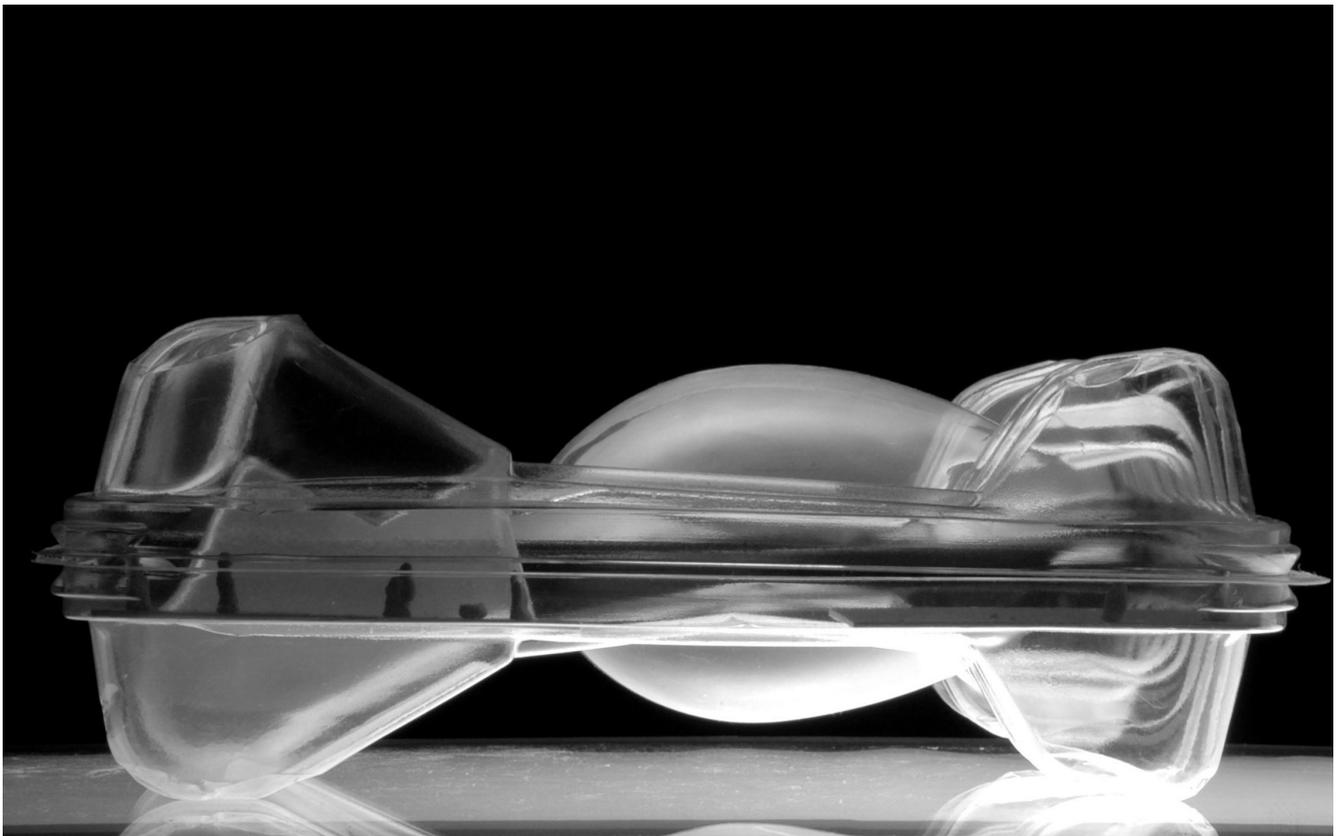


Phoenix Rising

Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane

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Mary-Ruth Walsh



Mary-Ruth Walsh, *Inhabiting Translucence*

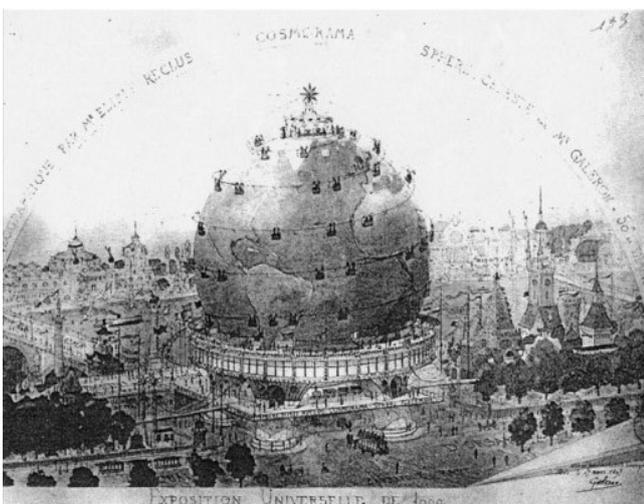
Logan Sisley: Both the video and the sculpture you are showing in *Phoenix Rising* relate to the mechanics of vision and how the viewer moves within a space – be it a gallery or a city – in order to see and understand. How do you understand the relationship between vision and knowledge?

Mary-Ruth Walsh: Vision and knowledge are strange bedfellows; how we perceive a space or a city is different for each person. Perceiving a city is not only visual, our five senses, perhaps a sixth sense, hunches, intuitions and curiosity all come into play. They help us negotiate and understand the city, which becomes different for every person.

Plato considered vision as humanity's greatest gift, so ocular centred vision has been around for a long time. We continue to be embedded in a history of vision as the central way to perceive; such as the use of a single point perspective in the Renaissance which rooted the viewer in one fixed place. This is embedded in western culture and can be quite a reductive way to experience a city. Perceiving the world through vision alone was challenged in art practices during the 50s and 60s. I'm thinking of the American sculptor Tony Smith's *Wandering Rocks*, titled after Joyce's *Ulysses*. These sculptures are shaped to make it impossible to anticipate views until one moves around them. As you walk through them they have unexpected shapes, it's like walking through a city and finding some detail or view you never experienced before. The Irish

philosopher and mathematician George Berkeley brilliantly demonstrated the conundrum and psychology of vision in his Treatise. It was exploited, albeit reductively, in the *Father Ted* sitcom (1) when Fr. Ted explains to his non-too-bright curate Dougal, “Now concentrate this time, Dougal. These (he points to some plastic cows on the table) are very small; those (pointing at some cows out of the window) are far away...”

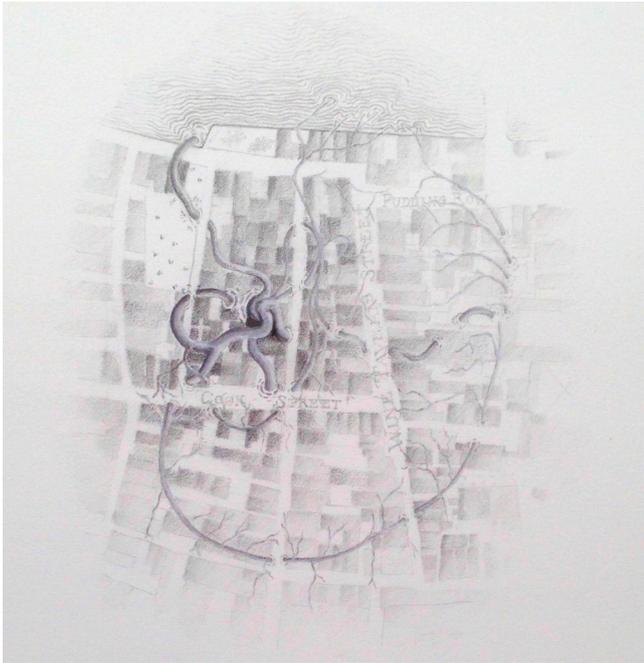
Another unreliable visual is Google Maps that shows earth as a luminous blue globe clothed in swirling white cloud. Earth from space-distance induces a glow of recognition and appeals to all. Zooming in we see a speck of landmass, identifying country, city then street, pinpointing out position on earth, adding a sense of belonging and a further assurance of location. Maps validate our existence. Maps are synonymous with knowledge, presuming if you can see it you understand it. Yet, Geddes’ friend the geographer Élisée Reclus knew two-dimensional maps could not accurately describe the world. Hence he began his quest for a way to describe or map the world. The results were his extraordinary mega spheres that contained a globe and a series of external stairs for people to literally walk around the earth. To this day mapping remains problematic, not only for what is put in and what is left out, but also how to describe a three-dimensional presence on flat paper or on the surface of a computer screen. Hence Google Maps claims to be on a ‘never-ending quest for the perfect map’. (2)



Project Cosmorama designed by Albert Galeron (after Reclus). From, Soizic Alavoine-Muller, A globe for the Universal Exhibition of 1900. The geographical utopia of Reclus, L'Espace géographique, 2003/2 (vol. 32)

The idea of mapping is present in the sculptures here in The Hugh Lane as they create or invent ‘new ground’. These interstitial spaces in unmapped places are fertile ground ready to project imagined places and utopian living. I use miniaturisation as a strategy producing seductive surfaces for imagined habitations made from discarded packaging. A landscape within a landscape. Susan Stewart described miniature as ‘the daydream of the microscope, the daydream of life inside life’. (3) Furthermore miniaturisation skews the time and space relation of the everyday world and enters the ‘infinite time of reverie’. In the constructed worlds of the developer’s plans, the architect’s models and my sculptural works time stands still while all the external world progresses. Miniaturisation became popular with the event of the Industrial Revolution; partly due to the desire to contain the ever-expanding world that opened with high-speed rail travel. Reducing scale rationalises space by containing it. Contained space is safe and closed off. Furthermore, aerial views obscure detail and freeze the gaze. This perspective visually empowers the viewer. Aerial views are seductively beautiful and inspire a feeling of omnipotence and supremacy. Siegfried Kracauer coined this view of the city as “mass ornament”. Brian O’Doherty describes the aerial view thus: ‘With the changes in scale, responses slide from the particular to the general. The individual is replaced by the race and we are a pushover for the race – a mortal biped, or a tangle of them spread out below like a rug. From a certain height people are generally good. Vertical distance encourages this generosity. Horizontality doesn’t seem to have the same moral virtue.’ (4)

Helicopter flyovers of Dublin city were favoured in Celtic Tiger times not only as the mode of transport *de rigueur* but also to consume the city’s parcels of land for potential development. Consuming these spaces through mapping and planning then overlaying the miniature plan of apartment blocks onto the world of clay and concrete created a disjuncture. The concrete objects of the sensual, physical world can’t relate to the miniature. In an earlier work I made titled *Real Estate*, an estate of town houses was erected without planning permission in St. Patrick’s Close, Dublin. Although the disjuncture between the real and virtual estate was prominent, what was notable was the public’s strong desire to buy into a space to live, to establish a home. Those who bought a house readily projected themselves into



Mary-Ruth Walsh, *Body & City Drawings: The Circulation of the Stomach down Cook Street up Wine Tavern Street & into Pudding Row*

that space. Katherine Waugh's brilliant essay *I'm forever Blowing Bubbles* responds to *Real E-State's* performance cum installation, expanding on the ideas of the virtual and on my interest in Swiftian themes.

How has your research into Geddes changed or enhanced your thinking about the city?

It was wonderful to be introduced to Geddes. He was a remarkable thinker and I really like his idea of layered maps of Dublin showing multiple perspectives of the same city. His use of numerous lenses, the microscope and camera obscura all contributed to a rich textural view of a city and is the premise for my film titled *Take a deep breath now*. His use of medical terms to describe buildings like 'diagnosis before treatment' and 'conservative surgery' has some parallels with ideas in my *Body and City Drawings*. It's also a great way to approach conserving and renewing an old city like Dublin. I adopted his motto 'by leaves we live' for some of the images in my film. It would be great if Dublin city also adopted that motto in a community-spirited way. Geddes' daughter Norah also influenced the city by changing small open derelict sites in slum areas into playgrounds for children. On 3rd April 1912 *The Irish Times* reported the opening of St. Augustine Street playground which 'contains an ample space where children may play at their games to their heart's content; a

sand pit, where infants may amuse themselves free from harm, a convenient shower-bath, which will be used under supervision, and a number of cradles in which babies may enjoy the air in comfort and safety. Every day a trained nurse will attend to watch over children who are under the age for school'. (5) The same article paid tribute to Norah Geddes' skill and tenacity in setting up the playgrounds. It is telling to compare how we consider children's welfare today. Hence I've dedicated my film titled *Take a deep breath now* to Norah Geddes.

Can you discuss how you apply different visual languages – photography, video, drawing and sculpture – to reflect on our built environment?

In a way my work is about using the language of seductive surfaces such as lens-based images; photographs, film (6) and drawings to describe different ways of seeing built spaces. As Juhani Pallasmaa noted, buildings help define what would otherwise be a limitless space. (7) Buildings create an inside and outside. They provide a location for us to identify with, limiting space and creating an inside from which to view the world outside. Each visual language I use, be it drawing, sculpture, photography or film reflects different ways of seeing. In part, it's about the mediation of space, and art, through the lens and through the medium of computer, internet, magazines and books. I'm interested in what happens in that gap between the real object and its two-dimensional representation. To me that gap is full of promises and denials, of realities and unrealities, of improbabilities and possibilities. That interstitial, unmapped space is a rich and fertile place for my art practice.

Can you talk about your interest in transparency in architecture? What does this mean to you and what are its implications?

Transparent building, we are led to believe, laid bare what was heretofore the private interior. Excessive use of glass, with the idea of diminishing the barrier between inside and outside has in fact made this dynamic more cloaked and complex. Transparency expressively changes people's behaviour. From Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon to Le Corbusier's theories of air, space and light, the idea of seeing and being seen as radically altered the physicality and psychology of urban landscapes.

The complexities of transparency multiply when it is scrutinized. Is there really such a thing as transparency? Glass' leading feature, Edgar Allan Poe tells us is glitter. He notes its false principles; its flickering and unique lights are sometimes pleasing to children and idiots alike. (8) Buildings in transparent materials mirror their surroundings; for example one of New York's glass skyscrapers appears to have no substance, there is no façade, it mimics the sky, it is the materiality of reflection. Standing in front of such a building become an exercise in self observation as the reflected self parades up and down mindlessly mimicking your every move. The building denies your gaze by reflecting it back. Glass may be transparent but glass buildings are not. It is no accident that Edward Hopper removed the glass from his haunting images of urban reverie; unglazed windows allowed him to penetrate human consciousness to extraordinary depths.

Transparency is fetishised in architectural plans and models. The two-dimensional illustrative plan of a building shows layers of substrata, foundations, floors, ceilings and roofs layered up to complete a structure, indicating X-ray vision. More telling is the architect's plan of a city, laid out as a model, usually made of transparent materials - Plexiglas, glass or alabaster - often lit from within heightening the glitter effect. These Perspex boxes seduce the viewer into a utopian transparent city, instead of revealing all; the city becomes reflective and disrupts the dialogue of inside and outside. These miniature representations of buildings become sculptural or fetish objects of desire far removed from the reality of construction.

The transparent building denies or negates the human presence. However it makes great ocular centred imagery, especially for the camera which Le Corbusier was so taken with. Yet Adolf Loos, Eileen Gray and Sigfried Giedion understood the need for human scale and not to look at buildings

as visual images alone, but to engage all the senses when experiencing built space; the 'feel' of the materiality and the sound or echo of the interior.

Virtual and real experience is radically different. I'm thinking of the smooth white paper with a two-dimensional drawing of a house plan versus the finished house with textured surfaces and a physical presence. Often this transition from two-dimensional to three doesn't go so well. But when it goes right the results are beautiful spaces like Charlemont House where this gallery is housed.

NOTES

- 1 *Father Ted* was a sitcom produced by independent production company Hat Trick Productions for British broadcaster Channel 4. It was an all-Irish cast.
- 2 James Wan for Think Africa Press, 'Why Google Maps gets Africa wrong', *The Guardian*, Wednesday 2 April 2014: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/02/google-maps-gets-africa-wrong>
- 3 Susan Stewart, (1984) *On Longing; Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Johns Hopkins University Press. p54 & p65
- 4 Brian O'Doherty, (1976) *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. Artforum magazine, America. p13.
- 5 *The Irish Times*, 3rd April, 1912, p.10
- 6 I call my moving image work 'film' as opposed to video as the making and collecting of images and editing is more akin to cutting and splicing associated with celluloid film.
- 7 Juhani Pallasmaa, (2005) *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*. Wiley-Academy, England.
- 8 Edgar Allan Poe, (1840) *The Philosophy of Furniture*.



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