

John Seth

[...]

— A Go on then.

B What, from here?¹

— *Altered tracks* (1987): the floor is marked with lines using ground black charcoal. On a far wall, four photographs are hung low. The photographs are of maps carrying Irish place names; parts of the maps are obscured by stones. A muted voice-over, of three voices, accounts what sounds like a palm reading session: the telling of a 'life narrative' as somehow fore-written.² A figure, any figure, a woman, bare footed, carrying stones, takes a measured walk along a line on the floor making decisions on direction at the points where the line forks. Stopping occasionally she carefully places, one by one, the stones on the lines. The procedure appears to be strategic and predetermined. Perhaps not. In this manner she walks along each line. As she walks the black lines are smudged. Eventually, the black lines are virtually erased. No, not erased; the lines remain, but like a trodden path, worn, its edges no longer clearly differentiated, indistinct.

The work appears to speak an identity. The reading of the palm suggests a conferring of an identity that is indicated, indexed³ even, upon the very surface of the body. The tracks marked on the floor determine the movement of the action of walking. However, it is the action itself that undoes this narrative. Within the determinism of the tracks, the actions of the body (the artist) counter the narrative. The lines are smudged, the placing of stones becomes stoppages. The photographs on the far wall write in another text: a location is specified through maps and Irish place names. The body appears to become 'naturalised' through the location, map, and places names of a particular landscape. Indeed, it might be argued that place here intersects with the body marking a political and autobiographical space as difference.⁴ In this reading identity is returned, through a particular configuration of resistance through difference, as a determinism. However, might there be another configuration of resistance that undermines this narrative's desire for

1 It is, perhaps, a curious undertaking to attempt an identification of a practice. The convention is to mark some beginning point from which a practice progresses. But how is a beginning to be located? Are there perhaps many beginnings? Perhaps, beginnings betray a lie. After all, are not beginnings always only locatable retrospectively, after the event? Importantly, is not the identification of a practice – through beginnings or otherwise – also a kind of marker of an end, the point from which the 'retrospective' is viewed? Moreover, in relation to a 'practice' that confounds identification, how might a beginning be constituted? And whose beginning, mine? Is this a beginning ... or a point of departure?

2 The three voices are of the artist and two other voices that sound, through the accents of 'Standard English' and 'Irish', an identification of cultural and social differences.

3 The term 'index' belongs to the sign system of C S Pierce: symbol, icon, index. The symbol is a sign that bears an arbitrary relation to the idea or thing that it stands in for, but one that is nevertheless socially agreed on (eg traffic signs). The icon is a sign of resemblance where the sign looks like the object it is standing in for. For Pierce, the index is a 'natural' sign (eg the most commonly used example is that of a hand to a hand-print in sand, or that of smoke being an index of fire). In this sense the index implies a 'presence'. I am also indebted to Rosalind Krauss' discussion in 'Notes on the index: parts 1 & 2,' (1976, 1977) in *The originality of the avant-garde and other modernists myths*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1985

4 See Fiona Barber, 'Territories of difference: Irish women artists in Britain,' *Third Text* 27, 1994, pp.67–69. See also her 'Strategy of Resistance,' in *FAN*, vol.3, no.3, 1991

identification, a resistance that opens the space of a topology of restlessness?

- The image in the video of the installation *The gap of two birds* (1988 & 89) also follows a track (or a line). Following a track and marking the terrain of the mountain, Maumeen,⁵ the camera, restlessly, hand-held shaking, and in a slowed motion, carries the viewer along. The image cuts between the track being covered, the framing of the horizon, and a spinning round to look back. Where? The terrain already covered? An indication of a hesitancy? One of the photographs within the installation space shows a caravan park. The caravan park marks a geographical location north of the border looking south across Carlingford Lough. Four glass panels that rest on the floor are etched with the words 'north' and 'south': two etched with the word 'north' and two etched with the word 'south'. The performance partly entails the tracing – through a rubbing – of 'north' and then 'south' onto separate strips of paper. The mountain track, whilst not actually located on or near the border, is read into the border narrative. But how does this reading occur? Perhaps the border narrative is traced, then, through the restlessness or hesitancy of the camera movement? A movement, through a displacement, that indexes the terrain. Not through the indexicality of the camera image, but through the body's movement along the terrain. Are we here then back to the artist's body as the site of identity and presence? In the final image on the video the camera spins and rests, freeze frame, on the artist's face. In doing so the point-of-view shot, as the apparent point-of-view of the artist, is undermined. Who is seeing? Which body carries the camera? A no-body?

— A Are you not forgetting?

B What?

A The opening image. A hand, palm turned towards the viewer, drifts downwards across the screen. A ghostly track.

B Yes, how could I forget. The hand, palm turned outwards, beckons.

- The lines walked on, in *Altered tracks*, seem to offer a reading different than that of the lines on the palms of a hand. Not the lines of a map either. It is, rather, in the

5 Translated roughly into English as 'Gap of birds'

alternating space between the lines on the palm and lines on a map. And no, not as a location in the between space of this or that, but as an undecidability. Perhaps one might attempt a reading of *The gap of two birds* into *Altered tracks*, which would entail a re-negotiation, or perhaps a re-articulation of the metaphor of the track and the border. Or, rather, the track and border as a crossing of one another: the track as border. In this contentious geographic space, the border is charged with a determinacy that marks the terrain as either inside or outside – a determinacy that marks the discourse of the nation in the projection of an outside for the process of self-identification. However, in this discourse of the nation the figure of the ‘migrant’ signifies the border as a space of traversal and indeterminacy. The border, here as both inside *and* outside, marks the passage (movement) from an elsewhere to here *and* as a here to an elsewhere. But where here?

- [...] To situate the border. The border cannot be situated as a fixing of a position. The border in its beginning/end, perhaps, cannot be – as the word ‘situate’ suggests – given a location, cannot *be* located. (To situate: to give a site to; to place, locate.) However, in the discourse of identity and the formation of the nation there seems a necessity to make such an identification. An identification that regulates the movement of people: an identification (passport control) for the purposes of inclusion and exclusion. Here the apparent slippage between or across inclusion/exclusion is not an indication of an undecidability. It is, rather, articulated at the level of a stereotype; not as a fixity but a fluid and shifting chain of signifiers that nevertheless mark a distinction between desirable/undesirable – the desirable, here, signifies through a negative identification of the undesirable: immigrant, refugee, terrorist, drug trafficker, contagion, etc. The list might go on. In a general sense, however, the border becomes the site of the regulation of *contagion*. Not as a regulation that silences, but rather a regulation that is spoken, described, legislated, inscribed in case law, and circulated also in popular discourse (newspapers, television, etc.). Perhaps, through the production of knowledge and through this articulation, the border regulation – spoken everywhere – also produces a silencing. The socio-legal discourse of the

border, drawing the object of inspection – the other – into itself, affects a silencing. The other is spoken through this discourse. The regulation, however, can never be complete, can never be total. The border remains porous.

- Is this, then, despite its porosity,⁶ the situation of the border: of regulation and control? Can an undecidability be insinuated into the space of this regulation? Perhaps in this very porosity the border opens itself to an undecidability? The border, of course, is not only a location at the geographical/legal limits of a nation, but also a set of designated sites of entry that can be located anywhere (*eg* airports). Moreover, the border, as limit, margin, end, is also not somehow designated at the points of a nation's relation to its geographical outside: an elsewhere. Rather, the border (as a *figuring* of limits, ends, boundaries) is situated within and at the centre of the nation. If the border is marked by this condition of porosity, then this porosity is part of the very centre of the nation. The nation, in its inability to regulate the contagion of the foreign, is reconfigured as a deformation (as possibly ruin). The sites of porosity might be, like the *stain* of a contagion, an insinuation spreading through everywhere. The consequent inability to identify, as a separating out of constituent parts, suggests the undecidable: neither identity nor its other, but somehow both.

- The porosity of the border now extends both inward *and* outward. Electronic and digital communication systems open the border to the limits of regulation by its (the regulators) inability to identify (fix) this new space of porosity. *Inscribe I* (1994) and *Inscribe II* (1995), in the use of the Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN), locates itself in this fluid and shifting space.⁷ However, in placing itself in such a space, how might the work be identified? Perhaps the work occupies this space as a continuous traversal? In the marking of such a space, the boundary is the site of a relation to the other as risk. Is it possible to *mark* such a space as an indexing? Perhaps the very passage, however instantaneous, indicates such a space as a threshold. What, then, is the image that comes, that traverses such a space? How, do we figure, at this limit-space of the threshold, an image?

6 My thanks to Alex Coles for drawing my attention – although in a different context – to the Walter Benjamin text, 'Naples,' (1924) in *One-way street*, trans. E Jephcott and K Shorter, NLB, London 1979

7 *Inscribe I* (1994) and *II* (1995) were commissioned by the collaborative/curatorial practice Strike (Siraj Izhar). *Inscribe I* situated its space between London and Dublin and in the offices of British Telecom and Telecom Éireann respectively. With *Inscribe II* the work played out a relation between Derry (Orchard Gallery) and London (an empty office space in London Wall Buildings in the City of London)

- *Inscribe II*: On a small video-phone screen we see an image of a hand apparently washing a white wall. The image pixilates with the speeding up, or suddenness, of any movement. However, this breaking up of the image re-composes itself soon enough. Occasionally, the camera pans across the wall, and away from the performed action, to show a cluster of pen nibs that appear to be somehow caught in this wall. Their sharp writing points pinned into the whitewashed brickwork deny their function as part of the instrument for writing. The hand sometimes washes up close to this cluster of pen nibs. The action continues for a period of five hours. No, not a period, a duration. The specific length of time is surely irrelevant; it is simply that the action takes place: here, now, but is continuous.

I am in a disused office space in London. Actually, an office space temporarily out of use: not a space in disuse (as ruin), but one awaiting use, awaiting occupation. The space is divided into a number of rooms. Along and at the end of a narrow but short corridor, onto which a number of these smaller rooms open, a video-phone is located on a plinth (screen A). A further video-phone (screen B) is located directly opposite the entrance door of the office space. On this screen is an image of the entrance doorway of another space. To be precise, screen B presents an image of the rear entrance to this other space (Orchard Gallery in Derry). The video-phones provide a link, via the ISDN, between this office space and the Orchard Gallery. Whilst screen A provides a view of the performed action, screen B provides the possibility of an exchange between the audiences in London and Derry. The exchange is marked by an offering of words; occasionally, the exchange suggests the possibility of contact, but the exchange remains empty. The action, of the hand washing the wall, viewed on screen A continues and, over the duration of time, some of the whiteness of the wall is washed away. Nevertheless, the washing away is neither a cleaning nor an attempt to remove a surface behind which something is to be revealed. It merely registers as an action; or perhaps a kind of non-action.

- The main focal images in both *Inscribe I* and *II* present actions that suggest a kind of textual operation. The scrapping and scratching with a pen nib at a text

stencilled onto a metal surface in *Inscribe I* and the hand washing a white wall in *Inscribe II*. The technological procedure, (via ISDN), that allows for these images' transmission, offers a link as a moment of the *instantaneous* and of *simultaneity*.⁸ Indeed, it is a simultaneity that offers an authentication through the apparent *presence* of the message sender. A presence that places both sender and receiver in the 'same time' and that eradicates – through speed – the time-space of transmission. Paul Virilio refers to this as the effect of 'teleportation' and 'telepresence': a being here and elsewhere at the same time. However, in the moment of teleportation surely the thing transmitted emerges as a re-presentation and thus encounters an absencing. The very process of representation (teleportation) leads to the 'removal' of the object, 'as though the represented object died, were degraded, were disincarnated in its own image.'⁹ In the teleported event, the communication is not with the other through telepresence, but through the other's image mistaken as presence. Moreover, the images – surfaces scratched and scrapped, a hand washing a wall – whilst providing indexical traces, nevertheless refuse any possibility of presence.

— The white wall in *Inscribe II* offers itself as an image. But an image of what? Is this image of the border, a border image; an image of a kind of shimmering distance? An image that is simultaneously not an image? Could this be the threshold of an image? Barely an image, as an image at its beginning; or perhaps, an image withdrawing – at the point of disappearance – barely an image left? And when we attempt to think such an image, are we not thinking simultaneously of an image *at* and *of* the threshold? It is as though the process of washing the wall amounts to a preparation for something yet to come. Or, perhaps, this is an indication of the after of the event, and thus of something having already happened.

— The 'white paintings', (1951) by Robert Rauschenberg, provide a gloss white surface as a reflective plane. Additionally, in the process of making this work, Rauschenberg placed the still wet canvases outside and upon which collected dust, gravel, etc. John Cage has described this surface as an airport for 'lights, shadows, and particles'.¹⁰ Moreover, Cage went on to say that the white paintings 'caught whatever fell upon them.'¹¹ This

8 Paul Virilio, 'The third interval,' in *Art & design profile 24: marking the city boundaries*, 1992, p.81

9 Emmanuel Levinas, 'Reality and its shadow,' in *Collected philosophical papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Martinus Nijhoff, Dordrecht 1987, p.6

10 John Cage, 'On Robert Rauschenberg, artist, and his work,' (1961) in *Silence: lectures and writings*, Marion Boyars, London 1995, p.102.

11 *ibid.*, p.108

surface, then, performs an indexing, not only of the moment of the collecting process of dust, etc., but also of the moment and place of its location for viewing. In this viewing space, light and ghostly images flit across the surface of the painting. However, the indexing – in this particular work – whilst offering a presence that is temporal, spatial, and human, nevertheless remains indeterminate. The authorial identification that is so suggestive in the transparency of the indexical code is undone.

- In performance, how might an action that amounts to nothing be identified? A non-action? If actions, through the relation to meaning, attain significance, then perhaps non-actions break the relation to meaning and are empty. An action – as a sign that harbours the characteristics of indexicality – can never be anything but replete with meaning. In the trace of its movement, the action reveals its self through presence. Clearly not all actions leave traces; however, all actions can potentially leave a mark of its passage, a mark indicating its *having-been-there*. Perhaps in the non-action, the trace as an indexing of presence is incomplete. The index of the non-action – index as the marker of presence – paradoxically reveals an absence: the having-been-there as, instead, a no-longer-there. In the work of Tallentire, the non-action proliferates. It would of course be mistaken to follow this line to the point of a formalism: the emptied sign as pure form. Instead, the actions that undo – refuse, or withhold – the desire for completion, in the emptying out of the indexical sign, fill it with an absenting.

- A And the sign [...] for an ellipsis?
- B Clearly, this is not the same as the index. The index, whilst offering a presence, as an 'emanation of the referent',¹² nevertheless, does so through an absence. The thing indexed is no longer there. The ellipsis also indicates an absence. However, as a sign (symbolically) and not as an index. When reading a text that contains an ellipsis, rarely do we consider the effect of this absence on the text as a whole. It remains unspoken. To reflect upon this absence renders the meaning of the text uncertain.
- A Perhaps the ellipsis might also be considered as bearing the quality of porosity, or perhaps a stain. Both might be considered as corrosive.

12 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard, Hill & Wang, New York 1981, p.80

B Perhaps. However, the 'stain' can of course also be an indexical sign, and possibly an index of the body, but certainly also of contagion.

A And the restlessness ...?

— The restlessness? Ah, yes.

— [...]