Lee Walton's Video Mediated Performances in Relation to Rem Koolhass' Junk Space

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Lee Walton's video mediated performances frequently present the artist interacting with the urban environment. We see Walton scrambling over small structures, responding with simple gestures to objects on the street, or caressing a multitude of urban surfaces. His practice connects with both the literary representations of flanerie and the tradition of artistic practice of positing the artist as flaneur. Walton's use of the video camera complicates this connection to flanerie, influencing response mechanisms in witnesses of both his live actions and the video representations of them, as well as complicating Walton's relationship to his acts.

The video camera's presence and later editing, as well as the specificity of Walton's responses to the urban environment, suggests that his continuing of the tradition of an artist depicted engaged in behaviour of 'transgressive curiosity' in an urban realm, is not simply utilising a mere trope in conceptually oriented public performances. Instead, his contemporary flaneur figure is a response to specifics of urban architecture and communication today. Rem Koolhaas identifies this current landscape as Junkspace, and through examining Koolhaas' 'Junkspace' text, we can consider if Walton's physical negotiations and recordings of them, echo the contemporaraneous presence of Junkspace.

Many of Walton's video performances depict acts that deviate from the normal pragmatic behaviours urban architecture generally dictates. Regimented use of space is economically undermined through the acting out of a simple premise, for example in Get Over It (2004) we see Walton awkwardly scramble over structures such as dumpsters and mailboxes. The strenuous effort of Walton's physical acts initially seems oppositional to the traditional notion of the flaneur; "strolling at an overtly leisurely pace." Yet, the increased time it takes Walton to navigate by going over rather than past obstacles on the street returns his act to a sense of undermining a utilitarian prerogative for economically time-managed pathways. The absurdity of Walton's resulting behaviour hints at the difficulty of negating the socio-architectural dictates on use of public space that are primarily utilitarian, at least on surface level, and attempt to dictate their uses whilst dissuading potential alternative uses.

Rem Koolhaas on his theory of the contemporaneous existence of 'Junkspace' says, "Junkspace is a domain of feigned, simulated order." that "can easily engulf a whole city," Koolhaas seems to suggest that internalised codes of utilitarian conduct provide

lessened choice whilst maintaining a ruse of freedom. He writes, "Junkspace is authorless, yet surprisingly authoritarian... At the moment of its greatest emancipation, humankind is subjected to the most dictatorial scripts... mankind is browbeaten into submitting to the most harshly engineered plotline." Koolhaas suggests that because of this, even when forced to navigate for instance a maze-like route through a contemporary airport, "we never reconstruct or question the absurdity of these enforced derives, we meekly submit to grotesque journeys." Walton appears to try to escape this lack of questioning by heightening the absurdity; Get Over It references a latent systematic of spatial use through its supposition with another equally structured method of navigation. If the modernist impulse that inspired the behavioural dictates Walton attempts to deviate from are partially redundant, than Walton is failing to offer a meaningful alternative instead his approach in Get Over It depicts a narrow freedom that appears inherently pointless and habitual.

Each video cut in Get Over It shows Walton casually approaching yet another structure to 'get over,' this dogmatic repetition of activity creating a pun on the works title, which is normally a suggestion against fixation. The hypnotic rhythm of Walton's repetitive actions echoes Guy Debord's statement that, "the first psychogeographical attractions discovered by derivers may tend to fixate them around new habitual axes, to which they will constantly be drawn back." Walton breaks down ritualised public behaviour only by supplanting it with new limitations, that are imposed by himself yet are also constrictive.

Walton's small, unexpected deviations depict, "an unwillingness to conform to the programmatic street. Preferring to invent new rules governing the duration and form of a bodily system of mapping." The pointless element in Walton's 'new rules' correlates with Koolhaas interpretation that "There is a special way of moving in Junkspace, at the same time aimless and purposeful." This suggests a distinctly post-modern malaise where Junkspace is the inevitable bastardisation of the inherent sincerity modernities notion of progress provided. Koolhaas writes, "Junkspace is what remains after modernization has run its course, or, more precisely, what coagulates while modernization is in progress, its fallout." This fallout, the failed utopics of modernity, leaves Junkspace as the 'dead data' of the modern metropolis.

Echoing Judd's proclamation that "A work [of art] needs only to be interesting," Koolhaas states" Junkspace does not pretend to create perfection only interest." Similarly Walton's clambering fulfils his premise, yet the purposefulness of the 'getting over' in appearing distinctly aimless, is a cynical self-negation of any attempt towards an improved model either through example or critical enquiry. Junkspace, and Walton's Get Over It both convey "a terminal hollowness, a vicious parody of ambition." Perhaps then Walton's behaviour depicted in the work, and even the work itself, is Junkspace. A re-enactment of our widespread fate that, "because we abhor the utilitarian, we have condemned ourselves to a lifelong immersion in the arbitrary."

Walton's documented acts appear at times pointless and innocuously minor, yet there is often an undercurrent or slippage towards the illicit. In Walton's recent video performance Getting A feel For The Place (2007) we see the artist as he moves around Belfast literally rubbing the landscape, massaging anything from fences to pavements with his hands. Walton's rhythmic rubbing surpasses "pragmatic pedestrian behaviour" instead suggesting an odd perversion. The "transgressive curiosity" of Walton's attentiveness to surface creates a different dynamic agency to a merely observant flaneur whose "sense of 'being there' is withheld."

This identification of the criminal potential of the flaneur, that Walton's practice frequently suggests, has firm historical roots; "the urban walk... is always on the verge of being somehow suspect, dangerous and unlawful. The term "flaneur' after all, originally meant "loiterer, " a fritterer away of time without legitimate claim to the street" In the flaneur's tenuous balance between reserved engagement and agency, criminality can arise with ease, as cool detachment flounders under the true implications of anonymity. The questionable legitimacy of Walton's actions causes some passers-by to pause momentarily in suspicion whilst assessing his intentions. Interestingly the video camera's presence, documenting Walton, appears to greatly influence the response mechanism his behaviour provokes. The video camera acts as a stabiliser to any actual transgressive quality of his behaviour, in part because the spectacle of theatricality becomes a justifier- granting the act a tenuous degree of legitimacy. After passers-by notice the camera, their demeanour alters as their suspicion is allayed. Hence, an elderly lady appears willing in Getting A Feel For the Place, to walk up and post a letter in a mailbox that an enraptured Walton is rubbing.

With the ubiquity of video cameras now, that its presence has an impact on alleviating a sense of criminality in Walton's behaviour is somewhat surprising. Particularly as it appears from assessing the way the passers-by respond to the camera looking only directly at the lense, and the height its positioned at to be a camera alone on a tripod without someone viewing through it, directing the scene. The reason the presence of the video camera makes Walton's performances less psychologically threatening can perhaps be extended through Foucault's identification of the internal panopticon. Foucault wrote, "an inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself." If Foucault's notion of panoptic self-administration was in deed actualised then the presence of the video camera could be read as a partial regression back to an externalised panopticon. In Walton's video-mediated performances the video camera becomes Walton's digitised higher consciousness, a partial expulsion of the internalised panoptic administration, that enables him to act temporarily free of self-regulation. This would explain the ability of people to 'act out' in front of the video camera, even when it is perched alone, undirected, on a tripod, as the camera temporarily houses their panoptic self-consciousness.

The acceptance of Walton's transgressions of behavioural norms by passers-by aware of the filming infers an acceptance of camera and performer as only a partially split entity. Walton's observation points are doubled he is both performer depicted and panoptic observer looking through the viewfinder at himself. Walton, by never looking directly at the camera, and acknowledging its presence, highlights this split. Despite Walton ignoring the camera presence whilst filming the Getting A Feel For the Place video, other people in the footage show awareness and respond to the camera. This prevents the viewer of the video feeling a level of complete 'fly on the wall' invisibility. The people's response to the video camera instead locates the lense firmly onto the street (and consequently the video audience's perspective is felt to be located on the street, with greater force). This positions the viewer of the video within the position of the flaneur. Therefore the doubling of the artists perspective transfers through to the viewer of Walton's video, who is positioned both as flaneur whilst also relating to the perspective Walton is experiencing whilst performing; an empathetic affiliation assisted by the physicality of Walton's gestures that the viewer can transpose mentally onto their own figure.

This complex multi-positioning of the audience by Walton, as in a sense both observer and observed, relates to developed ideas of the dynamic between flaneur and the crowd. Benjamin describes how the traditional flaneur positioned himself as someone who "goes botanizing on the asphalt." Yet this notion of the flaneur as "a connoisseur of human nature" who is clearly in control and firm understanding of his vision of the street, disintegrated under close inspection. Walter Benjamin suggested that Baudelaire transformed the flaneur from "the aloof observer of the city's masses into a figure driven by suspicion and longing in equal measure... [Creating a] libidinal tangle in which pursuer and pursued lost their clear polarities." This is clearly echoed by Rem Koolhaas who writes, "Junkspace is best enjoyed in a state of postrevolutionary gawking. Polarities have merged- there is nothing left between desolation and frenzy." This dynamic highlights how "flanerie is public and other-directed. It is more than 'taking the air' or going for a walk. The flaneur is out to see and be seen." Hence in Walton's contemporaneous revisiting of flanerie he positions a video camera, that in its digitised restraint simulates the flaneur 'botanizing on the asphalt' until the moments when the camera is acknowledged by someone, tangling the power balance of pursuer and pursued, by implicating the camera as 'being there'. This power balance becoming ever more enmeshed when we consider Walton's position as both frenzied performer and observer of his activity.

It is interesting how Walton depicts himself in casual dress, that in its inherent neutrality seems to create an 'everyman persona'. Walton even jokes on his website that he desires to be 'an extra' in the movies, having perfected the incognito. Of course, the repetitious return of Walton, always dressed the same, into the frame after each cut in Get Over It, and his constant presence in Getting A Feel For The Place makes us acutely aware of his presence, effectively destroying his anonymity. Walter Benjamin writing on the notion of the flaneur's incognito identified that "The dialectic of flanerie [is]: on the

one hand, the man who feels himself observed by everyone and everything, the totally suspicious person, on the other, the completely undiscoverable, hidden person." Walton's video footage of himself highlights this contrasting aspect of identification; he is unmemorable in each individual segment of cut footage yet stringed together a solid profile emerges. Logically, Benjamin identified that "photography made it possible for the first time to preserve permanent and unmistakeable traces of a human being...Most decisive of all conquests of a person's incognito had been accomplished."

The impossibility of the flaneur to really "preserve a discrete estrangement" and the resulting effect that "in times of terror, when everyone is something of a conspirator, everybody will be in a situation where he has to play detective" is best highlighted by Walton's work The Life-Theater Project (2004). Walton undermines the early idea of flanerie as a simple taxonomic process of investigation through the constructed theatrics in most of his works and in The Life -Theatre Project this approach is foregrounded. The work appears to be set out to illustrate Benjamin's description of, "an enormous crowd in which no one is either quite transparent or quite opaque to all others."

Walton's The Life-Theatre Project utilised more than 20 actors and Walton opened the 'show' to the audience gathered on the street, by telling them that over the next 15 minutes they would be witnessing both 'real' and 'orchestrated' activity before them. Slowly the minutes passed as each spectator scrutinized each pedestrian and passer-by. Before long the group became anxious and could not distinguish the "real" people from the "fake." After about seven minutes, the spectators began applauding each person that passed by. Progressively, as each minute passed, the entire scene became more theatrical...At a certain point, many of the pedestrians, unsure of why they were being cheered, reacted to the crowd by waving or giving a thumbs up-some of them avoided walking down the street all together. At one point, a clown dressed in blue with a big red nose rode by on his bicycle- the crowd erupted with cheering and laughter.

The impossibility of the audience to determine actors from normal passers-by (the clown with the red nose incidentally was not one of Walton's actors) clearly highlights the limitations of their observations, as both conspirators and detectives in Walton's game. Yet, what seems most interesting was the collective theatricality of the crowd, which heightened as the theatre project progressed. In this way, The Life-Theater Project was antithetical to the modern crowd as described by Benjamin,

The crowd really is a spectacle of nature- if one may apply the term to social conditions. A street, a conflagration, or a traffic accident assemble people who are not defined along class lines. They present themselves as concrete gatherings, but socially they remain abstract- namely in their isolated private interests.

Walton instead created a scenario of co-conspirators; thereby provoking group detection, displayed in their open chorusing. The Life-Theatre Project equally transcended the seamless aspect of Koolhaas' Junkspace, which he identified in a similar vein to Benjamin, "Junkspace pretends to unite, but it actually splinters. It creates communities not out of shared interest or free association, but out of identical statistics

and unvalidable demographics, an opportunistic weave of vested interests." If the flaneur was originally "someone abandoned in the crowd" then the willing crowd, actors and random people walking by in Life/Street Theatre are abandoned in a crowd of 'Junkspace', yet Walton's insertion of new rules acts as a retrieval system in that it enables identification of the inherent nature of Junkspace. "Junkspace is political: It depends on the central removal of the critical faculty in the name of comfort and pleasure." Life/Street Theatre, promoted discomfort as the audience consciously floundered in their focus on critical enquiry of passer-bys 'legitimacy'.

Koolhaas states that, "identity is the new junk food for the dispossessed." This fits within the idea of flanerie that "as an ethic retrieves the individual from the mass by elevating idiosyncrasies and mannerisms as well as individuality and singular perspective of an individuals observations and points of view." Conversely The Life-Theatre Project, highlighted how 'Junkspace' is in its entirety is "an authorless world beyond anyone's claim, always unique, utterly unpredictable, yet intensely familiar." As the group on the street began cheering each and every passerby, there appeared an awareness of the immersive nature of Junkspace's familiarity; and how the true authorless nature of urban space has been swamped by it.

"Junkspace represents a reverse typology of cumulative, approximative identity" By trying to examine specifics of each individual, everything was examined by the Life/Theatre Project crowd and shown to be suspiciously unpredictable to a point of anarchy. Walton's Life/Theatre has been described as casting "a secret net over the quotidian, playing a game of hiding in plain sight." Yet, in doing so, the work conversely highlighted that this is also the way Junkspace operates with its, 'domain of feigned, simulated order.' The Life-Theatre Project, in highlighting the simulated ordering of Junkspace, showed up Junkspace's fissures. Despite the apparent seamlessness of surface Junkspace provides, "so extensive that you rarely perceive limits,' Junkspace is in fact, "a web without a spider; although it is an architecture of the masses, each trajectory is strictly unique. Its anarchy is one of the last tangible ways in which we experience freedom."

This idea of agency being able to be located in the specific, despite Junkspace's overarching recipe of uniformity, is again present in Walton's video-performance Making Changes (2005)The video documents Walton walking around Manhattan, making interventions with objects and structures located on the streets. These acts range from almost imperceptible changes- Walton picking up a bundle of hoses and dropping them back on the ground, to those appearing slightly more deviant in their impact- Walton knocking over a bucket filled with white paint or propping a large metal circle upright so it rolls away, out of frame, potentially wreaking havoc.

Walton's flirtation with different moments of surprising agency continues discourse on the freedom of anonymity dense population allows. Benjamin wrote, "The original social content of the detective story was the obliteration of the individuals traces in the big

city crowd" Walton's disruptions would normally be authorless acts, absorbed immediately into an unidentifiable collective of urban disturbance. Yet the audience repeatedly witnesses Walton walk in to the video frame, disturb something, and then with mock casualness leave, the video evidence, preserving and collating his acts against obliteration.

The varied levels of disturbances in Making Changes become easily comparable as they are edited in cuts of continuous flow. They suggest interventions ranging from the work of the deliberate teenage prankster, to the bumbling fool who accidentally knocks into a bicycle shackled to a post, that consequently flops the other way. Yet, each intervention is enacted by a concentrating Walton, whose levels of engagement is maintained despite the mostly aimless results of his focus. In this equal attentiveness of Walton, regardless of the impact of his intervention, he seems to reduce the importance of affect. Walton says of Making Changes that, "each action will render a different affect (to me and or you), but this is secondary to the act." He suggests that even when affects are more obvious they can, "yield no more importance." Perhaps this suggestion foregrounds Walton's intention to puncture Junkspace, with the indeterminate repercussions of this, democratising the means.

Some of Walton's acts in Making Changes do appear designed to interrupt Junkspace on a perceptible level. In one frame, Walton drags a potted conifer (a clear example of junk-ambience) from the kerb where it is house into the centre of the pathway, potentially affecting "the business oriented tempo of the New York street." We immediately consider the peak-hour implications of this obstruction, Walton's act highlighting the 'human labyrinth', which despite the dictates of urban architecture remains overall, a primarily unorchestrated level of Junkspace. Koolhaas writes that, "The idea that a profession once dictated, or at least presumed to predict people's movements now seems laughable, or worse: unthinkable."
Yet, the detritus of this thinking is found in the regimentation of the utilisation of space that Junkspace still most often adheres to, as people navigate the dead data of buried ideas.

These problematic flows hint at the limitations of Junkspace's feigned order as it clings to the hope of systematization; Koolhaas writes "Junkspace is often described as a space of flows, but that is a misnomer; flows depend on disciplined movement, bodies that cohere." Later he states, "Where movement becomes synchronized, it curdles... Flows in Junkspace lead to disaster." Junkspace is both reliant on regimented use of its space yet is frequently victimised by it when cohesion of spatial use overwhelms it. This is "evidence of the awkward fit between the portals of Junkspace and the narrow calibrations of the old world"

Too many synchronised bodies can highlight the malignant state of Junkspace, yet equally a single act can puncture the seamless structure of its facade. Koolhaas writes, "Sometimes an entire Junkspace comes undone through the nonconformity of one of its

members." Junkspace may permeate almost everything and seem endless, yet it still contains liminal points where it can easily splinter if it encounters resistance. Walton depicts this resistance in Making Changes, not simply in his grander interventions, but in the most minor acts too. Individually these small acts may 'yield no importance' yet collectively, performed by the masses they threaten to consume Junkspace. "Because it is so intensely consumed, Junkspace is fanatically maintained." This maintenance is part of the ruse of Junkspace's robustness. When 'the cosmetic is the new cosmic' to spit even slightly on the Junkspace patina becomes heresy. This is where Walton's minor and often pointless interventions in Getting A Feel for the City, Get Over It, and Making Changes become vicious parody, not only of the modernist impulse of improvement, but also as mimicry of the minor upgrade and pointless suggestions constantly incorporated into Junkspace.

The video work of Lee Walton when examined through the lens of Rem Koolhaas' identification of Junkspace, can be seen as a cogent response to the state the contemporary flaneur finds himself in now. No longer privy to a notion of separation, today's flaneur cannot "preserve a discrete estrangement" from his Junkspace surrounds. Swept along in the immersive stranglehold of familiar or arbitrarily differentiated vectors he may choose, like Walton depicts in his works, to make dents in the Junkspace surface; by dismantling, even in a minute fashion, the feigned, simulated order of Junkspace. If so these acts of retaliation against (and simultaneous enactment of) the postmodern cynicism that is his legacy, are as much the fall-out of modernism's coagulations as Junkspace is itself.

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