

Title

Narrative traces through being and places, drawing, performance and painting.

‘He will not have been (a) present but he will have left a gift by not disappearing without leaving a trace.’¹ Derrida Re-Reading Levinas

1) An invitation from Triarchy Press.

Andrew Carey editor of Triarchy Press contacted me in May 2018, asking if I’d be interested in submitting a proposal for a book. Among Triarchy Press’s long list of authors are Phil Smith and the Devon based performance collective Wrights and Sites.² Since attending Phil Smith’s ‘Masses’ walk (part of the event to launch Wrights and Sites’s book *A Mis-Guide* at ICA London 2006³), I have been an enthusiastic follower of Smith’s maverick thinking and doing and have corresponded with him in relation to his ideas on the effects people experience from being in outside places. I suspect Smith put my name forward to Carey as a possible candidate for a book on walking as art. I am flattered to receive this invitation, and hope to achieve what’s required. However, although I have made a small number of performances (while doing a Masters at UAL 2002-4 and later a research degree 2006-11), in which walking played a part; I cannot claim walking as a material that I now use in my practice. But I have been inspired by other people’s walks and by Smith’s *Masses* walk in which he showed us the marks of the broad arrow and bench mark (signing sea level), carved into stones on London pavements and buildings. Smith told us these marks are also the sign for the sound of God making the world. I find his idea so provocative and exhilarating, that I’ve never wanted to question its credibility.

2) Drawing in outside places: inspired by Linda Kitson –

It could be said that the broad arrow and benchmark are drawings made in the outside environment, and the idea that they might also signify a sound chimes well (forgive the pun) with my research in which I developed a Driftsinging method of drawing with sound as the primary material (I will explain later). My fascination in making drawings outside the studio began when I was an undergraduate in the 1970’s, I was taught Location Drawing by the inspiring artist Linda Kitson. Kitson (who in 1982 was commissioned by the war museum to record the Falklands war), took us to draw around Vauxhall Bridge; I was intrigued by the process of attempting to capture in marks on paper, some essence of the things I saw in motion around me. Years later I understood that I was; to quote Charles Baudelaire ‘Entering into the crowd watching [recording] the river of life [as it] flow[ed] past.’⁴ This method can be called Flaneurism, Charles Baudelaire coined the term for his friend and painter of everyday life Constantine Guys, roughly 70 years before Walter Benjamin appropriated the word in his Arcades Project.⁵ Benjamin’s Flaneur was an aesthete character who lazily walked a turtle though Parisian arcades, Guys however was an industrious man who painted street scenes in Paris and among other commissions was sent to Crimea by The Illustrated London News to observe and make visual reports of the war. As an MA student at the RCA I strived towards Guy’s Flaneurism and used the activity much like a passport to access and document other peoples worlds. My privilege of birth gave me freedom to roam and I recorded life in the Arctic, Papua New Guinea and New York. Documenting events and / or actions, evolved into a process of recording stories in

1 J. Derrida, ‘At this very moment in this work here I am’ in *Re-reading Levinas*, trans. R. Berezdivin, ed. R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991, p. 37.

2 <https://www.triarchypress.net>

3 S. Hodge, S. Persighetti, P. Smith, C. Turner, & T. Weaver, *A Mis-Guide to Anywhere*. Exeter: Wrights and Sites, 2006.

4 C. Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne, US, Phaidon, 1964. P.10 2019

5 W. Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*. trans. H. Eiland & K. McLaughlin. Cambridge: Belknap Harvard, 2002.

drawings, and as sand became caked into gauche, and ice froze fern patterns into paint, I began to be more aware of the places where I worked, and wondered how much they influenced both me and my drawings. Twenty years later in the early 00's I enrolled as an MA student at Central Saint Martins and my Flanerism extended into performance drawing and documentation. At CSM Dr. Kate Love led us kindly through theory seminars and told us 'You will find one text [among all the philosophical, theoretical and fine art related writing] that resonates with you'. Levinas's writing on the trace became that most resonant and thought provoking text for me. Levinas's concept related to otherness, and the presence of others no longer in this world, and Derrida's rereading of Levinas's text '*He will not have been (a) present but he will have left a gift by not disappearing without leaving a trace,*' speaks to me of kind consideration of others, and of different ways of being in and experiencing place, and also of traces, made both intentionally (drawn), and unconsciously (stepped), while physically passing through place.⁶

Derrida and Levinas's text also acknowledges that the past can be evident in the present, suggesting to me that it is possible (if not literally then in the mind's ear and eye), to slip time and conjure elements from the past and future into the present day. Following my interest in the relationship between a practitioner and the place where they work, I undertook a research degree investigating whether when a practitioner makes a drawing outside it is possible to reveal an interaction between the practitioner and the environment.⁷

3) From Mark Drawing to Sound Drawing: evidencing a collaborative interaction.

Making drawings in outside spaces meant being seen by passers by, and when a work is made in front of an audience that work is then defined as a performance, therefore I made performance drawings in outside places. I found that observational performance drawings do not interact with place, although elements of a place (as mentioned earlier- with sand and ice) sometimes merge unsolicited into the process, but performance drawings made by marking place (such as gypsum on grass, or chalk on wall or pavement), impose signs onto place. Those signs behave like a well-trodden path (signifying previous safe passage), directing people through that place. While performing and documenting (in video) drawings that marked place, I became aware of how sound can describe the material, condition and shape of place. Marcel Proust, understood this when he said 'I could hear the whistling of trains ... now nearer ... now further off... punctuating the distance like the note of a bird in a forest, show[ing] me ... the deserted countryside ...'^{8,9} Curator Anthony Huberman in conversation at London's Drawing Room gallery for the 2005 *Sounds Like Drawing* exhibition, explained a correlation between drawing and sound, '...there are specific properties in approaching drawing, ... that are shared by approaching sound.' Huberman clarified those properties as 'more draft like ... quicker ... something to do with the line, and to do with mark making.'¹⁰ Through further research I found that the spatial, durational and mapping qualities in sound allow it to be employed as a material to draw with, and if the sound is vocal then the practitioner using their voice is the tool while making the work. I

6 J. Derrida, 'At this very moment in this work here I am' in *Re-reading Levinas*, trans. R. Berezdivin, ed. R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991, p. 37.

7 <http://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/5455/>

8 M. Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, volume 1, *Swann's Way*, London: Vintage Books, 2002, pp. 1-2.

9 H.D. Thoreau, *The Portable Thoreau*, ed C. Bode, US, UK Penguin Books, 1982. p.375. Thoreau in his text *Sounds*, understood that the echoes of the bells he heard through the woods were 'to some extent original sound...not merely a repetition...but partly the voice of the wood. As the sonic wave from the bells bounced, reflected, refracted and resonated through, trees, branches, leaves and undergrowth to reach the place where Thoreau stood, the waves absorbed the character of place and became woven through with the place itself. So I came to understand that sound can be a drawing that moves through a place and interacts with the material of place.

10 Anthony Huberman at the Drawing Room gallery London 2005 for the *Sounds like Drawing* exhibition. Source *1+1+1. Double agents, issue three 2005*, 'Sounds Like Drawing: In conversation, exhibition curator Anthony Huberman, gallery director Mary Doyle and other contributing artists.'

developed a Driftsinging process, borrowing from the Situationist *Drift*, and Baudelaire's flâneur, Driftsinging also relates to Soundings and Echo Location.^{11 12}

At the end of my research I understood that when a practitioner sounds in a place, the material (vocal sound), from the practitioner's body then interacts with the material of place in reflection, refraction and echo, thereby bridging the separation between environment and practitioner. In this way it can be said that a vocal sound drawing performed in an outside space evidences a collaborative interaction between the practitioner, the work and that place.¹³

4. Being in, perceiving and being displaced from place.

During my research journey from visual drawing to sound drawing, I took a route I had not anticipated, investigating philosophical and scientific concepts of being in place, and uncovering different interpretations and perceptions of place. Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his phenomenological interpretation of the world, proclaims 'between the seeing and the seen... a blending of some sort takes place.'¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty believes this merging occurs because the fabric of our bodies is also that of our environment. '...colour light depth which are there before us, are only there because they awaken an echo in our body.'¹⁵ This led me to wonder whether it's possible the environment we come from may actually be part of our physical and psychological make up. I began to think differently about people in place, especially in relation to mass displacement, an issue that artist and activist David Cross described to me as 'A defining condition of our times.'¹⁶ In 2017 The British Geographical Institute and Royal Geographical Society held their annual conference, that year the subject title was De-Colonizing Geography. I presented a paper in which I applied my findings to my concerns regarding mass displacement. I touched on Psychogeography ('...*the behavioral impact of place*...'), rights of way (achieved by The ramblers Association in the UK Countryside rights of way act 2000), Thoreau's concepts on walking and sauntering (the word sauntering comes from 'holy-lander'), geographer Doreen Massey's political understanding of place ('territory is socially constructed it is a product of history'), Neuroscientist David Eagleman's research into perceived distortion of time (people on full alert experience stretched time), and Doreen Massey's advice that to negotiate place people must ask for mutual respect and recognition. I also submitted Phil Smith's findings (when people sit in unused places they bring those places back to life, and also Smith's concept '...Mythogeography, (which describes the multiplicity of truth [in a place]...recognizes the virtues of immigration...and the stories and specters carried within all those that journey'.)¹⁷

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11 G. Debord, "Theorie de la Dérive", in *International Situationists* # 2, Paris, December 1958. <http://www.bopsecrets.org> (accessed 27 March 2009) "a rapid passage through varied ambiances ... Dérives involve playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psychogeographical effects" (G. Debord).

12 C. Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne, US, Phaidon, 1964.

13 M.Foa. *Sounding Out: Performance Drawing in Response to the Outside Environment*, PhD thesis, UAL, 2011.

14 M.Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind' in *The Primacy of Perception*, USA: Northwestern University Press, 1964.p162-4

15 __ 1964

16 'A defining condition of our times' David Cross, Artist, Activist, and Research Fellow, University of the Arts London in conversation UAL, 2006.

17 M.Coverley, *Psychogeography*,UK: Pocket Essentials,2006.

18 Henry. D. Thoreau, *The Portable Thoreau*, ed. C. Bode, US & UK: Penguin books, 1982, p. 592

19 Doreen Massey's contribution to the April 2002 symposium on the work of walking artist Hamish Fulton at the Tate Britain Gallery, London, April 2002, author's notes. The following note has been retrieved from Phil Smith's online blog

<http://www.rhizomes.net/issue7/smith.htm> 'Doreen Massey, Professor of Geography... at the Open University, has called Skiddaw peak in the north of England a "migrant mountain," "just passing through," "moving at the rate that our fingernails grow."'

I put it to the BGI & RGS that the over 70 millions people (2019 UNHCR figure), forced to undertake extreme and dangerous journeys, are affected by and are interacting with place—each one is not free to roam. These individuals have learned the art of walking and many saunter from the Holy Land, through socially constructed territories produced by history, in perceived stretched time frames, seeking mutual respect and recognition, carrying stories, specters and environments within themselves. They interact with place, bringing their life to a place, and in so doing bringing those traumatized places to life.

I called to the Royal Geographical Society long recognized for supporting expeditions made by those whose privilege of birth allows them freedom to explore, to acknowledge and document the extraordinary travels of enforced displacement, because these journeys encompass cultural, psychological and physical endurance and exploration, and are I believe a key to understanding our collective humanity— finally; (borrowing words from the 1649 true leveler and Digger Gerard Winstanley who sought to cultivate the common land), I believe the stories of each individual forced to journey through mass displacement are ‘*a gift to the common treasury for all.*’²³

5. Being drawn by place.

No doubt Derrida’s re-reading of Levinas’s concept related to otherness and the trace was embedded in the presentation I gave ‘...he will have made a gift by not disappearing without leaving a trace. But leaving a trace is also to *leave* it, to abandon it, not to insist upon it in a sign.’²⁴ Levinas was thinking about the traces we see around us left by loved ones gone from this world—(not signs directing - but marks resonating with place), a footprint on a path—a fingerprint on glass—an impression on a soft chair - traces that accompany us and enrich our experience of place. If as geographer Douglas Pockock explains ‘...people can be shaped not only by human conditions but also by their non human environment...who we are is inseparable from where we are ...where we were born and where we have been’, then it can be argued that we are not simply hailed from a place but more literally drawn from a place. Blended with our land and skylscapes - awakening echoes in our bodies.²⁵ My research began by investigating how drawing can be impacted by place; I had not expected that I would find evidence that suggests I myself have been drawn by a place. Perhaps this concept may be considered as fantastic as Smith’s bench mark signing the sound of God making the world- yet as the American Geographer Ellen Churchill Semple proclaims ‘...man is a product of the earth’s surface dust of her dust...’ and astrophysicist Dame Jocelyn Bell Burnell knows ‘*we are intimately and ultimately children of the stars.*’^{26 27} And so if it is possible that we are drawn by the earth from where we were born, drawn and shaped and imprinted by the place where we have

20 Burkhard Bilger ‘The Possibilian: What a brush with death taught David Eagleman about the mysteries of time and the brain,’ in *The New Yorker* online April 25 2011. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/04/25/the-possibilian>

21 From a telephone conversation with Doreen Massey (14 March 2006). I met Massey at the Stour Valley Arts *Lost in Space Topographies, Geographies and Ecologies*’ conference, Canterbury Cathedral, 24 February 2006. D. Massey. *For Space*. London, New Delhi: Sage Publications Thousand Oaks, 2005.

22 Jan 23rd 2017 posted on FB Phil Smith—then okayed in conversation with the author by Phil Smith on 10th August 2017.

23 In 1649 Gerard Winstanley and the True levellers - later to become know as the Diggers- reclaimed Saint Georges Hill Surrey (fenced in common land) and planted root crops. Intending to reclaim the common land, and to provide food for the local working people. “*England is not a Free People, till the Poor that have no land, have a free allowance to dig and labour the Commons*” The true levelers Standard Advanced 1649. <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/%7Erbear/digger.html> (accessed 18 March 2009).

24 Jacques Derrida, At This Very Moment In This Work Here I Am’ trans Ruben Berezdivin, in *Re-Reading Levinas* eds R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley. US: Indian University Press.1984.p37. Derrida re-reading. E. Levinas, “Humanisme de l’autre homme”, *Fata Morgana*, 1972; LGF, 1987.

25 Douglas Pockock, ‘Humankind-environment’ in the *Behavioural Environment Essays on Reflection, Application, and Re-evaluation*, eds: Boal.F.W. and Livingstone D.N. Oxford New York: Routledge. 1989. P84

26 Ellen Churchill Semple ‘Influences of Graphic Environment’, Constable London 1911.p.1 in Chapter 5 Douglas Pockock ‘Humankind-environment : musings on the role of the hyphen’-in *The Behavioural Environment essays on reflection application and re-evaluation*, ed F.W.Boal and DN Livingston, London New York: Routledge, 1989

originated from, then is it also possible that places can be shaped and imprinted with us? This ultimate interaction between humankind and the environment is one that touches on the most prescient issue of our day – extinction. In which case I propose that the word Psychogeography, invented in 1950's Europe to describe subversive acts challenging conventional ordinary society, needs to be updated to a term more fitting for our current times, one that acknowledges our interactions with and impact on our environmental geography.^{28 29 30}

Smith's Mythogeography which describes the multiplicity of truth [in a place]... recognizes the virtues of immigration...and the stories and specters carried within all those that journey' (see footnote 22) is one such word, however I would also propose the word Reciprocalgeography in acknowledgment of our impact on our environment and our responsibility to meet the consequences of our actions. Reciprocalgeography proposes we accept that being in our environment is an interaction with our environment, and that we must change our behavior from consumption to compassion, before our time runs out - because (yes I am being deliberately provocative here to make a point) just as we draw the environment, so we are also drawn by the environment - drawing goes both ways.

6. Combining drawing & painting through a pareidolian archeology.

To conclude this paper let me return to a method of drawing made by a person – those drawings that chase after thoughts, or document activities, or build and construct the shape and form of ideas, travelled from the minds eye into the seeing eye onto marks on a surface. While undertaking research I bemoaned what I felt was the invasive investigation of my practice, my supervisor the artist Professor Stephen Farthing chided me with words amounting to 'if your practice is not up to scrutiny then it's not worth doing. 'I skulked away and made an awkward sketch of myself dissecting the hand of my Frankenstein practice. I see now how reluctant I was to undertake the activity and that my practice was clearly lifeless slumped over the table. A recent return to my studio has me redrawing this activity, I am elbow deep in intestines while the monster (that is my practice) is less Frankenstein more a Guillermo del Toro creature resting its hand on my shoulder guiding or perhaps cautioning me as I rearrange its insides...and so it seems there is more of an interaction – a back and forth reflective process between myself, ideas and their visual realizations.

Let me return to where I began- an invitation from Triachy Press to submit a text on walking as a practice. Since finishing my drawing research degree the only walking I do now is the short stroll from my back door to my garden shed. I proposed a text that centered on that 'woandering' back and forth - succinctly the thinking and making around pictures. This reflective opportunity has encouraged me to expand my practice, and I have begun a correspondence course to gain an external pacer with a critical eye reflecting another point of view. I'm now working to bridge drawing and painting, allowing traces of decisions to be seen at the conclusion. I celebrate the fragments suggesting motion and the journey taken and Levinas's concept '... he will have left a gift by not disappearing without leaving a trace,' still continues to intrigue me. After a decade of drawing, performance and research, where reasoning, concept and text were prioritized, I have begun building in the process of making [rather than pre planning compositions]. When astronaut Chris Hadfield tweeted

27 Jocelyn Bell Burnell from her lecture at Queen Elizabeth Hall the South Bank London 2011 "...if it weren't for the stars we wouldn't be here we are intimately and ultimately children of the stars'. Jocelyn Bell Burnell discovered pulsars while undertaking PhD research in 1967.

28 'Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography,

29 G. Debord, 'Theorie de la Dérive', in International Situationists # 2 Paris December 1958 <http://www.bopsecrets.org> (Accessed 27 March 2009) "a rapid passage through varied ambiances...Dérives involve playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psychogeographical effects," G.Debord

30 Climate change- industrial impacts-fossil fuels, plastics- pesticides, ozone depletion, ocean pollution, population explosion, species extinction, extreme weather conditions, ice melt, mass displacement, carbon foot prints.

images of earth from the International Space Station and asked ‘What do you see here?’ I became fascinated in pareidolia, finding form in abstract spaces. ³¹

I have been undertaking what I call a pareidolian archeology, the process reveals visual triggers, unfixing my ideas and conjuring an unexpected narrative, allowing memory and imagination to come into play. But rather than the triggers being serendipitous happenstance I think I see them because I recognize something familiar, with the behavior of the material together with the triggers offer me directives, my subconscious is part of the process, and I’m finding my way in the moment of making. This helps to keep the content and the painting alive, yet really what I am grappling with is one of the oldest of picture making chestnuts.

How can I achieve in my paintings that sense of immediacy, of flight, of play, of unfinisheness and lightness of touch that sometimes happens in my drawings?

And so the woandering continues...

31 https://youtu.be/zi7R_WFfRMM