

*4th. International and Interdisciplinary
Conference on Emotional Geographies
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Artists: Michele Whiting and Linda Khatir (Quilos and the Windmill)

Abstract: Applicable to conference : 'Emotions in Fieldwork'

Title: Oxbow: Artists' collaboration in 'realandimagined' spaces



Our joint paper will unfold a collaborative artistic experience, where two research artists undertook a physical and emotional journey through the 'realandimagined' (Soja) spaces of a remote area called Oxbow in Saugatuck, USA. Our collaborative aim was to unfold a multilayered and emotional topology of the lesser spaces of Oxbow, once a first generation Native American camp and burial ground near Lake Michigan, and that still bears signs of that history.

Fieldwork entailed processes of walking, panning, mapping and collecting objects, sounds and images (both still and moving), sensing the environment from a position of trepidation and intrigue. In adopting these methodological approaches, we repeatedly entered the forest trying to locate the hidden ring of trees (burial ground) that we had heard about in passing. On these forays we were often lost and disoriented, creating new paths to nowhere, treading and re-treading our steps.

On our penultimate expedition we were accompanied by performance artist Young Joon Kwak, who helped us find the place we sought for so long, and there we three sat deep inside the forest, a small clearing surrounded by a perfect ring of trees. We lit a fire, listened and wrote from the body, saturated by the emotion of being in that place; the third voice reading out loud our fragmented texts, stitching our words together as sound. From this experience, a new form of site-writing emerged; a collaborative text that admitted 'affect' through sensing and recording our experiential understanding of place.

The now poignant experience of being-in the land (rather than looking at the landscape from afar) meant that individual and fluid approaches to writing could (e)merge; our shared investigative spaces opening up new paths along our labyrinthine journey towards further 'realandimagined' spaces. This paper therefore offers our experiential and emotional understanding of this contingent site, felt and evoked through a sentient creative practice, its methodology that of: experiencing, imagining and losing one's place in the world.

The resulting artworks (in multiple formats including moving image installation) were shown at The American Museum in Britain (Bath UK) in summer 2012.

Our paper includes audio works.

Keywords: Practice, collaboration, sound, affect, experiential, performance.

Transcript of spoken paper

In the guise of Quilos and the Windmill we do not attempt to frame our encounters but merely offer them up as fragments of experience. Through sustained observational processes, with the aim of drawing attention to the picturesque and the

perilous, we engage with actual and fictional *realandimagined* characters, spaces and places.

The edges of a forest (like other growing and flexible borders) may be considered a hinge between here and there, now and then - the place itself a transitional space (an elsewhere) wherein other realms and other things come and go. Within these spaces material geographies and spatial practices take shape, affecting subjectivity, consciousness, rationality and sociality; and the notion of the forest as 'elsewhere' opens up limitless possibilities for ways of being and modes of behaviour.

Through processes of walking, recording, mapping and sensing the land, we wander from the constructed paths, in search of new ways through the forest, to experience it from other viewpoints. As we journey we create an alternative imaginative guide ...a guide that tells of here and there, then and now, of future imaginings and past transgressions; a guide that maps the forest as a place of experiences, daydreams, recollections, re-enactments and fantasy.

In Saugatuck, some of those met along the way suggested new routes and became part of the expedition. One of these was Yung Joon Kwak a performance artist who joined us on the third attempt to find a hidden First Generation burial ground. We filmed each other as we made our way through the forest, climbing over fallen trees, walking down paths that were almost invisible and ending abruptly, and looking up at the canopy of trees that gradually blocked out the light.

Blinded

Over there

Later

Here

No further back

Now there up there

Turn this way

Yes but go back the other way

Here No

Look down there

and go on

stop here

Further back

Here No

Look down there

And go on

The further we entered the more we sensed the vital force of the environment, our feet becoming heavy as we pushed deeper into the ground - we sensed a physical connection with the land rather than a visual appreciation of the land-scape. The more we walked the more we felt and imagined. Our feet sinking, slight movements, smells, sounds all escalating as we tumbled and tripped on roots and stumps. We became increasingly aware of the forest's dense odour, and of our fragility in relation to the ground that rose up, enveloping us - until we came upon a large flat area surrounded by a perfect ring of trees, and understood that this was the place - the place for the work, and during time spent in the circle of trees we lit a fire, talked and wrote the fragments of texts that would eventually come together here as little Elegy, written read and recorded as sound.

Place in this instance, becomes more than an acknowledged site of memory. Dwelling in this sense makes place a holding bay, a container of things that show themselves through time spent there; showing being the flipside of concealing because we spend time absorbing the stillness around us; a process akin to Heidegger's notion of holding oneself back and allowing for consummation of the present-ness at hand. Through our lived bodies, we mediate across and within the hinge of memory and place, experiencing uneven and emotive adjacencies in the folds of this temporal experience.

'Little elegy' is considered as a form of 'site-writing' - writing that emerges from shared experiences in, and of a space and place; our two texts supplemented by a third voice who stitches our words together as sound.

Through writing, photographing and filming, we enter into a new double relation of being in - and observing ourselves as being in - the land.

Recurring spatial metaphors link art with place – perspective, ground, field, surface, plane, border, frame ...

Beneath the dark canopy of trees there was no horizon, no perspective, no edge and no frame - or rather there was a frame but it was a shifting one, its edges bursting with running, leaping, crawling, falling things, sounds from all sides and sights just beyond reach. A black centipede passed by, dwarfing a jumping yellow frog the size of a bee, and giant acorns thudded to the ground like eggs.

As we enter deeper into the forest the ground shifts from flatness to thickness. A thickness that is temporal, sonorous and spatial as well as material - a layered depth that rises up and bursts through the superficial visual plane of landscape.

We negotiate the gaps, folds and cracks hesitantly. The grounds, uprights and spaces of the forest come together as an elusive, temporary and split form, as an unfolding and self destructive form - a labyrinthine machine; its very nature discontinuous and open. In this sense it becomes less a place and more a series of events.

The burial ground and its ring of trees - we set out three times to find it, and three times the forest led us astray. No matter how we tried to negotiate it within our frame, it remained elusive, splitting, dropping down and rising up, burying parts of itself inside itself, while releasing other parts of itself to the outside - a double movement in, and of space and time - in Derridean terms, a place of defer-ence - always and already different and deferred.

As the reading of Little Elegy begins, we hold back, watching at a distance. The voice proceeds hesitantly, skipping sections, stumbling, speeding up and slowing down - retracing our steps.

In time with the voice, our thoughts fly, and fold back on themselves. The pages turn. The gaps and repeated words emerge as pauses, false starts and interruptions - as we listen we are powerless, working-blind.

our unknowing

echoes

splitting cracking

what lies under the ground

dune dust drift

struggle for speech

forest straining

our undoing

we admit we will not go on for ever

but there are sounds inside us

If we are pushed to give this kind of sound writing a name, we might call upon Derrida's 'arche- texte' - a text made up of other texts; a text that is at the same time singular and multiple, porous and open to meanings beyond those intended, beyond originality or authorship.

When voiced, the writing within the writing reveals itself still further, opening up a flood of traces and beginnings, the arche-texte's multiple and labyrinthine nature disallowing any fixed position or structure.

In giving in to the forest and letting it dictate our journey, we wandered from the well trodden paths in search of un-marked ground, and in the process, discovered a flexible circular frame - the environment itself reminding us that, to truly experience the land we need to delve beneath the surface of its inexhaustible depth.

LITTLE ELEGY PLAYS (13.5 minutes in total)

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