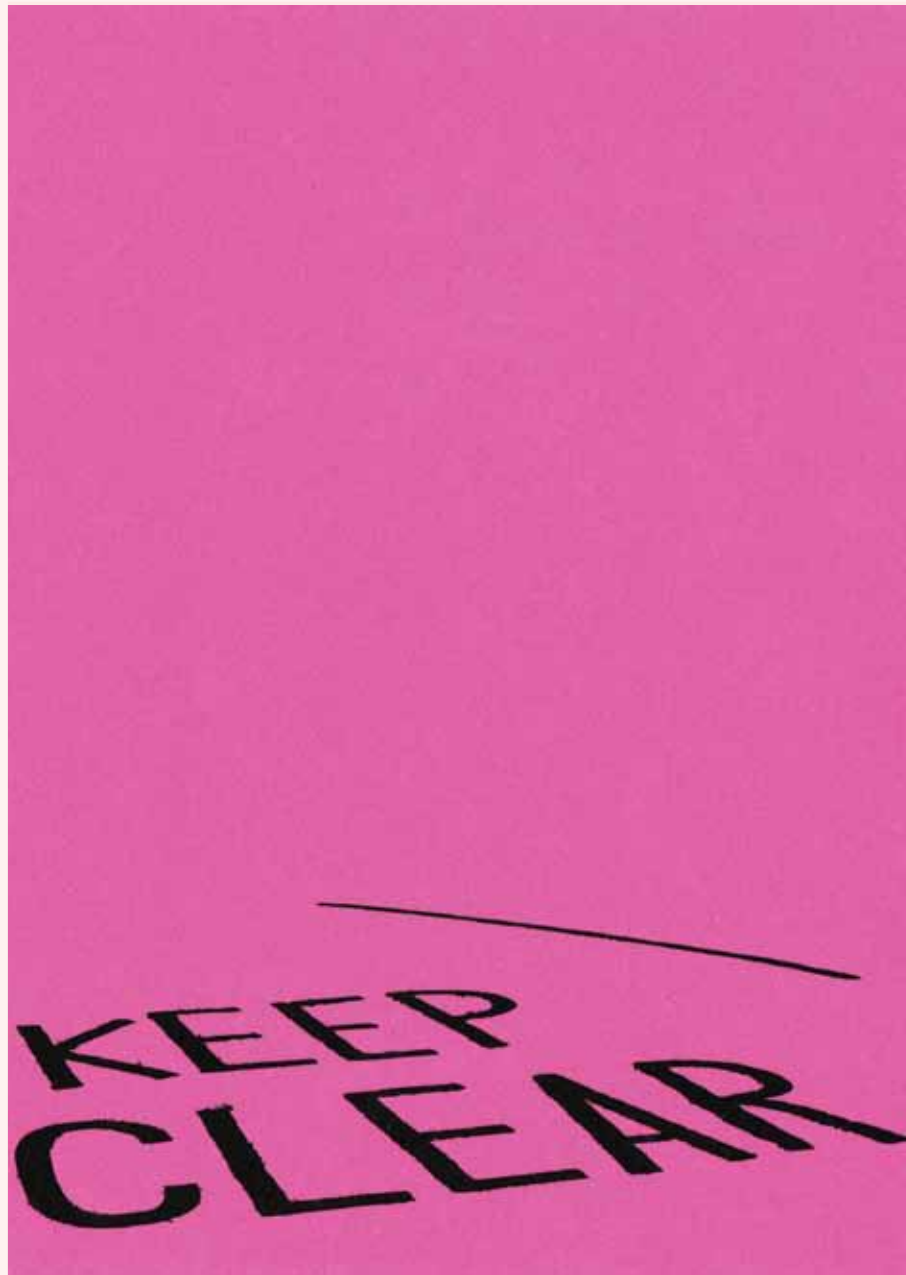


Elaine Tribley:
Mind your Head



Mind your Head:
*On Speculative Research
for the Public in
Elaine Tribley's work
by Matthew Bowman*

MESOPOTAMIA: 'The Land Between Two Rivers', (2010) is a series of cut vinyl works on mountboard produced by Elaine Tribley that depict objects and signs found in urban locations; the objects depicted are mostly manmade, while a few are natural, and each work uses a simple composition that sets the object – largely presented using bold, black lines and shapes – against a ground of one, occasionally two, colours. Some of the works incorporate text – naming particular places, road names, directions – copied from existing signs which serve to remind us that the street is a public space not merely to be traversed but also *read*.



Mesopotamia, Keep Clear, 2010

Accompanying these works, which are to be both seen and read, simultaneously representations of signs and signs, is a text that explains what we see here are images derived from a particular area of Chelmsford, Essex located between two rivers: the Can and the Chelmer. The significance of this location is not so much geographical, however, but more rooted in its parodic reinvention of the public sphere. As the text remarks: “According to local records dating back to 1830, whenever parliamentary elections were held, a local charade called the ‘*Mesopotamia* Elections’ took place on the island. Two candidates were chosen and voted on after making witty speeches, the losing candidate was then ducked in the river.”⁽ⁱ⁾ Here, the banks of the river are determined as the border of the democratic (counter-)space public sphere; being dunked into its waters akin to temporary expulsion.⁽ⁱⁱ⁾

The eye-catching design of the *Mesopotamia* works and the visual snippets of the modern world they show, then, are traces of a past that is visible and invisible. Walking down streets, the past is almost perceptible if one possesses the requisite historical knowledge or psychogeographic empathy. Tribley, through a process of research and artistic visualization, brings forth the past, whether it is real or imagined. Research within artistic practice isn’t, of course, unusual or new: at the minimum, research of various stripes play a vital role in art education through contextual studies modules and the accumulation of visual and textual sources relevant to an art student’s practice. More pertinent to this discussion are artists for whom research isn’t merely a useful adjunct

or preliminary to their core practice, but fundamentally *constitutes* that practice. Here we might contemplate conceptual art practices of the late 1960s and early 1970s, such as Robert Smithson and Hans Haacke, or third generation institutional critique emergent at the beginning of the 1990s, for example, Mark Dion, Andrea Fraser, and Christian Phillip Müller. Whether we take the earlier forms of artistic research or the latter examples, there is a significant amount of leeway in both function and presentation of that research; Smithson might be regarded as more poeticizing, sparking imaginative possibilities from the friction between disparate elements, whereas Haacke is steadfastly objective, proffering facts without obvious adulteration, and Dion is more concerned with how certain *methodologies* of research produce knowledge or knowledge-like effects. Sometimes research can be extensive but within the resultant artwork worn lightly, (this is certainly the case for Tribley), perhaps even invisibly; on other occasions, the research is upfront, potentially voluminous in size and dizzying in impact.

The significance of artistic research has come under especial scrutiny and intense, sometimes heated, discussion in the last few years. Indeed, 2011 witnessed an issue of *Texte zur Kunst* dedicated to this theme, the publication of *See it Again, Say it Again: The Artist as Researcher* which brings together artists and theorists, and the release of *Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*.⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾ In addition, we can also point to the creation of a new online journal entitled The Journal of Artistic Research, which brought out its first issue

during late 2011. In the context of this particular essay it would be impossible to summarize the multiple viewpoints that delineate the contours of this discussion, but it can be mentioned that much of its intensity is its conjunction with entwined debates apropos the particular transformations that have been provoked by the so-called ‘Bologna Process’ which has led to sustained consideration upon pedagogy in relation to art education and how artworks can be assessed using pan-European standardized criteria, on the one hand, and growing theorization into post-Fordist economics and its development of categories such as ‘knowledge production’ (or ‘cognitive capitalism’) and the precarization of labour through the widespread implementation of ‘flexible’ working conditions which favor the employer far more than the worker. Both the researcher and the artist, for instance, are post-Fordist workers moving from short-term contract to short-term contract, living by their wits and skills, but frequently struggling to attain any employment position that would guarantee any longstanding financial security.

In that regard, then, we may detect the foundations of a correlation between the presence of research in Tribley’s practice and ongoing conversations regarding the present condition of post-Fordist economics. However, we should proceed delicately here, maintaining but refusing to hypostatize that correlation, insofar as doing so would risk conflation and would, furthermore, potentially confuse the presence of research in Tribley’s work with its specific *function*. While it’s certainly possible to tackle the subject of research on a level of abstraction

– for example, examine the processes by which research can be identified as research and the protocols for its evaluation – we should develop the notion of artistic research in particular as a mode of site-specificity whereby ‘site’ is comprehended in its socio-historical and discursive aspects that may articulate and are in turn articulated by environmental and spatial factors. After all, in alignment with the term originally coined in phenomenology betokening the distinctiveness of consciousness, it could be said that research has an intentional structure: research is invariably research *of something*, and it is that ‘of-ness’ which constitutes research tout court and without which there could be no research at all.

Initially, one might account for the presence and function of research in Tribley’s oeuvre through reference to its often public art origins; in which case, research would be a corollary of public art’s requirement to demonstrate social relevance and inclusivity, that pre-established targets are being met, and state funding is being spent legitimately. But in many situations this disciplinary regime, is formally external to the completed artwork even as it leads to it. In Tribley’s practice, though, it’s centre-stage, or, perhaps more precisely, just about off-centre. The viewer, indeed, isn’t confronted with reams of information and working-out; instead, the final work is the communication and dissemination of that research even though, to be sure, it doesn’t replicate the entirety of that research. What is crucial here is – as with many artistic practices – that the research takes significant form, embraces a visuality, and locates



Historic Route Finder, 2009

a public. The language of street and road signs becomes a recurrent strategy in Tribley’s work. Designed to be read almost instantly, such signs communicate information that either notifies people that they are entering (or in) a particular location or direct them somewhere else. Sometimes, signs indicate that there’s something about the location that might be of cultural interest or that one should be careful of (for example, ‘mind your head!’).

Two works are especially notable for their appropriation of commonly-seen signs, but subversively utilized. *Historic Route Finder* (2009) is an iron signpost situated within the former Colchester

barracks that is more or less visually indiscernible from similar signposts found in English towns and cities to direct people to places of special interest. This indiscernibility, however, shifts upon closer inspection; the numerous arrows point not to nearby museums and the like but to recent and historical theatres of conflict that the British army have been embroiled in. As is typical with such signs, distances (measured upon how ‘the crow flies’) connect the signpost’s actual location to war zones (‘Waterloo 171m’; ‘Belfast 339m’); yet here the spatial and the temporal, or, more exactly, the geographic and the historic, are folded into one another. In tandem with the objectivity purportedly essential to



Bitter Memories, 2011

research procedures, Tribley presents the information neutrally, without casting political or moral judgment. *Birthplace* (2008), meanwhile, takes the form of a brown road sign and deliberately confuses the relation between geography and industrial history. Emblazoned upon the sign's centre are the words 'MARCONI Birthplace of Chelmsford' – the reference is to Guglielmo Marconi (1874-1937), an Italian (born in Bologna) credited as the inventor of radio, who opened The Marconi Wireless Telegraph & Signal Company in Chelmsford in 1899. In subsequent years, Chelmsford became known as the 'birthplace of radio' due to the experiments which resulted, during 1920, in the first publicized radio broadcast and then regular broadcasts from nearby Writtle in 1922. Tribley's

research suggests that Marconi's radio represents a paradigm shift into the modern age with Chelmsford at the epicentre. That contention is, I take it, relatively uncontroversial but Tribley's research undertakes a more playful, speculative argument in which Marconi gives birth to Chelmsford rather than merely being a major figure within its history.

The construction of a speculative, possibly counterintuitive argument pertains to one of the most vexed issues within the notion of artistic research: namely, how to reconcile the rigorous, evidently objective, demands of science-based research with the precepts of freedom and creativity implicated in artistic practice (and even why art might wish to ape the role of science). In the case of Tribley's work, artistic

research becomes a very particular type of knowledge production – that is to say, knowledge actively being *produced* (rather than *replicated* or simply *disseminated*) from imaginable correlations discovered in pre-existing sources. Tribley's speculative research, remembering its site-specific character, amounts to a reconfigured 'land speculation' based not upon profit and ownership but instead attempts to (re-) establish certain locations as public or counter-public spheres. To this end, she deploys a visual form that is strategically chameleonic, in the sense that the works she makes intentionally signal to beholders and merge with their site, almost becoming invisible. *Beacontree Medley* (2011), for example, consists of a cut vinyl pattern – based on local histories – imprinted onto the windows of Beacontree Swimming Pool; the vinyl, though, is semi-transparent and blends into the glass, visible only from certain angles and under certain conditions. In her text works, such as *Bitter Memories* (2011), vinyl lettering is located in unexpected places, such as low on a pillar. In another work from this series white vinyl lettering is fixed upon a white framed ground to read: 'I had no control, that was the hardest thing, realising nothing I did would make a difference'; the white-on-white brings the text to the cusp of (in)visibility, meaning that seeing the artwork is akin to finding or discovering it. The same is true for other works in this series, which renders each text in correspondence with its immediate location and invites the public to postulate possible links between text and its location.

To conclude, research often confronts the problem of its social availability as well as its social utility; for whom is the research intended? The researcher herself and a small community of likeminded scholars? Although the research process is often solitary, Tribley's deployment of visual techniques that are near-invisible and near-indiscernible operates as a strategy for eliciting the public's attention. Once the road sign has surprisingly been identified as an artwork, or once the white-on-white text has been unexpectedly found, the research becomes a kind of social-urban *détournement* that is communicated and shared with the public, inviting them to participate in that research, and hopefully see their environs as a public space. In this way, Tribley permits us to experience artistic research in its (inter)personal and local dimensions, rather than caught within the technocratic economics of post-Fordism and a sometimes restrictive objectivity.

(i) http://web.mac.com/elainetribley/elaine_tribley/Artwork/Pages/Mesopotamia.html

(ii) For the concept of the 'counter-public sphere', see Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002); also, Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy' in Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992).

(iii) *Texte zur Kunst*, June 2011; Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts* (London: Routledge, 2011); Janneke Wesseling (ed.), *See it Again, Say it Again: The Artist as Researcher* (Amsterdam: Antennae, Valiz, 2011). <http://www.jar-online.net>

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Matthew Bowman is an art theorist, critic, and curator. He is a lecturer at Colchester School of Art, and Head Librarian within the Department of Art History and Theory in the School of Philosophy and Art History at the University of Essex. In 2008 he completed his PhD at the University of Essex with a dissertation on the October journal and concepts of medium specificity. He has curated exhibitions in England and Austria, and published numerous essays, including 'The New Critical Historians of Art?' in James Elkins and Michael Newman (ed.), *The State of Art Criticism* (2008), with forthcoming essays on Martin Heidegger and Rosalind Krauss. His research conjoins theoretical, philosophical, and historical approaches to the study of art. At present he is researching collaborative art practice, authenticity in its personal-social dimension, materiality, and post-fordist society.

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MatthewBowman/About

Elaine Tribley

Born in Birmingham and now based in the east, Tribley works predominately in the public realm and currently holds an Associate Artist position at firstsite in Colchester. She obtained a BA in fine art from St Martin's School of Art in London and returned there in 2007 to complete an MFA. Her work spans photography, drawing, sculpture and installation and operates on the boundary between fine art and graphic design. Tribley explores and utilises her immediate environments, producing work with suggestions of

belonging and nostalgia, often with a sense of irony. She is interested in rural and urban landscapes, histories of place, artifice and the chance encounter. The language of street and road signage becomes a recurrent strategy in her work and she deploys a visual form that is strategically chameleonic using artistic research, in particular, as a mode of site-specificity.

Solo and group exhibitions include *Landmarks* at The Lethaby Gallery, London, 2006, *Invisible Dust* at The Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts in Norwich, 2011, *Landscape & Englishness* at The Benham Gallery, Colchester 2007, *The Hive* at The Gibberd Gallery, Harlow, 2011 and *No Mans Land* at The Elevator Gallery in Hackney, 2009. Her work was selected by Amnesty International to be shown at The Bargehouse for *Imagine a World...* in 2005 and more recently in 2012 she was invited to exhibit in *Echoes of Home* at The Mint Hotel, Tower of London in association with the Whitechapel Gallery.

Tribley has been commissioned to create several artworks for public sites across the East of England and in the Greater London area. Her work is held in the collections of Braintree Museum; Victoria & Albert Museum, London; Central St. Martins Art Book Collection and The Gardens of Easton Lodge sculpture collection. Tribley also works as a consultant and facilitator, engaging in regeneration programmes and educational projects and has curated several exhibitions.

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