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Running-room in the Mangle of Practice:
Contemporary art in the thick of things.

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

This document and the exhibited artwork it accompanies aims to perform a positive aesthetic of exile that enacts the dislocating and shattering strategies of spatial, temporal and imagistic montage but also attempts to open a caesura in today's relentless flow of images and thickening temporality. It joins with particular currents in engaged contemporary art to re-imagine what documentary form might be as an act of revelation not reduction. I have advocated in word and deed a structure of desire that is promiscuous without being possessive and accounts for a mode of subjectivity that temporally emerges from its material conditions in the thick of things. The corpus of experimental work has traversed a wide range of media and intentions but always with these issues in mind. I have produced small, tentative gestures in the city and ambitious proposals for affective maps in a mixed-media installation. I have gathered together an ambitious chorus of voices from across disciplines to share in common in a dialectical movement of resistance and accommodation that seeks to expand the realms of conceptual and corporeal possibility.

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Running-room in the Mangle of Practice

Contemporary art in the thick of things.

The starting point for critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and in 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. Therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory.

- Antonio Gramsci

Some time ago I received a gift. It was the remains of a small sea creature and was part of the natural species collection of Te Papa Tongawera. My partner at the time was the archivist and was cataloguing the substantial collection of these curious 'animals. Their bodies are created through an immanent and reciprocal relationship with their environment. As it traverses the sea floor it collects material fragments and other detritus and assembles them into a pyramidal architecture using a self generated gluey substance. At its base it flips the larger shells over to allow for a quicker, smoother journey across the seabed. The museum collects thousands of these creatures: numbered, catalogued and stored. Each is utterly unique, composed of chance encounters determined by its own biological genius. At the same time there is a deep generic similarity between each individual organism. Even prior to their internment in a museum these creatures are not spared an encounter with the human use of the world. Some have taken bottlecaps and other man-made materials and incorporated them into their shells. This act of transgressive *and* utilitarian appropriation, far from eliciting an environmentalist's rancour, open deepens my admiration for them. Theirs is an existence of movement and montage, but also of a situatedness that is perhaps unique to the animal world. For me the truth of these creatures is their synthesis of making and being made. My particular gift has also traveled across a multiplicity of temporal registers before landing here on this page before you: geological time, museum time, lovers time (in and out), the time of writing.

What I would like to do in this introduction is sketch out some of the conceptual and historical tools that I have incorporated in the production of the artwork before you. This will involve a few definitions and a gathering together of philosophical, scientific and art-historical voices creating a constellation of variables that I have identified as specifically relevant not only as an individual emerging into an artistic practice but also as a citizen in the world today who like any other tries to make sense of it. There are two methods of “making sense” that I would like to describe. One way would be to approach a situation from the outside and conceive it as a given more or less stable set of variables. From there you could perhaps siphon out meaning employing value judgments and self-assurances in an attempt to *master*, that is control and dominate, the “sense” that this complex situation could make. You end up with answers and you make a contribution in kind, adapting yourself to this way of thinking. Cause→Effect. Meaning becomes another currency in this detached position. This way of making sense polices the borders, strengthens categorical thinking.

The other way, the way I would like to advocate today, is the way of the little creature I described above. “Making sense” in this case means starting in the middle, in the *thick of things*, and working your way into unanticipated areas, drawing on the encounters you have along the way. You are already a player in the game; you have only to shift the territory of the playing field. If we think of the Gramsci quote above, that inventory is an infinite list. It is from this position that my research unfolded, following numerous threads of thought and experimentation that has cohered into the installation I call *The Hotel Empire*. Before getting into the details of that however I would like to flesh out some of these conceptual points.

These two ways of making sense are very different *ontological* orientations, or ways of being in the world, and I linger here because proceeding from either will determine the form the work takes. The two positions are also two different modes of *desire*, here viewed as a kind of engine that animates subjectivity at an affective and cognitive level. The first way of making sense is paradoxically *inanimate*. It is a desire to fix, to know, and to possess. It sees differences everywhere, but categorises them as such as a means of neutralising the catalysing properties that difference enacts. The second I would characterize as machinic, in a Deleuzian sense, even amorous, where desire is performed through immanent multiplicity. There is also a distinct corporeal dimension to this. In *The Matrix of Visual Culture* Patricia Pisters quotes from Spinoza’s *Ethics*: “Very often it happens that while we are enjoying a

thing we wanted, the body acquires from this enjoyment a new constitution, by which it is differently determined, and other images of things are aroused in it; and at the same time the mind begins to imagine other things and desire other things.”¹ The possibilities of body and mind are augmented through a promiscuous technology of desire that transforms being into becoming. You may remember as a child eating those sweets that looked like tiny coloured crystals which when you put them in your mouth exploded into a frenzy. They seemed to ignite taste buds you never knew you had. This is what the experience of art should be like, expanding the realms of cognitive and affective possibility.

This bodily politics of desire is a means of traversal and openness rather than one of possession and closure. Feature filmmaker and artist Chantal Akerman reinforces this anti-imperialistic disposition: “The way I would like to film corresponds to a certain wishful thinking on my part about nomadism, as well as to the idea that the land one possesses is always a sign of barbarism and blood, while the land one traverses without taking it reminds us of a book.”²

In a published conversation between the esteemed psychoanalysts Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips the authors boldly and provocatively state: “Knowing what one wants is an incitement to violence. Selfhood – the self constituted through prior and assured knowledge of what it desires, that is, stable representations – can only be constructed by the repudiating, by the censoring and punishing and trivializing of desire.”³ They proceed by attempting to find a vocabulary and logic of what they call “impersonal narcissism” which flows from a “talent for masochism”. These are complex and radical ideas that unfortunately I do not have the scope to pursue in depth here. However, it is worth noting that this talent for masochism is a catalyst for what the authors call the “shattering” of the ego that leaves one open and vulnerable to the new. Here, what is “truly sought is a fortifying dissolution not a monumental achievement.”⁴ Fragmentation, scattering, diagrams, constellations are important motifs I have used in *The Hotel Empire*.

Finally, this means of making sense, this mode of desire is what I call an *ecological* model. Not in the sense of being tuned to any particular ‘Green’ movement but an engaged, materialist perspective that accounts for the agency of humans and non-humans without recourse to any transcendental framework. Things do to us as we

¹ Pisters 2003:55

² quoted in Guiliana Bruno 2002:75

³ Bersani & Phillips 2008:94

⁴ *ibid.* p.93

do to them in a reciprocal open-ended play of encounters. For a better description of this I turn to Andrew Pickering and his concept of the *mangle*.

Pickering is a sociologist and philosopher of science but his concept of the mangle I find very useful in clarifying some of my own muddy thinking about artistic agency. It also works as a kind of glue that I can use to connect to different moments in art history, modern experiences of place and new pursuits in contemporary documentary form. Moreover, it has an altogether aesthetic dimension itself. Pickering views the practice of science not as a set of representations of absolute truth about reality but as a “field of *performative* material devices.”⁵ Science is an assemblage of tools that does things in the world, not an ersatz divinity that reveals nature as it is. Pickering makes this claim in the vein of a post-humanist critique of subjectivity that aims at distributing agency away from the centered, detached, rational Cartesian subject making claims about reality out there towards an ontological model of temporally emergent becoming by “means of a dialectic of resistance and accommodation”.⁶ This allows for the reverberating complexity of organic *and* non-organic (e.g. the Mississippi river, the UN, lint, New German Cinema, genetically modified corn) systems to emerge and unfold with each other. For me in my technologically prostheticized life in the flickering information deluge stretched across virtual and actual geographies, this not only makes a lot of sense but illuminates anew the problem of the art / life divide embedded, as it is, in the mangle of practice.

It has been the aim call of engaged avant-garde practices to perform the narrowing of the gap between art and life thus, in theory, liberating the emancipatory spirit of art from its marginal position into life as such. This may mean the destruction of the museums and the petrifying institutionalization they represent (Futurism); or, it may be a call for artists to directly enter the sphere of political and industrial relations (Constructivism); or, it may mean the call for the opening up of artistic categories onto other forms of everyday life, its rituals and objects (the readymade and body-art). Now, from the perspective of the mangle of practice this dichotomy is something of a false opposition and a more accurate description would be one of a consistent *struggle* and antagonism over time and amidst different social and material conditions. The divide is less important than a constant experimental engagement based on

⁵ Pickering 1993:563, my emphasis.

⁶ *ibid.* p. 567

encounters, what I will call events, between different forms of agency, different forms of organic and non-organic life. This element of struggle is crucial to avoid the potential danger of the mangle being seen as a flattening out of difference and distinction into a kind of bland egalitarian soup of equivalences. Artistic practices have often been seen as engaged responses to particular conditions – world war, entrenched sexism and prejudice, stale formalisms, new technologies, and so on. But what of that struggle today? What are the conditions of becoming that contemporary art ‘resists and accommodates’? What kind of topology could we map of this mangle?

In his book *Design and Crime (and other diatribes)* celebrated art critic Hal Foster describes a situation where today the art / life debate has been overtaken by what he calls the “total design” of contemporary capitalist culture. He writes that “the aesthetic and the utilitarian are not only conflated but all but subsumed in the commercial, and everything – not only architectural projects and art exhibitions but everything from jeans to genes – seems to be regarded as so much *design*.”⁷ From the use of “creativity” and “innovation” in business parlance and management practice to the increasing importance of vast media industries to global economies Total Design has become late-capital’s perverse revenge on the project of the avant-garde. Foster then sets about recovering two controversial, and very unfashionable, steadfast modernists from the beginning of the previous century, the architect Adolf Loos and writer Karl Kraus. Together, and responding to a different milieu of ‘total design’, they denounced the benign perfection of Art Nouveau and the lack of what Kraus called “running-room”.⁸ For what struggle, what ambition for alternatives, what delirium is possible in a world of total design? Foster: “Neither Loos nor Kraus says anything about a natural “essence” of art, or an absolute “autonomy” of culture; the stake is one of “distinctions” and “running-room”, of proposed differences and provisional spaces.”⁹

Proposed differences and provisional spaces. This is what I’m talking about. In the mangle of practice one must insist on these things. Insist on opening the space for running-room. Running-room is the shock to thought, the intensity in fascination, the gap between 0 and 1 the very abyss of our “flattened” digital world. Running-room is Lucretius’ swerve: “When atoms are traveling straight down though empty space by their own weight, at quite indeterminate times and places, they swerve ever so little

⁷ Hal Foster 2002:17

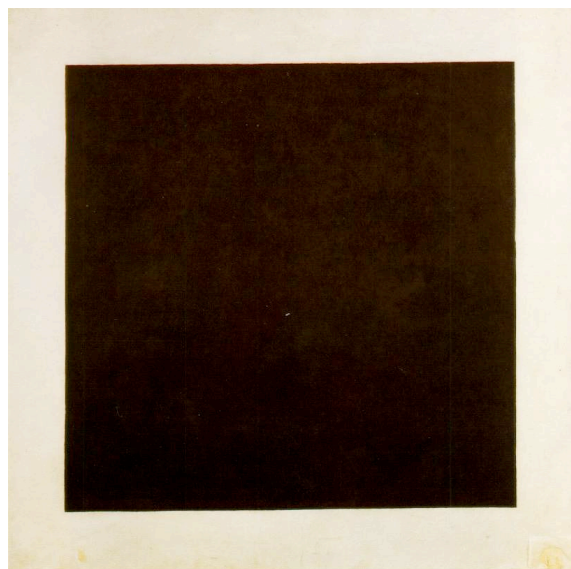
⁸ *ibid.* p.15-16

⁹ *ibid.* p.17

from their course, just so much that you would call it a change in direction. If it weren't for this swerve, everything would fall downwards through the abyss of space. No collision would take place and no impact of atom on atom would be created. Thus nature would not have created anything."¹⁰ Robert Rauschenberg said that you don't create art and you don't create life, you work in the middle, in the gap. Opening that gap might be the constitutive act of art. Sing it with Leonard Cohen: "Ring the bells that still can ring/Forget your perfect offering/There is a crack in everything/That's how the light gets in.". Running-room performs something like the concept of the frame in Gilles Deleuze's cinematic-thinking. The frame opens a closed-system to an "out-of-field" not to detach but to draw lines of convergence and reunion.¹¹ Elizabeth Grosz gives it a nice gloss when she writes "The frame is thus the first construction, the corners, of the plane of composition. With no frame or boundary there can be no territory, and without territory there may be objects or things but not qualities that can become expressive, that can intensify and transform living bodies"¹². Thus the running-room *becomes* the effect of composition in the mangle, the site of a minimal difference that opens to entire universes. Finally, running-room is the advice the cat gave to the mouse in Kafka's 'A Little Fable':

"Alas," said the mouse, "the whole world is growing smaller every day. At the beginning it was so big that I was afraid, I kept running and running, and I was glad when I saw walls far away to the right and left, but these long walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I must run into."

"You only need to change your direction," said the cat, and ate it up.¹³



Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1913

¹⁰ colophon in Manuel De Landa 2000

¹¹ See Gilles Deleuze 1996: 14-16.

¹² Elizabeth Grosz 2008:11

¹³ Franz Kafka, accessed online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Little_Fable.

Running-room in the mangle of practice. Proposed differences and provisional spaces. In what follows I offer a constellation of material that forms a co-responding narrative to the work exhibited. I explore the heterotopic spaces of new media and installation art, the “baroque effect” of urban experience, the thickening of contemporary temporality, the object-performances of Neo-Concrete and Gabriel Orozco, the performative body, the aesthetics of exile, documentary uncertainty, the ruins of utopia, and the ritual, reproduction and repetition involved in it all. I describe some of my early experiments and offer a detailed reflection on the components of *The Hotel Empire*; my proposal for a diverse arrangement of material that constructs an affective map of my experience in the mangle of practice.

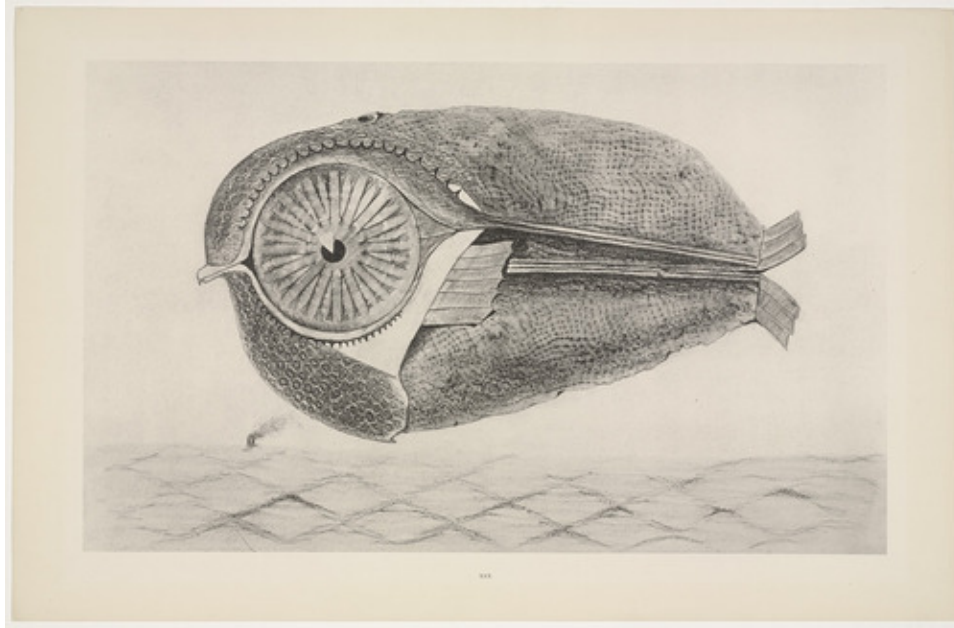


Alfred Hitchcock, film still from *Vertigo*, 1958

Landing Sites

In the chapter “New Ontologies”¹⁴ Pickering enlists the painting of Willem de Kooning and rubbings of Max Ernst as instances from the history of art that thematise “an ontology of becoming”. Ernst would at random lay paper on top of aged hotel floorboards and take rubbings of the grains and knots with a soft pencil. He would use these markings as the basis for his surrealistic renderings of beasts and fauna arranged into a volume appropriately enough named *Natural History*. For my part I had the work of Lygia Clark, Helio Oiticica and Gabriel Orozco in mind as I began experimenting in material form with these ideas.

¹⁴ Pickering & Guzik, ed. 2008:3



Max Ernst, 'The Fugitive' from the portfolio *Natural History*, 1925

This was very early in the experimental process and I wanted to begin with simple gestures of exploration that would speak from a position *in the thick of things*. I decided to use coloured children's plastercine bought from a toyshop. I prepared the clay by rolling several handfuls into more or less neat spheres. Carrying these with me as I went about my everyday activities about the city I would impress the spheres onto a surface of some object or structure. The clay was malleable but firm and the result of each impression was a kind of cast of the space between my body and these surfaces. At first it was random as to how I chose the surface. As I did more and more I found myself attracted to objects and structures in what you might call transient, or unremarkable spaces: escalators, telephone poles, the corners of iron railings, locker keyholes, domestic skirting board; the architectural and technological forms that accumulate into the urban landscape.

As well as the shape of the fragment they were impressed upon the clay also collected small particles of dust and debris. I did not attempt to remove this material. I wanted the clay to absorb and collect all that was possible in that moment of connection. I left the clay unfired and soft when I displayed them for a critique. I selected a part of the MFA studio that a group of us shared as an informal kitchen and lunch area and arranged the clay impressions (I had the working title of *Landing Sites* but it never really stuck for me) in random positions on the ground. Over that time the clay kept absorbing those small particles circulating in the air and of course on the ground

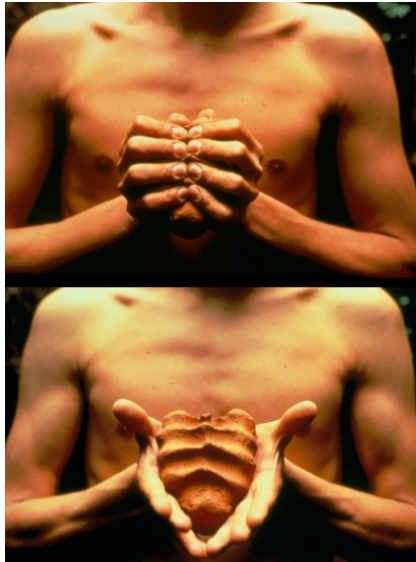


Richard Shepherd, *Landing Sites*, 2010



Richard Shepherd, *Landing Sites*, 2010

itself. I was concerned with incorporating a temporal element in a sculptural process that also accounted for the experience of passage through public space. These elements – time, material, space – are of course crucial to any aesthetic decisions and my work has been a sustained exploration of them, though it has traveled across a variety of media and contexts.



Gabriel Orozco has spoken, as a sculptor, of the importance to him of dust. “Dust accumulates where there is no motion, in the space between the sculpture and the base.”¹⁵ Actively courting it represents a disposition towards the natural erosion of things. This “inbetween” space is also crucial for Orozco who often explores objects and sites at the margins of urban experience. Critic Benjamin Buchloh, who has had a sustained and productive engagement with Orozco’s work, has termed parts of his practice “object performances”.¹⁶ This phrase

refers in particular to such works as 1992’s *Yielding Stone*, 1991’s *My Hands Are My Heart* and Buchloh relates them to a history of post-minimalist sculpture that employed bodily traces and mnemonic indexes. Interesting here is not only Orozco’s introjection of the temporal dimension into sculptural production but also his use of photography to record some of his more ephemeral street-based object performances such as 1992’s *Extension of Reflection* where Orozco rode his bicycle in a circle dissecting two puddles.



Gabriel Orozco *Extension of Reflection*, 1992

¹⁵ Gabriel Orozco 2001:93

¹⁶ Benjamin Buchloh 1993:9

During the critique itself more than one viewer bent down to touch the objects. Some asked me, as you do at these things, if this was okay. Of course I said it was. As well as the debris and dust from the original encounter the objects keep collecting material as well as small impressions (or even full-weight footprints) left by curious and accidental handling. Some people were curious as to the ‘origins’ of the objects, others were happy to not know and speculate, others enjoyed the exploration of form, colour and space as they encountered them.

I had been inspired by the writings of Brazilian artist Lygia Clark from the 1950’s and 60s some of which were edited into an article in *October* magazine in 1994. Clark was a leading member of the Neo-Concrete movement that aimed to build on the achievements of the work of Mondrian and the Constructivists. More specifically they were interested in the corporeal and expressive potential in this work that they saw as unfulfilled and latent. Clark saw the artwork not as machine or simple object but as an “almost-body” that “only delivers itself up wholly through a direct, phenomenological approach.”¹⁷ The artwork was a connection between the viewer and another aspect of reality. Later she would call her own work “propositions”:

We are the proposers: we are the mill. It’s up to you to blow into it the meaning of our existence.

We are the proposers: our proposal is that of dialogue. Alone, we don’t exist, we are at your mercy.

We are the proposers: we have buried the ‘work of art’ as such and we call out to you so that thought will live by means of your action.

We are the proposers: we are proposing neither the past nor the future to you, but the “now”.¹⁸

This emphasis away from the art-object to the space of the viewer should not be seen as part of the “dematerialization of the art-object” narrative coined by Lucy Lippard regarding the Conceptual Art of the 60s in North America. Materiality is still vital as a catalytic agent.

Another artist who began in the neo-concrete movement is important here, Helio Oiticica. His motto of “purity is a myth”, his intoxicating liberation of colour from the wall into the 3-dimensional space of the audience in his *Penetrables* and his famous work *Tropicalia* from 1967. This is Brazilian art critic Paulo Venancio Filho’s analysis

¹⁷ Lygia Clark 1994:33

¹⁸ *ibid.* p. 46.

of the work: “It’s precarious architecture invokes the *Suprasensorial* – the merely sensorial might prove insufficient; a total activation of relationship to the world through which the individual flows actively, *bodily*; a metaphor for the reality of the urban spaces of Rio de Janeiro”.¹⁹



Helio Oiticica, *Tropicalia*, 1967

This combination (or mangle) of spatialised colour, a kind of sensual geometry, propositioning the audience, non-representational analogies with architectural and urban space and a pre-occupation with “inbetween” spaces continued to be resonating ideas for me.

It is doubtful that they knew anything of each other but in the same year *Tropicalia* was displayed Michel Foucault gave a very famous lecture where he made the remark that while the 19th century obsessed over history the contemporary epoch would agonize over space. For him the experience of life has been removed from any linear, historical duration in time and instead exists in a network of connections. He writes, “Our epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites”²⁰. Foucault here concerns himself less with internal spaces of perception than with external spaces of habitation and action. More specifically he describes those sites that “have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in

¹⁹ Paulo Venancio Filho in Brett & Figueiredo, eds. 2007:29

²⁰ Michel Foucault 1986:23.

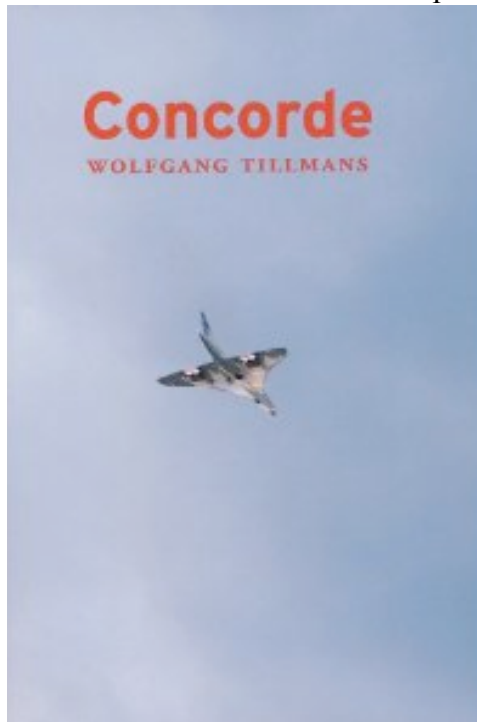
such a way as to suspect, neutralize or invert the set of relations they happen to designate, mirror or reflect”²¹. There is thus both a transgressive and critical potential in what Foucault names *heterotopia*. One could say as well that there is a multiplicity of layers or gestalts where smaller parts are continuously intertwining with bigger ones: heterotopia are elements or sites within societies and are themselves composed of connected sites that model the former, giving us a rich and complex image of place. Foucault systematically describes a number of these heterotopia which make for a wonderful list: rest homes, prisons, psychiatric hospitals, cemeteries, cinemas, carpets, museums, libraries, boats, motel dives. The point being that these spaces act as kinds of microcosms for relations that exist in the wider society within which a heterotopia operates. Not to eliminate time from discussion altogether Foucault also coins heterochrony as a vital component of heterotopia: “slices of time” that open a break in or suspend the succession of moments outside the heterotopia. There are heterotopia that accumulate time, such as archives, and there are heterotopia that squander time, that are spaces of fleeting moments and transience, such as festivals. The temporary exhibition in a museum would offer a dialectical combination of the two. Foucault calls colonies an “extreme” type of heterotopia and, writing and practicing in a postcolonial situation, it is indeed fuel for thought to consider the sets of external relations (the source not at all being self-evident) our present situation suspects, neutralizes or inverts. This is something I will return to, particularly in relation to the writings of Stephen Turner, as I build this image of space that I have been working in.

Test Pieces

The next phase of my work was a series of small works that continued my exploration of my immediate physical settings. These ranged from spontaneous performative actions using materials at hand, recording anonymous uses of public space and a photographic analysis of urban planning as it relates to colonial history and the material flux of city life. This phase of work remained at the tentative and propositional stage and I didn’t consider them polished works in the least. They did however provide useful stepping stones into more thorough and complex work. I arranged a number of these works, or their documentations onto tables in my studio as kinds of test pieces, thinking out loud. For example, I was having lunch on Manners Mall – a pedestrian only retail area of Wellington where teenagers and street buskers

²¹ Ibid. p. 24.

are known to frequent. Construction had begun to turn the street into a bus lane to ease traffic congestion. I was eating an orange and noticed that clustered around the entrance of the nearby McDonald's were dozens of trampled chewing gum stains. I had just finished the orange and had a handful of pieces of orange peel. I decided to place each peel on a piece of chewing gum. I photographed the chance arrangement and threw away the orange peels. Unfortunately the documentation of this piece has since been lost. Another work at this time was a series of photographs I took of shoes that had been thrown over power-lines around different locations of the city. Each abandoned item of footwear was placed in the center of the frame becoming a cut into

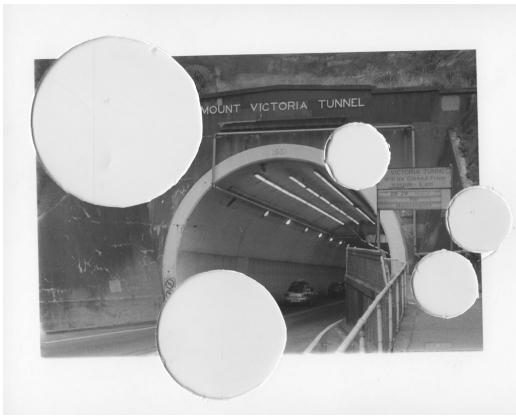
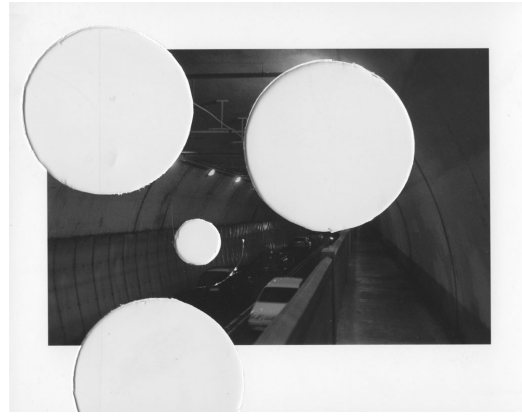
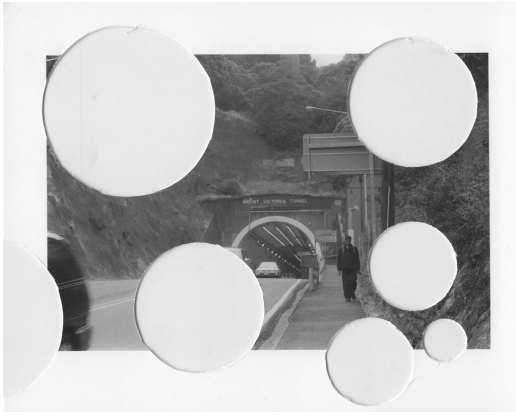


the blue monochrome of the sky in the background. (I am reminded here of a comment Wolfgang Tillmans made somewhere that his *Concorde* series of images were his attempt to make colour-field paintings with a camera.) What I liked about this series was that together they recorded a kind of virtual, anonymous collective of discarded objects. They were small nodal points of discontinuity in the visual landscape and documents of cheap thrills.

There is more than a hint of melancholy and nostalgia in these works. Tillmans' images retrospectively remind us of the failed utopian desires of technological triumph and human ingenuity that *Concorde* represented. They are street-level views with eyes towards another, perhaps better, place. Likewise my *orange peels on chewing gum* thematizes the loss of the possibility of public collective experience through its ephemerality and use of discarded materials. The images of abandoned shoes too seem to speak of the desire for escape and transcendence but keep a firm ground in the bodily setting of the street.

Another work I did at this time was a series of black & white photographs I made of the Mt Victoria tunnel. Onto the prints of these photographs I made a series of circular cuts of different sizes. The tunnel was built in the 1930s and at the time was one of the largest feats of civic engineering in the country. It was part of a wider project at the time to construct monuments, museums, civic buildings and so on as visible markers of cultural and industrial progress to symbolically represent New





Richard Shepherd, *Test Pieces*, 2010

Zealand's "maturity" from colonial outpost to self-governing Dominion of the British Empire. The resulting images were, however, all too literal and representational. The tunnel cuts through rock and stone; I cut through the texture of the photograph. While they might have a banal and pleasing graphic look they fail on all conceptual and material fronts in terms of the way I wanted to work in the mangle. They did however get me interested in other visible traces of the city's colonial past and short history of modernization.

Taken together these works continue my interest in the motif of the scatter, chance arrangements, colour, everyday uses of public space, working from the thick of things. But they were altogether compromised by a complacent and nostalgic atmosphere. It was here that I turned to a much greater engagement with contemporary writing about the modern experience of space and the role of new media and the moving image, the politics of installation and recent pursuits in documentary strategies to build on the themes that I had hitherto explored. I would like to now go into specific examples of this literature in detail before my larger reflection on the exhibited work, *The Hotel Empire*.

In *Warped Space* architectural theorist Anthony Vidler dedicates a chapter to Walter Benjamin's great and highly influential 'Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' essay. Vidler's concern is primarily the spatial implications of Benjamin's oft quoted remark that "architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction"²². Vidler connects this with earlier work done by Benjamin on allegory, the baroque and tragic drama. He posits that Benjamin saw in the spaces of the modern city a continuation of baroque forms and a further collapse of Renaissance humanism.

"We seldom look at our surroundings", writes Vidler.²³ Though one could say that our surroundings have their sights firmly set on us. It is this state of ambient distraction within so many calls to attention that Benjamin, according to Vidler, sets out to investigate the "phenomenological conditions comprised by 'distraction'".²⁴ Modern man appropriates the modern city in two ways, he writes – use and

²² Benjamin in Vidler 2000:81

²³ *ibid.* p.79

²⁴ *ibid.* p.82

perception. The former is associated with tactility, habit and the everyday; the latter with contemplation, description, distance. What is proposed by Vidler and Benjamin both is that the space available for purely visual contemplation is diminished by the massive sensory overload that constitutes the modern city which gives way to new forms of sensory experience. This is not to be viewed as a wholly negative judgment. Rather, the seemingly passive position of absentminded examiner “will activate a deeper understanding of urban topography than simple visual inspection”²⁵. There is then a particular sensuality, tactility in the distracted and dispersed wanderings of city dwellers. The city becomes a space that one must “feel” one’s way through rather than look upon and examine. Critical distance collapses as does the space between foreground and background, figure and ground. The city pushes, pulls, imprints, presses, ignites and exhausts the body, mutating the flesh in turn. It is not all happy, haptic idleness however. With the collapse of a space for reflective distance comes anxiety and confusion. This Vidler terms the “baroque effect”. When the body is at home everywhere and nowhere it suffers “irregular breathing”. For Friedrich Nietzsche baroque style “appears whenever a great age of art enters decline”²⁶. There is a mixture here then, appropriate to Benjamin’s thought, of sharp contrasts, decadence and melancholy, light and dark. For Vidler’s part he emphasizes this space as a “dark space”; an echo chamber of dashed Enlightenment hopes: The space of the modern city, of the modern baroque, sees the

subject bodily projecting itself in the ruined landscape of historical destiny, measured by the relentless ticking and turning of clocks at ever-increasing tempos, soulless in the wasteland of humanism’s detritus, picking its way among the bones of fallen heroes.²⁷

Boris Groys describes a situation today where art, once on the fringes of cultural production, is now taking its place in the mainstream as another “exhibition practice” along with architecture and design. He writes, “Today, there is no longer any ‘ontological’ difference between making art and displaying art. In the context of contemporary art, to make art is to show art.”²⁸ For Groys this completely transforms the role of the exhibition space from an institutional public space filled with artworks

²⁵ Ibid. p. 83.

²⁶ Benjamin in *ibid.* p. 93.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 97.

²⁸ Groys 2009:1

selected by a curator in the public interest to an actual artwork itself constructed by the sovereign decisions of the artist via the form of an artistic installation. Furthermore, the installation then becomes the space where two different concepts of Western freedom become visible, becomes its “experimental terrain”.²⁹ The line between the institutional freedom provided by the rule of law and public debate, embodied by the curator, and the individual, sovereign freedoms to act as one sees fit, are embodied by the artist. These become blurred in the artistic installation.

Indeed, the installation, as Groys notes, is often seen as a “democratic” gesture, allowing the public to enter into the space of the artwork itself as active agents. This is certainly true. However, Groys writes,

this analysis of installation art practice tends to overlook the symbolic act of privatizing the public space of the exhibition, which *precedes* the act of opening the installation to a community of visitors...By entering this space, the visitor leaves the public territory of democratic legitimacy and enters the space of sovereign, authoritarian control.³⁰

The visitor to the installation becomes a refugee – “on foreign ground” - under the control of the artist who distributes him or her through the artwork demanding their attention at all times. For Groys this is precisely the political significance of the artistic installation. “In our time of violent export, installing, and securing of democracy...installation practice reveals the act of unconditional, sovereign violence that initially installs any democratic order.”³¹

This practice also has implications for the organization of the audience itself. In a traditional exhibition the ideal audience is the isolated individual, safe in their own space, moving from artwork to artwork, making their judgments. In the installation however, because of its holistic character, the art space can only be perceived as such by a “collective of visitors”. And for Groys, they are “radically contemporary communities”³² in that they are virtual, fluid and unconditioned by the past, vocation, or location precisely because in the installation they are in the heterotopic, sovereign space of the artist.

In a contemporary age where almost everything (democracy, religion, art, capital, etc) is re-producing itself, re-presenting itself into new locales, the exhibitionist practice of installation art assists this community of visitors “in reflecting upon their

²⁹ *ibid.* p. 4

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.* p. 5

own condition, offering them an opportunity to exhibit themselves to themselves.”³³ It thus becomes, in a brilliant inversion of Benjamin’s thesis on the fate of aura in modern societies, a space of ‘profane illumination’ where the installation performs a caesura in the endlessly circulating copies of images and objects.

In ‘The Noise of the Marketplace’ artist and theorist Victor Burgin discusses the “cinema-hopping” of the early Surrealists who would wander in and out of theatres over the course of a day propelled by boredom, distraction, and pleasure in the chance narrative and topological connections and they would create ³⁴. A proto-Situationist *détournement*. The situation today is of course much changed and the self-consciously playful resistant practices of the Surrealists are now democratized and dispersed across multi-media platforms available to the masses. Moreover, “Films are today dislocated and dismantled even without intervention by the spectator” as they are scattered and *dismembered* across our mediated environments³⁵. For Burgin film becomes “a heterogeneous psychological object, constructed from image scraps scattered in space and time” and that can be *remembered* individually or collectively in ways unforeseen or unintended by the film’s producers. For Burgin this inaugurates the *cinematic heterotopia*. Building on Foucault’s notion Burgin writes that the heterotopia is “a site of instability and contravention” and, since we are dealing with the cinematic, can be constituted in virtual spaces, not only the actual spaces Foucault described. The cinematic heterotopia is thus defined by its traversal between and amidst actual-architectonic sites and virtual-perceptual sites. Borrowing from Baudelaire Burgin claims as the spectator-subject position in this environment “a *kaleidoscope* equipped with consciousness”. Burgin sees an analogous relationship between the scattered and fragmentary nature of the cinematic heterotopia and such “‘interior’ processes as inner speech and involuntary association” (the ultimate ‘other place’ of course being the Freudian unconscious).³⁶ Drawing from psychoanalytic discourse Burgin describes unconscious and associative processes that favour the visual over the verbal and arrange into ““short sequences, most often fragmentary, circular and repetitive.””³⁷ What is important to note at this point is that there is a

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ Victor Burgin 2004

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 8

³⁶ *Ibid.* p.14

³⁷ Laplanche cited in *ibid.*

similitude being proposed that links the fragmented mediascapes that we inhabit with our own interior spaces, our dreams, memories, fantasies and desires. And that the residues from the one leak, bleed and pool into the other.

Burgin is not content to simply describe our situation either. Later in the text he joins Pierre Nora in the call for the creation of “sites of memory”. This is needed, Burgin argues, since “in the storm of representations that rages in contemporary life, the forms of continuity that were once inhabited from the inside...are dissolved in a mediatic solution of perpetual contemporaneity.”³⁸

Mary Ann Doane in an article titled ‘The Location of the Image: Cinematic projection and scale in modernity’ asks, “Where is the image?” Dialoguing with Dominique Païni Doane she discusses the projected image as the meeting place of spectacle and geometry, optics and psychology. Contrary to other pictorial forms where images have fixed and more or less static material supports, the projected image is produced “through the interception of a beam of light with a surface *which is totally foreign to the image*” (my emphasis).³⁹ Projection has connotations of the alchemical transformation of material into immaterial, the perspectival rendering of three-dimensional space and mapping. However, Doane writes, there is also the “less calculable notion of projection as an attribute of subjectivity”⁴⁰. Within aesthetic theory the confrontation between spectator and the “illusionary” artwork requires “the viewer actively participates in the construction of an impression of the real, and is led by experience and expectation to ‘project’”. The implication of the spectator goes much further than this.

For Doane projection is not only a structural necessity of cinema, but in fact *precedes* it. Doane highlights the myriad optical toys and devices of the 19th century that were precursors to the cinema that also employed projection. Interestingly however Doane does not draw a straight line through these devices as primitive steps to the achievement of cinema as we know it. “Indeed, it could be said that the cinema, immaterial product of a beam of light, is *haunted* by optical toys; by the miniature, *touchable*, manipulable opaque image” (my emphasis)⁴¹. The immateriality of the cinematic image is haunted by its own past as concrete device; it is nostalgic for its own revoked tangibility. Doane suggests this lack is transferred onto the *embodied*

³⁸ *ibid.* p. 21.

³⁹ Mary Ann Doane in Douglas & Eaton, eds. 2009:152

⁴⁰ *ibid.* p.153

⁴¹ *ibid.* p.155

experience of spectatorship. In the early days of cinema this was analyzed via the now debunked “persistence of vision” doctrine and the after-image. As we all know film is comprised of a series of still images projected through a machine at 24 frames per second. When we watch a film we do not perceive the gaps. The persistence of vision thesis suggested the reason for this was that images were imprinted on the retina and held there for a fraction of a moment, long enough to connect it to the next frame, creating the illusion of seamless movement. The doctrine thus took recourse to pre-cinematic forms of printing and etching using human physiology as substrate.

Doane identifies the 1920s and 1960s as moments of high interest and experimentation among artists with the projected image, location and corporeality. It is not coincidental that these two historical moments are also ones of great economic and technological change. In these tumultuous periods the turn to the cinematic image becomes central as that which “dematerializes location, undoes solidity, and destabilizes the spectator’s assurance of position”⁴².

T.J. Demos examines the underside of modernity’s utopian projects and its traumatic dislocations. He invokes the writings of various philosophers from Edward Said, Walter Benjamin and George Lukas who describe the forced displacement and alienation produced by colonial expansion, imperial war machines and capital accumulation. Demos, however, attempts to posit this counter-narrative of modernity as not necessarily a wholly negative experience. Indeed, he proposes exile as that “creative flight into multiplicity”⁴³; a transformative experience that produces an acute awareness and sensitivity towards difference that comes from the necessary negotiation of differing cultural positions. Demos groups exile with terms such as migration, diaspora, and refugee which bestow on those who experience it a ‘double consciousness’. “Exile designates a ruptured psycho-geography of fundamental ambivalence, calling up the longing for home and the embrace of elsewhere, and that it is antithetical to any unified meaning”⁴⁴.

Demos outlines an “aesthetic of exile” using the genealogy of the diasporic, the nomadic and the refugee. Geo-political factors are incorporated with art-historical terms such as Mona Hatoum’s use of post-minimalist sculpture, cinematic palimpsests

⁴² *ibid.* p.156

⁴³ T.J. Demos 2009:77

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p.80

and the domestic readymade to explore her experience as a London-based artist with Palestinian and Lebanese origins. A common feature of the aesthetic of exile is the use of disjunctive techniques: montage, appropriation, disorientating installations and lensing historical events through a highly subjective (not necessarily individualist) gaze.

In the 1990s, Demos notes, there was an internationally widespread official institutionalization of multiculturalism. Rather than a liberating and empathetic opening onto cultural difference “the result has been the fixing of cultural, racial and sexual signs within the discourse of political correctness...and the commodification of ethnic and racial difference within neo-liberal globalization.”⁴⁵

In his description of artistic ‘nomadism’ Demos includes artists such as Gabriel Orozco, Francis Alys and Rirkrit Tiravanija. Employing a poetic sensibility across a variety of mediums and geopolitical contexts artists such as these are seen to evade the struggle for recognition from the margins and instead exploit the globetrotting networks of contemporary art to promote a subjectivity that exceeds the nation state and other technologies of identity. These strategies are said to deny easily branded and exportable local or tribal identities. Interestingly, however, Demos is skeptical of the criticality of this strategy that potentially privileges the romantic sensibilities of the individual artist at the expense of any purported subversive anti-essentialising edge. It is arguable of course whether or not this is the function of a compromised art practice or the eagerness of the institutions of art to latch onto and celebrate the perceived subversive actions of individuals. More importantly Demos outlines the risk of naively celebrating the transgressing of borders in the name of those who never have the same opportunities.

As a counter to this Demos explores those artists that he sees engaged in a “creative reinvention of documentary strategies of representation”⁴⁶. We will return to this trope below in Demos’s brilliant reading of Steve McQueen’s work.

In a final passage in this text though Demos cites philosopher Giorgio Agamben who claims that the refugee has become “the paradigm of a new historical consciousness”. This radical claim demands that for any coming politics there needs to be a universalizing of “exile as the condition of being human” – a sort of universal proletariat. Demos concedes that it is very difficult to actually imagine, to picture or foresee what such a dispersed polity would be like, but perhaps this community yet to

⁴⁵ Ibid. p.80

⁴⁶ ibid. p.81

come is the new potential site of utopia, and perhaps artists and other cultural workers have a prime role to play in unleashing the imagination in exile.

Throughout this research there has been a recurring observation in the art since the 1960s that performance has become a central object of theorization and practice. Along with the conceptual gesture, the Minimalist opening of the object to the phenomenological space of the viewer, performance art has exploded the possibilities of art-making. In the influential text 'Presence in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation' Amelia Jones explores a crucial element of this type of practice alluded to in her title. The problem of 'presence' is not simply one for historians to debate over. Performance art has often been and still is seen as the most *direct* and unmediated form of expression.

The sticky fact remain however that for the large majority of artists and art audience performance, or body art as Jones calls it, is most often experienced through its "documentary traces". These can be photographs, films, videos, texts, oral accounts and so on. Far from diminishing their intentionality Jones argues that the re-presenting document is built into the ontological basis of body art that seeks to destabilise the myth of presence. She writes, "To the point, I insist that it is precisely the relationship of these bodies/subjects to documentation (or, more specifically, to re-presentation) that most profoundly points to the dislocation of the fantasy of the fixed, normative, centered modernist subject and thus most dramatically provides a radical challenge to the masculinism, racism, colonialism, classism, and heterosexism built in to this fantasy."⁴⁷

It is precisely the *mediated*, acculturated state of *all* bodies that performance art highlights. No person is sufficient unto his or herself. As such performing the self is always a kind of schizophrenic task tied as it is to its historical determinants and present contingencies. Using the concept of the supplement from Jacques Derrida Jones states that "the photograph...could, in fact, be said to expose the body itself as supplementary, as both the visible 'proof' of the self and its endless deferral."⁴⁸ This of course begs the question of the Real, the core of the human, its location or even existence. One can say though that, at least in this deconstructionist idiom, the Real becomes the stage of *écriture*: the textual play of internal contradictions. The indexicality of photographic documentation is analogous to the indexicality of the

⁴⁷ Amelia Jones 1997:12

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 14.

body and it will then be the rights of the specific artwork to highlight and express the marks and scars of being with the world.

Concentrating on our local context now. Jennifer Lawn and Bronwyn Beatty have outlined the role the cultural sector plays in economic policy and national branding. During his tenure as Prime Minister in the 1980s David Lange identified film as the “third dimension in our foreign policy”⁴⁹. This was consistent with the international neoliberal turn in the 1980s associated with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Lawn and Beatty state that, “In neoliberal fashion, a competitive business model is offered as the paradigm for other spheres of activity, both collective and individual: the country runs best when run like a company that carefully cultivates and manages its brand image as its best asset.”⁵⁰ It is often noted that we live in a creative and information based economy. As manufacturing is sent offshore for cheaper and less regulated labour there has been an exponential rise in economic investment in cultural production and consumption. In a country as small as New Zealand where economic growth is often conflated with national well-being those engaged in creative and cultural production are confronted from the outset with a powerful branded image of place.

Here in Wellington the local city council has taken the advice of an advertising consultancy firm and adopted the ‘Wellywood’ brand. As a third-hand slogan it’s not too innovative but neatly encapsulates an aspirational national identity that continually seeks external approval. Key to this process has been the commodification and export of place as *tabula rasa* ripe for the projection of commercially viable appropriation. This post-Fordist economy comprised of collaborations between government bodies, the tourism industry and cultural producers, forms a kind of corporate ‘synergy’ that “manufactures and manipulates the globally transportable space of virtual reality”.⁵¹ This has been vividly displayed in the copious lamentations during the recent industrial relations dispute in the filming of the *Hobbit* movies where many commentators, including Peter Jackson, expressed regret that New Zealand would no longer be the place of Middle Earth.

⁴⁹ Lawn & Beatty 2005: 34.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 122

⁵¹ Lawn & Beatty *ibid.* p. 127

Returning to the postcolonial situation raised in Foucault's concept of the heterotopia, Stephen Turner in his article 'Colonialism Continued: Producing the Self for Export' claims that in postcolonial societies, such as New Zealand, "ideas and images of self and place" are always produced for export, for "the virtual space of the global marketplace"⁵² Turner's concern is how this "export consciousness" affects identity and experience.

Turner clearly states that colonialism was an earlier phase of capitalism and capitalist expansion (indeed one of its prime engines) and today this informs the actual lived conditions of everyday life. Postcolonialism then should not be viewed as something after colonialism has ended and deposited in the annals of history but rather an ongoing negotiation.

"Producing oneself in settler culture for a globalizing market, that is, in terms that others can understand and consume, creates a condition of internal exile, where one is not quite at home, because the place is lived in, or settled, only as an object of metropolitan fantasy".⁵³ Turner argues that for every articulation of self and place comes a simultaneous concealment. The postcolonial subject (Turner does not, perhaps problematically, distinguish between marginal and majority subject positions), is borne into a pre-given economy of representation that *a priori* prevents any 'authentic' experience of self and place. In fact, speaking from his own position within the settler society he is describing, "I do not think a more authentic position is available to me... But neither do I think my position in the world is reducible to a capitalized product, to images of New Zealand that others can understand and consume."⁵⁴ Hence the exile, and the stunted desire to escape it.

This escape, Turner argues, takes the form of what he calls "dubbing". Drawing the analogy from audio production it is the laying down of local content onto a globalised and familiar form.

Colonialism continued then is the mediated production of images and ideas of self for the consumption of others. Turner does offer room to maneuver in this space however. In his analysis of OMC's music video for their hit song 'How Bizarre' Turner explains how the ostensible Polynesian authorship and context is dubbed onto familiar pop music forms with American pop cultural references which refrain from "appearing indigenous" to a white majority that desires an exotic and

⁵² Turner 2005: 218.

⁵³ *ibid.* p. 219

⁵⁴ *ibid.* p. 220.

static image of ethnic categories.

I believe that in this context a positive aesthetics of exile, as described by Demos, is critical and opens out onto these multiple modes of belonging. For me this means a relation to place that is grounded in the historical realities that precede my being here but that also accounts for the radically dissociative and mediated experience of space and self in contemporary times.

I would like to turn now to a deeper meditation on precisely that: contemporary time. For our purposes it is an appropriately ambivalent term. As a periodising marker it is extremely vague. Is not every time contemporary time, and if so, how does one observe and record it? Is contemporaneity something that is after postmodernity as well as modernity, or is it a baroque folding into and out of these terms? Does 'the contemporary' carry a similar stylistic coherence as 'the modern', hegemonic or avant-garde? To be contemporary also implies relationality. To be contemporaneous means to be *in time with* others. I am drawn to the open-ended direction of this relationality.

I would like to begin this train of thought with Giorgio Agamben who simply asks, 'What is the Contemporary?'⁵⁵ A beautiful text, whose brevity and clarity make it difficult to summarise, Agamben winds us through Christian messianism, neurophysiology, astrophysics, fashion and poetry. The first answer to his question is given by Nietzsche in his *Untimely Meditations*. The Contemporary is the figure who experiences their present with a profound "out-of-jointness", occupying a position of fracture within chronological time. Much like the figure of the refugee described by Hannah Arendt as the "vanguard of their people" the Contemporary is able, *because* of their anachronism, to perceive their own times with heightened senses. To be contemporary is a paradoxical experience of attachment and distance, commitment and repudiation. One could say with Walter Benjamin that to be contemporary would be to practice dialectics at a standstill.

Agamben invokes the contemporary paradigm of fragmentation and shattering but also connections and togetherness via the allegory of broken and mended vertebrae in Osip Mandelstam's 1923 poem 'The Century':

My century, my beast, who will manage

⁵⁵ Giorgio Agamben 2009.

to look inside your eyes
and weld together with his own blood
the vertebrae of two centuries?⁵⁶

To be contemporary is to intimately court that which is radically other than oneself, indeed to make friends with the demons at the doors. “The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness.”⁵⁷ This is not to fall into a pathological and angst ridden existentialist cliché. Perceiving darkness for Agamben is something like a call to arms. He cites the neurophysiological discovery of “off-cells” that are cells in the retina that are activated in the absence of stimulation from light which produce the sensory experience we know as darkness. The contemporary who concerns himself with the darkness of his own time is in turn shaped by it, “struck” by it and cannot *not* respond to it.

This darkness is not only present and active but perpetually *delayed*. Agamben notes that the darkness we perceive in the night sky is the light from stars so distant from ourselves that it cannot reach us.

In an expanding universe, the most remote galaxies move away from us at a speed so great that their light is never able to reach us. What we perceive as the darkness of the heavens is this light, that though traveling toward us, cannot reach us, since the galaxies from which the light originates move away from us at a velocity greater than the speed of light.

To be contemporary is to be called by the darkness of ones time and then made to wait. Finally, the contemporary is a “caesura” in the “inert homogeneity of linear time”. The caesura *opens up a space* of untimeliness where the concealed and obscured is re-animated and invited to a “meeting place” of ghosts traveling at the speed of light.

One of the most cogent accounts of contemporaneity that this research has encountered is Terry Smith’s *What is Contemporary Art?* His book charts a genealogy of artistic practice from the “official” house-style of globalization constituted by what Smith calls the “re-modernism” and “retro-sensationalism” of artists like Damien

⁵⁶ Quoted in *ibid.* p. 42.

⁵⁷ Agamben, p. 44.

Hirst, Matthew Barney, Takashi Murakami, Andreas Gursky and Jeff Koons, to the “swarming attack vehicles” from the former margins of the modern world that favour documentary and ethnographic forms best articulated by the work showcased in Documenta XI in 2002, to a third stream that Smith succinctly describes as tending to “focus on four concerns: time, place, mediation, and mood.”⁵⁸

These are the four crucial elements of contemporaneity as Smith defines it. In the interconnected multiplicity of an era built on the aftermath of postmodernity wide-ranging questions are beginning to be asked across all disciplines. “Art, like every other human activity, can be no more than provisional as to its expectations about answers. Provocative testers, doubt-filled gestures, equivocal objects, tentative projections, diffident propositions, or hopeful anticipations: these are the most common forms of art today.”⁵⁹ Gathered together Smith believes these forms constitute “an interrogation into the ontology of the present”.

The situation that art and artists, indeed everyone, finds themselves in is one that is torn by the failures of overarching attempts to define the times in totality – progressive or conservative, historical, ecological or theological. Modern time displaced some into states of non-contemporaneous primitivism and designated others as the vanguard of progress. This position is no longer tenable and rushing into this vacuum is a multiplicity of kinds of time. This is what Smith calls the “thickening” of the present.

Smith discusses Paul Chan’s *The 7 Lights* (2005-07), a series of works consisting of light projections onto various surfaces through a number of configurations. In each, shadowy outlines of objects, animals and people - some familiar from popular culture and historical events - cascade across their digital displays. These profoundly minimal studies evoke certain religious themes but their own tremulous materiality, there and not there, cast our thoughts back on ourselves.

Is a museum a factory? asks artist and writer Hito Steyerl.⁶⁰ As we begin our concluding remarks in this section it seems apt to pose such a question assembling as it does a number of the concerns crucial to this research: the status of production in the post-Fordist era and the role of creative labour in that economy, contemporary

⁵⁸ Terry Smith 2009:95

⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 2

⁶⁰ Hito Steyerl 2009

art's spatial and temporal forms and the potential interventions they may make within a radically multiplicitous and contingent time and space.

Steyerl's ostensible object of inquiry is the current dispersion of cinematic space and cinematic time into art spaces, particularly politicized cinema. Steyerl references Jonathan Beller's coinage "to look is to labor". The factory has spilled over into the social and now penetrates our deepest and most private spaces – our perception and even unconscious.⁶¹ (This reminds me of something I heard Jean-Luc Godard say, relaying the comments of a CBS television studio executive who, Godard said, was always surprised when people claimed he was in the business of making television shows. He was on the contrary in the business of making people.) "The senses are drafted into production, the media capitalize upon the aesthetic faculties and imaginary practices of viewers," Steyerl writes.⁶² If the museum becomes a type of cinematic heterotopia that is at the same time a biopolitical factory, what kinds of knowledge does it produce?

Steyerl notes the crucial difference between conventional cinema and media installations, thoroughly rehearsed in the literature: where the cinema arrests its spectators in front of single channel moving images, installations and their spectators "spread out in space, connected only by distraction, separation, and difference." This difference precludes any hopes that politicized cinema in the museum claims a place as a conventionally conceived public sphere. As Steyerl notes, "partial impressions dominate the picture". Instead of a site of ideal consensus it is one of dissensus that is shared between artist and spectator that puts contemporaneity's lack of future prospects on prime display.

Today, cinematic politics are post-representational. They do not educate the crowd, but produce it. They articulate the crowd in space and in time. They submerge it in partial invisibility and then orchestrate their dispersion, movement, and reconfiguration. They organize the crowd without preaching to it. They replace the gaze of the bourgeois sovereign spectator of the white cube with the incomplete, obscured, fractured, and overwhelmed vision of the spectator-as-laborer.

⁶¹ Beller's book *The Cinematic Mode of Production* is a fascinating and comprehensive account of this process.

⁶² Steyerl 2009

Elsewhere Steyerl elaborates on the “post-representational” status of art she mentions above.⁶³ For her the power of art, documentary or otherwise, rests not in its content but in the re-organisation of the affective construction of perception itself. Here she echoes the writings of Jacques Ranciere and his concept of the ‘distribution of the sensible’. It is not a matter of finding a space of critical distance, an outside, but to *be* in the midst of things and articulate forms of intelligence “beyond representation”. What would this look like? Steyerl leaves this question dangling in front of the reader, just out of sight.

A possible response might be found in TJ Demos’s reading of Steve McQueen’s 2002 work *Western Deep*. In this work Demos identifies several prominent currents within contemporary art that are “developing into a new model of documentary form”⁶⁴ which are indeed beyond representation. McQueen, along with artists such as Anri Sala, Emily Jacir, Walid Raad and Zarina Bhimji all follow a documentary impulse but resist the naïve belief in transparency of authoritative documentary codes as well as potentially self-defeating ethnographic tactics of the postcolonial constellation. They build uncertainty into the hazy boundary between the virtual and the real and work within a post-minimalist framework of embodied spectator participation.

Western Deep documents the labour in the deepest gold mine in the world in Johannesburg, South Africa and begins with a long sequence of darkness that is interrupted by ambiguous flashes of light. The soundtrack at this point consists of the loud clashing of mechanical gears and metallic tearing sounds. Eventually it is revealed that we had been traveling with a camera down a long elevator shaft as we are opened out onto a strange underground environment flooded with artificial light. For Demos “this darkness is not simply metaphorical...It presents us with a form of representation somehow based on the flickering presence of absence”.⁶⁵ It relinquishes any claims to objectivity just as much as it denies any fiction or narrative devices. As well as this, Demos notes, by challenging the audience on an affective, perceptual level McQueen “underlies the materiality of the film’s installation, which resists the audience’s passive immersion into new forms of technology”.

⁶³ Hito Steyerl 2007

⁶⁴ T.J. Demos 2005:61

⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 62

Demos sees in this work, and others by McQueen, an emphasis on the *interval* or filmic interstice as constituent element. The interval is a period of time between events and McQueen and other artists use this durational element to expand or contract the experience of time, removing it from regimented and spatialised clock-time. The interval is also the gap of darkness between film frames⁶⁶ that for many film theorists accentuates its relation to industrial production and immutable linearity. However, Demos discusses Deleuze's theory of the time-image that emerged in cinematic practices after the historical fracture of WWII. Deleuze: "Film ceases to be 'images in a chain...an uninterrupted chain of images each one the slave of the next,' and whose slave we are".⁶⁷ The time-image is associated with the drifting wanderers ("seers" not "do-ers") of Italian neo-realist film and the French new wave but it could also apply to Steyerl's spectator-as-labourer.

Of course the vast majority of image-production today, art and amateur, is digital video. Demos notes that we have in the last couple of decades seen a shift from Deleuze's time-image to Jameson's "total flow" of video that "brings about a post-filmic phenomenological arrangement, which includes new modes of spectatorial involvement in its spatiotemporal matrix."⁶⁸ The intrinsic gaps of film that provided its own denial of the appearance of visual plenitude is externalized into actual and embodied space in media installations that articulate the flickering nature of ourselves as we struggle in the game of resistance and accommodation. We are thus in the constellation of the projected image, the fractured screens of the cinematic heterotopia and the museum-factory – the art of darkness – that this research has been describing as part of the mangle of practice.

The Hotel Empire

I shall attempt a brief summary. The experience of contemporary urban space, at least since Benjamin described it in the early part of the 20th century, is one dominated by massive sensory stimulation emanating predominately from media and image making technologies that have infiltrated every aspect of conscious and unconscious life. This has been the cause of confusion and anxiety over the dissolution of previously fixed and stable positions and the multiplication of

⁶⁶ Mary Ann Doane in her book *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* offers the remarkable statistic that in the conventional projection of a feature film the audience is in total darkness for 40% of the film's duration. We just don't notice it due to the gap between the speed of projection and our perceptual capabilities.

⁶⁷ Deleuze quoted in Demos 2005:72.

⁶⁸ Demos, p. 75.

simultaneous temporalities. Political and social forces have dislocated vast numbers of people and the very distinctions between the virtual and the actual slip and shift before our blazing eyes. These same blazing eyes have become the 21st-century coalface as media and cultural industries form the bedrock of a ravenously expanding capitalist machinery demanding resources and fuel not only from the physical world but from the creativity and cognitive capacities of human beings.

In response contemporary art attempts to picture all this not from a safe, distance but one that is fully implicated in the mangle. These same processes of fragmentation have opened up huge possibilities for new affective intensities and collective experiences. Contemporary art can reveal these processes as they are happening, symbolically articulating the violence operating in our societies, and providing spaces for an active understanding of them. The future in all directions appears extremely uncertain therefore we need new vocabularies and new forms to address these conditions.

As such I will spend the remainder of this document fleshing out some of the background themes, contexts and decisions of the exhibited work as my proposal towards such a vocabulary.



Alfred Hitchcock, film still from *Vertigo*, 1958

The Empire Hotel is the setting for the pivotal moment in the film *Vertigo*. Madeline Elster is dead, killed by her husband Gavin, who hires Scottie, a retired detective, to follow a woman, Judy, whom Gavin hires to act, dress and speak like his wife, knowing that Scottie will fall in love with her. Gavin stages the death of Madeline as a suicide using Judy as bait precipitated by the paralyzing fear of heights suffered by Scottie. Scottie watches helplessly as his love plummets to her death from the top of a

Spanish bell tower. Believing himself to be the cause of her death he goes mad. Some time later he spots Judy on the street instantly reminding him of who he thought was Madeline but was indeed Judy herself. He begins the process of transforming Judy back into Madeline, just as Gavin had done; dressing her, directing her, altering her appearance. Judy accepts all this as she too is in love with Scottie and feels guilty for her past deception. Judy reveals herself to Scottie as the Madeline of his dreams in her bedroom in the Empire Hotel. But when fantasy turns to reality it often becomes a nightmare.

It is from this fragment of an image, a neon image of new possibilities and perverse violence, second chances and traumatized pasts that I build my installation *The Hotel Empire*.⁶⁹

In one room I have covered the floor with an arrangement of yellow objects constructed using the same methods as those of the *Landing Sites* described above.



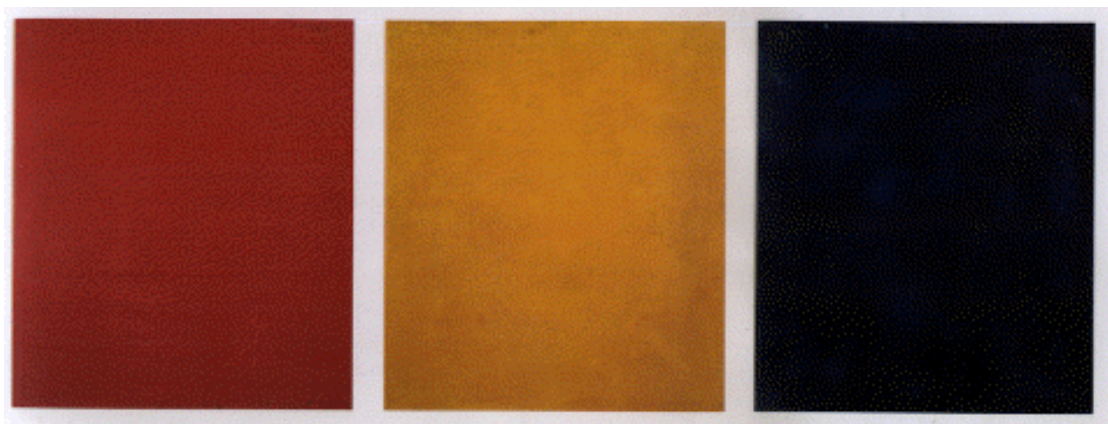
They reach out and fill the floor though they don't seem to have any particular pattern or order; they simply push up against the boundaries of the space they find themselves in. Many of these "almost-bodies" were made during my recent travels through Europe and are quite literally souvenirs. These indexical traces of pushing, leaning, pressing, rolling, turning, tearing between myself and my environment push out from their grounded positions to the spectators' eyes as they maneuver through the space. All of these objects are yellow. It is like an exploded yellow monochrome painting with its pieces, scarred in the process, left vibrating on the ground. Each is utterly unique but made from the exact same stuff. The writer Borges, as he went progressively blind in old age, was in the habit of wearing bright yellow ties. He did this, he said, because yellow is the last colour you see before you go blind and he wanted to see something in the mirror when he put his tie on each morning. The poet

⁶⁹ At the time of writing the installation was still a work in progress. As such, titles and specific placements of objects are subject to change for the final exhibition.

Wallace Stevens once used the line “description without place” to describe the ‘place’ of art and that is what these are.⁷⁰

On one wall in the same room is a small painting on board with the shapes **19XX** painted in the middle. On the plane home I was watching a film by Jean-Luc Godard, *Origins of the 21st century*. It was a collage film made for a special screening at Cannes to celebrate the cinema of the 20th century. It is constructed in a similar vein to his massive *Histoire(s) du Cinema*. It is one of the most moving things I have ever seen.⁷¹ In it, as is typical of Godard’s films, the film footage is intercut with black title cards with the year printed in white Helvetica type. When I watched this, 30 000 meters above the ground going at who knows what speed it struck me like a slap in the face how long ago the 20th century now feels. And yet, how much we still live our lives in that century. I was born there and most, if not all of my conceptual and corporeal tools owe their existence to 20th century thinking. The text painting is one of the 20th century’s greatest inventions. I’m thinking particularly of Ed Ruscha and On Kawara, but also of Marcel Broodthaers and John Baldessari. Around the corner in the second section of the installation is exactly the same painting. These are my first two paintings and I am sure there are numerous flaws and errors. I have chosen to do them in colour, not black and white. I did this because colours harmonise and relate with each other and they also corrupt and intoxicate the surrounding visual space.

Inside this second section you will discover at first three pools of rectangular light emitted from projectors in the ceiling. These are my penetrables, my invitations to enter the body of the image, to look and labour and move around. The sequence begins across the three panels with “pure” red, blue and yellow.



Alexander Rodchenko, *Pure red color, pure yellow color, pure blue colour*, 1921

⁷⁰ Quoted in Zizek 2009:5

⁷¹ Both parts can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mYCh_rzPDHg

From here other kinds of imagery emerge. They include amateur grainy black and white panning footage of a seafront with shadowy figures in the foreground. This footage cuts to scenes of a ship at sea and another pan across an industrialized harbour. It looks very much like Wellington might have in the 1930s but it is actually San Francisco, the setting of *Vertigo*. There is also footage of my friend Sammin Son that I shot at a party we were both at. Sam is a performance artist whose most recent work has been about the extreme discipline and violence inflicted on his body and psyche during his time spent in the South Korean army. At this party however he freestyles for the camera, seemingly going into an ecstatic trance at one point before hugging someone emerging out of camera left. Next there is footage from the final scene of the film *Morvern Callar* by Lynne Ramsey. This scene is one of my all-time favourite moments in cinema. The film begins with the suicide of Morvern's boyfriend who leaves her a manuscript of his novel and a mixtape. You can see her wearing earphones in this scene, listening to her walkman as she drifts amongst the crowd of an Ibiza-style rave, only she's listening to the Mamas and the Papas 'This is Dedicated to the One I Love'. Maria Walsh, who associates this scene with what she calls the "cinematic feminine sublime" describes it thus: "Cinematically, her identity is displaced by rhythms of light, color, and editing. On the level of engagement with the film's images, their "signaletic" value, Morvern becomes a figure of motor-sensory escape from the confines of identity. The absences that her new existence pivots on are permeated with circularity and repetition."⁷² This is also running-room. Such scenes of brutal abstraction amidst figurative representation and narrative remind me of an important observation from Slavoj Žižek's book *The Plague of Fantasies*

Among the antagonisms that characterize our epoch (world-market globalization versus the assertion of ethnic particularisms, etc), perhaps the key place belongs to the antagonism between the abstraction that increasingly determines our lives (in the guise of digitalization, speculative market relations, etc) and the deluge of pseudo-concrete images. In the good old days of traditional *Idelogiekritik*, the paradigmatic critical procedure was to regress from 'abstract' (religious, legal...) notions to the concrete social reality in which these notions were rooted; today, it seems more and more that the critical procedure is forced to follow the opposite path, from pseudo-

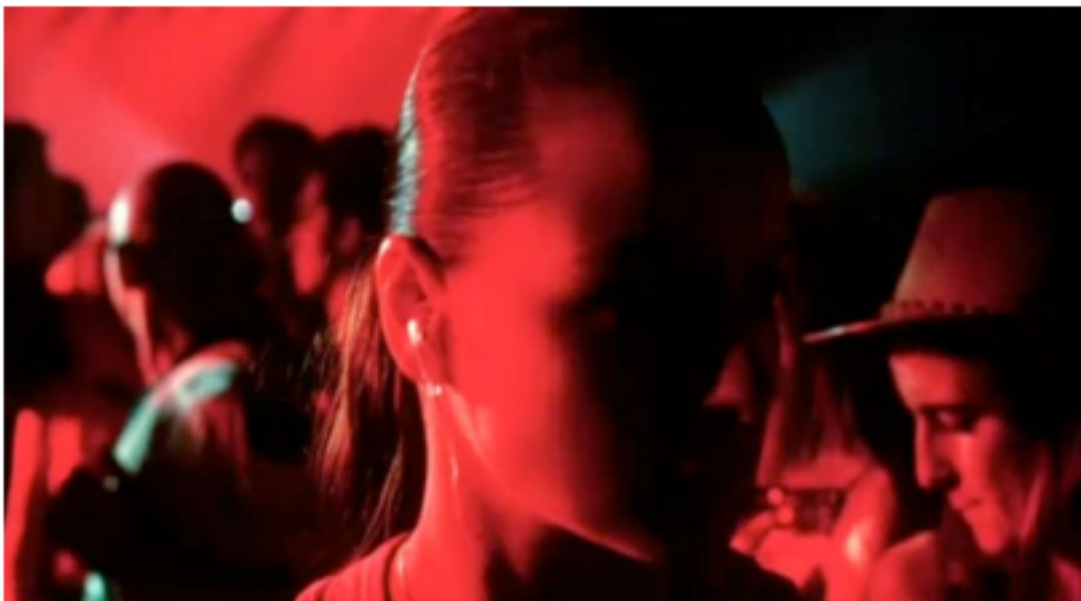
⁷² Maria Walsh 2008:unpaginated

concrete imagery to abstract (digital, market...) processes which effectively structure our living experience.⁷³

These “abstract processes” are precisely what I have been calling the mangle of practice.



Video still from *The Hotel Empire*



Video still from *The Hotel Empire*

To your left as you watch these three panels is a large television monitor mounted to the wall. It is a documentation of a performance I made on Lambton Quay in the Wellington CBD. It is locally well known that Lambton Quay marks the site of

⁷³ Zizek 2008:xxiii

the pre-European shoreline. Prospective settlers in the United Kingdom were sold a vision of New Zealand and Wellington in particular of something between an Arcadian utopia and rural England. These impressions were based on the excitable rhetoric of the New Zealand Company and commissioned paintings by the likes of Charles Heaphy. When the settlers arrived expecting land to work they discovered that not only were there other people here (who themselves had a long and complicated journey in and out of the region⁷⁴) but the land itself was full of inhospitable bush densely packed amongst valleys and hills. After a permanent settlement was established it was quickly deemed necessary to dredge the harbour floor and reclaim more flat land in the inner harbour to base government buildings, railways, police stations and the like. Thus the colonists set about turning their environment into the image they had of it in their collective minds to begin with. This process continues on today with the construction of Oriental Bay, a man-made beach comprised of sand sourced from Nelson in the south island.

My performance consisted of filling several large bags full of sand from Oriental Bay and methodically covering the curbside of Lambton Quay with that sand. I walk backwards scattering the dusty matter in an evenly distributed line that follows the contour of the urban plan to the letter. An absurd gesture of dislocation. It was a way of reaching back into history of this place with a material, sculptural gesture that did not result in any monument for the ages or populist piece of public art. I simply let the material do what it is made to do. Scatter into the wind.

The next image in the installation is to the left of this last video and it is a black and white photograph taken on Wellington harbour in the early 20th century. I accessed it from an online archive of historical documents during my research into the history of the Lambton Quay land reclamation project. The same steamy industrial background found in the footage from San Francisco is in evidence here. The image also has an uncanny resemblance to the famous Seurat painting depicting riverside bathers with Parisian factories in the background.⁷⁵ Depictions of everyday life with strange ambiguity. The figures in both painting and photograph are obscured from our view, in shadow, isolated from each other. The two men in the photograph are well-dressed in fashionable clothes but their surroundings appear to be less than hospitable. It is difficult to tell the ethnicity of the two men. The aggressive diagonal separation

⁷⁴ See *The Making of Wellington: 1800-1914* ed. David Hamer & Roberta Nicholls, Victoria University Press, 1990 for an account of the tumultuous movements of 19th-century Maori in and out of the Wellington region.

⁷⁵ Thanks to supervisor Martin Patrick for pointing this out to me.

in the frame between construction rubble and calm harbour sea with these two Beckett-like characters cast out of the industrial hearth to fish for their supper with a piece of string speaks volumes to me about the violence of imperial modernization and the striving to persist of bodies and minds in such a self-inflicted situation.



Photograph from *The Hotel Empire*



George Seurat, *Bathers at Asnières*, 1883-84

On the far corner of the second section of the installation is a computer monitor placed on a white plinth. Playing on continuous loop on that computer is a video I compiled out of footage sourced from video-sharing websites that depict the engulfing in flames of the Communist China Television (CCTV) building in Beijing. The office

of Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, OMA, designed the building after winning an international competition. Interestingly OMA only submitted an entry for this building after deciding not to submit one for the construction at Ground Zero in New York City as they believed the project would be mired in reactionary nostalgia from the outset. In an address to Lebanese architecture students Koolhaas explained that the inspiration for the design of the CCTV building came from taking the Twin Towers and folding them into a loop.⁷⁶ This is also evident in part of my video in which I include part of a professionally made digital animation advertising the design of the building. During a Chinese new years celebration a part of the CCTV complex (in fact not the iconic loop but a more traditional skyscraper directly adjacent it that houses a hotel and tv studios) caught fire. It caused a spectacular inferno but the building remained standing and appeared to sustain only surface damage.

This situation is almost overflowing with symbolic content. Koolhaas, and his office, is unique among the contemporary crop of so-called starchitects. OMA receives commissions for buildings and but there is also AMO who act as a research based think-tank gathering information from OMA's different projects as well as several long-term research projects on the international process of modernization. Koolhaas, himself a former script-writer in the 1970s, is also an astute and incisive writer. Key amongst his conceptual armoury is the term Bigness. In 1994 he wrote, "In a landscape of disarray, disassembly, dissociation, disclamation, the attraction of Bigness is its potential to reconstruct the Whole, resurrect the Real, reinvent the collective, reclaim maximum possibility."⁷⁷ It turns out though that this Whole is full of holes. Koolhaas's designs often incorporate voids and subtractions.

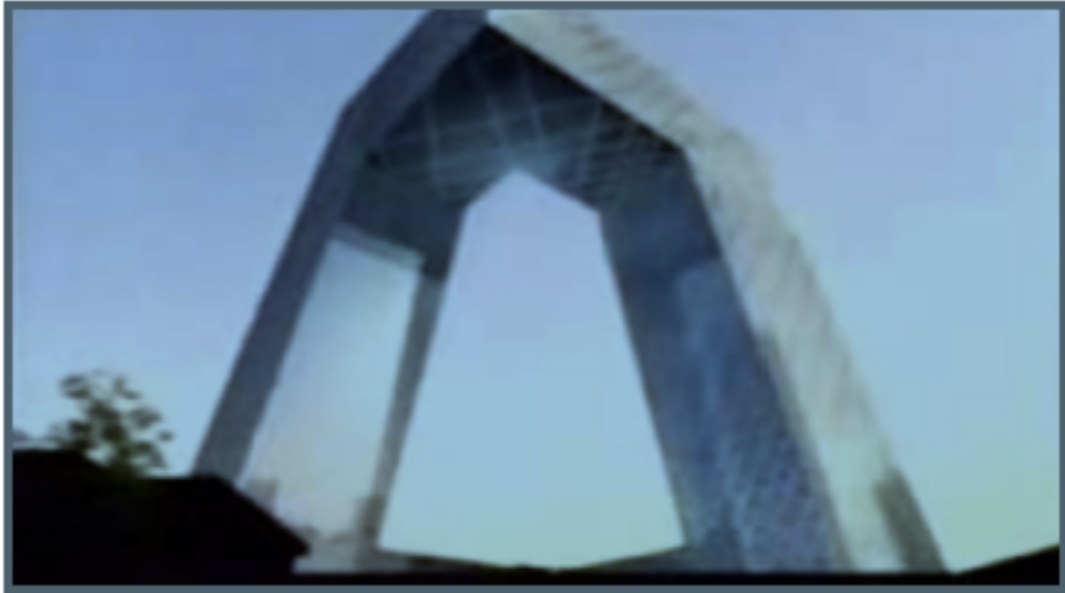
This building not only houses the state broadcasting services of one of the most authoritarian regimes in the world but it is literally a burning example of the conflation of built space with the flows of the image economy. Its iconic void seemingly giving form to the centerless dispersion of power of global capitalism whilst at the same time representing a pioneering Western intervention into Chinese cultural, architectural and economic space.

The structure of this video is a fairly crude editing procedure following a kind of "on/off" dynamic. It begins with a red sliver in the center of the screen and billows and widens as the flames grow larger. There is then a sharp cut to daytime and a view from a passing vehicle of the scorched building. The video more or less follows this

⁷⁶ Lecture can be accessed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQdjKR8hYxI>

⁷⁷ Koolhaas quoted in Foster 2002:51

on/off switching except for the extended animation sequence which echoes the abstraction of the projections on the floor even as it attempts to render a “realistic” picture of the site. The work relates to Andy Warhol’s 1964 film *Empire* which dissolved the iconic American tower into pure cinematic duration. The hyperactive male libido is of course more than just innuendo here. It is precisely this “edifice complex” that I am attempting to reveal.



Video still from *The Hotel Empire*



Andy Warhol, *Empire*, 1964

Finally, at the hinge of the wall that separates the two sections of the installation – one light, one dark - is a photograph in a lightbox. It is an image of another friend of mine, a photographer, Hans, asleep in the lounge of my house. I would like to quote Maurice Blanchot from his *The Space of Literature*:

Vigilance is sleep when night falls. Whoever does not sleep cannot stay awake. Vigilance consists in not always keeping watch, for it seeks awakening as its essence... Sleep is intimacy with the center. I am, not dispersed, but entirely gathered together where I am, in this spot which is my position and where the world, because of the firmness of my attachment, localizes itself.⁷⁸

In the mangle of practice every point is a center out which the most complex and rich arrangements unfold. I find running-room in those folds.



Photograph in a lightbox from *The Hotel Empire*

I have attempted in this document and the exhibited artwork in accompanies to perform a positive aesthetic of exile that enacts the dislocating and shattering strategies of spatial, temporal and imagistic montage but also opens a caesura in the relentless flow of images and thickening temporality. In this caesura a gathering can take place; a gathering of a virtual community of spectators labouring under 21st-century Capital striving to persist, to enlarge their capacities to enjoy life. I have

⁷⁸ Blanchot cited in Fisher 1993:27

joined with particular currents in engaged contemporary art to re-imagine what documentary form might be as an act of revelation not reduction. I have advocated in word and deed a desire that is promiscuous without being possessive and accounts for a mode of subjectivity that temporally emerges from its material conditions in the thick of things. My year's work has been wide and ranging but always with these issues in mind. I have produced small, tentative gestures in the city and ambitious proposals for affective maps in an installation. I have gathered together an ambitious chorus of voices from across disciplines to mark what is only the beginning of an artistic practice. Bruno Latour reminds us that the etymology of the word *thing* is related to the origins of the words we use to designate judiciary assemblies, such as parliaments. He writes, "Now, is this not extraordinary that the banal term we use for designating what is out there, unquestionably, a thing, what lies out of any dispute, out of language, is also the oldest word we all have used to designate the oldest of the sites in which our ancestors did their dealing and tried to settle their disputes? A thing is, in one sense, an object out there and, in another sense, an *issue* very much *in* there, at any rate, a *gathering*."⁷⁹ This gathering is the mangle of practice where material, cognitive, organic and non-organic things resist and accommodate each other in the dance of agency, and where we, as artists, attempt to make some running-room.

⁷⁹ Bruno Latour 2004:233

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