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If we cannot be convinced we should at least remain in suspense. 1

In *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicholas Bourriaud makes a series of authoritative pronouncements on art as a series of participatory practices where an artist employs a toolkit of signs, actions and objects to form and examine relationships. Where he dictates "there is no mental place where the artist might exclude himself from the world he represents," a retreat to the studios of Angela Silver, Kyle Beal and Chris Gillespie might instead predict that artists see their studios as pockets to escape that challenge much of contemporary art's current fascination with hyper-social participation, constantly engaged outreach, and face-to-face interactions with the world. Bourriaud's assumptions about how much of contemporary art is predicated upon the artist's situation within the city—a highly networked place where interactions and relationships are flowing constantly—often overlook productive private spaces. It's in this tension between public practices and private spaces that allows us to see the overwhelming spectacle of the city as a foil for the studio as a site for introspection.

If our environments are maps that are in constant need of deciphering, Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* is a document of the internal process of searching for meaning. Plumbing the depths of our spaces is a dazzling, and yet exhausting and incomplete search: "however the city may really be, beneath this thick coating of signs, whatever it may contain or conceal, you leave...without having discovered it." In the fast-moving traffic of meaning and interaction, *Invisible Cities* also traces our ability to make elaborate and densely constructed cities rise out of the invisible realms of the imagination.

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Like walking down one street rather than another, Kyle Beal's work chooses circuitous paths, picks up bits along the way, and finds piles of meanings that serve to destabilize the whole map. Here Calvino might describe a navigation through an unknown space, an experience that organizes itself in a different order for each traveler: "The traveler roams all around and has nothing but doubts: he is unable to distinguish the features of the city, the features he keeps distinct in his mind also mingle." Like the objects that float in antigravity around the paper-edge in Beal's "Marginal Drawing," his studio process proposes a temporary suspension of logical language and interpretation, or a guess-and-test streaming together of media, snippets of text and images, tracing lines of investigation between his objects.

Angela Silver's shredded dictionary-archives begin with an already rich accumulation of labour. "Etym" is an ultimate act of deconstruction, where an object—a book, a dictionary—with very legible habits of use is rendered useless through this daring physical undoing. The undone dictionary also makes fresh space for new meaning, and we approach it as Neville approaches a familiar narrative in The Waves by Virginia Woolf. In deep introspection he finds places for his well-tread texts, thoughts and lived experiences to expand: "...now in this room, which I enter without knocking, things are said as if they had been written. I go to the bookcase. If I choose, I read half a page of anything. I need not speak. But I listen. I am marvelously on the alert." By changing the book's form, Silver simultaneously destroys the conventional architectures of the text and inscribes new layers in our physical relationship to reading.

In his work "The Wonderful World of Ants" Chris Gillespie sets up a pseudo-scientific experiment where the artist's collection of information follows closely behind the ants as they carry on with their day-to-day business. A symbol of collective and highly organized work, the patterns and topographies of the ants in the studio become yet another code to unravel. "If we consider that we have to grope through a fog even to understand the very things we hold in our hands, then we find that it is not knowledge but habit which takes away their strangeness," and in Gillespie's studio, the self-contained studio space becomes a magnifying glass to those sights that might be rendered imperceptible if they were loose in the city.

ditdahditdit rejects the recent construction of the studio space as a vista of unrelenting toil or out-modeled method: it's a reclaimed territory, a space where open-ended questions and layers of meaning piled-high are declared game for decoding.

SOURCES:

¹ "That it is madness to judge the truth and the false from our own capacities," *On Friendship*, Michel De Montaigne, Penguin Books, London, 2004. pgs. 22 - 29 ² *Relational Aesthetics*, by Nicholas Bourriard, les Presses du Reel, Dijon, France. 2002 English version, 1998 French version. http://www.gairspace.org.uk/htm/bourr.htm and http://www.strecher.org/archives/il a/2003 02 25 il archive.php accessed July

2005.

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³ *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino, Vintage Classics, Great Britain, 1997. p. 14. ⁴ Calvino, p. 34.

⁵ *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf, Penguin Books, Middlesex, England. 1966. p. 170

⁶ De Montaigne, p. 26