

INTRODUCTION

GHOSTS OF THE RESTLESS SHORE: SPACE, PLACE AND MEMORY OF THE SEFTON COAST

MIKE COLLIER

An exhibition of new, mixed media by Jake Campbell (poet), Mike Collier (artist), Tim Collier (photographer), Robert Strachan (sound artist) and Sam Wiehl (artist) inspired by walking together along the Sefton Coastal Footpath in the summer of 2014.

‘It is vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves, There is none such. It is the bog in our brain and bowels, the primitive vigor of Nature in us, that inspires that dream.’ —Henry David Thoreau (1)

I. Background

This collaborative project, organized by WALK,(2) began life as a walk (which developed into a ‘walking symposium’) along the Sefton Coastal Footpath in 2014. This walk, or event ... or performance ... was called **Walking Through the Sands of Time: A Walk Along the Sefton Coastal Footpath**, (3) and it was timed to coincide with the showing of the exhibition **Walk On: From Richard Long to Janet Cardiff—40 Years of Art Walking at The Atkinson** (from 12 April to 9 August 2014) which I co-curated.

The Sefton Coastal Footpath is approximately 22.5 miles long and is a recognised ‘National Path’. We completed the walk (or, rather, meander) from start to finish over 4 days (2 weekends — 12/13 & 20/21) in July 2014. The walk was supported with funds from The Heritage Lottery Fund and the Sefton Coast Landscape Partnership. It was advertised locally and members of the public were invited to join us and share their own experiences. The walk was led by natural historian John Dempsey and was structured to allow people without cars to participate, so:

- Walk one started at Waterloo Station and finished at Hightown Station—4.4 miles
- Walk two started at Hightown Station and finished at Freshfield Station—4.7 miles
- Walk three started at Freshfield Station and finished at Ainsdale Station—4.4 miles
- Walk four started at Ainsdale Station and finished at the RSPB Centre at Marshside, Southport; with a minibus to take participants from Weld Road to Marshside (<http://www.rspb.org.uk/reserves/guide/m/marshside/>)—4.7 miles.

Over thirty people joined us on the walk. Tim Collier passed on some of his photographic expertise to participants who had brought their own cameras. Sound artist Robert Strachan was happy to let people listen to the soundscapes on the walk through headphones using his audio equipment and poet Jake Campbell talked to people about how he fashions words and poems, and at a number of points on the walk he read some of his poems about the coast. The participants who walked with us were encouraged to interpret their experiences creatively.

II. About the Sefton Coast

From the mouth of the River Mersey to the Ribble estuary stretches England’s largest undeveloped dune system—the Sefton Coast. This coast has a fascinating history, containing a National Nature Reserve, many Sites of Special Scientific Interest and is a European Special Protection Area because of the importance of its natural heritage. The landscape comprises ‘endless’ beaches, coastal marshes, pine wood heaths and tidal estuaries, which permeate the perception of all of those that visit.

It is landscape alive with special wildlife and its coastal waters are home to famous shipwrecks like the ‘Star of Hope’, and the loss of life associated with these wrecks prompted the building of Britain’s first lifeboat station at Formby Point, in 1775. This coast also has a long and rich

history of leisure and tourism, dating back to the mid-1800s and is littered with the remnants of buildings and operational sites from the First and Second World Wars. This history is explained in more detail in Stephen Whittle's essay in this publication.

The Sefton Coast's special flora and fauna comprises nationally scarce examples and its big skies offer views across the Irish Sea, to North Wales' distant promontories and mountain peaks and, to the north, Blackpool and the summits of the southern Lake District. It is a windblown land that is constantly in motion; its stories are fixed in history and the artists in *Ghosts of the Restless Shore* have explored not just the sands of time, but the sand beneath their feet; passing literally, and figuratively, on their way through Sefton's history, 'step by step'.

III. The Phenomenological Walk

Much of the work I make myself (and with WALK) is based around my practice of walking or, more properly, meandering, with a group of people, often led by a natural historian. Moving slowly (or meandering) through an environment affects our experience in ways that are not immediately apparent. It allows the walker time to stop whenever and wherever they find something interesting to explore, and time to respond to the weather patterns and soundscapes of an environment. For me, the relationship between walking and artistic practice is a complex one, involving collaboration, participation and conversational exchange. Meandering in a group seems to encourage discussion that 'meanders' across natural history, social history, politics and philosophy. Each walk is different; sometimes (if along the same route) repeatable, but never replicable; the vagaries of weather, group dynamic and seasonal patterns ensuring this. These shared experiences with fellow walkers generate new knowledge, new ways of experiencing the world.

The walks I organize through WALK are, of course, different to a Sunday afternoon stroll that we may take with our family (though no more or less important—just different). This particular walk along the Sefton Coast involved 'a gathering together of synaesthetic material and social sensory experiences as they unfold in the sequence and duration of the walk'. It attempted to:

'show what is there from the perspective of the flesh, from embodied experiences. Such a walk is utterly different from an ordinary walk in space-time since it involves temporal expansion. Attempting to write (or give sound/vision) to such a walk involves pausing, looking around, sensing from different perspectives along the route, going back as well as forward. There is always sensory overload and decisions have to be taken with regards to what appears to be significant. Such a walk takes time and is far from spontaneous. It is an analytical walk that selects from experiences often gathered at different times to create the narrative. The process of walking is one in which a person perceives in order to know. To know is to know how to perceive and bodily perception is a form of cultural knowledge. As well as describing some perceptual experiences it must inevitably filter out or ignore others.' (4)

Robert Strachan writes about how, during the walk along the Sefton Coast (and on subsequent visits) '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'. He ends his essay by asserting that 'our responses to landscape, the imaginative and creative turns that we take from it, are always refracted through the prism of contemporary culture'.

Tim Collier talks about how layered memories of the Sefton Coast have built up from each of his walks along the coast over the period of his life, often 'separated by prolonged periods of real time, yet stacked up together to produce a seamless continuity of imagined time'.

John Dempsey not only walks the coast, he regularly (like the poet John Clare) lowers himself to the ground—crawling through the sand and mud to properly experience the coast and its teeming life:

I crawl around on my hands and knees, dampness and cold ebbing into my joints, in search of

Petalwort on cold winter days, just as collectors driven by a fascination for mosses did in Victorian times. The search for this tiny lower plant is all engrossing, a planet shrunk to a few millimetres of dune earth, a world in miniature, yet you can feel the hunt still developing into a towering obsession.'

And Jake Campbell writes that he experienced the walk as 'a gathering— of names, of words, of artefacts. New names and words, rolled on the tongue, tested out in whispers, cross-referred to maps and articles. New words which find shape and form, become real, on the beach'.

IV. Space, Place and Memory

This project is ABOUT a place. The Sefton Coast. Curator Stephen Whittle's essay provides an excellent background to the subsequent chapters in this book, defining the historical and geographical significance of the Sefton Coast in history. Each of the artists/ writers in this volume describe a different set of relationships to, and understanding of, this special place. Strachan describes it 'as a liminal, or in-between space ... a transitional point between the known and unknown, a place between danger and safety, between everyday settlement and wilderness, in which its natural cycles work as both an obscuring and revealing force'. For Dempsey, the coast is constantly changing, 'The notion of constant movement, of change and transit is inescapable here—tens of thousands of wading birds move along the coast in spring and autumn, stopping off as we would at a motorway service station to fuel up before northward journeys to the arctic—or southbound migrations to African shores in autumn resume.' Collier (Tim) writes about finding himself 'drawn to the coast, always preferring winter when the vast horizons seem endless and you can spend all day without coming across a soul'. And Campbell writes that 'on the beach at Formby, you can literally step back several thousand years into the lives of nomadic hunter-gatherers, whose footprints, when the tide cares to reveal them, can be seen hollowed into the sediment'.

When writing or thinking about place, we often use the term landscape—the landscape of the Sefton Coast, for instance. However, it is just as relevant to talk about the soundscape of the Sefton Coast. 'The word soundscape first appeared in our language towards the end of the last century ... The term is credited to Murray Schaffer, who embraced and studied the sounds of various habitats. Schafer was searching for ways to frame the experience of sound in new, nonvisual contexts'.(5) The work of Strachan in this exhibition extends this idea of a particular soundscape in relation to place.

Each of the artists/writers here explores how in, and through place, the world 'presents' itself, in vision, sound, touch or smell. 'The way in which human identity might be tied to place is ... merely indicative of the fundamental character of our engagement with the world—of all our encounters with persons and things—as always taking place in place.'(6) Malpas (1999) writes that 'The notion that there is an intimate connection between person and place, and so also between self and enviroing world, is ... neither a peculiar idiosyncrasy to be found in works of literature nor a leftover from pre-modern societies—nor does it seem likely to be a merely contingent feature of human psychology. There is good reason to suppose that the human relationship to place is a fundamental structure in what makes possible the sort of life that is characteristically human.'(7) A further issue raised by Campbell foregrounds the fact that he is only recently acquainted with the Sefton Coast, having been born and lived in the North East of England for much of his life. Campbell uses this sense of dislocation to forensically and poetically explore areas of commonality and difference in an approach that clearly sharpens his sense and sensual experience of place. Turning again to Malpas, we understand that 'in the emphasis on the idea of being 'beyond' or out of one's knowledge' we find a sense of knowledge that ties knowledge closely to a familiar location'.(8) This feeling of knowledge experienced beyond knowledge is also shared by Collier (Tim) as he suggests in his essay that, although he still regards the Sefton Coast as his home, he hasn't lived there for over thirty years, and his experiences of the area, when he returns (which he does regularly), are significantly sharpened by this geographical and temporal distance.

And what of the term 'space' in the title of the show? Space, as defined here, describes our sensual and emotional relationship to a geographical area. It is defined by our embodied

experience of the world. It is a space for movement (hence the focus on walking in this project) and activity. It describes our interaction with a place as we move through the world and experience it with all our senses. However, there are two kinds of space, says Bachelard 'intimate space and exterior space'(9)—and these 'kinds of space' keep encouraging and nourishing each other 'as it were, in their growth'. As Rilke said 'Through every human being, unique space, intimate space, opens up to the world'.(10) And Malpas suggests that 'to have a sense of one's self, whether in terms of one's culture or one's person, is, in a sense, ... to have a sense of [space]'.(11) All of the writers/artists in this publication make this link between inner and outer space (as well as between the micro and macro elements of the world they perceive) either directly or indirectly, especially as they reflect on the role memory plays in defining a sense of place and space.

Memory clearly plays a crucial role in our understanding of space and place, and Campbell, Collier, Strachan and Dempsey explore this in different ways. Each describes a kind of layering of memories (short or long term) that together 'construct' as sense of space and place. As Malpas further explains 'we understand a particular space through being able to grasp the sorts of narratives of action that are possible within that space; we understand a place and a landscape [soundscape] through the historical and personal narratives that are marked out within it and give that place a particular unity and establish a particular set or possibilities within it'.

V. Afterword

The work in this exhibition and catalogue has developed over a period of twelve months. Following the walk along the Sefton Coast in 2014, the artists and Dempsey stayed in touch with each other and continued to meet. A subsequent visit to see Geraldine Reid, Head of the Botany Department at the World Museum in Liverpool, was crucial in bringing together many of our thoughts surrounding the relationship between art and science, and indeed of our place within the world. It is my own personal experience that many of the scientists (mostly natural historians) I have walked and worked with over the years have an innate, embodied engagement with the world. They collect data, of course, but their enthusiasm for, and understanding of, their environment is emotional and passionate. They perceive the world, I think, in a fundamentally phenomenological way. A questioning of the relationship between art and science, technology and the earth, runs throughout this publication, and the exhibition has been tightly hung, referencing the way natural history collections are presented. I am indebted to Reid for her essay on diatoms—a subject that has been explored by all of the artists in this exhibition and book—and a further result of this dialogue was the development of a number of collaborative works/projects (between the Colliers, Reid and Campbell for instance, as well as between Wiehl and Strachan) and a continuing exchange of information and further forays into the dunes with Dempsey. This has been a richly rewarding set of collaborations which will continue into the future and develop in new directions especially through our website, www.ghosts-of-the-restless-shore.co.uk.

Endnotes

1. Schama, S. (1996) *Landscape and Memory*. London: Fontana Press, p.578.
2. WALK (Walking, Art, Landskip and Knowledge) is a research centre at the University of Sunderland that explores how we creatively experience the world as we walk through it.
3. The title for the project was inspired by Phil Smith's excellent book, *The Sands of Time: An Introduction to the Sand Dunes of the Sefton Coast*. (2009). Stroud: Amberley Publishing.
4. Tilley, C. (2012) 'Walking the Past in the Present' in Árnason, A; Ellison, N; Vergunst, J and Whitehouse, A (eds) *Landscapes Beyond Land*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, p.29.
5. Krause, B. (2012) *The Great Animal Orchestra*. London: Profile Books, pp.26-7.
6. Malpas, J. E. (1999) *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.15.

7. Ibid, p.13.

8. Ibid, p.189.

9. Bachelard, G. (2014) *The Poetics of Space*. New York: Penguin Books, p. 218.

10. Ibid.

11. Malpas, J. E. (1999) *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.188.

12. Ibid.