

IN-BETWEEN SPACES

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I first became interested in the Sefton Coast as a site of possible artistic response in 2008 during Liverpool's tenure as European Capital of Culture. As part of an audiovisual arts organisation called the Hive Collective we commissioned Chris Watson and Matthew Herbert (two of the U.K.'s most prominent sound artists) to respond to Antony Gormley's installation *Another Place*, a sculptural installation made up of casts of the artist's body which runs for a mile up the beach at Waterloo and Crosby. A key moment in formulating the two artists' responses was their experiences during a particularly inclement day of field recording. Both Watson and Herbert were nearly stranded in the sinking sands just off Waterloo beach and had to hurriedly return to the safety of the tide line. It struck both artists as powerful and poignant that such a dangerous environment can be found just a few hundred yards from the safe and mundane environment of British suburbia on the streets of Waterloo itself. As Watson told me:

'We found out as we went out there it's quite a dangerous place and I liked this idea of it [being] a place where you can go with your partner or your family or your friends to just hang out and have an ice cream ... but it's a place in transition ... That place in between the tides I think is one of the most hostile environments on earth. It's neither land nor sea.'

This incident stayed with me as I began to explore the area further in terms of my own artistic responses during the past couple of years. Indeed, it has informed the subsequent installation work Sam Wiehl and I carried out for the exhibition *Ghosts of the Restless Shore: Space, Place and Memory of the Sefton Coast* at The Atkinson. As artists we became increasingly interested in the coast as a liminal, or in-between space. It is a transitional point between the known and unknown, a place between danger and safety, between every day settlement and wilderness, in which its natural cycles work as both an obscuring and revealing force; in terms of its tidal and seasonal cycles the coast is at once a changing and renewing space. At the same time, it erodes what was once there, often scarring it indelibly with the forces of nature. Often this renders its objects and natural phenomena under erasure. We can see what once was, but it is now changed and obscured according to its position in the natural world.

Our original piece that came out of the *Walking Through the Sands of Time*¹ project was a direct response to this. Developed during a series of art walks in 2014, *Uncollected* drew upon recurring themes within our work relating to affect, memory, loss and place. The piece was composed of digitally reimaged film and audio field recordings from the rubble embankment at Hightown beach including gunshots from the adjacent Altcar Rifle Range, vibrations from discarded steel stakes planted within concrete rubble, the local soundmark of the bell of Hightown Church and the bricks that make up the majority of beach in this area. Started in 1942 the rubble embankment was initially made up of bricks from bomb-damaged buildings in Liverpool and subsequently became a dumping ground for building demolitions in the region. For us as artists, these bricks seemed to represent cultural artefacts which over time erode and change both in terms of form and identity. The constant wash of the sea had eroded their defined edges into more indistinct and organic shapes, their tops scarred with faded names of long-closed brickworks. It was as if the bricks were being gradually reclaimed by the natural environment while maintaining the traces of a recently lost culture. It is this intersection between the cultural and the natural world that has defined our responses to the coast and is one of the central themes across all of the work included in *Ghosts of the Restless Shore*. A key theme for us is the way we (as culturally and socially informed people) interact with the natural environment, not just in terms of the way in which the landscape is experienced, but also the way in which it is interpreted and imagined.

The Sefton Coast's geographical position just outside the urban and suburban conurbations of

Merseyside and West Lancashire provides a clear set of encounters in this respect. Both in terms of scale and sensory experience, the coast provides an in-between space of immediate contrasts. Indeed, scale is incredibly important to the way in which we experience this landscape. The seascape offers visual and aural perspectives which are vast and uninterrupted in comparison to constant variances in sound and vision of the urban milieu to which it is so close. And this is clearly part of our attraction to it. The seasonal flocking of humans to the shoreline since the advent of tourism has been essentially sensory in nature. We visit the coast to inhale the air, to smell the salt, to experience light in a manner that is extraordinary and takes us out of our everyday existence. We visit to listen to the rolling of the waves on the shoreline, to feel the wind in our hair. Each of these responses to the sensory affects of the environment has become part of the socially constructed set of signifiers relating to how we interact with our surroundings. Through our interaction with the shoreline we deliberately place ourselves in an altered perspective with the world, into a different sense of scale, bathed in a different light, immersed in a different sound world. In doing so we also move into a different sense of time, we tap into the rhythms of the rolling waves, we let the sounds of nature slow us in a physical and mental entrainment.

Of course, scale is also a matter of perspective. The coastline provides a rich variation of experience depending on where we train our eyes and ears. The richness of the area's natural and social history is to be found in the most minute detail as well as its imposing seascape and landscape. The dunes, meadows and woods are alive with an incredible richness of flora and fauna and the focus of the eye and ear upon its intricacies brings this diversity to life. The environment itself affords different levels of engagement, different modes of exploring the world around us. The suspension of everyday modes of time and attention lead us to look closely, to be engulfed in a constant sonic environment that suspends linearity or to exercise selective attention in the way we listen to the environment. The landscape invites us to look down at or into the minutiae of detail in plant life, as well as immersing ourselves in the open sky and engulfing seascape. We train our ears on the difference in soundscape of birds and insects, masking out the low frequency sound-bed of the waves and wind. We trace the subtle remnants of human habitation in the foundations of abandoned structures and shipwrecks; we scour the tide line for washed-up signs of life elsewhere.

Technology further enhances this sense of engagement by providing a different sense of focus, a more acute sense of attention. Through the very nature of the lens, the headphone, the deliberate framing of the natural world, we experience and understand the environment anew. This technological mediation gives a sense of hyper-reality and acute abstraction from the real-world environment. This was brought home to me during the walks that formed part of the Walking Through the Sands of Time project (1). At various points, participants were invited to listen to the soundscape using headphones and a stereo directional microphone. It was clear to me from people's responses that the audio framing provided by these relatively commonplace pieces of technology profoundly altered their perception of the soundscape. The focused listening engendered by these technologies allowed participants not only to hear elements of the audio world that they would otherwise have missed, but also to interpret and experience the soundscape in new ways. People found themselves engaging with the experience of listening in this manner in explicitly emotional or aesthetic terms.

In-Between Spaces, the audiovisual installation included in Ghosts of the Restless Shore, acknowledges technology's processes of attention by both focusing in on the minute aspects of the soundscape and exploring the vastness of the world through the self-conscious mediation of the landscape. Here, we are not trying to represent a sense of the real experience of being on the coastline in which the technology is transparent. Rather, the technology and its subsequent effect upon the mediation of the work is an integral part of the process of response. It forms the work within us and it is a key 'actor' in the creative process. During our research and field recording for the installation we used various technologies such as highly directional microphones which provide

a clear audio focus upon elements of the soundscape, contact microphones which record audio directly from the surface of a given object, and macro film lenses which give extreme close-ups of the small-scale elements of the shore. Each of these technologies provide a frame through which to view and hear the real world. Significantly, these audio and visual field recordings were subsequently processed through contemporary editing and post-production technologies towards the realisation of the final piece.

In a sense, this recording of the landscape as engagement is part of the tradition of encounters with the coastline that has existed since the heyday of amateur collection in the nineteenth century. The meticulous recording of the area's natural history, such as the specimens collected by Chris Felton and George Russell which are included in this volume, are instructive here. As well as fulfilling an altruistic service in recording the natural life of the area, they also provide a way of engaging with the landscape for the protagonists. Furthermore, nature here is aestheticised into highly stylised material culture: through pressed, dried and preserved collections of flowers, seaweed and grasses, beautifully composed, meticulously framed and documented. As artists working with digital media, our 'preservation', representation and response to the landscape is, by its nature, formed from within a digital aesthetic. Indeed the piece begins with sonic and visual representations of diatoms that are entirely digitally generated. These single-cell organisms are a feature of the coast. They are of great biological interest but cannot be heard or seen by the naked eye. To the casual observer such as myself, the placing of them onto slides takes them into the realm of the imagination and almost fantastical; a living world which is significant but unknowable; existing, but out of the reach of our everyday perception. A response was thus necessitated both by the minute scale of these organisms and through our inability to capture their sounds. The morphing of these speculative image and sound worlds into real-world recordings and film and then back into computer-generated landscapes within the piece was an attempt to blur the boundaries between the natural and the digital. Even the 'real-world' and relatively untreated sounds and images that form the core of the piece are either abstracted or presented from a perspective that invites indeterminacy. The installation uses a final collecting technology (GPS) to take the coordinates of the contours of the coast itself. In this section the mapped physical properties of the coastal terrain are transformed into a digital landscape viewed from an imaginary and idealised perspective.

Ultimately, of course, our response to the coast as artists is articulated clearly within the context of our own creative trajectories. As well as being necessarily grounded within our own technological practices and interests, the work is reflective of some of the major themes that have run through our work over the past decade through the creation of a number of audiovisual installations and live art events as members of the Hive Collective. The key areas that we have explored throughout this period have been to do with the effects of an ubiquitous digital media upon human experience in terms of memory, emotion and our relationship to place. For us, the way in which our subjectivities are enmeshed within the virtual and digital is a central social fact that permeates the way in which we live our lives in the twenty-first century. Even within the immersion of the natural world that 'spaces' such as the Sefton Coast affords, we cannot escape our fundamentally changed subjectivities. Our responses to landscape, the imaginative and creative turns that we take from it, are always refracted through the prism of contemporary culture.

Endnote

1. See Collier's introduction in this catalogue for more information about the project 'Walking Through the Sands of Time'.