

## **Wapping: the mechanics of fluids**

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 three artists - Sharon Kivland, Pamela Wells and Sue Ridge. The study of the forms and functions of angels - angelomorphology - concerns their position, their appearance, and their role or function. Within angelology, the angel is 'a spirit or heavenly being who mediates between the human and divine realms'. Put simply, angels are messengers. They are in-between. Their status as flux provides a challenge to traditional modes of representation and allows us the opportunity to think and make space and time differently. Here I will look at how the angel in the work of three very different philosophers, Luce Irigaray, Walter Benjamin and Michel Serres, raises a different aspect of 'between-ness'.

This focus on flux 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. (Wapping pumped 33 million gallons of water per annum in the 1930's at 300 gallons per minute at 800 psi). This was achieved through the generation of steam - the transformation of one fluid, liquid water, into another, gaseous air. Water from a well was circulated between roof-top tanks, underground reservoirs and the pumps through a complex system of pipes.

It is of course possible to understand 'Wapping' in a 'concrete' and 'singular' manner. 'Wapping' is 10,250 square foot of new arts space located in a pumping station on the north bank of the Thames adjacent to the Shadwell Basin. The building is constructed out of red brick, with a timber and iron trussed roof, and a stone floor. It is composed of two larger masses placed at an angle to each other. One is the engine house for the steam pumps, with a turbine house and an accumulator tower. The other is the boiler house with coal store, filter house, two water tanks and a chimney. The engine house and boiler house are linked by a connecting corridor with a store and mess room. 'Wapping' was built by the London Hydraulic Power Company in 1890 and operated as a steam generated pumping station until the 1950's when it switched to electricity. Initially 'Wapping' contained six steam boilers and their pumping engines. Two electric turbines were added in 1923. The pumping station closed in 1977 and lay empty until it was rediscovered by the Women's Playhouse Trust and used for site-specific arts events. From October 2000 it will operate as an international arts venue with performance areas, gallery spaces and a restaurant. But how interesting is a story

told this way? Not very. Instead, what I do here by speculating on angels is place 'Wapping' in a different context, as a multiplicity of spaces, times and people.

### **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>1</sup>*

For me, the two key feminists where space and subjectivity are most closely linked 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. Constantly on the move, her passage creates networks, points of connection between things.

Networks locate us physically and conceptually in both space and time, allowing us to make links between otherwise disconnected elements at the same time. A series of contemporary urban art strategies articulate this notion of the network in different ways. For example, the DIA Centre for the Arts located in a four storey renovated warehouse at 548 West 22nd Street in Chelsea, New York is part of a much larger network of art works sited across the city and the US, such as Walter de Maria's 'Lightening Field' in Quemado, New Mexico, 1977 or the 'Earth Room' in Soho, New York City. Although a gallery based institution, DIA has a clear policy

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<sup>1</sup> Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, London: The Athlone Press, 1993, pp. 17-8.

to extend the boundaries of the gallery. From its conception it has supported projects unlikely to get funding because of their nature or scale regardless of their location. Also based in New York, Creative Time, funded by the Public Art Fund, have created a series of art works across the public spaces of the city - bridges, beaches, landfills, subways, storefronts, bars, television and cyberspace.

In the UK, a radical curatorial approach has also tended to follow a programme of spatial dispersal, relocating the gallery into multiple city-wide or even country-wide cartographies of work. Some networks are the result of galleries extending their boundaries, for example, Ikon, Birmingham; others are related to the decisions of funding and/or organising agencies, for example, Public Art Development Trust, London Arts Board and Art Angel (funded by London Arts Board), yet others are the result of the tactics of artist-lead organisations, for example, Time-based Art in Hull or Locus+ in Newcastle. A number of recent shows have been constellations where multiple pieces are dispersed over space, for example 'In the Midst of Things' (1999) and 'Artstranspennine' (1998). These are cartographies which map a selection of sites not as isolated spots but as relational entities - as networks. The ways in which the interventions relate to one other is a function primarily of their geographical distribution.

'Wapping' is interesting in this respect. It is but one site in a network which connects four other pump houses via 187 miles of pipe to over 8000 machines, over half of which are lifts. Objects as diverse as vacuum cleaners and Tower Bridge are connected, as are architectures as different as West End London Theatres, apartment blocks in Kensington and Mayfair, docks in east London and Kings Cross railway goods yards. In its new life 'Wapping' will be connected to a very different world, the contemporary London art scene. But not just to the gallery world, the curatorial plans are much more interesting than that and involve art, architecture, design, theatre and performance. 'Wapping' will feature on a number of cultural maps of London, bringing together audiences from very different fields.

Another aspect of the constellation appears in another emerging trend in contemporary art practice - the artist's walk. Rather than a constellation of projects, the work here takes the form of a network. The artist composes a route or journey through which the audience encounter differing aspects of a place. In Marysia Lewandowska's 'Detour' (1999) the artist developed a tour of the Paddington Basin area, visiting sites as bizarre as Selfridges packing warehouse and a tiny flat in a housing estate. Christine Hill's 'Where Exactly Are We Going?' engaged participants in exactly this kind of activity, creating an alternative to the sanitized commercial tour of New York by taking customers to visit locations and characters they would not normally encounter. Most memorable for me was Janet

Cardiff's 'The Missing Voice' (1999) where the artist took the role of story-teller. Cardiff created a sound track which led the audience, wearing headphones and a discman obtained from Whitechapel's public lending library, on a choreographed route through the city.

One new programme planned for 'Wapping', 'Walking to Wapping', will involve making a number of journeys to 'Wapping'. Participants will be taken for a walk by various story tellers, from politicians to novelists, who will devise their point of departure and route according to personal history and interest. These walks will position 'Wapping' in new ways, locating the physical space in a number of private and public narratives.

### **between what has been and what will be**

*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 might be an object or fragment of everyday life; a space, such as the arcade, Benjamin's central architectural dialectical image; or even a figure, such as the prostitute. As seller and commodity in one, she contained contradiction within her. 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. It is the coming together of history and the future, the 'has been' and the 'not yet' in one instant.

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

In contemporary urban photography there has been a recent obsession with empty spaces - terrain vagues or heterotopias as they have been called. Architectural photography has never been keen on mess. Images of buildings in the architectural press are rarely cluttered by inhabitants or even traces of inhabitation. But this current fascination with places devoid of people is different. Artists such as Rut Blees Luxemburg, Catherine Yass, Bridget Smith, Jane and Louise Wilson have created photographs of architecture where the emptiness is not about keeping the details clean. Their gesture is more generous. By setting certain things aside a space is provided for the viewer to imagine. These images are suggestive. These places have not always been and will not always be empty. But their very emptiness allows us to project all kinds of alternative scenarios onto them. Like detectives we search for clues, traces of past occupations, props for future activities.

Emptiness has a spatial and temporal quality. The removal of an original use creates a place to be filled. Empty places are not full, they are cavities with nothing in, gaps, undercrofts. But where does a fascination with emptiness leave us as makers of cities - is it possible to design 'emptiness' - to *do* nothing? Does this signify an act of resistance to the intensification and extensification of commodity capitalism? Could we describe making emptiness as a critical spatial practice? In conversations at 'Wapping', both the Australian architecture practice, Shed 54, and artistic director of the Women's Playhouse Trust, Jules Wright, suggested a desire for emptiness. For Wright, her initial attraction to the building was in no small way connected to its defunct status - it was a place empty of purpose. Shed 54's approach to the architectural design was to respond and make clear the building's original functions. Both wanted to do little, very little, as little as possible to make the building function in its new capacity.

In *One-Way Street*, Benjamin played on the juxtaposition of sub-title and content in each of his prose pieces, using the sub-titles to bring to life hidden meanings in the text. In art practice working dialectically can mean creating images, objects, spaces which contain contradictions within them. It can also involve using techniques of juxtaposition, positioning text or titles to displace perceived meanings or placing an object in a site in order to recontextualise meaning.

Outside the context of the supposedly neutral gallery, the locations where art work is to be inserted are already places and societies in their own right. Interventions can transform the existing meaning of a site in order to allow audiences to respond dialectically with a public space, to re-think and re-read the terrain from different perspectives. In the PS1 contemporary art centre, located in an old public school building in Queen's, New York, a number of artists have created works which are

site specific and permanent installations. Some are obvious, such as James Turrell's place with no roof, where the audience occupy benches around the corners of an otherwise locked room at dusk each evening, to look up at a plane of blue - unsure as to whether they are staring at the sky or a canvas marked with a celestial image. But other works, such as the careful cleaning and polishing of existing wall tiles, are less conspicuous, more ambiguous, more anonymous.

'Wapping' has a history of work - visual and performance art - being developed in close relation to the site. In 1991 Anya Gallaccio filled the space with 24 whistling kettles making reference to the function of the building - steam power. For her 1996 installation commissioned by Women's Playhouse Trust, 'Surfaces and Intensities', Gallaccio produced a cube measuring 3m x 4m x 3m and weighing 34 tonnes made of ice bricks on the Boiler House floor. This ephemeral sculpture slowly melted away aided by a large chunk of rock salt embedded in the centre. Again the inspiration for the work was drawn from the building's links with water but developed in a much more elemental way. 'Wapping' will open with an installation by Jane Prophet. 'Conductor' is composed of 120 glowing fibre optic cables suspended from the ceiling of the Boiler House and water flooding the floor to a depth of 300mm. The materials chosen, water and fibre optics, refer to the history of the architecture. After the power station was decommissioned, a communication company purchased the system, ran fibre optic cables along the pipe lines, and used the network for telecommunication across London. In dissolving boundaries - the permanence of sculpture in the case of Gallaccio - and the finite space of architecture in the case of Prophet - both artists' work resonate with the qualities of the building and the commissioning ambitions of Women's Playhouse Trust.

### **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>3</sup>*

It is within the work of Michel Serres' that the angel really takes central stage. Serre's 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 earlier texts Serres' interest in angels was more implicit, but in a more recent publication, *Angels: A Modern Myth*, a narrative set at an airport, angels appear through the conversations of the two main characters. Serres' suggests that there are certain places where

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Serres, *Angels: A Modern Myth*, Paris: Flammarion, 1995, pp. 139-46.

messages from angels increase in number and intensity. These tend to be places of transition and passage, such as airports and other places of mass transit, spaces of interchange such as new technologies, he calls them 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 and places. Some prepositions emphasise position, the relation of an object or a subject to place, for example on, in and at; others focus on relationships between subjects 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. Work made through collaboration with others involves inter-action of this nature, where what becomes important is not only the qualities of particular end-products but the processes of making them. Even if the outcome is not determined in advance, ways in which relationships between artists/architects and their publics are constructed can constitute a major part of the conceptualisation and realisation of the project, providing aesthetic and formal value. This may tend towards the choreographic, where the work is manifest less as an object and more as an event, a series of relationships people make with one another.

Jules Wright's history as a theatre director has certainly influenced the kind of work commissioned for 'Wapping' in the past. Pieces such as 'Lea Anderson's 'Dirt' (1993) and Shobana Jeyasingh's 'Answers from the Ocean' (1995) are hard to categorise. But perhaps 'Shiny Nylon', commissioned by Women's Playhouse Trust for a warehouse in the Royal Docks in 1994, best captures the atmosphere of the projects. This performative piece brought together a visual artist, Anya Gallaccio; a writer, Deborah Levy; a choreographer, Kristina Page; and a composer, Billy Page; to create a work composed of song, dance, sound, words. The concerns of the piece- issues of marginality and being out of place - were reinforced in the location of the performance - a tent in an abandoned warehouse in the middle of nowhere.

Combining aspects of the visual arts and performing arts, architecture and theatre, 'fine' art and community participation, moving from one practice to another, is at the heart of 'Wapping'. Plans for new commissions will continue to make connections across different art and design disciplines. The idea for the restaurant is an interesting one in this respect. The furniture will be changed on a regular

basis, providing a show-case for young designers' work, the opportunity to buy pieces, as well as somewhere to sit and eat. This performative twist is perhaps suggestive of the choreographic potential for the future of the place.

Implicit in the building is the memory of the movement of water through the space over time. 'Wapping' is a place of circulation and of transformation, where water flowed between stores and pipes as well as oscillated between liquid and gas. Never immobile, the medium is the message in arts projects envisaged for the future as well as those performed in the recent past. Interventions that locate 'Wapping' in networks across the city, that make relationships with the building's history in terms of fluids and that work across disciplines, all this implies constant flux. The mechanics of fluids are very angelic.

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