

after alert catchers: a response to a collaborative project

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From the perspective of ordinary affects, things like narrative and identity become tentative though forceful compositions of disparate moving elements: the watching and waiting for an event to unfold, the details of scenes, the strange or predictable progression in which one thing leads to another
(Stewart, 2007: 5-6)

This project, among other things, brought attention to 'ordinary affects' as articulated by Kathleen Stewart. Over a number of months through 2016 three artists, Megan Calver, Susie David, and Gabrielle Hoad visited, worked with, spent time with the spit of sand-dunes, beach and shore that is Dawlish Warren Nature Reserve on the Exe estuary in Devon. The artists shared some outcomes of this working in a public showing titled 'throw only to an alert catcher' installed in three beach huts over two days in October 2016, and they kept a research log titled The Buffer Zone hosted at the a-n.co.uk website. Using language (text + voice + print) along with movement (tasks + games + actions + representations) and observation (mirroring / echoing / tracing / watching) the artists engaged in investigations that mix elements particular to the location, and generate potential actions that are applicable elsewhere. They worked in a shared context, theoretical and artistic, that allowed for quick reactions, and the generation of material that would not have been possible on their own. Questions of closeness and distance, of material and immaterial, of duration and the immediate are played with and teased at resulting in a portfolio of outcomes that can develop in different directions.

intimation of intimate imitation

The project proposes a relation to place that is specific and particular, but also transferable. The artists have adopted an approach that plays the site, plays with the site, performing parallels, operating with equivalence. They have engaged in a series of imitative intimate activities. They adopt poses, take up positions, insert themselves into the space or onto the place in attitudes or forms that echo and parallel the features or roles or events they have found there. The activity of the artists as a collective (Megan, Susie and Gabby) may parallel but also be understood as activity in the collective of the place, the plants, birds, tides, golfers, dogs, camera, and sound-recording equipment that make up the site.

The bodies of the artists shift role, flickering between being the organiser of a scene, to being seen, being a person to being a thing among things. As a visiting birdwatcher you might want to become unnoticeable to the avian life of the shoreline. How do you hide yourself in a bush? You could drape yourself in camouflage netting and sway in time with the branches' movements. And then as an artist you reveal yourself to the watching camera, being stiffer than a windswept shrub, becoming apparent as in and

other than that bush. The aim isn't to fool the viewer, or yourself, but to take time to try on the situation of that plant, to be in the landscape and not only looking at it.

Or how to perform something of the uncertainty of seeing? As we walk along a beach and see ahead some thing, a shape that might be a seal, a stone, a body. And to respond by adjusting to the form, fitting your outline, your silhouette to the seen shape. Can feeling it make clearer what is up ahead? Does fitting to something engender sympathy? Putting on the landscape as a way of learning it, and yet knowing that it is a temporary costuming, that at the end of the day we or the bird leave, and the rock, or fence or dune remain.

Adjusting to the seen outline relies on dispersed yet adjacent viewing positions, an outside eye, the eye of the witness or the camera's eye. "Shift your leg a bit. Yes, that's better." A to-and-fro of alterations toward a specific line of sight. A passing hiker (or a swooping gull) will see the oddness of this unmatched, out-of-place placement, the camera performs the limited perception of the discrete subject. Sign, fences, groynes, beach huts, litter, offer possibilities of knowing outside our experience, other knowing or being beyond the human. As the camera sometimes enters the frame, the still camera seen by the video camera, the camera on a tripod snapped by the hand-held one, it is more easily observed as an actor, evident as a thing both inside and outside.

Thinking less of relations of subjects and objects, and more of shared mineral and organic compounds, shared orientation or subjection to gravity may allow for a sensing of a relationship that has parallels, has equivalences, of bush to body, of plant to animal, of carbon-based lifeform to carbon-based lifeform. To hide may require less a putting on of camouflage and more a recognition. A recognition depending on an awareness or openness to the sense of translation, across forms, among objects, of objects received from each other.

care for meaning and responsibility to communicate

The time spent at Dawlish Warren, returning over months, in different weathers, in different moods, allowed for a familiarity to develop, for the artists to become intimate with the place. This intimacy allowed them to shift beyond the surprise of the newness of things, the novelty of a signboard, or a striking pebble, and into a surprise of recurrence, a surprise of recognition. Time spent with the site doesn't dull the sensing, but supports an experience across time, aware of returns, of patterns that are unseen in the moment.

A mode of caring for the site or the locale in its totality, its complexity of events and effects over time, was bound up for the artists with a sense of responsibility. Of being responsible for and to each other, and responsible to the environment and the work and the assemblage of which they were (are) a part. They were each responsible to the place, and accountable to the place, and yet they shared responsibility for the work or for the activity. The weight of owning the work, of being named as maker shifted from an individual to the group, and beyond the three artists to a shared making with the place and its inhabitants. One way in which they expressed this was as 'giving voice' to

the other, to another, outside the human, beyond human language. And in the same gesture of expression they admitted the effort required to shift metaphors and names to accommodate the more-than-human.

passing on and swapping: scores and scoring

Forms of power and meaning become circuits lodged in singularities. They have to be followed through disparate scenes. They can gather themselves into what we think of as stories and selves. But they can also remain, or become again, dispersed, floating, recombining -- regardless of what whole or what relay of rushing signs they might find themselves in for a while. (Stewart, 2007: 6)

The three artists exchange and pass on different roles, and as these are taken up, different figures come to the fore, or recede into a supporting status. Watching the video material, or observing the installations, the viewer gets an inkling of the working process. There is an awareness that any of the three artists might initiate an action and this could move quickly as there is someone to try this action for, to try it on, and someone to watch, to see it from the outside. And as quickly they can move on from this as another of the trio suggests an activity. These are things that three can do that are harder or slower or not possible for one.

In this there is an echo of a music hall act where the trio might be imagined as passing hats among them, never arriving at a final role, always alert to the possibility of a change of position. So when Megan is hailing, Susie is hearing and Gabby is recording. When one is observing, a second is noting, and a third is documenting. This distribution of roles allows for a position outside an action, as witness or recorder, but that role is at the same time within the action as it is happening because it can be witnessed.

Passing and swapping also happened offsite, away from the location, using online exchanges or face-to-face meeting at other places. So email or shared online documents, or their blog became other linked sites where the activity at Dawlish Warren carried on by other means. These digital trails and traces, logs and footprints exist as other points in the network, extending the potential for further future generation. The strategies for passing and sharing developed at the Warren site where sharing was (part of) the making are paralleled in strategies of sharing in order to make the project happen. Practices of collaborative or collective making operated within the events on site, and in making it possible for the on-site event to occur. The work did not and does not begin or end at the entrance to the Nature Reserve.

Working as a trio they needed to describe or explain an action to each other, so that the different roles within it could be followed. In this explanation the action is scored, the representation, description, or imitation of the action presents itself to the others as a model, a model to be followed, copied, imitated, repeated. The works and sketches presented by the artists might offer themselves as scores for others, for others to do likewise, to do here at Dawlish Warren, or to do elsewhere. The score opens up the

possibility to ask what is 'the same', to extend Donna Haraway's questioning of the Same (Haraway, 1992: 297), and to open repetition to diversity.

In presenting these works to a public, they again function as scores. These actions can be done by others, they can be interpreted, performed, remade by anyone who has learnt the score, and seeing or reading or watching the action is already a teaching of it. The score also opens up the business of imitation and repetition, and of intimacy. Is my interpretation of a score, my mimicking of an action, the same as the original? If I now click pebbles together to make the stones chat, is that the same as the time that Susie did it? Is it my version of her action, is it different? And if it is different, how does it differ?

The score facilitates sharing, exchange, or dissemination, and resists hoarding, isolation, or stasis. A score supports movement and multiplicity, as an action can be repeated, returned to, reactivated. In this quality, the score though it may seem to remove the work from its intimacy with the site, with the location at Dawlish Warren, recalls the sense of familiarity across time, the surprise of recognition and the sensing of the modulation or variation in the familiar. The encounter with versions of a work, interpretations of a score offers a different experience of sensing variation, likeness, and an investigation of what it is to be the same.

stepping onward

The project has been a learning process for the artists, as they have explored methods of generating material, testing ideas, trying out activities. It has also given an opportunity to learn how to work collaboratively, as they have engaged in different modes of sharing and exchange, of initiating and following, of combining skills. They have come to know Dawlish Warren intimately, but have also gathered a set of learning strategies that they can bring to other sites or locations. They have played with occupying different positions within making or testing activities, and can bring this sense of an outside eye or a sounding board into future making. And they have generated a set of scores that can be shared with other makers, or with a wider public, allowing for engagement with and activation of other sites or places. The project has been personal and political, bringing intimate imitative actions into a public realm. In their focussing of attention on the insignificant (or rather actively shifting significance) the artists have kept an element of play as fun, and play as slack, a slackness that allows entry or access for others.

bibliography

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Mark Leahy is a writer and artist operating among textual practices and performance. Recent live work includes 'his voice' (Plymouth, Oct 2015; Manchester, Feb 2016; Totnes, Aug 2016), 'flat-head self-tapping' at Chelsea School of Art (May 2015) and 'answering machine' for *Experimentica14* at Chapter Cardiff (Nov 2014). He has been commissioned to write texts to accompany work by artists including Nathan Walker, Katy Connor, Steven Paige, and LOW PROFILE. Critical publications include essays in *C21 Literature*, *Open Letter*, *Performance Research Journal* and *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*. He was MA Programme Leader at Dartington College of Arts (2007-2010) and teaches at Falmouth and Plymouth Universities.