

Terrain and Territory

An Ethnographic Approach to Site Specific Movement Research

I have approached my engagement in site-specific movement research at the University of Limerick with the intention to formulate a theoretical framework for the creation of site-specific dance work. A scope inclusive of the culture of the land itself as reflective of that of its inhabitants; the value systems it communicates, the stories inscribed in its topography. My approach to this task is to include an ethnographic element to the study of site, in addition to what would normally be a self-reflective bodily based discourse- (one that uses the researcher's body as the sole interpreter and communicator of place, space, and its socio-cultural, intrapersonal realities). Through the inclusion of modalities of ethnographic fieldwork: formal and informal interviewing, researching archives, participant observation, and video recording: the perceptions of the site were enriched intellectually and kinesthetically. The terrain suddenly became territory, power, and history: a communicator of social significance. Somewhere between the experiential, the sensual, the social and historical I found the communication of a culture; a base from which to develop performative action.

In this paper I will discuss methods engaged in an ethnographically and experientially grounded project in site-specific movement research, and the notions of place that they evoke. This essay conveys the site-specific movement researcher as ethnographer, a creative thinker, whose theory is derived from the experiential- the result of malleable, ever-changing and unpredictable synchronic relationships between body (as Self), time, space and other. Conveying an experience in which, the sentient body is at the core of the text generated. This discourse is framed in the methods that proved themselves to be present within this experiential practice, Spradley's ethnographic research¹ cycle and George Wallas'² model for creative thinking³. To negotiate ways in which these two methods do not supplement the other, I will provide additional approaches derivative of this experience in site-specific movement research.³

1 See, Spradley (1983) "The Ethnographic Research Cycle", in *Participant Observation*

2 See, Wallas (1926) *The Art of Thought*

3 Refer to Research *Aims* on page 1 to find an outline of this project and its objectives

Theory and Rationale

*'(To frequent space is) to repeat the gleeful and silent experience of infancy: **to be other, and go to the other, in a place**' (Michel de Certeau, 1984). The gleeful and silent experience of infancy is that of the first journey, of birth as the primal experience of differentiation, of recognition of the self as self and as other, repeated later in the experiences of walking as the first use of space, and of the mirror as the first identification with the image of the self. All narrative goes back to infancy (Auge 1995:83).*

The generation of site specific plastic or performance art is a concentrated effort in communicating relation.⁴ Such an association is a subjective process, a linking of cultural identity to our built environments (Leach 2005:297): a symbiotic discourse regarding the construction of place. Bourdieu, in his notion of habitus, refers to this idiomatic relationship between the body and space as a kind of "... 'structural apprenticeship' through which we at once appropriate the world and are appropriated by it" (Dovey 2002:283). One's habitus, as defined by Bourdieu, is informed by one's social practices.

'a set of acquired characteristics...(which) may be totally or partially common to people who have been the product of similar social conditions...(but) may be changed by historical action oriented by intention and consciousness and using pedagogic devices" (Bourdieu 2002:45).

One's disposition is not fixed, no matter how deep the embodiment of the social facts determining one's nature. Culture does not equate nature, and it is around this thought that I organize a structure with which to sustain query.

I entered the field as a foreigner, a student of ethnochoreology and a performance artist. Qualities of engagement between environment, community and self disclose an overlap in these roles. This overlap occurs primarily in the intention to cultivate responses from observing or witnessing an environment or people. In this paper, by focusing on the differentiation between these roles, I am engaging in a reflective process which contextualizes the act of performance as it is being created.

⁴ See, *Locating Self*, pages 2-6 of this portfolio, for a discussion on notions of site-specificity

Approaches To Site Specific Movement Research-The Ethnographic Research Cycle

Ethnographic scopes can be broad (macro) or specific (micro). The content or situation varies in this range of scopes from broad social movements to single gestures. The 'gesture' I am observing is my own reaction to the land, the relationship created with it and the people who frequent its scape.

The ethnographic approach which I chose to frame this reflection is *cyclic*. The ethnographer using this research cycle is constantly referencing and analyzing data gathered in the field. The feedback he/she receives from this process directs the study and content of their work. It is in this process that, as Auge says, "the ethnologist...is able to identify or recognize what happens afterwards; what has changed, the dynamics diachronic relationships of space, time, and a people" (Auge 1995:14).

The *cyclic approach*, ascribed by Spradley, repeats itself because questions are developed during the process of research and analysis. These developments cause the cycle to revisit itself as new questions arise. Beginning with "*broad descriptive questions*", an ethnographer (with some analysis) comes to more specific "*structural questions*" and then "*contrast questions*". In this process I began with a general survey of the site. *What am I attracted to? What are the general attributes of the landscape? How is it constructed? What structures are put in place to guide people's interactions with the land? What is natural? Where do we see the presence of man? His remnants?*⁵ This pacing refined my perspective and helped inspire specific questions for the locals. A general survey of space highlighted the use of waterways to establish borders between terrains. From this point of interest I directed questions to the fisherman, joggers, and passersby. Likewise in the collection of data the specificity of observations moved from "*broad*" to "*selective*". And so, questions of place soon became selective- *How does this path inform me of the places history? How does the depth of the creek inform me of its source? The shape of its bed? How does my sense of boundary inform my carriage? What is acceptable behaviour in this place?* Each data collection was followed by the

⁵ See, *Journals excerpts from a General Survey of Site*, pages 7-8 in the Appendix

recording of observations in the form of a journal, two excerpts of which are available for reference in pages appendix.

In short ,the sequence of the a cyclic approach to ethnographic work is as follows: 1) initial general inquiry/ course of study, 2) participant observation, 3) creating records of data, 4) analysis of data, and the cycle repeats with the 5) formulation of ethnographic questions. This sequence is not inclusive of writing ethnography, but can be. This cycle informed my perceptions of the space as place and served as launching point for qualitative and quantitative activities in movement research.⁶

Approaches to Site-Specific Movement Research: A Model for Creativity

Similarly the creative cycle as ascribed by psychologist, Graham Wallas, repeats itself in a cyclic, cumulative convolution. Its stages are revisited as theory arises from its practice. Such an approach consists of four steps: 1) Preparation, 2) Incubation, 3) Illumination, and 4) Verification. To which I add a fifth: 5) Reflection: as did my primary instructor in dance composition, Lyndon Branaugh, in my undergraduate studies at Cal Arts. This paper, as well the overview of literature found previous to this document, are part of stages of reflection imperative to the practice of movement research.

In preparation one initially collects data- preliminary impressions of the subject material. In this project, preparation involved the collection of quantitative and qualitative data, by surveying site, journaling, collecting ordinances and literature about the site⁷, and informally interviewing residents and recreational users of the site. It was also at this point that I began using my body as a quantitative marker. The collection of structural and quantitative material was anchored in the use of my own body as a reference point for measurement. In this activity the boundaries of the body became a compass from which to determine direction and delineate a sense of my own mass. My newly discovered proportions- height, width, and depth-

⁶ See, *Methods of Quantitative Data Collection*, pages 9-11 in the Appendix

⁷ See, *Maps of Site and Field Survey Excerpt*, pages 1-4 in Appendix

served as a gauge with which to express my impact on the landscape. In these exercise two cameras were used to provide feedback, one handheld and the other set on the banks of the loch. This subjective method of accessing the qualitative attributes from the landscape, through quantitative tasks, became the central focus in my reflective and performative research activities.

The second stage, the incubation period, is a process of reflection in which one's environment is controlled during the period of gestation. Separating oneself from the process of collection through an external engagement with site provides time to review and contemplate the data collected. In this project, once the initial data was collected, this incubation period consisted of frequent consultations with my project supervisor as well as the solitary review of data collected. In this gestation I was cultivating ground for Wallas' next stage of the creative process, Illumination: the moment when a new idea emerges. It is in this stage of the creative process theory begins to emerge from practice.

Engaging the Field: Experiential Exercises in Quantitative and Qualitative Research

One day, early in the process, I visited the site and noticed all the trash that had accumulated at the banks of the river. So, on my way I collected bottles. The collection attracted multiple conversations with passers by. The most relevant was that with a man who made sure to comment that the trash was not 'theirs' (the people of the area). It had flown from the tributaries that lead into the River. The trash belonging to the Counties of Limerick, Tipperary and Clare- and , in his opinion, should not be regarded as the property of the locals. So, I began to view the river and other water ways as a byway. The next day I began to inquire about the waterways, the canal, the lough, and river to local fisherman. From these accounts I learned that the canal was manmade and had been used for moving stones from the quarries upstream. They referred to the greenbelt that had disappeared from across the river (now that University accommodations had been built). And they also pointed out the original banks of the River Shannon, which had receded immensely from a dam being built upstream. Thousands of fish died when the river was diverted, and fishing season now begins a month. Another local

woman, whose property encloses a gate which controls the water flow, from the canal to the river, informed me that her family had been in this part of Clare for hundreds of years. She claimed to have pictures of the men digging the canal. In these conversations I came to realize that what I mistook to be a natural creek was a manmade canal and that the banks of the River were configured by a manmade deviation of its water. And that even the mounds that the student village stood on were a manmade addition to a flood plain. I began to contemplate what in fact was natural in 'nature'.

After these informal interviews- I wanted to see and feel the substance of the land. And so I planned to dig- literally. Yet prior to this happening I met to work with Rachel Sweeney, my course supervisor. Rachel facilitated a blindfolded exercise on site, in which she guided my movement and aided in isolating my relationship to the terrain with my remaining senses-taste, smell, touch, and sound. The activity reconfigured my sense of the site. Its dimensions became distinctly related to the resistance and line of the objects against the qualities of my own structure. The earth, soft and uneven, felt as though I would fall into it or even off its surface. The slightest inclines became incredibly unstable. The trees (when I followed their contour) created a more compact angular space, likened to the walls of a shelter. My image of the space also became more saturated in colour. Upon taking the blindfold off I was surprised. It had seemed I had been in a dense canopy of trees, arching above and over my head, the amount of space across and between them was unexpected.

The next day, I came to dig. The ordinances I had collected had said the general area had been a flood plan, not preferable for farming. Now the University of Limericks student accommodations are located there (Thomand Village). My approach to this task was objective yet quantitative with a focus on height, width, volume, placement and framing. The site I was digging in had been an island constructed to support the canal over a hundred in relationship to the hidden sensory inspired architecture of the space (from Rachel's exercise). The depth related to that of the creek, and negotiated the stature of my presence.⁸

⁸ See, *Sketches from Fieldwork*, pages 14-15

Crossing Over: Bridging Reflective and Performative Research Activities

My curiosity turned to how a viewer would perceive my body in these tasks. *What type of a narrative would this action intuit? If my own impressions began to reconfigure its semblance, how then would this affect the viewer? What relationships will be established?* With this intention I conducted a research activity within the context of Dance Research Forum's Student Symposium (DRFI).⁹ This performative gesture was presented within the context of a walking tour which consisted of a handout out with a map of the campus and a collation of stories from informal interviews about the area. In this presentation I dug a knee deep hole for myself .¹⁰A hole which, consequently, could only be three feet deep for the pipes I found part at that depth. Responses to this action were conveyed by participants as witnessing the site in silence and enjoying its many elements, playing the part of performer in their following of guide and map to the site, questioning of my role as researcher versus performer, and a very interesting perception by multiple people that I was on my knees. This perception of the body morphing in its spatial orientation/framing, portrayed a recontextualizing of environment which inversely reconstructed the comportment of the body in the eye of the observer.¹¹This caused me to wonder how that viewpoint was an expression of their habitus'. *In a place of passing, as that path normally was (a non-place) how does the body structure relationships with the environment? What is the social value of that action? In transforming non-place to place for myself, what is the expression of that place? And, as a foreigner, how is my interpretation of place compared to the local perceptions of that place?*

Feedback

These questions were shortly answered in part by a visit to the woman whose house borders the site. I had called in response to her invitation to come see the photographs of the men digging the canal. When meeting, she communicated

⁹ See, *Dance Research Forum Ireland Student Symposium Handout*, Pages 14-15 in the Appendix

¹⁰, See *Images from DRFI Student Symposium*, page 16 of the Appendix

her distaste in my transgressive action, the danger of the hole presented to people and animals, her water system (which the pipe I had come upon had been connected to), and my unbelievable disregard for the land. Though the response was unforeseen, it communicated with what regard the land was perceived. Though the use of the land was not explicit (there were no borders, markers to define territory) it was saturated with meaning. Through my conversation (and multiple apologies for offending her) it came to my knowledge that the new had accidentally cut off her electricity. She conveyed a history of individuals threatening well-being in their use of the land in her area. I came to realize that this development contrasted the few open spaces so radically, that I had assumed that open space was just that, while for this woman it was a haven, what was left of a few sanct places. While the people of the institution, myself included, frequented the area as passersby- on recreational walks and jogs, creating a non- place out of the areas surrounding the path. For this woman, whose frequency of the space existed from living in a locale which she has inhabited for decades, as well as the fisherman standing in the river day after day observing its flow, these bodies of water were the last places creating boundaries between local and encroaching culture -consuming the land and challenging their value in its preservation and organic use. My acts, transgressive within this locality, helped illuminate the value that untouched terrain holds for these people- conveying lineage, self worth, and a tangible sense of well-being- safety, peace, and bounty.

Compiling Experience: A Reflection and Conclusion to a Progress in Site-Specific Movement Research

In reviewing and compiling material for submission I had edited nine videos from this practice in site specific movement research. The choreography of these images, those created by each camera fore mentioned, show a stillness of form which is witnessed from afar, but a violence in close proximity that appears almost criminal.¹² The vertical jolting landscape, the stillness of the body in space, what

¹² See, Images from Site Work Synopsis pages 17-18 in the Appendix, and for Quicktime files of the files refer to DVD in Appendix

is felt as calm, contained, and organic, in fact communicates a crime against the land, a blasphemization of its attributes. The narrative communicated throughout the research is implicit in its documentation, and is transmitted in the projects artistic context. In summary this approach, rooted in an experiential mode of inquiry and utilizing methods of ethnographic research, relied heavily on the presence and action of the self (body). The bodily based response to this research- which took form in performative movement research activities –served as a vital expression of the researchers embodied perceptions of the terrain, and helped disclose the value of the terrain to the local. Both these approaches, parallel a less formalized yet cyclic experience of being a foreigner in a new land, repeatedly picking up data as I go along, ‘getting a feel’ of a place in order to find where I belong, Each role treats what is unknown by revisiting its qualitative and quantitative attributes until it becomes a sense of place is embodied, experienced, generated and communicated. It is in this overlap that the research practices of ethnographer and choreographer (as creative thinkers) are not only inscribed in one another, but also a part of the a personalized experience of locating self.

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