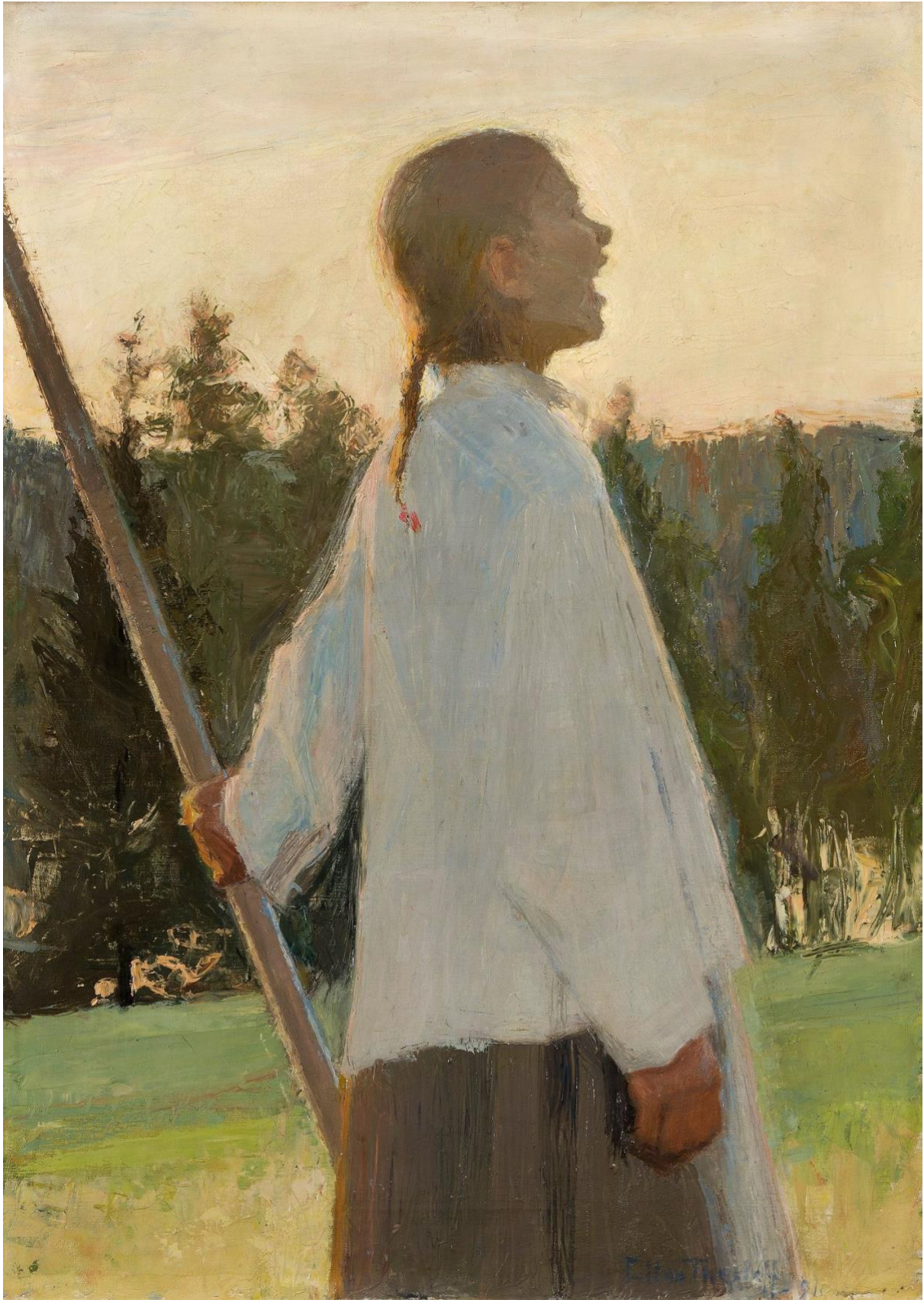


Mathew Ryan Lacosse

*Gleaning, Preparing, Echoing*

“MA Research Paper, Kunstakademiet Oslo”



i

In my old studio, I had a small print of Ellen Thesleff's *Echo* (1891) hanging on the wall above my desk. The image shows a young girl in profile with braided hair and loose clothing holding a staff. The sun is setting and she is shouting or singing into an expanse beyond the frame. When looking at it, I imagined how the sound of her echo might be altered by the qualities of her surroundings such as the landscape, atmospheric conditions like wind or precipitation, or sounds from other animals. This painting suggested to me, not the emptiness of an echo chamber, but the potential for an echo to be the layering of multiple voices. I would return to this image often when working in that studio. *Echo* was, for some time, a literal command, for example, to go out and make sounds in the forest. I had just recently moved to Oslo and had been spending a lot of time in the forest, much like the Finnish forest depicted in the painting. I did a piece where I walked around a logged clearing and hit the standing trees on its perimeter with a branch. This notion of echo has since loosened into a metaphor, or a sort of guiding principle for the work I am doing in my practice. I have been working to establish echoes between the physical things that pass through my hands (on a spectrum between collected and made), the ideas I come across, and the sites I pass through.

On the floor in my studio at Oslo National Academy of the Arts are clumps of coal clinker, from the largest at a diameter of around 30cm to the smallest at less than 3cm. Coal clinker is an accumulation of substances such as silica that don't burn off during a coal fire. Rather, these non-burnable substances melt together. Periodically, someone tending a coal fire must remove them to make room for the burning of raw coal. I first came to know about clinker from tending the coal fire in the blacksmith workshop. The coal fire here produces donut-shaped pieces, whereas the coal clinker in my studio are many different shapes. I found these pieces amongst grass on a hill leading up to one of the Academy's buildings. It appears as backfill made of industrial waste from brick-making factories in the area. Bricks and iron, remnants of industrial production, were used as landfill to offer clear industry-effective edges to the Akerselva. From a distance these pieces appear as a uniform dark grey color with a rough matte surface, but up close they are composed of varying colors and materials melded together, such as red from the brick material or, in some areas, iridescent glass like surfaces. It is lightweight and makes a *clink* sound when tapped against one another.

The coal clinker is judged as redundant waste in the production of energy from coal and therefore mostly sits in the ground of landfills. Its lack of value at the end of this process draws me to it. For me, this material resonates as both an end, or the result of some process or history, but also as a beginning. The early industries of Oslo created this abundance of clinker. These former industrial sites have been redeveloped as parks, condominiums, and the Academy. As construction commences, seasons change, or the river's banks recede, an underlying stratum of recent industrial history is revealed. There is an of echo between the layers of this stratum. While at the Academy, I have been drawn to the type of echo these different materials and lifestyles make against one another—the

residual, the new, and the role I have in mediating. If these interstices are given attention, they might reframe our understanding of our own history as resolved.



ii

During this past year of research and practice, I have been noticing the pastiche way in which my practice has developed. It is not linear, nor does it have a clear logic. Rather, it is made of impressions bouncing off one another in the objects I find, in my surroundings, and through the people I meet. I am interested in what is left out or discarded. It was with such joy that I first watched Agnes Varda's *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2000) while writing this text. The documentary traces the act of gleaning—an old, and surprisingly to me, legally codified practice in France of collecting food left over from the harvest in industrial agriculture. In the film, gleaning is approached in several different ways: in the traditional way dictated by French law; in the historical representations of gleaners in paintings; contemporary gleaners living off the waste in cities; artists who glean for the productive possibility of discarded materials; in conversations Varda has with former-gleaners in various towns in France. Varda herself gleans materials while filming but also superimposes gleaning, as her film making method, onto the whole project.

The echoes of Varda, through the reaching of her hand to the potato of her choice or noticing the lens-cap swinging in front of the lens, are included. A favorite moment of mine is her ecstatic response to one of the gleaners on a potato farm noting the abundance of heart-shaped potatoes cast aside in the harvest. She first exclaims and then narrates,

The heart, I want the heart!

I was glad.

I immediately filmed them up close, and set about filming perilously with one hand, my other hand gleaning heart-shaped potatoes.

Then I took a few home with me.

I looked at them again, filmed them again.

Then it dawned upon me: the Good Heart Charity Meals.<sup>iii</sup>

In this moment, Varda as subject and narrator goes through the whole process of integrating herself into the material she is gleaning. When gleaned by Varda, this potato takes on a transformative potential. In discussing the documentary, Mireille Rosello says “The idea is not to put the objects back into circulation to avoid wasting (Varda will never consume the heart-shaped potatoes that she takes home), but to give them a new identity, a new role and function.”<sup>iv</sup>

The coal clinkers are one of several materials that I have gleaned from my surroundings, and which now reside in my studio. For some years I have been interested in what is left over and part of my practice involves walking around areas that I live or work in. For example, each day I walk down and up the river, to and from studio. I usually have my eyes down on the ground or off to the river. Things that meet my eyes are also things that might meet your feet as you walk over them. On one of these walks, I noticed a concrete object running across the river from bank to bank. This form is one large object broken up into three sections, two low platforms on either riverbank that are generally above water and a long section that spans between them. This middle section generally sits about 20cm below the surface of the water. The form is the remaining part of an iron structure that no longer exists on the site. There are varying levels of remediation on the Akerselva, and this appears to have fit within the too expensive, not enough of a bother category.

With the other objects I had gleaned from the river and brought to my studio, it felt necessary to clean them. I was preparing these objects by cleaning them to be worked on, studied, or displayed. These methods of preparation that had become so routine in my studio became much more interesting when echoed back to this concrete form. A larger project of relating to this concrete form through an act of preparation began here. Over a period of three weeks in early spring I would go down regularly to brush off the dirt, algae, and other substances that had settled on the surface over the years. To do this,

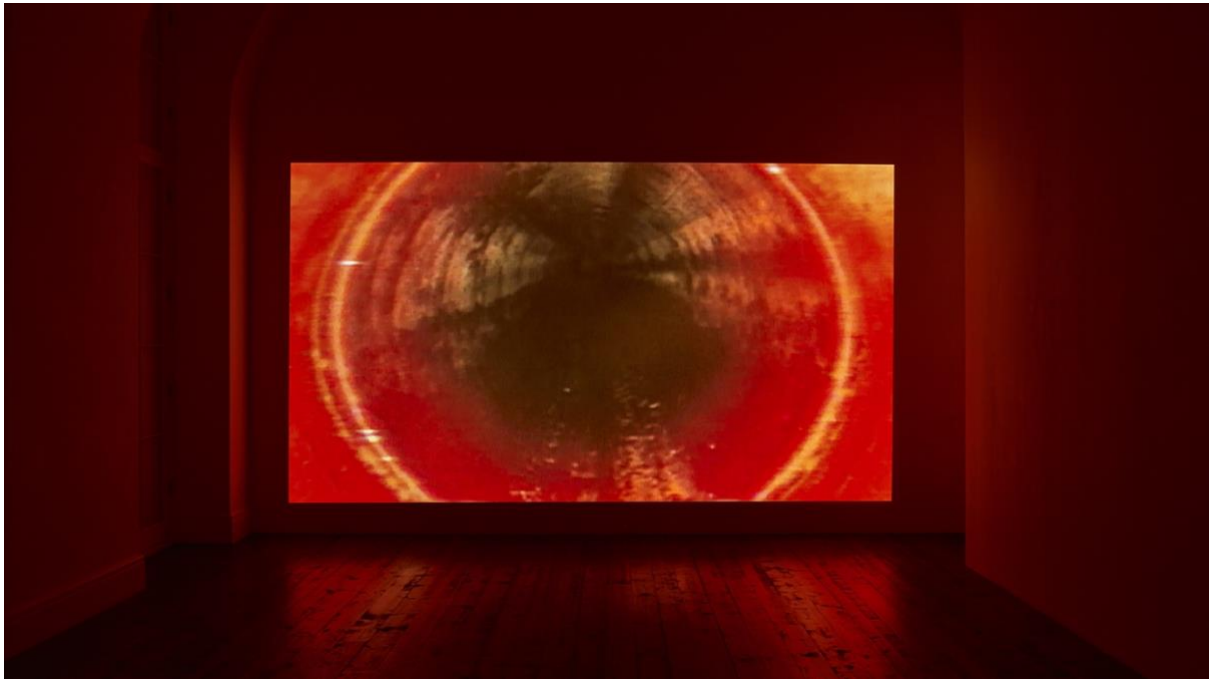
I went through several different brush types, trying out which worked best. Some did nothing and some fell apart at the roughness of the weathered concrete. I needed to retrieve those fine metal bristles with a magnet, out of fear that they might end up in a fish. I say this because in starting this project, these steps were not apparent to me. They came through working with the site. I have since collected the bristles from that brush in a jar in my studio and their delicate “V” shape is in a few small sculptures I am making. It turns out that there was a brush factory for many years adjacent to this site where I spent months preparing the brushes and cleaning the concrete.<sup>v</sup> Working with Johan Andrén, we echoed historical documentation of the river by Inger Munch with a series of black and white, large format photographs.<sup>vi</sup>



vii

I have revisited the site to shoot a video of me cleaning the form of the sediments and algae that had rested on the surface since my first visit. In this video, I shot it from such an angle as provide the most under-water visibility possible to emphasize the form. I was looking to show the results of this preparation. I thought that if I prepared this object through spending time with it, tidying it up, and making it visible, other potential uses or understandings of it might be more likely. In this there is a gleaning to make visible, but also a gleaning to use. I came to understand the form and its situation on the river as a stage for a theatre. I was thinking about the work of artist Maria Nordman, specifically

how she would assign the role of author to chance, site, and the viewer, and Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!* Ultimately, this work diverged away from the projects of Nordman or Laderman Ukeles to a personal approach to the site and the concrete form. I was slightly reserved in opening the project to an audience who might assign new authorship, especially when I still felt like I was just coming to understand my role in it. It felt as if the work was still in my studio, or in process.



viii

Recently, I have been interested in the work of Peter Fischli and David Weiss. I think that the works *Kanalvideo* (1992) and *equilibres* (1984-1987) can offer a way into the gleaning and echoing of my practice. The echo that I am proposing happens in the objects and impressions I gather being re-situated or re-formulated. What I am working on has to do with the space between the gleaned object or impression and the echo that is building on that gleaned object or impression. In these works by Fischli and Weiss, the humor or effect of the works is created through a distancing between the facts or specifics of the material or subject matter (the gleaned object) and the illusion proposed, either through titling or minor editing (the echo).

*Kanalvideo* (1992) is a 62-minute-long silent video loop by Fischli and Weiss. It is a seemingly never-ending video which passes through a tube and feels as though the audience is transported down a rabbit hole or a vortex towards another space or time. This trip is punctuated by alterations in the footage's hue and saturation. The feeling is existential and hypnotic, an endless trip. However, it is an illusion, and a cheap one at that. The duo collected this footage of a camera being driven robotically through a sewer system from the archives of the sewer maintenance department in Zürich,

Switzerland. In this work there is a slight illusion created, where the origins of the found footage waver in and out of importance as the viewer is caught up in the hypnotic qualities of the vortex. These are moments of tension or confusion between parody and sincerity. Throughout the duration of the film, one is reminded of the specifics of the found footage at certain wake-up points such as a rat in the sewer or detritus lining its otherwise cylindrical walls. At times, the camera fails under the low-lit environment it is in and the video becomes distorted by pixels. I imagine the footage has a short lifespan under the normal circumstances of use but is extended by Fischli and Weiss' appropriation of it.



ix

In earlier works by Fischli and Weiss, such as the series *Equilibres* (1984-1987), the titles for the arrangements of found objects slide between the imaginary of adventure or film—such as with *The Roped Mountaineers* (wine bottle, carrot, fork, twine, two cheese graters, and a pie lifter) and *Ben Hur* (aerosol can, four rolls of tape, a clamp, three batteries, and bucket)—to a different kind of imaginary, that of the creative potential of “free time” and work in the artist's studio—*As Far As It Goes* (liquor bottle, vice, pot, kettle, roller-skate, dust-pan, fuel bottle, two brushes, saw, and trowel) and *The Time at our Disposal* (full juice bottle, block, s-shaped strip of metal, empty water bottle, fiber board block, and tape) pictured above. In these works, there is a parody or play on an idea of artists as producing imaginary worlds by transforming regular materials into objects of beauty or thought. It is this dry



playfulness that I am drawn to. When I speak about echoes in my practice, it is this space between the gleaned object and the imaginary potential that I am interested in pursuing. In their work there is a tension between irony and earnestness. As might be clear, I am approaching gleaning and the notion of echo with earnestness. The works described are a relief to the seriousness with which I sometimes approach work in the studio. There is something missed when taking things too seriously. That said, I think that by situating myself, openly, as one part in this echoing environment, through the presence of my trials or tribulations, hard work or boredom, it might open the work up in a similar way. This presence, whether literal or through the *invisible hand* of editing and selection, is what is so charming about Agnes Varda in films like *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*.



x

In February I will have a solo exhibition to which this is an accompanying text. I have chosen the space at the Academy officially named the "Asian Garden". This is a large courtyard space divided into two separate volumes by a multi-story glass walkway. One volume is enclosed by four walls and the other opens to the Akerselva, right at the point of a waterfall. One hears opera singers preparing and water falling, respectively. From my perspective, the name "Asian Garden" is an unacceptable, careless, and incorrect characterization of this space. It was given this name by someone who freely associated the space's sparse, gravel-laden aesthetic of water management systems with the aesthetics of a Japanese stone garden. The stretching that took place between this name and the reality of the

place was my initial point of entry and I have found the Georges Perec's *Infra-ordinary* as a way of approaching the site. In the text he says,

What's needed perhaps is finally to found our own anthropology, one that will speak about us, will look in ourselves for what for so long we've been pillaging from others. Not the exotic anymore, but the endotic.<sup>xi</sup>

So far, I have been writing mostly about the echo between my practice and the objects around me. It is with this project that I want to approach these terms, gleaning and echo, in a site-specific manner. Through the space's title it is suggesting, falsely, an empty or contemplative space. Whereas I see this space as made up many different layers, materials, and ideologies. Over the next few months, I plan to glean what is there in the space or what passes through it, myself included, to build up an echo. The resulting exhibition will, I intent, be the result of my practice with its own resonances altered by and reflecting on the qualities of these surroundings.

These *endotic* qualities, these banalities that Fischli and Weiss were so sharp to observe, are where I want to ground this space. I am interested in echoing the specifics of the space. For example, on the upper panes of glass walkway are several black vinyl silhouettes of hawks used to deter other birds from flying into them. These silhouettes are repeated around the Academy in spots where birds might mistakenly fly into windows. I am working on a piece right now that is stretch and echo the aesthetic of these hawks into vinyl silhouettes of ducks, crows, and pigeons that surround the feeder of birds down on the river. These vinyl silhouettes will be adhered to the lower levels of the glass walkway, giving a viewer the impression of being confronted by gathering of hungry birds.

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<sup>i</sup> Ellen Thesleff, *Echo*, 1891, oil on canvas, 61 x 43,5 cm, Anders Wiklöf Collection, Andersudde, Åland Islands, <<https://www.clarkart.edu/Microsites/Women-Artists-in-Paris/About-the-Artists/ELLEN-THESLEFF>> [accessed 05 November 2022].

<sup>ii</sup> Les glaneurs et la glaneuse dir. by. Agnes Varda, (Mubi, 2000) <<https://usf.no/arrangement/film-samlarne-og-jeg/2022-10-13/>> [accessed 05 November 2022]

<sup>iii</sup> Les glaneurs et la glaneuse dir. by. Agnes Varda, (Mubi, 2000)

<sup>iv</sup> Mireille Rosello, 'Agnès Varda's Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse', *Studies in French Cinema*, 1.1, (2001) 29-36 <<https://doi.org/10.1386/sfci.1.1.29>> (35)

<sup>v</sup> Formerly the factory of 'W. Jordan Børste & Penselfabrik A/S'.

<sup>vi</sup> Inger Munch, *Akerselven*, second edition (Oslo: Kolofon, 2020)

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vii Johan Andréén and Mathew Lacosse, 2022, black and white negative, dimensions variable, Artist's Collection.

viii Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *Kanalvideo* (still), video, 2000  
<<https://www.meer.com/en/60642-peter-fischli>> [accessed 05 November 2022].

ix Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *The Time at our Disposal*, 1986, photograph  
<<https://matthewmarks.com/exhibitions/peter-fischli-david-weiss-equilibres-04-2007>> [accessed 05 November 2022]

x Niklas Lello, 'Uteområdet Den asiatiske hagen brukes iblant som utstillingsrom. Her med verk av Marie Skeie.' (Author's trans. 'The outside area The Asian Garden is sometimes used as an exhibition space. Here with the work of Marie Skeie.') digital photograph <<https://khio.no/om-kunsthogskolen-i-oslo/galleri-og-scener>> [accessed 05 November 2022]

xi Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and other Pieces*, trans. by John Sturrock (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997) 205-207.

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