Like every spoken word, every line drawn is a social act: a division, a wall, a river, a connection, a window, a bridge, perhaps all at the same time. Michel de Certeau’s spatial narrative ambiguity. Every such act is social because it constitutes a proposal to redistribute social relations in space. Doubly so because it takes place within particular sets of social circumstances, modes of communication and production: a line drawn as a threshold in a design studio, another drawn as a strategic security fence between geopolitical regions. As Francis Alÿs’ The Green Line (opposite) poignantly shows, the simple act of drawing a line can be deeply political indeed. The idea is inexcusable, inescapable, but in the best possible way. It forces us to take position, to take responsibility and to answer. The single most important question you can ask a design student, Kathryn Moore once told me, is ‘why?’ and then ask it again, and again.

It is with this in mind that the double topic for this issue of On Site review was developed. Ethics and publics not as separate issues, but as inseparable aspects of any intervention, proposed intervention or interpretation of the built environment.

Transformation and interpretation, from any disciplinary position, inevitably involves these two things. First, a deep sense of deliberation fundamental to any design act (either thinking before, or thinking through, action) whether a line, a room, a conversation, a critique or a text. Every design act, in this sense, constitutes the turning of values into form.

The key ethical responsibility of the architect lies not in the representation, whether it is at the scale of one’s own work or practice, or in the abstraction of Modernism’s Universal Man or what Adrian Forty identified as the ‘subject of the welfare state’. Aside from the construction industry’s relationship with state-supported housing programmes, ‘who is architecture’s public?’ which he answered himself saying that the public of architecture is anybody who uses it. The quote can be understood in its historical context as a humanist counter to the abstraction of Modernism’s Universal Man or what Francis Alÿs traced, with a dripping can of green paint, 24km of the Green Line that in 1994 had been drawn on a 1:20,000 map of the Jerusalem area. It signalled the position of the Israeli state over the agreed Green Zone.

Sometimes doing something poetic can become political and sometimes doing something political can become poetic.

— Francis Alÿs

The Green Line
Jenin 2004
In collaboration with Philippe Bellaia, Rachel Leah Jones and Julien Devon
17 34 min

www.francisalys.com/greenline

Francis Alÿs traced, with a dripping can of green paint, 24km of the Green Line that in 1994 had been drawn on a 1:20,000 map of the Jerusalem area. It signalled the position of the Israeli state over the agreed Green Zones.

In the name of others.

To the creation of empowering spatial, and hence social, relationships in the name of others.

— Jeremy Till


Folch-Serra, Mireya. ‘Place, Voice, Space: Mikhail Bakhtin’s critical spatial practices in the assembly of unheard voices

In the midst of urban development and in the theatre of development dynamics. Relational art practices, the concept of the Commons, infrastructure in informal settlements – all are reminders that indeterminate territory and basic needs and services can be common ground.

On the other hand, the failure of representation of both the city and its multiple publics – the paradoxes of public space and the relationship between architecture and dialogue, point out the difficult task of transposing particular direct connections, institutions and traumatic experiences into architecture. Ultimately, this issue is about the assemblage of public space and the agency of its publics.

Tim Beasley-Murray writes that ‘dialogue bears the imprint of its own failure’, meaning that, quite positively, dialogue fails to signify completely because it leaves room for response. The call for articles that went out was more the messy text of a conversation between Stephanie White and myself as a clearly wrapped call, and one that indeed generated some reflection and exchanges on the ethics and publics of On Site review itself.

The proposals that came in covered a wide range of subjects in the best possible messy way. Some had direct relations to ethical dilemmas and aspects of public representation, others teased out the latent ethical and representational issues within projects and processes. What stands out is the degree to which each contributor deals with critical self-reflection and sets up their own particular capacity for response. Each raises specific questions about assumptions, methods and hypotheses, courageously failing to signify completely.

Whether it is in inviting critical reflection on ethical dilemmas at varying scales, or inviting a performative yawn/bark in the best dialogical way, the words and lines assembled here are opening thoughts, beggining for response.

“The key ethical responsibility of the architect lies not in the refinement of the object as static visual product, but as contributor to the creation of empowering spatial, and hence social, relationships in the name of others.”

Jeremy Till