

# Trajectory

## Robert Clark

**A**lmost a century ago Marcel Duchamp changed the course of cultural history in one fell swoop by exhibiting a readymade urinal in a gallery and thereby redefining it as an artwork. Ever since, a large proportion of art has been concerned with variations of attempts to get life, as it is lived outside the gallery walls, with all its complexities and contingencies, reintroduced into the hallowed halls of culture. It is now an accepted fact that gallery art can consist of anything and everything. But what would happen if a resurrected Duchamp were to reinstall his urinal back in the Gents? Would it resort to being a urinal pure and simple? What happens to radical and, as it is at best, ambiguously or problematically defined art when it is no longer propped up by the culturally legitimising context of the artworld venue?

The Trajectory project places art back into the public realm but is certainly not Public Art as we tend to know it. The recent history of Public Art, especially in Britain, has amounted to a sorry story of creative compromise, of civic decoration, of monuments to the status quo. It tends to be stone-carved animals, blobby semi-abstraction, welded pseudo-cubism or some kind of hi-tech diversion. It is the stuff of everything-in-its-place. With far more creative dynamism, Trajectory risks displacement and therefore catalyses cultural unease and uncertainty. It takes gallery-type, non-monumental, in some cases anti-monumental art, that has been immaculately composed in the studio, and temporarily puts it out on the street, thus leaving it open to all kinds of suspicion, scorn, reproof, and the downright sceptical accusation that it might not be art at all. So why should these artists risk such a fate for their work? Because, by such an act of artistic disorientation, their art might also spark off cultural intrigues, interrogations, exciting confrontations, the thrills of the unforeseen.

**Trajectory**, the latest in the ongoing artist-run Vitrine project, involves five Yorkshire-based artists being invited to present their work in the window spaces and display cabinets (vitrines) of the commercial and civic buildings of Leeds city centre. The glass façade of the window and boxed vitrine may act as a surrogate framing device, but a frame that is expressly designed for the projection of consumer products and civic instruction rather than the perceptually, emotionally and intellectually more absorbent matter of art.

The culturally provocative displacement in both **Meriel Herbert** and **Simon Le Ruez's** works tends to be one from private to public. Secret moments of psychological vulnerability and



fallibility are exposed to the general public, tricking the passers-by into becoming inadvertent voyeurs. Herbert's close-up video loop reveals the artist scratching her own arm in a compulsive act verging on self-harm. An act of secret self-doubt, the kind of personal action that is, according to social etiquette, kept very much to one's ashamed self, is ironically presented in a format more fitting to self-image advertisement. Le Ruez's sculptural 'dialogue of little curiosities' (in the artist's own typically sensitively self-revealing description) is here given an extra conversational turn by its being placed in a more public field of debate. Le Ruez is highly skilled in the creating and assembling of evocative props. Combining often deceptively domestic materials with disorientations of scale, he conjures scenarios of the most poignant resonance.



The other three artists involved in Trajectory tend to play with intimations of architectural displacement. **Lucy Gibson** aims to create a pagoda-like 'place where time recedes', in the most un-meditative of environments: the Merrion Shopping Centre. The artist will mimic aspects of the centre's architecture in wooden fragments that are elaborately repeated and layered to emulate the rhythmic finesse of typical pagoda construction. A palace to frantic or apathetic consumerism is subtly infiltrated by 3D architectural pointers to the possibility of a world beyond. **Matthew Houlding** has stated 'I grew up in Tanzania and Kenya, where what you didn't have you invented.' Even when seen in galleries, Houlding's work evokes architectural estrangement. Shown here, surrounded by the bustle and stress of the city's railway station, his sci-fi shanty town reveries, depicted here in a series of glossy collages recalling 'National Geographic' and estate agents' windows, should take on an extra twist of typically subtle architectural delirium. Finally, **Pippa Koszerek** presents, in full public view, plans and publicity for her 'Unmasked For Public Art Agency'. The Agency's display proposes the location of an 'ideal derelict space', thus combining, with considerable deadpan irony, concerns about urban dereliction with aspects of a traditional Romantic penchant for wildernesses and moody ruins.



If Trajectory can be seen as an exhibition it is a distinctly out-of-place kind of exhibition. It aims to stop people in the tracks of their usual way of going to work, to incite a pause in the usual round of shopping. It aims to trip up a more-of-the-same culture. Its purpose is to amuse and delight as much as to provoke ponderings. Our commercial and civic environments are so mundanely what they are, it is surely, if only temporarily, life-affirming to have them interjected with moments of bemusement and elements of the extraordinary. And what is Trajectory selling? Nothing but its own creative self. What is it telling us to do? Nothing but to think and feel for ourselves. It dares to go out there and take the big wide world on, and, in its own small way, makes it appear bigger for being there. Trajectory points out a slightly wider range of directions.

Unlike the pseudo-artists of the traditional Public Art world, it is a fact that artists who are any good have always been a contrary lot. They act out of step and put themselves where they shouldn't rightly be. They misbehave, get in the way of everyday predictabilities and divert the mainstream. It occurs to me, that if Duchamp were to be around today, he wouldn't only be likely to reinstall his urinal in the gents, he probably would go ahead and pee in it.

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Introduction and 'Trajectory': installation shots 'Launchpad' March 2005.



## Meriel Herbert Scratching

Herbert has built a reputation for her complex time-based pieces shown both in galleries and alternative sites. The continuing strength of her practice is its ability to provoke unease in the audience and raise questions about the human condition. Private moments often become public in her work, and previous pieces have centred upon relationships and flawed attempts at communication. Herbert explores notions of the 'self' through the playback of repetitive gestures and speech. More recently she has begun to create pieces that investigate her own identity as an artist for the first time.

For *Vitrine*, a video showing a close-up of the artist performing one such repetitive action (repeatedly scratching her arm) is visible on a screen within the basement window of the Central Library, showing during the hours of darkness only. Recorded in real time, the artist's hand can be seen scratching until she finally breaks through the skin, but as the video is looped no sooner has this action stopped than it begins again - the scratching is relentless, rendering the viewer increasingly uncomfortable throughout the duration of the piece. The work raises questions for the viewer: is the woman scratching from boredom, because of a nervous itch, or is it closer to self-harm? For the artist, it articulates some of the pressure that she feels to produce work, and the sometimes unpleasant nature of waiting in the studio for inspiration. The creative process can be accompanied by a sense of panic, and more broadly what everyone feels at times: the fear of failure.

