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The stairwell as stage:

Jeena Shin's 'Artspace Stairwell Project'

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A staircase never existed in the plans of the former Newton Post Office (1973) on Karangahape Road. Architects Mark-Brown, Fairhead and Sang designed the vertical tower shaft as the site of the modern technology of a lift well or a future escalator pit. While the architects might have viewed the later addition of a staircase as a cost-saving measure, it functions today as a viewing device for Jeena Shin's (1973- ) *Artspace Stairwell project*, positioned at the interstice of the street and the first floor ARTSPACE gallery. The *Artspace Stairwell Project* was commissioned for ARTSPACE by Emma Bugden for the duration of her directorship from 2009-2011, allowing the project to operate as an open-ended process outside the temporal constraints of a public gallery. Bugden and Shin understood the project as an 'expanded experimental framework' where the site could be used as a public studio with the accompanying freedoms and constraints. Shin both retrieved elements of a design history by paring back surface layers and performed acrobatic acts of painting on a high scaffold to patinate the upper reaches of the stairwell.

Stairwells form a buffer zone for their occupants between the street and a building's interior. The ARTSPACE stairwell is public in the sense that it can be entered without being challenged, yet it is an interstitial space, subject to neither the morays of the street nor the conventions of the gallery. The permissive social dynamic of this stairwell enables lengthy greetings and farewells, lounging, or lingering conversations. Experiment with the unregulated qualities of the stairwell is part of ARTSPACE's recent history; including the *Music for Stairwell* project (2003), curated by Sean Kerr, where a series of experimental sound works filled the stairwell. The anticipatory potential of the stairs as a mechanism of performance was used by artist Alicia Frankovich, who arrived prone on the shoulders of gallery staff as she was carried up the stairs, in an event that coincided with the launch of Shin's first phase of the stairwell painting in February 2009.

Unlike the proposed single floor lift, the staircase at the centre of Shin's 'studio' is not designed for continuous movement. At particular moments, the stair-climber might pause or rest as suggested by the affordances of the stairwell itself; at the ground floor, at the central

landing and at the anteroom at the top of the stairs before entering the gallery. Shin began her preliminary experiments for the *Artspace Stairwell Project* with short video observations that documented her own rhythms of ascent and descent of the stairs. This process involved testing the parameters of the site through the multiple motor-interfaces of camera-body-staircase. On occasion she would inadvertently film her hands and feet as she documented the perceptual shifts and qualities of light at different points on the staircase. The kinesis of climbing and descending became the basis of the composition of the wall paintings that would unfold in concertina-like rhythms over the stairwell during the next three years. The series of paintings are a condensed temporal schema of a process that is the work as much as the painted physical remainders.

Near the beginning of last century, Marcel Duchamp's work *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2 (1912)* used the mechanism of camera-body-staircase in the development of an abstract visual language. Duchamp's descending figure rotates counter-clockwise from the frontal view of the upper left of the frame, to the profile view of the figure's limbs in a piston-like movement at the bottom right. In Duchamp's painting, the technology of the stairs fuses with the mechanized body. In Shin's abstract painting the movement of climbing is implied in the multi-directional facets of the composition. Materially, she embeds a trace of the stair mechanism within the wall itself in the form of a line produced by the break between smooth plaster and rough stucco on the walls at the height of the handrail of the stairs. As our hands grasp the physical handrail, the turning line that is the handrail's reflection, becomes the baseline of the painted composition on the walls above, a haptic doubling of the architectural structure of the staircase.

As we descend or ascend the stairs, we experience constant spatial shifts that fuse the visual with the tactile and the kinesthetic; we turn back on ourselves at the central landing and reverse our direction. For cultural theorist David Wills, attention to the technological action of turning toward the back, the detour or deviation, is a mode of interrogating the perspectival bias towards frontality. In his recent writing on 'dorsality' he examines the political implications of 'thinking of the back' as a theory of body-technology. He suggests that the 'dorsal turn' operates as a form of politicized resistance to progressive technological rhetoric that presents itself as straight-forward linear advance. He writes,

Any bending is a type of falling or folding back on itself, with respect to itself. Any departure, however slight from the pure and strict (and necessarily impossible to define) forward linearity makes reference to what is behind, raises the question, infects as it were that strict forward linearity of movement with a decelerating pull

from behind and so implies or calls for a thinking of what is behind, a thinking of the back.

I suggest that several modes of thinking back, or taking the peripheral position exist in the *Artspace Stairwell Project*, to use Wills terms. First, Shin 'turns back' to the interior history of the Newton Post Office by removing the white layer of paint that blanketed the brown tiles and the iron bar that runs the length of the North wall of the stairwell. This reverse operation reveals the formerly suppressed materiality of the interior. Secondly, Shin offers no reassuring directional perspective, we must turn our spine and strain to the limits of our optical capacity to see the work while in active transit of the stairwell. To comprehend the wall paintings on the stairwell in their entirety is outside of visual possibility, causing a sense that one is somehow outwitted by the painting. No matter where we stand to look at it there is always a part of the wall painting that is behind or beneath us, eluding comprehension unless we move. While we imagine that we have some control over the frontal perspective, the lateral and liminal, or the dorsal according to Wills, escapes us as a matter of course. Thirdly, Shin 'holds back' by slowly allowing the work to accumulate from the barely perceptible to the glimmering high gloss of the triangular shapes of the East wall in the final phase. There is not necessarily a space-time conception that implies forward motion in each layer of the painting, rather their codependence suggests a reversible or cyclical relation to time.

Examples of 'thinking back', 'turning' and 'reversal' occur in the process of physically describing the *Artspace Stairwell Project*. Even description is a demanding exercise in mapping the mobile perceptual coordinates of a site where left turns into right, front turns to back and above becomes below determined by our position in ascent or descent. Shin describes the four phases of the project as 'Acts', suggesting the performative action of making, a terminology that I adopt in what follows. The first *Act* spanned the period from 2008-2009 and includes several parts; archival research into the building plans, observation, drawing, modelling and the paring back of old paint as 'selective restoration.' The second *Act* in 2009, involved the painting of the South wall at the ground floor and the first layer of the West wall. In 2010, as the third *Act*, Shin reworked the painted surface of the West wall. For the fourth *Act*, completed in 2011, the East wall was painted with the negative space of the fold-model sequence pattern and high gloss shapes. The description of each *Act* reflects conversations with the artist about the sequential interplay that stems from one initial motif; an A4 size paper fold-model.

*Act 1: Paring Back (2008-2009)*

Prior to starting physical work, Shin spent time establishing the spatial and phenomenological dynamics of the stairwell. Her initial video observations documented movement and the variability of light through the long slit windows. Aside from the stairs themselves, sunlight and shadow are the primary means to draw us around the stairwell. Shadows are the discontinuous gaps in sunlight cast by matter. When bodies or cars cross Karangahape Road outside the play of light makes an image of the exterior world on the interior of the stairwell through the window apertures. Shin experimented with the passage of light around a slit-holed, three-dimensional cardboard model, at 1:20 scale, to test how she could use the transience of natural light in the stairwell as a compositional device. The latter part of the day became a preferred time of working, where the kinder washes of light of the westward sun clearly revealed the graduations of white in the painted surface. Shin's design interpolates the lances of shadow and patches of bright light that are the intermittent doubles of their architectural counterparts; the windows and cross joinery that generate spatial punctuation.

Shin retrieved copies of the original plans of the Newton Post Office from the University of Auckland Architecture library, in order to draw a 1:20 scale plan and elevation of the stairwell. As information was poor in relation to the original interior, Shin and Bugden enticed Ron Sang, one of the original architects of the Post Office, to revisit an early commission in his practice. Sang encouraged Shin to restore the rock garden on the ground floor, the negative shapes of which can still be seen indented in the ground floor and he was enthusiastic about recovering the flooring original materials of the staircase. Billy Apple advocated the restoration of the original orange perspex casing over the central iron bar that runs down the centre of the North wall and the orange paint on the hand-railings. However Shin resisted the verisimilitude of historical recreation by selectively working to only reveal traces of the earlier time-period that were in keeping with her overall concept.

Gallery staff and friends worked with Shin to painstakingly remove the thick white paint that coated the brown 'temuka-style' tiles of the mosaic on the North wall. The iron bar was also stripped to reveal its oxidizing material that had been hidden by an homogenizing white layer. The heavy coats of brown paint on the handrail were sanded back to reveal the bare material and oiled to bring out the striations of composited wood. The retrieval of these details is sensitive to the craft of the workers who clad the stairwell. Shin turns back the arrow of progress in a process of remembering. Wills suggests that memory has structural possibilities, perhaps triggering a chain reaction of memories for those who recall the site as a thriving community post office. A poetic link at least exists between Shin's folded paper starting point and the ghosts of the clerks who once carried masses of folded paper

envelopes between the ground and upper floor of this stairwell. However, Shin's sympathy was not extended to the original stucco finish that was removed by laborious grinding to be plastered over to prepare the walls for painting. Only the rough stucco up to the height as the handrail was retained as a reminder of the original surface.

*Act 2: Painting from back to front (2009)*

The painting of the stairwell began with the South rear wall on the ground floor of the entrance foyer. The South wall painting hovers at the edge of optical perception where Shin's painting is at its most visually challenging, especially as the iris must also adjust to the transition from exterior to interior light on entering the building. I found myself walking backwards out the door to view this painting. By glancing across the surface from an oblique angle I could catch the raised edges of the shapes; the incisions in the surface where the work of layering is revealed. All of the shapes Shin uses in the stairwell originate from a single sheet of A4 paper folded in several simple moves. The fold-model, of Shin's invention, is a recurring visual refrain in much of her recent work. The shape first appears at its smallest size at the left corner of the South wall and grows to form a chain, flipping from front-face of the shape to the back-face as it grows in scale upwards, descends and climbs back up again. This dynamic ascent and descent foreshadows the pattern to come on the longer East and West walls. At this point an entire 1:1 drawing was traced out and painted by Shin and her assistant Anya Henis.

Shin made 70 templates in expanding size increments of the fold-model, to trace the outline of the interlinking shapes. Each facet of the fold model was then painted with one of five different shades of white *Aalto* paint; variations on the 'gallery white' used inside ARTSPACE. Many of the white shades in Shin's paintings cannot be captured by photography and even the human eye relies on variance in natural light to render visible some parts the painted walls at certain times of day. Theorist of interior space, Rachel Carley has observed the material qualities of Shin's choice of paint, noting that in earlier work she painted with undercoat as a mode of dwelling in the 'constructional interim' between primer and top coat. Gallery white could also be read as an 'interim' material, it is a neutral white paint, implying a latent potentiality to be inscribed, punctured and endlessly reapplied. This serviceable paint is always simultaneously awaiting a future life and smoothing over previous art interventions. The stairwell itself is an interim space where, as Carley suggests, Shin's work operates at varying degrees of internal relation to the fold-model, retaining a suggestion of its sharply folded edge in the delineations between the painted edges of each chromatic layer.

In the same time period as painting the lower wall, Shin began work on the West wall of the stairwell. She extended the fold-model's size, this time starting from the scale of the largest shape on the South wall. The permutations of the crystalline chain that result, also in five shades of white, lightly play on the weight-shifting and correcting motion of the human-staircase assemblage. The pattern expands in scale as the climber moves up the stairs, exaggerating the sense of an expanding scale in the process of ascent towards the gallery. The fold-model becomes larger through a process of inversion, turning and mirroring that suggests an anti-hierarchical decentring of subject-object and figure-ground. For Thomas Leeson the fold line in architecture is not a linear continuum with start and end point, rather, it is a space where one thing is also always the other.

Counter to critiques of the apolitical nature of geometrical abstraction, Leeson suggests that the ever-present spatial simultaneity of the fold contains a politics of difference by always suggesting an other. Through the process of fold and inversion the traditional structures of symbolic order are undone, turned upside down, held fragilely held together, yet always kept apart by the folded line as a zero space, a space of no-dimension. While repetition is sometimes pegged as anti-humanist, for Leeson the replication process contains inevitable changes and organic mutations like a xerox machine that varies an image over time. Although exacting in her work, Shin found that the replication of the hand-made templates of the fold-model did not necessarily take the undulating chain where the preliminary drawings of the painting had suggested. Shin's process accepts the transformative power of the variant or the chaotic in her unfolding system. Over the course of the project Shin spent less time planning in advance, allowing continued attention to phenomena or a 'thinking-feeling of what happens' in the site guide her technique.

### *Act 3 (2010) Return to the West wall*

On her return a year later in early 2010, Shin repainted the same West wall with a second, graduated palette of grey. The pattern of *Act 3* is not a retracing or strengthening of the shapes of *Act 2*, that now becomes the under-layer, rather the fold-model chain is rephrased in 'off-set' register to the layer below. At certain points the two chains obscure the other and the darker grey facets of the *Act 3* pattern even overlaps itself. Paradoxically the initial layers of white of *Act 2* become a shadow of the second heavier-toned layer, complicating the already ambiguous foreground and background relations even further. While Shin had planned this layer in a scale drawing, this time when she reached the site she worked intuitively as suggested by the pattern beneath. The deliberately oscillating effect of the fold-model as front or back, mirror or shadow has connections to the optically mobile tesserae of Max Escher's mid-century monochromatic prints. The spatial conundrum of the *Artspace*

*Stairwell Project* recalls the three staircases in Escher's lithograph 'Relativity' (1953) where figures appear to ascend and descend simultaneously. While Shin's fold-model pattern is not as strictly mathematical as Escher's principles of plane tessellations based on 'translation, rotation and reflection,' she shares with Escher the constant flux of the border line or the fold/unfold line. Escher writes,

The border line between two adjacent shapes having a double function, the act of tracing such a line is a complicated business. On either side of it, simultaneously, a recognizability takes shape. But the human eye and mind cannot be busy with two things at the same moment, and so there must be a quick and continual jumping from one side to the other.

Shin's West wall has lively qualities of inversion and reversion in the movement between the almost imperceptible white under-layer of *Act 2* and the more emphatic (louder) movement of *Act 3*.

#### *Act 4 (2011) The negative space*

Shin's final *Act 4* was to paint the East wall of the stairwell. The wall was painted without a drawing, using the scale cardboard templates and the wall opposite as a guide. This pattern is in fact a reflection of the negative space of *Act 3*, the darker grey pattern on the West wall. The expanse of the surrounding wall was painted with a darker shade of light-absorbent white so the remaining pattern stands out in the standard 'gallery white'. In a final operatic move, each of the fold-models is painted with one triangular shape in high gloss white so they shine brilliantly when viewed obliquely. From a lateral perspective the sunlight defines the radiant triangles, while they fade away to nothingness when faced from a frontal position. We must use our tangential vision to see this transient and free-floating section of the fold-model. This implies a temporal mode of viewing at the wall through shifts of light, with a sensibility that Japanese novelist Jun'ichiro Tanizaki considers uncharacteristic of Western viewing norms. He describes the beauty of the variation in shadows that lends particular pleasures to the occupant of a Japanese room, where heavy shadows sit against lighter shadows on otherwise unadorned walls. His obverse description of the perceptual effect of gold dust as a way of reflecting light around a dark Japanese interior suggests the high gloss of the Shin's binding material; where a patina which "until that moment had only a dull and sleepy luster, will, as you move past, suddenly gleam forth as if it had burst into flame."

The situational framing that allows a dispersed perception of the paintings as 'experiential event' are important to the *Artspace Stairwell Project*. Brian Massumi analyses the operative frame in certain art practices that deploy minute attention to detail and obsessive experimentation in how a situation is set up or framed, as Shin's work does. He suggests that such compositions create "more a *performance envelope* than an objective frame." Shin finds a working understanding of this sense of the enveloping frame in Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani's concept of *sunyata*. *Sunyata* is translated as 'a mode of constitutive negativity or emptiness' by art historian Norman Bryson. Nishitani critiques the Cartesian enclosure of the self and the visual frame by proposing a wider field of reference to the subject/object binary. Bryson maintains that Nishitani's removal of the object from the framing apparatus highlights a neglected dimension of Western discussions of visibility. As *Act 4* is primarily composed of the negative space of the fold-model Bryson's reading of Nishitani's concept is instructive,

In Nishitani's description, an object's presence can be defined only in negative terms. Since there is no way of singling out an object *x* without at the same time including it in the global field of transformations, what appears as the object *x* is only the difference between *x* and the total surrounding field. Similarly what appears as the surrounding field is only its difference from object *x*.

I can imagine literally that Shin's fold-model starting point is Nishitani's elusive object *x*, it is nothing in itself, it lacks the properties of a fixed entity, it is simply a phase in a continuously mobile process, anticipating or retracing the perceptual shifts of the stair-climber.

If we spend time in the transformative field of Shin's *Stairwell project*, as the sun passes in and out we might sense a back and forth ripple in our retina that mirrors the turning of our spine, limbs and the stairwell itself. The presently painted walls and the staircase vehicle propel us upwards and back down insisting that the paintings are experienced twice from different directions. The work inhabits multiple temporalities through repetition and variation as an entry/exit point to the gallery and through the turn back to a reconstructed past of the Newton Post Office. Shin creates a stage for memories to be triggered to disrupt the forward momentum of time. For Nishitani *sunyata* is a concept of 'radical impermanence', where an object, such as a flower exists only as a phase in the incremental transformation from seed to the return of matter to dust. Shin's painting is only a momentary arrest in the stairwell's cycle, already accumulating the scuffs and smudges of human presence before the eventual erasure of the painted surface with indefatigable 'gallery white'. Once covered over, perhaps these wall paintings might one day be archaeologically excavated themselves, or they will persist in technologies of memory as an archive of infinite forms.