

Property is Theft!

Reuben Moss

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THE PHYSICS ROOM CONTEMPORARY ART SPACE

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A conversation between Reuben Moss and Jamie Hanton

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Jamie Hanton: Maybe you could tell me a bit about your prior research, and then what happened when you got to Christchurch to begin the residency?

Reuben Moss: The prior research was basic: everything that I could find on the Internet about Christchurch and its current situation. I had the idea of the sound / window work before arriving and that translated very directly, but for the other work I was looking for an object I could put in the space and then the pavers occurred to me. I was reading a letter sent to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon—the author of *What Is Property?: or, An Inquiry into the Principle of Right and of Government*, from which the title of the show is taken—by a French economist named Louis Auguste Blanqui and in it he says, “Your style is too lofty ever to be of service to the madmen who in discussing the gravest questions of our social order, use paving-stones as their weapons.”

JH: In a previous conversation we’d discussed the fact that in Europe when a building is abandoned, or not occupied, the windows are bricked up...

RM: Right, so that was the starting point for the window work, but the vernacular here is plywood. It’s funny, there aren’t many similarities between Lisbon and Christchurch, but the effects of economic deprivation and the methods of gentrification in Lisbon have had similar results to the earthquake here. Post-disaster—whether that’s economic or natural—the way that the economic reality affects what happens afterwards is very comparable. There’s a similar amount of abandonment in downtown Lisbon and they brick the windows up and then cement the facades. I think I told you about the freaky project where the council or developer even put photos of old ladies in the windows to say, I don’t know, ‘everything’s fine here —don’t worry! We haven’t evicted a bunch of old ladies—they’re still there, look!’

JH: But if we look further back, we see there was a major earthquake in Lisbon too?

RM: Yes, Lisbon was the first European city to be redesigned around a master plan after the 1755 earthquake that absolutely destroyed the city. Following this, the city was rebuilt along the plan of the Prime Minister, the Marquis of Pombal, who was apparently a very vicious man and who was effectively running Portugal at the time.

JH: I wonder if you could talk about your work in Dunedin (which featured in your first exhibition here, *Monuments and other reminders* earlier in the year) and the old post office, and the connections between those?

RM: Yeah, it’s great that 209 Tuam Street is a post office building, I find it’s a great irony for me as I spent a lot of time working on the old Dunedin Post Office and now this exhibition is going to be in another post office. The Dunedin one was emblematic of the story of neoliberalism in New Zealand. That’s the story I was always trying to tell; that it was a building that was precarious. From 1996 it was transferred to the city council then it

went through varying owners and development plans but in about 1997 or 1998, the city council ripped all of the hardwood out, they’re like, ‘well this is costing us money, so let’s just get all the valuable wood out of it.’ And, you know, it was the same as this building—beautiful kauri floors and rimu hard timber—all ripped out. So then the building was sitting empty, it had holes in the roof, it was filling with water, and it was a great symbol of the end of the welfare state—sitting there decaying. And, also of Dunedin, the post office is at the south end of town, which had once been the bustling centre, but was really suffering during the 90s. There’s been a massive effort to gentrify that area and that’s [the post office] one of the anchor projects of that process. Either way, it was destined to become very private, it was no longer any sort of public space, it had no connection to the state which had built it. It’s similar to the post office here ... it’s nice that there’s a gallery in there—it’s still a public space to an extent ... as public as galleries can be.

JH: There’s a lovely—albeit totally coincidental—link for us in that this is going to be the last show in this space and we’re boarding up the windows in preparation to leave and building a barricade: a final, ‘Come and get us!’ aimed at the strange situation around us.

Can you tell me about the conversation you had with the political scientist when you first arrived, because I think that’s still informed what’s going on in the exhibition...

RM: For me, the political question we struggle most with today—and have for a long time—is the question of the welfare state and the role of property. When property exists, property becomes something that ensures capitalism and then it becomes almost interchangeable with capital in that context. When I arrived I met with Dr Lindsey McDonald from the University of Canterbury who had written his PhD on that very question: the political philosophy of property rights, and the conclusion he arrives at is that there is no ethical basis for property, but that property is a social contract and the state is founded upon the defence of property and now, under neo-liberal conditions, exists to defend property.

JH: Was his research international or was it about New Zealand specifically?

RM: He’s definitely interested in the fact that New Zealand begins with an enactment of property; Māori didn’t have the same conception of property and it’s obviously a contention in the treaty up until today. Māori understanding of property is much more in line with custodianship, not this idea of ‘to increase’ or ‘to gain’ from property. That’s a foreign imposition and there’s a contradiction in terms of the English morality towards property, with the Lockean notion that you worked the land and thus you created property. The British understood this moral quandary, but they chose to ignore it when they occupied indigenous land.

JH: And how has your Christchurch-specific research been influenced by this conversation?

RM: I haven’t come up with anything original, but when you look at the situation in the inner city and this massive act of government appropriation, you have to ask, what is property in Christchurch? If the state only exists to protect property, then all of a sudden the state

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buys everything or forces everyone to sell then that’s not a public service. The idea is to then recapitalise on it, the residential red zone is a perfect example: they haven’t bought all this property to make a public park, the mentality was obviously to create a large area of property / capital. And now there are threats of selling-off areas of the red zone to pay for other property projects. I think there are some bizarre paradoxes in Christchurch in terms of neoliberal capitalism, where an ostensibly Tory government created a centralised plan which involved mass appropriation and then built these enormous state buildings—it ultimately smells very corrupt and you have to ask, who’s benefiting here? To say that it’s just neoliberal logic that’s driving this city isn’t going far enough, I think little deals between people must have occurred.

I was looking through the CERA archives when I was in Lisbon, and you find this incredible amount of redaction under section 9(2): of the Official Information Act. This section refers to ‘commercial interests’, so things can be redacted from official government documents when there are commercial interests at stake. However, when you’re talking about mass appropriation of property in tandem with re-zoning, in ways which were dodgy at best—certainly inefficient—and geared towards property prices not towards housing people, is commercial interest a legitimate reason to hide information?

Reuben Moss (1985) lives and works in Lisbon, Portugal. Recent exhibitions include, *The Hive Hums With Many Minds Part Two*, Te Tuhi (group) 2016, *Erre que Erre que Erre que Erre*, C/ Encarnación González 8, Madrid (group), 2016, *Arte y Propaganda Libertaria*, C/ Encarnación González 8, Madrid (group) 2015, *5x5 Catello*, *Espai d’art contemporani de Castelló* (group), 2013, *Arte Útil 1*, Off Limits, Madrid, (group), 2011.

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