

# CRATES and IMAGES

Two new texts by Dr. Nina Wakeford

## CRATES

In January she drove to Self Storage, visiting for the first time to enquire about renting space. The month before she had let each of the grandchildren roam through the house, room by room, marvelling at their ability to quickly select and carefully pack up their agreed three items each. She herself had not been able to make any progress about what to transport to her own already overstuffed home, what to sell or give away, or what to take to the recycling site. 'A house is nothing other than subjectivity,' she told herself, 'a self under construction'. By the New Year she realised she would soon have to put the building on the market. She made a resolution. If she packed just a few things into boxes each day and made regular trips to fill a storage unit, without having to make any more decisions, she could cope with the gradual sense of subtraction.

It was pure chance that on that initial visit she met the man who sold access to the 'abandoned storage' units. While she was looking through the pages of the contract – a two year fixed agreement so she could afford the discounted monthly rate – he had come up to the counter and asked for the manager, who had quickly appeared and handed over a large set of keys. She had made a joke about maybe needing that many units herself, and he had explained that the keys were not to open his rentals, but rather to unlock units which were no longer being paid for and would need to be cleared. He liaised with all the storage businesses in the city, inspecting these units, removing anything with a name on, and then selling the contents to online bidders who would have to clear them completely to get back their deposit left at the front desk.

She imagined her own mind as Self Storage, some units stuffed with belongings which were visited

and sorted on a regular basis and others which had been neglected or forgotten. She felt drawn to the abandoned storage units. She asked how much one might go for, and if she might accompany the man to see one there and then. He was reluctant, but promised to let her know when he next put some up on his eBay site. So, in late February, she found herself back at Self Storage, as she would every month for the next two years, each time a key to a different abandoned unit in her hand. After the first visit, she brought her girlfriend, and together they began to buy units not to empty, but to make people up. A 'theatre of composition' was what her girlfriend called it.

Soon she found she could not bear to part with any units even after having invented their previous owners – she just re-rented them under her own name. She also stopped visually inspecting the contents as she found the scene overwhelming. She could best make people up with her eyes shut. Closing her eyes as her girlfriend put the key in the Self Storage lock, she would only open them an hour or so later when the unit was again secured. Without the use of her sight, she would take in a deep breath as she heard the door opening. She tried to get a sense of the unit as a room and then as a person, first by its smell. The scent of tobacco, when it was present, always seemed to arrive quickly, as did bleach or washing fluid. Perfumes reached her more slowly. Last of all came the smells associated with plastic or electronics or rubber or IKEA furniture, each of which she learned to distinguish, and each of which helped her begin to compose a stranger's inner life: despair, dreams, indifference.

When prompted, her girlfriend would then start describing, in meticulous detail, every bit of contents and its position – objects which were leaning, stuffed in a corner, balanced or piled up. She kept as

much of the inventory in her head as possible, and sometimes asked for a reminder if she could not retain as much as she needed. Occasionally she asked questions. Then they went home and she wrote it all out. In an attempt to reconnect objects and owners she uploaded her texts as reviews on Self Storage's Trustpilot page, hoping that someone would recognise themselves.

She read that Sigmund Freud in his *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* had described the unconscious as a bourgeois interior, with an entrance hall, a drawing room, and a threshold in between guarded by a watchman who would only let certain mental impulses into the drawing room. Having opened her feelings to the scenes in Self Storage she found this irritating. She was frequently entirely consumed by sadness when she sensed the lives which they found in such small - definitely not bourgeois - spaces, lives expressing themselves as if someone had pressed pause.

Sources:

Diana Fuss (2004) *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms that Shaped Them*. London: Routledge

Sarah Tripp (2017) *Making People Up*. PhD Thesis, Edinburgh College of Art

## IMAGES

*The modern system of publics creates a demanding social phenomenology. Our willingness to process a passing appeal determines which publics we belong to and performs their extension... The direction of our glance can constitute our social world.* (Warner, 2002).

How do we know which publics we belong to?

The cultural theorist Michael Warner has proposed that we pay more attention to a kind of public which comes into being only in relation to texts and

their circulation (for example the public created by the reading of these short paragraphs. Hello!). In other words, in many writing contexts - including journalism, advertising, fiction, drama - the available addressees are essentially imaginary. A public, in this sense, may be understood as a relationship amongst strangers. Love letters or emails have a clear and identifiable addressee. The texts to which Warner refers assume some kind of 'stranger-sociability'. A public might be said to be 'stranger-relationality' in pure form, Warner suggests.

Do street notices, advertisements, messages, stickers and signs work in this way? What kind of stranger-relationality do they assume or create? How do they give a shape to the interactivity of those who have no idea with whom they are interacting?

Street notices attempt to make relationships with us as indefinite others, not only through words and images, but through the practices of pinning, sticking and stapling paper to exterior surfaces in spaces in which glancing is possible, or even expected - think of the roaming gaze of the flaneuse. Yes, street notices rely on the fact we know they are assuming we are strangers. And they often also attempt to recruit via a short and/or urgent message or demand or plea.

Warner proposes stranger-sociability as one of the defining elements of modernity, in which social imaginary is defined by discourse (rather than kinship or place). Yet unlike many of the historic publications with which Warner is fascinated, such as the daily newsletters distributed in the 17th and 18th century, which had a regular mechanism of distribution, a street notice stuck to a lamp post does not itself move around, even if copies are attached to several nearby lamp posts, and in this way, become distributed. Rather, we circulate around the notice, if it manages to capture our attention at all. The temporal rhythm of a daily or weekly publication or broadcast does not determine a street

engagement must operate differently, maybe mediated by a strip of paper to be torn off, a phone number or a QR code. These street notices are a call to a stranger, but they have no single fixed mode of response. They operate within an attention economy rooted outdoors. Yet, in whatever way you might encounter a photocopied A4 piece of paper stuck up in the shared green space opposite this gallery, by coming into its range, and noticing it, you fulfill the only entry condition demanded by a public.

Perhaps we should focus on these objects, which may draw on known styles and current popular culture or invent an idiosyncratic visual language, as a having a potential for a kind of impact as a network, and that it is this network (if we tracked their multifarious manifestations from tree to tree, tree to lamppost, lamppost to wall) which constitute the social world suggested by Warner's quotation above. Street notices do not have the resonant network affect of a Twitter storm or a viral social media post. Neither do they, in any straightforward way, evidence an awareness of their subordinate position in relation to official signage – ruling them out as having true counterpublic potential in Warner's terms. Unlike other texts (such as this one) they do not have any clear mode of citation, so cannot straightforwardly refer to each other. Yet in their stubborn calls for attention, they insist on the outside world as an ongoing space for the encounter of not only words, but possible discourse. Even though media theorist Susanna Paasonen uses the following term to describe the operation of the contemporary social media landscape, street notices also have what she calls 'affective stickiness', especially when they are juxtaposed one alongside another. Any weakness of their network is due to the fact our possible participation is limited. What shared language is assumed? At what height are they placed? How much pre-existing knowledge do we need to understand

a demand? Do they function when half torn down? Does the ink wash away in rain or quickly fade in sunlight? Do we have the technology to respond?

References:

Susanna Paasonen (2020) 'Resonant networks; on affect and social media' in Anne Fleig and Christian von Scheve (Eds.) *Public Spheres of Resonance: Constellations of Affect and Language*. London: Routledge, 49-62

Michael Warner (2002) 'Publics and Counterpublics'. *Public Culture*, 14.1, 49-90

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