

# Surface/Touch

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## 1. Making Rubbings

*A rubbing is a reproduction of the texture of a surface created by placing a piece of paper or similar material over the subject and then rubbing the paper with something to deposit marks ...<sup>1</sup> The Surrealists introduced this technique into art: Max Ernst made rubbings of textures he found evocative and played with them to create new images. He called it frottage.<sup>2</sup> Frottage may (also) refer to: sexual rubbing; non-penetrative sex ...<sup>3</sup>*

Making a rubbing is intimate; even transgressive.

I have been asked to think about my rubbings in relation to institutional power. I am intrigued. I sniff at the words like a dog. In the introduction to 'Law and the Senses' See,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rubbing> retrieved 12 June 2018

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Surrealist\\_techniques#Frottage](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Surrealist_techniques#Frottage) retrieved 12 June 2018

<sup>3</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frottage> retrieved 12 June 2018

the editors state, ‘capitalism relentlessly crafts our sensorial immersion into hyperaesthetic atmospheres, mirrored by art’s ongoing fetishisation of site-specific sensoriality’.<sup>4</sup> Is this what I do? Fetishise site-specific sensoriality? I feel uncomfortable and put the phrase into Google. Amongst the offered related links is ‘list of kinks wiki’. I don’t want to be accused of fetishising site-specific sensoriality; fetishising implies doing it for its own sake, for its own pleasure, and that feels self-indulgent. But my feeling that making rubbings of surface textures is somehow ‘weird’ is precisely connected to a discomfort with not understanding why I feel a compulsion to do this. I’m not at ease with self-indulgence. I have a look at Pallasmaa’s *The Eyes of the Skin*<sup>5</sup> and discover that I live in an oracularcentric culture. Perhaps rubbings are less weird or fetishistic than an act of rebellion against the hegemony of the eye.

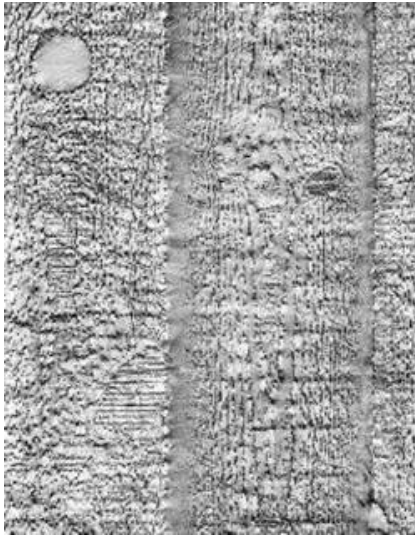
My work is about both touch and the eye. My eye touches. I feel the surface with my eye. My eye feels the texture. But, my eye is mine. It is private. Whatever goes from the external world through the optic nerve to my brain is personal to me. You will never see what I see. And it’s locked up inside my head. And when I die, it will die with me. But, if I make a rubbing, I am making something out there in the ‘real world’. We can both look at it. We can talk about what it is. We can wonder what it might mean. It’s a building. How was it made? What materials? Who was responsible for that finish? Making rubbings of

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<sup>4</sup> Andrea Pavoni et al., eds, *See*. (London: University of Westminster Press, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa. *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*. Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2005.

the Queen Elizabeth Hall and Hayward Gallery<sup>6</sup> took me to the London Metropolitan Archive where I found the architects' and structural engineers' drawings and learned that these were translated by carpenters into the three-dimensional formwork that held the concrete. Those buildings were, in effect, hand-made.<sup>7</sup> What does this tell us about institutional power?

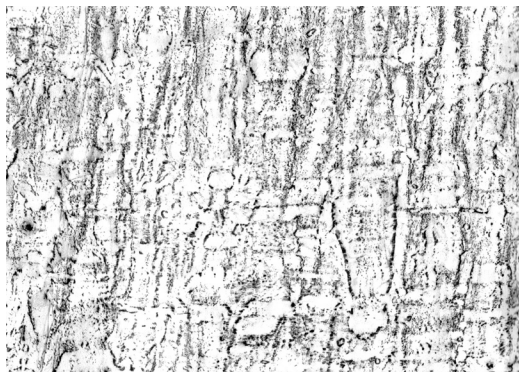


In situ cast concrete, Hayward Gallery, showing texture of soft wood grain shuttering, 2015

<sup>6</sup> In Autumn 2015 I was given permission to make rubbings in and around these buildings.

<sup>7</sup> For an account of how these buildings were made, see *The Art of Concrete: Building the South Bank Arts Centre*, <https://www.westminster.ac.uk/sites/default/public-files/general-documents/southbank-pamphlet.pdf> from the series, 'Constructing Post-War Britain, Building Workers' Stories 1950-1970'.

Touch: my fingers' ends tingle typing the word. In 2018 I was invited to run a workshop at the Queen Elizabeth Hall where people would be allowed to make their own rubbings. One visitor, a partially sighted man who had come with his young daughter, sat down to make a rubbing. I went over to talk with him. 'I can't see this,' he said, pointing at the paper with its graphite marks, 'but when I touch the surface I feel what the rubbing reveals to you.' Another visitor came back to tell me she'd been walking around the site observing its surfaces for the first time. Touch helps us to see.



Texture of the Hornbeam trunk. This richness is not visible to the naked eye. 2018

The workshop offered participants the unusual opportunity to work in uncontested space.<sup>8</sup> But making a rubbing,

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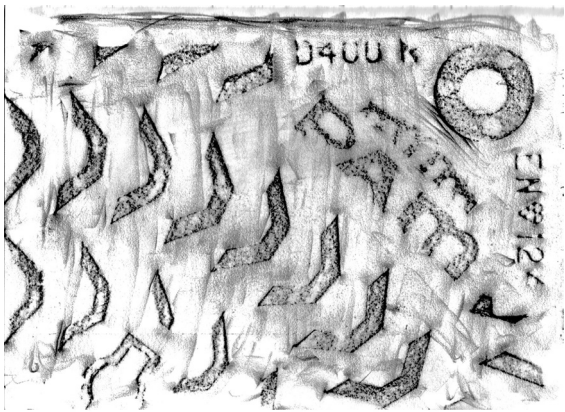
<sup>8</sup> Uncontested because consent was given as a precondition of running the workshop.

a like for like representation of surface, is rarely neutral. The making raises questions: does one have the right, in a city, to engage with surfaces? Is making a rubbing an act of trespass? Are there any property issues? A rubbing doesn't damage the surface, but would a security person know that? A rubbing is nothing. An impression. A trace. It has no agency. It helps no one. It offers only an expectation. Sometimes it functions as evidence; sometimes it makes an attractive image: 'Look', it says, 'you didn't notice how lovely I am, did you?' Rubbings are conditional, speculative, exploratory. It is their enactment that endows them with agency. In the moment of their making, the enactor's relationship to the space, the surface, the act, is where our interest lies.

## 2. Inventory of Rubbings

The more I try to answer these questions, the more I think I'm the wrong person to answer them. The method I will follow feels a bit like reverse engineering. In trying to figure out an answer I look back at the rubbings I've done.

I've been surprised to find that as soon as I started studying art formally, about 12 years ago, I started making rubbings. My rubbings were made in public spaces: a drain cover on a pavement, for example, or of inanimate objects, or in institutional space where I felt I needed to ask for permission. Sometimes, though, I'd do a rubbing quickly and surreptitiously: the tiles in the loo at the new extension to the Tate Modern; or the concrete wall surface in the loos at the Building Centre in Store Street.



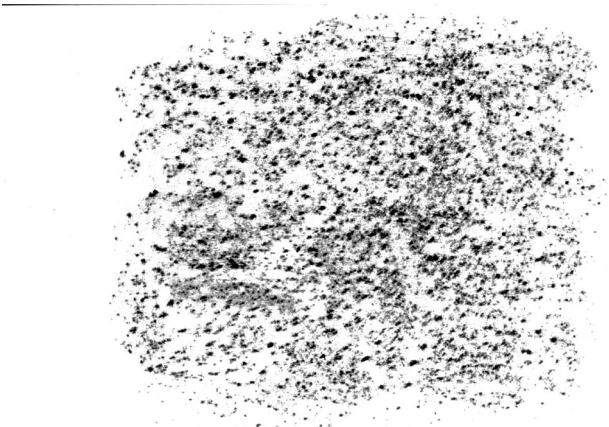
Drain cover, partial rubbing, Hercules Road, 2007



Smooth grey rock, Moshup's Beach, Martha's Vineyard, Ma., 2017



Wall tiling, toilets, Blavatsky Building, Tate Modern, 2017



Building Centre Storen St Toilet Wall Surface

Smooth concrete toilet wall, Building Centre, London, 2017

I wondered whether my discomfort with making rubbings in any but the most uncontested spaces (pavement drain covers, for example) was in any way a gendered

response. Would a man feel he had to ask permission? My approach to rubbings has largely been opportunistic. I have used the technique to provide me with information, as a way to record surface, to capture texture, as aide-memoire. Rubbings are often engagement with place. With the Southbank project, the rubbings drew me into the architecture and became a post hoc map of the buildings' construction. Rubbings are always about institutional power: why else would making a rubbing feel furtive? Every rubbing belongs somewhere: in a public space, or on private property. Regardless of its provenance there is always a responsible body and, therefore, someone who might take exception to the intrusion of touch.

### 3. Site Specific Investigations

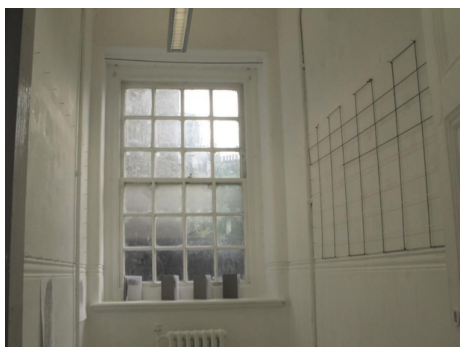
I work with site. The Brushing Room, Chelsea College of Art, 2011, comprised a graphite rubbing on a wall, picking out the faint shadow of an archway that had long ago been removed. The site had once been at the top of a staircase in what had been the Royal Army Medical College and was shown, on old plans, as The Brushing Room. Officers' outer clothing would be removed and brushed down so that they could enter their living quarters without trailing dust and grime. It seemed fitting that, in making my work, I brushed the surface of this architectural feature with graphite: adding a layer of dust in a place that, historically, had been dedicated to its removal. The configuration of the room in which I found the arch bore no obvious relation to the original architecture.





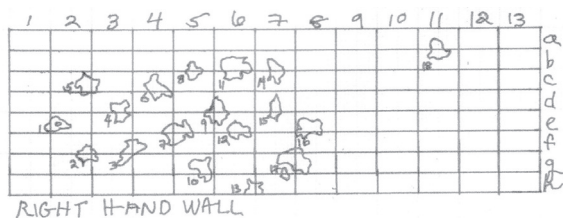
The Brushing Room, Chelsea College of Art, 2011

Wall mapping, Project Room, Chelsea College of Art, 2011. The history of an institution can be read in the marks on its walls. I booked a project room only to discover that the previous occupant, while carefully slapping polyfilla over all the holes they'd made, had forgotten to smooth it down, leaving lumpy rows along either wall. I made a careful atlas of these marks – taking rubbings and mapping them on a grid. This was one of a number of projects I did meticulously, recording signs of previous occupation. It was a forensic examination.



Wall Mapping, Project Room, Chelsea College of Art, 2011

On the windowsill are four notebooks containing original rubbings of the marks on the two walls. The right-hand wall shows the gridding from which I made maps. Below is a graphic representation of the wall.

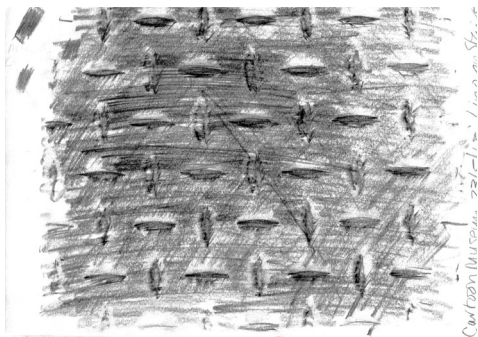


Wall Mapping. Map of wall, Project Room, Chelsea College of Art, 2011

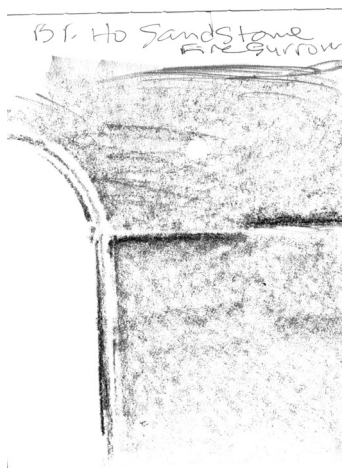
### Museums project

Since 2013, I have been documenting visits to museums in Greater London. Museums raise all kinds of issues around institutional power: how did they start and who started them, how are they housed (a purpose-built edifice?), where did the collection come from? How representative of the subject is it? It struck me more forcibly

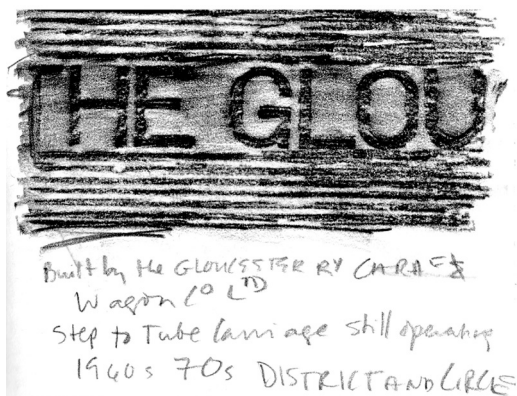
each time that any collection is random – that the British Museum, for example, is full of what was found, of what was left when civilisations crumbled, and what was taken and chosen for display. Museums validate their collections by displaying them as if they are definitive, and they are famously places where one is enjoined not to touch.



Stair lino, Cartoon Museum, London, 2013



Sandstone fireplace, Benjamin Franklin House, London, Undated



London Transport Museum, partial step plate of Tube carriage, 2013

### Sketch books

Looking through my sketch books, I realise that I have always been unconsciously aware of institutional power's raising the question of whether and when to ask permission, and an anxiety not to be caught. I would not have felt the same about photography or sketching, only rarely feeling the need to ask permission to do those. I turn to Pallasmaa again:

The eye is the organ of distance and separation, whereas touch is the sense of nearness, intimacy and affection. The eye surveys, controls and investigates, whereas touch approaches and caresses.<sup>9</sup>

Until you make a rubbing, you can't know what it will tell you. I like to make rubbings because I like to touch.

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<sup>9</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa. *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*. Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2005, 46.

I was asked (correspondence with editor) ‘to think of the normativity/regularity of your work in relation to the surfaces you are rubbing and what institutional power they represent’, and the answer is they are always in relation to power. Touch always has the potential to be transgressive, and my approach to where, when, and how I make rubbings has always been, albeit subconsciously, dictated by that understanding.

And then I remember that there is a project I’ve wanted to do for a long time and I’ve not known how to go about it and it is precisely because it is about institutional power. I would like to make rubbings of the thresholds of each of the Cambridge colleges, but institutional thresholds are forbidding and you need to be invited to cross them. I got to know Cambridge when I did site-based projects there in 2014/15.<sup>10</sup> I never engaged with the University and became increasingly aware of how much it dominates the landscape and how other it is. But it used to be different. I have *The City of Cambridge Official Guide*,<sup>11</sup> issued by ‘Authority’ of the Council of the City of Cambridge, Guildhall, Cambridge. It is undated but contains a Rag Week photo dated 1959 and an advertisement for a school giving term dates for 1961. It offers a walk through Cambridge which would be hard to negotiate in 2018. On page 88, for example, we are strolling around Trinity: ‘We now come to Nevile’s Court ... Make your way to the far right-hand corner of the Court, to the flight of stairs

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.zanditon.com/thresholds/all.htm>

<sup>11</sup> E. Cave (ed.) *The City of Cambridge Official Guide*. (Croydon: Home Publishing, n.d./1961).

leading to the entrance to the library. Open to visitors in the afternoons.' This is not a walk one could undertake today. Though whether in 1960 I could have made rubbings without permission, I do not know.

I make rubbings out of curiosity – how will this look? how will this feel? – institutions invite conformity; not the open-ended curious gaze.

## References

- E. Cave (ed.) *The City of Cambridge Official Guide*. Croydon: Home Publishing, 1961.
- Juhani Pallasmaa. *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*. Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2005.
- Andrea Pavoni et al., eds, *See*. London: University of Westminster Press, 2018.

# Appendix: Rubbings Inventory: Table of rubbings found in a sample of sketch books from 2007–2017

## RUBBINGS INVENTORY – SKETCHBOOKS, 2007–2017

SURFACE DETAILS			LOCATION DETAILS			DATE	PERMISSIONS	
DESCRIPTION	NATURAL WORLD	BUILT ENVIRONMENT	DESCRIPTION	PUBLIC REALM	PRIVATE PROPERTY		Yes	No
Street furniture: bench support nearest to bridge facing south		X	Public seating area, Riverside, MI6 Building, Vauxhall	X		31.01.07		X
Street furniture: lamp standard third from bridge facing north		X	Thames Path, MI6 Building, Vauxhall	X		31.01.07		X
3 textured surfaces		X	Parade Ground, Chelsea College of Art		X	13–15.06.07		X
Partial rubbing (upper right corner) of access/manhole cover		X	North side, Hercules Road, Lambeth	X		30.07.07		X

SURFACE DETAILS			LOCATION DETAILS			DATE	PERMISSIONS	
DESCRIPTION	NATURAL WORLD	BUILT ENVIRONMENT	DESCRIPTION	PUBLIC REALM	PRIVATE PROPERTY		Yes	No
Rubber matting over hole in pavement		X	Lambeth Palace Road on approach to bridge opposite Lambeth Palace	X		30.07.07		X
Audio speaker surface; visitors are given a stethoscope to press against this to listen to audio descriptions		X	Florence Nightingale Museum, Guys and St Thomas' Hospital Trust		X	11.01.13	X	
Textured lino on stairs		X	Cartoon Museum, London		X	23.05.13	X	
Embossed Chubb maker marks on door of room safe		X	Cartoon Museum, London		X	23.05.13	X	



Metal grille work on the inside lid of an iron chest, c.1700, oldest piece of furniture in Bank	X	Bank of England Museum		X	19.06.13	X	
Wooden step with brass lettering; step onto a District and Circle Line tube carriage c. 1960s	X	London Transport Museum, Covent Garden		X	14.11.13	X	
Top of wooden balustrade handrail overlooking the dinosaur in the front entrance	X	Natural History Museum, Kensington		X	24.11.14		X
Sandstone fireplace surround	X	Benjamin Franklin House, Charing Cross		X	Undated (2015?)	X	
Latex casts of screw cut open to reveal 360-degree surface	NA	Studio		NA	17.03.15	NA	

SURFACE DETAILS			LOCATION DETAILS			DATE	PERMISSIONS	
DESCRIPTION	NATURAL WORLD	BUILT ENVIRONMENT	DESCRIPTION	PUBLIC REALM	PRIVATE PROPERTY		Yes	No
Side of plastic gear wheel - Found object		NA	Studio		NA	17.04.15	NA	
Breeze block wall: Tyvek test rubbings x 2		NA	Studio		NA	30.04.15	NA	
Metal grill table surface		X	Hyde Park near Marble Arch, open air cafe		X	25.10.15		X
Eroded fragment of oyster shell	X		Moshup's Beach, Aquinnah, Martha's Vineyard		X	29.06.15		X
Pink granite boulder	X		Great Rock Bight, Chilmark, Martha's Vineyard		X	30.06.15		X

Embossed identification marks on unidentified metal objects; part of testing equipment		X	Kirkaldy Testing Museum, Southwark		X	Undated, 2016	X	
Polished concrete surface, toilet cubicle wall		X	Building Centre, Store Street		X	30.11.2016		X
Wall tiles, toilet cubicle		X	Tate Modern, Blavatnik Building		X	06.02.17		X
Various exposed surfaces, multi-level building site		X	Southbank Place, Waterloo		X	29.03.17	X	
Coarse textured boulder, smooth to touch	X		Moshup's Beach, Aquinnah, Martha's Vineyard		X	22.06.17		X
Chestnuts, x2: concave and convex sides	X		Wanstead Flats, Wanstead	X		26.09.17		X

