

Passage: transitive economy

In February 2000, Anne Graham's work for the Sydney Sculpture Walk, *Passage*, was installed in Martin Square, at the heart of the civic area of the city. *Passage* consists of three interconnected elements: an outline or 'map' of one of the former Georgian houses on the site⁷ inscribed into the rough paving of the square in polished black granite and underlit metal grilles; three fountains, whose shapes are taken from Georgian sponging pans, sited at the 'ablutions' end of the former home; and, at approximately ten-minute intervals, a fine mist that rises from the grilles to form ghostly walls where the house used to stand.

The title, *Passage*, can be read literally, with reference to corridors, hallways, journeys and the movement, or passage, of time. But *Passage* also performs meaning by materialising the site as, simultaneously, a definitive,

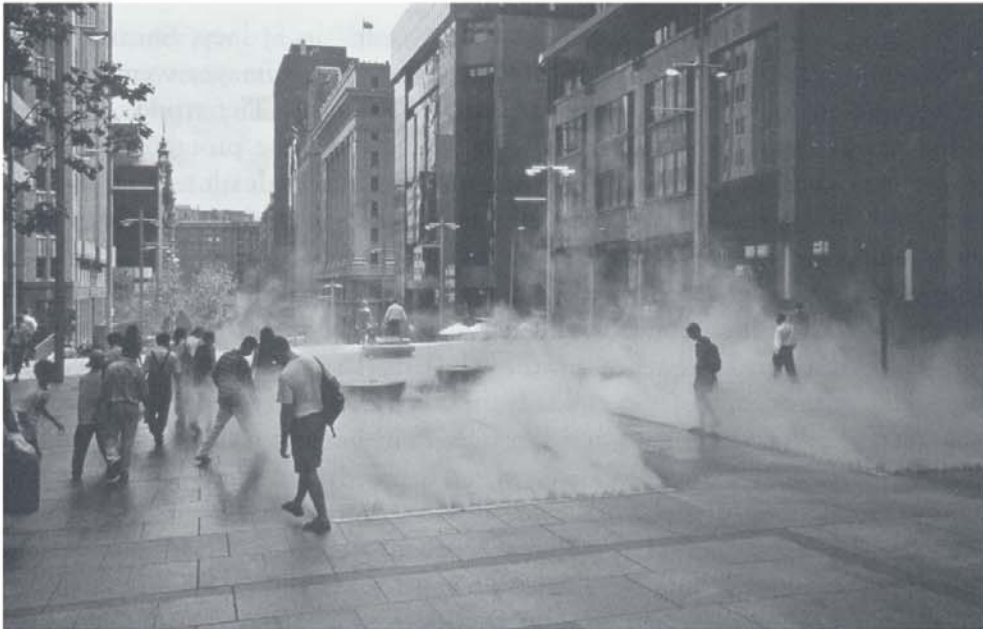


Figure 3.3 Anne Graham, *Passage* (2000)

Plate 12 Anne Graham, *Passage* (2000)



physical locus and an imaginative activity, a modulation between object and process, where the past is mapped within the present. *Passage* mobilises an ‘in-between’ in space–time relations, neither spatialising time nor historicising space, but exploring their dynamic intersection. Arguably, Graham’s work articulates what Doreen Massey has called the ‘event of place’, where the ‘here and now’ meet to produce subjects, places and histories:

‘Here’ is where spatial narratives meet up or form configurations, conjunctures or trajectories, which have their own temporalities (so ‘now’ is as problematical as ‘here’) ... ‘Here’ is an intertwining of histories in which the spatiality of those histories (their then as well as their here) is inescapably entangled.⁸

As an event of place, *Passage* opens the site temporally as well as spatially, suggesting a modulation between the artwork as an object and its *work* as a process of engagement between subjects and spaces. The granite, grilles and bronze basins accord with the conservative impulses of much public art, providing a visual centre to the square and the pleasant sound of water rushing through controlled jets [colour plate 12]. But the mist that rises to form the walls of the ‘house’ disrupts the space, intervenes in the daily life of the city, and creates a new architecture from its past. This is public sculpture as theatre, as an event, a passage between the ‘now and then’ used to invoke the ‘here and there’ of a space marked by a contested history of exile and brutal settlement, fought over the image of the site as an ‘empty map’ – the colonial myth of Australia as *terra nullius*.⁹

In the same year that Graham installed *Passage* in Sydney, Shirin Neshat collaborated with Philip Glass on a film project whose images were initiated in response to another contested site – Israel/Palestine. The work is entitled *Passage*, and again, there are literal correspondences: the protagonists in the film enact a funereal ritual, a rite of passage from life to death and from death to renewal. The figures’ passage across time and space within the short film is circular and connective; a body borne by a group of male figures is met by mourning women on a beach, while a lone child, digging in the sand at a distance from the adults, replicates the actions of burial, arranging stones over a mound. In the final sequence of the film, its visual direction is reversed, beginning at the locus of the child, from whence fire sweeps across the sand toward the collected women and men, as if in an ancient, unbidden act of purification [colour plate 13].

The production of the work was also a form of passage, a movement between ideas, images and sound developed in dialogue. Glass initiated the collaboration, approaching Neshat with a short (*c.* 11 min) score. At this time, Neshat had been working on visual motifs derived loosely from footage of the Israel/Palestine conflict, specifically news coverage of mourners (both Israeli and Palestinian) carrying their dead aloft. These fragmentary visual and



Figure 3.4 Shirin Neshat, Video Still, *Passage* (2001)

sonic passages were brought together in the final work through a collaborative process that itself required a transmedial and transcultural exchange, leaving neither the initial score nor the images (nor, arguably, the artists themselves) unchanged.

Like the *Passage* produced by Graham, that by Neshat and Glass brings the ‘here and now’ into vital connection with the ‘there and then’, linking the space of the film with the ‘event of place’, where place is not a fixed and stable marker of identity or power, but is a site of perpetual negotiation. Following Massey’s argument:

Place, in other words, does – as many argue – change us, not through some visceral belonging (some barely changing rootedness, as so many would have it), but through the *practising* of place, the negotiation of intersecting trajectories; place as an arena where negotiation is forced upon us.¹⁰

As arena where negotiations are forced upon us, where places are practised, these two *Passages* are certainly events. Yet connecting the works through a notion of the event begs the question as to what purpose, to what effect?

Arguably, to great effect and with a crucial, critical purpose: namely, to open what I want to call a transitive economy in and through the *work* of art. This formulation does not propose art solely as an object (the artwork), but also as an action, a process of engagement – art’s *work*.¹¹

My interest in thinking through transitivity in relation to the event is not wholly without precedent; in a telling sequence from her book, *Sounding the Event*, Yve Lomax suggested a link between transitivity and the constitution of the event as a passage in these terms:

Fundamental to the event is the relation of extension; for any event, there is a coming together of events and this process of coming together, which is transitive, is what constitutes the event – the chunk – as a passage.¹²

Like Massey’s formulations of the event of place where ‘intersecting trajectories’ meet, Lomax focuses upon events as extensive – as acts that bring together multiple, even divergent, elements. Significantly, Lomax’s argument moves *from* the event *toward* the passage via this concept of extension, suggesting that the passage (the ‘chunk’) is the locus of composition for the event. In this sense, a passage is the very possibility of encountering an event, or, as I would want to suggest, taking Lomax’s argument in another direction, the materialisation of a transitive economy. To explore this further, it is worth defining the term ‘transitive’ as it is being used here, since it opens two critical insights – how extensive connections across difference might be configured, and how works of art can produce participants rather than disengaged spectators.

Derived from the same root as ‘transit’, passing across or through, ‘transitive’ has two primary uses: the first is in logic and mathematics, from where the senses of extension and relation are drawn (if $A=B$ and $B=C$, then $A=C$); and the second is linguistic, describing a verb that requires an object to complete its action. In the former, it is important to note that a transitive relationship need not be reduced to equivalence or sameness, even in logic/math, since the relation between the terms need not be described by ‘is equal to’ (as above), but rather, by more open-ended and non-linear formulations, such as ‘shares particular qualities with’. In this more open sense, transitivity is a way of exploring the mechanisms by which we draw disparate items together through analogy, bricolage and/or segue. The arts are a potent form of this kind of relational transitivity, using a wide range of visual, material, poetic and aesthetic operations to make new meanings through multi-valent connections. On these terms, the transitive economies that characterise art’s *work* move beyond the binary, combining any number of extensive ideas, objects or events, yet always reminding us that while many connective valences are possible, not all of them work. That is, there are relational resonances between some materials and concepts that enable correspondence to emerge, and there are dissonances between others that shatter its hold.

Similarly, the second, linguistic use of transitivity suggests a continuum of relationships, rather than a binary opposition; few verbs are absolutely transitive or intransitive, most are mutable, deriving their transitive status in use, through making meaning. Transitivity further implies a change of state or transformation in and through connection such that neither the subject nor the object of the action remain unchanged in the encounter. Take ‘making art’: ‘I make art’ is not unidirectional, with the subject simply acting upon the object. Rather, ‘I’ am transformed in the very production of ‘art’. This again posits a model of subjectivity formed in extensivity, with and through other subjects and objects in the world, rather than through solipsism. The subject and the object participate in the act of ‘art’, in the event of making, and are both transformed. Transitivity here is a form of intrinsic participation, going beyond spectatorial distance. As I am arguing in this chapter, a transitive economy is non-binary, multiply connective and extensive in its relational processes and, importantly, participative in a very broad sense. That is, subjects of linguistic/aesthetic transitives require objects to complete their thought or action.

If, as I am arguing, we move toward the idea that the *work* of art is to materialise a transitive economy, to open a transformative and extensive relationship between images, objects and ideas, then, taking this logic forward, art does not simply represent or communicate this to a mute spectator, but engages participants in the event that it unfolds. The participants complete the thought, undertake a passage, as they become part of a transitive economy.

It is useful here to return to the Neshat/Glass collaborative *Passage* to develop this notion of a transitive economy. The internal structure of the work pairs two passages – one musical, one visual – to produce an evocative account of ritual. Rituals span the present and the past by bridging the gulf between the particular, immanent conditions of daily existence and an unknowable, but often desired, transcendence. In *Passage*, the music figures this in its harmonics and circularity, broken only by the voices of the mourning female figures whose cries pull us back to the immediacy of grief and longing. The ritual enacted within the work is similarly ‘now’ (the actors’ clothing placing them within a contemporary frame of reference) and ‘always’ (it is a repetition, an eternal return). Moreover, the work is a cinematic installation; the space of performance *within* the work can only be engaged through the performance space created by the event *of* the work.¹³ The complex movements between times and spaces typical of ritual activity – now, then, here, there, always, everywhere – are effected through the transitive economy of *Passage*, through its extensive and relational valences, but also through the form of participative agency that it engenders. Participant–spectators play a role within the structures of ritual invoked by the work – *we* complete its thought.

The transitive negotiation of space and time in *Passage* reverses the usual logic of the relationship between place and identity, both on and off the screen. Rather than assuming that the fixity of place produces collective forms of

identity, we might look again at transient spaces where identities are negotiated in performance. Or, as Nadia Lovell argued:

Rather than view the local as firmly situated through myth or ritual, the performative aspects of religious activities are considered essential in anchoring belonging and making it (temporarily) tangible through social practice'.¹⁴

Nowhere could the question of the status of local space and belonging be more critical and contested than in the territories of Israel/Palestine. At its most extreme, the conflict between the two sides takes a small parcel of land to be a definitive marker of identity, whose status is non-negotiable. If, instead, this land is understood to be a 'temporarily tangible' site of belonging, one materialised through performative rituals of identity in and through space, it becomes, in a very profound sense, negotiable. I would suggest that the transitive economy opened by the Neshat/Glass film *Passage* enacts precisely this shift from fixed site to negotiable situation, making all of us – Israelis, Palestinians and any other participant-viewers – potential agents of change.

Graham's sculptural installation also links site with situation, bringing the history of Sydney into direct contact with the experiences of residents and visitors in the city's present spaces. To undertake the 'passage' figured by Graham's installation, spectators must become participants, engaging bodily with the physical presence of the work, and imaginatively with the absences it invokes. The outline inscribed in the paving, the cartographic contours of the work, can be understood only in the movement of viewers, tracing the lines with their footsteps, moving 'into' and 'out from' the 'house', imagining its scale and its relation to what once constituted, and what now constitutes, this urban centre. As the 'walls' of the 'house' appear and recede in vapour, a transitive economy is materialised in the body of the viewer, just as surely as it is in Martin Square.

In its multi-sensory modulation between the past and the present, the virtual and the real, *Passage* suggests a way of doing histories otherwise, of making histories 'matter' in every sense of the word. In this way, the transitive economy of *Passage* enables participants to inhabit the space of the city, and the locus of the present, differently. As the event of the work unfolds in Martin Square, the potential to 'actualise' a new or different figurative form of social inhabitation emerges, if only for a short time. Providing this opportunity, *Passage* destabilises the city as a naturalised site, rendering it a situation, an orientation, a connective economy, within the world.