

## **The Practice of Space: Hayley Newman & Emily Speed**

**Tracey Warr**

Commissioned by Castlefield Gallery to coincide with Hayley Newman & Emily Speed, 1 Mar – 7 Apr 2013

‘To live is to pass from one space to another, while doing your very best not to bump yourself’  
(Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces*).

### **1. What we move about in the midst of**

Hayley Newman and Emily Speed’s artworks consider the body in space and depict a bodily understanding of spaces. They address the social production of space and the social construction of needs. They are making work about dwelling in the body, in houses, in cities, on the planet, in the universe.

In her work *Inhabitant* (2009) Emily Speed moves around Linz wearing an accretion of cardboard boxes and model houses. In this performance she becomes one of her own drawings of hybrid body buildings in which buildings are worn like armour or a shell, with just two bare legs protruding. She wears ephemeral architecture that conceals and protects her, but also blinds her, making her dependent on passers-by to keep her moving safely.

In her novella, *Common* (2013) Newman presents a fictionalized account of one day as self-appointed Artist-in-Residence in the City of London. She moves through the spaces of the city, charting riots and the crash of global markets and currencies. Newman engages in a critical inhabiting of the city.

Space is not fixed, but always being made, always unfinished and open. It is not a given, but is socially constructed. Henri Lefebvre describes space and the political organization of space as expressive of social relationships but also reflecting back on them. Edward Soja writes that social relations are both space-forming and space-contingent. We are always inhabiting some kind of space – bed, shed, house, garden, office, car, train, street. Spaces hide us, defend us, express us and constrain us. They are shelters, refuges, retreats, snugs, perches and nooks. In spaces we generate, store, recuperate, regenerate; are intimate, private or public. Spaces are our territories, our castles, our nests. They make us comfortable or agoraphobic or claustrophobic. The spaces we make reflect our psychological needs, our physical needs, our social, economic and political beliefs and structures. We wear space, formed from the inside like a carapace and Doreen Massey writes that space presents us with a continuous series of encounters between bundles of trajectories.

### **2. A garment-house and the function of inhabiting**

Speed’s *Human Castle* (2012) was shown in a park as a live performance during the Edinburgh Festival, and also exists as a moving image work. Ten acro-balancers directed by Speed gradually converge, the women wearing strange shapes strapped to their backs that look like geometrical wings. At first in pairs they try balancing on each other knees, hands, shoulders, and then eventually they form a circle with the women on the men’s shoulders, unfolding their ‘wings’ which are revealed to be drapes resembling castle walls topped by felt crenellations. The performers sustain the shape, or the collective costume of the ephemeral castle briefly before the women carefully regain the ground and the castle collapses.

At the Beaux Arts Ball in New York in 1931 the architects of the Chrysler Building and other skyscrapers wore cardboard versions of their own structures.

In her work Speed variously wears buildings, furniture and boats, that evoke defensive shells for the frail human body that can be glimpsed merely with bare legs and feet. Louise Bourgeois' *Femme Maison* drawing depicts a naked woman whose head and torso are concealed by a house. Speed also cites literary influences on her work such as Italo Calvino, Kobo Abe and Mark Z. Danielewski. Her architecture costumes are usually constructed using the consumer detritus of packaging that in a harsh irony is often used by the homeless as flimsy shelter.

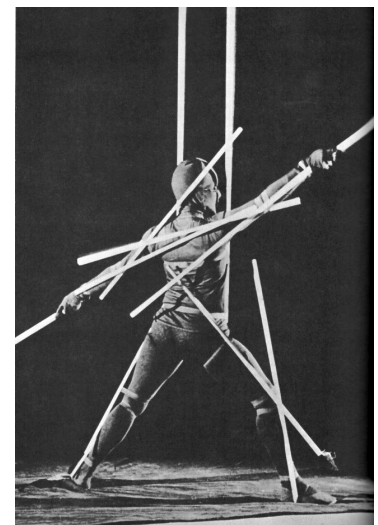


Beaux Arts Ball, New York, 1931. Photo from the collection of Christopher Gray.

Speed's hybrid body-buildings express a paradox (or two). On the one hand they are concerned with the construction of the self. Playing house, playing with dolls' houses, building childhood base camps are all ways in which we use habitats to explore and project our own sense of identity. These spaces also express the desire to conceal who we are or to conceal ourselves altogether, to be invisible and invulnerable behind a mask or costume. On the other hand the hybridization of body with building expresses a sense of fragility and mortality. A huff and a puff could blow the house down that is bodged from cardboard.

Spaces habitually inhabited make an impression on the body and our bodies and their actions imprint themselves on our environments. The novelist Thomas Hardy noted how one side of a stone floor in a church doorway was worn down by countless feet. Space can become a habit, a well-worn garment, and our bodies become habituated to moving in well-known spaces. Gaston Bachelard writes that he longs to know the psychological history of each of our muscles.

In her new work *Build Up* (2013) Speed works with acrobats in the Toastrack building in Manchester, creating a series of construction exercises, where the body engages in a cyclical repetition of movement that becomes a rhythm of building and collapsing. In some of the still images produced, dancer's limbs clad a stairwell, describing space with the body. Speed's work relates to Oskar Schlemmer's examination of the body in space in paintings such as *Group of 14 in an Imaginary Architecture* (1930) and *Bauhaus Staircase* (1932), and his recently renovated murals of figures and dancing bodies in the stairwell of the Bauhaus Workshop Building in Weimar. In *Slat Dance* (1920s) or *The Triadic Ballet* (1922) Schlemmer padded and riveted geometric shapes and inflexible materials onto the body, shaping it, modifying it and constraining it, articulating space with costumed bodies rather than delineating characters. Speed's work depicts the body moving about in the midst of space, defining, and being defined.



Oskar Schlemmer, *Slat Dance*, 1920s

### 3. Serious buffoonery

Many of Newman's works also use costumes and masks. In *Volcano Lady* (2004-2006) she made studio photographs and a performance wearing a costume that resembled an erupting volcano: first ashy and smokey, and then, when she does a headstand, revealing flaming lava red bloomers beneath.



Toyen, *Relache*, 1943.

The work references Toyen's Surrealist painting *Relache* (1943) which depicts a female body upside down, her feet merging with the wall and her head covered by her inverted clothing. But whilst there is a dreamlike irrationality to Toyen's image, Newman's *Volcano Lady* comically enacts an uncompromising image of natural forces – erupting volcano and female sexuality.

In *Domestique* (2012-2013) Newman has created 'portraits' with 70 worn-out dishcloths. In a performance with one of these cloths covering her face, she references the nameless, faceless people labouring in sweatshops where the cloths are made. The dishcloths are abject and almost without value. *Façadism* (2013) is a selection of short stories about faces and references the facades of buildings which, like the dishcloths, can often have an uncanny resemblance to faces. The stories examine the honest, masked, and false faces people present to the world and to other people. Not all faces can be read like an open book.

In *Histoire Economique* (2013) Newman performs a series of bank rubbings, treating banks as part of a bygone heritage like a castle, a stately mansion or a knight's grave, the pun of bank rubbings suggesting robbery, erasure and brass rubbings. In several works (*Connotations*, *Common*, *Daily Hayley*) Newman uses faction – playing imaginatively, fictitiously with real space and times subjected to fiction to question the validity of the information that is disseminated, that we receive. Newman's imagination and focus is civic and social, driven by and through political philosophy, making manifest the invisible ideological architectures we create and live in (hierarchies, capitalism, dogmas).

Her work employs a Dadaist absurdity to address serious issues in our ecologies and economies. At Cabaret Voltaire in 1916, one of the founders of Dada, Hugo Ball, had to be carried on and off stage in a shiny blue cylinder costume with lobster hands since he couldn't move. Like many ritual costumes, Ball's outfit as a 'Magical Bishop' was both ridiculous and serious. Newman's use of costumes and masks also has this aspect of both satire and uncanny. She manifests the invisible, turning it into an entity with her costumes and actions (*Spoon Lady*, *Suicide Cat*) so that it can be looked at with pinned open eyes, its injustices lanced with ridicule. Clowns and jesters wore costumes and facial masks or makeup to look ludicrous and comical but also to give them some protection from the backlash against the hard truths they spoke, the things it is just not polite to actually say.

Singing in the collective, The Gluts, and co-founding Capitalists Anonymous, the humour in Newman's work has an uncomfortable, iconoclastic edge. We don't want to look at a spot on the end of a nose, it's a bit awkward to observe *Volcano Lady*'s red drawers, we'd rather not have to think about sweatshops or really changing our lives because of climate change.

#### 4. In the woodshed

Newman's *Woodshed* was a temporary structure built in Beaconsfield gallery in London, referencing the slang definition of 'woodshedding' as a slightly removed place for practicing (usually music) but in this case a range of creative skills and making. Whilst there are points of connection between Newman and Speed's work: employing performance, sculpture, photography and text to explore the body's relationship with space, the emphasis of their individual approaches to this topic and the materials they draw on differ, with Speed's emphasis placed on the psychology of space in relation to the body, and Newman concentrating more on a political satire of social space in relation to the body. They effectively and differently embrace the spatial turn in critical and creative practice, manifesting the rich potential of space as a tool for making, thinking and being.

This text draws on Bachelard, Gaston (1964) *The Poetics of Space*, Boston: Beacon; Gropius, Walter, ed. (1961) *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press; Lefebvre, Henri (1991) *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith, Oxford: Blackwell; Massey, Doreen (2005) *For Space*, London: Sage; Perec, Georges (1997) *Species of Spaces and other Pieces*, London: Penguin; Rendell, Jane (2006) *Art and Architecture: A Space Between*, London: I.B. Tauris; Scarry, Elaine (1985) *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Soja, Edward W. (1989) *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, London: Verso.

--

**Tracey Warr is a writer, curator, teacher and Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Art Theory at Oxford Brookes University.**