Spolium, a Latin term, referred to the skin or the hide stripped from an animal, but also more generally in its plural form, *spolia,* to that which had been taken through violence such as the spoils of war. Later, the word came to be associated with a repurposing of architectural fragments, particularly the early Christian use of architectural fragments from Classical Antiquity. Maria Fabricius Hansen argues that this practice was not the result of economic necessity alone, nor merely due to a lack of available craftsmanship as Vasari contemptuously claimed in the 16th C. The practice also amounted to an act of 'translation'[i] as these fragments were not concealed but incorporated into the production of a new heterogeneous, architectural language. It is in this context that Hansen speaks of the 'eloquence' of spolia, not only for the traces that they carry of other times and places but also for their iterative singularity as they shift from one phenomenal context to another.

Translation is widely understood as a fraught territory involving negotiation, friction, power, dissidence and control, where objects of knowledge shift, fragment and collide. In the in-between space of translation, knowledge-objects are transferred between frames of meaning-making; what is untranslatable or unknowable is usually lost in the transaction. Decolonial scholars demand that this space of translation be reconfigured so that different frames of meaning-making are maintained in every act of interlocution, so that the tension between the thinkable and unthinkable is not reduced or erased in the interests of the powerful but becomes an ever-present component of communication.

This is the territory within which the artistic work of Michael Cleary operates. Comprised of objects, images and actions, Cleary's work often amplifies moments where one thing seems to be on the cusp of becoming another, or in the process of being translated from one state into another. Things are not certain; the activity of deliberating, weighing up, measuring is felt as part of each

thing that Cleary makes. He fabricates objects that incorporate spolia – blocks, bricks, stones, mechanisms – which hint at, but never resolve into thinkable forms. They insist upon their materiality within an arrangement that Karen Barad describes as 'material-discursive'[ii] – that is to say they are recognised as components in an ever-shifting networks of relations, a phenomenon that includes the artist, his labour, the viewer, their class position, the institution of art, concepts from art history and new materialism, capitalist realism, the industrial histories of Limerick and more. Barad has drawn on the work of the 20th C physicist Niels Bohr, who demonstrated that boundaries do not exist in any stable or easily determinable condition, to argue that objects exist as a result of an abstractive procedure that she describes as a 'cut', but also as an 'intra-action'. Unlike interaction 'which presumes the prior existence of independent entities'[iii], intra-actions enact boundaries that are constitutive of what Barad describes as 'agential reality . . . within which we intra-act and have our being'. In Barad's theory agency is not a pre-existing property of humans but is enacted through a dynamics of intra-activity, an entanglement of matter and practice that recognises a possibility for 'worldly-configurings'.[iv]

The introduction of agency into this consideration of Cleary's work is not incidental but necessary in order to fully comprehend its politics. In addition to objects that generate a poetic space of indeterminacy, Cleary is influenced by Arjun Appadurai's work on *the social life of things*, namely the idea that 'persons and things are not radically distinct categories, and that the transactions that surround things are invested with the properties of social relations'.v This has led to an important aspect of Cleary's work, the production a set of tools for a counter-occupation of public space. He brings his materialist sensibility to this project, entering fully into the material dimension of public space that guides and shapes 'the somatic response' of those who interact with its objects and structures. Cleary notices the tangible effects of this interaction – the 'wear and tear of handrails polished by human touch or the cracked footpath broken by human traffic that catches a heel'.[vi] He is also attuned to what he describes as 'precautionary or disciplinary architecture - walls, barriers, palisade fencing, checkpoints and turnstiles'[vii] – that generate what Steven Flusty describes as

'interdictory space',[viii] the kind of space that repels any formation of active publics. Cleary's tactical interventions, devices and adaptions offer other ways to make use of such structures, to neutralise their disciplinary effects. *Tactical Devices* includes objects, walks, workshops with the object performing as an actant, Bruno Latour's term for non-human actors. The artist also works with other human actors through the collective project, *Alternative Routes,* in which they test and trouble the boundaries imposed on the occupation of public space.

Cleary's proposal that objects 'perform a character',[ix] exceeding their purely ontic condition, situates his works on a spectrum somewhere between *Thingness* and *Objecthood*. Where the latter refers to forms that have achieved a kind of stable ontology in the entangled but systematised material order, thingness denotes a more fluid condition in which an object can be repurposed as a tool, or as a boundary marker of some kind, or as the locus of a discursive reconfiguration. Thingness seems to capture the dynamic, processual, shifting activity of Cleary's practice which also gives rise to a set of objects with a more stable existence. The tension between stability and instability returns us to the question of translation implied by the work. At stake in Cleary's work is the possibility of keeping different frames of meaning-making at play so that the 'work of art', to quote Paul Chan, exists as 'both more and less than a thing'.[x]

Fiona Woods, June 2020.

[i] Maria Fabricius Hansen, 2003, *The Eloquence of Appropriation, Prolegomena to an Understanding of Spolia in Early Christian Rome,* Rome: L'erma di Bretschneider.
[ii] Karen Barad, 1998, Getting Real: Technoscientific Practices and the Materialisation of Reality, in *differences, A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies,* 10.2, 1998, pp 87 – 128.
[iii] Ibid.
[iv] Karen Barad, 2003, Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter, in *SIGNS,* Spring 2003 I, pp 801 - 831.
[v] Arjun Appadurai, 2006, The Thing Itself, in *Public Culture Vol. 18, Issue 1,* Winter 2006, pp 15 – 21.
[vi] Michael Cleary, email to author.
[vii] Michael Cleary, 2017, *Tactical Devices,* Available at https://mikeclearyvisual.net/2017/02/25/alternative-route/
[viii] Flusty, Steven, 1994, *Building paranoia : the proliferation of interdictory space and the erosion of spatial justice*, West Hollywood, CA. : Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Urban Design.
[ix] Michael Cleary, email to author
[x] Paul Chan, 2009, What Art Is and Where it Belongs, *e-flux Journal #10.* Available at https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61356/what-art-is-and-where-it-belongs/