

## REFLECTIONS OF AN URBAN SPACE: FROM WALKING TO MAKING

Simon Swale

### INTRODUCTION

This artist's page contextualises my recent studio practice of jewellery and small object making.

This studio work is framed by various discourses relating to a general consideration of the contemporary urban environment, particularly as experienced in everyday life. This includes the reflection that urban experiences may be both understood by, and performed through, various forms of material culture that we encounter in our day-to-day lives, often encountered through the act of walking. Thus, for me walking has become part of a critical practice of experiencing and 'learning' the city, especially the environment and neighbourhood in which I live: Port Chalmers, Dunedin.

As a working port, Port Chalmers operates as a gateway for the entry and exit of material goods around the world. Many traces of these goods can be found strewn across the landscape near the port: rubbish, empty and discarded packaging, as well as detritus from the port such as barcoded dockets and other tagging systems, and rope and tape and other securing materials. It is examples such as these which I gather and reflect upon, reinterpreting these forms in metal – brass and stainless steel. These objects may then be worn or carried on the body, extending the narrative of travel, hopefully bringing the owner to reflect on both the landscape from whence they originated and the discourses of globalisation of which material culture is symptomatic.

### WALKING

For me, walking had been a simple act – a means of connecting A to B. At some point walking became more than walking. Walking became a process and, while my work is not about walking, it is work that could not have happened without walking. Walking connected me to the landscape from which I drew both inspiration and materials. Walking became part of my reflective practice. Walking has forced me to consider space and the movement of both people and commodities. In exploring the minutiae of daily life, I began to extrapolate outwards, exploring the human effects of globalisation. This was an unintended but significant development: "knowing the world through the body and the body through the world ... the experience by which we understand our body in relationship to the world."<sup>1</sup> It was not simply my own body I was now considering, however, but the lives and bodies of others involved in the flows of globalisation, and the human stories behind the flow of material culture.

Walking now underpins how I conceive, negotiate, discuss and formulate my studio practice, which responds directly to the detritus I find while walking through various urban spaces.



Figure 1. Beach Street / Peninsula–Beach Road,  
Port Chalmers, 2018.

## SPACE

Many of the material inspirations, indeed some of the materials used in my work, come from a stretch of land between the township of Port Chalmers and the nearby yacht club. This corridor is positioned tightly between the fence line of Port Otago, on one side, and an eroding cliff face on the other – the result of previous excavation and expansion carried out by Port Otago (Figure 1).

In many ways, it is a hard landscape to make sense of; it is at once a pedestrian pathway, a road and a railway track, facilitating travel utilising various means, various subjects and various objects. As a passage of transience it is hard to define, and the lack of continuity of its many functions further problematises this environment. Railway tracks, for instance, recessed in the bitumen, track with the road before veering off behind a Port Otago fence (Figure 2). Behind this fence, logs pile high in steel bays that resemble



Figure 2. Walkway/railway/road, Port Chalmers, 2018.

monstrous bookends. The footpath stops abruptly as erosion lays its claim, and shipping containers, laid end to end, act as breakers. Between cliff and containers – dirt, rubble, rock. Between containers and fence – windswept detritus. Logging tickets, barcodes, industrial packing wrap, the lids of disposable coffee cups, chewing gum and cigarette packets ... Pedestrians are forced onto a narrow pathway on the road, demarcated by a repetition of low concrete girders – scanty protection from the oncoming logging trucks which sweep around the corner ...

There is a lack of clear topographical references (maps show this passage labelled 'Beach Street' at one end and 'Peninsula–Beach Road' at another – but where does one space end and another begin?). For me, this reinforces this landscape's uniquely transitory nature, a space approaching Marc Augé's concept of 'Non Place.' For Augé, Non Place is a distinctly postmodern phenomenon involving "considerable physical modifications: urban connections, movements of population,"<sup>12</sup> typified by spaces such as refugee camps, airports and motorways. Thus it is not just the objects found within this space that speaks of the postmodern condition, but the very spaces in which they are found. As a passage of transit, this narrow corridor of space is increasingly delocalised and disconnected from its history and culture. I wonder whether my interventions into this space and the work I make in consequence can transform the discourse of this space?

## OBJECTS

I fossick in the dirt and under bushes, behind fences, searching for memories, traces and visitations. I find cigarette packets from around the world, empty and wet and muddy. Sodden, broken, ephemeral. These are traces of travel and movement – of tourists, sailors, port workers, locals, the kinds of "authentic fragments of daily life" that Walter Benjamin believed "say more than a painting."<sup>13</sup> The reclamation of found objects from the urban environment allows us to consider "its entire past, whether this concerns the origin and objective characteristics of the thing or the details of its ostensibly external history: previous owners, price of purchase, current value and so on ... All of these ... come together ... to form a whole magical encyclopaedia, a world order."<sup>14</sup> To me, these discarded cigarette packets exemplify the global cultural economy,<sup>15</sup> emblematic of the constant flow of labour, technology and capital across geographical boundaries. Cigarette packets present narratives and conversations concerning real or imagined worlds.



Figure 3. Simon Swale, *Insignificant Artefact I*, 2018, stainless steel.



Figure 4. Simon Swale, *Insignificant Artefact II*, 2018, spray-painted stainless steel.





Figure 5. Simon Swale, *Insignificant Artefact III*, 2018, stainless steel.



Figure 6. Simon Swale, *Insignificant Artefact IV*, 2018, spray-painted stainless steel.

In an attempt to know, to decode, to understand, I recreate discarded cigarette boxes and other ephemera in stainless steel and brass. Memorialising, rarefying, recontextualising – a consideration of the stories of these objects and the people who have held them. In the recreation of the ephemeral in the durable a narrative is entered into. But it is a narrative whose beginnings we can only imagine – the histories of objects we encounter in the practice of our everyday lives preface our own experiences of them.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have outlined the conceptual foundation of my current practice as a Master of Fine Art candidate in jewellery and metalwork at the Dunedin School of Art. This work is grounded in a critical and reflective practice that has engaged with a specific urban site near Port Otago in Port Chalmers, Dunedin. Walking has become part of my methodology, both as part of my reflective practice and also as a means of direct engagement with that physical space. I have sought to conceive of this space critically and conceptually through the lens of urban theory, correlating it with a discourse of the global cultural economy and of contemporary material culture. These combined perspectives have informed my ongoing studio work as I seek to develop my practice in direct relationship to the spaces that have informed it.



Figure 7. Simon Swale, *Insignificant Artefact V*, 2018, spray-painted stainless steel.

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- 1 Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (London: Granta, 2014), 29.
- 2 Augé, Marc, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London and New York: Verso, 2008), 34.
- 3 Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in his *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978).
- 4 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 207.
- 5 See Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Culture Economy," in his *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation* (Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota, 1996), 27-47.