

The Streets Where Foxes Hide: An Introduction

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Over the last few months Reinis Lismanis and I have been working towards his new exhibition, *The Streets Where Foxes Hide*. Throughout the week, we've sent each other things to look at and read and then, normally on a Saturday, have caught up on the phone to discuss our responses to the material. It has been an enjoyable routine and a nice way of developing the work.

Through reflection on what Lismanis has been making and several of the sources that we've looked at, I have become progressively more interested in the possibilities for experience and evaluation of art works with different kinds of ontology. Specifically, I've thought about works that are, in some combination, integrated with non art practices, ephemeral or dispersed across multiple places.

On one level, this is simply appealing as an exploration of more dynamic and practical forms of aesthetic experience, engaging the brain and body in ways other than those obtained by looking at something fixed and decontextualised. However, I have also been interested in the political and ethical dimensions of work with these characteristics. Art works invading public space particularly have the dual potential of making us think in a way closer to first principles about both themselves and what they disrupt and are concomitant with chance and collaboration. In this spirit, I will give an overview of *The Streets Where Foxes Hide* focussing on the work as related to non art practices and dispersed in time and space.

Amongst Lismanis' early influences is his experience as a technician and studio assistant. Through this he developed an interest in labour, particularly of undervalued forms, and in the practical boundaries of everyday activities, whether technological, methodological or political. He explores these themes primarily through the tools, materials and processes both of his own artistic practice and those more generally, regularly drawing on his background in photography.

In *The Streets Where Foxes Hide*, labour is expressed as subject matter through presentation of items Lismanis commonly uses in the studio. His squeegee, photographed and printed in sections in *5710 x T5434_T6054 x 2020-09-13-SQUEEGEE-8162* is employed for spreading ink and paint. Through a look at his shoes in *T5437_T6037_T6069 x T5432_T5434_T5437_T6032_T6037_T6054 x 2020-09-13-ADIDAS-03*, we might envisage the choosing appropriate attire for mess or weather, pacing around something in progress, or stepping out for coffee. The representation of items both directly and indirectly related to his work is significant, casting the net of the 'ancillary' deliberately wide and stressing the place of the final product in a wider context.



Reinis Lismanis, *5710 x T5434_T6054 x 2020-09-13-SQUEEGEE-8162*, 2020, Chroma Key paint, pigment ink, inkjet prints on aluminium with aluminium subframe, 80x100cm. Photograph: Reinis Lismanis.

Materials function alongside subject matter as vehicles for meaning explicating this theme of labour. Indeed, in Lismanis' use of collage and abstraction, the two become increasingly inextricable. The artist chooses non-traditional materials, many associated with other forms of work. In areas of *T5432_T6032 x 2015-07-10-BERLIN-6740* medium was pressed onto panel using shrink wrapping. Similarly, the surface texture of the upper two thirds of *T5437_T6037_T6069 x T5432_T5434_T5437_T6032_T6037_T6054 x 2020-09-13-ADIDAS-03* was achieved using a sponge. *T6033* comes from his latest series of works made using the leftover contents of discarded printer cartridges and inkjet paper.

This latter case exemplifies Lismanis' parallel production of photographic work and works in other media employing a lexicon derived from his work with photography, what you might term 'meta-photographic'. Whilst preparing for *The Streets where Foxes Hide*, he has suggested that the difficulty of controlling the ink in his work carries the conceptual virtue of making its original purpose in printing conspicuous.



Image of *T6063* in progress, 2020. Photograph: Reinis Lismanis

Through the explication of his process and the use of materials primarily associated with other forms of labour, Lismanis attempts to use his work as a route towards the discussion of work per se. His images of items at various degrees of remove from action undertaken in the studio indicate his accompanying interest in framing his work as an activity emerging from practical boundaries. This, in turn, serves as the foundation of the more concretely political aspects of *The Streets Where Foxes Hide*.

T5432_T6032 x 2015-07-10-BERLIN-6740 is another meta-photographic work through which we can approach Lismanis' emphasis of technological, methodological and political parameters. Here, pigment ink and printing paper, as components of image production through which we perceive the world, are deployed to create something non-representative; a limiting case of the reconstruction of reality, a kind of controlled explosion. In this staging of a malfunction, we can read technological mediation as either limit or compromise. *R-9010 x boarded7's* characterises mediation similarly, picturing Ivor Robert-Jones' Churchill statue in Parliament square covered following Black Lives Matter protests and planned counter-demonstrations from right-wing Nationalists. Contrary to concealment at face value, the monument's presence in the picture is public knowledge. The physical event's unfolding is outstripped by its life in images, functioning as it has as a potent signifier at the confluence of political and historical discourses, all of which, it can be argued, are regulated in some way. Lismanis' conversion of the image to Bitmap rendered it as a composite of small squares, achieving an effect reminiscent of offset newspaper print.



Reinis Lismanis, *T5432_T6032 x 2015-07-10-BERLIN-6740*, 2019, Pigment ink on glossy inkjet paper, inkjet print and laminating film on aluminium with aluminium subframe, 120 x 100 cm and Reinis Lismanis, *R-9010 x boarded7*, 2020 Spray paint and inkjet prints on aluminium with aluminium subframe, 120 x 100 cm. Photographs: Reinis Lismanis

The inclusion of *R-9010 x boarded7* in *The Streets Where Foxes Hide* underwrites another important context in Lismanis' work, that of his immediate urban environment. The title of the exhibition, taken from Sons of Kemet's *My Queen is Ada Eastman*, is part homage to this locale, part expression of political affiliation. The atmosphere and appearance of South East London has long served as a source of inspiration for Lismanis and which he photographed extensively for his 2019 book *Trial and Error*. References are less direct in the exhibition although are there to be found, for example in the diagonal patterns of *T6033*, redolent of anti slip markings on the stairs up to his Greenwich studio, sitting across the river from the green-blue cranes and silos of a large Tate and Lyle factory.

Whilst Lismanis' work evinces a conceptual relationship with both labour and its own status as a practically bounded activity, I also wish to suggest on the enhancement of these themes in its extension in time and space. It can be argued that making art about making art precludes ever presenting what you are ostensibly working towards. This is a problematically rigid interpretation applied to Lismanis' work, which is reflexive in a variety of different ways. However, in presenting labour, the work in progress is commonly deferred as, for example, in *5710 x T5434_T6054 x 2020-09-13-SQUEEGEE-8162*, where we don't see the squeegee's strokes but the squeegee itself.

One possible way of reading this is as taking a critical approach to the priority of the means over the ends apposite to Lismanis' reflection on labour. On the pages of *Trial and Error*, the artist overlaid exhibition installation shots with images of himself working, literally obscuring a definitive view of finished work. Such a gesture, attempting to depose the product invites us to consider ways that a hierarchy of means and ends might be undermined. Whilst it is natural to respond that, by virtue of presentation in the work, process necessarily transmutes into product, I would argue that meaning successfully persists nonetheless.

Maintaining work in a state of development is one way of taking such a position on means and ends. As well as implying development in the presentation of labour, Lismanis regularly reconstitutes old work for new, often destroying it in the process. The filing cabinets at the centre of his installation at Brockley Gardens in March 2020 were, for example, decorated with cut out pieces of works from his *Archival Pigment Prints* series. Recycling counteracts finality and extends the work in time as elements appear and reappear. Lismanis' regular use of appropriation of which the photograph in *T5432_T6032 x 2015-07-10-BERLIN-6740* is one of the most recent examples

demonstrating a constituent's existence in time, branching out from origins in a separate practical context. In the same vein the *T5437_T6037_T6069 x T5432_T5434_T5437_T6032_T6037_T6054 x 2020-09-13-ADIDAS-03* shoes were pictured earlier on the artist's feet in *Trial and Error*; an example of an object in his work whose appearance straddles the spheres of final product and documentation. The book also opens with an account of a walk to the studio in which, I like to imagine, they were worn.



Reinis Lismanis, *T5437_T6037_T6069 x T5432_T5434_T5437_T6032_T6037_T6054 x 2020-09-13-ADIDAS-03*, 2020, Pigment ink on glossy inkjet paper and inkjet prints on aluminium with aluminium subframe, 120 x 100 cm. Photograph: Reinis Lismanis

This manner of evolution is not the only way that Lismanis' work is ontologically dispersed. The significance of not just materials but also methods associated with other working activities endows it with dimensions of meaning that would not be available in perceptually identical works created differently. It matters that Lismanis has produced marks using a spray bottle and sponge in a way that makes it analogous to performance, yet this aspect of it is only evidenced rather than directly visible in the work. Of course, this observation can be levelled at a huge proportion of art works, nonetheless, I would suggest that the themes in Lismanis' work lend it potency. Whilst it might be a stretch, one could even go as far to argue that the combination of invisibility and importance of the method in the final product is germane to his interest in labour.

For me, the question of presenting somebody's work should be bound up with the question of how it is received by the viewer as information. I like to see work exhibited in a way which is in its spirit; showing as well as saying, in a delivery appropriately continuous with the content. Behind this is the attempt to express a positive case for art and idea not being equivalent, rooted in my own interest in what kinds of things happen to ideas when we encounter them in artistic media. To qualify this, there is the risk of alienating people through a totally unanchored experience. Maybe the solution is giving both the option of being explained to and being immersed in and having faith that people will see the exclusive virtues of each.

One way to read Lismanis' interest in labour, emphasis on practical boundaries and embrace of temporality and dispersal through development is as an invitation towards different ways of evaluating artworks and artistic practice as ongoing processes. In his spirit I am closing my essay with a compilation of quotes arising from our work in preparation for the exhibition; an elevation of process of sorts. In so doing, I want to offer a possible interpretation of the project which is not exhausted by what is in the gallery or written here, one that goes some way to including the conversations we've had, my reading, my notes, my misunderstandings and dead ends. I am also doing this to turn the spotlight on my own fallibility, to widen the landscape through which others can forge routes and to loosen my control over the terms in which it can be enjoyable and

beneficial. In this spirit, it seems only right to incorporate the responses of others, you are invited visit <https://bit.ly/3dEJroY> where you can leave a comment on a google docs version of this essay.



Studio image, 2020. Photograph: Reinis Lismanis

*Acquired this taste for London Pride / Spread my wings in these noxious skies /
In these streets, these streets where foxes hide*

Sons of Kemet, My Queen is Ada Eastman

Making of bike chain from natural felt – manner of making - part of work despite absence

Own notes, taken during Child D. *Labouring Bodies: Art Work and History* online talk delivered via Zoom 9 July 2020 as part of program for *Johanna Unzueta: Tools for Life*, Modern Art Oxford 8 February – 10 May 2020

This was followed by an increasingly celebrated performance where Ofili set up a market stall where he laid out a display of elephant dung for perusal of passers by. Of course, for Ofili this was very much a two-way process of enquiry. He was primarily interested in the reactions of the public...

Worsdale G. (1998) *The Stereotype* in the catalogue to *Chris Ofili* organised by Southampton City Art Gallery and the Serpentine Gallery. London: Southampton City Art Gallery and the Serpentine Gallery p3

As part of the 2019 Okayama Art Summit, Hyperflor© (2-benzyl-1, 3-dioxan-5-one) was 'exhibited' via electronic diffusers placed across the city to function as 'scene transitions' between different spaces. The work itself has a similarly transitional conceptual identity: a fundamentally creative act (the synthesis of a new molecule); a legal-commercial entity (patent pending); and an artwork that operates materially, conceptually and economical...Every aspect of Hyperflor seems to resist containment as an artwork, but it is only through its status as such that [its] multiple identities are brought into meaningful correlation...What interests me in the work of Raspet and Zheng is how the indeterminate status of art might help us orientate ourselves in a formless – or, perhaps, over-informed world.'

Zhexi Zhang G. *What do we mean by the 'Real' World?*, Frieze, 14 July 2020
<https://www.frieze.com/article/what-do-we-mean-real-world> (accessed: 30 September 2020)

- *Cause the ink doesn't "like" being used this way*

- *But that's a positive thing*
- *[Cause the ink doesn't "like" being used this way] Like that*
- *Yes*

WhatsApp exchange, August 2020

'Why do this? Why build these kind of, useless things, these things that really don't make much sense in terms of the prevailing logic in which our societies are structured? Well, I think, for me, there's a glimpse of a certain kind of freedom in...creating what I call impossible objects, these objects that are not really useful to...the kinds of structures and organisational logics that define so much of our everyday lives...'

Paglen T, Artist Lecture for *Trevor Paglen: Sites Unseen*, Smithsonian Art Museum streamed lived 20 June 2018 <https://youtu.be/EP-Vb-S9KFs> (accessed 30 September 2020)

Let's return to the liminal case of documenta 11, which was said to contain more cinematic material than could be seen by a single person in the 100 days the exhibition was open to the public. No single spectator could even claim to have seen everything, much less to have exhausted the meanings in this volume of work...Only if the night guards and various spectators worked together in shifts could the cinematic material of documenta 11 be viewed. But in order to understand what (and how) they are watching, they must meet to make sense of it. This shared activity is completely different from that of spectators narcissistically gazing at themselves and each other inside exhibitions - it does not simply ignore the artwork...but takes it to another level

Steyerl, H. (2012) *Is a Museum a Factory?* in *The Wretched of the Screen* Berlin: Steinberg Press p73

In this mode of the photographic, my image is only a few lines of code away from yours and another few lines away from being an .mp3 file

Speri I. (2019) *A Remote Studio Studio Visit with Reinis Lismanis* in Lismanis R. *Trial and Error* Jesi: Skinnerbook p121

Zheng makes the case for the necessity of these activities for political ends, as a way of undermining apparently rife so-called 'consensual fictions', human systems masquerading as nature. Whilst it may be timely, the phenomenon doesn't depend on this kind of puffy evaluative adjunct

Own notes, August 2020

Through being photographed, something becomes part of a system of information, fitted into schemes of classification and storage...Photographs do more than redefine the stuff of ordinary experience and add vast amounts of material we never see at all. Reality as such is redefined – as an item for exhibition, as a record for scrutiny, as a target for surveillance

Sontag S (1977) *The Image World* in *On Photography* (2008 edition) London: Penguin p156

A 100% accurate, comprehensive list of the exact size and shape of every blade of grass on my front lawn is 'true' but it not a truth that anyone will have any interest in. What renders a truth meaningful, worthwhile, etc is its relevance, which in turn requires extraordinary discernment and sensitivity to context, questions of value, and overall point...

Foster-Wallace D (2011), *The Pale King* London: Penguin (second edition) p261

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas...The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships...

Marx K. & Engels F (1846) *The German Ideology* (1999 edition) edited and introduced by C.J. Arthur London: Lawrence and Wishart Limited p64

Imagine the ghostly existence of the work which you are constantly making work about making.

Own notes, March 2020.

For me that's very much how I try to think about my own life, too. There's never any time lost. Even something you might think of as a mistake or as a failure is really just you collecting material or information that could be rearranged or re-applied differently to get a successful outcome.

Self T, *On Not Being Afraid of Hard Work* 30 June 2017

<https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/tschabalala-self-on-not-being-afraid-of-hard-work/>
(accessed 2 October 2020)

As a spectator, it's easy to feel excluded by self-referential art. At a certain point, questioning the medium can become a rather exclusive variety of navel-gazing.

Doney I. & Petraitis P. (2019), *Unseen Platform: Trial and Error*, <https://reinis.es/texts> (accessed 1 October 2020)

There is a refrain in this book that concepts create exclusions and that makes for absences in understanding. When work practices are forgotten, ignored, excluded, not seen or denied then any account of the ethical and political issues in doing work is restricted.

Pettinger L (2019), *What's wrong with work?*, Bristol: Policy Press p49