Scotland and (ii) Connaught Place, Delhi, India. The paper examines ways in which he has sought to prolong the notion of artistic activity within the field of distribution and his efforts to disclose potential breaches in the cultural infrastructure emerging through dispersed and uncertain practices. These selected micro-encounters extend the provocation put forward by the Raqs Media Collective during INSERT2014 in Delhi. They are part of his broader practice research highlighting the potential of creative indeterminacy to, push away from 'art' and to restore an embodied relationship to the world. The paper explores creative work that attempts, as Marcel Duchamp once wrote, to be not of art, and to delay closure – that closure being the co-opting of art by the institutions that define art as art and that have traditionally distributed it.

Keywords: art; audience; embodiment; disruption; society; social action; post-capital; indeterminate practices; uncertainty; escape; ontology; trope.

According to Daniel Kunitz (2011, 50-51) the lesson of the earlier efforts in the 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, T. E. 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 [for example] thousands of freely circulating paperbacks?" (Price, S. 2002, 7).

In other words, if you want to free yourself from what can at times feel like 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.

That's all well and good, but art that leaves its place of making is prone to endless manipulation, interpretations and vested interests (Buren, D. 1970, 100-104; Kosuth, J. 1989, 169-173). In bringing the viewer into close proximity of art in its own closest reality I encounter art's paradoxical inability to render life – *but* I also sense this may be art's function – disclosure of a kind of gap or void.

In my practice, I take as my starting point Michael Philipson's call to uncover those spaces that culture has not reached or to take Philipson further, to excavate those spaces or gaps that culture has somehow forgotten or that progress has left behind (1995, 202-203). By everyday practices such as walking, tracing or sweeping the lines and contours of openings, cracks and delineations, I hope to expose something between art and life - even if only momentarily.

This paper contextualizes two iterations of an everyday practice from the summer and autumn of 2014, in 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. These spaces offered potential ‘escape routes’ where I could work through and reflect on various and prescient tropes of reflexivity such as:

Escape options	Wanderings/meandering
Conscious crumbling	Unconscious drifting/getting lost
Unstructured method	No method at all
Ambivalence	Uncertainty/indeterminacy
Activating	New functions of art
Purposeful purposelessness	Purposeless purposefulness
Encounters	Prompting directional change
Anonymity	Remain an outsider
Indeterminate	Maintain tortoise-like behaviour
Window shopping	Merge with the crowd

I am acting and thinking through the persistence of art as a system that uncovers spaces of potential through dispersed and uncertain practices. The new works described are part of a broader practice where I am trying to highlight the creative potential of the everyday, the fragment, the uncertainty, the ambivalent. I say system but it is probably more of a routine, like a maintenance programme – one inhabiting non-spaces such as ruins, or cracks, gaps and openings in vacant or abandoned buildings. The routine somehow conjures a contrast between the theatrical and the banal, the everyday and the curious, an out of the ordinary ordinariness. According to one commentator, I’m choreographing a kind of bathetic - a dérivistic sweeping or cleaning (O’Neill, M. 2010)

This performative practice opens up to me the spaces and objects of the everyday. 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)

Working in neglected urban spaces offers a useful metaphor for a state of being - paradoxically there is much creative energy found in such settings. I came across such a place in the form of St Peters Seminary, currently standing in ruins on the West Coast of Scotland overlooking the Clyde. I stumbled across it whilst out for a walk one rainy afternoon and I have been drawn back again and again to this place over several years. In the summer of 2014 I received a small travel grant from my faculty, to try out some ideas there. The result was the convergence of a studio routine I had been observing for many years and what I would loosely term, a performed occupation of the ruin (see figures 6-9).

Sweeping *felt* right as an everyday practice and sweeping around the ruins of St Peters felt right: as if 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 within a chance to speak. I made seven, six-minute films out of the footage . Responding to one version of the films, Dean Hughes wrote the following:

“The screen depicts the inside of a modernist ruin, St Peters Seminary in Cardross, Scotland to be precise, clearly identifiable through its cast and molded concrete pierced by the outside light and foliage. The horizon demarks and splits the screen in half. Entering from the right a sweeping brush first, and then next a figure move along this indeterminate line and circle around to double back, all the while slowly accruing and moving dust and detritus to a point located approximately center stage. It occurs to me that this path taken by the lone figure with a sweeping brush is opposite to the direction at which the text appeared and announced the beginning of the video. As a filmic device entering from the right and moving to the left, acts as a disjuncture that arrests my comfortable viewing.

As an artwork *'I am from Leonia'* is filled with futility. There seems little tangible attempt to actually cleanse the space in any demonstrable sense.

This feeling is enhanced when in one sequence the figure's attention is centered upon sweeping along a shadow cast by the ruin's distinctive vaulted ceilings. What could be filled with more purposeful purposelessness than following a contour whose only certainty is that it will have shifted as soon as one has completed the activity of following along its path? This unassailable quality is further testified to when the figure diligently sweeps along the edge of what would have been a balcony seemingly oblivious to the genuine detritus, which constitutes the floor below. Neither is the sweeping piecemeal in the way that it might be conducted if one was passing time within monotonous employment. 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 intersections between the opposite forces that is apparent within '*Leonia*' activates a potential for meaning to be created by a viewer through a continuous process of purpose forming which is initiated and then refuted, and discarded.

Watching *Leonia* I cannot help but think of American artist Douglas Huebler's famous assertion from 1968 when he states, "The world is full of objects more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more". The protagonist within the video is intent on moving and remodeling matter rather than making a new construction or order. Shepley's video presents itself as a tension. What is the nature of this sweeping? What is its purpose? The action is carried out and performed with a sensitivity removed from simple cleaning (what indeed could be cleaned?). The figure seems to be part archeologist 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. I think about cleaning and the points at which cleaning occurs; after a party, after a meal, before and after visitors. All moments similar to these are epiphanies within our lives when compared next to the act of removing and discarding after the event. I wonder if cleaning is ever the event, or is it resigned to be the melancholy moment after the fact. Cleaning, sweeping in this instance, is the quintessential point to reminisce and a point not to be in the present.

Is there virtue in seeing all things, and all activities, outside of a hierarchy and as being equal? In a likewise manner artworks exude and pronounce themselves as events and pre-eminence is given to the arrival at this state via the popularity of the phrase ‘installation’ within our lexicon of contemporary art practice. *Leonia*, in its residual dwelling on what has long passed and is out of place, makes me wonder how little contemporary art thinks of *de-installing*, the act of removing an artwork from a situation or event. Perhaps de-installing lies too far beyond the commodity address?

Concentrating upon the site of this modern ruin I am struck by how indeterminate it seems. Is this the fate of modernist buildings of this nature that fall into emptiness and disrepair? Unsure of their own status, the building’s vice is to exist in perpetuity as both forgotten relic, and abandoned beginning. Alec Shepley’s ‘*Leonia*’ testifies to this curious status and in turn one can watch the video thinking that the building is new or under construction, the sweeper preparing the ground for further work, and yet at the same time it is apparent that this is a wreck and very much a former glory. The consistency and sensitivity of the sweeper, as he attests to his strange occupation, occludes singular readings and provides meaning in multiple positions” (Hughes, D. 2015, 7-10).

The routine is principally cleaning (see figure 5) and yet it has become more than that – 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:

“Escapology, broadly speaking, refers to the rapidly growing field of empirical enquiry and speculative research into the ways and means, tactics and strategies of escaping capture. [] Capture may be epistemic, terminological, but whatever its configuration, escapology is about fleeing its normative clutches. The mode of escapology most widespread in the mainstream artworld has to do with escaping the ontological capture that is the bane of autonomous art practice, whereby

actions or objects have their very mode of being (their ‘ontology’) captured as art; just art. This form of capture relies on that most perversely neoliberal form of capture – operative or performative capture, whereby things are put to work, made to perform. Escapology, in short, is the theory and practice of suspending the operations of all these mechanisms of capture.

Yet escapology is a paradoxical undertaking, and an often-ambivalent science. For obvious reasons, escape itself can neither assert itself for what it is, nor perform itself as escape: it must always appear impossible from the perspective of power, yet at the same time it must be always already under way. Escapology, then, is less the study and implementation of sets of tactics or strategies for avoiding capture, than the acknowledgement of a simple, concrete fact: escape happens.” (Wright, S. 2014, 23).

Enjoying the paradox, working in a kind of waiting room is outside what could be seen as a *normal* artistic practice, in so-called non-places, margins of my studio, physical and conceptual spaces *outside* or *misplaced*. Kicking fragments down the path, sweeping particles, dust and contouring cracks, joins and crumbling architectural features, all provide the marginal spaces I need for dispersals – ones that do not stand for anything certain and are in a state of intercession.

Renegotiating the relationship, boundaries, meaning, form, material and testing out whether a work could be perhaps not “of art”, as Duchamp once asked (1913, 105), locates practice specifically in the quotidian, in the repetitive tasks I do on a daily basis such as walking, cleaning, cooking, waiting (de Certeau, M. 1984, 114).

Through enacting what have become uncertain practices and made up/ad hoc on the spot nomadic routines in neglected urban spaces, the attempt is there to focus on particular conditions and undermine a universalized framework through a kind of ‘spontaneous philosophy’ (Gramsci, A. 1971, 323-77).

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 25 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 *INSERT* for both conceptual and logistical reasons. Delhi is where the collective was founded in 1992 and has been based ever since. 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 *INSERT* and has for the last two decades been fascinated by abandoned buildings, and those that have been built but never used (Ali 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 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, J-C. 2010).

My own project in *New Models for Common Ground* 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 (see Figures 10-12). 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 and Palika Park on Connaught Place, Delhi. This park (and if you include the Bazaar) 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.

Benjamin wrote, the bazaar is the last hangout of the *flâneur* and I was set on inserting myself here with my sweeping brush, meandering through the spaces and contouring the intersecting lines which divide and subdivide the city's lots, towards a mobile practice (Benjamin, W. 2002, 12).

Experiencing at such a slow, tortoise like pace contrasted with the effects of a large, fast moving city, the popular park busy with people from all walks of life, and served to foreground the large edifice of the modern office block void of people and produced many ad hoc micro-engagements with local people, visitors 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 myself as an actor of a nomadic and fragmented practice, with an aim to occupy spaces seemingly void of artistic activity. By inserting myself this way as a means to subvert and affect rhetorical frameworks and structures, to 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” (ibid 2014, 10). The point of departure for this event, therefore, is not ‘an artwork’ as such but the practice. 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 the studio procedure – that of sweeping the floor. As Einstein wrote:

“To raise new questions, new possibilities, to regard old questions from a new angle, requires creative imagination and marks real advances in science”. (Einstein, A. 1938, 92).

Through the series of drifts through the proposed sites in Delhi, my proposal was to experience current conditions, explore and document 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 ‘self-abasing gesture’ of street-cleaning I encountered physical manifestations of the incomplete, unfinished maintenance and failings in the institutional fabric, the forgotten and the misjudged and form a visual language remarking on a *condition of being* (Moran, J. 2005, 25).

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 10-12).

In *Enactments #1, #2 and #3* (see figures 13-15) I am engaged in the act of sweeping the selected sites Connaught Place, Palika Park and Skipper Tower. At first glance these may seem like pointless acts, however I am exploring escape opportunities; what Gordon Matta-Clarke has referred to as metaphoric voids, gaps, left-over or 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, as I did at Kilmahew, following the psycho-geographic lines and shapes in my path, sensually sweeping the brush along the grooves, gutters and pavements of the selected sites.

Palika Park and Skipper Tower have a strong resonance (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.

In taking ‘a line for a walk’ (or in this case a brush) I caress surfaces such as with painting or drawing – the material (dust) is the medium and concrete the substrate. Other than the documentation, there is no permanent object or representation - only the immediate experience and shared witnessing of the live act. A line drawn in the sand (see figures 16 & 17). These acts are examples of doing and undoing and this interplay becomes the maxim of the process. Given the reaction of the people I encounter in taking my practice to the street, this situated work seems to serve as a temporary sign transmitting a joyous presence in and amongst the proposed sites. It also means encountering new audiences and creating art not about art but an empowerment of a relationship and an application of an aesthetic of regular experience to other encounters in a wider field of action – a key aim of my creative work.

These projects focused on architecture and site as metaphors for our own psychological condition as humans, 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 neglect - to invert it and create the potential for a more positive metaphor by *cleaning*, where art has become more like a system or operation. 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.

The writings of Italo Calvino, in particular his book *Invisible Cities*, and principally the sections about the cities of Leonia and Sophronia, have influenced this work. The accidental viewer on the street of Delhi or visitor to Kilmahew would witness a figure steadily and progressively sweeping his way around, 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 the 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. For example, my enactments pause, visualize and reflect on the status of the fragment within a potentially restored embodied relationship with the world (Temple, N. 2013, 3-4).

For me as an artist I felt I had created precisely the kind of dispersed encampment around the place of possibility I wanted - one 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, 202-203).

However, through the unfinished I am also disclosing ambivalence – what is missing or not being seen – a disappearance if you like. I feel as though I am occupying the role of the wandering performer but unseen by any public - as Christine Ross wrote, through ambivalence indifference is deployed as a condition of possibility. In other words, possibility is revealed by disclosure of ambivalence – what 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 with the world (Ross, C. 2006, 1-49).

I am also alluding to the artist as a traveller, walking and moulding thought - drawing the people in and inviting them on an existential journey – a journey through imagined sites of the fragment such as those witnessed by readers of *Invisible Cities*. The elements being discursive spaces, linked and alert to architecture and site as metaphors for our psychological states, all refer to a place of (our) making and unmaking, both real and imagined.

Positioning myself within a fragmented and incomplete project heightens tensions between the meaningful and the meaningless, between creativity and fall, fiction and reality. In this project, 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.

In this work, I am immersed in a set of visual relationships that subconsciously I may be aware of, to create allegories, new meanings and to foreground the creative potential of the tentative in a process of renewal and redefinition. Through the unfinished - the impossibility of art (the gap between the real and represented) and yet the possibility of art, is made apparent through the disclosure of the ambivalence of representation - of the gap between art and life. After all, the artist reveals gaps and doesn't fill them in and “the value of art today [] – its condition of possibility - lies in this disclosure” (Ross, C. 2006, 49).

Drifting this way, in an uncertain and ambivalent manner, mixing attentiveness and apathy, purpose and ennui, creates a provisional site of (my) making and *unmaking*

and aims to open up a speculation on the possibility of a place for art and narratives of hope. Precedents include Beuys, Hanson, Laderman Ukeles, Alÿs, Perray, Orozco and others (see figures 1-5).

Alÿs, Perra and Laderman Ukeles are probably my closest reference points and in the words of Ukeles, a particular the ‘flushing up to consciousness’ of everyday practice – that of routine maintenance, flagging the void spaces to approach, address, attend (1969).

According to Bartholomew Ryan (2009) Ukeles promoted maintenance as an important value to the excitement of avant-garde and unbridled industrial ‘development’. She asked, after the revolution who was going to be pick up the garbage on Monday morning? Ukeles, along with many other female conceptual artists 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 even joined the Department of Sanitation in 1977, as an Artist in Residence and she has been there ever since.

Why this 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 would say it creates an entry point, or portal into Broodthaers’ field of distribution and enables a means of ‘listening more closely to the hum of life’ (ibid).

Ukeles’ “actions underscored the institution’s contradictory role as champion of artistic expression, cultural gatekeeper and preserver of the past, and to rephrase Helena Reckett in her (wonderful) essay ‘Forgotten Relations: Feminist Artists and Relational Aesthetics’ (2013, 133) my focus on the supplement of cleaning I am contouring culture’s inscription within walls, floors and other 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. People stop and comment. They

encounter my unsteady but progressive 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. Is it a kind of self-abasement, self-propelled into a kind of wilderness? Are they Sisyphean attempts to fulfill the impossible blueprint referred to by the inhabitants of *Invisible Cities*? Or are they escape plans?

Of course, like Price, Broodthaers, and many more before him, my intention is to escape institutions. However, futility is an artistic tactic I deploy. Together with ambivalence and deferral. To quote Stephen Wright once more:

“This is escapology’s *a priori*, and though it seeks to better appreciate the escapological drive in contemporary culture, it does not see escape as a self-conscious attempt to escape *from* something. It envisages escape in terms of offensive retreat; as such, it shares none of the projective logic of an event-driven vision of history. Whereas (left-leaning) art historians and social theorists have conditioned us to think of emancipation, and indeed of art itself, in terms of events – whether past or yet to come – escapology rejects this masculinist perspective as one premised on the luxury of being able to wait for the coming event or to look back on the one which took place. Escapology is the science of the kind of everyday elusiveness, leakage and doing-otherwise that can really only be described as ‘escape’ once power structures shift to capture its movement. Ultimately, escapology’s examples, those that instantiate its concrete truth, all lie beyond, or behind, the event horizon itself.

In lieu of an example, then, consider this speculative etymology suggestively put forth by a contemporary escapologist. The verb ‘escape’ is usually thought to derive from the Vulgar Latin *excapare*, from *ex-* (‘out’) + *capio* (‘capture’). It may well be, however, that it comes from the Late Latin *ex cappa*, in reference not to capture at all but to a ‘cape’ or cloak which remains behind even as the living body which it had clad has slipped away.” (Wright 2014, 23-24).

However certain the “paradoxical undertaking” of such projects may be, the works I enact are least an attempt to delay being co-opted by the institutions that define art and that have traditionally distributed it (Wright, S. 2014, 23). This period of time I refer to, called ‘delayed closure’, is led by emergent problem finding as part of the creative process (Getzels 1976, 174-178). As Donald Schön wrote, the development of an appreciative system involves a reflective conversation between the situation and those within it (Schön 1995, 272-275).

For a visual language to emerge I needed to work with formlessness and actions 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 or to trespass on that site, doing/undoing and accepting the potential of failure 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.

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 and to engage in a practice of simply being there. I was able to unmake and blur – acts I found liberating and engendered ad hoc encounters 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).

Both the Kilmahew and Delhi projects are ongoing and in 2016 there is a further iteration of practice planned at IGNCA in the form of an occupation of the galleries thinking through places of dis-assembly and hovering in a state of unresolved poetics, ambivalence, mutability and itinerancy.

The project aims to rethink expectations about the artwork, opening up the space to uncertain practices and to problematise assumptions of what may constitute a work of art investigating the “unsitely aesthetic” (Miranda, M. 2013, 22-48).

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 syntax of these places, I was able to explore an everyday practice and what Kwon has referred to as a place where our fictional selves could be in the space of unmaking, retrieving for myself some form of ownership and control for the idea of an art that is not of art – and although this form of occupation of the everyday can be seen as yet another rhetorical construct it is a *lived* process (Shepley 2014, 90-91).

Both Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre saw the everyday as an elusive category, stretching out invisibly across urban space, incorporating wordless activities and caught up in the nameless, the indefinable. This territory can seem almost unreadable, forever escaping analysis or interpretation and defined by what is left over, after all distinct, superior, specialized, structured activities have been singled out by analysis but then, as Meno the pre-Socratic philosopher said “how will you go about finding that thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you?” (in Solnit, R. 2006, 4).

Illustrations



Figure 1. Jo Hanson, "Art That's Sweeping the City", Sweeping (for the camera) by her front steps, San Francisco, CA, 1980. (Source: <http://greenmuseum.org/>).



Figure 2. Joseph Beuys, "Ausfegen" (Sweeping) Aktion am 1. Mai 1972 auf dem Karl-Marx-Platz in Berlin, 1972. (Source: <http://www.galerie-cyprian-brenner.de/>).



Figure 3. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, 'Hartford Wash', 1973 (Source:



Figure 4. Francis Alÿs, "Paradox of Practice 1 (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing)" Mexico City, 1997.

(Source: <http://www.francisalys.com/public/>).



Figure 5. Régis Perray, “Sweeping the Western Road”, Giza, Egypt, March 1999.
(Courtesy the artist, collection FRAC Franche-Comte, Besancon).



Figure 6. Alec Shepley, Untitled (Sweeping Albert Street Studio). Winnipeg
Artspace, Winnipeg Fringe Festival, 1999. (Image copyright Alec Shepley)



Figure 7. Alec Shepley, (Still) “I am from Leonia”, 2015. Kilmahew, Scotland.
(Courtesy the artist).



Figure 8. Alec Shepley, (Still) “I am from Leonia”, 2015. Kilmahew, Scotland.
(Courtesy the artist).



Figure 9. Alec Shepley, Untitled (Sweeping St Peters Seminary) 2014. Kilmahew, Scotland.



Figure 10. Alec Shepley, *Untitled (Sweeping St Peters Seminary)* 2014. Kilmahew, Scotland.



Figure 11. Palika Park, New Delhi (Image courtesy of Raqs Media Collective, INSERT2014)

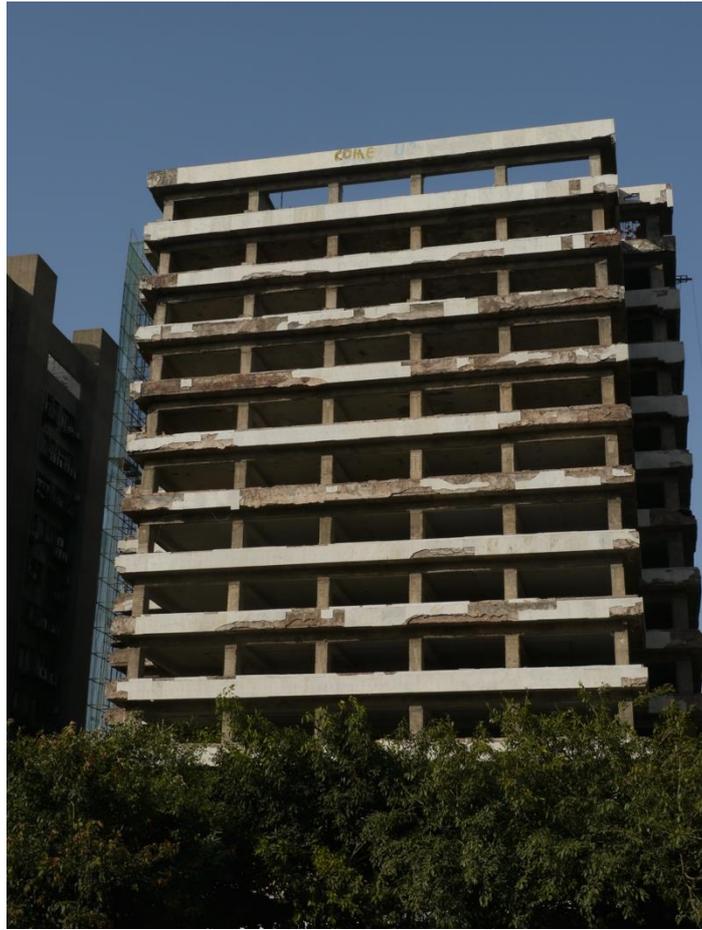


Figure 12. Skipper Tower, 2014. New Delhi (Courtesy the artist)



Figure 13. Connaught Place, New Delhi 2014. (Courtesy the artist).



Figure 14. Alec Shepley, “Enactment #1” 2014. Connaught Place, New Delhi (Courtesy the artist).



Figure 15. Alec Shepley, “Enactment #2”, 2014. Skipper Tower, New Delhi (Courtesy the artist).



Figure 16. Alec Shepley, “Enactment #3”, 2014. Palika Park, New Delhi (Courtesy the artist).



Figure 17 & 18. Alec Shepley, Untitled (Temporary dust drawings made during impromptu sweeping enactment) 2014. India Gate, New Delhi (Courtesy the artist).



Figure 19. Street cleaner, 2014. Connaught Place, New Delhi (Courtesy the artist).



Figure 20. Alec Shepley, Untitled (Floor buffing enactment) 2014. Radisson, New Delhi (Courtesy the artist).

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