

## **'Conductor': a tribute to the angels**

*we are voyagers, discoverers  
of the not-known,*

*the unrecorded;  
we have no map;*

*possibly we will reach haven,  
heaven<sup>1</sup>.*

*120 vertical lines of fine electro-luminescent cables set out on a 4ft grid running into 74 tonnes of water.*

For me, the critic is a travel writer, always going far from home, invited as a guest into someone else's place. To enter another's space necessitates movement out of one's own territory - it involves trust on both parts. To engage with something imagined and made by another is also to journey, from what is already known towards what is as yet unknown. To encounter another requires a willingness to connect, but also to let go, to take risks. Some critics travel like tourists, crossing vast territories but remaining unchanged. Others, like me, are constantly pulled out of the familiar toward the strange, impelled by a desire for transformation. We exist in motion, in-between, like an angel. I have an ongoing interest in angels. Initial impulses came out of my interest in the relationship between feminism and architecture, how thinking the 'feminine' allows us to imagine new spatialities. More recently, my angelic thinking has developed in response to writing about artists concerned with movement, travel, and exchange. An angel is 'a spirit or heavenly being who mediates between the human and divine realms'. Put simply, angels are messengers. They have the power to transform.

### **point of entry: between presence and absence**

*A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from paradise: it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.<sup>2</sup>*

Paul Klee's angel was a key image for Walter Benjamin. It was a dialectical image, an important aspect of Benjamin's methodology - a frozen moment which encapsulates a dialectical contradiction. The dialectical image is a thought which occupies a threshold position in space, time and consciousness: it is between history and nature, myth, between dream and awakening, between antiquity and modernity. The image

---

<sup>1</sup> H.D. 'Tribute to the Angels', *Trilogy*, London: Carcanet Press Ltd., 1997, pp. 58-9.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, IX 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations*, London: Fontana Press, 1992, p. 249)

might be an object, fragment, figure or space. The figure of the angel at the threshold of time is dialectics at a stand-still. At this moment, the present is allowed access to the past and a glimpse of the future. It is the coming together in one instant of what 'has been' and what is 'not yet'. . .

To enter 'Conductor', you leave a place of light, conversation and warmth and pass through a steel door at the end of a corridor between the Engine House and the Boiler House. You find yourself in a gallery up-close, simultaneously in and not-in, what appear to be hundreds of lines of light glowing jade white in ink black infinity. The light cuts through the close chill silence wrapped about me in an exhilarating way. I feel the hairs on my arms stand up on end. Where am I? Held hushed above a planar surface of water - who knows how deep - I look down and the light lines seem to go on forever. There is no sound except a dark, dark liquid slapping at some distance horizon that I cannot see.

'Conductor' is an installation by Jane Prophet, composed of 120 glowing electro-luminescent cables suspended from the ceiling of a boiler house, with water flooding the floor to a depth of 300mm. The work is located at 'Wapping', a pumping station on the north bank of the Thames adjacent to the Shadwell Basin. Rediscovered by the Women's Playhouse Trust, it has recently been converted by Shed 54 architects, into an international arts venue with performance areas, gallery spaces and a restaurant. The building, composed of an engine house and boiler house, constructed out of red brick, with a timber and iron trussed roof, and stone floor was built by the London Hydraulic Power company in 1890. It operated as a steam generated pumping station until the 1950's when it switched to electricity. After the pumping station closed in 1977, a communication company purchased part of the underground the system, ran fibre optic cables along the pipe lines and used the network for telecommunication across London. The juxtaposition of water and light in Prophet's installation refers closely to the material and programmatic history of the architecture. The combination of fire and water in a pump house is strongly elemental and highly charged, even more explosive is the potential reaction of water and electricity placed in such close proximity.

Elemental work is not new to 'Wapping', nor is the play of dialectical oppositions to Prophet. In 1991, also making reference to the original function of the building - steam power - Anya Gallaccio filled the same space with 24 whistling kettles. For 'Surfaces and Intensities', her 1996 installation commissioned by Women's Playhouse Trust, Gallaccio produced a cube measuring 3m x 4m x 3m and weighing 34 tonnes made of ice bricks on the boiler house floor. Aided by a large chunk of rock salt embedded in the centre, this ephemeral sculpture slowly melted away. This fascination with presence and absence, is also a strong theme running through Prophet's work, though articulated in a very different way. In 'Landscape Room' 2000 a series of digitally manipulated photographic images of the grounds of Holkham Hall, place computer-generated 'trees' alongside 'real' trees, creating a parkland which conflates real and imaginary, artificial and natural, past, present and future. Likewise in 'Conductor', Prophet delights in tampering with our perception of what is there and what is not there - distinctions critical to locating ourselves in the world. Like the generation of steam at 'Wapping' - the transformation of one fluid, liquid water, into another, gaseous air, 'Conductor' has us believe the lines of light are both tangible and ephemeral. Like angels we hover on the threshold between real and imaginary, matter and spirit, earth and heaven.

### **coming-and-going : between here and elsewhere**

*The angel is that which unceasingly passes through the envelope(s) or container(s) goes from one side to the other, reworking every deadline, changing every decision, thwarting all repetition. . . Irreducible to philosophy, theology, morality, angels appear as messengers of ethics evoked by art, sculpture, painting or*

*music - without its being possible to say anything more than the gesture that represents them. . . They speak like messengers, but gesture seems to be their 'nature'. Movement, posture, the coming-and-going between the two. They move or stir up? The paralysis or apatheia of the body, or the soul, or the world. They set trances or convulsions to music, or give them harmony.*<sup>3</sup>

For me, the two feminists who explore the relationship between space and subjectivity in terms of movement and containment are Rosi Braidotti and Luce Irigaray. In Braidotti's writing, the nomadic subject is an important 'theoretical figuration for contemporary subjectivity'. The moving subject or nomad describes an epistemological condition, a kind of knowingness or unknowingness that refuses fixity, that allows us to think between, or to think 'as if'. For Irigaray as well, subjectivity and spatiality are intrinsically connected. Irigaray's mode of operation is suggestive. Metaphorically and strategically, the spatiality of the female body is offered to us as a way of imagining new forms of exchange between subjects and spaces. For Irigaray, it is in order to deny the angel, or women's nomadic status, that men have confined women as and in the spaces of the male symbolic systems of law and language. The angel rethinks the organisation of patriarchal space and time. She circulates as a mediator, an alternative to the phallus, who rather than cutting through, goes between and bridges.

This focus on movement is particularly pertinent with regard to 'Wapping', a building whose very existence depends on flow and change. As a steam powered hydraulic pumping station, its purpose was to move vast quantities of water at high pressure through a network of pipes under London. Networks locate us physically and conceptually in both space and time, abstract versions, such as grids, suggest that the environments we inhabit might go on forever. It is hard not to draw parallels between Prophet's 'Conductor' and Walter de Maria's 'Lightening Field' in Quemado, New Mexico. Both works use grids composed of lines of light - but in one the grid is located in an exposed landscape, the other in a contained room. At first 'Conductor' appears to have no limit-line - you are unable to locate yourself in either a vertical or horizontal dimension. The longer you linger the more aware you become aware of the edges of the Boiler Room, the texture of the walls and further on in the distance a doorway with a gentle glow. The contours of the room seem to hold the lines in, making their verticality even more overwhelming. And as the soffit of the ceiling comes into view, it appears that these delicate tracings of light are holding apart the heavy darkness above and below. This is where 'Conductor' really departs from another reference point - Richard Wilson's 1992 installation at the Saachi Gallery. While it is easy to draw similarities between these pieces of work, both artists flooded a space with liquid, Prophet's use of artificial light in a dark room, focuses emphasis on the changing nature of the altered perception of the de-stabilised edges.

This play with the edges of perception is a recurring theme in Prophet's work. In 'Landscape Room' and also 'TechnoSphere' 1996 and 1999, an interactive digital landscape populated by virtual creatures simulating evolutionary processes, offer us representations of space which hover between safe and dangerous. The feelings of comfort and/or fear they inspire in us, vary according to the accompanying narratives concerning the role of digital technology viz-a-viz natural order, as well as in relation to spatial questions of scale, containment and control. Interest in such issues is not new - it has been integral to the philosophy of aesthetics at least since Kant, Indeed eighteenth-century debates around the picturesque and sublime have interested Prophet for some time. The relevance of the notion of the sublime as a landscape terrifying in its enormous and uncontainable scale, is something she believes has been replaced by our horror of the micro,

---

<sup>3</sup> Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, London: The Athlone Press, 1993, pp. 17-8.

the subliminally small. In a recent collection of essays on eighteenth-century aesthetics Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla suggest the importance of 'transport' and 'ravishment' as recurring tropes in debates on the sublime.<sup>4</sup> They argue that the sublime is neither a set of qualities internal to an object, nor the interior landscape of the mental affect of such objects, but rather the endlessly deferred and transformative discourse between these two. Moving from one text to another, from travel writing, to religious debate, to imaginative literature, the discourse around the sublime is mutative. Much like the shifting limits of 'Conductor'.

### **surface tension: between one and another**

*Préposer: to put someone in a position to carry out a function by giving them the means or the autonomy to do it ... that's prepositions for you. They don't change in themselves, but they change everything around them: words, things and people ... prepositions transform words and syntax, while pré-posés transform men.*<sup>5</sup>

It is within the work of Michel Serres that the angel really takes central stage. Serres' intellectual project is enormous and wide ranging. Truly interdisciplinary, he travels across science, literature, philosophy and art, constantly interrogating, in the most poetic fashion, the nature of knowledge itself. In *Angels: A Modern Myth*, a narrative set at an airport, Serres suggests that there are certain places where messages from angels increase in number and intensity. These tend to be places of transition and passage, the 'passing places of angels'. 'Wandering with no fixed habitat', Serres emphasises the unstable nature of angels, their dual role as verbal messengers and elemental fluxes, the importance of communication, mediation and transformation as a result of exchange, but perhaps the most interesting thing Serres has to say about angels is that they are the personification of prepositions.

Prepositions make connections between two, between people, objects and places. Some prepositions emphasise position, the relation of an object or a person to a place, for example on, in and at; others focus on relationships between people and objects, for example, among and with; and yet others, the directional nature of these connections, like, beyond, for or to. Art objects and processes can function like prepositions: by making unexpected connections they can change everything around them. If we remain with 'Conductor' for long enough, we see a slow ripple disrupting the surface of the water, allowing us to encounter the artist for an instance.

This desire to connect is not new for Prophet, her work often involves making some kind of relation with the audience using the body as a field of reference. In 'Swarm' 1996 Prophet used mathematics to transform the movement of the audience walking among an installation of beehives into a two dimensional and shifting projection of swarms of bees. But there is an even more explicit relationship with the performative aspect of a piece of work Prophet produced for her degree show back in 1987. Lying hidden in a dark pool breathing through a miked tube, without warning the artist brought up her hands, glowing in the light of pencil torches trapped to her wrists in luminous gloves, to touch the underside of the water's surface. Whatever we want to call it, live-art, time-based or performative installation, the work produces an unexpected reaction in the

---

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla, eds., *The Sublime: A Reader in British eighteenth-century aesthetics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Serres, *Angels: a Modern Myth*, Paris: Flammarion, 1995, pp. 139-46.

audience's perception of the space they occupy, both bodily and architecturally, physically and emotionally. As in 'Conductor', the experience is dislocating, mirroring in 'Wapping' the recent changes to building fabric and function.

November 2000

### **References**

Walter Benjamin, ix 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations*, London: Fontana Press, 1992.

H.D., 'Tribute to the Angels', *Trilogy*, London: Carcanet Press Ltd., 1997.

Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, London: The Athlone Press, 1993.

Michel Serres, *Angels: a Modern Myth*, Paris: Flammarion, 1995.

The essay was published as 'Conductor: a tribute to the angels', *Jane Prophet: 'Conductor'*, by The Wapping Project, London, (2001).