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Ruins

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“Do you see, my friend, how he gets a hold on your mind and leads it through these places and makes you see what you only hear?” Longinus describing Herodotus’ sublime literary techniques in On the Sublime, first century AD (Havell, 1890:52)

LONGINUS WROTE “A LOFTY PASSAGE does not convince the reason of the reader, but takes him out of himself. That which is admirable ever confounds our judgment, and eclipses that which is merely reasonable or agreeable” (Harvell, 1890:3). Emphasising the sublime as a felt effect, Longinus defined *affect* as a show of oratory power, from beyond the audience’s ken. Longinus’ treatise considers oratorical technology contributing to an audience’s affective turn. In the eighteenth century the sublime was reactivated, the definition transitioning from affect in oratory to awe-inspired appreciation of landscape through the writings of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. The machinations of the sublime remained beyond the consciousness of ‘the reader’ or ‘viewer’: a quasi-religious wondering or frisson upon facing a vast magnitude.

Traditional totems of the sublime: ruins, overpowering mountain ranges and vast deserts are symbols that can be seen as ciphers for a contemporary experience of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is a humankind-centred

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series of geological ‘Golden spikes’,¹ where faunal and palaeontological shifts are inscribed within the minerals of the Earth’s crust; from agriculture, slavery and colonisation of the Americas, to the Industrial Revolution and nuclear testing—culminating in Crutzen and Stoermer’s assertion of a ‘new’ geological epoch.²

My practice research collapses the sublime and Anthropocene together, uncovering a shared synonymy. These terms connote an externalised gaze, distancing the self from others, often embodied within a colonial or western-centric gaze. It conveys mastery over an environment, a dominated humanity, and exploited more-than-humans;³ these groups often sharing a commonality of commodification.

Contemporary sublime symbols might now be vast data-servers, polluted rivers or the detritus of human life casually obliterated by extreme weather events like Hurricane Dorian. The magnitude and obliteration signified by these symbols reinforce feelings of separation, and rarely puncture the distanced gaze of the individual. They remain ineffable and overwhelming—key features of the sublime—and synonymous with the seeming impossibility of accurately representing the Anthropocene. The terms connote a certain privileged, dominant, (western)-human-centred narrative; the cultural geographer John Wylie, describes the privileged distanced gaze of a Sublime surveyor of landscape in:

...the figure who gazes upon landscape is an aloof, distanced figure, detached from the life of the land. The explorer scoping out the distances to be mapped. The landowner contemplating their property from a detached vantage-point. Here, the distances of landscape

¹ A Global Boundary Stratotype Section and Point (GSSP), an internationally agreed upon reference point on a stratigraphic section which defines the lower boundary of a stage on the geologic time scale.

² See Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000.

³ For me, the phrase ‘more-than-human’ as a mode of enquiry, eases my passage between the states of feminist anti-humanism and post-humanism; not quite letting go of the need for an equitable access to justice, shelter and sustenance as basic human rights, but also acknowledging the equal need for these basic rights among more-than-humans, including all living things.

involve an ethically-problematic detachment and indifference—a distance which enables command and control, which facilitates an uncaring and remote perspective. (Wylie, 2017:15-16)

Symbols of the sublime and the Anthropocene can both be thought of as hyperobjects, which Timothy Morton describes thus:

A hyperobject could be a black hole. A hyperobject could be the Lago Agrio oil field in Ecuador, or the Florida Everglades. A hyperobject could be the biosphere, or the Solar System. A hyperobject could be the sum total of all the nuclear materials on Earth.... I do not access hyperobjects across a distance, through some transparent medium. Hyperobjects are here, right here in my social and experiential space. Like faces pressed against a window, they leer at me menacingly. (Morton, 2013:1-27)

Jakob Lund wryly describes the difficulty for Western subjects in the Anthropocene to ‘enjoy’ the sublime; we can’t marvel at the alpine glacier without witnessing its retreat; it’s hard to wonder at a Dubai skyscraper without acknowledging the material and human cost. Humans are geological forces, entangled in nature we used to see as separate and remote. He quotes Bruno Latour:

To feel the sublime, you needed to remain ‘distant’ from what remained a spectacle; infinitely ‘inferior’ in physical forces to what you were witnessing; infinitely ‘superior’ in moral grandeur. Only then could you test the incommensurability between these two forms of infinity. Bad luck: there is no place where you can hide yourselves; you are now fully ‘commensurable’ with the physical forces that you have unleashed; as to moral superiority, you have lost that too! (Latour, 2016 cited in Lund, 2018:169)

The sublime gaze historically occupied a position of safety. Kantian experiences of the sublime kept one safely removed from the abyss. “When in aesthetic judgment, we consider nature as a might that has no dominance over us,” writes

Kant, “then it is dynamically sublime. If we are to judge nature as sublime dynamically, we must present it as arousing fear.” (Kant, 1790:119). Likewise, Burkean physical and psychological engulfment is marked by terror, similar in concept to Morton’s hyperobjectivity.⁴ Lund (2018) argues evocatively that a contemporary experience of the Anthropocene, and the attendant precarity, forces a cancellation of our distance to overwhelming natural forces, where one cannot securely experience a sublime spectacle.

Locating the sublime within notions of the Anthropocene⁵ and post-humanity means any recognition of a sublime moment must also reckon with an intimate, non-distanced entanglement of humans, other species, technology and the environment. This moment could be defined as the ‘capitalist ruins’ which Anna Tsing describes:

Global landscapes today are strewn with this kind of ruin. Still, these places can be lively despite announcements of their death; abandoned asset fields sometimes yield new multispecies and multicultural life. In a global state of precarity, we don’t have choices other than looking for life in this ruin. (Tsing, 2015:6).

These sublime capitalist ruins are not only deforestation and melting glaciers, but cities, streets and communities. If we inhabit the capitalist ruins, is everything, everywhere, in a more-than-human, hyperobjective understanding of the world, ruined?

Burke’s version of the sublime is hyperobjective in its engulfment. However, it denies the viewer the perceptual distance to comprehend complex realities and veils our complicity in provoking a Sublime Anthropocene. This immediacy reiterates Latour’s denial of perceptually comforting distance, rupturing our separate, solitary contemplation. We are not solitary—our centrism is ruptured by trajectories and histories of

⁴ See Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757).

⁵ See also ‘Chthulucene’ (Haraway, 2016), ‘Capital-ocene’ (Moore, 2014), ‘Plantation-ocene’ or the ‘Anthroscene’ (Parikka, 2014).

others, unspooling in Lund’s “contemporary contemporary” (Cox and Lund, 2016:9, my emphasis). Contemporaneity resonates with the sublime in two ways: firstly, as an ungraspable magnitude that exceeds any individual subjective experience or perception; secondly, through its temporality whereby linear progression is replaced by instantaneity and temporal co-existence.

This sense of being a very small part of a greater temporal co-existence is echoed in Tsing’s (2015:20) description of our species-wide precarity in the age of the Anthropocene, “Precarity is the condition of being vulnerable to others. Unpredictable encounters transform us: we are not in control, even of ourselves.” It is equally embodied by the fact that an experience of the sublime can induce in the experiencer a sensation of vulnerability, of sublimation. This production of vulnerability potentially affords different positioning; a more decentred or fragmented sense of power, agency and subjecthood. Perhaps an activated experience of the Sublime Anthropocene; accessing the ‘small self’⁶ could force a wedge of vulnerability or openness, into the edifice of the Anthropocene.

RUINS

Enacted polyvocally and performatively, an exploration of ruins/ruination forms the body of this artistic practice research. The continual and cyclical potential of ruins is questioned: bodies as site of ruination; ruins catalysing change or becoming stages; the global/colonial/imperial forces implicated in the causation and causality of ruins; appropriations of ruins—all of which suggest a certain

⁶ Paul Piff and Dacher Keltner et al (2015:884) explain, “we conceptualise the small self as a relative diminishment of the individual self and its interests vis à vis something perceived to be more vast and powerful than oneself.” Piff and Keltner’s research demonstrates that experiencers respond more positively to playful explorations of complex ideas and become more attuned to a shared sense of global responsibility after an affective encounter such as an experience of the Sublime: A ‘peak experience’ is a moment accompanied by a euphoric mental state often achieved by self-actualizing individuals. The concept was originally developed by Abraham Maslow, who describes peak experiences as, “rare, exciting, oceanic, deeply moving, exhilarating, elevating experiences that generate an advanced form of perceiving reality and are even mystic and magical in their effect upon the experimenter” (Maslow, 1964 cited in Corsini, 1998:22).

agency bound to ruins. These threads are unpicked through cultural geography, indigenous knowledge systems and ecology. Ruins offer a powerful space or opportunity for unexpected and original growth; resistance emerges from the smouldering wreckage of modernity and post-modernity. If we take this to suggest ruins have agency, and catalyse more-than-humans, do we and they resist a linear model of progress and instead formulate a polyvocal networked resistance?

In November 2017 Maud Hendricks, Bernie O'Reilly of Outlandish Theatre Platform (OT) and I began a collaborative enquiry using the Sublime Anthropocene to explore the 'ruins' of Dublin 8. Using the term "theatre of ruins" (Saunders, 2005:67) we considered Dublin 8 as a 'theatre of ruins' where lives unfold and are performed. Different iterations or chronologies of the term 'ruin' emerged: the past, present, viable and anticipatory ruin, and Maud and Bernie's sense of Dublin 8's constant 'not-quite-becoming'.

Using Beckett's "The Capital of the Ruins" (written for broadcast in 1946 in post-war France) as a catalyst for enquiry posed a lens to view contemporary issues, not least Beckett's own conflicted insider/outsider status, a condition shared by Maud and Bernie, both self-described 'blow-ins'. My outsider-colonialist perspective informed my own conflicted 'ruin-porn' gaze; a gaze turned upon what I saw as the visceral ruins of empire, of capitalism, of the church-state structure. During the process of collaboration, I came to realise that my flattened uncomplicated notion of 'ruins' was reductive: that these were non-static ruins, rather—in the truest sense of the 'contemporary contemporary'⁷—thick continuous unfoldings of temporalities—continuously unfolding multiple⁷ and "multiplicitous live trajectories" (Massey, 2005:9).

At this point it is important then to introduce an additional voice within the project, that of Maud Hendricks, performer, writer, and director, OT Platform:

When observing Dublin 8 as a site of Ruins, I talk from a migrant

⁷ See DeSilvey and Edensor, 2013, page 27.

and a woman's perspective; from an inclusive, entrepreneurial and lived-in experience.

The very slow collapse of visible class structures and definitive community fault-lines in Dublin's post-colonial society over the last 100 years is being counteracted by new power drivers that move in, capitalizing on public land, redistributing the human landscape according to old class fault-lines. I see these often-oppressive power structures, these past and present fault-lines as the ruins of an era. From the Ruins the beginnings of a new society can be witnessed, marked by the inclusion or exclusion of the people representing these ruins. The Ruins are equal to the society that people live in today, our recognised Now.

OT Platform attempts to stage intersectional experiences of the Now within frameworks of visible and invisible ruins, meticulously considering individual perceptions of human suffering. The audience, part of the same becoming-society, experiences the performance as unsettling or displacing, confrontational, recognisable, or all of these simultaneously. The performance is not just geared to arouse an emotional or emphatic reaction, but to disorientate and disturb. The formula of the recognisable and the disassociated others together on stage create a sublime experience.

With the idea of a theatre of ruins, I am signaling the end of the naive era, where one's lived experience cannot be enjoyed without considering the perspective of others.

By actively inviting socio-economic and culturally diverse people into a poly-vocal creation process existing visible and invisible societal fault-lines create a natural dramaturgy. By researching and staging multiple uncensored perspectives and creating an overarching performance, an analogy of the chaos that makes up our society is exposed.

With these performances, created through rigorous philosophical research and performance practice we attempt to present the unrepresentable; the sublime.

We used the sublime as a tool to uncover the absurdity of everyday life in the ruins and the sublime in the absurdity/impossibility of this condition. We wanted to discover new versions by collapsing the distance of the outsider's or dominator's

commercialised gaze and access her vulnerability. This dissolving of the self through an experience involved seeing vulnerability as a tool of commonality; of recognising that the Anthropocene is not ‘over-there’ it is *here* in a rich, Morton-esque ‘in-your-face’-dness.⁸ Our process scaled distances and immediacies with audiences through Via Negativa⁹ methods where one switches between roles of maker/performer/audience—inverting assumed hierarchies. From a position of sublimation within text, experience, conversation and aesthetic engulfment, one writes, one performs and is critiqued and then re-evaluates and redesigns the performance manual.

Our collective aim was to co-stage what an audience knows together with the unknown; to bear witness and become unsettled by the instability within several systems. Audience experiences of precarity challenge continuous reestablishment of stereotypes and hierarchies inherent to the Dublin 8 ‘stage’ and the mediated environment of ‘theatre’. We questioned whether the sublime’s gaze upon wilderness/the other, was mirrored in the handling of the ‘ruins’ of Dublin 8? Has it been designated at a state-level ‘legitimate wilderness’—an ‘urban jungle’? This action concomitantly devalues human life—withholding cultural access and intensifying individualisation of sub-communities. As with colonial ‘divide-and-rule’ strategies exercised globally, historically and contemporaneously, this seems a politically structured strategy of ‘keeping-people-separate’—making differences obvious, marking divisions between selves and

⁸ “there it is, staring me in the face, as the hyperobject global warming. And I helped cause it. I am directly responsible...” (Morton, 2013:60)

⁹ “The term “*via negativa*” is derived from negative theology, which attempts to define god by describing what god is not, or rather, what god cannot be. The concept, conceived in late fifth century AD, was based on the presumption that the divine is unattainable to the human experience and understanding and god can therefore only be contemplated through what god cannot be described as. This term was introduced to theatre practice by Polish director and theatre innovator Jerzy Grotowski. He used the term “*via negativa*” to describe a method in which the actor works primarily toward discovering and overcoming the obstacles that prevent him from attaining his psychophysical perfection. However, neither theological questions nor acting techniques are the focus of our interest. In our work “*via negativa*” means to reduce the performance to basic elements in order to sharpen our relationship with the viewer and understand what is (or is not) the essence of this relationship.” (VN Theatre, 2020)

others, the curiously uniform ‘we’ and unquantifiable ‘they’.

OT trespass these divisions in their lived experience—they make home and kin within that complex intricate and intimate space; they explore the interrelations between these trajectories; they “stay with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016:1). Their practice over 10 years culminates in a strong desire to subvert ideas of representation of people and place; the content and forms that shape their practice can be practiced anywhere—they are a set of trajectories which could reveal something about a space in it’s becoming anywhere in the world—which refers to Beckett’s non-specificity and equally, his specificity. Specificity of representation was a trap I fell into; my attempts to reduce or stage ‘representative ruins’ without recognising the ‘liveness’ of the sites, meant slipping once again into patterns of dominance, reduction and an extractive gaze.

Acknowledging this gaze exposes ethical anxiety accompanying middle-class voyeurism, therefore our performances were made explicitly in response to our own experiences of the ruins. Abandoning the masterful individualism of the sublime gaze, individual expressions were forged through an acknowledgment of the vulnerability of the practitioner:

Researchers are often the vulnerable practitioners and knowledge creators. They are the subjects of the research as well as the authors of its ideas: researcher and the researched, the insider, the practitioner-researcher, and the researcher as auteur.
(Mackey, 2016:481)

From granularity and textural analysis, the researcher emerges through this deep personal attention to place. This process acknowledges the ethics of representation emerging from creating a platform for polyvocal inter-community trajectories and exposing the geographical complexity of this site. Perpetuating this sublime gaze would comply with existing state or corporation-driven extractive violence and exploit the vulnerable experimental form and participatory methodologies. The practice generates new or alternative narratives and possibilities new modes of listening/spectating/attention—it requires non-passive

audiences that become part of the materiality and agency of the theatrical space, whose affective encounters enrich and augment the *mise-en-scène*.

The practice creates space for experimentation and vulnerability, but there are limits to this condition—acknowledging the inherent contradiction of being privileged and secure enough to ‘play’ is key. We investigated Deleuze’s distinctions between exhaustion/tiredness,¹⁰ realising that true precarity (exhaustion) generates an inability to possibilite—whereas ‘tiredness’ retains the fragmentary ability to approach a semblance of selectivity. This refers to the paradox of Kant’s ‘comfortable’ position of ‘enjoying’ the sublime—this small, tired pocket of energy can lead to activism—and the sublime can become an activist tool, waking up those who are asleep. This project personally demanded a discovery of the space between acting and spectating; activating a double-edged gaze; performing constellations of environments that intersect only partially.

Shared precarity of performer and audience enters uncanny terrains—*unheimlich* and its antonym *heimlich*. These signifiers of the sublime operate within systems of ‘home’ and hospitality; to shared commonality within space, and simultaneously to the foreign, the dis-/mis-placed. ‘Homeliness’ resonates strongly with themes of *Oikos*, the Greek term denoting family, property, home. This basic unit of Greek society forms the root of terms eco-nomy and eco-logy, twin concerns of the Anthropocene, of living in the ruins. In this work, we investigate the economy and ecology of the living, agential theatre of the ‘Ruins’ and challenge conventions of theatre and theatre-going.

CONCLUSION

Becoming ‘vulnerable practitioners’ formed methodologies for the creation of new knowledge, new ontologies for the sublime

¹⁰ “Exhausted is a whole lot more than tired. It’s not just tiredness, I’m not just tired, in spite of the climb.’ The tired no longer prepares for any possibility (subjective): he therefore cannot realize the smallest possibility (objective). But possibility remains, because you never realize all of the possible, you even bring it into being as you realize some of it. The tired has only exhausted realization, while the exhausted exhausts all of the possible. The tired can no longer realize, but the exhausted can no longer possibilite.” (Deleuze, 1995:3-27)

and Anthropocene. Our challenge was telling terrible stories without losing the audience; of engendering playful performativity in a patchy Anthropocene made up of non-synchronous users; going granular to encourage engagement rather than the hyperobjective distance of planetary-scale descriptors.

This collaborative artistic practice challenges power that is centralised within traditional sublime and Anthropocene ontologies, moving towards more distributed networks, meshes of shared agency. By rejecting the absolutism inherent to the sublime and Anthropocene; rejecting models of asymmetrical power,¹¹ one becomes open to the relativism of the vulnerability. Relativism composed of multiple voices offers power from being part of a mesh of ‘small selves’; recognising that there is no ‘I/eye’ without the “non-I” (Lund, 2009:70); and that one must allow space for this *and* integrate blended knowledge forms, because there are no pure ‘knowers’; we all move between multiple ontologies all the time.

Longinus writes, “We are the slaves of money...and also the slaves of pleasure; these two violate our lives and our persons” (Havell, 1890:84). Instead of yielding to the tyranny of one’s own self-involved desires, Longinus suggests that humans need to be vulnerable to the liberating force of sublimity. The experience of the sublime feeds the soul with a sense of what goes beyond the mortal and the mundane; it reveals an unexpected pathway leading outward from the prison of selfhood. Tsing (2015:29) writes, “the problem of precarious survival helps us see what is wrong. Precarity is a state of acknowledgement of our vulnerability to others. In order to survive, we need help, and help is always the service of another...”

This is the experience we want for and from the audience—testing the edges of the sublime, plunging into discomfort, the horror of voyeurism, a recognition of possibility. These ruins cannot be fixed, pinned, taxonomized. The uncanny experience of this creative process is a metaphor for witnessing the ruins, in turn witnessing the anxiety and violence of the Anthropocene.

¹¹ See Vergès, 2017, page 3.

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