

**KARIN RUGGABER**

**in conversation with**

**SARAH STATON & PHILLIP LAI**

**Sarah Staton:** Earlier I asked you to describe your work – I looked at images online and you described this idea of slants and triangles and then also the film that's on the website. So you've created works within the room – the cast elements – and the works in the window, which are like two types of work and then the third work is on the website, which is a film shot in a residential neighbourhood in Istanbul where your father lives, and it's very still, very little happens, and it's a little bit of a continuation of the books that you've made?

**Karin Ruggaber:** Yes. It's an ongoing project or work about the suburb of Yesilyurt that I've been working on for seven or eight years, that has something to do with recording the area. It is how I look at something that's beyond what I'm directly making. These projects aren't necessarily anything concrete but to do with a wider attitude or frame in how I think of my work. This is a parallel strand of working and a form of research in an open sense where I try to figure things out in my work. The made sculpture has developed its own logic. But this other strand of the work is where I look at external things and make these projects or books on ideas around architecture, perhaps as an extension of a making process. For example in Romania I went on a road trip to find these amazing and quite hard to find Roma houses, so-called gypsy palaces. They are built in the middle of the countryside with quite basic ways of constructing, made by hand, almost as a manifestation of the idea of settling. They are very ornate and completely over the top and like sculpture in way. I like the idea that they don't really exist in proper terms of house building or settling or territory. As the Roma are nomadic, they are often not lived in, so they are like images of houses; something about them is completely about display.

The film in itself is quite clumsy. I'm using the video camera as a way to try to see something about this kind of space in a time-based frame rather than a still photographic frame. I think of the film like a book, it's a mechanical way of going through something page-by-page, collecting frame-by-frame, bringing

together and cataloguing without any hierarchies from my point of view – it's almost indexical. It is literally about making visual decisions – this goes next to this, and this goes next to this – and I think a big part of my work tries to undo these categories and hierarchies or the rationalisation process that goes along with that.

**SS:** It's almost as if you're using your hand held camera or digital camera, or whatever you're using, like an early plate camera where it has to be there for ages. It seems paradoxical...

**KR:** And it doesn't really work.

**SS:** No, but in a way it really works.

**KR:** Yes because I couldn't really use a tripod because when you do you are suddenly fixed and have to make a more conscious choice, whereas I'm trying not to do that because that's a different thing and I'm trying to do something to undo that.

**Ingrid Swenson:** I think this sense of undoing connections is one of the things that makes the film so fascinating in contrast or in parallel to the work in the gallery because it's undone a connection in a really fundamental way, but your brain, your understanding of the work puts it together and gives it a new relationship. Another way you've undone a connection is by putting the work in the window in that way, it's an ambiguous space that has not been used in that way before. You could talk about it being vulnerable, but I'm not so interested in that – it is hovering between what's outside and what's inside and what that means to be outside or inside. The film is exterior to the exhibition, but it exists in its interpretation and its meaning as a part of the exhibition, and I think that that connected and disconnectedness is so strong.

**Phillip Lai:** I know you don't want the address to be so literal but in certain terms it's tending to be about the outside of the building.

**KR:** It is – and funnily enough even though I've thought of this show as having quite abstract elements and have treated the title as another element within my thinking, it now looks like it makes perfect sense: the title (*An outside of a house*) the film and the pieces are making almost too much sense together. This strangely goes completely against what I had intended. I don't like the overt literal relationship between what a title says and what you see in the show. This maybe goes for titles generally, the relationship between a word and an object, between what you look at and surround yourself with and what you make. I was thinking of the title more as a state.

**SS:** I was interested in the decision-making process that you went through when you were asked to do the project at PEER?

**KR:** From the very beginning I was thinking to make something about the dynamic of the space. There's one space and there's another one – the double gallery space seems to ask for either repetition or contrast. I wanted to respond to the setting, and to change something about the square-ness and direction of the space. The diagonal is a response to that. The first experience of the space is from the outside and the complete view of the double frame, and then you come in and you reverse and look out. The work is to do with that – it's about reversing something, about how one moves in the space.

**PL:** I have thought about it much more as a space that you look into, not really look out of. I mean obviously you can look out of it once you've come in.

**KR:** As soon as you enter there is the material sense of the work, which is in contrast to the view and there is something in my work that's about 'flat'. I think

of this space as quite two-dimensional. It also has a central perspective to do with the windows, and the double-frame. There's something that flattens and reduces a view to something pictorial, which is an idea I really like in terms of sculpture. For example, I've been looking at perspective painting for a long time – how a set of systems create space, show and demonstrate depth – and I like the way that this was a discovery in painting and there's something about these ideas of a mechanical relationship to what's around you that I'm trying to translate into sculpture. The gallery is a frame in a functional and symbolic way; and within it the windows are again frames. I'm interested to create something that has a tense relationship with the frame that tries to define its own frame. The wall-work for example is a shape that isn't falling but it is quite a firm diagonal. It's very dynamic but also a slightly uneasy shape as – a shard of sorts. What I like about the floor piece is that it changes as you walk around it; you have different angles and the whole dynamic of the piece shifts. With painting you have one viewpoint, with sculpture you move around it. You are in the same space as it.

**PL:** In the press release there's the term haptic...

**KR:** Haptic floor. Yes it's a paradox, because a floor is not something that we touch or have a direct visual relationship with – we don't need to look at it while we walk. I'm interested in making a visual relationship to the floor and in this line between a visual-consciousness – and how you understand something in physical terms. It is to do with standing height, shifting perspective and the relationship to the ground.

There is a piece in the window, which is a collar, it's called collar, this body-head-shoulder element, which acts as a frame for the head/face. I like that the collar represents the threshold between body and head, between a physical understanding and a rationalising process, negotiating raw instinct and first

stills from *Yesilyurt*, 2013

impression with the cultural and socialised parts.

**PL:** This all seems like a continuous ongoing process – developing a language. It's quite a massive project.

**KR:** I think much of my work is to do with realising something about the directness and desire towards something, and architecture in its scale and physicality is a sort of mirror. In a sense I'm trying to make a house, a space, something of architectural scale almost beyond what I can manage in terms of size. Something you can't hold anymore but that holds you. My sculptures are all made by hand and so for me it is about stretching an idea or object physically.

The way I work in the studio develops organically rather than by design. I have a lot of made elements and then I have an idea of how I react to an actual space, scale or situation. If I look back at my work it takes on the character of a large ongoing process almost as if it's one work with different objects at different points in time - a gradual development, how one form goes with another or can hold another. It's a bit like an alphabet; you can read it. It is something to do with how things hold together; I look for some coherence but also at what doesn't fit. Each relief is numbered consecutively, which overall keeps it together but also gives complete freedom and allows for any possible development.

**SS:** Physically, the work is flat, but is also very much sculpture – and then there are the elements in the window – did you make these in situ at PEER or were they made in the studio?

**KR:** They were made in the studio but are unfixed or have very little fixing; some of them are only held by couple of pins. Some of the fabric pieces are just placed in friction. It's about how to make something flat stand up, but not to construct it. They are compositions out of things that I don't intend to come

together necessarily and they happen as I put things next to other things, often as a by-product of another activity, when you're working on something else or clearing up the studio. These are really interesting aspects in sculpture. The window pieces are to do with the idea of clothing, or structures that behave like clothes in the sense that they have no fixed location. We wear clothes or we store them – they are transient in a way. They only come into being when worn, otherwise as objects they are in limbo. The way they're laid out now took ten minutes to arrange – it's almost as if the unpacking was the setting up. I tried to do the first thing as I came in, as I believe often the first thing you do is sort of true – you kind of know and then if you think too much and rationalise it you can't know it anymore or lose it. I'm interested in a flatter, less visually considered, more direct way of showing an object, that is more to do with its core, and in a paradoxical way less about the idea of showing.

**PL:** I found several different ways into the show. You told us earlier about the colours further abstracting the concrete in a way. When you come close to it they are quite impure, and they are quite messy and rough, and so it's not about a haptic sense for me it's much more about a kind of attraction on one surface, a psychological reception of the object.

**KR:** This is the most colourful thing that I've done to date. I'm not necessarily interested in colour as such, it's more a kind of alienation of the process in a strange way, and yet the colour is making this work. Concrete is quite an easy and forgiving casting process, it can be quite fast on that level of making and process. I've discovered these pigments, some are incredibly straightforward and others are difficult to mix and see... I am trying to understand how to make it work, how to produce something in terms of colour and then it feels like everything is a bit wrong.

What's intriguing is that concrete is a fake stone but it's instant – you create a

stills from *Yesilyurt*, 2013

geological formation in a sense – and you can bring your imagination to it unlike in geology when you are confronted with something bigger that has formed beyond human input. There is something about the mixing up of these conditions that I find intriguing – it's a strange physical paradox.

What's fascinating about casting is that you can't really control it, it's not direct, you have to wait for the result. Because I developed the work from a vocabulary that's ongoing and now at this point there's this colour and it's become completely artificial on all levels. A lot of initial intentions in the work have blurred into other decisions.

At the moment I'm interested in the edges of Europe and I've been travelling around these areas for some time. I think there's something interesting in this thing where one context drops off into another. I am interested in spaces that are in some sort of transformation; in Turkey for example there is a very different kind of mood and atmosphere, in how people relate to the outside. The orientation is completely different and I'm quite interested in looking at that, it's a very sensory thing.

**SS:** I think that idea that you are looking at the periphery is really fascinating.

**KR:** Yes I'm quite interested in things that aren't direct. The idea for this talk for instance was to invite you and Phillip to create a triangular situation, which makes it less easy to shape and control. I like both of your ways of working; there is something about a wider idea of sculpture.

I often try to find strategies to undo how things are done, like for example a one-day exhibition I'm organising with students in a geological collection called the Rock Room at UCL. It's from the late 1800s, an amazing place, completely visceral with lots of drawers full of rocks – the whole ground is in these drawers,

categorised and ordered according to the periodic table. I'm interested in this confrontation between incongruous matter, this basic stuff, and the way it is framed and can be read in all these ways, historically, scientifically or simply through its forms and consistencies. This space is cross between a museum and teaching space, quite unprecious, you can take things out and touch them, it has a tea kitchen as well. It really sits on the edge of many things and offers an opportunity to see and realise something differently. It's very rare to find these spaces now.

I'm organising the project within a very short turnaround; the students will be invited to contribute and react to the space on the day: this cuts out the expectation of what it should be and how an exhibition should work. There's no time to consider or rationalise too much, which especially in an academic environment makes complete sense to me. It will hardly be an exhibition, maybe it's to do with reversing the idea of showing.

**SS:** You and Philip talked about your work as a process of developing a language. To take this further, is your work in some way like letters in a word?

**KR:** Yes, maybe. I like this idea of the alphabet as a very basic organisation of lines, in that you have words that you can read, which makes meaning accessible through these basic lines.

**SS:** Because you also talked about the idea that you are not a native English speaker.

**KR:** Ah yes, I said that in terms of this title *An outside of a house*, which is probably a strange title and sounds like a grammatical error. I think of it – this 'outside' – as an object, as a sort of paradoxical flat yet space-object-texture-thing you can touch. So I wanted to make it into an object by calling it 'a

something'. Maybe it's about how I speak; I am not a native English speaker. But what you can do if it's your second language, which is really nice in English, is move away more easily from conventions perhaps, from how grammar dictates, you can stack things together, you can play around with the language a bit. I've been here for a long time, but even so, there are so many codes within the language that I will never get to or have access to and that's something I enjoy, there is a kind of freedom in that. Maybe as an artist you have to be always on the outside.

**PL:** When you talked about the fabric and the collar – they are clothing for me – it makes me feel very much that they are compositions – you might compose what you wear and that's done in front of the mirror . . .

**KR:** Yes, and which you can never fully understand because you are actually wearing it and cannot really see yourself. It's this combination of how something feels and what it expresses and how clothes underline this expression, something between internal and external.



## **KARIN RUGGABER**

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