Mr. Kappus was a young aspiring poet who went to the same military academy as Rilke, and he started writing to him asking for advice. Rilke responded eight or nine times, and after he passed away Mr. Kappus published the letters, though the other side of the correspondence is lost.

Sue When I started trying to think in comparison to Berger, even though they both put a huge emphasis on ordinary human beings partaking in everyday activity, and Rilke describes it as all people having the capacity to translate the world, when Rilke talks about the processes and the outcome they’re really explicitly artistic, whereas Berger is more coming out of the everyday, compounded by this Marxist stance.

Jonelle It’s advice for the artist.

S But without being elitist.

J He says if you don’t need to write, don’t write.

S It’s not a Kandinsky’s triangle, but he’s very clear that it’s artistic process, it’s not necessarily Berger in the field. But he still talks about the ultimate task of humankind as unifying transformation, task is to praise the world and thus immortalise it… that’s a pretty clear correlation in terms of engagement.

J It ended up coming down to human consciousness over any other sort of consciousness, and how that translated into an almost spiritual engagement with our surroundings.

S It’s very spiritual.

J Not a religiousness, but a spirituality.

S Well we see him take religion to task.

J All the advice he gives comes down to trying to create this genuine engagement, about stripping back everything that’s built up for the sake of comfort and ease, everything that becomes artifice.
S He also talks about how food has become another thing to do; you’re meant to eat because of nutrition.

J He speaks about dulling the distinction of the need – about it being superfluous and want rather than a need, not looking at things the way they are because of this built up structure.

S He talks about Christianity as putting emphasis on the future, that we should all be looking forward to heaven. He really stringently criticises Christians. They are so zealous… base and worthless...

deliver..

M This is in 1908 or 1907? Way before evangelical Christianity.

S He has huge foresight regarding these different kinds of impingements.

J It’s as if he knows the entire history of the world with a full awareness of his position within it. Especially when he talks about the sexual relationship between women and men.

S He doesn’t use the term feminism but he talks about how in the future there will be women who are women rather than women as the opposite of men, which is fascinating from the point of view of feminist phenomenology or feminist psychoanalysis, they all really hone in on this woman as woman, not woman as that which is not man.

M I have a friend who is very critical about the male genius, about the dominance of the male genius.

S Well the patriarchal distribution of the male genius rather than the men.

J The men can’t help it.

M Žižek for example makes her vomit.

J Who’s Žižek?

M He’s from…

D Slovenia.

M …and he’s very visible and sort of exudes this patriarchal authority, and makes this particular friend very upset… But as a counterexample to that, she makes an exception for Rilke, probably because of what you’re saying.

S I wonder if she’s read this slim volume called On Love and Other Difficulties, which says more about the gender divide.

J He’s very into difficult things.
S And why they shouldn’t be difficult.

M So how does a poet from the early part of the 20th century, a male poet, in these presumably patriarchal circles, or phallocentric circles – where does he come across these thoughts?

S Well he didn’t operate in circles as such, he travelled a lot, was married but didn’t spend a huge amount of time with his wife.

J He was very much embraced solitude.

S Solitude is one of his big things.

M Geography of solitude. Is that the reason he could access these big thoughts?

S One of the interesting things when he talks about sadness, is that it’s very important to be alone and to be introverted when you’re sad, because you have no idea what these procedures are enacting on you, and why would you assume that being sad is a negative thing, that it isn’t having positive effects. He’s intensively and indiscriminately reflective in that way.

M If you look at look Thoreau - another kind of recluse, but he gravitated toward norms, the idea that men are the dominant energetic spiritual force in the world.

J There is obviously a certain truth to some dichotomies between men and women but they don’t add up to men being a dominant force.

S If you look at cultures within the amazon, the matriarchal system has developed in a totally different way.

J ‘Only the individual who is solitary is placed under the deepest laws like a Thing, and when he walks out into the rising dawn or looks out into the event-filled evening and when he feels what is happening there, all situations drop from him as if from a dead man, though he stands in the midst of pure life.’

S He talks about physical desire as this endless feeling, and talks about daily life and what it throws up, and honing in and focusing and having climactic points.

‘Physical desire is a sensual experience, no different from pure contemplation.. it is a great and endless feeling which is granted to us, a way of knowing the world, the fullness and splendor of all knowledge. And that we receive this pleasure cannot be a bad thing; what is bad is the way almost all of us misuse the experience and waste and apply it as a stimulus to the tired parts of our lives, as a distraction instead of as a concentration of ourselves into climactic points.’

He’s very cynical about functionalism and modes of mass production, that idea of the working day and doing something at the end of the working day because you’ve been working all day.
Nothing is for itself in that structure, and through this utility everything becomes artifice. How this structure is built around a fear of mystery and the unknown, because we think we’ll face alienation if we embrace at the unknown. But what can actually be discovered here are the laws that bind us to the world, so that we are not alone when we are in contact with these laws because they are part of a material that everybody partakes of.

I’ve just read Orpheus and don’t know that much about him, but I don’t get any feeling of man alone with his thoughts, it’s always him in consultation with his surroundings, and his surroundings become him and he becomes his surroundings.

It’s really interesting that you say that because I was going to mention how he gets almost metaphysical in letters to a young poet and talks about how we’ve been acting out life to such an extent we’ve become almost indistinguishable from it, and he talks about life in these abstract terms, all the same emotive substance, the same stuff but at different levels.

Qualitatively it’s the same.

‘We are placed into life as into the element with which we have the most affinity: and moreover we have after thousands of years of adaptation come to resemble this life so closely that if we keep still we can.. hardly be distinguished from all that surrounds us.’

He’s engaging to the extent, that’s the level he has to be operating on, because that’s where artistic process is happening.

I never get any sadness.

More of a yearning that is the awareness of the presence of a gulf.

I see what you mean in terms of reading his poems, but I don’t get that sense when I’m reading his writings, there’s an emotive acknowledgement, but I don’t know if he draws on that rather than feel saddened by it.

There’s a comparison between him and Berger I made in thinking about the conditions they draw up, and there’s a lot of animals there, and what the presence of animals does to your experience of a space. Berger’s experience in the field is sparked by an animal… Have you read this poem.. ,

What birds plunge through is not the intimate space in which you see all forms intensified. (Out in the Open, you would be denied your self, would disappear into that vastness.)

Space reaches from us and construes the world:
to know a tree, in its true element,
throw inner space around it, from that pure
abundance in you. Surround it with restraint.
It has no limits. Not till it is held
in your renouncing is it truly there.

M Am I wrong to think that there’s a mystical, eastern approach... taking everything in terms of all the energy of the world, and we’re missing out on that – I mean he’s writing at the end of the Industrial Revolution and he’s caught up in all this functionalism.

S He’s very much aware and is thinking on it on those levels, but I think he focuses on the everyday ramifications, I think he thinks the ethereal stuff will ultimately take care of itself, but we’re missing out on a daily basis.

J We’re missing out on that in life, the basic texture of life and the human soul in the world.

D Obviously, you write about yourself in nature, you’re implicitly criticising our lack of engagement with nature – I think the question is whether this chasm between how we see ourselves and the reality of ourselves how we see the world and the reality of the world, whether poetry bridges that chasm or not – whether his poetry bridges that gap or not. And when I say I don’t feel any kind of sadness or melancholy, I really feel he believes that poetry achieves that, it’s not a fool’s errand to pursue that vocation, and each poem puts a little more on the bridge and makes it across. Whereas the aesthetic of a lot of other poets is to acknowledge the futility of it, but continue regardless, but I think he feels there’s a certain achievement, that it’s working.

J That it’s doing work, not that it works.

S I think that’s what makes reading him a very different experience from reading other poets, that acknowledgement of beauty being in the fact that it’s futile, that kind of heroic acceptance, that notion of the wounded hero, you’re wounded and you’re not actually a hero but that just intensifies your heroic quality, even though the language is intense and the imagery is grand, it’s almost an understated approach in that there’s this acceptance of it fulfilling a function he believes it to fulfill.

D Definitely, it’s almost triumphant.

S In terms of sadness, Archaic Torso of Apollo – there is no one here who does not know you, you must change your life, and he’s referencing the Belvedere Torso that was discovered from antiquity and that all the big Renaissance artists would have drawn from. It has no limbs and no head and it’s hunched over but still incredibly virile and powerful – I actually saw it in Rome and it is incredible. It’s this huge worn away sculpture, and everyone was drawing from this to capture the perfect male form, and that’s what this poem is based on, but maybe the sadness in it comes from antiquity being
permeated with nostalgia, this idea of tapping into the beauty and grandeur and glory of this nostalgia, and its glory being embedded in the fact that it was ruin.

**D** You must change your life. Does he mean you must be in continuous change?

**M** Would you consider him a critic of modernity then? A direct critic?

**S** It’s difficult to judge with Letters as obviously it’s a correspondence and not something he necessarily expected anyone to ever see, he’s writing to a young poet who’s writing to him for advice, and I suppose you always have to take into account a certain amount of liberties, or if he’s not backing himself up to the extent that he usually would because it’s a correspondence and because this person is already invested in his opinion. A lot of his poems work with imagery and antiquity and myth, so unless you’re getting into critical theory it’s really hard to identify hardcore strands of criticism. But he does come out with fairly straight statements.

**M** Two people are coming to mind: Herman Hesse, who had very similar nostalgic and romantic ideas about retaining a kind of spiritual awareness, and then Ayn Rand, and Dave was talking about Ayn Rand before, and *All Watched Over By Machines of Loving Grace*, and her theory that it’s all useless and that we have to be selfish, and modernity is us coming into our natural state, being symbiotic with these developing machines.

**S** Her philosophy would probably be a very close antithesis if you had to pick one. Was it Plato or Aristotle she said was the only philosopher who ever influenced her? Man is selfish, and selfish isn’t a bad thing, it’s just how you operate in the world, there’s nothing cruel about it, and very much grounded in you must act in this way now because there isn’t a whole lot coming after, whereas Rilke is more saying you shouldn’t think that just because heaven is on the way and heaven is going to be fantastic that life isn’t wonderful, or that you shouldn’t be living to the utmost extent now – which is where he takes such issue with Christianity because Christianity would render the present moment banal and wasteful.

**J** Well he thinks that every way we live is part of the same gestation and part of this becoming that will never actually happen but is every moment being born and striving toward this perfection that can't exist in the present, but that’s what’s beautiful about it and that beauty is what we can take part in.

**S** When we said we’d look at this text, re-reading over it I’d forgotten how he just drops things in there. We looked at Field the last time, and Berger just lists out these kind of qualitative criteria for a moment of transformation or moment of awareness in a given space but Rilke just drops these snippets of advice in there as if they’re nothing.. but it’s interesting at the start when he gives his opinions about the poems Kappus has sent him, and he’s sort of giving him a way out, you know saying if you decide
you don’t want to be a poet that’s not a bad thing, he doesn’t necessarily think he’s cut out for it or he’s going to make it but he’s still spending a huge amount of time.

J And Kappus is expressing so much doubt.

M Sue you’ve hi-lighted something here in the book, about sadness.. I’m kind of wondering, if there’s an element of cynicism – ‘I believe that almost all our sadnesses are periods of tautening that we experience as numbness because we can no longer hear the stirring of our feelings, which have become foreign to us’. This is where I see a suggestion of cynicism, a criticism of modernity or bring in the ‘middle of transition.’ But there’s a hope.

J That we can embrace something rather than run away from it.

M It’s already in your blood in a sense.

S And again he talks about how important it is to be alone when you’re sad, because these changes aren’t necessarily bad.

J He talks about sickness as well and how it isn’t necessarily a bad thing, how it’s the symptom of healing, the process of fighting off and getting past the foreign thing.

S A gestation period.

J A transformation period – that’s what sickness is or what sadness is.

S Why would you negate or ignore them, when you don’t know what changes are being enacted.

J And he talks about process as being a surplus of that, and building up a framework of disdain with which we talk about the world, and that’s kind of how he sees society.

S It’s padding.

M It’s very prophetic as well, because since then these circumstances he’s describing, since then people have been accentuated to such a degree.

S I see him as having foresight in terms of contemporary art practice, embracing sadness as qualitatively the same, do you know Sam Taylor Wood? There was this documentary I watched years ago, and she had just finished rereading Wuthering Heights, and she felt compelled to go to the area associated with Emily Bronte and the book, near Haworth in West Yorkshire, and she took these photographs, trying to reflect on this melancholy that permeates the book, and saying people give out about melancholia, this kind of indulgent artistic temperament, whereas she saw it as an integral part of her day, a time for thinking, a different type of thinking, which I think is underrated or misattributed.
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A detection of something that’s just under a surface of familiarity.

Not something to wallow in but a point of departure.

He talks about humility, and to have faith in your experiences and not try to dominate them prior to entering them.

And you have to go through these states of mind if you want to make artwork. If you’re going to go that far with introspection, if you’re submerging yourself then these kind of occurrences will happen, and it’s just matter of fact.

He talks about not discarding the little things, or not overlooking them in terms of being creative and finding in them links to explore our connection to the world.

Which links to Perec as well.

It all kinds of rings heavily of eastern mysticism for me.

What about it?

Journey to the east.

There’s so much that’s intuitively correct about eastern thought.

I don’t agree with prefixes

You mean I’m trying to affix labels?

Well, do you mean the label to imply a criticism?

Not at all, just that there are two different writers from two different genres with these same themes.

You mean Germanic and rooted in Romanticism?

Well Romanticism is kind of a dirty word or was at least, when the surrealists were starting or the Dadaists were starting.

It doesn’t mean anything to me, to be honest.

I’ve just been reading the bits that Sue has marked, and he’s talking about the purity of being an artist – that the artist must remain ignorant of his talent, and this kind of reflects Hesse’s Buddhist approach.

You can read it again as a critique of modernity and Rand and the ethos of being heavily aware of our virtues.
J It’s not that Rilke and eastern mysticism are two comparable schools of thought; it's just that they've both gotten at the same truths.

D That’s what I mean by labeling. Do you know the story from Rilke’s time as Rodin’s secretary, and Shaw set for a bust – bear in mind Rilke’s relative position in that room. He talks about how Rodin would sculpt the whole torso, and then cut the head of, felt that the essence of a person could be distilled in the head but only through the initial inclusion of the torso. But apparently Shaw was the one sitter who was fascinated by this – Rilke talked about Shaw wanting to figure out how he could get his entire body into his head, and then he was fascinated with the decapitation before it being cast in bronze, and wanted to try to make the entire space around him Shavian or Shaw-esque in nature.

But anyway Rilke really liked Shaw, and it links to what you were saying about humility, and he talks about Shaw as being a proud man, not proud in the Wildean sense, not in the way a master is proud of his dog, but in the way a dog is proud of his master. And I thought that was a very apposite way of placing Shaw.

J A kind of delighted faith, a humility that isn’t aware of itself.

S I think it’s to do with the work carrying more than the worker.

D It’s the work being fed into him.

S Not to go so far as saying ‘I am a worthless vessel’ but if you have the right channeling behind it, is where innocence comes into it to a certain degree, seeing the works as a separate degree, going against biographical analysis – not to the extent that ‘anyone could have made this’ but a sort of awe in their success.

J That’s why you detect no sadness in his work and see the works themselves as being triumphant.

D Because they’re productions and they work on their own.

J We need to be humble in order to detect these things about the world and have faith in them and translate them but they’re born of the same thing that we’re born of, and they go on living and teaching us about our connection to the world of which they were also a product, which we weren’t in control of totally in the first place.

M I’d like to hear you talk about this at Mother’s Tankstation at an opening.

J No? Why?

M It just wouldn’t fly, there’s a hum of romantic essentialist approach that just doesn’t work – I’m using Mother’s as an example obviously.
S But they put themselves out there as being ‘difficult on purpose’ because of the benefits that has. We were there talking about critical writing, and one of the directors was explaining how they never start their press releases with ‘we are delighted to invite you’, there’ll always be critical thinking, demands on the reader right away. Unashamedly saying that art is hard and its theory is complicated.

J It is complicated to get back to basics.

S They might see this as the easy way out, I think is Michael’s point.

M Complicating things and not being able to reduce any of the work that appears in there to a single, modernist philosophy, is their modus operandi.

D Rilke didn’t do what Wittgenstein decided to do, just go back to the Austrian hills, just live there and do nothing and write nothing.

J As a principle, he’s not avoiding things.

S I can’t remember why Wittgenstein distanced himself, but I think as opposed to a J.D. Salinger prototype of not wanting anything to do with publicity, a displeasure with the world and that’s why you remove yourself from it, whereas Rilke took huge pleasure in the world. And remember as you said earlier he believed he was making things that functioned and enacted on people and caused reactions in people, so he probably wouldn’t have felt the need to disband with everything and be alone, because through his engagement he was living fruitfully.

J I think it’s important that the reason he saw his poems as doing so much work is because he didn’t see beauty as in any way superfluous or in any way just a by-product of functional living that can be enjoyed; he saw beauty as the thing experienced when we detect this very essential thing about nature, about all of our experienced relationship with it.

D That’s his specific definition of beauty?

J That’s my reading of his definition of beauty.. and I think that’s what has prompted us to do this whole project.

M So what exactly are you doing with this material?

S We wanted to take Berger, Rilke and Perec and flesh out the ideas and see how they operate when spoken about in a public space – the idea of a public space rather than a public forum, per se, which is why we’re doing some sort of event for every writer.

Perec provides these really explicit outlines, self-appointed tasks, everyday living and spaces.

J We wanted to approach art in a documentary way, and these writers came up.
S I was doing a lot of research around Perec and his approach to the everyday, his acknowledgment of the importance of the everyday and its transformative potential. Everyday living and everyday space. One of my favourite quotes of his is *Question your teaspoons*. Everything is resource, everyday life is where things happen – your daily space.

D The most important book I ever read was written by him – *The Rights Of The Reader*. I contend it’s the most important book that anyone who wants to read books should read.

S Some of his ideas as well are around reading and writing, which always puts me in mind of Moyra Davey. She’s an American artist who describes herself as a photographer – she talks about the two activities as being the same thing, a means of thinking, but *activated* thinking. For our Perec event, we’ll be asking people to participate in a recreation to his self-appointed task *Lieux* (meaning 'places'), where he would go and document a place by just sitting and writing in a subjectively mechanistic way as things came to him, and would take a card or a bill or a polaroid, put it all in an envelope and seal it would wax, and that would be an artifact, not a link or representation but something tangibly embodying that piece of space and time. And then he would do another activity where he would document through memory.

J Do you know Gary Coyle?

D I have a brilliant book of his called *A Death in Dun Laoghaire*. It’s a photo collection but a series of texts as well.

J I came across him in the *Into The Light* exhibition in the Crawford in Cork, that branch of it. His piece was a frantic drawing of a forest in Wicklow, the scene of a crime. I really liked it, and when I looked him up I found that he had done this project where he would document his daily trips to the Forty Foot bathing place in Dun Laoghaire with writing, photographs and maps. And there was this connection, the whole ritualistic element of doing this thing most days and then documenting it, looking at what happens on a basic level of engagement and seeing in it something transformative. I
found it connected a lot to what Rilke was saying, about how spirituality can come out of all of this; his project was like a secular ritual.

S It’s interesting that Gary Coyle does landscape and Rilke looks at anthropomorphic aspects to a landscape. Someone writing about him said he describes things in that way so that ultimately boundaries come loose or lose their hard edges, things blur over, and Gary Coyle uses landscape to convey an emotion or a crime.

J I like the fact that Coyle takes a documentary approach but allows this lush, beautiful aesthetic to be a part of that, but kind of passively and why not, why shy away from it.

D I know Rilke through *Poetics of Space* by Bachelard – he constantly quotes Rilke, but isn’t there a chapter called Curvings – he has lovely chapter titles, and there’s a chapter on curvings and it’s probably a very male thing to appropriate the feminine forms to that.

J We think about curviness a good bit. But Bachelard is purely phenomenological.

D Do you? But even we... I would defy anyone to say that it was a woman who came up with the notion of phallocentrism, every hill is a breast and every cave is a vagina, every obelisk is a penis.

S I see that as going into really stringent Freudian theory, and that there are all these repressed associations that we can’t get away from. I think Rilke is operating more in terms of emotive ramifying power, attributes being given to the landscape that we might associate with humans.

D ‘The world is large,

but in us it as deep as the sea.’

I think that’s the qualitative difference between how the world is and how we see it.

J That Freudian reading is a very narcissistic thing as supposed to the Rilkean anthropomorphism, which is the opposite and is more... 'eastern', if you like. More about a union.

D I think about this engagement with landscape and I think about someone walking by on the phone, talking about some random situation that I know nothing about because I don’t know who that person is, and it’s like a wave of seawater up your nose, how big the world is in comparison to your puny pathetic life. And I feel that way with nature, I don’t associate myself with nature at all.

J It’s almost like this impossible thing to focus on, every person that passes you, these things happening and passing by you, and to think about this moment of another person – everything leading up to it and everything that happens after and we’re just this tiny convergence and it’s just fascinating; it’s the most basic thing ever but it’s amazing. And a little bit like Berger’s ‘event’, in that the flow of
experience is pricked and transformed by the interjection of another consciousness.

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Follow this link for responsive work made preparation for this discussion:
http://fieldartdublin.wordpress.com/2013/04/07/rilke-responsive-text/