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Notes on Spode Works

It was sometime before one could see, the hot air escaping caused the candle to flicker, but as soon as one's eyes became accustomed to the glimmer of light the interior of the chamber gradually loomed before one, with its strange and wonderful medley of extraordinary and beautiful objects heaped upon one another.

There was naturally short suspense for those present who could not see, when Lord Carnarvon said to me 'Can you see anything'. I replied to him 'Yes, it is wonderful.'

Tutankhamun: Anatomy of an Excavation. Howard Carter's diaries and journals.¹

Original Spode Works site, Stoke-on-Trent, February 2012

I am both stunned and excited upon first entering Spode - a vast factory site - in the heart of Stoke. We are walking through a labyrinth of rooms, workshops and both inside and outside spaces. I could never have imagined the complexity, the age or remains. Mostly excited, some sadness - some disbelief. But mostly very deeply excited and curious.

'Yes, it is wonderful.'

Original Spode Works site, Stoke-on-Trent, September 2012 - First residency

Days of walking, looking, walking, smelling, listening, squinting, taking notes, making images. As though in a state of feverish mapping and documenting: eyes, hands and feet searching through the array of corridors, rooms, light and darkness, rubble and tidiness, walking, looking, breathing in the different atmospheres, making more images.

Continuing walking, feeling and seeing in my sleep - the body and mind are trying to make sense, to inhabit and navigate the spaces. The experience of entering a site with endless choice is daunting. Every decision about engaging with the remnants of the factory site will have a meaning, a power, a rhetoric. So: how to engage, how to make sense of the spaces - make sense of all the remains? (Why make sense/what kind of sense?) 'See with the feeling eye - feel with a seeing hand'². I am acutely aware of how both myself and many of the other artists immediately started sorting and separating, categorizing and evaluating the remains: Making a hierarchy of attention; the value of attention; the value of being chosen.³

On my Desk

While writing, I have three postcards lying on my desk, acquired in museums on different journeys, times and places. They are together now on my desk, and I am attempting to make sense of my hierarchy(s) of attention. These artworks display the attention of the Boyle family, Richard Wentworth and Sir John Soane. Sir John Soane's⁴ Private Museum (which is a shrine to the classical ruins of the world) represents the structure and logic of the collection, the selection - the divine accumulation of stuff - stuff which by the power of *the display*, and by being *collected*, is given, even forced, to be significant and particular.



Another vista; The Boyle family are best known for their earth studies: three dimensional casts of the surface of the earth which record and document *random* sites with great accuracy. This random selection serves several purposes: nothing is excluded as a potential subject; the particular is chosen to serve as a representative of the whole; the subjective role of the artists and creators is re-designated to that of 'presenters'⁵. I am fascinated by the thought of the 'undiscriminating eye' - is it possible or is it a utopian ideal? It resonates with what I - over the years - keep coming back to: *Rhopography* (from *rhopos*, *trivial objects, small wares, trifles*) [that describes] *those things which lack importance, the unassuming material base of life that importance constantly overlooks*.⁶ This is exemplified in Richard Wentworth's work 'Making Do and Getting By, a Selection of Everyday Encounters'⁷: work which touches on the very reasons why I wanted to work with art (and archaeology⁸). It brings to attention the almost invisible trace of human gesture - *making do* - minute, unimportant, ephemeral gestures that one experiences a familiarity with over decades of past or future; of - *getting by*.

Three images, pointing to three ways, positions or topoi of my attention, my gaze, my actions and work at Spode - through **the collection**, (the act of collecting, the accumulation and order of objects and commodities), **the site** (found/random/constructed/given/imaginary/imagined/chosen), and **the trace** (gesture/evidence/fragment/relic). These forms are my navigation tools in 'the landscape' of Spode and Stoke-on-Trent.



¹ Carter, H., 'Tutankhamun: Anatomy of an Excavation. Howard Carter's diaries and journals'. <http://www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/discoveringTut/>, 1922, (30.8.15).

² Leslie, E., 'See with a Feeling Eye: Feel with a Seeing Hand' *Sensuous Knowledge, Focus on Artistic Research and Development* No. 7. KHIB, 2014.

³ Caroline Slotte reflects upon the value of attention, time and care in her text, part of her Research Fellowship *Taking an Object and Staying with It*. 'The value of objects interests me. I closely examine that which is considered valuable, and even more closely that which is seen as worthless. Rearranging these attitudes, elevating the low, making the worthless valuable, appears both surprisingly easy and immediately satisfying. For it is as though by simply spending a lot of time with an object, I can increase its value.(...) Could it have to do with something as inestimable as care? That a transformation simply takes place when something is treated well? Through the act of caring, one encourages others to do the same: Look - this is valuable, because I treat it as such.' Slotte, C., 'Closer' KHIB, 2010.

⁴ Soane commissioned a watercolour 'The imagined view of the Bank of England in Ruins', his own building, for his 80th birthday 1830. http://www.soane.org/collections/soanes_london/bankofengland/8.

⁵ 'About' the Boyle family <http://www.boylefamily.co.uk/boyle/about/>.

⁶ Bryson, N., *Looking at the Overlooked, Four Essays on Still-Life Painting*, 1990

⁷ Wentworth Richard: *Making Do and Getting By, a Selection of Everyday Encounters*, 1970-85 (Wentworth/Lisson Gallery).

⁸ At the University of Bergen, I studied Archaeology in the 90's and worked at different excavation sites in Norway for several years.

On the Factory, the Ruin & Decay - Buddleia was Never a Pattern

Spode⁹: factory, home of the refinement and production of Bone China and underglaze transfer methods. Blue and White.¹⁰

Workplace for decades. All parts of production, distribution, managerial and publicity work done on the same site. Closed for production in 2008, workers left. The brand and intellectual property sold to The Portmerion Group; the site and buildings under City Council administration.

Further activity on site continued through the process of selling and moving valuables, kilns, decals, finished ware, unused materials, cables, moving of the collections, (to Spode Museum Trust¹¹ and Trelissick House¹²). The guards and other staff affiliated to the site are required for keeping it safe, caring. BCB¹³ as a massive explosion of activity. Scavengers and opportunists breaking in, taking lamps, copper wiring and lead from the roof; the rummaging of pigeons and other birds, cats, badgers, foxes, mice, rats, beetles, flies, ants and countless other life forms such as microbes, bacteria, fungus, together with plants of many sorts quite rapidly moved in (or were blown through a broken window) making the buddleia's purple flowers blossom triumphantly.¹⁴

It's both scary and reassuring to see how fast the process of decay and ruination happens. Water has been the most violent destructor/agent, paving the way for a new state of things. (Can one say that decay is not about the past - its about the transformation to something else, a passage from one state to another?)

Gilda Williams makes an interesting distinction: '[that one could] finally define a ruin as an architectural site whose inhabitants were forced out, whereas a derelict is a place so unwelcoming its residents packed up and left [...]'.¹⁵

Spode's workers were most certainly forced out. Under surveillance, they were asked to leave immediately one day in November 2008. The Christmas decorations were left as though evidence of a Pompeian catastrophe. Does this qualify Spode Works as a ruin? Or is it the trauma and impact of the closure? Or the overwhelmingly present past that makes it fruitful to coin 'Contemporary Ruin' as a description? The Ruin encapsulates the trauma which created it - not war or a natural catastrophe, but the slow and just as devastating economic failure. This situation is not exclusive to Stoke, but has, like a slow motion tsunami, been spreading across most industrialized lands. Yet the Contemporary Ruin does not pose. It carries none of the glorification or reverence of past grandeur. It screams at you. It laughs in your face. It mocks you. Is that why people get so angry and ashamed at the prospect of the Contemporary Ruin? Because it cannot be denied? One cannot turn a blind eye? Does it expose the failure, the mistakes, the fragility of the times and society that we live in?

Each time I returned, the site had changed. For being 'a dead site,' a lot happens. The expectation of a stand still was quickly refuted. Nature's invasion and reclaiming of the site has had a dramatic speed, and the trace of new human activity is similarly constant. Things/objects/stuff disappear and re-appear; a heavy metal band shoot a video leaving graffiti, stage props and a wig. Rooms and areas became unsafe because of asbestos findings or the architecture simply collapsing. We never knew which spaces would become out of bounds between each time, as well as negotiating for new spaces for investigation. Gilda Williams' text is partially titled: 'It was what it was', a phrase which became an important 'matter of fact' perspective regarding how to relate to Spode; the easily felt



nostalgia, mixed with 'ruin lust'¹⁶ and an 'allegorical impulse'¹⁷ needs a bit of resistance. So Williams' dry 'it was what it was' was given my own addition, 'it is what it is', to deal with the *current* state as well as my own role at the site. Activity at the site almost became an irritation. Why? Because suddenly 'Topographies' entry point in September 2012 became 'the standard' - a year 0, an expectation or a measure of 'authenticity', the 'original' state of the site. Such a perspective has validity for the museum, or an historian or archaeologist who has a *mandate*. A *Mandate* to preserve, collect and sort out the untouched from the disturbed: to sort out timelines. As artists, do we have a mandate to preserve or to save/rescue anything? What is our 'Arts mandate'? The site already contained evidence of a collecting, categorizing eye. 'Valuables', such as cabinets and furniture, finished products - the museum items - were already removed. Stickers saying 'Museum Trust'¹⁸ were to be found on 'everything' appearing to date from before 1900. Maybe *our mandate* is to question these processes: What is the criteria of selection? What stories are selected? Who selects them? For what? What is their mandate? What is the rhetoric of power in the collecting, selecting, and archiving? By interventions and other entry points, art and artist can question and challenge how an archive is created, constituted and understood.

Wandering through rooms of what was left, 'The concept of importance can arise only by separating itself from what is declared to be trivial and insignificant; 'importance' generates 'waste', (...) that which is excluded or passed over'.¹⁹
The site is whatever was there. The present site is 'authentic' as evidence of the here and now. It is what it is.



⁹ <http://www.thepotteries.org/potters/spode.htm>.

¹⁰ Spode as a leading developer and producer of iconic objects, patterns, materials and techniques in ceramic history resonated with my practice. I had worked with the ceramic object for years as a storyteller/cultural signifier, and in particular with the impact of the introduction of (Chinese) porcelain to Europe tracing and mirroring personal and public histories in art, object and trade history. <http://www.spodemuseumtrust.org/spode-collection.html>.

¹¹ The Spode Museum Trust was established in 1987, in order to protect the Spode Archive for posterity. The Spode Archive includes some 40,000 ceramic items spanning over 200 years from the late 18th Century to 2008. It also includes some 25,000 engraved copper plates from which transfer prints were made for printed ceramic wares. There are also collections of antique factory tools, furniture and moulds and ¼ million Spode and Copeland documents, including watercolour paintings of some 70,000 ceramic patterns. <http://www.spodemuseumtrust.org>

¹² Trelissick House: <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/article-1355791834262/>.

¹³ British Ceramics Biennial.

¹⁴ In researching the numerous flower patterns so popular to ceramic ware, I did not manage to find a pattern or depiction of buddleia in Spode or Portmerion's pattern books. It seems that all the other flowers belonging to UK flora have found their way into being depicted on ceramic ware. Why not the Buddleia? Is it poetic justice?

¹⁵ Williams, G., 'It was what it was: Modern Ruins', in *Ruins, Documents of Contemporary Art*, London, Whitechapel, 2010.

¹⁶ Terziyska, Y., 'Ruin Lust: A Review of Our Fascination with Decay', *Drain Magazine* 2014, <http://drainmag.com/fascination-with-decay/>, (08.08.15). 'There were a few key themes concerning 'the ruin' present here; the German term *ruinenlust* (ruin lust) was resurrected by Rose Macaulay in her 1953 study, *Pleasure of Ruins*[2], temporally situating the phenomenon in the Modern period. She argues that *ruinenlust* is associated with the pleasure found in ruins - a pleasure that may derive from the beauty found in desolation and decay, from an imagining of a past (and thus a future), from destruction and the hope for rebirth or from an understanding of the passage of time and the inevitability of death.'

¹⁷ Owens, C., 'The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism Part 2', *October*, Vol. 13 Summer, 1980.

¹⁸ Or stickers with simply 'TRUST', as if to encourage a feeling of trust - but trust in what?

¹⁹ Bryson, N., *Looking at the Overlooked, Four Essays on Still-Life Painting*, 1990

On Digging - A Locus of Trouble For and In the Present

In the work- 'Digging - Wrestling with Dieter Roelstrate', I staged an archaeological test dig - 1x1 metre in the back yard of the AirSpace Gallery²⁰ in Hanley, when Topographies showed 'The Site is the Question'²¹, digging layer upon layer for 5 days. Dieter Roelstrate's article 'Why Dig - on the Historical Turn in Art' had made me defiant with his refusal and critique of art and artists turning their attention to the past. So I read, dug and argued with Dieter and myself while pondering, and reflecting upon Roelstrate's question: Why dig? Starting out, confident with the certainty of figuring it out, uncovering, triumphing with the power of the fragment, but... I soon realised that with the lack of parameters for a proper (archaeological) dig, the 'this has most likely been or not been taking place here' was pointless in my 'art dig'. So what was I looking for? What was the purpose or the parameter of my work? I reflected more upon *the choices* - or the limitations and possibilities I had set up when working. Archaeological methods have similarities to how I (and many others) work with art. Art seems to be able to appropriate any method.

Choice of site/theme/field of interest- and questioning that specific limitation. Then start to work, scraping and digging away through layers and layers of unassuming dirt and rubble, with the expectation of what might be found. Is the expectation equal to genre or tradition? And then hopefully to find the unexpected?

Dealing with futility: Why dig? Why art? How to make meaning out of shit and fragments (use the sieve, add some water - does it look better? No? Then you dig some more - maybe now?) Vague traces and gestures. The leap of imagination.

In my dig, I become merely a destroyer. What do the objects I find signify? What is my system of selection in terms of giving value and attention? I ended up discarding all the objects and fragments I had dug out - the beige tile ceramic shards, glass, pebbles, wood, coal, EVERYTHING - in the bin. Instead, what I found was a hole in the ground, a negative sculpture. Evidence of my labour and time, connecting me to both the present and the past - partaking in both. So what's the score? Roelstrate vs. Mydland I-I. In the last minute I found a 'knockout' in Nadine Attewell's text. She points to the possible 'dehistoricising' of society: 'It is important to contest this dehistoricising move, not just in the interest of a more accurate analysis, but because, as the debate over Education Secretary Michael Gove's plans to overhaul the national history curriculum reminds us, the past is among the most critical of the terrains on and over which the struggle to define belonging plays out. At the same time, the past functions as a locus of trouble for and in the present.' I-2.



²⁰ <http://www.airspacegallery.org> situated in Broad Street: http://www.thepotteries.org/streets/hanley/broad_st/

²¹ Roelstrate, D., 'Why Dig - on the Historical Turn in Art' *Kunstjournalen* 2010/2011 http://www.kunstjournalen.no/11_eng/dieter-roelstraete-why-dig (6.6.2011) See also 'The Way of the Shovel, on the Archaeological Imaginary in Art' 2009 <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-way-of-the-shovel-on-the-archeological-imaginary-in-art/> for a bit of redemption. (2011)





On Layers: Simulacrum and the Expected

Contemporary Spode Landscape: Italian White

In the meticulous mapping of Spode, my eyes touching every surface, set to find the expected - my expectation is of the iconic blue and white bone china, the Italian blue, the willow pattern. My inner image of the lustrous blue glued itself to any surface, like the decals and transfers lying scattered around (not blue but brown and yellow as they are before firing - the yellow of 'cover coat' being like a traffic light - frozen on amber - holding its breath before red or green - stop or go - in suspense). This projection of expectation was like the slippery sliding of the printed decals from one surface (the paper) to another (the china)²². I go around with this sliding gaze - gluing, smudging gaze, imposing my expectations upon the surfaces I encounter. Yet without really finding it...expectation pauses at amber - in suspense, hesitating. But I realise that the surfaces are not blank - or unfinished - they are in a 'present state' filled with landscapes and patterns of their own; of another making.

The room was already there, waiting for plates again. In children's books about historic (ruins) places, there is often a transparent foliated page with the imagined past drawn on in fragments to let the image of the now merge with the image of the possible past, creating a vision, a space outside both the imagined and real remains. Is this place or site created - a simulacrum?

*A common definition of the simulacrum is a copy of a copy whose relation to the model has become so attenuated that it can no longer properly be said to be a copy. It stands on its own as a copy without a model.*²³

In introducing the plates into the room, I am using the potential of the imagined 'real' (original) to turn over, to apply a foliated layer. It is the 'masked difference, not the manifest resemblance, that produces the effect of uncanniness so often associated with the simulacrum.'²⁴

Layer 1. Perception - expected imagery - imagined blue, is it a 'masked difference' also in the expected imagery itself? Or the 'images take on a life of their own' in dust or blue?
 Layer 2. Perception - an imagined past, the speculative present in the potential correctness of the room - the tension between expectation and experience.



²² The invention of how to transfer a graphic 2 dimensional print to a 3 dimensional object is also attributed to Spode. The graphic print (historically produced from a copper plate engraving), is made with ceramic materials such as cobalt, onto a paper covered with water soluble gum arabic, then covered with a layer of lacquer (cover coat). When immersed in water, the gum dissolves and the print and lacquer slide off to fix onto any glazed (3d) surface. These are then fired, activating the oxides and glaze to produce brilliant colours.

²³ Massumi, B., 'Realer than Real: The Simulacrum According to Deleuze and Guattari', in *Copyright* no.1, 1987, p.92. As argued in Deleuze and Guattari's writings, Massumi continues, *The terms copy and model bind us to the world of representation and objective (re)production. A copy, no matter how many times removed, authentic or fake, is defined by the presence or absence of internal, essential relations of resemblance to a model. The simulacrum, on the other hand, bears only an external and deceptive resemblance to a putative model. The process of its production, its inner dynamism, is entirely different from that of its supposed model; its resemblance to it is merely a surface effect, an illusion. (...) It is that masked difference, not the manifest resemblance, that produces the effect of uncanniness so often associated with the simulacrum. A copy is made in order to stand in for its model. A simulacrum has a different agenda, it enters different circuits. Pop Art is the example Deleuze uses for simulacra that have successfully broken out of the copy mold: the multiplied, stylized images take on a life of their own. The thrust of the process is not to become an equivalent of the "model" but to turn against it and its world in order to open a new space for the simulacrum's own mad proliferation. The simulacrum affirms its own difference. It is not an implosion, but a differentiation; it is an index not of absolute proximity, but of galactic distances.*

²⁴ Ibid.

On Scraping: Absence/presence

The Ronald Copeland Art Gallery²⁵: Thick air, the sound of pigeons, loud steps - as though the sound wouldn't stick. Water seeping in.

Facts: Built specifically for the Copeland's private collection of both European and Asian porcelain, china and ceramic ware. The space was used for board-meetings, corporate and private VIP receptions. Now owned by the council of Stoke-on-Trent. Public property? The factor of dynamic memory allocation refers to a mathematical problem in the construction of artificial intelligence. Simply put, it is the ability to forget in order to make available room to process something new. Computers have a limited amount of memory. Machines and computers don't forget, but they need to be programmed to delete, and erase information.²⁶

How does this mechanism work in humans? When is it time to forget? When do we hold on? When entering Spode and the art gallery, we questioned the mechanisms and the necessity of dynamic forgetting.

Through the gesture of a gift, this room was given to the Council of Stoke-on-Trent.²⁷ Now it is a piece of public art, pointing to the transition from a private to a public room, and marking that this room will nevermore be the home of the Copeland collection it was once built for. The collection was sold at Bonham's²⁸ just before we opened the exhibition. Now dispersed, it will never again be what it was.

We intervened the process of decay, that inevitability would bring the room into the state of being forgotten. Through a refurbishment, not a reconstruction, of the room to an idealistic "0-point", where the cracked and leaking sky light, the mould infected wooden walls and the water stained, damaged floor were cleaned and brought back to a possible new start, the project's intention was to revitalize and thereby enable the room to be remembered and reinvented...

In the process of disturbing the room, a lot of feelings were stirred:

We wanted: to refurbish - not restore - make a clean slate - draw a line - zero out - show that the past would not suddenly revive itself and become the present. We wanted to make it a public space - it's privacy had ended. It - whatever it was - could never really happen again - a closed past.

They wanted (speculation): as long as it was in a state of ruin, the potential of a reviving the past was there. This potential it seemed, was, better than a closed past and a changed present.

By mistake - a layer of 1.5 mm of shiny varnish was applied on the faded wood panels.

X: 'it must be restored back to how it was!'

Me: to a ruin?- can one restore anything back to a state of decay?

When was the 'was'?

Three sacks of scraped off varnish approx. 4 kg. and many hours later - the place is oiled, sanded, waxed, cleaned, painted, re-wired.²⁹ The sacks of varnish are captivating. Each scraping is like a thin layer of newness more disturbing than pigeon's droppings, moist and fungal. The shiny varnished surface mirrored 'the now' - is that why it was not liked?

I decided that the cabinets should be the only thing left untouched (by us) - but sealed shut. This action was so as not to have new exhibitions, not to be part of making an expectation of the past to be 'restored' or 'reconstructed'. The cabinets have now gained the ability to insist on a presence, the ever building layers of dust - the still evident dust rings loud with absence, pointing to the presence of an object removed and replaced. Pointing to the dispersed collection, to different sites where the objects actually exist. Not here.

Returning to the simulacrum again:

*A copy is made in order to stand in for its model. A simulacrum has a different agenda, it enters different circuits. (...) The thrust of the process is not to become an equivalent of the 'model' but to turn against it and its world in order to open a new space for the simulacrum's own mad proliferation.*³⁰

Can we hope that the room 'enters different circuits?' Can it open new spaces, territories and possible futures?³¹



²⁵ In 1950 Spode, under W. T. Copeland & Sons Ltd, commissioned a book about the firm from G. Bernard Hughes. 'The Story of Spode' is with the only historical/official material found on the art gallery. The name is wrong they say- it was Robert Copeland. But here history becomes a blur, as 'Ronald' is correct digging in the archival material. Were the many R. Copelands washed out by history? <http://spodehistory.blogspot.no/2013/05/spode-and-art-gallery.html>.

²⁶ Mydland, A.H. & J. Sandborg: 'The Ronald Copeland Art Gallery: The Factor of Dynamic Memory Allocation - 2014', in Vociferous Void, Original Spode Works, From the inauguration speech, see also Sandborgs section in this publication for the complete script.

²⁷ The gift was received on behalf of the Council by Counselor Ruth Rosenau. 'A gift is a magic object, it is restless and symbolically attached to the giver, binding giver and receiver together until it is returned or passed on. To keep a gift instead of passing it on is to arrest its dynamic nature, it quits working and loses its characteristics as a carrier of dynamic relations when removed from circulation.' Heier, M., 'Ex-Centric', Research Fellow Thesis, 2013, KHiO.

²⁸ <http://www.bonhams.com/auctions/21214/?category=results#/aa0=1&w0=results&m0=0>
https://www.bonhams.com/press_release/13208/ (31.8.15).

²⁹ We decided to take the lacquer away. We had not intended it in the first place, and it was causing too much controversy, which was not our goal or artistic intention. On the contrary, it was to create a place that people would be attracted to and where they could unite.

³⁰ Massumi: 'Realer Than Real, The Simulacrum According to Deleuze and Guattari', in *Copyright* no.1, 1987, p.92.

³¹ The room's timeline, has started again, ticking, dripping, crawling, with unexpected usage, for rave concerts, weddings etc.



On Returns

In the process of writing, I am digging, sorting, searching through my own notes, images, memories and impressions. It is an excavation of the excavation - of the layers of time and events that wedge themselves between me in the now, and me in the then. One of my first notes is questioning my dislike of the other artists' seemingly shameless/frivolous scavenging of the site - while I tiptoed around in the dirt, afraid to disturb, with some inner urge and desire to just preserve it as it was, to freeze it to a disaster diorama - with a sensation that I (or any) could not ever manage to reveal, recreate, or activate more beauty and sheer meaning from the place than was already there. Digging is a destructive practice. Yet in the digging lies the potential of change – an excavation of the future.²⁸

Our sensations were bewildering and full of strange emotion. We questioned one another as to the meaning of it all. (...) We closed the hole, locked the wooden-grill which had been placed upon the first doorway, we mounted our donkeys and returned home contemplating what we had seen.

Tutankhamun: Anatomy of an Excavation. Howard Carter's diaries and journals.



²⁸ Roelstrate, D., *The Way of the Shovel*.

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