

Reflecting on "Our Place"
Dr Bridget Keehan and Dr Amanda Rogers

You Are Here

Latitude: 51.6083 / 51°36'29"N

Longitude: -3.9811 / 3°58'51"W

OS Eastings: 262910

OS Northings: 191798

OS Grid: SS629917

Mapcode National: WL3.ZN

Mapcode Global: VH4K8.YT6Y

Formed of Buff Tondu brick with ashlar dressings; a flat roof.

Two storeys with a basement at South West, grand entrance hall, staircase to rear, top lit, equipped with long spinal corridors and distinctive spatial arrangements enclosed within,¹ concerns of displacement and replacement.

What happens here? What atmospheres do you create?

Plot and land, characters and contours, exits and entrances.

You will have to move.

We traverse the northern margin and make sketches of the Farewell Rock.

Noticing layering, shapes, boundaries and interpreting sedimentary features.

Reading the land, teasing out time, system and process.

Measuring small differences, calculating statistical significance.

Finding new words, forming new maps: deltas, debris, turbidity and fast flows, gathering in the shallows, paddling in pools of knowledge.²

These words are spoken at the beginning of *Our Place*, a soundwalk created by theatre maker, Dr Bridget Keehan, whilst Artist in Resident in the Department of Geography at Swansea University.³ Swansea/Abertawe is Wales' 'second city' by the sea, a place that experienced immense wealth as it rose to become the global centre of copper production during the industrial revolution, but also immense poverty following its post-industrial decline in the twentieth century, from which it has struggled to recover.⁴ Swansea Bay, which covers a much wider portion of the Welsh coastline, stretches from Pembrokeshire in the West to Port Talbot in the East, with its legendary steelworks (run by Tata Steel), one of the largest in Europe, on the shoreline. Keehan's theatre practice is site-specific and the residency provided an opportunity for her to interrogate some taken-for-granted assumptions about concepts such as 'place' and 'site' in a context where these terms are

scrutinized and studied from a range of perspectives. The opening extract conveys the idea of place unfolding, emerging to us, through us, with us, changing from a set of co-ordinates, to a building that is located, to a mobile set of processes, to a fluid experience of feelings, to a set of practices that make and define what place is, and does. It is somewhere literal but also metaphorical, concrete but elusive, a palimpsest of experience. The extract, and indeed, this written reflection, offers only partial access to the soundwalk given that central components, including the soundscape and the embodied experience of the walk itself are absent.

To create *Our Place*, Bridget invited academics, students and estates staff to write a short extract about their experience of place – particularly in relation to their research, teaching, or life in Swansea. Bridget edited these texts together into a montage that was supplemented with her own writing and ‘found text’, such as technical descriptions of the Wallace Building (where the Geography Department is situated – see Figure 1). Participants were then invited to record sections of the material. The voice recordings were edited together with additional background sounds encompassing human and non-human elements, including music, breaking waves, seagulls, train doors opening and closing as they arrived and departed from stations, ice-cutting and wildfire burnings. The text was recorded in different languages, notably Welsh, but also Polish, Russian, French and German, reflecting different identities and research locations as well as emphasising classic associations of place as interconnected.⁵ Audiences are led on the walk and listen to the recording through headsets. Since being completed in May 2018, over 100 individuals from the University and the wider public have been on this walk, and it has also been used in undergraduate teaching on creative research methods. Here, we reflect on the creative process and thinking behind *Our Place* as a form of ‘managed conversation’ that is constructed as a way of opening up commentary about creative practice and place, posing, questioning, deflecting and developing ideas from the soundwalk that we have discussed before – during – and since – the project.⁶



Figure 1: The Wallace Building, Swansea University

Influences

Amanda: You describe your work as site-responsive, so let's start with what that means to you and how it compares with different approaches to/understandings of site-specific work? Only there are many 'typologies' of site-based work academically and practitioners also have their own understandings of this term based on how they encounter and use place as part of their own creative practice.⁷

Bridget: There are two main influences that kick-started my impulse to make theatre outside of theatre buildings. One is the work of Mike Pearson and the experimental performance company *Brith Gof*. When I was starting out as a theatre maker I went to see a lot of *Brith Gof's* work. They were the first practitioners to show me the potential of using non-theatre locations as a starting point for the creation of a performance. Putting on play texts in theatre buildings seemed a lot less interesting than creating work in an environment that has other functions and associations distinct from theatre. Another influence came from being a theatre maker working in prisons. One of the many things I learnt from this was how powerful theatre can be in disrupting the rules and conventions that constitute place. This potentially anarchic aspect of theatrical performance is appealing to me and subsequently most of my work has been made outside of theatre buildings.

I refer to my work as site and community responsive as it seems the most accurate

way to describe how I work: researching the stories, histories and functions of a location but also responding to the communities that are in relationship with that particular locale. Site-specific has become a rather generic term, used to identify performance that takes place outside of theatre buildings, but not necessarily referring to performance that arises in response to a specific location, despite the fact that the term indicates exactly this.

Amanda: My first encounter with site specific work I think was through the American behavioural artist, Marcus Young (he calls himself a behavioural artist rather than a performance artist), where I saw him walk very slowly for several hours through a busy shopping centre, and it really drew attention to how we behave, act, perform, in particular settings. It was a shock to me. Before then, I suppose I naively felt that the connection between performance and place was harmonious, a humanistic orientation about rootedness, authenticity, connection. Marcus' work was completely 'out of place', yet also very much 'in place'⁸, and this dissonance made me realise that simple acts of performance can completely re-make places and force you to look at them anew. So, like you, this possibility of anarchy is what also – ultimately – made me think this type of work is really interesting. Did you find any anarchy here?!

Bridget: Yes, I think there's creative anarchy to be found when we invite ourselves/ others to break out of conventional limits of daily life. Instead of sitting in front of your screen in your office that day, attending meetings, writing emails, writing a lecture going to a staff meeting, you and some of your colleagues and students engaged in a different mode of being with each other. Our lives are so often caught within limited frames of exchange. I hope that art can offer a chance to be outside of – albeit temporarily – the parameters of a dominant system which values us only in terms of productivity. The simple act of walking with no particular end point, i.e. we're not climbing a mountain or collecting samples, we are just being together, plus the soundscape is inviting sensory feeling so that there is a shared but ultimately personal imaginative experience happening.

How did you come to walking and a soundwalk as your medium in this piece?

Bridget: Quite early on in the residency I went on a fieldtrip with students and could see the potential for making a theatre performance from this. A primary function of the trip was to learn factual information about a particular location whereas a frequent starting point of theatre is 'let's pretend', and with that comes the convention of one location standing in for another. The field trip was in essence a curated walk and brought to mind a number of artists who have developed 'walking as art', such as *Wrights & Sights* who 'employ disrupted walking strategies as tools for playful debate, collaboration, intervention and spatial meaning-making.'⁹ Drawing on this mode of performance, I wanted to play with sets of facts and knowledge that is used to define and construct place. The intention of the soundwalk is to disrupt the usual purpose of a field trip (to understand what is there) and instead provide stimulus for those participating to imagine other locations that can be layered on to the

route.¹⁰ There is fluidity between where the body is 'placed' in space and time and where the mind is encouraged to wander through the musicality of the soundscape.

Process

Bridget: I began building content for the walk by familiarising myself with the research interests of the Department of Geography. One of the delights of being an Artist in Residence within a Geography department was discovering the multiple ways of articulating place. I wanted to draw on these different discourses, that would ordinarily be channelled into different modules, lectures and seminars, and blend together the somewhat separate streams of physical and cultural analysis of environments. Through weaving together branches of knowledge, such as the OS map readings that begin and end the soundscape, with sections of cultural analysis describing the decline of a high street, alongside discourse detailing the components of soil, I hoped to create an aural tapestry of place. The process of scripting and editing these disparate, yet connected, frames of reference together produced a multiple encounter with place making. It bought my awareness to a range of ways in which sense is made of where we are in time and space but also the pleasure that can be derived from imaginative and playful disruptions to place making.

Amanda: The most exciting aspect of the soundwalk for me – and I am talking now about the act of doing the walk as opposed to the making of it – was the ways in which it triggered a performance impulse. For example, in listening to the section about climbing hills in Berlin, we moved uphill, and I felt the way I was moving change. I was no longer just walking in my 'everyday way' but instead began to think of each step I took as moving to a summit. Of course, each participant has a different journey and varying degrees of immersion and responsiveness to the walk, but I think the potential for performativity is there in the ways the words, sounds and moving through space might impact on participants. In this respect, we are always, all, engaged in the dynamic and embodied act of place-making, in producing an open-ended set of experiences that are unique, changeable, and which involve multiple material interactions – here of body and landscape – that emphasise the way in which place can be thought of as an assemblage, with different relations that pull it together, but also tear it apart¹¹.

Bridget: This was something I had previously explored in a performance I created in 2014 called *Day to Go*, which was a bus journey reimagining the town of Barry¹². On that occasion I worked with the sound artist Chris Young to create a soundscape to accompany the bus ride. This gave me a great appreciation for the ways in which sound can evoke and also disrupt a sense of place, and I was curious to test this out via a walk. Other factors that influenced my choice included the range of research within geography. Part of what I found stimulating as I became more familiar with the work of the Department was that in one office someone was focused on the composition of soil whilst next door someone was analysing

wildfires. In addition to the range of research there is a rich mix of languages spoken in this Department, not least because we are in Wales and there is a rich tradition of Welsh language Geography. The sounds of these, along with the sounds to be found with the various research areas of the Department inspired me to create a soundscape that expressed the rhythms and atmospheres of these different languages and environments.

Amanda: Yes, and the performative act of narration in the soundscape also betrays, or conveys, our experiences of place as well – both here, in the body as you are doing it, and also, as you imagine being somewhere else. In *Our Place* this comes out when repeated refrains of text are read by different individuals, each of whom emphasise different words, and I was struck by how shifts in emphasis and tone changed the associations I was making of both the places being described and those through which I was moving.

When we were walking along listening to the first draft of the soundwalk I remember this clear feeling of 'tuning in' to the building and its people. It was like a radio where you turn the dial and hear a different perspective, one linked with, yet distinct from, the one before. You described it as peering in through the segmented windows: you can see something, but not everything. It reminded me of how places 'gather'¹³ together stories that inevitably spill beyond it, connecting and transporting us to places all over the world, from a theatre on the edge of Phnom Penh, to an ice cave in Greenland.¹⁴ As Lippard writes, 'Place has width as well as depth. It is about connection, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there'. So there was this threading together of different places, temporalities, themes, practices, and knowledges whilst also highlighting their disconnection or juxtaposition. For me, the aesthetics of the building's architecture seemed to translate into the aesthetic form of the walk itself whilst perhaps also articulating the aesthetics of geographical knowledge, where there are often very visible resonances between the research we do as geographers but there is also opaqueness, or a lack of understanding.

Bridget: Yes, there is a provocation in the soundscape to make connections between our immediate surroundings and what is happening elsewhere, and consequently to view what is in front of us through an expanded lens.

Amanda: Sound is often seen as enabling that kind of shift in perspective, it is heard as a 'spatially disruptive force that transgresses boundaries and territories'¹⁵ – and also experiences because it presents places and communities to us in particular ways. Sounds produce conditions or situations that allow varied encounters to emerge, ones that are individually interpreted and experienced.

Bridget: The idea of using sound to disrupt boundaries is a central intention in the design. Sound places and displaces, as well as producing rhythms that infiltrate our bodies and

produce affect. The soundwalk was a means through which to 'release' and 'remix' the knowledge, languages and experiences of people and combine them into a shared experience. But the selected locations along the route also deliberately resonated with the soundscape. I was aiming for participants to imagine the physical space that they were walking in becoming the place they were hearing about through the headsets, with some sections of text inviting us to think 'what if'? For example, the material relating to Fukushima in the aftermath of the meltdown of the nuclear reactor, is spoken in the present tense, prompting us to view the plants, woodland and pond we pass through as contaminated, as if we were really in a post-apocalyptic landscape right now, with radioactive dust and desolate buildings.

Embodied Responses

Amanda: Let's just talk about this some more because that embodied sense of connection, although imagined, was very strong and you felt very drawn into the places being talked about. And it was 'as if' one place *could* almost be substituted for another both imaginatively and physically at times. Even though geographers attend to the specificity of place, there was this sense not perhaps of substitution but of resonance across different places and times. For instance, going back to that Fukushima section, in the earlier months of the year, in that part of the walk there were derelict greenhouses, empty vines, garden rubbish on the side, no leaves on the trees. It felt desolate. Then you could look out towards the sea, and on the other side of the Bay is Port Talbot, and that is an industry in decline, and you connect that to the part of the soundwalk about Swansea city centre being desolate, a place that suffers from the inequalities of capitalism, and imaginatively, you connect together all these places that you literally see, are physically in, or imagine based on your experience or the imagery created in the text, and it comes together to deliver this emotional punch. It's such a sensorial overload and people were literally moved to act, perform, differently. A good example was the man who ran his hands into the soil so that he could physically see that image of there being more organisms in a handful of soil than there are people on the earth. That connection made with place, emerging from its multiple composite trajectories, can be very powerful and strong. But as we also know, such connections also shift, and as with many sensory experiences, they can be fleeting. As we said earlier, places are dynamic and eventful, rather than static and 'authentic'¹⁶. So the vines grew. The grass turned green. The apocalypse was set against spring. And that gave others who experienced the walk hope for maybe a different future for the place we were in.

Bridget: There is an eventful, emergent quality to doing the walk and experiencing a place as an audience member. Audience responses highlighted these qualities but also the chance sonic encounters or interruptions within the walk, and how it made them navigate the border between being 'in' and 'out' of the piece. So there were shifting dynamics of experience. Sometimes sounds of industrial lawnmowers, and new build drilling on the campus seemed

to add new resonance to moments when disasters or wars were described, but at other times they were a distraction. This chance element of live performance – particularly when it is happening outside of assigned theatre space and in the midst of everyday interactions between people – is exciting. There is a tension in the fact that although you can design an experience you cannot control it. It makes the work vulnerable to what other people might deem more important, but also its presence can arouse curiosity and enable interactions with people who may not ordinarily become involved. I guess that brings us back to the importance of place, how it is coded and understood, and the ways in which art can re-write and imagine it anew.



Figure 2: Participants on the 'wasteland' part of the soundwalk.

¹ Found text from University College of Swansea, 'Architectural features of the new Natural Sciences Building: Architects – Sir Percy Thomas & Son, Cardiff, Swansea and Shrewsbury' In University College of Swansea, *Departments of Geography, Geology, Botany, Zoology* (Swansea, University College Swansea Press, 1961), pp.47-48 (p.47).

² Text written by Prof. David B. Clarke.

³ In the UK, the Leverhulme Trust ran an Artist in Residency scheme until 2017 when it was closed. The aim of the scheme was to foster creative collaborations between artists and academics, with a key criterion being that the artist must work in a different discipline to that of the host department in a UK Higher Education Institution. It was one of the few schemes to foster interdisciplinary exchanges across the arts, humanities, sciences and social sciences.

⁴ L. Miskell, *Intelligent Town: An urban history of Swansea 1780-1855* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2011)

⁵ Massey

⁶ See also D. Matless and M. Pearson, 'A Regional Conversation' *cultural geographies* 19, 2012, pp.123-129 for another example of a managed conversation about creative practice (and landscape).

⁷ There are many different ways of categorising site-specific work. Compare, for instance, M. Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) and M. Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2002). For a detailed exposition of the different understandings of site and place operationalised in artworks in geography, see S.G.Cant and N.J.Morris 'Geographies of Art and Environment', *Social and Cultural Geography* 7, 2006, pp.857-861.

⁸ T. Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, ideology and transgression* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

⁹ See: <http://www.mis-guide.com/ws/about.html>

¹⁰ For a more detailed examination of how through active involvement in fieldwork, it is possible to uncover the influences that go into making place as a palimpsest see A. Marvell and D. Simm, 'Unravelling the Geographical Palimpsest through Fieldwork: Discovering a Sense of Place' *Geography* 101, 2016, pp. 125-36.

¹¹ See M.DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (London, Continuum, 2006).

¹² Barry is a seaside town in the Vale of Glamorgan, on the South Wales coast near Cardiff.

¹³ A. Escobar, 'Culture Sits in Places: Reflections on Globalism and Subaltern Strategies of Localization Article' *Political Geography* 20, 2001, pp.139-174, (p.143).

¹⁴ L. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society: The Sense of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York, The New Press, 1997) p. 7.

¹⁵ M. Gallagher, A. Kanngieser and J. Prior, 'Listening geographies: landscape, affect and geotechnologies' *Progress in Human Geography* 41, 2017, pp. 618-637, (p.621).

¹⁶ For an eventful approach to place see: A. Escobar, 'Culture Sits in Places: Reflections on Globalism and Subaltern Strategies of Localization Article' *Political Geography* 20, 2001, pp.139-174, (p.143).