BODY, TRACE, EVENT

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During an interview at her studio in Los Angeles, Ingrid Calame and I had the following exchange:

> Ingrid Calame: **Drawing is so structural, it's like bones, and painting is about surface, about colour.**
> Michael Newman: And skin?
> Ingrid Calame: **Skin and bones.**[1]

I

In 1997, Ingrid Calame was working on *SHPHLOO!*, a system of making paintings from stains traced from her studio floor, when she heard from her cousin about the very upsetting circumstances of her grandmother's death five years before: not found for several days, her body had started to disintegrate. Hearing this influenced Calame's decision to start tracing stains outside in the street.

> **I was thinking about how we all disintegrate. We all know that we're going to disintegrate, not just while we're alive, but also when we're dead. I was thinking a lot about mortality. There are signs of it everywhere on public streets and sidewalks – marks of collapse, accidents, and loss. I wanted the work to reflect everybody's disintegration, everybody's loss. The mess of it.**[2]

The stains that the body extrude throw into question the body's boundaries and structure in a way that challenges the separateness and integrity of the organism. When Calame makes tracings from the floor, street, or other surface, the stains and marks are not reproduced, but rather outlined. This provides a document of, or memorial to, the patches of oil, scuffs, trodden-in chewing gum, street markings, graffiti, cracks, peels and other effects of human habitation and erosion, but also creates a separable configuration, that will eventually be the basis for the structure of an abstract painting. The presence of the painting continues to rely on the inscription of the trace of that which is past and elsewhere as its condition. The painting is thus simultaneously abstraction and document. Rather than being private expressions, Calame's paintings position themselves in relation to that which is already-there, and to the public:

> **I chose the street because I wanted a public parade of loss rather than a private revealing of events ... Death doesn't seem like only a giant cataclysmic event, but also incremental loss and transfomation.**[3]

Calame makes her paintings and drawings according to the following steps. First, she traces the marks and stains on the ground on translucent Mylar polyester film. Once back in the studio, she then places different tracings on top of one another. Calame calls this arrangement a 'constellation', suggesting the way in which stars at different distances form patterns in the night sky.[4] Then a second tracing from these different tracings is made onto another single sheet of Mylar, each layer in a different coloured pencil, and it is rolled back up when it is done. These coloured pencil drawings form the basis for paintings on aluminium sheets where blocks of colour are added. Until 2008 Calame used sign painter's enamel, which would go on slick with a shiny surface, and more recently she has turned to oil paint that holds the traces of the brush.

Calame makes and presents her work in such a way that the viewer is made aware that it comes from the effects of life and natural processes elsewhere – something happened, whether the actions of humans or the weather, to create the marks and stains – and enters into our lives in the form of a configuration that constitutes another event, that of the painting for the beholder. In 2006 Calame and her assistants made tracings at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, home of the most important NASCAR races. While the track itself is polished clean to reduce friction, thick rubber tire tracks are left in the pits to increase traction. Calame also found a ghostly remnant of a 'victory donut'– a pretzel-shaped configuration of skid marks – left by British

driver Dan Wheldon on winning the 2005 Indy 500 race. Like the graffiti that Calame would later trace from the L.A. River – a dried-out concrete canal – and the numerals she traced from the ArcelorMittal Steel Shipping building, these are marks that have been deliberately made or left as a form of communication or commemoration; more often, we find the traces of inadvertent stains and marks that are the result of weather, erosion, spills and leavings. This distinction raises a question of the basis of what we take as meaningful and what is contingent.[5] Behind this lies the further question of the relation of life to the world constructed by humans. The philosopher Hannah Arendt's 1958 book *The Human Condition* makes a distinction between two concepts of life: between what the ancient Greeks called *zoe* – biological life that reproduces itself endlessly without change – and *bios* – the unique, individual lives that enter into a world made through the speech and action of human beings.[6] Work results in a framework – including physical places – in which speech and action may be publicly communicated, rendered meaningful, and preserved for future generations. In this respect, Calame's tracings and the constellations, drawings and paintings that she created from them displaced the self-created record of Dan Wheldon's gladiatorial victory into a different framework of value and meaning from that of the race track, raising the question of the relation of art as a form of *bios* to bodily life or *zoe*.

Stains produced by the body imply a reversion from biographical life to biological and physical process. We could therefore read the circumscription of the stain as an attempt at restitution. This works both as a ritual of mourning, like the ceremony of a burial or cremation, and a process of formation through which the mark or stain becomes a 'work' that participates in the creation of a social world. Calame's works have both commemorative and constructive or celebratory dimensions: they contain the memory of what is often low, abject and ignored, while bringing something new into the world in an affirmative way.

The production of the work involves a simultaneous attachment and detachment. To have an unmediated relation with the stain as stain or mark in its contingency is to be attached to it rather than to treat it as a separate object of knowledge that is under the control of the subject. However, to circumscribe a stain is to enact a double detachment, of the tracing from its source marks and stains, and of the subject making the tracing from the piece of ground – tarmac or concrete or paving – on which it was found. The 'constellations' – the layered arrangements of tracings on the studio floor – are a further step in detachment, as they are reconfigurations. This process of unpicking the immediate connection with the dead through remembrance is how mourning works, and is a way for Calame to avoid the melancholy of the trace when it is treated as a relic. The stain must be circumscribed so that it is not overwhelming, so that it doesn't spread so far that it takes over everything. The tracing imposes a limit that, while referring to the unlimited beyond, provides something specific that may be worked upon. What, then, are the implications of Calame's reworking?

II

Pliny the Elder writing in the 1st century A.D. in his *Natural History*, tells a story of the origin of painting. The daughter of a potter named Butades circumscribes the shadow cast on the wall of her lover who is about to depart on a journey. If the shadow is conceived as a part of the person, the daughter has created a memorial to her absent lover in the very place where a piece of him will have been. But that is not all. Her father goes on to use the outline on the wall to make a relief in clay, which he fires in his oven, thus creating a portrait that is no longer the very place of its subject, but becomes something detachable.[7] Similarly, by circumscribing tracings memorializing marks and stains, Calame allows them to be separated from their place and translated elsewhere into the final drawing or painting.

Calame's paintings are abstract works that have a mimetic dimension. While we usually think of the result of mimetic activity as a copy of an original, or a representation of something in the world, an imitation may also be an enactment, as when a mime or impersonator imitates someone.[8] Calame chooses as her subject not objects or other upright, intact bodies, but stains and marks, that is to say residues left on the ground, and as a result her paintings originate not in formal abstraction but through acts of mimetic circumscription. The later stages of her process of production still maintain this mimetic relation to the stain or trace.[9] Thus they serve as meeting points between the trace that is the source of the work, and the artist's activity, which remains 'mimetic' in the sense of a configuring of oneself towards the object in a way that is not a projection from the artist but that continues to conform to the object itself, in this case the stains and marks on the ground.

B-b-b, rr gR-UF!, b-b-b (1999; pp.38–39), *...puEEp...* (2001; p.46), *Spalunk!* (1997; p.29), are some of the titles of Calame's paintings. This gives us a clue concerning the significance of her approach to artmaking. The titles suggest sounds – perhaps actually heard in the street – that are transcribed into letters and phonemes.

They are thus the sonic parallel to the tracings of the stains and marks. Used as titles of the paintings, the phonemes draw attention to the temporality involved in the making and reception of the work. In addition, Calame translates the sounds into combinations of letters that function like phonemes but without becoming the components of words, so that they do not leave behind the materiality of the letter. The equivalent sound is no longer background noise as it might have been before being picked out by the artist, but it is also not allowed to become an already existing word with a meaning. Language is opened up to an otherness that it does not absorb. In Calame's paintings we continue to sense what contributed to the construction of the work, although without having it literally represented, just as the sounds echo in the voicing of the letters that make up these titles. That writing out the sounds makes the sounds repeatable apart from the situation in which they were heard is analogous to the way in which, thanks to the process though which Calame produces the paintings, the rendering of the trace may be displaced from its original situation, resulting in a moveable drawing or painting, or the translation of the configuration elsewhere in an installation.

Considering the titles together with the paintings draws attention to the act of mimesis through which the abstract paintings are produced, the particular form of mimicry that carries over and preserves something of the object's singularity. On the one hand, Calame's way of making work is distinct from an automatic process like imprinting or recording, but on the other hand, it does not go so far as to produce an idealized version that leaves behind the particularity of where it comes from, or subsumes that particularity under a projected form. Calame opens up a space for creation in relation to an acknowledgment of the given. She produces work that is both heteronomous – open to the traces of what is outside – and autonomous in that the elements are brought together into a deliberately organized whole that is the culmination of numerous decisions along the way.[10]

This acknowledgement of the outside is also the reason that Calame pursues forms of unity in her work that may be achieved without totalization, that is, without integrating the elements in such a way that they are subsumed in a whole. Closure is required for there to be a work at all, but in Calame's process closure retains a degree of contingency, so it never becomes an autonomy that is closed. In the first stage, the stains and marks are circumscribed but not taken over – Calame allows the stain or mark itself to be left behind. In the next stage, the rearrangement into constellations makes use of parts of the often very large source-tracings, and the drawings in which the re-tracings of the layers on a single surface are made from within the constellations spread over the floor, rather than from the perspective of an overview. Again, in the final stage of the production of paintings, the framing edges make each painting seem like a selection from a larger field. The frame seems at once to be an essential and necessary aspect of the painting (in terms of the aesthetic of its internal relations stressed by the use of colour and areas of paint) and yet also arbitrary (in relation to the continuity of the field of tracings outside the frame). In a sense, imposing a frame is a way of not being overwhelmed by all there is: Calame has said that 'In that rectangle the universe is controllable but outside it is not.'[11] However, the framing edge doesn't close out what is or was beyond. What is framed within the coloured pencil drawing or painting is part of a larger whole that extends beyond the frame. Visiting the studio I saw tracings occupying the whole of the studio floor, and had to walk over them gingerly in my socks to see the constellation in progress. Having worked in experimental cinema as a student, Calame has a strong sense of the relation of what is within the rectangle to the out-of-frame. Her drawings and paintings combine a sense of the aesthetic necessity of the composition with – through the intimation of change and the endlessness of what goes on outside – its contingency.

III

The larger whole is institutional as well as physical. Conceptual art, following the examples of dada and Marcel Duchamp, made a turn to consider the role of the institution of art as well as the particular spaces in which it appears in determining the value and meaning of its objects. Calame takes this turn in a direction that is simultaneously extremely literal, and yet also much more expansive in scope. The literalism has to do with the way in which context is physically inscribed in the work through the tracings, and forms the ground for the installations. The expansiveness has to do with the range of her inquiry concerning the ways in which we try to make sense of that very literal condition, tied to our physical bodies. The structures we create mediate between our physical condition – ultimately life and death – and the desire to render these conditions meaningful and extended beyond the moment.

As the new millennium approached Calame embarked upon a large-scale project, *Secular Response* (1999–2006) which involved constellating tracings in three architectural structures concerned with systems of knowing: religion, economics and science. She filled

three sites corresponding with these systems – the Ardsley United Methodist Church (her hometown church in Westchester, New York), the New York Stock Exchange and the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona – with constellations of tracings from the streets of Los Angeles, Las Vegas and New York's Wall Street. The enormous new drawings that resulted were of relocated tracings that filled the floor areas that could be walked – furniture and walls constituted blank areas in the drawings. Thus in effect the outside – the street carried over into the constellations laid out in the buildings – is brought inside to make the drawings which will in turn be taken outside the interiors where they were made, to provide the sources of works shown in the architectural and institutional spaces of galleries and museums.

Calame's approach to her work positions her in relation both to modernist abstract painting, and to the art that arose out of the questioning of the premises of modernism by minimal and conceptual artists. Systems were used by conceptual artists such as Sol LeWitt to remove the production of art from the exclusive expression of the artist's subjectivity, or objects and installations were conceived in terms of the history of their context.[12] Or the work of art was taken to be produced by and declarative of its situation, like a shadow, imprint or stain.[13] By the mid-1970s an approach to appropriating and re-presenting already-existing images of media-stereotypes was emerging that would develop into the work of what became known as 'the Pictures Generation'.[14] During the 1990s exhibitions of contemporary art were filled with film and video projections. In so far as there are aspects of Calame's painting aligned with all of these approaches – the use of system, the literal, the relation to the already-existing, pre-and post-production, the reference of the work to its situation – we can designate her painting as resolutely 'post-conceptual'.

However, there are other aspects of Calame's work which places it within a much longer history – indeed, her tracings in the L.A. River of both contingent marks and graffiti relate to the earliest human mark-making, where sometimes it is impossible to tell what is a human mark and what has been left by time. And not only has she recently turned to the Renaissance technique of 'pouncing' to produce her wall drawings, but the three steps by which she produces her painting – from tracing, through constellations, to drawings and paintings – also have a striking similarity to the approach advocated by Leon Battista Alberti in *On Painting*, written in Latin in 1435, the first systematic treatise on the subject. Alberti divides painting into three parts – circumscription, composition, and colour[15] – in a way that is paralleled by the three stages Calame has developed as her method. 'Circumscription ... the process of delineating the external outlines on the painting' corresponds to the initial tracing around the marks and stains; 'composition ... that procedure in painting whereby the parts are composed together in a picture' corresponds to the composition – literally the 'putting together' – of the tracings from different parts and places, split in Calame's case into the layering of constellations and the making of drawings from them; and 'colour' with the addition of enamel or oil paint to the final surface.[16] The difference, of course, is that for Calame the painting is not conceived as a proportional representation of bodies and objects in space by analogy with a window: the relation to what the drawing or painting is 'of' is neither that typical of a representation nor a map, but remains closer to that of a one-to-one tracing. The aim is not the representation of an object, but rather the presentation of a configuration that ultimately derives from something that came into being through contact – the stain, scrape or mark.[17]

What Calame adds that is not derived from the tracing procedure is colour. If the lines refer back to the tracing of the trace, and function analogously to memories of the past, colour relates to the viewer's present experience of the painting itself. This is all the more so as colour in Calame's paintings is not representational. Historically, the break between the colour on the surface of a painting and the colour in an image that represents local colour – the break that takes place in Van Gogh, Gauguin, the Fauvists and Matisse – serves to emphasize the viewer's experience of the painting *as* painting by contrast with the element of representation which always comes after the experience of the object or scene. In Calame's recent oil paintings colour frees itself from being tied to registering the different levels of the tracings of the marks and stains that formed a constellation. It also becomes more variegated in relation to the shapes, rather than serving as fill like in sign painting. If Calame's previous work recalls the historical disputes between line and colour – *disegno e colore* – which go back to the Renaissance, a time when painters were seeking to rise above being craft-based mixers and daubers of pigments to be concerned with geometry and ideas, it has always also questioned this hierarchy, by subordinating line to the mark and stain (therefore not the idea), by making the line itself coloured in the constellations and drawings, and by finally emphasizing the immediate, free and explosive dimension of colour.

Calame's oil paintings from 2009–10 in which colour frees itself are based on constellations from tracings made in the ArcelorMittal steel warehouse in Buffalo, New York, which had recently become disused following the closing of the plant due to the decline

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been raised to the horizontal, but there is no horizon line. The pigment grips to the wall as it falls. The effect is as if simultaneously looking down on a landscape from the sky, and looking up at the cosmos from the ground. Near and far views are combined into one, as the viewer feels at once close to the material pigment and texture of the surface, and yet as though regarding something from much further away than the wall actually is. As with other paintings and installations by Calame, even though this configuration is cut by the architecture, the viewer feels that he or she is seeing something at once complete in itself and a part of something vast, even infinite.

Coda

Sitting in front of her wall drawing in Monterey Museum of Art, Calame told me that her favourite novelist is Marcel Proust.[19] I think we discussed how in *In Search of Lost Time* memory is experienced in and through the body. Afterwards I remembered Proust's description in the novel of the visit of the writer Bergotte to a gallery to see Johannes Vermeer's *View of Delft* (1660–61), where he is drawn to a 'little patch of yellow': 'he fixed his gaze, like a child upon a yellow butterfly that it wants to catch, on the precious little patch of yellow wall'. He decides that his last books have been too dry, 'I ought to have gone over them with a few layers of colour, made my language precious in itself, like this little patch of yellow wall.' He dies repeating to himself 'Little patch of yellow wall, with a sloping roof, little patch of yellow wall.'[20] The patch of colour, of paint, seems to detach itself from any representational role.[21] There is in painting something about colour that cannot be contained. In Calame's approach to making paintings and drawings, the 'too much' of the surrounding chaos of life requires that she set the limits of the frame, and the tendency of the stain to spread and take over everything, requires that it be given the exoskeleton of a contour. With her recent turn towards the autonomy of colour – no longer determined as in-fill in the place of the marks and stains at the source of the drawings and now allowed to modulate in its own way – the emphasis of the work has shifted, without abandoning the relation to traces, towards the presence of the painting to the viewer. Colour gives a force to the shapes of the paintings on aluminium, and the pounced wall drawings seem to pulsate of their own accord. While the works carry the memory of their making, they are by no means and never were only about the past. The processes that go into their production are taken up in each future viewer's perception, which also has the mimetic character of a re-enactment, following the contours and affected by the colours of the paint. While Ingrid Calame's paintings and drawings are fully present as line and colour on surfaces, in the event of experiencing them, we are drawn into consideration of both their history and the potential they contain.

Notes

1. Interview with the author, 29 December 2010.
2. Quoted in Ben Portis, *Wallworks: Contemporary Artists and Place* (Toronto, AGO, 2007). Also quoted in Marcelle Polednik, 'Ingrid Calame: Mining the Surface', in *In Process: Ingrid Calame* (Monterey, CA: Monterey Museum of Art, 2010), p.9.
3. Quoted in Freiman, 'Traces of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway'. Also quoted in Polednik, 'Ingrid Calame', p.38.
4. Anton Rabinbach in his introduction to an early essay of Walter Benjamin titled 'Doctrine of the Similar' writes that 'he was preoccupied with thoughts about perception as a reading of the configurations of surfaces just as primeval man regarded the world about him and the sky. Here lie the seeds of the considerations which he employs many years later in the sketch "The Doctrine of the Similar." The emergence of constellations as configurations on the surface of the sky, he maintained, was the beginning of reading, the script that coincided with the formation of the mythic world age. The constellations were for the mythical world, what later the Holy Writ was for revelation.' 'Introduction to Walter Benjamin's "Doctrine of the Similar"' *New German Critique,* No. 17 Special Walter Benjamin Issue (Spring 1979), p.62.
5. James Elkins poses the question of how we decide what in a picture is allowed to signify and what not in James Elkins, *On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
6. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp.12–37. The precise nature of the distinction between bios and zoe as made by Arendt is controversial: see Laurent Debreuil, 'Leaving Politics: Bios, Zoe, Life' *diacritics*, Vol. 36, No. 2, Summer, pp.83–98.
7. For my discussion of this story, see Michael Newman, 'The Marks, Traces, and Gestures of Drawing', in *The Stage of Drawing – Gesture and Act: Selected From the Tate Collection*, Avis Newman and Catherine de Zegher eds (London and New York: Tate Publishing and The Drawing Center, 2003).

8. The idea of a mimesis as a copy or representation derives from Plato, and that of mimesis as enactment from Aristotle, in relation to theatre.
9. These kinds of relations have come to be known, following the American pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, as 'indexical signs', signs produced by that to which they refer, as fire produces smoke, or a finger its print.
10. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: The Athlone Press, 1997), p.6. For excellent discussions of Adorno's concept of mimesis, see Michael Cahn, 'Subversive Mimesis: Theodor W. Adorno and the Modern Impasse of Critique', in Mihai Spariosu, ed., *Mimesis in Contemporary Theory: Volume 1 The Literary and Philosophical* Debate (Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamin's Publishing Company), pp.27–55; and Shierry Weber Nicholsen, *Exact Imagination, Late Work on Adorno's Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), pp.136–180.
11. Interview with the author, 29 December 2010.
12. During our conversation on 29 December 2010, Ingrid Calame mentioned with great admiration her former teacher Michael Asher's exhibition at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 2008, where he restored the inner metal framework of all the partition walls that had been installed during the museum's history, a project that is at once conceptual, extremely literal, and to do with retracing the history of the institution through its architecture.
13. See Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1985).
14. From an essay by Douglas Crimp, 'Pictures', October, No. 8 (Spring 1979), pp. 75–88; see also Douglas Eklund, *The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009).
15. Which he calls 'reception of light', Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting,* trans. Cecil Grayson (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1991), p.64.
16. ibid, pp.65–67.
17. There are historical precedents for this: Leonardo's recommendation that the artist take a stain made by throwing a paint-loaded sponge at the wall as an inspiration for a composition, and in the 18th century Alexander Cozens's method of teaching landscape painting using ink blots on paper as the starting point. (See Michael Newman, 'The Marks, Traces, and Gestures of Drawing', op. cit., pp.97–99.) The difference is that for Calame the source is given, already existing marks in a particular place in the world, and these serve as more than a source of inspiration or composition, and remain as a reference through the various stages of the procedure.
18. 'Painting, or Signs and Marks' in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 1 1913–1926* (Cambridge, MA. and London: The MIT Press, 1996), p.85.
19. Conversation with the author, 30 December 2010.
20. Proust took the words 'little patch of yellow' from an essay on Vermeer by his friend the art critic Jean-Louis Vaudoyer. See Eric Karpeles, *Paintings in Proust: A Visual Companion to 'in Search of Lost Time'* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2008), pp.340–341. The translation of the passage is by Karpeles, p.234.
21. For a brilliant discussion of the distinction between the patch and the detail, see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), pp.229–271.