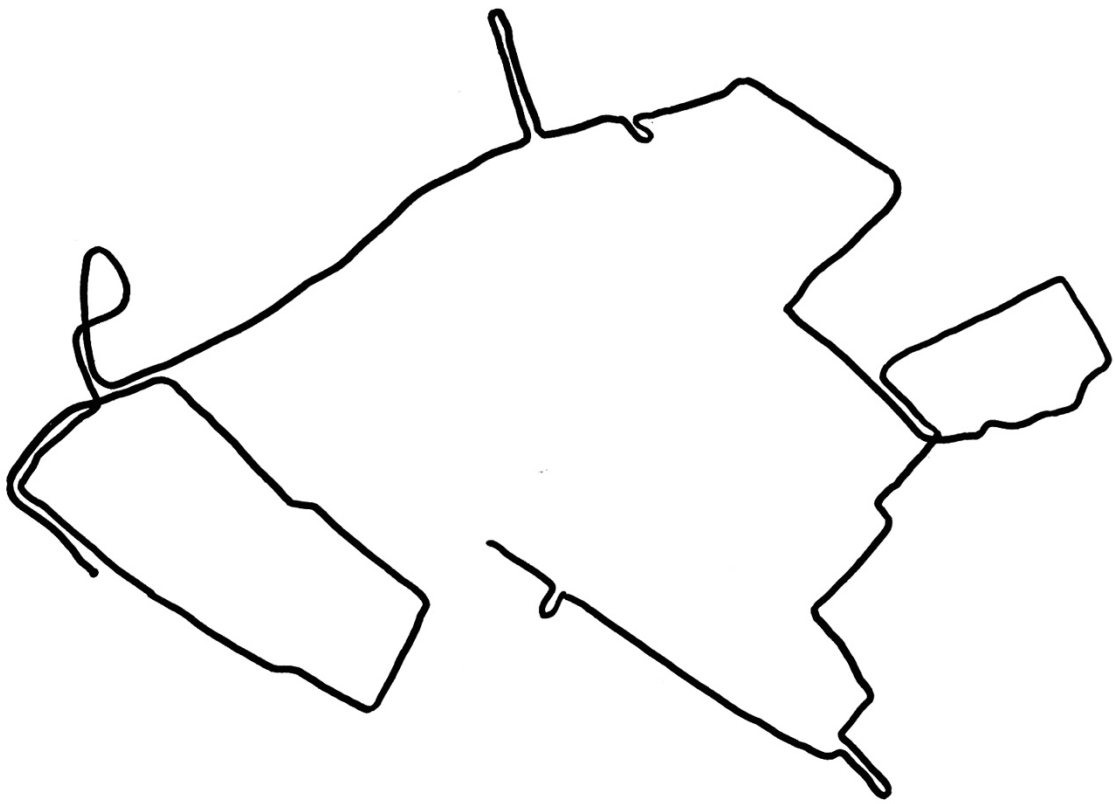

COURT CIRCULAR SE11

INVITATION

J.V., March 4th, 2020

Dear N&K,

I hope despite the worrying news about COVID-19 you are both well.

I'm writing to formally invite N&K to participate in a group show scheduled to open at the old Lambeth County Court, Cleaver Square in Kennington SE11 in late May.

As part of this proposal, I've been thinking about how the work can best engage with the historical context of the space e.g. what it means for artists to appropriate it. I think it would be a very good fit for N&K – perhaps to situate work in the space, or create a group walk in the neighbourhood that engages with the theme.

Some background about the courthouse – since the 1930s it had mostly dealt with social housing claims and eviction cases but was controversially decommissioned a few years ago as a 'cost efficiency'. The space is now managed by ASC who rent out cubicle studios to artists. The space, as you can imagine, is unique – we have two courtrooms available to us as well as the main art-deco hall of the courthouse. What about coming over sometime to have a look and discuss possible ways in which we could do something together?

I look forward to hearing from you soon.
J

…

N., March 5th, 2020

Dear J,

What a wonderful space and premise for an exhibition!

Perhaps antique postcards offer a way forward to weave with the history and location. Perhaps N&K can create a short walk around the space interspersed by topical cards. I can begin by collecting a small number of antique postcards that depict law courts. These cards could be a means of bridging the subject of the court with an artistically-styled artifact – we'd use these to prompt discussions and observations along the walk.

DISPOSITION

Perhaps the idea of disposition is not really so mysterious. A ball at the top of an inclined plane possesses a disposition. The geometry of the ball and its relative position are the simple markers of potential agency. Even without rolling down the incline, the ball is actively doing something by occupying its position. Disposition, in common parlance, usually describes an unfolding relationship between potentials. It describes a tendency, activity, faculty or property in either beings or objects – a propensity within a context.[1]

GROUNDS

N: Following on from J's invitation, and as we discussed, I have the working title 'Holding Courts' **[see Image 1]** and a few questions to keep in mind. What are your first impressions on seeing the image? How do you think the image might relate to the title? And, if you can think of an alternative or permutation to the title, what would it be?

PURSUANCE

K: My first impression is to do with the Chancery Division being located in this building which is also the site of the Jarndyce v Jarndyce case, the labyrinthine inheritance suit at the heart of Charles Dickens' novel 'Bleak House'. It also reminded me of the time in my twenties I was a solicitor's clerk and then a law student in and out of the Inns of Court which, even then, felt like stepping back into the Victorian era. 'Holding court' is something that happens literally within the building, but it is also what happens in the courtyard media gatherings following a landmark judgement.

…

N: You've moved away from the image and entered a literary and judicial labyrinth! Straight away targeting the scene-within-the-scene and raiding the memory banks. Yet, no mention of the hand, the scale of the postcard, or the colour? Perhaps this nicely captures our different tendencies – how typically, you look 'in-to' something (historical research) and I look 'on-to' it (appearance, what is present).

Here's what I'll point out – it's my left hand cradling a scaled-down version of an antique postcard. Behind the scenes, my right hand operates the camera (interesting, perhaps, it's the right hand that's raised in court as someone is sworn

[1] Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*, Verso, London, 2016, p. 72.

in to give evidence). The hand is far bigger than the building, there's something strange to weigh up there – imagine how that would be in reality?

Hands, holding, passing hand-to-hand, that's on my mind. How and why are these ephemeral things 'handed down'? All the hands that must have held this postcard along the way over time and all the homes that have handled and stored it before it reached me. I connect that with the suit in Bleak House because it goes on and on, and the message on the reverse grows ever more mysterious. We're left with something that holds only traces, whispers… and is wonderfully open to speculation.

…

K: Yes, the 'in-to' and the 'on-to', our two ways of seeing that occasionally come to the fore and interweave. The playing card size in respect to Lewis Carroll's Alice and the Queen of Hearts could be part of a magician's box of tricks featuring King, Queen and Knave as diamonds, hearts, clubs and spades. These lend themselves well to an underlying motif. The colouring is interesting too. An overall bluish grey tinge – perhaps reflecting what looks a cloudy or stormy day – but on closer scrutiny, the yellow on the lamps, suggesting that it is at dusk. It's also noteworthy that yellow is used sparingly, and red, the only other primary colour, seems to be part of the livery of the horse-drawn carriage. Did the sender perhaps add these colours to the original postcard? Do they have any overall significance?

I really like the relay of hands holding and the swearing of oath positioning of the hand and card.

'Holding Court' recalling the fixed expression must have its origins in the practice of the royal court e.g. of Elizabeth I, to sit in different parts of the realm. Another line is 'court' as a verb used e.g. in the context of eros – it has connotations of seduction and manipulation for me, 'the court of appeal' perhaps, so that could be an interesting line of thinking.

…

K: I've been reading 'The People's War' by Angus Calder, and his chapter on the beginning of the London Blitz in September 1940. This passage resonates in relation to the location of the Royal Courts of Justice:

'At the hub of the wheel lay the twin cities of London and Westminster. With Whitehall, Bloomsbury, Fleet Street, St Paul's, the Bank of England, the central area still concentrated within its few square miles Britain's cultural past, its commercial presence and its legislative future. The raider could be sure that whatever he struck there was of objective or sentimental importance, and later this would become the most heavily blitzed area of all.'

Maybe there is also something in the idea of 'twin cities' … 'legislative future' … 'objective or sentimental importance'.

…

EVIDENCE

N: Have a closer look at this real-sized card image **[see Image 2]**. It's been in a personal archive for over 100 years which suggests it has some 'sentimental importance'.

The shades of this postcard appear to indicate a night scene. Why is there a crowd and so many horse-drawn buses here so late at night? Looking closer, certain elements don't add up, for instance, the tree to the upper left is in silhouette, yet also casting a shadow on the ground. The streetlamps and window in the distance gleam yellow as if lit, but the figures nearby don't seem to throw shadows that relate to their light. I can only think this is a painted scene where the added darkness is an artistic device played like a card. Going back to the theme of 'anxiety', the uncanniness of this picture seems pertinent, and the closure of the Lambeth court (no legislative future there!). And, of course, in what you were reading about the Blitz – the anxiety of what the night would deliver.

Turning the card over, what do you make of the pencil marks - thinking of anxiety, are there potential traces of that in these too? I like the detail of it being from the 'Ducal Series' (ducal = duke) - not quite part of the card suit, but a player in court, nonetheless.

…

K: I like your speculation - 'a tension between …' and the connection to the theme of 'anxiety'. The scrawled, barely decipherable handwriting has the quality of being written in haste. Can you make out the address and is the recipient 'Master Harold Johnson' do you think?

The London Law Courts' architect was George Street and I'm trying to see if there are any images of his architectural floor plan. No success so far but in relation to the postcard I think I have found an image which was taken on the same day, by the same photographer. Notice the time - 5.00 p.m. as opposed to the 10.15 (am / pm?) in the postcard. Of course, maybe Nestlé were the leading condensed milk brand in the late 1880s and this is a coincidentally similar image.

Resonances for me in 'Ducal' and 'Printed in Saxony'. Angus Calder's reference to 'making necessary repairs at once to culturally important ruins' like the Royal Courts of Justice. By a few leaps and bounds this leads me to filmmakers Powell and Pressburger and 'The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp', to the onset of the Second World War and the out-of-kilter chivalric world of the protagonists depicted in that film.

…

N: The online photograph matching is remarkable! And too, the resonance of the final line from Calder – 'There was havoc in the Inns of Court.' The words 'havoc' and 'court 'sit on opposite benches in my mind, whereas there are clear parallels in the photos.

'*Have been to see the Law Courts*…'. Interesting it's in pencil - informal, provisional (yet followed with the writer's initials, as if certified). Is the medium (graphite not ink) that you detect the haste in? Perhaps it was written hastily, or amidst a flurry of other activity. I can't untangle the address (perhaps if I were working in an Edwardian sorting office there'd be an anxiety in that.

The message reverberates with my arrangement with J to meet on site – we cancelled this due to him self-isolating - how now can I SEE the court? I'm thinking about walking all the way there to take some photographs. We should think about where this walk should / would start. Ground this in reality.

…

K: Really glad that you are going at last to walk the route. I look forward to hearing more.

When I met with J at the court a week or so before lockdown, I brought with me a copy of 'Capitalist Realism' by Mark Fisher. As we walked around the space with his son, I read aloud the passage, which I had come across coincidentally, about acquittal and surveillance control via Kafka's 'The Trial'. It seemed to have an obvious parallel in the setting (and my past experience of eviction in this place!) as well as to the show's theme of anxiety. Fisher writes about the protracted legal wrangling in Kafka's novel which, for me, has its counterpart in 'Bleak House'. What Fisher says about cybernetic power and control societies also reverberates with our new-found 'working from home' mode.

…

N: Take a look at this second postcard **[see Image 3]**. It's shot from an elevated angle, unlike the first scene where the photographer must've been on the ground. Seen from height, the figures on the pavements are black marks, like small short ink-strokes – notations. Data. It's not quite a bird's-eye view of the street but it's a survey, nonetheless. I wonder what the vantage point was in the, apparently, middle of the street? Was the camera in someone's hand, or raised in a balloon? I recall other postcards we've come across which use a method of encoding the message – i.e. mirror writing. How historic correspondences were surveilled in their time, and by whom, and the potential for anxiety this might raise.

On the reverse, another pencil message, to Miss Weighill in North Yorkshire, from Auntie in Shepherd's Bush, January 1932: '*I have tried to get you a card of Marble Arch but have not succeeded we are all very well return Sunday. Auntie*'. I wonder

how much effort (or anxiety) Auntie had expended in the search for a card of Marble Arch, and why it may have been more desirable than the one sent?

The cancellation mark states - 'IT'S QUICKER TO TELEPHONE'

There's no house name or number for the addressee, simply the village name. Presumably everyone knew each other then, so it was unnecessary.

Off now to Cleaver Square.

…

K: 'IT'S QUICKER TO TELEPHONE' almost reads like an admonishment. Does this 'public service' message reflect an increasing (presumably middle class) take up of domestic telephones in the 1930s?

Notations, notaries, note-taking (the solicitor's clerk sitting behind counsel). The figures remind me of Lowry in their outline. I think the camera may have been fixed to a rostrum and this was originally a commission of some sort to promote this symbol of the legal system.

There seems to be some bleaching of the skyline in the middle distance with the effect of bringing the building into sharp relief.

It's a 'Valentine's' postcard - perhaps the company had niched origins.

Is Miss Weighill a student of some sort, for example, of architecture? The postcard after all details the 'Monastic Gothic Style' of the courts and this might have been a familiar language. Was her aunt on a brief visit to London and the clock was ticking on her finding a postcard of the Marble Arch on a stationer's carousel, (hence the hasty-seeming pencilled scrawl of her handwriting?).

I love the detail of it costing a million pounds and that this magical sum came from 'unclaimed funds from Chancery'. What were the stories behind these cumulative sums I wonder?

…

DISCOVERY

N: Just returned from my visit to Cleaver Square. Two things stood out, firstly, the orderliness of the adjacent streets, and secondly, the number and quality of historic painted street signs remaining on the walls. These signs, many retaining parts of letters and words in the paint, are what we are often drawn to when we walk, struck me this time as semi-erased / reworked paintings. This tension I perceived there put me in mind of what Brian Dillon has written on the subject of 'erasure'. I thought

back to the first postcard (Law Courts at 'night') where the address on the reverse is undecipherable. What does it mean to dissolve an address? To 'not be able to place' something? Or even, to 're-place' it?

Back to 'IT'S QUICKER TO TELEPHONE'. The irony of that as a cancellation mark on a posted card! I wonder whether Miss Weighill had a telephone at all then, in a small village in the midst of the North York Moors. Interestingly, one of the first buildings I encountered on the walk from Kennington was a telephone exchange (entirely at odds design-wise with the surrounding architecture). Could that be a stopping point I wonder?

Mention of Lowry-like figures is pertinent because Lowry worked as a rent collector. There's a painting by him 'The Removal' (1928) depicting an eviction. Perhaps these strands could weave back to what J tells us about Lambeth County Court in his invitation. I'm also thinking that the historic street-based painted place names could be documented in a series of photographs or postcards.

…

K: I've been listening (somewhat distractedly) to Claire Tomalin's 'Charles Dickens – A Life' on the radio. My ears prick up at the mention of his house in Doughty Street, transporting me to our Bloomsbury walk, with the location in that street of Doughty Court, a radical set of legal chambers. As Tomalin recounts, the writer's father John was constantly trying to keep one step ahead of his creditors when Dickens was a boy. Until they catch up with him and he finds himself in Marshalsea Debtor's Prison. When Charles visited John there for the first time, he found his father in an unexpectedly upbeat mood. It was on this occasion apparently that John Dickens spoke about the delicate balance between happiness and misery (or perhaps we could say anxiety?) caused by having sufficient yearly income or not having it. This of course made its way into Dickens' novel David Copperfield – in the famous words of Mr Micawber.

So, a lateral connection to Lowry's 'The Removal' but also to this pandemic, and the depressing prognosis for UK employment particularly the financial security of the precariat, the furloughed, and the likely permanently laid off as UK businesses go to the wall.

…

OBLIGATION

N: '*Hope you are well*' says HM's message of November 28th **[see Image 4]**. I'm disposed to wonder what, in 1904, Boots the Chemist of Nottingham (the cards' publisher) might have prescribed for a customer experiencing anxiety?

What stands out is a peculiar colour chemistry - a hazy cyan watercolour sky and an otherworldly pinkish glow seemingly radiating from the building to the cobbles. Dream-like hues suffusing the air around a jagged fortress-like edifice. The blank canvas of the pavement in front of the courts, the spartan, sweeping expanse of highly ordered stones in the foreground… it all seems so surfaced, durable, robust, intact, grid-like, no room for weeds, nature, greenery, or creaturely things. This is an entirely human-dominated realm.

…

N: The ghostly embossed stamp on the envelope.
The traces of Veronal in the glass vessel.
The residue of street names…

There's something in the crumbling white paint of the signage in the photo below that for me, connects with the touches of powder lingering in the antique bottle.
Emptiness, removal, erasure, amnesia… almost.
A painted window to the past.

…

K: Yes, what is crucial in our method is that 'something in', the angle which leads us here and there, inexorably, down another rabbit hole. Such connective ellipses come into play as we divine the ghost signs that are everywhere around us when we walk together. Ingold's 'clues to whereabouts and expectations' that we make out in the parsing of and passing on of text, image and memory seems particularly pertinent to this rumination or rummaging.

I love the crumbly white-painted obliteration in your street sign, just one of many that we have taken over the last few years. '*Oublier*' – 'to forget' is the narcotic grain in obliterate and oblivion. The latter particularly, recalling your words 'emptiness, removal, erasure, amnesia' is what someone might have sought from a powder of Veronal in 1904.

…

N: The final card **[see Image 5]**. Something from the 'SUNK GEM SERIES' – a glazed (varnished) white card with indented monochrome image of the Central Criminal Courts, London. The spacious indent framing the photographic scene prompts me to think of a moat on all sides of a castle. Certainly, the photographer captures the imposing edifice from a suitably timorous, upward-angled view. There are also what appear to be two small ink marks (lower middle and middle right). Are they some kind of 'x marks the spot' through which the sender nudges the receiver's memory?

On the reverse, the most expansive communication we've seen in these cards yet. I read '*Dear Walker*' where really, it's more likely to be 'Walter'. I'm going to leave it as 'Walker'…

…

K: More familiarly the courts are known as the Old Bailey. Did you know about Dead Man's Walk? I've found this from Dan Brown, editor of the Londonist website:

'*Dead Man's Walk is a passage-cum-tunnel at the back of the Old Bailey, off limits to the public. It's a relic from the days of the notorious Newgate Gaol, which previously stood on this site. Condemned criminals would walk along the passage on the way to the private gallows.*

The passage contains a series of brick arches that get progressively narrower as the gallows site is approached. It must have been a terrifying final walk for the doomed of Newgate'.

'Progressively narrower', the Dead Man's Walk, the dead walking, walking with the dead, the dear departed, the dear walker, all the people that walk with us. That correspondence again. That fleeting cognition. Perhaps 'W', as you say, standing for 'Walker' and not 'Walter'. 'Dear Walker'! I think we have another possibility for our title.

…

ADJOURNMENT

…

COURT CIRCULAR SE11 – IMAGES

Image 1:

Image 2:

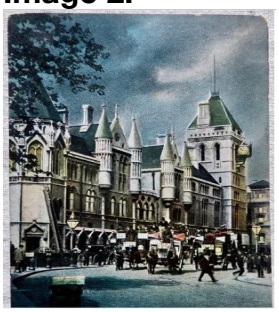

Image 3:

Image 4:

Image 5: