

***Pear Pressure* – Transient Text as Territoriality**

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Abstract

Place-oriented practice has gained a more prominent position within the remit of contemporary art in recent years. This paper discusses how the exploration and recording of something as seemingly transient as inscribed 'text' on prickly pear leaves (classification - *opuntia ficus-indica*) might reveal surprising insights into place. The work interrogates the strollers' tendency to inscribe words and symbols on the fleshy tissue of prickly pears growing abundantly in the Maltese countryside. Ingold (2007, p.43) asserts that when 'text' is formed by the removal of material, scored or etched, it can be described as reductive writing. This paper argues that 'soft graffiti' can further our understanding of fleeting territoriality and generate insight into the social and cultural aspects of place.¹

Strollers succumb to the habit of their peers and with a pointed or sharp object and by applying some pressure they inscribe 'text' on fresh leaves. Hence the title: *Pear Pressure*. I photographed this habit over a number of years accumulating hundreds of photographs. Each photograph tells a story. The photographic archive emerging from such exploration developed into an artistic installation which was first exhibited at the University of Leeds in 2014 and at the newly established contemporary art space at the Junior college in 2018.

Keywords : Fine Art, Text, Place, Territory, Mapping

Mapping Place

I initiated this work by combining Fine Art practice with a longstanding interest in place, territory and textuality. The context of this work evolved from a consideration of place as a potential site for artistic practice. Certain places, more than others, appear condensed with myriad stories which can be unraveled, juxtaposed, manipulated and re-told. Art research entails a complex and poetic intertwining of real and imaginary contexts. 'The critical visual artist, in the enactment of his or her thinking, operates between the real and the semblance, able to mitigate against the disappearance of the real into virtualisation' (Neil 2006, pp.60-61). Macleod and Holdridge (2006, p.8) argue that 'art is always in translation, because it is matter: it is materially realised ideas'. Further possibilities for the exchange of new knowledge

1 'Soft graffiti' refers to text inscribed on prickly pear leaves.

may occur when practice is combined with theory. Davy sustains that theory releases the potential of practice and its role 'is to uncover the possibilities that remain inherent within practices and thereby liberate them towards futures already latent within them' (2006, p.21).

Although there tends to be an alignment between practice-led research and qualitative research methods, practice-led research has its own distinctive research approach and strategies (Haseman 2010, pp.147-148). Sullivan (2005, p.115) argues that '[t]o create, the researcher has to enter into the realm of imagination, to take on the possible, as well as the plausible, and probable'. This paper aims to address the questions: What opportunities for art practice emerge from an investigation into the 'textuality' of place?; and How might 'text' contribute to an understanding of territoriality within the context of artistic practice? The term 'textuality' refers to traces of nature and culture inscribed on surfaces which might reveal bits and pieces of stories.

My artistic practice is often concerned with place. It explores the complex associations of matter and place, and identifies opportunities for contemporary Fine Art practice. The first step is to be in place; 'one's place is where one puts down one's feet' (Carlson 2009, p.83). Ingold (2013, p.1) maintains that '[i]t is, in short, by watching, listening and feeling – by paying attention to what the world has to tell us – that we learn.' Ingold describes this as 'correspondance', which means, setting up 'a relation with the world', allowing it to open up paths of deterritorialisation and potential lines of flight (2013, p.7).

I have been mapping places for a number of years but my focus is generally narrowed down to specific nuances of place. Casey (2005, p.xv) argues that mapping the land departs from notions of generic or cartographic mapping since it is a matter of moving and going through the land. I tend not to focus on the bigger picture since I am generally more interested in what is happening on the 'fringe'. Casey sustains that mapping represents movement in what Deleuze and Guattari call smooth space, drifting; it is opposed to movement in striated space like cartographic mapping, gridlike and homogeneous in character (Casey 2005, p.xvi). Mapping consists of a subtle scanning of the land at a tacit level as opposed to surveying (Casey 2005, p.12). Deleuze and Guattari (1987 p.13) assert that a rhizome is '*a map and not a tracing*. Make a map, not a tracing' they utter [original emphasis]. Foster notes (1996, p.185) that different forms of mapping are now implicit in the work of many contemporary artists.

After repeat visits to a valley in the North West of Malta, out of a narrow passage emblazoned with a thick wall of prickly pears whose main function is to shield the fields on the other side, prospects for artistic practice started to emerge. The spiny succulent which is not indigenous to Malta thrives in the Mediterranean climate. It grows abundantly and forms dense and tangled structures often serving as boundaries between neighbouring fields.

Strollers initiated the habit of ‘posting’ messages on the prickly pear ‘wall’ much like they do on social media. (Figures 1 and 2) Whenever I visited the valley I could notice fresh inscriptions. This paper argues that soft graffiti can further our understanding of place and generate insight into the social and cultural aspects of place. The messages inscribed are mostly comprised of names and dates alluding to relationships, births, current dates (‘I Was Here’ type of message) and other personally significant memories. Nicknames, band names, politics and other vague symbols occasionally cropped up but these were far less common.



Figure 1 Soft graffiti 1



Figure 2 Soft graffiti 2

I mapped the valley when it is most quiet; often early in the morning. I photographed each and every message, over time amassing hundreds of images on my computer. The subject matter remains the prerogative of the 'authors' who unawares of my practice post 'text' on this organic 'wall'. I took close-up shots, filling the space within the photograph with 'text'. Benjamin (1968, p.236) argues that 'with the close-up, space expands'. The actual leaves are not disturbed; if detached from the shrub they will desiccate and die unless they are re-planted. Due to the ephemeral qualities of the matter the project is entirely based on photographic documentation. Thus, as Sontag (1977, p.16) asserts the 'photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence'.

Every message was photographed numerous times; from various angles and elevations and with different exposures and shutter speeds. This was necessary to capture the 'ideal' shot; the best moment. The 'text' was not always fully exposed due to the newer leaves obstructing the older ones. At times it was difficult to capture the message clearly.

Sontag (1977, p.70) describes photography as 'the inventory of mortality'. Messages are not erased as the leaf dies out because they are reterritorialised in the photographs. Most leaves rot due to the wounds (writing) inflicted on their skin, something I could witness upon repeat visits to the valley. Derrida (1976, p.25) maintains that '[w]hat writing itself, in its nonphonetic moment, betrays, is life'. In the context of *Pear Pressure* such a statement is both paradoxical and revelatory. Writing can be considered a remembrance of life; however, it is also a betrayal - writing as an act of violence.

The selection process is rigorous; hundreds of digital photographs waiting to be chosen. When I was selecting photographs I was taken back to the valley. Photographs evoke memories. Pearson and Shanks (2001, p.42) argue that 'memory is not an inventory, but is the act of memorizing [and] this is also the *work* of the photograph...' [original italics]. Images were digitally edited on computer and cropped to Polaroid size (approximately 7.9cm by 7.9cm); only one version of each message was printed, using photographic matte paper and including a white Polaroid border all around. It is hoped that the retro Polaroid aesthetic would further expose the transient nature of prickly pear 'text'.²

I am attracted to the valley when it is practically deserted. Reflecting on my collection of photographs I realised that what I have is a collection of re-collections.³ The photographs show that '[e]ven when there are no people around their traces are everywhere' (Dyer 2005, p.223). These are people stories imbricated with the history of the place; an unfolding narrative that is both private and public. The dichotomous notions of private and public are inescapable throughout my investigation of place.

2 Polaroids tend to fade over time. I tried to achieve a non-saturated chromatic texture similar to the original Polaroid prints.

3 'Like the collector, the photographer is animated by a passion that, even when it appears to be for the present, is linked to a sense of the past' (Sontag 1977, p.77).

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The photographs were arranged one next to the other separated by five centimeter intervals. Around one hundred and eighty-five photographs were used. There is no particular order to this work; it is reconfigured according to the space and decisions are taken on the spot. It is non-chronological and multidirectional. The aim is to produce a spatial, visual narrative that flows along walls, floors and ceilings, round the perimeter of windows, doors and other features found inside the gallery. The layout conveys the growth patterns of the shrub which is capable of spreading beyond its allocated space. (Figure 3)

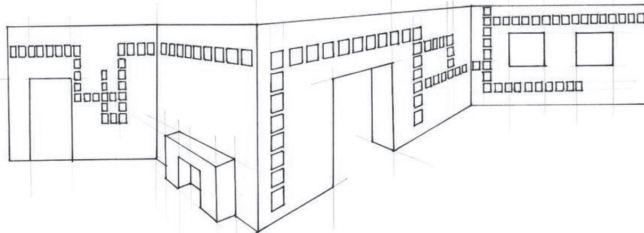


Figure 3 Sketch *Pear Pressure*

Pear Pressure was shown at Lifton Place, University of Leeds in 2014. Considered in the context of Deleuze's and Guattari's notion of mapping the proliferation of messages on prickly pears takes on a new significance. 'It [writing] has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come' Deleuze and Guattari (1987 p.5) maintain. The photographic installation took the form of a narrative, a 'textual' map of the valley, and the viewers could walk along the valley by engaging with the map. The narrative has neither beginning nor end; like the rhizome it is ant genealogy (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p.12). (Figure 4)



Figure 4 *Pear Pressure* (2014) at Lifton Place, University of Leeds.

'A photograph could also be described as a quotation'; it decontextualises the subject (Sontag 1977, p.75). Benjamin (1968, p.151) maintains that '[t]o quote a text involves the interruption of its context'. These interruptions can be considered as lines of deterritorialisation. New contexts emerge; the reader 'invents in texts something different from what they [author] "intended"' (De Certeau 1984, p.169). Gibbons asserts that 'photographs have as much transformative potential as they have evidential powers, and the two can most often be said to work hand in hand with one another' (2007, p.37). Based on the photographic evidence viewers can conjure up narratives and join in the conversation as it unfolds.⁴ The reader combines text 'fragments and creates something un-known in the space organized by their capacity for allowing an indefinite plurality of meanings' (De Certeau 1984, p.169).

The 'text' in *Pear Pressure* is made from a series of grooves. Brassai (2002, p.42) notes that 'a groove is infinitely more powerful than a line. It slows the hand, it focuses concentration and requires effort, liberating the life-giving force that wells up from a child's inmost being'. Moreover, for Brassai, 'the material plays an active, creative role in everything incised on it' (2002, p.42).

The 'groove' can be considered a kind of 'scarification' on the surface of the skin; a scar in soft tissue. Skin was one of the earliest means of expressing identity and life experiences in both a permanent and a temporary form (Keefer 2013, p.539). Instead of using one's own skin visitors to the valley are resorting to the soft succulents' skin to reveal snippets of their identity.

Keefer (2013, p.541) tells us of C.H. Armitage's classification of five purposes of scarification; one of them being identification with a tribe. The scars inflicted on prickly pears perhaps indicate the need to belong and to connect with others, and to temporarily appropriate place. Scarification can be one of the rites of passage denoting a move from one phase to another in a person's life (Moolla 2012, p.27). This shares parallels with the 'text' inscribed by strollers which frequently points to significant events in their lives. Keefer defines scarification as a silent but visible way of communication (2013, p.541).

The reductive process of scraping-off tissue from a leaf surface often encourages rot, decay and possibly death, depending on the 'wounds' being inflicted. Nature goes into auto-destruct mode as if it wants to have the last word. There are times when the leaf becomes too weak to hold its own and consequently succumbs to gravity. The leaf detaches from the plant, and if it manages to settle on a discrete layer of soil, it may take root and grow into a new plant. Through this cycle we can discern a natural process of reterritorialisation.

When seeds and leaves drop to the ground, do they not continue the life stories of the trees from which they fell? Thus the ground, too, is no mere surface, upon which trees stand like an army of soldiers on parade (Ingold 2013, p.87).

4 Photographs in *Pear Pressure* work in relation to one another; they converse and create a continuum.

‘The surface and that which takes place at the surface is what “renders possible” – in other words, the event as that which is expressed’ (Deleuze 2004, p.214). *Pear Pressure* takes place on the surface. It reterritorialises surface ‘text’ onto architectural surfaces. It appropriates walls, floors, ceilings and corners; it moves in all directions. The surface makes the work possible.

The work tells us of social and cultural activity and people’s engagement with the valley. Further layers of ‘text’ are continuously added and erased and the fluid configuration of *Pear Pressure* is an attempt at capturing this textual interplay. The viewer is implicated in the work as much as the original authors.

The room at Lifton Place was filled with ‘text’ and to read the ‘text’ one had to walk around the room; new possibilities emerged as one drifted in an unplanned manner. Like a map, the work ‘is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real’. The work is also a work-in-progress; it is always disposed to acquire more (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p.13).

Over time my collection of prickly pear graffiti continued to grow and in 2018 the full series was installed in the contemporary art space at the University of Malta Junior College in Msida. (Figure 5). The configuration of this space is very different from the one in Leeds since it constitutes a partitioned wall within a much larger space. The white wooden panels forming the wall were not straight but indented at specific intervals thus disrupting the apparent linearity of the structure. In Leeds the narrative followed the layout of the gallery while this time round it appropriated a dedicated space as if it was a blank canvas. Here the work appeared less intrusive and unlike the haphazard growth characteristic of prickly pears it had to develop within a very restricted area. Local visitors could engage more directly with the ‘text’ inscribed on such a common succulent species and also due to the socially and culturally influenced messages posted on this organic wall. The work is aimed to reterritorialise place through a photographic open archive of textual fragments.



Figure 5 *Pear Pressure* (2018) at the University of Malta Junior College, Msida.

An experientially grounded notion of place has been favoured throughout this work mainly due to the underlying practice-led methodology. The work blurs the boundaries between different disciplines and it allows for multiple readings from unfamiliar perspectives. It is aimed to capture the often neglected textuality which in this specific work is considered as a form of territoriality albeit a fleeting one.

A place owes its character to the experiences it affords to those who spend time there – to the sights, sounds and indeed smells that constitute its specific ambience. And these, in turn, depend on the kinds of activities in which its inhabitants engage. It is from this relational context of people's engagement with the world, in the business of dwelling, that each place draws its unique significance (Ingold 2011, p.192).

Place is 'something not merely characterisable but actually experienced in qualitative terms' Casey argues and thus, 'for example, color, texture, and depth, are known to us only in and by the body that enters and occupies a given place' (1997, p.204). Our body inhabits space and time, 'I cannot forget that it is through my body that I go toward the world', maintains Merleau-Ponty (2012, p.330). Casey is of the idea that being in place is not just a matter of fitting into place (1997, p.232). Furthermore, Casey echoing the words of Merleau-Ponty states that by virtue 'of the lived body, I can be said to know, at a preobjective and yet fully efficacious level, the places that populate my ongoing experience' (1997, p.232). This notion shares parallels with Heidegger's view of *Dasein*. Human presence is key to place, thus place cannot be established without the intervention of humans.

Places do not occur naturally but are created by human beings through some mark or sign of human presence. A wilderness in itself is placeless, for it has no human center or point of convergence around which nature can gather and become bounded (Pogue Harrison 2002, p.350).

From a societal point of view, Lefebvre argues that every society creates its own space, and this has implications for appropriation and demarcation of territory. 'Space is social morphology: it is to lived experience what form itself is to the living organism, and just as intimately bound up with function and structure', according to Lefebvre (1991, p.94).

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) bring to our attention two particular types of space: striated and smooth space. They provide an intricate description of how both spaces should be envisioned. Striated space is constituted by parallel elements (for example horizontal and vertical), intertwining and intersecting, delimited and closed, whereas smooth space is solid; continuous, unlimited in direction and non homogeneous (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p.525). As shown in the photographs the work is characterised by an apparent sequential and linear approach, however, the

photographic narrative, like prickly pears, appropriates the entire given space. The prickly pear is an invasive species since it grows rapidly and it is very resilient thus other plant species might find it difficult to survive alongside such a hard succulent. Prickly pears grow in all directions and their leaves tend to overlap to create thick walls, hence, their popularity with farmers.

The photographic narrative shown at the Junior College occupied the whole wall and although linear in character it does not have a beginning or end. Viewers may start at any point in time and go back and forth, look up and down in order to make their own place stories from prickly pear text. The work was shown alongside my *RTO* series of cabinets which also respond to 'textual' territoriality synonymous with the Maltese countryside. Territoriality can be fleeting and temporary but it still establishes some kind of appropriation in this case in the form of inscribed text.

Place is never fixed or static, and it responds to diverse ongoing fluctuations. The character of place, Massey (2004, p.98) explicates, is not only the result of what goes on within it, but is also an outcome of the juxtaposition of flows, relations and connections from outside. *Pear Pressure* can be considered an ethnographic documentary of people's memories that perhaps unknowingly leave a temporary delineation of their presence within a specific territory. The photographic archive that constitutes this body of work establishes a connection between the unapparent permanence of messages posted on social media (once posted such messages can never really be deleted) and the digital images of text that is destined to fade if not captured through a lens. While organic text is ephemeral in nature, photographed text acquires a more lasting existence.

Every time I installed *Pear Pressure* I became aware of the embodiment it entailed; installing the work becomes a pseudo-performance. Every single photograph I pick up is a re-collection. Every photograph stuck is a re-telling; a narrative in the (re-) making. The work gains more significance since the original fleeting messages will no longer exist in the valley and the only presence of such messages is through these images. The photographic installation becomes the only form of documentation of such inscriptions and here the significant contribution of place mapping becomes more evident.

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Bio-note

Dr Trevor Borg is an artist, curator and academic based in Malta. His practice spans across different media including drawing, painting, sculpture, photography, video, and installations. Borg's work has been shown in various galleries and museums worldwide and in 2005 he was chosen to represent Malta as part of a major European Union exhibition and at La Biennale di Venezia Arte 2019. His work often juxtaposes the poetic with the political and the past with the present. Place, space, territory and temporality are among the more explored themes in his work. He also publishes and presents work about artistic practice internationally. Borg is a lecturer at the University of Malta at the Department of Digital Arts.