



re : public

asking the question 'can something happen in public again?'

**re : public-
cation**

“dead public #1”

exhibition materials 4/2/10-13/3/10

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Dead Public #1:

Friday 5 February: 4-6 pm. Mick Wilson

Under Discussion: Amanda Ralph, *Coroner Regrets* (until Sat 6 Feb). *Coroner Regrets*, the result of a self-initiated inquiry at the Coroner's Court in Dublin, is a summary record of Amanda Ralph's recollection of events that transpired there. For *re : public*, Ralph recreates *Coroner Regrets* as a text work, hundreds of sheets of transcriptions installed in the gallery.

'...to the public, or nobody, the well-known...'
Georg Hamann (1759) *Socratic Memorabilia*

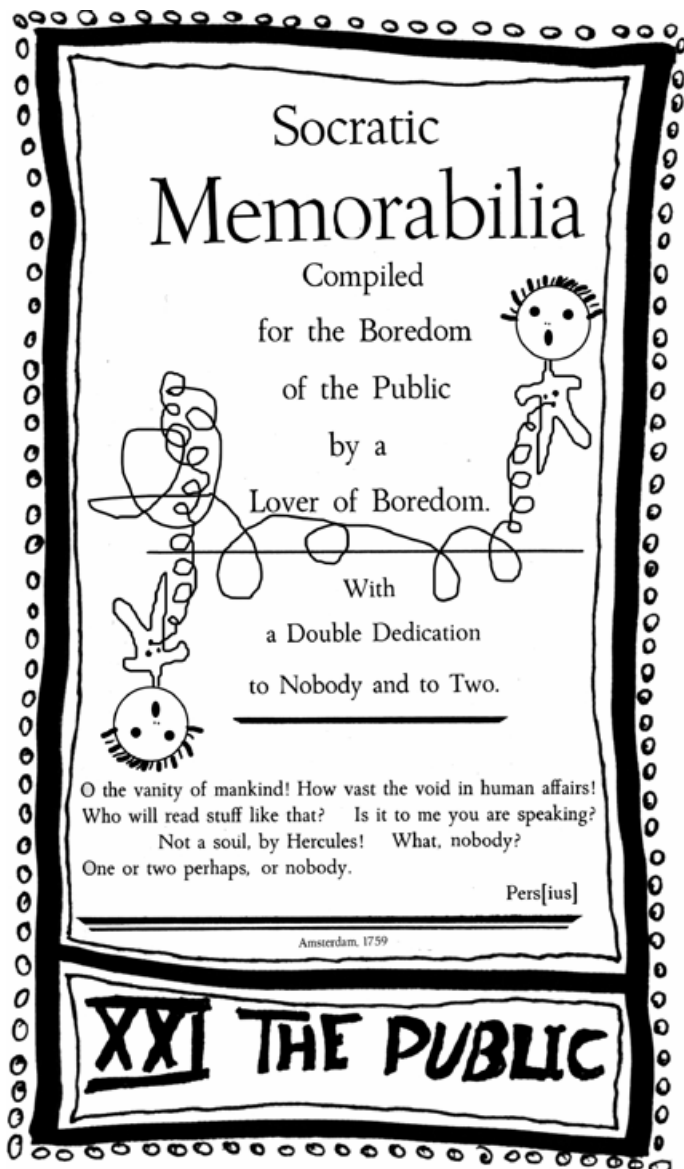


Image from *My Hamann's Socratic Memorabilia*, an artwork referencing Hamann's work *Socratic Memorabilia* from the 18th century. Hamann's frontispiece to this book provides a dedication lampooning the then emerging concept of 'the public' so important to Enlightenment authors such as Immanuel Kant and others. "O the vanity of mankind"...Who will read stuff like that? Is it to me you are speaking?"

Natural and Political
OBSERVATIONS

Mentioned in a following INDEX,
and made upon the
Bills of Mortality.

By *JOHN GRAUNT*,
Citizen of
LONDON.

With reference to the *Government, Religion, Trade, Growth, Ayre, Diseases, and the several Changes* of the said **CITY.**

— *Nec, me ut mirare Turba, labor.*
Contentus pariter LeHoribus —

LONDON,

Printed by *Tho: Knaptoft*, for *John Martin, James Allis, and Tho: Dine*, at the Sign of the Bell in *St. Paul's Church-yard*, **MDCLXII.**

Title page of John Graunt's (1662) *Natural and Political Observations Made upon the Bills of Mortality*. This is cited by many as a key text in the emergence of modern governmental statistical practices (variously called "social accountancy" and "political arithmetic"). It is a work based upon reading 'Bills of Mortality' - the weekly and annual lists of deaths produced in England from the late 16th century onwards.

Introduction

This ongoing series examines how the questions of the 'political' and of the 'public' might be approached through attending to mortality (i.e., to the apprehension that 'we' must die) - not simply as an existential horizon (not as a 'fact' of personal biography) but rather as a condition of embodied temporal co-existence and as a fundamental dimension of material social being. Natality (i.e., that 'we' are born) also operates here, and we must consider what, possibly stronger claims it might make on our attention. The somewhat clumsily constructed, and over-reaching questions presented as points of departure are: how might the themes of the political, mortality and social co-being or 'public-ness' be understood together and read through their interrelationship? And how might the interaction of these themes recast the questions of each: i.e., how might we re-consider in this way questions such as what is the political? what is the public? what is it to die? Perhaps, these last three questions may also be transposed from this essential form ('what is...?') to a question about the practical possibility of things being otherwise: how

might we do politics otherwise? how can we produce publics otherwise? how can we share that we die otherwise?

Such a critical enquiry would it is hoped produce alternatives, choices, and the practical possibility of doing otherwise.

Awkward Talk

The awkward use of scare quotes around key words – ('we', 'public-ness', and so forth) indicates a difficulty with the use of these terms: the scare quotes seem to say: "how can we speak of 'we'?" "what is 'public'?" There is a sense in which this willingness to fuss over the meanings of terms is somehow an indulgent and wasteful exercise, not worthy of serious and practical matters. There is a fear that we might end up 'debating things to death' but not get anything done, that we might not be properly responsible and therefore not 'make a difference' in the world because we are getting caught up in mere words, rhetoric, fancy language and insider-jargons. Instead of doing something meaningful, but rather concentrating our attention on 'meanings' and on the way we speak, we might risk simply performing imagined versions of ourselves (flattering self images) as radicals, oppositional free-thinkers, and dissenting ("right-thinking") subjects who know what's what, and aren't fooled by the dominant value system or "ideology" or "group-think" or "consensus" etc.

This is a serious risk. It is a risk that is not dispelled simply by calling it and naming it as a possible trap that we may fall into – or perhaps more likely, a 'trap' that we may jump into willingly. However, it is also likely that in the performance in front of each other – in public? – of this talking – of this debating things to death – that there will be a challenge made to these flattering self-images that might be vainly produced by our fancy talk. ('Fancy talk' might also be called 'imaginative talk' – there may be a tendency to disdain 'fancy' as unnecessary, over-done, frivolous or whimsical, on the one hand, and to celebrate 'imaginative' as creative, inventive, playful and productive, on the other hand.)

To name something as a risk, as potential error, as a wrong way we must not go, is not thereby to prevent us from going that wrong way, nor does it stop us from making that mistake. Indeed, sometimes talking about something that must not happen or saying we don't want something to happen, is part of the very procedure whereby we bring the supposedly undesired state-of-affairs about. (Talking and actualities don't quite marry up in a unequivocal manner. As the contemporary idiom sometimes has it - "Methinks he doth protest too much!" or as Shakespeare's Queen Gertrude put it – "The lady doth protest too much, methinks". 'Protesting' here may mean not simply denying, challenging, or resisting: it perhaps primarily, means, declaring, asserting, swearing or avowing that something is the case. Sometimes it is precisely the avowal that operates as a disavowal – "Yeah, I know but...")

The tricky equivocation of talking, and the tricky choreography – the dancing bodies – of avowal and disavowal seem key to talking about death. In Duchamp's last joke, his epitaph – *'D'ailleurs c'est toujours les autres qui meurent'* – he says – roughly translated into English - 'Anyway, it's always other people who die' (or 'And besides! It's only the others that die'.)¹

Suggesting something of the tension between avowal and disavowal of death, Paul Ricoeur in his lectures on *Living Up To Death* introduces a tension between the desire for an 'invulnerable' life and the attempt to apprehend what it is to die, to be dead, to be not.

The question What sort of beings are the dead? is so insistent that even in our secularised societies we do not know what to do with the dead, that is, with the cadavers. [...] The mourning I want to enter into – as a work of mourning...the internalization before my death of a question post-mortem, of the question: what are the dead? To see myself dead before being dead, and to apply to myself in anticipation a survivor's question. In short, the dread of the future perfect. I said, in passing, that it is a question for those in good health. In, effect its capacity to give rise to dread is strongest when it comes to disturb, confront, insult the insolence on our appetite for an invulnerable life. This adjective "invulnerable" brings into play the difference from what I shall say below, later, toward the end, if my discourse gets there, the joy of living to the end, hence about the appetite for a life colored by a certain insouciance that I call cheerfulness. But let's not go too fast. We aren't there yet. We are only at the beginning. That is, with abstractions, mixed-up meanings, confusions that need to be clarified. [Emphasis added.]

Paul Ricoeur (d. 2005) (2009) *Living Up To Death*. University of Chicago Press. pp. 8-11.

Ricoeur warns against too hastily getting to the end – as is often said, 'where's your hurry?' (We might also wish to avoid too hastily imagining that we are 'secularised' – especially as death talk so quickly becomes god talk and spirit talk.) The equivocal way we speak about dead certainties is often acknowledged, but even this seems just another trick in the game of avowal and disavowal of mortality. Even Ricoeur's pre-post-mortem time-play on thinking death begins with talk of an imagined 'invulnerable life'. Ricoeur's term here is mirrored and echoed (reversed and replayed) by Judith Butler's term 'precarious life'. See Judith Butler's (2004) *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*

Butler writes eloquently of death, dying, surviving the dead, and the potential for collectivity arising in the fact of inevitable loss: we die, those we hold dear die, and death appears as a universal aspect of bodily being. She writes of 'precarious life' as opposed to an imagined 'invulnerable life'. She writes beautiful words about death and dying in another curious version of our skill with avowal and disavowal of mortal being. She writes against the backdrop of war in Iraq, of the Patriot Act, of the AIDS pandemic, and one assumes from the tremendous affective density of her prose, against a backdrop of intimate personal and immediate loss. She begins by speaking of politics and death:

I propose to consider a dimension of political life that has to do with our exposure to violence and our complicity in it, with our vulnerability to loss and the task of mourning that follows, and with finding a basis for community in these conditions [...] Loss has made a tenuous we of us all. (pp. 19-20.)

Precarious Life

I would like to quote some longer extracts from Butler's work as a way of initiating a discussion that tries to establish whether or not there is a way to speak about, death, politics and public-ness that can open up new possibilities in how we organize ourselves as co-existing bodily beings in deeply contested, desperately vulnerable and tragically inequitable worlds. Perhaps, together in conversation around these words, we can try to maintain a consciousness of the risks of the grandiose over-reaching and of the uncanny dancing of avowal and disavowal that fancy talk can often have. Butler proceeds:

We can not precisely "argue against" these dimensions of human vulnerability, inasmuch as they function, in effect, as the limits of the arguable, even perhaps as the fecundity of the inarguable. It is not that my thesis survives any argument against it: surely there are various ways of regarding corporeal vulnerability and the task of mourning, and various ways of figuring these conditions within the sphere of politics. But if the opposition is to vulnerability and the task of mourning itself, regardless of its formulation, then it is probably best not to regard this opposition primarily as an "argument." Indeed, if there were no opposition to this thesis, then there would be no reason to write this essay. And, if the opposition to this thesis were not consequential, there would be no political reason for reimagining the possibility of community on the basis of vulnerability and loss.

Butler introduces an image here of the disavowal of death and so re-echoes a theme that has become familiar feature of writing and talking about death. She then places this dynamic of avowal and disavowal as at the heart of the process of mourning.

Perhaps...one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say submitting to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance. There is losing, as we know, but there is also the transformative effect of loss, and this latter cannot be charted or planned. One can try to choose it, but it may be that this experience of transformation deconstitutes choice at some level. I do not think, for instance, that one can invoke the Protestant ethic when it comes to loss. One cannot say, "Oh, I'll go through loss this way, and that will be the result, and I'll apply myself to the task, and I'll endeavour to achieve the resolution of grief that is before me." I think one is hit by waves, and that one starts out the day with an aim, a project, a plan, and finds oneself foiled. One finds oneself fallen. One is exhausted but does not know why. Something is larger than one's own deliberate plan, one's own project, one's own knowing and choosing.

Something takes hold of you: where does it come from? What sense does it make? What claims us at such moments, such that we are not masters of

ourselves? To what are we tied? And by what are we seized? Freud reminded us that when we lose someone, we do not always know what it is in that person that has been lost. So one loses, one is also faced with something enigmatic: something is hiding in the loss, something is lost within the recesses of loss. If mourning involves knowing what one has lost (and melancholia originally meant, to a certain extent, not knowing), then mourning would be maintained by its enigmatic dimension, by the experience of not knowing incited by losing what we cannot fully fathom.

When we lose certain people, or when we are dispossessed from a place, or a community, we may simply feel that we are undergoing something temporary, that mourning will be over and some restoration of prior order will be achieved. But maybe when we undergo what we do, something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us. It is not as if an "I" exists independently over here and then simply loses a "you" over there, especially if the attachment to "you" is part of what composes who "I" am. If I lose you, under these conditions then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. (pp. 19-22.)

Butler continues:

Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility. If my fate is originally or finally separable from yours, then the we is transversed by a relationality that we cannot easily argue against; or, rather, we can argue against it, but we would be denying something fundamental about the social conditions of our very formation. (pp. 22-23.)

Lets face it. We are undine by each other. And if we're not we're missing something. (p.23)

The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. (p.26.)

Butler's text I believe is a very compelling treatment of the relationship between mortality, public-ness and the political. It reinforces my conviction that there is something to be achieved by working through the intersection of these three terms: death, politics, public-ness. However, I am also a little

troubled by an aspect of the way in which her discussion produces a declarative normativity (“Let’s face it”) and the ways in which we are returned to a familiar construction of “the human” of a universal shared horizon of a potential “we” who are exposed to loss.

In my education in the 1980s and 1990s I was given to understand that it was important to avoid the universalising discourses of enlightenment reason that posit a homogenous human being precisely because it occludes and represses, and indeed oppresses, a whole plenitude of differences and divergences and alterities and otherness-es and that world of worlds of elsewhere-s and otherwise-s. This earlier repudiation of universalism and discourses on shared human essence was not just a claim for the importance of gendered social being, of “identity” categories, of majority and minority rights, of different axes of social, political, cultural and economic inclusion and exclusion – it was a concern to open up potentials for alternative futures, alternative social worlds, alternative ways of being together in difference from, but not indifferent to, each other.

Fancy Talk and Cruel Measures

Of course the appeal of themes such as natality and mortality is that these seem to posit a great overarching, though somewhat bloody-mined and daunting, horizon of a shared human condition, experience or fate within which or from which, if not common cause, at least common being and becoming and being undone in the world may be constructed. However, it is the very empirical and material density as it were of births and deaths that somehow cuts against this image of “we” finding a tenuous political collectivity and renewed political imagination in our common exposure to the world of loss and violence and touch. What could fancy talk like “empirical and material density ... of births and deaths” possibly mean?

Socioeconomic inequalities in premature mortality in Britain increased over the second half of the 20th century, particularly from the early 1970s onwards. The magnitude of mortality differentials reflects the trend in income inequality, which has also undergone a dramatic increase over the past quarter century. G Davey Smith, D Dorling, R Mitchell, M Shaw (2002) 'Health inequalities in Britain: continuing increases up to the end of the 20th century' *Epidemiol Community Health* 56:434–435 See also Shaw M, Dorling D, Gordon D, et al. (1999) *The widening gap: health inequalities and policy in Britain*. Bristol: The Policy Press.

People in lower socio-economic status groups experience poorer health and have shorter lives than those in higher status groups and these differences have increased in both sexes in recent years. Marie-Josèphe Saurel-Cubizolles et al. (2009) 'Social inequalities in mortality by cause among men and women in France'. *J Epidemiol Community Health*. March; 63(3): 197–202.

A substantial proportion of the world’s population never officially exist, in that neither their death nor their birth will ever be recorded by any government agency. This is especially likely in areas of conflict, where there are often large-scale movements of population and where registration systems are a low priority. Even in countries that appear to have well-functioning registration systems there may be

considerable discrepancies between official data and that gathered by household surveys. Data on infant mortality are especially problematic, even among some groups in advanced industrialised countries. Martin McKee (2001) 'Global Health Inequalities: The Challenge to Epidemiology' *NSW Public Health Bulletin* Vol.12 No.5 p.130 See for the original debate on the correlation between inequality and mortality patterns see: Wilkinson RG. (1992) 'National mortality rates: the impact of inequality?' *Am J Public Health*. 82: 1082–4. Judge K. (1995) *Income distribution and life expectancy: a critical appraisal*. *BMJ* 311: 1282–1285.

Mortality, that we die, and the loss of others to which it exposes us, is precisely what discloses – in its affectively reduced and flattened ‘empirical’ disclosure – the most searing and dramatic index of inequity of our not-being-in-common. (This turn to metrics and indexes and the counting-of-what-counts also becomes a trap and a grim accountancy with its own dangers, but that’s another day’s work perhaps.)

But returning to this question what could fancy talk like “empirical and material density ... of births and deaths” possibly mean? I would like to turn to Amanda Ralph’s work *Coroner Regrets*. Before talking to the way questions of ‘publicness, politics and death’ are made present in this work, and how this work helps explicate the expression “empirical and material density ... of births and deaths” I want to address some questions of art and form and the systems of production, consumption and negligent co-option that the artworld operates.

Contemporary Art and Negligent Attention

Coroner Regrets was presented here in this space about a decade ago. It is here again on the floor being walked into the ground and appears doomed to go unread and un-regarded – put on show as a bearer of inattention and disregard, shown as a thing, an idea, a text, a testimony that is disregarded. In some way the very logic of the exhibition cycle dooms such work to negligent co-option – the neglect of temporary and insincere attention that produces no obligation on us. “Yes I saw that. What’s on next?” (It is worth noting that the artist does not necessarily endorse this particular way of “reading” of the work).

Coroner Regrets.

Coroner Regrets is a very difficult and demanding art project. For this work Amanda Ralph attended over a sustained period of time the coroner’s court hearings in Dublin’s north inner city, where cases of sudden and/or unexpected death were examined in order to establish the circumstances, cause and nature of the deaths in question. The coroner was enquiring into ‘what had happened’ and Amanda was enquiring into ‘what is happening’ in the process of the coroner’s court hearings. Amanda was ‘self-commissioned’ in this regard – she had given herself the job of attending on what was happening and she kept careful notes on all that happened and all that was said in the Coroner’s Court. Amanda distilled these notes into a precise, clear, crisp and terse prose which mapped the contingencies of other people’s death and the things that are said and done by those who outlive these deaths. She then invited two actors to rehearse these lines and created a work that combines audio recordings of her tight limpid prose with images of the Liffey waters where the jetsam and flotsam of the city wash up. A sample of this writing reads as follows:

The next case was an inquest into the death of a 27-year-old who had been living with his parents. His mother's deposition said that he had been addicted to heroin and was trying to get off. He had not taken heroin in the last eight months and was on a methadone programme. She was worried that he had begun to hang around with a bad crowd and mentioned to her husband that she was afraid he was doing heroin again. She said her husband did not want to acknowledge this. Her son came home one evening and went to bed. The mother asked her 18-year-old son who shared a room with the deceased to keep an eye on him as his breathing was a little irregular. She went to work the next day. Later her younger son came to her. The 27-year-old had died in his sleep. The toxicology report showed methadone but no trace of heroin in his blood. The verdict was death by misadventure. The father and an uncle of the deceased were in court. The Coroner said he realised there had been another recent tragic death in the family, the younger son had subsequently overdosed. Amanda Ralph (2000) *Coroner Regrets*. p. 45.

How should this work – that deals with the difficulties of constructing 'memory' and the contest of authority over what happened? What matters? Whose death counts? What counts as suicide, misadventure, accident, indeterminate or determined? – How should it be historically inscribed? Perhaps it should be abandoned to its ephemeral contingent moment? Perhaps, as it is a book, it can be preserved in libraries and reading lists and textual commentaries like this. Perhaps some art historian will include it in a period survey essay, perhaps not. But maybe this work demands a different order of inscription into the contemporary horizon of cultural practice – here in this immediate local context of Dublin in 2010. I believe that giving consideration to this work should be a way into thinking alternative strategies of production and encounter with the work of art than the formulaic exhibition strategies that dominate contemporary institutional practices and in which many artists frame their ambitions. But this takes me very much off-point, so let's return to the work

Amanda's project was prompted by a small press entry entitled: 'Coroner regrets drug deaths'. This short press cutting announces her project in the book accompanying and extending the work.

Dublin's drugs epidemic was highlighted by the City Coroner, Dr. Brian Farrell, yesterday.

After he had conducted inquests into the drug-related deaths of four young people, he said: "It's a profound tragedy." Three of the deaths were from heroin overdoses and one from cocaine poisoning. The four victims were aged 21 and 28.

Dr. Farrell told the visibly distressed families: "Today has been a particularly sad day. It shows the number of young people dying tragically in the drugs epidemic in our city and community at the moment."

Verdicts of death by misadventure were recorded in the four cases, and Dr. Farrell said he was particularly impressed by the strength shown by the

Death, politics, public-ness and the cultural tasks of representation, narrative, meaning-making, coping, and judging are all knitted within the assemblage of Amanda Ralph's enquiry into 'what is happening' and indeed within the assemblage of the Coroner's Court enquiry into 'what has happened'. The individuation of the citizen's death conditions the coroner's formal production of an interpretation of any given death. What has caused this death? An overdose, a misadventure, an epidemic, a city, a community, a situation, a contingent unexpectedness that just happens to happen, a pattern of resource distribution, an economy, an economy of pleasures? Who knows? Who speaks?

It strikes me again almost a decade later reading this fragment of newspaper copy that it is the 'good doctor' - the judge - that speaks of profound tragedy and epidemic and pronounces 'death by misadventure'? Ralph also speaks of others' deaths and multiplies the relays of this speaking. She is writing texts for others to speak about the speaking of others upon the death of others. While the dead perhaps may not speak, are the bereaved also bereft of utterance? Or are they bereft of audience and authority? Or are they unutterably saddened?

What can we prove here? What do we know? People die. These deaths are documented. Some deaths are 'sudden' and 'unexpected' other deaths are to be expected in due course. There is a public accounting – a public institution the coroner's court as the publicly funded apparatus of registration – of these deaths. There is a distribution of utterances about these deaths that multiplies linkages across private-ness and public-ness. Perhaps, there is already enough known here in this work of art to warrant that we may open a further enquiry, a new court of investigation, that attempts to examine the multiple possible linkages between death, politics, public-ness, and culture. But time has passed since this work was first produced – the stories refer to court transactions of 1998, to events that happened earlier, and pertain to an artwork that was completed by 2000. Now, in 2010 we are beginning our enquiry and *tempis fugit*. How many more have died? How many more have been born? How much more or less do we know or understand? What do we know?

These phrases conjuring up those who speak after someone else's death of someone else's death reminded me of Duchamp's last joke, his epitaph which reverberates with speaking about others who have died: '*D'ailleurs c'est toujours les autres qui meurent*'

Other Seminars in This Series

4 pm Seminar: Dead Public 2

A discussion with Sylvia Loeffler about her recent research at NCAD under the supervision of Dr. Paul O'Brien, on 'Mapping the Blind Spots: A Multidisciplinary Investigation of Visual Waste Products in Public Urban Space'. Led by Mick Wilson.

4 pm Seminar: Dead Public 3

This session will involve discussion with Shane Cullen of his 1997 work *Fragments sur les Institutions Republicaines IV*.

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re : public-ation series

The **Re : Public-ation** series is a series of texts that provide short readings which introduce key terms and ideas in the debate on public-ness and contemporary culture. These are for educational and cultural use only and intended not for resale. These are produced in conjunction with the exhibition project **re : public** at temple bar gallery co-organised by Temple Bar Gallery and Studios the Graduate School of Creative Arts and Media (GradCAM) 4th February – 13th March 2010.

re : public is curated by Daniel Jewesbury and features contributions by Igor Grubić : Owen Hatherley : Peter Liversidge : Aisling O’Beirn : Nina Power : Robert Anderson : Mark Hackett : Sandra Johnston : The Thamesmead Archive : Dennis McNulty : Simon Sheikh : Robert Porter : Leigh French : Neil Gray : Dan Shippides : Seamus Nolan : Dead Public : Amanda Ralph : MA Art in the Contemporary World (NCAD) : MA Art in Public (Ulster) : *Fold* : *Variant* : Tech.Know : Linda Doyle (CTVR) : Experiential Aesthetics : Event: Praxis: and others...

re : public coincides with the major five day international conference Arts Research: Publics and Purposes at Dublin City Council’s new “Wood Quay venue” at the Civic Offices in Dublin’s city centre, and just beside Temple Bar. Other shows coinciding with **re : public** and the conference include Critique of Archival Reason curated by Henk Slager at the RHA, and Sound Re: Sound by Sarah Dunne , curated by Brian Fay at Broadcast Gallery.

For more information on all of these events see (www.gradcam.ie)

With the support of the Culture Programme of the European Union. This project is an element within the “Artist as Citizen” project. This is an EU research project in association with GradCAM.



¹ “Engraved on his tombstone, this statement affirms the fact of death as an impossible experience. Impossible, if only because we can only witness the death of another and not our own. Duchamp’s epitaph haunts the spectator by evoking, through our utterance of it, Duchamp’s lifelike presence. Although it may be construed as denial of death, this statement challenges the facticity of both life and death as fundamental givens. This epitaph ironically recasts the relationship between life and death, engraving the shadow of life into the traces of death.” (Dalia Judowitz, *Unpacking Duchamp: Art in Transit*, p.228.)