

Dorothy Smith, *Tower Drawing*, 2013, pen on paper

The Allegory of Place

SILVIA LOEFFLER PROFILES KATHY HERBERT AND DOROTHY SMITH'S PROJECT 'OPEN TO THE PUBLIC', WHICH WAS SHOWN AT SATELLITE STUDIOS PROJECT SPACE, DUBLIN DURING OCTOBER 2013.

THE character of buildings and the economic realities of an area are all factors that can colour our perception and experience of place. The rhythms of a city, along with its smells and sounds, create emotional impulses, ranging from a sense of well being to repulsion. A focus on emotional and visual responses to space was at the heart of Kathy Herbert and Dorothy Smith's recent 'Open To the Public' (9 – 19 October 2013) project at Satellite Studios Project Space, Dublin.¹ In doing so, their work stresses the private and intimate relationship we can have with our environment. Their joint work is a search for possible alternative interpretations of public space.

Both Herbert and Smith have an ongoing interest in taking art out of formal studio and gallery frameworks and a keen interest in forging more dynamic relationships between the artist and the audience. As the title of their project emphasised, their concern was to expand on public experience and involvement with the creative process.

Drawing is central to both Smith and Herbert's working methods. Prior to 'Open to the Public', the artists undertook individual drawing projects as part of Phizzfest (Phibsborough Community and Arts Festival), Herberts's *Drawing Conversations* and Smith's *weareallinthistogether*.² The artists' projects for Phizzfest used drawing in public spaces to investigate issues of communication and audience interaction and formed the basis for their work in Satellite Studios.

After working at Phizzfest, the two artists felt the need to take their project one step further and exhibit the work made. This process would also provide a documentation for work which, in Kathy Herbert's case in particular, was extremely ephemeral. With this in mind, they spoke to Roisin McNamee in Satellite Studios, who invited them to use the Project Space, which they had just acquired from the landlord. Through meetings and emails, the dates were fixed and also the cost. The complete project was run and funded by the artists. The ground floor project space of Satellite Studios, Dublin is a highly visible space, with large windows facing onto Upper Dominick Street. Kathy Herbert and Dorothy Smith were invited to create work to address this context for 10 days.

The roots of Herbert and Smith's joint project go back to 2011. Herbert had just finished her MA in Sculpture at NCAD and was looking for a way to create some kind of connection with the audience for her work. Herbert also had the idea that she wanted art to be part of everyone's everyday experience. The artist decided to keep it as simple as possible and started to draw in public and invite passers-by to come over and converse with her. As this proved successful, Herbert then started to apply to make this work in arts festivals, being accepted first for 'Earwig!' at the Tuam Arts Festival in 2011 and the following year for Phizzfest, where she met Dorothy Smith. Where Herbert's practice

is concerned with art and ecology, Dorothy Smith's work is focussed on the built environment and how experience of the everyday is shaped, often in relation to overlooked or empty premises. As both Smith and Herbert had interrelating ideas and aims for their work, they decided to team up. They then worked with Draiocht for National Drawing Day and with Phizzfest.

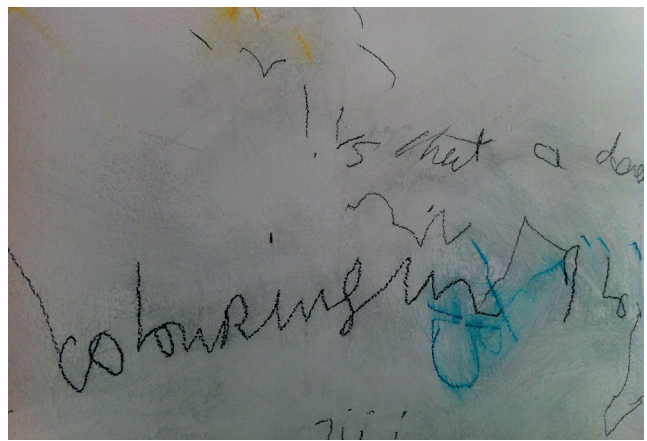
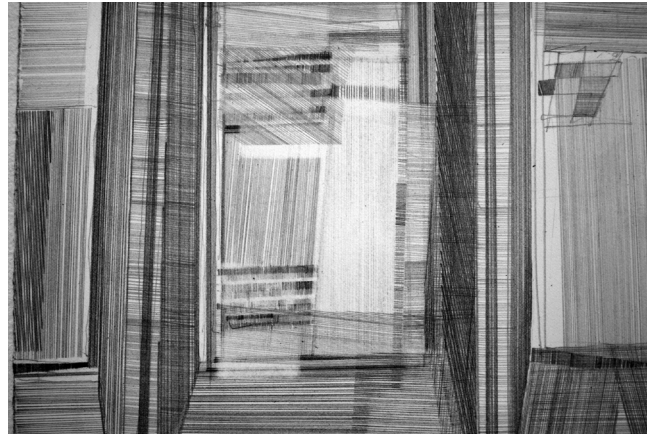
'Open to the Public' may be related to the Situationist International movement, operating out of Paris in the 1950s and 1960s – specifically their famed collage-based maps which sought to chart psychological influences on space and other playful associations. The Situationists called for new modes of interpreting the city, based on an exploration of the 'emotional' realms of urban space, whilst conducting their 'psychogeographic' explorations. This idea, and the Situationists' call for exploring the concept of an 'intimate and tender mapping' of public spaces, seems particularly apt in relation to 'Open to the Public'.³

It is important to note as well that the Situationists' maps were not an exercise in gaining dominance or control over a domain, which may often be the motivation for 'official' charting of space. Rather they sought to highlight how our interaction with urban space could mirror our internal landscape of emotions. And more radically still, these 'tender mappings' sought to transcribe our bodily and mental movement in space, as it is emotions that 'move us', literally and metaphorically, from one place to another, with every journey consisting of encounters and actions like departing, meeting, staying.

Word Tree was a key work made by Kathy Herbert for 'Open to the Public'. It comprised a large-scale wall drawing, created in-situ at the Satellite Studios project space. The piece was part of a body of work entitled *Drawing Conversations* that Herbert has been developing since Phizzfest earlier in the year. As part of the process, passers by were invited to converse with the artist while she was drawing.

Herbert sees this as a way of bringing drawing into the public domain – both in terms of its making and reception.⁴ There is an emphasis on the live and unique nature of these exchanges, as no photography or video recording is permitted. Following these conversations, the artist incorporated notes into the drawing about what was said. A crucial part of the process involved the work's ultimate erasure and removal – Herbert washed layers of the drawing away until nothing was left. This was a work that celebrated the power of the ephemeral: a kind of anti-monument.

Smith presented *weareallinthistogether*, the composite drawing that featured 30 portraits of members of the public, each of whom had sat for 10 – 30 minutes to be drawn during the course of the September 2012 Phizzfest festival. The work fused representations of this group of people, both as a community and set of individuals. As the drawings

Kathy Herbert, *Word Tree* (detail), 2013, Satellite Project Space, graphite and pastels on painted wallDorothy Smith, *Study for Tower Drawing*, 2013, 8 x 8cm, pen on paper,

were built up over time with each portrait layered over the previous, individual sitters are not recognisable, but a pattern emerges that recognises both individuality and commonality. The drawings were photographed after each sitting and these images were then animated allowing the slow build up of each work to be viewed. All sitters were emailed the finished animations – a gesture acknowledging their role in the collective creation of the work. These animations were looped and screened on a monitor in the project space but also in another 'offsite' venue – McGeogh's Public House in Phibsborough, where the videos were visible from the street.

In the Project Space, Smith also worked on a series of drawings of 'Phibsborough Tower', the tower above Phibsborough Shopping Centre – which she saw as a particular urban landmark. Commenting on the process of working in the 'open studio' situation of the 'Open to the Public' project, Smith emphasised how important the "quality of the process" was in informing her work, which explores the fabric of urban space.

'Open to the Public' explored the implications of navigating the city in visually and emotional terms as kind of hybrid mode of transit – and one especially sensitive to in-between zones, thresholds and the shifting cultural identity of parts of the city. Overall, both artists used their drawing-based practices to explore our relationship to public space as a kind of allegory for all human relationships and experience. In doing so, 'Open to the Public' also raised questions about use – relating both to the role of artists documenting the community and how communities themselves inhabit and make use of the buildings that comprise their locales.

The sensitivity of Kathy Herbert and Dorothy Smith's 'Open to the Public' project to its context served to counteract all-too-common experiences of urban space: alienation and lack of ownership. In opening up the solitary and private process of drawing to public interaction, 'Open to the Public' stressed an individual and human relationship with place.

Herbert and Smith navigated these questions in a non-didactic and open-ended way. Their mapping processes were based on following rather than leading, and attempted to reflect the lived and felt experience of a place. Both artists utilised novel approaches to drawing in order to offer an alternative survey of the infrastructure and inhabitants of a particular area. In this way, 'Open to the Public' introduced new possibilities for the interpretation of place.

Silvia Loeffler is an independent artist, researcher and educator.

Notes

1. www.satellitestudios.tumblr.com
2. The fifth Phizzfest festival will take place in May 2014. The festival is wholly founded and run by people from the local community and attracts people from increasing wide circles of interest and geographic location each year. It has been hugely successful in motivating, engaging and connecting people and in beginning to change perceptions of the area
3. Simon Ford, *The Situationist International. A User's Guide*, 2005, Black Dog Publishing, London
4. Author conversation, 'Open to the Public' panel discussion, 16 October 2013
5. Author conversation, 'Open to the Public' panel discussion, 16 October 2013