

## LANDSCAPE AND ENVIRONMENT NETWORK INVESTIGATOR'S REPORT:

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### LIVING IN A MATERIAL WORLD: PERFORMATIVITIES OF EMPTINESS

#### 1 DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITIES OF THE NETWORK AND THE THEMES EXPLORED

This series of experimental, location-based workshops engaged with a range of disciplines, arts and community organisations in order to provide an arena in which, combined with follow-up symposia and a national conference, approaches to landscape and environment were compared, combined and placed in critically reflective relationships.

The Network responded to discussions held between participants in the emergent Performativity | Place | Space research theme at the University of Bristol (led by Professor Martin White with RCUK Fellows Dr Jo Carruthers and Dr Angela Piccini) and colleagues in the southwest of England and in Wales. Participants in the research theme, drawn from a range of disciplines, were invited to explore notions of place and space — real and imagined, physical and virtual, natural and constructed, historical and contemporary — as 'performative'. In other words, how the active engagement with and practising of space creates our material experiences of place. Approaching place and space via theories of performativity informed by Judith Butler's work (and engaging with a wide range of scholars writing about the event of place from across arts, humanities and social sciences disciplines) the network highlighted the active, multiple and ever-changing nature of 'location' through time. We were also specifically interested in investigating the relationships between debates around space and place and those that have characterised landscape and environment.

To that end we devised a series of location-based workshops and invited a group of up to 20 participants to each. For each workshop, we focused on 'emptiness', specifically on locations considered to be abandoned, degraded, disappeared, transitory, unmarked yet which are materially rich. This focus engaged with the ways in which landscape and environment are often valued or devalued, remembered and forgotten, enabling them to contest and complicate assumptions regarding 'empty space' as well as trace the cultural configurations that create 'emptiness'. 'Emptiness' thus focused research questions on the specificities of the active constitution and performance of landscape and environment and highlights place as emergent potential.

The workshops provided a forum for the meeting of diverse research methods across the disciplines represented, from philosophical enquiry to empirical investigation and from creative cultural interventions to traditional fieldwork. Higher education, professional arts and public-sector community workers were all represented. Source materials circulated before events, but the content of the three two-day workshops were left with room for participants to shape their focus and scope.

The workshops were paired with symposia which provided an anchor-point for workshop findings. Individuals shared areas of expertise with the specific aim of

questioning disciplinary and methodological boundaries as they pertain to landscape and environment. The symposium events culminated in collaborative and individual presentations that evidenced the potential to transform cross-disciplinary approaches into transdisciplinary practice and highlighted areas for further work. All of these activities were subsequently shared and reflected upon via the project's collaborative wiki space, hosted by Stanford University's Humanities Lab (<http://humanitieslab.stanford.edu/materialworld/11>).

**Workshop 1: Bristol Temple Meads (10-12 October 2006)**

Angela Piccini and Jo Carruthers hosted the first workshop, providing a booklet outlining Temple Meads' historical and cultural significance to those unfamiliar with it. The British railway network figures as a key materialisation of nineteenth-century industrialisation. From E P Thompson's early work on the production of time by the new railways (1967, 'Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism', *Past and Present* 38) through to more recent studies of the interconnectedness of slavery, industry and migration (eg., A. Trachtenberg, 1982, *The Incorporation of America*, New York: Hill and Wang; P. Glennie and N. Thrift, 1996, 'Reworking E. P. Thompson's 'Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism', *Time and Society* 5: 3), railways and their stations have been marked out as transitional 'non-spaces'. Situated within Redcliffe, the prime area for regeneration in Bristol, Temple Meads is home to Isambard Kingdom Brunel's World Heritage Site passenger shed, housed within the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum. Currently a contemporary conference venue it is hidden from public users and has become a contemporary site of 'culturally emptied' space, while historically it was a site of transition and mass migration. Timed to coincide with the 200th anniversary of Brunel, this workshop explored the passenger shed focus on issues around landscape and memory through a focus on mobility, empire, industry and materiality.

The workshop attempted to extend previous work that Andrew Patterson initiated at the Central Railway Station (Rautatiesema) in Helsinki, a Locative Media strand of the annual Pixelache festival ([traumwerk.stanford.edu:3455/ContemporaryPast/40](http://traumwerk.stanford.edu:3455/ContemporaryPast/40)), which two Network partners, Angela Piccini and Mike Pearson, attended. To that end, participants explored the relationship between the current railway station operated by First Great Western, and the site of Brunel's station. Participants were requested to bring key reading with them to the orientation meeting in the station restaurant on the Friday night. This aimed to situate our activities within the key intellectual and creative concerns of the multi-disciplinary group. The remainder of the weekend combined group working in the Education Room at the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum with tours of Brunel's station buildings and both group and individual work in the current working station.

The weekend began with a discussion of participants' working methods across their areas of expertise. We focused on method in order to begin to find ways in which we might collectively develop group working, given the fact that we had never before worked in tandem. This was followed by unstructured activities, which allowed participants leeway to explore the spaces in small groups and attempt to identify common concerns through a loose fieldwalking practice. Small groups were formed

and requested to work collectively in either space, to identify both common and discordant interests and methods and attempt to devise strategies for collaboration. This — perhaps necessarily — produced anxiety amongst some participants used to working to more specific agendas and to strict ‘output’ criteria.

The weekend also included a number of more structured tasks which provided for many the sanctuary of ‘guidance’ but were designed to encourage self-reflection on modes of working and practices of attention. These activities were borrowed from conventional drama workshop practices, which themselves have been adopted widely through managerial training practices. The whole group gathered within a small space under an old carriage arch. Individuals were given 5 minutes to identify and collect traces of human activity and then to reflect back. We then split into smaller groups to begin to devise collaborative practices that were more closely informed by performance, rather than drama, and feed back. By combining a range of activities, both structured and unstructured, the workshop aimed to identify potential cognate working methods, concerns and points of interconnection among participants. Additionally, as the first on-site meeting of the Network, the workshop usefully exposed areas that required more careful attention in order to develop collaborative strategies to balance disciplinary and practice-oriented ways of working. A series of iterative group discussions attempted to facilitate further practical work to be developed for presentation at the first symposium.

### ***Symposium 1: 23 February 2007***

The symposium touched on familiar questions: about whether we're all [archaeologists] now (<http://documents.stanford.edu/MichaelShanks/112>), or all drama practitioners, and so on. The question is one of which models of working we adopt when, how and why. Where performance or archaeological practices might present as having immediately recognisable potential — with their emphasis on relationships between event, material and acting in and on ‘the field’ — what conceptual, critical and creative spaces might we produce to accommodate a range of disciplinary practices? The tensions therein, the resistance of totalising narratives of practice in the face of calls for inter- and transdisciplinarity provided a focus for this symposium, which was structured in a conversational framework.

We invited JD Dewsbury to act as a discussant in order to facilitate a conversational mode for the symposium. The network steering group felt that formal presentations would lose the generative and dialogic nature of the work done over the weekend; a discussant would mean that the ongoing, emerging nature of the enquiry would be performed rather than subsumed within ‘answers’ or ‘presentations’. We discussed the following three sets of questions:

- 1) What was the direction behind the enquiries we made of the site? Was there an agenda — in terms of pedagogy, ideology, practice or philosophy — behind what we set out to do there? What do we believe in (in terms of why we investigate such sites in the way we do)?
- 2) In what ways was the body central to our enquiries into place and space? We addressed the ways in which we are drawn to the affective locations and

ecologies within the site; the visceral impact of the space itself and the flesh of other bodies (including the wear and tear left on the material fabric of the site); the experience of the duration of the workshop (e.g. in terms of emotions and the relations with other participants); the perspective and orientation of the senses; the question of animal and nonhuman presence (e.g. bricks, electrical cables, plumbing, electromagnetic waves etc)

3) What was the present time, the enacted 'now', of the emptiness of the site? Were we aware of trying to avoid the dangerous attraction of memory and the erasures enacted by remembering? What are we re-animating or is it more an animation of the site? Are there 'present' ghosts or traces of 'absent' past inhabitations? Are the material traces of past occupations loss or an affirmative force?

This first symposium associated with the project brought the initial workshop participants together to discuss across a range of subject areas, including archaeology, literature, fine art, photography, screen art and performance. Panel presentations addressed the modes of enquiry we explored, the ways in which the material body (animal and non-animal) was central to our enquiries and how we conceived of the present time — the enacted 'now' — of the emptiness of the site.

Threaded through these conversations the participants presented a range of responses to the workshop. Douglass Bailey showed his photographs of the station at night. Peter Metelerkamp showed his photographic prints. Carol Stevens and Moira Gavin showed three screen works. Mike Pearson and Heike Roms presented their audio maps of the station. Steve Mills produced an audio archaeology of Temple Meads. Jo Carruthers, James Dixon and Angela Piccini all gave spoken presentations that focused on text and signage. See <http://humanitieslab.stanford.edu/materialworld/106> for records of these presentations.

### ***Workshop 2: Mynydd Epynt (25-27 May 2007)***

We took as a starting point Walter Benjamin's observation that 'When someone goes on a trip (s)he has something to tell about'. Mike Pearson and colleagues from Aberystwyth University designed this workshop, which marked a unique collaboration with the Ministry of Defence. Until 1940 Mynydd Epynt (Brecon Beacons) was occupied by a community of farmers and their families. To create the MoD training centre 54 homes were vacated and 219 people were obliged to leave. At the same time a primary school, a church, and the Drovers Arms inn were closed (Herbert Hughes, 1998, *An Uprooted Community: A History of Epynt*, Cardiff: Gomer Press).

For this workshop we continued to be interested in what we bring to site as well as 'read' from it, and focused on how we produce place through creative research: in other words, to 'find a "way of telling" about it which has personal and communal currency' (M. Pearson, 1998, 'My Balls/Your Chin', *Performance Research* 3 (2): 41). The workshop built on the Temple Meads workshop and symposium with an initial introduction and site tour, based on a loosely historical framework. Drawing on our

findings at Temple Meads, which suggested that the group required more formal exercises to facilitate collaboration, we devised a series of activities and concerns to foster both group and individual working practices.

We also created space for presentations from Site Commandant Lt Col Chris Sernberg, from Network partners, from one of the invited artists, Iwan Bala, and from AHRC Landscape and Environment Research Award holder Prof Peter Coates. Drawing on J D Dewsbury's contributions to the first Network symposium, we invited participants to consider Derrida's notion of 'hospitality' as a potential framework for the weekend to frame our responsibilities to the working communities on Epynt (both MoD and farming) and to foreground the ways in which the site both invites and excludes people and discourses.

The group visited three of the firing ranges over the weekend. Workshop exercises focused on questions of memory (to recall sounds, gestures, images) and narrative (textual, performance- and image-based evocations of place). Groups were given Polaroid cameras and were asked to take 2 photos of the visited ranges and to recover one object, with a focus on collective remembering/mapping. Groups also focused on practices of mapping and walking to consider the potential for what Pearson and Shanks have defined as 'deep mapping' (2000, *Theatre/Archaeology*, London: Routledge). In practice, group dynamics differed dramatically. Some groups dispersed and tended to veer towards individual work with occasional conversation; some groups spent much of the time discussing their own responses; others found that being at site generated wider-ranging discussions about disciplinary approaches to landscape and environment. We ended the workshop with considerations of how we might describe/ demonstrate/ reconstitute Epynt for other people elsewhere and aimed to identify ways in which to extend our collaborative working off site. We considered what tactics we might use for engaging with the specific emptinesses of this place: edit, montage, stutter, silence, waiting, erasure, inscription, and so on.

### ***Symposium 2: 14 September 2007***

Our second symposium welcomed John Wylie (Geography, University of Exeter) as discussant. Departing from the dialogic, or conversational, structure of the first symposium, we sought to echo the workshop itself in the follow-up symposium. An initial session was framed as 'Snapshots', which were brief individual presentations that considered how our memories of the weekend inflected, extended, complicated or responded to site. The aim was to begin to build up a picture of Epynt for symposium delegates that resisted a singular concept of what the site 'was'. We then moved in to Group Conversations, in which the three workshop groups focused on a specific place in Epynt. Groups considered the various activities (recording, representing, analysing, performing) they engaged in and aimed to recall such things as sounds, gestures, images. The questions that were posed to the group focused on affective recollection, hospitality and returned to consider emptiness:

- 1) What was the weather like? What were the dominant colours and tones of the site? How would you describe the quality of the light? How did the ground feel underfoot?

- 2) How would you describe your own affective tenor and mood while at Epynt?
- 3) What was the most mobile thing at Epynt? What was stillest?
- 4) When you were there, where else did you think you'd like to be, and why? Afterwards, what did you wish you'd done, or wish that you hadn't? Was your group work productive? Of course this begs the further question — what would constitute a productive group in this context? How would we recognise productivity?
- 5) What, if anything, have you forgotten and then remembered again about Epynt? To what extent is Epynt all about forgetting?
- 6) In some ways, it seems, you were guests at Epynt. Who were your hosts?
- 7) To be a guest is to have been invited into a territory in some way 'foreign' to you. A guest is a stranger, an Other etc. So how, if at all, did your incoming presence dis-locate and disrupt Epynt?
- 8) But then again a guest is different from a ghost. A guest is a visitor, a ghost is a visitation — it arrives without warning, it hasn't been invited. At Epynt, who were the ghosts? Ghosts don't just spook — they withdraw, they try to hide themselves away. What was hidden and elusive about Epynt? How did you feel or see such ghosts?
- 9) While emptiness may well not have been foremost in your mind at Epynt, was the site in any way experienced as empty? Did you 'feel empty' while there/on leaving?
- 10) Emptiness and blankness. How are they similar and different? Is Epynt a blank canvas, ready to be filled in by the colours brought by visitors? Or alternatively is Epynt itself an emptying, a sort of black hole?
- 11) Emptiness and matter/materiality. Much contemporary theory talks about matter (and nature) as rich, alive, lively, and so on, rather than as just inert 'stuff'. Was the Epynt landscape alive in this way? Is the 'emptiness' of a landscape itself a sort of liveliness?
- 12) Emptiness and absence. Absence implies presence (haunting). But does emptiness imply fullness? In other words is Epynt thinkable as a space of potential — potentially 'full', present, alive? It seems to me that a symposium such as this — your work, our conversations — will inevitably tend to *make Epynt present*, even if in fragments. How does this square with emptiness? What goes unspoken, unseen? What might a full landscape, a fully-present landscape, possibly look like?

The afternoon then moved to a presentation of a range of creative practice-led responses to the workshop. Roger Owen coordinated the audio recording of *Sound of Stillness*, the 1959 T. C. Thomas' play about the Epynt evictions. Margaret Ames and Roger Owen devised a Welsh-language performance the engaged with the contested history of the place. Richard Huw Morgan presented a devised performance based on surreptitious audio recordings he made over the weekend. Ivor Davies spoke about his paintings as a form of response to Epynt. Iain Biggs displayed his large-scale, mixed-media deep map. Angela Piccini, Carol Stevens and Moira Gavin presented screen works. James Dixon, Mike Pearson, Jo Carruthers, Heike Roms, Tim Cole, Peter Coates and JD Dewsbury all gave critical-reflective

presentations. Lt Col Christopher Sernberg and Lt Karl Salmon also attended and participated in the day. Many participants spoke of the challenges brought to their own approaches and assumptions because of working in such close proximity to other practitioners. These challenges were at times embraced and at other times seen as threatening and led to engaged discussion.

**Workshop 3: Avonmouth-Severn Beach Littoral (25-27 January 2008)**

The Littoral is — literally — the tidal area, 'of or pertaining to the shore', a description that at some point someone decided characterized the strip of land between Avonmouth and Severn Beach. It is an area pertaining to the shore and as such is dominated by the tide, a tide that has the largest range in Europe and the second largest range in the world. Designed by Iain Biggs and James Dixon at University of West of England, the final workshop drew on the previous four events and focused on the ways in which 'emptiness' is performed through practices of attention. Previously we were asking ourselves 'who' finds this space empty / not empty, which suggested that 'emptiness' be considered as much an absence of attention to something not already anticipated by our discursive understanding as it is a quality of any particular physical location. The issue of practices of attention was drawn from practices familiar to site-oriented artists, which blends reconnaissance and reverie.

This activity suggested that one way to be open to emptiness is deliberately to attempt the (albeit impossible) bracketing of our various professionalisms and their discourses by adopting something that approximates to an attentive 'amateurism'. Biggs and Dixon were interested in the analogy here with the role of the essayist. Interest in the notion of the essay — from Old French *essai*, pertaining to weighing, a trial, experiment, of the nature of a first draft, something tentative — relates to its root in the Old French term: *essai* - L. *exagium*, weighing, and has been focused by Hamburger's 'An Essay on the Essay' in *Art as Second Nature* (1975, Manchester: Carcanet New Press).

Where the Temple Meads workshop focused on archaeological sampling and 'drama' versus 'performance' workshop as method and Mynydd Epynt centred on material performances of remembering and affect, the Avonmouth-Severn Beach Littoral workshop took as its model The Observer Book of... series of books. Dealing with topics like dogs, clouds, uniforms, and old buildings, these were clearly written to encourage curiosity and an enthusiastic attending to, or essaying of, the everyday world. One point of departure was Edward S. Casey's claim: 'If a position is a fixed posit of an established culture, (is) a place, despite its frequently settled appearance,' an essay in experimental living within a changing culture? (1993, *Getting back into place: towards a renewed understanding of the place-world*, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press). We also asked: can a notion of essaying be linked in any way to our particular interests in how multiple practices of attention can bring into focus chance findings? Rather than closing down definitions of 'emptiness' and 'methodology', might such an orientation challenge us to open out these terms?

To address these questions we asked that each of the four groups respond to a range of topics via the notion of *The Observer Book of the Overlooked*: the Littoral (earth/water); non-human activity; hiding places; (effects of) weather; litter; waterways; air; paths. Like the other two workshops, this event was situated by presentations. Peter Insole (Bristol City Archaeologist) presented on the hidden history of Avonmouth's First World War material remains, including council findings of mustard gas dumping sites, while Owain Jones (Countryside and Community Research Institute, University of Gloucester) presented a personal history of his family's occupation of the land through the centuries. The large geographical area of Severn Beach and Avonmouth involved the groups in a lot of walking: covering distance and travelling rather than 'stopping'. This practice proved a spur to reflection on our engagement with the site.

### ***Symposium 3: 17 March 2008***

Following the success of the discussant mode for the previous events, Ika Willis (Classics, Bristol) was invited to act as discussant at this event. Returning to a more conversational format, felt to be a more generative approach to disseminating our workshop activities, we addressed the following questions within our groups:

- 1) Despite our emphasis on provisionality, do we know now what we made? (How) have these things been (re)made in the period of reflection after the trip?
- 2) How did we conceptualize walking? And how in opposition to 'working'?
- 3) What did we bring to the site? Physically? Intellectually / emotionally / associatively? Would the ideal be to bring nothing? How can we assess the usefulness of what we bring in advance or retrospectively? Do we elicit something from a site by bringing something to it, or do we silence it? How can we tell? Is amateurism a 'thing' that is brought, or the absence of bringing?
- 4) Were the topics given for the workshop useful things to bring?

The day was structured according to the working groups from the weekend with individuals and groups presenting a wide range of work from poetry (John Wylie) to photographs (Tim Cole), to video and sound installation (Jem Noble and Angela Piccini), to reflection on collaboration and the potential of site-specific writing (Jo Carruthers), to screen work (Carol Stevens and Moira Gavin) to collaborative archaeology-performance based on the notion of the transect (Penny Bickle, Iain Biggs, Mike Pearson, Clare Thornton, Owain Jones). The aim was to find ways to resist reproducing a show-and-tell symposium format and to trouble demarcations between critical-theoretical textual practices and practice-based responses.

### ***Conference, 6-8 June 2008***

Our final event was a more traditionally framed conference, which saw some 80 delegates attend over the weekend. Bringing together all workshop participants with other AHRC Landscape and Environment award holders to act as discussants, the conference explored the background to the events plus the key themes of emptiness and presence; emptying and absence; spacings; and methods. Plenary presentations

from Professor Stephen Daniels (Nottingham) and Hayden Lorimer (Glasgow) extended the geographical imaginations that we employed throughout the Network. Professor Ralph Pite (English, University of Bristol) was the invited discussant at the end of the conference and contributed significant points about the importance of a theological understanding of emptiness vis a vis landscape and environment. Good Cop Bad Cop performed *Phantom Ride* on the Friday, which drew out and developed some of the concerns explored at the Epynt workshop. Conventional paper presentation-discussion sessions were interspersed with sessions in which participants showed and spoke to their practice-based outputs from the Network.

## **2 OVERVIEW OF THE PEOPLE AND ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED AND THE FREQUENCY AND TYPE OF COLLABORATIONS**

The Network comprised the core partners: University of Bristol (Jo Carruthers and Angela Piccini), Aberystwyth University (Mike Pearson, Heike Roms, Roger Owen) and University of West of England (Iain Biggs, James Dixon, Carol Stevens). That core partnership was extended in both workshops and symposia to include:

*Independent artists:* Clare Thornton, Iwan Bala, Jem Noble, Anna Farthing, Ivor Davies, Richard Huw Morgan

*Public- and heritage-sector:* Lt Col Christopher Sernberg and Carl Salmon (MoD), First Great Western, British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, Severn Beach-Piling Parish Council, Peter Insole (Bristol City Council)

*University of Bristol:* Peter Coates, Ralph Pite, Tim Cole, J D Dewsbury, Ika Willis

*Aberystwyth University:* Margaret Ames, Louise Richards, Peter Merriman

*University of West of England:* Claire Doherty, Paul Gough

*Exeter University:* John Wylie

*Cardiff University:* Penny Bickle, Douglass Bailey, Steve Mills

*Nottingham University:* Professor Stephen Daniels

*University of Glasgow:* Hayden Lorimer

Additionally, as fellow AHRC Landscape and Environment award holders Sally Bushell (Lancaster) and Adeline Johns-Putra (Exeter) contributed significantly to the final conference.

The Network met on average every three months, at workshops, symposia and Partner meetings.

## **3 EVALUATION OF HOW THE THEMATIC AREA HAS BEEN ADVANCED THROUGH THE NETWORK**

Our Network's theme of 'emptiness' proved a challenging provocation from the outset. The Network aimed to 'stimulate cross-disciplinary fertilisation of methodological approaches to place and space through site-based workshops and reflective symposia; to produce new understandings of place and space; to generate genuinely interdisciplinary methodologies that can be introduced to the wider academic and cultural sphere'. Our workshops were not intended to be 'sharing' events, or attempts to see the world through each other's eyes, but took the form of 'fieldwork' recognisable to scientists, social scientists and artists. We were not

interested in discovering the meaning or defining the character of site, but rather in producing multiple sites through our various disciplinary practices:

What happens when we site? What kinds of places do we practice through our particular, self-aware practices?

This is not new. From the antiquarians roaming the British countryside in the company of artists to the Boyle Family contemporary archaeology fieldwork of the 1960s (C. Holtorf and A. Piccini eds, 2008, *Contemporary Archaeologies*, Peter Lang) through to the Brith Gof performance work with archaeologists at University of Wales Lampeter in the 1990s (see M. Pearson and M. Shanks, 2000, *Theatre/Archaeology*, London: Routledge) and more recent collaborations between artists and academics (K. Till, 2008, 'Artistic and activist memory-work: approaching place-based practice, *Memory Studies* 1), site invites collaborative action.

We all 'know' emptiness when we see, hear and feel it, yet clearly it is not empirically 'true'. We considered practical emptiness across the disciplines represented by the Network, from the potentiality of the blank canvas or empty stage, the seemingly evacuated landscape or the excavated site — emptiness as a series of moments in the life cycles of material culture. As Ralph Pite reminded us at our final conference, the spiritual and theological import of 'emptiness' cannot be ignored as it sits in close proximity to the performative potential of emptiness. Such potential might be thought through the site of an open mouth waiting to speak, or via a Heideggerean clearing or within Luce Irigaray's conceptualising of 'air' (1999, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, University of Texas Press).

Our diverse practices grappled with emptiness variously, from emptiness *qua* emptiness through to the plays of plentitude through to the romantic pull of ghostings (the pressure on your back in a darkened stairwell, the whisperings of the past in the landscape) through to questions of erasure / memory / forgetting / obliteration / inscription. At the same time, we needed to maintain an awareness that the very act of writing on these pages gradually erases the memory of being-there, while at the same time writing produces site anew:

the mark of deletion is not, however, a "merely negative symbol". That deletion is the final writing of an epoch. Under its strokes the presence of a transcendental signified is effaced while still remaining legible. Is effaced while still remaining legible, while making visible the very idea of the sign....it de-limits ontotheology, the metaphysics of presence and logocentrism (J. Derrida, 1980. *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press: 23).

To advance our thematic area, we were concerned with the generative tensions between:

- an interest in how emptiness is itself performative, that is, how emptiness produces itself;
- how human and non-human agents produce emptiness;

- how human and non-human agents might perform or enact (as distinct from performativity) emptiness as a salvo to the alienating modern desire for presence;
- the relationship between 'lack' and emptiness, viewed through the lens of interdisciplinarity — which in itself produces lack via its reification of disciplinarity and the notion that the inter is neither one thing nor the other.

We considered how at a basic level we were all engaged in sensory, ongoing enactments of space and we rendered these embodied experiences via different media: the body, the text and the archive. Reflecting on the activities of the Network, Piccini has argued that there appear to be four loose, overlapping methods used:

- Observation and random or adhoc sampling
- Rules-based activities
- Introducing new material into site
- Conversation

### *Observation*

Observation involved practices of attention through the senses, largely guided by our implicit disciplinary interests. That is, we attended to things that called out to us, that affected us in some way in a practice not so dissimilar to the early empiricism of Francis Bacon or Thomas Browne. Due to the twin directives of observing through performativity and emptiness, we simply looked for and listened to traces and signals that signal this for us. Yet, to observe requires us to perceive, and perception requires memory in order that we may recognise what we perceive. Following Henri Bergson (1912, *Matter and Memory*), we might consider how perception also tends towards materialisation. The act of observation drives us to the material.

The way in which we sampled these places varied, although photography has dominated. On one level, the photographic image is an indexical link to place and it provides evidence of our having been there and of the temporally and spatially specific relationships between us and place: I was there, then. What was particularly interesting is that in our groups we were all very well aware of the trouble with documents — from the impossibility of its status as objective record to the politics and ethics of representation (see A. Piccini and C. Rye, 2009, 'Of fevered archives', in L. Allegue, S. Jones, B. Kershaw and A. Piccini, eds, forthcoming, *Practice-as-Research: in Performance and Screen*, London: Palgrave Macmillan).

Perhaps alongside the affective aspects of material and our entanglements with the ready to hand, our culture of collecting (J. Elsner and R. Cardinal, 1994, eds, *Cultures of Collecting*, Harvard University Press) goes hand in hand with acts of perception. People taking photographs are located. They stop. Their resulting images index what is behind the lens, too — where the photographer might be standing. And if the photographer is using a Bluetooth device, then there's geositional information encoded onto the image as metadata. There's a self-conscious quality to people in groups with cameras. And they all photograph the same things. Like a group of

tourists, once one takes a picture of something, they all do it in turn. We used mobile phones, still film and still digital cameras and video as modes of observational method.

Our images served very different functions, however. Observations seemed always a means to a series of ends. Where people were using video, it was not so much for its documentary qualities but in order to produce images and sounds from which creative works could be made. Others used cameras as recording devices, to produce images that would be carefully inspected at a later date, because one cannot fit a patch of concrete and the traces of at least 3 different benches into a finds bag. The photographic image here stands in for its 3D index, as prosthetic memory (A. Landsberg, 2004, *Prosthetic Memory*, Columbia University Press). The photograph may or may not be artfully composed, but it must give a sense of scale, detail and context. Cameras may also be used to transform text into image, for surely the wit relies on the materiality of signage rather than the words *per se*.

The absence of photography also became a photographic process in that we all either expressed guilt over photographic excess or refused photography or even, in the case of one of our participants, hid a camera which took pictures that will never be developed. Cognate modes of observational method include sound recording, drawing and writing. The different attentions to detail that these practices afford produce a completely different quality of observation. Drawing entails precise decisions about borders and boundaries, the there/not there of the meniscus between object and surface. The act of drawing transforms the observed into a constellation of dots, dashes and shadings. Like writing, it lends itself to considered abstractions and fictional illuminations and brings more sharply into focus the performative relationship between matter and memory. Repeated pencil lines and cursive loops of ballpoint pen slowly emerge into being — yet, like the impossibility of attention, the closer you look the more difficult it becomes to see any real edges between things.

#### *Rules-based activities*

Games and exercises provided useful constraints around observation. Commonly used in the creative and performing arts, the workshop exercise in its various forms became a tool through which to negotiate relationships within the group. Such exercises acknowledged the arbitrariness of any framing and in its production of boundaries points towards their infinite extensibility. Games result in the collective pursuit of play, although they are often difficult (J. Dovey and H. Kennedy, 2006, *Game Cultures*, Open University Press). At Temple Meads we had to confront the fact that while some of the group did want simply to 'get on' with what interested them, others felt that the site was overwhelming and worked against the possibility of chance collaborations. So we focused on a single tunnel and had five minutes to identify and collect traces of human activity, as junior archaeologists.

At Epynt, the many suggested exercises involving recollection and deep mapping did not, in the end, play out over the weekend, although we retained the Polaroid snapshots at each location. Instead, at Epynt we were led by a tour guide through

the landscape, in and out of a minibus, across these vast landscapes. Whereas at Temple Meads there was no space for loitering, here at Epynt there was no time. While the workshop had been very carefully planned, part of that care manifested itself in our not requiring it.

Such exercises, however, importantly shake groups from established ways of working. The transect idea at Avonmouth, borrowed from archaeology, was new to many participants and yet a simple concept for them all to follow. The task was framed in terms of looking to the right of whatever was first perceived. However, where does one stop in such an exercise, because such an activity inevitably transforms the overlooked into the observed. Another group chose instead to have no goal. They attempted the impossible: not to look for anything.

#### *Bringing things in to site*

It is not possible to avoid bringing infection. Like the colonials before us, our simple bodies harbour change. How do we account for what we bring to site (intellectually, creatively, personally, materially) in terms of how we always both determine and add to place? How do we account for what place brings to us and how it shapes what we do?

Some participants brought books in their rucksacks in a reflexive and witty exchange. Others brought unwieldy boxes and tripods and microphones and headphones and tapes covered with that filmy plastic so that our arms, shoulders and backs ached at the end of each day. Others were aware of bringing literally infected bodies that made thinking cloudy, or worn-out, injured or pregnant bodies that brought fatigue. Organisers had to bring paperwork and plans, and timetables, tickets and minibus keys and the need to remember detail and anxiety about that need. We also brought the fact that we have other interests outside of the academic context that inform our interactions. Some brought small objects to place in the landscape and photograph. We all brought our own disciplinary toolkits and shamelessly borrowed from one another.

#### *Conversation*

There was a range of activities under the broad title of conversation. The to-and-fro speech among participants connected the Network to technologies of walking as one of its primary modes. If we consider walking as the practice of placing one foot in front of the other and then back again, conversation as method encompasses a wide range of practices. All of our mobile practices constituted conversation. Strolling / walking / nomadism / flânerie/ spatial praxis / sauntering all place our bodies in conversation with place. We speak to place through movement and listen out for and to it. The speed of our walking is regulated by the ground, the weather, the width of the path, the fit of our boots. Such listening does not impose meaning or understanding, it is a productive silence.

Our conversations with each other took many forms, from arguments, to whispers in corridors, from formal seminar-based discussions, to informal gossip in the pub. One of our biggest challenges was how to keep conversations going when we were not

together. Our wiki has been an important conversational structure. Conversation requires us to account for our relationships with others.

In short, our thematic area of performativities of emptiness and our concerns with method were significantly challenged and advanced through the Network. While at times difficult, we were able to remain faithful to a desire to remove goals and to move away from signification. Shaping the experience of this network as a whole is the sense in which the bravest, most productive ways of working together are not those that seek to materialize, to represent, almost in the moment of being there. Rather, there is method in a kind of madness that insists on maintaining provisionality and in the madness that says up front that we do not know exactly what it is that we are doing. The Network framework provided us with an opportunity to investigate new forms of sociality, where there was no common goal. What was unique in this Network was the fact that so many disciplines and practices and attitudes were brought together — like an unruly family at Christmas. But we argue that this embraces the ethics of being-in-the-world. We chose to work at obviously difficult sites that brought to the fore our own assumptions about which kind of work we might value. And because we worked at site we had to engage with both the ongoing politics of inhabitation and the weight of history.

Together, the workshops, symposia and the conference performed the work of insisting that the Network's activities were not about producing fixed meanings from landscapes. Rather, they projected forward to explore the potential of place. Nor was the Network solely about producing a set of different orientations for the researcher, artist, artist-scholar that emptied our bodies of institutional practices — although this was a hugely important and energizing aspect of the series. Our work at site and beyond added to the stories of these places.

What might this mean for others from across the arts and humanities? It might mean that the distinction between people who do fieldwork and people who work in libraries, or between research and art, are perhaps the wrong dividing lines. We have successfully resisted the drive to elevate one discipline above all others, for it has been through the meeting of communities of practice that some of the more serendipitous findings have been made. What the network demonstrated is the positive arbitrariness of the task: it is both necessary and impossible.

#### **4 THE KEY ADVANCES IN UNDERSTANDING THAT EMERGED FROM THE DISCUSSIONS AND, IF APPLICABLE, PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO THE ADVANCES IN THE STUDY OF THE RELEVANT AHRC STRATEGIC PROGRAMME**

(see separate Programme Contribution Statement)

#### **5 FUTURE TOPICS FOR INVESTIGATION THAT WERE IDENTIFIED**

If — and this assumes an agreement in the network that was not necessarily the case — we aim to inform non-representational ways of experiencing site/place/locale/network through our working weekends (perhaps a more satisfactory term than workshop) how might writing in proximity of emptiness contribute to this process? What modes of writing are we comfortable with? To

engage with the rich variety of emptinesses, we needed to borrow and adapt a wide range of methods, which importantly resulted in a post- rather than multi-, inter- or even trans-disciplinary space.

There seem to be some clear questions that the Network poses at the end of its life:

- 1) Might interdisciplinarity constitute an arts-based version of mixed method research in the social sciences that simply reifies disciplinary boundaries?
- 2) Might interdisciplinarity generate, instead, a new method for arts-based research that synthesises the best practices from individual disciplines?
- 3) Is there a transformation that occurs at the point at which disciplines touch when working together at site that points more towards research modes rather than methods to suggest new forms of transdisciplinarity?
- 4) Might the new ways of knowing produced by such a Network suggest the benefit of contact, rather than collision — the little static shocks that we pass along to one another rather than the single lightning strike, the forever-extensible rather than the bounded, which perhaps suggests a post-disciplinary space of utopian hospitality?

In asking those questions we might also investigate where our activities were located; whose interests our work served; what broad purpose was fulfilled by our work; in what ways are our practices engaged with the inevitable politics of the contexts in which they were situated. And so we might ask:

- 1) Is method, here, about effective methods for facilitating collaboration?
- 2) Does it facilitate new research; inter-, cross- or transdisciplinarity; or cross-sector work?
- 3) Is there a method, or set of methods, that can achieve all of these at the same time?
- 4) Is this actually method in a conventional sense? How do we arrive at ways of knowing? And who gets to say?
- 5) Is our aim summation — a misguided attempt to build up knowledge as progressive act?

Surely, Capel Babell at Mynydd Epynt is itself a warning to those who think they can approach a singular truth stone-by-stone.

## **6 FUTURE COLLABORATIONS OR RESEARCH PROJECTS THAT EMERGED FROM THE NETWORK/WORKSHOPS**

- Art and Archaeology Network: Helen Wickstead (UCL) and Janet Hodgson (Birmingham City University)
- 'Garden/ City/ Wild' workshops, University of Bristol, led by Prof Peter Coates as a continuation of this network (under the Performativity/ Place/ Space theme).
- Iain Biggs is now PI of a research project in a novel £1.1 million interdisciplinary research programme entitled Grey and Pleasant Land? An Interdisciplinary Exploration of the Connectivity of Older People in Rural Civic Society, which aims to find out what life in rural communities is like for

Britain's ageing population. His three-year practice-led research project will draw directly on understandings developed within the network to explore and evoke attitudes to the countryside as a social, cultural and environmental space. This is being funded through a collaboration between five UK Research Councils (ESRC, EPSRC, BBSRC, MRC and AHRC (See <http://www.land2.uwe.ac.uk/bullfrm.htm>).

- Prof Mike Pearson and Heike Roms are organising the 2009 Landscape and Environment Conference, Living Landscapes: An international conference on performance, landscape and environment at Aberystwyth University (18-21 June).
- Angela Piccini is undertaking a project on place and screen media in the context of the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics and its harnessing of material culture and locale in the production of civic identities. Unsuccessful AHRC application. Supported by University of Bristol BIRTHA and by Visiting Scholar status at University of British Columbia (Jan-Aug 2009).

## **7 PLANS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OR ACTION**

- Forthcoming paper on Mynydd Epynt by Tim Cole, Historical Studies, University of Bristol
- Paper in preparation on method and post-disciplinarity by Angela Piccini
- Submission to ESRC to develop research on place and screen media in an Olympic cities context
- Maintenance of project wiki