



THE PRECARIOUS ECOLOGIES OF COSMOPOLITANISM

Marsha Meskimmon

Meskimmon contends that cosmopolitanism might be described as a precarious ecology, a state of dynamic exchange between selves and others, and a corporeal interplay between subjects, objects and ideas in the world. In this sense, cosmopolitanism is not a finished product, but rather a delicate balance reached during the mutual making of subjects and worlds, when that making welcomes difference and encourages ethical encounters with others. Turning to specific works by the artists Joan Brassil, Catherine Bertola and Johanna Hällsten, Meskimmon suggests that one of the ways that contemporary art can play a role in the creation of the precarious ecologies of cosmopolitanism is through its ability to evoke in viewers a state of wonder. Meskimmon explores wonder as a precarious, and precious, affective state that enmeshes us, imaginatively and sensually, within the world, and through each of these very different instances she demonstrates how artwork can participate in the production of a tenuous and attenuated moment of balance, a precarious ecology, that has the potential to align us through our shared wonder at the open generosity of the world.

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Abstract

Meskimmon contends that cosmopolitanism might be described as a precarious ecology, a state of dynamic exchange between selves and others, and a corporeal interplay between subjects, objects and ideas in the world. In this sense, cosmopolitanism is not a finished product, but rather a delicate balance reached during the mutual making of subjects and worlds, when that making welcomes difference and encourages ethical encounters with others. Turning to specific works by the artists Joan Brassil, Catherine Bertola and Johanna Hällsten, Meskimmon suggests that one of the ways that contemporary art can play a role in the creation of the precarious ecologies of cosmopolitanism is through its ability to evoke in viewers

¹ An earlier version of this essay appears in a special issue of the *Humanities Research Journal* on 'Worlds and world-making in contemporary art' (2013), vol. 19, no. 2.

a state of wonder. Meskimmon explores wonder as a precarious, and precious, affective state that enmeshes us, imaginatively and sensually, within the world, and through each of these very different instances she demonstrates how artwork can participate in the production of a tenuous and attenuated moment of balance, a precarious ecology, that has the potential to align us through our shared wonder at the open generosity of the world.

Making worlds *After the fact*

Fleeting, fragile patterns, rendered in dust, gradually covered the floor of an abandoned Georgian farmhouse in Bicker, Lincolnshire, as the artist Catherine Bertola meticulously 'cleaned' the space from dawn to dusk each day for nearly a month in 2006.² Her cleaning³ was a drawing in and out from dust, a slow, repetitive process of working with the material residue of the past in the space of the present so that the two worlds collided, *after the fact*. Their collision was quotidian rather than dramatic; the traces of one world were re-made in another using the humblest, yet most ubiquitous of materials: dust. The particles that materialised the elaborate, yet tenuous, interconnections between past and present worlds in *After the fact* (Figure 1) were themselves evocative of a double movement in time. Dust signals both the radical unmaking of the world, its movement toward entropy, and the agency of world-making, the material trace left



Figure 1: Catherine Bertola, *After the fact*, 2006. Found dust and sound. Courtesy of the artist, Workplace Gallery and Galerie M+R Fricke.

2 Bertola's site-specific installation *After the fact* was performed as part of the Beacon Art project of 2006, *no place, like home*, curated by John Plowman across a number of sites in Lincolnshire between 9 September and 10 October.

3 'Cleaning' is literally invoked here: the work was made of dust, soap and polish, using dusters and cleaning cloths as tools. The notion of cleaning as women's work was recognised by the artist and by a number of critics of the work. See for example: 'Uncovering the past with Catherine Bertola' (interviewed by Victoria Redshaw), *Scarlet Opus*, posted March 2009, <http://trendsblog.co.uk/?p=358>.

in the wake of human and non-human activities that seek to give shape and meaning to the world.

I want to suggest that there is a compelling connection between the dust that was so central to *After the fact* and a provocative statement made by American philosopher Nelson Goodman over thirty years ago in *Ways of Worldmaking* where he considered from what we might make worlds: 'Not from nothing, after all, but from other worlds. Worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking' (Goodman, 1978, p.7). Goodman's formulation is a useful starting point for thinking through the complexities of worlds and world-making in art as it reminds us that there is no outside to art-making, no privileged beyond from which to represent a world, only the stuff of which the art and the world both consist. From dust to world, from world to dust, world-making in art is always *after the fact*, yet never out of time. There is no end to the enterprise of world-making, nor to the potential for material transformation in art-making. Nor does world-making in art conform to a unidirectional temporality, a teleological mission or final utopian destination. World-making in this sense is *ecological*; it describes ongoing, mutable processes and systems of relation that take place between living and non-living things. Arguably, where art-making becomes world-making, materiality becomes crucial to ecology.⁴

Bertola's recurrent labour in making *After the fact* was as integral to its meaning as the dust from which it was made. The large and complex patterned dust drawing threatened to decompose, to be *unmade*, without the continual attention, effort and care of the artist as she 'cleaned' the floor each day. When she departed, dust slowly reclaimed the space leaving only the photographic trace of the work as its legacy. The hours upon hours of Bertola's laborious cleaning never displaced the dust; her excessive work could neither hold back time, nor remove the residual traces of past worlds. The work's production was itself an instance of world-making as re-making; the ecology it sustained for the period of its installation was a perpetual material transformation in and of time. The resultant site-specific drawing did not simply replace the 'past' with the 'present', but brought them together within the same space, in and of the same material, transformed.

Significantly, *After the fact* did not illustrate the history of its site, nor did it present an image of a

4 In using the term ecology in the present text, I am drawing upon its etymology, but I am also indebted to the work of Martin L. Davies, specifically his essay 'Thinking practice: On the concept of an ecology of knowledge', in M.L. Davies and M. Meskimmon (eds) (2003) *Breaking the Disciplines: Reconceptions in Knowledge, Art and Culture*, London, I.B. Taurus, pp.9–34.

Georgian domestic interior. Rather, it produced a space in which it was possible to (re-)encounter, imaginatively, the curves and arabesques that once adorned the papered walls of the Georgian farmhouse, now gone to dust. Re-animated through patterns traced in that selfsame dust, their tenuous lines were drawn out across the wooden floor. The space was thus articulated as a locus for memory and imagination that collapsed time and folded worlds into one another through their re-making as art. In this re-making, facture and material were intimately intertwined and mutually constitutive. The repetitive activity of drawing *in* dust allowed the emergence of the dust *as* drawing. As Goodman wrote, 'the many stuffs – matter, energy, waves, phenomena – that worlds are made of are made along with the worlds' (p.7).

If we are able to describe the agency of Bertola's work as an ecology, as a dynamic and sustainable system of relations between subjects, objects and their environment, we must also acknowledge the fragile, ephemeral nature of this ecology. *After the fact* was a precarious ecology, a world re-made in art that risked its unmaking at every turn. Dust is unsettling sediment, the slightest touch disturbs it, yet its presence is pervasive. The dust drawing at the centre of the installation was precarious; despite its complexity and the repetitive activity of its making, it was fragile and ephemeral, subject to the vicissitudes of movement in its vicinity and to reclamation by the accumulation of new layers of dust over time. It required human maintenance, continual acts of remaking, to remain *in situ*. *After the fact* demonstrates viscerally, in the affective force of its materiality, the fact that even the most elaborate and carefully-composed world may be fleeting and fragile.

I want to suggest, however, that the precarious ecology configured by *After the fact* is more nuanced than these direct references to its ephemeral materials and tenuous facture convey. While the precarious does signal fragility, ephemerality, uncertainty and risk, its etymology further connects it with prayer or entreaty. That which is precarious is dependent upon the will or favour of another; it is obtainable through earnest request or negotiation. Arguably, *After the fact* could only be produced by working *with* the dust rather than *upon* or *against* it; the work was effected through an active negotiation with the parameters of the space and its material constraints. The repetitive cleansing traced the lines and patterns of the dust in concert with its own textures, forms and proclivities. The sound derived from the repeated actions of the artist in making the work was recorded and played back into the space, producing a sonic equivalent to its gestural

notation. While not a space of prayer in any formal religious sense, the recurrent movements of the artist, accompanied by the rhythmic aurality of the recording in the space, eloquently evoked the meditative qualities of introspective reflection that commonly attend quiet engagement with repetitious manual tasks.

Perhaps not surprisingly, entreaty shares a common root (*trahere*) with trace; to entreat is to *draw down* favour. In drawing out the resonances between the particles and the floor, the times past and present that inhered to the interstitial fabric of the dust, yielded themselves to the making of the work through the communion between the body of the maker and the world that was being made. In *After the fact*, drawing became a form of entreaty, a precarious act of engaged world-making in which subjects and objects were mutually configured as they were drawn forth, in dust, gesture and breath.

The mercurial materiality and manufacture of *After the fact* articulated a precarious ecology in an abandoned farmhouse for a month in 2006 and then was gone. Our engagement with the work now, therefore, must always be 'after the fact', our invocation of its affective force summoned through careful and attentive description of what once was made in dust, and has now gone to dust. We cannot experience it again, nor can we inspire others to make the pilgrimage to the work to experience it themselves. However, dust drawings have a history within European modernism, a history of material transformation through photography, that complicates their precarious existence as worlds made in art. In 1920 Marcel Duchamp's *Large glass*, which had lain for some years in his studio, undisturbed, collecting dust, became the subject of his interest again, and that of his friend and fellow artist, Man Ray. In what is now acknowledged as a collaborative work, the piece was transformed through photography and re-named *Dust breeding (large glass with dust notes)*.⁵

Like *Dust breeding*, *After the fact* is not simply a past work, documented in photographs, but a work that has a vital photographic component within its larger and more complex configuration, and that this component adds an important dimension to the dynamics of the piece. In *After the fact*, the photographic images of the

5 The 'collaborative' nature of *Dust breeding* is now commonly acknowledged and this contributes to discussions of the 'work' consisting of both the object (*Large glass* with the accumulated dust on its surface) and its photographic trace. See, for instance, the reference to the work: 'Man Ray: *Dust Breeding* (69.521)' in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/69.521> (October 2006).

dust drawing *in situ* reiterate the complex temporality of the work and render its extraordinary physical presence palpable through the visual focus of the lens. The photograph allows the viewer to grasp the space and the fragile drawing on its floor in one, immediate, look; its transformation of dust traced through light into an indexical image adds to the visceral experience of ephemerality in the work by capturing a single moment and holding it stilled.

The photographs of *After the fact* are haptic – that is, experienced as tactile through the visual – and they engage us bodily in a work that we may never see ‘in the flesh’. In this sense, they participate in what Olivier Asselin, Johanne Lamoureux and Christine Ross have called ‘precarious visibility’, a bodily form of vision that locates the subject within the dynamic aesthetics of the work, rather than as its distanced or disinterested observer (Asselin et al, 2008). The multi-layered affective registers through which the work operates are thus not lost in the photograph, but redoubled. The precarious ecology of the work is able to be conveyed, after the fact, through the agency of the photograph.

I want also to suggest that one of the most significant qualities of the photographic trace of Bertola’s site-specific dust drawing is its capacity to make visible the extraordinary within the ordinary. The photographs are nearly monochrome; the space they image is non-descript, yet from within this quotidian visual locus emerges an elaborate figure, both two- and three-dimensional, formed from light, shade, mass and volume, yet tenuous in its presence. It is hard to grasp; it compels us to look, to make it out. It might be called wondrous in its ability to make us regard again that which we would otherwise simply overlook (Datson and Park, 2008, p.18).

Indeed, our engagement with this work is premised upon many of the perceptual, cognitive and affective states that have, historically, been attributed to wonder: the rupture of the familiar by the appearance of the unfamiliar; a visceral, vertiginous and immediate response compelling an attitude of contemplative enquiry; a temporal suspension characterised by close attention to specific objects. Wonder is not the sublime, and *After the fact* does not over-awe or overwhelm us. Its extraordinary qualities of elaboration and intricacy are a delicate surprise in the space, an unusual encounter within the realm of the familiar that brings us up against the limits of our recognition but offers no threat. It compels our enquiry to become embodied and engaged: *what is this, how has it come to be here, what do I make of it?* Pausing, lingering and taking pleasure in our encounter with the unfamiliar, we participate in the wondrous, precarious ecologies offered by world-

making in art. In his exploration of the significance of wonder to creative and intellectual enquiry, Philip Fisher has argued that ‘[i]n locating the extraordinary back within the ordinary, explanation breaks open the fabric of the ordinary itself and changes it forever, both for thought and for perception ... The ordinary is not just the dictionary of things we are used to; it is also relations among them ... including contiguity, scale and genres of experience.’ (Fisher, 1998, p.100)

World-making is not of necessity dramatic, but it is, potentially, wondrous. We make worlds everywhere and always as we go our daily rounds. We inhabit worlds that were made before our time, and we make worlds that will exceed our own existence. The profundity of such domestic world-making is inscribed in the quotidian, and yet the extraordinary is easily overlooked or disregarded when it resides within the everyday. As Fisher suggests, however, experiencing wonder in the face of the rupture of the extraordinary *within* the ordinary changes our relationship to the world forever.

Arguably, it is not simply a fortuitous coincidence that links the precarious with the wondrous in this particular work, but rather a more complex interweaving between the affective force of wonder and the materialisation of precarious ecologies in contemporary art. Wonder marks the boundaries of the known and recognised, the limits of the ever-same. Moving beyond those limits is a precarious enterprise, risky and, as I will argue, dependent upon other subjects and objects in the world. Wonder is not the only affective play of the precarious that can be engendered by contemporary art, but it is an especially significant state in relation to the interpellation of subjects and agencies in world-making, where the work of world-making is premised upon our interconnections with others and our openness to difference, and where world-making changes our relationship to the ordinary forever. As I will draw out in what remains of this essay, it is in this sense that the precarious and wondrous ecologies of world-making in art can contribute to an exploration of the critical and creative practices of cosmopolitanism.

Tethering time

In 2001 the artist Joan Brassil (1919–2005) installed a large-scale sound sculpture in the grounds of the Campbelltown Arts Centre in the suburbs of Sydney. Entitled *A tether of time* (Figure 2), Brassil’s installation enfolds the macro within the micro, taking an oblique view through one particular space of the many worlds that surround us, unobserved and unnoticed. Exploring the dynamics of this work enables further connections



Figure 2: Joan Brassil, *A tether of time*, 2000-2001. Stainless steel, steel, wire, concrete, jarrah. Campbelltown Arts Centre Collection, purchased with assistance from the Australia Council 2001. Reproduced with permission.

between the precarious and the wondrous to emerge in the world-making agency of art.

A tether of time consists of three main elements, roughly configured in the shape of a 'T'. The 'downstroke' is inscribed by a slim flow of water over terraced steps, running some five metres along the length of the ground. This flow is neither like a natural river stream nor a traditional fountain, but more like a miniature industrial canal or a contemporary interpretation of the channelled water in a medieval Moorish garden. The 'cross-stroke' is marked by the most striking feature of the installation: five stainless steel tuning forks, strung with steel wire to produce a wind-harp over eight metres high. Each 'fork' has two smooth, soft-wood panels attached to its base which stand in amidst stone slabs carved with poetic lines referring to the histories of the site: from Aboriginal origins to contact and the later development of a large suburb.

A tether of time is typical of Brassil's installation practice more generally, a practice characterised by

a poetic use of industrial and technological materials and a meticulous attention to the details of site and meaning. However, the scale of the work, its permanence and its material and structural affinities with the built environment, sets it apart from many of the more fragile and tenuous works that have marked Brassil's practice. Significantly, however, I want to argue in what follows that the work's substantial physical presence neither negates the precariousness of its world-making nor the wonder it is capable of engendering.

While the precarious is commonly associated with the fleeting and ephemeral, it can also suggest lingering on the very brink of change. In the terms of the present discussion, the precarious can describe the event of ecological balance, when mutable elements are poised in harmonic connection. *A tether of time* is not so much a free-standing sculpture, as one such 'event', a play conducted between the work's varied physical components as they delineate the space of the sculpture garden and direct spectators' viewpoints

and movements within it. Its various shifts of scale and material are seemingly incompatible: the work is solid and fluid, it is massive and delicate; it is an object, an image, a space and a temporal event at once.

The balance of opposing forces in the work sets up a precarious ecology and surprises us with the extraordinary, tethered to the banal, time and again. Driving past the gallery and sculpture garden on one of the suburb's ubiquitous small highways, littered with commercial premises, traffic signs, street lights, telephone and power poles strung with cables, we spot a glistening wind-harp by the side of the road.⁶ And yet, this harp is not at all unlike the street lights and telephone poles themselves, a fact which strikes one all the more powerfully from within the garden where the concrete and steel forms resonate with the oft-overlooked 'view' of commercial suburbia beyond. The installation's contours, materials and setting actually connect the sculpture garden with the surrounding suburban landscape rather than maintaining its isolation as a 'refuge' from what is commonly conceived as an unappealing, disorganised sprawl. *A tether of time* intervenes in Campbelltown's sculpture garden rather than simply being set in it, and, in so doing, renders the everyday extraordinary. In addition, the work performs the space as a system of relations between subjects and objects within multiple worlds – the sculpture garden, the surrounding suburbs, the cosmos. It is an ecology. More strongly, I suggest that the work entreats us to take an active role in remaking the world in this otherwise ordinary space, and if we answer this entreaty and engage with the work, we can partake of its precarious wonders.

In this sense, it is significant that *A tether of time* is a sound sculpture as well as a visual and material intervention into the space. The wind-harps capture the movement of the air, making gentle calls, while the flowing water lightly babbles. However, the most fascinating and compelling sounds produced by the work are not able to be heard just by walking past it, or by standing in the garden. To hear the unheard, it is necessary to press your ear against the wood at the base of the tuning forks, 'hugging' the poles and feeling their smooth, soft texture on your face. Standing in this way, the sound is magnificent; the slightest tremor of air, the resonance of the earth and the vibrations caused by the buildings and cables in Campbelltown are transformed into beautiful, vibrant song. By physically connecting with the work, the inaudible sounds of

the world around you become audible, and the virtual breaks into the temporal flow of the everyday in an aesthetic remaking of both the space and the subject who hears and imagines anew. Just as the seamlessness of daily experience is disrupted by the sight of a wind-harp by the side of the road, these heterogeneous sounds interrupt our dulled continuity by bringing us to our senses and connecting us to change and opening us to difference.

In *A tether of time* the extraordinary breaks into the ordinary through a critical shift in the attention of participant-observers, and I use the term 'participant' at this point most deliberately. *A tether of time* is not a work 'in-itself', an object offering itself to the distanced gaze of an onlooker. Rather, to have any effect, it requires the multi-sensory participation of subjects engaging with the work as a process of making connections across difference. The subject is here interpellated through an affective register as a perceptual instrument, captivated in wondrous arrest at the experience of their momentary connection to the cosmos. This enhanced mode of attention reveals the hidden, the unseen and unheard worlds that surround us; we are enworlded and world-making at once. Connected bodily to the random resonances of the multiple worlds we inhabit simultaneously, we become aware of the precariousness of our enworldment and how much threatens to disappear, overlooked, or pass away, unheard.

Activating the precarious links between visual, spatial and aural forms of perception at the point of wonder, *A tether of time* facilitates our potential to inhabit spaces differently. Studies in the physiology of music are instructive here: it is impossible to 'hear' a continual monotone until it is disrupted by a variant sound, because 'hearing' is constituted at once by the physical perception of vibration and the cognitive processing of the phenomenon as 'sound' which occurs in differentiation (Roederer, 1995, pp.3–6). 'Hearing' is constituted through attending to, and acknowledging, difference, as much as in any physical activity in the ear. When we hear the unheard in contact with the tuning forks of Brassil's installation, we are not only having new tonal ranges made available to our bodies through technological instruments, we are becoming aware of the simultaneity of our sensory perception and cognitive processing through the strategic production of a shift in our attention. We are made aware of our embodiment, and through this, our situation within worlds and the knowledges, narratives and contexts these entail. Like *After the fact*, *A tether of time's* world-making is remaking. There is no beyond or outside from which to construct another, different or new, world; the

⁶ When I visited the site in 2002, I noticed the wind-harp and Joan Brassil confirmed that she had hoped it would surprise drivers and shake them into an awareness of their surroundings.

new and the different emerge from past and present worlds, remade, reseen, reheard. World-making in art that acknowledges our embeddedness, our embodied 'worldliness', articulates difference through, rather than beyond, the everyday.

These thoughts have some purchase in thinking through the connections between contemporary art and world-making in a global economy, at least for those of us who are committed to exploring the possibilities of engendering cross-cultural dialogues in and through difference rather than conceding to a unified, cultural hegemony. What I have termed here 'the precarious ecologies of cosmopolitanism' are the sustainable, yet evolving, systems of relation that engender a generous intersubjectivity and an openness to difference. These ecologies are risky, subject to change, premised upon negotiation with others and, I would argue, absolutely critical to an ethical way of inhabiting a global world – to engendering a cosmopolitan imagination.⁷ I am suggesting that world-making in art is one of the ways in which we might instantiate the wondrous and precarious ecologies that enable us to glimpse the potential of the cosmopolitan imagination to 'open the fabric of the ordinary and change it forever'.

The change in the fabric of the ordinary evoked through such precarious ecologies might better be understood as an *exchange*, or an encounter, between worlds and subjects, both of whom are remade in their meeting. Once we have encountered the drawing traced in dust, *After the fact*, we cannot simply overlook the Lincolnshire site as derelict and unworthy of our attention. Bertola's world-making remakes the space and the subjects who engage with it; worlds and subjects are mutually reconstituted in the agency of the artwork. Tethering the temporality of the cosmos to the quotidian, *A tether of time* leaves its trace on those who participate, bodily, in the event it unfolds. The macro opens within the micro and is materialised through the perceptual cognition of the subject; subjects, objects, space and time are mutually remade.

⁷ In *Contemporary Art and the Cosmopolitan Imagination* (2010) I developed the idea of 'imagination' specifically, but I would also want to note the work of Nikos Papastergiadis in *Cosmopolitanism and Culture* (2012), which develops the notion of a cosmopolitan 'imaginary'. I have used 'imagination' to link the idea more specifically to the work of philosophers Moira Gatens and Gen Lloyd, who in *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza Past and Present* (1999) have argued for the significance of imagining in the construction of a generous, responsible and intercorporeal subject. However, despite different emphases, Papastergiadis and I are very much aligned in our thinking about the importance of contemporary art, the cultural imaginary and imagination as an intersubjective activity, to a cosmopolitan project.

In a telling passage concerning the political dimensions of globalisation and transnational cultural exchange, Rob Wilson argues that '[a]t best, globalization is generating new forms of reflexivity, altered terms of citizenship, amplified melanges and ties to transnational culture, and thus provoking an *aesthetic of openness* toward otherness that is not just the chance for commodification, spectatorship, and colonization.' (Wilson, 1998, p.355)

Wilson's 'aesthetic of openness' is significant. The aesthetic dimension formed part of what he termed the 'new cosmopolitanism', a cosmopolitanism that could, potentially, meet some of the political, ethical and juridical challenges of globalisation. This is not simply a reconstitution of the nineteenth-century European ideal of cosmopolitanism, which tends to privilege an elite form of world-travel through the consumption of high culture mixed with an exciting dash of 'exotica' from the 'rest' of the world. Rather, the cosmopolitanism being explored and developed by Wilson and other scholars, such as Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006), Seyla Benhabib (2006) and Mica Nava (2007), is cognisant of the significant contribution of feminist and postcolonial debates to the framing of 'world citizenship' beyond a masculine-normative, Eurocentric project. Indeed, the work that has emerged in the past decade on cosmopolitanism in the social sciences and humanities is more commonly premised on making connections with others in the world across and through difference, whether those are cultural, sexual, national, ethnic and/or differences of class and economic status. These cosmopolitanisms are situated perspectives on the possibilities of dialogue and community-building which acknowledge the complexities of the intertwining of the local within the global, and, as I have argued at greater length elsewhere, these are cosmopolitanisms that have a significant relationship to the fields of aesthetics and art-making (Meskimmon, 2010, pp.3–10).

In exploring the specific idea of the precarious ecologies of cosmopolitanism articulated by contemporary art practices as world-making activities, and in connecting these with the affective state of wonder, I am here drawing upon the broad links between aesthetics, art and the embodied, enworlded cosmopolitanisms described very briefly above, while also extending these ideas in new ways. I want to suggest that particular ways of materialising our corporeal and affective exchanges with other subjects and objects in aesthetic world-(re)making activities have precise ramifications for the development of an ethical cosmopolitan subjectivity and the politics of imagination.

There are three dimensions to these connections that are of particular significance here: the intrinsic links between elite and non-elite experiences and conceptions of precarity,⁸ the non-teleological and non-representational status of a precarious ecology in art, and the compelling generosity of wonder within imagination.⁹ In recent years, some political theorists have suggested that the transnational labour markets of the global economy have shifted in such a way that we now no longer have a mass *proletariat*, but a mass *precariat*, a pool of low-paid, insecurely employed and highly mobile, global workers and transnational economic migrants (for example, see Standing, 2011). The precarious state in which this global non-elite labour force exist is widely condemned and, I would argue, rarely connected to the increasing insecurity and mobility of an elite global labour force in the form of, for example, international artists, architects, designers, academics, corporate executives, IT specialists and other high-level 'consultants'. These two groups of 'cosmopolitans' share their 'precarious' experience of globalisation, but clearly are divided by their economic status and the power differentials this brings. Finding ways to articulate both the high and low status experiences of the precarious nature of production within a global economy sets out the possibility of a fuller and richer cosmopolitan conversation that brings together elite and non-elite cultural exchange. I want to suggest that this is one of the possibilities of art-making as world-making, though I am not suggesting here that the international contemporary art world is universally accessible. What I am suggesting is that art as world-making permits a space to open that can enable new forms of public engagement to emerge, encourage dialogues and, moreover, suggest strategies of creative intervention within a range of different communities.¹⁰

8 Judith Butler makes a similar point concerning the political valence of the term 'precarity', which is more precisely demonstrative of economic, social and cultural disempowerment (non-elite status) than 'precariousness' (2009, pp.25–32). In addition, I would argue that it is not just a coincidence that wonder has also had 'elite' and 'non-elite' versions over its long history (Evans and Marr, 2006, pp.15–6).

9 The concept of generosity as it is developed here is indebted to the work of feminist philosophers rethinking embodiment and ethics, e.g. Rosalyn Diprose in *Corporeal Generosity: On Giving with Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas* (2002) and Gatens and Lloyd (1999).

10 I am very aware of art's embeddedness within the systems of global capital and I am not suggesting that art provides a utopian space accessible equally to all. But it would be mistaken to think that all works of contemporary practice reside wholly within, for example, the space of the gallery, when much work is now done in public, cooperative or community spaces, and there are many works that seek

Delineating the cosmopolitan project of art's world-making through the idea of 'precarious ecologies' is a deliberate strategy. As explored above through close attention to the material qualities of the works of Bertola and Brassil, a precarious ecology is not envisaged here as a fixed or bounded entity – it is not a thing, but a process or a state of relations between subjects, objects and their environment. This is significant both in terms of the concept of cosmopolitanism that it underpins and in its reiteration of the agency of art as a world-making practice rather than a mere mode of representation. The former undoes teleology: in envisaging cosmopolitanism as a process of world-making rather than an end-point, we open the term and the inter-related fields of politics, ethics and aesthetics to change and development over time. This way of thinking through a cosmopolitan project allows its becoming to remain one of its key features – we never simply arrive. These insights in turn mobilise what Edward Casey called the 'possibilising' (Casey, [1976] 2000, p.15) force of imagining, that is, imagination's potential to provide a locus for the emergence of new and different thought. As a precarious ecology, cosmopolitanism is neither predetermined in content, nor in form; instead, it is understood as a carefully-poised system of relationships that are open to difference, managed through intersubjective generosity and negotiation with others, and constantly changing as the material constraints of the environment evolve. They are risky but worth it.

Art-making as world-making in the stronger sense of materialising these precarious ecologies does not image the cosmopolitan, but enables imagination to play a critical part in its articulation. Art is thus not a mirror of the world (a representation of *the world*), but a constituent component in its perpetual remaking, a component whose materiality and affective agency are paramount. Hence, I am not seeking in my exploration of contemporary art to find specific works that are 'about' cosmopolitan ideas, or that paint a picture of a cosmopolitan world, but rather to ask how particular works (re)make worlds that open the possibility for the interpellation of cosmopolitan subject-positions and inter-relationships.

The third point in regard to the specificity of the argument being made here in relation to art as a world-making activity and the precarious ecologies of

out new and different audiences, precisely to effect forms of communication that move beyond the 'elite' realms of traditional 'high culture' (for example, see Grant H. Kester in *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* [2004]).

cosmopolitanism takes us back to wonder. Thus far we have explored the experience of wonder as one of the affective states that can be engendered through works of art that make precarious worlds, and it has been suggested that these worlds and the subjects who engage with/in them are both changed by their encounter. I want to suggest that the connection with wonder becomes even more prescient when the possibilising force of imagination is introduced into this mix, as it is, so strongly, in the case of the aesthetic openness of cosmopolitanism. To take this idea further, and bring the varied strands developed through this essay together, it is useful to turn to a final work: *Speak rhymes with beak*, a sound installation piece from 2006 by Johanna Hällsten.

Speaking enchanting rhymes

Speak rhymes with beak (Figure 3) consists of a three-and-a-half-minute-long sound loop, exhibited in gallery spaces accompanied by a log and bird seed. Approaching it, one is invited to light on the log and listen to the sounds of bird calls and human voices intermingled and played through a bell-speaker that focuses the sound to immerse the listener within its sonic space. The simplicity of the materials – the log and seed – and the soft surround of the audio



Figure 3: Johanna Hällsten, *Speak rhymes with beak*, 2006. Sound installation, sound on a loop 3.5 mins, log, bird seed. Reproduced by kind permission of the artist.

experience entreat us gently to remain with the work as the sound runs its course.

The sound itself consists of three recorded elements: a bird that woke the artist each morning when she stayed at Wuhan University, Professor Chen Wangheng of Wuhan University, speaking the words ‘ni hao’ (hello), ‘saijian’ (goodbye) and ‘wo ai ni’ (I love you) in her dialect, in that order, and ambient sound of birds and noises taken from a garden in Tokyo. These elements were developed into a sonic dialogue by Hällsten, who used digital sound editing to make the morning bird calls ‘answer’ the human salutations in the sonic setting of the Japanese garden. Slowly, through the subtle manipulation of the sound, the voices of the bird and the woman begin to resonate in tone, pitch, timbre and rhythm, until they are ‘speaking’ to one another.

Hällsten, a Swedish-born artist living in the UK, frequently works in Asia, and a number of her works have explored the problems and opportunities of translation, dialogue and cross-cultural (mis) communication. Derived from her own experiences of the linguistic challenges of working in China, *Speak rhymes with beak* further extends its translative explorations to human and non-human communication. The woman speaking in the sound piece seeks to ‘teach’ the bird to speak Chinese; the bird responds, but their interaction is not unidirectional. Instead, it is mutual, as each intones toward and with the other, and each learns to speak a new, shared language that emerges between a Chinese dialect and birdsong. In the end, they intone ‘wo ai ni’ (I love you) together in their hybrid incantation.

Speak rhymes with beak is more directly related to the question of transnational dialogue and exchange than either *After the fact* or *A tether of time*, and in that sense, the questions it raises for world-making in art as a cosmopolitan project might seem more obvious. Clearly, it suggests the possibility of a shared, mutual respect and engagement with difference and the possibility of finding spaces and means through which to communicate productively and generously with others with whom we share the world. The work recognises those shared dialogues as mutually-transformative and connective; this is not a model of cultural imposition, where the dominant speaker’s language is ‘learned’ by the other so they can ‘communicate’.

But it is not the direct reference to translation or cross-cultural dialogue that makes Hällsten’s remade world so fascinating within a broader discussion of the potential of art to create precarious, cosmopolitan, ecologies. I want to suggest that the affective dimensions of the work reiterate and extend its reach

to incorporate the listener within its aural community of exchange. To hear the work requires the listener to settle on the log and be still, to enter into the space that is offered by the work quietly and attentively. The shift in tone in the sound piece is not audible unless we open ourselves to hearing it; it does not shout, but whispers. We are brought close to it; we are entangled with it. In these phenomena we find again the state of wonder, of the new and extraordinary emerging through the everyday, arresting our attention, opening us to the pleasures of difference and changing us forever. The work is an entreaty, a precarious ecology that invites us to negotiate a new language and be surprised and delighted by the resonant refrain. It enchants.

In her book *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings and Ethics* political theorist Jane Bennett argues eloquently for the power of wonder to compel generous ethical agency:

■ Enchantment entails a state of wonder ... A state of openness to the disturbing, captivating elements in everyday experience ... More specifically, my contention is that enchantment can aid in the project of cultivating a stance of presumptive generosity (i.e., of rendering oneself more open to the surprise of other selves and bodies, and more willing and able to enter into productive assemblages with them). ▮

(Bennett, 2001, p.131)

If the precarious ecologies of cosmopolitanism that are so wonderfully materialised by the world-making agency of contemporary art are to move beyond imagining the new toward ethical action in the world, it is perhaps by cultivating such a stance of generosity. It is not enough to call for an aesthetics of openness, or posit a predetermined and unchanging picture of a cosmopolitan future. To effect the precarious ecologies that enable us to recognise our interdependence with other human and non-human agents and to compel us to enter into connections with them as we share a world, we need to be able to find ways to explore and take pleasure in difference without being overwhelmed by it, or seeking to overwhelm others. Such generous intersubjectivity is precarious: risky, dependent upon the will of others and often fleeting.

After the fact, *A tether of time* and *Speak rhymes with beak* each enable us to imaginatively inhabit the world remade in and through wonder. In each case, as we experience the extraordinary breaking through the fabric of the ordinary, we are changed and our relations within the world are changed as well. The world is dust, and it is astounding. The cosmos is everywhere

singing, unheard, and it is possible to make strangers friends. We can inhabit the precarious ecologies of cosmopolitanism; however, it is a risky business.

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'HOW DARE YOU RUBBISH MY TOWN!': PLACE LISTENING AS AN APPROACH TO SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART WITHIN UK URBAN REGENERATION CONTEXTS

Elaine Speight

Abstract

In this essay Speight outlines 'place listening' as a cosmopolitan approach to socially engaged art practice within contexts of urban change. Informed by Doreen Massey's concept of a 'global sense of place', place listening stands in opposition to dominant models of public art as well as certain critical art practices, which are predicated upon essentialist readings of place. Speight argues that by failing to acknowledge the varied ways in which places are experienced, such practices negate the agency of people by suppressing more complex narratives. In response, place listening seeks to reveal more contradictory and empowered readings through embodied, relational and sustained engagement with and within specific places. The essay focuses on Palimpsest, an art project designed by Speight herself that took place in West Bromwich, a town that has been portrayed as an exhausted victim of mobile global capital, leading to accusations of misrepresentation and prompting one West Bromwich resident to exclaim, 'How dare you rubbish my town!' By examining the methods employed within Palimpsest, particularly urban walking,

Speight explores how place listening might enable the expression of more nuanced and cosmopolitan senses of place.

Within the popular imagination, the concept of globalisation tends to conjure up emotive images of exploitation and degradation: Indian children stitching T-shirts to be sold overseas for less than the price of a cup of coffee, devastated rainforests, and the enforced displacement of whole local communities to accommodate polluting factories or mass-industrial agriculture. However, as Doreen Massey (1994) attests in *Space, Place and Gender*, for the majority of people in the Western world the experience of globalisation is a much more nuanced and prosaic affair. Furthermore, rather than invariably eroding customary ways of life, globalisation frequently presents new opportunities for action and agency, for example through advances in communication technologies and the expansion of global networks. Yet, despite this, I would suggest that many artistic approaches to globalisation are predicated upon what Nigel Thrift describes as 'a narrative of beleaguered-ness, in which everyday life is gradually being crushed by forces outside its control' (Thrift, 2004, p.54). This is particularly true of certain types of art practice which have emerged over the last ten years in connection with the regeneration of British towns and cities. These practices can generally be categorised into two main approaches. In the first, as an officially appointed 'placemaker', the artist seeks to locate and re-insert the locally specific meanings and 'senses of place' whose survival are perceived to be jeopardised by the regeneration process. In the second, however, the artist adopts the role of a critical commentator, for whom the redevelopment of certain places provides a lens through which to tell wider stories about the effects of urban governance and globalisation.

In this essay, I claim that, while these approaches are positioned differently in relation to urban regeneration processes, they are both informed by an anxiety about globalisation as a homogenising and destructive force, resulting from a popular essentialist reading of place that emphasises notions of rootedness, boundaries and singular identities. My argument is that by failing to acknowledge the varied ways in which places are experienced, such practices negate the agency of individuals by casting places as the passive and powerless victims of global capital. In response I want to outline the alternative approach of 'place listening', which I have been working towards in my own practice as an artist and curator. By describing aspects of *Palimpsest*, a project that I developed in the Midlands town of West Bromwich, I will examine how embodied