

## LIVING IN A MATERIAL WORLD: PERFORMATIVITIES OF EMPTINESS

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### Network's Contribution to Landscape and Environment Programme Objectives

1. *make a coherent contribution to arts and humanities understanding of landscape and environment through its thematic focus*

The Network contributed to arts and humanities understandings of landscape and environment through its deliberately provocative thematic focus on emptiness. See Section 3 of Investigator's Final Report for detailed discussion of theme. The careful attention to the design and delivery of the working weekends and their associated symposia in terms of iteration and dialogue was a key aspect of this contribution. Rather than seeking to advance our theme through interdisciplinarity, the collision / collaboration between a small number of disciplines, we sought to design a structure that would allow a large number of disciplines and practices to sit in proximity with one another. Our emphasis on notions of hospitality - on the ethics of co-working - forced us to make useful connections between our working at site within communities and everyday disciplinary practices within institutions.

2. *develop a research field in terms of theory, methods, sources, materials and case studies which will enable comparative analyses of landscape and environment to be undertaken*

The Network's transdisciplinary practices encouraged us to engage widely with a range of materials and critical-theoretical approaches to landscape and environment via performativity and emptiness. This frequently proved both challenging and generative as the various groupings confronted disciplinary-specific assumptions concerning the two themes. Moreover, the different models adopted for each of the working weekends and symposia evidenced important overlapping concerns and positive differences in practice that have resulted in a methodological model for transdisciplinary landscape and environment research (outlined in Section 3 of Investigator's Final Report). The workshops in combination with the symposia, final conference and project's collaborative wiki space (<http://humanitieslab.stanford.edu/materialworld/11>) iteratively developed a research field that facilitated interconnections among diverse existing research materials and theoretical approaches. Specifically, for each workshop and symposium participants were invited to consider a range of materials, from creative practice to journal articles, while the wiki provided a sustainable space in which to develop a collaborative bibliography on performativity, emptiness and landscape and environment. An area that could have been developed further, and was identified as a potentially rich area for future research, concerned religion and theology and its contributions to place-based understandings of emptiness.

3. *explore new approaches for studying landscape and environment*

The Network's focus on combining fieldwork practices across a diverse range of disciplines with dialogue and archive-based research developed novel collaborations across existing approaches to landscape and environment prevalent in performance, fine art, archaeology and geography. Moreover, those intersections both informed and were informed by arts and humanities archive-based research practices. Most importantly, the Network evidenced the need to respect the contributions of all of the disciplinary areas represented (both HE and non-HE), developing a nuanced understanding of the collaborative ethics of such research. A detailed account of these approaches is provided in Section 1 of the Investigator's Report.

4. *promote effective working between disciplines and build new connections and understanding as an outcome*

Drawing on Item 3, above, the Network sought to promote effective working across academic disciplines and non-academic practices. In fact, developing ways in which to converse and collaborate were at the heart of our activities. It was important for us to aim towards hospitality while remaining aware of the discourses and practices that are inevitably excluded. By combining space for dialogue with defined practical tasks and more open-ended activities, which demanded that groups develop strategies for cooperation, the Network created an infrastructure designed to facilitate effective working. Moreover, with our focus on working at site, the Network was able to build new connections with communities that will inform Network partners' subsequent research activities.

5. *facilitate exchange between researchers, a wide range of individuals and organisations committed to increasing knowledge of landscape and environment, including those in the creative industries, the cultural sector (including museums and galleries), urban and rural communities, government agencies, public, charitable and voluntary bodies*

The Network established successful working relationships with First Great Western, the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum (Temple Meads workshop), the Ministry of Defence (Mynydd Epynt workshop and symposium), Bristol City Council and the working communities of Avonmouth and Severn Beach (Avonmouth-Severn Beach Littoral). In particular, the relationship with Lt Col Christopher Sernberg was instrumental to the success of the Epynt workshop, while Peter Insole, Bristol City Archaeologist made a significant contribution to Avonmouth-Severn Beach. Most importantly, the communities with whom we worked in all three of the workshops warmly welcomed us and took an active interest in our work. Passengers and staff at Bristol Temple Meads, residents of Sennybridge and the soliders on exercise on Mynydd Epynt and the residents and workers of Avonmouth and Severn Beach all were key to the success of

the working weekends. Again, the ethics of hospitality was brought to the fore and encouraged us often to re-think the aims and objectives of our work and remain alive to the problematic of considering 'emptiness' within living communities.

*6. develop the research community by supporting new researchers and integrating them with established ones, including collaborating with researchers in organisations beyond the HE sector*

The Network developed the research community through its unique flattened structure that ensured co-working between post-doctoral researchers, doctoral students, senior and junior researchers, artists and public sector / creative industry workers. Similarly, the symposia structure resisted re-inscribing established academic hierarchies through its emphasis on dialogue rather than individual presentation.

*7. contribute to public awareness of arts and humanities research on landscape and environment by disseminating findings and addressing current issues of public concern through outputs directed at a wide audience (including web pages, exhibitions, performances, public lectures and broadcasts)*

The Network contributed to public awareness of arts and humanities research on landscape and environment by disseminating a rich array of material via the project wiki, including critical-theoretic writing; creative writing; notes; photographs; video; digitized artworks; reflections on performance. The wiki is Google-visible and Piccini has been contacted by both researchers and interested members of the public to discuss the Network. Arguably, however, the on-the-ground, embodied interactions between the Network and the communities within which it worked were the most significant forms of dissemination. The curiosity that the Network inspired wherever it went instigated conversation, questioning and in turns amazement and bewilderment. While the people of Sennybridge positively welcomed our presence, some of the soldiers on Epynt were wary of our attention. Our experiences with the soldiers perhaps most closely resembled problematic ethnographic encounter and we became acutely aware of our intrusion and the complexities of the power relationships produced. Conversely, the people of both Avonmouth and Severn Beach were pleasantly surprised to find that their communities could be 'worthy' of interest from 'academics'. We were enthusiastically welcomed and residents and workers were very keen to tell us their stories and their memories of these places.

*8. develop themes and approaches that are, or may, become embedded in the research agenda and resources of the arts and humanities*

The Network's thematic focus on 'emptiness' has been hugely significant. As a provocation it of course forced all Network participants to point to the impossibility of emptiness and the ethics of declaring places to be empty. Beyond that starting point, however, working with emptiness via performativity (again contested and variously

understood across the disciplines) highlighted the performative power of emptiness within the Network alongside the materialities of emptiness within the landscape and environment. Emptiness as a theme acted upon the Network to structure our work and interactions in new ways and demanded that we begin to unpick many of our assumptions about what constitutes appropriate research and methods for understanding landscape and environment. Ultimately, the Network evidenced the positive contribution to arts and humanities research agendas that is to be made through mixed-mode, at-site practices in the context of provocative, broad-based themes.

*9. make a significant international impact within the field of landscape and environment*

While the Network did not aim to make a significant international impact within the field of landscape and environment, individual partners have further developed international collaboration facilitated by Network involvement. As principle investigator, Piccini was invited to University of Minnesota to present Network activities to the Architectures of Emptiness symposium. She is also involved as potential co-investigator in an application for University of Bristol to lead an RCUK Digital Economy Hub. If successful, Piccini will lead a team of researchers and artists in a range of community-based participatory practices that focus on locality and leading-edge digital technologies. Activities of other Network partners are detailed on both the online j-es form and in the Investigator's Report.