

OVERGADEN.

With maritime flag codes and the body as a breakwater, Mary Coble explores the social framework we are navigating in.

INTERVIEW

I Am Simply a Figure

By Bonnie Fortune

Mary Coble's work is striking in its visual presence, and it often involves arduous physical commitment from her, as a performer, to achieve. Her work is inspired by contemporary political realities, but rather than subsuming herself into larger social movements, she places her body at the centre of confrontation. Her perspective is about challenging what is considered normal. Her challenge doesn't offer alternatives to the way things are so much as embody our collective frustration, offering the potential for catharsis. On the occasion of Mary Coble's solo exhibition at Overgaden, I met up with her to have a conversation about her process and motivation, and the strategies behind her work for this exhibition, and her work in general.

Bonnie Fortune I want to focus on your artistic process, starting with your new work dealing with an abandoned shipyard in Nakskov, Denmark.

Mary Coble In 2010, I moved from Washington DC to Denmark to teach at Funen Art Academy in Odense. On one of my first weekends here I went to see Art Festival Tumult in and around the area of Nakskov, which focused on site-specific work. The artists, Nina Fischer & Maroan el Sani, had a piece in the former Nakskov shipyard and through this, I became interested in the shipyard floor, which was covered in hand-drawn plans for over 235 ships. Seeing these drawings was amazing to me. I began to document the floor piece by piece through photographs. I had to fight against only making beautiful images of a decaying floor. That wasn't enough for me. I needed to research to find out if there was something there to dig in to.

BF Would you say this method, being attracted to a site for an aesthetic reason and then delving deeper, is typical of your working process?

MC Sometimes, yes, but I also see it as a part of the process to fight against it. I don't like having to put a concept into a site *after* I find it, but in the case of the shipyard, a small amount of research uncovered so many things that I quickly became interested in investigating further. A lot of my process does start with trying to research things that might not actually relate to what I will do in the end. For me, it's just a different way of working, versus coming up with a concept and then exploring it through visual strategies. The shipyard and its visual interests evolved into connections I was making between the history of the place and its relationship, on a larger scale, with eco-

omic globalization. The cycle of how shipping helped to start globalization, and how globalization then rendered these smaller shipping towns obsolete, became a point of focus for me. I think of what happened in Nakskov as a kind of warning, and I was interested in discussing that through my work. I started with the beautiful drawings that were in decay and I worked out from there to the town that was in economic decay, to globalization, and onto codes and warning signals that I decided connected both.

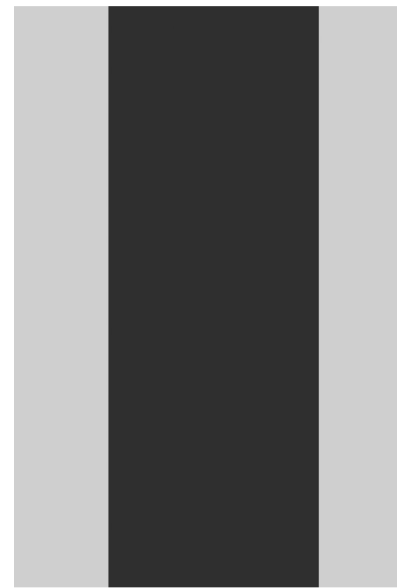
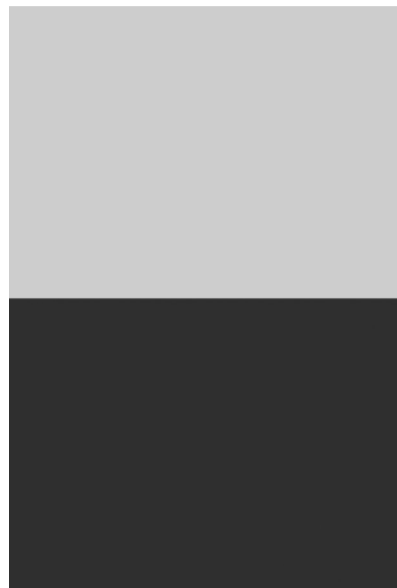
I tend to relate to issues of social injustice that I have direct experience of, or that have affected communities that I'm interested in, or have been a part of personally. At first, I was hesitant to make work in relation to Nakskov. I thought, what did I know, being new to Denmark, and feeling like an outsider? I had to figure out how to approach this honestly. Part of my process involved talking to people who were invested in the town and shipyard in different ways, gathering all the knowledge I could about the drawings on the floor, the shipping industry and globalization, and then deciding what my own approach could be.

BF As an artist, you are, of course, not an expert in shipbuilding or in economic globalization, but how are you using the research into these subjects in your work?

MC I'll be doing a live performance at Overgaden on the night of the opening. Through a specific code, this performance discusses the research that I have been doing over the past couple of years on the history of the shipyard, and the broader ideas of globalization. I have always been interested in the use of codes as a form of communication, or miscommunication, and this research process has only deepened that interest. In this case, I will be using the code of international maritime warning flags - a mode of communication between ships. 'Bravo', for example, the letter 'B', has its own visual flag, but that flag also has a sentence attached to it. One flag can mean "I have lost sight of you", while two flags together have a whole different meaning. I'll hang the flags in a formation that relays a specific message, but depending on how they are viewed, the intended message could be lost or confused. This piece is deeply invested in this concept of confused communication and the danger that could result from that. The performance will include a sound element that relates to and expands these ideas.

BF I haven't heard it yet, because I am waiting for the opening, but the sound element reads like a kind of play. The dialogue is stilted and mannered, like a Victorian-era parlour drama. Was this intentional?

MC Yes, it's between Mike and No-



International signal flags, from the left: "I wish to communicate with you", "I am maneuvering with difficulty" and "You are in a dangerous position"

ember, representing the first and last ship built in the shipyard. Maybe, like, the youngest and oldest ship. I have constructed a dialogue using only the simple sentences from the manual for the International Code of Signals like "I am maneuvering with difficulty". As I wrote the dialogue, I thought about creating a relationship of struggle, of desire and resistance, between these two ships. Maybe it turned into a love story, but I also want it to be open to multiple interpretations.

BF I got that. It's pretty sexual, but it is also poignant.

MC I think it can also be neutral, I mean it's like ship language; "I am dazzled by your searchlight" or "I am on fire".

BF I don't know, it's pretty sexy.

MC It's nice to hear that the love story comes out. I do want that, but I also want it to reflect some of the struggle that is part of the town's history.

BF As you explained the entire play is based on shipping flag code, but is there actually a reason for a ship to say, "I am dazzled by your searchlight"?

MC Yes, the dialogue is straight from the almost 70-page manual. I liked the use of language and how these sentences could be put together in a way that opened up how they might be interpreted. So "dazzled" could be a dangerous thing if one ship is blinded by the other, or it could read as a sweet sentiment if one ship admires or is amazed by the other.

BF What is it about codes for you? This project quickly moved away from the marks on the floor. When you found out what they meant, you built another layer on top of it with the coded flag play, and the performance. Throughout your work, I can see a continued investigation into different types of codes, such as the use and misuse of language, but also visual codes, like how bodies are read in space.

MC The process of putting the work together for this show has drawn out several threads and points of continuity for me. Performativity is an obvious thread which links to the idea of bodies in space that you mention, and is something I consider a lot. Even though I am most often the performer in my work, I always intend my body to be 'a body'. It's not me, or about me. When I perform, my body is a code, a symbol, or a stand-in for something else.

BF I see you entering into, or creating difficult situations in your work. For me, Maneuvering with Difficulty: Mike and November (2012) and the misunderstandings contained within the piece seem to be another version of this tendency.

MC In many of my performances there are levels of difficulty that I have set up for myself. A Sisyphean process is evident in pieces like *Straight Ahead* (2012), which shows me traversing snow pile after snow pile on a loop. The point, for me, is my physical engagement in an act, which is then code for something else. The act is a stand-in, it is never about the act itself. *The Sound of Fighting Cocks* (2012) might be an example where I have explored the concept of misunderstanding. It's a sound piece that is based on a recording that I made during a piece called *Fighting Cocks* that I performed in Toronto in 2011. The live piece was about play, violence, and queer masculinity in a locker room. The sound piece is also about all of these things, but with no visual cues. You hear something that could be taken for violence, or it could be taken for pleasure. Then you hear people cheering, describing what is happening in a distasteful kind of way, or asking for it to stop. This piece creates a space where the experience of one person is going to be different to that of the next person, and I am interested in that space.

BF I would not describe that as a misunderstanding, per se. Listening to you discuss your interest in the concept of misunderstanding, it

seems more that you are interested in using the opportunity for misunderstanding or misinterpretation as a place of creative potential. I see what you are calling misunderstanding more as you making space for other ways of experiencing the normal. For a misunderstanding to happen, one has to start with a 'right way' or a 'correct way', and then deviate from that. You could describe this as a space of misunderstanding, but it is also a space of potential. So let's talk more about the performance. I would like to hear about what you are thinking before you begin a performance?

MC I am simply a figure. In all my performance pieces, I don't consider myself to be acting. That would be something that I am not interested in doing. I don't have a character. I try to focus on the task that I have before me and on experiencing that in a sincere way.

BF The thing that I notice about all of this is that you disappear. Mary Coble is not there. Most performers seem to have an identity or a persona but in your work the figure becomes an almost negative space for the audience to project upon.

MC This relates to what I said about my body being a code, a stand-in for something else. I am never going to make eye contact with the audience, or allow them any point of connection with me as Mary. My goal is to remove my personality, so that the audience relates to me as a figure - potentially anyone.

BF There are two threads that I see in your practice. Firstly, an overt investigation of gender, in pieces like *Binding Ritual: Daily Routine* (2005), in which you tape and un-tape your breasts for over an hour, or the performance *Fighting Cocks*, which focuses on the gender roles associated with a specific site. Then there is the work that investigates selected places and their histories, through site-specific performance. You use the architecture, or the landscape, of a chosen site as inspiration, or as the backdrop for a performance - it becomes both a

source of content and an aesthetic filter for the work.

MC: Perhaps these two directions are tied together. I think the exploration of gender and queer identity is something that will always be part of the work I do. I look at the world with a queer perspective, so that is an inevitable aspect of my practice. I think this perspective causes me to pay attention to deviations from the norm. How are norms constructed and deconstructed? How does this shape our histories? These are the questions that I am constantly asking with my art and research, and site-specific work is definitely related to my exploration of gender and queer identity.

Bonnie Fortune is an artist and writer and lives in Copenhagen.

ESSAY

Signals, Details, Manuals

By Louise Wolthers

Even before you enter Mary Coble's exhibition at Overgaden, you encounter the first messages about maneuvering, which are visible from the street and the canal outside the building. In the windows she has mounted signal flags normally used in ship communications, and behind them stories unfold about the positions and navigations of both ships and people in Coble's video, photographic and audio works.

Christianshavn and Overgaden provide an ideal setting for marine stories. The famous B&W shipyard, for example, began as a machine factory in a building on Overgaden neden Vandet. It specialised in steam engines for ships, and the business went so well that the company expanded several times and opened a shipyard in Christianshavn, which was followed by a larger shipyard on Refshaleøen in 1872. In this way B&W put its stamp on the city, industrialisation and business life - but demand eventually fell, and in 1996 the company finally went bankrupt. The story of B&W is one that is mirrored in those of other shipyards and companies that grew through industrialisation, but were subsequently overtaken by progress. It also applies to Nakskov Shipyard, which provided the direct inspiration for the parts of Coble's exhibition encompassing the flag and sound installation *Maneuvering with Difficulty: Mike and November* (2012) and the photographic banners *Shipyards: From Mike to November* (2012).

The shipyard in Nakskov, founded in 1916 by the East Asiatic Company, is not as well-known as B&W, but holds equally interesting stories, which are not least significant in relation to understanding the growth and decline of the places that Copenhagen in its complacency calls peripheral Denmark. The Nakskov shipyard produced plenty of ships, bringing a tremendous period of growth to the town - which, however, was so dependent on the shipyard's jobs and trade that an inevitable decay set in when the shipyard closed in 1986.

Coble's above-mentioned flag, audio and photographic works can be seen as messages from the recent past - from Nakskov, the shipyard, its employees and the ships sent out into the world. The first ship built there was called Mexico, which Coble has abbreviated to 'M', or 'Mike', as the letter is known in code. The final ship was the ferry Niels Klim, represented in the exhibition by 'November' for the letter 'N'. Coble has constructed a fictional dialogue between them, in which each statement is taken from a manual for visual ship communications. The two ships are personified by voices, which are interwoven with the signal flags in the front space of Overgaden's ground floor. Mike and November sail on the edge of time and reality, and try to communicate across a distance that is both physical and emotional. The narrative that arises deals with the struggle to follow each other through time, and the feelings of being misunderstood, lost, or too old.

In the middle exhibition space, the signal flags are replaced by another type of message, in the form of seven banners. Here, the temporal distance from the first to the final ship has been visualised in the form of photographs of the floor of the impressive template loft at Nakskov Shipyard. 70 years of work by the shipwrights has been imprinted on the floor in lines, numbers, letters and colours. If you are lucky enough to have been in the giant loft and walked on the peeling paint between the bird droppings, paper scraps and other indefinable rubbish, you have heard a small piece of history crackling underfoot. After having carefully swept the porous floor, Coble has painstakingly photographed it, one small section at a time. She zooms in on fragments of the templates of several ships, and in the photographs the thin scratches on the floor resemble the lines on a palm marked by age and work. The photographs highlight such details as outlines, numbers, and notes about 'tube',

'front' or 'pit' on the blue-green floor'. While here at the exhibition - remembering how things went at the Nakskov shipyard - we may well associate these detached words with questions of life and death, a shipwright could translate all these codes into the correct technical terms. Yet they will remain forever fragments - the larger picture has faded away.

It would require enormous resources to photograph the entire floor, and Coble does not pretend to have constructed a comprehensive documentation in the seven photographic banners. Instead, these may be understood as visual tales about navigation, the passage of time and physical work. The photograph is traditionally the archival medium par excellence. With its ability to fix and preserve fragments of history, photography has played a major role in underpinning the scientific authority of the archive. To photograph and thus document places and events in an archivable material is however not the only way to remember them. The body can also remember, preserve and communicate historical knowledge in various kinds of actions and performances.

Coble's live performance at the exhibition opening, the hoisting of signal flags, is turned into an exaggeratedly tedious and repetitive process that can be viewed as just such a piece of remembrance work. Not because she attempts to emulate the correct use of the signal flags, or to recreate messages that may have been sent from Nakskov's ships; the performance and the resulting installation are rather an interpretation of the history of crafts, industry and progress. The hanging of the signal flags is about communication across time and space, translating from one language or medium into another. In translation there are always small displacements, and these 'misquotations' encompass the potential to understand and act in a way other than that prescribed by the prevailing manual.

For Coble, the performance is about precisely the everyday 'games' we all play in relation to habits, codes and norms. This can include linguistic performativity, in which a statement acquires effect and validity by citing an agreed code. When you attempt to liberate a language from its predetermined rules it often becomes incomprehensible, as when ordinary actions are exaggerated, repeated or shifted to another context. It can also include social performance, in which we define and marginalise ourselves and each other through various everyday rituals - such as ritualised teasing in the locker room, or the usual expectations towards how we perform gender. Both of these are thematised in Coble's sound piece *The Sound of Fighting Cocks* (2012), in which violence drags on and gender is indefinable.

The body's movements and expressions are quite fundamentally shaped by the physical environment and obstacles. Our surroundings, landscape and architecture choreograph us, which the figure in the video *Straight Ahead* (2012) demonstrates by insisting on staggering forward across piles of cleared snow. It is, in other words, a mat-



Mary Coble, *Straight Ahead* (video still), 2012

ter of attempting to walk straight in the impassable margin that otherwise frames the norm and the golden mean. Coble uses the body as a tool in simple actions and repeated movements. This may well put the viewer to the test, as in the video *Fall* (2009), which examines the encounter between gravity and surface as the figure throws itself backwards towards an expanse of water - again and again. With the small shocks of pain and fatigue that eventually arise, the figure becomes a Sisyphus that bears only its own body and some incomprehensible intentions.

In the exhibition, performance meets photography, sound and video, which add new layers to the original performance. The various technologies interact and create the possibility of expanding the concepts of time, place, fixation and transience that otherwise usually limit the individual media. *Watermarks* (2012), created in collaboration with the artist Bliithe Riley, is

based on a site-specific performative act, but has been edited into a cinematic narrative about a figure who performs the seemingly pointless work of creating holes in the ice on a snow-covered sea. The holes are not used for ice fishing, but simply comprise a piece of transient land art. Like a kind of temporary photography, they capture for a moment the reflected image of the sky in the water, but only for as long as daylight allows. Time will soon erase them again.

Like a ship, the physical and social body attempts to mark out and follow its own route in relation to society's norms, the details of the landscape, and the signals of others. Hardly surprising that it can be difficult to maneuver.

Louise Wolthers is an art historian and scholar at the Hasselblad Foundation in Gothenburg.

1 In Danish the word for 'tube' can also mean 'move' and 'pit' can mean 'grave'.

CV

Mary Coble (b. 1978) holds a Master of Fine Arts from the George Washington University in Washington DC, 2004. She has had several solo exhibitions and live performances, most recently *Fighting Cocks* included in *Commitment Issues: A Night of Performance*, FADO Performance Art Network, Toronto, 2011, and *Asylum* at ALT_CPH 11, Copenhagen, 2011. Her work has also been shown at a number of group exhibitions, among these *Lost and Found: Queering the Archive* at Nikolaj Kunsthal, Copenhagen, 2009, and *Global Feminisms*, Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, 2006. Mary Coble is a professor at Funen Art Academy in Odense and lives in Copenhagen.

ARTIST TALK

Thursday 28 June at 5.30pm Mary Coble will give an introduction to her exhibition, which she will relate to previous works and her approach to performance art. The event will be in English.

GUIDED TOUR

Sunday 8 July at 2pm Overgaden invites you to a guided tour of the exhibition in the company of Karen Mette Fog Pedersen, a member of Overgaden's curatorial staff. Afterwards we will serve coffee and cake. The event will be in Danish.

PANEL DISCUSSION AND BOOK LAUNCH

Thursday 2 August at 5.30pm Mary Coble will hold a panel discussion about performance and performativity with Dominic Johnson, Mathias Danbolt and Al Masson. On the occasion of the event Mary Coble will launch a publication with texts on the exhibited works, written by a number of artists and art theorist. The event will be in English.

UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS

Friday 24 August 2012 Overgaden presents two solo exhibitions by Yorgos Sapountzis and Hito Steyerl. The exhibitions are part of Copenhagen Art Festival, which takes place 24 August - 2 September. The festival offers a multifaceted exhibition programme and is organised by Copenhagen's five art centres: Kunsthal Charlottenborg, Den Frie Udstillingsbygning, Kunstforeningen GI Strand, Nikolaj Kunsthal and Overgaden. The last day of the exhibitions at Overgaden is 21 October 2012.

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Translation: Billy O'Shea

This exhibition folder can be downloaded from www.overgaden.org



Mary Coble, *Fall* (video still), 2009