

Interview with Allyson Clay and Susan Schuppli by Josephine Mills

Experiences of urban space and desired notions of the city are significant topics in art practice and theory as well as in daily news and conversation. To discuss these issues, I interviewed Susan Schuppli and Allyson Clay, two artists long interested in this area. Currently, Susan is investigating gendered qualities of public space while Allyson examines the increasing presence of surveillance cameras. In addition to discovering how they situate their work, the following conversations include a Vanity Fair flavour with tales from high school and a nightstand reading list.

In Vancouver, I frequently walk over one of Susan Schuppli's artworks—a city sponsored path of tiles bearing local signatures installed on the sidewalk near the Broadway Skytrain station. We first met during a discussion of my doctoral research on public art. I was interested in her thoughtful approach to identity and urban experience demonstrated through her guerrilla “historical plaques” project around Vancouver, and the various photo-based works she made for store front windows and transit shelters from Vancouver to California.

JM: Ever since I started focusing on the area of art for, and about, urban spaces, I'm attuned to landmarks. There's a miniature Statue of Liberty in a mall parking lot in Coquitlam and a replica of the S. S. Minnow from Gilligan's Island, with fake palm tree, at a strip mall in Langley. What landmarks interest you?

SS: Well I'm interested in vernacular culture so the Exotic World on Main Street [in Vancouver] immediately springs to mind as this wacky museum created by a now elderly couple as an archive of their travels. While their souvenirs fall in line with the typical paraphernalia of 'exoticism' they are very devoted to their museum and its collection of personal artefacts.

The silver space rocket down near False Creek on 4th Avenue is also extraordinary as a commemorative structure. It is actually a monument to the metal workers of the city but on a sunny day in Vancouver its looks like its about to blast off into orbit.

Last year I was living in Lethbridge—there was this great moment last spring when a crane was taking down the huge yellow MacDonald's arches. It reminded me of Mark Lewis' photographs of the removal of the Lenin statues in the former Soviet Union—the dismantling of the icon of capitalism albeit temporarily. I jumped out of my car and snapped a picture as the 'M' hovered in Prairie space.

JM: Political geographers critique the simplistic use of the notion of space within the work of cultural and feminist theorists. Gillian Rose argues that instead of using spatialising metaphors to ground discussions of gendered social relations, we need to see that “Space itself—and landscape and place likewise—far from being firm foundations for disciplinary expertise and power, are insecure, precarious and fluctuating.” [1] And Doreen Massey explains that cultural theorists fail to understand that “space is socially constructed . . . [and] the social is spatially constructed too.” [2] I think that unlike theorists, many artists working on the city, particularly feminist artists, are aware of urban space as a nexus of relations. What strategies do you consider when making work for a public site or for a gallery?

SS: As an artist I always think about strategies as specific to context and subject-matter. In this regard, the strategy is as contingent as the spaces it attempts to map. Ambiguity is also of interest to me, not simply as an excuse for a lack of coherency or clarity in the work but rather as a means of refusing a singular narrative or for thwarting the totalizing logic of a work. Academia on the other hand, prefers a complete and thorough argument; disciplinary boundaries are undermined when the work appears ambiguous as to its loyalties. Artists are engaged in a process of transformation whereby an idea or concept is made manifest in [im]material form. Whenever this process of translation occurs some contradictions or uneasy relationships develop. It is in these spaces of paradox, where the logic necessarily breaks down or refuses to play itself out that interesting art happens.

To get back to the question at hand, the kinds of strategies I've used when doing work in non-traditional viewing spaces are of necessity different than the kinds of strategies I've used in gallery spaces. The latter allows for a more immersive experience where distractions and extraneous information can be held at bay or to a minimum. The space of the city competes with the space of public art in unprecedented ways. In fact, I think it is really only projects like Felix Gonzalez Torres' minimal billboard works that succeed in disrupting the 'noise' of urban life and thereby produce a space of subjectivity and reflection.

JM: What are you working on currently?

SS: Well, the project which I just completed this summer continued the conceptual trajectory of my work but moved it into the realm of satire and live performance. My work has consistently engaged in an analysis of the legacy of a Western philosophical tradition in which masculinity is aligned with the social spaces of the city and femininity with domesticity or private space. Historic conceptions of femininity viewed women as too close to the corporeal to be featured in narratives of rational urban presence. Accordingly patriarchy assigned the domestic as the place that is proper to women,

the place where her excessive sexuality could be tamed and housed. The project concerned itself with re-inserting the feminine body into public city spaces as a deliberately destabilising presence.

Produced for the Ottawa Art Gallery in response to their exhibition programme, *In All the Wrong Places*, my contribution consisted of a series of performance interventions which explored the relationship between gender, technology and corporate culture. Working with professional actors, a series of five female characters were deployed throughout the downtown sector. The impulse behind the performance interventions was to create a visual disruption in the work-place traffic flow, to bring art to a commuting public who may or may not make their way to art galleries, and in the process, to initiate dialogue. Once again, the sexual dynamics of space and appropriate modes of moving through various kinds of public spaces were explored.

JM: I'm hooked on the CBC television show DaVinci's Inquest. I love the use of Vancouver as the actual setting (not a stand in for Anywhere, U.S.A.) and the tricks used to depict Vancouver as big and cosmopolitan—like night-time aerial pans of the city that can only last about 1.5 seconds before the camera runs out of skyscrapers. Can you comment on the representation of Vancouver?

SS: A student at Emily Carr, Steven Reintjes, was doing a project on 'placelessness' and I remember how brilliant I thought it was. He was interested in the specific Vancouver locations where film and television had "pictured" the city. But it was an image that was always out of focus—the shallow depth of field which only provides clarity to the actor's face leaving the background ambiguous and therefore an easy stand-in for somewhere in the US. Anyway, Steven proposed a project where images taken directly from film and television would re-appear as a blurred field on a series of bill-boards. To the viewer or passer-by the billboard would look like a series of unintelligible dots, when in fact they were actually seeing a distinct image of a specific place without the actor's face to foreground the image. Transposed to a billboard, the blurred images stood in the exact location where the the film or television show had been shot and where the viewer was themselves now located.

Okay, I can sort of understand when Vancouver's televisual identity is masked when it stands in for New York or Los Angeles, but when a movie of the week insists that Vancouver is actually Boulder, Colorado I wonder what is at stake? On the other hand, perhaps our identity crisis is fortuitous, otherwise Vancouver would seem like the murder/suicide/dysfunctional family capital of North America.

Allyson Clay and I sat down for a conversation after touring her exhibition "Quiet Enjoyment" at the Catriona Jeffries Gallery in which she uses watercolour and video to play the voyeur. However, recording from the roof of her apartment building, she isn't capturing anything smutty inside neighbouring buildings. The images focus on the surface of the window and reveal only the banal. One video work lays out the mechanism of her project—the video camera stands on a tripod projecting the image of a workman in an empty apartment onto a tiny ground glass rectangle a few feet from the lens.

It's fitting that our discussion started with the influence of a particular teacher, as I first met Allyson as her student at Simon Fraser University. Allyson's interest in thinking spatially started while attending high school in Rome and studying both geometry and art history with the same instructor.

AC: My teacher was doing his dissertation on a specific route through Rome—the Pope's coronation parade. As part of classes, he used to take us on walks. He owned an 18th Century map of Rome by Nolli. He photocopied it for us, we each took a section and studied it. I took an area near the Jewish ghetto and researched from Roman times up through medieval times. The area was initially a very urban part of the Roman empire, over time it became dilapidated and grassy, then eventually it became an area of commerce and part of the Jewish ghetto.

I just loved it. I was very privileged. I was a foreigner living in Rome at a time when it was relatively safe to be in the city at any time of night or day.

There was a time when I thought I was going to go into Architecture. I've always been interested in space, city space. But never in a really genderised way because it was never part of my vocabulary, my modernist training. Then I suddenly became immersed in feminist theory when I started teaching at SFU. At that time, I read and read feminist cultural theory.

JM: You have maintained this foundation, reading work by Gillian Rose and Beatriz Colomina, but your attention to the gender dynamics of public space focuses on the specific notion of playing with public acts of looking/being looked at. I find in your work a connection between the notion of public surveillance and the feminist attention to the gendered construction of the gaze within art practice. I see your work as a refusal of the residue of Mary Kelly's call for an art

practice in which women are the subjects, but absent visually. [This powerful influence opposed the long history within western art of visually over-representing the female body while denying women self-representation.]

AC: Judith Mastai has written about Mary Kelly and the law of the mother, about Kelly dictating what feminists shouldn't do: they shouldn't represent women or they shouldn't paint. Kelly laid out several different kinds of dictates to counter patriarchal representation. But, what if you kind of reversed all of that and decided to treat [Kelly] as the mum who said no—you're going to disobey her and act just like an adolescent.

JM: You suggested that your engagement with feminist cultural theory during the peak of attention to 'the gaze' converged with your recent interest in the spatial relations of the city. Are you interested in Mike Davis' arguments about a crisis in contemporary cities due to the privatisation of public space and the rise of surveillance?

AC: In relation to the city and surveillance, the disobedience I just described is an interesting idea—it suggests taking up femininity in a different kind of way. In another sense, the surveillance cameras all over various cities, they're an extension of 'thou shalt not.' So, why don't you perform for them? You can either perform for them or always behave well.

The idea of misbehaving, I'd say that's the general bracket of what I'm doing, but I'm being really polite about it. It's kind of gratifying to know that I'm doing something you shouldn't be doing and I'm actually showing it publicly. But I'm doing something that everybody actually does; look at other people, while not being noticed looking. I'm always searching for cameras in public places, for the contraption that's hiding them, just so that I get a better idea of where I'm being seen from. And then of course I immediately feel guilty for locating them because if I were about to perform an illegal act, that's what I'd be doing; trying to find those cameras first!

Allyson's work plays with ambiguity versus specificity in recognising urban landscapes. The work she displayed in the exhibition "Urban Fictions" (Presentation House Gallery) involved light-boxes with images of the generic California freeway and city street. Inserted into a personal, poetic text the images become all the more unspecific in terms of identifying their city and yet emblematic of a common experience of contemporary urban space.

A work in her latest exhibition continues this contradiction. My first experience was exactly what Allyson hoped for. On approaching the gallery, I saw a video camera mounted in the window. Assuming it was recording, I became self-conscious and, as soon as I entered, went to check out the small monitor attached to the camera. It took several moments to figure out that the camera was in fact not shooting the street outside, but replaying recorded footage of another street seen through another window.

The ideas that Susan and Allyson address in their work circulate as much in literature and art theory as in art practice. To get a larger picture of the artists' work, and also hot tips on books, I asked each of them what is currently on their reading list. Breaking the ice on this revealing subject, I offered that for evening relaxation, I like the experience of a specific location in a good mystery novel such as L.R. Wright's depiction of B.C.'s Sunshine Coast or Sandra Scoppetone's New York. For the day time, I have gained much from Marita Sturken's *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (1997), which Susan recommended. As well, Ann Game's chapter "Places in Time" from *Undoing the Social: Towards a Deconstructive Sociology* (1991) provides an enjoyable encounter with old-boy theorist Michel de Certeau's influential approach to spatial theory developed in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984).

Aritha Van Herk's book *Restlessness* (1998) is on Susan's night table at this moment. She notes that the title is perhaps apropos as teaching leaves her with little time for fiction. Other books that she is browsing are *Virtualities* (1998) by Margaret Morse, *Prosthetic Culture* (1997) by Celia Lury and *Times of the Technoculture* (1999) by Kevin Robins and Frank Webster.

Allyson agreed that the rigours of teaching mean she hasn't been reading what she'd like to. She did confess to buying a vanity press publication entitled *How to Hide Things in Public Places at a spy shop*. In "Quiet Enjoyment," Allyson included a quote from P.D. James: "She supposed that, behind those windows, people lived their secretive, separate even desperate lives, yet the lights seemed to shine out with the promise of unattainable security."

Notes:

[1] Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p.160.

[2] Doreen Massey, "Politics and Space/Time," *New Left Review* 196 (1992): 70.