

THE LAUNDRY ROOM



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INTRODUCTION

The Laundry Room exhibition was held in the Autumn of 2012 at BalinHouseProjects (BHP), an artist-run space based in the Tabard Gardens Estate, Borough, London SE1. A walk and two workshops in BHP's neighbourhood and the South London Gallery supplemented the exhibition.

The ideas for *The Laundry Room* began with the conversations about our practices and the common interest between design and fine art; materials and their inherent qualities; the making of objects; and the cycle of material usage when obsolete objects become reappropriated as raw materials. Our early discussion centred around the rapid changes and gentrification in the area of Borough and Bermondsey.

Inspired by Richard Wentworth's *Making Do and Getting By*, we invited the artist to create an exhibition in response to the recent transition the area of Borough and Bermondsey have been going through.¹ Wentworth's association with the area was described in a statement by the artist: 'The artist Richard Wentworth holds unusual keys to the area, knowing it first in the year he left school in 1965. He lived from 1967 until 1974 on Balfour Street SE17 and watched the preparations for the construction of the Heygate Estate and the arrival of its first occupants. In 1969, with other RCA graduates he founded Dilston Studio, which was his workshop until 1978. His association with the invention of 'Goldsmiths' in these years coincided with the first period of decline in the docks, warehousing, stockholding and manufacturing throughout SE London. His records of this path to dereliction and social and technological change formed the

base for his work *Making Do and Getting By*, first seen at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1985.'²

The storage space adjacent to the BHP (one of the flats in the Tabard Gardens Estate) still had the remnants of its original use as a communal laundry/drying room, and the cycles of 'reincarnations' it had gone through since. As this exhibition was going to be the last one before the BHP undergoes the planned reconfiguration to connect the laundry room (a utilitarian, public space) – and the flat (a domestic space), the topics of our conversations went on to materials, memory and the potential to generate new processes of (re-) thinking and (re-)making from the obsolete. With these themes in mind, we asked the designer Michael Marriott who engages with the notion of 'economy of means', reuse and re-appropriation of materials and the ready-mades, to 're-appropriate' the Laundry Room for its temporary use as an exhibition space in the context of the planned alteration to the BHP's space.

The two events – the exhibition and the intervention in the room that complemented each other was also supplemented by a series of events: a walk led by Wentworth; workshops for the local residents and members of the public. It was a particular sensibility, which we saw in the works of Wentworth and Marriott that brought them together: a mutual approach by which they engage with our relationship with material culture in their respective specialisms. Often by re-appropriating found objects, both artists explore the nature of humanity through their astute observations of the interactions between people and the everyday built environment. Their works question, reframe and rephrase our relationship with material things – mass production and consumption of 'stuff'.

It turned out that although acquaintances over 20 years, Wentworth and Marriott had never worked on a project together.

We believed that it was an appropriate moment to revisit Wentworth's *Making Do and Getting By*, as the areas of Borough and Bermondsey, which are some of the poorest in London, are currently going through another period of transformation. Working with a network of artists and designers, the project explored the implications of the areas' cultural shift, exemplified by the recent openings of art institutions such as the White Cube Bermondsey and The Drawing Room, as well as the development around London Bridge station that is symbolised by the construction of The Shard.

Eduardo Padilha &
Maiko Tsutsumi
May 2013

1. *Making Do and Getting By* is an ongoing photographic series through which Wentworth documents the everyday, paying attention to objects, occasional and involuntary geometries as well as uncanny situations that often go unnoticed (Source: Lisson Gallery).
2. An extract from a statement by Richard Wentworth given to the curators of *The Laundry Room* during the preparation of the project.

BALIN HOUSE PROJECTS

BalinHouseProjects (BHP) is a non-profit, self funded artist-run space. BHP is named after the building on a council estate in Borough, South East London in which the space is located. The area of Borough, being one of the oldest in London, dates from the city's foundation and since then has accumulated a very rich history and diverse population of national and international immigrants.

It holds numerous iconic landmarks from the past and present. As well as having been inhabited by some famous people that lived and worked locally like Charles Dickens, Charlie Chaplin, Octavia Hill and John Harvard among others, the area has been home to religious pilgrims travelling from Southwark Cathedral to Canterbury Cathedral and criminals that terrorised the community like the Hooley family, a gang who later lent their name to the expression 'hooligan'.* For a long time, the area south of the river was known for its lawlessness and injustice and poverty were rife.

Borough has the first bridge to be constructed in the city: London Bridge, where the Great Fire passed from north to south in 1666 destroying most of the buildings in the area. Despite waves of construction and destruction caused by such events as the Great Fire, the Second World War and major shifts in socio-economic conditions, the area has managed to retain many buildings that reflect this history. The neighbourhood has always been densely populated due to local trade and industry. More recently with the arrival of Tate Modern and the Shard, the area is undergoing major gentrification and once more is experiencing an influx of

new inhabitants and changes in its socio-economic dynamics.

In 2006, I moved to Balin House with the hope of becoming a long-term resident and was very keen to get to know my neighbours and the environment in a short period of time. Moreover, I wanted to understand the legacy of Borough's historical past and to get to know the socio-political dynamics of the local community. BHP was conceived initially as a way to address my desire to interact with people and the immediate environment as well as the need to construct an identity, which would form the base and reference for my future in the city. In order to mediate social gatherings, I started curating art exhibitions and opened the doors of my living space to neighbours and colleagues. The flat became a place where people exchanged personal and professional information. BHP received a very eclectic crowd and we were all drawn by a mutual curiosity to know each other. Initially these gatherings started in the flat as spontaneous and speculative events to investigate the social dynamics of the new environment. Throughout the events at BHP, I realised that I was activating a potential in the private space, transforming it into a social space and creating opportunities where I could get involved with the community. Over time, after many small and indoor projects, BHP has started to explore public space more through workshops with different community groups.

In the last two projects (*Beating the Bounds* and *The Laundry Room*) BHP has given more emphasis to the concept of collective memory and the observation of shifts in socio-economic conditions. *Beating the Bounds* conceived by the artist Ana Laura Lopez de la Torre, consisted

of a series of night walks guided by local inhabitants who told their personal histories and experiences of living in the area. The project promoted the idea of circulating personal 'data', which helped to map the local social fabric, link information and discuss changes in the community as well as to encourage the feeling of belonging to the place.

The latest project *The Laundry Room* is curated in collaboration with Maiko Tsutsumi to mark the end of a cycle of exhibitions at BHP before the flat embarks on an internal renovation. For this project, artist Richard Wentworth and designer Michael Marriott were invited to explore together with us the conditions of the flat as both private living space and intermittent semi public space. For the exhibition, BHP incorporated an adjacent space to the flat that is a former laundry room, after which the exhibition was named.

Through the project at BHP, Wentworth and Marriott brought all of us on a journey to revisit the world as a physical fact. These observations started in the former laundry room, a communal and social space that had been disused for a long time. The sealed pipes, hooks for washing lines, spray tags and peeling walls became the background for the display of Wentworth's photographic series *Making Do and Getting By*, themselves images of marks left on the material world and public arena. Marriott very subtly intervened in the space where he drilled three large holes in the wall, linking the room to the flat, and hanging a drilled-out piece as a pulley device on the entrance door. Such a gesture made access to both the outside and inside spaces easier, while the holes in the wall created an opportunity for visitors to observe and be observed through them.

My training as an artist has provided me with the skills to develop BalinHouseProjects as a tool for creating an identity in the community. While I still maintain my studio as a place of making my own work, BHP has become a place of thinking in the social arena and interaction between my private and professional life.

Eduardo Padiliha

* Leonard Reilly, *The Story of the Borough: Neighbourhood History*, No.7 (London: Southwark Council, 2009).





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THE LAUNDRY ROOM

The project started with a series of conversations between the curators, Maiko & Eduardo together with Richard & myself. We spoke about the nature, history and context of the laundry room and the building it was situated in, and discussed how it sat in relation to Eduardo's apartment. The room was just next door to Eduardo's apartment, separated by a single skin wall, which formed one side of Eduardo's hallway. The wall was rendered on the hallway side as you would expect, but also on the laundry room side, whereas all the other walls were just painted brick. The laundry room had other distinct qualities too; it was a very dark, small space (less than 10 sq M), it was also an odd five-sided shape, and with no windows.

These conditions lent it a very specific atmosphere, with remnants of its original life, such as capped off pipework coming in and out and a line of sturdy hooks around the wall just above head height. It was apparent that it had been unused or mis-used for some years (since the 1950's we found out, due to a tragic accident), there were layers of different coloured flaking paint (municipal palette), pools of spilt paint on the floor and some gold aerosol-ed graffiti on top.

Whilst there were plenty of interesting aspects to the space, what I became most fascinated by was the separating wall, as dividing element. Eduardo had told us that he hoped he might be able to remove this wall at some point in the future, to expand the footprint of his compact living space. We had discussed the logistics of that: negotiating purchase from the

council; where services might enter and exit; and the nature and material of the wall itself, which was a little mysterious, being plastered on both sides, and in such a utilitarian space.

This and the so-far-only-imagined, enlarged living space made me want to investigate what the wall was made of. By piercing this wall we could provide a glimpse of how the two spaces might feel if connected as one, revealing sight lines from one space to the other. We would also though, discover what the wall was made of, and establish the scale of operation needed to remove it.

On its own this might have remained an imagined idea, perhaps best put off until Eduardo had established a plan with the council. Introducing large holes through the wall, would produce cores, from the drilling process, as a kind of archaeological evidence, which could also act as weights, which together with some laundry room hardware (pulleys, hooks, ropes), could make a device that acted as a door closer. The opening and closing of the door would then mean there was a piece of wall traveling up and down in the space as you entered. It would also animate the space by altering the meagre light levels offered by a centrally mounted ceiling light and the three pierced holes in the wall (which turned out to be made of cinder block, which I think was identified by Richard, via his wild knowledge of the fabric of the world).

The whole project was surrounded by a fluid discussion, we talked a lot of other buildings and things related to building things. We talked of Eladio Dieste, a Uruguayan architect and engineer whose work I had only seen in books but was deeply impressed by, who built incredible

huge, yet delicate structures from brick, that looked like they shouldn't stand up.^(fig.1) It turned out that Eduardo's father had commissioned a colleague of Dieste's to build the family house, and Eduardo knew a handful of his buildings in Uruguay. We then talked about books on Dieste, and his writing which echoed some of my own preoccupations: 'For architecture to be truly constructed the materials should not be used without a deep respect for their essence and consequently their possibilities. This is the only way that what we build will have the cosmic economy'.* I had picked up on this quote and was intrigued by his use of the wording 'cosmic economy'. Both words were most likely chosen for their original and fuller meanings; cosmic meaning holistic? and economy referring to resourcefulness? Eduardo described a Brazilian term for another kind of building culture that is common in poorer neighbourhoods around the world; 'puxadinho', which means something like a 'little (improvised) extension'. This reminded us of the work of Mexican artist Abraham Cruzvillegas and an ongoing project of his called Autoconstrucción. This is a term he coined to describe a similar, ad-hoc process of making that stemmed from a childhood upbringing, seeing a suburb of Mexico City stretch via varied interventions with available materials. Maiko introduced to the conversation, a group of Japanese artists I wasn't familiar with, called Mono Ha, and particularly a work from 1968 by Nobuo Sekine called Phase - Mother Earth^(fig.2), a project that shared a loose conceptual similarity with my proposal for the laundry room wall.

Writing this now, makes me aware that we all share a kind of anthropological interest in how things are made and how different

cultures create things in different places and at different times, but which can share certain qualities. It's a little like the concept behind the Pitt Rivers Museum, where the focus is on a particular archetype regardless of geographic or historical provenance, which shifts the view more towards specific things. It probably also explains a bit our interest in the nature of things and the making of them, how they can hold a certain kind of power, which language sometime fails to properly describe? And maybe that sums up what we all spend a lot of our lives thinking about, which is how quite everyday things can also be quite special?

Michael Marriott



(fig.1)



(fig.2)

* Remo Pedreschi, *Eladio Dieste, The Engineer's Contribution to Contemporary Architecture* (London: Thomas Telford, 2000), 21.





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ON THE BLINK

Think how many dates and times you encounter in a day. Public time has receded. The stuck church clock and the reluctant radial sweeps of municipal and railway timepieces can still be shared as daily snap shots. But it's the minuscule calibrations of the passing days and nights blinking at us, awake or asleep, which constitute our collective twenty-four hour datum.

You can check out time using timeless methods. You can watch the fall of light, you can plot shadows. You can count tree rings, calculate girth, notate the seasons and weigh up why dawn differs from dusk. You can chart wear and tear, the theadbaring of clothes, the staining of furnishings, the flakings of paint, the perishings of rubbers, the soleing of shoes, the shoeing of horses and the mossings of roofs.

As you read this, what lies nearby? The day's date on the newspaper, the time on the cooker, the postmark and the till receipt? The bankcard and the sell-by coded pint of milk, the rail ticket and the snapshot of the family pet? The passport and that outdated membership card?

What if cities were this assiduous? Why is there no edict to put everything in its time and place? What if, like food, everything (yes, every thing) bore its place of origin, its pedigree and its 'date'?

Every brick, every pane of glass, every rail and pole, every timber element, every slate and tile, every nail and screw and coat of paint, all the paving, all the asphalts and all the aggregates and mortars.

All the topographies and every planted tree, every roof line, every party wall. Every conduit, every duct, every cable. The parade of static tyres processing along the gutter demarcate kerb from the highway. They each carry their moulded synthesised provenance.

Victorians dated their buildings, Parisians stamp their pavements, the Swiss time their trains. Americans put up storey lines, but omit the 'e'. We tell tall stories.

Humans invent and mark anniversaries, popping open bottles that tell us where and when they are from, breaking fresh bread and slicing into matured cheese. Memorialisers.

The invitation to make an exhibition in an abandoned laundry room in Balin House, a 1938 block of municipal housing in the Borough, once upon a time in Bermondsey, now in Southwark, throws down a personal and a political marker.

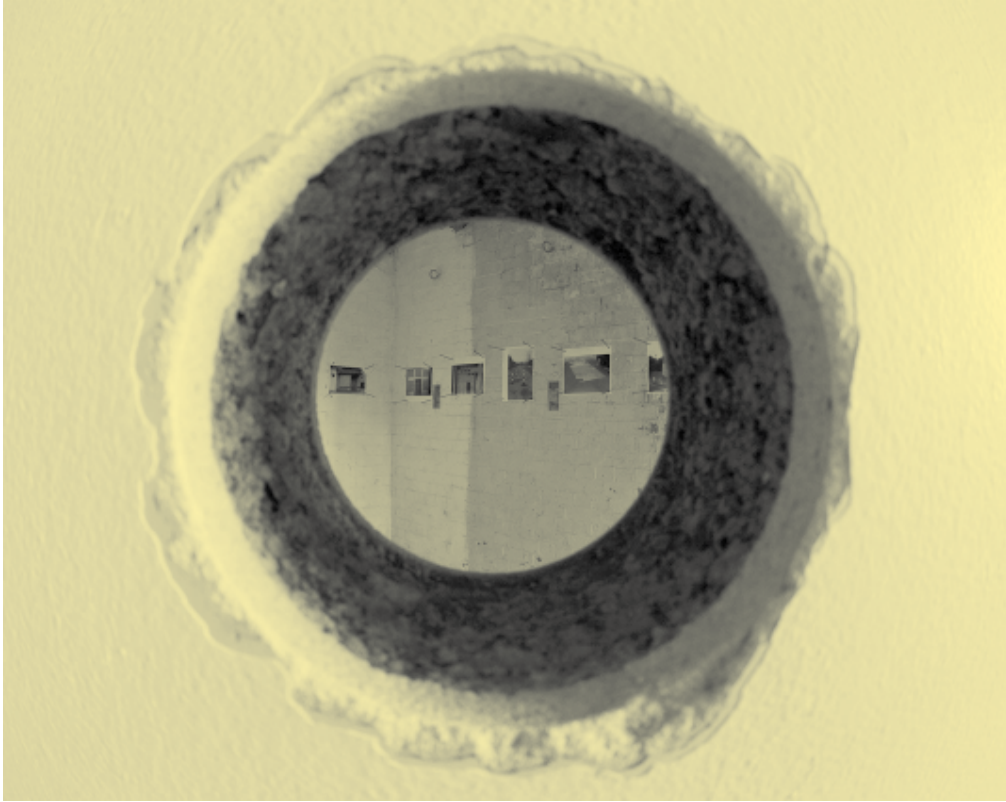
It's just a ten-minute walk from the flat I occupied forty years ago. From this student eyrie I watched the erasing of the 1890s street plan and the optimistic formulation of the Heygate Estate. Nearby I enjoyed the amenity of the freshly completed Bricklayers Arms roundabout and overpass.

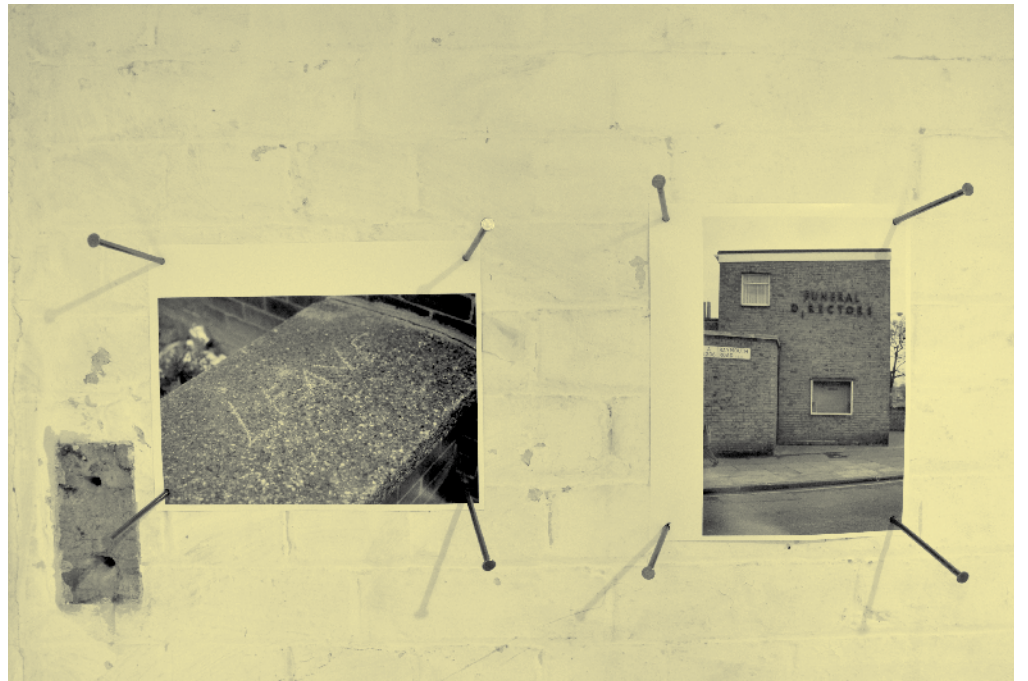
All my to-ings and fro-ings to Balin House were overseen by the topping out of Renzo Piano's Shard, blinking like an inland lighthouse.

Things come, things go. Some times are seen as special, and we 'make time' to do them.

Richard Wentworth





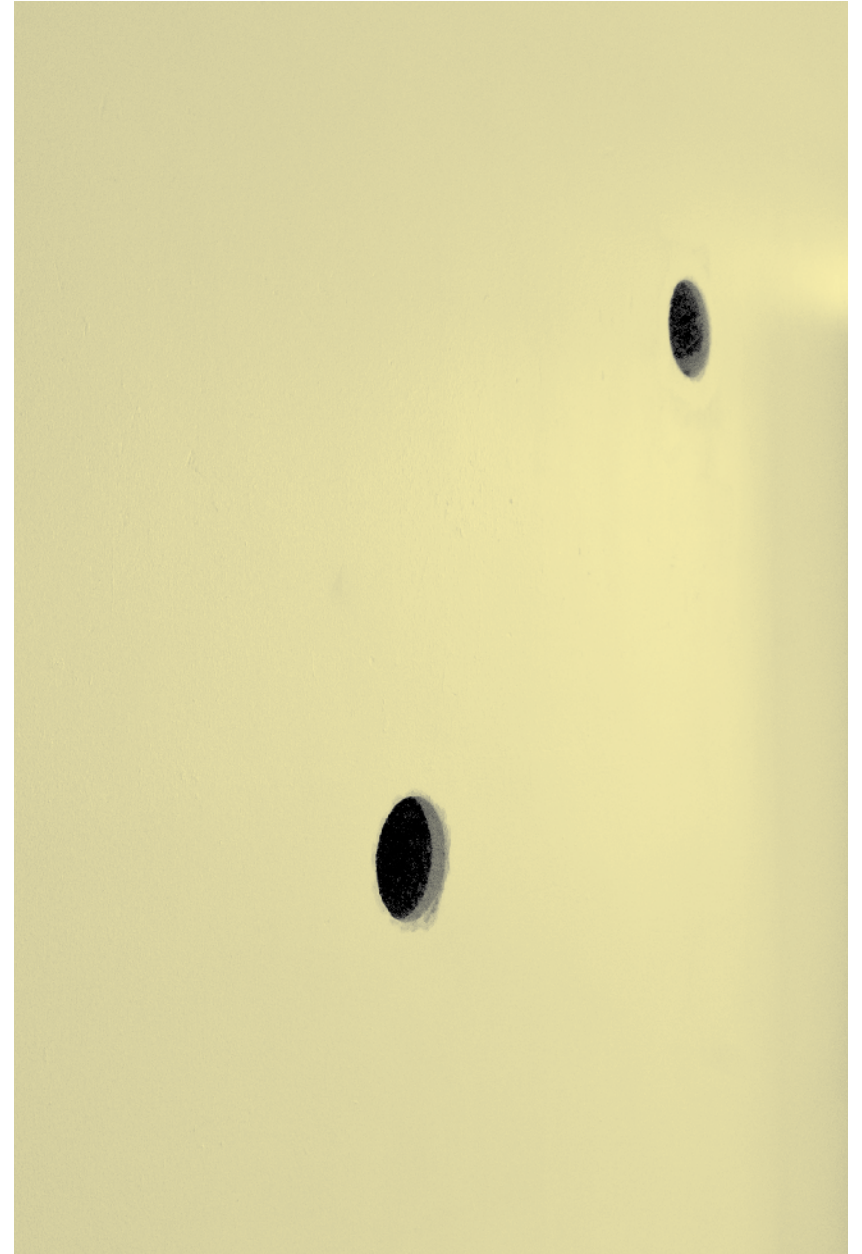


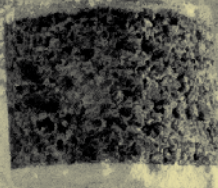


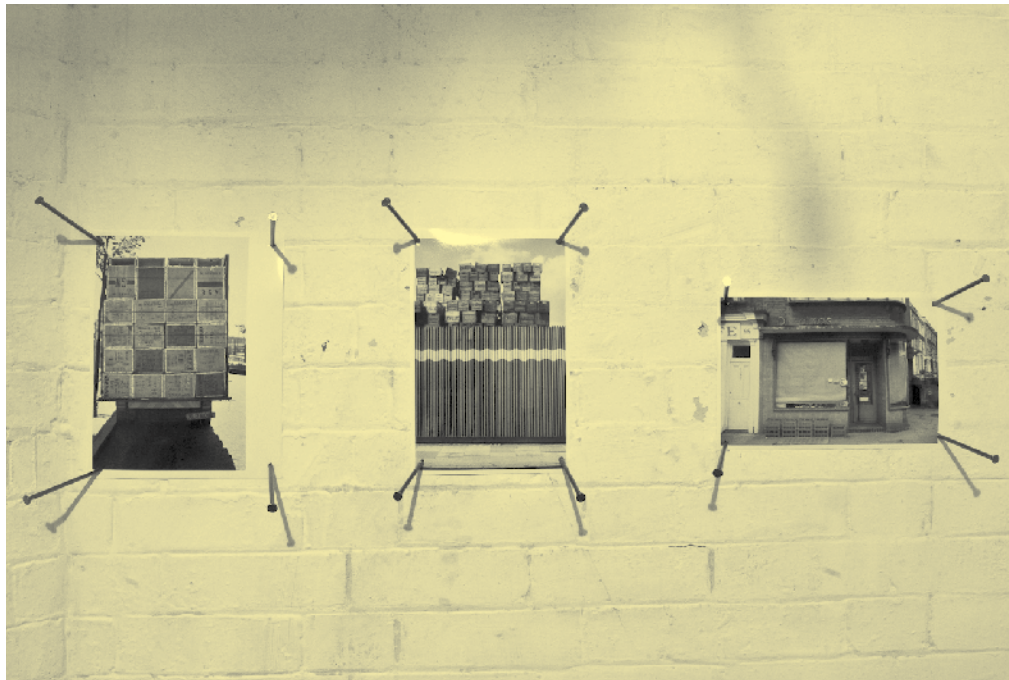
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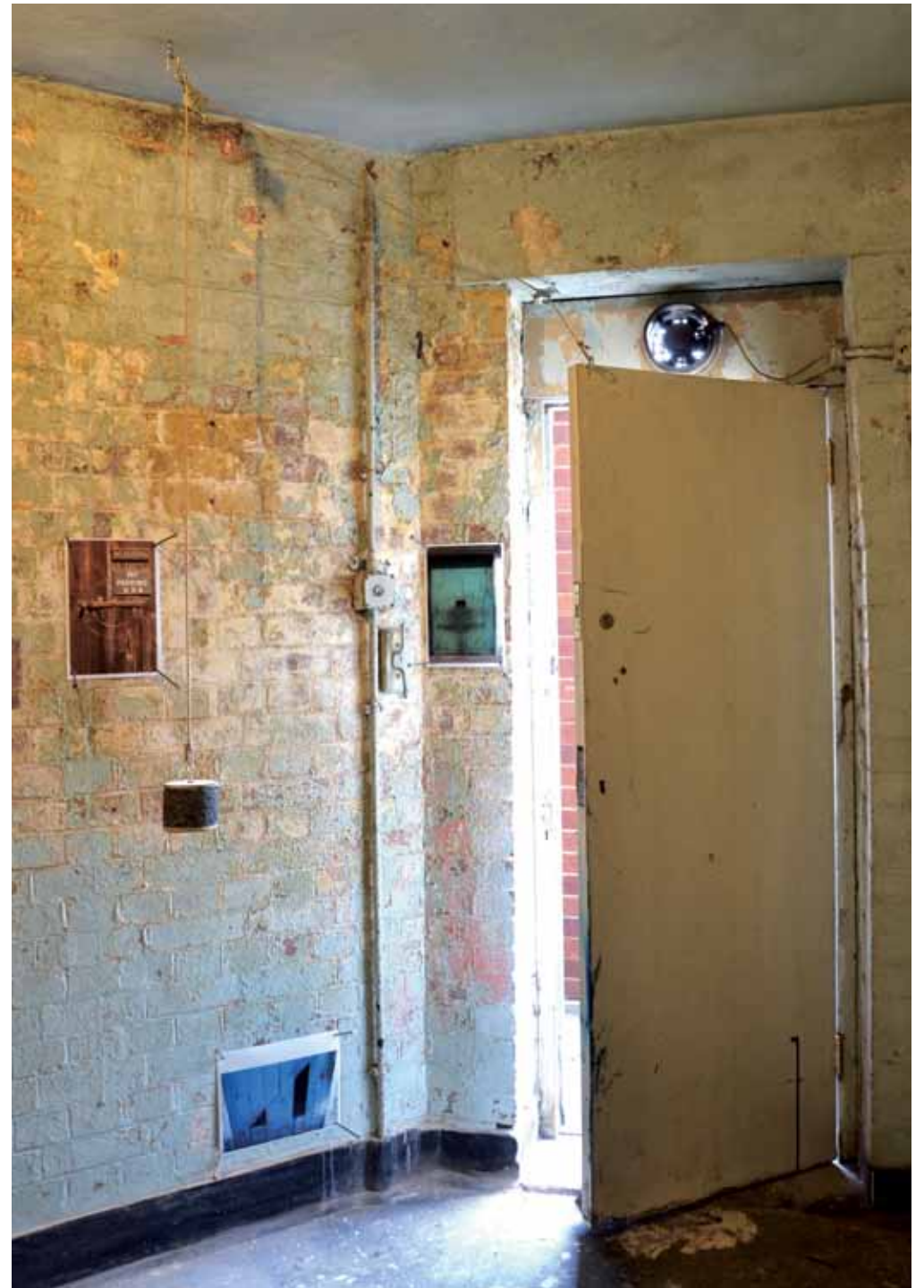


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**MATERIAL /
GESTURE /
LANGUAGE**

This text is my attempt to capture the essence of the ‘unspoken’ that was present in the gestures and conversations that took place during the course of The Laundry Room project. It is something of an elusive quality, which cannot be made visible or tangible by simply recording and printing a dialogue. It is more than the words that were said, existing in the gaps between the words. It also reflects the cultural conditions present in our gestures, proverbs and memories. While *The Laundry Room* is the product of dialogues and gestures, language played as important a part as its physical and visual elements. Like buildings, different languages also reflect the characteristics of the people they belong to, subtly telling us how a particular people from a particular place think and act - evident, for example, in the manner in which things are named (or unnamed).¹ The project is as much about the people whose lives we have imagined and talked about as it is about the ones who are present, experiencing the layers and residues of history the place enfolds while being part of this process of continuous layering and altering.

Our starting point was a shared language – materials and a built environment. For me, the world has always been very ‘material’, something I first realised when I cut my thumb as a toddler while trying to sharpen a pencil. Despite the incident, when I started school my parents gave me a knife to sharpen my own set of pencils, banning the use of my father’s electric sharpener. Through making and using tools, as well as improvising with available stuff – mostly for

the purpose of play – I became accustomed to the language of ‘how things work’. Working within the community of designers and makers, I have come across many people with good insights into why certain objects and buildings are in the way they are. This power – or agency – of things, places and situations that evoke memories, thoughts and actions sometimes so powerfully, has been my object of pursuit for many years.²

What came up repeatedly in our conversations was the history (or histories) of a given place – its layers, buildings and cultures – and how much the way in which cities develop reveals the characteristics and tendencies of the people in them, as well as their geopolitical circumstances. In this context, we also talked about the significance of the act of making do, in the making of the history of places. The act of devising a temporary solution is a gesture that leaves its trace in tangible forms, disclosing the intentions of the originators as a response to specific problems and needs in a specific place and time. In *The Public and Its Problems*, John Dewey wrote: ‘a public does not pre[-]exist its particular problem but emerges in response to it’.³ In this perspective, the traces of actions such as building, mending and altering are visible remnants of the public(s) that once existed in places that are in a constant state of flux. The location of *The Laundry Room* carries you to different times in the past. At the same time, as the room has become part of the BalinHouseProjects’s narrative and transition, it is also a place of the future as well as the present in which our conversations and actions – drilling the holes, engaging with the past, imagining the future – belong(-ed). In this sense, time and causality became less rigid and linear in the space. Bernard Lahire articulated



this state of interconnectedness, of the present and past, memories, actions and imagination, in *The Plural Actor*: ‘in these triggers of schemes of action (habits of thought, language, movement . . .) the past is at the same time so present and so totally invisible, so perfectly imperceptible as such, that, as distinct from memory, it is confused with perception, appreciation or gesture’.⁴

My interest lies in what these traces of action and intentionality offer us when we encounter them; particularly in the way we ‘read’ gestures, intentions, compromises, wishes and decisions of others, that are imbued in the built/made things. How can such an encounter work in the same way as seeing a screenshot from a movie, triggering something in you before unfolding the rest of the story in front of your eyes? Although this occurrence of ‘unfolding’ is not always obvious, material condition often tells you a great deal about how it came to be: its conditions are shaped by nature’s principles and/or human actions. When I think of such a cycle of action and perception, I often think of my childhood memories of the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka, to which my family made frequent visits. There, after marvelling at the beautifully crafted tools and other ethnological artefacts, we watched hundreds of videos about peoples of the world making tools, shelters and all sorts of other instruments then using them in their everyday rituals and special occasions. The experience revealed how tools enable humans to connect their psyches to the physical world. As the anthropologist Tim Dant wrote in *Materiality and Society*: ‘the material life of a people is inseparable from the religion, rituals or customs of their cultural existence’.⁵

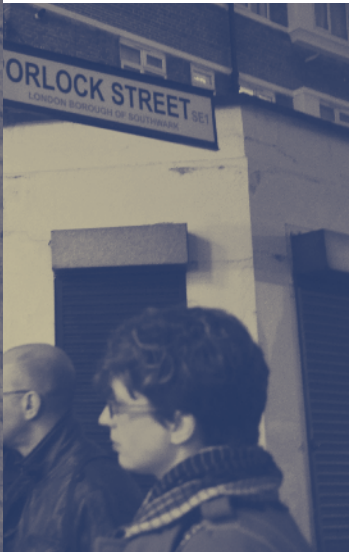
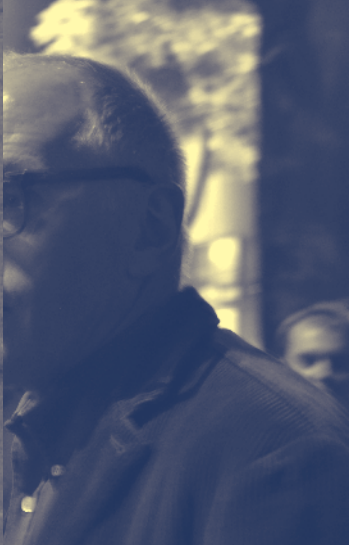
I like Dant’s use of the phrase ‘cultural resonance’: ‘. . . we are always living with the things that have been produced within our society, things which have a cultural resonance that makes the flow of our lives feel familiar, just as much as the sound of our language does.’⁶ I think cultural resonance is the echo from the originators of the objects – their intentionalities, which triggered the act of making, altering or intervention, as well as the social and historical factors that may have influenced their decision-making. Dant argued that agency of objects originates in the agency of human actions, thus they are ‘essentially human agency transferred to material objects’.⁷ In the passage where he examines the work of French psychoanalyst Serge Tisseron, Dant wrote: ‘material objects act as a conduit that extends the agency of the body and the person into the world while also providing a channel from the world back into the person. Things are agents of the self but also of the society towards the individual . . .’.⁸ Here, gestures and actions play the key role as catalyst so that an object can become the carrier of human agency. As quoted in *Materiality and Society*, Tisseron referred to ‘the agency of things as “reversible” in the sense that they carry memories, signs, social relationships to the person but can then be used by the person to express and manage personality and an emotional life’.⁹ This ‘reversible-ability’ of things, which may be a bit like the ‘reverse engineering’ of a radio, helps explain how things potentially embody and evoke stories and actions. As Dant wrote, the relations between human beings and the objects they live with ‘. . . are at once tactile and visual, practical and symbolic’, and that ‘to engage with the material stuff that surrounds us is to unlock the human agency that has been “congealed” within it . . .’.¹⁰ When I think about my habit of spotting

an oddity – and the occasional humour within it – in a familiar environment, I often recall the broken door I saw on my usual bus journey back in my hometown. One day, a broken corner of a sliding door that belonged to a house facing the road caught my eye. It looked like it had been given a temporary fix but it stayed in the same state for the next 10 years or so. Each time I got on the bus, I looked at it and wondered about the story behind it. (The house was obviously inhabited, though I never saw a person using the door.) I was surprised to discover that my sister, who often took the same bus route, had never noticed the door. So the broken door didn’t quite exist in her world, nor did the possibility of the imagined stories surrounding it:

Objects are for us, often without our recognizing it, the companions of our actions, our emotions and our thoughts. They not only accompany us from the cradle to the grave. They precede us in the one and survive us in the other. Tomorrow they will speak our language. But are they not already speaking to us, and sometimes much better than with words?¹¹

Maiko Tsutsumi

1. E.g. As exemplified by the word *puxadinho*, mentioned in Michael Marriott’s text in this book.
2. Some of the most useful tools I have ‘borrowed’ while exploring these subjects in the context of design practice were studies of the experience of the ‘artwork’ from philosophical and anthropological perspectives: e.g. Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*; John Dewey, *Art As Experience*; Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency*. Also equally informative were the works on materiality by Daniel Miller, Grant McCracken, Tim Dant and Jane Bennett.
3. Quoted in Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 100. Bennett refers to Dewey’s notion of a public in the passage in which she considers a political system as a kind of ecosystem.
4. Bernard Lahire, *The Plural Actor* (Cambridge: Polity Press: 2011), 72.
5. Tim Dant, *Materiality and Society* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2005), 3.
6. *Ibid.*, ix.
7. *Ibid.*, 60.
8. *Ibid.*, 64.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 146.
11. *Ibid.*, 108. Tisseron quoted by Dant. Original source: Serge Tisseron, *Comment l’esprit vient aux objets*.





Bain House
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